

# Elementary School Students' Likes and Dislikes About Outside, Inside and Meal/Snack Recess

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School recess has been associated with many positive outcomes such as physical activity, health, communication, favorable affect, social connectedness, behavior, attention, and cognitive functioning (Hodges et al., 2022). These outcomes tend to be more likely when students report high enjoyment of recess (Ridgers et al., 2012) that generally increase in recess climates that are well-supervised and that facilitate a variety of socially engaging active play choices, free time, and opportunities while minimizing crowding, boredom, misbehavior, safety concerns, isolation, social conflict, and bullying (McNamara et al., 2014). Experiencing recess-based enjoyment and favorable affect can also facilitate outcomes such as reduced dysfunctional social behavior during recess in the form of social exclusion and physical aggression (Boulton et al., 2009; Doll et al., 2003; McNamara, 2013).

## Factors in Recess Enjoyment

Elementary school students tend to enjoy recess more when there are ample opportunities for fun social interactions that foster feelings of belonging and support from peers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gere & MacDonald, 2010; Woods et al., 2012). On the other hand, the dominant social aspects of recess that students tend to *dislike* are experiencing boredom, exclusion, and interpersonal conflicts often occurring when trying to make decisions or resolving disagreements about who can participate in an activity and which equipment, space, or rules should be implemented into the activities (Knowles et al., 2013). Students often experience difficulty and stress with trying to make these decisions and can exacerbate students' fear, loneliness (Hansen et al., 2012), and reduced interest and participation in physical activity during recess (London, et al., 2015; McNamara et al., 2014).

Students also generally enjoy being physically active during recess and prefer approximately 40% of outside recess while engaging in more sedentary (i.e., sitting and standing), socially interactive activities with friends or peers the remainder of the time (Jarrett & Duckett-Hedgebeth, 2003). Some students—especially those aged 8-12—even enjoy *vigorous* physical activity during recess often when playing less-structured sports, ball games, and activities like running and chasing games (e.g., tag, “red light, green light”). Being physically active during recess often depends, however, on the availability of appropriate choices, loose equipment (e.g., an assortment of balls, skipping ropes, frisbees), and playing spaces (e.g., gym, playground, outdoor sports field, other playing areas) (Hyndman & Lester, 2015; Ridgers et al., 2012).

These findings signal the importance of various aspects of the school recess environment on students' enjoyment of recess. The most frequently identified environmental barriers during recess tend to be inclement weather, not being able to use personal electronic devices, and lacking space and facilities to actively play (Pawlowski et al., 2014). After controlling for gender and developmental level in grades 4-8 students, Lodewyk and McNamara (2020, p. 360) reported, “Both recess environment and activity preferences accounted for a significant portion of the variability related to affect and enjoyment of recess.” More specifically, “Having equipment and space and preference for moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, organizing and playing games, and free time predicted both affect and enjoyment.” Some students also enjoy having the choice of whether to participate in some structured (peer-led and adult supported and modeled) sporting activities (Parrish et al., 2020).

Recess in North American elementary schools generally occurs every day and is held outdoors, unless the weather is unsuitable which results in students frequently being restricted to inside (i.e., classroom) spaces only (McNamara et al., 2014). This can be frustrating for many because students tend to be more physically active and enjoy outside recess more than inside recess (Tran et al., 2013). This preference for being outdoors during recess tends to increase with age during elementary school (Knowles et al., 2013) and is often because they feel less constrained by adult expectations and rules when they are outside (Tovey, 2007). To illustrate, a study of the recess preferences of over 500 students in elementary school, Lodewyk and McNamara (2020, p. 364) reported that outside recess was second only to P.E./Gym class as students' *favorite* part of the school day, mainly because "they could play and be with their friends, be outside and active, and play games." On the other hand, inside recess was the least favorite part of the school day for 46% of the students mainly because of "having to be silent, boredom, and sitting too much". It is important to note that some students in this study reported inside recess as the most-favorite part of their school day (5%) whereas 7% signaled outdoor recess as their least-favorite. Students also prefer inside recess when they feel unsafe or uncomfortable during outside recess, and this is often due to a lack of adult supervision, bullying, inclement weather, and environmental constraints to active play in the form of overcrowding and a lack of functioning equipment (Ridgers et al., 2012; Vaillancourt et al., 2010).

### **Gender Differences in Recess Enjoyment**

Research has highlighted some significant differences between girls and boys in their enjoyment and preferences for elementary school recess, leading some scholars like Hyndman et al. (2017) to assert that variance in likes and dislikes by gender are "the most common demographic variable that correlates to children's active play on school playgrounds" (p. 328). For example, boys are more likely than girls to enjoy outside recess (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005), to be physically active during recess (e.g., Ridgers et al., 2012), and to experience and enjoy moderate to vigorous intensity in physical activity during recess (Lodewyk & McNamara, 2020; Woods et al., 2012, 2015). Boys are also more likely to enjoy more "competitive" ball games and sports that are played in a large area and group and that enable some light ("rough and tumble") physical contact (Jarrett & Duckett-Hedgebeth, 2003; Ridgers et al., 2012; Woods et al., 2012). Meanwhile, girls tend to prefer recess activities that are less structured, done in smaller groups and in more isolated areas, that enable verbal expression, are less intense physically (e.g., hide-and-peek, 4-square, hopscotch) and that foster enriching social interactions with peers and teachers (Jarrett & Duckett-Hedgebeth, 2003; Holmes, 2012; Pawlowski et al., 2014; Ridgers et al., 2012; Woods et al., 2012, 2015). Finally, although the weather/climate during recess is a frustration for most boys and girls, researchers (e.g., Lodewyk & McNamara, 2020; Pawlowski et al., 2014) have noted that boys tend to most dislike the lack of playing fields, experiencing interpersonal conflicts during ball games, and the insufficient time provided for recess. Meanwhile, girls' dislikes of recess tend to be more focused on relational stresses with peers and the lack of space and loose equipment (e.g., frisbees, jump ropes) making it difficult to find areas in the recess space for some privacy to just "hang out" and do fun activities with their friends like dance, play tag, work on arts or crafts, read, or just listen to music (Lodewyk & McNamara, 2020; Rose & Rudolph, 2006).

### **Research Aim**

Experts have called for more fine-grained, situated research into students' experiences and specific aspects of the recess setting students like, dislike, and feel threatened by (Hodges et al., 2022; McNamara et al., 2014; Parrish et al., 2020; Ramstetter et al., 2010). To illustrate, Svanelöv (2023, p.

11) recommends that “students’ perspectives about which recess activities are valued needs to be explored” because “on many occasions, it is not the physical performance of physical activity that has the greatest positive social impact on students, but rather the social interaction and feeling of belonging to something.” Also, since studies on school recess rarely differentiate between the indoor, outdoor, and eating aspects of recess (or lunch), some recess scholars (e.g., Lodewyk & McNamara, 2020) have called for studies that explore in greater specificity what boys and girls like and dislike in such contexts. For example, following their study, Lodewyk and McNamara (2020) concluded that “based on how relatively unpopular indoor recess was with the children in this study, more research is needed to determine factors that are important for making indoor play more active and meaningful when children are inside for recess” (p. 370). Consequently, this study was descriptive in nature with the aim of increasing knowledge about what students specifically like and dislike about recess relative to gender and recess type (outside, inside, and meal/snack time).

## **Method**

To add more detailed insight into gender-specific factors in students’ enjoyment of outside, inside, and meal/snack recess, a descriptive research study was implemented using several open-ended questions in an anonymous online survey that was completed in a classroom during school. We believed that such a design would enable students to elaborate both generally about the recess climate, while being able to identify specific problematic aspects of indoor, outdoor and meal/snack recess needing attention, intervention, and/or additional information. We also endeavoured—through the anonymous online survey—to foster a nonthreatening environment wherein the students could feel safe to disclose potentially sensitive information about their recess feelings and experiences. We also used open-ended items in this study that have been previously used in recess research (e.g., Lodewyk & McNamara, 2020).

**Participants and Procedure.** This study was conducted in seven Catholic elementary schools located in a four small to mid-sized cities (populations of 19,000–137,000) within one school district of southern Ontario, Canada. Study participants were 386 elementary school students (203 or 52.6% girls and 183 or 47.4% boys) from grades 4 through 8 (75 participants in grade four, 89 in grade five, 42 in grade six, 94 in grade seven, and 86 in grade eight). Following the attainment of ethical clearance from the university and school board, consent was attained from the school principals, each participant, and their parent(s). Approximately 60% of the student participants and their parent(s) provided consent. These individuals completed an online survey through Survey Monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) in the school library during one of their regularly scheduled classes using one computer for each participating student. The survey was administered by a trained graduate student with the regular classroom teacher present to supervise the class and to help in rare cases with login or language clarification. Those not providing informed consent completed an alternative learning activity while consenting students completed the survey.

**Recess Context.** Although most elementary school schedules include two 15-minute recesses and a 40-minute lunch break each school day (Wu et al., 2015), elementary schools in Ontario, Canada follow a Balanced School Day schedule consisting of two 40-minute recess breaks each school day (one mid-morning and one early-afternoon) for students in junior kindergarten (JK) to grade 8. Each of these recesses has an initial 20-minute nutrition (meal/snack) recess wherein students sit at their classroom desks to eat food that they brought with them from home. Weather permitting, students are then allowed to go outside the school building for a 20-minute recess break on school grounds. The Ontario Education Act (1990) mandating such recesses leaves some discretion to each school

principal about aspects such as the exact times of day for recess, whether to have a separate recess for the primary (JK-3) and intermediate (4-8) grades, and when to keep the students inside for recess. For example, if the weather is deemed unsuitable by the principal or school board (i.e., rainy, stormy, or with temperatures too cold or hot), students must remain inside their classroom for recess. The seven Catholic elementary schools in this study had recess at the same time, used similar facilities and equipment, and followed the same school board policies pertaining to recess.

**Measures.** Participating students were first asked to provide basic demographic information about, for example, their grade, sex, and school. They then responded to several Likert-style items (not for this study) and seven open-ended items wherein they reported their likes and dislikes of outdoor, indoor, and meal/snack recess. To illustrate, one such item asked participants, “Please list the things you don’t like about outside recess.” This question stem was repeated in the next five items with minor changes in *liked* or *disliked* relative to *outside*, *inside*, and *meal/snack recess*. For example, the item for assessing what students liked about indoor recess was, “Please list the things you like about inside recess.” One additional, open-ended item about outside recess was, “During outside recess, do you feel safe from kids who are mean? Please explain.”

**Data Analysis.** Students’ responses to each question were copied verbatim into an Excel file. These responses were then analyzed inductively in two cycles of increasing specificity as recommended by Miles et al. (2013). In the first cycle, responses were read multiple times by two researchers (including one of the authors) to ensure comprehension and to enable the coding of responses into blocks of dominant categories or patterns of phrases, words, or experiences that were grouped together to create themes. Two themes emerged that were representative across all six questions (likes and dislikes of indoor, outdoor, and meal/snack recess) with no differentiation by gender. As almost all responses were brief (approximately 3-10 words), the coding process resulted in approximately 98% agreement between the two researchers, and any discrepancies were discussed until a classification agreement was achieved. In the second cycle, one researcher conducted a frequency analysis (see Tables 1-4) to determine the quantities of student responses for likes and dislikes of indoor, outdoor, and meal/snack recess by theme, category, and gender (along with the additional item, “During outside recess, do you feel safe from kids who are mean? Please explain.”). The second researcher corroborated these frequencies after conducting the same second-cycle analysis on approximately 3% of the data.

## Results

Two overarching themes were identified in the data for students’ likes and dislikes of recess. The first was that *social experiences are vital in shaping recess experiences*. This reflected students’ general value for having friends or peers to be, interact, and play with during recess that enable one to feel safe from harmful conflict, bullying, and feelings of discomfort and estrangement. The second theme was *opportunities for students to meaningfully and actively engage in recess*. This theme reflected students’ general value for recess features that promoted their physical activity, positive affect (e.g., enjoyment, belongingness), and fulfilling play. Some of these features were opportunities for getting fresh air, having enough space and choices of activities, being protected from inclement weather, and just having some free time away from schoolwork. The more specific codes emerging from the data for likes and dislikes of outdoor, indoor, and meal/snack recess were situated in these two dominant themes by gender.

**Outdoor Recess Likes.** The main aspects of outdoor recess that students reported liking and disliking are listed in Table 1. The prominent *likes* about outdoor recess within the first theme (social experiences) were that students ( $n = 220$  comments) valued having friends and/or peers (including students from other classes) with whom to play, have fun, talk, “hang out,” and be physically active. For example, “You have free time to talk to your friends and play when in the classroom you can’t.” The prevailing *likes* about outdoor recess within the second theme (opportunities) were enjoying the fresh air outdoors ( $n = 60$ ), having a break from class ( $n = 36$ ), and having fun relaxing or playing games or activities (e.g., reading, role plays, pom-pom, manhunt, hopscotch, music, walk and talk, four-square;  $n = 182$ ) and sports (e.g., soccer, basketball, football;  $n = 113$ ). For example, it is a “time to talk with friends and we get a break to play games.” Some students ( $n = 8$ -15 comments) also shared their value for being able to play in open space like a grass field and having the necessary options and play equipment. To illustrate, one student stated, “Fresh air, fun with friends, get to play soccer, get to play basketball, sports, and a reasonable time to be outside.”

Girls and boys differed somewhat in what they liked about outdoor recess. There were notably more comments from girls ( $n = 139$ ) than boys ( $n = 81$ ) about the importance of having friends/peers to play and have fun with, to talk to, to “hang out,” and to be physically active with. In regards to the second theme (opportunities to meaningfully and actively engage), girls had more ( $n = 125$  comments for girls; 57 for boys) diversified activity and game interests (e.g., reading, role plays, gymnastics, pom-pom, manhunt, hopscotch, music, walking and talking, just relaxing), were more concerned about inclement weather (e.g., being cold or wet), and reported a stronger desire for open space—especially for being on the grass field. On the other hand, boys had higher preferences for fresh air ( $n = 38$  for boys; 22 for girls) and having sports to play such as basketball, football, and soccer ( $n = 81$  for boys; 32 for girls).

**Outdoor Recess Dislikes.** Results of students’ *dislikes* about outdoor recess revealed more comments about the second theme (opportunities;  $n = 304$  comments) than the first theme (social experiences;  $n = 121$  comments). The main social experience concerns were about interpersonal “conflicts” (minor disagreements, rude behavior, cheating, arguing, and fighting;  $n = 47$ ) and less so being a victim of various forms of bullying (physical aggression, verbal demeaning and teasing, social gossip and shunning;  $n = 56$ ). Some sample comments illustrating these included, “Drama outside, that’s where the arguments happen,” and “Well some of the times you’ll have kids coming over to you, trying to start a fight or making fun of you.” Some students ( $n = 12$  comments) also reported feeling isolated with no friends or peers with whom to play. For example, “People don’t share or hurt me for no reasons;” “Kids exclude you from games;” “When my friends are sick, I have to hangout alone;” and, “Sometimes there’s nobody to play with.”

The most common *dislike* of outdoor recess ( $n = 113$ ) was within the second theme (opportunities) and was specifically the discomfort of having inclement weather (i.e., being too cold, wet, or hot). This was associated with the second most common dislike ( $n = 71$ ), namely being restricted to certain play areas only because when it was too wet outside students were often only allowed to access the paved (blacktop) or playground areas or could only “walk and talk” when it was too hot or wet. For example, one student stated, “I don’t like that there’s no playground equipment like monkey bars and when it’s black top only everybody is crowded on the black top and there’s over 500 kids.” Other students shared that, “bad weather, crowded, no place to sit, have to sit on ground” and “I don’t like how the teachers make us stay on the black top and not allow us to walk on the path even though it’s still black top.” Other more moderate dislikes were being bored ( $n = 26$ ), fear of injury (e.g., falling,

**Table 1**  
*Outdoor Recess Likes and Dislikes*

LIKE		OUTSIDE RECESS				
Code	Girls	Boys	Code	DISLIKE	Girls	Boys
<b>Theme 1: Social Experiences are Vital in Shaping Recess Experiences</b>						
Friends/Peers to:			Social Conflict (minor disagreements; rude, cheating, arguments, "fights")		24	23
Play and have fun with	45	23	Victimization – Physical		4	7
Talk to	33	19	Victimization – Verbal (demeaning, verbal teasing )		5	14
Be (hang out) with	21	16	Victimization – Social (shunning, gossip)		8	6
Be active/exercise with	18	16	Bullying in general		7	5
Be with from other classes	22	7	Alone; No friends to play with		6	6
Able to be yourself	6	-	Guys Take Over		3	-
Some teachers on yard duty	3	-	Noise		3	-
<b>Theme 2: Opportunities to Meaningfully and Actively Engage</b>						
Fresh Air	22	38	Weather (Cold, wet, hot, etc.)		71	42
Break from Class	20	16	Restricted Play Areas (e.g., blacktop or playground only when wet; walk and talk only, etc.)		37	34
Fun Games/Activities to Play	94	36	Boredom		15	11
4-Square	10	6	Safety: Hurt by a structure, fall, ball thrown, rough play...		13	10
Other*	21	15	Lack of Equipment for play and no playground		11	11
Having Sports to Play	10	34	Lack of variety		8	7
Soccer	14	19	Too Crowded/Lack of Space		8	7
Football	0	15	Too Short		4	4
Basketball	8	13	Some Activities I Dislike (Soccer, Tag)		3	8
It's just fun	11	18				
Open Field (Green Space)	10	5				
Lots of Space	9	5				
Free Time	4	9				
Lots to do and play	4	8				
We have the equipment.	6	2				
Weather (Cold, wet, etc.)	6	-				

Notes. Numeric values are quantities of comments.

\*E.g., Gymnastics, Read, Role Plays, Pom-Pom, Manhunt, Hopscotch, H+S, Toys, Music, Walk & Talk or Relax

being hit by a ball, being hurt by a structure or in rough play;  $n = 23$ ), and not having the necessary equipment or playground for play ( $n = 22$ ). For example, one student stated, “Not aloud to bring certain sports equipment, we have to share everything with little kids, and we don't have very good basketball nets.” More minor dislikes ( $n = 11–15$  comments each) were the lack of variety of activity options, not having enough space to play (too crowded), wanting outside recess to be longer in duration, and disliking some of the activities being played like soccer or tag.

Gender differences in dislikes of outside recess were particularly evident in only two aspects. Girls reported notably more dislike of inclement weather ( $n = 71$  comments for girls; 42 for boys), whereas boys reported twice as much dislike of verbal bullying in the form of, for example, demeaning “putdowns” and teasing.

**Feeling Safe from Mean Kids during Outside Recess.** Of the total sample of boys and girls, 29 girls and 32 boys responded to the item about feeling safe from mean kids during outside recess (see Table 2). Of these, 7 girls (3.5%) and 10 boys (5.46%) reported generally feeling unsafe during outside recess mainly due to some form of bullying ( $n = 6$  comments in girls; 7 in boys). A few reported that this was because either the teacher wasn't watching, or they were not able to find any safe spaces away from the mean kids. For example, some students stated, “The bullying doesn't stop;” “[I] Rarely [feel safe] because they hurt me make me cry and they think its funny but its not;” “I'm kinda the punching bag, if you get that;” “There is no safe space to go to from the mean kids;” and, “Sometimes

the teacher is watching and when the teacher is not kids will bully other kids.” The remaining respondents felt safe at recess as “There aren’t any mean people,” or because they had coping mechanisms to respond to the kids who were mean. Among these were having adequate teacher supervision and lots of helpful friends, being able to defend oneself, avoiding them by moving around or keeping busy, and ignoring them or not caring what they say. The following statements illustrated this, “Yes [I feel safe] because I can hit back, and I am not afraid to get in trouble;” “Yes because i don’t care about what they say;” and, “Because I know my friends and teachers will stick up for me.”

**Table 2**  
*Feeling Safe from Mean Kids during Outdoor Recess*

<b>“DURING OUTSIDE RECESS, DO YOU FEEL SAFE FROM KIDS WHO ARE MEAN? PLEASE EXPLAIN.”</b>		
<b>Code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	
	<b>Girls (n = 29)</b>	<b>Boys (n = 32)</b>
<b>No, I Don’t Feel Safe</b>		
Being bullied in general	3	5
Other (e.g., teacher not watching, no safe space)	1	3
Victimization – Verbal/Social (demeaning, verbal teasing, shunning, gossip)	2	1
Victimization – Physical aggression	1	1
<b>Yes, I Feel Safe Because...</b>		
I have lots of helpful friends around.	7	3
I’m bigger and/or can defend myself.	0	8
I can move around or keep busy to avoid them.	4	4
There is adequate teacher supervision.	2	3
I ignore mean people or don’t care what they say.	2	2
There aren’t any mean people.	3	0

*Notes.* Numeric values are quantities of comments.

**Indoor Recess Likes.** The main aspects that students reported liking and disliking about indoor recess are listed in Table 3. Similar to outdoor recess, students most liked the social experiences of having friends/peers to talk to and/or to be with and play with during indoor recess ( $n = 108$  comments). For example, one student expressed this as, “Play indoor games and talk with friends.” Students also highlighted several preferred opportunities for meaningful engagement during inside recess. Many ( $n = 63$  comments) liked being nice and warm, having board games (e.g., chess, checkers, and cards;  $n = 85$ ), and other activities to engage in ( $n = 32$ ) such as doing homework ( $n = 41$ ), reading ( $n = 28$ ), being on phones or watching a video ( $n = 27$ ), sitting and relaxing (18), eating snacks ( $n = 15$ ), or drawing, coloring, or working on a craft ( $n = 36$ ). As one student (Case 92) elaborated:

Now, inside recesses can also be fun. Like, if you like to draw or play board games, then it's practically a paradise. Sometimes it's kind of nice to have a small drawing contest or something. Also, it's great to not have to go outside in the rain or freezing cold for fifteen minutes. You also have a kind of freedom that isn't available outside. For example, you have a chance to work on an assignment that's due soon. Maybe even edit your work so it's free of spelling errors. I don't like inside recesses as much as outdoor recesses, but when they happen it does prove to be somewhat fun. Not to mention some pretty funny things happen as well.

An analysis of responses by gender revealed higher values for girls than boys in liking friends/peers to talk to and be and play with ( $n = 73$  comments for girls; 35 for boys), being nice and warm ( $n = 45$  for girls; 18 for boys), and having activities like homework ( $n = 31$  for girls; 10 for boys), reading ( $n = 18$  for girls; 10 for boys), sitting and relaxing ( $n = 12$  for girls; 6 for boys), eating snacks ( $n = 12$  for girls, 3 for boys) and drawing, coloring, or working on crafts ( $n = 23$  for girls; 13 for boys). On the other hand, boys were higher in liking board games ( $n = 19$  for girls; 29 for boys) and screen time ( $n = 11$  for girls; 16 for boys). These gender differences—and the finding that 15 comments by boys compared to five by girls indicated liking nothing about indoor recess—could signal an elevated risk for boredom in boys during indoor recess.

**Indoor Recess Dislikes.** Students' *dislikes* about indoor recess within the social experiences theme revealed little to no concern with being bullied, yet elevated concern ( $n = 108$  comments) with the chaotic climate (i.e., hyperactivity and silliness), social conflict (e.g., arguments, throwing food), and excessive noise (e.g., yelling) that made it difficult to focus. Some sample comments illustrating these include, "too crowded, too loud, too much screaming, so much talking," and "It is very loud, people throw things around, I get headaches." Some girls ( $n = 15$  comments) also expressed dislike with not being able to see and interact with friends from other classes as they would in outdoor recess. Foremost dislikes of indoor recess relative to students' opportunities to meaningfully and actively engage included boredom ( $n = 65$ ), being physically

**Table 3**  
*Indoor Recess Likes and Dislikes*

LIKE		INSIDE RECESS			
Code	Girls	Boys	Code	Girls	Boys
<b>Theme 1: Social Experiences are Vital in Shaping Recess Experiences</b>					
Friends/Peers to play with	10	5	Too loud (i.e., noisy)	49	35
Friends/Peers to talk to	50	23	Chaotic climate (e.g., yelling, being silly, hyper, hard to focus)	18	6
Friends/Peers to be with (hang out)	13	7	Can't see our friends from other classes	15	0
			Social Conflict	7	7
			No privacy or chance to be by yourself	5	0
<b>Theme 2: Opportunities to Meaningfully and Actively Engage</b>					
Nice and warm inside	45	18	Boredom (nothing or not much to do)	34	31
Having Board Games to Play	19	29	Can't be physically active like running and playing sports	30	27
Cards	12	3	Feeling "Stuck" (no space/crowded/constricted)	27	15
Chess/Checkers	9	13	Must stay seated in our desks	19	17
Having Other Activities to Play	22	10	Too hot/smelly/no fresh air	23	11
Draw, Build, Color, or Crafts	23	13	Little choice or variety of activities	17	11
Homework	31	10	Required to do schoolwork sometimes	6	5
Screens (phone, videos, etc.)	11	16	We must be quiet	5	3
Read	18	10	Not allowed on phones or screens	5	0
Sit and relax	12	6	Lack of equipment (e.g., board games are all taken or too old)	4	0
Eat snacks	12	3			
Free Time/Break from Class	8	3			
<b>THEME 3: OTHER</b>					
Everything	2	4	Everything	0	3
Nothing	5	15	Nothing	11	10

Notes. Numeric values are quantities of comments.

inactive ( $n = 57$ )—especially in the form of having to stay seated ( $n = 36$ )—and feeling stuck and constrained in a crowded space ( $n = 42$ ) that lacked fresh air and was too hot and smelly ( $n = 34$ ) with

few choices or variety in activities to do ( $n = 28$ ). A student (Case 91) illustrated these dislikes by stating:

Inside recesses are often boring. Like, what is there to do? Play a board game that's missing half the pieces? Play hangman? Okay that's kind of fun, but there's just a lack of overall things to do. In higher grades, there's some paper and some broken board games, and that's it. Not to mention, you can't walk around or any of that, because you'll be told to sit back down. Now, I can see why teachers would tell you to sit down if you were running around the classroom, screaming like a maniac. However, I just think there should be more to do for inside recesses rather than just drawing or something.

Compared to boys, girls had an equal or higher quantity of comments for each reported dislike of indoor recess. Most prominent was their frustration with the noise level, chaotic climate, not being able to see and interact with friends from other classes, and lacking equipment (e.g., board games), variety in activities, fresh air, and space for privacy and solitude.

**Meal/Snack Recess Likes and Dislikes.** As expected, there was a considerable similarity of likes and dislikes about meal/snack recess (see Table 4) with those for inside recess as both are held indoors. Students expressed considerable appreciation for the time allotted to eat food ( $n = 184$  comments)—especially if they could eat with their friends ( $n = 19$ )—and to socialize with others ( $n = 60$ ). Some students also valued the opportunity to have some “free time” to rest ( $n = 28$ ), do some schoolwork ( $n = 8$ ), have some “quiet time” ( $n = 8$ ), or participate in some other activities like games, reading, drawing, or watching a movie ( $n = 15$ ). Two sample statements were, “We can take a break from schoolwork and running around and we can eat our food and fuel up i guess;” and “We are able to play games and be loud and talk about things with your friends.” An analysis of responses by gender revealed that girls expressed notably more value for eating food ( $n = 109$  for girls; 75 for boys), eating with friends ( $n = 19$  for girls; 0 for boys), and participating in activities like games, reading, drawing, and watching a movie ( $n = 11$  for girls; 4 for boys).

**Table 4**  
*Meal/Snack Recess Likes and Dislikes*

Code	LIKE		MEAL/SNACK TIME RECESS			
	Girls	Boys	Code	DISLIKE	Girls	Boys
<b>Theme 1: Social Experiences are Vital in Shaping Recess Experiences</b>						
Eating Food	109	75	Too Loud (e.g., noisy, yelling)		26	20
Socializing with others	31	29	Chaotic Climate (e.g., rough housing, throwing or stealing food, arguing, interruptions, talking about gross stuff, lacking supervision)		25	7
Eat with friends	19	0	In seats only (i.e., Can't eat with friends)		11	4
			Can't talk		6	1
			Verbal/Social Victimization		3	1
<b>Theme 2: Opportunities to Meaningfully and Actively Engage</b>						
Rest/Break/Free Time	14	14	Not enough time to eat		26	11
Read/Draw/Games, Movies	11	4	The food (i.e., I dislike it or there is not enough of it)		11	16
School work	5	3	Boredom/Can't move/Can only talk		4	8
Quiet/Calm	3	5	Doing schoolwork while eating		4	3
			Food rules (e.g., healthy snack, can't share)		6	0
			Too long		4	1
<b>Theme 3: Other</b>						
I Like Everything	4	6	There is nothing I dislike		46	26

Notes. Numeric values are quantities of comments.

Dislikes of meal/snack recess within the social experiences theme closely resembled the dislikes of indoor recess; namely, it was too loud ( $n = 46$  comments), took place in a chaotic climate (e.g., rough housing, throwing or stealing food, arguing, interruptions, talking about gross stuff, lacking supervision;  $n = 32$ ), and required sitting in their desks with little opportunity to eat with or talk to their friends;  $n = 22$ ). For example, one student stated, “When my classmates get in trouble and we need to hear the teacher yelling at them, and we can't get out of our seats.” Dislikes of meal/snack recess within the lack of opportunities to meaningfully and actively engage theme included not having enough time to eat ( $n = 37$ ), distaste for their food (or the lack of it;  $n = 27$ ), feeling stifled (i.e., bored, only being able to talk not physically move around;  $n = 12$ ), and having rules like doing schoolwork while eating ( $n = 7$ ) or not being able to share or exchange food (or being forced to only eat healthy food;  $n = 6$ ). It is important to note that 27% of what students disliked about meal/snack recess was that there was nothing they disliked ( $n = 72$ ) which signals that many of the students were satisfied with it. There were also substantially more comments from girls ( $n = 46$ ) than boys ( $n = 26$ ) that they disliked nothing about meal/snack recess. Girls specifically reported more dislike of the loud and chaotic climate, having to remain in your desk with little to no opportunity to interact, share food, and eat with friends. Meanwhile, boys were higher in disliking their food and in feeling stifled (i.e., bored with only talking and little movement).

## Discussion

The aim of this descriptive study was to qualitatively increase the specificity of knowledge about what students like and dislike about outside, inside, and meal/snack recess relative to gender. Two overarching themes emerged from the data, namely that *social experiences are vital in shaping recess experiences* and that *students need opportunities to meaningfully and actively engage in recess*. These themes share some similarity with the recommendation from Physical and Health Education (PHE) Canada (2020, p. 20) that “A well-designed recess provides a variety of opportunities for children to be active, engaged, and free from bullying and exclusion... The overarching goal should be to change the playground culture to one that fosters friendships and positive interaction patterns.” The importance of this goal (positive social experiences) was clear in this study as by far the most common aspect that students *liked* about both outdoor and indoor recess was the social experience of having friends, classmates, and peers from other classes with whom to play, have fun, talk, “hang out,” and be physically active. Students also highly valued the time to eat their food during meal/snack recess, especially when they were also able to socialize with others as they did so. Hence, the results of this study corroborate the clear importance of a positive and safe social climate during recess (Lodewyk & McNamara, 2020; McNamara, 2013, 2021) while adding fresh support for this need during meal/snack recess.

This study also provided three findings signaling that, for most students, positive social interactions might be compromised more during inside and meal/snack recess than outside recess. First, more than twice the number of *dislike* comments of outside recess pertained to the lack of opportunities theme, than to the social experiences theme. Some studies have demonstrated the advantages of providing an assortment of movable equipment (e.g., jump ropes, hula hoops, various balls), recycled materials (e.g., tires, plastic boxed crates), and natural environments like grass, trees, rocks, and water available for students to use during recess (Hyndman et al., 2017; Tovey, 2007). Second, there were relatively few comments reporting a dislike of interpersonal “conflicts” and forms of bullying such as physical aggression, teasing, and social gossip and shunning during outside recess. This may be because the larger playing areas outside can afford students to avoid conflicts and congested spaces wherein they

are less comfortable or safe (Kasali & Dogan, 2010). Third, by far the most *disliked* aspects of indoor recess in this study were the chaotic climate (i.e., hyperactivity and silliness), social conflict (e.g., arguments, throwing food), and elevated noise (e.g., yelling) that made it difficult for students to focus. The relatively few dislikes of the social climate of meal/snack recess closely mirrored those for indoor recess—especially frustration with an inside (classroom) recess climate that was loud, chaotic, and lacked adequate supervision. It may be useful to find ways to reduce social conflict and feelings of chaos, congestion, and confinement during inside meal/snack recess by creating or finding larger spaces, enabling more movement so students can be more mobile and can socialize with peers, and by providing more specialized and enticing supplies for the diversity of student interests (McNamara, 2021; PHE Canada, 2020). Another potential intervention is to teach students effective strategies to help them cope with various scenarios of inter-personal conflict (e.g., bullying, cooperative decision-making, peer pressure, mediation skills) during recess (Olsen et al., 2024).

**Feeling Unsafe.** In the present study, 3.4% of girls and 5.5% of boys reported feeling unsafe from mean kids during outside recess. 3% of the girls and 3.8% of the boys attributed this to experiences of being bullied in some way, whereas others linked it to the lack of teacher supervision or enough safe spaces. These proportions generally align with some other recess research (e.g., Boulton et al., 2009; McNamara et al., 2018) and with recommendations to both improve the recess climate toward positive social interactions and problem-solving skills while providing evidence-based interventions (e.g., conflict management training, semi-structured activity options, increased supervision) to students experiencing social isolation and bullying (e.g., McNamara, 2021; PHE Canada, 2020). For example, the work of Vaillancourt et al. (2010) led to calls for adequate staff supervision during recess because it tends to reduce incidences by helping teachers more easily identify students who are bullying and/or being victimized. They also recommend the provision of a greater supply and diversity of loose equipment for desired recess activities, especially when recess is outdoors where some students—especially those with certain disabilities—feel more vulnerable due to the combination of less supervision and increased space and freedom.

**Differentiated Activity Choices.** Another noteworthy finding of this study was students' desire for more differentiated activity opportunities during recess. To illustrate, although there was strong enjoyment of the fresh air (outside), staying warm (inside), having a break from class, and playing games and sports (e.g., soccer, basketball, football) that has been reported in previous research on school recess (e.g., Hyndman & Lester, 2015; Lodewyk & McNamara, 2020; Ridgers et al., 2012), students also mentioned value for several less-traditional activities for outside (e.g., relaxing, reading, listening to music, walking and talking, and playing roles, pom-pom, manhunt, hopscotch, four-square) and inside/meal-snack recess (e.g., chess, checkers, cards, drawing, coloring, working on a craft, homework, reading, being on phones, watching a video, eating food, or just sitting, relaxing, and socializing).

This desire for more differentiated activity opportunities was also evident in students' reported dislikes of outside (i.e., boredom, fearing injury, and not having the necessary equipment, playground, activity options, time, or space to play what they wanted), inside (i.e., boredom, being physically inactive, lacking diverse activity choices, and feeling stuck and constrained in a crowded, hot, smelly space or desk with no fresh air), and meal/snack recess (i.e., not having enough time to eat, lacking food or disliking the taste of it, and feeling stifled, bored, and unable to talk with their friends). This aligns with some other recess research highlighting the need for a generally safe yet less-restrictive recess climate—both inside and outside—along with availing activity opportunities by potentially providing, for example, ample space (especially green), time, fixed and loose equipment, student

training, some structured programs, and the use of peer leaders and models (Lodewyk & McNamara, 2020; Massey et al., 2018; Parrish et al., 2020; Tovey, 2007). Adding some structured teacher- or student-led activities should be optional for students and should not overstructure recess wherein autonomous play and its associated benefits are compromised (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005).

**Gender Differences.** The differences to emerge between girls' and boys' elementary school recess likes and dislikes in this study also provide fresh insight into how each might be uniquely more vulnerable either inside or outside. It appears that girls may be more susceptible to disliking many traditional outside recess contexts that are typically "characterized by minimal supervision, limited equipment, barren spaces, strict rules, safety concerns, social conflict, and descriptions of a culture where social exclusion and victimization are normal and routine behaviors" (PHE Canada, 2020, p. 10). To illustrate, relative to outside recess, girls in this study expressed twice the value as boys for having friends/peers, open spaces on which to interact and play, more diversified activity and game options, and concerns about inclement weather; whereas, boys had approximately twice the value as girls for fresh air, having sports to play, and a dislike of verbal bullying (e.g., putdowns and teasing). Combined with other research (e.g., Lodewyk & McNamara, 2020; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Ridgers et al., 2012; Woods et al., 2012, 2015), the findings of this study suggest that boys in elementary school are generally more inclined to enjoy outside recess more than inside recess primarily because they can be more physically active outdoors—especially moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity in the form of competitive games and sports—even if the weather is somewhat inclement. Meanwhile, girls might be more reliant on opportunities to engage in a diverse array of activities (e.g., dance, reading, crafts, art, listening to music, and games like hopscotch, and rope-jumping) that enable them to socially engage with peers while also being physically active and climate comfortable.

For many of the same reasons, this study also provides evidence that boys might be more susceptible than girls to being bored and frustrated during inside and meal/snack recess, especially if inside recess provides ample positive interactions, enough space and diverse activity choices, and minimizes chaos and social conflict. To illustrate, in the present study, girls had over twice the number of comments *liking* indoor and meal-snack recess for the opportunity to talk to and play with friends and peers, being nice and warm, and having activities like homework, reading, sitting and relaxing, eating food, and drawing, coloring, or working on crafts. Conversely, girls most *disliked* the noise level, chaotic climate, not being able to see, eat with, and interact with friends from other classes, lack of equipment (e.g., board games), variety in activities, fresh air, and space for privacy, and solitude during inside and meal/snack recess. Meanwhile, boys were about twice as likely to report liking board games and screen time and were more prone to feeling stifled (i.e., bored with only talking and little movement) during inside and meal/snack recess.

These gender differences during inside and meal/snack recess—and the finding that three times as many comments by boys indicated liking nothing about indoor recess, and that twice as many girls disliked nothing about meal/snack recess—could signal an elevated risk for boredom and frustration in boys during indoor and meal/snack recess. This may partially account for why Lodewyk and McNamara (2020) found that boys enjoyed indoor recess less and moderate to vigorous physical activity more than girls during recess, whereas girls had higher enjoyment for casual social interactions and for activities such as dance, crafts, art, and reading during recess. It may be vital in both indoor and outdoor settings, to provide ample space and opportunities for positive time alone to read, listen to music, or catch up on homework, to interact socially with peers and/or teachers while perhaps working on arts or crafts or playing games, and/or to participate in diverse physical activities individually or in groups such as dance, hopscotch, four-square, jump rope, tag, or sports (Jarret &

Duckett-Hedgebeth, 2003; Holmes, 2012; Lodewyk & McNamara, 2020; Pawlowski et al., 2014; Ridgers et al., 2012; Woods et al., 2012, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study suggest that recess enjoyment might be enhanced if outside, inside, and meal/snack recesses are structured to better differentiate personal and gender-specific needs of students by providing them with the positive social experiences and the opportunities to meaningfully and actively engage in recess. A noteworthy limitation of this study was the exclusive use of students in Catholic elementary schools that constrains the potential transferability of results because some research has revealed that some recess outcomes vary between public, private, and/or religious-based schools. For example, Barros et al. (2009) found significantly less recess time in children attending public rather than private school. Further, Kasali and Dogan (2010) reported that public schools in Turkey generally had less space and variety of opportunities for students during recess than private schools. However, this potential confounding variable is just one of many in school-based research because of its complex setting with many nested variables (e.g., ethnicity, school policies and practices, culture, socioeconomic status, green space) that could factor in students' enjoyment of recess. For this reason, we support the caution asserted by Hannus et al. (2018) against making assumptions "about which barriers and facilitators affect a specific population in its social, organizational, physical, and cultural context" (p. 1017). For this reason, it might also be useful to tailor interventions to the unique and specific cultural dynamics of each school and surrounding area (Anthamatten et al., 2011).

Despite this limitation, the present study adds to current knowledge about what students specifically like and dislike about outside, inside, and meal/snack recess relative to gender. We welcome new studies that jointly investigate students' dislikes and likes of inside and outside recess as a function of setting (e.g., urban/rural, policy, socioeconomic, ethnic, inside and outside). We also call for more studies into how recess enjoyment differs by developmental level, since Lodewyk and McNamara (2020) highlighted that the recess enjoyment and physical activity of students in grades 7–8 may be more compromised than students in grades 4–6 because they tend to be less physically active and more peer-dependent and self-conscious. These students in grades 7–8 also preferred using recess more as free time to just socialize, especially if recess is outdoors, with their friends, and if there are plenty of diverse activity options so they are less isolated, bored, and sedentary.

Finally, more research is welcomed to confirm and add to the results of this study relative to how teacher supervision and behaviours (e.g., differentiated activity and equipment choices, space, equipment, some semi-structured programming) might influence students' recess enjoyment beyond those noted in this study and in other research. For example, among the recommendations for teachers and administrators made by Olsen et al. (2024, p. 131) was that they "consider establishing 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."

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