

Team Sport Participation and Quality of Life for Children with Disabilities and Their  
Families

Teresa M. Hess

Chapman University

Quality is a word that brings to mind the valuation of an entity, whether it is a commercial product, such as a purse, or as it defines elements of a person's existence. We can connect this concept of "quality" to our own personal experiences and how these experiences add value to our lives. While many kinds of experiences can contribute to either happiness or obstacle-driven growth, many would agree that core areas of focus for qualitatively measuring their value include physical and emotional well-being, interactions with others, and family supports. This paper focused on parents' perceptions of team sport participation and how it affected the quality of life for their elementary age children with disabilities and their families.

Research in the area of quality of life, has been conducted by Ann and Rudd Turnbull. They have determined that the quality of life experienced by the individual with a disability also impacts that individual's family (Purcell, Turnbull, & Jackson, 2006). They identify specific criteria that make up five domains contributing to the Family Quality of Life (F.Q.O.L.). These domains are listed as: Physical/material well being; disability-related supports; family interaction; parenting; and emotional well being (Purcell, Turnbull, & Jackson, 2006). When a child with a disability participates in a sports program, these domains that are part of F.Q.O.L. are affected. The community of sport provides a venue where families interact with other families. The success or lack of success of a sport experience or any other experience certainly impacts the emotional well being of the child and their family (Friend, Summers, & Turnbull, 2009). Additional areas of research have included the importance of establishing connections with other families who have children with disabilities (Friend, Summers, & Turnbull, 2009) and the importance of inclusive practices for those with disabilities (Turnbull, Summers,

Turnbull, Brotherson, Winton, Roberts, Snyder, McWilliam, Chandler, Schrandt, Stowe, Bruder, Divenere, Epley, Hornback, Huff, Miksch, Mitchell, Sharp, & Stroup-Rentier, 2007). Both of these areas are also encompassed in the team sport experience. The pervasive nature of these domains and the strength of their impact on happiness and satisfaction contributed to the importance of this study. This paper used grounded theory to guide the research on how these domains of quality of life are affected through team sports participation for children with disabilities and their families. Through observations of team practice, competitions, and parent interviews I studied how participation on a team sport affected the lives of the participants and their families. Questions were formulated to help better understand the impact their involvement in sports had on the participant's child and family.

Many opportunities are available for children with disabilities to have a team sport experience. Baseball teams have grown from 5 pilot leagues in 1988 to more than 560 leagues throughout the United States and Canada by 1991 (Therrien, 1992). The growth of these teams is one indication that parents desire this type of activity and involvement for their child. This paper looked at the reasons parents signed their child up for a team sport and why they did or did not continue the experience. Parents were also asked why they chose a segregated sport experience versus an integrated sport experience and what guided their decision-making.

Parents may have very different goals for what they desire from their child's participation on a team sport. Socialization is certainly a key area of focus along with physical development being another desired area of development for their child. This paper studied the experiences of these families in achieving these goals and other

unexpected benefits from their participation. Negative experiences were also part of this experience. Parents were asked about such experiences and encouraged to share their opinions on what their recommendations would be to avoid any future replication of those incidents.

Through observations of team practice, competitions, and parent interviews I studied how participation on a team sport with other children who have disabilities affected the lives of the participants and their families. Parents' expectations, experiences, and reflections were included in the conversations. Areas of focus included the social/emotional and physical development of the child, impacts on sibling relationships, and parent supports and connections. This information promotes an understanding of the importance of team sport participation to the quality of life for children with disabilities and their families.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

The theoretical framework used for this study incorporates both Phenomenology and Feminist Standpoint Theory. Phenomenology looks at the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people. Alfred Schutz created his own phenomenological theory of meaning by combining ideas from both Henri Bergson and Edmond Husserl. Schutz developed the idea of the lifeworld as a theoretical concept that refers to the world as it is experienced by each person (Allan, 2010). It is cultural, filled with meaning made up from the assumptions and beliefs from which an individual interprets their everyday existence.

Using Phenomenology as a framework supports my research on how participation in team sport affects the quality of life for individuals with disabilities and their families.

The participants' responses to questions were studied for how the experience of team sport has had meaning to their lives. Affects on self-esteem for their children, feelings of happiness for personal accomplishments, and feelings of belonging to a group are meaningful experiences for these families. The structure of the experience of team sport participation provided these families with a practice and game schedule that is the same of that experienced by families of non-disabled children. Other experiences included having their child receive a team uniform, take a team photo, and the opportunity for the family to participate in team dinners. These experiences or structures conform to the sport experiences of those parents with non-disabled children. This paper looked at how the participants felt their experience with these structures was beneficial to them and their families. The core of their team sport experience involved the emotional supports and positive interactions for both the families and the children with disabilities participating on the team (Gross, 2008), (Pauls, 2007) and (Thierren, 1992). This essence of the experience contributed to the lived experience for this group of people.

In conjunction with Phenomenology, I also used Feminist Standpoint Theory to guide its research. Feminist Standpoint Theory, according to Dorothy Smith, emphasizes that what a person knows is affected by where a person "stands" in society (Appelrouth & Edles, 2007). Therefore, our gender affects our experience of reality. So, women experience the world in a different way than men. Dorothy Smith was also influenced by the ideas presented by Schutz regarding phenomenology (Appelrouth & Edles, 2007). She specifically demonstrates how men and women bracket and view the world in different ways according to their distinctive lifeworlds. As all participants in

this study were women, it is important to use this theory to understand and interpret the data collected.

The women in this study are the primary caretakers of their children and thus they may be the ones who make the majority of the decisions regarding their children's schooling, medical care, and outside activities. How these women network and support each other in their roles was studied. This may provide information about how gender affects our experiences of reality (Appelrouth & Edles, 2007). Children with disabilities can have some extreme needs and the mothers may become consumed with caring for their children to the detriment of their own lives. Are these women only focused on benefits for their children from their team participation or do these women feel that they benefit from their child's participation in the sport? Determining if the women are able to see themselves as more than mothers of children with disabilities through team participation is another question. Are their roles as mothers affected in either positive or negative ways from this participation? These roles would affect how these women perceive their world (Appelrouth & Edles, 2007). Feminist Standpoint Theory will frame the study to determine how these elements affect the quality of life for these women and their families.

There is a wide range of literature on the subject of sports participation for individuals with disabilities. From children's sports to teams for adults, various elements of athletic involvement have been studied. In reviewing the literature for this research, I chose the articles that focused on children at both the elementary and secondary school level, as this is the population I would be looking at in my study. Three main categories emerged from the literature as areas of significance. In spite of legislation requiring that

individuals with disabilities be included in sports programs, several articles addressed existing barriers to the successful implementation of such programs. Choosing between an inclusive sport experience versus a segregated sport experience was another subject of focus. Finally, the impact of team sport participation on individual's self-esteem and personal growth was investigated. The topics of personal growth and development were a common thread through all the articles. None of the research seemed to specifically look at how team sport participation affected the quality of life for children with disabilities and their families. While benefits for the participant were mentioned, their impact on the family's quality of life were not addressed.

### **Barriers to Sport Participation and Legislation**

The arguments about inclusive sports have been going on for decades. The rights that both individuals with disabilities have under federal antidiscrimination laws and rights belonging to sponsoring agencies are discussed by Block (1995). From the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, which required all facilities built with full or partial federal funding to be accessible to individuals with disabilities to the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, and including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004, Block (2005), Fetter-Harrott, Stekette, & Dare (2008), and Silvers & Wasserman (2000) describe the many ways in which these laws are not consistently enforced. Using individual cases, Block (2005) describes how the laws must be followed and describes specific criteria for sport team participation under these laws. Block (2005), Silvers & Wasserman (2000), and Fetter-Harrott, Stekette, & Dare (2008) address policy pitfalls and solutions to those pitfalls so that youth are allowed to enjoy sport opportunities the same as their non-disabled peers.

In spite of legislation that prohibits individuals with disabilities from being excluded from participation in sports, the opportunities for team sport participation for those with disabilities is still very limited. Both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (I.D.E.A., 2004) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (A.D.A., 1990) prohibit discrimination against students on the basis of disability. However, some advocates and physical educators feel that one of the final frontiers for full inclusion in public schools is in the area of sports programs (Fine, 2009). According to Groff and Kleiber (2001) one of the main challenges to adolescents is finding an opportunity to participate in sport. They state, “Although adapted sports programs for adolescents with physical disabilities have increased in recent years, they continue to be widely unavailable and inequitably distributed throughout the United States.” (pg. 3)

Many reasons for the dearth of sport opportunities are discussed by Fine (2009), Moran & Block (2010), Groff & Kleiber (2001), and Ponchillia, P., Armbruster, J., and Wiebold, J. (2005). The contributing factors preventing the growth of sport opportunities for youth with disabilities described in their articles included; institutional fear of liability, a lack of knowledge and training of staff, and fears of both parents and children regarding their participation in a sport program. Solutions to address these issues are considered by Moran & Block (2010), Stein & Paciorek ((1994), Ponchillia, Arbruster, & Wiebold (2005), Groff & Kleiber (2001), and Fine (2009). With more than 50 million Americans having some type of documented disability (Fine, 2009) along with support from advocacy groups and legislation (Fine, 2009), (Ponchillia, Arbruster, & Wiebold, 2005), and (Stein & Paciorek, 1995), it can be hoped that opportunities for quality involvement in sports will continue to grow for individuals with disabilities.



### **Inclusive versus Segregated Sports**

Inclusive sport programs versus segregated sport programs can be a topic that is highly debated between groups. In an article by Grosse (2008), she reviews the pros and cons of participation in either type of sport experience. Examining parent goals as well as the child's needs, Grosse (2008) outlines the way to make a match with the child and the team. Pauls (2007) describes the benefits his son attained through participation in a segregated sports team. Therrien (1992) also discusses segregated baseball teams and their importance to children with disabilities. Both Pauls (2007) and Therrien (1992) describe how each team does benefit from non-disabled peers participating in some capacity with the team. Stanistreet (2005) describes the need for sport opportunities for those with disabilities and refers to the individual's desire to participate in sport as "...desperate". (p. 18) These research articles show a strong desire on the part of the individuals and their families to participate on a team. The decision as to whether that experience should be on a segregated or inclusive team is really up to the individual. One point that is clearly made in all the articles is that athletic involvement is both desired by individuals with disabilities and is a beneficial experience in a variety of ways.

### **Benefits From Athletic Participation**

The benefits for involvement in sport are well documented. Research focusing on sports participation in the general population is plentiful and increased interest in sports for those with disabilities is increasing due to political action by disability-related groups (Smith, 1993). Both Groff & Kiebler (2001) and Smith (1993) look at the psychosocial benefits of sport participation for those with disabilities. The areas of identity formation, physiological impacts, and self-actualization show positive association with sport

involvement according to both Smith (1993) and Groff & Kiebler (2001). Stanistreet (2005) maintains that participation in sport allows those with disabilities to "...come out of their shells and play an active role in life" (p.19). Bolduc (2009) and Pauls (2007) describe multiple ways in which participation in a team hockey sport provided life long benefits for their sons. From increased physical skills, to improved self-esteem, goal building, and feelings of belonging, the research indicates that participation in team sport is beneficial to those with disabilities.

None of the articles contests that there are many benefits for individual's with disabilities through team sport participation. However, the impact those benefits have on the individual's family are never specifically studied. The families are usually included in the description of an athletic event, rather than being discussed as part of the experience. Only two of the articles in this literature review specifically mention the possible impact on the family of the individual with a disability. Therrien (1992) addresses this when she states,

As much as the Challenger Program does for children with disabilities and their buddies, I think it does more for the parents. The games are not only a source of enjoyment but they help parents appreciate what their own children are able to accomplish. (p. 22)

Additionally, in his article about hockey team participation for individuals with physical and intellectual disabilities, Bolduc (2009) describes his observation of family member's faces during a practice session. He states,

Recently, I observed the kids in this special program skate-doing drills, scrimmaging, having a general blast. On that particular day, I paused for a

moment and looked at the parents and not the kids on the ice. I saw the smiles on the family member's faces—family members who can bear testament that Will's story is not unique and that their own children demonstrate similar strength and determination in daily life. (p. 21)

Both Therrien (1992) and Bolduc (2009) reference an impact on the family, but it is not the focus of the research. The importance of this experience to the quality of life for the family is an area that needs further research.

From legislation that mandates equal access to athletics for individuals with disabilities to specific benefits from participation in sport, there is an increasing amount of research in the area of athletics and disability. However, there is limited research studying how participating in team sport affects the quality of life for a child with a disability and the family. There are many ways in which individuals with disabilities benefit from participation in athletics and it seems reasonable to question to what extent the family benefits as well. Contributing factors to quality of life for an individual with a disability includes physical and emotional well being, interactions with others, and family supports. This study hopes to provide further information missing from the research about the impact of sport participation on the family's quality of life as well.

### **Methods: Data Sources, Data Collection, and Personal Subjectivity**

As a special educator in the local K-12 school district, I had access to individuals who administrate and coach in several of the athletic leagues in the area. Through a process referred to as snowball sampling I was able to recruit participants for my research. Snowball sampling is a technique where subjects for research are gathered through the researcher's known acquaintances. As the sample increases it appears to grow like a

rolling snowball. This strategy also enables the researcher to gain access to individuals who have specific sets of experiences that the researcher is interested in exploring. The speech pathologist who works at the elementary school where I teach has children who plays a sport for one of the local leagues. Through her connections I was able to gain access to the coach of the team for children with disabilities. This team has children with both intellectual and physical disabilities who participate. The children are in the upper elementary grades, which includes grades 4 through 6. I made my initial contact with this gentleman through an e-mail. I explained my research interest and my desire to work with his team. He responded that he would be very happy to have me work with parents on his team and he felt there would be a positive response from those parents. He placed an e-mail to the team parents explaining my research interest and inviting them to speak to me, if they wished, at the next team practice.

At the first practice session I attended, I introduced myself and explained my research to the parents. I invited them to participate in the study and let them choose the place and time that we would meet. All participants chose to meet at practices and games. This was easiest for them as when their children were at practice they were being “watched” by another trusted adult. This would allow them to give me their attention and attend to our conversations with less distraction. I thanked them for participating and gained their written consent to use their interviews. I explained to them that they would be “anonymous” and that I would take care to maintain their confidentiality.

Total participants who signed consent forms totaled five, however, only 3 participants consistently showed up for our scheduled interview times. All participants were women, mothers of a child on the team, and Caucasian. All three of the women

were married to the fathers of these children. Two of the three participants had other non-disabled children. For one participant, this was her only child. All three of the women had paying jobs outside of the home and also considered themselves the primary caretakers for their child. This team is located in a middle to upper-middle class area and parents of participating children live in this same area. The majority of the team players are Caucasian, however, there are Hispanic and Asian children on this team as well.

Research was conducted through a combination of observation and interviews. A total of five team practices and two games were observed. Triangulation through the utilization of observations, individual interviews and group interviews was utilized to provide different perspectives for obtaining information.

The number of interviews with all participants totaled five and each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. I prepared my questions ahead of time so that I could focus on the participant's responses. My questions included, but were not limited to the following:

1. How did you learn about this team sport opportunity?
2. What did you hope to experience from your participation?
3. Why did you choose a segregated sport experience versus an inclusive sport experience?
4. In what ways have you and your family benefited from this experience?
5. Why would you participate/not participate next year?

Our conversations seemed to "take off" from the first question and only needed occasional guided comments on my part to steer the direction of the discussion. I tried to make my questions open ended to encourage more than yes or no responses and to enable each participant to elaborate on their child's participation on the team and their feelings

about its impact. The mothers seemed excited and enthusiastic to share their experiences and feelings about their child's participation in team sport and what it had contributed to their quality of life and the family's quality of life. As all three of the parents were involved or had been involved in some level of litigation with the local school districts, they declined to be audio taped. Therefore, field notes were written immediately following each interview session. Quotes from field notes were reconstructed from memory.

### **Subjectivity**

Each of us views the world from a subjective standpoint. Our personal backgrounds and life experiences shape who we are and how we comprehend the world. When we take the time to reflect on the basis for our beliefs of the world, when we challenge ourselves to consider opposing points of view, we begin to broaden our minds and expand our knowledge. It seems an essential component of this understanding would include a personal study and reflection of our individual background and life experiences. Interpreting this personal information will enable us to develop a more comprehensive and open-minded basis for our perception and explanation of the world. My own experiences with athletics and working in special education form the lens through which I view this research.

Athletics has strongly influenced how I view the world. From 7<sup>th</sup> grade through my senior year in college, participating in sports has enabled me to grow in numerous ways. I learned leadership skills, team building, good sportsmanship, and my self-esteem increased as my hard work improved my athletic skills. Athletics was not just about me. Athletics involved my entire family at one point or another. My parents developed

friendships with other team parents that lasted long after I graduated. My brother came to support me at as many of my events as he could. My extended family used my competitions as reasons to get together and reconnect. Being on a team sport involved and affected my entire family.

Both of my own sons have been involved in a variety of sports. From Little League and soccer teams, to high school volleyball, university rowing, and surfing, our sons have always competed in athletics. I have seen them both learn and grow from their team involvement in the same ways I did growing up. Their involvement has also impacted our own family's structure. We formed lifelong friendships with other parents that supported us through some typical stress with raising teens. These same friendships also supported us through the death of a close family member. Athletics and team have always been essential components of my life. Athletics has grounded me, supported me, involved me and challenged me to be a better person.

In addition to my experiences in athletics, I also have another lens from which I view my research. For the past twenty-five years I have worked as a teacher in special education. I am passionate about my field and consider myself to be very fortunate to love the work I do on a daily basis. I am fiercely protective of my students and their families and do my absolute best to promote their happiness and achievement on all levels. As a proponent of inclusive education, my students are integrated into general education classes whenever possible. I have always tried to teach my students with the caring and passion that I wanted my own sons taught. In my interactions with parents I try to be as considerate and understanding as I would hope my own children's teachers would be with me. My students and their families are a huge part of my life. The

majority of my day-to-day life centers around how I can best help them and support them. Each and every one of my students is special to me and I value everything that makes them unique individuals.

My passion for my profession has fueled a desire to go back to school to get my Ph.D. in disability studies. In this field I look at how society views those with disabilities and how they are positioned in our culture. I do not accept the view that those with physical or mental disabilities should be excluded from participating in society. I am hoping to study areas where there have been exclusionary practices, try to understand the reasons behind their occurrence, and use that understanding to promote understanding and change for the better.

It is from these perspectives that I conducted my research on how athletic involvement affects the quality of life for individuals with disabilities and their families. My own experiences lead me to believe that involvement in sport is an important part of life. I have multiple views of the influence of sport on the individual and the family. I have memories of being a student on a team, I have been a parent of a child on a team, and I have used athletics throughout my life to maintain balance and control. As a teacher of students with special needs, I support opportunities for my students and their families to be able to participate on an athletic team to experience the many positive components that come from playing on a team sport. My personal history, along with my background in athletics, and my involvement in special education will shape my research as I look for those same qualities and experiences with the families of children with disabilities.



## **Findings**

The findings from this research were compiled from interviews and observations of both team practices and games. Notes were coded to find relevant or emerging themes regarding this topic. As themes developed, it was possible to see how the data organized the participants' experiences with team sport participation. The following themes developed which identify areas that affected the quality of life for those individuals and their families who participated on this team.

### **Parents Find Support as Part of This Segregated Team Experience**

The three participants in this study were the primary caretakers of their children and bore the majority of the responsibility for their children's care. Their views reflect their position in our society as women who are nurturers and their comments regarding their child's practice time as "their" time indicated they do not have much other time to spend on themselves. Their emphasis on their personal friendships and supports through their child's team participation reveals that this is an important component of their team sport experience. The emotional support they received as a result of their child's participation on this team was depicted as a vital and integral part of their lives.

The following quotes illustrate the feelings of support experienced by these women:

- Wilma- "For me, it's that I always know my friends are here. I never have to go through anything alone. We're here for each other. We nourish each other."
- Karen- "I think we form faster/deeper friendships in this group. It's really special."
- Wilma- "I call practice time on Friday my 'therapy Friday'."

These quotes describe a feeling of acceptance and caring with this group that these women had not found elsewhere. They attributed their participation on this team as providing them with these important, emotional connections with other women.

Informational support from these trusted friendships was another aspect of support these women received. Navigating the complex government systems to access services for a special needs child can be grueling. These parents were able to obtain information through these trusted friendships as a result of their participation on this team. According to one mom:

- Karen- "There's a great support network among parents. We share ideas and contacts from everything from programs, nutrition, parenting tips, pediatricians, etc. We always give each other information."

Additionally, information gathered from field notes revealed several instances where this type of information support occurred. On one occasion a parent brought flyers to pass out to the other parents about a summer camp for special needs students. At another practice session, two parents sat to the side of the bleachers reviewing a child's paperwork for their school program. Deep in conversation, they were discussing the pros and cons of different aspects of the student's education. When they were finished they shared a long hug and words of thanks and appreciation were spoken. These examples indicate that a valued network for these women is provided for them through participation on this team. This network gives them trusted sources of information for the services and supports their children require.

All the participants indicated through the interviews that outside of this team they experienced a sense of isolation and marginalization as a result of being parents of

children with special needs. Collectively they indicated that their participation on this team provided them with a sense of belonging to a group where they felt included and their sense of isolation or being “different” was alleviated. Practices and game nights included many comments regarding this theme of “being like everyone else” and “being part of a family” through their team participation. Individually, the participants made the following specific references to their own feelings of both isolation and belonging in regards to their involvement with this team:

- Wilma- “We ‘belong’ and the other ‘typical’ teams want to be part of US rather than the other way around.”
- Karen- “It’s the one time we can feel/be like ‘all the other families’ who have kids playing a sport.”
- Jill- “It’s the one time I can be like everyone else.”
- Wilma- “One conversation with the manager and I knew we were ‘home’.”
- Karen- “We left one league that wasn’t so welcoming to join this league which makes us feel like we’re part of a family.”
- Jill- “I liked not feeling different for a change, just like everyone else who was there, no different.”

Throughout this research, the participants indicated that the feelings of “belonging” to a group contributed positively to their experiences. This sense of “belonging” lessened their feelings of isolation and clearly contributed to the quality of their experience.

### **A Sense of Belonging for the Children**

All participants indicated that their children also experienced positive feelings of belonging to a group as a result of their participation on this team. Both Karen and Jill spoke of their own children feeling “different” and “isolated” from other children because of their disabilities. All three participants agreed that their children enjoyed being part of a team and the sense of belonging to a group that resulted from their participation on this team. They had the following comments to make:

- Jill- “Well, you know we have the whole physical thing with our son, along with the other. It’s just been so important for him to do the ‘typical’ kid thing, not ‘be typical’ (not handicapped) but to do the same things as the other kids, and to talk to them at school like that. That was real important.”
- Karen- “ I asked him the other day, just wondering about the friend thing, and he said, ‘Mom, all my friends are on the team. They are all my friends now, all of them.’ Who could argue with that?”
- Wilma- “Some kids love it so much they wear their game uniforms all the time, practice, school, all the time.”
- Karen- “ I still have to say the biggest thing for him was acceptance and being a part of this really impacted that.”

Several of the children were seen wearing their game uniforms at practices. Those parents also indicated that their children loved being a part of the team so much that they had a difficult time getting them to wear clothes other than their team uniform. As with their parents, the children’s participation on this team provided them with a

strong sense of belonging to a group that helped alleviate feelings of isolation they had experienced as a result of their disabilities.

### **Self Esteem for Children**

Increased self-esteem was another benefit participants indicated their children experienced as a result of their participation on this team. Development of both social skills and physical skills were indicated as being contributing factors to their increased self esteem. Parent comments included the following statements:

- Jill- “ That was probably the best part, it was so good for his self esteem.”
- Wilma- “It was so great for his self esteem, we can all use that, can’t we?”
- Jill- “Now he just feels better about himself.”

These statements regarding their children’s increased self esteem by participants were reflected in the children’s demeanors observed at both practices and games.

Participating team players were seen smiling, “strutting” up to bat, waving at the crowd, and cheering for each other. Their behaviors indicated they were happily involved in their sport and they were clearly enjoying their participation on the team. The children responded to the cheers of the viewers by smiling, waving, and shouting comments out to them.

Participants’ comments clearly identify an increase in self esteem for their children as a result of their participation in a team sport program. In fact, Jill identifies that component of her child’s participation as “the best part” of his team experience. Field notes provide numerous examples of the children’s behavior indicating happiness, confidence, and enjoyment of their participation. Having a positive team sport experience would ultimately contribute to any child’s self esteem.

### **Family Involvement**

In addition to parents and the participating children benefiting from this experience, it seems that there were additional benefits for the entire family. Observations of practices and game nights provided opportunities to observe other family members being involved with the team. Fathers were seen helping out at practice with hitting, pitching, and fielding balls with the children. Siblings were observed supporting their brothers and sisters by cheering at both games and practices. The participants made the following comments regarding their family's involvement with the team:

- Karen- "It's family time. The whole family can join in, maybe not coaching or anything, but at least coming to the games. All the kids like that."
- Wilma- "It's been a good thing for our family."
- Jill- "It's good for the siblings as well."
- Karen- "His brothers always want to come to his games. Maybe it's the snack bar (laughter), but they're always excited when he has a game."

Benefits from participating on this team are seen to encompass the entire family. Comments and observations support the idea that the entire family can be involved and benefit from their connection with this sport. Parents and siblings have opportunities to be involved and indicate through both their actions and comments that they enjoy this involvement.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this research indicate that the involvement in team sport for their children with disabilities positively affected the quality of life for both the children and

their families. Information gathered from observation, individual interviews, group interviews, and field notes suggest that areas contributing to quality of life were positively affected for these families by their child's athletic participation. After coding interviews, observations, and field notes, themes developed that connected to the domains identified by the Turnbulls as contributing to quality of life (Purcell, Turnbull, & Jackson, 2006). These domains included the areas of disability related supports, family interaction, parenting, and emotional well-being (Purcell et al., 2006) The interviews indicated that parents felt they were part of a strong support system through their child's participation on this team, they felt a sense of belonging to a group, they felt their child had increased self-esteem and skill development, and their child experienced the sense of friendship and belonging to a group. These areas correlate with those domains that have been established as contributing to Family Quality of Life (F.Q.O.L.) as indicated by Purcell, Turnbull, & Jackson (2006).

Interpretation of the data uses Phenomenology to frame the concept of how team sport participation adds meaning to the lives of the families involved. Phenomenology helps identify the meaning, structure, and essence of this experience for this group of people. The team sport experience of this group of participants is different from any other group that would be studied. It is influenced by the assumptions and beliefs that each individual uses to interpret their experiences. These participants refer to their participation on this team as providing them with the same experience as those families with non-disabled children. They identify support systems, a sense of belonging, increased self esteem, and family involvement as components that contribute positively to their team involvement. This is their perception of their participation on this team and

the interview data along with observations and field notes support this as their experience.

The participants in this study were all women who are mothers of children with disabilities. According to Feminist Standpoint Theory, the interview data in this study would be influenced by how gender affects our experience of reality. As women experience the world in a different way than men, the information gathered in this study truly reflects how these women interpret their experience. Their interpretations, based on their position in society as female, caretakers, and nurturers will be different than if men or fathers made them. These participants show a need for connection and belonging that might not be the same for men. As the primary caretakers for their children, these women would benefit from connections and networking to gain the information they need to inform their choices for their children from nutrition to school. If the men or fathers do not have these same needs, their experience and interpretation of their team experience will be different. The evidence collected in this study is influenced by female perspective and reflects their experience in our society.

There are limitations to this research and this study should not be used to make overriding generalizations about team sport experience for children with disabilities and their families. First, this is a small study involving only one team in one sport area. This is also a segregated team for children with disabilities. Additional information from those experiencing an inclusive team sport experience could be highly informative. Other types of sports that are individual versus “team” would provide further understanding of the impact of athletics on quality of life for those with disabilities and their families. This is a team for upper elementary aged children. Other areas of study could include primary



aged children, secondary school aged children, and college age students. Finally, the area where this team resides is a middle to upper-middle class area. Socio-economic status for individuals involved on these teams would be an additional factor influencing their experiences and should be considered in further research.

### **Implications**

The idea that all individuals, regardless of whether or not they are disabled, are entitled to enjoying a quality life filled with positive experiences would not reasonably be disputed. The findings in this research underscore the concept that participation in team sport can positively affect the quality of life for children with disabilities as well as have a positive impact on quality of life for the families of these children. Parents' comments show significant social/emotional benefits for themselves, their families, and their disabled children from their participation in a sport program. Additionally, skill development in the areas of physical skills as well as social skills were seen to be areas of growth as well.

Sport teams for those with disabilities are still not available in all areas. Socio-economic status would be a factor contributing to a family's ability to participate on a team, if government funding is unavailable to support team development. Availability of team sport and athletic involvement for children with disabilities at the school level, including elementary, secondary, and higher education would be a possible area for development. If supported by government funding it would be possible for all individual's with disabilities to participate regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Previous research in this area indicates that there is significant interest in developing increased team sport opportunities for children with disabilities. Their growth over the

past few years has been documented to have significantly increased (Therrien, 1992).

Certainly support groups would advocate for opportunities for individuals with disabilities to have these experiences. The importance of team sport involvement indicated by these families, the positive experiences reported, along with the research indicating that interest in these opportunities is increasing, points to the need for further research in this area. Educators, advocacy groups, and other government agencies would benefit from this continued research.

## References

- Allan, K. (2010) *Explorations in Classical Sociological Theory*. Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press
- Appelrouth, S. & Edles, L.D. (2007) *Sociological Theory in the Contemporary Era*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press
- Block, Martin E. (1995) Ensuring the quality of life through activity—Americans with Disabilities Act: Its impact on youth sports *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 66(1) 28-33. Retrieved from <http://proquest.umi.com.lib.proxy.chapman.edu/pqdweb?did=1774461&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=8974&RQT=309&VName=PQD>
- Fetter-Harrott, A., Steketee, A.M., & Dare, M.J. (2008) Boosting inclusion for students with disabilities *District Administration* 44(10) 63-65. Retrieved from [http://www.districtadministration.com/viewpage.aspx?pagename=/toc\\_700809.htm&folder=pagecachefolder](http://www.districtadministration.com/viewpage.aspx?pagename=/toc_700809.htm&folder=pagecachefolder)
- Fine, L. (2009) GAO probes access of students with disabilities to sports *Education Week* 29(13) 22-24. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2009/12/02/index.html>
- Friend, A., Summers, J. A., & Turnbull, A. (2009) Impacts of family support in early childhood intervention research *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities* 44(4) 453-470. Retrieved from <http://www.ddced.org/etmrdv/TOC/etddv44n4.htm>
- Groff, D. & Kleiber, D. (2001) Exploring the identity formation of youth involved in an adapted sports program *Therapeutic Recreation Journal* 35 (4) 318-333.

- Retrieved from [http://proquest.umi.com.libproxy.chpamn.edu/pqdlink? did=100298470&Fmt=3&clientId=8974&RQT=309&VName=PQD](http://proquest.umi.com.libproxy.chpamn.edu/pqdlink?did=100298470&Fmt=3&clientId=8974&RQT=309&VName=PQD)
- Grosse, S. (2008) Sports competition-integrated or segregated? Which is better for your child? *Exceptional Parent 38(6)* 28-29. Retrieved from <http://www.eparent.com/index.asp>
- Moran, T. E. & Block, M.E. (2009) Barriers to participation of children with disabilities in youth sports *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus 6(3)* 1-13. Retrieved from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol6/iss3/art5>
- Pauls, A. (2007) Goal! *Exceptional Parent 37(6)* p.44. Retrieved from <http://www.eparent.com>
- Ponchillia, P., Armbruster, J., & Wiebold, J. (2005) The national sports education camps project: Introducing sports skills to students with visual impairments through short-term specialized instruction *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness 99(11)* 587-598. Accession Number: EJ720637
- Purcell, M., Turnbull, A., & Jackson, C. (2006) Linking early childhood inclusion and family quality of life: Current literature and future directions *Young Exceptional Children 9:10* 10-19. doi: 10.1177/109625060600900302
- Silvers, A. & Wasserman, D. (2000) Convention and competence: Disability rights in sports and education *Society 37(3)* 63-67. Accession Number: EJ658527
- Smith, R. (1993) Sport and physical activity for people with physical disabilities *Parks & Recreation 28(2)* 21-28. Retrieved from <http://find.galegroup.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/gtx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&>

tabID=T003&proId=ITOF&docId=A13443591&source=gale&srcprod=ITOF  
&userGroup

Stanistreet, P. (2005) Not just a game *Adults Learning 16(8)* 18-19. Retrieved from  
<http://www.niace.org.uk/publications/adults-learning>

Stein, J. & Paciorek, M.J. (1995) Sport for all: A declaration of rights of individuals with disabilities; Responsibilities of program organizers *Physical Educator 51(4)* 188-193. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com.libproxy.chapman.edu/ehost/delivery?sid=cf6c621a-8b63-4a7f-9103-790b2fcb9fc%40sessionmgr111&vid=45&hid=25>

Therrien, V. (1992) Challenger little league it's a hit *The Exceptional Parent (22)* 20-22. Retrieved from <http://find.galegroup.com/gtx/retrieve.do?contentSet=IAC-Documents&resultListType=R>

Turnbull, A., Summers, J., Turnbull, R., Brotherson, M., Winton, P., Roberts, R., Snyder, P., McWilliams, R., Chandler, L., Schrandt, S., Stowe, M., Bruder, M., Divenere, N., Epley, P., Hornback, M., Huff, B., Miksch, P., Mitchell, L., Sharp, L., & Stroup-Rentier, V. (2007) Family supports and services in early intervention: A bold vision *Journal of Early Intervention 29(3)* 187-206. Retrieved from <http://dx.Doi.org.libproxy.chapman.edu/10.1177/105381510702900301>

