Proposal
Submitted in response to the Call for Papers for the
Faculty of Education's 11th Annual Graduate Student Symposium
March 5 & 6, 2010

Submitted by:
Barbara J. Melnychuk

This proposal lists the previous research topics connected to this study, outlines the research questions addressed and the methods used in this study, suggests the potential significance of the study, briefly outlines my results, and proposes a format for my presentation.

Previous Research

Previous research that is directly on point with this study is extremely limited. For this reason, I reviewed five related bodies of research connected to decision making as it applies to individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. These include: quality of life, self-determination, decision making theory and practice, risks related to decision making, opportunities to practice decision making, and the impact of paraprofessionals on decision making.

Research Questions and Methods

In my study, the following research questions were examined.

1. What is the range of opportunities for decision making during a typical school day or school year, as perceived by high school students with and without intellectual disabilities from one Manitoba high school?

2. How do the students’ perceptions of the range of opportunities for decision making between these two groups compare?

3. How do teachers, educational assistants and an administrator from the school explain any similarities or differences? What factors are perceived as having an influence on the similarities and differences?

This was an exploratory qualitative study that relied on data collected through three student focus groups, two adult focus groups and one interview, facilitated and audio-recorded by the researcher. The student focus groups were also recorded graphically by a graphic facilitator.

Professional Significance

Potentially, this study could make at least three main contributions to the field as follows: methodological information around giving voice to the perspectives of students with and without intellectual disabilities through the use of focus groups; adding to the research base related to the impact of factors that may facilitate or impede decision-making opportunities for students within
the high school system; and to encourage educators and parents to examine the opportunities afforded students with and without intellectual disabilities to practice decision-making.

Results

The results of my study, based on analysis of the data from all six sources, can be organized into the following three themes: structure of the school system, role of adults and safety. The structures of the school system place limitations on the decision-making opportunities of both students with and without intellectual disabilities. Two of the limiting structures perceived by students and staff were transportation and the credit system. The role of the adults in the school system has the potential to facilitate or limit the decision-making opportunities experienced by both students with and without intellectual disabilities in the following areas: classroom activities, assignments, co-curricular activities, special events and friendships. The impact of the role of adults was perceived to be different for each of these two groups of students. The safety of all students was shown to be a very high concern for all adults interviewed, and was also mentioned by students with special needs. Safety concerns were shown to impact the decision-making opportunities of students with and without intellectual disabilities very differently.