

## PEDAGOGY

# Parent Perceptions of a College Physical Education Program for Homeschool Students

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## Abstract

*Although the number of homeschool students in the United States has increased to approximately 2 million K–12 students as of spring 2010, there has been limited research on homeschool families and physical education. In particular, investigations of parent perceptions of homeschool physical education programs are lacking. The purpose of this study was to examine the parent perceptions of a college physical education program for homeschool children. Participants included 11 female parents of a child or children enrolled in the homeschool physical education program for 6 weeks. Data were collected through focus group interviews with the 11 parents placed in one of three groups based on the age of their participant(s). In addition, observational field notes were taken before, during, and after each homeschool physical education session. Data were inductively analyzed for themes through constant comparison of raw data. Methodological and investigator triangulation and member checking were utilized and supported trustworthiness. Five main themes emerged from the data from the parent perceptions of physical education and benefits of participating in physical education. For physical education, homeschool parents described a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Further, the theme of negative physical education experiences describes poor physical activity experiences that have influenced parent perceptions of physical education. Homeschool parents recognized multiple benefits of*

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*physical education in relation to their children and to the family. At the student participation level, the theme of affective learning describes the social-emotional development experienced by the homeschool children through the physical education program. The theme of student exposure describes other participant benefits of a physical education program. Finally, the theme of impact on family describes the benefits associated with physical education taking place outside of the college physical education program.*

The number of homeschool students in the United States has continued to increase in the last decade. As of 2016, an estimated 2.3 million children have been homeschooled, up from approximately 2 million K–12 students in spring 2010 (Ray, 2016). Homeschooling has become more accepted across demographic groups and for children with varying needs (Tingstrom, 2016). An estimated 32% of homeschool students belong to minority groups (Noel et al., 2013).

Parents decide to homeschool their children for a variety of reasons (Wachob, 2015). The ability to individualize the curriculum and learning environment for each child while using nontraditional pedagogical approaches were the most common reasons for the decision to homeschool (Ray, 2016). According to the 2016 National Household Education Surveys Program, 80% of parents with homeschool students indicated a concern about the environment of traditional schools (e.g., safety, drugs, or negative peer pressure) as a reason for homeschooling. Whether the reason for selecting homeschooling involves dissatisfaction with public school education, a desire to integrate religious instruction, or concerns for the public school environment, the outcomes of homeschooling students have been impressive. Homeschool students, irrespective of parental education or income, outperform public school students on standardized tests (Ray, 2016). Individuals who have been homeschooled are also likely to engage in community service and activism and to adopt parental values.

Regardless of the schooling environment, increases in learning and academic success have been linked to parental involvement (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Green & Walker, 2007; Na, 2015). Parental involvement not only benefits students academically but has also been tied to physical activity participation (Leung et al., 2017; Lim & Biddle, 2012; Zecevic et al., 2010). When parents indicate enjoyment

and support children in physical activity, children are more likely to be physically active (Zecevic et al., 2010). However, physical activity participation and fitness levels of homeschool children may be low despite positive parental attitudes toward fitness (McKethan et al., 2010; Swenson et al., 2016).

Homeschool children and families have been described as an “understudied population” (Swenson et al., 2016, Future Research Direction section, para. 1). Parents of homeschool children are heavily involved with daily decision-making about education, including time spent in physical education (PE). Further research on homeschool parent perceptions of PE is warranted. Homeschool parent perceptions may influence support, including logistical support via driving children to programming and providing necessary resources, which influences participation (Myrold & Ullrich-French, 2017).

Parents may rely on personal childhood experiences and anecdotal commentary from children because of lack of firsthand experience with current PE programs (Sheehy, 2011). Thus, perceptions of PE may be inaccurate, incomplete, and inclusive of assumptions, with parents placing an emphasis on play rather than learning (Na, 2015). Although parents may perceive PE as less beneficial than participation in youth sport (Na, 2015; Neely & Holt, 2014), they have recognized the importance of some outcome goals for the PE curriculum. Na (2015) mentioned parent-identified goals in PE such as learning life skills, having time to play, and health promotion. The findings of Sheehy (1993) and Na (2015) demonstrate parent perceptions of current PE practices. Exposing parents more directly to current K–12 PE practices may be beneficial in addressing misperceptions and in shifting toward more positive perceptions of PE (Sheehy, 2011). Given the role of parents in parent teacher associations and local government, K–12 policies and funding for PE can be negatively affected and the content may be further marginalized without a greater understanding and appreciation of PE (Sheehy, 2011). Investigation of parent perceptions of a college PE program for homeschool children may allow researchers to make recommendations that support the advocacy of PE.

In a push to promote quality PE, legislation has been written to define and recommend policies regarding PE (An Act to Promote Quality Physical Education, 2017; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

Senate Bill 297 (An Act to Promote Quality Physical Education, 2017) includes mandates for PE for all grades to be taught by certified physical educators and for PE to focus on “physical competence, health-related fitness and enjoyment of physical activity” (p. 3). Parents of homeschool students have reportedly attempted to meet physical activity demands through a variety of programming such as local recreation programs, church programs, or home-designed programs (McKethan et al., 2000). Although state and national legislation has set expectations for quality PE in public schools, the requirements for the homeschool population have not been defined.

Some colleges and universities with PE teacher education (PETE) programs have begun to offer PE programs for homeschool children (Everhart, 1998; Everhart & McKethan, 2004; Kane, 2016; Swenson et al., 2016; Tingstrom, 2016; Wachob, 2015). The benefits of such programs are multifaceted in nature: PETE programs gain exposure in the community, preservice teachers develop teaching skills and an understanding of varied needs of children, and homeschool children have access to quality PE and may increase physical activity participation (Everhart, 1998; Everhart & McKethan, 2004; Swenson et al., 2016; Tingstrom, 2016; Wachob, 2015). Parents have reported the experience as valuable for the children in engaging within the community and for psychomotor and affective development and lifelong physical fitness (Everhart, 1998; Tingstrom, 2016). While parents of students in public school have limited opportunities to learn about K–12 PE programs, parents who enroll their homeschool children in college PE programs often directly observe lessons and engage in subsequent dialogue with children. Given the opportunity to observe and discuss, parents of homeschool children may be in a better position than parents of children in public school to provide a more accurate and in-depth assessment of PE curricula and instructional strategies.

As the practice of homeschooling in the United States increases, coupled with faulty perceptions of PE among public school parents, research needs to focus on better understanding perceptions of parents who observe a college PE program for homeschool children. The unique perspective of homeschool parents may provide insight into parent expectations and perceptions of PE, given more knowledge and experience. In particular, an instrumental case

study design would be appropriate for the investigation of such a unique situation. Instrumental case study design can provide meaning and understanding of a phenomenon within a bounded system (Merriam, 2009). An instrumental case study allows for exploration of a topic, with the case used as a secondary interest in refining a theory (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Observations and detailed logs allow for further understand of individuals and the overarching theory.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of homeschool parents pertaining to PE and a homeschool PE program facilitated at a college. The research questions that guided the study included What are the perceptions of PE from the perspective of a homeschool parent? What benefits do parents perceive for their children in participating in a college PE program?

## Method

### Participants and Setting

Participants in this study were 16 parents sending their children to a PE program for homeschool students at a local college in Western Massachusetts. The college PE program for homeschool students, being offered by a college with a PETE program, was in its fifth year of existence. Parents transported their children to the classes and remained in the fieldhouse where they could utilize the indoor track, socialize with other parents, and observe the PE classes.

Families that were homeschooling children in the surrounding area were invited to enroll children to engage in a weekly 70-min PE lesson. Lessons were planned and taught by preservice teachers (PSTs) based on a curriculum developed by the program directors, including the department chair, faculty, and graduate teaching fellows. All PSTs were enrolled in the PETE program. Some PSTs were teaching the homeschool children within lab sessions for elementary and secondary methods courses, while others were gaining teaching experience through work study. The ratio of homeschool student to PSTs averaged out to be 23:2 per age group.

The homeschool children were separated into three groups by age, with each group being taught in a separate space the size of an official basketball court. Curriculum content for the 5–7 and 8–11 age groups consists of a Skill Themes and Movement Concepts approach, as well as cooperative games and rhythmic activities. The

12-and-up group receives instruction in team, dual, and individual sports. The PSTs prepare and implement content into 6-week units. The college PE program for homeschool students runs for 12 weeks each semester.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection methods included observation and focus group interviews. Field notes based on observations in relation to behaviors and interactions of participants and their children, the setting, and documents were recorded at six sessions. Field notes supplemented the focus group interviews and used for triangulation of data from other sources. Focus groups were organized by the age groups of the children (5–7, 8–11, 12 and up). Questions used for the focus group interviews were modified from the Sheehy (1993) case study. Prevalidation of questions was performed, followed by bracketing.

### **Data Analyses and Trustworthiness**

Data analyses commenced with verbatim transcription of field notes and focus group interviews. Pseudonyms were inserted for all individuals, places, and institutions. The 11 parents were assigned to one of three focus groups. Participants were all female. Data were inductively analyzed for themes through constant comparison of raw data (Strauss & Corbin, 1986). Methodological and investigator triangulation and member checking were utilized and supported trustworthiness. The research questions were addressed through methodological triangulation with data collected via observations and focus group interviews. Investigator triangulation involved independent analyses of the data by Steven W. Groccia, Michelle E. Moosbrugger, and Kevin M. Mirando followed by discussion and further analyses. For member checking, participants were provided transcripts of the focus group interviews and were requested to review and report any discrepancies or additions.

## **Results**

Five main themes emerged from the data for homeschool parent perceptions of PE and benefits of participating in PE. For PE, homeschool parents described a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Further, the theme of negative physical education experiences describes poor physical activity experiences that have influenced

parent perceptions of PE. Homeschool parents recognized multiple benefits of PE in relation to their children and to the family. At the student participation level, the theme of affective learning describes the social-emotional development experienced by the homeschool children through the PE program. The theme of student exposure describes other participant benefits of a PE program. Finally, the theme of impact on family describes the benefits associated with PE taking place outside of the college PE program. Direct quotations are provided for each category and show the interrelatedness among categories.

### **A Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum**

When discussing PE, all participants associated specific activities with positive experiences from PE. Fitness, motor skills, and sport skills were described as central to PE. Movement and exposure to a variety of activities were purposefully selected and implemented within the program, which ties to the desired outcome of lifelong healthful physical activity of both the parent and the college PE program. A mother with two children in the oldest age group (12 and older) described PE:

Physical education to me is being physically fit in the sense that the body is healthy, the heart is healthy, the muscles are able to do everyday tasks and maybe a little beyond that. Um, flexibility is there so they don't get hurt doing everyday things, and again, a little over that. . . . mental health as well to me. I feel that physical fitness helps you mentally, so I feel like those just work together.

Another mother of two students in the oldest age group, but from a different focus group interview, echoed educating for lifelong physical activity:

[The college physical education program does] very well in this class not just teaching sports and teaching competition or engaging competition but really teaching the healthy part of being physically active. . . . Because it is being physically active and being healthy, and even healthy competition is a very necessary life skill that I believe is too often overlooked.

Parents with homeschool children in the younger age groups also recognized the PE curriculum. A mother with a child in each of the college program's three age groups described the developmentally appropriate curriculum:

I think one of the things that I like is breaking down the skills, like you do here, but you know when they go play a sport, it's a sport, it's a game, it's how to play it. But, breaking it down into throwing a ball, and kicking in those smaller gross motor skills that then build up to the game or to the bigger sports.

Homeschool children in the college PE program were exposed to a variety of motor skill, sport skill, and physical activity opportunities through the curriculum. Parents viewed the PE curriculum as a means of promoting healthy behaviors in their homeschool children, and child participation in the college PE program was key to the development of the skills necessary for lifelong physical activity.

## Negative Physical Education Experiences

The focus group participants desired for their children to live healthy lives and believed purposeful PE to be one way of working toward lifelong physical activity. The homeschool parents were clear on what they felt "purposeful" PE was, but they often contrasted the desired outcomes with negative PE experiences. A mother with two children in the youngest age group recalled,

I think when I was in PE it was all about, like, dodgeball, and the one activity we're doing today. And I didn't really think about [physical education] in terms of, like, my life. And I think one of the things that I would like to see in phys. ed, and I think you do a good job here, is teaching them that it's a lifelong skill of physical activity, um, that's the goal. Not just knocking somebody out in dodgeball, you know our goal is to promote wellness and fitness, and cardiovascular health.

Multiple focus group participants described negative experiences associated with PE programs in public schools. Lack of organization and student safety were two areas of concern for the parents. A

parent of two children described the lack of organization in public school PE:

One of the biggest complaints from my son, who is the older one, uh, when he was in fourth grade, um, one of his biggest complaints was that they didn't do physical education. That most of the time was spent sitting, working in a workbook on health. . . . There was too much sitting and too much focus on other things.

Another instance of a lack of organization in public school PE stemmed from the size of the class. One mother spoke of a personal experience as a substitute PE teacher:

I've actually worked as a substitute gym teacher before too, and my kids have been in public school. Sometimes it's hard to control the kids depending on what population you work with. And there's so many kids. . . . It's just sometimes [the teachers are] overwhelmed with so many kids, and that's part of why they give them health work to do because when you have 40 kids and some of them don't listen, or a lot of them won't listen, it's just, it can be like pandemonium.

When describing negative PE experiences, the parents said that large class sizes not only affect classroom organization but also present a safety issue.

The size of a class in PE classes, public or homeschool, was identified as a safety concern for the homeschool parents. One mother described a space issue for the oldest group attending the college PE program for homeschool children: "I know for the bigger kids, the space sometimes when they're playing the games is not enough. They feel like they might hit into each other." Another parent linked her son's negative experience in public school PE to large class sizes. The homeschool mother stated,

I think [the college physical education program is] really well organized too. My older son when he was in seventh grade in public school last year broke his arm during gym. And the gym teacher didn't notice for 15 minutes that his arm was broken. So, I like the fact that the [preservice teachers] here

really watch what people are doing, and they're really safe. . . . I think it's really important for gym teachers in general. The safety issue. Because I found that especially in public schools, sometimes they're not really watching. They only have one person, and um, kids get out of control.

Parents identified access to another college PE program for homeschool children in the local area. Both college PE programs are taught with preservice teachers from the PETE programs from the institution supporting the program. One mother compared the two programs, stating, "It is rather early, and it's actually not as well organized, I think as this program." Another stated,

The student teachers didn't seem to have as much of a plan to keep the kids busy or I don't know, I just didn't feel—not just the safety, but the whole thing as a whole didn't seem put together as well as it is here.

Parents were supportive of the PE curriculum and felt the college PE program encouraged their children to be physically active. They perceived lifelong physical activity as a major objective for PE and identified organization and safety as important pieces crucial to quality PE. In addition to the perceptions of PE, parents perceived specific benefits for their homeschool child's participation in a college PE program.

### **Affective Learning**

Participants shared the benefits they perceived for their homeschool children participating in a college PE program. Child participation in the college PE program directly influenced the psychomotor domain, with children being physically engaged within each lesson of the program. However, participants consistently recognized growth in their homeschool child's social and emotional development as a benefit of participation in the college PE program.

Homeschool parents discussed the importance of increasing social awareness in their children and the use of PE as a vehicle for growth in all three learning domains. A mother shared how the college PE program provided her homeschool children with a sense of normalcy:

I also like that, that my kids, my kids have a lot of opportunity to be around other kids, but it's nice that I can justify this because they are learning at the same time. And they're exposed to larger groups of kids their age and similar ages. And other kids that are homeschool. . . . but it's nice to have some homeschool-centered activities so that they don't feel like 'I'm the only homeschool kid in this room.'

Another parent echoed how being involved in the program has furthered her son's social development:

It's helped with being part of a group and having to pay attention to something outside of himself like he, uh, he's not the only one in the area. He has to realize that his actions affect every other kid that he's doing things with, for better or worse. So, more awareness.

Additionally, participants recognized the importance for children to be exposed to a variety of learning environments. A mother of two children stated,

I know that they gained some socialization skills and benefited from the teachers' interaction with them. . . . Um, they naturally get used to having one teacher unless they belong to a co-op or something. Um, so it's good to have other teachers teaching them in their own styles.

For the homeschool students, participation in the college PE program was key to developing friendships and interacting with other children and adults.

## **Exposure**

When discussing the college PE program for homeschool children, parents reported that their children's exposure to a variety of PE activities had positive benefits outside of the school setting. From a physical standpoint, being exposed to a variety of physical activity and sport skills has led the homeschool students to learn about self-awareness. One mother described how exposure has affected her two children in the youngest age group:

Exposing kids to activities that they might not choose to do themselves. I know our kids all have their certain things they like to do, but, um, you know, my kids don't like to play catch, for example, my girls that are in this program, they wouldn't choose to do that. However, here, they work on those skills as part of it, and then they see that it's kind of fun and then they'll choose to do that at home. So I think that an introduction of skills that they wouldn't choose to work on their own is something that I've noticed.

In reference to the benefits of being physically educated, a mother simply stated, "I also think it's a good way to realize where their strengths and weaknesses are too, because sometimes they might be good at one thing and the other week they are struggling."

Parents felt encouraged that their homeschool children were being exposed to a variety of new activities in the college PE program. The exposure has led to an increase in physical activity in their homeschool children outside of the college program. Multiple participants described how a team handball unit led to various engagement at home among their children: "I know they learned the rules of handball. . . . So, they've never been exposed to that before. So, now, they know how to play it and they actually play it at other places too, parks." Another member of the focus group followed up, stating, "The handball, especially, they had never heard of handball before. And they were talking—my, both of my kids were talking—about, um, the rules at home. And, discussing what's allowed and what's not allowed [laughs]." Despite not having "a ball for it," the second participant indicated her children would like to participate in team handball outside of the program. This was echoed by a mother of six taking part in a different focus group. She stated,

One of the benefits is the exposure to things that I couldn't have given them like lacrosse. Um, and I mean they got—they got a lot of interest in that to the point that they wanted to buy lacrosse sticks after. Playing in the backyard. But, I'd say they're more physically fit.

From exploring personal strengths and weaknesses to bringing new content home, exposure to new movement opportunities was

perceived by parents as a benefit of participation in the college PE program.

### **Impact on Family**

Homeschool child participation in the college PE program directly influenced the families at home. When parents reported their children's physical activity completed at home, their responses were consistent with most children increasing their physical activity outside of the program. Parents described their children discussing, and when possible, performing, the activities being taught to them in the college PE program. Parents also discussed the socialization process of younger children watching their older siblings participating in the college PE program.

Parents chose to enroll their homeschool children in the college PE program and wanted their children to be physically active outside of it. Parents described an increase in discussions around physical activity among family members. A mother of six described the influence of the homeschool program at home:

Playing in the backyard. . . . I'd say they are more physically fit. . . . But in all, [I think it's helped them become more, like, physically fit] and also it's given them like a love for these things that they want to, like, do them at home. You know, they bring it home and they do it, and since there's a big group of them, they can play it at home too, so it's good.

When reporting the benefits of the college PE program, participation in PE influenced the frequency of family physical activity. In reference to increased family physical activity, a mother described how she and her 11-year-old son are active together:

Like, [the college PE program] has kind of set up that, that precedent. Because the hikes and stuff were just for mom, but this, like, he gets it. . . . And it helps us get up in the morning because we're not out-of-the-door-early people.

Another mother of two described an increase in communication between father and son:

But, I've noticed they talk a little bit more about sports because he'll—my son—will now go and tell [his father] about some sport they're learning, and they can kind of engage that way a little bit more now. So, that's nice for my husband... that's just a nice little additional thing that has come out of [the college PE program].

Parents discussed how the environment of the college PE program created a socialization process for younger siblings. The program is situated inside of a collegiate fieldhouse with four full-size basketball courts inside of a track. See-through dividers enclose the teaching spaces while allowing families to observe all aspects of a lesson. Toddlers observe their siblings from the outside, frequently mimicking the skill themes and movement patterns being taught. A mother of four described the socialization process:

I see that [watching and mimicking] in my four-year-old being close to developmentally ready. And now I see her trying, you know, you know at the edge of the class watching everybody, really being interested. And I feel like just observing . . . you can see into the nets—really helps prepare the little ones as well.

Parents perceived the college program to be beneficial not solely to the children engaged in the physical education lessons but also to the family as a whole.

## Discussion

The research served to inform about homeschool parent perceptions of PE and their perceived benefits of PE. Parents of homeschool children recognized the importance of PE and believed developmentally appropriate PE to be a stepping stone to a physically active lifestyle. Participant descriptions of the college PE program for homeschool children revealed positive social interactions among their children. Further, child participation in the college PE program dispelled any negative thoughts or experiences of PE perceived by the parents (Na, 2015; Sheehy, 2011). Purposeful PE may increase social skills and positively increase physical activity in homeschool students while affecting the overall perception of PE.

Participants identified benefits to participation in a college PE program for homeschool students. At the individual level, the college PE program exposed the homeschool children to a variety of movement and motor skills that they may or may not have engaged in. Parent participants appreciated their children stretching their “physical” comfort zones and were encouraged to see their children actively bringing home activities learned at the college program. Whether practicing new skills, teaching and playing sports to friends, or discussing rules and games, the benefits of a PE program for homeschool students were highlighted by the participants.

The study served to address the gaps in the literature pertaining to parent perceptions and benefits of a college PE program for homeschool students. Findings indicate that homeschool students and their families are positively influenced by purposeful PE programming. Participant comments indicate that a college PE program can encourage homeschool children to pursue physical activity outside of the program and can challenge their physical and social comfort zones. These PE experiences positively affect families and encourage the pursuit of a physically active lifestyle. The reflections of the parents of homeschool children participating in a college PE program show the field of PE in a positive light.

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