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Can We Talk? A Correspondence Study to Examine Responsiveness of Physical Educators to Requests for a Phone Call from Parents of Children With Disabilities

Sean Healy
University of Limerick

Justin A. Haegele
Old Dominion University, jhaegele@odu.edu

Steven K. Holland
Norwegian University of Science & Technology

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Can we talk? A correspondence study to examine responsiveness of physical educators to requests for a phone call from parents of children with disabilities

Sean Healy[a], Justin A. Haegele [b,c] and Steven K. Holland [d]

[a]Physical Education and Sport Sciences, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland; [b]Darden College of Education & Professional Studies, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, USA; [c]Center for Movement, Health, & Disability, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, USA; [d]Faculty of Social and Educational Studies, NTNU—Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

ABSTRACT

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) mandates that parental input be considered when making educational decisions for children with disabilities, including in physical education. However, parents of children with disabilities often report suboptimal communication experiences with physical educators. The purpose of the current study was to examine if the initiation of a parent–physical educator relationship is influenced by whether students have a disability or not. An online message correspondence study methodology was used to detect potential disparities in the responsiveness of a sample of 320 physical educators to electronic message requests for a phone call to discuss physical education service from hypothetical parents of a child with a visual impairment (VI), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Down syndrome (DS), or no disability. Parents of children with ASD had reduced odds of receiving a positive response as compared to parents of children without disabilities (15.8% vs 26.9% RR = .57). Similarly, parents of children with DS had reduced odds of receiving a positive response as compared to parents of children without disabilities (15.2% vs 26.9%, RR = .59). Strategies to promote parent–physical educator relationships are urgently needed, especially for parents of children with ASD and DS.

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SDG 3: good health and well-being; SDG 4: quality education; SDG 10: reduced inequalities

Introduction

For many students with disabilities, physical education is marred by experiences of exclusion (Haegele and Sutherland 2015). A multitude of accounts, from diverse samples of students with disabilities, echo sentiments of exclusion, limited participation, and bullying (e.g. Alves et al. 2020; Goodwin and Watkinson 2000; Healy, Msetfi, and Gallagher 2013). Although less frequent, some positive experiences of inclusion in physical

CONTACT Sean Healy Sean.Healy@ul.ie Department of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, University of Limerick, Limerick V94 T9PX, Ireland

education are evidenced in the literature, characterised by feelings of belonging, connectedness to fellow students, supportive teachers, and skilful participation (Alves et al. 2020; Fitzgerald 2005; Goodwin and Watkinson 2000; Wang 2019). Physical educators point to numerous factors that shape their ability to effectively accommodate students with disabilities, such as their previous training, the need to manage large class sizes, a scarcity of adapted equipment, and limited knowledge/competence (Lirgg et al. 2017; Rekaa, Hanisch, and Ytterhus 2019). To foster a more inclusive environment in physical education, the critical role of collaboration among all stakeholders—including teachers, teaching assistants, students, and their parents—is emphasised (Rekaa, Hanisch, and Ytterhus 2019).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004) mandates that parental input be considered when making educational decisions for children with disabilities, including in physical education. Indeed, for several decades, parent–teacher relationships have been recognised as being critical to the development of effective service provisions for children with disabilities (Blue-Banning et al. 2004), including physical education (An and Hodge 2013; Chaapel et al. 2013; Lane et al. 2021; Perkins et al. 2013; Svendby and Dowling 2013). For example, a phenomenological study exploring the experiences of parents of children with developmental disabilities in physical education identified communication with the general physical educator as the 'most critical ingredient' to their involvement in their child's experience (An and Hodge 2013). Despite the importance of communication, parents often report suboptimal partnership and communication experiences with physical education teachers (An and Hodge 2013; Svendby and Dowling 2013), including with specialist-adapted physical education teachers (Chaapel et al. 2013). Therefore, although parents have demonstrated a desire to initiate and maintain ongoing communication with their child's physical education teacher (Chaapel et al. 2013), the success of this effort is questionable.

To date, data examining communication between parents and PE teachers have been largely qualitative in nature and have centered on parental perspectives. Although this line of inquiry has provided a rich tapestry of parents' experiences with their parent–teacher relationship, it is difficult to generalise results. For example, parents have recalled a lack of communication with physical education teachers as being problematic (Perkins et al. 2013), however, the degree to which poor teacher–parent communication presents as an obstacle to the development of a teacher–parent partnership remains unknown. Moreover, the existing research does little to provide insight into how the process of initiating parent–teacher relationships may differ between parents of children with disabilities as compared to parents of children without disabilities. As such, we do not know if parents are experiencing any sort of discrimination from their child's physical education teacher, or if the lack of parent–teacher relationship is consistent between children with and without disabilities within the school.

To extend upon the current research, in this study, we applied a field-based correspondence study methodology to gain insight into the process of initiating parent–teacher relationships for parents of children with disabilities. Correspondence studies are a specific type of field experiment that enables researchers to examine difficult-to-detect behaviours, such as discrimination, and decision-making in real-world scenarios. Correspondence studies (a type of audit study) often refer to a specific type of field experiment in which a researcher randomises one or more characteristics about hypothetical individuals (e.g. disability status) and sends emails from these 'individuals' out into the field to

test the effect of those characteristics on some outcome (e.g. likelihood of receiving a response; (Gaddis 2018)). The use of correspondence studies has increased in recent decades to examine unequal treatment in areas such as employment (Ameri et al. 2018; Stone and Wright 2013), housing (Verhaeghe, Van Der Bracht, and Van De Putte 2016), access to fitness centres (Healy 2022), and recently, education (Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh 2012; Olsen, Kyhse-Andersen, and Moynihan 2022; Pfaff et al. 2021). For example, Pfaff et al. (2021) utilised a correspondence methodology to understand if public school principals in the United States (US) discriminate on the basis of religion by emailing the principals of a large sample of public schools and asking for a meeting, randomly assigning the religious (non)affiliation of the family. The results of this study showed that hypothetical emailers who reported to be Muslim or atheist were significantly less likely to receive a response, as compared to Christian/Catholic senders (Pfaff et al. 2021). Similarly, Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh (2012) utilised a correspondence study methodology to examine how willing university faculty members were to meet with fictitious prospective PhD students based on gender and race as signalled in emails. For requests to meet in 1-week, Caucasian males were granted access to faculty members 26% more often than women and minorities. Despite the utility demonstrated in prior work using correspondence studies to explore discriminatory behaviours, this methodology has yet to be applied to better understand the degree to which parent–teacher relationships in physical education are influenced by whether the parents' child has a disability or not.

In summary, the importance of the parent–teacher relationship, particularly for parents of children with disabilities, is well-evidenced, and enshrined in educational law. However, the existing qualitative data suggest that parents of children with disabilities frequently perceive their relationship with their child's physical education teacher to be inadequate (An and Hodge 2013; Chaapel et al. 2013; Lane et al. 2021; Perkins et al. 2013; Svendby and Dowling 2013). To extend upon the existing data, the purpose of the current study was to utilise a field-based correspondence study design to examine if the initiation of a parent–physical education teacher relationship is influenced by whether their child has a disability or not. More specifically, an online message correspondence study methodology was used to detect potential disparities in the responsiveness of a sample of 320 physical educators to electronic message requests for a phone call to discuss PE service from hypothetical parents of a child with vision loss (VI), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Down syndrome (DS), or no disability. The study focuses on the initial contact between a parent and physical educator, which presents as the first, essential step for the development of a parent–teacher partnership.

Methods

Sample

A random sample of elementary schools ($n = 320$) was generated from the totality of elementary schools listed online in one state located in the Eastern region of the United States. This represented approximately half of the total elementary schools within the state. Of these, the physical educator listed first on the school website was identified, thus comprising the study sample. Email addresses were collected from

each school's website. In instances when the physical educator, or their email address, was not available online, the school was deemed not eligible, and an alternative school and physical educator were randomly chosen. This process occurred until the targeted sample size of 320 physical educators was attained.

Procedures

Three hundred and twenty emails were sent from a fictitious parent using a generic gender-neutral-sounding email address to members of the study sample. A random sending schedule was developed, whereby 40 emails were sent per day over an eight-day period. Emails to each investigative group (i.e. VI, ASD, ID, or no disability) were sent over two days during school hours. Eighty physical educators received the generic, control email which read:

> My child aged 8 is soon moving to your school district. He dislikes PE, and while we try to encourage him to participate in lots of afterschool sport, he doesn't have much interest. Would it be possible to schedule a time to talk about your PE program? I would also be curious to learn about any afterschool sports that may be available to him.

The message was then manipulated to disclose that the student, the subject of the email, had a disability, including either VI, ASD, or DS (80 emails per group). This was done via the addition of the following sentences: 'Also, he has Down syndrome [or 'vision loss' or 'autism spectrum disorder'] and if necessary, I can tell the PE teacher/s about the simple ways they can help him be successful.' These disability types were chosen due to physical education teachers commonly reporting difficulty in including students with these types of disabilities in their classes (Hutzler et al. 2019; Lirgg et al. 2017).

Responses received from the study participants in the three weeks following the inquiry being made were organised using an Excel spreadsheet. Email responses were assigned to the list of senders. Study procedures were approved by the IRB board at the University of Delaware's institutional review board.

Dependent variables

Overall responsiveness

We evaluated the percentage of parents who received any response from the physical education teachers, and if the rate of response varied based on disability status (VI, ASD, DS, no disability) of the hypothetical parent's child. This method is similar to that of prior correspondence studies examining potential disparities of treatment of minority groups, including individuals with disabilities (Baert 2016; Kugelmass 2016; Pfaff et al. 2021; Stone and Wright 2013; Verhaeghe, Van Der Bracht, and Van De Putte 2016).

Nature of the response

We evaluated the frequency at which physical educators responded positively to parents of children with VI, ASD, or DS as compared to parents of children not reported to have a disability. Positive responses were defined as responses that indicated a willingness of the physical educator to talk to the parent (e.g. 'yes, can you phone me on … ' or 'Yes, I am available to talk on … '). Negative responses were defined as non-responsiveness or

those responses whereby the physical educator indicated that they were not willing to talk to the parent (e.g. 'sorry, I am not able to talk', 'You should try talking to X instead'). The categories of 'positive' and 'negative' were defined a priori.

Due to the frequency at which physical education teachers were not willing to talk to the parents but rather referred the parent to another individual (e.g. school principal, special education teacher, APE specialist) a sub-category of negative responses called 'referrals' was constructed for exploratory purposes. Referrals were defined as (a) responses that suggested the parents talk to another individual or (b) an email from someone other than the physical educator at their school indicating that the physical educator passed it on to them.

To reduce bias in the assessment of the nature of the responses, each email was analysed by two members of the research team, blind to the sender group. Reviewers agreed on 79% of cases. The disagreements were discussed by the three members of the research team and a final decision on the nature of the response was made. This evaluation of response type was informed by prior audit studies examining fictitious requests for access to services, such as psychotherapy (Kugelmass 2016) and primary care providers (Olah, Gaisano, and Hwang 2013).

Statistical analysis

Binary logistic regression analyses were conducted to examine if the odds of receiving an overall response or positive response were significantly different for groups reporting a child with a VI, DS, or ASD, as compared to the control group who did not report having one of these disabilities. Relative risk (RR) is reported to aid interpretation. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the data on the frequency of referrals between groups. Statistical comparison of referral frequency between groups was constrained by the sample size. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 29 (IBM Corp 2019) with an alpha level of 10%. Although increasing the likelihood of Type 1 errors, an alpha level of 10% was deemed appropriate due to our interest in being able to identify potential statistically marginal but real-world meaningful differences (Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgins 2001) as our methodology (correspondence study) allows for the observation of 'real-world' behaviours. Moreover, this study included a small sample size thus findings are considered as a precursor to further studies (Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgins 2001).

Results

Physical educator overall responsiveness

Response rates by group were as follows: parents of children without a disability (32.1%, n = 25), parents of children with VI (37.7%, n = 29), parents of children with ASD (27.6%, n = 21), and parents of children with DS (25.5%, n = 20). Binary logistic regression analyses showed that overall response rates in parents of children with ASD, DS, and VI did not significantly differ as compared to parents of children without a disability.

Physical educator responsiveness: rate of positive responses

Among parents of children without a disability, 26.9% received a positive response from physical education teachers, as compared to response rates of 27.3%, 15.2%, and 15.8% in

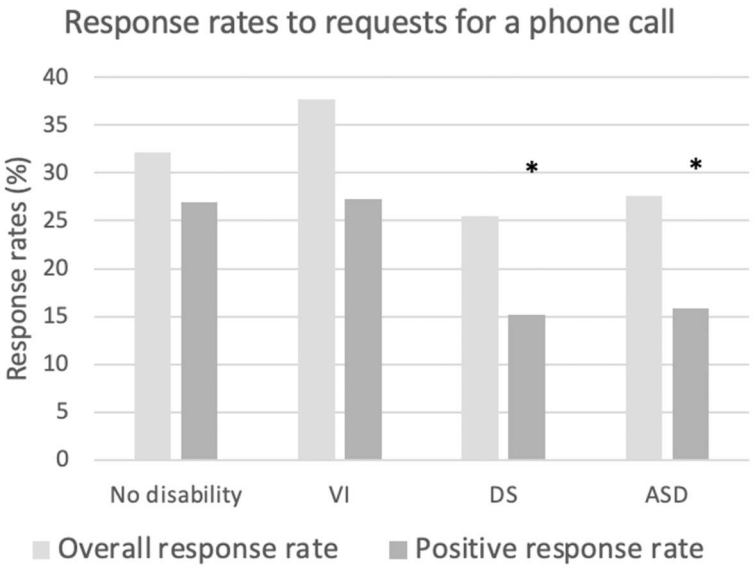

Figure 1. Prevalence rates of overall and positive response rates to requests for a phone call. VI = Visual impairment; DS = Downs syndrome; ASD = Autism spectrum disorder, *Significantly different compared with individuals without disabilities at the alpha level of $p < .1$.

parents of children with VI, DS, and ASD, respectively. Parents of children with ASD had a lower prevalence and reduced odds of receiving a positive response as compared to parents of children without disabilities (15.8% vs 26.9%; Exp[B] = .509, 95% CI [.230, 1.126], $p = 0.095$), meaning they were 43% less likely to receive a positive response (RR = .57). Similarly, parents of children with DS had a lower prevalence and reduced odds of receiving a positive response as compared to parents of children without disabilities (15.2% vs 26.9%; Exp[B] = .486, 95% CI [.22, 1.074], $p = 0.074$), meaning they were 41% less likely to receive a positive response (RR = .59). Parents of children with VI were approximately as likely to get a positive response as parents of children without a disability (27.3% vs 26.9%, respectively, RR = 1.01) (see Figure 1).

Physical educator responsiveness: rate of referral responses

Regarding the rate of referral responses (i.e. a response that suggests the parents talk to another individual or an email from someone other than the physical educator), 1.3% (n = 1) of the control group received a referral response, compared to 3.9% ($n = 3$) of parents of children with ASD, 7.6% ($n = 6$) of parents of children with DS, and 7.8% (n = 6) of children with VI. Sample size prohibited the statistical comparison between groups.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to utilise a field-based correspondence study design to examine if the initiation of a parent–teacher relationship, via the request for a phone call from a parent to a PE teacher, is influenced by whether their child has a disability or not. Although fictitious parents of children with VI, ASD, or DS were similarly as likely to

receive an email response from the physical educators as parents with children without disabilities, parents of a child with ASD or DS were over 40% less likely to receive a *positive* response from the physical educators. In addition, higher proportions of parents of children with ASD and DS received a referral to 'others' (i.e. special education teacher, etc.) as compared to parents of children without disabilities.

The overall low response rate across groups is problematic; between 25.5% and 37.7% of parents received a response, regardless of disability status. This is concerning as parental involvement has been identified as being critical to students' success in schools (Hornby and Blackwell 2018). This finding may be unsurprising, however, parent–teacher interactions regarding physical education have previously been identified as being suboptimal as compared to other subjects (Perkins et al. 2013, Wilhelmsen and Sørensen 2019). The current study offers quantitative data to support these claims. Several resources exist to help promote parental involvement in physical education, including positive parent–teacher interaction and collaboration (e.g. Active Schools 2018; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2015; SHAPE 2015). Fewer resources and training materials exist specifically for parents of children with disabilities (Wilhelmsen and Sørensen 2019). Current resources available for parents need content specifically developed for parents of children with disabilities (e.g. information on the IEP process). But, as indicated in the current study, parents' desire for input into their child's physical education class is not sufficient; the parent–physical educator relationship also needs to be fostered from the physical educators' side.

One approach to address the issue is to focus on teacher-training regarding communication and engagement with parents during pre-service training (Lemmer 2012). While practical experience is prioritised in teacher education programmes (e.g. lesson plan writing, teaching, assessment), less opportunity exists for parent–teacher interactions beyond what is read or discussed in classrooms (Dotger, Harris, and Hansel 2008). The obvious solution is to include and improve parental engagement during pre-service teacher education through targeted and intentional opportunities while in practical learning situations (Azad, Marcus, and Mandell 2021), an approach supported by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation 2022) for all teacher candidates. Two of the six CAEP (2022) standards explicitly address the ability to work with and engagement with 'diverse P-12 students and their families' (p.1) and more work needs to be conducted in teacher education programmes to ensure these standards are met. Ideally, the trainee teachers learn to collaborate with parents as part of working with all members of the multidisciplinary team such as the autism specialist, teachers certified in visual impairment (TVIs), APE teachers, and behaviour specialists. However, training alone is unlikely to improve the parent–teachers' relationships – factors such as physical educators having sufficient time to dedicate to responding to parents' queries are critical aspects of this issue also.

The finding that fictitious parents of children with ASD or DS receive fewer positive responses suggests that among parents of these children, the development of a relationship with their child's physical educator may be especially constrained at the first point of interaction. This could very well contribute to the suboptimal relationship that is often described by parents of children with disabilities, including those with developmental disabilities like ASD, when engaging with their child's physical educator (e.g. An and Hodge 2013; Perkins et al. 2013; Svendby and Dowling 2013). We would argue that

these data on positive response rates disparities reveal behaviour that is discriminatory in nature, where parents of children with ASD or DS are being marginalised by physical educators because of their child's disability status. While it is not possible to identify exactly why this discriminatory behaviour was evident in our findings, it is clear that disability status, specifically ASD and DS, has a differential influence on physical educators' behaviours. Perhaps, to speculate, this is related to the physical educators' education/training history or their experiences [or lack thereof] in working with students with ASD and DS. This speculation is supported by findings that physical education teachers lacked professional training and knowledge to successfully integrate students with disabilities in physical education, which, we posit, may impact teachers' willingness to engage with families of children with disabilities or assume responsibility for their education (Hutzler et al. 2019; Rekaa, Hanisch, and Ytterhus 2019; Wang 2019). However, to understand the reasons why these differential behaviours have occurred in our findings, follow-up studies engaging directly with the teachers about their behaviours would be required.

Interestingly, a different picture emerges when considering similarities between responses to parents of children with VI and those without disabilities. That is, in our findings, a similar number of parents of children with VI received positive responses from physical educators (27.3%) as those without disabilities (26.9%). This finding was somewhat surprising, given the differential treatment provided to parents of children with ASD and DS. Furthermore, there is a substantial body of research that demonstrates that youth with VI tend to report challenging or marginalising experiences in physical education (Haegele et al. 2022) and centre those experiences on decisions and behaviours of physical educators (Haegele and Zhu 2017). Therefore, it is surprising to see that physical educators were responsive to parents of children with VI to the same extent as children without disabilities. However, an argument could be made that the current poor experiences of those with VI may be the exact reason why physical educators are keen to respond to email inquiries, where perhaps they are hopeful to collaborate with parents in ways that can help to enhance experiences for their students. Indeed, physical educators have reported to having positive dispositions to including children with VI in their classes, recognising it as a beneficial experience for students with and without disabilities, while also noting challenges in the endeavour (Conroy 2012). This finding of the current study is encouraging and given the central role that parents play in the engagement of children with VI in physical activity (Columna et al. 2019), perhaps the development of a collaborative parent–teacher relationship could foster improvements in PE experiences for youth with VI.

Additionally, in the extant literature, some physical education teachers have been described as unsupportive and providing negative experiences through the exclusion, segregation, bullying, or lack of teaching of students with disabilities (Haegele and Sutherland 2015; Holland and Haegele 2021; Ball et al. 2022), which may be the result of limited training (Wang 2019) or feelings and attitudes that students with disabilities are the responsibility of specialist-adapted physical education teachers (Richards et al. 2023). The physical education teacher has both a right and a mandate to be a part of the education of students with disabilities through IDEIA. Therefore, in-service trainings should be provided and focus on the responsibilities and expectations of general educators regarding the education and school experience of children with disabilities and their families.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered in the interpretation of the findings. First, the emails were limited to representing parents of male students and students with a limited number of types of disabilities (ASD, VI, DS) only. The addition of other disabilities or female students, or indeed the disclosure of other demographic characteristics (e.g. age, race, etc.), would allow for an analysis of how disability may intersect with other identities to influence teacher responsiveness. This would require the recruitment of a sample that was beyond the scope of the current study. Second, emails from hypothetical parents offered support (i.e. 'I can tell the PE teacher/s about the simple ways they can help him be successful'); findings may therefore highlight 'best case scenario' whereas the omission of offers of support might result in poorer response rates. Third, the request for a phone call from the fictitious parents referred to a student with a disability not yet enrolled in the school – we deemed this a natural and critical point when a parent would likely want to talk to their child's physical education teacher and referring to an enrolled student would not be possible. How teachers' response may differ for already enrolled vs future to-be-enrolled students remains to be seen. Finally, judging the nature of the teacher response (e.g. positive vs negative) was subjective – this is reflected in the 21% of disagreements between evaluators. To mitigate this, the evaluation was conducted blind to the group receiving the response and a third author was consulted to resolve disagreements.

Conclusion

Data collected via a correspondence study methodology demonstrated that parents of children with ASD and DS received fewer positive responses to a phone call request from parents as compared to parents of children without disabilities. To realise the IDEIA mandate that parental input be considered when making educational decisions for children with disabilities, including in physical education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004), measures are required to increase the opportunities for parents to engage with physical educators. The data from this study suggest these relationships are constrained from the first point of interaction. Although the determinants of a successful physical educator–parent relationship require examination, most likely a multi-pronged approach is required whereby teachers have the necessary time, knowledge, and attitudes to foster a collaborative relationship with parents, and parents, including those of children with disabilities, are equipped and motivated to engage with their child's physical educator.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes to contributors

Sean Healy is an Associate Professor in the Department of Physical Education and Sports Science at the University of Limerick, Ireland. His research focuses on physical activity promotion among autistic people, with specific interests in web-based physical activity interventions and 24-hour movement behaviours.

Justin A. Haegele is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Movement Sciences at Old Dominion University. His research focuses on the interdisciplinary field of adapted physical activity, with a primary interest in examining how individuals with disabilities, more specifically those with visual impairments or autism spectrum disorder, experience physical activity participation.

Steven K. Holland is an Associate Professor in the Department of Teacher Education in the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Norway. His researcher centres around the experiences of disabled *individuals* in physical education, physical activity, and sports settings as well as the socialisation experiences of adapted physical education teachers.

ORCID

Justin A. Haegele http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8580-4782
Steven K. Holland http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6535-2459

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