

Student Perspectives of the Context of Recess;
Implications for Student Well-Being
Ashley Dunseith
Child and Youth Studies, Brock University

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Abstract

With most students in Canada spending approximately 180 days a year in school, averaging more than six hours a day (Morrison & Kirby, 2011), Wei, Szumilas and Kutcher (2011) argue that this places educational institutions in an unique position in terms of influencing the health and well-being of students. This brings forth the need for school environments to be utilized in ways that are conducive to promoting student development. Much of the educational and developmental components embedded within the school system as well as experiences within greatly influence student's health and well-being. A national statement was made concerning American children's education and mental health that is greatly applicable to the Canadian school system. It was stated that schools "must be active partners in the mental health care of our children" because of the "important interplay between emotional health and school success" (Lazarus & Sulkowski, 2011, pp. 15-16). This identifies the need to ensure that all students, as much as possible, are being provided with safe environments and sufficient support in order to encourage positive developmental trajectories of student health and well-being.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Children in Canada spend upwards of 30 hours a week in school, which identifies educational institutions as being in both a unique and influential position for promoting and encouraging the learning and development of today's children and youth. Many educators understand the importance of their role in student's education, and reflect that in their classroom routine; however, there are still components of the school environment that remain unappreciated in their contribution to student development. As a result, these components are often underutilized. Vialet (2008) provides a detailed look into emerging evidence on the real-life experiences of school staff that led the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2007) to declare **recess** a largely undervalued time within the school system. Recess has recently been placed at the forefront of a debate concerning its overall purpose and whether it helps or hinders student's academic development. What fails to be addressed in the debate is the potential for the benefits of recess to extend much beyond that of academics. The benefits of recess are believed to largely outweigh the potential negative implications speculated to exist within the unique environment. It is therefore important to present recess as another valuable part of the school environment, and as one that holds countless opportunities to promote student's health and well-being.

Through the current research, I propose to qualitatively describe the undervalued components of recess that positively contribute to children's health and well-being. In order to do this, two valuable policy documents will be intertwined with student responses in order to speak to the influence of recess, as well as the need to recognize it as a key resource in the promotion of positive student development. The Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS, 2006) A Shared Responsibility document emphasizes the need for early promotion of student health as a method for decreasing mental health concerns. Secondly, Morrison and

Kirby's (2011) Joint Consortium for School Health (JCHSH) emphasizes the many ways in which school can and should contribute to students' health and well-being. Both documents emphasized many components of children's daily lives that need greater attention in order to encourage the most optimal outcomes for our children and youth. Many of the concepts discussed were applicable to the recess environment – even though the documents failed to acknowledge recess as one of students' key environments. This research study aims to not only contribute valuable knowledge to the field of child and youth studies, but is structured in hopes of preceding an imminent movement that not only alters current perceptions of recess, but as one that also advocates for it as an essential, positive elementary school component.

Considering the benefits of recess extend far beyond just that of academics, the main focus guiding this research will be to fully understand and describe the developmental purpose of recess. Apart from the widely assumed primary objective of recess (academic development), the goal of this research will be to answer the following overarching research question “what are students' experiences with recess?”. The research will be further supplemented by a key sub-question in order to ensure a detailed understanding of recess is established. The research goal is to understand the influence that recess has on not only student well-being, but also on their general development. The research will therefore also aim to answer the supplementary question, “how might these experiences influence the developmental trajectories of student well-being?”, by exploring students' perspectives of the recess environment as well as their experiences within. The Joint Consortium of School Health (JCSH, Morrison & Kirby, 2011) published an extensive review calling for schools to be seen as an environment capable of promoting student's positive health and well-being; however, within the document, recess is again neglected as part of that valuable environment.

In order to fully uncover the extent to which recess may be a valuable component of the elementary school environment, I will analyze a portion of data from ongoing research conducted by Dr. Lauren McNamara that looks at a variety of stakeholder perspectives of recess, as well as an initiative to enhance the developmental benefits associated with recess. From there, the MCYS (2006) and the JCSH (Morrison & Kirby, 2011) will be used to provide a look into the expectations of schools today in relation to caring for children's health and well-being, and how recess attends to many of those expectations. It is critical to understand the role recess plays in students' school day, but more so how the recess environment and their experiences within influences their health, well-being, and overall development. To move forward with the research at hand, it is necessary to first obtain a comprehensive understanding of the structure of Southern Ontario schools while placing a greater emphasis on understanding the recess environment in particular in order to effectively present it as a potential viable developmental tool.

School and Recess Environment

Wei et al. (2011) argue that schools are particularly influential in addressing the health and well-being of children and youth. The general climate of the institution as well as how connected individuals feel to the environment and staff can largely influence their health, well-being and overall development. This consequently leads to the importance of understanding that the entire school environment (including recess) plays a crucial role in the development and success of students.

Recess must therefore be understood and utilized as an important component of students' school day as the benefits are insurmountable. Ramstetter, Murray, and Garner (2010) add to the importance of recess through their argument that it is a fundamental element in relation to the education of the 'whole child' during the school day. Slade and Griffith (2013) describe the

education of the ‘whole child’ as lessons that place attention on not only the cognitive development of students, but on their social, emotional, mental, and physical development, as well as their overall well-being.

In understanding recess in its undervalued state, Anthony Pellegrini (1987), who has become a key stakeholder in recess research, brought forth an important revelation when he acknowledged that little is known about what actually happens on the playground during recess. He further argued that even less is known about children’s behaviours and interactions, but more specifically how their activities and interactions can contribute to their subsequent learning and development (Pellegrini, 1987). This therefore contributes another reason as to how providing data in the proposed research area could not only contribute valuable knowledge, but could call for a change in recess structure in order to maximize the developmental potential of today and tomorrow’s student population.

Health and Well-Being in Today’s Students

According to the United Nations (UN) in their goal of creating a ‘World Fit for Children’, they endorse a commitment to ensure that every child not only has the right to develop to their full potential, but also has the opportunities to become “physically healthy, mentally alert, socially competent, emotionally sound and ready to learn” (Kieling et al., 2011, p. 1522). Flaspohler, Meehan, Mara, and Keller (2012) acknowledge the reality of a growing need for the establishment of effective early mental health prevention programs to reduce children’s risk factors but to also promote their healthy development. Wintersteen (2010) argues that prevention interventions and programs that focus on health-promotion will have greater success in targeting children’s mental health if they are provided to individuals in an environment that is both close

to them and deemed appropriate by the participants. This therefore highlights the school environment as a prime location for mental health prevention and promotion-based programs.

An important and influential finding in relation to child and youth development is that approximately 10-20% of children and youth today experience mental health issues, with their needs often being neglected (Kieling et al., 2011). Furthermore, when individuals experience mental health issues, especially at a young age, they are at an increased risk of not only failing academically, but also experiencing a number of social and emotional struggles in their everyday lives. Mainella, Agate and Clark (2011) identify the reality that researchers and other key stakeholders concerned with the development and well-being of children and youth are in a “unique position to intervene in a positive way” (p. 101). This consequently identifies the importance of acknowledging the influence of the school system, especially in regards to existing tools that are both overlooked and undervalued. When considering the influence of mental health symptoms on child and youth outcomes, it is essential that all possible tools, recess included, are used to their full potential. This will ensure that children and youth are provided with ample opportunities in hopes of contributing to healthy and successful developmental trajectories void of mental health illnesses or concerns.

Promoting Positive Development within the School Environment

When considering the importance of children’s health and well-being, it is essential that as many of their environments as possible are structured in such a way as to positively promote their development. In the context of the current research, and again taking into consideration children and youths’ extended involvement in educational institutions, schools have become central to the obvious development of students’ cognitive skills and knowledge, but more so to the less obvious promotion of positive health and prevention of mental health issues. Mainella et

al. (2011) argue that in order to encourage students' well-being as well as productive interactions among them, students need to be provided with opportunities for outdoor-based play in a safe and dynamic environment. McNamara (2013) discovered that many students actually struggle with negotiating the recess environment, consequently hindering their ability to engage in productive play with peers. For some students, recess may be their only opportunity for not only peer interaction, but for outdoor-based free play, again highlighting the necessity of ensuring it is a safe and welcoming environment. This idea of children lacking substantial opportunities for play was one of the many reasons that brought Canadian Tire Jumpstart to make the following claim:

... play doesn't come out to play as much anymore. As a company that cares deeply about families, knowing half our kids aren't active matters, for a country without strong children cannot stay strong. So Canadian Tire is rallying this country's most influential partners to bring back play, and with it, all the confidence, creativity, and strength that serve to remind, we all play for Canada.

(Canadian Tire, 2013)

Furthermore, considering the Cartoon Network and a National Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) have launched a *rescuing* recess campaign (Henley, McBride, Milligan, & Nichols, 2007), it is time for recess to be utilized as the developmental tool it has the ability to be.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

As previously introduced in their goal of creating a ‘World Fit for Children’, the UN endorses a commitment to ensure that every child is provided with opportunities for optimal physical, social, emotional, mental and academic development. This includes providing them with environments that productively foster their development within each facet (Kieling et al., 2011). Jakes and DeBord (2010) argue that children and adolescents “may have great potential, intelligence, and ability, but sometimes lack motivation, a nurturing environment, and family, school, or community support” (p. 178). Putting children first and ensuring they have strong support in each of their primary environments (home, school, and community) could prove to be considerably influential to their well-being. Taking this into account while also acknowledging the excess of time students spend in schools, Roeser, Eccles, and Sameroff (2000) highlight the importance of the school’s role in promoting children’s development, health and well-being. These important developmental contributions come in addition to the school systems already important role of educating students.

The following literature review is broken down into three sections to speak to the current education system and the importance of addressing child and youth development within the school environment. The first section will lay the groundwork for the current research by providing details about Canadian schools with a heightened focus on recess and its purpose within the education system. The second section will highlight the pervasiveness of mental health concerns in children and adolescents which is the preface to the necessity of encouraging the development of positive student health and well-being through a number of accessible avenues. The final section will bring everything together by addressing how recess may be a

practical catalyst for not only promoting the health and well-being of today's children but also preventing mental health issues through positive health promotion efforts.

Section One: School and Recess Environment

Originating in the Peel Region of Ontario, a 'balanced day' system provides students with 100 minutes of classroom instruction, followed by 40 minutes of time allotted for a nutrition and fitness break (Dorman, Gauthier, & Thirkill, 2013). The first 20 minutes are allocated as a 'nutrition' break, and the second 20 minutes are allocated to sending the children outside for their 'fitness' break (Dorman et al., 2013). Holmes, Pellegrini and Schmidt (2006) found 20 minute recesses to be optimal in increasing student's postrecess classroom attention and minimizing problematic behaviours. The fact that children are provided with 40 minute breaks may raise some questions here; however, since they are separated into two different sections: nutrition and fitness, they should be regarded as two separate recess components. Pellegrini and Smith (1993) argued that depending on the desired behaviours of the students, optimal recess lengths may vary. They argued that shorter recess periods are more beneficial physically, but longer periods may be more beneficial for the sedentary activities that typically follow recess (Pellegrini & Smith, 1993). When considering the amount of time students spend in the classroom in between recess, it is important to note that the longer they are expected to remain in the classroom, the more vigorous and potentially problematic their play may become during recess (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993). This again provides another channel for utilizing recess to optimize the developmental outcomes of students and to encourage positive and productive interactions among peers.

Peer interactions are an integral part of child and youth development and for many recess may be one of the few opportunities some individuals have to engage with their peers (Pellegrini

& Bohn, 2005). Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) argue that the social exchanges that occur between peers at recess are particularly important for not only elementary student's cognitive development, but for their general school adjustment as well. Peer interactions are necessary in that it allows children to both learn and refine social skills, and ultimately, children's level of social competence with their peers can be a powerful predictor of student's overall school performance and adjustment (Pellegrini, Blatchford, Kato, & Baines, 2004; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005).

What is recess? Holmes et al. (2006) and Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) describe recess as a critical part of elementary children's school day in that it provides them with a break from cognitively demanding academic instruction, and opportunities to engage in physical activities and interactions with their peers – all relatively free from adult intervention. This idea of recess play is further identified by the fact that it can take place either indoors or outdoors, as long as children are still receiving an unstructured break (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). In acknowledging that recess is not only crucial in providing students with said break from academic instruction, it should not be viewed as a method of escaping academics, but instead, Pellegrini and Bjorklund (1997) argue that this undervalued component of the school day is imperative in increasing student's classroom attention post-recess, positive peer interaction, and their general health and well-being.

Visions of recess environments tend to differ based on individual's past experiences. Depictions of 'playgrounds' often encompass pictures of the infamous jungle gym which some schools are fortunate enough to have. However, for the context of the current research, 'playgrounds' will be used to describe the entire recess environment including fields (soccer, football, baseball, and unmarked grassed areas), tarmac, and jungle gyms.

The first organized playground movement was developed in 1868, followed by supervised playgrounds in 1886 by the Boston Women's Club and Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association (Mainella et al., 2011). From there stemmed the creation of the Playground Association of America and the National Recreation Association, in which a number of gentlemen such as Luther Gulick, Henry Curtis, and Joseph Lee, became playground advocates and called for the development of new playgrounds and new programs for children (Mainella et al., 2011). These movements reiterate the importance of not only providing students with spaces to engage in play and interact with their peers, but also acknowledging the benefits that such environments can provide in promoting students' optimal development.

Although parallel benefits are believed to exist between indoor and outdoor recesses, the activities available for students within each environment can greatly impact the specific nature of the benefits achieved. Pellegrini and Smith (1993) found that students are far more likely to engage in positive, physically active play when they are able to have their recess outdoors. Tran, Clark and Racette (2013) substantiated that claim by testing activity levels of students in grades two through five, for both indoor and outdoor recesses. Students' activity levels were at their peak for outdoor recesses and much lower during indoor recess periods (Tran et al., 2013). This raises concerns around what happens when children experience a number of indoor recesses in a row, such as from rainy spring days, or cold winter days where temperatures reach dangerous lows. Evans and Pellegrini (1997) found that following indoor recess periods teachers more often reported their students as not only being more difficult to manage, but as experiencing greater levels of agitation as well (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997). Pellegrini and Smith (1993) stated that "the optimal length [or environment] of the recess period may vary, depending on the behaviour desired" (p. 57). As previously noted, shorter recess periods may be better in terms of

opportunities for physical activity; however longer recess periods, or those that occur indoors may be more beneficial for more sedentary behaviours such as social interactions. McNamara (2013) argues recess provides students with an outlet for physically active play regardless, and when students are restricted from that outlet, students lose those valuable opportunities for physical activity, peer interaction, fresh air and the benefits associated with each.

Importance of recess. Recess has been found to play a crucial role in many aspects of children's academic and social well-being. For example, recess is believed to provide students with opportunities to exercise to enhance their attention when they return to the classroom as well as to encourage their active participation within academic instruction (Henley et al., 2007). Ginsburg (2006) maintains that the free, unstructured play that students engage in during recess is beneficial in encouraging their social, emotional, and cognitive development and well-being. Encouraging children to use their imagination and creativity by allowing them to create their own games and rules may contribute to the development of problem-solving and coping skills as well as leadership skills. Morrison and Kirby (2011) contends that students need to develop a number of skills related to their social and emotional development such as cooperative learning, problem solving and peer modeling, which are all achievable within the recess environment. Furthermore, recess is also capable of encouraging the development of stress management, appropriate coping skills, conflict management, and resilience (Barros, Silver, & Stein, 2009). Axtman (2004) argues that "the loss of recess, according to experts in child health and psychology, results in more sedentary, stressed-out youngsters who may encounter significant difficulties learning to socialize" (p. 4). Ramstetter et al. (2010) furthermore argue that the benefits of recess much outweigh the problems that may occur (i.e. bullying, teasing, exclusion)

and that recess should therefore not be withheld from students for either academic or punitive reasons.

In previous years, research has come to acknowledge the reality that recess is slowly losing ground in a few countries. Recently, a trend emerged in both the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) where schools are reducing, and some altogether eliminating recess in elementary schools (Blatchford, 1998). Dills, Morgan, and Rotthoff (2011) found that within the past five to 10 years, 40% of school districts in the United States alone have reduced or eliminated recess to provide students with more time allotted for classroom instruction. Considering the importance of recess, reducing or eliminating recess could prove to do more harm to children's development than good.

Important perspectives of recess. When explaining an environment in hopes of presenting an in-depth understanding of it, including the voices of key stakeholders is essential in order to ensure both a proper understanding and portrayal is developed. A number of researchers have contributed valuable knowledge concerning the school environment, but only recently has recess begun to receive the attention it deserves. Furthermore, it was not until even more recently that the voices of students started to be included in recess research, even though it is an environment designed for students' benefit.

Students. According to a few studies that have included children's voices within research concerning recess, most elementary children typically report a thorough enjoyment of the recess breaks they receive throughout the demanding school day (Holmes et al., 2006). Butcher (1999) also found recess to be a time that not only excites children, but often registers as not only their favourite part of the school day but as something they always look forward to. In McNamara's ongoing research, elementary school children typically provide a variety of reasons as to why

they think students *need* recess. They often described recess in the following ways: as a necessary break from instruction, as a chance to get fresh air, and as an opportunity to engage in play and interact with their peers (McNamara, 2013).

A few students highlighted some problems associated with recess; they did however also provide potential strategies in addition to their comments in order to mitigate and correct the perceived issues. As discovered in McNamara's (2013) research, minimal supervision on the playground can often, unfortunately, serve as a catalyst for antisocial behaviour in the 'hidden' corners of the playground. One student indicated that kids tend to get overly aggressive when they know they are a 'safe' distance from authority figures, or if they know they are out of sight of the playground supervisors (McNamara, 2013). One consistency noted across student responses in McNamara's (2013) research was the need for additional supervisors on the playground to reduce the amount of bullying, teasing, and antisocial behaviours.

Staff. Children are not the only ones in the school system that look forward to and count on the recess break. Teachers require additional time for not only their personal needs, but to ensure that when they return to the classroom, their students have renewed energy and attentiveness to academic instruction (Butcher, 1999). A teacher in McNamara's (2013) research indicated that recess is a beneficial time for students to de-stress, expel their excess energy and to get their blood flowing in hopes of producing rested students that are ready and excited to learn post-recess. Teachers also highlighted how much of an impact recess can have on student's academic engagement and success. Essentially, the more students engage in various energy-burning activities and use the opportunity to engage positively with peers at recess, the readier students are to attend to the material teachers present to them following.

Many principals, however, often have a different opinion of the recess period. Vialet (2008) conducted a study in which most principals responded by stating that the most difficult period of the day is recess. Vialet (2008) interprets recess as the “ugly secret” (p. 38) that no one really discusses, but that every principal confronts at least once or twice a day. In a growing body of research surrounding principals’ experiences, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation still declared recess as an undervalued time during the school day (Vialet, 2008).

When it comes to the current recess environment, some staff painted the picture of a moderately disorganized environment with students’ activity levels falling on a wide spectrum from physically active, to sedentary (McNamara, 2013). A teacher indicated that many self-directed children have little trouble finding appropriate activities to engage in during recess; however there are a number of students that do not know how to negotiate the unstructured environment (McNamara, 2013). This struggle experienced by a number of students can lead to further challenges in the recess environment including the development of social conflict. However, when students are provided with appropriate support they may develop the skills necessary to negotiate the recess environment and to engage in successful conflict resolution, as well as positive peer interaction.

Although there are many perspectives of the general recess environment as well as the struggles and triumphs within, most of the attention recess receives from adults is negative due to the problematic behaviours noted to occur during that time (i.e. bullying and antisocial behaviours). What the current research aims to do is to modify the negative perceptions that have caused superintendants and government agencies to reduce or eliminate recess by presenting recess through the eyes of the students themselves.

Section Two: Health and Well-Being in Today's Students

In the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS, 2006) and their creation of a policy framework for child and youth mental health, their vision for Ontario becomes one where mental health is recognized as a key factor in children's health and well-being. This vision furthermore includes the belief that children and youth are capable of growing to reach their full potential if they are provided with the best opportunities possible to grow and succeed. The MCYS (2006) does however emphasize that in order for this vision to be attainable, they require "a commitment on the part of everyone in Ontario to promote the well-being of children and youth, so that children and youth with [and without] mental health problems and illnesses live, learn and thrive in their communities" (p. 6).

When considering the array of influences that exist in children's lives and which are capable of impacting their well-being, it is essential to ensure that as many of children's environments as possible are structured in ways that are conducive to promoting their development. Schools have received a lot of recent attention in regards to their potential as a resource for encouraging the development of the 'whole student', including their mental health and well-being. Many organizations including the Ministry of Ontario have taken this initiative to the next level in order to ensure students are provided with the necessary tools to develop to their full potential.

The mental health of children and youth today is becoming a very real concern, and when children's environments are not explicitly well aligned with the goal of promoting children's development from a holistic perspective, then children's mental health can also be overlooked. The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA; 2014) estimates that ten to 20% of Canadian children and youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder, consequently classifying it as the

single most disabling group of disorders, worldwide. Furthermore, mental disorders in children and youth, second to injuries, are ranked as the second highest Canadian hospital care expenditure (CMHA, 2014). Existing knowledge on mental health, although limited, is thought to play a fundamental role in providing an understanding of the impact mental health issues can have on individuals, especially on children and youth. This crucial knowledge highlights the importance and need to modify current methods of positive health promotion into tools for prevention, earlier identification, and interventions directed at children and youth (Wei et al., 2011). The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH; 2012) found that nearly 70% of mental health disorders experienced by the adult population today may be a direct result of early onset mental health problems during childhood or adolescence, consequently emphasizing the need to target mental health concerns at a younger age.

According to Kieling et al. (2010), a startling ten to 20% of children and adolescents experience mental health problems with their mental health needs all too often being neglected. As found by Statistics Canada, in 2012 alone, 17% of Canadians 15 and older (approximately 4.9 million individuals) perceived themselves as needing mental health care. Among these people, 67% had their needs met, 21% had their needs partially met, and 12% did not have their needs met at all. What is more concerning is that in regards to children and mental health issues, only one in five children who need mental health services receive the professional help they need (CMHA, 2014). Furthermore, with half of the disabilities experienced by individuals between the ages of ten and 24 being attributable to mental health (Lazarus & Sulkowski, 2011), this again emphasizes the need for greater attention and intervention to be directed towards these concerns. Kieling et al. (2011) argue that there are a number of positive outcomes associated with earlier investment in child health and well-being. These outcomes include increased developmental

potential, prevention or decreased severity of adult disorders and economic advantages for healthy individuals (Kieling et al., 2011). What is critical to understand especially in the context of the current research is that child and adolescent mental health services extend much beyond the health sector to include several other agencies that can and do play a key role in supporting these individuals (Goodman et al., 1997). These additional systems include education, social care, and even the criminal justice system.

Before diverging into what we can do for children and youth in terms of health promotion, we must address their needs in order to ensure a good fit of programming or intervention. There is an evident gap between the needs individuals have and the resources available to address such needs (Kieling et al., 2011). Kieling et al. (2011) furthermore argues that a variety of long-term health and socioeconomic benefits exist, such as those previously mentioned, if we take a more preventative perspective and promotional stance in addressing children and adolescents' developmental needs. In again drawing on the MCYS' (2006) vision for Ontario, they believe children and youth should have access to a continuum of services and supports specific to their needs. Each community and the services within need to work together in order to achieve this (MCYS, 2006). Fostering networking and communication between agencies is a necessity in order to ensure all stakeholders are on the same level and each positively contributing to student's needs.

Poor health outcomes. In keeping in context with the education system, it is essential to understand the outcomes students can experience as a result of [mental health] problems or poor experiences within the school environment. According to the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL; 2009), "poor mental health in Canadian school children poses a significant risk to their academic development and puts them at a greater risk of dropping out of school, substance abuse

and suicide” (p. 3). This highlights the need for schools to be prepared to address the wide spectrum of student needs in order to ensure that all students are equipped with the necessary tools for a successful future.

The CMHA (2013) found that 5% of males and 12% of females between the ages of 12-19 years had experienced a major depressive episode. This places a total of approximately 3.2 million children and youth at risk of experiencing further depressive symptoms or becoming clinically depressed. Furthermore, depression can be exceptionally detrimental for children as it is one of the most influential predictors for future mental health risks (Ross, Schochet, & Bellair, 2010). What is important to acknowledge here, as it will be further explored the following section, is the existence of a negative relationship between children’s level of social competence and the risk for developing depression (Ross et al., 2010). Essentially, as children’s level of social competence decreases, their risk of depression increases. Student’s school competence contributes to their level of school connectedness as it is yet another key factor correlated with mental health symptoms, especially depression (Ross et al., 2010). Ross et al. (2010) aim to emphasize the roles that both adolescent’s interpersonal risk- and protective factors play in relation to their school experiences, but more so, to their experience of depressive symptoms. As a result, knowledge of potential risk and protective factors within the school environment can provide valuable information for the creation and implementation of appropriate prevention and intervention programs. Depression can lead to a number of poor outcomes for children and youth, but one key area that it greatly affects is their school attendance (Burton, Marshal, & Chisolm, 2014), placing individuals at a greater risk of experiencing a number of poor outcomes in other facets of their lives.

Experiences of mental health issues are often associated with school problems such as chronic absenteeism or dropping out at an early age (McEwan, Waddell, & Barker, 2007; Saluja et al., 2004; Burton et al., 2014), which can substantially influence individual's future trajectories. Extending on problems of chronic absenteeism, 25-90% of frequently absent students met requirements for a diagnosis according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Likewise, 7% of students with regular school attendance also met the criteria for a DSM-IV diagnosis (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003). Egger et al. (2003) found that 88% of "school refusers" (p. 797) had at least one DSM-IV diagnosis, and 75% had a parent that was previously treated for a mental health disorder. It is important to acknowledge that there could be a number of plausible explanations behind student's school refusal behaviours above and beyond the presence of mental health concerns. Egger et al. (2003) brought forward notion that "any level of mixed school refusal should be seen as a red flag alerting providers to a high risk of childhood psychopathology" (p. 804), but also to other potential problematic situations or experiences. This again emphasizes the need to establish programs that focus on both prevention and early intervention in order to provide individuals with the necessary developmental tools and support.

As previously noted, programs that focus on the promotion of positive mental health and well-being along with the prevention of mental health concerns are likely to be more successful when presented to individuals in environments in which they are comfortable – such as their school (Wintersteen, 2010). When considering the poor outcomes individuals can experience as a result of mental health problems, it is important for a greater focus to be placed on early prevention through means of promoting positive health and well-being. The concept of early prevention is especially important when taking into account not only the well-being of

elementary and secondary school populations today, but their future health and well-being as well.

Durlak and Wells (1997) conducted a meta-analysis of 177 school-based prevention programs designed to address behavioural and social issues associated with mental health disorders in order to distinguish ways to prevent problematic behaviours. They identified a variety of structures and components as being both beneficial in addressing the needs of not only the school as a whole, but more importantly, of the needs of the individuals. Longitudinal prevention programs that ran across multiple years were identified as most effective with a greater likelihood of fostering lasting benefits in participants (Durlak & Wells, 1997). Furthermore, prevention programs designed to focus on multiple domains within a designated area (i.e. well-being) are deemed as being far more beneficial for participants. Greenberg et al. (2003) argue that in order to enhance the likelihood of program success, emphasis needs to be placed on “changing children’s behaviours, teacher and family behaviours, home-school relationships and school and neighbourhood support for [the development of] healthy, competent behaviour” (p. 469). It is further argued that well-designed and well-implemented development and prevention programs aimed at children and youth can evoke a wide variety of positive outcomes such as the reduction of problematic behaviours and the increase of both social and emotional competencies (Durlak & Wells, 1997). Essentially, programs that focus on the holistic needs of children and youth are more likely to continue promoting positive health and well-being.

Kieling et al. (2011) advance the idea first raised by Sullivan (1953) that we are not isolated creatures as individual’s temperament, personality, skills, experience and genetic predispositions all play a role in their vulnerability to mental health issues and disorders. Gilgun

(1996) found that children who experience excessive risk are at an elevated risk for experiencing negative outcomes such as the development of mental health issues as well as the poor outcomes often associated with them.

Professionals providing psychological services in schools are believed to “share a commitment to improve the educational, social-emotional and life outcomes of children” (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013, p. 475). In order for them to effectively do so, it is important to understand the various influences of both risk and protective factors so that healthy development among children and youth can be maximized (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013). Providing children and youth with such intricate support is crucial for developing their emotional and social competencies.

Emotional competence is described as how an individual handles their own emotions as well as those associated with emotionally charged problems (Ciarrochi & Scott, 2003; Saarni, 1997). When connecting this to children and their development, emotional competence is considered to be a large contributor to their social success (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser 2012). Essentially, emotional competence is believed to be central to one’s ability to successfully and appropriately interact and develop relationships with peers (Denham et al., 2003). Understanding one’s emotions and how to use them effectively is crucial in that this understanding can be used to provide helpful social cues to others, thus playing a critical role in shaping future social interactions (Denham et al., 2012). Successful development of emotional competencies will likely contribute to individual’s successful interactions with peers. Children who are able to react both empathetically and prosocially to peers’ emotions were viewed as being more socially competent by their teachers and peers (Denham & Burger, 1991; Denham & Holt, 1993).

Children that develop emotional competence are more capable and successful in establishing peer relationships. Rose-Krasnor (1977) developed a 'prism model' to describe the interplay of emotional and social competence in children's daily activities. Her model is built on the belief that social competence is not only the effectiveness of interactions between individuals, but is the result of socially organized and understood behaviours that meet individual's short and long term developmental needs. She advances the idea that one's social competence is reflective of the quality of friendships they have with their peers as well as the concept of 'group status' and social self-efficacy. With acknowledging the significance of emotional and social competencies as well as the need to encourage the development of each within students, it is also crucial to understand the poor outcomes students can experience as a result of inadequate social and emotional competencies.

According to a study conducted by Klem and Connell (2004), fewer than 50% of elementary school students had particularly well-developed social and emotional competencies by their eighth grade graduation. In looking at a general population of elementary students, some may easily succeed in academics whereas others may struggle, become disengaged, experience deficiencies in just one or both competencies, experience difficulties learning, or even disrupt the education of their peers (Benson, Scales, Leffert, & Roehlkepartiam, 1999). In continuing to provide connections between mental health and the school environment, when an individual lacks social emotional competence, they are yet again at an increased risk of developing depression and other possible mental health issues. This emphasizes the need to ensure that students' social and emotional competence development is being encouraged within as many of their environments as possible. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL; 2013), social and emotional skills are crucial in becoming a good

person – student, citizen, or worker. They also argue that if the development of these competencies is encouraged in today’s children through multiyear, integrated programs, many risk behaviours can be prevented or reduced (CASEL, 2013). The CASEL (2013) organization believes that a potential method of encouraging the development of social and emotional skills is to have students engage in positive activities, both inside and outside of the classroom. Zins and Elias (2006) describe effective schools as those that not only educate their students to pass standardized testing requirements, but those that also encourage students to excel in everyday life. They further argue that curriculums (formal and informal) that integrate social and emotional competency skill development alongside academic instruction are more capable of maximizing student’s potential to succeed in school and beyond (Zins & Elias, 2006). Previously traditional curriculums have now been extended to include a variety of different foci including that of educating the ‘whole’ child rather than focusing solely on student’s academic development. This includes ensuring each of their educational environments (recess included) is used to encourage not only individual development, but their social development as well.

Peer support and well-being. Interacting positively with peers is believed to be an important developmental task for elementary students especially because children’s involvement with their peers can influence student’s levels of school adjustment and school connectedness as well as their future interactions with peers. Pellegrini et al. (2004) argue that ‘we-relationships’ in terms of mutual friendships are the basis for our existence. Essentially, we are born into a socially-oriented world where becoming a ‘we’ is essential in order for the ‘I’ to experience the world (Pellegrini et al., 2004). Kostenius and Ohrling (2006) build on the importance of peer support with their argument that “the meaning of schoolchildren’s health and well-being [is]

understood as the experience of relationships to others and as the relationship to oneself” (p. 226).

In Kostenius and Ohrling’s (2006) research, students reported that having friends made them feel ‘good’, whereas being excluded or lacking peer relationships made them feel ‘bad’. During late childhood as individuals merge into early adolescence, peer interactions and relations become even more important and considerably interrelated to individuals’ development (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1993). Bukowski et al. (1993) emphasize that individuals’ relationships with their peers influence student development in a number of ways. Positive interactions between peers can influence student’s ability to cope with a variety of different situations. Sullivan (1953) found that “peer and friendship relations in early adolescence constitute a person’s first true interpersonal relationships and make a profound contribution to adolescent’s sense of well-being” (as cited in Bukowski et al., 1993, p. 24). Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) argue that social exchanges that occur within the school environment (particularly at recess) between peers are especially important to elementary students’ cognitive development, and contribute to their level of school connectedness and adjustment as previously noted. Pellegrini and Smith (1993) extend on this idea with the notion that what children do on the playground has the potential to have considerable educational and developmental implications. In terms of educational implications, Pellegrini and Smith (1993) brought forward the concept of social competence, and how children must be able to function in both social and cognitive spheres in order to be successful in the school environment (Pellegrini & Smith, 1993). Adequate social interaction with peers at recess is believed to have positive implications for students. This does however raise concerns about the students who struggle to navigate the recess environment and to initiate and develop positive peer interactions.

While friendships are believed to provide students with opportunities for positive social interaction, they are also thought to provide a number of benefits such as security and closeness. In this way, when students lack key social relationships, it can often result in feelings of loneliness and isolation (Bukowski et al., 1993). McNamara's (2013) research contends that some of the reasons conflict exists on the playground in relation to peer interaction (such as bullying and exclusion) are at least partially attributable to antisocial peers and to individuals that are less skilled at engaging in positive peer interaction. One of the teachers in McNamara's (2013) study went so far as to claim that today's children do not know how to engage in proper play with peers, therefore highlighting an important area that could benefit from greater attention. Students often attributed feelings of 'safety' to both the quantity and quality of friendships they had (McNamara, 2013). Students reported more positive experiences when they had at least one peer nearby during free time to act as a safeguard against potential conflict. They furthermore reported that a lack of peers made them feel lonely and even fear the recess environment. Having few friendships was associated with a perceived lack of support or protection in the occurrence of conflict (McNamara, 2013). The concern that becomes exposed here are perceptions of 'safety' for students that lack good quality peer relations and the negative outcomes that can be experienced as a result.

In trying to understand the quality of peer relationships, Bukowski et al. (1993) offer a description of peer interactions in relation to students' perceived levels of acceptance and rejection. They suggest that peer interactions can be described as an 'impact-preference' relationship. The *impact* of a friendship is described by Bukowski et al. (1993) as the "sum of [perceived] acceptance and rejection" (p. 25) and is considered to be an indicator of individuals' popularity among peers. Conversely, peer *preference* is "the difference between acceptance and

rejection and is a measure of a child's relative likeableness" (Bukowski et al., 1993, p. 25). Essentially, these concepts play a large role in student's perceptions of both acceptance and rejection and ultimately their feelings of 'safety' on the playground. These concepts will be explored in relation to how peer-based relationships and the degree of social support within them can impact student development.

Acceptance. Social skills are deemed as an important concept in relation to student's overall education. Children deemed as 'likeable' by fellow peers are likely to have more opportunities to develop new friendships and often report more positive experiences within those friendships than do children who are described as being liked by fewer peers (Bukowski et al., 1993). What is important to address in relation to elementary school-age children is the fact that acceptance and inclusion into peer groups are of great importance during this time in their lives. Children deemed as 'unpopular' by fellow schoolmates may not feel included within a main peer group, but may successfully find solace and protection from loneliness in a secure relationship with one or two close friends (Bukowski et al., 1993).

Rejection. As for students who are less skilled in negotiating the establishment of friendships, a lack of 'togetherness' or inadequate peer relationships during childhood and adolescence can negatively affect their well-being, and ultimately their broader life outcomes (Kostenius & Ohring, 2006). This consequently brings forth the need to encourage positive interactions among students, as well as between staff and students. When individuals fail to integrate into any sort of peer group structure, they can often experience social isolation in which they may experience feelings of emotional loneliness. These feelings or experiences may contribute to developmental concerns such as an increased the risk of mental health problems (Bukowski et al., 1993). Essentially, it is important to understand just how much children's

health and well-being can be impacted as a result of their experiences with peers. It is necessary to take students' peer interactions and health and well-being into consideration when designing and implementing programs aimed at promoting positive development.

In taking into account just how many ways the health and well-being of children and youth can be impacted, it is crucial that their environments are structured in a manner that is going to encourage their development in the most holistic and optimal way. One of children and youths' main environments – the school system – should be recognized as a noteworthy resource for encouraging the development of the 'whole' child, including their health and well-being.

Section Three: Promoting Positive Development within the School Environment

Pellegrini (1987), a prominent scholar in school and recess research, made a powerful statement when he articulated that “we know very little about what children do on the playground and know even less about the ways in which these behaviours are related to learning and development” (p. 2). Although the argument comes from a rather dated source, the primary notion still stands as true. Principals and educational stakeholders overwhelmingly place their main efforts on the problems and concerns of recess such as teasing, fighting, and exclusion rather than considering ways to minimize such behaviours and enhance the benefits recess has to offer (Violet, 2008). For many children, recess is often one of their favourite parts of the school day which therefore highlights the importance of understanding the complete value of recess, from all angles.

Roeser et al. (2000) brought forth the reality that schools are now viewed as a critical resource for the promotion of positive mental health as well as for the use of primary prevention mechanisms. Keep in mind that these new roles are in addition to the already important goal that schools play in educating students. In constructing their policy framework, the MCYS (2006)

recognized that child and youth mental health is a shared responsibility beyond the traditional health sector. Goodman, Daines and White (1997) add to this by including education as an additional sector that should also address children's mental health needs.

Position of schools. Schools are now identified as being in a prime position to address student's development, health, and well-being (Wei et al., 2011). This is especially true considering the heightened amount of time students spend within the school system. The Council of Ministers of Education in Canada found that elementary students spend an average of 919 hours a year in compulsory instruction with secondary student's instruction time averaging 923 hours per year (Morrison & Kirby, 2011). Noltemeyer and Bush (2013) also note the importance of school by stressing that most children worldwide attend some sort of school, therefore making schools a fertile ground for the promotion of both positive development and resilience. This consequently brings forth the idea that *all* schools should be structured in such a way as to place them in a position to encourage positive development, with a greater focus being placed on prevention over intervention. Schools have become a viable resource for reaching the individuals who underuse available services, and therefore must be utilized accordingly (Ginsburg, Becker, Newman-Kingery, & Nichols, 2008).

As previously noted, a realization was made about the American education system that is both comparable and applicable to the Canadian education system. It was argued that schools need to be active partners when it comes to the mental health of students because of the critical interplay between student's school success and their mental health (Lazarus & Sulkowski, 2011). It was furthermore argued that students' academic and psychosocial functioning can no longer be seen as separate, but must be viewed as an interrelated entity. It is believed that a high quality education should be prepared to "teach young people to interact in socially skilled and respectful

ways; to practice positive, safe, and healthy behaviours; to contribute ethically and responsibly to their peer group, family, school, and community and to possess basic competencies, work habits, and values as a foundation for meaningful employment and engaged citizenship” (Elias et al., 1997; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Learning First Alliance, 2001; Osher, Dwyer, & Jackson, 2002, as cited in Greenberg et al., 2003, pp. 466-467).

How schools can promote positive health. As previously alluded to, school connectedness and overall climate can play a large role in determining the future health and well-being of students. The Institute of Medicine (2009) highlights that in order to work towards the prevention and the treatment of emotional, behavioural, and mental disorders; we need to be promoting children and adolescents’ self-esteem, social-emotional competence and social inclusion.

Comprehensive health. The notion that ‘children are our future’ emphasizes the need for today’s and tomorrow’s children and youth to be provided with adequate resources to ensure positive and healthy development. Kostenius and Ohrling (2006) second this important finding and further argue that children’s health and well-being are crucial as it greatly affects a country’s future productivity. Jakes and DeBord (2010) also found student’s academic success to be critical in developing children and youths’ future economic and social well-being. Kostenius and Ohrling (2004) further argue that how children’s school participation is handled and supported is important in order to ensure their active participation within school and community settings as well as their present and future well-being. Roeser et al. (2000) argue that the school environment should therefore be utilized as a central area for both the promotion of positive health and prevention of mental health problems, in addition to the obvious, primary role of student education.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “a health-promoting school is one that constantly strengthens its capacity as a health setting for living, learning and working” (WHO, 2014). The WHO explains the roles that health promoting schools can play in order to promote student’s healthy development. This includes providing both a formal and informal health curricula, establishing a safe and healthy school environment, providing necessary resources such as access to appropriate health services, and having active communication and involvement with families and the wider community (WHO, 2014).

Well-being. The primary focus within the elementary school level is placed on academics; however, a greater number of mental health concerns are emerging and are identified as being a key component of students’ health, safety, and well-being. With this in mind, it is important to also acknowledge the fact that these components are largely missing from the educational curricula. According to Kirby and Keon (2006), and Santar, Short, and Ferguson (2009), one of the primary goals of educational institutions should be to promote the health and well-being of all students. This is especially true as health concerns are now presenting themselves earlier than ever, consequently supporting the need for programs aimed at prevention and health promotion to be initiated at an earlier grade level.

School climate. Cook, Murphy, and Hunt (2000), and Freiberg (1999) found the school climate to be influential across a number of student outcomes, including their socioemotional functioning, behaviour, grades, and academic performance (as cited in Woolley & Grogan-Kaylor, 2006). The overall school climate can therefore play a large role in not only student’s academic development, but also their health and well-being. Zins and Elias (2006) believe that a reciprocal relationship exists between the entire school climate and student’s social-emotional development. This means that not only does a positive environment promote social and

emotional learning; social and emotional learning consequently facilitates a supportive learning environment (Zins & Elias, 2006). When working with children and youth, the school climate should be a central focus (Durlak & Wells, 1997), especially as it plays a key role in fostering their school connectedness.

School connectedness. According to Ross et al. (2010), poor school connectedness is “not simply a general marker of distress, but a potential risk factor for future depressive symptoms” (p. 270). School connectedness has been found to have an even larger association with mental health than does an individual’s level of attachment with their parent(s) or parental figure(s) (Ross et al., 2010). It is important to note that there are a variety of extraneous variables that may impact individual’s degree of school connectedness. Ross et al. (2010) state that “social skills may account for some of the individual differences on school connectedness and [it] exerts a large proportion of its influences in depressive symptoms via school connectedness” (p. 273). This highlights the fact that the influence of social skills on one’s development and school connectedness should not be underestimated. Essentially, it is vital to understand the developmental precursors to school connectedness, while also taking into account social skills, attachment, parents, and school environment as each of them greatly influence student’s level of school connectedness (Shochet et al., 2008, Shochet et al., 2007, as cited in Ross et al., 2010).

When taking into account the age range of students in elementary school, especially intermediate students preparing to make the transition into high school (ages 12-14), school connectedness could have an especially strong proximal influence on depressive symptoms for these students (Ross et al., 2010). This means that school connectedness could be seen as either a potential risk or protective factor in relation to the development of depression in these students depending on their age. Children that are verging on adolescence are believed to be more

susceptible to developing depressive symptoms as they are experiencing a number of changes in their lives (Maughan, Collishaw, & Stringaris, 2013). At this age, students are heavily dependent on the acceptance and perceptions of peers and a lack of adequate peer relationships may cause individuals to experience loneliness and insecurity, which can ultimately affect their well-being. Furthermore, beyond student's perceived level of peer connectedness, connections to both school staff and the general school environment also play a key role in influencing student well-being.

With this in mind, prevention approaches that address and promote student's level of school connectedness should be initiated well before students reach adolescence, with earlier implementation identified as being more beneficial (Ross et al., 2010). Ross et al. (2010) go so far as to say that the promotion of positive development and mental health should start as earlier as primary school. Essentially, the sooner measures are implemented that focus on positive student health and well-being, the better.

Support. As previously mentioned, schools are in a particularly unique position to help prevent the development of childhood and adolescent mental health challenges by supporting students' academic and emotional developmental (Lazarus & Sulkowski, 2011). Noltemeyer and Bush (2013) found that when students perceived a strong level of support from their peers, they were more likely to be protected from mental health problems, more specifically from depression. This finding was especially true for children who had experienced abuse, but was found to be more prominent in females (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013). As for males and peer support, Furlong, Felix, and Sharkey (2011) found that males' perceived level of social support from a close peer often buffered experiences of depression, especially when dealing with experiences of victimization (as cited in Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013). This highlights the need to

ensure students are provided with a number of avenues for support, including encouraging the initiation of new, positive, supportive relationships between peers.

Zins and Elias (2006) depict ‘genuinely effective schools’ as those that not only prepare students academically to pass state-regulated tests, but to be competent in their ability to succeed in daily life. They further found that when aspects of social and emotional competence are included in the academic curriculum and school environment, this may maximize student’s potential and ability to succeed within the school environment and beyond (Zins & Elias, 2006). Zins, Walberg, and Weissberg (2004) argue that because students are faced with so much uncertainty on a day-to-day basis, this can cause them to experience a great degree of insecurity, exclusion, and discouragement. This therefore highlights the notion that providing students with numerous avenues for support in addition to encouraging the development of social and emotional competencies is important and far more beneficial than previously realized, especially within the school environment (as cited in Zins & Elias, 2006).

Importance of social and emotional learning (SEL). Lazarus and Sulkowski (2011) raise the idea that if social and emotional learning programs were to be established within the school system to address growing mental health concerns, behavioural problems, and increasing dropout rates, this would contribute to better outcomes of today’s youth. Such inclusions in education may also contribute to a more productive society, and reduce the need for excessive social assistance. Elias et al. (1997) and the CASEL (2003) organization define social and emotional learning as

...the process of acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions; developing caring and concern for others;

making responsible decisions; establishing positive relationships; and handling challenging situations capably (as cited in Zins & Elias, 2006, p. 234).

SEL programs typically target a number of students' behaviours, cognitions, emotions, and social interactions. What is also important to acknowledge is that many of the skills developed through SEL can be reinforced as part of the informal curriculum, with reinforcements extending into the recess and playground environment. SEL programs are designed to teach children and youth how to effectively manage their emotions, understand their peers' perspectives and opinions, create reasonable and smart goals, and to be responsible in their decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000, as cited in Greenberg et al., 2003). If these components were to be established and reinforced across the school environment, the outcomes would likely be: more positive interactions and less antisocial behaviours, consequently leading to fewer problems within the classrooms and hallways, and most importantly on the playground at recess. Considering there is little adult supervision during recess breaks, if these core values were to be instilled in children within all environments, this would likely contribute to fewer concerns and problems as well as more positive and productive interactions among them.

Recess as a viable tool to encourage positive development. The fact that the Cartoon Network and a National Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) have launched a "rescuing" recess campaign (Henley et al., 2007) highlights just how important recess is, and how its current value continues to be overlooked. Wei et al. (2011) discuss the need for implementing a comprehensive school mental health model, with the focus being directed to secondary schools. The idea that comes forth here is the need to be proactive at an earlier age rather than taking a 'reactive' or 'repair' approach at a later age. If comprehensive health models were to be

implemented at an earlier age or at an elementary school level, children would be in a better position with an increased likelihood of positive development, school adjustment, and school connectedness. These key aspects of children's development are especially important during student's transition into secondary school. As previously noted, promoting positive health *and* well-being is an underlying focus within the classroom setting, in addition to the already important task of educating students. However, there exists an overlooked area of the school environment that has considerable potential to be an opportune area for promoting the health and wellness of students in a multitude of ways.

Mainella et al. (2011) argue that if we wish to encourage positive youth development along with positive interactions with peers, we need to provide them with the opportunity for outdoor-based play. Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) argue that "relationships with peers and social skills often develop in the context of social games with peers such as tag, soccer, and jump-rope games" (p 16). Children, more specifically boys, use their involvement in a variety of games as a way to both obtain and maintain social competence with their peers and to encourage positive school adjustment (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). Pellegrini et al. (2004) argue that children's participation in games may predict their level of adjustment within the school environment as it is believed to be an indicator of children's physical ability, as well as their social status among fellow peers.

Location of play. Pellegrini et al. (1995) discovered that whether play was based indoors or outdoors (dependent on weather), students were still able experience the benefits of a break from academic instruction. One of the most documented benefits was students' increased attention post recess (as cited in Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1997). Pellegrini and Smith (1993) do however argue that although parallel benefits are found

in both indoor and outdoor recess environments, students were able to engage in higher levels of physical activity outside in comparison to indoor environments. Weather plays a large role in determining students' accessibility of various play methods. Rainy or dangerously cold days result in students being kept indoors with little opportunity for physical activity, which may result in pent up energy. In relation to the recess location, Mainella et al. (2011) argue that "outdoor-based play and reconnection to nature are critical if we wish to achieve positive youth development" (p. 100), consequently highlighting the need to give children a positive outlet outside when available, but also provide them with alternatives for days they are restricted to indoor recess.

Lack of play. There are a number of reasons why children do not get as much out of outdoor play as in the past. Mainella et al. (2011) contend that this lack of outside play is due to a greater preference for new entertainment methods (in terms of modern technology), an increase in parents' safety and crime concerns (more specifically in low income neighbourhoods), and hurried, overscheduled children. What is critical to understand is that there are consequences when it comes to inadequate play activity. Mainella et al. (2011) highlighted that many of these consequences have the underlying focus of the potential for a "spiraling upturn of social and emotional disorders" (p. 92).

Recess can have a number of both positive and negative impacts on students; however, these impacts tend to differ dependent on the activities students choose to engage in during their free time (Dills et al., 2011). As highlighted through principals' recess concerns and struggles, Holmes et al. (2006) argue that too much bullying, teasing, and aggressive behaviours present themselves at recess creating an uncomfortable and problematic environment for many students. This was also found by

Pellegrini and Blatchford (2002) in which they noted that as a result of these negative behaviours, schools in England have begun substantially reducing students' allotted recess time with some districts having eliminated recess altogether. In those English schools, recess is not only thought to take away from valuable instructional time, which is already quite scarce, but is believed to provide greater opportunities for students to exhibit these questionable and antisocial behaviours (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2002).

Reasons that are given by 'no nonsense' politicians and superintendants, and not by the educational frontline workers such as teachers, parents, or students themselves, include that "recess is a waste of valuable time – time that could be more profitable for instruction... moreover, the playground at recess is the place where kids get bullied and aggression is learned" (Pellegrini, 2005, p. 3). As highlighted by McNamara, Vaantaja, Dunseith and Franklin (2014), many students attribute problematic behaviours to a lack of supervision on the playground which further contributes to student's heightened fears of peer conflict. Increasing the supervisory roles on the playground could contribute to more positive interactions among students, which would hopefully reduce the antisocial, bully-like tendencies that are noted to often occur.

Advocating for a recess-based program. Children that endure a number of adverse circumstances within their life may be at a heightened likelihood of experiencing a variety of problems in their day-to-day life. These occurrences may include mental health concerns, difficulties establishing and maintaining friendships, or even academic struggles. Zins and Elias (2006) argue that providing these students with protective mechanisms such as additional support or the encouragement of social and emotional competency development may keep children out of harm's way or even act as

a buffer from the negative outcomes associated with risk or poor playground experiences, such as the development of mental health problems.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Children spend a considerable amount of their childhood within the school environment which consequently highlights it as one of the most influential environments in encouraging student development, beyond academics. Recess, however, is a neglected aspect of the school environment in that its potential benefits have been long overlooked and ultimately, undervalued. The research at hand aims to alter current perceptions by presenting recess as a key developmental resource in terms of increasing student well-being, and decreasing the likelihood of mental health concerns through highlighting the existing benefits and tools embedded in recess.

Overview

I am conducting my research using a qualitative framework with the overarching goal of providing a rich description of the recess environment, in relation to the influence it has on the developmental trajectories of student well-being. A qualitative framework will allow students' voices to come forward to capture their unique experiences on the playground in ways that quantitative research cannot. Considering recess has been undervalued for far too long, the current research goal is to present recess as not only a positive environment for students, but as one that is capable of promoting student's health and well-being. I will be using existing data from an on-going multisite case study analysis of elementary school recess being conducted by Dr. Lauren McNamara at Brock University. McNamara's research aims to understand student, staff, and volunteer experiences within recess environments. The goal of her research is thoroughly understand perceptions of and experiences within the recess environment in order to inform a project aimed at maximizing the benefits associated with recess, while simultaneously reducing the levels of conflict and antisocial behaviours. By doing this, I intend to uncover

the specific ways in which recess serves as a viable tool for promoting the health and well-being of today's children and youth, as perceived by students themselves.

In order to achieve the goal of presenting recess as a viable developmental resource within the school environment, I will describe the recess environment in its entirety as well as the interactions that occur within through students' perceptions. Students completed questionnaires surrounding their recess experiences, which will be categorized into appropriate themes, and complemented with key information from the MCYS (2006) Policy Framework and JSCH (2010) Better Practices and Perspectives document. The policy documents were included in order to achieve triangulation within the research. Supplementing students' responses with valuable information concerning the need to encourage student health and well-being was used to validate student perceptions of the recess environment and to present recess as an importance developmental tool. A summary of the latter two documents will be provided prior to discussing both documents accordingly within the themes to not only provide government support to the topic at hand, but to ensure regulations concerning student health and well-being are being met appropriately in the recess environment.

Examining recess using a qualitative framework will allow for connections between various recess components and positive student development to emerge. Through the use of qualitative techniques, the research will be structured in a manner that allows for in-depth exploration of recess, as well as the creation of a complex, detailed understanding of the topic in question. According to Creswell (2013), studies that use a qualitative design have a strong orientation toward the overall impact of the research as well as "its ability to transform the world" (p. 44). The current research will include a complex description of the current recess environment as well as interpretations of health concerns that plague children and youths'

development such as mental health issues. Including a child mental health component allows for readers to gain an understanding of not only the reality of early onset mental health problems, but how promoting comprehensive student health and well-being at an early age has the capability of preventing the occurrence, or lessening the negative outcomes often associated with mental health difficulties. Detailed connections will be then made between the recess environment and its impact on student health and well-being. This will not only contribute to existing literature, it may even act as a catalyst for change among existing educational practices and structures, including recess.

Within qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge the existence of researcher bias. According to Mehra (2002) “ what we believe in determines what we want to study...More often than not, we have our personal beliefs and views about a topic - either in support of one side of the argument, or on the social, cultural, political sub-texts that seem to guide the development of the argument” (n.p.). It is usually one’s passion that drives research in a qualitative field, and very much the passion to ensure that children have the opportunities to have positive experiences within the recess environment guided the desire to bring attention to a key, overlooked environment in children’s lives in order to understand the influence that recess can have the developmental trajectories of student well-being.

Including the voices of children and youth within research is critical when investigating a subject that has such a strong influence on the developmental trajectories of student health and well-being. Cook-Sather (2002) engages in an extensive discussion surrounding the necessity of including students’ perspectives in research, especially on material directly connected to them. She acknowledged the fact that student voices have largely been missing from data, but researchers and policy makers are now discussing the importance of bringing student voices to

the foreground. By emphasizing student voices within research, this allows researchers to not only attend to what students are saying, but to productively use student voices for educational reform. As in their article, Corbett and Wilson (1995) argue that we must “make a difference with, not for, students” (p. 12).

Theoretical Frameworks

Social constructivism. When conducting research, many researchers often seek to understand the world in which they live, and how it is understood in the context of the research question. Creswell (2013) furthermore argues that when conducting research, it is essential to include various perspectives of the phenomenon under study. As it falls in line with the structure of the current research, inductive methods will be used in order to determine and construct theories or patterns of meaning (Creswell, 2013). All in all, the underlying intent of a qualitative researcher is to understand and make sense of the meanings that others have constructed about the subject matter, and in this case, about recess. When researching such a specific topic as recess, it is important to understand that individuals may have different understandings of the particular phenomenon, therefore highlighting the need to not only clearly express one’s personality when discussing a topic, but to ensure participants’ perceptions are properly portrayed.

Ecological developmental systems theory. As an umbrella term, developmental systems theories contend that development occurs within individuals as they interact with a number of physical settings as well as the individuals within them (Lerner, 1989; Lerner & Kauffman, 1985 as cited Duerden & Witt, 2010). It is argued that development is not only an interactive process between the individual and their environment, but furthermore, when a good fit exists between an individual and their environments, that individual is likely to experience more positive

developmental outcomes (Lerner, Anderson, Balsano, Dowling, & Bobek, 2003, as cited Duerden & Witt, 2010). The ecological systems theory, originated by Bronfenbrenner (1979), focuses on the interactions that occur between and within individual's life contexts. Individuals are understood to exist in a number of settings, starting with the individual and moving outward. In a combined theory, individuals are understood to not only be influenced both within and across each of their environments, but are said to be influenced by the individuals within those settings as well. Therefore, the developmental ecological systems theory used for the purpose of the current research understands the various influences that play a role in individual's development and experiences, consequently highlighting the need to understand the recess environment in particular in relation to its influence on student development, health, and well-being.

Original Research

The data being used for the current research study stems from an on-going research project initiated by Dr. Lauren McNamara of Brock University. Her research has been working towards understanding both the context of and experiences within the elementary school recess environment.

Ethics. When any research structure involves the participation of humans, approval from research ethics boards is a necessity. For the current research, a request for ethics clearance for secondary use of data has been approved allowing the study to move forward. Secondary use of data is being used as it will allow the perceptions of the participants to describe recess from a slightly different position, one that describes the opportunities to encourage the health and well-being of students in the recess environment.

Participants. When taking into account one of the underlying goals of qualitative research (to develop a complex and detailed understanding of the topic under investigation), the sample population includes a number of students from three Southern Ontario schools. The recess environment in the participating schools each depicts an environment rich in opportunities to influence student development in a multitude of ways. The recess setting encompasses a culture that encourages students to engage in peer socialization and energy-burning activities all the while receiving a break from academic instruction and getting fresh air. That same environment – one that offers students so many positive opportunities – has also been described as chaotic. Some students have been noted to struggle in navigating the free structure of recess, often leading to a rise in conflict among students. This may cause individuals to question the viability of recess being a positive influence on student well-being. However, in acknowledging the evident benefits and struggles experienced at recess, attention needs to be given to the true potential of recess in its influence on student well-being. Portraying recess as a positive, accepting environment will work towards shaping both student experiences and a number of stakeholder perspectives concerning the influence of recess on student well-being.

The inclusion of a variety of student perspectives will ensure consistency across participant responses in order to attribute validity to the data set. Participants (n =123) range from children in junior and senior kindergarten, now both amalgamated and referred to as the ‘Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) through grade 8. All students completed and submitted the questionnaire anonymously. Students reported their current grade, but otherwise, no gender, racial specification or other personal identifiers were used. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the participants in reference to participants within each elementary division. The names and locations of participants’ schools will also remain anonymous. Each of the schools do follow a

similar recess structure – the balanced day – and supervision practices seemed to be consistent across each of the schools as well. Two of the schools have a population of approximately 280 students, while the third school approaches 445 students. Comparisons of recess were not made between the schools; rather recess itself was analyzed across all three school

Elementary School Divisions	Number of Participants
Full Day Kindergarten (FDK)	31
Primary: Grades 1-3	29
Junior: Grades 4-6	45
Intermediate: Grades 7-8	6
Undisclosed	12
Total	123

Table 1: Reported Grade

environments in order to work towards understanding students' recess experiences.

Data collection. The following section will provide a detailed look into how the data was collected. The data will then be presented and discussed in accordance to how it is not only relevant to the research at hand, but how it will be used to further the current research surrounding students' experiences and their subsequent health and well-being.

Consent. All participants were given an information session and a document highlighting the goals of the research being conducted. Once informed consent was received from participants, as well as third party consent from parents/guardians of minors and assent from students, participants completed questionnaires that provide details into participants' perceptions of the overall recess structure, goals, and potentially beneficial modifications. All questionnaires were completed and submitted anonymously.

Questionnaires. Questionnaires were designed in a way as to extract valuable data from the school system through obtaining the very valuable opinions of students. Students' perceptions of recess are crucial in that it is a component of the school day that most students not only look forward to, but that they count on as both a break from academic instruction, and as a

chance to socialize with fellow peers. Although initially this component of the questionnaire was structured to first gain an insight into how students view the recess environment and its components, it then became imperative to understand the varied perceptions of the developmental benefits of recess. Taking this into consideration, this data contributes to the ability to identify the various components of recess that can either contribute to or hinder students health and well-being. Furthermore, it could contribute to the development of a program that addresses to the requests and needs of students which might otherwise be overlooked.

Present Study

Design. A case study begins with the identification of a case, or concrete entity in need of further understanding (Creswell, 2013). For the current research I propose to conduct a descriptive case study in order to depict recess as a potential tool for the promotion of student development, health, and well-being. Choosing recess as a contemporary bounded system or case will allow me to not only provide an in-depth description of the environment under study, but it will allow for the creation of appropriate case themes in terms of the developmental influences found within the recess environment.

The unit of analysis includes data from three separate Southern Ontario elementary schools concerning perceptions surrounding the existing recess environment. The data within the case study can be depicted as a bounded case study in that it is bounded by time and place, because data collection and analysis is limited to the data collected within the school day, but more so within the school year.

For the current research, I propose to analyze the various perceptions of recess collected using a different lens in order to connect student experiences of recess to the various developmental outcomes associated with recess experiences. I will provide extensive details

surrounding how recess activities and interactions contribute to student development, health and well-being. Therefore, in relation to the general recess environment, structure and developmental components, participant perceptions need to be clearly described in such a way as to facilitate a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon.

Analysis. In order to organize the relevant perspectives, while reviewing the data, I will use an open-coding method in order to allow potential underlying themes to emerge. In addition, I will conduct a categorical aggregation in which, through the use of axial coding, various recess perceptions will be categorized into themes according to how the responses correspond to depictions of well-being. The categories will become the base upon which the MCYS (2006) policy framework and Morrison and Kirby (2011) JSCH document will be used to provide additional support behind the necessity and value of the recess environment.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Discussion

The following analysis will not only explore the data set in detail, but will also reintroduce the two supplementary texts previously drawn on in the literature review in order to provide a comprehensive understanding as to how elementary students' recess experiences influence student's development in relation to their health and well-being. The Ontario MCYS (2006) Framework for Child and Youth Mental Health and the Morrison and Kirby's (2011) Better Practices and Perspectives documents will be applied to the current research of three recess environments in Southern Ontario. By applying the two documents to the research, this will allow for the construction of a deeper understanding as to just how the recess environment influences the developmental trajectories of student health and well-being.

A brief description of both the MCYS (2006) and Morrison and Kirby's (2011) JCSH documents will be introduced prior to delving into the connections between the documents and current research and the health and well-being initiatives intertwined within them. The Ontario MCYS (2006) was identified as playing a key role in both leading and encouraging collaboration on child and youth issues across child and youth serving ministries and sectors, including that of education. Their framework document recognizes that children's mental health should be a *shared responsibility* across all children's environments and services (MCYS, 2006). This includes families/ caregivers, communities, service providers, government agencies as well as all child and youth serving sectors. The shared responsibility conclusion was reached following many years of discussion and research involving discussions with over 300 participants (including members of the government and community partners), extensive literature reviews, consultations with mental health experts and series of inter-ministerial discussions. These discussions led to the conclusion that the framework should reflect the importance of social

determinants of mental health for children and youth, the need for a continuum of services, and the need for coordinated and collaborative planning and service delivery.

As a result, the MCYS (2006) established a vision for Ontario in which “child and youth mental health is recognized as a key determinant of overall health and well-being, and where children and youth grow to reach their full potential” (p. ii). The MCYS wants to ensure that Ontario provides children and youth with the best opportunities possible to succeed and reach their full potential. They furthermore argue that this vision will lead to the establishment of support that will contribute to improved mental health outcomes for children. However, in order for their vision to become a reality, this requires a commitment from everyone in Ontario to promote the health and well-being of children and youth to not only prevent the occurrence of mental health problems where possible, but so that those living with mental health problems and illnesses are capable of living, learning, and thriving in their communities (MCYS, 2006).

Promoting the health and well-being of children and youth has recently been at the forefront of health initiatives, especially within the education system. Morrison and Kirby (2011) created a Better Practices and Perspectives document that focuses on utilizing ‘Schools as a Setting for Promoting Positive Mental Health’. The purpose of the document was to develop guidelines that would lead to better practices in promoting positive mental health within a comprehensive school health framework. Safe and caring school policies support a variety of initiatives that focus on a number of practices including: bullying prevention programs, skill development sessions for students, positive behaviour discipline strategies, child advocacy considerations, peer-helper/mentor approaches and consultation and awareness forums for parents and the community. Morrison and Kirby (2011) believe that their document may serve as “useful planning resources for teachers, school administrators, and school health professionals,

as well as other government, provincial and community stakeholders involved in the development or implementation of positive mental health approaches” (p. 5). When it comes to the education system, it is important to acknowledge that opportunities to encourage the health and well-being among students extend much beyond the classroom setting. Although recess is a key component to students’ school day, it has been overlooked as a viable resource for promoting their health and well-being.

What is evident from the MCYS (2006) and Morrison and Kirby’s (2011) documents and the current research is that there is a dire need for attention to be placed on prevention and health promotion tactics, rather than interventions which often occur in a reactive manner to existing problems. Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal, and Riley-Tillman (2004) are trying to shift the focus of educators and health professionals “from a preoccupation with repairing weakness to enhancement of positive qualities” (p. 101). The MCYS (2006) found a number of areas within the education system that require improvement in order to positively encourage student development. It is believed that the developmental trajectories of student well-being can be greatly influenced within the school system by placing an increased emphasis on health promotion, illness prevention, and earlier identification (MCYS, 2006). By doing so, the current need for intensive and costly mental health services and supports could consequently be reduced (MCYS, 2006). The MCYS (2006) “will support continued efforts in knowledge development and exchange to promote and sustain better outcomes for children and youth in Ontario” (p. 15). The MCYS (2006) furthermore argues that existing research points to a necessity of more effective practices and programs in order to improve the lives of children, youth and their families/caregivers.

Morrison and Kirby (2011) also proposes a necessary shift in both thinking about and acting on children and youth's mental health that involves recognizing that their state of psychological well-being is not only influenced by the absence of problems and risk-need concerns, but also is impacted by the existence of positive factors present within individuals and their social settings that contribute to positive growth and development. (p. 7)

It is argued that we need caring and nurturing environments that are capable of positively influencing children's coping strategies and conflict management skills, as well as their overall development (Morrison & Kirby, 2011). The MCYS (2006) maintains that reinforcing a positive environment will enable children to establish positive connections with others as well as avoid destructive influences. Individuals with positive mental health are more likely to be able to act intelligently on personal decisions to contribute to both their emotional and physical growth. (Morrison & Kirby, 2011). By promoting such growth in children and youth's environments, this is just one more way we can positively contribute to the developmental trajectories of student health and well-being.

In terms of environments that are optimal for promoting child and youth development, the school environment has received considerable attention in terms of its ability to promote student development beyond that of academics. Students spend more than 180 days a year in school, averaging more than six hours a day (Morrison & Kirby, 2011). This results in the school environment being a prime location for promoting the health and well-being of today's and tomorrow's children youth. Many believe that positive mental health promotion is neither the responsibility nor role of the school (Morrison & Kirby, 2011). However, in reality, schools are identified as a unique community setting in that the greatest number of children can be both

accessed and supported (Morrison & Kirby, 2011), therefore again highlighting the true potential of the school environment. The barrier most frequently cited for preventing the promotion of positive mental health is the need to expand current perceptions of ‘mental health’ beyond that of students’ *needs* or *problems* to incorporate other facets including strengths, protective factors, and well-ness. Morrison and Kirby (2011) furthermore argues that schools, homes, and communities are key settings in addressing children and youth’s mental fitness and their psychological needs. However a key element of the school day is still neglected in terms of its capacity to promote student development. Recess is continually ignored leaving the existing benefits of recess to go unappreciated. When acknowledged and structured properly, recess has the potential to contribute to student health and well-being in a number of ways.

The following section will explore data that captures students’ experiences with recess in relation to how such experiences influence the developmental trajectories of health and well-being. Morrison and Kirby (2011) contend that meaningful educational experiences can contribute to positive social and academic development as well as foster the development of healthy peer relationships. McNamara et al. (2014) argue that paying attention to as well as contributing resources to the context of recess could present the opportunity to establish a strong foundation for the development of children’s mental health and well-being. It is believed that comprehensive health promotion should be integrated into all aspects of the school environment, including recess. Considering recess registers as many student’s favourite part of the school day, this not only enhances the perceived importance of recess but it also addresses the need for more suitable attention to be given to recess. McNamara et al. (2014) contend that there are different ways to think about the purpose of recess. All in all, it is essential to acknowledge that the context of recess is not suitable for all individuals, and as a result has the potential to both

positively and negatively influence student's development and their social and emotional health in a multitude of ways (McNamara et al., 2014). Benson and Scales (2009) highlight the significance and necessity of social support in adolescence. In taking into account their findings, this highlights how social interactions and support can play a role in the prevention of mental illness as well as how it can foster competencies that promote positive mental health and encourage children to thrive.

Students' responses indicated that there are a number of ways in which recess influences the developmental trajectories of student well-being. As a result, recess has therefore been identified as a key resource for the development of student mental health and well-being in three ways which will act as the main themes of well-being for the purpose of the analysis. Recess will be presented as a 1) 'release', an 2) 'opportunity to exercise individuality', and an 3) 'avenue for support'. These three themes will be supplemented with student experiences in order to enhance understandings of just how influential recess is on the development trajectories of health and well-being. In order to contribute to further understanding of the achieved results, see Figure 1 below for a concept map outlining the current research themes.

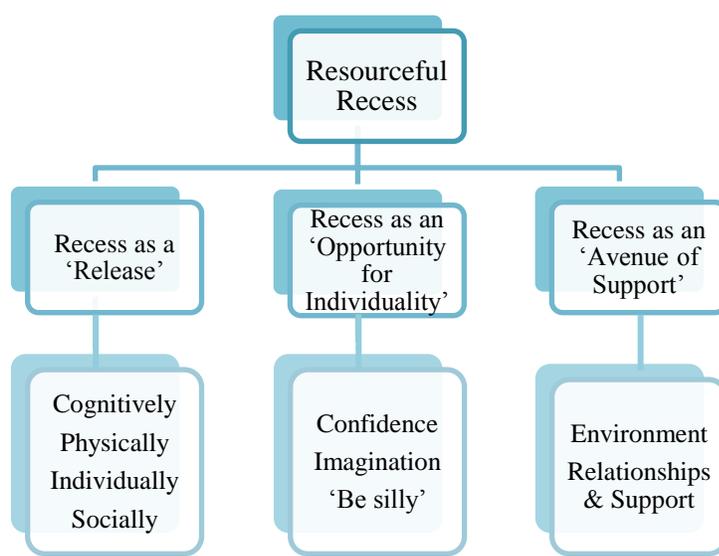


Figure 1: Analysis Themes

Recess as a 'Release'

Recess provides students with a 'release' from a number of demanding aspects of their school day. Evident in students' responses, is that recess offers students cognitive, physical, social, and individual releases that consequently influence their well-being. Each theme of 'release' will be broken down and supplemented with student experiences. Morrison and Kirby (2011) believe in the use of a strength-based approach where participants are asked to share their personal experiences in relation to the activities they engage in, social relationship experiences that evoke a sense of accomplishment and the ability to make choices. An analysis of reported experiences will lead to an understanding of just how recess acts as a 'release' for students in a multitude of ways.

Cognitive release. Students spend a substantial part of not only their weekdays, but of their developmental lives within the school system. At more than 6 hours a day, 180 days a year in school (Morrison & Kirby, 2011), students need regular breaks throughout the day in order to get the most out of their education. Students described a number of reasons as to why they think they need recess, but in regards to achieving a cognitive release, a grade six student indicated that "students need recess because they need time to let loose and so they can relax their minds from all of that school work". Being restricted in the classroom for extended periods of time often results in increased fidgeting, inattention, restlessness, and off-task behaviours, and are all indicators of students in need of a break (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997). Another student reported that "students need to get out of the classroom sometimes". Letting 'loose' and relaxing their minds from academic instruction will likely not only lead to healthier and happier students, but could contribute to increased classroom attention post-recess. Pellegrini and Bjorklund (1997) found that children's levels of attention improved post-recess, while Homes et al. (2006) also

assert that student's learning is maximized when provided with adequate breaks throughout the day. In terms of allowing students to release their cognitive buildup through opportunities to relax their minds, one student reported that on top of thoroughly enjoying recess, "it's a time you can relax but you can still be active, but you're relaxed in a different way". This indicates that recess offers students a sort of release that other environments may not be able to provide them with. Students not only need a break from academic instruction, they need a break from the classroom setting and the strict expectations often imbedded within.

Physical release. Students benefit immensely from opportunities to not only change their physical surroundings, but to engage in physical activities that encourage their health and well-being. In terms of the physical release recess provides students, this category can be broken down into three components. The physical environment itself, along with the physical activity, and the energy students can release, students are able achieve a quality physical release from the recess environment.

Environment. A change of physical space is believed to provide students with a necessary break, allowing them to renew their ability to attend to material within the classroom upon their return. As previously noted, a student participant reported that "...students need to get out of the classroom sometimes". Students often described the need to 'let loose' outside confounds of the classroom. In again reflecting on the previous student quote about escaping the classroom structure, this individual reported that recess offers them a time to relax, but that they are able to relax in a different way, one that allows them to release their energy in a productive manner that contributes to their health, happiness and well-being. According to the JSCH (2010), all physical spaces should be structured in a manner that ensures all staff and students "feel welcome, can access facilities and maneuver within them, are able to fully participate and benefit

from learning activities, make use of accessible equipment and software” (pp. 23-24). Although the classroom may be conducive to student development in a multitude of ways, the classroom is not an ideal place for certain exchanges such as for students to engage in social interactions in order to develop a variety of social skills. The outside recess environment is not only conducive to giving students the opportunity to get some fresh air, students rated getting fresh air as being of equal importance to socialization and physical health.

Physical fitness. Participants acknowledge the importance of physical activity in terms of its importance for their body, growth, and development. One student indicated that “students need recess for the exercise and to develop their bodies for when they are older”. Not only does exercise refresh the mind, students are capable of acknowledging just how important physical activity and play is for their health and well-being. Although peer socialization is rated of equal importance, Mahoney and Stattin (2000) also believe that when youth engage in structured activities with their peers, they are more likely to experience positive outcomes in comparison to those who engage in more sedentary activities during the recess period. Teachers in McNamara’s (2013) research reported that when students engage in structured physical activities, they are not only working on their physical fitness, they are developing conflict management and team work skills, as well as releasing their pent up energy in order to return back to the classroom with renewed attention and engagement in learning.

Energy release. Students are typically identified as needing time to burn off their energy so they become more attentive and ready to learn upon their return to the classroom. Essentially they are expected and encouraged to run out their energy in order to return to the classroom as docile, manageable students. Students demonstrated similar beliefs in using recess as time to ‘waste’ their energy as a student in grade three blatantly reported “students *need* recess because

they *need* to waist [sic] their energy”. Furthermore, another student indicated that “students need recess because that is there [sic] only time to be silly and let out all of their energy”. What also emerges within the students’ comments about releasing their energy and ‘being silly’ is the idea that students need the ability to be themselves, and sometimes, the classroom environment does not present those opportunities. This again points back to the belief that “...students need to get out of the class sometimes”. Although some believe recess to be an opportunity for students to burn off their energy, some students actually perceive recess as being a necessity for not only waking up their minds, but as a way to regain energy to return to the class reenergized and attentive. Furthermore, some students also believe that recess allows them to express their individuality and engage in activities and interactions related to their interests.

Individual release. Not only is recess perceived as a time for students to escape the sometimes monotonous classroom routine, students often perceive recess as a time where they can do what they want and be who they are. One student indicated that they “just need time to be their self and just take a break”. Not only do students receive a physical release from leaving the classroom environment, but recess typically allows students to choose to engage in activities that encompass their interests. A student described the need for recess as the “...need for time to do their own thing”. The option to engage in games and activities preferred by the students will likely result in more active and satisfied children. One individual acknowledged the need for children to be able to participate in activities they like and feels as though recess is “...there [sic] only time to be silly and let out all of their energy”. This again leads to the assumption that the classroom is a serious environment that is not always conducive to students’ ‘silliness’, which when it does occur may result in increased punishment, or ridicule from fellow students. This again brings forth the comment made by a sixth grade student that recess is a way to relax and be

active, but to be “relaxed in a different way”. This could lead to the further assumption that classroom structures, in comparison to the recess environment, may not be conducive to overly active, and the amount of material that needs to be covered over the school year makes for an intense and quick moving schedule, with little room for students to express individuality, relax their minds, be physically active, or socialize with peers.

Social release. Children’s motivation, commitment and enjoyment of school can be greatly influenced by their social experiences, especially those that occur during recess. A common theme that emerged within participant responses was the notion that recess is one of students’ only opportunities during the school day to interact with peers as they are not allowed very much ‘off-topic’ conversation during classroom instruction and work. It is important to note, that this may be some students only opportunities to interact with peers between the school, community, and home environment, furthermore highlighting the considerable importance of recess as a key social environment for children. A grade six student felt as though they needed recess “because it allows people to update and socialize with their friends”. Recess is depicted as a key part of the school day that allows students to connect with their peers, and reflects the necessity of strong social and emotional needs of children (McNamara et al., 2014). Barros et al., (2009) contends that the type of play that occurs at recess between peers is considered to be both healthy and necessary when it comes to encouraging student’s social and emotional development. Furthermore, according to Doll, Murphy, and Song (2003), children’s early social behaviours that are typically developed and maintained at recess, correlate with children’s mental health and are predictive of student’s later life satisfaction. A student participant identified one of their favourite parts of recess as being the fact that “anybody will let you play”. Some students have difficulty navigating the playground, and peers do not always engage in

inclusive play which may cause some students to struggle more than others within the recess environment.

When students experience social difficulties, this can create additional challenges in engaging in “respectful, collaborative, and inclusive physically active play that supports a positive developmental trajectory” (McNamara, 2013, p. 15). Students often experience difficulties socially when it comes to being their true selves. Children today are seemingly much more judgemental than in the past, which causes some children to fear stepping out of their comfort zone. The next main theme that emerged from the data was students’ perception that recess is slowly becoming an environment that allows them to express their individuality and engage in activities that are more in tune with their interests.

Recess as an ‘Opportunity for Individuality’

A policy for inclusion as depicted within the JSCH (2010) encompasses the belief that in order to encourage inclusion, acceptance of individual differences in personal perspectives, values and beliefs need to be encourage among all children in all environments, including the recess environment. Morrison and Kirby (2011) also argue that it is essential that we “draw on students’ strengths [because] strengths empower students and give them confidence” (p. 50). Children should have the confidence to be their true selves free of judgement. One student participant indicated that “students need recess because they just need time to be their self and just take a break”. A second participant also noted that students need recess because “they need time to do their own thing”. By allowing students to engage in free play at recess, they are developing a number of skills, including creativity and the use of their imagination (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001)

Imagination is a skill that should not require the use of equipment, which has seemingly proved to be scarce at each of the schools involved in the research. Students reported enjoyment in making up their own games as well as a lack of need or use for equipment because as a student reported, “when I play I use my imagination”. The development of a child’s imagination is seemingly critical in their development and well-being. Children become capable of envisioning worlds beyond reality, and for some, may use their imagination as a slight escape from real world situations. However, when asked what students would have at recess if they could create their own, although many students reported the inclusion of the typical popular sports (soccer, football, hockey), activities (jump rope, 4square) and clubs, some students replicated the current recess structure, but as one that includes additional supervisors.

A student participant described recess as “the only time for us kids to act silly, goofy and to play”. This again acknowledges not only the expectation of maturity and formality within the classroom, but highlights students longing for the releases achievable in the recess environment. Some students do however fear the thought of being ‘themselves’ as indicated by a student that did not feel comfortable within the school environment. This student in particular reported that “I always feel like someones [sic] watching me”. This could indicate insecurity in that students are worried about being themselves in the sense that someone may judge them, or that it may act as a catalyst for bullying or teasing episodes. On the other hand, another student indicated that they do feel comfortable at recess because they “feel at home”. The same student did however also report that they did not feel comfortable or safe because students in grades four to seven are being picked on by grade eights, consequently hindering the activities they feel comfortable engaging in.

Students identified a need for freedom and choice in their recess environment. They emphasized the need for opportunities to not only play with who they want to, but to engage in activities that they enjoy and are comfortable with. Short and Russel-Mayhew (2009) identify asset-rich schools as those in which adults and stakeholders make efforts “to understand the perspectives of students and convey an attitude of support for their personal and academic development” (p. 9). Morrison and Kirby (2011) argue that it is critical to understand how students feel about their school life, and by recognizing children and youth’s membership to school and the larger community, it is important that they have a say in matters that concern them, especially in regards to recess. The MCYS (2006) believes that wherever possible, children, youth, and their families/caregivers should be involved in both planning and delivery of services or supports. “Students love to have choice...it gives them a sense of personal power...a sense that their decision-making counts, and that they can make a difference” (Morrison & Kirby 2011, p. 51).

When students were given the opportunity to choose the activities they would have if they could design their own recess, as previously noted, many students went for the typical responses of choosing sports, activities, and clubs, while others seemed to follow suit and imitate existing behaviours of the playground and supervisors. One student indicated that all they want to do at recess is to “tell everyone what to do, sit on the wall”. By using that student’s depiction of the ideal recess, which sounds as though it reflects the current recess structure, it seems as though when students exert too much freedom or individuality, they are punished. As a result, these students spend their break sitting on the wall as punishment and end up missing recess altogether. One of the Morrison and Kirby’s (2011) ‘Better Practice Statements’ regarding ‘teaching and learning’ states that we must “adopt approaches that support autonomy, for

example, by minimizing control, listening to and validating student perspectives, and creating opportunities for children to experience choice and autonomy...” (p. 65). A second statement in the same category argues that we need to explore students areas of strengths, interests, and potential as it is “critical for personalizing learning for students and embracing their engagement in education and relationships” (p. 65). If we involve students in more choices about their environments, this could lead to happier and more engaged students both inside and outside of the classroom.

It is important to recognize that students not only need partial freedom and opportunities for choice, but they also need to be able to contribute to their own environments and take responsibility for them as well. Many children are challenged by the freedom associated with recess and the lack of structure within it which can lead to social awkwardness, conflict, equipment issues, and an absence of productive games and activities (McNamara, 2013). One teacher in McNamara et al.’s (2014) research went so far as to say that today’s students do not know how to play productively, which can again result in increased conflict on the playground. Children often rely on their peers for guidance in relation to activities they should or should not engage in during the recess period. However when children struggle with making appropriate decisions, this could influence a larger portion of the recess environment than previously recognized. Not only do the interactions between peers and with school staff provide students with substantial support avenues, they also greatly influence the developmental trajectories of student well-being.

Recess as an ‘Avenue of Support’

The MCYS (2006) believes that one of the most promising and cost-effective ways to promote positive mental health and well-being in today’s students is to strengthen their

protective factors as well as reduce their risk factors. Protective factors are defined as factors that contribute to children's development of resiliency, and enhancing these factors require addressing the developmental needs of today's students (Morrison & Kirby, 2011). Enhancement of children's protective factors is believed to reduce the likelihood of developing mental health problems and illnesses later in life (Weisz, Sandler, Durlak, & Anton, 2005). One of the most important protective factors in children's lives is the presence of support. Children need multilevel support systems in their lives, with an appropriate base of support present within each of their environments. As for the school system, there are a number of ways the school supports children's developmental trajectories.

Recess is explained as a source of support, as an opportunity to make connections with fellow peers, and as a part of the day that greatly influences the strong social and emotional needs of children (McNamara et al., 2014). According to Losier and Morrison (2007) and Sheridan, Warnes, Cowan, Schemm, and Clark (2004) children and youth's social contexts and networks provide "important resources and influences that have the capacity to contribute to and enhance their psychological well-being" (as cited in JSCH, 2010, p. 8). Recess provides students with support in a multitude of ways. From the environment itself, to feelings of comfort and belonging, to peer interaction and support, to adult support and supervision, recess is a complex environment that contributes to the developmental trajectories of student well-being through various means.

Environment. Morrison and Kirby (2011) argue that students' environments as much as possible should be caring and nurturing in order to have a positive impact on student development. Through one of their 'Better Practice Statements' for social and physical environments, they furthermore argue that "school-wide initiatives that foster the creation of safe

and caring school environments” need to be implemented (p. 62). Morrison and Kirby (2011) challenge both educators and administrators to pay closer attention to all aspects of students’ learning environments, including recess, in order to ensure that they meet students’ emotional, physical, and academic needs. In terms of the key features of environments that contribute to students’ development positively, Eccles and Gootman (2003) argue that adequate attention needs to be given to students’ “physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, integration of family, school, and community efforts” (pp. 112-113). McNamara et al. (2014) argue that in order for children to feel accepted, they need to be provided with an inclusive setting as much as possible.

Physical environment. When asking students about their perceived level of comfort and safety within the recess environment, many students unexpectedly reported on the physical structure of the environment. Grade one students often reported feeling safe because “there’s no bad guys, and the teachers can save us”, “there is a gate”, and “cause I don’t get lost”. The recess structure alone contributes to the developmental trajectories of student well-being in that it provides students with feelings of comfort in knowing they are in a safe environment. Not only does the environment itself contribute to student health and well-being, the relationships established and maintained within also contribute to students’ school experiences. Policies that not only foster student’s social and emotional development but also identify safe and caring school climates are essential in establishing belonging and connectedness among all students (Morrison & Kirby, 2011). In their ‘Better Practice Statements’, Morrison and Kirby (2011) argues that the social and physical environment should be conducive to

facilitate the connectedness of all students within the school and community by creating accessible meeting places or social spaces where students feel safe and valued where opportunities for students to develop positive relationships with caring peers and adults can take place. (p. 61)

The MCYS (2006) also brings forth the notion that it is necessary to reinforce a positive community environment within schools in order to encourage positive peer relations among students. When children are given opportunities to interact with peers in a supported and safe space, they have more favourable circumstances to develop positive, reciprocal and cooperative interactions with their peers (McNamara et al., 2014).

Perceived safety. When it comes to children's environments, they need to feel safe and comfortable in order to experience the developmental benefits associated with each. Morrison and Kirby (2011) emphasize the need to establish safe environments for all children as well as to reach out within those environments to all students, but especially to those that may be at-risk. One student reported that they like recess very much because "I feel better at recess". This could be attributable to a number of reasons including feelings of safety and comfort, but in connecting to the previous themes, this could also be attributed to the ability to be themselves or the ability to achieve a multilevel 'release' at recess. A second student commented on their enjoyment of recess when they expressed that they "love to play super happy". Again, there could be numerous explanations such as the ability to establish relationships and perceiving strong avenues of social support around them.

Relationships. Parents always want the best for their children, and when it comes to school and recess, parents would like to ensure their children have only positive experiences, and to be sure of this, they try to establish strong avenues of support through fellow peers and adults.

One student reported an excess of pressure from their parents to join a club when they stated “my mom made me go and it makes me feel like she does not think I have friends”. Parents seemingly understand the importance of peer relationships on student development, and fear the end result if their children lack that important form of support. Another of Morrison and Kirby’s (2011) ‘Better Practice Statements’ in relation to ‘teaching and learning’, argues that it is important for students to be provided with opportunities to learn and practice social skills that will allow them to work cooperatively with others, to develop conflict management skills, and to form and maintain relationships.

Peer relationships. Within the JCSH (Morrison & Kirby, 2011), Schonert-Reichl (2007) argues that students’ ability to connect with peers is influenced by current and former friendships, and that students often perceive the quality of their friendships as being more important than quantity of friendships. Some students did however indicate that having many friends made them not only enjoy recess, but also made them feel more comfortable. A young student reported a great enjoyment of recess because they have “lots of friends”. Some students on the other hand appreciated just having a single friend to play with. One student described their favourite part of recess as being “when you have a friend to play with”. Morrison and Kirby (2011) believe that when students have meaningful educational experiences, social experiences included, these experiences contribute to both positive social and academic development in children, and aid in fostering the development of healthy peer interaction and the development of relationships. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor and Schellinger (2011) noted that the ability to connect with peers fosters a sense of belonging within individuals that is associated with a variety of factors that influence student’s academic motivation, engagement, behaviour, and ultimately influence their subsequent choices, strategies, efforts, and commitment to learning.

Students are believed to experience better outcomes throughout their lifespan when they are able to create and sustain healthy friendships (Bukowski et al., 1993; Bukowski, Laursen, & Hoza, 2010; Sullivan, 1953). It is through these friendships that students develop social competence.

Peer support. In terms of peer interactions, student responses were sorted into three ways peers offer students support. Participants indicated that 1) having faithful friendships, 2) experiencing physical closeness for protection and 3) perceiving positive peer attitudes during interactions were all necessary and considerably influence the developmental trajectories of student health and well-being.

Faithful friendships. Many students reported one of their favourite parts of recess as involving interacting and playing with fellow classmates. One student said that their favourite part of recess was “playing with me [sic] friends because no matter what your friends will always be your friend and will be willing to play with you”. Another student indicated that as long as they have someone to play with they were comfortable when they stated that “I love to go for my recess is so I can play with any friends [sic]”. A third student reported their favourite aspect of recess as being “when you have a friend to play with”. Students often described their enjoyment of recess as being directly related to their peer interactions. It was often indicated that students liked recess “very much” because “I have friends”, or “cause I have lots of friends”. One student summed up their level of comfort by acknowledging that as long as they had friends around them, they felt comfortable because they did not have to experience the recess environment alone, which can be frightening. McNamara et al. (2014) noted that not having friends to play with during recess can cause students significant social and emotional stress, consequently negatively influencing their health and well-being.

When students were questioned about any aspects of recess they would like to change, there were two responses in particular that stood out. One student indicated they wish there were “friends to always play with you”. This highlights just how important peer interactions are and what students experience when they lack these interactions. A second student made a request about recess equipment when they reported “I wish to have a pair of swings”. How students worded their requests also underlined the importance students place on having a peer to play with. A simple request of swings does not have the same connotation as the request for a *pair* of swings.

Physical closeness for protection. Not only do students perceive the presence of peers to be important to their enjoyment of recess, but also to their overall development and well-being. Some students did however have different perceptions as to the benefits of peers during recess. A kindergarten student indicated that their favourite part of recess is not recess itself, but “holding hands, because it can be scary outside”. This brings forward the realization that having peers by their side allows students to feel comfortable within the environment by acting as a protective factor. Another student seconded the comfort of having peers in close proximity for protection when they too reported feeling safe because of having “friends to hold hands and big people to hold hands”. One student reported one of their favourite parts of recess as “...when older kids play with me”. Not only does the presence of peers offer their fellow classmates a sense of comfort, but students also know they have older students and adults they can surround themselves with.

When students have the support of peers in close proximity, it often gives them a sense of confidence which could prove to be beneficial for some, or encourage antisocial behaviours in others. In terms of support, one student reported that “I feel comfortable because my friends have

my back if something isn't right". They know that if there was to be an issue, say with bullying or exclusion, they have friends that will stand up for them. Another student said they "like recess very much, because of all the people to help you". This presumably not only includes peers, and fellow schoolmates, younger and older, but teachers and supervisors as well. When students know they have available support, and they perceive this within their peer relationships, this creates an environment that is not only more conducive to heightened feelings of safety and comfort, but may also enhance the positive experiences students have at recess, consequently influencing their well-being.

Perceived peer attitudes. Peers' attitudes play a large role in how supportive fellow students perceive them to be. A young student indicated that their favourite part of recess is "when kids are nice to me". When students perceive their friends as being kind, this also increases the likelihood of perceived support. A recess volunteer in McNamara et al.'s (2014) research indicated that they enjoy working with younger students in particular because "if you make a mistake they don't care they just laugh and it is done". Non-judgemental attitudes like this allow students to not only feel comfortable within their environment, but to feel comfortable being themselves and expressing their individuality as well. Morrison and Kirby (2011) place an emphasis on encouraging the establishment of policies for inclusion. Promoting acceptance of individuals, regardless of personal differences, is key in encouraging positive attitudes, acceptance and support among peers.

Lack of positive peer interaction. If students fail to develop coping and conflict management skills, they are consequently at an increased risk of experiencing social, emotional, and/or behavioural problems. These experiences can 'snowball' and create a destructive developmental path that influences their school connections and engagement (Fredericks,

Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Pellegrini et al., 2004; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1999; Tolan, Kendall, & Guerra, 1995). When students have limited, or ineffective social skills, consequent experiences in the recess environment have the capability of significantly influencing student's mental health and general school adjustment (Pellegrini et al., 2004).

Conflict. As evident within the current data, conflict exists in the recess environment in various forms. Students engage in and experience bouts of antisocial behaviour including fighting, bullying, and exclusion. Experiencing each or any of these conflicts can cause students a great deal of stress, consequently potentially negatively influencing their well-being. One student reported mixed feelings of comfort on the playground. The student reported feeling both comfortable and uncomfortable in the recess environment because "I am playing with my friends but there are a couple of mean kids on the playground". Another student in particular reported that they least like "everything" about recess. This brings forth the understanding of how, although students request endless freedom, having adequate support from peers and adults in the environment proves to be beneficial in not only encouraging positive interaction among students, but in continuing to promote the developmental trajectories of student well-being.

Antisocial behaviours. A lack of adequate adult supervision unfortunately acts as a catalyst for the occurrence of antisocial behaviours. According to one student, when reflecting on the recess environment, they reported that "what I like least about recess is that you can get bullied". Bullying was a common theme through students' answers, from fears of "I don't like the bullies", to "getting bullied" and seeing other "kids being bullied". Across all student responses there was a common consensus that they "don't like the bullying problems" that occur in the recess environment. Such antisocial behaviours can cause children to have less than

optimal experiences and can consequently hinder the developmental trajectories of student well-being.

Not only is it the negative interactions, such as teasing and bullying, among peers that can cause students to have poor recess experiences, but some students struggle with the lack of inclusion that is also noted to occur. One student reported their least favourite part of recess as being “that some other people don’t like to play with other people”. This leaves individuals alone to experience the recess environment which has already been described by some as being “scary”. Another student seconded this recess downfall by stating “I don’t like that sometimes people exclude other kids”. In understanding these two student’s comments, it seems as though it is not the children reporting the exclusion that are experiencing it, but better yet these individuals are speaking on behalf of the students that are being excluded and may more often than not experience their voices being silenced. One student that is believed to experience exclusion on a regular basis stated that their least favourite part is “that no one will play or even talk to me”. A couple students even went so far as to make a wish to change recess so “that people can’t say no so you can’t play”, and that you have “friends to always play with you”. If students are not allowed to say no when a student asks to play with them, this would result in fewer students being turned away from peer groups, and hopefully encourage the establishment of more positive interactions between peers. As a result, this would lead to both happier and healthier students. McNamara (2013) maintains that positive social experiences are capable of significantly influencing student health and well-being which can in turn alter student’s developmental health trajectories.

Adult support. As first indicated by McNamara et al. (2014), many students actually lack ability to initiate meaningful friendships with peers. This often leaves students either trying to

navigate the recess structure alone, which has proven to be frightening to some, or clinging to adults for support. One student reported liking the supervisory duties on the playground “because people actually talk to me”. Supervision provides lonely students with someone they can count on when other students exclude them through providing them with even a simple discussion that could make all the difference in that student’s day. Another student reported their main reason for liking recess as being “because of all the people to help you”, which is believed to extend beyond that of peers. Morrison and Kirby (2011) believe that you can enhance students’ school and community connectedness through providing engaging mentors for students identified as at-risk. They furthermore argue that students need to build positive attachment with caring adults as it is critical for their positive growth, development and well-being (Morrison & Kirby, 2011). Relationships that exist with caring adults in the school environment are believed to provide students with important social support, as well as opportunities to learn skills that contribute to the development of resiliency (Morrison & Kirby, 2011). Encouraging the development of relationships among students and teachers allows students to view teachers as more trusting as well as to feel more comfortable engaging in meaningful discussions with them. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2005) argue that children and youth’s relationships with both adults and peers contribute greatly to their psychological well-being. These relationships are characterized by “interactions that convey genuineness, empathy, unconditional caring and affirmation” (Brendtro et al., 2005, p. 8). At the same time students need to have relationships with caring adults, they still have adults for supervision and support.

Supervision. Many students emphasized the necessity of having a sound support system on the playground. From interactions with fellow classmates, protection of older peers, relationships with caring adults, and the supervisory role of teachers and lunch monitors, many

students still reported greater feeling of comfort when they knew there were teachers supervising the grounds. One student reported “I feel comfortable because I do not get bullied. I have teachers watching me and lots of friends to play with”. When reflecting on how comfortable students feel at recess, another student indicated “I feel really comfortable because it’s about the kids having more fun at recess and more supervision”. Students seemingly understand the supervisory role of teachers and lunch monitors and report “it makes me feel safe to have someone watching to save me”.

Some students did however request additional supervision when they stated they would like to “have more teachers out because then they are able to see more of what is going on”. If supervisors are more in tune with what is happening on the school grounds, conflict can consequently be reduced, simultaneously increasing student’s comfort and well-being. Some students on the other hand feel as though the same supervisory role that is believed to offer them protection and comfort, often takes away their freedom, and hinders the activities students are able to freely engage in. “The teachers yell too much at the kids. They take the fun out of recess”. One student reported that they do not like the general recess environment because of the supervision, “because sometimes we aren’t allowed places I want to go”. What many students fail to understand is that when a lack of adequate supervision exists, this creates an environment that invites both social and behavioural challenges (Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, 2010).

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Implications

Throughout the process of the research, several implications for both future research and practice and policy emerged, and will therefore be addressed within the following section.

Future research. In reflecting on the current research, there are a number of directions that the research could be taken that would contribute substantially to the field of Child and Youth Studies in relation to the connection between student's experiences and their health and well-being.

A similar research direction could be taken with future research, however, the use of quantitative over qualitative measures, such as one to measure student's well-being beyond their reported experiences, could determine if a more direct relationship exists between that of children's recess experiences and their health and well-being. Student's relationships with others have also presented themselves as a domineering force in terms of its influence on student's happiness, school success, and well-being. This is yet another substantial area of child development that could benefit from additional research.

Another interesting aspect of the research would be to look deeper look into potential gender differences that may exist between student's experiences and their well-being. It would be thought-provoking to investigate whether gender not only influences the activities students choose to engage in during their recesses, but how those activities and experiences consequently influence student well-being.

Practice and policy. The current research brought forth the notion that more sufficient attention needs to be directed to students' environments, but more importantly to children's school experiences in particular. Children spend a large portion of their childhood within

educational institutions, and as continually emphasized throughout the research, their experiences within these environments can be considerably influential to student's health and well-being. Ensuring that children and youth are provided with not only environments they feel safe in, but that they have adequate sources of support within each of those environments would be an appropriate and important place to start.

The Joint Consortium for School Health (Morrison & Kirby, 2011) is a commendable resource in relation to educational institutions and the necessity of addressing children and youth's health and well-being. Their 'Better Practice Statements' provide an all-encompassing look into how important promoting health and well-being is to student's development and future trajectories. However, as continually emphasized throughout the process of the research was the fact that recess is continually overlooked within the literature, including the JSCH (Morrison & Kirby, 2011) document. It is hopeful that research, including the current study, will shed light on the importance of recess and consequently call for the necessary attention to be directed to recess that it truly deserves.

Pin-pointing particular aspects of the school environment, better yet – the recess environment that students both excel in and struggle with, would allow for the creation of resources that appropriately heighten the benefits and minimize the struggles associated with the recess environment. The creation of such resources would encourage positive experiences among students and consequently influence developmental trajectories of student well-being.

As expressed earlier, what became very evident from the Ministry of Child and Youth Services (2006), the Joint Consortium for School Health (Morrison & Kirby, 2011) and the current research was that greater attention needed to be placed on the use of both prevention and health promotion tactics directed at today's students, rather than reactive methods that are often

used to respond to existing problems. The goal of the MCYS (2006) document was to work towards ensuring that Ontario is providing children and youth with the best opportunities possible to succeed and reach their full potential. Furthermore, the JSCH (2010) provided a detailed look into just how important promoting health and well-being is to student's development and future trajectories. It is hopeful that the current research, as well as future research studies, will shed light on the importance of recess and consequently call for the necessary attention to be directed to recess that it truly deserves.

Generating the necessary attention towards aspects of children's lives, such as recess, that have not only been absent in research thus far, but have been noted to greatly influence student health and well-being is the first step in establishing a strong foundation of valuable knowledge. We can build upon that foundation with student resources and various avenues of support in order to both support and encourage student well-being.

The findings at hand could be a valuable layer upon that foundation to further guide practice and policy by ensuring students have positive experiences across the entire school environment including recess. If children are engaged and connected to the school environment in its entirety – to peers and classmates, teachers and staff, and the inner and outer classroom environments, they are more likely to have positive experiences which will likely translate into increased well-being.

Possible partnerships. It is important that the knowledge at hand is shared with key people in children's lives such as parents, school staff, and the larger community. If these parties understand the importance of the recess environment and its influence on student well-being, this could initiate a larger movement in projects aimed at extracting and maximizing the hidden

benefits embedded in the recess environment, much like Dr. McNamara has started in the Niagara Region, with the Niagara Recess Project.

Limitations

Although the current research makes an important contribution to not only research concerning children and youth, but also research concerning their education and well-being, there are still limitations that need to be addressed. The following section will highlight a few limitations within the current research.

The first limitation concerns the chosen methodology. With including participants from only three separate Southern Ontario schools, this limits the potential generalizability between other elementary schools as well as other student's recess experiences. Considering all three elementary schools involved in the research follow a 'balanced day' school schedule, recess experiences at other schools that may or may not abide by the same structure could cause for different recess experiences to emerge, and thus would be unaccounted for within the current research. Although the goal of a case study is not to infer generalizability, future research may want to take this into consideration in order to further extend the knowledge of recess influences. Secondly, in regards to the individuals involved within the study, the research could benefit from greater number of participants in order to ensure a diversity of experiences within the recess environment.

Focusing on only one perspective – in this case students' perspective – may be viewed as a limitation in some respects. However, when considering both the scope and focus of the research at hand, placing students' experiences and perspectives at the forefront of the research encapsulates a detailed understanding of the recess environment according to those most involved in and influenced by the environment.

There are a number of influential factors that play an important role in students' school experiences; they do however extend beyond the scope the he research at hand. Socioeconomic contexts of the school and greater community, gender differences among students, and differences in students' developmental stages are all factors that could have a potentially influential role on student experiences in terms of availability of resources, which could consequently hinder support of recess improvement initiatives. A larger research project could contribute greater attention to other important areas of research such as the influence of socioeconomic contexts. When researching possible initiatives to increase students' positive experiences and well-being, understanding the socioeconomic of the institution and surrounding areas would contribute valuable knowledge to the cause.

Although the purpose of qualitative research is to explore and understand the experiences of participants, because there were no quantitative components or measures concerning student's mental health included in the current research, no causal relationships can be concluded concerning the impact of recess on student's recess experiences and their [mental] health and well-being. Instead, the current study aimed to explore the connection that exists between students' experiences and their health and well-being.

Final Thoughts

With acknowledging not only the importance of recess, but the fact that its importance continues to be overlooked, the research at hand aimed to provide recess with the recognition that the unique environment deserves. Through providing a detailed look into students' experiences within the recess environment and connecting those experiences in a multitude of ways as to how they influence the developmental trajectories of student well-being, the current research has presented recess as not only an important tool in children's development, but as one

that can considerably influence their health and well-being, as well as their general developmental trajectories.

Recess was presented in such a way as to enhance the understanding of just how influential recess is on student's development. Firstly, recess was identified to serve as a midday time-out that allows students to achieve a multilevel release. In terms of this identified 'release', students are provided with the opportunity to achieve a cognitive release through being provided with a break from demanding material in order for students to both cognitively process the previous lesson, but also to relieve stress. Students are also able to achieve a physical release in which they expel excess energy in order to return to the classroom with renewed attention, engagement and readiness to learn. A social release allows students to connect with peers in order to socialize and develop key social skills. Lastly, recess allows students to achieve an individual release through allowing them express their individuality in ways that the classroom structure is not always conducive to.

By providing students with freedom on the playground, and consequently allowing them to discover personal preferences, this led to the second major finding that recess is conducive to providing students with an 'opportunity for individuality'. Allowing students to engage in preferred activities and to interact with peers in productive ways not only allows students to build essential skills such as stress management, conflict resolution, coping skills, and a wide variety of social skills, it allows students to develop their imagination and creativity.

Encouraging students to express their individuality and providing them with adequate support in the process was evident within students' responses as being key components to having positive experiences within the recess environment. This was also an important factor that led to

the identification of recess as also being an important ‘avenue of support’ in relation to promoting positive developmental trajectories of student health and well-being.

All in all, in reflecting on students’ responses throughout the research, it is evident that recess plays a far more important role in influencing the developmental trajectories of student health and well-being than it is recognized for. The recess environment has been presented in such a way as to hopefully precede an imminent movement that advocates for recess as an essential, positive elementary school component. However, the research at hand has also presented recess as an environment that not only needs more sufficient attention in order to ensure children are being provided with the most optimal environment for their overall development, but as also needing further research in order to continually ensure that children’s needs are being met within such an important environment.

Appendix A

Student Questionnaires:

1. Why do you think students need recess?
2. What is your favourite part of recess? Why?
3. Do you feel comfortable at recess? Why or why not?
4. Is there anything at recess you wish was different? Why?
5. Do you have equipment to play with at recess? Do you use it?
6. What do you like least about recess?
7. If you could create your own recess, what activities would you have?
8. What do you like best about the Recess Project?
9. Has the Recess Project made recess better for you? If so, why?
10. How much do you like recess? (Circle One):

Not Much So-So Fine Very Much

- Please explain

11. Circle your favourite part of the school day:

Class Gym Indoor Recess

- Outdoor Recess Club Other

- Why is this your favourite time?

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