School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study

Executive Summary

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Terminology

'Breaktime' (or 'recess' as it is referred to in the US) is a break within the school day which typically involves access to outdoor space, when weather and space permit, and is often unstructured time for recreation, play and socialization with peers in a setting where adults often supervise at a distance. Breaktimes can be differentiated from other short breaks which allow students to have a comfort break, a snack or meal or to move to another location for the next lesson - without unstructured time for recreation.

Here we use the term 'break' or 'break time' to refer to any breaks in the school day allowing for unstructured recreation. These may take place in the morning, as part of a lunchtime or in the afternoon. Sometimes we refer to specific breaks such as morning or afternoon break. 'Lunch time' refers to more than break time, however, and refers to the specific break in the school day that also includes time for a meal, as few schools seem to separate out meal time from recreational time during the lunch period.

Executive summary

Background

Over the last two to three decades there have been substantial changes to schools and education in England. There has been increasing pressure on schools to increase standards whilst also supporting the needs of their pupils to meet the changing challenges of living in 21st century society. There have been structural changes to schools and the curriculum in England as well as campaigns focusing on improving school food and increasing levels of physical activity amongst children. Over this period there have been growing concerns about the mental health of children and young people.

There have also been marked changes in children's social lives in and out of school with a decline in children's independence of movement and a corresponding reduction in off line opportunities for informal peer interaction and play outside of school (Play England, 2012; Shaw et al., 2013). Online communication and interaction has substantially increased. There has been increased interest in attendance of adult-organised after-school activities and clubs (Chanfreau et al., 2015).

Against this backdrop, a seeming constant in schools is break and lunch times – the parts in the school day when pupils get to meet friends and socialise, eat, visit the toilet and engage in activities that are meaningful for them in a setting relatively free of adult control. Just about the only systematic data available on breaktimes in schools in England and, as far as we know, anywhere in the world, comes from the two previous national surveys, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, undertaken in 1995 (with information on changes to breaktimes since 1990) and 2006.

However, there is little agreement about the value and function of break times amongst school staff and policy makers, and they are often taken for granted. For many adults, breaks are simply a habitual, relatively unimportant pause in a busy day. There is no statutory requirement for schools to provide children with a break in the school day and they hardly figure in government policy or in Ofsted inspection processes. When they are considered by schools it is often in the context of the problems that can arise and the practicalities of school management. For pupils, however, breaktimes are some of the most valued times and experiences they have in school. Our previous research (Baines & Blatchford, 2011; Baines & Blatchford, 2009; Blatchford, 1998; Blatchford et al., 2003) has shown that breaktimes have an important role in social development.

Given the changes to education and society, and the lack of officially gathered systematic information on breaktimes, it is a timely moment to carry out a follow-up national survey, and an important opportunity to map trends in this little understood part of school life over the past 25 years. In addition, we also wanted to survey changes in children's social lives in and out of school since 2006 to provide important information on their perspective on break and lunch times but also to see how these times relate to their wider social lives with peers outside of school.

What we did

The BaSiS (Breaktime and Social life in Schools) study involved a national survey of state funded and independent primary and secondary schools in England. We collected current information on the main features of break and lunch times, including: timing and duration; breaktime organisation and management; supervision arrangements; changes to school grounds; rules for pupil movement during break times; the perceived value and function of these times and views on pupil behaviour at break times. The study also involved a survey of pupils' views and experience of social life in and out of school and a set of case studies of schools that characterise a range of approaches to break and lunch times and school provision.

Over a quarter of sampled schools[1] returned school surveys. The responding sample was found to be representative in relation to most measures (e.g., school type, proportion of pupils receiving free school meals, where schools were located, pupil gender and Ofsted status). Data and findings relating to independent schools (which made up 5% of the total sample) are reported separately to enable accurate comparisons with earlier surveys in 1995 and 2006 (as previous surveys only collected data from state schools).

A sub-sample of schools also agreed to participate in the pupil survey. Of the primary and secondary schools that agreed, a random sample stratified by region and school phase was selected, sent questionnaires and asked to allow at least one class of pupils in Year 5 or Years 8 and 10 to be invited to complete a questionnaire[2]. Surveys were completed by 1669 pupils, 691 were in Year 5, 540 in Year 8 and 438 in Year 10.

Findings presented here relate to state funded schools unless explicitly stated. Analyses provide an up-to-date view of arrangements, views on and experiences of breaktimes in schools in 2017 and, through comparison with previous data, changes in these since 2006, 1995 and in some areas relative to 1990.

Key findings
The duration of break and lunch times
Break times and lunch times are universally experienced in schools. There were no cases of schools that did not report some form of break for pupils. Total time devoted to breaks varies according to education phase.

Average total time for breaks was 85 minutes at Key Stage 1 (KS1 – pupils aged 5-7 years), 76 minutes at Key Stage 2 (KS2 – pupils aged 7-11 years) and 63-64 minutes at Key Stage 3 (KS3 - pupils aged 11 to 14 years) and Key Stage 4 (KS4 – pupils aged 14 to 16 years). As a proportion of the school day, breaks made up on average about 22%, 20% and 16% at primary level (KS1 and KS2) and secondary levels (KS3 and KS4 combined) respectively. Independent schools had longer breaktimes than state funded schools.

Most primary schools have morning breaks of 15 minutes with a few taking 20 minutes. Lunch breaks of between 45-60 minutes are the most common at Key Stages 1 and 2 but more schools reported KS1 lunchtime breaks of more than an hour than at KS2. By contrast, more schools reported shorter breaks of up to 45 minutes at KS2 than KS1. Only 15% of primary schools reported having an afternoon break at KS2 whereas over half of schools reported that KS1 pupils had an afternoon break, usually of about 15 minutes.

A majority of secondary schools have morning breaks of 20 mins, with a few having 15 minutes. About half of all secondary schools have lunch breaks of less than 45 mins, with about a quarter having 35 minutes or less. Afternoon breaks are virtually non-existent at secondary level.

An important finding is that there has been a reduction in the length of breaktimes since 2006 and a really marked decline since 1995. Since 1995 breaktimes have been reduced by an average of 45 minutes per week for the youngest children in school (at KS1) and by 65 minutes per week for

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[1] A 20% sample of primary and secondary schools (n=4379) was sent a school questionnaire. There was a 26% response rate overall (993 surveys were returned by primary schools and 199 by secondary schools). The response rate was lower for independent schools (16%) than state funded schools (26%).
[2] 52 schools were sent questionnaires for pupils to complete (or could complete the survey electronically) – 37 schools (23 primary and 14 secondary) returned completed pupil questionnaires (a 71% response rate).

students in secondary school (at KS3 and 4). These reductions are caused by the cutting out of afternoon breaks and, increasingly, the shortening of the lunch break.

The main reasons given by schools for the reduction in break times are to create more time for teaching and learning, specifically to cover the curriculum and to manage or limit perceived poor behaviour of students that school staff say occurs during lunchtimes. These are the same reasons for reductions in breaks identified in previous surveys.

Primary schools with a higher proportion of pupils in receipt of free school meals and/or in urban areas tended to have less total time for breaks even when controlling for the length of the school day.

Suitability of school grounds for breaktime activities, supervision, and teaching and learning outdoors
Schools were very positive about the suitability of their school grounds for breaktime activities, supervision, and learning outdoors. This view was more positive than in previous surveys. Primary schools were positive about the nature and state of repair of a wide range of spaces, structures and resources available in the outdoor areas used for breaks. Secondary schools were also positive about the availability and quality of their basic provision but were more negative about the existence and quality of playground markings, sheltered and quiet areas on the playground. A particular difference between primary and secondary schools was in the availability and quality of fixed and portable play equipment. These were widely available and in good repair in primary schools but not in secondary schools. Furthermore, this was an area of improvement in primary schools, relative to previous figures in 2006, but not in secondary schools. When working with outside agencies to improve the school grounds, fixed play equipment was the area that most schools, primary and secondary, were focusing on.

There has been a marked increase since 2006 in the presence of CCTV in school playgrounds with nearly half of primary and three quarters of secondary schools with CCTV in their playground spaces. However, this security measure was least likely to be identified as an area the school had worked to improve.

Breaktime Supervision
Support staff were most likely to supervise at break times in primary schools, particularly during the lunch break. Teachers were most likely to supervise breaks in secondary schools and independent schools.

There has been a marked increase in the average numbers of adult supervisors supervising breaks on primary and secondary playgrounds in 2017 compared to 2006 and 1995. This means that there is a higher staff to pupil ratio than in previous surveys. This seeming increase may be affected by a possible increase in the staggering of breaks in schools, however, which would require more supervision, and the exact figures may therefore be lower. Nevertheless, across the three surveys, the supervisor-student ratio in 2017 is the highest yet.

The predominant approach to the support and training of supervisors in primary and secondary schools was informal (e.g. involving discussions with supervisors as and when required, discussion of job role, etc.). The provision of formal training of supervisors has reduced compared to previous surveys, particularly in secondary schools.

Supervision in most schools takes the form of general oversight but in many primary schools some supervisors organise and supervise particular activities for children to participate in if they wish. There was little evidence of schools having adopted fully structured breaktimes where pupils are required to choose from a menu of adult led/supervised activities to participate in.

Freedom of movement

In primary schools, children were largely required to stay outside of school buildings during breaktimes. In most secondary schools, pupils were allowed access to specific indoor areas during breaks and the proportion of schools offering this had increased since 2006 and 1995. However, in earlier surveys pupils were more likely to be allowed access to most areas of the school during breaks. During poor weather, most primary schools had a policy of children staying in their classrooms with very few schools allowing children outside. In secondary schools, during wet weather pupils were allowed access to most areas of the school and a large minority of schools still allowed children out, though not onto grassy areas.

Secondary schools rarely allow any students off school premises during lunch breaks even with parental permission. This is different to the picture in the earlier surveys. In 1995 approximately 67% of secondary schools allowed any students or particular year groups (usually older students in years 9-11) off site during lunch breaks, when parental permission was in place. In 2017, the equivalent figure is that only 12% of secondary schools report allowing some students to leave the premises during lunch break.

Withholding breaks

A major finding was that 60% of primary and secondary schools said that children might miss a full break or lunch time. The main reasons given for this related to the management of misbehaviour or to help pupils catch up with schoolwork. Many schools indicated that this was part of a school policy. This was a line of enquiry that was new and particular to the 2017 survey and thus it is not possible to examine changes in the withholding of breaks over the 20-year period.

Activities during breaks and before/after school

Many schools reported that they offered activities for children during breaktimes and this had increased slightly since 2006. Most frequently offered adult-led activities during breaks were team sports, music and curriculum support activities. Independent schools were more likely to run a wider range of clubs than state funded secondary schools during break times.

The proportion of primary schools offering breakfast clubs has nearly doubled since 2006 from 42% in 2006 to 78% in 2017. Nearly three quarters of secondary schools also offered breakfast clubs.

Nearly all primary and secondary schools offered adult-led clubs and activities <u>after</u> school but slightly fewer secondary schools were offering these compared to 2006. Independent schools were <u>less</u> likely to run clubs after school.

The most commonly offered <u>after-school</u> clubs involved team sports, music, art, drama and curriculum support. There was a marked increase, compared to 2006, in the proportion of schools offering curriculum support activities <u>after</u> school, while proportions offering other types of clubs were stable or had declined.

Nearly three quarters of secondary schools and 31% of primary schools allowed children to bring mobile phones to school. Their use was prevented during the school day in primary schools but nearly half of secondary schools allowed pupils to use them during breaks.

The perceived value and challenges of breaks, and views on pupil behaviour
Primary schools highlighted breaktimes as providing important opportunities for energy release and physical exercise, socialising with peers and to get fresh air. Secondary schools saw breaks in more functional terms as important times for eating and drinking, energy release, physical exercise and getting fresh air than valuing it for the social opportunity it provides. The valuing of breaks as time to get fresh air has increased since 2006.

Although the majority of schools indicated that there were challenges at breaktimes, the proportions of schools saying this had reduced compared to levels in 2006. The main challenges highlighted were the poor social behaviour of a minority of pupils and concerns about overcrowding of the dinner hall/ outside space, and the quality of supervision, particularly at secondary level.

Schools were more positive than in 2006 and 1995 about pupils' behaviour during breaktimes and outside of school. Proportionally more schools in 2017 than in previous surveys reported a perceived improvement or no improvement in breaktime behaviour in the past 5 years. In contrast to previous surveys, schools that reported a perceived decline in behaviour suggested that this was less to do with aggressive behaviour and more to do with poor levels of social competence among some pupils. There is, then, an apparent shift in the perceived cause of poor behaviour.

Pupils' views on breaktimes
Findings from the survey of pupils' views showed that pupils are overwhelmingly positive about break times and particularly the longer lunch break which 87% of pupils liked or really liked. Very few pupils (5%) expressed a dislike of these times. These findings are unchanged since the previous pupil survey undertaken in 2006. Higher percentages of pupils like breaktimes than they do school in general, lessons and/or mealtimes.

Pupils at primary and secondary levels valued breaks first and foremost for the opportunity they provide to socialise with friends. They also valued the opportunity for some free time, and the chance to choose what they wanted to do and/or to engage in playful activities. These values were largely consistent with those identified by the 2006 survey. Since 2006, all pupils, but particularly secondary-aged pupils, were more likely to value lunch time as time to eat and drink and less likely as a chance to get physical exercise.

Pupils, consistent with school staff, identified the poor behaviour of some other pupils as the main challenge of breaktime. This was coupled with the absence of things to do, the banning of fun activities and, particularly amongst secondary pupils, having sufficient time to eat. Concerns about the banning of fun activities and sufficient time to eat have increased since 2006.

A majority of pupils indicated that lunchbreaks were too short and should be made longer. Surprisingly, older students were more likely to express this view, possibly because of the relatively short lunch breaks that secondary pupils experience compared to primary pupils. Most pupils also felt that there were enough adults supervising at breaktime, though older students were slightly more likely than younger pupils to express the view that there were too many adults supervising.

Pupils' experiences of what happens during breaktimes

Over three quarters of primary pupils indicated that they participated in adult-organised activities during breaktimes. This was much lower, at less than a third, for Year 8 pupils, and even less for pupils in Year 10. The most prevalent activities that pupils participated in were team sports, other sports, and music, and nearly 10% indicated that they attended homework/curriculum support clubs during break times.

A large majority of pupils (over 80%) indicated that they had missed break times and this was more likely amongst older pupils. The main reasons for missing breaks were consequences imposed on all class members due to the poor behaviour of one individual, or to finish off homework/ class work.

The majority of pupils reported that they enjoyed mealtimes. However, reflecting our earlier finding, secondary pupils indicated that they did not have enough time to eat their lunch.

Social life after school
Most primary pupils, but only a minority of secondary school pupils, attended after-school clubs and clubs outside of school. There has been a marked decline in the attendance of after-school and out-of-school clubs in the 10 years since the previous survey in 2006. Nevertheless, the types of clubs that pupils today are most likely to attend are much the same as 2006, and largely involve after-school team sports, other sports and music, and out-of-school youth organisations (e.g. Brownies, Scouts etc).

Most pupils, particularly older students, reported that on the preceding day they had gone straight home. Fewer pupils than in 2006 reported that they went to a friend's house after school and in terms of activities after school, fewer pupils than in 2006 indicated that they played or met with friends. TV viewing/playing on devices (without friends physically present) has overtaken activities with friends as the principle after school activity. It is important to emphasise that this survey did not examine social engagement with friends online.

An important finding is that there has been a marked reduction, since 2006, in the proportions of pupils who regularly meet (offline) with peers outside of school. There has also been an increase in the proportion of students who rarely meet with peers outside of school (less than once a week). These findings highlight that school is increasingly the main, and in some cases, the only context where young people get to socialise directly (and in unmediated ways) with peers and friends of their own age.

Results also show, consistent with the findings for the 2006 survey, that the vast majority (85%) of pupils felt that it was important for them to have time to meet with friends in school; less than 5% indicated that it was not important. Pupils in 2017 were less likely than in 2006 to report that it was true that they had many friends in school (73% vs 87% respectively). In 2017 a higher proportion of pupils (10%) than in 2006 (4%) reported that they did not believe that they had many friends in school.

Conclusions
The BaSiS study set out to understand the nature, organisation and management of school break times, along with the views of school staff and pupils, and to provide insights into the social lives of pupils outside of school. The study aimed to compare this national picture with our previous surveys undertaken in 2006 and 1995 to provide an understanding of continuities and changes in these areas over the course of the last two decades.

The findings from the BaSiS study come at a time of increased concern about the mental and social health of young people. There are strong suggestions that they are experiencing more stress and pressure, and more mental health problems than ever before. It also comes at a time when there are debates about the value of adult-organised clubs after school, concerns about the narrowing of the school curriculum, and pressure on young people and schools to improve performance. Outside of the school context, there are debates about declining independence and opportunities for play outdoors, as well as concerns about the changing influence of, and access to, digital technology and associated activities in children's lives. The research findings reported here are relevant to all of these debates.

The BaSiS project findings show that there is currently a lack of clarity about the purpose of break times in school and how they may contribute to the broader aims of school, education and development. Break times offer space, time and opportunities for a range of non-curricular and extra-curricular activities, but this lack of clarity means that some schools feel that they can reduce these times in favour of the curriculum and learning in class. There are clearly difficulties that can arise at breaktime and it is therefore understandable if one solution involves limiting the contexts within which poor behaviour occurs most frequently or seeking to control it by increasing supervision. Yet, the overall impression was that pupils' views about breaktime were at odds with the view of school staff who stressed the problems that arise and the perception that breaktimes need to be tightly managed and short. The vast majority of students viewed breaktimes very positively and valued the social opportunities they allow, as well as the opportunities for eating and drinking. Pupils would in fact prefer break and lunch times to be longer and would like to see an easing of constraints on enjoyable activities, and more opportunities for activities to engage in.

There are alternative ways of handling the challenging behaviours that can sometimes arise during breaks. These may, in part, come about due to an absence of resources, activities and things to do or poor use of space. Even if pupils do engage in anti-social behaviour we query the view that the solution is yet more adult structure and control. Just as important, we feel, is dealing with it in the context of everyday peer interaction itself (e.g. during school breaktimes). Whilst schools and teachers can be effective in teaching children about moral understanding, children also learn from their own experiences, mistakes and reflections. School breaktimes play an important role here. The difficulties that staff know arise at breaktime can be viewed positively in the sense that they can be the basis for discussion with pupils and greater involvement of pupils in school decisions and management (Blatchford, 1998), within a moral framework provided by the school.

Evidence of further cuts to breaktime and shortening of lunchtimes take on more significance in the light of findings on children's opportunities to meet offline with friends outside of school. Not only did we find a significant reduction on 2006 levels in direct offline socialising with friends after school and a reduction in going to a friend's house after school. We also found a significant reduction in meeting up with peers outside of school such that nearly a third of children saw peers outside of school less than once a week. These three consistent findings suggest a marked decline in face-to-face direct socialisation with peers outside of school, at least outside of a digital context. These have important implications when considered against the wealth of research evidence that strongly suggests that breaktimes are important sites for peer interaction and for the development of personal, social, cognitive and emotional understanding and skills[3] (Baines & Blatchford, 2011; Blatchford 1998; Gray, 2011; McNamara et al., 2018; Smith, 2010; Veiga et al., 2017; Whitebread et al., 2009). It may be that breaktimes are one of the few remaining opportunities that children have for sustained interaction with each other on their own terms and

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[3] It is important to note that a unique, direct causal connection has not yet been established between breaktime interaction, play and the development of important social skills, though as argued here it is a main site for interaction with peers and friends and participation in groups. These in turn have been found to significantly affect children's development and wellbeing (see Blatchford et al., 2016; Bukowski et al., 2018).

on the issues, activities and topics of interest and value to them. These contexts offer significant opportunities for the development of important skills and understandings that are not often learned in other contexts such as the classroom, in many adult-led after-school clubs or at home.

At a time of growing concern about children's mental health and personal and social development, we believe that every school pupil should have the opportunity for break times in the school day. These times are important as an enjoyable brief break from the intensities of learning. But they also provide crucial opportunities for children and adolescents alike to engage with peers and friends in fun activities of their own choosing in a safe and supportive context. It is important, we believe, to acknowledge the valuable contributions that break times make to the social, emotional, mental and physical development of children and young people.

Recommendations

There are six main recommendations arising from this research:

1. **Schools should carefully consider the time available for breaks** and work to ensure that pupils in both primary and secondary schools have adequate breaks in the day. This should include a lunch time that allows reasonable time for pupils to meet with friends, collect and eat a meal, and some free time for self-chosen activities, whether this is play, participating in a club or socialising freely with friends and peers. While there is no consensus on the optimal length of breaks, the length of breaks should be considered in terms of a restorative function (e.g. for engagement, learning, cognitive processing) as well as functioning to provide opportunities for sustained social interaction with peers, play, physical exercise and extra-curricular clubs.

2. **Schools should aim to develop a policy on breaks in the school day**. While breaktimes make up around 20% of the school day, they are overlooked, and this is reflected in the lack of school policy. A school policy should cover their nature and length, their staffing and training for break time supervision, making clear what the school hopes pupils will gain from breaks and how it is perceived that these times support children's development, learning, and wellbeing.

3. **Schools should consult and work with pupils to enable them to have a say on break times**, the activities and clubs on offer and how the outdoor space is set up, resourced and decorated so that playground activities can be engaging, interesting and fun. There are a number of organisations that provide useful advice on, and support for, improving opportunities during breaktimes. Secondary schools, in particularly, should also try innovative ideas to enrich the quality of breaktimes for pupils. Schools should consider providing adult led clubs/ extended learning opportunities as part of the school day or after school rather than during break times.

4. **Schools should reconsider the practice of withholding break time** as an individual or group sanction or for pupils to complete work, especially if this is routinely used. This is taken for granted as a punishment, but there is evidence that this approach is likely to be counter-productive to children's well-being generally, especially if regularly experienced. It is also important to note that although there appears to be no legislation requiring that pupils are allowed time for a break (in contrast to the situation for teachers), article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which the UK is a signatory, states that children have a right to play. Schools should consider

alternative, constructive ways of motivating and sanctioning pupils and enabling them to finish academic work rather than withholding breaktimes.

5. **Schools should review their approach to the training of supervisors.** Supervisor training should aim to support, manage and to strategically facilitate positive and constructive breaktime experiences that contribute to children's wellbeing and their social and psychological development. Training should ensure that staff know how to manage everyday problems that can arise during breaks in an inclusive and strategic fashion.

6. **Policy makers should consider legislating for time for pupils to have breaks**. Working adults, including teachers have a right to breaks but there is no equivalent policy for pupils. Legislation should convey an average expectation that ensures all pupils have regular and sustained periods of break time every day to undertake activities of their own choosing, with peers and in an outdoor space for the purpose of play, recreation and social development.