

Parents' Perceptions of their Child's 5th Grade Physical Education Program

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe parents' perceptions of their 5th grade child's physical education program. Twenty seven parents were interviewed regarding the types of information they currently have and the sources from which that information came. Results indicated that many parents possessed inaccurate information about their fifth grade child's physical education program—information that typically was acquired from their children. Few parents attempted to obtain information from other, more direct sources. Further, all parents drew on their own, often negative, recollections of "gym classes" to fill in the gaps where they lacked information about their child's program. Certain practices signaled the marginalization of physical education at their child's school.

Throughout the published literature in physical education there has been considerable rhetoric about the need to recruit and maintain the support of parents (Blankenship, 2000; Kentz & Orman, 1998; Moore & Gray, 1990; Nelson, 1986; Scantling, Lackey, Strand, & Johnson, 1998; Schneider, 1992; Smith, 1985; Wilcox, 1987). This rhetoric is understandable since in a variety of ways parents can influence both educational policy generally, and the particular nature of the school attended by their offspring. Through means as disparate as tax referenda, pressure group activities, testimony at public hearings, letters to the editor in the public press, parent/teacher conferences, and family discussions around the dinner table, parents can and do act to encourage, limit, or shape the events in schools.

The same parents may also choose to ignore the curriculum content, teaching processes, and operat-

ing policies of their children's schools. Either choice, active engagement or passive disengagement, has its consequences. Some results of parental dispositions are immediate and of obvious importance, as in the case of exercising the vote to support or deny funding for particular school programs. Others, however, are subtle and may be visible only in terms of long-term relationships between schools and the community, as in the case of parental engagement in curriculum development projects.

For physical education teachers in particular, there is a widely held belief that parental perceptions matter a great deal (Blankenship, 2000; Kentz & Orman, 1998; Moore & Gray, 1990; Nelson, 1986; Scantling, et.al., 1998; Smith, 1985; Wilcox, 1987) and are critical to the future of the subject in schools. Despite this belief and the obvious potential for parental influence which might validate it, surprisingly few published research studies exist that report the attitudes of parents about physical education (Gillam, 1986; Poitras, 1984; Pritchard, 1988; Stewart & Green, 1987).

Further, the studies on which such research reports are based are difficult to compare and synthesize into useful knowledge because they (a) investigate such diverse populations that generalizations would be difficult, and (b) employ such a variety of methods for gathering data that no replications are available. Researchers investigating parental attitudes about physical education, for example, have most commonly used written questionnaires and telephone surveys to gather data. Questionnaires limit the conclusions inferred from the information gathered because the participants' responses are powerfully influenced by the particular way in which questions are worded. While this limitation also is true of many other direct

survey techniques, such as closed ended individual or group interviews, the latter methods may present some opportunity to follow-up and probe responses and do allow the gathering of contextual information which can illuminate otherwise ambiguous or misleading responses.

Although the small set of studies located for review was useful in reporting some information about parental attitudes toward physical education in general, none of the investigators (mentioned previously) employed the strategy of probing responses to program operation at a single school site—that is, rich case analyses simply are not available. One exception to this pattern is found in a study conducted on attitudes toward high school physical education (Tannehill, Romar, O’Sullivan, England, & Rosenberg, 1994). A 36-item questionnaire was administered to 139 parents of high school students to determine parent attitudes toward their child’s high school physical education program. One disturbing finding, according to the authors, was that “39% of the parents chose not to identify a strength and 41% failed to identify a weakness” (p. 417) in their teenager’s physical education program. Twenty eight percent chose not to provide an opinion of the major contribution that physical education makes to a teenager’s total education in high school.

Moreover, studies in other disciplines have repeatedly indicated that parents’ attitudes about schools (and their decisions to be involved) are at least partially related to what they know about the schools their children attend (Ames, 1993; Decker & Majerczyk, 2000; Healey, 1994); yet the amount and type of information that serves as the basis for parental attitudes is largely absent from the research base in physical education. Therefore, in order to understand parental attitudes (and then to recruit wider parental support) physical educators must know more about the ways in which parents gather information about their child’s physical education program and how that information is perceived. If physical educators are to improve the effectiveness of their communication with parents, then the accuracy of the parents’ interpretation of

that information must be systematically assessed. Therefore, the case study (in which a variety of data collection methods are utilized to establish the trustworthiness of the information) serves as a viable means for investigating this topic.

Accordingly, the present case study was undertaken to provide parents with the opportunity to participate in face-to-face interviews for the purpose of expressing their current understanding of the physical education program in which their elementary child participates. The purpose of this study was to provide data for identifying modes of communication utilized by parents and a list of factors which appear to be salient in developing and informing parents’ perceptions of their child’s 5th grade physical education program. The specific research questions of this study were: a) What information did the parents have about their child’s 5th grade physical education program? b) From what sources did that information come? and c) What sources appeared to be most and least credible to parents?

Methods

Participants

Parents. Twenty-seven parents (23 females and 4 males) were interviewed for this study. Each of the male participants was interviewed with their female companion. Eleven of the parents (41%) had attended Sunny Brook School (pseudonyms are used for all persons and places); all were white and English-speaking. Twenty-five of the parents were presently married; 20 parents had at least two children. Fourteen parents reported an average annual household income between \$25,000 and \$49,999, while nine reported an average annual income of over \$50,000. Ten parents reported the highest level of education completed as high school, eight parents completed some college, and ten parents earned an undergraduate college degree. Based on family income, the types of homes in which these participants lived, the vehicles they drove, highest level of education completed, and their occupations, most of the parents interviewed

for this study can reliably be placed in the working and middle classes.

The Physical Education Teacher. Kelly (a pseudonym) teaches a developmentally and instructionally appropriate K-6 program at Sunny Brook School (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2004) that includes a variety of skill themes (i.e., volleying, dribbling, throwing, catching, etc...) and movement concepts (i.e., major categories of movement concepts include space awareness, effort, and relationships). She uses teaching methods that encourage a positive learning environment; maximum participation; appropriate skill and concept practice time; success for every student; cognitive understanding; and student self-discipline and self-direction.

At the beginning of each school year, Kelly (a pseudonym) sends home a note to parents informing them of the days on which their child has physical education class. She also includes the expectations for appropriate clothing as well as her expectations for student behavior in the gym. There is no other communication at any point in the year unless she sends a note requesting parental permission for a special event. She did comment, however, that occasionally some parents have contacted her about their child's grade or informed her that their child was sick.

At the time of this study, the physical education teacher welcomed parents who were "just passing through" to observe or participate in her classes. There was, however, no formal program for getting parents involved in any aspect of the physical education program.

Data Collection

The primary sources of data were (a) a parent demographic questionnaire; (b) formal, open-ended interviews with parents, teachers, principal; (c) field observations at the school; (d) document analysis of formal school policies; and (e) informal conversations with participants who attended school events. Each of the data sources provided opportunities for cross-checking individual accounts and validating information. Utilizing a variety of

methods was necessary because no single source could provide a comprehensive perspective. Due to publication length constraints, only data from interviews with parents and the parental background questionnaire will be presented.

Parent Interviews and Questionnaire. Two one-hour audio taped interviews were conducted with each of the 27 parents (of a possible 100 parents of fifth grade children) who volunteered to participate in this case study. A standardized, open-ended interview format was used to allow most efficient use of the interview time, to assure that each participant was asked the same questions in the same order, and to facilitate comparison of participants' answers to the same question (Patton, 2001). A questionnaire also was given to each participating parent in order to elicit basic demographic information such as age, gender, occupation, education, number of children, and other details important for describing the parent.

Data Analysis

The data analysis occurred concurrently with the data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). Interviews were transcribed immediately and reviewed to suggest ongoing adjustments in the protocol. Each transcript was first reviewed and analytic units that appeared to present complete expressions of a single thought were identified and sorted into categories. As the analysis proceeded, the researcher labeled, merged, adjusted, and constantly compared the data within each category. (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). In addition, the data were examined for relationships among categories as part of the inductive reasoning process. Negative cases which did not fit into the categories also were identified; all negative cases were clarified or confirmed by further checks with the participants involved. In order to insure the integrity of the data collected from the interviews with parents, that information was cross-checked with school documents and data from the interviews with the physical education teacher, classroom teachers, and the principal.

Results

Parent Responses

What information do parents have about their child's physical education program? Of the 27 parents who completed both interviews, eight parents (30%) said they did not know the physical education teacher's name and three of those eight indicated that they would not recognize her. On the other hand, 22 parents (81%) indicated they would recognize the physical education teacher and 19 (70%) of those also knew her name.

Only 18 (67%) of the 27 parents knew the exact number of days that their fifth grade child had physical education class; one parent did not know and eight parents were unsure. While most of the parents interviewed struggled with the question of what their child's fifth grade physical education class was about, all but two parents mentioned several activities they had heard about in passing from their children. Two parents (7%) reported knowing nothing about the program.

The following excerpt represents a typical parent response when asked to explain what they knew about their child's physical education program. Whenever necessary, words have been inserted in brackets to clarify parent responses.

... I know that they did a lot of different activities. It wasn't just one particular thing. They did play different games, they did jump roping . . . square dancing . . . I believe they played a lacrosse game . . . and various exercises... those are the only organized things that I know of . . . when he [her son] talked to me about it [physical education], he complained about some of the things that he thought the boys should not be doing . . . like jump roping and I don't think he cared for that square dance very much...

This mother knew only what her son told her about the physical education program although observations as well as the interview with Kelly (a pseudonym) indicated that much of the information was incorrect. For example, the physical education teacher never taught traditional square dancing;

instead she taught a unit on line dancing using popular music. Several field observations during the line dance unit indicated that students (regardless of gender) participated with enthusiasm. As a culminating event, the fifth graders were invited to perform the line dances at a public show and more than 50% of the fifth graders (both boys and girls) voluntarily participated in that event.

A better-informed parent knew that her son had physical education class twice a week for 45 minutes and the exact days on which her son attended physical education class. She accurately named three units taught, knew the teacher's name, and commented that her son "loves gym." She had more accurate information than many of the parents interviewed, but she did not perceive herself as knowledgeable about the program.

... I actually don't know too much . . . I didn't think too much of physical education until you approached me and I really started thinking about it . . . He [my son] gets his mark and that's it. I don't know how he gets it, it's just an S, N, or U . . . I have been to the open house and I think the gym teacher was there; we just never went over and talked to her . . . I think if the school made the value of physical education as strong as it should be, then maybe I would have thought of talking to her . . . but I never even gave it a thought... what would I want to know about, how he plays? . . .

In this quote, the woman's dilemma was evident. She realized that she did not know how her son's physical education grade was calculated or the criteria on which it was based. She did not, however, have enough understanding to formulate a question about a program that she thought was centered around playing games.

The same parent also provided some insight about the hidden messages that are projected from the school (perhaps unknowingly) regarding physical education as a school subject. She believed that the grade of S, N, or U was given only to those subjects that were "nonacademic" and therefore

nonessential to a child's education. They were the subjects that she thought the school regarded as the "frills"—nice to have but not critical to academic development. The grading system of S, N, or U signaled to her (and to other parents interviewed) that Sunny Brook school personnel did not really consider physical education to be an important subject, so why should she?

One continuing pattern is that each parent made statements involving incorrect information concerning the physical education program at Sunny Brook School. The end result was that parents unknowingly based their judgment of their child's physical education program on information that was incomplete, inaccurate, and obsolete. Part of this problem can be attributed to the parent's means of acquiring information.

From what sources does that information come?

An interesting split occurred in parental responses when they were asked if they had ever received any written information about the physical education program at Sunny Brook School. Fourteen parents (52%) said they had received written information in the form of permission slips, requirements for proper dress, or fliers about special events; while 13 of the parents interviewed (48%) indicated that they had never received any written information about the physical education program.

Many parents (67%) revealed that they only heard about physical education class if something "really exciting" happened or if something happened that their child did not like. Most parents (81%) asked questions about their child's day at school but those questions were most frequently either general (e.g., how was your day?) or specifically related to grades, homework, or projects assigned in the academic subjects, rather than the "special subjects" of art, music, and physical education.

Most parents (81%) commented that when they asked their child the general question, "how was your day?", the typical child's answer was something like "fine" or "okay." The parent usually reported changing the subject rather than asking for elaboration on such responses. The same parents

stated that it was less difficult to engage their child in a conversation about a specific test or project when a teacher had written comments or a grade had been assigned. In those instances, the parent could ask questions and the child could provide a detailed account. None of those types of conversations were reported as having occurred with regard to physical education.

What sources of information do parents regard as most and least credible? For many parents (67%), their child not only was the primary source of information about the physical education program but was perceived as the most credible one as well. The following excerpt from an interview with a husband and wife is an example of a typical parent response.

... [male participant] All I know about the physical education system at the school is what my son tells me when he comes home . . . he tells me what they did in gym, whether he had a good time or a bad time . . . but usually, he comes home with positive things to say . . . I think he's a good source of information, he tells me what I need to know . . .

[female participant] I think we're going to learn the most by listening to our kids... even if it's a one-sided type of conversation and you're only getting the child's end of it . . . I also think the kids are the best source . . .

This quote suggests that the couple heard all they believed they needed to hear when their child described what his physical education class was like. They considered their son's stories as an accurate source of information because he talked about both the activities that he enjoyed and the activities that he did not prefer. This type of response was given by a fairly large number of parents interviewed. Thirteen parents (48%) responded that if they really needed to know more about the physical education program, their son or daughter would provide the most accurate and dependable information. Only six parents (22%) indicated they would ask the physical education

teacher about the program. The remaining eight parents (30%) would either call the school office or speak with other parents if they wanted specific information related to physical education.

Discussion

Returning to the research questions, three main conclusions are supported. First, with some exceptions, most parents were not able to provide detailed information about their child's physical education program. Information that parents were able to articulate was trivial, frequently inaccurate, and often filled with discrepancies. This sketchy and inconsistent parental picture of physical education at Sunny Brook School can be attributed in part to the primary vehicle for acquiring that information—their children. The amount of detailed information provided by the child depended upon both the interest and persistence of the parent, as well as the child's ability to respond to oral questions. In general, parents did not contact the physical educator (directly) for better information regarding their child's physical education program.

Second, all parents drew on their own recollections of physical education classes to fill in the gaps where they lacked information about their child's program. This was particularly true of the parents who had attended Sunny Brook School as children. They assumed that the physical education program had not changed since they had attended. Hence, those parents were unlikely to seek information about their child's fifth grade physical education program because they relied on what they thought they already knew.

Third, parents indicated several specific signals from Sunny Brook School about the importance placed on physical education. Parents mentioned the school's grading system (*S, N, U* grades for art, music, and physical education and *A, B, C* grades for academic subjects) as a signal of physical education's lesser value. Other parents noted that physical education was omitted from the Parent Teacher Organization's (PTO) list of possible ways that parents could become involved at

Sunny Brook, again indicating unimportance. Some parents commented on the format for Open House (in which the physical education presentation was organized as an obstacle course for the children) as symbolizing that the physical education program did not produce evidence of student learning, but only of student enjoyment. Finally, the amount and type of information that the parents received about their child's performance in Kelly's (a pseudonym) program was infrequent and less meaningful when compared to the information received about their child's progress in academic subjects. These subtle signals from the school reinforced parents' existing notions that physical education was not an important subject in the curriculum.

Parents' notions about the relative unimportance of physical education were perhaps unknowingly reinforced by the physical education teacher, Kelly (a pseudonym). While the quality of her program was locally recognized, she relied on students to communicate at home their satisfaction. Kelly extended no public invitation for parents to seek information, observe classes, or become involved in any way with the physical education program (as distinct from special school-wide events) at Sunny Brook School. The only interaction that Kelly had with parents took place infrequently during occasional parent visits to the school or with parents who called to question their child's physical education grade.

Implications

Physical educators, often pushed to their limits to deliver a quality program within the political and economic confines of schools, may neglect the opportunity to establish and maintain the meaningful two-way dialogue that can lead to positive relationships with the parents of the children they teach. The evidence from the study reported here suggests that the common belief of many physical education teachers is false (i.e., that if teachers deliver a quality physical education program, then the children will accurately communicate information back to their parents).

This did not happen in an accurate, detailed, or meaningful way in most of the households studied, thereby leaving parents with little or no recent and accurate information regarding their child's physical education program. The consequence of this lack of information was evident in the marginal position held by physical education within Sunny Brook School as well as in repeated community initiatives (supported at least by some parents) to eliminate physical education from the curriculum altogether.

Instead, physical educators need to take responsibility for maintaining regular communication with parents and for showing the importance of their subject matter by: a) creating an interactive physical education web site through which parents would have regular access to updated information as well as an opportunity to engage in dialogue with the physical education teacher; b) implementing quality assessment practices and aligning the physical education grade standards with those used in the academic subjects; c) advocating for increased physical activity in the form of assignments that students complete at home with their parents; and d) supplementing student portfolios with meaningful artifacts from physical education lessons. The effectiveness of each of these methods, once implemented, should be documented in further research studies. If we truly care about physical education, then two-way communication with parents is more than a practical strategy for survival, it is our professional responsibility as educators.

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