Transition in Physical Recreation and Students with Cognitive Disabilities: Graduate and Parent Perspectives

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived impact of physical recreation transition programming on individuals with cognitive disabilities and generate strategies for improved transition. Interviews were completed with 17 young adults who were one to three years post graduation. Interviews determined graduate’s perception of their own activity levels. Focus groups were completed with 23 parents of young adult graduates, from varying regions of the United States. Amount and types of past and current recreational pursuits, promotional and inhibitory factors impacting activity participation, and strategies for improved transition programming were explored in focus groups. Coded data revealed that physical recreation transition success requires development and maintenance of a strong community that must be provided with support in the major areas of structure, exposure, education, and social environment. Transitioning can be improved through increased parent training, implementation of mentor groups, utilization of state personnel, and increased integration into higher education.

The majority of Americans today are physically inactive (Surgeon General, 1996). Recent awareness of the long range debilitating effects of inactivity and the lack of exercise public school children are receiving has created a push for increased time requirements for physical activity during the school day (Texas Senate Bill 19, 2002). It is believed that if school-aged students, including those with disabilities, establish good physical activity habits while in school, those habits will continue after leaving school. Yet, time and again, studies show that the actual participation in recreation pursuits among individuals with cognitive disabilities is primarily inactive and infrequent (Eichstaedt & Lavay, 1992; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Obrusnikova, Valkova, & Block, 2003; Rimmer, Braddock, & Pitetti, 1996).

To assist students with disabilities to prepare for an active and independent life after leaving school, inclusion of community recreation in transition programming is imperative. Transition services are defined as “a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities.” (PL 101-476, 34 CFR 300.18). Post-school activities include post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation. Community participation includes active recreation and leisure pursuits (Piletic, 1998). The 1997 Amendments of The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (PL 105-17) placed an increased emphasis on parent participation in the educational process. Primary caregivers of individuals with disabilities often play key roles in the activity levels of individuals with disabilities. Involvement of families is especially critical during the transition to life after high school, the success of which requires ongoing collaborative efforts by professionals and families (Wehmeyer, Morningstar, & Husted, 1999). Given that students, parents, siblings, and other family members are all affected by the transition process and its outcomes, these individuals should be collaborative partners in transition planning and decision making. Parents and siblings are often highly involved in the leisure choices of individuals with disabil-
ities (Chambers, Hughes, & Carter, 2004). Because the support networks of persons with significant cognitive disabilities typically are composed of family members, it is important to identify families’ involvement in the transition process and families’ perceptions of transition outcomes to determine post-school outcomes that are valued. This information could guide transition teams in developing goals that are supported by families.

The impact of school programming and placement on achieving a physically active lifestyle after the school years is virtually unknown. Research addressing recreation transition training indicates that when the obstacles of transportation and financing were removed, with training, individuals with cognitive disabilities were able to maintain an increased level of community recreation participation (Ashton-Shaeffer, Shelton, & Johnson, 1995).

The provision of recreation services within transition planning can prove a powerful and effective tool for individuals with cognitive disabilities. Inclusion of recreation in transition programming enhances self-confidence, skill acquisition, and is most effective when addressed at an early age (Da Gama, 2000). Participation in leisure and recreation activities aids in the development of social and motor skills, execution of personal choice and self-determination, and contributes to a sense of self-worth and belonging in a community (Datillo, 1994; Kelly, 1983, 1987; Kleiber & Kelly, 1980).

There has been very little analysis of the community recreation participation of individuals with disabilities, particularly those with cognitive disabilities, after graduation from high school (Smith, 1993). In fact, despite the importance of an active lifestyle to health and quality of life, no studies reporting the amount of physical recreation participation of individuals with disabilities after graduation have been located in the literature, nor were any studies located that examined parent perceptions of recreation transition planning. This study was designed to determine how parents perceive the impact of recreation transition programming and how their adult children with cognitive disabilities perceive their post-school leisure pursuits.

Method

Participants

Participants were 23 parents of young adults with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities and 17 young adults who were 1-3 years post graduation. The young adult participants were the children of parent participants. Participants were from the Midwest, Mountain, and Southeast regions of the United States. They were selected by adapted physical educators from their school district utilizing purposive sampling. All young adult participants received community-based recreation training while in school.

Parent participants. Parent participants had an average of three children including the young adult participating in the project. The length of time that the families had lived in the area ranged from 10 to 50 years (M = 24.07, SD = 11.40). Over half of the parent respondents (53%) stated they had a household income level over $55,000 per year. Over half of the mothers who participated in the study (53%) had obtained an undergraduate degree. Half of the fathers who responded to the survey (50%) obtained a graduate degree. A summary of the demographic information provided by the parents is detailed in Table 1.

Young adult participants. Young adult participants ranged in age from 22 years to 25 years, (M = 23.58, SD = 1.12). Of the 17 young adults, one was living in a group home, one was living in an apartment, and the remaining 15 were living with one or two parent(s). Vocationally, three of the young adults were not working, three were working full-time in a sheltered workshop, eight were working part-time in the community, and three were working full-time in the community.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect data: (a) a focus group interview guide, (b) the TRAIL Leisure Assessment Battery, and (c) a questionnaire for the parent/guardian participants. An interview guide was followed during the focus groups and interviews to insure a systematic collection of information. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions and probes. Focus groups either oc-
curred in one of the participant’s homes, a public library, or a church meeting room. Focus groups lasted between 2-3 hours and were facilitated by the primary investigator.

The TRAIL Leisure Assessment Battery (TLAB) was selected to measure the young adult participation in recreational activities. The TLAB’s validity and reliability measures were reported by Datillo, Hoge, and Malley (1996). This tool was developed to measure leisure activity with individuals with cognitive disabilities and includes pictures to facilitate comprehension. This questionnaire consists of three main components focusing on:

1. identification of activities the participants have done in the past or in which they are currently participating;
2. identification of choice, socialization, enjoyment, and assistance the participants believed they received while participating in these activities; and
3. constraints to recreation participation. The instrument requires a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. Young adult participants were interviewed privately in their homes. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour.

A questionnaire was also provided to the parent participants to obtain information relating to family demographics, community participation, post-school status, and educational information. The questionnaire was completed prior to their participation in the focus groups.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The method used for this study was action research, with the goal of analyzing perceived post-school physical recreation experiences of young adults with cognitive disabilities in order to generate strategies for improving physical recreation transition planning and implementation. Participatory action research (PAR) is one means of addressing the gap between the researchers and the intended beneficiaries of research (McTaggart, 1991; Whyte, 1991). The terminal goal of PAR is to collaboratively find and implement a solution to a problem.

Data were collected through focus groups with parents, a brief survey, and supplemental interviews with young adult graduates. Interviews and focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed for content analysis. Themes and concepts were identified from the transcription of the focus groups and interviews. Open coding was utilized to systematically analyze the data. These data were then

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Level of Education (Mom)</th>
<th>Level of Education (Dad)</th>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Years Living in area</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>26-35k</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>55k+</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>G</td>
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<td>U</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>HS</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>46-55k</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>HS</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>46-55k</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. W = Widowed, M = Married, S = Separated, SI = Single, U = Undergraduate, HS = High School, G = Graduate, k = Thousand, + = More than, and - = not reported.
placed into coding frames for organization and identification of findings. These frames support and create the themes and categories identified by the participants.

The young adult information relating to the activities in which they participate and frequency of participation were analyzed using quantitative methods. Demographic information collected from parent participants were analyzed utilizing descriptive statistics.

**Results**

**School-Based Community Recreation Participation**

All young adult participants experienced a full-continuum of community recreation opportunities while in school. Settings ranged from attending a high school with no organized physical education and limited community trips to attending a transition program with community recreation experiences at least three times per week. The most frequently reported school-based community recreation trips by all participants were bowling and swimming.

Parent participants identified that their children also experienced community recreation with their family when they were growing up. Several parents described family ski trips, camping, hiking, biking, walking, and roller-skating as family leisure pursuits. All activities identified by parents as physical recreation pursuits were special trips and not a part of their weekly routine.

**Current Community Recreation Participation**

Exposure to the sport and recreation activities, whether as a spectator or an active participant, through school and community experiences, clearly contributed to the participation level of the child while in school. However, a significant drop in active participation was observed in most of the young adults after graduation. The young adults were still seeking many leisure pursuits, but the activities with the highest number of responses were sedentary. The activities that 20% and higher of the young adults believed they currently participate in ‘a lot’ are summarized in Table 2. The item considered a ‘physical recreation’ activity, or a health related activity, which received the highest number of responses, was bowling (41%). Other physical recreation activities with frequent participation included exercising at home (35%), going for a walk (35%), playing catch (24%), swimming (24%), biking (24%), and basketball (24%).

The strongest factor that facilitated the physical recreation participation for the young adults was Special Olympics. Focus group data revealed that all but one of the young adult participants maintained their participation in Special Olympics after graduation. Many of the family’s recreational lives revolved around the Special Olympic sports of bicycling, tennis, swimming, and bowling.

All young adults interviewed currently par-

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percent Participating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CDs</td>
<td>65</td>
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<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing the Car</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeding Dog</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit family</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat out</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowl</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nap</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video games</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeding Cat</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sport event</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draw</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table gam</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catch</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swim</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bike</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ride Bus</td>
<td>24</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
participate in community recreation activities with either their families or other individuals with similar disabilities. The most athletic participation is spent in a segregated environment, where individuals with disabilities are in the majority. When community recreation is pursued in an integrated environment, it is with peers with disabilities or family members.

Promotional Strategies

Most families identified several factors that promote physical recreation for their children. These included sibling activity level, parent activity level, Special Olympics, and exposure to a variety of activities.

For parents who were not physically active, the participation of the child centered more around Special Olympic opportunities, school based sports, and sports that their siblings were participating in. Several parents correlated their child’s ability in a particular sport with the exposure to sibling participation. However, observation of sibling activity places the young adult participant in the role of spectator. Several parents reported that although their child was not active during these times, the observation of the activity assisted with learning the sport and creating a desire to do the activities their siblings were doing.

Another promotional factor that was evident in the young adult’s school years was the activity level of the families. Parents who enjoyed active recreation personally, indicated that they believed their children were positively impacted by this example. A parent who struggles with intermittent health problems saw a correlation between her health and her daughter’s activity level:

I would say that our activity level depended a lot on my health. I was sort of the driving force, in getting the planning stuff, but, she did things you know, with an older sister and a younger brother, so she, you know, fit right in, and was moderately active I would say. But then, if I had a really long period of being bed-ridden, sometimes, for several months, then her activity level would really drop off.

Parents who did not report they were personally active when their child was growing up reported a reliance on Special Olympics as the primary mode of physical activity.

All parents identified with the fact that active participation was easily accomplished while their children were in school when the events, time, and scheduling were already in place. One parent hypothesized that this occurred because Special Olympics required no planning by parents. Parents are told where to go and what time to be there.

Although Special Olympics was identified as the strongest indicator for providing physical activity, the most frequently indicated factor identified by parents as a promotional strategy for active participation, was the exposure to a variety of activities in school and on school-directed community trips. In all focus groups except from the Southeast, parents believed that the broad range of activities provided for their children had a positive impact.

Inhibitory Factors

Without participation in Special Olympics, the amount of physical recreation of the graduates would have been very low because of several obstacles faced by the young adults and their parent(s). Inhibitory factors include those that prevent or limit the community recreation participation of the graduates. The factors identified in the focus groups included safety, work, planning, health concerns, parent education, lack of organization, and school orientation.

Many parents expressed concern over the safety of their children when in the community without supervision. When describing her fear for her daughter’s safety while in the community alone, one parent stated, “As vulnerable as she seems to be, I just know she would go. If somebody stops, she would get in that car, I know she would.”

Although parents reported their children were instructed in safety through class talks and role-playing at school, they were not confident in their child’s ability to transfer those skills to an actual situation. The above parent’s spouse added:

The safety thing is really tough. Because it’s sort of like, nutritional eating, intellectually they get that, and they know they shouldn’t get into a car with strangers, and they know
to stay together in groups. There are a lot of things they can grasp intellectually, but when it comes down to doing it, if the situation is just a little bit different from what has been described to them, they won’t recognize it.

Several parents identified work as a deterrent to participation. One young adult works an average of 50 hours per week, leaving little time and even less energy for participation. Another young adult from the same group expressed concern over leaving the house because his work might need him unexpectedly and he would be called to come in. He spoke of his peers at work as unreliable and believed a need to be available in case they did not show up for work.

One parent felt quite limited by the health problems with which her two children struggle. She believes her son must have constant supervision in case a seizure may occur, and her daughter struggles with depression, among other health challenges. She said that it was often easier to simply stay home.

Regardless of education and income level, almost all parents interviewed reported being inhibited by the need to plan every activity for their child after graduation. Frequently, several of the Special Olympic activities were no longer an option after graduation, reducing the organized opportunities. This has left gaps of time for parents to fill for their children. This shift in planning responsibility seemed overwhelming and frustrating for some parents and left some feeling unprepared to fill this new need in their children. Two parents, who seemed content in the role of organizer and time-filler for their children, were retired and not working.

Additionally, most of the active recreation pursuits of parents were school-oriented. Many young adults played for their school sport teams, providing physical activity in a structured environment. When their children were in school, the emphasis for many of these families was to engage in activities to support the school. After graduation, that emphasis disappeared, leaving parents and young adults unsure of where to direct those energies.

**Factors Promoting Transition**

Although lacking in direction, parents reported that there were some specific skills their child had gained from school in the development of independent recreation abilities. They also identified additional factors that provided a positive impact on their child’s recreation transition. These skills and factors included experience on sport teams, modification skills, exposure to a variety of activities, having the school as an advocate, support of other families, and state provided personnel.

Many young adult participants participated in sports teams in both integrated and segregated settings. Sports included basketball, soccer, softball, swimming, football, and gymnastics. This participation was reflected very positively by all parents and they felt even limited ‘game time’ created an interest in the sport that some parents believed was an important role in positively impacting transition.

An interest in sports can develop initiative in young adults to pursue community recreation activities on their own. Several parents noticed that when attempting a recreation activity with their child, it was obvious the young adult had been exposed to the activity before. In some instances the young adult instructed the parent on how to participate in the activity. One parent articulated this by identifying that the varied exposure allowed her child to figure out what he really likes to do and become good at those few specific activities:

The Adapted PE Specialist had those guys and girls joining every sport possible. For example, volleyball, for Austin is not a great sport. He tried it though, and his teacher (APE) encouraged him and he’d go and he’d participate, but because it is a two-handed sport for him, it was not a good sport for him. But he tried it and he was able to say at some point, I really don’t like that sport after all. And that’s one of the things I’ve loved is he’s tried so many things and not just through the school, partly what we have provided too. He’s experienced any sport created! And he has been able to excel or say well, OK, that’s not for me.
Factors identified above focus on support for the student. Parents identified additional factors that positively impact transition focusing on support for the family as a whole. In the Mountain region, additional family support is provided by the state. A program that provides leisure support personnel for children and young adults is in place. The young adult is allotted a certain number of hours with the state worker. Participants in this study utilized that time for community recreation activities with the worker. This is described as community integration by the state and these workers are also available for assistance with daily living, employment, assistive technology, decision-making, transportation, and emergency care. Parents in this group reported that this contributed significantly to their child ‘getting out’ and participating in activities.

**Strategies for Improved Transitioning**

Throughout the focus groups, parents explored their child’s physical recreation transition programming. All parents had spent at least one-year post graduation with their child. In reflecting on this time, they identified many struggles encountered that revealed areas they felt could have improved the recreation transition process. These included parent training, transportation, development of mentors, better state workers, and increased integration in higher education. In identifying these areas, the parents brainstormed resolutions to mediate the problems. These ideas will be explored below.

It was clear to many parents that there are many services for their children after graduation to facilitate their transition, but they were confused over which services provided what, which ones they could qualify for, and how to access them. A transition workshop for parents involving social services was suggested. Additionally, many parents reported that, although their children were taught valuable skills for recreation participation in school, they were unaware of all of them, and unsure of how to schedule and implement the skills taught.

Suggestions to circumvent this problem included increased parent training. Parents expressed a need to learn about the agencies and programs available after graduation. They thought that a monthly newsletter, detailing the recreation activities for individuals with disabilities scheduled in the community, would help them determine what was available in the community and when.

They also wanted to learn exactly what activities their child participated in at school and how they could access and modify those activities for their child. Some parents reported it would have been beneficial for them and their child to learn exactly how to plan and access activities. Parents also expressed their dislike of being the sole person(s) responsible for planning recreation for their children. One resolution generated by several parents was the implementation of a parent mentor program while their child was still in school. This program would consist of parent groups who are geographically close and have children of varied ages and levels of education. The groups could meet monthly or whatever time period determined by the members, to talk about what activities their children are doing and how they are participating in them. This concept was expanded with the idea of getting young adults together for community recreation trips after graduation.

Having a support group close to each other was important because all parents were frustrated with the struggles of transportation for their child. Although each site had public specialized transportation, it was cited as unreliable and unreasonable in rates and requirements for qualification. One parent was denied access to specialized transportation because her son’s level of functioning was too high.

A strategy identified to facilitate diversified planning and ease the concern of transportation was the development of a mentor program. The program proposed would begin with the school placing signs at recreation facilities requesting mentor volunteers. The ideal mentor would be an older individual who is settled in the area, without plans to move away in the near future, who participates in activities at the recreation setting on a regular schedule. Once the mentor was approved, s/he would meet the young adult at the facility on a regular basis and serve as a fitness companion. This could be as little as once a month or as frequent as two times per
week. The long-term goal of the mentor program would be to get the young adult into a regular routine of physical recreation, which would potentially continue even if the mentor needed to discontinue participation. The short-term benefits address the obstacles of planning, parent direction, and, if provided by the mentor, transportation.

The state supported personnel program in the Mountain region provides mentors for young adults. Parents from this area spoke positively about this program. However, problems related to the program were identified. Often workers did not have exactly the same interests as the young adult, or chose to participate in the same activities each time, limiting variety of exposure. Parents suggested that it would be beneficial for the young adult and the workers to fill out interest surveys and be matched up based on interests. Additionally, the young adult could be assigned two or three different workers, all of whom have different foci, broadening their experiences. The concept of teaching empowerment through community service was discussed. It was suggested that once young adults graduate, they could serve as a mentor in conjunction with the state worker, forming a natural peer tutor program. The graduate could plan and participate in activities with a young adult who has not yet graduated.

One parent was particularly concerned that her son develops peer relationships with young adults who do not have disabilities. She viewed higher education as an ideal setting to achieve this goal. Each of the regions had higher education courses offered through the local community college for individuals with disabilities. This concerned parent suggested developing a program of this kind, which would begin while the young adults are still in high school:

If they [community college] just provided the gym and a time and made it known that the kids were going to come in and if anyone on the campus would like to participate or, where you could instantaneously get that and then afterwards have a social time. They have the cafeteria, they have rooms there, so the kids could sit and visit and even have tables to play games or something along with it. And I think if you began those times, then those friends might continue on.

The evaluator clarified the idea with:

When let’s just say if Nat were still in high school, and instead of getting PE credit, he had like a community class or something, and they take him to the junior college, and you can have it set up where you have some type of reverse mainstreaming or, just a welcoming time for other people to come that are going to be there after he graduates, so he’s already got connections there.

Concepts and Themes

After focus group data open coding was completed, several concepts and themes emerged. The theory of community encompassed all of the concepts that emerged from the data. In order for a community to grow, it must be supported. Support was identified as a theme in this research. The forms of support that parents involved in this study identified as having received or needed related to the concepts of Structure, Exposure, Education, and Social Environment, which will be explored below. A visual representation of the factors impacting physical recreation transition can be found in Figure 1.

Structure

The period immediately following graduation serves as a time of exploration and freedom for all young adults. Many graduates have plans for higher education or enter the work force full time. Of the 1998 graduates, 27% of graduates with disabilities entered post-secondary education compared to 68% of the general student population. Additionally, three to five years after graduation, only slightly more than half of young adults with disabilities are employed compared to 69% of their non-disabled peers (Fabian, Lent, & Willis, 1998). For graduates who participated in this study, only three (17%) entered the work force full time in an integrated setting. Participation in higher education occurred one time per week, at most, for the other participants.

With limited transportation, the amount of
community recreation participation is reduced even further. This leaves a large amount of unstructured time. Without the skills to structure that time themselves, the onus of planning is on the parents. However, several of parents, regardless of educational attainment and income level, seemed unsure of how to plan for their children. Figuring out the community services and what each had to offer seemed overwhelming and confusing. While their children were in school, parents were provided with structure when the schools would plan community events and trips and simply notify parents of when to have their child there. Although there were many community trips organized by the schools, there was never a complete list compiled for parents to refer to as needed. Several parents reported that they believed the reliance on externally structured activities could prove to be detrimental after graduation because it develops dependence on others to plan and organize recreation. If and when those external supports are no longer in place, young adults are left without the skills to support themselves.

**Exposure**

Exposure was another theme that arose from the focus group data. There seemed to be a high level of satisfaction from parents whose children were exposed to a wide range of community activities while in school. One parent identified one of the benefits of exposure as being one that allowed her child to get specific on his true interests:

> It has been a process. It's really been fine tuned since he graduated. But even those activities, required or not, it's just that wonderful exposure that he has had so that he

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**Figure 1. Factors Impacting Physical Recreation Transition.**

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**Promotional Factors**
- Special Olympics
- Sibling and parent activities
- Exposure in school
- Variety of activities
- State support personnel
- Sport teams

**Inhibitory Factors**
- Safety
- Companionship
- Transportation
- Shift in setting and onus
- Planning
- Parent training
can say with assurance; I do or don’t want to
do that.

For parents whose children did not get a
wide variety of community activities while in
school, a level of satisfaction was expressed if
the young adult was highly involved in one or
two specific activities. For some parents, whose
children did not receive organized PE, all
were satisfied because their children were
highly involved in Special Olympics outside of
school programming. One parent explained
“I didn’t expect much out of them since we
had the Special Olympics. I didn’t really delve
into that at school. I figured that was more
academic.” The Special Olympics community
provided the support that those families
needed to feel satisfied.

For families whose children did not receive
physical education until entering the transi-
tion program, participation on the regular
school sport teams produced satisfaction
based more on social acceptance than physical
activity. One parent whose son played on the
football team explained:

He did one play the entire three years he
was out there and they dedicated the whole
sports banquet to him one year. He was
more of a cheerleader then anything else,
but he would lead the group in prayer and
the whole bit and it would blow me away.

The other parent in that group, whose daugh-
ter competed on the swim team expressed
similar thoughts:

She seemed to be well accepted by her
peers. You could see that with the other
students when she went to the swimming
events and that. And then when they had
other presentations you know, for what they
accomplished, she was well accepted by
other students.

Although the amount of exposure varied
among groups, data revealed that in terms of
parent satisfaction, if a sense of achievement
and acceptance was believed, positive state-
ments were reported.

Education

One of the prevailing concepts generated
from this study was one of education. In de-
scribing the strengths and needs of the recre-
ation transition programming for their chil-
dren, parents identified a need for increased
education for themselves and their children,
as well as an appreciation for the education
that was received.

Whether their child’s participation was
through school-based sports, community trips,
or Special Olympics, all parents seemed grate-
ful for that exposure. They mentioned an
awareness and appreciation for the use of
modifications to facilitate their child’s par-
icipation. Even parents whose children received
physical education one time per week ex-
pressed little concern.

However, the same parents who were not
concerned over minimal physical education,
expressed concern over the reduced emphasis
on the health benefits of physical activity. One
parent spoke about the message the school
sends their children:

I think if the child, while going through
school, seeing that the people who they
look up to thought it necessary to have PE
once a day or three times a week. I think
that would encourage the child to think
that it was more important, rather than hav-
ing it once every other Friday. I think they
are intelligent enough to figure out that
that’s really not as important as learning
about money or telling time if you put it
that far back on the level of priorities.

Parents also described a need for increased
education related to planning for both their
children and themselves. In-home training for
parents was identified as a need. One parent
was aware that being able to task analyze ac-
tivities for her son would help, but was unsure
of how to do it. Another parent recom-
ended parent training:

Maybe some sort of transition class for the
parents before they leave to know what our
options are. To know where to go. Because
I don’t know what the heck to do after
graduation. I was like, now what do I do?
Where do I go? How? I didn’t know what
options are out there.

Several parents expressed a desire for their
children to be able to find an activity on their
own and know how to schedule it. One school
district involved is beginning to circumvent this problem by integrating decision-making and training of planning skills into its recreation transition program.

Social Support

It is natural when discussing challenges for the conversation to lead to possible solutions. This held true for the focus groups in this study. Throughout the discussion, parents identified the role of social support in their journey. Positive experiences identified by parents included school and state services and what they had gained from other families. Negative experiences produced solutions that inevitably lead back to what they need from others to assist them in overcoming the obstacles.

The successes identified with physical recreation transition were attributed to members of the young adults’ immediate community including family members, school personnel, Special Olympics coaches and teammates, friends, and state support personnel. Support from community members is one solution to the obstacles young adults are facing to increased physical recreation. Enlistment of mentors, improvement of specialized transportation, improved communication and training between schools and parents, all involve strengthening of the common interest, or the community.

Discussion

“To sustain itself, the larger community must have a structure in place that is designed by the membership and responds to its needs” (Collay, Enloe, Dunlap, & Gagnon, 1998). As an action research project, the goal was to explore the recreation transition programming provided by school districts with its community members, and identify the strengths and weaknesses of those programs to provide a catalyst for change.

The lack of physical activity for graduates in this study support previous findings relating to inactivity and individuals with disabilities (Eichstaedt & Lavay, 1992; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Obrusnikova et al., 2003; Rimmer et al., 1996). Additionally, graduates’ portrayal of their free-time spent primarily with other individuals with disabilities and family members is consistent with earlier findings (Modell, Rider, & Menchetti, 1997; Reiter & Levi, 1981). Obstacles to successful transition have focused on the vocational realm, however, a common identified challenge both vocationally and recreationally is in the area of transportation (O’Fallon, 1995). As reported by a group of Adapted Physical Educators from Wisconsin, among the highest ranked obstacles to the provision of leisure transition services include transportation before and after school, budget constraints, lack of companions for participation, and lack of community collaboration (Kreuger, DiRocco, & Felix, 2000). Parent participants in this study did not mention money as a barrier to transition. O’Fallon and Kreuger et al. also reported obstacles to leisure transition to include ease of accessibility and use of facilities. These factors were not presented as obstacles by participants in this study. A contributing factor may be the community recreation training received by the participants while in school.

Needs revealed by the parents for successful physical recreation transition provide the deepest insight into the goals for programming. These needs provide valuable supplementation to the current transition literature. Regardless of educational placement of their children, marital status, income level, or educational attainment of parents, needs were identified in the areas of increased education and training in planning recreation activities, improved awareness of community resources provided to parents, development of stronger community mentors, and skills to seek or create structured opportunities.

The success identified with physical recreation transition were attributed to members of the young adult’s immediate community including family members, the school, Special Olympics, friends, and support personnel provided by the state. Solutions to the obstacles young adults are facing to increased physical recreation involve needed support from community members. Enlistment of mentors, improvement of specialized transportation, improved communication and training between schools and parents, all involve strengthening of the common interest, or the community. Participants in this study described a need for communion.

For some families, strength of community
was maintained through some post-school supports (state personnel services and Special Olympics). However, for most families who participated in this research, the supports of education, a structured environment, opportunity for exposure, and social supports either ceased or were greatly reduced after their young adults graduated from the school system.

As action research is cyclical, this study lends itself to supplemental administration. A logical recommendation for further study is to implement the strategies suggested in the regions involved, reflect, and if needed, begin problem-solving again. Additional research recommendations include utilizing the results from this study as a reflective guide for practitioners when evaluating their own programs, and designing an action research study based on identified areas of concern.

Conclusion

The base of the word community is common. Individuals holding a common interest are members of a community. In this study, the common interests are the young adults. Achievement of a high quality of life after graduation is the goal of the members of the community involved in this research. Parents believed that the quality of life for their young adults would be improved with higher levels of activity after graduation. The theory of community encompassed all of the concepts and themes that emerged from the data. Clearly, the parents and young adults involved in this research identified the need for a stronger community after graduation. Practitioners can utilize this information to assist in maintaining support for their students through development of a stronger community. This includes increased involvement and training of parents, empowerment training for the students, and community networking for the families.

References


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Received: 17 September 2005
Initial Acceptance: 12 November 2005
Final Acceptance: 15 April 2006