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# Disability and Access: Leadership Opportunities for Students with Disabilities in High School

Tori A. Klisz

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# Disability and Access: Leadership Opportunities for Students with Disabilities in High School

## **Abstract**

Many students at public high schools enrich their high school experience and gain valuable skills through their participation in extra-curricular activities including, but not limited to, high school student leadership organizations. In this study, the researcher aims to present qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews that provide insight into the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations to students with disabilities. This study examines the perspectives of both student leaders in high school student leadership organizations and students with disabilities at three public high schools. The findings indicate that high school student leadership organizations provide limited accessibility to some students with disabilities. Policy, practice, and research implications are explored about how to improve the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations.

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## **First Advisor**

Phil Smith

## **Second Advisor**

Carole Gorenflo, Ph.D.

## **Third Advisor**

Janet L. Fisher

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DISABILITY AND ACCESS: LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS WITH  
DISABILITIES IN HIGH SCHOOL

By

Tori Klisz

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in Special Education

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date

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### **Abstract**

Many students at public high schools enrich their high school experience and gain valuable skills through their participation in extra-curricular activities including, but not limited to, high school student leadership organizations. In this study, the researcher aims to present qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews that provide insight into the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations to students with disabilities. This study examines the perspectives of both student leaders in high school student leadership organizations and students with disabilities at three public high schools. The findings indicate that high school student leadership organizations provide limited accessibility to some students with disabilities. Policy, practice, and research implications are explored about how to improve the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations.

## **Introduction**

Extracurricular activities play a large role in the lives of today's high school students. In many schools, there exist a variety of different activities in which students can take part in, including, but not limited to, sports, academic clubs, student interest groups, honorary clubs, faith-based organizations, and student civic or leadership organizations. Students with disabilities have a right to participate in these activities just as students without disabilities do. Regulations in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 require that students with disabilities are provided opportunities to participate in nonacademic and extracurricular services and activities equal to those of students without disabilities, as noted in a letter to the public written by the Assistant Secretary of the Office of Civil Rights to clarify schools' legal obligations (Galanter, 2013). While schools are mandated to give students with disabilities these opportunities, there are often loopholes and barriers that do not allow the activities to be accessible to students with disabilities. For instance, scholars note that many schools have policies that preclude involvement in extracurricular activities for students with low grades or behavioral difficulties (Imada, Doyle, Brock, & Goddard, 2002). How do these barriers to the accessibility of organizations play out in student leadership groups? Are there any facilitators to their accessibility and why should there be? It is the purpose of this study to determine how high school student leadership organizations might become completely accessible to all students with disabilities.

## **Review of the Literature**

There is no published literature currently available on the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations for students with disabilities, nor has there been an argument made for improving the accessibility of such organizations, if need be. While this is a highly

specialized topic, little research exists on the inclusion of students with disabilities in extracurricular activities in general. This may be due to a lack of desire to participate from students with disabilities in extracurricular activities or a lack of accessibility of the activities. It is also possible that the lack of research exists because scholars do not typically gather data from individuals with disabilities themselves when conducting qualitative studies on the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. The input of students with disabilities is required in order to determine the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations. Literature exists, however, on the positive effects of high school student leadership organizations and the role that leadership plays in self-advocacy and self-determination (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin; 2003; Holland & Andre, 1995; Johnson, 1999; Ludden, 2011; Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005). These works support the notion of creating accessible high school student leadership organizations in which students with disabilities can develop and expand upon their leadership skills. Publications were also found regarding environments and practices that foster the development of leadership skills in students with disabilities, as well as barriers to and methods for inclusive student activities (Amcrman & Carr-Jones, 2006; Brigham, Morocco, Clay, & Zigmond, 2006; Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun, 2008; Imada et al., 2002; Pivik, McComas, & LaFlamme, 2002; Smith, 2010; Udvari-Solner, Thousand, Villa, Quiocho, & Kelly, 2005). This literature provides a framework for making suggestions on how to effectively make high school student leadership organizations more accessible.

### **Positive Effects of Student Leadership Organizations**

Many scholars associate involvement in youth civic activities, also referred to as constructive leisure activities, with a myriad of positive experiences and outcomes that are less frequently associated with lack of involvement in these activities. According to Ludden (2011),



adolescents involved in civic activities illustrate more positive youth development in terms of extracurricular involvement, enhanced psychological well-being, low problem behavior, high academic engagement, and positive perceptions of parents and peers than those who are not involved. These developmental outcomes may occur because constructive leisure provides opportunities to acquire and practice specific social, physical, and intellectual skills that can prove useful in a variety of settings; to contribute to the well-being of one's community and to develop a sense of agency as a member of that community; to belong to a socially recognized and valued group; to establish supportive social networks of both peers and adults which may be helpful in both the present and the future; and to experience and deal with challenges (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Research by Hansen et al. (2003) shows that students involved in youth activities report higher rates of learning experiences in goal setting, effort, problem solving, and time management than students involved in comparison activities. These students also report more experiences related to identity reflection and learning emotional regulation. In terms of interpersonal development, the students also reported higher rates of experiences that involved relationships with other people as well as more learning experiences related to group process skills, leadership, and prosocial norms.

While youth involved in any civic activity experience the aforementioned developmental outcomes, student leadership organizations like student councils and student governments, also known as school civic activities or school-involvement activities, yield some specific benefits for adolescents. Markstrom, Li, Blackshire, and Wilfong (2005) found that involvement in student government and issue groups at school in particular, as well as community service, was associated with the development of multiple ego strengths within the Erikson identity framework, including hope, will, purpose, competence, care, and wisdom (as cited in Ludden,

2011). Research by Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, and Galloway (2007) noted that civic-school connections are related to adolescents' sense of community connectedness and their perceptions of teachers as promoting a democratic environment of respect, tolerance, and fairness (as cited in Ludden, 2011). School-involvement activities were also found to be positively related to liking school at Grade 10 as well as 12<sup>th</sup>-grade GPA and the likelihood of attending college full-time at age 21 (Eccles & Barber, 1999).

Along with personal growth and academic success, student leadership organizations can also provide social status for adolescents. In a study by Holland and Andre (1995), activities that involve leadership or academic excellence such as student council and honorary clubs were rated the highest among non-sport activities for prestige by adolescents. Ludden (2011) found that adolescents involved in school civic activities perceived higher personal popularity than those who were uninvolved. This social status can raise the self-esteem and self-confidence of members.

### **Self-Determination, Self-Advocacy, and Leadership**

#### **Self-Determination.**

Reaching self-determination and developing self-advocacy skills has been found to be related to developing and possessing leadership skills (Johnson, 1999; Test et al., 2005). Most definitions of self-determination, as noted by Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (1998), attribute the role of a causal agent to individuals with disabilities in making decisions in their lives and assume that their actions do or should exist free of undue external influences (as cited in Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). However, taking on that role may not be possible for all individuals with disabilities; as a result, Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) offer a different definition of the term, regarding self-determination as experiencing quality of life consistent with one's own values, preferences, strengths, and needs. It should be acknowledged that self-determination means

different things to different people and is manifest in different ways by different people (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

A study by Johnson (1999) identified elements of self-determination that are also considered to be elements of effective leadership. Covey (1989) addresses personal management and leadership in a number of his works and the strategies that he recommends address elements of self-determination such as setting priorities, having and making choices, setting goals, developing a sense of self-awareness, time management, and collaborating with others (as cited in Johnson, 1999). Works by Covey (1989) also suggest seven principles of highly effective people in relation to principle-centered leadership: being proactive; beginning with the end in mind; putting first things first; thinking win-win; seeking first to understand, then to be understood; synergize; and sharpen the saw; all of which are similar to the self-determination attributes of self-understanding, setting goals, communicating and listening, negotiating, and taking care of oneself (as cited in Johnson, 1999). Johnson (1999) states that although an exercise of self-determination may not and does not need to be an exercise in leadership, an exercise in leadership is always an exercise in self-determination.

### **Self-Advocacy.**

Field (1996) found that self-advocacy is a concept and skill associated with self-determination (as cited in Test et al., 2005). Self-advocacy has been defined by Hayden and Schoultz (1991) as "teaching people with disabilities how to advocate for themselves and to learn how to speak out for what they believe in." (p. 4) (as cited in Johnson, 1999). Dybwad and Bersani (1996) remark that self-advocacy is a social change and human rights movement that has a diverse history (as cited in Aichroth et al., 2002). Test et al. (2005) developed a conceptual framework of self-advocacy which includes four components: knowledge of self, knowledge of

rights, communication, and leadership. William and Schoultz (1982) note that the fourth component, leadership, enables a person to transition from individual self-advocacy to advocating for others as a group of individuals that share common concerns (as cited in Test et al., 2005).

### **Leadership.**

Test et al. (2005) suggest that leadership involves recognition of the common needs and desires of others, working with others, group dynamics, and one's responsibilities. Understanding one's role within a group with people of similar interests, needs, and strengths as well as having the ability to speak up within that group are leadership skills in the self-advocacy conceptual framework created by Test et al. (2005). People with disabilities that become better self-advocates and advocates for others through developing their leadership skills can influence positive change for their communities. Aichroth et al. (2002) believe that we have much more to gain than to lose if we include self-advocates in the political and professional roles that they have not yet filled.

The development of leadership skills that enhance the self-determination of people with disabilities and allow them to expand their self-advocacy skills can have a positive impact on their futures. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997,1998) note that it has long been accepted that self-determination and self-advocacy skills enhance the capability of students' with disabilities to assume responsibility for their own lives and have an effective transition from school to adult life (as cited in Amerman and Carr-Jones, 2006). Carter, Lane, Pierson and Glaeser (2006) found that school and home environments can foster and impede the development, use, and refinement of such skills (as cited in Smith & Routel, 2010). It could be suggested that it would be beneficial to

provide opportunities and environments at school through extracurricular activities in which students with disabilities can develop, use, and refine these skills.

### **Environments and Practices that Foster the Development of Leadership Skills in Students with Disabilities**

According to Schultz and Carpenter (1995), most students with mild disabilities exhibit poor self-image, a lack of interest in school, low achievement, slower learning rates than their peers, and difficulty in transferring general knowledge to other pertinent areas (as cited in Imada et al., 2002). Imada et al. (2002) believe that these disabilities can be compensated for by addressing the individual needs of each student and that we can provide assistance to students with mild disabilities by providing a basis for developing leadership skills. They note that we can present leadership possibilities to students every day, which will establish self-confidence, engender responsibility and consequences, and push students to challenge themselves.

A study by Brigharm et al. (2006) that explored what makes a high school a good environment for students with disabilities found that good high schools shared common attributes for educating students with disabilities: providing support structures that could be combined and customized to meet the needs and strengths of individual students; working to intentionally connect students to the school; and creating a connected and caring adult community to serve students' academic and social needs. These high schools place a high premium on getting students to connect with the school through encouraging participating in social opportunities like clubs, theatre productions, sports, and other extracurricular activities. When students experience a sense of connection or belonging to the school through their relationships with adults and/or other students, they become motivated to succeed (Brigharm et al., 2006). Once a sense of community is established among teachers and students, it can

promote long-term networks that support all students, including those with disabilities (Udvari-Solner et al., 2005). Brigharm et al. (2006) note that through these strategies, the schools made it possible for students to choose and integrate a variety of social contacts. Doing so helped them to build the concept that they have a disability rather than that they are disabled.

Research by Amerman and Carr-Jones (2006) suggests that students' with disabilities self-esteem is enhanced as they participate in activities that allow them to explore their strengths, interests, and learning styles. Through these activities, they also learn the importance of self-advocacy and how they can be empowered by their rights and responsibilities.

### **Methods for and Barriers to Accessible and Inclusive Student Activities**

#### **Methods.**

A study by Pivik et al. (2002) examined the inclusivity of schools which identified current barriers to inclusive education and suggestions of facilitators to remove those barriers. The barriers and suggestions identified are not only relevant to inclusive education, but also activities involved in the education process such as student extracurricular activities. The study found that facilitating an inclusive school environment requires ensuring physical access for students with disabilities, providing opportunities for optimal learning and social experiences, and producing a nurturing climate. Students with disabilities involved in the study, and their parents, identified areas where progress could be made in schools, including: modifying physical structures to improve accessibility, addressing the negative attitudes of others through increased disability awareness, and providing increased inclusive education of teachers and staff to deal with the lack of knowledge and understanding. Research by Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007), which provides strategies that support inclusive education, suggests taking ecological inventories to assess the current and future demands of environments in which students will work

and the performance of students in light of those demands. They also provide suggestions for the use of peers as natural supports, noting that once peers have been given information about communication strategies, positive behavioral strategies, and teaching techniques, they can provide natural support and advocate for their peers with disabilities.

A similar study was conducted with service learning programs in schools. Service learning programs are increasingly being employed with students with disabilities (Dymond et al., 2008). Gent and Gurecka (1998) argue that these programs meet the needs of all students because they blend academic and functional skills as well as promote critical thinking. Students with very different abilities can find meaningful ways to actively participate as a result (as cited in Dymond et al., 2008).

A study by Dymond et al. (2008) identified six categories for including students with disabilities into service learning programs: activity selection and structure, collaboration, expectations, encouragement, grouping, and modifications. Participants emphasized the importance of selecting activities that match the strengths of students with disabilities and promote active participation as well as allowing students to design or choose their own service projects. They also deemed the collaboration of school personnel, particularly teaching assistants and other support staff, as essential. Participants were adamant that teachers have the same expectations for all their students, including those with disabilities, as well as provide encouragement for those students. Modifications noted in the study that facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities in service learning may include monitoring those students more frequently, providing supplementary instruction in the classroom, and modifying the rules and grading practices.

**Barriers.**

The most common barriers to inclusive education identified by Pivik et al. (2002) were physical, institutional, instructional, and attitudinal barriers. The students with disabilities surveyed, and their parents, reported that although physical barriers were an impediment to full participation, instructional and attitudinal barriers were the most frequent barriers. In terms of environmental barriers, they noted the lack of accessibility for recreational activities was a paramount concern for youth in high school. Students reported intentional attitudinal barriers in the form of isolation, physical bullying, and emotional barriers. Unintentional attitudinal barriers were also illustrated through a lack of knowledge, education, understanding, or effort on the part of the education system or staff at the schools of these students. Downing (2008) regards a lack of teacher training and experience as a barrier to inclusive education (as cited in Smith, 2010). This unpreparedness may lead to the unintentional and intentional attitudinal barriers in inclusive education settings identified by the parents and students in Pivik et al.'s study.

In a study by Dymond et al. (2008), which determined barriers to inclusive service learning programs, five types of barriers appeared including: resources, teacher attributes and experiences, organizational structure, planning, and student characteristics. Participants in this study identified money and transportation as primary resource barriers to the inclusion of students with disabilities. They noted that a lack of knowledge and experience with students with disabilities, a lack of training and patience, and low expectations for the students were a barrier to the success of inclusive programs. Downing (2008) found that since many educators do not think students with disabilities will benefit from instruction in inclusive education, they do not provide it (as cited in Smith, 2010). Participants in the study by Dymond et al. (2008) also reported that some students with disabilities have low self-esteem and do not want to participate



in service learning activities because they believe it places them in situations where they face potential embarrassment.

Although very little research has been done on the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations for students with disabilities, the literature reviewed provides evidence for examining and, if need be, improving the accessibility of these organizations. Many individuals that are considered to be self-determined have attributes that correlate with a variety of sets of leadership skills. Leadership is also considered to be a component of self-advocacy. Students can become more self-determined and better self-advocates in their transition from school to adult life through the development of leadership skills in high school. Activities that allow students to explore their strengths and interests as well as connect with other students and adults help students to improve their self-esteem and leadership skills. Student leadership organizations or student civic activities provide students with not only these opportunities, but also opportunities for personal growth, academic success, and social status. These opportunities can all have a positive impact on the high school experience of students with disabilities as well as prepare them for their next step after high school. While providing the chance to participate in accessible student leadership organizations to students with disabilities can be difficult due to environmental, physical, institutional, and attitudinal barriers, the outcomes are worth attempting to overcome these barriers. Further research must be done in order to determine the specific barriers to accessibility that high school student leadership organizations face and provide suggestions for improving the accessibility of such organizations.

## Methods

### Participants

Twelve high school students from three public high schools in the Midwest were recruited for the study. Two students with disabilities receiving special education services for any disability through an individualized education plan (IEP) and two students who held leadership positions in a student leadership organization were recruited from each school. The recruitment process began with me contacting school administrators at three public high schools to inform them about the study and see if their school would be interested in participating. The school administrators provided me with the contact information of the advisors of student leadership organizations and special education teachers or directors at the high schools. The advisors of student leadership organizations and special education teachers or directors were informed about the study and asked to recruit students that they thought would be good candidates for the study and were eligible to participate based on the requirements of having received special education services for a disability through an IEP or held a leadership position in a high school student leadership organization. They provided those students with informed consent and assent agreements to be signed by the students and their parents or guardians. Only the first two students with disabilities and the first two students that held leadership positions to return the agreements from each school were interviewed.

### Materials

The participants were interviewed using two sets of semi-structured interview questions and probes, one for the students with disabilities and one for the students who held leadership positions in student leadership organizations, which can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively. As suggested by Glesne (2011), the probes were designed as requests for more

explanation, clarification, description, and evaluation from the participants. The interviews were recorded using the Voice Memos application available through the standard Utilities on an Apple iPhone 4S.

### **Procedures**

Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher has specified questions he or she wants to ask; however, he or she remains prepared to develop new questions in order to pursue unexpected leads that may arise during interviews and uses probing to inquire into all points of interest (Glendon, 2011). I interviewed each student individually at his or her school in one session that lasted fifteen to twenty-five minutes on average. Each interview was recorded so that the data could later be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist.

One set of semi-structured interview questions was administered to the students with disabilities participating in the study. The semi-structured interview questions for that set consisted of questions about the students' knowledge of student leadership organizations at their respective schools and their membership requirements, their interest in participating in student leadership organizations, and if they perceive student leadership organizations to be accessible for themselves specifically as well as for other students with disabilities.

Another set of semi-structured interview questions was administered to the students who held leadership positions in student leadership organizations. The semi-structured interview questions for that set consisted of questions about the requirements for membership in their organizations, the structure and content of meetings of their organizations, and the types of projects, activities, and events in which members of the organizations plan and participate in as well as the abilities they perceive necessary to actively participate in their organizations.

Each set of semi-structured interview questions addressed the same questions for each participant to whom the set was relevant. The questions in each interview were written as open-ended questions, to allow me to develop questions to follow-up on unexpected responses or vague responses from participants. Each question was followed by probes that provided me the opportunity to gather as many relevant details as possible from participants about the subjects in question.

After I received the transcriptions from the professional transcriptionist, the transcriptions were reviewed to find topics that some or all of the participants shared through thematic analysis. In thematic analysis, the researcher searches through data to find themes and patterns using analytical techniques (Glesne, 2011). Based on themes from the interviews and the literature review, I drew conclusions about the accessibility of student leadership organizations in high schools for students with disabilities, and recommendations were made for changes in policy and future research to improve the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations.

### **Design**

The study methodology which was used in conducting this research was critical ethnography. According to R. Usher (1996, 22), the term critical as it is used in critical theory refers to finding and uncovering beliefs and practices that limit justice, democracy, and human freedom (as cited in Glesne, 2011). Glesne (2011) describes ethnography as using culture as the theoretical framework to study and describe a group of people. Critical ethnography aims to uncover unjust beliefs and practices through studying a culture or group of people. The purpose of critical ethnography is the pursuit of social justice—this study aims to provide a foundation for proposing changes that can improve the quality of life of students with disabilities through their participation in student leadership organizations.

## Results

Three major themes emerged regarding the perceived accessibility of high school student leadership organizations in the responses of participants: leadership opportunities for students with disabilities in high school student leadership organizations; barriers to accessibility for students with disabilities in high school student leadership organization; and suggestions for improving the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations.

### **Leadership Opportunities for Students with Disabilities**

#### **Opportunities for participation.**

The student leaders and students with disabilities suggested that students with disabilities may be able to participate in student leadership organizations' meetings by providing their input when groups are brainstorming new ideas for events or activities or having discussions about how to plan and prepare for events or activities. Some student leaders also thought students with disabilities may be able to take on tasks of their own to complete to prepare for events or activities. One student leader remarked, "I think the people in our organization are pretty tolerant and I don't think anyone would be mean or ask of anyone anything that they couldn't do. I won't even say it's that hard the things that we talk about..."

Some of the tasks the student leaders suggested students with disabilities may be able to complete or assist with include: making posters or advertisements to promote events; decorating for events; helping with set-up and cleanup; typing up scripts for assemblies; and giving directions to others. The students with disabilities suggested they may be able to help make events happen by: building things, helping with set-up, making creative decorations, and getting support from the teachers or the principal. Both the student leaders and students with disabilities

thought that students with disabilities could participate in student leadership organizations, whether it be in meetings or planning and participating in events and activities.

### **Positive outcomes.**

All of the student leaders thought that students with disabilities would be able to experience the same positive effects on their high school experiences that the student leaders had if they were able to fully participate in student leadership organizations. These positive effects include: gaining confidence, becoming more outgoing, getting involved in more student activities, bonding with other members to form new friendships, feeling included as part of a group, and learning about one's own leadership style and skills. The student leaders also felt that they gained many leadership skills and experience through planning and participating in meetings and activities for their student leadership organizations, such as: time management, working with others, and public speaking. They expressed beliefs that students with disabilities could gain the same or other valuable skills and experience through participating in meetings, events, and activities. Many of the students with disabilities thought that if they were to join a student leadership organization they would be able to gain social skills and make more friends as well as have fun.

### **Barriers to Accessibility for Students with Disabilities**

#### **Barriers to membership.**

The student leaders thought that the application process for membership could be a barrier for students with disabilities. For some student leadership organizations, student leaders felt that students needed to be popular or know a lot of people to get elected, and that students with disabilities who are separated from other students, lack social skills, or do not communicate traditionally, may not be able to meet those unspoken requirements. One student leader

remarked, "I know there are some students in our center program that do not have verbal communication, so I can see where that would definitely be a problem." Other student leaders thought that students might not be able to comprehend the application questions which must be filled out when applying for membership. Some student leaders also saw the level of support required by students with more severe disabilities as a barrier to membership.

Many of the students with disabilities interviewed thought that they might be able to meet the membership requirements of student leadership organizations if they tried to join. However, they suggested that not all students with disabilities might be able to join because they may not understand what to do. When asked if she thought all students with disabilities could join or only some of them, one student with disabilities said, "[I]t depends on how bad their disability is, but some kids maybe don't understand..." Some students with disabilities also suggested that negative feelings towards students with disabilities could be a barrier to membership in student leadership organizations for students with disabilities.

#### **Barriers in planning and participation.**

Students with disabilities and student leaders both saw a lack of understanding or comprehension about how to plan and participate in events as a barrier to accessibility for students with disabilities in student leadership organizations. One student with disabilities suggested that only some students with disabilities are able to plan and participate in events because students with certain disabilities "[w]ouldn't understand and sometimes people are so mean, so they would make fun of you for not understanding." Some student leaders also saw significant communication deficits as a barrier to planning and participation. When asked to expand upon a remark that students with certain disabilities could participate in events put on by a student council, the student leader of that council stated, "As long as you are capable of

communicating and as long as you are capable of kind of relaying information and what is necessary and what needs to be done, that you could participate no matter what your disability is.”

Another barrier students with disabilities and student leaders identified was a deficit in social skills. Student leaders noted that in order to plan the events, members have to be outgoing and willing to talk to people as well as listeners that can remain focused during conversations where tasks are being delegated. The student leaders implied that if students with disabilities did not possess those skills, or acted out during meetings and events, they would not be able to plan or participate in events with their student leadership organizations. The students with disabilities expressed that they lack confidence and may feel too shy or out of place to participate in planning at meetings or putting on events with student leadership organizations. Some student leaders also suggested that physical disabilities, visual impairments, or hearing impairments, might make participation in some of the activities put on by the student leadership organizations more difficult such as decorating for school dances or leading school assemblies.

### **Suggestions for Improving the Accessibility of Student Leadership Organizations**

#### **Suggestions for improving the accessibility of membership.**

A suggestion provided by both student leaders and students with disabilities for improving the accessibility of membership to student leadership organizations was to provide more information about student leadership organizations to students with disabilities directly, so that they could make informed decisions about membership, and to be more inviting. Many of the student leaders were involved with or informed about student council and other similar student leadership organizations at the middle schools they attended. They were encouraged by former high school student leaders to join those organizations. The student leaders implied that



students with disabilities might not have received the same information and encouragement to join student leadership organizations. One student leader noted, "I don't think we ever really advertise it, but we need to talk to them [students with disabilities] about it. Maybe do a little meeting and talk to them about student council and the benefits they have and the fun activities we get to do and how they will really benefit from doing something like student council." A student with disabilities shared similar feelings when she said, "I think they could encourage more people with disabilities to do it..." Some student leaders also suggested changes to their application processes which would improve the accessibility of membership to their organizations, such as introducing an interview process in addition to a popular vote and having an advisor or a student leader explain the questions on an application document to students with disabilities.

**Suggestions for improving accessibility of planning and participating in events.**

While the students with disabilities and student leaders shared similar suggestions on how to improve the accessibility of membership to student leadership organizations, their responses differed on how to improve the accessibility of planning and participating in events. Many students with disabilities suggested that student leadership organizations could make planning and participating in their events more accessible by providing more details about events and tasks to students with disabilities who join their organizations, being patient with them, and answering any questions they might have. One student with disabilities recommended that student leadership organizations "have other people in there that would explain it better and let us have the time that we really need to understand it better." Another student suggested that the student leadership organizations could make things easier by "just showing us how to do it."

Student leaders tended to perceive making participating and planning events with their organization more accessible to be a rather complex process. A few of the student leaders implied that in order to make participating and planning events with their organization more accessible, they would need to eliminate the prejudices held by their members towards students with disabilities and provided suggestions about how to do so. One student leader remarked, "I think if we just kind of explained to them why we were doing it and how it would be more fair to the students with disabilities and the benefits from it, I think most people... they might not still like that we are changing things, but I think they would understand why we were changing things and be more okay with that." Another student leader stated, "I think people just need to think about it and say, 'Would I want to be excluded from something like that?' Because that is exactly how those other kids are going to feel. They don't want to be excluded. They want to be just like anyone else." The student leaders suggested these conversations would help members of their student leadership organizations to be supportive in making changes to their practices which make planning and participating in their events more accessible to students with disabilities.

Both students with disabilities and student leaders, however, thought that student leadership organizations could improve their accessibility by learning more about students with disabilities. When asked how student leadership organizations could make changes to become more accessible despite barriers that exist, one student with disabilities suggested that changes could be made, "If more people thought about that, actually, because I don't think they put a lot of thought into kids with disadvantages." The student leaders' answers were more focused on educating themselves about the needs of students with disabilities. One student leader suggested, "Training our executive board, so we would know how to react [if students with disabilities

needed assistance] and how to help them and what we can do to help make them more comfortable.”

### **Discussion**

As I planned this project, my hunch was that high school student leadership organizations provide only limited accessibility to some students with disabilities. The results of this study indicate that my hunch was correct, at least for the particular group of students with disabilities and student leaders that were interviewed. The results also indicate that students with disabilities and student leaders have valuable ideas about ways in which student leadership organizations at their schools could improve the accessibility of their membership, as well as the accessibility of planning and participating in events as a member of the organization.

Improving the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations by implementing the suggestions of student leaders and students with disabilities at the schools in which the organizations are established has the potential to provide leadership opportunities to students with disabilities that may not have previously been available due to a number of barriers. The barriers to participating in student leadership organizations identified in this study, such as communication deficits, difficulties in comprehension, lack of social skills, lack of knowledge about students with disabilities by student leaders, and the complexity of the application process or the tasks assigned to members of student leadership organizations, reflect the findings of Pivik et al. (2002), which identify the most common barriers to inclusive education as physical, institutional, instructional, and attitudinal barriers. The suggestions made by student leaders and students with disabilities for overcoming the barriers identified in this study, such as providing the members of student leadership organization with more information about students with disabilities and their needs, reaching out to students with disabilities to

encourage them to join student leadership organizations, modifying the tasks required of members with disabilities and the directions provided to members with disabilities, as well as eliminating the prejudices of current members towards students with disabilities, bear many similarities to methods for inclusive student activities noted by scholars. These methods include: addressing negative attitudes through increased disability awareness; providing increased inclusive education to teachers and staff to combat lack of knowledge and understanding; using peers that have been given information about communication strategies, positive behavioral strategies, and teaching techniques as natural supports for students with disabilities; selecting activities which and modifying activities to match the strengths of students with disabilities (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Dymond et al., 2008; Pivik et al., 2002).

Students with disabilities that choose to seize the leadership opportunities that could be provided if barriers are overcome through the implementation of the suggestions made by student leaders and students with disabilities may experience positive effects on their high school experience and gain leadership skills and experience. The positive effects and leadership skills that student leaders determined to be a result of their membership in student leadership organizations and those that students with disabilities suggested they might gain if they were to become members, correlated with many of the positive effects of membership in youth civic activities, like student leadership organizations, identified in research studies. These positive outcomes and leadership skills identified by the students include: gaining confidence; becoming more outgoing; getting involved in more student activities; bonding with other members to form new friendships; feeling included as part of a group; and learning about one's own leadership style and skills, time management, working with others, and public speaking. The positive effects identified by scholars consist of acquiring and practicing specific social, physical, and

intellectual skills that can prove useful in a variety of settings; belonging to a socially recognized and valued group; establishing supportive social networks of both peers and adults which may be helpful in both the present and the future; experiencing and dealing with challenges; higher rates of learning experiences in goal setting, effort, problem solving, and time management than students involved in comparison activities; and more experiences related to identity reflection and learning emotional regulation (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Hansen et al., 2003). Even though students are not guaranteed to experience these outcomes through taking advantage of the leadership opportunities that are provided by student leadership organizations, it would benefit students with disabilities to ensure that they are provided the same leadership opportunities as students without disabilities by student leadership organizations, so that they are given the same chance to experience these outcomes.

Administrators and educators can help to facilitate leadership opportunities for students with disabilities through high school student leadership organizations by educating the advisors and members of those organizations about how to meet the needs of students with disabilities and ways in which they can implement universal design, by allowing multiple means to provide information to, engage, and gain information from students with disabilities. They can also help to secure any resources, such as technology or transportation, which allow high school student leadership organizations to become more accessible for students with disabilities.

Teacher education programs should not only introduce the topic of inclusion in a classroom context, but also in terms of extracurricular activities. Prospective teachers should learn how to be advocates for their students' involvement in organizations such as student leadership organizations.

While administrators and educators can create the framework for change and advocate for the inclusion of students with disabilities, much of the responsibility of becoming more accessible lies on the members of student leadership organizations, because these organizations are for the most part student-led. The students must work to be a catalyst for change in their organizations, by altering their perceptions of students with disabilities, as well as working with students with disabilities to find ways in which the operations of their organizations could be adapted to become more accessible for all students. In addition, changes in policy should be made to not only mandate that students with disabilities are provided opportunities to participate in nonacademic and extracurricular services and activities equal to those of students without disabilities, but also assess the accessibility of such services and activities regularly to ensure that students with disabilities are truly being provided opportunities to participate in them.

Teacher education programs, administrators, educators, and students have a responsibility to improve the accessibility of student leadership organizations. The inaccessibility of extracurricular activities offered by public high schools, such as student leadership organizations, is one of many injustices faced by students with disabilities in educational settings. Issues of social justice are inherent not only in educational experiences, but also the day-to-day community experiences of students with disabilities. Students with disabilities deserve to be offered the same opportunity to be successful as students without disabilities. In the context of this study, students with disabilities have the right to be afforded leadership opportunities through student leadership organizations that students without disabilities currently receive.

It might be argued that it is not fair for students with disabilities to be given these opportunities, because student leadership organizations must make adaptations to the way they are traditionally run in order to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. Some will

insist that they do not have to do so in order for students without disabilities to have leadership opportunities, and that therefore the opportunities are not the equal. However, fair—equitable—and equal are not synonymous in a social justice context. Equity is meeting the needs of each person so that each person has an opportunity to be successful, whereas equal is treating each person the same regardless of their needs.

While the results of this study indicate that student leadership organizations are somewhat accessible to some students with disabilities, people must not remain content with partial inclusion. In order for students with disabilities to be fairly included in student leadership organizations, all students with disabilities must be able to fully and meaningfully participate. As noted by Conner and Ferri (2007), having students with disabilities only present and visible and not allowing them to fully or meaningfully participate violates the principles of inclusion. Similar to Conner and Ferri's (2007) stance on special education, instead of being satisfied with the way things are, people should instead view students in special education as an illustration of the insufficient progress made towards the integration of people with disabilities into society at large. This study should prompt readers to take notice of the lack of advancement made towards inclusion in student activities and take action towards making those activities, like student leadership organizations, more accessible.

In order to improve the accessibility of student leadership organizations for students with disabilities so that they are able to be fully included, the narratives of students with disabilities are required. Sherry (2005) makes the observation that people with disabilities are typically spoken about and spoken for, but hardly listened to (as cited in Ferri, 2011). It is critical that the perspectives of students with disabilities are considered when taking actions that affect the lives of students with disabilities. The responses of students with disabilities from this study must be

considered when assessing the accessibility of the student leadership organizations in question, and should be used in conversations about making student leadership organizations more accessible.

Further research is needed on students with disabilities who are members of high school student leadership organizations in order to better determine the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations and the impacts that those organizations can have on their members with disabilities. Qualitative studies which research how students with disabilities who are members of student leadership organizations access membership, meetings, event planning, and participation in events for their student leadership organizations, as well as the barriers to access they face as members, can provide further insight into the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations. This kind of insight is not available from students with disabilities who are not members of student leadership organizations and student leaders of organizations which do not have members with disabilities. Qualitative research on the benefits that students with disabilities feel they receive from membership in student leadership organizations could provide evidence of the positive outcomes of having accessible student leadership organizations. Such evidence could support an argument for improving the accessibility of student leadership organizations, and the personal accounts from students with disabilities who are members may encourage other students with disabilities to join student leadership organization.

Rich and extensive qualitative data, gathered from students with disabilities who are members of student leadership organizations would provide results which reflect the actual experiences of students with disabilities as well as their needs and desires. These results could provide more detailed information about the accessibility of high school student leadership



organizations which could be used to make additional, evidenced-based suggestions about how to improve the accessibility of those organizations.

### **Conclusion**

Educators and students must begin to critically assess the accessibility of their student organizations such as student leadership organizations. Such organizations have the ability to provide students with disabilities with chances to have positive experiences and develop skills as leaders that not only improve their high school experience, but may also help them to become more self-determined and better self-advocates. It is the duty of our education system to provide support for inclusive practices which allow students with disabilities to have those opportunities. It is likely the result will be that allowing students with disabilities such opportunities will benefit many students and people, not just those with disabilities.

**Appendix A.**

*Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Students with Disabilities*

*Introduction*

1. Please tell me a little about yourself and what you like to do for fun.

(Probes)

-What do you do for fun after-school and on the weekends?

-Are you in any clubs, organizations, or sports?

2. Have you heard of any student leadership clubs or groups that plan activities for the whole school like student governments or student councils and would you like to be in a group like that?

(Probes)

-What have you heard about those groups?

-Why or why wouldn't you like to be in a group like student council or student government?

*Membership Requirements*

3. What do you know about what a person needs to do to join a group like that and do you know if it is hard for students with disabilities to join?

(Probes)

-Do you think that you could join a group like that or that you would not be able to? Why or why not?

-Do you think all the students you know with disabilities could join or only some of them? Why?

*Meetings*

4. Please tell me what you know about the meetings for that group and if you think students with disabilities would be able to go to those meetings and be a part of them.

(Probes)

- What do you think happens at the meetings?
- Would you be able to come to meetings for that type of group if they were after school or at night? If not, why?
- Do you think all students with disabilities could come to the meetings if they were after school or at night? Why or why not?
- Do you think you could be a part of the meetings? Do you think all students with disabilities could?

*Events and Activities*

5. Please talk to me about some events you can think of that student council or student government groups plan and what you think someone needs to be able to do to help make those events happen.

(Probes)

- What do you think they had to do to make those things happen?
- Do you think you could help them to make those things happen? How?
- Do you think all students with disabilities could help them to make those things happen? Why or why not?

6. How are you and other students with disabilities able to participate in the events that those groups plan?

(Probes)

- Can you participate as much as everyone else?

-Do you think that all students with disabilities can participate as much as everyone else?

Why or why not?

*Closing*

7. How much are you able to be a part of a student council or student government group when compared to your classmates and how could the group be changed so that everyone can be a part of the group equally?

(Probes)

-How do you think that these groups might make it easier for you or other students with disabilities to be a part of the meetings?

-How do you think that these groups might make it easier for you or other students with disabilities to participate in their events or activities?

-Is there anything that might make it difficult to make those changes?

-Do you think those changes could still be made even though it will be difficult? How?

8. What good things do you think could happen in your life from you being able to join this a group like this?

9. Is there anything else you would like to say that will help people better understand whether students with disabilities can fully participate in student leadership groups?

**Appendix B.***Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Student Leaders in High School Student Leadership**Organizations**Introduction*

1. Please tell me about being involved in your student leadership organization.

(Probes)

- How long have you been involved?
- How did you find out about this organization?
- What motivated you to participate?
- What is the leadership position you hold in this organization?
- What do you do in that role?

*Membership Requirements*

2. Please talk to me about the requirements to join your organization, and what skills or abilities you think someone must possess in order to meet them.

(Probes)

- Do you think there are any implied or unspoken requirements to join your organization?
- Do you think that it is easy to meet these requirements?
- Do you think that students with certain disabilities could meet these requirements?
- Do you think that any student with any kind of disability could meet these requirements?

*Meetings*

3. Could you please tell me about the meetings for your organization and if you think that students with disabilities could fully participate in the meetings?

(Probes)

- How often, when, and where are they held?
- What typically happens at the meetings?
- Do you think that students with only certain disabilities could participate in the meetings or any student with any disability? Could they participate in only some parts of the meeting or could they participate fully?
- If you do not think that students with disabilities could participate in your meetings, why is that?

#### *Events and Activities*

4. Please tell me about planning events and activities in your organization, and the skills or abilities you think are necessary to be a part of planning and participating in those events and activities.

(Probes)

- What are some of the steps involved in planning these events and activities?
- Do you think that students with certain types of disabilities could play a role in planning an event or activity? What do you think those roles may be?
- Do you think that any student with any kind of disability could play a role in planning an event or activity? What do you think those roles may be?
- Do you think that students with certain types of disabilities could participate in the events and activities your organization plans or do you think that any student with any kind of disability could participate?

#### *Closing*

5. What are the positive effects being in a student leadership organization has had on your high school experience? Do you think students with disabilities would be able to

experience the same positive effects if they were able to fully participate in a student leadership organization?

(Probes)

-What leadership skills and experience do you think that you gain through planning and participating in meetings, events, and activities for this organization?

-Do you think students with disabilities would gain the same or other valuable skills and experience through participating in meetings, events, and activities?

6. Please tell me about how accessible you think your student leadership organization is for students with disabilities and steps you think could be taken to make it more accessible.

(Probes)

-Do you think that your student leadership organization is accessible to all students with disabilities, some students with disabilities, or no students with disabilities?

-Can you think of any barriers to making your organization more accessible to all students with disabilities?

-How do you think people may be able to overcome those barriers?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share that you think could help people better understand the accessibility of high school student leadership organizations?

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