



Recess in Elementary Schools in the United States, Chile, and Italy

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Abstract

This study compares the role of recess in elementary schools in Buffalo, New York, Santiago, Chile, and Torremaggiore, Italy by examining what cultural factors contribute to differences in recess requirements, how students and teachers are impacted, and what these differences look like in schools locally in Buffalo, New York and internationally in Santiago, Chile and Torremaggiore, Italy. In addition, this project looks at the implications recess—or a lack of it—can have on teachers, students, and the field of education.

Background

Research suggests that recess has positive effects on students cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally by providing relief from academic challenges presented by school (Ramstetter, Murray, & Garner, 2010). For example, Lassiter and Campbell (2019) found that disruptive behavior in the classroom decreased significantly after the implementation of a recess program in an elementary school. Despite the many benefits, schools in the United States have been found to reduce recess time as a result of increased pressure to focus on academics and some teachers even revoke time for recess as punishment (Murray & Ramstetter, 2013). Schools with higher poverty levels are also less likely to have scheduled recess (Lee, Burgeson, Fulton, & Spain, 2007).

I originally became interested in the topic of recess as a result of my employment as a Recreation Attendant within the Town of Cheektowaga Youth and Recreation department. During the summer months I work with a team of three people who travel to three playgrounds per day to provide free programming for children. This experience has caused me to see the benefits play has for children and I have personally experienced them because I was once an attendee of these programs myself.

In January 2019 students from Universidad Mayor in Santiago, Chile traveled to Buffalo State, and I was able to spend time with them and learn more about their country. In particular, I learned that recess is mandatory in Chilean schools after 90 minutes of instructional time. I compared this to my experiences in the United States where students may only have free time during lunch periods. In June 2019 I traveled to Santiago where I was able to see these differences myself. In January 2020 I traveled to Torremaggiore, Italy and learned that students do not have recess, but instead have shorter school days that allow for unstructured play time with other children in the neighborhood and in their families. This caused me to wonder what cultural factors contribute to these differences and what these differences look like in schools locally in Buffalo, New York and internationally in Santiago, Chile and Torremaggiore, Italy. Del Prado Hill, Day, Chicola, and Shandomo (2014) support the decision for preservice teachers to engage in international experiences because they allow for cultural awareness building which is crucial to becoming global citizens and educating future students to live in a global world.

Methods

United States	Chile	Italy
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Examine literature associated with recess in this countryRecruit 1-2 classroom teachers from a Buffalo State PDS Consortium partner schoolData collected between February 2019 and May 2019 in the form of online and hard copy surveys, classroom observations, interviews with classroom teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Examine literature associated with recess in this countryRecruit 1-2 classroom teachers affiliated with Universidad Mayor in SantiagoData collected in June 2019 in the form of online and hard copy surveys, classroom observations, interviews with classroom teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Examine literature associated with recess in this countryRecruit 1-2 classroom teachers from a Buffalo State IPDS partner school in TorremaggioreData collected in January 2020 in the form of online and hard copy surveys, classroom observations, interviews with classroom teachers

Findings

Locally, I was able to observe a 5th grade classroom. The teacher has his own homeroom, but the students in 5th grade rotate to different teachers throughout the day. One teacher teaches English language arts, another science and social studies, and the teacher I observed teaches math. Each class has a one-hour instructional block and the teacher attempts to break up the time and get the students moving using a website called GoNoodle. This website features short videos that encourage students to stretch, dance, and participate in other physical activities (GoNoodle, n.d.). The teacher used this website at the halfway point of the lesson. The teachers used two videos of about six minutes in total. The teacher explained that the teachers in their school try to take their homeroom classes out on the playground when it is warm outside, but due to the weather in Western New York that is generally limited to May and June. During these months, the teachers generally take students on the playground daily. As per school rules, the teachers are only allowed to take their students on the playground for up to 10 minutes.

In Chile, I was able to observe a 2nd grade classroom. The teacher teaches 90 minute blocks of English and travels between 1st and 2nd grade classrooms every other day. In this setting students had two 15 minute breaks for recess in the morning, a 45-60 minute lunch period, and one 15 minute break for recess in the afternoon. The students have recess at these times each day despite the weather forecast. The layout of the school creates an enclosed courtyard where students can play ball or other different games. Students are supervised by a handful of monitors while the teachers prepare for their next lessons. In my observations there were very few adults around during recess. When asked what contributes to time for recess the teacher explained that students have a lot of energy they need to expel. In Chile classes can have up to 45 students and teachers work to find ways to allow students to move and stay active while inside the classroom. For example, this teacher implemented breaks for students during the lesson by playing a song and video from the game Just Dance to which students followed along.

In Italy, I was able to observe a 5th grade classroom. The teacher teaches 90 minute blocks of English and travels between two 5th grade classrooms each day. Although the students did not have time for formal recess, the relaxed structure of the class allowed time for students to communicate informally with their peers. Students begin school at 8:20 and have a 10 minute break around 10:15. Students are released from school at 1:20. Schools in Italy do not have cafeterias because students are expected to each lunch with their families. As a result of the shorter school day students must attend classes on Saturdays, but they also have plenty of time to engage in unstructured play with their peers and relax at home. In the neighborhood surrounding the school children could be seen playing or walking with their parents. During my time in the classroom I found that students were engaged and able to pay attention for longer periods of time.

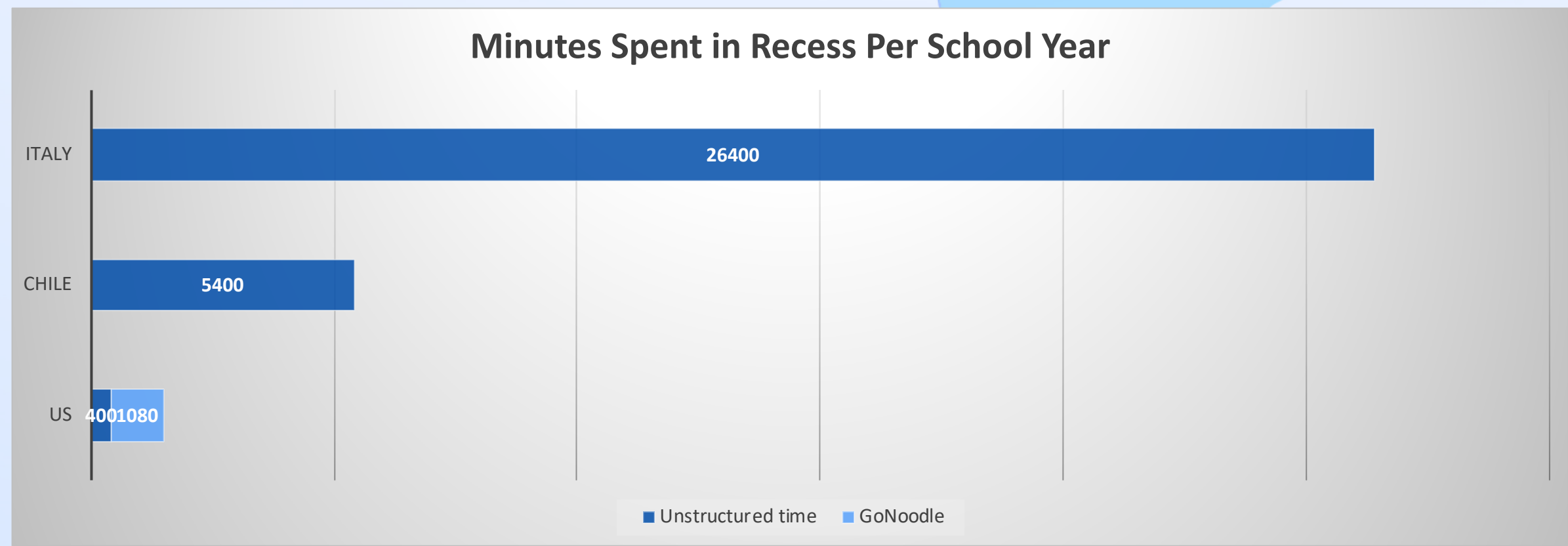


Figure 1: Minutes spent in recess per school year.

Figure 1 compares the minutes spent in recess per school year for each country. By law, students in Chile have 30 minutes of recess per day for 180 school days. Therefore, students in Chile spend a total of 5,400 minutes in recess per school year. In Italy, students are released from school 2 hours earlier than students in the US and Chile and also attend school 6 days per week. Therefore, students have 120 minutes of unstructured time per day for 220 school days which adds up to 26,400 minutes per year. Students at the school I studied in the US spend 6 minutes per day for 180 days watching GoNoodle videos and 10 minutes per day for 40 school days playing on the playground. Therefore, students at this school in the US spend a total of 1,480 minutes in recess per school year.

Implications for Teachers and Students

As teachers it is important to recognize the benefits of unstructured playtime and implement ‘brain breaks’ for students in the classroom. Increasingly it seems as though there is no time in the school day for students to engage in play because of the focus on academic work. However, students are more engaged in the lesson when they have the opportunity for a small break. They are also able to interact positively with their peers in a way that is not always feasible when they are seated in desks. When asked what factors contribute to the decision [for recess] the teacher I interviewed said, “Just because who wants to sit at a desk without moving around for 60 minutes or whatever the case may be? That’s not fun for anybody and their kids. They need to get up. They need to move around.”

It is worth noting that the local elementary school where the teacher I interviewed works is a leader in trauma-informed schooling. The school has implemented many new initiatives to help students deal with the traumas they face at home such as aromatherapy, yoga, and even collaborating with a renowned health psychologist who works with children and leads professional development for faculty and staff. I am interested to know how recess/unstructured play time would help the students in this school deal more effectively with the stress associated with trauma. Increased time for recess might also help to address concerns in the US about the growing obesity rate among children.

Next Steps

In June 2020 I will travel to Rwanda where I will have the opportunity to observe and lead professional development in local schools. I am interested in learning more about what the regulations are for recess in this country and how they compare to the United States, Chile, and Italy.

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