During the 2006–2007 school year, the number of detentions that the middle school students at International Christian School Uijongbu (ICSU) received in the classes after lunch outnumbered those in the classes before lunch by a ratio of nearly 2:1. The students received a total of 54 detentions; 19 of those came before lunch, and 35 came after lunch. The middle school students at ICSU attend four classes before lunch and three classes after lunch. Students receive detentions when they break school rules. For example, they might arrive to class tardy three or more times, not turn in documents that require a parent signature, or demonstrate disrespectful or rude behavior. The categories in which most of the afternoon detentions were occurring were excessive tardiness and rude and disrespectful behavior. The fact that students were receiving nearly twice as many detentions in the afternoon was quite alarming to the administration at ICSU, especially since the students have an additional class in the morning. The administration sought out possible changes that would help the students’ behavior and attention in afternoon classes.

Although many schools in the United States have eliminated recess from their schedules in recent years, the administration at ICSU decided to add a lunchtime recess to the middle school schedule to see whether the extra break in the day would help the students focus in their afternoon classes and would eliminate some of the behavior problems. A variety of researchers have examined the effects of a recess break on elementary-level students and found that breaking up the students’ study periods was an effective way to help them stay focused in their classes after the break (Dubroc 2007; Evans and Pellegrini 1997; Pellegrini and Bohn 2005; Pellegrini and Smith 1993; Ridgway et al. 2003; Taras 2005).

In order to add the break without restructuring the entire school day, the administration at ICSU added 5 minutes from the end of the fourth-period class and took 5 minutes from the beginning of the fifth-period class, thus adding 10 minutes to the lunch period. The students could leave the cafeteria once they had finished eating to go out to the school playground. The average time the students would spend on the playground was anywhere from 10 to 15 minutes. The secondary principal and the director of the school monitored the recess break on a rotating basis. The students were brought back inside from recess 7 minutes before the beginning of the fifth-period class to allow them some time to transition from the relaxed environment of recess to the structured environment of the classroom.

ICSU collected data for the first three months of the 2007–2008 school year to determine whether implementing a recess break would decrease the ratio of detentions after recess to those before recess. The overall number of detentions during those three months of school was reduced from 59 to 19. Of the 19 detentions that the middle school students received from August through October, 9 of them occurred before lunch and 10 of them occurred during the lunch period or after lunch. This ratio of detentions after recess to those before was much closer to 1:1 than was the ratio from the previous year.

Although the overall change in behavior may very well have been due to the inclusion of a recess break in the schedule, other changes occurred between the two school years that may, in part, explain some of the causes for the ratio decrease. This school year, substitute teachers taught the sixth grade for about six weeks while the current sixth-grade teacher was on medical leave. The teachers who substituted in the sixth grade were veteran teachers, however, and were familiar with the school’s discipline policies, so it is likely that the change in teachers proved to be an
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insignificant factor in the study. Also, the eighth-grade class moved into the ninth grade, so the class was not included in the study this school year because those students did not have recess. Likewise, the sixth-grade class was new to the study this school year. No data existed for them last year when they were fifth graders because elementary students do not receive detentions. The effects of these changes are likely negligible because last year’s eighth-grade class did not have many detentions on record and the current sixth-grade class had a 1:1 ratio of detentions.

Students were surveyed at the end of the study to determine their feelings about the recess break. Of the 64 students who were polled, 30 students said that it was easier to concentrate in class after the recess break, 29 said that they noticed no difference, and 5 students said that it was actually harder to concentrate in class after the recess break. Of those who said that it harder to concentrate after recess, 4 of the students were sixth-grade girls and 1 student was an eighth-grade boy. These conclusions follow a study mentioned by Pellegrini and Smith (1993) in which some students who were highly task oriented actually returned from the recess break more distracted. The 5 students who said that it was harder to concentrate might fit that category. However, because of the anonymity of the survey, it is difficult to determine. The reported increase in ability to concentrate for the majority paired with the overall decrease in the ratio of detentions handed out to the students after recess compared with those handed out before recess made this intervention a success.

Teachers who had middle school students after lunch also filled out a survey to evaluate the effects of the recess break. The 8 surveyed teachers all reported that they viewed the recess break as a beneficial addition to the schedule for the students. The middle school physical education teacher wrote of the recess break, “I believe it is very helpful! It gives them time to let off steam, loosen up, and refocus.” She also reported that she has been able to make more progress in her class this year and that the students listen better. The seventh-grade English teacher wrote that the students have a hard time focusing in the afternoon, but “when they are able to get some exercise, they focus better.” The middle school music teacher, who has many of the middle school students right after the recess break, reported that she is definitely making more progress this year. She wrote, “Less time is wasted, so we get to work faster with less transition time needed.” Many teachers reported, however, that it took the students an additional 2 to 5 minutes to settle down after returning from the recess break. This last finding implies that perhaps the students need more after-recess transition time, which could come about by sending the students in an extra minute or 2 earlier from the playground.

The overall effects of the recess break for middle school students were largely positive. There was a decrease in the ratio of detentions after lunch to those before lunch during the intervention period. Many of the students reported that it was easier to concentrate after the recess break, and teachers reported making the same or more progress in their curriculum.

References

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