



Schoolyard Conditions and Recess Practice: Canadian Principals' Perspectives on Challenges and Opportunities

Lauren McNamara

Diversity Institute
Toronto Metropolitan University
Toronto, Ontario
CANADA

Ken R. Lodewyk

Department of Kinesiology
Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario
CANADA

Wendy Cukier

Diversity Institute
Toronto Metropolitan University
Toronto, Ontario
CANADA

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ken Lodewyk, Department of Kinesiology, Brock University, 1812 Sir Isaac Brock Way, St. Catharines, ON, Canada, L2R-6P7.
E-mail: klodewyk@brocku.ca

Author Biographies

Lauren McNamara (PhD), is a learning scientist, Ashoka Fellow, and advisor whose work focuses on how everyday school environments shape students' experiences of belonging, school engagement, and mental health. As the founder of Schoolyards for Thought, an Adjunct Research Professor with Brock University, a consulting research scientist with the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University, and member of the Royal Society of Canada's Working Group on Children and Schools, Dr. McNamara works across research, policy, and practice to support system-level change.

Ken Lodewyk (PhD), is a Professor in the Department of Kinesiology at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. The focus of his teaching is in motor and psychosocial development, physical literacy, and movement pedagogy. His general research interest is in the relations between instructional practices, motivation, beliefs, life skills, achievement, and physical literacy in physical and health education, recreation, and sport.

Wendy Cukier (PhD), is one of Canada's leading experts in disruptive technologies, innovation processes and diversity. She is a professor in the Department of Entrepreneurship and Strategy in the School of Business Management at Toronto Metropolitan University. She holds an MA and MBA from the University of Toronto and a PhD from the Schulich School of Business, York University. Dr. Cukier is also the Founder of Ryerson University's Diversity Institute.

Abstract

The present study employed a cross-sectional mixed methods survey design to examine 123 elementary school principals' perspectives on recess – more specifically their perceptions of the value of recess, major recess-related challenges, organizational and environmental constraints, supervision practices, policy considerations, and factors that may support higher quality recess experiences. The study applied a mixed-format design using both closed and open-ended items in an anonymous online survey. The open-ended items were analyzed via an inductive qualitative thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) and others. Results of quantitative frequency analysis was reported alongside the following three interconnected summative themes: (1) the developmental importance of recess; (2) the organizational, environmental, and relational conditions shaping recess experiences; and (3) the broader institutional structures influencing how recess was supported within schools. Collectively, these themes positioned recess not simply as a break within the school day, but as a complex developmental, relational, organizational, and institutional environment shaped by interactions among supervision practices, physical environments, funding structures, institutional policies, and opportunities for student participation and engagement.

Keywords: school principals; schoolyards; mixed format; constraints

Résumé

La présente étude a utilisé un devis transversal de méthodes mixtes pour examiner les perspectives de 123 directions d'écoles primaires concernant les récréations, plus précisément leurs perceptions de la valeur des récréations, des principaux défis qui y sont associés, des contraintes organisationnelles et environnementales, des pratiques de surveillance, des considérations liées aux politiques ainsi que des facteurs pouvant favoriser des expériences de récréation de meilleure qualité. L'étude reposait sur un devis à format mixte combinant des questions fermées et ouvertes dans le cadre d'un sondage en ligne anonyme. Les réponses aux questions ouvertes ont été analysées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique qualitative inductive, inspirée de Braun et Clarke (2006, 2019) et d'autres auteurs. Les résultats de l'analyse quantitative des fréquences ont été présentés en parallèle de trois thèmes synthèses interreliés : 1) l'importance du développement de la récréation; 2) les conditions organisationnelles, environnementales et relationnelles qui façonnent les expériences de récréation; et 3) les structures institutionnelles plus larges qui influencent la façon dont les récréations sont soutenues dans les écoles. Dans leur ensemble, ces thèmes mettent en évidence que la récréation ne constitue pas seulement une pause dans la journée scolaire, mais plutôt un environnement complexe sur les plans du développement, des relations, de l'organisation et des institutions. Cet environnement est façonné par les interactions entre les pratiques de surveillance, les environnements physiques, les mécanismes de financement, les politiques institutionnelles ainsi que les possibilités offertes aux élèves de participer et de s'engager.

Mots-clés: directions d'école; cours d'école; méthode mixte; contraintes

Introduction

At a time when concerns regarding children's mental health, loneliness, physical inactivity, declining opportunities for free play, and increasing screen engagement continue to rise, recess remains one of the few generally accessible opportunities for daily play, movement, peer interaction, and informal socialization embedded within children's everyday lives. Recess occupies a unique position within the school day as one of the few regularly occurring periods in which children have opportunities for self-directed play, exploration, movement, and social negotiation outside formal instructional constraints. A recent policy statement from the Council on School Health in the United States (Murray et al., 2026) asserts that, across childhood, play and informal social interaction have consistently been associated with a wide range of academic and developmental benefits, including physical activity participation, emotional regulation, attention, cognitive processing, memory, social competence, problem-solving, peer relationship development, school engagement, and overall well-being. For many children, particularly those living in urban or socioeconomically marginalized communities, recess may additionally represent one of the only consistent opportunities for outdoor play, leisure, peer socialization, and access to recreational equipment within their daily lives (Massey et al., 2018). For example, Lodewyk and McNamara (2025) reported that, compared to students in a moderately populated area of southwestern Ontario, grade 4-8 students attending school in the Greater Toronto Area reported significantly higher negative recess affect overall; and lower enjoyment and opportunities for play during indoor recess (p. 445). Recess is therefore not simply a pause between academic activities, but an everyday social environment through which children experience movement, belonging, conflict, autonomy, exclusion, and peer culture within the rhythms of school life (McNamara, 2021).

In their national position paper on recess, Physical and Health Education Canada (McNamara & Zakaria, 2020) emphasized the developmental importance of recess in Canadian schools, describing it as a necessary component of children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Rights-based frameworks including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2013) similarly recognize children's right to play and leisure participation as central to healthy development. Despite this growing recognition, recess continues to occupy a contradictory position within many educational systems: widely acknowledged as beneficial, yet often under-supported in policy, funding, staffing, supervision, and infrastructure.

Historically, recess has frequently been conceptualized as a break from "real" learning rather than as a meaningful educational and developmental environment. As a result, recess has often occupied a peripheral position within school improvement planning, educational policy, and broader discussions of child development and well-being (Massey et al., 2021a, 2021b; McNamara, 2021). Yet what occurs during recess does not remain isolated from the rest of the school day. Children carry the social experiences, conflicts, friendships, exclusions, emotional states, and physical experiences of recess back into classrooms, peer groups, and subsequent interactions. In this sense, recess functions as an important social environment through which belonging, participation, autonomy, and peer relationships are continuously negotiated within the everyday ecology of school life (McNamara et al., 2018b, 2014).

Factors such as space availability, equipment access, supervision practices, scheduling structures, school rules, and institutional priorities may influence not only opportunities for engagement, but also patterns of exclusion, crowding, boredom, and conflict across recess settings. For example, conditions such as limited activity options, restrictive rules, insufficient supervision,

and scarcity of space or equipment may concentrate participation into narrower and more competitive forms of interaction while reducing opportunities for creative, cooperative, and self-directed play (Massey et al., 2018; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). This perspective is important because recess-related challenges are often framed primarily as student behavioral problems requiring increased control or disciplinary management. However, environmental and organizational conditions may themselves contribute to many of the interactional patterns observed during recess. From this perspective, recess environments may function similarly to other social ecologies in which institutional conditions shape patterns of participation and behavior over time (McNamara et al., 2018a, 2018b; Massey et al., 2021a, 2021b; Rhea et al., 2025; Thompson & London, 2023).

Schoolyards may, therefore, be understood as a form of everyday educational infrastructure that shapes children's opportunities for movement, social connection, play, and daily participation. Yet, despite the amount of time children spend in these environments across childhood, schoolyards have historically received comparatively limited scholarly, policy, and infrastructural attention relative to their developmental significance (Massey et al., 2018). For example, research (Massey et al., 2021a; Massey et al., 2021b; McNamara et al., 2018a, 2018b; Rhea et al., 2025; Thompson & London, 2023) indicates that – while schools invest substantial attention toward classroom instruction, assessment, and academic outcomes – the recess environments in which children spend significant portions of their daily social lives outdoors often remain under-designed, under-funded, and unevenly supported. That research has also signalled that conditions such as restrictive schoolyard rules, reduced opportunities for active and risky play, inequities in access to equipment and outdoor infrastructure, and reliance on localized fundraising efforts to support playground improvements may create substantial disparities in children's recess experiences across schools and communities.

Although the recess research has frequently focused on children's physical activity levels, intervention outcomes, behavioral management, and the health benefits associated with outdoor play and movement (e.g., Haug et al., 2010; Ridgers et al., 2007; Suga et al., 2021), comparatively less attention has been paid to recess as a complex social and organizational environment shaped by broader institutional and environmental conditions within schools, or to the perspectives of school leaders responsible for navigating these dynamics in practice (e.g., London et al., 2015). Principal's perspectives seem vital because they occupy an important role in shaping recess environments through decisions related to supervision structures, scheduling, staffing, policy implementation, equipment access, safety procedures, and school climate (Vaantaja, 2016). However, to date, there is very limited research information about what elementary school principals in Canada perceive to be the priorities, opportunities, and challenges associated with recess.

This study sought to better understand, more specifically, how recess is organized, experienced, and navigated within the institutional realities of a sample of contemporary Canadian elementary schools. The specific research questions were: (1) What are the elementary school demographic characteristics especially relative to recess? More specifically, what is each school's enrollment, estimated area socio-economic status, total recess duration each school day, degree of separation between younger and older students during recess, and the total number of students outside together at once for recess? What do school principals report as their (2) value and vision for recess; (3) recess procedures during inclement weather; (4) recess policies and funding; (5) withholding of recess from certain students; (6) equipment and materials for recess; (7) recess supervision by developmental level; (8) recess supervisor position, hiring, and training protocols;

(9) most important recess challenges and/or constraints; and, (10) ways to improve recess. Finally, (11) What are the main themes to emerge from the qualitative thematic analysis.

Methods

Research Design

The ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was the framework undergirding this research as it postulates that children's experiences emerge through interactions among social, physical, and organizational environments. Within this, recess was conceptualized not simply as unstructured free time, but as a multidimensional developmental environment shaped by interacting social, relational, organizational, physical, and institutional conditions, including supervision practices, schoolyard design, policies, equipment access, scheduling practices, and broader school priorities. The study applied, more specifically, a descriptive mixed-format survey design wherein data was collected through a short anonymous online survey consisting of seven more "closed-ended" (i.e., checklist, Likert-style, yes/no response, one phrase response) items that were assessed more quantitatively along with another 15 survey items that were "open-ended" items wherein participants provided sentence or more elaborate paragraph answers that were analyzed qualitatively (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

Participants by Province

A total of 123 elementary school principals participated in the study. Respondents represented schools from across Canada, with the largest representation from Ontario ($n = 32$), British Columbia ($n = 25$), Alberta ($n = 22$), Nova Scotia ($n = 15$), and Saskatchewan ($n = 10$), alongside smaller representation from other provinces and territories (with no participants from the Northwest Territories or Nunavut).

Online Survey

Data were collected using an anonymous online survey developed by the research team (two professors and one adjunct professor) to explore principals' perspectives regarding recess within elementary schools. Survey development was informed by earlier pilot research with school principals in Ontario (Vaantaja, 2016) and recurring research and theoretical issues identified in preliminary mixed-method studies related to recess supervision, conflict, equipment access, schoolyard conditions, and organizational challenges (McNamara, 2021, 2013; McNamara et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2014). More specifically, the survey administered to a sample of Ontario principals in the prior pilot research (Vaantaja, 2016) used 33 predominately closed-response items applied to the "fitness break" portion of recess. Except for a few open-ended items (e.g., "Please list your three most pressing challenges with recess at your school.") that added more of a qualitative dimension to the survey/study, the items used in this study were modified slightly from the piloted version in Ontario. Minor adaptations of some of the items included changing some of the phrasing for a national rather than provincial sample such as referring to "recess" nationally, instead of "fitness break" that would apply in Ontario. A sample item alteration was changing "Are teachers allowed to exclude students from all or part of fitness break as a consequence for academic or discipline reasons?" to "Are staff allowed to withhold recess as a consequence for any reason?"

To answer the aforementioned research questions, the survey included a combination of open-ended (longer response) items and closed-ended (e.g., checklists, Likert-style, word or phrase answers) regarding topics such as school demographics (e.g., enrolments, socio-economic status,

daily recess duration, number of students together at once for outside recess), equipment availability, a checklist of recess challenges, and recess supervisor ratios, hiring, and training. The survey items and their response choices (if applicable) are shown in Appendix A.

Procedure

A nonprobability convenience/volunteer sample was used for this study. Following the attainment of ethics approval from a university Research Ethics Board, the research team contacted research coordinators/consultants at 1-3 school boards in each province and territory of Canada to introduce them to the study and to arrange for and secure ethics approval from their respective boards. The school board research coordinators were informed that all principals in the entire school board could be invited to participate in the survey. Any recruited principals were then contacted by that coordinator by email that included an introduction to the study, a brief consent section, and a link to the online survey on [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com). As reported earlier, there was unequal representation from each province and territory (mainly five represented). We caution that our recruitment protocol provided limited information about the sample, field dates, number invited, and the methods used by each school board research coordinator that may somewhat compromise coverage bias and potential selection of participants. We also do not and cannot imply national representativeness because of, for example, the uneven distribution of participants across provinces and territories.

In the introduction and consent section of the online survey recruited principals were informed that consent was implied if they continued to the survey, that the online surveys were anonymous and encrypted to protect IP address, and that no individual school, school board, or city identifiers were to be used in the survey or in the reporting of any results. They were also reminded of their ethical rights to, for example, voluntarily participate, skip or partially answer any questions, and/or to discontinue and log off at any time. The survey was designed to require approximately 15–20 minutes to complete and the data was downloaded by the research team into an Excel file for analysis.

Data Analysis

Responses to each of the survey items were copied verbatim into an Excel file and responses to the opening seven-item quantitative format items assessing demographics were then transferred to the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS; version 2024) for frequency analyses (see Table 1). The two formats of the survey (more closed and open-ended items) were analyzed simultaneously. Responses to open-ended survey items were analyzed using a qualitative inductive thematic analysis approach informed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), Creswell and Poth (2018), and Saldaña (2021). First, responses were read multiple times by two members of the research team to establish blocks of dominant patterns of phrases, words, or experiences that were grouped together to create codes. Second, one researcher then conducted a frequency analysis on the to determine the quantities of student responses on each survey item and relative to each research question. Representative verbatim quotations (including grammar) were selected to illustrate prominent patterns, institutional tensions, and recurring organizational concerns within the data. Meanwhile, the second data analyst frequency coded approximately 3% of the qualitative data to confirm inter-rater frequency consistency. Although frequencies of data codes (patterns) were recorded descriptively to indicate the relative prominence of recurring concerns across the dataset, the data analysis further prioritized the contextual meaning and relationships embedded within principals' responses rather than frequency counts alone. Hence, summative themes were

interpreted through a qualitative thematic analysis of the more open-ended survey items. This involved repeated engagement with the dataset to support immersion and familiarization with participants' responses. The coding process was iterative and interpretive, with themes developed through ongoing comparison, reflection, and engagement with patterns of meaning across the dataset. To strengthen trustworthiness and analytic rigor, interpretations of the data, codes, and themes were discussed and compared regularly and refined into broader thematic groupings reflecting recurring patterns and to ensure that findings remained grounded within the dataset while capturing broader patterns across participants' experiences.

Table 1

Overview of Health Promoting Schools Standards and Indicator Systems

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Province/Territory ($N = 123$; $NR=0$)	Ontario	32	26.0
	British Columbia	25	20.3
	Alberta	22	17.8
	Nova Scotia	15	12.2
	Saskatchewan	10	8.2
	Other	19	15.5
School Enrollment Size ($N=123$; $NR=0$)	≤100 students	9	7.3
	101–200 students	22	17.9
	201–300 students	30	24.4
	301–400 students	17	13.8
	>400 students	45	36.6
Perceived School Socio-Economic Status ($N=121$; $NR=2$)	Above average	42	34.7
	Average	62	51.2
	Below average	17	14.0
Total Outdoor Recess Time Each School Day ($N=90$; $NR=33$)	0–39 minutes	13	14.4
	40–49 minutes	38	42.2
	50–59 minutes	18	20.0
	≥60 minutes	21	23.3
Younger and Older Students Separated at Recess ($N=119$; $NR=4$)	Yes	56	47.1
	No	53	44.5
	Somewhat (hybrid)	10	8.4
# of Students Outside Together for Recess ($N=117$; $NR=6$)	<100	18	15.4
	101–150	14	12.0
	151–200	18	15.4
	201–250	23	19.6
	251–300	11	9.4
	301–350	9	7.7
	>350	24	20.5

Note: N = all valid responses and may vary slightly across categories due to non-responses for some survey items; NR = No-response.

Results

School Quantitative Demographic Characteristics

Specific school demographic information is summarized in Table 1 and includes the total number of respondents and non-respondents by characteristic. To summarize, participating school enrollments (as reported by the principals) varied considerably by school from fewer than 100 students ($n = 9$) to more than 400 students ($n = 45$). Schools also represented diverse socioeconomic contexts, with 42 principals describing their school communities as above average socioeconomic status, 62 as average, and 17 as below average. The duration of total outdoor recess time including lunch break in minutes was generally (56.6% of respondents) below 50 minutes. Almost half ($n = 56$; 47%) of the principals reported that the younger students were separated from the older students during recess, whereas 10 schools reported using a hybrid approach wherein all grades shared most areas (although some spaces were allotted to only the older grades). Finally, the number of students outside on the same play space for recess at one time varied from <100 ($n = 18$; 15.4%) to >350 ($n = 24$; 20.5%).

Value and Vision for Recess

There was strong support for the statement “Active outdoor free play during the school day is an important and necessary part of children’s overall health and development and should be well-supported” with 83 valid responses responding strongly agree, 19 agree, 5 neither agree or disagree (16 did not respond). A sample “agree” comment from participant (P) 22 was:

While it is critical for all students to have play and fresh air. Many of our students have significant social skill deficits and ‘play’ is very physical or involves students play-fighting/fighting. We do not have enough staff to offer as many structured games and activities as we would like.

The main reason for neither agreeing or disagreeing was that “we also have other physical literacy activities available throughout the day, and our classes have movement inherent in programming” (P95).

Responses to the item, “In an ideal world, what would recess at your school look like (indoor and outdoor)?” were categorized into two dominant themes that were consistent across most of the open-ended qualitative items. The first theme was the environmental/organizational aspect of recess (e.g., funding, supervision, equipment) with 130 responses to this item whereas the second reflected something about the students (e.g., behavior, conflict resolution, marginalization) with 56 responses. The dominant preference was for a diversity of options, outdoor spaces, and equipment ($n = 46$). Less prominent were desires for less fears about liability risk and cancellations of outside recess due to weather ($n = 18$) which seemed to align with their value for students interacting cooperatively, problem-solving, and resolving conflicts ($n = 25$) while being playfully physically active ($n = 21$). There was also a notable emphasis on the need for students to have fun ($n = 10$) partly by engaging in a blend of diverse free play and semi-structured activities (e.g., table tennis, stretching, board games, quiet time) ($n = 9$); include intramurals and clubs ($n = 9$), use multiple venues ($n = 8$), are well-equipped with supplies ($n = 9$), and use trained student leaders ($n = 9$) and recess supervisors ($n = 8$) as facilitators.

Recess Procedures During Inclement Weather

During inclement weather, some of the principals ($n = 31$) stated that their school did whatever was feasible to have recess outdoors ($n = 20$) including getting parental consent to let willing students stay outside for all or a part of such recesses even if it was raining lightly or not too cold (e.g., -27°C ; $n = 11$). Most of the principals, however, reported that their school students remained indoors ($n = 24$) and in a classroom ($n = 33$) with six offering some structured movement activities in the classroom. Meanwhile, several ($n = 28$), signaled their use of a combination of indoor locations such as a classroom or the gym, cafeteria, hallway, or library ($n = 19$) while nine indicated having multiple activities at several “play stations” throughout the school where students could go for their indoor recess. Sample activities included board games, cards, crafts, watching movies or dance videos, reading, art, and construction; or free play, intramurals, or walk-run club in the gym.

Recess Policies and Funding

Responses pertaining to the administration of recess signaled scant use (only two of the 86 responses) of a formal recess committee or recess team in the school to monitor and make decisions about recess. Eight of the respondents reported using another form of administrative or oversight body in the school. An example of this was (P65): “The entire staff and administration reviews, reflects, and discusses recess problems, procedures, and expectations whenever necessary during staff meetings.” Funding for the purchase and implementation of play structures such as climbers, slides, and monkey bars for student use during recess, was linked to school fundraising initiatives in 28 respondents (e.g., “School fundraising and any small additional amounts we can find in our budgets - which in reality amounts to a few hundred dollars a year - if any.” P28) whereas 22 reported a dependence on a school parent council or service club (e.g., “I have received donations from service clubs; The school division provides in kind help by doing the installation.” P29), 14 highlighted allocations from government grants and/or the school board (“Some grants can be made available through government.” P6), and 20 noted some combination of these or another source. This hybrid perspective was expressed by one respondent (P5) as “Sometimes the school board will fund fixing, maintenance, and some money if structure is overdue. The majority of the money has to be found through grants, fundraising and parent council.”

When asked how specific recess policies at the regional and provincial levels might be helpful, a noteworthy proportion of responding principals ($n = 23$) stated that they did not know how policymakers could help or that government policy had little to no relevance because, for example (P69), “You can’t make it a policy to have volunteers run activities.” Several others ($n = 7$) were similarly skeptical by asserting that – because policymakers are not realistic or well-enough connected to students, local communities, or schools – recess policies should be community and/or school-based to reflect and meet the needs of local areas, schools, and students. Others, however, welcomed additional funding for more recess supervisors (teacher and non-teacher; $n = 9$), more staff training (especially on conflict resolution and inclusion; $n = 8$), and for large and small equipment ($n = 7$). Some ($n = 10$) highlighted that policymakers could help to provide more equitable expectations, guidelines, and other non-funding resources to better ensure quality recess. Several ($n = 8$) highlighted the need for policymakers to focus less on preventing liability concerns and academic success and more on facilitating active and even “riskier” free play during recess.

Withholding Recess from Students

There were diverse responses to the question “Are staff allowed to withhold recess as a consequence for any reason?” Of the 122 responses, 23 participants reported “no” (e.g., P27 “The kids need the social time and we all need a break from one another from time to time.”) and 39 of the sample responded: “occasionally or rarely”. A sample comment (P127) for this group was “For exceptional circumstances such as misbehavior during recess and an occasional teacher that uses it to offer the student extra help.” The most common response (40 participants) was “yes”. The following comment reflects why some schools occasionally withheld recess from certain students as a form of consequence:

We have a learning room. If a student is sent to the learning room at one of the recesses they will work on skills/expectations of the school. They may go outside with the learning room leader to practice supervised play to get help with conflict. Sometimes they will do yoga or a relaxation activity. Sometimes they will read stories and brainstorm solutions. (P7)

Equipment and Materials for Recess

The most common response to the item “At your school, equipment and materials during recess includes...” was “A limited variety of equipment and materials, in good shape” ($n = 44$). A comment exemplifying this was: “We could always have more especially for junior high students. We have balls and lines on tarmac for games” (P17). Some of these respondents noted that although equipment was limited, there were other dynamics that limited students’ effective use of that equipment. For example, one respondent stated:

We have some materials that were donated however, the footballs are too large for students to hold properly. Also, the students don't really play appropriately with the materials - they use the items to throw at one another. Our PE teacher has worked hard to teach the students games and activities to play with the materials but, with limited exposure to structured activities/structure and coaching around social skill development in their personal lives, it is challenging for them to play appropriately without an adult leading/overseeing the activity. (P22)

The second more common response ($n = 35$) was “a wide variety of equipment and materials (that are in good shape) is available to students all year.” Sample comments included: “We just got a grant for timber stacks; these are idea for imaginative/creative play, they double seating for an outdoor classroom and provide shade during soccer season” (P7); “We love the free play, loose part play and areas where students can use their imaginations” (P84); “We have invested in lots of winter equipment (sleds and shovels) which has transformed our recess during the winter when our play structures are closed and traditional sports are harder to play” (P96). The third more common response ($n = 20$) was “a limited variety of equipment/materials, but not in good shape.” A sample comment (P19) for this response was: “Play structures are available but equipment/material is used up quickly, Cheap equipment does not last long. Can be expensive to buy new every year;”

Recess Supervision by Developmental Level

The daily average ratio of students per one yard-duty recess supervisor in kindergarten (out of 63 total school responses) ranged from <10 ($n = 3$), 10-19 ($n = 15$), 20-24 ($n = 13$), 25-40 ($n =$

13), 41-65 ($n = 14$), to > 65 ($n = 5$). This ratio increased in 72 total responses relative to the primary grades (1-3): <10 ($n = 0$); 10-19 ($n = 3$), 20-24 ($n = 6$), 25-40 ($n = 19$), 41-65 ($n = 28$), and > 65 ($n = 16$). Results for the 70 responses for the junior level were: <10 ($n = 1$); 10-19 ($n = 3$), 20-24 ($n = 4$), 25-40 ($n = 17$), 41-65 ($n = 24$), and > 65 ($n = 21$); whereas the 63 responses for the intermediate level results were: <10 ($n = 2$); 10-19 ($n = 2$), 20-24 ($n = 3$), 25-40 ($n = 17$), 41-65 ($n = 22$), and > 65 ($n = 17$). These values signal the lowest ratio of students per one yard-duty supervisor was lowest in Pre-K to K grades compared to the older grades when the ratio was similar across the primary, junior, and intermediate grade levels. It is also important to note that this ratio can depend on how many students have special needs as there would then be more Educational Assistants supervising during recess.

Recess Supervisor Position, Hiring, and Training Protocols

Responding principals reported that recess supervisors during recess were usually on duty teachers ($n = 94$); educational or learning assistants ($n = 55$), paid lunch monitors/supervisors including parents ($n = 42$); school administrators (especially the principal; $n = 30$), school staff generally ($n = 11$), or others (e.g., secretary, daycare educators, attendants, older students; $n = 8$). Some schools had teachers supervising the morning and afternoon recesses and other school staff (e.g. educational or learning assistants) supervising the noon/lunch eating and recess.

The most common responses to the item: “If supervisors are not teachers or full-time staff, please indicate the hiring requirements for yard duty supervisors” was not responding at all or stating *not applicable* ($n = 99$) thereby implying that recess supervisors were teachers or full-time school staff like educational or learning assistants. Of the remaining 25 responses, six stated they did not know and 19 listed several criteria that either the school or board (e.g., CUPE job posting) used to hire individuals as mainly noon-hour supervisors (e.g., 1 hour/day) with parents often applying for these positions. The general criteria for these positions were basic first aid, criminal record check with vulnerable sector screening, completed application and references, high school diploma preferred, an interview by school administration or the board/district human resources personnel that assess aspects such as communication and relationship skills, English language proficiency, experience with children, professionalism (e.g., attendance, punctuality), behavior management and conflict resolution skills, general health, and one’s ability to carry out instructions and to work outdoors in adverse weather.

Results for the item “Is training provided for recess supervisors?” varied from 45 stating “yes”, 48 “no”, and the remainder ($n = 31$) not responding. Of those responding yes, 26 elaborated that orientation to basic behavioral expectations, rules, procedures, and injury/emergency/first aid protocol for recess was generally held at the start of the year with regular conversations and updates as needed in staff meetings or personally with the administrators. Another 12 respondents highlighted that specific training occurred at the board/district level (e.g., professional development days by PE Specialists) or by the school administration on aspects topics such as conflict management training, cultural responsiveness, restorative practices, non-violent crisis intervention, and/or violent risk assessment and treatment often through problem-solving scenarios such as roll plays live or in videos. Some respondents ($n = 5$) highlighted that the training was not system/district wide but very school specific generally done by the school administration such as teacher and administration through modeling in the form of “job-shadowing” or pairing a teacher with a lunch-hour supervisor.

Most Important Recess Challenges and/or Constraints

Frequency results to the checklist of main school recess challenges for principals were: social conflict among children ($n = 72$), behavioral concerns ($n = 62$), no one to organize space, plan activities, or oversee recess ($n = 58$), equipment management ($n = 41$), liability concerns ($n = 26$), lack of space ($n = 22$), lack of facilities ($n = 17$), and seems a separate part of the fabric of the school environment ($n = 0$). More specific qualitative information about what principals believed to be their main challenges with school recess was assessed through two of the open-ended survey items (“Please list your three most pressing challenges with recess at your school;” and “What three things most constrain you from enacting an ideal recess?”). Results from these two items revealed two main topical categories, namely (1) environmental and organizational challenges; and (2) student behavioral and interpersonal challenges. These categories housed each subordinate theme and its frequency (see Tables 2 and 3). Analysis of the data within and across these two items revealed that, overall, environmental and organizational challenges were more dominant concerns than student behavior and interpersonal relationships.

Table 2

Most Pressing Challenges with School Recess

Environmental/Organizational	Student Behavioural & Interpersonal
Lack of Equipment & Space ($n = 42$) • Lack of Space, especially when icy or wet often due to inadequate drainage in play areas ($n = 20$). • Lack of equipment and play structures ($n = 15$). • Need for better funding for and management of the available equipment ($n = 7$). Inadequate Supervision & Facilitation ($n = 36$) • Short-staffed so unable to attend to all students ($n = 12$). • Supervisor apathy (being off-task and lacking engagement or relationship building with the students) ($n = 7$). • Inability to fully supervise due to the large size of the area and the poor sightlines for observing ($n = 7$). • Lack of adult-facilitated structured play (often too much just idle free play and not enough adult activity/play facilitators and organizers: ($n = 10$)) Lack of Opportunities & Choices Leading to Boredom ($n = 18$) • To reduce boredom and misbehavior, we need more activity options and differentiated terrain and spaces (e.g., covered areas when it is raining) for creative interactive play). Weather ($n = 12$) • Dressing for the cold; cancelling outside recess due to the weather; Keeping students off the icy areas. Insufficient Funding ($n = 7$) • Need for better funding to maintain and management the available equipment.	• Interpersonal conflicts ($n = 27$). • Lacking in necessary sharing, social, independent, cooperative, & conflict resolution skills (e.g., making up a game together) ($n = 23$). • Rough “tackle-type” play (e.g, King of the Hill, Snow Forts, Snowball fights, Bullying) ($n = 22$). • Misbehavior (e.g., not adhering to rules or directions, playing in restricted areas, aggression) ($n = 17$) • Hyper-Active and Over-Competitive ($n = 7$).

Table 3*Strongest Constraints to Enacting an Ideal Recess*

Environmental/Organizational	Student Behavioural & Interpersonal
Inadequate Supervision & Facilitation ($n = 45$) • Lack of personnel including volunteers, excessive student-supervisor ratios, not enough want the job, irregularity of personnel, apathy, and inattention. ($n = 30$) • Teacher recess supervisors are often overloaded because they have to supervise recess during their break. They are, therefore, often not into leading activities or engaging with students) ($n = 15$) Lack of Equipment & Space ($n = 41$) • Lack of Age-Appropriate Equipment for Engaged Active Play ($n = 11$) • Overcrowded/Lack of Space ($n = 11$) Insufficient Funding ($n = 35$) • Mainly to hire more trained supervisors. Lack of Diverse Opportunities & Choices ($n = 19$) • Insufficient options, schoolyard designs, and suitable facilities for creative and active Play (including adequate drainage so fields... are not wet and muddy for half of the school year). Lack of Time • Insufficient time for recess (especially getting out and in during the winter) and performing supervision duties ($n = 16$) Lack of Support & Training for Supervisors ($n = 13$) • We especially need to better support and train non-teachers for recess supervision ($n = 10$) • More dialogue and training to narrow the diversity of views recess supervisors have about their role (e.g., some use it for rest, others to punish students for classroom misbehavior) ($n = 3$) Other ($n = 15$) • Injury and Liability Concerns ($n = 7$) • Weather (too cold, icy, wet, muddy, and not enough shade) ($n = 5$) • Lack of an Action Plan (vision, goals, policies, collaboration, implementation) ($n = 3$)	Lack of student social and conflict resolution skills. ($n = 6$) Student disinterest in physical activity and outside recess mainly due to their desire to be on screens. ($n = 7$) Inability to organize and lead their own activities. ($n = 5$) Interpersonal conflicts. ($n = 4$)

The primary environmental and organizational concerns were the lack of equipment, play structures, and space along with ($n = 42$ in Table 2, 41 in Table 3) and inadequate supervision and facilitation ($n = 36$ in Table 2, 45 in Table 3). This included being short-staffed (so supervisors were unable to attend to all students), supervisor apathy (being off-task and lacking engagement or relationship building with the students), the inability to fully supervise due to the large size of the area and the poor sightlines for observing, and the lack of adult-facilitated structured play (often too much just idle free play and not enough adult activity/play facilitators and organizers. For example, one principal (P21) stated: “No playground - not even swings or climbing apparatus,

lack of adult connection, apathy.” Another (P65) elaborated: “Inadequate supervision. I would like to shift from “supervisors” to “play facilitators. Supervisors do not have enough of a relationship with students.” Other prominent environmental and organizational recess challenges were insufficient funding (mainly to pay for supervisors and to maintain and manage the equipment; ($n = 35$ in Table 2 and 7 in Table 3); lack of diverse and creative spaces (e.g., terrains, venues) and opportunities enabling choices – that tend to lead to more creative active play and less frequent student boredom ($n = 18$ in Table 2 and 19 in Table 3). Two sample comments for this were: (P44) “Students do not want to go outside, so the transition usually takes more time than planned which reduces the total time outside and causes issues with supervising;” and (P101) “There are no activities for primary students. The students often just do not know what to play.”

Other environmental and organizational themes across both items (though less frequent) were insufficient time for recess (especially getting out and in during the winter) and for performing supervision duties ($n = 16$ in Table 3), lack of support and training for recess supervisors (especially non-teachers and to establish more of a shared understanding of their roles), and weather-related constraints ($n = 12$ in Table 2 and 5 in Table 3). One comment reflective of this was:

Budget constraints - cannot hire more staff; Most qualified individuals who could make lunch recess run more smoothly are teachers and they need a break too. More training opportunities for supervisors and EAs [Educational Assistants] who do outdoor supervision (games and problem-solving skills). (P22)

Constraints due to weather were also mentioned somewhat pertaining to how poor drainage systems and open-shelters leading to icy, wet, or muddy play areas that constrain space and opportunities for creative active play during recess.

Although the student behavioral and interpersonal challenges were foremost in the checklist results reported in the opening of this section, they were not as prevalent in the open-ended items. For example, a total of 27 principals cited relational conflicts as one of their three most pressing recess challenges, 23 reported lacking sharing, independence and social, cooperative, and conflict resolution skills, 22 highlighted the rough “tackle-type” play such as “King of the Hill” and snowball fights, and 24 noted general misbehavior in the form of not adhering to rules or directions, playing in restricted areas, aggression, and hyper-active and over-competitive students. These concerns were similar in the reported constraints to enacting an ideal recess although they were mentioned less frequently and seven principals added the concern about student disinterest in physical activity and outside recess claiming it was mainly due to their desire to be on screens (i.e., phones, laptops). Sample comments for these themes included: “Kids getting along and learning to problem solve independently” (P47); “Students fighting and being disrespectful to one another and adults - students do not know how to play and benefit greatly from adult guidance and structure to referee - lead activities” (P22); and “Kids would rather stare at their phones than be active” (P27).

Ways to Improve School Recess

The same two primary themes (environmental and organizational; student behavioral and interpersonal) emerged from analysis of the results of the open-ended item asking principals: “What are the three things that you feel would most help you improve recess at your school?” The main findings are reported in Table 4 and indicate again that environmental and organizational suggestions ($n = 177$) were more dominant than those pertaining to student

behavior and interpersonal relationships ($n = 21$). The main suggestions related to students' behaviors and interpersonal attributes were the need for availability and access to more diverse, safe, and effective equipment, spaces, and facilities ($n = 49$), increased structured activities ($n = 26$), more effective supervision ($n = 34$) partly through the provision of more and better trained supervisors (especially in facilitating physical activities and in resolving conflict) beyond just teachers ($n = 18$), funding ($n = 19$), and time ($n = 12$) for recess.

Table 4

What would most help you improve recess at your school?

Environmental & Organizational	Student Behavioural & Interpersonal
More availability and access to diverse, safe, and effective equipment, spaces, and facilities ($n = 49$) • Movable equipment (e.g., toys, game supplies) ($n = 26$) • Varied and creative outdoor play spaces ($n = 17$) • Better quality and maintenance (e.g., drainage, paving) ($n = 6$) More structured activities ($n = 26$) • Using peer physical activity leaders ($n = 6$) Supervision ($n = 34$) • More of them ($n = 23$); • Of (to manage) equipment ($n = 4$) • Of student conflicts ($n = 4$) • Higher diligence and rule consistency ($n = 3$) More and Better Trained Supervisors especially in physical activities and conflict resolution (i.e., teachers, support staff, and volunteers) ($n = 18$) Time ($n = 12$) • More time for recess ($n = 7$) • Improved transitions to and from recess ($n = 3$) • More time off for teachers during recess ($n = 2$) Money ($n = 19$) • More of it ($n = 7$) • For equipment ($n = 5$) • For personnel like supervisors etc. ($n = 7$) Higher priority for natural play at recess among the board, administrators, and staff ($n = 5$) More and better managed space ($n = 4$) Others ($n = 10$) • Better engagement of teachers & staff with students at recess ($n = 3$) • Less concern about liability ($n = 2$) • Delegate first aid to the school office ($n = 2$) • More support for special needs students ($n = 1$) • Have a recess coordinator ($n = 1$) • More storage for recess equipment ($n = 1$)	More social skills and behavioural (e.g., conflict resolution, problem-solving, cooperation) training for students ($n = 11$) Training for increased knowledge of activities to play ($n = 5$) Less screens and more time outside ($n = 5$)

These were partially exemplified in the following comment:

Willingness for people to see recess as a priority, policy to never take recess away, no inclement weather policy for cold or wet (change temp minimums or allow Polar Bear Club). Budget to fund equipment, track and organize huge amounts of human resources and loss of equipment has happened in the past and it is hard enough to get gym equipment now for programming with budget constraints. (P5)

The foremost suggestion related to students' behaviors and interpersonal attributes were to improve students' recess social skills and behaviors in the form of conflict resolution, problem-solving, and cooperation ($n = 11$). This was evident in the following comment: "More staff. More training around conflict resolution (for teachers and supervisors). More ideas about outdoor activities that can be played with basic materials (balls) or games that students can run independently once they understand the rules" (P52).

Summative Themes

Theme 1: Principals Viewed Recess as an Important Developmental Environment

Qualitative thematic analysis of principals' survey responses revealed three interconnected themes. The first was that recess was overwhelmingly described as an important and necessary developmental component of children's daily school experiences rather than simply serving as a break from classroom learning. This was evident in the strong support for the closed-ended item: "Active outdoor free play during the school day is an important and necessary part of children's overall health and development and should be well-supported." It was also evident in the open-ended items wherein recess was commonly described as an important opportunity for movement, peer interaction, imaginative play, conflict resolution, independent problem-solving, and social-emotional development, particularly within the context of increasing concerns regarding children's mental health, sedentary behavior, and screen engagement. This endorsement of recess persisted among principals who simultaneously described substantial recess-related challenges within their schools such as student conflict, rough play, insufficient staffing and supervision, overcrowding, liability, weather restrictions, safety expectations, lack of equipment and adult facilitation of activities and behaviour, along with restricted activity opportunities and spaces for diverse, structured and unstructured, and cooperative play. One principal explained that

While it is critical for all students to have play and fresh air, many of our students have significant social skill deficits and 'play' is very physical or involves students play fighting/fighting. We do not have enough staff to offer as many structured games and activities as we would like. (P122)

Theme 2: Recess Was Shaped by Organizational, Environmental, and Relational Conditions

Open-ended responses suggested that environmental and organizational concerns were often more prominent than student behavioral concerns when principals described both their most pressing recess challenges and the factors constraining their ability to enact an "ideal" recess. More specifically, as is evident in Tables 2 and 3, the more prominent concerns were about inadequate and inequitable supervision, space, equipment, play affordances, funding, and a lack of alignment between risk management and children's developmental needs. For example, student-to-supervisor ratios often increased substantially beyond the kindergarten years, with many schools reporting ratios exceeding 40 students per supervisor and several reporting ratios greater than 65 students per supervisor in junior and intermediate grades. Recess supervision frequently appeared

understaffed, inconsistent, reactive, and insufficiently supported relative to the complexity of students' social and developmental needs during recess. At the same time, supervision was rarely framed as behavioral monitoring and safety management alone as it also highlighted relational engagement, activity facilitation, conflict resolution, proactive guidance for students' social interactions, and the ability to create inclusive and engaging recess environments. One principal (P65) explained: "Inadequate supervision. I would like to shift from 'supervisors' to 'play facilitators.' Supervisors do not have enough of a relationship with students." However, insufficient staffing appeared to frequently force recess supervision to become primarily reactive and safety-oriented thereby limiting opportunities for adults to engage in more positive holistic forms of interaction during recess. Difficulties hiring and retaining recess supervisors, limited funding for supervision personnel, inconsistent training practices, and reliance on already overextended teaching staff were recurring concerns. Approaches to recess supervision varied substantially across schools and districts and highlighted the absence of consistent training, shared recess philosophies, or coordinated approaches to student engagement during recess. Greater organizational support for recess supervisors—particularly non-teaching staff responsible for lunch-hour supervision—was repeatedly identified as an important need.

Across both quantitative and qualitative responses, many schoolyards were also described as offering limited opportunities for diverse forms of play and engagement often due to insufficient play structures, lack of age-appropriate equipment, poor drainage, icy or muddy conditions, overcrowded play areas, aging equipment, limited and inequitable financial resources, and a lack of diverse landscape play areas for imaginative, cooperative, creative, or self-directed forms of engagement. Outdoor environments were often perceived as particularly restrictive during winter months or periods of inclement weather when opportunities for outdoor activity became more constrained. These conditions were commonly associated with boredom, conflict, rough play, and over-competition among students. At the same time, expanded equipment access, winter play materials, natural play features, varied terrain, and flexible activity spaces frequently appeared linked to more positive recess experiences. At the same time, recess environments were often described as being heavily dependent on external (supplementary) funding sources such as parent councils, community partnership donations, grants, volunteer support, and service clubs.

Importantly, recess environments were often shaped by ongoing efforts to balance opportunities for active and creative play with institutional expectations regarding safety, injury prevention and treatment, inclement weather, supervision policy, and institutional risk reduction and management. For example, restrictions related to the use of sports equipment, activities (e.g., sledding, snow play, rough-and-tumble play), outdoor access, icy play areas, and weather-related recess cancellations were frequently linked to liability concerns and safety policies. One principal explained that:

We have sleds that were available to classes but have now been told that children cannot use them unless they are wearing a helmet. Helmets are cost prohibitive and unsanitary to share. Logistically, helmets would be a nightmare to store, distribute, fit and sanitize. (P48)

Similarly, restrictions on students bringing equipment from home or accessing certain materials were often framed through concerns regarding safety and supervision. Further, although some schools attempted to maximize outdoor recess opportunities whenever possible, others described frequent transitions indoors because of cold weather, icy conditions, rain, or concerns regarding student safety and supervision.

Finally, many principals simultaneously emphasized the importance of increased adult presence, relational support, and opportunities for facilitated engagement during recess. This motive appeared to be less for obsessive adult-controlled recess environments than for maximizing opportunities for free, autonomous, creative, inclusive, meaningful, safe, interactive, cooperative play with the necessary means to navigate and resolve conflict and challenges. Several principals also highlighted how more optimal school recess could have positive implications on children's positive social and outdoor play skills including reduced screen use beyond school hours.

Theme 3: Recess Was Frequently Under-Supported Within the Educational System

Principals' responses repeatedly suggested that schools often operated without coherent approaches, consistent support systems, or dedicated resources necessary to support high-quality recess environments. Formal recess planning structures appeared notably uncommon across schools, with only two principals reporting the existence of a dedicated recess committee or team responsible for monitoring or improving recess practices. Although some schools described informal staff discussions regarding recess concerns, the data indicated that recess governance remained fragmented, reactive, and inconsistently coordinated across schools in the form of supervision, equipment management, student engagement, and conflict resolution practices. Consistent with patterns reflected throughout the broader findings, principals' responses frequently revealed an institutional contradiction in which recess was widely recognized as important for children's well-being and development while remaining comparatively under-supported and peripheral within organizational structures, staffing models, funding systems, and policy frameworks. Some respondents welcomed clearer expectations, increased funding, more training opportunities, and greater policy support for inclusive and developmentally meaningful recess environments. Others expressed skepticism regarding external policy approaches, emphasizing the importance of flexibility and responsiveness to local school contexts and student needs.

Discussion

The ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and more specific environmental theories of affordances (Gibson, 1979) suggest that physical and social environments influence the types of activities, relationships, and interaction patterns that become possible within a setting. This was evident in this study through the finding that environmental scarcity—including insufficient space, equipment, supervision, and activity options that include more facilitation from recess supervisors and student leaders—appeared to compromise how students navigated recess environments socially and behaviorally. For example, principals in this study often reported a recess environment constrained by conflict, boredom, rough play, exclusion, and dysregulated interactions among students; and that highly restrictive environments could exacerbate patterns of competition, exclusion, and interpersonal tension. Several principals also emphasized that relational conflict generally increased with larger numbers of students in a small space and having limited options and opportunities for participation and engagement. Much of this has been corroborated previously with elementary school students (Lodewyk & McNamara, 2025; McNamara et al., 2018a, 2018b; Massey et al., 2021a, 2021b; Vaillancourt et al., 2010) highlighting the importance of diverse activity options, flexible play spaces, natural elements, loose-parts play, cooperative activities, differentiated environments, and relational forms of adult facilitation in more positive recess experiences. However, discovering that principals across

several Canadian provinces also report many of these challenges provides a useful contribution to the recess literature.

A second noteworthy finding of this study relative to current knowledge was that improving elementary school recess – beyond addressing specific environmental issues like playground management and more established behavioural factors such as student behavior – should also confront *broader system and infrastructure* issues. For example, collective feedback from the principals revealed recess challenges that varied considerably between schools such as in policy alignment, shared philosophies, coordinated planning structures, dedicated funding, and institutional support. There is research that can help guide principals to improve their recess systems and infrastructures. For example, a study by Olsen et al. (2024, p. 131) resulted in recommendations such as fostering “cohorts, developing a handbook, creating a rotation schedule (i.e., blacktop, field, playground), developing a recess committee, utilizing the physical education teacher for staff development, assigning recess, equipment and bags, offering a variety of activities, and teaching children how to play.” Other broad recommendations are provided in resources such as Physical and Health Education Canada’s Position Statement on Recess (McNamara & Zakaria, 2020).

Supervision emerged as a particular institutional tension in this study. To illustrate, principals frequently distinguished between passive-reactive monitoring models centered primarily on behavioral surveillance while generally favoring more active-relational approaches focused on adult facilitation, inclusion, conflict support, and engagement that help create positive social climates during recess. Unfortunately, many principals reported the lack the staffing capacity, organizational support, and training structures necessary to consistently enact more relational approaches because supervision responsibilities were often layered onto already overextended staff workloads thereby contributing to fatigue and passive-reactive supervision models. This adds important new principal specificity to a report on the status of quality supervision during recess in Canada by McNamara (2021) stating:

The ratio of staff to children is inconsistent, ranging from one supervisor to anywhere from 50–220 students on the playground, including kindergarteners. The inconsistencies vary across school boards, schools, and even days—as principals have reported that the ratio of teachers to students can change very quickly if a supervisor is late or does not show up at all. Schools generally have the option of hiring part-time yard duty supervisors to fill this gap, yet the qualifications and experience required are very minimal (often a high school diploma). (p. 1819)

Another noteworthy finding from our study was the tension that principals described between supporting children’s developmental needs and navigating broader institutional constraints. In other words, there appeared to be some contradiction with recess being widely viewed as developmentally important – as reported with a small sample of Ontario principals by Vaantaja (2016) – while remaining comparatively under-valued and supported within the educational system. To explain, principals in this study consistently valued opportunities for movement, autonomy, creativity, social interaction, and active play during recess; although these developmental goals were frequently constrained by institutional pressures related to liability, supervision demands, staffing shortages, operational efficiency, weather policies, behavioral management, and risk reduction. In several cases, principals explicitly questioned whether concerns regarding safety and liability – although vital – had become overly restrictive in ways

that constrained children's opportunities for active, creative, and developmentally meaningful play. This reflects broader tensions increasingly identified within contemporary childhood and educational research concerning the balance between protection and developmental opportunities such as risky play (Brussoni et al., 2015) and culturally tailored, natural, and differentiated recess landscapes (Anthamatten et al., 2011; Ridgers et al., 2007). For example, compared to a control group, elementary school students who experienced a more natural schoolyard were higher in small group social interactions and moderate to vigorous physical activity (Raney et al., 2021).

Finally, our findings also revealed notable differences between schools as recess environments were described by principals as highly dependent upon local fundraising capacity, grants, parent councils, volunteer efforts, and community partnerships. Features that were frequently described as contingent upon schools' ability to secure supplementary funding beyond core educational budgets included playground redevelopment, loose-parts materials, painted games, natural play features, winter play equipment, and broader schoolyard improvements such as maintaining equipment and improving drainage or outdoor infrastructure. Principals' responses also suggested substantial inequities in schools' abilities to mobilize such resources. These are especially important revelations given that recess may represent one of the few consistent opportunities many children have for outdoor play and peer interaction, disparities in funding and schoolyard quality may contribute to broader inequities in children's developmental experiences (Massey et al., 2018).

Limitations and Future Research

Several study limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study examined principals' self-reported perceptions and experiences rather than direct observational data. As a result, the findings reflect principals' interpretations of recess environments and student experiences within their schools and did not include the voices of students, recess supervisors, teachers, families, or other school personnel who may experience recess differently. Second, because the study was cross-sectional the findings capture principals' perspectives at a particular point in time and cannot infer changes in recess practices or experiences over time. Third, participation was voluntary, and principals with particular interest in recess-related issues may have been more likely to participate. Fourth, although schools from across Canada were represented, participation varied across provinces and territories and may not fully capture regional differences in recess policies, climates, or school structures. Finally, because qualitative data were collected through open-ended survey responses rather than interviews or observations, opportunities for follow-up clarification and deeper contextual exploration were limited.

The findings point toward several important directions for future research. More comparative research – especially observational studies that go beyond self-report data and assess school differences alongside student, principals, teacher, recess supervisor, and even family perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of recess as a shared social environment. Longitudinal research examining how changes in schoolyard design, supervision approaches, equipment access, or organizational structures influence recess experiences over time would also be valuable. Finally, broader policy analyses examining how educational systems prioritize, fund, regulate, and structure recess may contribute to more coordinated and equitable approaches to supporting children's opportunities for play, movement, belonging, and social participation during the school day.

Conclusion

We conclude with some practical and policy implications from the study. Schools may need to consider: (1) Shifting away from viewing recess primarily through behavioral management frameworks toward a more ecological and developmental focus that recognizes the influence of environmental and organizational conditions on children's experiences. (2) Strengthening relational and facilitative approaches to recess supervision in the form of more investment in training, professional learning, and organizational support for recess supervisors and other staff responsible for outdoor supervision. (3) Adding more diversified and inclusive schoolyard environments in the form of, for example, varied activity spaces that facilitate creative, autonomous, and self-regulated play along with more natural, seasonal, and loose-parts materials (e.g., green and shaded spaces, tires, craft supplies, sports/games equipment, winter play activities). These opportunities have been associated with more positive recess experiences in that expanding the range of available participation opportunities may help reduce bottlenecks, overcrowding, repetitive play patterns, and concentrated competition within recess environments (McNamara & Zakaria, 2020; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). (4) Improving coordinated and dedicated recess committees, planning structures, and shared recess philosophies within and across participating schools and districts. More intentional planning processes involving educators, supervisors, students, families, and administrators may help strengthen alignment across supervision practices, equipment management, inclusion goals, environmental design, and policy implementation. (5) Providing broader policy attention (e.g., dedicated funding, clearer policy guidance, and protection of recess time) might also be useful in better more systematically supporting recess within complex educational systems.

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Appendix A

Survey Items

1. In what province does your school reside?
2. In your school, how many minutes per day of outdoor recess (including during lunch break) is offered to students? If the amount of time differs for different grades, please indicate.
3. Compared to other schools in your board would you consider your school to be: (Above average socio-economic status; Average socio-economic status; Below average socio-economic status).
4. What is the average population of your school? (100 or less; 101 to 200; 201 to 300; 301 to 400; 401 or more).
5. Please select the box the best represents the following statement: *"Active, outdoor free play during the school day is an important and necessary part of children's overall health and development and should be well supported."* (Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly disagree).
6. How many children are outside on the same play space for recess at one time? (100 or less, 101 to 150, 151 to 200, 201 to 250, 251 to 300, 301 to 350, 351 or more).
7. Are the younger students separate from the older students during recess? If so, please describe the arrangement.
8. Who supervises the students during recess?
9. If supervisors are not teachers or full-time school staff, please indicate the hiring requirements for yard duty supervisors.
10. Is training provided for recess supervisors? (No, Yes) If yes, please describe the training for supervisors.
11. What is the daily average ratio of yard duty supervisors to students in:
Kindergarten: ____; Primary: ____; Junior: ____; Intermediate: ____.
12. Please list your three most pressing challenges with recess at your school.
13. Who is responsible for funding the purchase and implementation of play structures (climbers, slides, monkey bars, etc)?
14. Does your school have a formal recess committee or team to monitor and make decisions regarding recess? (Yes, No, Other [Please specify])
15. In an ideal world, what would recess at your school look like (indoor and outdoor)?
16. What three things most constrain you from enacting an ideal recess?
17. Checklist: At your school, equipment and materials during recess includes: (A wide variety of equipment and materials (that are in good shape) is available to students all year; Limited variety of equipment and materials, in good shape; Limited variety of equipment/materials, but not in good shape; Equipment/materials can be brought from home only; No equipment/materials allowed).
Comments:
18. Checklist: From the list below, please select all of the challenges your school has with recess. (Lack of facilities; Lack of space, No one to organize space, plan activities, or oversee recess, Behavioural concerns, Liability concerns, Equipment management, Social conflict among children, Seems a separate part of the fabric of the school environment).
19. Please indicate how you school handles recess during inclement weather.
20. Are staff allowed to withhold recess as a consequence for any reason? (Yes, No) (Comment:).
21. What are the three things that you feel would most help you improve recess at your school?
22. How might specific recess policies at the regional and provincial levels be helpful for you?