Exploring the Meaning of Parental Involvement in Physical Education for Students With Developmental Disabilities

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The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to explore the experiences and meaning of parental involvement in physical education from the perspectives of the parents of students with developmental disabilities. The stories of four mothers of elementary aged children (3 boys, 1 girl), two mothers and one couple (mother and father) of secondary-aged youth (1 girl, 2 boys) with developmental disabilities, were gathered by using interviews, photographs, school documents, and the researcher’s journal. Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) ecological system theory provided a conceptual framework to interpret the findings of this inquiry. Three themes emerged from thematic analysis: being an advocate for my child, understanding the big picture, and collaborative partnerships undeveloped in GPE. The findings lend additional support to the need for establishing collaborative partnerships in physical education between home and school environments (An & Goodwin, 2007; Tekin, 2011).

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, children with disabilities, Down syndrome, phenomenology, qualitative research

Parental involvement in children’s education and school has always been a significant interest in the United States since the beginning of the 20th century (Tekin, 2011). Numerous studies have reported that parental involvement influence children’s achievement and performance in school (Dimmock & O’Donoghue, 1996; Epstein, 2010; van Voorhis, 2003). Research indicates that parental involvement affects student academic achievement (e.g., increased grade point average), student behavior in schools (e.g., improved self-concept, classroom behavior, attendance,
motivation, and retention), and school improvement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998).

Pate and Andrews (2006) define parental involvement as “having an awareness of and involvement in schoolwork, understanding of the interaction between parenting skills and student success in schooling, and a commitment to consistent communication with educators about student progress” (p. 1). In a broader sense, it implies the beliefs, attitudes, and activities of parents to support their children’s learning; that is, it includes parent values and expectations, parent behaviors (e.g., reading, tutoring, conversations about school-related matters), parent participation in school functions (e.g., parent-teacher conferences and volunteering), and parent leadership in decision making through involvement in the community (Epstein, 2010; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005).

Since the 1980s, the importance of parental involvement has been highlighted with the rapid growth of evidence supporting the positive impact on students’ performances in the United States (Barge & Loges, 2003). Parent participation and roles have been addressed and implemented through multiple policies, such as Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994), Improving America’s School Act (1994), No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), to improve public education (Congress of the United States, 1994; Public Education Network, 2004; Tekin, 2011; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). In particular, parental participation was established as one of the national education goals in Goals 2000: “by the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children” (PL103–227, Title I, Section 102, 8A).

In special education, parental involvement is also regarded as an essential part to be implemented in educational programs and services (Spann, Kohler, & Soensksen, 2003). Parents are required to be involved in planning and decision-making processes for their children’s education through Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings under IDEA (Turnbull et al., 2006). Parent participation in the IEP meeting is regarded as an important task in that it serves as a means of communication among teachers, parents, and other educationally focused professionals as well as a place to establish a child’s educational program (Garriot, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000; Spann et al., 2003).

More so now than ever, many students with disabilities attend inclusive general physical education (GPE) classes in the United States (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007) and yet, physical education (PE) is rarely discussed in the IEP meeting although the educational goals, supports, and services are determined through the meeting (Turnbull et al., 2006). Parents’ input to the IEP process is as critical arguably as much as that of the educational professionals. Parents can share vital information, for example, their child’s strengths and weaknesses, behavioral attributes and tendencies, learning styles, and they can provide educational support in and outside of school (An & Goodwin, 2007). Further, with the support of parents, the GPE teacher is better able to meet the needs of each individual student in an inclusive setting. In short, parental involvement is important because students with parental support perform better in school (Turnbull et al., 2006).
Ecological System Theory

Children develop in distinct contexts that are “unique combinations of personal and environmental circumstances that can result in different paths of changes” (Berk, 2009, p. 8). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory or EST (1992, 2005) is a sociocultural view of human development focusing on the mechanism of person and environment interactions (Adamsons, O’Brien, & Pasley, 2007). In EST, development implies “the set of processes through which properties of the person and the environment interact to produce constancy and change in the characteristics of the person over the life course” (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p. 191). Environment is referred to as any event or condition outside the person that either influences or is influenced by the developing person (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983). EST posits that child development does not appear in isolation but is shaped in relation to each child’s home, school, community, and society, meaning that multiple environments can make an enormous difference in the developmental outcome of children with disabilities (Bengoechea & Johnson, 2001).

EST “focuses on the importance of interactions within and between life contexts (e.g., work, school, family, etc)” (Duerden & Witt, 2010, p. 108). Four systems comprise the theory: (a) micro-, (b) meso-, (c) exo-, and (d) macrosystem. These environmental systems represent different spaces whereby interaction occurs (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Further the nature of the interaction at one level is influenced by events at other levels (Sontag, 1996).

The microsystem “represents an individual’s immediate context including associated roles, actors, and environmental characteristics” (Duerden & Witt, 2010, p. 110). At this level, the child has a reciprocal relationship with the environment. Child’s biological and social behaviors (e.g., disability) influence the parent’s behavior (e.g., involvement in school) as well as the parent as a primary caregiver in the family influences the child’s behavior (Berk, 2009).

The mesosystem refers to the connection between the child’s microsystems (e.g., parents and teachers). A child’s learning progress is influenced not only by activities taken place in classes but also supported by his/her parent participation in school. If there is a link between home (parent) and school (teacher), the child’s development is likely influenced by their relationships (Berk, 2009). Bronfenbrenner (1992) further classified the interconnections between home and school settings as (a) multisetting participation where the child is engaging in (home and school); (b) indirect relation established by the connection between home and school (parents and teachers interactions), (c) intersetting communications where messages are transmitted from one setting to the other (school newsletter, progress report), and (d) intersetting knowledge where information or experiences are obtained from others (Sontag, 1996).

The exosystem represents social settings where a child’s development is influenced by the environment that he or she is not a part of (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). It represents the social networks of the parents such as workplaces, friends, extended-family members, and health and welfare services and their religious institutions (Berk, 2009). Parents’ social networks can support child caring and enhance children’s development. Particularly in those cases, for example, where
the parents’ workplace provides good medical benefits, paid leave, and flexible
working schedule, if friends and extended-family members give advice, companion-
ship, and assistance, and if health and welfare services afford financial assistance
(Berk, 2009).

The macrosystem is the outermost layer of environmental context in EST,
representing the broader social influences such as laws, economic circumstances,
and cultural and societal expectations (Berk, 2009). Educational laws—NCLB
and IDEA—require parent participation in school to support students’ learning.
The IDEA specifically requires the parents to engage in the IEP process for their
children to determine educational programs and services. Parental involvement
in PE can also be influenced by the belief system of the parents (Sontag, 1996).

EST suggests that a child’s development is affected by the roles parents play in
their educational experiences across environmental contexts (e.g., communication
with teachers, giving assistance, affording physical activity participation). There-
fore, this study explored the meaning of parental involvement from the perspectives
of parents of children with developmental disabilities. We specifically sought to
understand their experiences of involvement in PE, parents’ roles, and partnerships
between parents and GPE teachers.

Method

A hermeneutic phenomenology was used because we sought to describe phenomena
as interpreted by the parents (e.g., communicating, assisting, and interacting with
teachers) and to understand the meaning of the written word (i.e., the language of
the parents; Allen, 1995; van Manen, 1997). The phenomenological inquiry focuses
on describing and interpreting “…the meaning for several individuals of their lived
experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). As such, it helps
us deepen our understanding of the essence or meaning of everyday experiences
that are sought. With the approval from the Institutional Review Board at a support-
ing institution, informed consent was obtained from all parents. Pseudonyms were
used for all parents and their children to protect their identity and confidentiality.

Participants

A purposefully selected sample of eight White parents of children with develop-
mental disabilities eventually agreed to participate in this study. More specifically,
a purposeful criterion sampling strategy was used (Patton, 2002) to identify and
recruit (a) parents who had children with developmental disabilities included in
either elementary or secondary GPE programs and (b) parents who were active
members in their child’s school such as regularly attending school functions and
events (e.g., IEP meeting, PTA conference, volunteering in school). Purposeful
sampling was used as it permits the sampling of participants who can provide in-
derth information about a particular phenomenon, which maximizes the potential
for discovering themes and patterns in the context under study (Erlandson, Harris,
Skipper, & Allen, 1993). In this study, the main phenomenon was parental involve-
ment in the educational experiences of their children with developmental disabilities.

Developmental disabilities are defined as substantial limitations in a child’s
development in one (or more) of the following areas: physical, cognitive,
Parental Involvement in Physical Education

communication, social or emotional, and adaptive development (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Parents were recruited through an adapted recreational sports (ARS) program at a local university, as the first author was the instructor of the program. Recruited were three mothers of children with Down syndrome (DS) and one mother of a child with global developmental delay (mean = 10 years). Two mothers and one couple had children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD; mean = 15.3 years). All parents held middle-class status and lived in a suburban area. Four children attended schools located in District A: Matt in District B, Chad in District C, and Jade in District D (Table 1).

Children in elementary school participated in PE twice a week. The middle school children participated in PE five days a week for one semester. It was informative to listen to the stories of both parents of elementary and secondary school aged children due to the different structure of PE programs at each level. All children were included in GPE classes and all, but Jade received APE services once a week. In elementary school, the APE service was offered in a form of one-on-one pullout session. In middle school, children participated in community physical activity programs. All but Jade received the support of a full or part time paraprofessional in PE. They have participated in extracurricular sport activities in and outside of school (e.g., intramural sports, Special Olympics, local sport clubs) as well. Their average time for participation was 6.4 years (range 4–10 years).

IEP meetings were held at the beginning and end of the school year except for Elle (Matt’s mother) who attended four times a year. The IEP teams consisted of principals, general education teachers, special education teachers, and the parents. Other professionals (e.g., therapists, psychologists, behavioral analysts, transition coordinators, county coordinators, or APE teachers) also attended the IEP meetings occasionally depending upon the needs of the students. None of the parents reported GPE teachers’ attendance in their children’s IEP team meetings, but five parents stated the APE teachers’ presence in the meeting.

Data Collection

Multiple data sources of interviews, artifacts, and researcher’s journal were gathered to understand parents’ perspectives. A combination of multiple sources brings multiple perspectives forward and allows the researcher to better understand the essence of the experiences encountered (Erlandson et al., 1993).

The primary source of data was face-to-face, semistructured interviews completed by the first author and transcribed verbatim subsequently. Situated in EST, construction of the interview guide was driven by the research questions in regard to parental involvement in school PE and other relevant environments. That is the authors were mindful of the constructs of EST and the study’s research questions in constructing the interview questions as such we asked questions about home, school, and community environments. The authors further refined the guide by consulting the extant literature and field testing the questions (An & Goodwin, 2007; Epstein, 2010; Erlandson et al., 1993). Sample questions include the following: How would you describe your involvement in your child’s PE program? How important is it for you to be involved in your child’s PE program? How meaningful is it for you to interact with the GPE teacher? Over a three-week period, all eight parents completed a series of three interviews lasting approximately 60–90 min each (Seidman, 1998). The focus of the initial interview was on understanding the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Martial Status</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Sibling (Age)</th>
<th>Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elle</td>
<td>Grant Writer (Part-Time)</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Brother (12)</td>
<td>DS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Manager (Full-Time)</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Jade</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Three brothers (12, 9, 6)</td>
<td>GDD/ADD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dena</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two step-brothers (24, 23) &amp; One brother (8)</td>
<td>DS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>Project Manager (Full-Time)</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>One brother (10)</td>
<td>DS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One sister (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lori</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Iris</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>One sister (11)</td>
<td>Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>Software Engineer (Full-Time)</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>Real Estate Broker (Full-Time)</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Brad</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Dale</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Three brothers (15, 11, 9)</td>
<td>Asperger/OCD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ADD: Attention Deficit Disorder; GDD: Global Developmental Delay; DS: Down syndrome; OCD: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
experiences of their involvement. The second interview focused on their relationships with the GPE teachers. The significance of artifacts (e.g., photos, videos, e-mails, IEP documents) was discussed during the third interview to add greater depth to the information.

Photographs and written documents were gathered as a form of artifacts to supplement the interviews and strengthen trustworthiness of the findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Photographs help in capturing the setting for others as well as in recalling things that have happened (Patton, 2002). Except for Abby, all other parents shared photographs that they had of their children’s participation in school PE, community sports programs, and family physical activities. They all provided their children’s IEP documents as well. Four parents brought copies of e-mails, newsletters, or notes from GPE teachers and/or APE teachers. These materials were supplemental to the interview data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

The lead author wrote entities into a journal after each interview for recording her interpretations about rapport and nonverbal behaviors, descriptive and reflective notes about what was said that day, ideas for further probing questions, and her preliminary thoughts about themes (Patton, 2002). From these narratives, the researchers could return conceptually to the settings during data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to examine the essence, structure, and meaning of the parents’ experiences (van Manen, 1997). The authors independently completed the steps of reading transcripts and researcher’s journals, highlighting and adding labels (coding) and structural descriptions, sorting by category and coding, organizing them into preliminary themes, and generating themes and subthemes, and then later they discussed to confirm the common themes throughout the process until a mutual understanding was reached (van Manen, 1997). Data were also analyzed separately by school grouping of the children (elementary and secondary school). The central themes emerged from the data were similar for both groups, but there were some distinctions shown between two groups with regard to the types and the level of parents’ engagement. These distinctions will be highlighted in the results and discussion.

**Trustworthiness**

Credibility was established through a purposeful sampling for rich data sources (i.e., parents of children/youth with Down syndrome, ASD, developmental delay, active involvement in IEP, and children’s placement in GPE), different sources of data (i.e., parents of children and youth), and a two-phase member check system verifying the interview transcripts and the results of the thematic analysis that reflect parents’ experiences (Erlandson et al., 1993). All parents were asked to review the interview transcripts for accuracy and representation. All but Nora responded with minor changes. In the second phase, a cover letter and summary of the preliminary themes and their descriptions was sent via e-mail. They indicated that their views and experiences were well represented. To ensure the validation of the findings (dependability), multiple methods were used; that is, the interview information was supported by other sources such as photographs, school documents, and
researcher’s journals (Meadow & Morse, 2001). Transferability was established through presenting the descriptions of all participants and their contexts and utilizing a purposive criterion sampling strategy (Patton, 2002). Confirmability, the objectivity of the data, was established through peer debriefing process (i.e., first and second author; Creswell, 2007).

Findings

Three themes emerged that represent the meaning parents of children with developmental disabilities ascribe to their involvement in PE: (a) being an advocate for my child, (b) understanding the big picture, and (c) collaborative partnerships undeveloped in GPE. In narrative, we present these recurrent themes and their accompanying subthemes (Table 2).

Being an Advocate for My Child

The theme, *Being an advocate for my child*, portrays parents’ understanding of “parental involvement” in their children’s education, including PE. Parents recognized themselves as a representative on behalf of their children to communicate their children’s needs, to monitor their children’s learning and performance, and to collaborate with educators who provide services to their children. Their experiences and perceptions are captured in the subthemes (a) assuring my child’s learning and success and (b) working as a team.

**Assuring my child’s learning and success.** The parents gave meaning to how important it was for them to advocate on behalf of their children. Sara, mother of 10-year-old Jade with global developmental delay, believed that parents should stand up for their children to help with their success in school:

> This is her life. What does or doesn’t happen to her now is going to have a major impact when she’s grown. I have to make sure that she gets everything she needs now because she’s building the foundation, so when she is grown, she can do the thing she needs to do. It’s critical that I’m part of that process to make sure they’re doing what Jade needs. I think it’s important for a parent to have an involvement. It taught me that I’m much more of an advocate.

Table 2  Summary of the Thematic Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being an advocate for my child</td>
<td>Assuring my child’s learning and success</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working as a team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the big picture</td>
<td>Unending communication</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playing a supporting role in school</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Networking with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative partnerships undeveloped in GPE</td>
<td>Limited interest in GPE program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gathering information from others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Elle, mother of 8-year-old Matt with Down syndrome, also explained the importance of parental involvement for the success of her child:

It is very important. Our kids are there. These are the people that are shaping them. I want to know about those people, I want to see what the environment is like at school, and I want to contribute to it as much as I can. I think it’s always important for parents to know what’s going on with their kids and to be present to help when the opportunities arise or to guide the people who are working with my children.

She further highlighted her role in Matt’s education:

Since Matt isn’t big enough or articulates [well] enough at this point to speak for himself, that’s my job to be his advocate and try to make sure that the goal of his overall educational framework is something that makes sense for him and will help him to achieve what we know he’s capable of achieving.

**Working as a team.** Being advocates, the parents felt obligated to share information with the teachers as much as they could to help teachers and their children. They articulated that parents and teachers held a different form of expertise about the child so it is essential for them to share their expertise with each other and work together to promote their children’s learning. Tara, mother of 12-year-old Alex with Down syndrome, wanted to help teachers so she provided information about Down syndrome and inclusion.

I even gave a book to the regular education teachers about Down syndrome being mainstreamed into the classroom. I wish it wasn’t that large book, but I highlighted certain things, and I came up with the overview of certain chapters and pages to look at. They could focus on the important things that I listed out, but I think it’s just very important to try and explain. I would give him a sheet all about Alex, just anything I could think about that would help with the teacher. There were a couple of times I e-mailed the gym teacher.

Nate, father of 13-year-old Iris with autism, also mentioned the importance of home-school collaboration:

In the sixth grade when they were struggling a little bit in school, they would say [that] “how can we work with her in these things?” We sent materials from home and said, “This is what we’ve been doing if you want to borrow from us or use that as a guideline to create an approach.” We are not in the business of telling them how to run their school because they are the educators, and we are parents. We have different areas of expertise, but when you combine that two, I think you can get very good results.

Abby, mother of 17-year-old Dale with Asperger’s syndrome, also highlighted the importance of collaboration among team members:

I’ve always taken the position that I’m a part of the team. I know Dale better than the teacher does; however, they know their subject area better than I do. We have to work as a team and communicate back and forth so that Dale benefits from their specialty of understanding . . . and make sure that everybody’s on the same page so that we are all working together to benefit Dale.
Understanding the Big Picture

The theme, *Understanding the big picture* reflects the approaches the parents used with regard to their involvement in their children’s educational programs and schools. They gave direct and indirect assistance to their children’s education. This was illuminated in the subthemes (a) unending communication, (b) playing a supporting role, and (c) networking with others.

**Unending communication.** The parents indicated that communication was the most critical ingredient to establishing their involvement. They interacted with the teachers using verbal (meetings) and written (e-mails) communication. Lori and Nate (Iris’ parents) perceived that the IEP meeting was the place where they could review what was going on and help the team members develop the best practices for Iris:

> At the IEP meeting, we were there. Nate and I go. We have this regular education teacher and special education teacher, and there’s always an administrator. Sometimes the speech therapist is there or occupation therapist is there. Related services are there . . . everybody talks about what would be best for Iris. We’ve already received the draft of IEP . . . it gives the opportunity to talk about everything we were going to do.

Along with the IEP meeting, the parents also attended monthly or quarterly meetings because the IEP meeting was held only once or twice a year. Tara even initiated monthly meetings with teachers every year, so she could get updates about Alex on a regular basis:

> We would set that [monthly meeting] up each month. At the end of the meeting, we planned for the next one. What it was for myself and my husband to get together with school and anyone who wanted to participate to talk about what’s going on with things been good or things been not so good, what things are coming up, what projects are coming, so we could be prepared, and we could help give input to the teachers . . . . it [monthly meeting] was really to alleviate being surprised at the IEP meeting and to open up the dialogue between us and the school.

Elle highly valued her participation in meetings in school: “We always do the parent-teacher conference for Matt. I think it’s very, very valuable to have another opportunity to be in the classroom and hear from the teacher.” Sara [Jade’s Mother] similarly said: “I always go because I want to talk to the teacher about my children, just to get a sense of what’s going on.”

In conjunction with verbal communications, the parents communicated via e-mail and daily logbooks. E-mail was the most common mode of written communication used by the parents. They considered it a quick, easy, and convenient tool to communicate with the teachers. Tara [Alex’s mother] said:

> We a lot of times e-mailed just because of my work schedule. E-mail is the best way of getting hold of me. A lot of communication we did through e-mail with the specialist [GPE teacher]. It was probably the easiest form of communication.

**Playing a supporting role in school.** Besides verbal and written exchanges, parents also played the roles of observer and volunteer in their children’s school.
Periodically, the parents were invited by teachers in addition to parents taking it upon themselves to visit the schools and observe their children. Tara reminded that the GPE teacher invited her at the end of Alex’s fifth grade to the Gym Show. Similarly, Dena also mentioned her participation in school during school fun day at the end of school year. Abby went along with Dale for a field trip to observe his participation. She recalled, “I would come [field trips] to observe his interaction with other children and with the teachers, how he was doing with whatever their activity was.” Likewise Lori stated:

I usually go and observe PE a couple of times just to see how it’s going, but I primarily go there to make sure that she’s [Iris] not standing on the sidelines, and if it’s something that they can modify, then they should be modifying it.

The parents were willing to support their children’s GPE programs. The parents believed that their support helped them learn as well as informed the GPE teachers about their children. Nora [Brad’s mother] explained:

I’ve got to help them out, but the thing is that these teachers aren’t trained in special needs. They’re not specifically trained in autism. They’ve got kids that all over the board, so you need the parent to come in [to help].

Tara also shared information with the teachers to help them understand Alex’s disability:

I think it is important for the gym [PE] teacher to have high expectations of Alex, understand what Down syndrome is, understand he has low muscle tone, and understand he won’t be able to do everything that the other kids are doing. I thought it was important to communicate all that up front.

Dena even volunteered in Chad’s GPE class. She stated, “At the beginning of the year, they [school] sent out a list of all the activities that are going on or fundraisers, and then asked for volunteers. . . . I did last year volunteer for the climbing wall in his school.”

Networking with others. The parents constantly reached out to the community by networking with other parents within school districts (special education parent groups) and disability organizations in the community. Tara (Alex’s mother) spoke to the necessity of networking within the community to afford various learning opportunities for her child: “I see myself continuing to research what PE type of activities are out there available. Constant networking and looking for things that are available and asking other people.” Abby (Dale’s mother) explained that she was a committee member for a special education parent group in the school district. The parent group was organized to help and support the families of children with disabilities within the school district and to increase the community awareness of disability. Abby said, “The goal of the committee is to increase the communication between parents and administrators and to increase awareness within the community of special needs kids and also to help increase funding or special needs equipment or education.” Likewise Sara (Jade’s mother) was involved in a program called “SPICE” (Special People in Catholic Education).

Elle (Matt’s mother) was actively involved in the community as well as in school. She was on the Board of a Down Syndrome Association (DSA). She
An and Hodge mentioned, “I’m on the Board as the age representative for kids ages 6 to 12 [and I] plan activities for that age group.” Elle perceived her involvement in DSA as an opportunity to learn more about Down syndrome and to provide her support: “I volunteered on the Buddy Walk committee for five years, and that was how I got to know more about the association and what they do for folks.” Dena (Chad’s mother) and her family also participated in Buddy Walk events every year, which were organized by the DSA to increase disability awareness.

**Collaborative Partnerships Undeveloped in GPE**

The last theme, *Collaborative partnerships undeveloped in GPE*, reveals the absence of collaboration between parents and GPE teachers. In regard to GPE, these parents are best described as passive agents. All parents recognized the value of physical activity as affording positive impact on their children’s development, such as socialization, increasing physical fitness and motor skills, and preventing secondary health risk (i.e., obesity); however, their involvement in GPE was very limited. Even though all the children participated in GPE programs, the parents gathered information through other professionals, such as special education teacher, classroom teacher, or APE teacher instead of the GPE teacher.

**Limited interest in GPE program.** The parents expressed that they were more driven to support academics than the PE program. Therefore, the GPE was rarely discussed in their children’s IEP meetings and this was coupled with the absence of GPE teachers in the meetings. In addition, the parents showed more interest in participating in extracurricular activities (i.e., cross-country running, community sport league, Special Olympics) rather than building relationships with the GPE teachers to gain program knowledge in PE.

Dena (Chad’s Mother) showed more concern about Chad’s learning in academics and behaviors than learning in GPE program:

> . . . but I guess because my kids have special needs, so I’ve always focused more on academics because it doesn’t come as easy to them. I think they [GPE teachers] were very open if you want to go in and observe or watch or if you have a question they always welcome that. I just never had a question because I was so involved in other issues [behavioral issues].

Elle also showed more concern about Matt’s academic achievement than the GPE. Elle spoke, “My focus last year was more on ‘Is he ever going to learn how to add? How is he keeping up with his reading?’ I think the academic focus was predominant.”

**Gathering information from others.** Although the parents spoke about their relationships with the GPE teachers as open and positive, they mostly received information from others. Consequently, they did not feel pressed to communicate with the GPE teachers. Elle explained that she frequently communicated with Matt’s classroom teacher so she felt it unnecessary to talk to the GPE teacher. She recalled:

> I don’t have communication with them [teachers from PE, Art, and Music]. Our whole relationship was kind of saying “hi” in a hallway when I see him. I would hear from the classroom teacher about what he was doing in the gym,
so I didn’t feel like I needed to talk to the gym teacher about what he was doing in gym.

Some parents felt that they should communicate with the APE teacher as result of their presence in the IEP meetings and information sharing. They also perceived that the APE teachers had more knowledge of disability than the GPE teacher did. Lori articulated that she relied more on the APE teacher than the GPE teacher due to teacher’s area of specialization:

I don’t know how much experience they [GPE teachers] have with children with disabilities. I tried to be reasonable in my expectation of the regular physical education teacher because I don’t think they’ve had much training in working with these kids. I can’t say that I’ve had a bad experience, but they’re [GPE teacher] relying more on an aid.

Lori further explained:

I don’t have any expectation from the GPE teacher because there are so many kids in there . . . 47 kids [in class], and Iris gets lost in a rush there because he [GPE teacher] doesn’t have a time to spend teaching her how to play football or table tennis, so I relied a lot on the person who is assisting her and the person who provides the APE. Now the APE could only be once a week so she’s not always there but at least she’s providing some support.

Nora also asserted that she expected more from the APE teacher than the GPE teacher: “I don’t have that expectation from the regular PE teachers, especially. I feel like they’re there to teach all the kids. They have a certain level they’re supposed to be teaching.” She even told the APE teacher’s role in GPE:

I don’t think it’s fair to expect him [GPE teacher] to modify. I mean maybe it sounds terrible. I just feel that’s what the APE teachers for and help them out with that. I think they should have somebody in there to help out with that.

The findings reveal that the parents were involved in their children’s educational journey across multiple environments: the home, school including PE setting, and community and through use of multiple means (e.g., regularly communicating, participating, and networking in schools and beyond). Collaborative partnership between parents and teachers were also highly valued in support of the children’s learning and development. Nonetheless, the parents did not actively seek out partnerships with the GPE teachers even though they all appreciated the benefits of inclusion and physical activity.

**Discussion**

The major aim of this research was to gain an understanding of parents’ perspectives about their involvement in their children’s PE. The parents held strong beliefs about their involvement as it affects their children’s learning and development. It was considered to be a critical process in terms of promoting their children’s success in school. Parental involvement was constructed through engaging in different levels of environmental systems, such as communication between parents
and teachers (mesosystem), supports to teachers and their children (microsystem), and participation in organization (exosystem). Although the parents articulated the importance of home and school collaborations, their partnership with the GPE was undeveloped. Plausibly, this was because they marginalized PE in comparison with other academic subjects and because they placed greater trust in other professionals in and beyond the schools. That is, they positioned themselves in the macrosystem because they constructed education as a home, school, and community enterprise (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 2005).

The parents’ meaning-making lend support to previous literature where parents were advocates representing their children’s attributes and needs for effective learning in schools (An & Goodwin, 2007; McBride & Lin, 1996). These parents acknowledged that their children had difficulty in expressing their needs to the teachers due to their disability. Parents, therefore, became agents for their children, and they regarded it as the most significant role they played.

Home-school collaboration was also recognized as the best approach to maximize the children’s development because each party—parents and teachers—have their own areas of expertise for the child’s learning (An & Goodwin, 2007; Epstein, 2010). Parents had a better understanding of their children (e.g., strength and weakness, likes and dislikes) whereas teachers had a better knowledge of the subjects they taught. Therefore, parents and teachers must have common goals for the children and work together to foster the children’s development based on shared power and authority (Epstein, 2010). In fact, a parent explicitly stated that parents and teachers have “different areas of expertise.” This connotes that parents regard themselves as the most important agents in the lives of children and should be treated as equal members in their children’s educational programs. It further emphasizes the value of parent-teacher partnership in their children’s education. This account clearly reflects the interconnection between two microsystems; that is, the home and school environments (Sontag, 1996).

Parental involvement was also constructed as the parents taking multiple roles. The major role they constantly conversed was “communication” with teachers. They indicated that recurrent communication is the most key element needed for establishing effective home-school collaborative partnerships (Mundschenk & Foley, 1994; Stoner et al., 2005). Similar to previous studies, the parents attended all meetings to discuss their children’s educational programs, performance, and needs. Communication was conducted in both direct (face-to-face) and indirect (written) ways (An & Goodwin, 2007; Epstein, 2010).

Moreover, the parents took the role of supporting their children and the teacher by becoming an observer and a volunteer in schools. In GPE programs, they volunteered to assist with class instruction (e.g., climbing wall) and school events (e.g., field day, fun day; Epstein, 2010). These efforts can be explained as the by-product of home-school collaborations because the parents responded to the schools’ initiation of promoting parental involvement.

The children’s learning and development was also influenced by parents’ engagement in the community as they were actively networking with people in different environmental contexts (exosystem). The parents constantly sought educational opportunities and resources for their children by engaging in community organizations (e.g., special education parent group, Down Syndrome Association,
and Autism Speaks). Through their involvement in different organizations, the parents obtained new and updated information of special education programs and services, local health and social services (i.e., Medicaid waiver), and physical activity and sports programs for their children. In turn, their involvement in such organizations helps bring greater public awareness of students with disabilities and the importance of their educational programs (macrosystem). Parental involvement was not only for their children’s learning but also for enlightening other people in the community.

Although parents valued parent-teacher partnership as a form of their involvement, no collaborative partnership existed between parents and GPE teachers. The parents frequently obtained information from other teachers as a result of frequent interactions with them (i.e., intersetting knowledge; Sontag, 1996). This action results in limiting parents’ interaction with the GPE teachers. They also brought up an issue of “trust” that they should rely on special education teachers or APE specialists even though their children participate in inclusive GPE because GPE teachers’ specialization was not that of teaching students with disabilities. They even marginalized the role of the GPE teacher. Parents’ perspectives about PE were likely influenced by the views of society (i.e., macrosystem).

Tellingly, the parents of secondary aged children showed more trust in the APE teacher than that of elementary aged children. Although they expressed that their children should be included in GPE, they still desired for their children to have more one-on-one attention and individualized instruction due to the bigger size classes and content taught (i.e., sports oriented programs). According to the parents, the elementary PE class had consisted of 22–25 students and secondary PE class had consisted of 47–50 students.

In summary, parents are the most crucial agents in the lives of their children in that they help shape the immediate environment where the child interacts. Important in our findings is that the parents were involved in multiple environmental spheres as advocates for their children, which likely influenced their children’s learning and development. They were also involved in their children’s education directly and indirectly through communication and participation. Thereby, we are reminded of the importance of people (e.g., parent-teacher interactions) in the educational process. In addition, the parents’ experiences suggest that team teaching between GPE and APE teachers could assist to establish relationship with the GPE teachers as well as to promote their children’s participation in inclusive GPE programs.

This study has two main limitations. First, the sample in this study was comprised primarily of mothers of students with developmental disabilities. The authors attempted to include the stories of both mothers and fathers, but only one father consented to participate in this inquiry. The other fathers were unable to participate not because of their disinterest in but because of time conflicts (e.g., work schedule and child caring). A second limitation was that this study captured the experiences of White middle class parents only, who were highly involved in the education of their children. The study’s findings, therefore, may not be representative of parental involvement concerning the ecology of upper- or low-income families, single parent families, or families of other ethnic groups. Hence examining families with more diverse cultures, backgrounds and perspectives would be an important consideration for future research.
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