

Give Us a Break: Irish Primary School Teachers' Experiences Supervising the Schoolyard during Breaktimes

Introduction

School should be a safe place where all children can develop intellectually and socially. Breaktime is an often-overlooked aspect of school life. It is the main setting where play occurs, though children's activity levels vary greatly. Breaktime offers one of the few times in the day when children engage in unstructured activities with peers and get relative freedom from intense adult supervision. It is also widely regarded as where the majority of conflict and behavioural issues occur; many children consider the schoolyard at playtime as the most dangerous place for them.

In one Irish study, at least half of children associated negative emotions or anxiety with joining in with peers during breaktimes (Tatlow-Golden et al., 2016). Peer rejection and arguments are common; triggers include ethnic background, space in the yard, rules of games, affluence of school location or area, and external factors such as cyberbullying. Less supervision and unstructured activities are also reasons for more frequent bullying and conflict at breaktime. Teachers find it difficult to establish what constitutes oppressive behaviour, as it is often discreet, whether it is physical oppression (pushing, fighting, scratching) or verbal (name-calling, threatening, laughing at).

Children progress socially at different rates, so some lack the social skills to solve problems and resolve conflicts independently. Conflicts can have negative effects on a child's experience in school, distract them from learning in class, and, for some victims of bullying and witnesses to incidents, lead to long-term emotional scars.

Conflict-prevention strategies and whole-school intervention approaches and programmes have had



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Breaktime is an often-overlooked aspect of primary school life. One of the few times in the day when children engage in unstructured activities with peers, it is also where most of the conflict occurs. This article describes a research study exploring six Irish primary school teachers' experiences managing the schoolyard during breaktime. It reports the study findings and makes practical recommendations to minimise conflict during breaktime.

varying degrees of success in maintaining a calmer playground. However, there is no focus on how school leaders can contribute to organising supervision during schoolyard breaktimes, nor how principals should interact with students and supervising teachers in this context.

Baines et al. (2020) identified the shortage of information on school breaktimes as evidence of the lack of importance attributed to this aspect of primary education by government, decision-makers, and education management. They explored teachers' experience of yard duty in order to share the voice, knowledge, and experience of teachers on how to improve current schoolyard management during breaktime: a voice that is missing to date from the discussion.

Research

Our qualitative study conducted semi-structured interviews with six primary school teachers (Table 1). Thematic analysis of the data identified three core themes: schoolyard organisation, the link between breaktime and the classroom, and schoolyard incidents.

Participant	Gender	Current class	Previous classes taught	Years teaching	School type ethos	Approximate school size
A	Male	4th	SEN teacher, 2nd, 5th, 3rd	12	Catholic, mixed	420
B	Male	5th	IT/SESE resource, 4th, 2nd	10	Catholic, boys	530
C	Male	4th	2nd, 3rd, 5th	6	Catholic, boys	230
D	Female	1st	5th, Senior Infants	7	Church of Ireland, mixed	200
E	Female	6th	Senior Infants, Junior Infants, 3rd, EAL support	10	Educate Together, mixed	460
F	Female	5th	EAL support, 4th, 6th	9	Educate Together, mixed	450

Table 1: Participant information. [SEN: special educational needs. SESE: social, environmental, and scientific education. EAL: English as an additional language.]

Discussion

Teachers described first-time schoolyard supervision experiences as 'daunting'. Better supervision training programmes are needed to improve teachers' understanding of the everyday running of the schoolyard and dealing with conflict.

Schoolyard organisation, the link between breaktime and the classroom, and schoolyard conflict have an influence on children and the teachers who supervise them during breaktimes. A well-organised schoolyard and breaktime contributed to the smooth running of a school day.

Two pandemic-enforced changes in schoolyard organisation practices have continued since Covid-19 emerged (Table 2). First, split or staggered breaks, implemented under pandemic guidelines on class bubbles, have led to increased supervision because there are fewer children in the yard at a specific breaktime, resulting in fewer incidents.

Second, schools experienced fewer incidents of conflict where structured play units and specific activity zones were continued, such as Gaelic games, soccer, basketball, fixed playground, playground games, and a climbing wall. Children visited these areas on a rotational basis.

Participant	'Split Break'	More space	Different zones	More supervision	Lower student-teacher ratio	Football removed
A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
B	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
C	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
D	✓	✓		✓	✓	
E	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
F	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Table 2: School changes to breaktime organisation during Covid-19

Breaktime is an invaluable part of the school day: something both students and teachers need, enjoy, and learn from. Children develop their social skills through friendships, problem-solving, and dealing with peer conflict. Teachers observe the children, see their dynamics, and learn new things about them; they also gain insights into the changes they will need to make in their pedagogical practices when they move to teaching a different year group: 'You

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get to talk with and see the other children . . . because sometimes we close our classroom door and that's all we see.'

Ways to improve schoolyard conflict management include:

- » Have informal conversations with children, because it 'affords them the right to tell their side and to be listened to'.
- » Ensure enough time for non-rushed handovers and updates between teachers. This reduces time spent in class resolving matters that arose during breaktime, particularly with older children.
- » Strong leadership from the principal, using different strategies and ways to get involved, sets a good example for staff and students to act appropriately.

When children have more space, supervision, and structure, fewer incidents occur. We suggest the following practical steps to minimise the level of conflict that teachers experience while supervising the schoolyard:

- » continually review organisational structures
- » improve supervision training and standards
- » allow time for teacher collaboration and handovers
- » unwavering commitment from leaders and managers.

Final thoughts

Ensuring a safe, inclusive, high-quality schoolyard environment is challenging but provides many benefits for children, including social interaction, exercise, problem-solving, communication skills, and informal learning. A well-organised schoolyard aids the smooth running of a school day and is important in developing the informal relationships between students and teachers. Extra planning, resources, and conversations for breaktime organisation, procedures, and supervision can only improve school practices and enhance the educational experience of children in our primary school sector.

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