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# Organization-Based Disability Access: A YMCA Childcare Center Case Study

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Organization-Based Disability Access:  
A YMCA Childcare Center Case Study  
May 2019  
Katherine Mowrer

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a  
Master of Arts in Peacebuilding & Conflict Transformation at  
SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA  
Advisor: Bruce Dayton

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Student Name: Katherine Mowrer

Date: 4/7/2019

## **Dedication**

This paper is dedicated to Katie Hodgson, a dear friend and SITER. Before Katie died, she walked, talked, sat, and shared with me as I woke up to my disability identity and began exploring its implications for peacebuilding work. She embodied Mia Mingus' words:

“I would argue that ‘disability justice’ is simply another term for love. And so is ‘solidarity,’ ‘access,’ and ‘access intimacy.’ I would argue that our work for liberation is simply a practice of love—one of the deepest and most profound there is” (2018).

## **Acknowledgements**

A huge thank you is in order for the teachers and administrators of the YMCA Childcare Center in Bethlehem, PA. The work you all do to care and educate the children of our community is a difficult and often thankless job. I deeply appreciate the time those I interviewed took during my data collection process and I can only hope that this paper can bring some clarity and assistance on the road to increasing disability access at the center.

My parents (my mom especially) have provided such wonderful support (not to mention food and shelter) during my research and writing. Bruce, thank you for your ongoing wisdom and support throughout my SIT education and specifically during my Capstone writing process. Having you as an advisor has been crucial to the ways I challenge myself in both academia and practice. Sean, thank you for your company and friendship during the Capstone writing process—working side by side with you gave me the energy, focus, and encouragement to keep going.

Growth happens through relationships, and I have been lucky enough to find a disability community in my family, friends, and academic colleagues. Thank you especially to Julia, Andee, Mokhtar, Juanita, Emily, and my Dismantling Disability class for making space for disability in academia and social justice work. Julia, you introduced me to Disability Justice when you sent me a link to Mia Mingus' blog—truly, that rerouted my education. Last, I acknowledge the Disability Justice movement and the queer, disabled, women of color that are centered in it. If our work is not intersectional it cannot shift the status quo—thank you for exemplifying that truth.

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the topic of disability access for organizations by utilizing three lenses. The first lens is Johan Galtung's development as unfolding theory which uses the metaphor of a flower seed and an ecosystem to illustrate sustainable development, which is the embodiment of the coding or cosmology of an individual or culture with symbiosis as the aim. The second lens is Universal Design, which is a framework for designing spaces (and other things like curriculum) so it is useful for the most people possible (including disabled people). Last, Disability Justice is an approach to Disability Rights that prioritizes intersectionality. Data was collected through interviews at the YMCA Childcare Center in Bethlehem, PA. Specific themes that emerge from the paper are interdependence, organizational planning, communication within organizations, funding issues, mainstreaming, and the challenge of making intersectionality tangible for non-academics.

**Note on Language**

There is much discourse in practitioner and academic communities oriented toward social justice on person-first language—the idea that when labeling someone who experiences oppression because of an aspect of their social identity, the identity label should be named after personhood is named. The key question in deciding how to label people asks: is this aspect of their social identity something that gives them pride, energy, and a healthy sense of self? If yes: identity before personhood. If not: personhood before identity. When in doubt, pay attention to how they talk about themselves.

An example of person-first language: when, in the past, I conducted research on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, I referred to people who experienced slavery as people who were enslaved, rather than enslaved people or slaves. An example of identity-first language: gay people generally find that previously mentioned proud sense of self in their gayness—and so, while gay people do experience oppression based on their social identity, it is common to name their identity before their personhood.

Language use in disability discourse is more complicated—the identity carries many different experiences both socially and medically. The Deaf and Autistic communities view their respective physical and neurological differences as positive, and view their respective communities as fully realized cultures for which to be proud of. There are other communities and individuals with a variety of diagnoses who prefer person-first language. Because of this nuance, I will be using different phrasing orders to talk about disabilities and diagnoses (both generally and specifically). It is important for me as a researcher, practitioner, and disabled



person with diverse diagnoses to embrace the very nuanced and personal relationship between naming and disability.

## Introduction

This paper explores accessibility at a YMCA Childcare Center in my hometown of Bethlehem, PA. The YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) is a non-profit organization with branches all over the world that emphasizes health, youth development, and social responsibility in its community-based work, including childcare (preschool, school age care, and summer day camp) (Greater Valley YMCA). I intended to utilize the Capstone research and writing process as a means to learn analytical and tangible skills in disability access, so I structured this project in a way that would allow me to replicate it for any organizational context. I picked the site for my research based off of a personal connection—the children of a friend of mine attend the center.

The overall project is framed by prominent peace theorist Johan Galtung's "development as unfolding" theory (2010, p. 16). Galtung writes that "Development is the unfolding of a culture; realizing the code or cosmology of that culture," utilizing the imagery of a flower seed: there is coded DNA in that seed, and the flower unfolds based on its code and complementary outside support and resources (1996, p. 127). This metaphor must be stretched wider to get to the truth of the matter—Galtung reminds his reader that everything (the seed, other plants, people) exists in relation to each other and that the messiness of development exists in this relationship. Diverse ecosystems in symbiosis are the most mature and healthy systems. So too is it for human and organizational development—through equity and collaboration, sustainable development occurs (Galtung, 1996). This theory is as applicable to the development and education of an individual student at the YMCA Childcare Center as it is for the organization as a whole.

The next framework utilized for this paper is Universal Design, which is a framework for designing structures, objects, and even curricula so that it can be useful to the most people possible. This project was structured with the intention to build my skills in understanding and advising organizations on their disability access. Universal Design was chosen because it is one of the most common frameworks for creating access. The specific resource utilized is “Equal Access: Universal Design of Professional Organizations,” created by the organization DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) and written by Sheryl Burgstahler (2017). The context of professional organizations was chosen so as to provide experience in utilizing a more general framework for Universal Design. As a framework, Universal Design attempts to create structures that embody the development as unfolding theory: draw on the diversity of needs and abilities to make a space the most accessible it can be.

Finally, Disability Justice is a framework utilized to ensure that the analysis emphasizes an intersectional approach to disability and access. Disability Justice takes Disability Rights a step further: it recognizes that a person’s experience with disability cannot be understood on its own. It must be understood within the context of aspects of that person’s identity (and therefore, relationship to power) (Mingus, 2011).

My choice to research and write about the practice of accessibility and disability justice sprouted from a personal awakening to my identity as a disabled person, and subsequent noticing that academia was not created for my hard-of-hearing body and mentally-ill mind. Academic settings, including of course SIT Graduate Institute, are created for the able-body and mind. The predominantly and historically lauded voices of international peacebuilders are white, male, straight, cisgender, and non-disabled (though of course that identity list does not

often reflect the populations they build peace for). The question hangs (as I check only a couple of those boxes)—is there a place for me in the peacebuilder community? To answer this, I understood that I needed to go to the basics of access, and build from there. This project is designed to build skills in analyzing and facilitating accessibility on an organizational level and to ask broader questions about the relationship between access, intersectionality, and development.

In the spirit of intersectionality, it is the least I can do to recognize in academic spaces that the land on which I learn is not my own—in the case of my research in Pennsylvania, it is land stolen from the Lenape/Delaware people by my German ancestors. It is land I and my family (as a part of the settler colonial structure of the US) continue to exploit for profit and power. The land I learned on while taking SIT classes was stolen from the Abenaki people by white colonizers. Both the Lenape and Abenaki people are part of the Algonquian ethnolinguistic group. Just as academia is subversively laced with ableism, so too is it laced with white supremacy. In the *Methodology* section, I discuss the role of home and identity in my practice—and as a white American, I carry the awareness of (and must interrogate) my personal notion of home and that it rests on a tradition of violence toward indigenous people.

One of my interviews took place in a break room in the YMCA building. The break room happens to be named after my great-grandfather, who in his life donated his finances, influence, and ideas to the organization. I was on edge throughout this interview—the stern portrait of Grandad Mowrer stared at me from across the fluorescently lit room. The contents of my unease were the bubbling up of my class and race privilege in a space predominantly controlled by people who are white and middle/upper class but created for the intersection of

people who are working-class and people of color. If my goal is equity, I must notice and interrogate paternalistic figures in charge of power structures that prevent intersectional equity, even if (especially if!) it means questioning the (either unconscious or not) biases of my own (paternal) great-grandfather.

## Literature Review

### *Universal Design*

Accessibility in design is a framework through which practitioners center the needs of disabled people, most relevantly when designing a physical structure. Michael Bednar, a US architect active in the 1970s (the height of the Disability Rights Movement), brought the word and idea of “universal” to design practices—he believed that everyone is better off when environmental obstacles to access are excluded in design work (Institute for Human Centered Design, 2014).

Ron Mace was another US architect and in the 1980s he was the first person to use the “Universal Design” phrase in public. He believed that design should be “usable by all people” and as a wheelchair user himself he had an intimate and valuable knowledge of the intersection of architecture and wheelchair access (as cited in Williamson, 2019, p. 148). Mace spoke openly about the messiness of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and its often negative effect on quality accessible design. Mace believed and demonstrated that through simplicity, design could be affordable, universally accessible, and beautiful. Through the approaches designers take when applying Universal Design concepts, they all follow in Mace’s work of creating spaces that are as accessible as possible for people who are disabled and, in his words, don’t “look like hell” (as cited in Williamson, 2019, p. 149).

In 1997 a group of Universal Design authorities established an oft-cited and well-respected list of Universal Design principles. The scholars worked under the umbrella of North Carolina State University’s Center for Universal Design, and in addition to John Mace, the group

included Bettye Rose Connell, Mike Jones, Jim Mueller, Abir Mullick, Elaine Ostroff, Jon Sanford, Ed Steinfeld, Molly Story, and Gregg Vanderheisen. The principles are as follows:

- 1) Equitable Use
- 2) Flexibility in Use
- 3) Simple and Intuitive Use
- 4) Perceptible Information
- 5) Tolerance for Error
- 6) Low Physical Effort
- 7) Size and Space for Approach and Use.

The group also reminds users that disability is not the only issue one must consider when designing for all: class, culture, and gender are just a few of the many things to be centered (Connell, et al., 1997). Design historian Bess Williamson critiques Universal Design—now that it is a mainstream form of design, people forget its roots in disability and instead aim for “common sense” design, not disability-minded design (2019, 191).

### *Disability Justice*

Disability Justice as a concept was formed and shaped in the mid-2000s by Patty Berne through her conversations with other queer disabled women of color (including Mia Mingus and Stacy Milbern). It was formed as a response to Disability Rights activists that primarily saw disability through a white, male, straight, capitalist lens emphasizing physical disabilities. Early Disability Justice organizing occurred around Berne’s performance art project “Sins Invalid,” and the project remains a central source for the movement. Berne, on the “Sins Invalid” website,

explains that Disability Justice as an idea and movement essentially asks for disability activism to be intersectional in nature, prioritize the leadership and voices of queer people of color, and extend to all disabilities. Questioning capitalist ideas of profit from individual productivity, disability justice prioritizes sustainable practices and collective liberation. The principles of Disability Justice are:

- 1) Intersectionality
- 2) Leadership of Those Most Impacted
- 3) Anti-Capitalist Politic
- 4) Commitment to Cross Movement Organizing
- 5) Recognizing Wholeness
- 6) Sustainability
- 7) Commitment to Cross Disability Solidarity
- 8) Interdependence
- 9) Collective Access
- 10) Collective Liberation

(Sins Invalid, 2015).

Mia Mingus, one of the founders of Disability Justice, is a Transformative Justice practitioner. She explains that by viewing the concept of disability as something primarily culturally created, Disability Justice reframes our cultural understandings of independence and interdependence. It exposes the falsity of the myth of independence (which suggests that independence is possible and a worthy aim) and instead recognizes that no one is independent (in the true sense of the word): we rely on other people for food, shelter, clothing,



transportation—and many more things. The concept of interdependence (recognition of our inherent connection) encourages action and activism that doesn't negatively value disability (Mingus, 2017).

### *Intersectionality*

Intersectionality is a framework for analyzing issues through the intersections of different social identities. It recognizes the multiplicity of how oppression is structured and therefore utilizes interdisciplinary approaches to combat oppression. The concept has existed for many decades (and perhaps centuries), notably at the crossing of race and gender: it is black women who have taught and continue to teach us intersectionality. In American history, one of the most common citations of intersectionality is Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech, usually called "Ain't I a Woman?" The speech is commonly remembered to have pointedly explained to the crowd that the women's movement routinely erased the unique oppression of black women (Romero, 2018). Ironically, the popularized version of this speech (to this day) is a wildly minstrelized bastardization of the original, written by a popular white feminist who was present at the speech. The original does not contain such direct references to the intersections of race and gender (nor the Southern dialect, as Truth was a Dutch speaking New Yorker) (The Sojourner Truth Project). Contemporaries of Truth like Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Maria Stewart all spoke and wrote about the intersections of their race and gender (and often class as well). Into the 20th century, academic and activist W. E. B. Du Bois built off of previous intersectional theory, exploring specifically the ways oppression based on nationality, class, and race intersected (Romero, 2018).

The next crucial moment for intersectionality stretches from the Civil Rights era to today. Activist and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) member Frances Beale actually used the term “intersectionality” in her pamphlet “Double jeopardy: to be Black and female,” and the Combahee River Collective (a black lesbian feminist organization active in the 1970s) named these intersections:

“[W]e are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives” (as cited in Romero, 2018, p. 45).

Other prominent activists and authors during this era including Angela Davis and Audre Lorde who further developed these ideas—but Kimberlé Crenshaw, a black legal scholar and feminist, is cited as the modern authority on intersectionality because of the prominence of her 1989 paper, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” (and her subsequent work) which explains that in order to understand black women’s experiences, it is necessary to consider both gender and race (rather than just one)—and the ways those connect (Romero, 2018).

### *Peace & Development*

To understand peace and development, it is necessary to first understand violence. Peace and violence exist opposite each other—and (because conflict is inevitable for living

things), development occurs when conflict is approached in a healthy manner with symbiosis as the goal. Johan Galtung is a prominent Peace & Conflict Studies academic and defines violence as something that “increases the distance between the potential and the actual, and that impedes the decrease of this distance” (1969, p. 168). Direct violence tends to be self-explanatory—it is violence on a personal and/or physical level, and the opposite of this is referred to as negative peace—systems in which individuals do not experience direct physical harm. Structural and cultural violence are a little more complicated. Structural violence exists in systematized marginalization of people (often based on identity). Cultural violence can be found in the subtle values and narratives of our society that legitimizes the aforementioned marginalization. The opposite of structural and cultural violence is positive peace—systems for which equity and sustainability are inherent (Galtung, 1990).

Development is intrinsically tied to peacebuilding, as sustainable development is a characteristic of structures and cultures that embody positive peace. Galtung introduces his “development as unfolding” theory in *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* where he writes about this cyclical connection:

“Defined narrowly, peace studies has a negative focus; reducing direct violence = reducing the suffering, when basic needs are insulted. Development studies reaches beyond that, not only meeting the needs but also developing the needs further. At that point, peace studies enters again, focusing on the reduction of structural and cultural violence” (127, 1996).

He goes on to explain that development can be defined as unfolding, or, using the image of a flower seed growing into bloom, “realizing the code or cosmology of that culture” (127, 1996).

Development cannot be wrought on the domination of one entity over another (as that would imply inherent violence)—and he stretches the metaphor further to discuss ecosystems that flourish on the basis of symbiosis. Galtung tells readers that “[h]istory seems to indicate that when civilizations think of themselves as perfect, then the end of that civilization is in sight” (2010, p. 29). Development—constant equitable growth—is the goal. Without it, people find themselves back on the road to violence and unhealthy conflict.

## **Methodology**

### *Background*

My Capstone was created and conducted in line with the goals of an action research project, in which the analysis is done with the intention of diagnosing a program's flaws and recommending solutions (Ferrance, 2000). I chose a specific case study so as to dive deeply into issues relevant to the topic of research. I intentionally selected and structured a research topic and site that could allow for beneficial learning for both researcher and participants.

Core to the philosophies behind my practice is an emphasis on home and identity: the most thorough and nuanced work can only happen when a practitioner understands a topic or a place at the core of who they are and how they exist in the world. Because of this, I moved back to my hometown of Bethlehem, PA to conduct this research. Bethlehem is my physical home, but I have also found a home in the disability community. My site for research (the YMCA Childcare Center in Bethlehem) was chosen because it has played an integral role in the growth of the children of a close friend of mine. My intention behind the focus and structure of my research is to both gain knowledge and perspective on the topic of accessibility for people who are disabled for my own practice and to also provide helpful insights for the organization I worked with. My process of data collection combines observation of the YMCA's structures/policies with interviews involving different stakeholders.

### *Participant Selection Process*

I sought to conduct semi-structured interviews with eight people for this study. I was able to complete six interviews. My goal was to conduct interviews with four teachers (though

because of time constraints and other factors, I only conducted two interviews) in order to more deeply understand their views on and experience with people with disabilities.

Specifically, I explored how they understand accommodations and access, the types of barriers to access they notice, the challenges they face when working with disabled people, and what they think needs to be done to sustain and grow access for disabled people. Please review *Appendix B* for more information on the interview structure and content. I conducted one semi-structured interview with the childcare director in order to understand the nuances and logic behind organizational policies and values. Please view *Appendix C* and *Appendix D* for more information on the interview structure and content. I intended to conduct three interviews (and was able to complete all three) with parents/guardians of children who are disabled that utilize the childcare center. Please view *Appendix A* for more information on the interview structure and content.

Understanding experiences and perceptions from the community involved in the childcare center was crucial to gaining a more nuanced perspective on accessibility for people with disabilities. Initial identification of my research participants was achieved through the childcare center's director (who was also an interview participant). To give more shape to the population I interviewed: all were women, three were white, and three were black. This statistical breakdown was not intentional, but it appears to accurately represent the identities of the YMCA Childcare Center staff and families.

*Administration of Interviews*

I was able to contact the participants over the phone or in person and interviewed all of them in person, either at the center or somewhere else more convenient for them. There was likely some bias (unconscious or otherwise) in potential participant suggestions made by the center's director, but I chose to allow that to happen that for the sake of finding participants in an organized and streamlined manner.

*Interview, Document, and Structure Analysis*

I recorded interviews utilizing an application on my phone. I transcribed the interviews by hand, and I intended to utilize the research coding software Nvivo to identify themes, but found it much easier to code the interviews by hand: I read through interviews and connected themes to individual sections, and repeated this process a few times, renaming and regrouping themes to find patterns. My coding process involved both inductive and deductive methods, and I found that integrating top-down and bottom-up approaches to identifying themes was intuitive for me as a researcher and practitioner, and also allowed a more cyclical and natural approach to learning and explaining my learning (Trochim, 2006).

Interviews are kept anonymous, and because of this are not directly cited in text. With the goal of best understanding the philosophies, practices, and policies of the YMCA Childcare Center, I reviewed relevant documents available online. I observed the accessibility of the structure by walking through and observing the space.

## Results & Analysis

In this section I will tell the results of my data collection and analyze them through three main frameworks as explained in the paper's introduction: Johan Galtung's development as unfolding theory, Universal Design, and Disability Justice. The research questions, interview questions, and the overall goals and structure of the paper aim to embody all three theoretical approaches—this can be seen overtly (through specific vocabulary or quantifiable issues) or thematically.

To understand the context of the research it is also crucial to understand the legal policies in place on disability and in the context of childcare. ADA (the Americans with Disabilities Act) defends childcare centers that do not accept disabled children into their care on the basis of safety or if accommodations made would cause "undue hardship" or change the characteristics of the center (physical or otherwise) to a significant extent. Otherwise, childcare centers cannot deny childcare on the basis of disability and cannot increase their cost for children that are disabled (Leuchovius, 2019). When ADA was signed into law by George H.W. Bush in 1990, it was through bipartisan effort. When things get done across the political aisle, however, they get sanitized. The ADA frames access as an individualized issue—in that sense, it legitimizes expense as an excuse to not retrofit inaccessible buildings. The tradition of engaging with access only when disabled individuals come forth and request access stretches into the history of US policy and remains at play today. This means that the labor of educating about and planning for access is the responsibility solely of people who are disabled, and it means that societally, the US does not have a strong grasp on accessibility-- neither what it is nor why it is important (Williamson, 131).



This research was outlined by three main questions: (1) What kind of policies must be in place for organizations to ensure accessibility for disabled people? (2) What kind of education and training is necessary for employees to implement accessible policies? and (3) How can organizations engage in ongoing development of their accessible practices for people with disabilities? The research questions and theoretical framework do not correlate specifically, but overlap sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly. In a similar manner to my thematic coding process (as discussed in the *Methodology* section) the formulation of my research questions and theoretical framework occurred cyclically with each element in relation to each other. The *Results & Analysis* section is divided into three parts to address each question separately. To complement findings from the DO-IT Universal Design checklist, I asked interviewees (the director of the YMCA Childcare Center, teachers at the center, and parents of children at the center) questions written through a Disability Justice lens.

## **Accessibility Policies**

This section examines data found that relate to the question: What kind of policies must be in place for organizations to ensure accessibility for disabled people? In addition to data collected from the checklist, the data collected in this section primarily come from answers to the questions (1) What is your understanding of accessibility? (2) Do you sense that the YMCA Childcare Center is accessible for people with disabilities? Why or why not? and (3) What can and should be done for the YMCA Childcare Center to be more accessible for people with disabilities? Specific topics explored include general planning and policies, information resources, physical environments and products, technology, and general accommodations.

## *Results*

### Defining Access

One parent defined access as “what reasonable efforts can be made to... provide the most excellent child care that they can.” One teacher defined it as “making the space and academics...an even place for everyone coming in.” The director explained that the bulk of her work is on access. Recognizing that all children have their own benchmarks and needs, she “make[s] sure that all children [have] some sort of individualized education (whether they have an IEP or not).” Some of the teachers I interviewed reflected on the presence of the different kinds of disabilities in YMCA classrooms—and the general consensus was that creating access for intellectual and emotional disabilities is a more nuanced challenge than creating access for physical disabilities.

### Information Resources

While the Bethlehem YMCA and its childcare center do include images of people who are not just white, male, and non-disabled on their website and publications, they don't publish a statement specifically commenting on their commitment to making their work accessible for people with disabilities, or affirming their commitment to accessible design. Additionally, information that the center disseminates to their families (or potential families) is available on a regular basis in both English and Spanish (and potentially in an electronic format, but not in Braille or large print). Printed materials are available on a low table that is reachable from a variety of heights. Electronic resources (social media and websites) are not specifically accessible—for images there are not text alternatives, and the director wasn't sure if the website is accessible from a text only browser. Videos published by the center do not include captioning or audio descriptions.

### Physical Environments & Technology

The general imagination of physical accessibility at the center is limited to wheelchair, crutch, or cane use. For the sake of clarity, I will mention the specific accessibility needs that the interviewees spoke about (even when they did not specify). When interviewees reflected on the issue of physical access, they almost always spoke about ramps and elevators.

One parent explained that she was uncertain about if the center was physically accessible because she had not seen any children at the center with pronounced or visible walking-related disabilities. She wasn't even sure if the building had an elevator, and noted that the entrance to the childcare center had steps. One teacher was uncertain if the playground

was wheelchair accessible, but thought it was probably not. A parent, a teacher, and the director all were unsure if the bathrooms on the childcare center's floor were wheelchair accessible. The director and I checked at the end of our interview and in fact there were bathrooms with the access symbol (outline of a wheelchair), signifying that the bathrooms are wheelchair accessible. The director mentioned that the YMCA building has a front entrance (a floor below the childcare center) with ramps and that there is an elevator (though it is hidden)—so technically the center is accessible for people with walking-related disabilities.

As far as wheelchair access beyond ramps, the entire facility is technically connected through an accessible route (including parking and pathways). Hallways and aisles are wide and clear of obstructions (though there was some question if all classrooms were—but if they are not, the potential obstructions are moveable). All spaces are well lit. There are not adequately high-contrast and large-print signage throughout the facility, nor to guide someone through accessible routes. The director shared a story about how the lack of high-contrast and large-print signage prevented a YMCA member in a different part of the building from understanding when a part of the facility was closed. While there are not adjustable height tables in different workstations, there are a variety of desk heights available for use (because it is a preschool). Additionally, the director is mindful of creating work spaces that can meet the needs of both left and right handed users, as well as different dexterity needs in writing and coloring. There is no TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf) in the center. Computers have software that allows the images on the monitors to be enlarged, but there are not trackballs available for someone who cannot utilize a mouse.

While one parent believed that the teachers and administrators would do all the work they could to make the center accessible for a child with a walking-related disability, she was uncertain if it was logistically possible. In the director's eyes, the two main things that needed to be done to make the childcare center accessible for people with physical disabilities is the installment of a ramp outside the center and automatic doors within the center.

### Non-Physical Disabilities

The checklist I utilized did not touch on spaces or programs accessible for people with disabilities that are not physical. However, this should be present in design because at the YMCA childcare center in particular there are more children diagnosed with emotional or intellectual disabilities than physical disabilities. There were a diverse array of opinions on this issue—a teacher, a parent, and the director said that the center is accessible for children with intellectual or emotional disabilities. They cited the quality of resources brought in and the other “ways and means” at the center's disposal. Another teacher and parent disagreed. The parent talked about the “chaotic” nature of the center and the large number of children that attend—illustrating that a child that requires a calm environment would not thrive there. The teacher spoke about the resources they have at their disposal—and while she said that children could be successful at the center, she explained that they “don't have the resources to really help them become... more successful,” and that that problem is pervasive for all childcare centers and schools that face funding issues. There was a perception among some of the interviewees that addressing physical access was both “doable” as well as less nuanced than addressing access for people with intellectual and emotional disabilities.

### Accommodations

The process of making spaces and programs accessible is often an individualized process that occurs only after a diagnosis—when spaces and programs do not have access built into them the process is even more of an unknown. One parent reflected on the process she went through to learn how (at any childcare center or school) to get accommodations for her children through IEPs (Individualized Education Program) and other means. She knew very little about the process, though she herself has had a learning disability since she was a child:

“I have never seen anything written out that would be helpful, and all along I’ve been blown away by how much effort it takes to track down the information to get your kids the help that they need. I’m college-educated, and I can’t even imagine what this process is like without having a bunch of connections and people who can walk you through the process... this [public school] system is designed to try and keep services away for as long as possible because they cost money and so the path to requesting an evaluation—the schools do almost anything to avoid having to do it for as long as possible.”

While these thoughts apply more broadly to the experience of children getting accommodations in public schools, it also is indicative of the US’ broader trends in access.

The director spoke about the process of accommodation requests at the YMCA Childcare Center. It is less formal than in other places which (for interviewees who commented on it) is universally viewed as a positive thing, because it allows for the nuance of the disability experience and is an easier, faster process. Often accommodations are done in situations where

everyone is “flying by the seat of [their] pants.” The culture of the center is to address things as they come up, in the moment.

One parent I interviewed is a foster parent, so her children’s accommodation needs are situated at the intersection of poverty, trauma, and disability. One example she gave about accommodations is in regards to eating: some of her children have experienced starvation in their past, so they need to be fed more often than a child that has not experienced food scarcity. This also overlaps with the children’s potentially aggressive behavior around food and other resources—when they become aggressive, teachers must be mindful of the child’s background when facilitating the situation. In order for her foster children’s needs to be met, the parent needs to provide a doctor’s note outlining the issue and then has an ongoing conversation with the director and the children’s teachers. The role of strong relationships and ongoing dialogue on the disability plays a significant role in ensuring a kind of access for the children that recognizes the nuances of the child’s background. The parent reflected on how discipline affects her children—as many of them have experienced emotional abuse in their past, more traditional forms of discipline make problems worse. She perceived that at a more expensive and prestigious childcare center than the YMCA, her children are more likely to be misunderstood and written off. She feels this because in her experience, though teachers and administrators at the center didn’t necessarily have extensive education on childhood trauma, they are consistently open to learning from her about those issues. She says that she could say to her children’s teacher, “Hey, here’s what’s going on with this kid. Talk to me about the behaviors your seeing. Let’s work on this together.”

## *Analysis*

### Access Defined

The process of creating access begins with establishing a framework. Social justice and disability academic Tanya Titchkosky defines access in her book *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* as “who belongs where, under what auspices or qualifications, and during what times or through what particular thresholds” (2011, p. 4). This intentionally vague definition asks for contexts to name the subjects of access (students), why they should be granted access, and when. Starting with the subject of access is crucial, because it lays out the groundwork (or, as Galtung would say, the code) for the lived application of access. In contrast, when interviewees defined access, they generally started at the object (the center’s structure, its curricula, and its staff) and the actions they take.

Another part of the value of starting at the subject is examining the definition of disability itself—it only exists when one person is in contrast to another (Titchkosky, 2011). Among the different models of disability is the Medical Model, which views disability as fundamentally negative—it is a problem to be fixed medically. Non-disabledness is the ideal in this model, and there is not space for much nuance in disability experiences. While medicine must obviously play a role with disability, it often approaches the issue in a dehumanizing way—and this is the real problem. In response to the Medical Model, the Social Model (under which Disability Justice and Universal Design fall) differentiates between impairment (a flaw in/lack of a part of the body) and disability (societal limitations for people with impairments) (Retief & Letšosa, 2018).



### Universal Design

Universal Design, similar to most disability frameworks, suffers from the same frustrating tradition of emphasizing the role of the physical over the emotional and intellectual. When it is applied and adapted to different contexts (including learning) there is more space for nuance (Williamson, 2019). Interview answers consistently pointed to this phenomenon. If interviewees had children with emotional or intellectual disabilities, they initially answered questions about access by first speaking about those types of disabilities. Later they inevitably brought up the role of ramps and elevators in access. The rest of the interviewees spoke primarily about ramps and elevators and their impact on physical access. When access is pictured in the mind's eye, wheelchair and walker users and their needs are pictured. Additionally, when interviewees reflected on the changes that needed to be made to make the center more accessible, they commented foremost on installation of ramps. The emphasis on physical access is of note primarily because children in the US are more likely to be diagnosed with a learning or social/emotional disability than a physical one (US Census Bureau, 2010). This statistic is consistent with the student population of the YMCA Childcare Center.

### Visibility of Disability

Disability does not exist within American culture's imagination of normalcy, and consistent access can't happen until we can imagine disability in every moment of life (Titchkosky, 2011). The YMCA building (as a whole, not just the childcare center) invisibilizes disability by hiding or not complying with elements of design that grant access (such as high-

resolution signage or prominently displayed directions and signage for the elevator and access routes).

Universal Design is a good structure to start with, but that it allowed for a check marked “yes” after all the wheelchair accessible sections at the YMCA points to its flaws: it asks that access be made possible, not prominent. Galtung writes that organizations develop healthily when they embrace their diversity with equitable and symbiotic structures (1996). The question of the elevator applies to this idea in an interesting way. While there exists an elevator from a wheelchair accessible floor to the non-wheelchair accessible floor, it is out of the way and barely used—therefore it is out of people’s imagination: current and potential YMCA staff, members, students, parents. This phenomenon—disabled people not utilizing accessible features or not choosing to request accessible features because they do not know that the possibility exists—pervades the history of disability policy in the US. It is in these moments where conversations about what rights really mean happen—the right to access isn’t contested, the level of equity and visibility to which it should be granted is (Williamson, 2019).

### Responsibility of Access

Generally in the US, the responsibility for people who are disabled to gain access is placed on the disabled individuals themselves (and their caretakers)—they must do the work of requesting and legitimizing the need for the structure to change, and even then access it is only granted sometimes. Excuses of “You can’t accommodate everybody” are made through the legal framework of “reasonable accommodation” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 26). This framework makes clear that fiscal cost and significant structural change are more of a problem than denied

human rights of people who are disabled—and the extent to which this happens depends on the organization. In words, most organizations strive for inclusion and access, often using these words specifically (Titchkosky, 2011). The YMCA is no different. It needs to be clear though that this problem is not a problem specific to any organization or any person—it is a legal and cultural framework that exists beyond the YMCA.

Interestingly, though the YMCA has a lot of issues with funding and though many of the teachers may have received less formal education than teachers at a more expensive childcare center, their approach to accommodations and access transcends. Generally the process of receiving accommodations in a workplace or school is taxing on the disabled person because it requires significant labor on their part. However, the relational nature of the YMCA means that the accommodation process is very informal and embodied by an ongoing conversation between the parent, the director, and the teacher. Because of this, the process is more natural and reaches the nuances of the child's identity and experiences (as embodied by the foster children mentioned in the *Results* section).

Many strides need to be made on a technical and physical level to make the YMCA Childcare Center more accessible. However, there exists a relational quality in the work done at the center that allows for a fluidity of access. This quality can be built upon to make the center's community better able to access quality care and education.

## **Teacher Education & Values**

This section examines the data found that relate to the question: What kind of education and training is necessary for employees to implement accessible policies? In addition to data collected from the checklist, the data in this section primarily come from the questions: (1) What kind of training do YMCA staff receive on disability? (2) What role does interdependence and independence play in childcare and education? (3) What ways do you or don't you see the interconnectedness of the marginalization of different groups (like people with disabilities, people of color, queer people, women, etc.)? Specific topics explored include accessibility policies, staff educational background, staff training, resources, independence, interdependence, diversity, and intersectionality.

### *Results*

#### Knowledge of Accessibility Policies

Staff at the center are familiar with printing documents and resources in both large print and Spanish, but not other forms (braille, for example). Staff are also not familiar with use of TDDs (telecommunication devices for the deaf), nor are they available for use at the YMCA. However, staff do have some familiarity with responding to other disability accommodations and communicating with parents and students with disabilities. While staff may not be knowledgeable on specific disability access issues, they are knowledgeable about individualized education.

### Educational Background

A general theme that ran through data gathered is the role informal education and anecdotal knowledge play in accessibility work done at the center—parents specifically remarked on this. Teachers would tell parents about a child they taught or knew that had the same disability as the parent’s child. This serves the purpose of educating and building community between staff and parents.

The YMCA Childcare Center requires staff to participate in eighteen hours of training every year. The trainings offered are on a variety of topics related to the work they do, and some are on aspects of disability and access: for example, individualized education, child development, restraining children, and Universal Design. Some staff have college degrees in Special Education, but others do not—so the level of learning that needs to be met with trainings isn’t consistent. One teacher commented that there are specific topics including addressing behavioral issues that have been requested for future trainings. Generally, there is a desire for teachers to receive more training so as to better do their work.

The topic of resources was met with diverse opinions. Some interviewees (teachers and parents) spoke about a lack of classroom resources and the tie to a lack of funding as the source of that issue. Resources, for one teacher, is lacking when it comes to helping students be the most successful they can be. Another teacher thought that the resources were strong and helped make the childcare accessible for children with emotional and learning disabilities. Bringing in specialists is always helpful, and teachers expressed a desire to have more consistent use of specialists.

### Independence & Interdependence

Definitions that emerged about independence were varying but generally fell under an umbrella of perceiving independence as personal autonomy. The director spoke about child development and the value of students learning different skills for personal care such as going to the bathroom by themselves and washing their hands. One parent reflected on this within the specific experience of her daughter, who has social/emotional disabilities: the daughter is able to go to the bathroom by herself if she has access to wipes brought from home.

Interviewees made it clear that this is often what independence means for young children: adults providing resources so children can do things without hands-on help. Another definition of independence is making responsible choices. The director talked about the value of children learning to make their own choices.

Another aspect of child development and independence is the self-focus of young children. It can be a challenge for them to work as a team because of their age—they experience the world very differently from adults and teenagers. In some ways children experience disability—they are developmentally different from adults and require different resources to succeed. Because of this, the approach to independence sometimes overlaps for teachers, regardless of whether the student is disabled or not.

One teacher said independence and interdependence “ha[ve] to go hand in hand in the early childhood education field... It needs to be a balance.” Teamwork is generally how the staff define interdependence. Other definitions given included asking for help and sharing. Another teacher, who happens to also be the parent of a YMCA student, spoke about her child’s relationship to the two ideas:

“I’m still trying to help her be independent. There are some things she’s independent with and there’s some things that she is not. To me, it’s okay to have days when you’re independent and days when you’re not. Because at the same time, we’re adults and there are days when we’re not independent. We need somebody to rely on.”

Not all interviewees said the same, but all made it clear that children at the center are supported and allowed to rely on others when they need to.

### Educational Philosophies

Within the conversation about independence and interdependence emerged specific insights and feelings on different philosophies toward education. One of the topics was the role of preschool, specifically—independence needs to be taught during preschool because students are being prepared for the “bigger picture:” kindergarten and the work they will be expected to do there.

Another topic that came up is mainstreaming, which is when students that are disabled are placed in the same classroom as other students who are not disabled. When there are students with disabilities at the center they are mainstreamed. A parent of an Autistic child spoke about interdependence in this context: before attending the YMCA, her child usually played by himself. When he attended childcare at the YMCA, he began to be more verbal and physical. Spending time with other children regardless of their abilities or disabilities had a positive effect on his development and quality of life. She said:

“You always have to be interdependent, you can’t be alone or independent...I don’t feel that there should be separate schools for kids with disabilities... The more integration

and the more the teachers can try to implement it at a younger age, the better it will be for both sides – disabled and kids who are [not disabled].”

Scaffolding is an educational concept in which educators provide support appropriate for students, with the aim of students reaching their appropriate goals or abilities. It was perceived by two parents (both of whom happen to be teachers—one at the YMCA and one elsewhere) as a means to finding a balance between independence and interdependence, especially for disabled children who need teacher support to flourish. One parent spoke about IEPs (Individualized Education Program) and how they create structure for teachers to scaffold properly. She explained that IEPs “really chang[e] the lens through which you see a student. It changes your compassion, but it also changes how you scaffold them to help them get to where they need to get.” While protecting confidentiality is important (she views this as a reason parents sometimes do not disclose disabilities), it is more important to make sure her kids get the help they need to learn and feel safe. She also places high value in interdependence, which she defines as: “giv[ing] care and receiv[ing] care with peers and teachers” and sees it as a means to helping children succeed.

### Intersectionality/Diversity

I asked all interviewees “What ways do you or don’t you see the interconnectedness of the marginalization of different groups (like disabled people, people of color, queer people, women, etc.?” My question was an attempt to get at that last point—no one is liberated unless everyone is liberated. It is a confusing idea in part because most people haven’t received an education in this idea of intersectionality. Even those who have find it a tough idea to



conceptualize and apply to the day-to-day. My interviewees, unsurprisingly, struggled to understand that question and they did so in a few different ways that say a lot about the politics of identity and domination.

The answers I received for this question ran the gamut: one person generally understood what I was asking, another noted the diversity of the center, a few seemed to think I was asking if the YMCA marginalized people based on their identity or thought I was asking if they (the interviewee) marginalize people based on their identity. There was some defensiveness at this question. As an aside: the analysis in this section was the most anxiety inducing for me because I have great respect for the work that the YMCA teachers and director do, and I view the parents I interviewed as loving and attentive parents. It's a challenge to analyze social justice issues through a lens that is both critical and respectful, and I hope that it is clear to the readers (whether they were interviewed for this paper or not) that I do not wish to demonize any interviewee. The work of creating frameworks for access and justice reveals the worst parts of how we are socialized, and I am not free from that. On a regular basis I catch myself feeling and thinking things that are not in line with intersectionality, Disability Justice, sustainable development, or peacebuilding. The work is to notice those things, ask why they are happening, and change them.

Interviewees made general reflections on the diversity of the center. One teacher mentioned her personal value of including diversity in her curriculum and said that the YMCA should do more work with reaching out to identity groups not well represented at the YMCA Childcare center. Another teacher felt that generally the center is a supportive place for different identities, and that diverse voices are included.

One parent, a foster mother, reflected that aside from the cost and the convenience of the location, the main reason she enrolled her children at the YMCA Childcare Center was because many of the teachers as well as the families that utilize the center come from somewhat diverse backgrounds—many are people of color and working class. She wanted her children to go to a cross-cultural center, and even though a lot of her children’s teachers didn’t have a lot of knowledge on disability or childhood trauma (and the ways it showed up for her foster children) they were willing to learn from her.

On the topic of representation, one teacher spoke about negative perceptions some of the families at the YMCA have about LGBT issues, and that she needs to be mindful of that during her work—essentially, avoid the topic. She also shared that the YMCA doesn’t reach out to LGBT families much, and while the center is technically inclusive in their policies, that might not be clear to LGBT families that could potentially be interested in enrolling their children at the center.

Race is another topic that was spoken about by a few different interviewees. The director spoke about not understanding different perceptions of people based on their race. Another teacher reflected on the racial representation in her classroom, and her experience in the past of students confusing her with other black teachers. She also spoke about the value of teaching in her class about different races and identities and their respective histories.

One of the most significant topics related to identity was class. The director told me that 80% of the families that utilize the center receive some type of subsidy so that they can afford to send their children to the YMCA. She shared that when a family cannot afford the cost of childcare, she will work with them to find resources so that they can afford it. One parent

named that poverty can be a kind of disability, and that the YMCA Childcare Center is particularly able to address this issue effectively when it comes up. Other centers are not as skilled in this. The topic of class overlaps with the center's students' different family situations: some parents are incarcerated, some children are in foster care, some children are parented by their grandparents, and many parents are single.

The director spoke about her approach to identity and how it plays out in different contexts:

"I personally do not look at anyone by their 'labels', I look at people for who they are in the inside. I try to have teachers teach that to children. I always tell the kids, when they say 'you don't like me cause I'm a boy', 'no I look at you like you're are Michael.'"

One parent spoke about different identities and the ways people are marginalized:

"I see lots of interconnectedness in terms of the feelings that those groups experience. Sometimes all those can be grouped together to actually produce the appropriate change for each of those individual groups. The experience of the feelings can often be the same, but the experience of what's happening is not always the same with hitting at the specific problems or working on solutions. Sometimes progress can get halted if we try and group too many groups in one category because the needs to reach some of those different things are actually a little bit different. It all exists, and I think how close to the ground you get with it is important."

Another parent touched on the relationship of disability to different identities:

"[D]isability doesn't care if you're black, white, queer, not queer, rich, poor—it just happens. And no one thinks it's going to happen to them... I feel as if it doesn't matter

who you are, where you're from, what you do, it just happens. Sometimes it can be from what you have experienced, like children who come from trauma—that could be the reason why they have a delay or they end up with a diagnoses that will affect them for life and is considered a disability. No one ever plans for it, no one knows it's gonna happen to them, it just happens. It doesn't matter who you are."

### *Analysis*

#### Education and Background

It wasn't clear from the interviews how much and what type of education staff members at the YMCA have, but it seemed that only a few have a bachelor's degree. This is an issue to be looked at more closely, however, because teachers with more education and experience on disability are more likely to have higher confidence in their choices and abilities on teaching children with disabilities (Koller, 2017). Also, teachers that have recently received degrees (associates or higher) are more likely to be at ease with including disabled children in their class (Weglarz-Ward, 2018).

The role anecdotal knowledge on disability plays at the center was interesting because statistically, childcare teachers are more enthusiastic about engaging in structuring access for their students with disabilities if the teacher either has a disabled loved one or if they have been given adequate knowledge of a prospective student's disability. Research makes it clear that a lack of training is perceived by childcare teachers as an obstacle to providing more inclusive classrooms, and this is something both teachers and parents at the YMCA spoke about (Weglarz-Ward, 2018). Supplementally, there is a direct correlation between the amount of

training teachers receive on disability and how in favor they are of making their classrooms inclusive (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Consistent as well with the experiences and opinions of many of the interviewees, childcare providers across the country view a lack of resources as an obstacle to providing more inclusive classrooms. One teacher spoke about wanting to be able to utilize specialists more, and research shows that specialists and childcare teachers are best able to collaborate when clear communication and common knowledge on disability is in place. Time constraints, funding, and education are all factors that affect the efficacy of teacher/specialist collaboration, and therefore, effectiveness of the therapy on a child with disabilities (Weglarz-Ward, 2018). These obstacles are all present at the YMCA.

### Independence & Interdependence

Independence is predominantly viewed (including by many of the people interviewed here) in terms of personal autonomy. This idea finds its roots in student disability activism at University of California at Berkeley in the 1970s. The Independent Living Movement reframed independence from the more medical definition (doing daily tasks without help) to freedom of autonomy—which often means living outside of institutions (Williamson, 2019). When this framework is applied to childcare, it is understood as personal responsibility, personal growth, and the child finding their voice. It is understood as necessary to foster so that children can work well as they grow older and (are interdependent and) work in groups and gain more responsibility.

Interviewees were asked about independence and interdependence because those themes prompt a lot of conversation in Disability Justice spaces. Mia Mingus writes about this extensively: true independence is not real—it is a myth that says “somehow we can and should be able to do everything on our own without any help from anyone” (2010). Humans are reliant on other humans (disabled and non-disabled alike)—no one is completely independent. The choices we make affect other people and vice versa. When the binary of dependence to independence is all a person knows, it makes sense that independence would be the ideal. Dependence often is conceptualized as disabled people framed as reliant on charity, pulling at the hearts and purses of non-disabled people, and independence is often conceptualized as non-disabled people framed as saviors and the moral ideal (Mingus, 2010).

One interviewee perceived that when children learn interdependence at a young age it helps them be more successful in life. Interdependence is in the same vein as solidarity— it breaks free from the (in)dependence binary and says, “*We need each other*. And every time we turn away from each other, we turn away from ourselves (Mingus, 2010). Galtung gets the last word on this: development is incomplete and unsustainable if mutual aid and equity are not at play (1996).

### Educational Philosophies

Intersectionality scholar Mary Romero writes that “[s]chooling is as much about socialization—the reproduction and passing on of culture—as it is about acquiring knowledge” (2017, p. 20). This is especially applicable to childcare settings. Galtung writes that systems (education and care included) should be a “means serving development, not an ends” (1996, p.

24). One of the teachers spoke about her belief that the role of preschool is to prepare students for the “bigger picture,” which in this case is kindergarten. The practicality of that is not in question (nor the value of an education), but the deeper values of the system that require that are. US culture trains people from childhood to work toward success as defined by capitalist values of being the best and making money. True development has no specific goal other than sustainability (or in Galtung’s metaphor, system maturity). Systems based on competition have the goal of gaining power (becoming a millionaire, going to an Ivy League school, etc.), and when children are taught to spend their lives reaching for things that will help give them more power, societies move farther away from sustainability.

While no teachers I interviewed spoke specifically about mainstreaming (though one parent did), it seemed clear that YMCA teachers are in favor of mainstreaming. Teachers in the US, regardless of if they teach in classrooms where children with disabilities are mainstreamed or separated, believe that children (regardless of ability) should be included in classrooms, and the primary obstacle to this is resources (or a lack thereof) (Koller, 2017). The parent who spoke about mainstreaming told me about the role it played in the personal development and happiness of her child. She worries about the potential for her child to be bullied and sees mainstreaming as a tool in increasing social aptitude for disabled and non-disabled children alike. And while children who are disabled need friendships with other children just as non-disabled children do, they are bullied and excluded at higher rates (Koller, 2017). The urgency of this issue is clear.

IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) were spoken about by many of the interviewees. One parent spoke about how IEPs make teachers look more deeply at the

complexity of a student's disabilities and needs in order to access care and education.

Specifically, she said that IEPs can “chang[e] your compassion” and allow for more effective scaffolding. She ardently believes in disclosing disabilities and her children's background so they can gain access. Confidentiality is a reason she believes many parents do not do this—and Titchkosky critiques this issue: “In developing more inclusive measures, the neo-liberal values of ‘privacy, confidentiality and autonomy’ remain key and such values need to be (literally) re-inscribed when dealing with disability issues” (Titchkosky, 101). Interdependence requires people to be vulnerable, make space for difference, and move toward equity.

### Intersectionality

Anyone can place themselves within the social pecking order of their culture—they know that their relationship to power within the groups they function in (from the nuclear family to the international community) relies on their individual social identities (for example, gender, ability, nationality, religion, race, sexuality, etc.) and how those identities interact with each other (Romero 39). It is through context created by relationships—with each other and with different identities—that individuals gain a sense of self. This is intersectionality (Romero 84). Galtung's theory of development names “equitable symbiosis” as a key part of any functioning system, and this can only occur through an intersectional analysis and approach (1996, p. 25).

It is clear that the YMCA Childcare Center doesn't utilize the framework of intersectionality. It shows up at times unconsciously, but for the most part it isn't there. This is not surprising, though—it is a fairly uncommon idea outside of particularly radical social justice



spaces. However, intersectional approaches do show up at the center, specifically in regards to class. Teachers and the director understand and act on the reality that poverty intersects with the student identity. They also do this a lot of the time with disability, but with more education this can be improved significantly.

Looking at the world through the lens of intersectionality is uncomfortable because it drags up some suppressed truths: often the power structures people trust were created and upheld because some groups (or identities) have power over other groups (Romero, 2018). I believe that a lot more work needs to be done at the YMCA on the topic of race. The leadership in the childcare center is predominantly white, which is likely in part why it is a problem. Intersectionality is a tradition that has been led by black women because they experience a doubleness of prejudice. White women often hide in the comfort and safety of our whiteness, but this cannot happen if accessibility and intersectionality are our goal. We must step up and dismantle the pillars that help us feel safe. More work also needs to be done on cultural perceptions and approaches to sexuality. From the few times LGBT people were brought up in the interviews, it seems that more work within the center and also in recruiting LGBT families is crucial. I didn't talk with the interviewees much about gender, which is interesting because they were all women. This wasn't intentional, but it reflects the societal norms we have around childcare: which parent should take the lead on parenting and which gender should do the work of caring for children.

Popular ideas such as diversity and multiculturalism bring some value to the table: learning about and valuing different identities are incredibly important. This is only a start, though (Romero, 2018). To make the world a more equitable place and to end oppression of

some identities groups by other identity groups on a cultural and structural level, movement beyond diversity is necessary. Romero brings into focus the specifics of this:

“White, male, heterosexual and citizenship privileges are not personal but are institutional arrangements that provide non-disabled persons classified as white, male and heterosexual greater access to power and resources that are not similarly available to people of color, women, LGBTQ individuals or non-citizens” (2018, p. 39).

Remembering that intersectional analysis isn't personal is hard because it pokes at all the crucial parts of who we are and drags up the shameful parts. It becomes awkward and scary to pull specific identities into the discussion, but these structures of domination will never be toppled unless that happens. Too often people that are oppressed in some way by oppressors in other ways (for example, white women, as explained in the last paragraph) turn to the parts of them that are oppressor to protect themselves from vulnerability. This prevents their liberation—it is only when people that are in any way oppressed work together to end oppression that liberation from racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism (and the list goes on) is possible.

The practice of colorblindness when it comes to race is particularly harmful. When we move beyond the framework of diversity to the framework of intersectionality, we understand that identities exist in relation to each other, and we understand that self-imposed metaphorical blindness ignores and therefore accepts power dynamics. This is most often discussed in relation to white privilege, but can also be understood in the relationship between disabled and non-disabled identities. Because the framework is so similar (the oppression shows up in overlapping ways—eugenics, poverty, etc. and for similar moral legitimization) and

is often upheld by the same people (in current culture an example is President Trump's rhetoric on the two issues) we cannot truly liberate ourselves from ableism or racism if the other "ism" remains in play in our systems and culture (Romero, 2018).

An (unspoken) theme in the conversations on intersectionality is that neither disability nor childcare are political issues. Between the structural erasure of disability and disabled people and the bipartisan nature of disability policy, this is not surprising. But disability and poverty are linked (in both directions), and the prominent social justice issue of police brutality connects race and disability (Van der Mark, 2017). Parents living in poverty must fight to ensure that their children are not exposed on a daily basis to toxic water and air: from lead pipes to mold in substandard housing and beyond, children living in poverty are at a higher risk for developing illnesses and disabilities than their middle to upper-class counterparts. With waning access to quality healthcare, assistance, and welfare, working parents are unable to provide the kind of support their disabled children need. The US legally and culturally frames childcare and care of people who are disabled as personal, individual issues—rather than something that connects to systemic patterns (Romero, 2018).

Any momentum for creating an accessible world for people with disabilities is defined by masculine individualism: any positive steps forward have been caused by the needs of war veterans, defined by the needs of middle-class men, and awarded to white people. Historically, a key aspect of rehabilitation was (and often still is) character building by the disabled person's individualized success of overcoming obstacles from their disability. Rehabilitation success was and still is judged through the ability of a person with a disability to "perform, seemingly at any

cost, the familiar activities of middle-class, white, and gender-appropriate life” (Williamson, 2019, p. 58).

The depoliticization of childcare is a mistake as well: childcare centers are structured just like any other school or organization with the understanding of normalcy and ideal as white, male, straight, cisgender, non-disabled, upper-class, Christian, and a US citizen. Anyone that doesn't fit inside all of those boxes faces cultural and structural violence (Galtung, 1996). This is sometimes in the minutia of life: having to defend the legitimacy of being absent from school for a non-Christian holiday, facing communication barriers with teachers because of deafness, or being transgender and not having a bathroom that feels safe to use. This is sometimes more overt: hiring discrimination, sexual harassment, or bullying. Class plays a significant role in quality childcare access. Wealth, and therefore poverty, is often inherited. While discrimination is less overt than it was decades or centuries ago, people that profited off of discrimination (in the forms of slavery, sexual discrimination, or institutionalization) passed their wealth down to their descendants. Once we begin utilizing an intersectional lens to unravel how inherited wealth is and was compiled, we are better able to understand the truths behind massive wealth inequality in the US. We can then move from an individualized perception of poverty to a structural understanding of the banking and state imposed wealth gap (Romero, 2018).

## **Organizational Development**

This section examines the data found that relates to the question: How can organizations engage in ongoing development of their accessible practices for people with disabilities? In addition to data collected from the checklist, the data in this section primarily comes from the question: What can and should be done for the YMCA Childcare Center to be more accessible for people with disabilities? This section in particular explores the implications of other interview questions in the overall accessibility of the YMCA Childcare Center. Specific topics explored include program evaluation and development, relational culture, and financial patterns and impact.

### *Results*

#### Program Evaluation & Development

One teacher talked about the center needing to do more work on strategic planning. She felt that too many responsibilities fell to the teachers, and that more work needs to be done to address issues on an administrative planning level.

Disability-related access issues are only addressed once they come up. There are policies and plans in place for some disabilities, but a teacher reflected on what that means practically for people with disabilities: "I feel like its drawing attention to them. They would have to go out of their way to accommodate." From the data collected it seems that there is not a formal process of requesting feedback from parents on disability access issues.

### Relational Culture

There are issues with communication and support for staff, and these take form in not having enough classroom resources, computer access, paid planning time, staff, or support from specialists. Meetings about teaching strategies don't help when these setbacks are at play. A teacher mentioned that when she speaks up about these issues, she is told, "Oh, we're working on that." She is frustrated by the many obstacles she faces because she and the other staff are "here because we love helping families and children. We know what the expectations are and we want to help. It's our duty as educators to help as much as we can."

In regards to communication, interviewees spoke about issues inside of the center (touched upon in the last paragraph) and with the community. The YMCA Childcare Center cannot do a good job of branching out into the community if there are issues with communication inside of the center that haven't been fixed. This is a problem that is currently being worked on internally. Developing strong ties with the community is an important value for the center. Some of the children of employees (teachers and administrators alike) attend the center, and this is crucial for the center in understanding the needs of the community.

Interviewees noted that more work needs to happen with learning about who is excluded from the center (intentionally or unintentionally). When it is not clear that a space is accessible for families that deal with specific disabilities (deafness, paralysis, etc.), those families are less likely to reach out to find out about the center. In addition to communicating about access possibilities at the YMCA, interviewees also spoke about the importance of improving structures so that they are more accessible.

Parents feel that their children will be safe, happy, healthy, and their access needs will be met when they send their children to the center. This is something that parents, teachers, and the director noted. One parent reflected that when she used to send her child to a different childcare center she felt as though she was abandoning him and cried when she dropped him off. At the YMCA center, in contrast, she feels a sense of relief, and that her child is accepted for who he is. She says that he loves the YMCA. The director explains that this feeling of safety comes from her leadership approach of “think like a parent, act like a professional.” She is a mother and this identity is prominent in how she approaches her work—and on top of that, her child attends the center. One parent reflected on how the director’s parental approach to her work is why the accommodation process there is so informal and helpful. The director also values relationships with the parents of families that bring their children to the center. She says,

“I can tell you something about almost every family and I take great pride in that because not everyone does that. But I try to know my families, and if you know your families you can individualize your relationship with them and then you can individualize the education for them. My parents are very open with me; I try to be open and real with them.”

She is also incredibly mindful of the children’s safety and can relate to parental worries about safety—she does not dismiss worries without checking in on the child. One parent notes that the administrators were once teachers at the YMCA, so they know the experience well. Also, there isn’t a lot of employee turnover and this allows for cultural norms to develop and be sustained. This sense of safety, validity, and acceptance carries through in the work the

teachers do. Parents perceive the teachers as a kind of family and they appreciate that teachers give individual attention to each student and their daily goals and successes.

### Financial Patterns & Impact

One of the greatest challenges the YMCA Childcare Center faces is a lack of funding. There is a perceived lack of work on grant writing and adequate fundraising. Without a regular flow of money, the center has had to cut funding for resources. No one spoke specifically about pay for administrators and teachers, but if budgets are being cut then likely wages are not as high as they should be. Funding is an issue in meeting specific and unique accommodations, and when the center is unable to acquire that access item, they need to get creative with what they have. Inconsistent finances affect strategic planning. Donors often understand little about the realities of the lives of people who rely on their donations to gain access to childcare. I attended a fundraiser for the YMCA a few months before I conducted my research, and I witnessed the primarily white and male (and obviously upper-class) attendees utilize paternalistic coded language (for example, “inner city”) when speaking about the children and families that utilize the center.

### *Analysis*

### Program Evaluation & Development

Galtung speaks to the value of strategic planning—it is the energy behind the often sub-conscious values (or code) of a place, the “defining goal-seeking processes... with complex feedback relations” (1996, p. 23). Values and goals are only as good as how a person or



organization lives into them. The YMCA Childcare Center needs to do more work on planning and executing their plans. This applies to accessibility and to other issues, but until all parts of the center exist fluidly, access cannot exist fluidly. Educational settings on an almost universal level structurally forget about access until a disabled individual walks (or rolls) into that space. Inevitably this means that disability is going to be looked at, in that setting, through an individualized lens and often retrospectively. Those systems force the person who is disabled and their support group to do much of the labor of access. When this happens, however, it is an opportunity to really look at, name, and explore the true values of the organization—and ultimately do the work to ensure that access becomes one of those values (Titchkosky, 2011). The cultural norm of applying accommodations in retrospect exists in part because legally, effort toward access need only be done once a disability has been documented and specific accommodations legitimized (Leuchovius, 2019). This individualized value prevents fluidity to access. For some more specific access issues this makes sense, but for many (especially when viewed through a Universal Design framework), it does not. Accommodations like video captioning or making documents available in a variety of forms and languages makes a habit out of inclusion by normalizing common accommodations.

The process of planning for access can be tricky because “[t]he document makes the version of disability it also aims to protect” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 101). The way disability is defined creates the paradigm for access and inclusion: the process of defining needs to be done intentionally and with care. Mingus explains what should be behind creating access: it should be “done in the service of love, justice, connection and community [so that it is] liberatory and

has the power to transform” (Mingus, 2018). Access should not only be created for individuals, but access should be a process of changing systems so that it becomes a given.

### Relational Culture

Systems are maintained and organizations are sustainable when needs are met (Galtung, 1996). The breakdown in communication and staff support affects the ability of the YMCA Childcare Center to do its best work. This needs to change—administration needs to do the significant work of planning and executing articulated issues staff want addressed.

The topic of parental education and resources also needs specific effort. Because of different factors parents are often unaware of their child’s disabilities and because their child’s teacher is a professional that sees the child on a daily basis, parents often see their children’s teachers as primary resources for learning about their children’s disabilities. As a primary resource for parents they need to have the trainings so that they can be able to educate and guide parents on how to have their child tested (and why testing is important). They also need to know of resources in the community that parents can utilize (and that are accessible regardless of class, language, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc.). These resources need to be endorsed by people of all backgrounds that have that disability.

### Financial Patterns & Impact

Creating a structure that has access built in requires good financial planning and spending. Budget concern is a prominent problem for childcare providers in acquiring equipment and skills for disabled student access (Weglarz-Ward, 2018). When there is a lack of

funding it is an impossible challenge to create spaces and curriculums that reflect Universal Design values. Retrofitting is a process that is perceived as difficult and expensive, and the center especially needs ramps outside and automated doors outside and inside.

In addition to accessing quality resources, childcare centers face the challenge of paying employees (teachers and administrators) adequate wages. The wage gap for jobs in the US based on gender and race looks like: for every dollar white men earn, white women make 77¢, black women make 64¢, and Latina women make 55¢. Across the US childcare workers are among the lowest paid workers—to pay so little and place such significant responsibility (care for our most vulnerable loved ones) in the hands of these workers is absurd (Romero, 2018). When employees are paid better it affects not only their quality of life but the quality of care and education they provide.

## Conclusion

The above analysis attempts to answer the research questions: (1) What kind of policies must be in place for organizations to ensure accessibility for disabled people? (2) What kind of education and training is necessary for employees to implement accessible policies? and (3) How can organizations engage in ongoing development of their accessible practices for people with disabilities? The study was limited in scope—involving one childcare center and six interviews (which were all conducted within 2 weeks of each other). The implications from this study are therefore limited. A study that aims to have a stronger grasp on organizational patterns at the YMCA Childcare Center would utilize a larger pool of interviews, more quantitative data on the demographics of those involved in the center, more diverse interview subjects (namely, current or former students at the center), and data would be collected for multiple years. A study that aims to have a stronger grasp on patterns within the broader childcare field in the US would collect that depth of data on a wider scale—utilizing childcare centers around the country as sites for research. This study aimed to aid the researcher in developing practical skills in analyzing and advising on organizational accessibility while also starting the conversation about disability access at the YMCA Childcare Center. My hope is that it managed to do both of those.

The implications of this research additionally allow readers to draw broad conclusions on the nature of development, intersectionality, access, and disability. While it is focused specifically on a childcare center, it carries universal implications for any organization (or system, for that matter). The application of Galtung's development as unfolding theory points to a need for all organizations and practitioners to evaluate their coding and what is required to

make their work sustainable. The common collective imagination of disability is depoliticized, and this dismisses the historic relationship between identity and oppression. Organizations and practitioners must interrogate this and make changes accordingly to ensure true development and sustainability. This includes doing significant work and planning to ensure that resource access (funding included) is built into an organization. This work requires dismantling of capitalist systems, and if this cannot happen structurally, it must happen in the small ways fundraising and resource allocation occur. Too often theory is not created with planning for tangible action in mind, and work needs to be done to create tools (similar to the Universal Design checklist utilized in this analysis) that help organizations and practitioners apply Disability Justice theory and values to the minutia of their practice.

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**Appendix A****INTERVIEW GUIDE & INSTRUCTIONS FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS**

I will ask you a series of open-ended questions, and the two of us will be able to further discuss the answer with follow up clarifying questions and explanations, before moving onto the next question.

1. Why did you choose to enroll your child at the YMCA Childcare Center?
2. What was your knowledge/perception of it before you enrolled your child? After?
3. Does your child have disabilities? Can you tell me about their disability(ies) and what your child's experience has been like at the YMCA in relation to their disability(ies)?
4. What do you know about the process of requesting accommodations for your child?
5. Have you requested accommodations here (or elsewhere)? If so, what was that process like?
6. What ways do you or don't you see the interconnectedness of the marginalization of different groups like persons with disabilities, people of color, queer people, women, etc.? How does this apply to your experience as a parent/guardian of a child at the YMCA Childcare Center?
7. What role does interdependence and independence play in childcare and education?
8. What is your understanding of accessibility? (What is access, how does it relate to your child's life, and what does it look like for people who are marginalized?)
9. Do you sense that the YMCA Childcare Center is accessible for people with disabilities? Why or why not?
10. What can and should be done for the YMCA Childcare Center to be more accessible for people with disabilities?

**Appendix B****INTERVIEW GUIDE & INSTRUCTIONS FOR TEACHERS**

I will ask you a series of open-ended questions, and the two of us will be able to further discuss the answer with follow up clarifying questions and explanations, before moving onto the next question.

1. What role does interdependence and independence play in childcare and education?
2. What ways do you or don't you see the interconnectedness of the marginalization of different groups like persons with disabilities, people of color, queer people, women, etc.?
3. How do these last two questions apply to the work you and your team do at the YMCA Childcare Center?
4. What is your understanding of accessibility? (What is access, how does it relate to your work, and what does it look like for people who are marginalized?)
5. What kind of training do you receive from the YMCA on disability?
6. Do you sense that the YMCA Childcare Center is accessible for people with disabilities? Why or why not?
7. What can and should be done for the YMCA Childcare Center to be more accessible for people with disabilities?

**Appendix C****INTERVIEW GUIDE & INSTRUCTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS**

I will ask you a series of open-ended questions, and the two of us will be able to further discuss the answer with follow up clarifying questions and explanations, before moving onto the next question.

1. What role does interdependence and independence play in childcare and education?
2. What ways do you or don't you see the interconnectedness of the marginalization of different groups like persons with disabilities, people of color, queer people, women, etc.?
3. How do these last two questions apply to the work you and your team do at the YMCA Childcare Center?
4. What is your understanding of accessibility? (What is access, how does it relate to your work, and what does it look like for people who are marginalized?)
5. Do you sense that the YMCA Childcare Center is accessible for people with disabilities? Why or why not?
6. What can and should be done for the YMCA Childcare Center to be more accessible for people with disabilities?

## Appendix D

### UNIVERSAL DESIGN CHECKLIST

This section is adapted from *Equal Access: Universal Design of Professional Organizations— A checklist for making professional organizations inclusive of everyone* by Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D. Many of the questions require yes/no/maybe/unsure answers, though feel free to expand on your answer if need be.

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“Universal design (UD) means that rather than designing for the average user, you design for people with differing native languages, genders, racial and ethnic backgrounds, abilities, and disabilities.”

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#### Planning, Policies, and Evaluation

- Are people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, men and women, young and old students, and other groups represented in the organization’s planning process?
- Do you have policies and procedures that ensure access to facilities, events, and information resources for people with disabilities?
- Are disability-related access issues and other diversity issues addressed in program evaluation plans and instruments?

#### Information Resources

- Do pictures in your publications and website include people with diverse characteristics with respect to race, gender, age, and disability?
- In key publications, do you include a statement about your commitment to access and procedures for requesting disability related accommodations? (For example, you could include the following statement: “Our organization’s goal is to make materials and activities accessible to all participants. Please inform organization leaders of accessibility barriers you encounter and request accommodations that will make activities and information resources accessible to you.”)
- Are all printed publications available (immediately or in a timely manner) in alternate formats such as Braille, large print, and electronic text?
- Are key documents provided in language(s) other than English?
- Are printed materials in your facility or at an event within easy reach from a variety of heights and without furniture blocking access?
- Do electronic resources, including web pages, adhere to accessibility guidelines or standards adopted by your organization, funding source, or the federal government? Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology and Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) are most commonly used. For example, are text alternatives

provided for graphic images on web pages? Can the content be accessed with a text only browser and by using the keyboard alone?

- Do you include a statement on your website affirming your commitment to accessible design? For example, you could include the following statement: “We strive to make our website accessible to everyone. We provide text descriptions of graphic images and photos. Video clips are captioned and audio-described. Suggestions for increasing the accessibility of these pages are welcome.”
- Do videos developed or used in your organization have captions? Audio descriptions?

### **Physical Environments and Products**

- Are there parking areas, pathways, and entrances to the building that are accessible from a seated position?
- Are all levels of the facility connected via an accessible route of travel?
- Are aisles kept wide and clear of obstructions for the safety of users who have mobility or visual impairments?
- Are wheelchair-accessible restrooms with well-marked signs available in or near the office?
- Is at least part of a service or counter desk at a height accessible from a seated position?
- Are there ample high-contrast, large-print directional signs to and throughout the facility, indicating accessible routes?
- Are telecommunication devices for the deaf (TDD) available?
- Is adequate light available?

### **Staff and Volunteers**

- Are all staff members and volunteers familiar with the availability and use of the Telecommunications Relay Service and alternate document formats?
- Do all staff members and volunteers know how to respond to requests for disability related accommodations, such as sign language interpreters?
- Are all staff members and volunteers aware of issues related to communicating with participants who have disabilities? Do staff deliver conference presentations and exhibits that are accessible to all participants?
- Are project staff, contractors, and volunteers in specific assignment areas (e.g., web page development, video creation) knowledgeable about accessibility requirements and considerations?

### **Technology**

- Is an adjustable-height table available for each type of workstation to assist participants who use wheelchairs or are small or large in stature?
- Do you provide adequate work space for both left- and right-handed users?

- Is software to enlarge screen images and a large monitor available to assist people with low vision and learning disabilities?
- Do you provide a trackball to be used by someone who has difficulty controlling a mouse?
- Are procedures in place for a timely response to requests for assistive technology?