



The social and educational significance of school breaktimes

Seminar Briefing Paper

Tuesday 29 April 2008

A follow up national survey of breaktimes in primary and secondary schools

Over ten years ago, Peter Blatchford led a team undertaking a unique national survey on the position and length of breaktimes in the school day. That survey revealed that while most schools had various kinds of breaks, the trend was for these being reduced both in frequency and in length. The reasons behind these trends appeared to be pressures to cover the school curriculum and concerns about pupil behaviour.

Recently the Foundation funded a second survey, in the context of a proliferation of curriculum reforms, and an increased emphasis on testing and league tables. Concerns have also continued over the challenges of controlling pupil behaviour, the need to attend to bullying, and the worry over teenage children leaving the school site and hanging around in local neighbourhoods. To what extent were the earlier breaktime trends still in place? How were schools coping with all these competing pressures?

The research involved a large-scale postal survey sent to a fifth of all primary and secondary schools in England and Wales. Overall 1566 questionnaires were returned, an overall response rate of 38% which is better than comparable recent postal surveys to schools. A pupil questionnaire was also sent to Year 5, year 8 and Year 10 pupils in 23 schools in England and Wales, and over 1300 young people provided their views.

In brief, the main findings were:

- Pupils were overwhelmingly positive about breaktimes, and felt that they did not get enough time to play, exercise and socialise.
- Nearly all schools reported that they organised clubs and other activities for pupils during breaktime and after school.
- Primary schools agreed with pupils in valuing breaktime as an opportunity for pupils to get exercise and to socialise. Secondary schools saw its value more in functional terms as providing time for eating and drinking and giving teachers a break.

However:

- Further reductions were reported since 1995 in the length of lunchtimes and the virtual abolition of afternoon break at Key Stage 2 and secondary levels. Total break time during the school day had declined and the length of the lunchbreak had been reduced at all age levels in school
- Schools and pupils were in agreement that the main problem at breaktime is poor behaviour but pupils also noted insufficient opportunity and space for fun activities and time to eat.
- Staff supervision was much higher in primary than secondary schools during break time, the ratios had not changed since 1995, and secondary schools were less likely than primary schools to offer formal training and support for the supervisory staff.
- Most schools agreed that behaviour outside school had declined since 2001 (although primary schools felt that breaktime behaviour had improved).

The social significance of school breaktimes

Breaktimes are first and foremost a social event. This social value is often overlooked, but is perhaps increasingly important at a time of marked decline in children's independence of movement and choice of activities. In his writing on the topic, Blatchford has emphasised that school breaktimes are one of the few remaining contexts for relatively safe pupil-pupil interaction, not dominated by adults, constrained by the curriculum or mediated through electronic means. It may be that we underestimate the social function of school breaktimes, e.g., in terms of developing social skills, forming friendships and adjustment to school.

Breaktimes are also an opportunity to exercise and run around. The growth of home entertainments such as DVD, computer and console games has played a part in reducing the amount of time spent in outside exercise and activity. There are widely publicised concerns about health and obesity in young people.

And yet we are increasingly nervous about how we supervise and control young people and the extent to which we allow them to take risks and 'act out'. The lunchbreak is viewed as a serious challenge by teachers, and there have been suggestions that breaktimes should be further cut in order to reduce conflict.

Questions that arise

The survey provides an interesting jumping-off point for thinking about the benefits of relatively unsupervised social time for young people at school, particularly in the context of changing activity patterns and concerns over social and emotional well-being.

One group of questions arises over the role of informal social interaction and how this contributes to development. What kinds of interactions are practised within break time and what function do these serve children? How do these relate to the development of peer groups in school and peer groups who meet outside school and hang out together in other contexts? In the context of more structured lives (for some at least) and more individual, home based entertainment options, do breaktimes become more or less important? In what ways?

Another set of questions arises concerning the fear of young people's behaviour that lies behind teachers' reluctance to allow long unsupervised periods of play. There seems to be "a negative view of relatively independent peer interaction", as the

authors report. This is affecting peer relations and independence of movement out of school, but also, it seems, within school as well. How should we deal with this attitude?

This leads to a third set of questions about school policy regarding breaktimes. There appears to be a tension between the possible educational and social value of breaktime, and what appears to be growing restrictions on breaktime and activities then. How can schools approach breaktime? How can they balance pupil independence with control and school management? We know that excessive control is not likely to be the answer. What is?

The authors also found differences between the approaches and perceptions of primary schools versus secondary schools. Primary schools report better behaviour at breaktimes and secondary schools report worse. Is there something different about breaktime in secondary schools and if so, what is it? Is this underplaying the importance of socialisation in adolescence?

Finally, if we believe that there are social and educational benefits to breaktimes, how do we protect them, and maximise these benefits without causing further stress to teachers?