

**SPORTS AND CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS:  
SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED EXPERIENCES OF VOLUNTEERS**



Courtesy of Special Olympics

**Maureen Ellen Hakala**

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**DISSERTATION**

to obtain  
the degree of doctor at the University of Twente,  
on the authority of the rector magnificus,  
prof. dr. T. T. M. Palstra,  
on account of the decision of the graduation committee,  
to be publicly defended  
on Wednesday, the 28<sup>th</sup> of March, 2018  
at 12.45 hrs.

by

**Maureen Ellen Hakala**

born on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 1959  
in Panama City, Florida, USA

This PhD dissertation has been approved by

Prof. dr. C. P. M. Wilderom (Supervisor)

Prof. dr. J. Winslade (Supervisor)

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## **DEDICATION**

In memory of my dear parents, Oliver Harold and Ruth (Coomey) Hakala, who supported and encouraged me through a lifetime of curiosity and learning. Your interest and questions about how I was doing in my “course” were very motivating for me. I wish you could have seen this completed project, but I know you are looking on and cheering me with a great deal of enthusiasm. Thank you for inspiring me to always keep reaching and for continually expressing how proud you were of me. Your life-long love and support have meant the world to me. I love you and I am very grateful to both of you for everything you’ve done. And, in memory of my sister Karen, who is also looking on and was a constant source of encouragement. Thank you, Sis.

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I appreciate the participants who agreed to participate in my study and took the process of answering the interview questions very seriously. All of you gave a big part of yourself to my study by sharing very dear and personal stories of your volunteer experiences. Thank you very much!

The dissertation journey had many solo moments. What kept me going were the love, support, and belief in me from a host of people. I owe a wealth of gratitude to so many people. Thank you! On a deeply personal note, I want to thank my parents, Oliver Harold and Ruth (Coomey) Hakala for their unwavering belief in me, unconditional love, and support of me on this journey. Thank you to my sister Karen for being interested in what I was doing and listening. To my brother Jim, thanks for your encouragement and support throughout this process. I am also fortunate to have some very dear friends that I am indebted to for their ongoing support and friendship. Laura - thank you for your guidance, and willingness to brainstorm ideas from the very beginning. I appreciate your assistance in exploring doctoral programs, supporting me through the program when I felt like I was going in circles, and I am especially grateful for your friendship. Brenda – thank you for your lifelong friendship and support of my learning. Thank you to an amazing group of friends that continually rallied around me with supportive words, deeds, and collective energies as I navigated all the personal challenges that arose during this dissertation process, especially the support I received from my soul family and friends – including, Lainie, Merryman, Kris, Dan, Dorene, Barbara, Rahel, Jenny, and many others. A special thank you to the Meyers – Jamie, Chuck, and Lucy for their support, and to Jamie for connecting me to the people at Special Olympics. Thank you to David Evangelista at Special Olympics for helping me to gain permission to use the photograph contained in this dissertation. To all the amazing people that work with children with special needs in all settings – teachers, assistants, and volunteers, thank you for all that you do! Please know how much of a difference you make in a child's life every day. I am honored to work with each of you. And, to the children, the athletes

who try so hard, I am proud of you and your efforts! May we remember to view you as people who are participating in structured sports with abilities! Thank you!



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## ABSTRACT

In this research, I studied how the volunteers who work with children in structured sports events made meaning of their experience in a relational context, as viewed through the lens of social constructionism. In the literature review, several themes emerged that were the foundation for the conceptual framework and informed the research question: *“How are the experiences of adult volunteers who work with children with special needs in structured sports events constructed?”*

This study was qualitative in nature and used the Dynamic Narrative Approach research method. This method applies narratives and includes aspects of social constructionism. Ten participants that met the criteria were selected for this study. Two rounds of interviews were conducted through the use of technology including computer assisted video conferencing. I coded the responses and a number of themes emerged.

Since I was looking at the volunteer experience through the lens of social constructionism, I explored how participants spoke about relations with others and the language they used to describe their interactions. The key focus areas emerged as the participants described: a process for getting and staying involved; motivation for getting and staying involved; meaningful volunteer experience; and suggestions and ideas about encouraging future volunteer recruitment. Themes that corresponded with these focus areas were also discussed. Discourse is generated in relation with others, so I also examined the various discourses that impacted the volunteers’ experiences, which included: the discourse of disability, the discourse of altruism/service, and the discourse of sports.

The results displayed that the participants’ language evolved from describing the children as “a kids with disabilities” to “athletes,” a demonstration of the social construction of a shift in the identity ascribed to the children. The participants told stories that described their own evolution as one of developing confidence and growth. The participants also offered ideas to encourage recruitment of volunteers. The results of this study contribute to the literature in volunteering, children with special needs, and structured sports events. In addition, information was provided that is useful for practitioners, volunteers, and others involved in serving children with special needs.



## PROLOGUE

### A Day at the Beach

As the time approached for the children to arrive at the beach, the volunteers eagerly awaited for the day to begin. The sun was shining and the water was lapping at the shoreline at the Seaside Lagoon. Several buses pulled up to the parking lot, effectively announcing the arrival of the children. As the teachers approached, they told us that this was the first trip to the beach for some of the children, and that the children were both excited and nervous about this trip. Many of the children, especially Craig, showed signs of excitement and some trepidation. I was also nervous because it was my first volunteer experience for children with special needs at the beach.

Craig was a child with multiple disabilities, including autism and physical disabilities. He had never been to the beach, was unable to swim, and was fearful of new situations. But, Craig was excited and said “I want to ride in a red kayak.” Like Craig, I was excited, but also anxious about ensuring that the day would be meaningful for the children.

Craig slowly walked to the edge of the beach, tentatively removed his shoes, and touched the sand. It took all his concentration but he quickly became distracted as he played with his friends. A game of bucket relay ensued with Craig slowly putting his feet in the water at the shoreline. The children were then introduced to the proper use of a lifejacket. I assisted Craig with his. He alternated between excitement and fear (“I’m scared of deep water.”), as he reluctantly put on his lifejacket.

The children rotated through different activities e.g., kayaking, surfing, and sailing. Craig kept looking at and talking about the red kayak, “I want that one”. When it was his turn to ride the kayak, Craig hesitated, and began to change his mind, fluctuating between wanting to ride it, and then being fearful about riding it. I recognized Craig’s fear as my own, and knew he needed some encouragement. I held out my hand, “Here I’ll help you,” and as he placed his small hand in mine, he smiled. The smile grew bigger as we boarded the kayak together, still clutching my hand. Once our kayak was in the water, I nudged the oar towards Craig and nodded with encouragement. Craig gingerly took the oar, rowing with one hand, still clutching my hand with the other. By the time we were headed back to shore, Craig was rowing with both hands. Craig was grinning from ear to ear and saying “this is FUN!” After returning to shore, Craig repeated every detail of riding in the kayak to anyone who would listen.

Craig experienced something new with excitement and trepidation. He did not know what a trip to the beach would mean for him. But he was willing to try new things like, putting his feet in the sand, wading in the water, and riding in a red kayak. Craig approached these new adventures with courage, and he learned that “I can do it!”

Like Craig, I approached this volunteer experience with excitement and some trepidation. I wanted to be helpful - to create a meaningful sports experience for children with special needs. Ultimately, I found that in striving to make this day at the beach meaningful for children like Craig, I was forever changed in that I experienced the joy of volunteering for structured sports events for children with special needs. These lessons were instrumental in choosing my career as a teacher for children with special needs. As an Adapted Physical Education Teacher, I work with children with special needs to provide them with an educational curriculum to develop gross motor skills, social skills, and opportunities to practice those skills in games and activities. My interest in this area began many years ago. As a child, I spent a great deal of time with my uncle who had Intellectual Disabilities (ID), formerly called Mental Retardation (MR). Uncle Jack was a special person who had some wonderfully social qualities and was an integral part of our family. So, my interest in this area continues, and provides the impetus for my studying this topic from the perspective of the adult volunteers, especially how the adult volunteers socially construct, and make meaning of, their experiences through working with the children with special needs in structured sports events. This study seeks to add to the research about the adult volunteer's experience, and to bring theory to practice. In addition, I hope to hear the stories from the participants' of this study. I am particularly interested in learning how their volunteer experience of working with children with special needs in structured sports events has impacted their lives, and how they made-meaning of their experiences.