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"It's All About the Kids": A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Special Needs Cheerleading Coaches

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Kimberly Nichole Page entitled "'It's All About the Kids": A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Special Needs Cheerleading Coaches." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Kinesiology and Sport Studies.

Leslee A. Fisher, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

“It's All About the Kids”:

A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Special Needs Cheerleading Coaches

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Science

Kinesiology

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Kimberly Nichole Page

May 2011

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Abstract

Special needs sport literature is narrow-focused and generally focuses on the different disabilities of athletes (Howe & Jones, 2006). Additionally, cheerleading is generally researched in terms of disordered eating and body image (Thompson & Digsby, 2004), high injury risk (Jacobson, Hubbard & Redus, 2004; Jacobson, Redus, & Palmer, 2005), and over-sexualization of youth (Adams & Bettis, 2003). While several websites and resources for coaches of special needs athletes provide information for how a coach should feel, there is a lack of empirical research to support these claims (www.specialolympics.org; www.usasf.net). In the present study, a phenomenological interview approach was taken for eight coaches of special needs cheerleading squads. The interviews were thematized to reveal figure themes of: (a) *enthusiasm*; (b) *parents*; (c) *us vs. "them"*; and (d) *improvements vs. struggles*. Additionally, there were two sub-ground themes of *the athletes* and *outside help*. All of the figure themes and the sub-ground themes were encompassed by the ground theme of *community*. Connections to previous research, practical implications, and future directions of the present findings are discussed.

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“It's All About the Kids”:

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I first realized my father was different when I was about three years old. I saw my friend's dad-- who had two arms-- and thought he looked weird. In my egocentric mind, all dads were like mine and only had one arm. I was wrong. My dad hates the term “handicapped.” Even more than the “h word,” my dad hates being treated differently just because he is missing a limb. My father has embraced his catastrophic injury and used his experience to help others that were born with impartial limbs or have lost an arm. From him, I learned at a young age to treat everyone the same, even if they had a physical or mental limitation.

This carried over into my 1st grade classroom when I met John Ryan. John Ryan and his twin brother had a severe case of Downs Syndrome. While other kids in the class mocked him, I befriended him. John Ryan's Special Education teacher noticed how well I connected with him and had me visit the Special Education classroom as a peer tutor to the other students. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in that classroom; there, I met some of my best grade school friends. Even as a kid, I felt the intrinsic rewards of working with the special needs population.

In addition, I have always enjoyed cheerleading. Growing up, I cheered for several youth football squads and participated in some competitive cheerleading. Special needs cheerleading combines two things I love—working with the special needs population and cheerleading.

In the fall of 2008, I observed the coach of a special needs cheerleading squad for a term project. She and I briefly spoke about her coaching experience, and as it turns out, she is the one who created competitive special needs cheerleading. While trying to write my term paper, I noticed that literature on cheerleading was scarce and narrowly focused. Furthermore, I noticed a lack of empirical studies on coaching special needs athletes; in fact, there is no known research literature to date on special needs cheerleading. Therefore, I proposed to pioneer a study on special needs cheerleading.

I chose a phenomenological study, due to the lack of information on special needs cheerleading coaches. The limited special needs literature highlights the benefits and barriers of working with the special needs population. I felt that there would be a similar consensus from coaches—that it is difficult but rewarding to work with the special needs population. It was my hope that my study will be read by others considering coaching a special needs squad, and that it will help them in their decision to coach.

Brief Literature Review

Cheerleading has been examined by several researchers. However, each of these studies has a very narrow focus. Generally, cheerleading literature focuses on eating disorders (Black, Larkin, Coster, Levernez, & Abood, 2003; Thompson & Digsby, 2004;), high injury risk (Jacobson, Redus, & Palmer, 2005) and the sociological/economical aspects of cheerleading (Adams & Bettis, 2003; Hobson, 2009). There is little psychology research on cheerleading other than that pertaining to eating disorders. In addition, special needs sport is rarely analyzed in sport psychology literature. There are, however, a few articles pertaining to the Special

Olympics. Most of these articles describe the different disabilities of Special Olympics participants (Howe & Jones, 2006). There are some that focus on how the Special Olympics affects the perceived competence and well-being of the athletes (Weiss, Diamond, Denmark, & Lovald, 2003). Finally, *The Washington Post* (2007) highlighted the benefits of athletes participating in special needs cheerleading, but did not mention coaches or volunteers (Curtis, 2007; St. George, 2007). None of these studies focuses on the actual psychological aspect of coaching a special needs team or on the benefits of coaching such a team.

In addition, much of literature that is on special education in the classroom focuses on the struggles and benefits that come from being a teacher (Mastropieri, 2001). While the Special Olympics website (www.specialolympics.org) states that coaches help build self-worth, and that being a coach can be one of the most rewarding experiences of a lifetime, there is a limited amount of actual empirical research (Weiss, et al., 2003). Since there is not any research pertaining specifically to the experiences of special needs coaches, it seemed that a fruitful area of research would be a phenomenological study on the experiences of such coaches. It was possible that in this type of study, coaches would discuss benefits, barriers, and items pertaining to their own life satisfaction as a result of being a special needs cheerleading coach.

Statement of the Problem

There are several claims about the increased self-worth and quality of life of special needs coaches and educators; however, there is no empirical research to support these claims. Other research articles state that persons working with the special needs population will receive great benefits, but they are not detailed. Additionally, research on special needs coaching as well

as cheerleading is generally lacking and narrow-focused. Therefore, a phenomenological study conducted related to the experience of coaching special needs athletes seems necessary and could contribute to the sport psychology knowledge base.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of special needs cheerleading coaches and the themes that may arise as a result of their experiences. This study was also intended to add diversity to previous literature on cheerleading and special needs sport.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was the lack of participants that were available to be interviewed. Coaches that were interested in participating in the study were selected based upon their proximity to the researcher and participation at a large-scale cheerleading competition. This made for a convenience sample (Fink, 2009). In addition, since the majority of interviews occurred over a cheerleading competition weekend, coaches were somewhat limited in the time that they could provide for an interview.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to current coaches of special needs cheerleading squads at one competition in the south-eastern United States. However, the number of coaches interviewed represented approximately 25% of the total number of special needs cheerleading coaches that coach competitive squads across the U.S. The scope of the study was delimited to phenomenological interviews about the experience of coaching cheerleading for special needs population and the quality of life of those coaches as a result of these experiences.

Definitions

COMPETITIVE/ALL-STAR CHEERLEADING- A high-risk sport that involves teams of cheerleaders (female and or male) that cheer, dance, and (in some cases) tumble and perform stunts. These squads compete against other squads that are similar in ability for prizes and awards (www.USAF.net, 2009).

SPECIAL NEEDS- Individuals that require assistance, individualized attention, or special care due to a medical, mental, or physical disability (Mauro, 2009).

SPECIAL NEEDS CHEERLEADING- A competitive/ all-star cheerleading squad that is comprised of all special needs members (St. George, 2007).

SPECIAL NEEDS CHEERLEADING COACH- One that coaches a special needs cheerleading squad. Generally, coaches must have a background in special needs education or training through the Special Olympics, as well as some general knowledge of cheerleading and how to minimize the risks associated with cheerleading stunts and tumbling (St. George, 2007; USAF, 2009).

STUNT/STUNTING- Any skill (in cheerleading) in which a top person is supported above the performance surface by one or more persons. Also referred to as a “mount” (USAF, 2009).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

In this chapter, I detail the main topics in cheerleading literature: (a) injury risk; (b) eating disorders and body image; and (c) sociological effects of cheerleading. Special needs education literature that is pertinent to the current study is also explored. Additionally, quality of life (QOL) literature that relates to sport and the current study is detailed and evaluated. I also provide a brief history of special needs cheerleading and its rise in popularity.

Research Foci Related to Cheerleading

Cheerleading has grown in popularity over the last decade. There are an estimated 3.5 million all-star cheerleaders in the United States (Adams & Bettis, 2003). Although cheerleading is a sport at most high schools and colleges, it has not been the focus of a lot of scholarly research (Adams & Bettis, 2003; Thompson & Digsby, 2004). One popular area of cheerleading research has dealt with the risk of injury in cheerleading (Jacobson, Hubbard, Redus, 2004; Jacobson, Redus, Palmer, 2005). In two studies, one pertaining to collegiate female cheerleaders (Jacobson, et al 2005) and the other to high school female cheerleaders (Jacobson, et al. 2004) researchers found that 61.9% of high school cheerleaders and 78.0% of collegiate cheerleaders have had an injury that required medical attention. The cheerleaders missed an overall average of 1.8 practice days due to injury, with 16.7% of collegiate athletes missing five or more days of practice (Jacobson, et al. 2004). The purpose of both studies was for high school sporting officials and the NCAA to start an injury reporting system for cheerleading just as they have done in other sports. This will also provide cheerleading squads with athletic trainers that other

sports teams are provided with for safety reasons. The researchers argue that cheerleaders are at high risk for catastrophic injury (e.g., a non-fatal injury that results in either severe spinal cord damage or permanent brain damage) as approximately two thirds of catastrophic injuries that have occurred with female athletes between 1981 and 2001 were related to cheerleading. Ironically, while 86.7% of collegiate cheerleaders were treated by doctors and 40.0% required injury-related surgery, most NCAA-affiliated teams did not have a team-specific doctor or trainer (Jacobson, et al. 2004). In both studies, Jacobson et al. used a stratified random sample and the same questionnaire to survey how many days of practice were missed due to injury, the duration and frequency of practices, specifically where injuries occurred on the body (e.g. head, neck, etc.) and the number of times an injury occurred. The instrument used was reliable and valid; however, the main problem with the survey was that it lacked a category for rib injury (which is fairly common with twisting stunts) and multiple injuries affiliated with one incidence. For example, an athlete may be dropped from a stunt and injure her wrist, neck, and arm on the same fall.

Two other areas of cheerleading that are frequently researched are body image and eating disorders. On some cheerleading squads, cheerleaders are required to “make weight” to be on a team just as wrestlers are (Thompson & Digsby, 2003). Since cheerleaders are often scored in competition based upon athleticism and looks, females participating in the sport may be at risk of developing eating disorders. In a study by Thompson and Digsby (2003), 156 high school cheerleaders filled out questionnaires about their body dissatisfaction, eating and dieting habits as well as exercise orientation. Preliminary results from this study showed no statistical differences between cheerleaders and a non-cheerleading population of a similar age. This may

be due to a small sample size (e.g. $N = 156$ cheerleaders out of an estimated 3.5 million) or a lack of clarity related to the instruments used. The researchers still argued that all teenaged females are at a “high risk” for eating disorders. Other researchers have suggested that cheerleaders are at an increased risk, with as many as one in three collegiate cheerleaders suffering from an eating disorder (Black, et al., 2003).

In sport sociology, there is some gender research which focuses on the fact that young female cheerleaders are required to be “feminine” and “sexual” while cheering for male sport teams (Adams & Bettis, 2003). These authors suggested that cheerleaders submit to the *feminine apologetic* by dressing in sexy uniforms and makeup to “apologize” for their unfeminine muscularity. Additionally, Adams and Bettis state that cheerleading is a gendered sport (e.g. 97% of the participants are female) that does not challenge traditional female roles in society. In general, female cheerleaders are seen as subservient to males on the teams that they are cheering for and on. Most importantly, Adams and Bettis recognize that “A staple of American schools, American life, and popular culture, the cheerleader, however, has received scant attention in scholarly research” (Adams & Bettis, 2003, p. 73). While the concept of social pressures of young cheerleaders to be “sexual” and “feminine” are important areas to examine, other aspects of cheerleading should be studied especially with the large number of participants and the growing popularity of the sport.

Research Related to Special Needs Athletes

There is also a lack of information on the special needs population in sport. There have been several studies pertaining to the Special Olympics and Paralympics (Howe & Jones, 2006; Weiss, Diamond, Demark, & Lovald, 2003). However, there is still a great need for further

research. There is also a great lack of research on coaching special needs athletes and on the coach-athlete relationship in special needs sport. The Special Olympics and Paralympics do have information on how to become a coach and training sessions for coaches (www.specialolympics.org). In this information, they talk about the benefits that both the coach and athlete will receive; however, there is no empirical research cited to support these claims.

Howe and Jones (2006) critically examined the current classification system of the Paralympic movement. The authors felt that the current classification system gives unfair disadvantage to some athletes (e.g. a swimmer with no legs may compete against a swimmer that is only missing one arm) and that competitive special need sports should adopt a more specific classification system for disabled athletes. Most importantly, Howe and Jones (2006) emphasized that the motto for the Paralympics is “empower, inspire, and achieve,” so that athletes will be empowered to participate in sport, and, hopefully, that this will inspire others to achieve great things.

There is some Special Education literature that reports the benefits and barriers of being a Special Education teacher (Mastropieri, 2001). Mastropieri discusses various challenges she faced during her first year of teaching in a Special Education classroom. While most of the challenges were pertaining to things outside of the classroom (e.g., scheduling meetings and communicating with parents, specific demands of the school and curriculum), she did mention some of the barriers pertaining to working with the special needs population. Namely, Mastropieri described the challenge related to managing the behavior of her students and the

internal struggle of when to mainstream¹ them. She mentioned that, at times, she wanted her students to be mainstreamed with non-special needs students. However, there were also times when they needed to be included with the special needs population and receive individual attention. In this article, Mastropieri sums up special needs education as, “Extrinsic rewards minimal, intrinsic rewards unlimited” (p. 66). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Mastropieri stated that one of her biggest barriers was a lack of training and resources that were available to special needs educators. One aim of the present study, therefore, was to be an informative aid to coaches and potential coaches of special needs cheerleading squads.

A great deal of Special Education literature and special needs in sport literature deals with empowering the population with competency and an increased quality of life (Carpenter, Bloom, & Boat, 1999; Weiss, Diamond, Demark, & Lovald, 2003; specialolympics.org). Carpenter et al. (1999) stated that special education is becoming more outcome-oriented. That is that special education is more focused on having the special needs population achieve competency, joy, and individual empowerment as opposed to academic learning (Carpenter et al., 1999). Carpenter and colleagues also challenged Special Educators to use socially valid practices and procedures such as peer tutoring and cooperative learning with the special needs population to empower them. While informative, these researchers do not to show how these practices add to the coaching or teaching experience.

Weiss, et al. (2003) randomly selected 97 Canadian Special Olympics (SO) athletes and interviewed them about their SO experience. Additionally, parents of these participants gave

¹ Mainstreaming or inclusion is when students with special needs are placed in a regular/traditional classroom during specific time periods based upon the skills of the student. For instance, a special needs student with average mathematics ability for non-needs students his age may be placed in a math class with non-needs students (Encarta, 2009).

direct reporting of information such as medals won and the changes seen in their child as a result of SO participation. Results suggested a positive correlation between medals earned and time in the SO with perceived self-competency and adaptive behaviors. The results of this study implied that participation in the SO is beneficial for the special needs population. The researchers also urged coaches and parents to work to instill self-competency and well-being into the lives of the athletes. While these researchers had a very narrowly focused pool (e.g., using only Canadian athletes and a small overall population of SO athletes), they found valuable information. The athletes that participated in the SO had an improved sense of well-being. Readers of the present study are encouraged to visit the SO website to view resources with which to help these athletes reach a better quality of life (www.specialolympics.org). In addition, the United States All Star Federation stated that helping these athletes will “create special memories for all of us” (www.usasf.net).

With the need for instructors to instill life satisfaction and competency lessons within their athletes, it is possible that the coaches and instructors have an improved life satisfaction due to their time working with the population. This link, however, has only been suggested (Curtis, 2007; Mastropieri, 2001; www.specialolympics.org). It might be fruitful to investigate the coaches of special needs athletes to evaluate if they, too, experience the improved life satisfaction that has been reported by the athletes and the families of these athletes as a result of sport participation. Furthermore, Theresa Crouse (2005) a writer for cheerleading magazines stated, “Though the rewards for coaches and volunteers may not be tangible, it is unquestionably lasting” (p. 35).

A 2007 article in the *Washington Post* followed the successes of several special needs cheerleading squads (St. George, 2007). In this article, writer Natalie St. George interviewed parents of special needs cheerleaders. Many of the parents commented on the increased confidence in their children as well as on how they improved their social skills. In response, author, mother of 12 and founder of mommylife.net, Barbra Curtis expressed that the article was excellent in reporting the benefits of participation in special needs cheerleading for the athletes, but that the writer “missed the benefits for the cheerleader peers who volunteer to help” (http://mommylife.net/archives/2007/09/special_needs_c.html).

History of Special Needs Cheerleading

In 2000, Coach Mary Fehrenbach and her two daughters moved to Lexington, Kentucky (M. Fehrenbach, personal conversation, November, 2008). While living in Virginia, Mary’s daughters, neither of which are special needs, were involved in gymnastics. She saw a sign at the gym calling for Special Olympics coaches. Coach Mary became a certified Special Olympics coach for gymnastics as well as for track and field. When her daughters moved to Kentucky, they discovered that cheerleading was very popular there. Mary’s daughters joined the Kentucky Elite cheerleading gym. There, Mary discovered that there were no programs for special needs individuals. In 2001, using her Special Olympics coaching knowledge, Mary started the first ever special needs cheerleading squad (St. George, 2007). At first, the special needs squad performed exhibition routines at local competitions. Over time, more gyms and coaches became interested in Mary’s idea. Now, there are over 200 special needs cheerleading squads in 32 states, and the

sport is expanding to Canada, Mexico, China, and Australia (Presson & Fehrenbach, 2008). At the national cheerleading championships in 2010, there were 18 special needs squads competing in two divisions that were based upon size (Cheersport, 2010).

Summary

In general, the cheerleading literature is narrowly focused, and since cheerleading is not considered a sport by the Special Olympics in most states or the Paralympics, it has not been included within any special needs sport literature. In addition, research done with the special needs athlete population has not focused on the coach; rather, it focuses on the athlete. However, several researchers have provided advice and suggestions for what a coach should do, and how a coach should feel, which is positive (Mastropieri, 2001; www.specialolympics.org; www.usasf.net). Finally, there have been specific requests from parents of special needs children involved in cheerleading for research related to the benefits to those that coach these squads (Curtis, 2007).

Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to integrate the scholarly research of cheerleading, coaching, and special needs sport by interviewing coaches of special needs cheerleading squads about their experience. Specifically, coaches were asked about the benefits and barriers of coaching as well as how they think their life satisfaction has changed as a result of coaching this population. It was believed that participants would describe similar themes of having an increased general life satisfaction as a result of coaching a special needs cheerleading squad. Furthermore, this information would identify potential benefits and barriers of coaching a special needs cheerleading squad, and it was hoped that it would help other coaches as well as individuals interested in coaching special needs cheerleading.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Overview

In this chapter, the methodology and data analyses are explained. Additionally, rationale for the chosen aspect of qualitative analysis is given. This study was conducted using phenomenological interviews.

Participants

Nine coaches of special needs cheerleading squads participated in this study (see Table 1). However, one interview was not used due to lack of length. Therefore, there were a total of eight participants in this study. There was also one special needs educator interviewed for the pilot study. A special needs educator was chosen to provide insight on the benefits and barriers of working with the special needs population, and because coaches and teachers are often paralleled with one another in research studies.

Demographic Questionnaire

Coaches were given a demographic questionnaire to fill out for basic information about the coaching population (See Appendix A). Specific demographic questions that were addressed were gender, age, race, ethnicity, and marital status. These are each things that have been related to QOL in previous studies (Gentner, 2004). Additionally, coaches were asked if they had any children that were involved in cheerleading, their children's ages (if applicable), and if they had any children or immediate family members that were special needs. The rationale for these demographic questions was that coaches with special needs children or family members may

have a different experience of coaching as opposed to those with no special needs family members, no children, or no prior cheerleading experience. Additionally, coaches may respond differently to working with the special needs population based upon their previous exposure to the special needs population. For example, a coach with no special needs family members may have an increased life satisfaction because they are feeling great intrinsic rewards for working with a population that they have never worked with before. Then again, coaches who have special needs children may have an increased life satisfaction because they are potentially helping their own children and family which may add to life satisfaction. Number of years coaching special needs cheerleading and the number of years working with the special needs population were also noted.

Procedures

A general overview of the procedure of phenomenological interviewing is shown in Figure 1 (Dale, 1996). This section details the process of phenomenological interviewing including: (a) bracketing interviews; (b) the pilot study; and (c) the main study. Furthermore, the process of transcribing and thematizing the interviews is detailed.

Bracketing interviews. It is key to phenomenological research that the researcher approach the topic without preconceived bias or notions of what she will hear in the interviews (Simpson, 2009). Although it is impossible for a researcher to completely put aside her biases (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), bracketing is a necessary component for the researcher so that she is aware of her own expectations of the study and any perceptions she may have of the population that she will be interviewing. While there was a bracketing interview with the researcher prior to the interviewing of participants, bracketing was a constant process of reflection that the researcher

participated in (Simpson, 2009). Upon IRB approval (see Appendix B), the bracketing interview with the researcher was conducted by a professor with a great deal of experience and knowledge in phenomenological research. This bracketing interview lasted approximately 27 minutes. The interviewer bracketed and verified the themes that stood out to him at the end of the interview. The researcher then transcribed the interview and presented it to a research group who also identified the same themes and potential biases. In this bracketing interview, the researcher's knowledge about special needs cheerleading, the special needs population, coaching, and the literature pertaining to the study were explored. From this interview and analysis the themes were: (a) intrinsic benefits felt from working with the special needs population; (b) a “connection” felt by the researcher to the special needs population; (c) a need to help members of the population feel equal; (d) previous experiences of observing a special needs cheerleading squad and coach; and (e) the enthusiasm expressed by the researcher about the topic.

Pilot study. Upon completion of the bracketing interview, a pilot interview was conducted with a special needs educator in the area. She is a personal contact of the researcher. The wording of the interview question was changed slightly from the actual interview so that it was applicable to this interviewee. The pilot study is an essential part of qualitative research because it allows the interviewer to become more comfortable with the protocol and have a “trial run.” Also, it allows the interviewees to give feedback about the things the researcher can do to improve her study, while providing feedback on the research questions (VanMaanen, 1983). This pilot study interview lasted 29 minutes. This interview was transcribed and sent to the pilot interviewee for verification. Then, this interview was thematized and sent to the interviewee for verification of themes. She gave positive feedback on the themes found and provided the

interviewee with constructive advice for making the interview process more comfortable for interviewees, such as explaining that the recording device was a computer. In this interview, the participant focused on the need for special needs children to be given equal opportunities as non-needs children. In addition, she spoke passionately about the positive feelings she felt when working with the population. For example, she stated, “When a child with Down's syndrome smiles, they smile with their whole body. Seeing that is a feeling that you just can't put into words, which is why I work with this group.”

Main study. For the main study, the head of the special needs division of all-star cheerleading, Bill Presson, was contacted via information on the United States All-Star Federation website (www.usasf.net). The nature of the study was explained to him and permission to contact special needs coaches was obtained. He happily consented and volunteered to personally contact coaches and encourage their participation in the study. In order to interview a large number of participants in a short time, coaches of teams participating in the 2010 Cheersport Nationals Competition—the largest cheerleading competition in the world (www.cheersport.net)--were contacted via e-mail (see Appendix C). The nature of the study was explained to them. If they were interested in participating in the study, they were prompted to reply to the researcher and an interview date and time were arranged. In addition, Bill Presson sent a personal note to coaches to encourage their participation. Coaches were reminded that the study was entirely voluntary and that they would not be compensated monetarily for their time. The researcher traveled to the weekend-long competition and interviewed eight coaches over the course of three days. One other coach was interviewed at a later date to assure saturation of the themes.

Phenomenological interviews. At the interview, the researcher administered an informed consent form (see Appendix D) and a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) to each coach. In order to establish rapport with the interviewees, the researcher explained her personal interest in the study including her father's disability and her previous experience as both a cheerleader and volunteer with the special needs population. By establishing herself as a former cheerleader, this most likely helped coaches feel more comfortable when explaining aspects of cheerleading that may be foreign to someone with no experience in the sport. Additionally, each coach was given the option to choose a pseudonym for him/herself and his/her gym, as to protect the privacy of the coach, athletes, and affiliated gym. All of the coaches declined this option and gave verbal consent to use their names and the name of their gym; however, athletes names and identifying information were changed as to protect the athletes. After each coach gave his/her consent, declined to provide a pseudonym, and asked any questions he/she had about the process, the researcher began the phenomenological interview.

A phenomenological interview consists of a single base question that is followed up with prompting questions in order to gain more information (Dale, 1996). The basic question was: “In your experience as the coach of a special needs cheerleading squad, what stands out for you?” Examples of prompting questions were: (a) Could you tell me more about this? ; (b) Would you care to elaborate on [specific item]?: and (c) How does [specific item] make you feel? A total of eight coaches and six interviews were used for this study. Two interviews consisted of a coach and assistant coach being interviewed together due to a combination of time restraints and because the coaches saw themselves as a team. After each interview, field notes were taken to

note the environment in which the interview took place as well as any information about body language and perceived personality traits were noted (see Appendix E).

Data Analysis

Demographic survey. Quantitative demographic survey data (i.e. age, number of years coaching) were analyzed using SPSS, a computer program for statistical analysis (Graziano & Raulin, 2007). The demographic data were analyzed with basic descriptive statistics (i.e., mean, median, and standard deviation). The participants were eight current special needs cheerleading coaches from six different gyms. All coaches interviewed were Caucasian. Male (N =2) and female (N =6) coaches ranged in age from 18 to 53 years. Four of the coaches were former all-star cheerleaders themselves. Five of the coaches had children of their own and at least one child currently involved in cheerleading. Only two of the coaches were parents of special needs children, and both of these children had Downs Syndrome. None of the coaches had a background in special needs education. A brief description of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Phenomenological interviews. Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher transcribed each verbatim. To ensure the privacy of the athletes, names and identifying information were changed. Then, the researcher sent a copy of the transcribed interviews to the interviewees via e-mail so that they could verify if what they had said was a truthful representation. Additionally, the coaches were allowed to elaborate on statements they made for clarity, or delete statements that they do not want to be used. This is a way of increasing the validity of the research (Dale, 1986; VanMaanen, 1983). There were no changes made by any of the coaches.

Phenomenological research group. After validation by the participants, five of the transcripts were presented to an existential phenomenology research group. This group was comprised of people of various ages, races, ethnicities, and educational backgrounds which helped to bring diverse perspectives to the interview analyses (Simpson, 2009). Additionally, this group had read over and discussed the bracketing interview so that they were aware of the researcher's potential biases. The group was facilitated by a professor with experience and knowledge of existential phenomenology. The group signed a confidentiality agreement which covered all interviews that they read (see Appendix F). In the group, one participant read aloud the interviewer's portion of the transcript while another member read the interviewee's portion. Several times during the readings of the transcripts, members of the group highlighted and discussed emerging themes within each individual interview while the researcher took notes. Members were encouraged to highlight and mark the transcripts for emerging themes; the marked transcripts were then returned to the researcher after the readings. Once the researcher became comfortable with the process of the research group, she thematized the final two interviews by herself.

The researcher then used the themes highlighted by the research team to create general themes that arose amongst the interviews. There were a few main themes with several sub-themes that emerged from the main themes. The thematic structure was refined twice and then presented to the research in the form of a chart. The research group then confirmed the themes.

Confirmation of thematic structure. Once the thematic structure was created and supporting quotations were found, a general overview of the structure was sent to all coaches. Each of the coaches responded to confirm the thematic structure. For example, one participant

responded, “Looks great to me!...Please feel free to ask if you need any more help in the future” (William, personal communication, March 1, 2011). In addition, whenever possible, coaches' exact wording was used in the themes to keep the structure as close as possible to their experience (Simpson, 2009).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of special needs cheerleading coaches and to add diversity to previous cheerleading and special needs sport literature. A total of eight participants and six interviews were used to create a thematic structure. The basic thematic structure, themes, sub-themes, and supporting quotations are provided in this chapter.

Thematic Structure

Meaning units were highlighted in each interview. Meaning units were defined as “a word or number of words that reflect a particular meaning different from other units” (Simpson, 2009). Once meaning units were found, then themes were formulated. Amongst the meaning units, seven major themes arose that characterized the experience of special needs coaches: (a) *Enthusiasm*; (b) *Parents*; (c) *Us vs. “Them”*; (d) *Improvements vs. Struggles*; (e) *Outside Help*; (f) *The Athletes*; and (g) *Community*. A list of the themes and sub-themes can be found in Figure 2. Within the seven major themes, figures and grounds were selected. A ground theme is the background against which all of the other themes emerge (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), and a graphic relationship between the ground themes was created (see Figure 3). Within the eight themes, one theme--*Community*--emerged as the primary ground theme that encompassed the rest of the themes. From the theme of community there were two secondary ground themes, *the athletes* and *outside help*, that encompassed the figural themes of *Parents*, *Us vs. “Them”*, *Improvement vs. Struggles*, and *Enthusiasm*. Within each figural theme there were sub-themes.

The figural themes, secondary ground themes and primary ground theme are detailed below with supporting quotations from interviewees.

Enthusiasm

This is the first figural theme. Enthusiasm emerged in the form of the coach's passion for the sport of special needs cheerleading and love for the athletes. Enthusiasm was present throughout all of the interviews with frequent comments such as, "I just love it!" (William). In this theme, sub-themes of *Why I do it* and *Spreading the Sport* also emerged.

Why I do it. Without prompting, the coaches mentioned why it is they coach special needs cheerleading. It is interesting to note that most of the coaches were in a volunteer position—that is they are not paid for their time. So, why do these coaches give up at least one night a week and often have weekend-long competitions that they travel to without compensation? As Bobette said:

Even though I am a mother [of a special needs child], I get more out of it....That's just a part of my life. They're part of me. (Bobette)

You can learn so much more from them than they will *ever* learn from you...you're just gonna learn and get so much more out of it than what you put in. (Jerica)

Everyone is so proud of what they've accomplished and that's probably the best feeling for me to know that I've helped them accomplish that and helping them get that feeling that I got for so many years. 'Cause like...I was competing. Everyone cheering for me was a great feeling. It's even better to have people cheering for them and you know helping them. (Caitlin)

I've coached a little bit of sports growing up with my son and um that was fine, and I enjoyed doing that. The problem with that, but I never felt the sense of accomplishment as I did—as I do when I, when we're able to get these athletes and show them what they can do.(Bill)

I've It's very rewarding. Very very rewarding. I think it's one of the most rewarding things ever done in my life. (Trish)

I don't get anything out of it...Yeah, like I don't get paid, I just volunteer. I just don't get anything out of it besides seeing them happy. I guess it--it makes me happy to see them happy. (William)

The very first team that I had (choking up), um one of my girls said to me, she said “All I ever wanted to do was to be a cheerleader.” So that's why I do it.... I think once you work with special needs population—it's a population-- you can't walk away from them, because it fulfills your life as much....I get so much more than I could ever give back. (Sharon)

Overall, they've taught me a lot. They really have. Your parents always tell you to be a good person. You know, do the right thing to people so that you can put your head at the end of the night, and they (the athletes) make you live that way. They truly—that's how they live. They're really good people, and they have kind hearts...That's really one of the best things that I always take away. (Vickie)

Spreading the sport. Many coaches are also enthusiastic about spreading the sport of special needs cheerleading across the United States. Sharon and Trish both advocated to have cheerleading added to the list of Special Olympics sports in their states. Bill pioneered the concept of competitive special needs cheerleading and has helped with its spread across the United States and several other countries. Vickie commented that so many other cheerleaders in her gym wanted to help with the special needs team when she stated, “I wish I could take more than 13 helpers!” (Vickie).

In two of the interviews, the participants even tried to recruit me (the researcher) to coach a special needs squad in my community where there are no squads. Bobette and Jerica promised in their interview:

B: For you, personally, if you were a cheerleader and you love special needs children, you need to be a coach one day.

J: Yeah, I promise...It will change your life.

Parents

The *Parents* of the athletes are one of the major figural themes that arose from the interviews. Each of the coaches mentioned some sort of parental involvement on their team. Within this theme, coaches discussed an *Amazement* of the parents, the *Input* parents give the coach about the athletes' physical and mental capabilities as well as putting in time, and *Struggles* between the coach and parents about how the athletes should be treated and how the team should be coached.

Amazement. Coaches indicated an amazement of the parents with their ability to balance all of the things that their children do. In this regard, coaches spoke with great enthusiasm and admiration for the parents. As one coach put it:

I have my oldest child on this team is 29 years old. She can't drive. She can't go to places on her own. Her parents are still taking her. Which I think the dedication the parents have is unmarked by anybody!...These parents drive them all the time, and they're in multiple things...They have horseback riding they, they have bowling...and their parents take the all the time. And just the dedication to do that with your child full time is unbelievable to me (Trish).

Trish also indicated that the strength of the parents in dealing with the various disabilities their children have was also a source of amazement. She stated, "I don't know that I have the strength as a parent that if my kid's in the hospital having surgery because of having a problem with their heart and I don't know if I would be able to handle that! These parents do, they get over the hurdle."

Input. Parents provided a lot of input to coaches about their children. Several coaches indicated that they had meetings with athletes' parents to discuss the physical and mental limitations of the athletes. As Bill put it, "They're [the parents] just glad to share and be a part of it."

The parents know their children better than the coaches. One coach was unsure that an athlete was comfortable being a part of the team. She told a story of a severely autistic cheerleader who would distance herself from the group. The parent assured the coach that, “She would tell her mother all the way home 'I love cheerleading. I love cheerleading!' (Sharon)”. Furthermore, parents have been more than willing to tell coaches to push the physical limitations of their children :“They're the biggest ones that went to me in the beginning and said 'Push em! Don't stop it. Don't let it be that they can't do it. They can. Just push em.' And I was like “Alright!” so I did. (Trish)”.

William spoke of the time that parents' input as well in their willingness to help out the coach in any way possible was a great help to him:

It was just some parents came down and were like, “If you need us to help you, we'll help you like memorize where my child is and all this...” Parents are just as supportive.

Finally, Sharon supported this statement by saying “You get a lot of information from the parents.”

Struggles. Coaches also identified that there were sometimes struggles with the parents at certain times. However, these struggles seemed fairly minimal; generally when speaking about them, the coaches seemed to have a light-hearted tone. For example, Bill joked:

Dealing with special needs par—athlete's parents is unique a lot of times...it becomes funny after a couple of years ,uh, and the special needs athlete's parent turns into a regular kid's parent. And then, yeah, they wanna know, “Well what are we doing to improve the routine? What's the other teams doing?” You know, “How are we gonna compete against this team?”...it's really funny to see it sometimes. Uh, cause I've already had parents that started scouting the teams and wanna try to see youtube videos of the other teams (Bill).

He later goes on to say, “There are times when I will get a text from a parent that says, 'Oh, Susie can't be there this weekend'...I would say the struggle [of coaching] outweighs the pride for a little bit there” (Bill).

Parents can also be overly protective or fight for their children. This also creates tension as Trish suggests:

You know...they have to fight constantly for their kids. I mean they really *really* fight for their children. Sometimes to the extreme where it's like, “Okay...back off...it's okay.” But when you've been fighting for your child for 20 years, it's hard to back off from fighting for [your] child (Trish).

Us vs. “Them”

This theme emerged in several forms. This is the *comparison of the special needs population to the non-needs population*, or, more specifically *the comparison of special needs cheerleading to non-needs cheerleading*. Often, coaches explained their philosophies by comparing their squad to a non-special needs squad or their cheerleaders to non-needs cheerleaders. Many coaches also expressed the need to treat their athletes like “normal” athletes or *the desire of the athletes to be treated as “normal”* and even discussed *assimilation* of their athletes into “traditional” society.

Comparison of the special needs population to the non-needs population. Coaches would highlight differences between the special needs population and the non-needs population in their interviews. For example, Jerica heavily discussed how the special needs population is more easy-going and loving than the traditional population:

But more than anything is like really what we learn from *them*...They don't hold regret. You know, they can be mad at us for making them do something one minute and, love on us the next...They don't worry about that little stuff that we worry about. (Jerica)

There were also several comments about the social development and actions of the special needs population such as, "You don't see that with regular children" (Bobette). This was further supported by Trish who stated:

And how many teenagers...typical teenagers would be mean, and hold grudges, and not be happy, let's keep it that way... But they [the special needs athletes] don't. They let it go. They move on. You know, it's like life is too short. They're always happy-go-lucky having a good time. (Trish)

Comparison of special needs cheerleading to non-needs cheerleading. Every participant did some form comparison of special needs cheerleading to non-needs cheerleading. Jerica and Caitlin, both former all-star cheerleaders, compared their previous experience to the experience their cheerleaders have. For example they stated, "It's all about competition. All you do is go over and over the routine. With special needs children you have to go over and over it even more" (Caitlin). William coaches both special needs and non-needs squads; when comparing the two, he said, "I mean they just do like little random things that are just...that my normal...like the normal teams wouldn't do. They just try so much harder than normal kids most of the time."

Vickie highlighted the great spirit of special needs cheerleaders as opposed to non-needs cheerleaders by stating, "They appreciate absolutely everything whereas some of the non-needs cheerleaders that you work with, they're not so grateful. These kids are very grateful." This was further supported by Jerica who gave an example of the support of a special needs team as compared to the experience of a coach on a non-needs team:

In um the special needs team all the girls really love each other and they want to see each other do well. And so, when one person hits a stunt and gets it right, you know the whole

team takes a second to clap for them and we say, “Yay! You know, good job!” And I think that’s so much...that’s a big difference is that we take time to slow down and focus on every little accomplishment that we make. You know...you’re going to pull all your hair out if you don’t stop to enjoy it. And I know that’s how a lot of coaches with typically developed teams are. (Jerica)

Finally, coaches highlighted both the ability and inability of their athletes as compared to non-needs cheerleaders. Again, Jerica spoke highly of one of her athletes’ ability to do a difficult stunt that “a lot of typically developed kids, most typically developed kids her age cannot do.” On the other hand, coaches spoke of difficulties related to having athletes in wheelchairs (Sharon and Bobette) and incorporating them into a routine; the short attention span of special needs athletes as compared to non-needs athletes was addressed by every coach.

The desire of the athlete to be treated as “normal”. Another *Us vs. “Them”* comparison that was made is that many of the athletes and their parents, “want to be treated like *regular* kids and parents. They don’t wanna be viewed or seen as special needs kids or special needs parents” (Trish). Trish went on to say that:

A lot of times when people see the special needs, and they see me yell at them or correct them they are like, “How can you do that, they’re handicapped!” Well they may be handicapped, but it doesn’t mean they need to be treated any different. Even though they’re in their 20s, their mentality is of a young kid at 10, 11, 12. You wouldn’t let a 10, 11, or 12 year-old talk back to you. (Trish)

When talking about how she wanted to structure her cheerleading program, Sharon mentioned “We wanted to run our program very similarly to the regular all-star programs...we don’t cap them at what they can do” (Sharon).

Assimilation. A few coaches touched on the idea of cheerleading as an outlet for assimilating special needs athletes into the “normal” population. Trish touched on the touch part of the balancing act between assimilating her athletes into being “a part of the gym” while also

“realizing they can't fully be part because they are special needs. That's been a real balancing act.” Finally, Sharon discussed how being mainstreamed at schools has carried over into the cheerleading world for her athletes and the pride that special needs cheerleaders feel from being a part of something that non-needs children do:

A lot of these kids now they go to regular high school. So who do they see all the time? They see cheerleaders at football games, and at basketball games. Now they can say, “Well, I'm a cheerleader too!” So, it makes them feel really good. Um in fact we had uh, um, [a] cheerleader last season who um went to the high school... and decided that she was gonna try out for high school cheerleading, and um....I guess she was there and they were saying, “Well, do you have any cheerleading experience?” and she goes, “I'm a Maryland Twister!” So you know, it's pride--in the fact that she was a part of something that she knew was big. You know, she sees all the other cheerleaders and she knows. You know she knows she's on a special needs team, but it didn't matter. She's a Maryland Twister. That's all that mattered. Because in our...in our region, that's something to be proud of...if you're on that team. So, it was nice to see that she...felt proud to be a Twister just like my daughter felt proud to be a Twister, you know, many years ago. So, it's an interesting dynamic...I think to see how they...um... assimilate themselves into that little world even though they're so very different. (Sharon)

Improvement vs. Struggles

This figural theme emerged when coaches would speak about the improvements that they would see in athletes as compared to the struggles that coaches would face while changing their coaching approach from that of a “normal” approach. It is often thought that the initial response of an interviewee is the most important of their responses. Bill's initial response to the interview question was:

How much improvement the athletes that we get in the program will show in all areas of their life...in their attitude, in their conscientiousness and their thoughtfulness in doing school work....um...in what they pay attention to and how long they are able to pay attention to things. (Bill)

Bobette remembered one milestone that one of her athletes reached when she stated, “she did have cerebral palsy and through what we were doing at the gym with her, her doctors said she

did not need to go see a physical therapist anymore..she was getting that and so much more just working on her gross motor *and* her fine motor *and* her speech” (Bobette). Vickie, Trish, Caitlin, and Sharon told stories about individual athletes who showed great improvements in their physical or social capabilities.

Coaches also spoke about improvements that they would see in the teams. For instance, one coach bragged:

Other parents from other teams who walk up to me and say that, “When I was looking—when I was looking at that team I didn't realize it was a special needs team. I had to look twice.” Because of the way their routine is, it's not a baby routine. It's at their age level, what they should be doing. Uh just everything about it and them um...I don't know how to put it. Having a good time, getting that accomplishment, learning that forward roll, doing the routine by themselves and me not having to tell them what to do and them realizing it it and me just giving a thumbs up to them. (Trish)

Sharon also spoke of the great improvements that her teams and individual athletes would show when she said:

And um it's amazing how much you get out of someone you thought... would be able to ever do it. You know I just..uh I'm...they always...they always exceed our expectations. And um you know sometimes I think our expectations are too high, but they always seem to meet it. And I think that they like that challenge. (Sharon)

However, Improvements do not come without struggles. Several coaches spoke of the trouble of keeping the attention of their athletes, especially in areas where there is a lot going on. William spoke of cheerleading competition that his team was presently at and stated:

When we get here, it's a workout! Trying to get all 19 of them from one end to the other and then warm-ups; you have all these teams everywhere. But, I mean you just have to like keep 'em moving and keep 'em focused, or they'll...they're just like little kids the whole time...run around the floor...and...gotta keep 'em entertained.

Sharon, Trish and Bobette all focused on the necessity of repetition and sameness in practices so that “everytime the athletes come into the gym the know exactly what's gonna happen” (Sharon).

Coaches also emphasized that repetition and sameness helps the athletes to focus and “They're not anticipating, because for some of them anticipating causes panic” (Sharon).

Caitlin also talked about the difficulty of dealing with a sick special needs athlete as opposed to what a “traditional” all-star team would do:

And if they get sick enough and they can't make it to a competition for the regular teams it's just throw somebody in there and do their part. For our team, that means making a change to the entire routine that every athlete needs to learn a new part. Which is extremely difficult after doing repetition and repetition of the—of what they knew and then having to change it for the weekend. It...it screws up the entire team. So the increased health issues make it difficult.

In addition, coaches mentioned how important it is to include every athlete in the routine and how that can be difficult at times, because “we want every child to be spotlighted. Not just one or two” (Bobette). Jerica had also choreographed for a “traditional” team in the past and she compared the struggle of choreographing her special needs team as compared to the other team in this way:

It's a lot different here because those girls, those girls are just numbers. You can put 'em in, just switch them, but with a special needs team its a lot harder because you're trying to work around individual people's needs...and I mean that's a big challenge because, of course, you want your team to look the best it can be, but, other times you want to make sure that everyone's being a part.

Sharon and Vickie also spoke of the struggles of trying to “spotlight” every child in the routine. Sharon also focused on the increased difficulty of trying to choreograph in an athlete that is wheelchair bound. Sharon and Bobette also mentioned the struggle of having low-functioning and high-functioning athletes on the same team.

The Athletes and Outside Help

The themes of *The Athletes* and *Outside Help* were encompassed by the previous figural themes of *Enthusiasm*, *Parents*, *Us vs. “Them”*, and *Improvement vs. Struggles*. Furthermore, the themes of *The Athletes* and *Outside Help* are the necessary components to the main ground theme of *Community*. That is to say that *The Athletes* and *Community* are sub-ground themes of the ground theme, *Community*. The theme of *Outside Help* is broken down into the sub-themes of *Helpers*, *Governing Bodies (Cheersport)*, and *Donations*.

Helpers. Several coaches spoke of having various helpers or “buddies” on their teams. Helpers are other cheerleaders from the gym that volunteer their time to assist the special needs athletes and coaches in any way possible. Helpers were found in a variety of capacities from making the athletes feel a special connection to the gym to serving as someone to assist the special needs athlete in learning her routine. Before she was a coach, Jerica served as a helper in her gym. She recounted her experience by stating:

I can say something to my girl and she will straighten up real fast, where someone else could and they may not respond the same way. You know we have another little girl that you know every time after she does something good she runs...she runs and gives her helper a hug. So it's like little connections they make and it's a lot more specialized with that one-on-one. (Jerica)

Bobette emphasized the importance of her helpers because:

They stay with them throughout the entire routine, so that you know because, for some girls after awhile they do learn the routine and they can do it on their own for a lot—for some of the other girls, they will never be able to do a full two minutes and thirty seconds routine on their own. (Bobette)

Sharon spoke of using helpers with her physically disabled athletes as an added layer of safety.

She stated that the high-quality helpers that she received were “elite athletes...who get college scholarships for cheerleading...they practice three days a week and come in on a day off to help

our athletes” (Sharon). Finally, Vickie spoke of a dilemma of having too many people that want to help out. She has one helper for each cheerleader on her team, and stated “I wish I could take more than 13 helpers!” (Vickie).

Governing bodies (Cheersport). The bulk of the interviews took place at a Cheersport competition. Cheersport is one of the several governing bodies of cheerleading that hosts competitions and takes a part in creating the rules of cheerleading. A couple of coaches spoke of the steps taken by Cheersport to advance special needs cheerleading. Bill mentioned that Cheersport allowed his team to exhibit their routine in front of a large audience before there was a special needs cheerleading division. He also stated that, “ I love competing and I love that Cheersport um actually ranks the teams” (Bill). Ranking the teams allows coaches to know what they can improve on and also rewards athletes for their hard work. Bobette commented on how supportive Cheersport is as compared to other cheerleading organizations by stating, “What stands out for me [is] how open the arms are of the, like, Cheersport, and other associations won't even let the special needs kids come in and be a part of a team” (Bobette). As previously indicated, Sharon and Trish both said that The Special Olympics added cheerleading as a sport in their respective states:

Basically the Special Olympics allows athletes to um govern their organization. And so they send delegates from each of the county areas to these meetings and they discuss what's important to them. And um our athletes who participate in our program who participate in Special Olympics have petitioned the Special Olympics Maryland to add cheerleading as a sport. And um they've worked for a really long time and they got what they wanted! And cheerleading was put into Special Olympics Maryland's list of um sport events um last year for the first time! (Sharon).

Donations. Several coaches spoke of the importance of donations to their squads and gyms. Trish, Bobette, Jerica, Sharon, and William all emphasized that their athletes paid nothing to be

a part of the program because of donations. Bobette said that one thing that stood out the most in her experience was, “Just the passion and the drive behind the owners of the gym to want to help us. Just a great organization.” Sharon indicated that being the parent of a special needs child was more expensive than being the parent of a “typical” child, “ 'cause a lot of times they have medical issues. So um you know, or you need extra therapy, you have physical therapy, or occupational or speech therapy that's outside of the school” (Sharon). William told a story of one of his higher-functioning athletes that entered an essay contest and wrote about her special needs cheerleading squad, “And they got like all this...like free shoes and they were sponsored and all that. They already don't pay the gym anything. They just got extra money...they got like brand new shoes, I think some new bags, new shirts.” Sharon spoke the most about how donations effected her team, “Um all of the expenses for the cheerleaders are, are paid 100 percent. There's nothing paid out of pocket to take the cheerleader to these events” (Sharon). She went on to say how thankful she was to the gym for donating their time and space as well as to the other teams at the gym: “Each team sets a designated goal of \$1000 to earn; that the money goes directly to the special needs program” (Sharon). Finally, she stressed the importance of special needs squads setting up a tax deductible non-profit booster club.

The athletes. The other ground theme that encompassed the figural themes was *The Athletes*. A lot of the special needs coaching experience revolves around the perception of the experience of the athletes. William stated that, “It's about helping them do something they wanna do” (William).

Trish emphasized the importance of also getting to know her athletes outside of cheerleading when she stated:

I try my hardest to be a part of their lives...and um...I also make it a point to go see them outside of this. Like if I know someone has an important track meet, I'll go to the track meet. If I know they like county games, I'll go to county games so I can see everybody. Because I am not just seeing them as a cheerleader, I am seeing them as a person, and then they relate to me more because I'm with them in something else, I'm interested in them as a person, not just a cheerleader that can get me an award. (Trish)

Bill fondly remembered one of his former athletes when he retold this story:

One of the athletes that we had when I was at Kentucky Elite, her name was “Sarah” and...uh...she her...her heart was huge but she still struggled a lot with a lot of the physical aspects of some of the things we were doing. But...but she never quit trying doing anything. So um...she really just wanted to do a cartwheel or a round off. And she would do one but it...but it---it was very weak—I mean just to be perfectly blunt. But we would always continue to encourage her and keep working on it, etc. And then...um one time at Cheersport when I came back after I had been gone—I can't remember if it was a year or for two years...um...I went back to warm ups and Kentucky Elite Showcats were warming up and “Sarah” was back there...and she threw an almost perfect roundoff...and just—everybody went nuts because she had never actually hit it before. And...um...she went nuts, and I went nuts...and... so forget the competition. Forget a jacket, or medal, or anything else. I mean we had our celebration and...I mean everybody who...who...that was...that connected to that felt like we'd all won. Just because she threw her roundoff in the warmups and everybody got to see it. And it was just—I just will never forget that experience back in there. It was incredible. (Bill)

Several other coaches told stories about individual athletes and how they stood out in their experience as a coach. It was best summed up by this statement by William, “I think every special needs coach I've met is just...it's all about the kids.”

Community

The ground theme that encompasses all of the figural themes as well as the sub-ground themes of *the Athletes* and *Outside Help* is *Community*. In fact it appears that the best way to define the experience of a special needs cheerleading coach is with the word *Community*. This word encompasses the special needs population and *The Athletes*, the *Outside Help*, *The Parents*, focuses on the *Struggles and Improvements*, as well as the *Enthusiasm* expressed by

these coaches. *Community* was chosen as the main ground theme because every other theme fits into this idea of a special needs cheerleading community.

Sharon mentioned the all-star community as a whole when she stated, “I have to say that the all-star community as a whole has been extremely welcoming to the athletes. I think that um they had very low expectations for the division itself, but I think that they—most people have changed their minds” (Sharon). She also goes on to say, “This population takes care of each other.” Jerica also commented that she had learned so much by helping in the community of special needs cheerleading by stating, “If you just step back and take your time...invest your time in something that's so much more than what your world revolves around, then you know you're just gonna learn and get so much more out of it” (Jerica).

While they came from varying backgrounds with different experiences of working with the special needs population, the eight coaches in this study all somehow reflected on the community aspect of working with a special needs athlete. In at the end of the day, each coach reminded me that it is not about them and what they get from it—it is simply about the athletes. Sharon told a touching story about a girl that had always wanted the opportunity to become a cheerleader, and because of special needs cheerleading and its coaches she had the chance to achieve a dream. This is where the title of the present study derives from.

Summary

A total of seven themes emerged from the interviews with special needs coaches. What is unique about each of the themes is that nearly every coach spoke about every theme. These four figural themes and three ground themes make up the experience of these special needs cheerleading coaches.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

In this chapter, major findings are discussed first. Then connections to previous research are made, and practical implications for sport psychologists, potential coaches of special needs cheerleading squads, and parents considering letting their special needs child participate in cheerleading are given. Finally, future directions and concluding remarks are given.

Major Findings

There were a total of seven major themes that arose from the eight interviews. Those themes included a main ground theme of *community*, two other ground themes of *the athletes* and *outside help*, as well as the figural themes of *parents, us vs. "them"*, *improvements vs. struggles*, and *enthusiasm*. While the Special Olympics website (www.specialolympics.org) is quick to highlight the good feelings one receives from coaching special needs athletes, it does not recreate the experience of a coach. In this study, the actual experiences that one goes through in coaching a special needs cheerleading squad were highlighted. According to Thomas and Pollio (2002), there are four major grounds in existential phenomenology that all of the figures and grounds found in a study must stand against. Those four grounds are *body*, *time*, *world*, and *others*. The main ground theme of *community* is encompassed by *world* as is the emotion of *enthusiasm*. *Outside help*, *the athletes*, *parents* and *us vs. "them"* is covered by the ground of *Others*. *Time* fits well with the *improvements vs. struggles* experienced by a special needs coach.

The most important finding of this study was the sense of *community* that was experienced by these special needs coaches. Under this dimension, all of the other grounds and figures emerged as a part of the experience of coaching a special needs cheerleading squad.

Additionally, the other two ground themes of *the athletes* and *outside help* made up the foundation for the ground theme of *community*. These ground themes also encompassed the figural themes of *parents, us vs. "them"*, *improvements vs. struggles*, and *enthusiasm*. There was the interesting dynamic that sometimes the *parents* were seen as a part of the *struggle* while at other times they were a keystone of *outside help* and a source of *enthusiasm* for the coaches. Coaches also experienced the differences that are present in the special needs population and special needs cheerleading as opposed to "traditional" cheerleading and the non-needs population. However, the sense of *community* shown by the non-needs population and their willingness to help the athletes in any way possible was a major source of *enthusiasm* for all.

Connections to Previous Research

As previously mentioned, there is no available research that specifically addresses coaching a special needs cheerleading squad, or even special needs cheerleading. An aim of this study was to connect the findings from the phenomenological interviews with special needs cheerleading coaches to previous literature that may be related to coaching special needs athletes. In this section connections to cheerleading literature, special needs sport literature, and special education literature are made.

The bulk of cheerleading literature focuses on increased body image issues and eating disorder risks for cheerleaders, especially at high levels (Thompson & Digsby, 2003). In the present study, no coaches even mentioned eating disorders amongst their athletes or as a part of their coaching experience. Another aspect of cheerleading that is frequently focused on in research is high-injury risk (Jacobson et al. 2003; Jacobson et al. 2005). Coaches in this study did mention that with the special needs population, "the increased health issues make it difficult"

(Caitlin); Sharon spoke of having to limit the stunts performed by her capable flyer because she was afraid that the bases on her team would not be able to safely support the flyer. The third aspect of cheerleading that is often focused on in the literature is the oversexualization of young girls and the amount of traditional femininity (pink, a lot of make up, skirts, etc.) that is in cheerleading (Adams & Bettis, 2003). This was also not touched on by coaches recounting their experiences as special needs cheerleading coaches.

Special needs sport literature primarily focuses on classification of the athletes (Howe & Jones, 2006). In their experience of coaching, several coaches in this study described the differences between high-functioning and low-functioning athletes (Trish, Sharon, Bobette, Jerica, William, and Bill); however, they did not take on the specific level of classification as described by Howe and Jones. In their study, Howe and Jones spoke of how such specific classification could actually disempower the Paralympic community. Conversely, in the current study, Sharon spoke of her unique system that used the differences in the functioning ability of her athletes to help the team out. For example, she used high-functioning athletes as a “big brother” or “big sister” for low-functioning athletes or individuals who were new to the program. This empowered the high-functioning athletes by giving them a responsibility; it also helped out the lower-functioning athletes by giving them a buddy to look up to. Furthermore, by placing two special needs athletes in a relationship, it allows for a level of empathy and support between the two athletes that may not be experienced between a special needs athlete and a non-needs coach.

Weiss et al. (2003) reported a positive correlation between perceived competency of Special Olympic athletes and the number of medals won by that athlete. Conversely, coaches in

the present study said that it was not about the medals, and that “[their athletes] just want the chance to compete” (Trish). Coaches emphasized that when the cheerleaders were on the floor competing, they could see how happy they were; the medals and trophies were not the primary focus. Weiss et al. (2003) did emphasize that participation in Special Olympics was beneficial to the athletes and to their quality of life. This is further supported in the current study by Bill who stated that most of the athletes in his program see some form of improvements in their life by the end of the first year. Sharon and Bobette also recalled stories of athletes who no longer had to attend physical or speech therapy as a direct result of participation in special needs cheerleading. Perhaps one of the most touching stories was told by Trish. She spoke of an athlete who was taken from his birth family because he was left in his crib with no social or physical contact for the first 15 months of his life. When he first began cheerleading, he was the most shy kid on the team. However, because of the socialization on his team, he eventually developed into one of the most outgoing and “happy-go-lucky” kids on the squad.

There are several parallels in the article by Mastropieri (2001) about challenges faced by special educators and the coaches of special needs teams from the current study. Mastropieri wrote about the need and importance of support and mentors; this was supported by several special needs coaches who spoke of the need for financial support as well as general support from parents and team helpers. Additionally, Mastropieri mentioned issues with time, which a few of the special needs coaches also mentioned—especially related to determining the length of practices. Another comparison in the challenges faced by special needs educators and coaches is the occasional difficult parent or behavioral issue. However, the main thing that Mastropieri focused on in her article was not the challenges faced by the special educator, but on the

indescribable intrinsic benefits one receives. Supporting the claims of Masteropieri, the United States All Star Federation website, and the Special Olympics website, each coach in the current study enthusiastically spoke about the benefits that they received from working with the special needs population. In addition, the Carpenter et al. (1999) article commanded the importance of special needs educators empowering their students with perceived competency. Several coaches highlighted that one of the best parts of their experience was giving kids the opportunity to do things that they had never done before, which adds empirical support to the Carpenter et al. (1999) article.

Practical Implications

There are several practical implications for this study. First and foremost, in this study the researcher attempted to address the need described by others to find out about the experience of special need coaches and volunteers, with special emphasis given to cheerleading (Curtis, 2007). Additionally, the findings of this study provide some empirical support for the claim that special needs coaches get a great deal of satisfaction working with this population (www.specialolympics.org; www.usasf.net). After talking with coaches, there are also several implications for coaches and parents that are thinking about becoming involved in special needs sport with regards to cheerleading. Finally, there are practical implications for sport psychology consultants that may work with a special needs cheerleading squad.

Coaches

- ▲ Familiarize yourself with various physical, mental and, developmental disabilities. Talk to the parents and teachers about the athletes--they know them the best.
- ▲ Prepare to be flexible and appeal to a number of learning styles.

- ⤴ Be patient and willing to repeat concepts, directions, and choreography.
- ⤴ Keep a set routine for each practice. Familiarity may help the athletes to learn faster and it will reduce anxiety of some athletes.
- ⤴ Creativity is key! You will have to integrate athletes with various physical and learning disabilities into routines.
- ⤴ Be prepared to find various forms of fundraising to offset costs of cheerleading for the families. All-star cheerleading is expensive, as is parenting a special needs child.
- ⤴ Don't be afraid to ask the gym and others for help if you need it.
- ⤴ Do not place limits on your athletes—they will surprise you.
- ⤴ Have fun! Your hard work and the hard work of your athletes will pay off in the end.
- ⤴ With the right attitude, you will get more out of this than what you put into it.

Parents

- ⤴ Special needs cheerleading can provide additional physical, social, and speech therapy for your children.
- ⤴ It can be fun for you and your child!
- ⤴ While there is risk involved in cheerleading, coaches always have the safety of your children at heart.
- ⤴ Many gyms participate in fundraising programs to offset the costs of cheerleading for you and your family.
- ⤴ There is a time commitment with cheerleading. Some squads practice once a week, while others may practice two times a week for a few hours. Some squads do not travel, and

others travel to several competitions a year. Ask questions, and remember that your child is an important part of a team once they join.

Sport Psychology Consultants

- ⤴ Speak with the coaches about the barriers and benefits of their coaching experience.
- ⤴ Know what the coaches expectations are for a sport psychology consultant. Many “traditional” cheerleading squads use visualization as a means of preparing for competition (Enders, 2008). Is this feasible with the special needs squad that you are working with?
- ⤴ Be aware of the various disabilities on a team when you begin to consult with them. You may have to adapt your teaching style to fit the learning styles of the athletes.
- ⤴ Just as with coaches, sameness and flexibility are key. Keep your visits fairly the same as to reduce anxiety with the athletes, but be able to be flexible and adapt to the present situation of the team.
- ⤴ A lot of the work you may do with a special needs cheerleading team may focus on anxiety reduction of athletes and being able to focus attention. These are two issues that have been highlighted by coaches that are common amongst teams.

It is the hope of the researcher that this information will be used as a guideline for those that are interested in coaching special needs sport, especially cheerleading as well as parents who are considering placing their children in special needs sport. Furthermore, this information can be used by present sport psychology consultants when considering working with a special needs team, with regards to cheerleading.

Future Directions

Future research opportunities are abundant! One potential research project would to interview higher-functioning athletes about their experience as members of a special needs cheerleading squad. It would also be interesting to interview these parents about their experience parenting a child on a special needs cheerleading squad. This would be a nice comparison to the Weiss, et al. (2003) study on the parents of Special Olympics athletes. This also opens the gate for future research opportunities exploring the quality of life and perceived change in the quality of life of special needs coaches.

Concluding Remarks

Entering this project, I had some experience of working with the special needs population. Nothing has fired my passion and desire more for this population than hearing the success stories of various athletes and the experiences of several coaches. The results of this study imply that coaches of special needs cheerleading squads enter a whole different community that is fueled by outside support and the athletes who compete. While there are struggles, the benefits outweighed the barriers for each of the coaches in this study. Finally, it was clear that coaches of special needs teams (rather cheerleading or any other sport) provided valuable opportunities for these athletes and empowered them to do things that they may not have been able to do before.

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APPENDECIES

Appendix A**Demographic Questions**

A. Are you: Male Female (check one)

B. How old are you? _____

C. What is your race? _____

D. What is your ethnicity? _____

E. What is your relationship status? _____

F. How many children do you have and what are their ages and grade level in school?

G. How many years have you been coaching special needs cheerleading? _____

H. How many years have you been working with the special needs population? _____

I. Do you have any children or immediate family members that are special needs?

Yes No

If so, how many? _____

J. Were you a cheerleader yourself? Yes No

Appendix B
FORM B APPLICATION

All applicants are encouraged to read the Form B guidelines. If you have any questions as you develop your Form B, contact your Departmental Review Committee (DRC) or Research Compliance Services at the Office of Research.

FORM B

IRB # _____

Date Received in OR _____

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

Application for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects

I. IDENTIFICATION OF PROJECT

1. Principal Investigator Co-Principal Investigator:

Kimberly Page M.S. Candidate
(865)974-9973

Faculty Advisor:

Leslee A. Fisher Ph.D.

Department: Sport Studies

2. Project Classification: Thesis

3. Title of Project: A Phenomenological Assessment of the Experiences of Special Needs Cheerleading Coaches

4. Starting Date: Upon IRB Approval

5. Estimated Completion Date: July 31, 2011

1. External Funding (if any): *N/A*

II. PROJECT OBJECTIVES There is little scholarly research on cheerleading coaches. Additionally, special needs literature is very narrowly focused and rarely looks at the coach or special needs educator. A great deal of special needs websites and literature discuss the improved quality of life for special needs athletes and how the coaches contribute to that. Furthermore, these websites and articles mention that coaches will have a good feeling after working with the populations, but they do not have any empirical research to support these claims. Finally, it is a rarity that special needs literature focuses on the benefits and barriers encountered when working with the special needs population. In the past ten years, special needs cheerleading has blossomed from a non-existent sport, to a world-wide sport with more than 200 teams in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Australia, China, and England. It is the objective of this researcher is to assess the phenomenological experience of 8-12 special needs cheerleading coaches by personal interviews.

III. DESCRIPTION AND SOURCE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS Current and/or former coaches of special needs cheerleading squads.

IV. METHODS AND PROCEDURES Coaches of special needs cheerleading squads will be contacted via e-mail (see Appendix A) to ask for voluntary participation. The e-mail list will be obtained by looking at teams that participated in the 2009 Cheerleading Worlds (www.cheersport.net), and then obtaining an e-mail address from the gym that is affiliated with the participating team. Coaches will be prompted to contact the principle researcher if they are interested in participating in the study and an interview date and time will be set. They will be allowed to ask the interviewer any questions they have concerning the nature of the study in advance. Coaches will be told in an e-mail (Appendix A) that their participation is voluntary.

For coaches who express further interest in the study and are in close proximity to the researcher, a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions will be given. At the interview, coaches will be given a basic demographic questionnaire prior to the interview for statistical purposes (Appendix B). Then, informed consent (see Appendix B) will be given by each coach both verbally and by signed form. The coach will be given an extra copy of the informed consent form, and they will be reminded that the interview is taped. Then, the coach will be asked to pick a pseudonym for her/himself and his/her gym, as to protect her/his privacy.

A phenomenological interview approach will be used and coaches will be asked to detail what stands out for them in their experiences as special needs coaches. Specifically coaches will be asked, "In your experience as the coach of a special needs cheerleading squad, what stands out for you?"

All interviews will be recorded on the principle investigators computer. They will then be transcribed to text by the principle investigator. Upon transcription, the interviews will be sent to the interviewees for any clarification of statements, or changes to material that they do not want to be included.

Prior to the main study, the principle investigator will go through a bracketing interview to assess any potential biases she may have. Also, two pilot interviews will be conducted following the same methodology as the main study. The only difference is that the pilot interviewees will be a special needs instructor and a non-special needs cheerleading coach and the question will be changed to suit their profession.

For data analysis, a group of doctoral students that are a part of a phenomenological seminar on campus will assist with the thematizing of the interviews. Prior to seeing any of the transcribed interviews, assisting students will be asked to sign a Pledge of Confidentiality (Appendix D) that will forbid them from discussing the study and any telling information about the participants. All copies of transcribed interviews will be returned to the principle investigator and destroyed upon completion of the study.

6. **SPECIFIC RISKS AND PROTECTION MEASURES** The risks involved with this study are minimal. The coaches may experience some emotions when asked to talk about their experience.

Every possible measure to protect the participants will be taken. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed; however, any names or telling information will be changed in the transcribed interviews to protect the privacy of the coaches, athletes, and teams. Upon transcription, all of the interview files will be destroyed. Until transcription is finished, all interviews will be stored on the principal investigator's computer, which is securely password protected. The principal investigator is the only one with access to her computer. Upon transcription, the interviews will be sent to the interviewees for any clarification of statements, or changes to material that they do not want to be included. Coaches will be allowed to remove themselves from the study at any time without consequence. In the instance that a coach removes themselves from the study, their informed consent, demographic survey, and interview will be destroyed.

Informed consent forms and demographic information will be locked away and only accessible to the principle investigator. Upon completion of the study, the demographic information will be destroyed. Informed consent forms will be kept in a secure location for a period of time following the study; however, the names of the participants will not be released.

Each individual that will assist with the thematizing of the interviews will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement (Appendix D). All copies of transcribed interviews will be returned to the principle investigator. Upon completion of the study, all transcribed interviews and forms pertaining to the thematizing of the interviews will be destroyed.

All coaches will be reminded of the following: the interviews are recorded for accuracy, they may stop the interview at any time or decline to be interviewed, they will have the option to read over the transcription of their interview, there is no monetary compensation for participation in the study, they may inquire about the process at any time, and a team of researchers will also read over the transcription to help with the data analysis after they sign a confidentiality statement.

VI. BENEFITS The coaches will not be compensated monetarily for their time; however, they will benefit by sharing his/her experience with another person. Furthermore, the coach will benefit by sharing their experience with the community, as it may help others in their decision to work with the special needs population. The coaches will also benefit by adding to scholarly research in the field of cheerleading and special needs sport/coaching. This study will also give them a chance to reflect on the good things they have done for the special needs community.

VII. METHODS FOR OBTAINING "INFORMED CONSENT" FROM PARTICIPANTS Informed consent will be obtained both verbally and by paper. The verbal permission will be recorded, but the recording will be destroyed upon transcription of the interview. The coaches will also be given a copy of the informed consent for their own records. The paper consent forms will be kept under lock and key.

VIII. QUALIFICATIONS OF THE INVESTIGATOR(S) TO CONDUCT RESEARCH Kim Page is a second year Master's student that is doing this study for her thesis. She has interviewed individuals before. Furthermore, the investigator is experienced in research, and has previously conducted qualitative research and quantitative research under IRB approval from this institution. She has taken also multiple classes in research methods, design, and research ethics at The University of Tennessee and her undergraduate institution. The faculty advisor, Leslee A. Fisher, has extensive research experience in both quantitative and qualitative methodology.

IX. FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT TO BE USED IN THE RESEARCH Interviews will be conducted in a private location to further insure the privacy of participants. All interviews will be conducted at cheerleading competitions in various locations around the country or in the gym of the coach.

Interviews will be recorded on the MacBook Pro of the principle investigator using the GarageBand program.

X. RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PRINCIPAL/CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(S)

The following information must be entered verbatim into this section:

By compliance with the policies established by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Tennessee the principal investigator(s) subscribe to the principles stated in "The Belmont Report" and standards of professional ethics in all research, development, and related activities involving human subjects under the auspices of The University of Tennessee. The principal investigator(s) further agree that:

V. Approval will be obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to instituting any change in this research project.

VI. Development of any unexpected risks will be immediately reported to Research Compliance Services.

VII. An annual review and progress report (Form R) will be completed and submitted when requested by the Institutional Review Board.

VIII. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for the duration of the project and for at least three years thereafter at a location approved by the Institutional Review Board.

XI. SIGNATURES

ALL SIGNATURES MUST BE ORIGINAL. The Principal Investigator should keep the original copy of the Form B and submit a copy with original signatures for review. Type the name of each individual above the appropriate signature line. Add signature lines for all Co-Principal Investigators, collaborating and student investigators, faculty advisor(s), department head of the Principal Investigator, and the Chair of the Departmental Review Committee. The following information should be typed verbatim, with added categories where needed:

Principal Investigator: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Co-Principal Investigator: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Student Advisor (if any): _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

XII. DEPARTMENT REVIEW AND APPROVAL

The application described above has been reviewed by the IRB departmental review committee and has been approved. The DRC further recommends that this application be reviewed as:

Expedited Review -- Category(s): _____

OR

Full IRB Review

Chair, DRC: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Department Head: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Protocol sent to Research Compliance Services for final approval on (Date) : _____

Approved:
Research Compliance Services
Office of Research
1534 White Avenue

Signature: _____ Date: _____

For additional information on Form B, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer or by phone at (865) 974-3466.

**Appendix A of IRB
E-mail to Special Needs Coaches**

Greetings Special Needs Coach!

My name is Kim Page, and I am a master's student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I am a former cheerleader, and I have worked with the special needs community in the past.

I am doing my thesis on the experience of special needs cheerleading coaches. Your participation could give parents and prospective coaches more information about coaching a special needs cheerleading squad.

I am asking for your help with my research! I would like to interview you about your experience. I will be present at [insert competition name and date here]. If you would like to share your experience with me and set up an interview time, or if you have any questions at all please reply to this e-mail. It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 30 minutes of your time.

You will receive no monetary compensation for this study, just the gratitude of the researcher for helping her expand the field of knowledge on special needs cheerleading and coaching special needs athletes. In this study, you will be asked to select a pseudonym (fake name) for yourself and your gym. All of the information gathered in this study is completely anonymous and will not be tracked back to you, your gym, or your athletes.

Should you have any questions pertaining to this research, you may also contact the UT Office of Research at (865)974-3466

I appreciate your help and support!

Cordially,

Kim Page

Masters in Sport Studies Candidate

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

If this e-mail has reached you in error, I apologize.

Appendix B of IRB**Demographic Questions**

A. Are you: _____ Male _____ Female (check one)

B. How old are you? _____

C. What is your race? _____

D. What is your ethnicity? _____

E. What is your relationship status? _____

F. How many children do you have and what are their ages and grade level in school?

G. How many years have you been coaching special needs cheerleading? _____

H. How many years have you been working with the special needs population? _____

I. Do you have any children or immediate family members that are special needs?

_____ Yes _____ No

If so, how many? _____

J. Were you a cheerleader yourself? _____ Yes _____ No

Appendix C of IRB Informed Consent for Interview

Project Title: Quality of Life, Benefits, and Barriers in Special Needs Cheerleading Coaches

Principal Investigator: Kim Page

What is the purpose of this research study?

There is very limited scholarly research on cheerleading, special needs athletes, and special needs coaches. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of special needs cheerleading coaches.

This study a part of the degree requirement for the principal investigator's masters in sport psychology.

This study has been approved by the institutional review board at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

How many people will take part in this study?

It is anticipated that 8-12 coaches will participate in this study.

How long will your part in this study last?

This study should last approximately 30 minutes depending upon how much of your experience you wish to share. If at any time you wish to remove yourself from the study, you may leave with no negative consequences. You will receive no monetary compensation for this study, just the gratitude of the researcher for helping her expand the field of knowledge on special needs cheerleading and coaching special needs athletes.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

You will be interviewed and asked to share about your experience of coaching a special needs squad. **The interview will be recorded.**

What are the possible risks and/or benefits from being in this study?

You may become emotional when sharing your experience of working with the special needs population. However, this will hopefully help you to reflect on the positive aspects of coaching a special needs cheerleading squad and how it has changed your life. Additionally, you will help other coaches and people that are considering working with the special needs population by sharing your experience and the potential benefits and barriers that they may encounter.

How will your privacy be protected?

The researcher will exercise every possible effort to ensure that your privacy is protected. Your name, your gym's name, the names of any athletes or any other telling information will be changed in the transcription of the interview. Your responses are completely anonymous. Additionally, all of the interviews will be destroyed once they are transcribed (typed up). The informed consent forms will be stored in a safe location, and the recorded interviews will only be accessible by the principal investigator. A research team will see the transcribed interviews; however, all telling information will be changed in the transcribed interviews. Furthermore, the members of the research team are required to sign a confidentiality agreement and will not be allowed to discuss this study with anyone other than the investigator, her advisor, and other members of the research team.

Participant's Agreement:

I have read all of the information provided above, and I have asked any questions that I may have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study, and I am aware that I may withdraw at any time. I understand that I may contact the principal investigator, Kim Page at any time with questions about the study. I may also contact her advisor, Dr. Leslee Fisher at any time with questions about the research or questions about the participant's rights.

Participant's Signature

Printed Name of Participant

Date

Investigator Signature

Appendix D of IRB**Research Assistant Confidentiality Agreement****Research Team Member's Pledge of Confidentiality**

As a member of this thesis research team, I understand that I will be reading transcriptions of confidential interviews. Despite the fact that all names and telling information have been changed, the information in these interviews has been released by the participants of the study with the understanding that their information will remain strictly confidential. I understand that it is my responsibility to honor the confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree to not share any information pertaining to this study with any individual except the principle investigator, her advisor and thesis committee, and other individuals on the research team. Finally, I understand that any violation of this agreement would be a serious breach of ethics, and therefore I pledge to stand by a vow of confidence.

Research Team Member

Date

Appendix C
E-mail to Special Needs Coaches

Greetings Special Needs Coach!

My name is Kim Page, and I am a master's student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I am a former cheerleader, and I have worked with the special needs community in the past.

I am doing my thesis on the experience of special needs cheerleading coaches. Your participation could give parents and prospective coaches more information about coaching a special needs cheerleading squad.

I am asking for your help with my research! I would like to interview you about your experience. I will be present at [insert competition name and date here]. If you would like to share your experience with me and set up an interview time, or if you have any questions at all please reply to this e-mail. It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 30 minutes of your time.

You will receive no monetary compensation for this study, just the gratitude of the researcher for helping her expand the field of knowledge on special needs cheerleading and coaching special needs athletes. In this study, you will be asked to select a pseudonym (fake name) for yourself and your gym. All of the information gathered in this study is completely anonymous and will not be tracked back to you, your gym, or your athletes.

Should you have any questions pertaining to this research, you may also contact the UT Office of Research at (865)974-3466

I appreciate your help and support!

Cordially,

Kim Page

Masters in Sport Studies Candidate

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

If this e-mail has reached you in error, I apologize.

Appendix D Informed Consent for Interview

Project Title: Quality of Life, Benefits, and Barriers in Special Needs Cheerleading Coaches

Principal Investigator: Kim Page

What is the purpose of this research study?

There is very limited scholarly research on cheerleading, special needs athletes, and special needs coaches. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of special needs cheerleading coaches.

This study a part of the degree requirement for the principal investigator's masters in sport psychology.

This study has been approved by the institutional review board at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

How many people will take part in this study?

It is anticipated that 8-12 coaches will participate in this study.

How long will your part in this study last?

This study should last approximately 30 minutes depending upon how much of your experience you wish to share. If at any time you wish to remove yourself from the study, you may leave with no negative consequences. You will receive no monetary compensation for this study, just the gratitude of the researcher for helping her expand the field of knowledge on special needs cheerleading and coaching special needs athletes.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

You will be interviewed and asked to share about your experience of coaching a special needs squad. **The interview will be recorded.**

What are the possible risks and/or benefits from being in this study?

You may become emotional when sharing your experience of working with the special needs population. However, this will hopefully help you to reflect on the positive aspects of coaching a special needs cheerleading squad and how it has changed your life. Additionally, you will help other coaches and people that are considering working with the special needs population by sharing your experience and the potential benefits and barriers that they may encounter.

How will your privacy be protected?

The researcher will exercise every possible effort to ensure that your privacy is protected. Your name, your gym's name, the names of any athletes or any other telling information will be changed in the transcription of the interview. Your responses are completely anonymous. Additionally, all of the interviews will be destroyed once they are transcribed (typed up). The informed consent forms will be stored in a safe location, and the recorded interviews will only be accessible by the principal investigator. A research team will see the transcribed interviews; however, all telling information will be changed in the transcribed interviews. Furthermore, the members of the research team are required to sign a confidentiality agreement and will not be allowed to discuss this study with anyone other than the investigator, her advisor, and other members of the research team.

Participant's Agreement:

I have read all of the information provided above, and I have asked any questions that I may have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study, and I am aware that I may withdraw at any time. I understand that I may contact the principal investigator, Kim Page at any time with questions about the study. I may also contact her advisor, Dr. Leslee Fisher at any time with questions about the research or questions about the participant's rights.

Participant's Signature

Printed Name of Participant

Date

Investigator Signature

Appendix E

Field Notes

Interview number: 2

Interviewee: Trish

Location/Time: Warm up-room at Cheersport competition. 5:30pm. The room is a very large open “ballroom” in a convention center. There are literally hundreds of people in this room rehearsing for competition tomorrow. It is fairly noisy and there is a lot going on.

Notes about interviewee: Has been coaching for 6 years. Trish seems to be very assertive, bold, and perhaps a bit boisterous. She is open about her experience and a pleasure to interview. Trish is one of the “better” special needs coaches as far as championships and titles go, she is almost a little cocky about her success. Length of interview was somewhat limited due to her team's warm-up time. She says “she could go on forever” with stories and she probably could!

Appendix F

Research Assistant Confidentiality Agreement

Research Team Member's Pledge of Confidentiality

As a member of this thesis research team, I understand that I will be reading transcriptions of confidential interviews. Despite the fact that all names and telling information have been changed, the information in these interviews has been released by the participants of the study with the understanding that their information will remain strictly confidential. I understand that it is my responsibility to honor the confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree to not share any information pertaining to this study with any individual except the principle investigator, her advisor and thesis committee, and other individuals on the research team. Finally, I understand that any violation of this agreement would be a serious breach of ethics, and therefore I pledge to stand by a vow of confidence.

Research Team Member

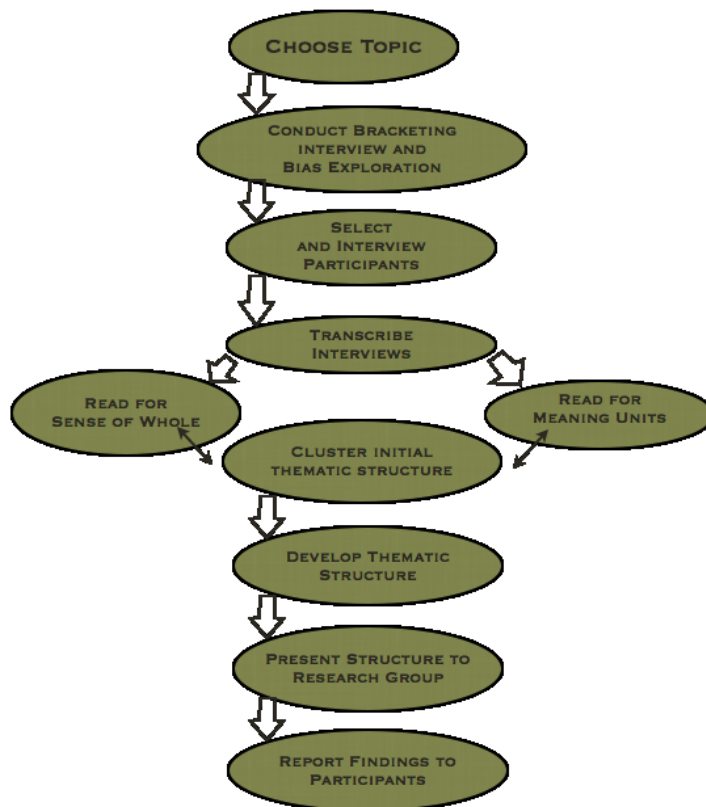
Date

Table 1

Description of Participants

Name	Age	Years Coaching Special Needs Cheerleading	Years Working with Special Needs Sport Population	Number of Children	Special Needs Child	Interview Length (in minutes)
Bill	49	9	9	2	No	22
Caitlin	20	5	5	0	No	22
Trish	41	5	9	2	No	29
William	25	5	5	0	No	12
Jerica	18	6	6	0	No	36
Bobette	48	6	20	2	Yes	36
Vickie	39	7	7	3	No	24
Sharon	53	8	18	2	Yes	88
(<i>N</i> = 8)	(<i>M</i> = 36.5)	(<i>M</i> =6.38)	(<i>M</i> =9.88)	(<i>M</i> =1.38)		(<i>M</i> =33)

Figure 1. Flow chart of phenomenological interviewing process taken from Dale, 1996.



Note: Portions of figure are from Pollio, H., Henley, T., & Thompson, C. (1993, Fall). *The phenomenology of everyday life*

Figure 2. List of themes and sub-themes.

Figure Themes**Sub Themes**

Enthusiasm

Why I do it

Spreading the Sport

Parents

Amazement

Input

Struggles

Us vs. "Them"

Comparison of the special needs population...

Comparison of special needs cheerleading...

The desire of the athletes to be treated as "normal"

Assimilation

Improvements vs. Struggles

Ground Theme**Sub-ground Themes****Sub-themes of Sub-ground themes**

Community

Outside Help

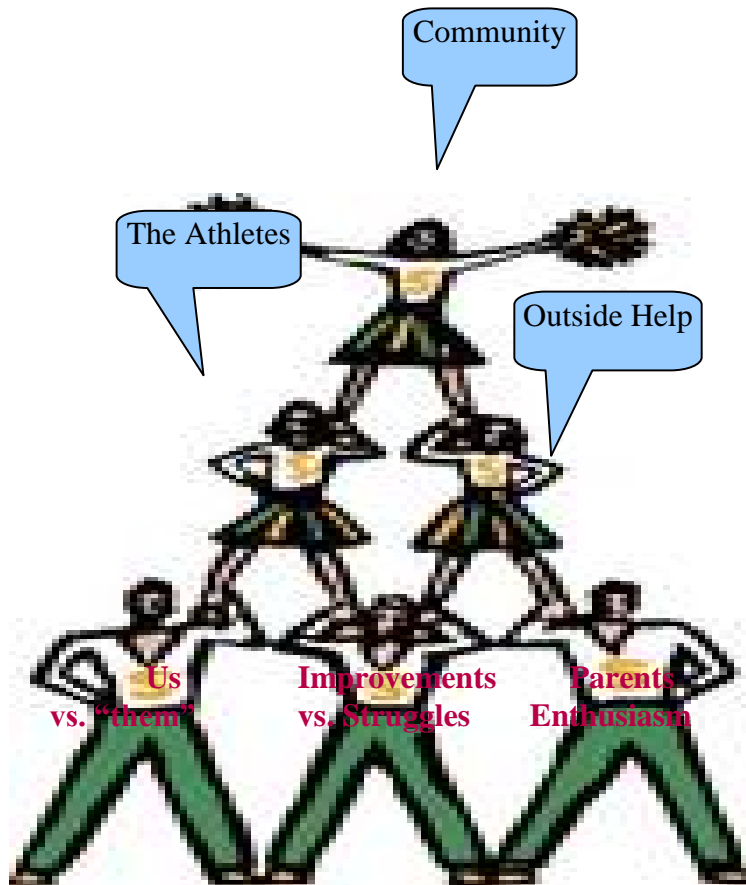
Helpers

Governing bodies (Cheersport)

Donations

The Athletes

Figure 3. Representation of thematic structure of the experience of special needs cheerleading coaches



VITA

Kimberly Nichole Page (“Kim”) was born May 9, 1987 in Knoxville, Tennessee. As a child she enjoyed theatre, cheerleading, dance, and working with students in the special needs classroom at her school. She attended Marietta College in Marietta, OH with plans to pursue her passion of theatre. There, she found an even deeper love for psychology and research. She graduated with an undergraduate degree in psychology and took courses in pre-medicine and music. Kim returned home for her graduate studies at the University of Tennessee where she pursued a Master's in Kinesiology. She also expanded on her love of research by taking several statistics courses. Kim hopes to one day complete a PhD in clinical psychology. In the mean time, she enjoys yelling at the TV when hockey is on and traveling to visit baseball stadiums.