Short skirts and breast juts: cheerleading, eroticism and schools

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Cheerleading, an American invention, has 3.8 million participants in the United States, 97\% of whom are female. It is an adult-sanctioned and typically school-affiliated activity that remains popular in spite of the increase in sports' opportunities for girls in schools. Drawing from popular culture and a middle school ethnography, the authors document the enduring popularity of cheerleading and how it is a vehicle through which adolescent girls may try out various facets of what it means to be a contemporary American woman. The cheerleader represents both the 'good' girl as well as the sexy tease. Understanding the sexual tensions embedded in cheerleading in its nation of origin may provide educators in different national contexts ideas of how to use cheerleading as an educational tool.

Introduction

During fall 2003 in Elma, Washington, USA, a community controversy arose over cheerleading attire, specifically the length of the high school cheerleader and drill teams' skirts (\textit{Spokesman Review}, 2003). The Elma school district’s administration banned the wearing of these skirts to school since the length did not adhere to school dress regulations for the rest of the student body; in the past this regulation had been waived for cheerleaders and drill team members. School Superintendent Tami Hickle said ‘What the high school decided is that the dress code would apply to everyone equally.’ However, the new regulations did allow members of the all female cheerleading and drill squad to wear these skirts to cheer and perform during sports events.

A mother of one of the team members said that parents were told by administrators that the short skirts were a distraction in the classroom, particularly for the boys. She responded that ‘Boys will always be horn toads no matter what girls wear.’ Furthermore, she commented that the school district’s new rule implied that ‘Cheerleaders are not nice girls.’ One young woman was so
incensed with the new regulations that she chose to wear ‘very ugly’ warm-up pants and her team sweater to school on game day as a form of protest against the administrative edict.

This recent school controversy speaks to the erotic tensions embedded in cheerleading, an activity in which 3.8 million people participate in the United States and an ever-increasing popular activity in over 50 countries, including England, Scotland and Wales (Elias, 2002; Roenigk, 2002). References to ‘horn toads’ and ‘nice girls’ illustrate the narrow pathway of appropriate femininity that adolescent girls must tread, particularly in very public activities such as cheerleading. In this article, we explore the erotic tensions in contemporary school cheerleading through an analysis of how US adolescent girls, cheerleading coaches and those associated with the business facets of cheerleading construct the meaning of cheerleading. Insights gained from a study of cheerleading’s erotic tensions in its nation of origin have significance for all countries in which cheerleading has been introduced because cheerleading, whether it be in the United States, England, Sweden or Costa Rica, offers girls one of the only adult sanctioned and mainstream vehicles for them to try out a sexualized identity in a public space.

**Sexuality and cheerleading: a literature review**

*A brief history*

Cheerleading became institutionalized on college campuses in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At this time, cheerleaders were all male, and the activity itself was seen as a masculine activity that was highly respected (Adams & Bettis, 2003). However, as early as the 1920s, one can find cheerleaders, albeit male cheerleaders, being described in very sensual terms.

A contemporary of Pericles, strolling into one of our football stadiums would ... delight in those lithe, white-sweatered and flannel-trousered youths in front of the bleachers, their mingled force and grace, their gestures at the same time hieratic and apparently jointless, that accompanied the spelling out of the locomotive cheer. And even an ancient Greek pulse would halt for a moment at that final upward leap of the young body, like a diver into the azure, as the stands thundered out the climatic ‘Stanford!’

(Cited in Hanson, 1995, p. 2)

Cheerleading remained an activity primarily for males until the 1940s. Females began to dominate cheerleading squads when male cheerleaders left campuses to fight during World War II, and by the 1950s the activity, particularly at the high school level, had become completely feminized. With the feminization of cheerleading came a new kind of sexualization of the activity as seen in Arturo Gonzales’s (1956) description of female cheerleaders:

No report on cheerleaders over the past three decades could be complete, of course, without reference to the coeds. Pretty young things in vestigial skirts, amply-filled sweaters and wearing baby shakos, they’ve burbled and twirled to the intense enjoyment of those fans easily distracted from the male carnage at the midfield by a few well-placed curves. (p. 104)
That focus on female sexuality and the erotic elements of cheerleading was amplified during the 1970s when professional cheerleading squads associated with professional athletic teams, particularly football, emerged. The Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, with their patented hot pants and low-cut cowgirl vests and shirts, was the first such squad to make explicit the sexual element of cheerleading. Performing routines more akin to Las Vegas showgirls, the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, as described by three of its former cheerleaders, epitomized the ultimate male fantasy:

> How do you tap into the paradox of the sexy, wholesome girl, the girl you’d like to take home to mother but make love to on the way over there? Well, take Miss America and dress her in hot pants and a halter top. Then put her out on a football field grinding out a lot of provocative dances, but the whole time keep telling the fans that these are good girls, wholesome girls. (Scholz et al., 1991, p. 143)

Because cheerleading represents simultaneously the ‘sexy, wholesome girl,’ as the Scholz sisters observe, the cheerleader, according to Kurman (1986), has evolved into ‘a disturbing erotic icon … She incarnates, in a word, a basic male-voyeuristic fantasy’ (p. 58).

Yet, most secondary, collegiate and competitive squads bear little resemblance to the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, and most work hard to disassociate themselves from this image. However, as we argue in this article, the erotic tensions already described creep into the language, practices and policies of cheerleading squads at all levels, from preadolescent All-Star squads to collegiate competitive squads. What then does this sexualization reveal about growing up feminine in today’s society? Davis (1990) argued that today the cheerleader symbolizes ‘dominant ideology about how females should look and act in our society’ (p. 155). Embedded in this ideology are the contradictory positions in which girls and women are located. They, meaning both females and cheerleaders, are to embody simultaneously the virtuous, ‘good girls’ and the sexually provocative ‘bad girls.’ Navigating these tensions becomes the work, albeit unacknowledged, of all cheerleaders.

**Sexuality and adolescent girls at the turn of this century**

Martin (1996) points out that the plethora of research published about adolescent girls in the late 1980s and 1990s failed to adequately address female sexuality and its effects on girls’ self-esteem. In the twenty-first century, we have seen a marked change in the silencing of female sexuality with the publication of several popular press books, including *The Secret Lives of Girls* (Lamb, 2001); *Fast Girls* (White, 2002); *Flirting with Danger* (Phillips, 2000) and *Dilemmas of Desire* (Tolman, 2002). What all of these books reveal is that adolescent females think about and engage in sexual activity of a wider variety than dominant society is ready to admit. The strength of these books is that they open the discussion of adolescent and prepubescent female sexuality that has often been overlooked. However, the findings of these authors focus on what girls think about and do in private.

Several researchers (Fine, 1988; Walkerdine, 1990) have pointed out that the erotic is rarely allowed to enter schools, at least in the formal curriculum and
practices. Furthermore, schools provide little space for girls to claim any sense of sexual agency, the formal sexual education curriculum being but one of many places in which female sexual desire and agency are silenced (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002). Yet, the erotic does sneak into schools—in private bathroom and cafeteria discussions, in the visible embraces among students in the hall and in the public display of dress. The erotic also enters in the form of extracurricular activities. In Prom Night, Best (2000) notes that the prom is one space in which girls are allowed to ‘negotiate the sexual terrain of school’ (p. 60). We assert in this article that cheerleading is another.

Cheerleaders as sexy tease and good girl

Cheerleading is an activity that is found in almost every middle-level, secondary-level and university level school in the United States. In the United States, cheerleading is often perceived as the highest status activity for girls in middle and high school, and girls who cheer occupy positions of power, prestige and privilege (Eder, 1985, 1995; Kurman, 1986; Eder & Parker, 1987; Lesko, 1988; Eckert, 1989; Adler et al., 1992; Adler & Adler, 1995; Merten, 1996, 1997; Kinney, 1999; Bettis & Adams, 2003). Furthermore, it is an activity that is typically supported by the school administration and other adults in the community since it represents a mainstream understanding of the role of females; in this perspective, cheerleading equates with ‘youthful prestige, wholesome attractiveness, peer leadership and popularity’ (Hanson, 1995, p. 2). As Eckert (1989) notes, extracurricular activities typically become the exclusive domain of those students who are supportive of school and what it represents to adults. For example, ‘Burnouts’ or those affiliated with drugs and/or those who are hostile to school rarely choose to become cheerleaders nor would they typically be selected to join the squad since a positive attitude towards school is a central facet of the activity.

However, at the same time, in the society at large and in the eyes of many adolescents, cheerleading operates as an activity that symbolizes ‘objectified sexuality and promiscuous availability’ (Hanson, 1995, p. 2). The short skirts, the sometimes sexually provocative moves of a cheerleading routine, the bright red lipstick and the public gaze of adult men and boys all contribute to a cultural activity that openly celebrates female sexuality. However, female sexuality is typically unacknowledged in schools, and the connection between the erotic and cheerleading is silenced by most adults associated with cheerleading (i.e. coaches, parents, camp instructors). Instead, most of the formal public discussion focuses on whether cheerleading is a sport or activity and its lack of status and financial support by school administrators. This eschewal of the erotic in cheerleading runs counter to representations of cheerleaders in popular culture venues. For example, in the award winning film, American Beauty (Universal Studios, 1999), a mid-life crisis for the lead male character, Lester Burnham, manifests itself in his desire for his daughter’s best friend, an adolescent cheerleader. Furthermore, professional cheerleading squads who cheer for professional sports teams, such as the Dallas Cowboy
Cheerleaders and Laker girls, are viewed as sexual icons in the country at large, and *Debbie Does Dallas* (Pussycat Cinema, 1978), a film that narrates a high school cheerleader squad’s sexual escapades, remains one of the top selling adult movies in the United States and has even been remade into an off-Broadway play (Nutt, 2001; Zinoman, 2002).

Hence, cheerleading operates symbolically at the intersection of the all-American good-girl next door who exemplifies peer leadership and the vamp who teases with her short skirt. How then do adolescent girls make sense of the contradictory status of cheerleading, one that embodies both wholesome and erotic tensions?

**Setting, methods and participants of the study**

This qualitative case study is part of a larger study that we began in 1998–1999 in a middle school located in a Midwestern state in the United States. The focus of this school ethnography was how adolescent girls understood leadership and the ways in which schools foster leadership in young girls. We became acquainted with this particular school and its principal during our work as teacher educators in mentoring first-year teachers. The principal’s interest and support of our study along with the racial/ethnic and social class diversity of the student population encouraged us to conduct our study at this particular school.

The school was located in Witchita, a town of 26,000 whose origins lay in an oil boom in the 1930s and a town that was known throughout the state as a highly stratified community. Approximately 5700 students were enrolled in the school district and approximately 430 attended the middle school, which consisted of two sixth-grade classes and all of the district’s seventh graders. The school district’s demographics were 75% White, 14% American Indian, 5% African American, 5% Latino and 1% Asian or Pacific Islander.

Each of us observed a full day in the school on a weekly basis for the entire school year, and both attended after school events such as talent night and cheerleading tryouts. After observing in a variety of classrooms and informal school settings such as lunch at the beginning of the year, we solicited girls who represented a variety of peer groups, social classes, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and academic interests to participate in our interviews. Of the approximately 75 girls we solicited, 61 agreed to be interviewed. During the first round of formal interviews with these 61 girls and throughout our accumulating field notes, cheerleaders were mentioned frequently as leaders, and we began to explore in these initial interviews why cheerleaders were considered both leaders and the most popular girls in the school. We asked the girls to describe the various peer groups in school, where cheerleaders fit in this scheme, and why the participants might want to become a cheerleader or not. Then, beginning in the second semester, we observed on a weekly basis two cheer preparation classes that the school had instituted to prepare girls for cheerleading tryouts. Initial cheerleading interviews were conducted with 22 of the girls before the tryouts, and we explored why girls wanted to become cheerleaders, what the judges were looking for in the selection of the cheerleading squad and who they thought might make the squad.
Another round of interviews was conducted with 16 of the girls following the tryouts where we asked about the tryout process itself, selection of the squad and, if they did not try out, why that was the case. Of these 16 girls who were enrolled in the cheerleading preparation class, eight did not try out—and the eight who did try out made the squad. The racial composition of the girls interviewed specifically about cheerleading consisted of 14 Whites, five Native Americans and three African Americans. Data for this case study were also derived from interviews of girls who did not participate in the cheerleading tryouts plus the cheer preparation teacher, Louise, who was responsible for the cheerleading classes and tryouts.

Separate from the ethnography, further data were gathered from observations of two 2002 Universal Cheerleaders Association (UCA) Cheer Camps for middle and secondary cheerleaders over a combined five-day period and from informal interviews conducted with camp coaches. One of these camps was located in Alabama and the other in Idaho, USA. These observations consisted of watching the girls practice new cheers that were being taught during the camp, listening to their informal talk during breaks, and noting the talk and actions of the instructors as they presented the material. We also conducted formal interviews with 10 officials of Varsity Spirit Corporation, the world’s largest distributor of cheerleading uniforms and paraphernalia and organizer of UCA Cheer Camps. We asked questions about the change in uniform design over the past 25 years as well as the criteria for judging the UCA competitions. Such questions engendered discussions ranging from the introduction of spandex into cheerleading uniforms to the deduction of points for ‘slashy’ or sexually suggestive movements during competitive cheerleading contests that UCA sponsors. Another major source of data for this study was derived from popular culture literature, videos, television and radio programs, and media discussions of cheerleading.

‘Cute women in short skirts’: results and discussion

I’m sexy; I’m cute.
I’m popular to boot.
I’m bitchin’, great hair,
The boys all love to stare.
I’m wanted; I’m hot.
I’m everything you’re not.
I’m pretty; I’m cool.
I dominate this school. (Opening cheer from the movie Bring It On; Universal studios, 2000)

This opening cheer in Bring it On, an enormously popular cheerleading movie both in the United States and in Europe, speaks to the sexual tensions embedded in not only contemporary cheerleading but also contemporary girlhood. All adolescent girls must find ways to negotiate the landscape of girlhood where they are expected to be nice, confident girls who are neither sluts nor snobs. However, cheerleaders find that pathway even more treacherous since they occupy a public position that situates them both as a wholesome girl and a sexy tease.
As representatives or ambassadors of their schools, cheerleaders are expected to be role models, and their morals are expected to be beyond reproach. Drinking, smoking, cursing and having sex while in one’s uniform are strictly forbidden, but even out of uniform cheerleaders are to be the moral leaders. Most cheerleaders must sign a contract or constitution that prescribes in detail what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior as illustrated by these guidelines:

Cheerleaders should never use cheers that are the least bit suggestive, or have phrases that rhyme with swear words. Cheers of this nature discourage many rooters in the stands from cooperating and encourage others to carry on with crude and inappropriate responses. *(Saturday Review, 1962)*

Corny as it sounds, cheerleaders do represent their school, so we have to act properly wherever we’re likely to meet anyone who knows us in that capacity. Our squad works under a system of demerits, which are handed out for reasons, ranging from wearing too much makeup to smoking or drinking in uniform. *(Norton, 1977)*

Each 8th grade (cheerleading) candidate is to wear a plain white shirt with red shorts and each 9th grade candidate is to wear a plain white shirt with navy shorts. Also, hair should be pulled away from the face. The girls will not be able to wear jewelry of any kind. *(1998)*

This final guideline was issued for those girls trying out for cheerleading at Wichita Middle School (WMS). The cheerleading coach repeatedly reminded the girls who wanted to be cheerleaders that they were expected to have high morals. They were told that whether they were selected or not, girls were to have ‘class—to win with grace and to lose with grace.’ In most of our conversations with the girls interested in trying out for cheerleader, they echoed the sentiments of the coach. For example, Sadie answered this way when asked about the meaning of cheerleading:

> It means that you’re going to have a lot of people looking up to you, and so you’re going to have to do, be, have like a big responsibility and you’re going to have to like do right things and if you do something bad, like if you make a mistake, you’re going to have to have big responsibility and like be responsible basically.

Responsibility, good grades, and being nice to everyone were all mentioned as part of being a cheerleader, and certainly fit its good-girl image. However, the girls were also intrigued by the sexual tensions inherent in cheerleading.

One of the primary reasons girls wanted to be a cheerleader was because they believed that cheerleading was a route to instant popularity, which increased the likelihood of getting a boyfriend, a high-status marker for adolescent girls. Hence, cheerleading operated as a discursive practice that affirmed heterosexualized femininity. Milea, a Native American girl who was selected as cheerleader, explains the perennial appeal of cheerleading at her school and why she wants to be part of this activity: ‘Boys like cheerleaders so that makes you popular. I want more boys to like me.’ Shanna, another Native American girl who participated in the cheerleading preparation class but did not try out for the squad, similarly notes, ‘Some girls think the boys will like you if you’re a cheerleader ’cause boys like the cheeriest people.’ Finally, Daneka, a Native American girl who wanted to be a cheerleader but eventually did not try out, explained why so many girls, including herself, want to be
a cheerleader: ‘Girls want to be cheerleaders because they believe that guys will like them more—they will see them as cute women in short skirts.’

Daneka’s use of ‘girls’ and ‘women’ in the same sentence reflects a primary attraction of cheerleading for many girls: it allows girls to try on a womanly (i.e. sexualized) identity in a school-sanctioned space. Girls have the opportunity to wear short skirts and often tight fitting vests that highlight their womanly physical attributes. When asked why she wanted to be a cheerleader, Julie, a White girl who eventually made the squad, immediately answered, ‘Well, I like wearin’ those cute little uniforms ... Oh, they’re really cute. They fit the level ...’ Julie is intrigued by the shortness of the skirt, and she is aware that the length does meet school regulations, in that ‘they fit the level.’

Furthermore, since many of the contemporary cheerleading moves are sexually suggestive, girls have the opportunity to move their bodies in ways that are not typically permitted on school campuses. Trying out for cheerleader allowed the girls numerous opportunities to use their bodies in sexually provocative ways and to draw attention to their physically maturing bodies. While learning a dance during their cheerleading preparation class, the girls practiced thrusting their hips from side to side while jutting their breasts prominently outward in moves reminiscent of Brittany Spears’ music videos. At first, their faces were intense as they assumed the look of a sexually mature woman. However, within seconds, many of them, suddenly feeling self-conscious with their new persona, erupted into girlish giggles, thus breaking the spell of sexuality and womanhood that appeared to envelop them. This was obviously a space for girlhood to meet womanhood with no boys around, but it was also practice for the time in which they would be expected to be the object of the male gaze. Once a girl is selected cheerleader, she is given ample opportunities at pep rallies and athletic events to perform (literally) her femininity (Walkerdine, 1993) in front of her peers, her adult teachers and administrators, and the larger community. Thus, cheerleading is a vehicle through which girls can try on various sexual facets of what it means to be a woman in contemporary US society and do so with a large audience and without the fear of being labeled a slut or a ‘skank,’ a derogatory term used at this school to designate girls who were sexually promiscuous.

For many girls, such as Julie, a White girl who was selected cheerleader, this opportunity to play with a sexualized identity was a primary reason why cheerleading was so appealing. She explains, ‘I’m in it for the short skirts, the guys, getting in front of everybody and making a total fool of myself.’ Lisa, a White girl who scored the most points during the tryouts, noted rather nonchalantly that the players were much more interested in cheerleaders’ bodies rather than their cheers: ‘they’re not paying any attention to the cheerleaders anyways except looking at their legs or something.’ Both girls focus on the fact that cheerleading provides a public space in which to be gazed upon, particularly by males. In fact, for girls at most schools, it is the most visible space for them, and visibility is the cornerstone of popularity. Therefore, cheerleading embodies the two things that many adolescent girls desire: to be visible and to showcase their femininity. Because cheerleading has been one of the only spaces in which females could enjoy high status and visibility, Milea, a
Native American girl who made the squad, states ‘I’ve been waitin’ for it [cheerleading] my whole life.’

Walkerdine (1993) argues that in most accounts of girls’ experiences in schools, the schoolgirl is typified as the girl who follows rules and is deferential, loyal, quiet and works hard. This image of the schoolgirl, Walkerdine asserts, has been constructed as a ‘defense against being the object of male fantasies. The erotic is displaced [in school accounts] as too dangerous. But it re-enters, it enters in the spaces that are outlawed in the primary school: popular culture’ (1993, p. 20). However, as seen earlier and contrary to Walkerdine’s assertion, cheerleading does allow the erotic to enter into school-sanctioned space for girls to play with or try on the identity of the all-American nice girl next door and the sexually provocative woman simultaneously. Cheerleaders are allowed to wear short skirts and tight fitting vests that often violate school dress codes, as seen in the Elma, Washington case, while performing sexually provocative dance moves such as pelvic thrusts to popular music not allowed elsewhere in school.

Although adults involved in cheerleading tend to downplay the sexualized elements of cheerleading, they are not immune to the erotic tensions of cheerleading. In preparing the girls for the middle school competition, Louise, the cheerleading preparation instructor, on several occasions instructed the girls to play up their sexuality, ‘When you make that turn, give the judges a sexy look.’ ‘Dazzle them. Give them goosebumps.’ On the day before tryouts, Louise offered make-up advice that speaks poignantly to the expectation that cheerleaders are to be sexy, but not sexual: ‘Put Vaseline on your teeth and put on a little extra makeup, but not too much. Don’t come looking like someone who could stand on the street [meaning a prostitute].’

Although Louise uses a language of sexuality in these comments, she, like many other adults involved in the activity, ignored typically that facet of cheerleading. We heard coaches routinely lamenting the fact that many of their cheerleaders desired to include Britney Spears’ dance moves in their routines. At a 2002 UCA Cheer Camp, one high school coach observed ‘It’s time to put the leader back in cheerleading.’ What she was speaking to was her desire to return cheerleading to its more ‘traditional’ roots where young women cheered for the boys to be successful in their athletic endeavors. In fact, in 2002, UCA’s theme for their summer camps was ‘Traditions.’ Through the requirement that squads create a traditional cheer that would galvanize and involve spectators and focus on crowd leadership and motivation, camp instructors sought to reverse a trend in which cheerleading squads focused on entertainment for the crowd. As part of this move, UCA introduced a new point system for cheerleading competitions that required points to be deducted for ‘slashy’ moves; that is, showing off and explicit sexual moves such as those displayed in the very popular Bring It On cheerleading movie, which most cheerleaders have seen. Bill Seely, vice president of operations and development for UCA, commented on these slashy moves:

It’s something we put in our score sheets at competition. Sportsmanship clause, it’s 5 percent of their score. If there are suggestive moves, they get penalized.
We do not believe that this adult shift in focus and disavowal of the erotic appeal of cheerleading is helpful to adolescent females transitioning into womanhood. It is yet another example of schools ignoring the discourse of desire that adolescents harbor and that plays an important role in their everyday lives (Fine, 1988). Cheerleading could provide a potential curricular space for girls to explore their emerging sexuality and female identity if school personnel formally acknowledged the erotic facets of this activity, constructed critical questions about it, and perhaps re-imagined, with the girls, what cheerleading could be.

**Cheerleading and its implications for educators: some initial recommendations**

Girl power posters rarely show girls dressing up like the Spice Girls and prancing around with their midriffs showing, preferring instead to show girls doing science behind test tubes or girls on the soccer field celebrating a goal. (Lamb, 2001, p. 40)

Lamb’s point is an important one to consider in understanding the perennially popular nature of US cheerleading and its growing numbers in the United Kingdom. Adults typically construct cheerleaders as girls who are ‘good’ girls and whose sole rationale for joining the squad has to do with school spirit and motivation. Louise, the WMS cheer coach, emphasized the support that cheerleaders were to provide the athletic teams:

> My school spirit comes from the heart, and these young women need to learn how to be loyal. They need to learn how to take the eyes off themselves. We’re there for other people; we’re not there for ourselves … If it weren’t for the athletes in the building, there would be no reason for us; we’re to give of ourselves; we are serving our athletes.

Instead, as the girls in this study have attested, their desire to be a part of the activity of cheerleading is as much about ‘dressing up like the Spice Girls and prancing around with their midriffs showing’ as it was about leading the fans and players to victory. How might these gaps in girls’ understandings and adults’ understandings of cheerleading be used as a curricular opening to engage in honest, healthy, developmentally appropriate conversations about sexuality?

Granted, in the United States, it is often difficult to have ‘honest’ conversations about sexuality and sex education because, as Irvine (2002) notes, the topic of sex education has been monopolized by the Conservative Right. Jocelyn Elders, the former Surgeon General, was fired for answering a question at an AIDS forum in which she affirmed that masturbation should be more openly discussed with children in schools (Irvine, 2002). Since cheerleading is an activity composed of girls who supposedly represent mainstream values and coached by adults who see it symbolically as a space for ‘nice’ girls, as the parent in Elma, Washington asserted, it may be a difficult vehicle through which to explore adolescent sexuality. Many parents and coaches who are invested in cheerleading retaining its traditional rationale, that of leadership, would be appalled at the thought that the activity could initiate some healthy discussions on adolescent sexuality. However, cheerleading is, in many ways, the perfect pedagogical vehicle through which to explore sexuality.
First, it is a ubiquitous institution found in almost every middle and high school across this country, and its status, although in flux in some schools, typically remains high. Second, its history delineates changing gender roles in American society, and, finally, its sexual image is found in popular culture films, videos, television, and in the popular vernacular (Adams & Bettis, 2003). Discussions of why cheerleading is still considered an activity for popular girls or not, how cheerleading has changed over its 135-year history, and how cheerleaders are used symbolically in music videos, films and popular culture, would all provide fertile ground for an exploration of sexuality and cheerleading. Furthermore, these types of discussions could take place among cheerleading squad members themselves, in after-school programs with cheerleaders and non-cheerleaders or through more formal classroom vehicles where the topic would provoke interest.

What might such a curriculum look like? Kim Irwin, originator of the performance art piece ‘WANTED: The X Cheerleaders Project’, has organized a curriculum for public school girls aged 9–12 and their teachers that uses cheerleading as a vehicle to explore a wide range of topics pertinent to girls’ lives. In conjunction with the Institute for Labor and the Community, Kim conducts workshops that discuss gender inequality, racism, body image, stereotypes and sports. The girls engage in research about these topics, share their findings with their peers and then construct cheers that speak to some of the tensions of contemporary girls’ lives. They share these cheers in public fora with teachers and parents in attendance. Therefore, they simultaneously receive the public visibility that cheerleaders have and most adolescents covet while critiquing facets of dominant femininity. In fact, Radical Cheerleaders whose squad numbers have grown exponentially across North America and Europe also use the vehicle of cheerleading to protest sexism and promote different dialogues about women’s issues, including sexuality.

What might it mean to involve adolescent girls themselves in conversations that interrogate the sexuality of cheerleading? We answer that question with two cheers, composed by early adolescent girls. The first one was constructed by an Idaho (USA) girl who playfully challenges stereotypical images of the cheerleader and confidently portrays what she considers important attributes for girls:

Totally, for sure,
As if I need a manicure.
My hair’s, a mess,
But I can ace most any test.
98s to 99s,
My grades are looking really fine.
I DON’T LIKE BOYS!
They just make a lot of noise.
Gooooooo GIRLS!

This second cheer was created by a group of girls from New York who were involved in Kim Irwin’s after-school program for children 9–12 years old. Their cheer also demonstrates how girls can become actively involved (if asked) in breaking traditional feminine stereotypes.
G-I-R-L-S
Girls, girls, we RULE
We can play sports, we’re tired of your lies
And we don’t have to stay home baking cherry pies.
We can beat you any day.
We’re fast; we’re strong,
And we know how to play.

Both cheers speak to what is on the minds of preadolescent and adolescent girls, trying out what it means to be a female in the twenty-first century. Constructing cheers and exploring the image of cheerleading in the society at large and in the schools that they inhabit, whether it is in physical education classes, in sex education classes or in the regular classroom, offers girls a non-threatening and fun way to talk about sexuality, desire, the female body and what it means to be ‘feminine.’ It also offers adults the opportunity to guide these discussions in thoughtful and educative ways.

References


Universal Studios (2000) *Bring it on* (Los Angeles, Universal Studios).


