

The Impact of Longer Lunch Periods in Early Childhood

Course 210: Prof. Díaz

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Abstract

No one likes the feeling of being rushed or being put under pressure, especially when it is time to enjoy a good meal. Unfortunately, there are many young school aged children all over the United States who feel like this every single day. The average lunch period for students ranges from 40-50 minutes. This may seem like enough time but after we calculate the amount of time that is being wasted, it is clearly not. Whether it is transitioning them from the classroom to the cafeteria or recess to the cafeteria, waiting online to get their food or investing the time to use the restroom and wash their hands; children are left with roughly 5 - 10 minutes to eat. This paper will discuss the issue of short lunch periods and go into depth of the many challenges it has presented for young school children.

There is not enough time in the school day to get everything done, however, it's always important to prioritize the time that is needed for students to eat a good meal. Educating ourselves on the negative effects of short lunch periods can allow us to take action and help bring a great positive change to the daily lives of young school children and bring up their academic performance. Some of the effects include wasting food, poor academic performance, less social interactions and health issues. The future of our younger generation depends on the actions we take now to help them succeed and we can do this by advocating for longer lunch periods. Longer lunch periods will help students feel less stressed, allow them to enjoy the lunch provided by the school or sent by their parents, they will have the energy they need to focus in school and longer lunch periods mean less food that is left uneaten.

This issue can lead to a lot of consequences if we do not take the time to address it. Educating ourselves and others about the challenge's young one's face because of shorter lunch periods can be the gateway to a positive impact. Longer lunch periods are strongly needed.

The Impact of Longer Lunch Periods in Early Childhood

Long lunch periods contribute greatly to the development of early childhood and is a very important topic of discussion that shouldn't be ignored. According to Rosa Riley (2017) there are a wide range of negative effects because of short lunch periods, these effects can include anything from health problems, poor academic performance and unnecessary food waste. There is so much that can be done to make the issue be known and putting a stop to it. This is why I chose to advocate for longer lunch periods. The benefits of extended lunch periods are many and need to be brought out in the light so it can become a reality for all students.

Statement of Problem

Children are not being given enough time to eat during their school day and this has been a serious issue that needs to be resolved. It does not only affect the children but those who care for them as well, such as teachers, school staff members and parents. According to Rosa Riley a journalist for "*Plan4Health*", children who have short lunch periods tend to develop rushed eating habits. (Riley 2017) This can lead to detrimental health effects and one of them is obesity. An ideal amount of time for children to sit down and eat their lunch is roughly 20 minutes. A fair amount of time can allow the children's body to signal them that they are full and not overeat. Not to mention, students with longer lunch times eats more nutrients than children with shorter lunchtimes. According to Riley, The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that students be given enough time to eat their lunch because this makes it more likely for them to enjoy their food and eat healthier options when they are not rushed. (Riley 2017)

Another great point that Rosa Riley mentioned was the extra time children will have to social interact with their peers. According to the article "*The Importance of Social Skills in the Elementary Grades*", students who fail to develop social interaction and behavior skills are at high

risk of unfavorable school outcomes and poor academic performance (Meier et al., 2006). Social interaction is one of the most important factors for the development and health of young school children. This also goes hand in hand with academic performance and behavior. Social interaction can help children develop language skills that can help improve participation in class and can help improve overall academic performance. According to Meier, in the classroom children are often rushed as well and kept silent while transitioning from one subject to another and are not allowed to enjoy or socialize with friends. What better way to social interact than enjoying a good meal with your friends, which is why longer lunch periods should be offered to students. School lunch periods are often overlooked as a key time during a children's school day to interact with friends and peers. This will allow children to have extra time to build up their communication skills in a more relaxed environment.

When being rushed, children often have to make the choice of either eating their food really quickly or throwing it away. Nicholas Bakalar, a journalist for the *New York Times*, mentions kids who have short lunch periods eat less and discard more. New studies have proved that this is the opposite for those students whose school offers a longer time to eat lunch. (Bakalar, 2015). We need to intervene as soon as possible, so children do not fall at risk of these negative effects that short lunch periods are causing. My target audience will be the principles who work at a Brooklyn public school that is known as P.S. 139. They have direct connections to the Superintendent and Chancellor, this will allow for them to be aware of the issue more quickly, which means a quicker change. Longer lunch periods means managing time better, encouraging lunch staff to make space for more lunch lines so kids can get lunch faster and have more time to eat.

Research

Research suggests that short lunch periods can bring many challenges to young elementary students. Challenges include health complications, poor social and academic performance and food waste. Research also shows the changes that can be done in order for kids to get longer lunch periods and take advantage of the extra time.

Article 1

In the article *“School Lunches Are Too Short- How schools and Parents are Pushing Back”* written by Rosa Riley, the negative effects of shorter lunch periods are of big concern. Riley explains that the school education system has been changing and because of that the curriculum has undergone some changes as well. These changes have shortened lunch in order to makeup academic time in the classroom. However, this article points out important issues that need to be addressed because of short lunch periods. Riley explains that shorter lunch periods have opened up a series of unhealthy habits and this includes rushed eating habits. Unfortunately, a lot of students have seen the negative health effects of rushing through their meal and the end result happens to be obesity. Obesity comes with a wide range of health complications such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and breathing problems such as asthma. Children who are obese are also at high risk of being teased, bullied and low self-esteem.

Riley also discusses how rushed lunch periods encourages children to eat less of the healthy foods on their plate and more of the “yummy” food which is not as healthy. This article also mentions that even parents have noticed the effects of short lunch periods on their children and therefore chosen to advocate for longer lunch periods. Studies have shown that students are not having enough time to eat because school districts have quoted that time for instructional time is serving as a barrier. I understand that instructional time is very important, however lunch time

should be a priority as well. Longer lunch periods may not stop all children from falling into obesity, but it will contribute to better eating habits. The author of this article makes it known that she is on the side for longer lunch periods. I appreciate the information provided in the article which is why I chose it. It has helped informed me more on the negative factors of short lunch periods and how others including parents are advocating for a change as well.

Article 2

The article *“Importance of Social Skills in the Elementary Grades”* by Catherine R. Meier, James C. DePerna and Maryjo M. Oster talks about the relationship between social skills and academic performance. This helps a lot with my advocacy because as we all know, a lot of socializing between peers and friends takes place during lunch periods. As an educator I am able to see the joy in a child’s face as they are enjoying a good meal and having a good, fun conversation with a close classmate. Meier explains social interaction as being one of the most important factors for the health and development of young children. Early social interaction is very beneficial for child development and the right environment can help children develop socially, which also includes strong language skills, communication and confidence.

The right environment is during their lunch period, the article mentions that children have a hard time socializing in the actual classroom due to instruction time. For the most part, teachers prefer for kids not to talk with one another as she/he is teaching the lesson. Students don’t want to get in trouble for speaking and are not able to as they transition quickly from one subject to another. What better time to let them socialize than during their lunch period where their environment is more relaxed. This is only possible by extending the time for lunch. Researchers have also observed a relationship between students’ social skills and academic outcome. Teachers have

mentioned that children who are more social tend to be more cooperative in the classroom and therefore benefit more from the lessons.

The authors of this article have explained the importance of social skills for young school children. I thought this article was appropriate for my advocacy because it has made us aware of the positive effects of extending the time for lunch periods. It will allow students to interact more and help improve their social skills and academic performance.

Article 3

I came across an interesting article published by the *New York Times*, and it is titled “*Longer Lunch Periods Mean Fuller Students*” by Nicholas Bakalar. This article addresses another issue caused by short lunch periods, which is the huge amount of food that is being thrown out and wasted. Research shows that students with short lunch periods discard more food than those who are allowed more time to eat. Bakalar mentions that a study was made where the eating habits of 1,001 students were tracked during the 2011-12 school year. They specifically tracked low-income students because they depend on most of the free school lunches. Schools who allowed less than 20 minutes for students to eat shows that they consume 12.8% less of their entrees, 11.8% fewer vegetables and 10.3% less of milk. This data was compared with students who have an average of 25 minutes or more to consume their food. The food that is not consumed is thrown into the garbage.

“Giving kids enough time to eat appears to play an important role” is what Julianna Cohen, assistant professor at Merrimack College, mentions. She continues by giving suggestions on what parents can do to push for it, she says “push for longer lunch periods, more lunch lines...anything that will get the kids through the lunch line faster so they can spend more time eating”. I couldn’t agree more, which is why I chose this article to help support my advocacy for longer lunch periods.

The author of the article made it very clear through his research where he stands. Longer lunch periods will help reduce food waste and allow low-income students take advantage of the free food they are entitled too.

Small Advocacy

I work as a Paraprofessional for the Department of Educational so I have connections to people who can possibly help me raise awareness on this issue. I plan to speak with my Assistant Principle and Head Principle so they can be informed on the things I have personally seen during the student's lunch times. I have witnessed children crying because they were not able to finish their lunch, I have seen them rushing to eat their meal and waste time waiting on the lines just to get their food. I know there is not enough time in the day to cover everything but I would like to let them know of the benefits of longer lunch periods and hopefully they will consider prioritizing the time kids have for lunch. I will also suggest for a Professional Development to be done where all teachers and staff can contribute ideas that can help resolve this issue. The possibilities are endless and there are many measures that can be taken. I can do my part by addressing the issue in my school first and making sure lunch time goes smooth for the kids I work with.

Large Advocacy

The large advocacy action that I would take is bringing this matter to the Superintendent and Chancellor of the Department of Education. I do not have direct contact with them which is why I will run the idea first to my school Principles, so they can communicate it to the higher ups that run the school system. If I am able to reach the ears of the Superintendent and Chancellor, public schools all over NYC can receive a positive change and have longer lunch periods. They have the power, resources and authority to make this idea come to life. I will also write a personal hand written letter to them, sharing the research I have found on short lunch periods. I will explain

the negative effects it has on student's health and academic performance. I will also explain the benefits other schools have had by implementing longer lunch periods.

I will also need the help of my fellow teachers and staff members so I can gather up testimonials that can prove the frustration and issues of short lunch periods. Teachers and lunch staff are the witnesses to what goes on in the school cafeterias and they can help bring a change if they speak up. I will also need the help of the parents who have been worried about this issue since day one. I recall many parents asking me "Why does my son always complain that he's hungry?" "Why did my daughter come home with a full lunchbox?" "My child says he didn't eat!". All these parents will be a great help in giving more testimonials and evidence of the issues that arise due to short lunch periods. By taking all the necessary actions, I hope to make a change and I hope for longer lunch periods for the benefit of our young students.

Commentary

I decided to advocate for longer lunch periods because as an educator, I witnessed many unfair things that go on in the school and this is one of them. I really care for my students and nothing upsets me more than not seeing them well fed. It breaks my heart having to tell them that they have 2 minutes left after they just sat down 5 minutes ago. I had to deal with many meltdowns because of the short amount of time. The teachers have sent so many kids to the nurse because of their little belly aches after they've been forced to eat fast. I would really wish for lunch periods to be extended and therefore see the positive outcome in our students. As an educator this will make a big impact on me, nothing motivates me more than seeing my students calm, happy and well fed.

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