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# **Starting a University-based** Physical Educational Program

# FOR HOMESCHOOLED CHILDREN

### DAVID A. WACHOB

hough teacher education programs in the United States are undergoing massive reform (Darling-Hammond, 2010), one notion remains unchanged: teachers learn to teach by teaching (Watson, Miller, & Patty, 2011). It has been well established that preservice teachers require ongoing experience in order to develop their beliefs about teaching (Amett & Freeburg, 2008), connect theory to practice (Krustchinsky & Moore, 1981), and become acclimated to their teaching role (Dueck, Altmann, Haslett, & Latimer, 1984). Though exposure to teaching experiences is a crucial part of developing high-quality teachers,

traditional models of practice include the bulk of these experiences toward the end of preservice teachers' college career or during student teaching (Watson et al., 2011).

This late onset of exposure to teaching can lead to an overwhelming feeling, or "reality shock" (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990), as student teachers face common classroom challenges such as

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behavior issues, time management, or dealing with students with special needs (Watson et al., 2011). A notable way to increase preparation is by exposing students to more teaching opportunities (Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986) earlier in their college careers (McFarland & Lord, 2008). Providing ongoing teaching experiences can help students refine their instructional skills, apply theory and content to teaching, and strengthen their beliefs about teaching (Etkina, 2010; Watson et al., 2011) while under the guidance of the faculty who train them (Botha & Reddy, 2011).

In most cases both teacher educators and preservice teachers agree that university courses struggle to duplicate real-life teaching experiences (Amett & Freeburg, 2008). One way that teacher education programs can provide ongoing practical teaching opportunities is by starting a community-based educational program. Running a university program, where school-age children come to campus and are taught regularly by preservice teachers, is one way to increase exposure and practice. This added level of experience can bridge the gap between pedagogical content and teaching application in a safe and controlled university environment.

A sequence of teaching experiences used at many institutions includes (1) peer-teaching (i.e., teaching a lesson to a group of college peers), (2) early field experiences (i.e., observing and co-teaching with a mentor teacher), and (3) student teaching (i.e., direct teaching under the guidance of a mentor teacher and university supervisor). Though this model provides students with a reliable progression of teaching exposure, it could be strengthened by adding a homeschool teaching level to the continuum. As displayed in Figure 1, this added level of experience can bridge the gap between peer teaching and early field experience by providing students with exposure to K–12 children under the direct guidance of university faculty. The homeschool experience is one example of how teacher-education programs can add a practical level to the current teaching continuum.

This article will discuss how one university added this level to their curriculum by developing a physical education program for homeschooling families. The program background and overview will be provided, as well as the details of the teaching experience. Considerations and limitations to running a program of this nature will also be addressed.

#### The Homeschool Experience

The homeschooling population has seen a steady increase in the number of families choosing this form of education, with over two million children being educated in the home, up about three percent from 2007 (Ray, 2011). Homeschoolers have several attributes that make them well suited as a target population for teacher education programs. First, home schools tend to have a more flexible schedule than public schools, allowing the program to be offered during the day instead of similar programs that run an after-school format. Second, the majority of homeschooled children are taught by a parent or primary caregiver (Isenberg, 2007) who can drive them to the program, thus eliminating transportation and

busing issues that might come up with similar types of programs (e.g., after-school programs). Finally, most communities have local co-ops, or groups of homeschooling families who meet regularly for educational and social support. Working with these groups can make it easy to identify potential families who are interested in an educational program. Finding local co-ops can be done by searching online or by visiting public libraries or churches to see if they offer space to homeschooling groups. Though homeschoolers are well suited for a university-based program, several factors should be considered when working with this population.

#### **Program Considerations**

Having an understanding of certain characteristics can help when planning and operating a program for homeschooled children. The considerations described here were the most recognized areas of concern from local families enrolled in the program.

*Limited Income.* In most homeschooling families, one parent stays home to teach, leaving only one parent to work secularly (Ray, 2011). This single-income variable, coupled with the expense (e.g., textbooks and workbooks, technology, general supplies) of home education (Cooper & Sureau, 2007; Lips & Feinberg, 2008) may limit the amount of money a family can spend on community-based programs. Therefore, the cost of registration needs to be reasonable. When determining a price, programs need to ensure that operational costs (e.g., lifeguard salary, equipment, and curricular materials) are fully covered but not inflated to the point that it limits the number of families who can afford to participate.

*Scheduling*. Though homeschool schedules are somewhat flexible, the day and time of the program should be considered. As mentioned above, many homeschooling families belong to co-ops who meet often, even weekly. Therefore, to avoid competing for times, programs should work directly with these groups to select days and times that best suit their members, making it easier to recruit families. Finding the best time of day for families will also influence participation. It may be that the majority of local families engage in formal education in the morning, leaving the afternoons open for extracurricular activities. Again, this type of information can be found by working directly with local co-ops and their members.

Accommodating Large Families. Another consideration when developing a program is larger families (Ray, 2011). Since education programs are designed for the K-12 population ages five and up, parents with non-school-age children might appreciate having a place to take them. An easy solution to help accommodate families is to offer an area that provides activities for the non-schoolage children and a place for parents to go during the program. This could be as simple as a comfortable room with some toys and places for the parents to sit, or an actual parallel program that works with the two- to four-year-olds. Another way to make the program even more appealing for families would be to give the parents access to additional resources in the building (e.g., the fitness center or computer lab) while their children are engaged in the program. Designing a program with a family focus, and not just for the school-age children, will generally be more appealing and can strengthen enrollment.

Schooling Beliefs. One last consideration when developing a program is why families choose to homeschool in the first place. Reasons that families choose to homeschool might include curriculum and educational beliefs, moral instruction and religious beliefs, well-being and safety of the child, and family unity (Princiotta & Bielick, 2006). Though the goal of this program is to provide preservice teachers with a K–12 teaching experience, it should be done with some considerations. If a program appears too similar to a public-school format, this might turn some families

away. For example, attempting to incorporate health education or classroom-based instruction might be unappealing to certain families. The program discussed in this article also found that some parents voiced concerns about certain activities (e.g., spiritually based yoga, certain dances, electronic active gaming) that went against their religious beliefs or moral instruction. Again, communicating with local co-ops on the needs and interests of their members can help establish a curriculum that is well suited for both the university and local families.

### Developing a Homeschool Physical Education Program

The homeschool physical education program (HPEP) at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) serves over 120 local homeschooled children and their parents, operating during both the fall and spring semesters. The HPEP offers programming for pre-K children, K-12 students, and the parents of enrolled children. In 2012, when the program was being developed, leaders from local homeschool co-op groups were contacted. After discussing the idea and the benefits to both the university and the local homeschoolers, these groups were very helpful in reaching out to their members. Families were contacted through their co-op and asked to complete an online survey about what they wanted out of the program. Next, several pilot sessions were offered to a limited number of families to help address some issues (e.g., transitioning large groups of children through locker rooms, and safety protocols for signing children in and out) and to build a rapport with families before officially starting the program. By reaching out to local coop groups, conducting a needs assessment, and by holding several pilot sessions, the program was developed.

Currently, each weekly session runs for two hours, including two one-hour classes broken into 45 minutes of instruction and



15 minutes for transition between the gymnasiums and the swimming pool. This program uses five instructional grade levels: pre-K, K-1st, 2nd-3rd, 4th-5th, and 6th-12th grades. During the first hour the P-1st (pre-K and K-1st are combined at first) and the 4th-5th graders are taught in separate gyms, and the 2nd-3rd and 6th-12th grade groups are in the swimming pool. During the second hour the groups switch between the two gymnasiums and the pool, making the 15-minute transition times necessary for getting the children through the locker room and between the assigned areas. Also at that time, the pre-K children are separated from the K-1st group and taken to an adjacent room for further instruction instead of swimming.

The cost of the K-12 program is \$20 per child, with a \$50 maximum per family. This means that families with three or more children pay only \$50 total. Since price was one of the highest identified concerns from the pilot program survey, the price cap was essential for attracting families. The pre-K program costs \$10 per child and is not included in the \$50 price cap. The separate budget is due to the weekly expenses of the pre-K program (i.e., snacks and crafts).

#### The K–12 Program

The K-12 curriculum includes physical education lessons in two gymnasiums, as well as swimming lessons in the department's natatorium. The physical education lessons are developed and taught by students enrolled in one of several methods courses tied to the homeschool program. The lesson content is based on specific topics or instructional models assigned by the course instructor. Since the program meets only seven times each semester, a new topic is covered each week. This provides the homeschooled children with exposure to as many activities as possible.

The swimming lessons are taught by students enrolled in the department's water-safety course. The curriculum follows the American Red Cross Water Safety program and prepares students to teach children in an aquatic environment under the direct guidance of a certified Water Safety Instructor Trainer. Homeschooled children are divided into small groups based on their skill level. The students enrolled in the water-safety course are responsible for developing and implementing lesson activities, as well as regularly assessing the children's swimming skill levels. As mentioned earlier, the grade groups for the program include the 2nd-3rd and 6th-12th grade groups together in the pool, and the K-1st and 4th-5th grade groups together. This specific grouping resulted from trial and error. When the program first started, the younger swimmers were all grouped together (K-3rd), which led to the shallow end of the pool being overcrowded with younger, inexperienced swimmers and the deep end remaining empty. Therefore, mixing the inexperienced with the more experienced swimmers allows for full use of the swimming pool, including a less crowded shallow end, which improves safety.

#### The Pre-K Program

The pre-K program was developed to give attention to homeschooling parents' non-school-age children ages two to four years old. The program has grown into an additional experience that is now included in the teaching rotation. The teacher-education students are responsible for teaching a lesson to the pre-K children based on assigned skills, including spatial awareness, locomotor and manipulative skills, and dodging/fleeing/chasing. Furthermore, there is a unique theme (e.g., seasons, under the sea, western) that the students must also incorporate into the lesson. For example, if a group is tasked with teaching a lesson focusing on locomotor skills during an "outer space" themed week, the lesson might have the children pretend to be astronauts or aliens while practicing different locomotor movements. Adding these themes has allowed teacher education students to practice their creativity and has been well received by the homeschooled children. These lessons take place in a gymnasium (the first hour) and in an adjacent classroom (second hour) that has the desks removed beforehand.

#### **Parent Fitness Opportunities**

Like all aspects of the program, the parent fitness idea also came from the pre-program survey, which found that the majority of

<b>Components of the Homeschool Physical Education Program</b>		
Program Components	Details	
Days and Times	The program meets from 1:00 to 3:00 pm on 7 Thursdays during both the fall and spring semesters.	
Cost	The K–12 program cost is \$20 per child, with a \$50 maximum per family per semester. The pre-K program is \$10 per child and is not included in the family maximum (has a separate budget).	
K–12 Curriculum	<i>Physical Education:</i> The lessons are 45 minutes long and take place in one of two gymnasiums or outside on an adjacent practice field. Lessons are based on assigned topics or instructional models that preservice students develop their lessons around.	
	Swim Lessons: Children are taught in small groups in an indoor swimming pool. Lessons are based on the American Red Cross Water Safety curriculum.	
Pre-K Experience	Designed for children ages 2–4 who have siblings enrolled in the K–12 program, the program focuses on spatial awareness, locomotor and non-locomotor movements, manipulative skills, and dodging/fleeing/chasing.	
Parent Fitness	Parents with enrolled children have free access to the department's fitness center. This access includes personal training and group fitness classes facilitated by the department's exercise science majors.	

Note: More details about the program can be found at www.iup.edu/kines/community/homeschool/default.aspx

the parents were interested in their own wellness opportunity. This resulted in giving the parents access to the department's fitness center during each program session. Besides having free access to the facility, the parents also have the opportunity for personal training and engagement in group fitness classes run by the department's exercise science students. Exercise science students looking to gain fitness training experience volunteer to work one-on-one with parents or facilitate group fitness classes. The group classes are very popular with the parents and have recently included mommy boot camp and core-training classes. See Table 1 for a summary of the components of IUP's homeschool physical education program that have been described so far.

#### The Student-Teaching Experience

The entire program is run by teacher education students enrolled in the health and physical education program, being directly supervised by the Department of Kinesiology, Health, and Sport Science faculty. These students develop and teach lessons to the homeschooled children, supervise transitions, and interact with the families before, during, and after each session. To help ensure that the teacher-education students are adequately prepared for this experience, they are enrolled in several pedagogical methods courses that are built into the homeschool program. These courses meet twice per week — once in the classroom to cover content and theory, and once during the homeschool program to teach and apply the content.

Students are taught how to write objectives and assessments; design developmentally appropriate lessons; address both state and national standards; and plan for supervision, safety, and behavioral considerations. The learning process throughout the semester is ongoing, with a three-tier design composed of (1) foundational pedagogical content early in the semester (before the homeschool program starts), (2) ongoing feedback and support (during the homeschool program) to help students modify their teaching approach, and (3) reflection on teaching (after the homeschool program ends) to discuss growth and development. This entire process is grounded in Danielson's (1996) framework for teaching, which identifies aspects of teacher responsibilities that can help improve student learning. This framework provides students with a roadmap of skills and competencies that should be developed in order to become effective teachers (Danielson, 1996).

The course that students are enrolled in will dictate the workload and responsibility for the homeschool program. For example, students in introductory teaching-methods courses work in groups of three to instruct the homeschooled children. Each group member is assigned a specific part of the lesson (warmup/cool-down, skill development, or skill application) that they are responsible for planning and teaching. Being responsible for only a portion of a lesson was found to be less overwhelming for inexperienced students. As students progress through the teachereducation curriculum, they are assigned more responsibilities. Students enrolled in the upper-level courses are required to teach either alone or with a partner, conduct a formal assessment during the lesson, and write a unit plan that incorporates an assigned instructional model from several course textbooks (see Lund & Tannehill, 2011, and Metzler, 2011). Assigning a specific model exposes teaching groups to different instructional strategies commonly used in physical education. The goal of this exposure is to help demonstrate to preservice teachers that a quality program

	Gym B (Grades 4–5)		
Day	Teaching Group	Instructional Mode	
1	Group 1 teaches Group 2 (video/observes)	Peer Teaching	
2	Group 2 teaches Group 3 (video/observes)	Outdoor Education	
3	Group 3 teaches Group 4 (video/observes)	Fitness and Wellnes Education	
4	Group 4 teaches Group 5 (video/observes)	Adventure Education	
5	Group 5 teaches Group 6 (video/observes)	Teaching Games for Understanding	
6	Group 6 teaches Group 7 (video/observes)	Skill Theme	
7	Group 7 teaches Group 1 (video/observes)	Personalized Syster	

Note: Most instructional models are presented to the students from the Lund et al. (2011) and Metzler (2011) textbooks.

uses a variety of instructional models to truly produce physically educated students (Metzler, 2011).

Each week, teaching groups rotate among different grade levels in order to work with children of various ages. Along with the course instructor, a non-teaching group will videotape and observe the lessons being taught. Through this process the teacher education students get to assess a lesson by completing a rubric and providing feedback from a pedagogical standpoint. After the teaching group has time to watch their video and write a reflective response, they meet with the course instructor to discuss peer feedback, instructor feedback, and self-reflection. Table 2 displays a sample rotation that is used for one of the methods courses.

When groups are not teaching or observing, they are responsible for transitioning. Moving the children to and from the gymnasiums and the swimming pool in a short timeframe can be challenging. The children always travel as a group and are never one-on-one with staff. The program follows the rule of three, which includes either one staff and two children or two staff and one child. The teacher-education students have all the required background clearances and insurance necessary for working with children. The parents also play a big role in making transitions more efficient and the program as a whole more successful.

Since most parents exercise in the building's fitness center, they are available to help handle any issues that come up (e.g., accidents or behavior issues). The parents also assist in getting their children dressed in the locker rooms during transitions to and from the pool, making that process more efficient. During the actual lessons the parents are either engaged in the fitness center or waiting in the lobby. They are very respectful toward the teaching process and do not interfere during the lessons. Having this high level of interaction with parents helps ensure that the program runs smoothly, which creates the best possible experience for the children it serves. This also gives teacher education students the opportunity to interact with the parents of their students, which is a practice that every good educator should follow (Moreira, Dias, Vaz, & Vaz, 2013).

#### **Perceived Benefits**

Running a program of this nature has several apparent benefits. Besides providing inexperienced teacher education students with practical experience opportunities, this program increases community exposure and generates additional revenue. Inviting local homeschooling families onto campus allows institutions to build positive relationships with families, which can help when they start looking at higher education options for their children. The departments that house these programs are also capable of generating additional revenue. The generated funds not only help to cover the cost of replacing damaged equipment and staffing (e.g., lifeguard salary) but also provide additional funds for faculty and student professional development (e.g., conference registration) or scholarship money to help low-income families participate in the program.

#### **Perceived Limitations**

Although there are several benefits to having this type of program, there are also potential limitations. When building this program into teacher education courses, the time commitment is high. The program described in this article meets seven times each semester, resulting in less class time to cover pedagogical content. Class time is also needed to allow teacher education students to work with their groups and prepare their lessons. Though finding a good balance between time for classroom content and time for teaching application is possible, it does need to be considered and discussed when integrating a program of this nature into the curriculum.

Besides the time commitment, another perceived limitation is the teaching experience itself. Though it does provide teacher education students with an opportunity to interact with actual children in an instructional setting, it lacks the authenticity of the public school setting that students are training to work in. As previously mentioned, the homeschool experience should be used as a transitional level between peer teaching and the early field experience to help students better refine their skills before being exposed to the intricacies of the public school setting.

#### **Summary**

The program described in this article is just one way that teacher education programs can add a level of experience to their existing curriculum. Strengthening the exposure that preservice teachers receive can help them develop into more effective educators (Watson et al., 2011). Students who are better prepared to enter the teaching field after graduating are more likely to stay in their field (Amett & Freeburg, 2008). With attrition being a major problem in education, and a large portion of teachers leaving the profession within the first few years (Sass, Flores, Claeys, & Pérez, 2012), it is crucial to address this issue. Retaining high-quality teachers is an essential way to build and maintain effective

physical education programs. After all, one of the best ways to advocate for a profession is through the development of highly qualified professionals.

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