

UNMASKING STUDENT LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP

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This dissertation is dedicated to the outstanding student leaders that make education a worthwhile and exciting endeavor for students, teachers, and community members alike.

This includes the remarkable student leaders in this study, and all of the student leaders throughout the k-12 educational systems who meet the sizable challenge of leading peers through authentic experiences. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once noted, “Our lives begin to

end the day we become silent about things that matter.” Successful student leaders bolster

the opportunity to leverage their personal interests in an effort to strengthen the bond

between themselves, their peers, school, and community. The struggles of cultivating

young leaders within k-12 education, particularly in this current day and age, make

grooming student leaders difficult, yet many find ways to succeed, and are owed a debt of

gratitude for enacting their position as leaders to improve the lives of their peers and

community at large. This dissertation is dedicated to student leadership, in hopes that we

may learn from their perspectives in an effort to enhance their practices.

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## ABSTRACT

Dominick Stella

### UNMASKING STUDENT LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP

Given the evolving scape of educational leadership, many k-12 institutions are reconsidering their leadership roles and strategies. One emerging possibility involves students assuming leadership roles. However, little research-based guidance exists with regards to developing student leaders within k-12 education. To address this gap, this arts-based qualitative study employed “The Seven C’s” of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (SCM) to examine how student leaders perceive leadership. The study was held at a small midwestern high school. Semi-structured interviews, multi-modal journals, and focus groups comprised the data collection methods of this study. Through purposeful sampling, 8 student advocates first participated in 90-minute semi-structured interviews, describing their perceptions of leadership. Then, to probe more deeply into their perceptions of leadership, they engaged with and responded to a variety of 30-minute superhero narratives, each of which accompanied by questions related to the SCM. Lastly, student leaders participated in one of two 60-minute focus groups, describing the influence media consumption has on their perceptions. Findings indicated that student leaders defined leadership both broadly and contextually. Student leaders discussed leadership concepts and examples that clustered around several themes: 1) Leadership as a mindset; 2) Real-world or “authentic” leadership; 3) Peer influence; and 4) Taking intellectual/leadership risks. Additionally, superhero narratives served as a catalyst for a thorough discussion of the SCM as it pertained to student leaders’ perceptions of leadership. Finally, the researcher found that media consumption plays a role in student leaders conceptualizing their own identity and perceptions of leadership. Based on the findings of this study, implications for practice include: (a) a framework for developing student leaders in the k-12 setting, (b) policy makers providing “authentic” opportunities for developing leaders to collaborate with their peers and community, (c) incorporating media usage pertaining to personal avocations within leadership development programs.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

### Introduction

Students have cared about establishing relationships with their communities for many years, but today's youth demonstrate community engagement in ways previous generations did not (Ekström & Östman, 2015; Pasek et al., 2006). Much of contemporary youths' efforts towards community engagement align with political involvement, volunteerism, and media use (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Rainie & Horrigan, 2005). Recent events such as the 2018 Parkland High School shooting have given rise to students voicing their concerns pertaining to school safety, while students in New York have pressed politicians on discipline reform, asserting that suspensions have been disproportionately assigned to black students, damaging their educational opportunities. Students have voiced these concerns through protests in the streets, at schools, and on social media. According to Dempster (2006) the meta-theme for young people is "relationships matter more than the institution" (p. 57). Today's youth are being asked to take on leadership opportunities without formal leadership training (Black et al., 2014, Delp, 2005; Libby et al., 2005; Wisner, 2011). Students are becoming leaders through practice. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how youth come to understand leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Despite students wanting to take on leadership roles within education, they have often been dismissed for reasons pertaining to their lack of maturity (MacBeath, 1998). However, the American perception of youth culture has recently evolved (Helenga, 2002, Lenhart, 2010). While media once projected youth as reckless and inept, media now thrives off of teens in diverse ways. Television shows, music, and various forms of entertainment have featured teenagers as the lead role, establishing them as perceived

role models and leaders. Not only have teenagers gained ground in the media, youth culture has leveraged social media to elevate their voice. Social media has allotted an opportunity for teenagers to interact with a diverse group of leaders that have not been accessible to previous generations (Boyd, 2014). The relationship between student voice and social media is strengthened by celebrities, politicians, and other well-known figures engaging in conversation with teens, elevating youth's ability to be heard as well as their desire to lead. Youth culture is often known for its relationship with media consumption and popular culture (Sefton-Green, 2006). However, little is known as to whether or not youths' relationship with media and popular culture has an impact on their ability to perceive leadership.

The standard procedure in becoming a leader in modern education is to go through a formal preparation program. Teachers, building level administrators, and central office leaders typically enroll in preparation programs requiring post-secondary education and an ability to pass state licensure exams. Although there are a variety of ways in which an individual can obtain a position of leadership, preparation through experience is often seen as an important element associated with leadership (Marcketti & Kadolph, 2010). Moreover, experiences can assist in shaping an individual's perspectives and actions, allowing them to act as leaders despite not having formal preparation. Youth, like adults, are often influenced by the world around them, informing their opinions and actions.

One significant influence on youth culture has been the growing presence of superhero narratives (i.e. Black Panther, Captain Marvel, The Avengers, The Justice League, Wonder Woman, etc.) (Martin, 2007; Wright, 2001). These superhero narratives

focus on leadership, friendship, and community. Given the power of this narrative, it offers a means to explore how young people perceive leadership. Although superhero narratives have previously been seen as a unilateral means of influencing Americans' perceptions of self-identity, the ways in which these narratives have been delivered have evolved significantly over the past 90 years. As time has progressed, media has shifted into a reciprocating sphere of dialog as opposed to unilateral messages of propaganda (McQuail, 2010). Media used to function as a way to provide information to consumers. Now, consumers have the opportunity to interact with the delivery of information. Congruently, youth culture is interacting with media in ways previous generations have not. Understanding the relationship between youth culture, student leadership, and superhero narratives may leverage new possibilities for student leadership development processes.

### **Literature Context**

This case study focuses on three primary areas of literature: 1) youth culture, 2) student leadership, and 3) comic book culture. By understanding youth culture, educational leaders will be able to make informed decisions pertaining to the education and opportunities of modern learners. Because the majority of today's youth has grown up in a world saturated in superhero narratives (Wright, 2001), this study looks to see how student leaders not only identify leadership qualities amongst these narratives but to what extent those qualities align with the expectation's student leaders have traditionally placed upon themselves.

Adults have perceived youth culture, for hundreds of years, as inept, reckless and ignorant (Konrath, 2013; Malekoff, 2008). Youth have traditionally had limited power in

constructing their own sense of identity (Morrell, 2015). These perceptions have evolved in recent years. Mass media has served as a vehicle of communicating, in unilateral ways, how youth should be perceived (Couldry, 2012). Teenagers are now at the epicenter of media, featured in music groups, television, movies, video games, and other forms of media. Until recently, youth culture was merely a construct of adult-think, categorizing generations in an effort to project adult concerns pertaining to the trajectories of social groups (Buckingham, 2008). The adult-centric view of youth culture has negative implications for literature pertaining to student leadership. However, teenagers now have a platform in which they can impact the ways in which society perceives them (Buckingham, 2013). By providing an opportunity for student voice to be heard, researchers mitigate circumstances in which the true voice of students is outweighed by the researcher (Aminitehrani, 2017).

Educational leaders are bearing witness to the impact youth can have on their society and the extent to which their voice is heard. In response, students are being allotted the opportunity to take on leadership roles they traditionally were not. Post-secondary education has witnessed a merging trend in student leadership research. Little research has been accomplished pertaining to student leadership development at the high school level, with the majority of research operating similar to the ways in which society constructs understanding of youth culture, through the eyes of adults rather than the eyes of youth. This study seeks to align the views of students with a theoretical framework constructed by adult scholars. Therefore, this study will identify the extent to which adult perceptions of youth align with how youth perceive themselves. In an effort to understand

leadership practices, post-secondary educators have utilized various theoretical frames. The most prominent theoretical frame has been the Social Change Model of Leadership.

Despite the Social Change Model of Leadership finding success at the post-secondary level, little research exists on its effectiveness within the k-12 setting. By constructing a study that utilizes the Social Change Model of Leadership's seven C's (See Appendix E) as a coding framework, student leaders' reactions to superhero narratives will be grounded in a theory that will allow for a new understanding of the relationship between student leaders' perceptions of superhero narratives and the extent to which those perceptions align with the Social Change Model of Leadership framework.

### **Research Questions**

This study will address the following questions:

1. How do high school student leaders define their leadership?
2. What is the relationship, if any, between student leadership and superhero narratives?

### **Conceptual & Methodological Design**

This study will focus on the concept of student leadership within the field of education and is an examination of the connection, if any, between superhero narratives, the means in which they are communicated and student leaders' perceptions of student leadership. Perceptions of student leadership will be investigated amongst a group of peer "student advocates" (student-selected representatives of leadership). Student advocates will be investigated in terms of their understanding of superhero narratives as it relates to their perceptions of student leadership and the extent to which a given form of narrative

delivery has an impact on their ability to identify leadership among student leaders. I will explore if and how superhero narratives are influential in youth perceptions of peer leadership. Overall, superhero narratives will be considered in terms of how they play a role in the perceptions of student leadership among a sample of peers. These inquiries will shed light on the influence superhero narratives have on student leaders' perceptions of peer leadership as well as the modes of narrative delivery that align most successfully with modern youth culture.

An arts-based qualitative research design will be used for this study, focusing on in-depth multimodal interviews (inquiry through participant exposure to comic books, audio recordings, movie segments, and video games), triangulated with journals and focus groups to assure validity in data outcomes (Creswell, 2017 citing Lincoln & Guba, 1994; Maxwell, 2009; Merriam, 2009, 2015). These semi-structured in-depth interviews with student advocates sought to explore the construct of student leadership as well as the influence of media on narrative delivery. Broadly speaking, this research was qualitative in nature, falling beneath the umbrella of “grounded theory” research.

### **Proposed Methodology**

This study is an arts-based qualitative research design. An arts-based research is defined as, "A set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined" (Leavy, 2015, p. 2). The majority of data being gathered will center on participants experiencing a variety of arts to reveal a greater

understanding of my research questions (Chilton & Scotti, 2014; Knowles, 2008, Leavy, 2015). Saldaña (2011) posits that arts-based research utilizes visual arts and media as a means to collect data or represent research findings. This study will utilize various forms of art and media (comic books, radio broadcasts, television shows, movies, and video games) during semi-structured interviews with learner advocates in an attempt to understand to what extent, if any, the form of narrative delivery has an impact on their ability to perceive connections between superhero narratives and their practice as student leaders.

The first way I will be gathering data from my participants is through two semi-structured in-depth interviews. The first semi-structured interview will consist of meeting with each of the eight student advocates individually to ask them a series of questions pertaining to their understanding of leadership (See Appendix A). Then, student advocates will be exposed to several superhero narratives through various means of media during a second semi-structured in-depth interview. Their exposure to these narratives will be in chronological order, meaning that the media used to deliver the narratives will begin with the first way in which the narratives were communicated (i.e. comic books) up until more recent means of narrative delivery (i.e. movie clips and video games) (See Appendix B).

The second source of data I will be collecting are journals. Each student advocate will have a journal in which they will be asked to reflect on their experience as student leaders in the school. Student advocates will be provided a prompt to which they can choose to elaborate as much as they would like to (See Appendix B). The purpose of the journal is to provide an additional outlet for the participant to share information regarding



their relationship with superhero narratives and how it may or may not relate to their understanding of leadership.

Third, all student advocates will conclude by participating in a focus group. The intention of the focus group is to identify the extent to which learners agree upon their understanding of narratives and to further promote an environment in which student advocates may discuss their varying perceptions of leadership. This will provide a platform for student advocates to converse with peers in regard to their understanding of superhero narratives and to explain how they may or may not see a connection to their lives; specifically, their use of media. Like the other forms of data collection, I will be providing a semi-structured platform of questions for participants to respond to in an organic way, rather than through contrived or unauthentic means (See Appendix C).

Last, the means to which the information will be coded will be guided through a consistent process across all three of the data collection methods. All interactions with the participants will be transcribed for the participants to later review and validate that I have accurately recorded their responses. After verification from participants, I will code the sources that were collected. Codes will be primarily based on “The Seven C’s” of Social Change Model of Leadership theory as well as emerging themes that I otherwise was not aware of prior to meeting with the participants. From this coding process I will have a body of credible data to draw conclusions from and theorize on the relationship, if any, between superhero narratives and student leaders’ perceptions of student leadership.

### **Significance**

This research is important to the field of educational leadership for three different reasons. First, educational leadership has seen a shift in conceptual frameworks for

decades. Scholars positing new approaches to leadership practice have brought upon this shift. From these practices, growing bodies of research have identified the need for new perspectives. While distributed leadership practices had previously been applied to central office, building-level and teacher-leaders, the rise of student leadership has garnered attention as well (Crowther et al., 2001; Komives et al., 2011; Wagner, 2016). Although student leadership has primarily been rooted in post-secondary education, a cultural paradigm has shifted, allowing for high school students to embrace similar opportunities. Therefore, educational leaders will need to identify the unique needs these newly formed student leaders will require. Unlike teacher-leaders, building-level administrators, and central office leadership, student leaders are placed into leadership positions without the benefit of going through a formal academic preparation program. This may seem jarring to some; however, it shouldn't come as a shock for a generation of learners who have primarily utilized the internet to find answers to their problems. While rote memorization has historically been common practice within education, modern learners are tasked with meaningful learning, placing themselves at the center of the teaching learning process (Jonassen et al., 2003). Therefore, an emphasis in the application of skills has been pushed to the forefront of modern education, allowing for students to apply the knowledge and skills they obtain in an effort to solve complex problems and build meaningful relationships with their learning.

Educational leaders will need to identify a means to which contemporary youth acquire leadership skills. Today's youth live in a society unlike any before them, therefore, leaders will need to leverage an understanding of media and youth culture to develop leaders. Most importantly, leaders must utilize their understanding of individuals

and contexts to create change externally as well as construct a sense of self. This is imperative for youth who often ask who they are, searching for an awareness of self and others. This will contribute to a growing body of research that has identified the need for leadership to be enacted at several organizational levels (Fry & Kriger, 2009).

Last, this study seeks to understand the extent to which media has an influence on leaderships' understanding of practice. This is unique in that it asks how popular culture has historically had an impact on our perceptions of self and to what extent those perceptions have been constructed in a unilateral way (McQuail, 2010). While superhero narratives had traditionally walked the line of propaganda and empowerment, the world in which superheroes exist today is significantly different from the one in which they were birthed into in the 1930's. Media, although remaining unilateral in some regards, is subject to a consumer base in youth that have grown into a world of reciprocity, one that possesses the power to communicate their ideas to nearly anyone they want to. This change in society leads one to consider if the tools of the past, in this case superheroes, can have the same impact on perceptions of self and identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The purpose of this arts-based qualitative study is to explore the effect, if any, of superhero narratives on student perceptions of student leadership at a small Midwestern high school. This literature review seeks to investigate the relationship between youth culture, student leadership, and superhero narratives. Literature from a diverse range of subject areas will be used to highlight some of the connections between sociology, psychology, and leadership development.

First, I will look to research pertaining to youth culture. In supporting our understanding of youth culture, aspects concerning media and technology will enhance our knowledge of modern youth culture (Morrell, 2015; Sefton-Green, 2006; Thompson, 2016). It is important to accurately comprehend youth culture if we are to grasp how modern students perceive student leadership. An inability to grasp youth culture may result in an analysis that is inaccurate, drawing conclusions from assumption rather than research. Second, we will look to the topic of student leadership (Holdsworth, 2005; Komives, 2011; Mitra, 2005, Ricketts & Dudd, 2002, Tan & Adams, 2018; Villarreal et al., 2018). By first identifying defining qualities from literature pertaining to youth culture, student leadership will be defined in-terms of which theoretical frameworks it derives from as well as its importance in contemporary education and at multiple levels of learning as well. Then, a specific framework for student leadership will be explained, allowing for connections to be made between characteristics that define youth culture as well as literature pertaining to superhero narratives. The last body of research pertains to the role media has played in society so far as its relationship with citizens in the United States and how that relationship is closely aligned with the evolution of superhero

narratives (Pelton et al., 2007; Sabin, 2013; Schwarz, 2002; Tatalovic, 2009; Wright, 2001.)

Embracing the relationship between youth culture, technology, and media will allow for a research study that doesn't neglect key elements pertaining to student leadership. This will prove to be beneficial for scholars who seek to understand student leadership, particularly within the k-12 setting as there is minimal research pertaining to the development of effective student leaders.

### **Youth Culture**

There have been several studies exploring the use of subculture as an analytical tool in understanding youth culture (Amine & Junaide, 2018; Brake, 2013; Matza & Sykes, 2017; Nayak, 2016; Nwalozie, 2015; O'Connor, 2016; Snyder, 2016; Wortham, 2011). However, none of them leverage comic book culture as a means to better understand youth culture. Brake (2013), in a qualitative study that compared a variety of subcultures in an effort to use subculture as an analytical tool in sociology, posits that four different areas commonly organize youth culture, each of which align with behavior: respectful youth, delinquent youth, cultural rebels, and politically militant youth. However, youth culture is not a term that is easily defined in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; it is often misunderstood by contemporary educators, policy makers and the public (Steinberg, 2008; Wortham, 2011).

Teenagers are frequently depicted through conflicting labels such as altruistic, apathetic, creative, deviant, engaged, and irrational (Haber & Asher, 2016; Tell, 2000). Accounts pertaining to youth over the past forty years have been used to label and characterize generations such as "Xennials", "Y (Millennials)", "Z (iGen)" and now

“Alpha” (Heng & Yazdanifard, 2013, Tolbize, 2008). A generation is defined as an identifiable group that shares birth years, age, location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages (Kaifi et al., 2012; Kapoor & Solomon, 2011; Srinivasan, 2012). These accounts rarely have anything to do with youth themselves; rather they serve as a tool to express adult concerns pertaining to the trajectories of social groups (Buckingham, 2008). Heng and Yazdanifard (2013), in a mixed methods research study, claim generation gaps are a point of concern for the business industry. They explain that each generation has unique characteristics that need to be considered by leaders as varying generations are tasked with working collaboratively. In their study, Generation Y is described as being tech savvy, yet struggling to communicate in face-to-face interactions. While defining characteristics of generations may be helpful for understanding collaborative experiences of colleagues, my research will add to a body of research that currently faces a gap in understanding perceptions of Generation Z students.

Some adult accounts are more optimistic in nature, believing that youths will contribute to society in meaningful ways whereas others are more pessimistic, believing that youths are the root of evil (Wright, 2001). Moreover, Dougherty and Dougherty (2010) found in a mixed methods study that some believe the media exploits children through advertising and television, whereas others assert that teenagers control an increasingly teen-driven market. The commodification of youth culture by mass media has led educators, policy makers, and the public to question the relationship between youth culture and their consumption of media. While teenagers are outperforming their teachers and parents in their use and understanding of media, adults claim that, when unsupervised, teenagers are more likely to be exposed to websites or video games that

induce delinquent behavior (Kim et al., 2006; Strasburger, 2013; Sternheimer, 2014). Recognizing the relationship between youth culture and media exposure will allow for educators, policy makers, and the public to establish policies and procedures that are cognizant of a shifting social scape – one that recognizes the pitfalls and benefits of media exposure among today’s youth (Anderson et al., 2003, DeLisi et al., 2013; Ward, 2004).

Leaders should consider these varying interpretations placed upon youth. A failure to do so may result in actions taken by educational leaders that are harmful or counterproductive to young people. Conversely, attempts to better understand youth and their views can allow for educational leaders to work more successfully with them (Vandegrift, 2015). This study seeks to understand if media exposure can be leveraged in a positive way, gaining understanding of student leaders’ perceptions, an aspect that has yet to be explored.

**Media Depictions.** Complaints about future generations have been made for centuries. Socrates claimed that children were more disobedient, had less respect for authority, and were worse mannered than his generation (Hadley, 2019). Although much has changed since the days of Ancient Greece, complaints pertaining to future generations have not. This sentiment holds true within US contemporary culture (Konrath, 2013, Malekoff, 2008).

The Harris Poll (2014) found that only 31 percent of adults believe students respect their teachers. Many adults attribute contemporary disobedience and lack of respect to increased media exposure in today’s youth. Media provides entertainment through videogames, television, and music, influencing teenagers’ perceptions of

authority, gender roles, sexuality, and violence (Dill & Thill, 2007; Duggan, 2015; Frisby & Behm-Morawitz, 2019; Johnston, 2015; Martino et al., 2006; Starker, 2017).

Conversely, the media has an influence on the ways in which people view teenagers (Osgerby, 2004). Besley (2003), in a qualitative study, posits adults have fashioned the ways in which youth are perceived by their society. However, our understanding of the ways in which media has positively influenced student leadership practice is unknown.

While many of the media's interpretations of youth culture appear to be inventive and playful in nature (Androutsopoulos, 2000; Palfreyman & Al Khalil, 2006; Saltmarsh, 2009) they can be harmful to society's understanding of youth culture as well as teenagers' perceptions of self (Morrell, 2015). Glendon and Clarke (2015) posit that vulnerable youth are more susceptible to the influence of reports and portrayals of suicide in mass media, with evidence being stronger when reports are communicated in news media as opposed to fictional formats. Similarly, Hargrave et al. (2009) suggest that although there is not a direct correlation between fictional media's portrayal of teens' relationship with binge drinking and teenagers actual drinking behaviors, news stories pertaining to teen drinking often result in policy actions as well as shifts in socially acceptable drinking behaviors. However, research does not describe the extent to which positive behaviors in media influence the actions or perceptions of youth.

There appears to be a particular gap in our current understanding of media's positive influence on teenagers' leadership perceptions. While Hargrave et al. (2009) claim there isn't a connection between youth exposure to delinquent behaviors, they do not speak to the extent in which exposure to fictional media may have a positive correlation with teen behavior, specifically leadership perceptions. My research will



focus on the relationship between a form of fictional media, superhero narratives, and their impact, if any, on their perceptions of student leadership. Media can have an impact on policies and procedures established in society, it also influences our understanding of leadership, notably those who are associated with politicized positions of power (Campus, 2013). Therefore, the relationship between media and youth culture should be considered when speaking to student leadership. Next, the connection between youth culture and media consumption will be explained. This is an important aspect, as it will help to rectify misunderstandings pertaining to the media's depiction of youth culture.

**Youth Culture & Media Consumption.** Advancements in media have influenced culture for centuries (Thompson, 2016). Literature pertaining to the role of media consumption in youth culture often suggests that various forms of media may have a positive and/or negative influence on youth culture, both within and outside the educational setting (Bertot, 2003; Henderson, 2017; Thompson, 2016). For example, the Internet is transforming human functioning, specifically how individuals construct their identity through the utilization of cyberspaces such as blogs, social media, and various virtual communities (Choudhury & McKinney, 2013; Kirmayer et al., 2016; Quinn & Papacharissi, 2017). Technology dependence has become synonymous with youth culture and in some cases suggesting that youth are too closely connected to media consumption. Literature characterizes an overuse of media as addictive, disruptive, and problematic, often leading to complications pertaining to establishing and maintaining healthy relationships (Johnson, 2016; Kirmayer et al., 2016). Many modern educational systems implement policies mandating the requirement of 1-to-1 device application where each student has a piece of technology, whether it be a laptop or tablet, to enhance their

learning opportunities (Henderson, 2017). However, not all school systems have the funding or access to provide students with modern technology to enhance learning (Bertot, 2003). Technology helps to enhance learning prospects across a diverse range of curricular subjects: high school journalism courses produce online newspapers; studio art courses provide opportunities to learn how to utilize digital media and science courses conduct virtual dissections. Technology is more than just a tool used for learning skills within school. Media use, through various means of technology, is one of the main ways teenagers communicate today (Quinn & Papacharissi, 2017).

Generation Z (people born between 1995-2012) has not known a world without social media (Rothman, 2016). They leverage media usage as a means to communicate and create. They have been part of changes to their world that have nurtured student leadership, upstander behavior, and social issues (Kompar, 2018). Where power dynamics previously hushed the voice of youth, current teenagers are empowered by access to social media (Pew Research Center, 2011). Social media allows for teenagers to communicate with millions around the world, including lawmakers, experts, and leaders. This relatively new world has empowered some youth to speak for cause and create change, acting as leaders.

The Internet serves as a place for teens to communicate, learn and come together around issues that interest them, but to also provide an outlet to escape reality (Ersoy, 2019; Goodyear & Armour, 2019; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Part of the appeal for today's youth and their use of media is that they do not have to communicate face-to-face (Castellacci & Tveito, 2018; Ellison et al., 2007; Nie, 2001). While Quinn (2016) argues that the Internet, specifically the use of social media

platforms, diminishes social capital by allowing opportunities for individuals to engage without having to see one another, Naslund et al. (2016) argue that such a stance is heavily biased, claiming peer-to-peer support via social media may afford opportunities for individuals to challenge stigma, increase consumer activity and allow for interventions. Adolescence can be an awkward time, various forms of media allow for a platform in which students can explore their identity (Manganello & Blake, 2010, Villanti et al., 2017). Because teenager personalities and identities are often in flux, the Internet provides a relatively safe way of doing so. However, many adults do not view the Internet as a valuable tool for exploring one's interests or identity. Parents have deeper concerns regarding the vast wealth of information that can be accessed through media consumption and the ease in which it can be retrieved. Among that information are graphic materials such as pornography and violence. However, parental concerns do not speak to whether or not various forms of media can be leveraged as a tool for delivering narratives that may influence teenager perceptions of self and others. This study will seek to understand to what extent narrative delivery may have an impact on student leaders' perceptions, a topic yet to be explored.

An extensive use of media by teenagers can lead to negative consequences. Teenagers often use various forms of media by themselves, leading to a growing sense of alienation and isolation that characterizes today's youth (Ives, 2013). Literature describes the connection between technology addiction and its detrimental impact on mental health, claiming that an over reliance of technology serves as a catalyst for anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies (Johnson, 2016; Kirmayer et al., 2016). Teenagers who become dependent of technology often find themselves doing so by themselves. While parents of

previous generations could notice pornographic magazines or weapons in their child's bedroom, a child's online activities may not leave as many clues for parents to be alerted. Parents' hostility towards technology extends into the classroom where there is a significant disconnect between how children learn and communicate outside of school as opposed to how they are taught in school. On the Internet, teenagers can say what they want, when they want, and to whomever they want. This is true because identities are often anonymous, and their ideas are taken seriously. Conversely, when students enter school they feel as though they have less rights, freedoms, and respect from others.

The hostility some teachers feel towards technology leads to a greater sense of alienation and frustration for students who embrace media consumption. However, educators are increasingly taking a positive stance towards adopting technology integration in their classrooms (Lederman & Jaschik, 2013). Within the high school context, teachers are using social media applications such as twitter to extend classroom discussions outside of school (McWilliams, Hickey, Hines, Conner, & Bishop, 2011). While many schools value what happens on a football field more than what happens on a child's computer screen at home, students are taking notice. In response, schools that emphasize the use of technology are emerging across the United States. For example, New Tech Network schools create a technology-rich environment where teachers and students create, communicate, access information, and experience self-directed learning (Mosier et al., 2015).

As schools begin to embrace the connection between youth culture and technology, leaders will need to reframe the fears adults have pertaining to media access. While censorship has traditionally been a way to mitigate youth's exposure to adult

content and other sources of distraction in the classroom, leaders may focus on additional techniques for today's youth to responsibly use various means of media as a learning tool. Through digital literacy, students learn how to use the Internet, evaluate websites for credibility, and surf the Internet safely (Marsh, 2005; Mohammadvari & Singh, 2015).

A significant weakness in the existing literature, however, is that much of the research focuses on technology and media consumption being leveraged as a means to better understand academic content, not leadership practice. While various forms of media have been used to help students, teachers, and administrators access and share information, literature does not identify where media consumption, narrative delivery, and student perceptions of leadership align. This study will seek to understand how various forms of media can be used as a means to explore to what extent, if any, superhero narratives have an impact on student leaders fostering leadership.

Rather than looking at youth culture as something separate from adult or mainstream culture, leaders may seek ways in which youths' strengths and preferred means of communication can be capitalized upon. Although media has traditionally been blamed as the catalyst of delinquent behavior amongst contemporary youth, adults should shift their perceptions of the role in which media plays within youth culture and how it can be leveraged to create inclusive opportunities for learning. Curriculum pertaining to content such as computer gaming or graphic design can help bridge the gap between technology usage, media consumption and education. However, students are educating themselves with tutorials and articles found on the internet (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). Therefore, schools should look for ways to make authentic connections and experiences for youth beyond the point of introducing content, finding connections between students'

lives and the lessons being taught in the classroom. Consideration of the role between media usage and today's youth may then be applied to additional constructs of youth culture within the educational setting such as student leadership.

### **Understanding Student Leadership**

**Defining Student Leadership.** The construct of student leadership is relatively new with few studies exclusively focusing on theories pertaining to student leadership (Adams & Velarde, 2018; Komives & Dugan, 2014; Wagner, 2016). Formal research pertaining to student leadership may be found in alternative contexts such as “distributed” or “youth” leadership. Spillane (2012) provides a definition of distributed leadership that suggests schools move away from top-down leadership in favor of systems that move the locus of leadership beyond principals and central office members. Moreover, student leaders act as a conduit, facilitating the connection between student voice, community, and action. Within secondary schools, student leadership is traditionally associated with a variety of roles such as student government membership, teachers' aides, peer mentors, peer-mediated instructors, or membership within student clubs and organizations. Spillane (2008) posits that distributive leadership represents, “alternative approaches to leadership that have arisen because of increased external demands and demands on schools.” (p. 31).

To facilitate the external demands placed upon schools, student leaders are allotted opportunities to contribute to their school and community in collaborative ways. Additionally, youth leadership theory provides context in understanding student leadership. Youth leadership is aligned with youth development, providing an avenue for young people to be involved in community organization activities, education reform, and

civic engagement (Catalano et al., 2004). However, Youth leadership is often spoken of in affiliation with programs that teach youth skills outside of the context of formal education.

While many accredited colleges provide opportunities to increase students' capacity as leaders during their time as college students (Kezar, 2011; Komives & Fincher, 2011; Seemiller, 2013; Wagner, 2016), high schools are starting to cultivate an importance in developing youth leadership. Although high schools generally do not provide opportunities for coursework pertaining to leadership, students are provided leadership opportunities through involvement in extra-curricular activities such as student clubs and athletics (Klau, Boyd, Luckow, & Associates, 2006; Komives & Dugan, 2014). Consequently, a growing body of youth leadership research has been accumulating over the past decade (Murphy & Reichard, 2018; Redmond, 2016; Szoko, 2020). Student leadership draws upon a growing body of knowledge, youth leadership, providing students an opportunity to act as leaders to their peers within the context of formal education. This study seeks to expand our understanding of student leadership beyond post-secondary education and into the k-12 setting, specifically with high school student leaders.

**Origins of Student Leadership.** Student leadership has roots tracing back to distributed leadership theory (Harris, 2009; Spillane, 2012). Although distributed leadership is a field of leadership theory traditionally aligned with adult practices, if not for distributed leadership, students may not have the opportunity to take on leadership roles that are often perceived as aligning with adult practices. The conceptualization of distributed leadership, as a theory, didn't occur until the 1920's (Harris, 2009). Gronn

(2000) cites Gibb (1954) as declaring, “leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality...” (p. 324). Despite early interests in distributed leadership, scholars paid minimal attention to the topic for decades until Brown and Hosking (1986). Modern works of scholarship pertaining to topics such as “transformational” and “charismatic” leadership have given rise to a continued interest in distributed leadership amongst prominent researchers of the 1980’s and 1990’s. (e.g. ; Barry, 1996; Beck & Peters, 1981; Gregory, 1996; Leithwood et al., 1997, and Senge 1993).

Since the 1990’s, the validity of distributed leadership has been contested. York-Barr and Duke (2004) suggested there is no correlation between distributive leadership practices and student learning outcomes. Mayrowetz (2008) proposed that there is not a correlation between the practice of distributive leadership, school improvement or leadership development. However, recent research refutes the idea that distributed leadership doesn’t have positive implications for leadership practices or student learning outcomes. Day et al. (2009) concluded that through a mediated relationship, distributed leadership led to positive outcomes such as improved morale of staff, which led to positive implications for students such as improved behavior and student learning outcomes. Moreover, literature has claimed nuanced relationships between individuals may have an impact on the extent to which distributed leadership practices are effective (Leithwood et al., 2009; Tian et al., 2016).

As distributed leadership has garnered more attention by scholars and practitioners, the importance of group dynamics and social constructs has increased in importance. Woods (2016) suggests power dynamics amongst group members often impact distributed leadership practices. While leadership has traditionally been spread



among building-level administrators, central office, and teachers, students are now being provided a voice within school leadership (Adams & Velarde, 2018; Mitra, 2006). This is partially due to teenagers' ability to use social media in an effort to be heard by those of traditionally authoritative positions as well as traditional leaders identifying the need for student voice in their schools (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2004; Mitra et al., 2012; Mitra, 2018). This shift in power dynamics has given rise to students being provided opportunities to lead. As society continues to evolve, an increasing demand for integrative solutions pertaining to collaboration, including multiple perspectives, will be needed to successfully approach societal challenges (Senge et al., 2004). However, current literature does not describe the extent to which student leaders identify their practice as collaborative nor does it describe if student leaders perceive themselves as members within a distributive model of leadership. Furthermore, this study seeks to understand how student leaders define their leadership.

**Identifying Gaps in Developing Student Leadership.** The concept of student leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has risen significantly over the past twenty years (Adams & Ververde, 2018; Tan & Adams, 2018; Tie, 2012). Several studies have explored the influence of student leadership development on youths' ability to construct leadership aptitudes (Adams et al., 2019; Amirianzadah, 2012; Keselman et al., 2015; Simonsen et al., 2014; Villarreal et al., 2018). However, adults remain skeptical of student leadership competencies.

Adams et al. (2019) assert student leaders should be exposed to leadership development programs that enable increased, "knowledge, competence, skills, and capabilities as leaders" (p. 1). Minimal research pertaining to student leadership and

leadership development models exists (Wisner, 2011). However, learning communities are tasked with the responsibility of developing effective student leaders (Dugan & Komives, 2007). This is problematic for schools as they seek to successfully develop student leaders (Adams, Kamarudin, & Tan, 2019).

As educational leaders have grown to provide leadership opportunities for students, several concerns arise. First, there is a gap in research pertaining to our understanding of students' perceptions of leadership, as far as how they see, interpret and experience it. Speaking to this point is a growing body of literature highlighting adults' perspectives of why student leadership is important (Bapasola, 2018; Skendall et al., 2016; Tian et al., 2016; Whitehall et al., 2018). Similar to this study, MacMahon and Bramhall (2004) utilize entertainment media to inform leadership preparation in higher education. Moreover, they argue that entertainment media allow for complex concepts to become visible, likely enhancing their ability to successfully acquire leadership concepts during developmental efforts. This adult theory of student leadership development has provided a pedagogical framework for utilizing entertainment media as a means of leadership development among higher education learners. This study, however, seeks to see if a similar theory can be applied to a different demographic of leaders, high school students. College freshmen view academic differences between high school and college (Appleby, 2006). The differences that high school and college students face are more than academic perceptions, yet their opportunities for leadership are merging closer to one another in contemporary education. This study seeks to investigate how leadership development occurs. By doing so, valuable information intended for those responsible for leadership development in education, corporate, civic, and community organizations will

become empowered to develop effective leadership practices (Bapasola, 2018). Next, I turn to a theory based in social change that will serve as a framework for understanding the relationship between student leadership and superhero narratives.

**Social Change Model of Leadership.** To complete this study, I will draw upon one primary theoretical perspective, the Social Change Model of Leadership. There have been several case studies pertaining to the Social Change Model of Leadership (Campbell et al. 2012; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Kezar & Lester, 2011). The Higher Education Research Institute conceived the Social Change Model of Leadership Development to establish a leadership model, separate of corporate leadership models, to fit into undergraduate learning environments (Wagner, 2016). The model seeks to integrate established leadership development concepts in an effort to provide opportunity for those who are not in traditional leadership roles to create positive change (Komives & Wagner, 2009). Although the model was initially intended for college students, contemporary high school students face similar circumstances pertaining to leadership development.

The model has two goals: 1) enhance student learning and development by building upon their “self-knowledge” and “leadership competence” and 2) facilitate positive change within the institution or community in an effort to allow a given institution to function effectively and humanely (Komives, 2016). Due to the model’s emphasis on collaboration and social change, it focuses on leadership development through three different perspectives (Haber, 2011). First, the model examines the “individual,” asking two primary questions: 1) What personal qualities are we attempting to foster and develop in those who participate in leadership roles and 2) What personalities are most supportive of a functioning group and positive social change?

Second, the model examines the “group,” asking how collaborative leadership can be designed to facilitate and develop the desired qualities with the intent to effect positive social change. Last, the model analyzes the “community/society,” asking what kinds of activities are most effective in developing desired personal qualities in an individual.

The Social Change Model of Leadership Development is based on seven critical values known as “The Seven C’s” (Astin, 1996). The first value is “Consciousness of Self,” the ability for one to be aware of the beliefs, values, attitudes and emotions that motivate actions and how these beliefs impact the leader’s consciousness of others. The second value is “Congruence,” understanding one’s own values, strengths, beliefs, and limitations. The third value is “Commitment,” knowledge of self to understand what motivates the individual to serve as a leader and work towards a collective effort. The fourth value is “Collaboration”; group members explore differences in individual values, ideas, affiliations, visions and identities in an effort to transcend individual interests and behaviors, towards achieving group goals. The fifth value is “Common Purpose,” collective analysis of the issues at hand, allowing all members to share their vision and participate in articulating their purpose and goal. The sixth, “Controversy with Civility,” inevitable differences within a group should be accepted and resolved through open and honest dialog. The last value is, “Citizenship,” social change stems from active engagement in a community rather than simply being a member of a community. Each of the aforementioned “C’s” work congruently in an effort to identify the values of individuals, groups, and communities (see Appendix E).

The definitive goal of “The Seven C’s” of Leadership is to provide a creative process for generating change within environments and situations that are constantly

evolving (Bapasola, 2018; Komives, 2016). This study will focus on student leaders attempting to form understandings that will improve the communities they are part of while simultaneously gaining insight into their own values, strengths, beliefs, and limitations. While student leaders are elected into a role of responsibility, they do not have the formal leadership training that teachers or building-level administrators might have in this area (Whitehall et al., 2018). The Seven C's will provide a baseline in understanding the extent to which exposure to superhero narratives will allow for gained insight into their perceptions of student leaders. While "The Seven C's" have been applied at the post-secondary setting, literature does not currently speak to their involvement in the k-12 setting (Skendall et al., 2017). This study will investigate the applicability of the Social Justice Change Model within a high school setting, a present gap in the literature.

### **Superhero Culture in America**

Superhero narratives, for the past 90 years, have been the catalyst for constructing and challenging identity in the United States of America. Several works of literature support a correlation between exposure to superhero narratives and the construction of identity (Gibson et al., 2016; Nicosia, 2016; Tilley, 2017; Wright, 2017). Since 1938, Americans have witnessed standards of truth, justice, and the American way. Comic books, radio shows, television broadcasts, silver screen productions, and videogames have all served as means to communicate superhero narratives. Each superhero aligns with distinct historical periods within American culture and serves as an indication as to what the most pressing social issues of the time were. This literature review will provide

brief descriptions regarding a few superheroes, demonstrating their impact on American culture. From their inception, superhero narratives allowed for, much like other forms of media at the time, a unilateral way of communicating the expectations for identity in American Culture.

The birth of modern comic books served as a catalyst for superhero narratives. Prior to comic books being formed, comic strips were published in newspapers during the latter half of the nineteenth-century. Wright (2001) posits that comic strips served to “satirize the foibles of domestic life, social relations, and ethnicity in the tradition of vaudeville routines” (p. 2). Due to their humorous qualities they became known as funnies, often earning themselves their own section within weekly newspaper publications (Berger, 1971).

While readers became familiarized with their newspaper’s funnies section, the format of comics became engrained in American culture, making its organization easily transferable to other outlets such as pulp magazines. As pulp magazines gained exposure, comic book publishers emerged from the pulp publication genre (Wright, 2001). Despite most of pulp publications not being humorous in content, they shared a similar format to that of the funnies section people had grown accustomed to. This similarity in format allowed for an established understanding that so long as the medium had sequential scenes within a printed format it would be known as a “comic” regardless of its genre (Wright, 2001).

Pulp fiction merged with pulp heroes in the late 1920’s, resulting in some of the very first comics to feature heroes, Tarzan and Buck Rogers (Bongco, 2014). Although the comics didn’t emphasize superhuman qualities, they focused on making political

commentary about the world (McAllister et al., 2001). The commentaries of these hero narratives were not polarizing in nature. Rather than pinning political ideologies against one another, hero narratives unearthed the common ground among society. Fingerroth (2004) concludes:

[T]he hero's values are society's values. That's not to say that the hero is a Republican or Democrat, a Christian or a Jew. But the rules both spoken and unspoken, that we live by – the ones that say, “Our society isn't perfect, but it's pretty damn good,” are the rules on which superheroes agree. They believe that democracy is the best form of government. They believe in racial, religious, and gender parity; judge each individual on his or her own merits. In other words, without being overtly ideological, superheroes champion the consensus views of most residents of Western democracies. The appeal then becomes that heroism, which lies within the individual, supports the team at large. If everyone is doing their part, then everyone can be a hero (p. 160).

In the 1930's the American Dream had become a nightmare. American citizens barred witness to a society that was socially, morally, and politically corrupt. All of this in the face of citizens struggling to conceptualize their own identity as newly formed citizens of the United States. In an effort to escape the harsh realities of the great depression people turned to entertainment. No form of entertainment was more successful than that of superhero comics. The superhero genre provided for a unilateral message to its readers, a message that empowered Americans to believe moral justice would prevail. Superhero figures fought for others that simply didn't have the power to fight for themselves. It comes as no surprise that Superman was America's first superhero. He

reflected the society in which he was developed. Much like citizens of the great depression, Superman struggled to discover his own identity as an alien from another land with aspirations of making the world a better place. The success of Superman gave life to superheroes Batman and Wonder Woman (Wright, 2001). “By the summer of 1941 comic books were selling at the rate of 10 million copies a month. There were more than twenty-nine comic book publishers, and over 150 different titles were being published.” (Duncan et al., 2015, p. 33).

Publication companies quickly identified the reason as to why superhero narratives were popular amongst Americans. Superheroes were a unifying force that empowered American citizens to relate to and construct their identity from (Wright, 2001). While the medium had previously been used as a unilateral means to develop identity for citizens during the Great Depression, it had continued to do so as a means of military propaganda in WWII (Wright, 2001). America’s first star-spangled hero, Captain America, was created as a means of propaganda, instilling a sense of strength among US soldiers who were gathered together to fight the Nazi regime. Those who were not fighting in the war read Captain America, empowering them to believe America would not lose. The first issue of Captain America featured an image of Captain America punching Adolf Hitler in the face, signaling to the world that America was serious about taking down Hitler and the Nazi regime.

Once World War II came to an end, the public’s interest in Captain America came to a hush and the role of superheroes changed. Comic book publishers continued to use superheroes as a vehicle for propaganda. Superheroes were involved in narratives that promoted American ideologies such as unity, truth, and justice. “Superman urged readers



to give to the American Red Cross. Batman and Robin asked boys and girls to ‘keep the American eagle flying’ by purchasing war bonds and stamps” (Wright, 2001, p. 34).

Fingerth (2004) posits, “A hero embodies what we believe is best in ourselves. A hero is a standard to aspire to as well as an individual to be admired” (p. 14). The individualistic concept of being a hero may be applied to the act of heroism in which one person’s efforts can be used to support a team or greater good. The public deemed superheroes as unnecessary in a time in which the United States won the war and were more focused on healing than defeating evil.

American comic book readers struggled to relate to characters that otherwise didn’t align with their personal identities. In an effort to escape the propagandistic behavior of publishing companies, readers looked to Crime and Western comics for their entertainment. Although the public’s interest in Captain America had plummeted in the 1950’s, publishers made an effort to maintain interest in narratives pertaining to the adventures of heroes such as Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman. These aforementioned heroes withstood the test of time because their storylines conformed to the times in which they were published. Superman fought a myriad of corrupt circumstances in the 30’s but as he transitioned into the following decades his efforts were exerted towards fighting the crimes of the time. In the 1950’s Superman fought communist villains whereas in the 1970’s he fought against a corrupt judicial system (Duncan, 2015). This fundamental concept, superheroes need to represent the values of the society that produces them, hasn’t always sustained success. Publishers pushed more storylines that paralleled the current times during the late 1950’s, but interest in crime and western genres were significantly outselling superhero comics.

By 1954, comic book publishers were under fire from the government. Critics of the medium, US Congress included, claimed that there was a possibility that exposure to comics was causing more children to engage in delinquent behavior (Nyberg, 1955). Comics were under fire for their advertisements including weapons, story lines containing sexually deviant behavior, and allegations to them promoting homosexuality were made. In an effort to sustain the medium, the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) acted as an alternative government regulation to allow for comic publishers to self-regulate the content of their comic books in the United States. The Comics Code Authority (CCA) was established, suggesting several regulations for publishers. Although the CCA seal of approval was not mandatory for sale, parents and businesses would not sell comics without it to children, leading to low comic book sales.

The attention comic books were getting for contributing to delinquent behavior subsided in 1956 when new forms of media became public enemy number one. Rock-and-roll music emerged as the new threat to youth culture. In comparison, comic books appeared to be a means of child's entertainment. At the same time, movies and television garnered attention for possibly contributing to a youth culture plagued in delinquent behavior, engaging in drugs, alcohol, and sex. This opened the door for comic book publishers to invest in the creation of new superheroes while looking for additional outlets to share their heroes with society.

New superheroes were created in the 1960's sparking interest in comic book readers. Like decades before, publishers were inspired by current events. Particularly, The Great Space Race sparked America's interest in science and space travel. Heroes such as Spider-man, The Fantastic Four, and The Incredible Hulk were a generation of

heroes who all came about their powers through an interaction with science, none of which were born as heroes, rather their life experience groomed them to have the ability to become a hero. Acquisition of powers piqued the interest of readers for decades to follow. Namely, the 1990's gave rise to *The X-Men*, a publication that featured a group of diverse individuals working together to achieve common good despite their differences (Gerde, 2008). While the X-Men achieved success in the 1990's, the industry quickly tanked.

The last comic book hero to perform well in the market place was Spawn, selling 1.7 million copies of its first issue. Publication companies saw the success of Spawn and reacted in a way that wasn't friendly to consumers. Rather than investing in new storylines, companies invested in alternative routes to market their heroes, diversifying their strategic approach. Superheroes were on trading cards, made into action figures, playable in video games, and placed on products to be sold. Simultaneously, the prices of comics were increased, making it more difficult for readers to afford. This consequently forced the comic book industry to face near extinction.

The world of superhero narratives would change dramatically when Disney purchased the rights to several well-known comic book characters, believing that they could breathe new life into them through the silver screen. This assumption was predicated from the recent success that Sam Raimi's *Spider-man* achieved in 2002 as well as DC comic's previous success with Richard Donner's 1978 production of *Superman*, each proving that superhero narratives may be more palpable on the silver screen for consumers.

The first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a revitalization of superheroes. Much like the society in which they were born into, our current society has a population of people who are looking for an escape from reality as well as outlets to construct their own identity. Favreau (2008) argues that a post 9/11 world calls for a source of entertainment that will allow for Americans to deal with difficult events. Similar to the roles Captain America, Superman, and others have played in comic books, silver screen adaptations seek to provide entertainment while simultaneously commenting on societal dynamics.

With the introduction of computer technology and the Internet, mass media has been forced to change. Akin to a necessary change in mass media has come a newly acquired means of sharing superhero narratives. The new trend appears to be a revival from Hollywood to remake superhero narratives into silver screen productions. Movie titles such as *Batman*, *Black Panther*, *Wonder Woman*, *The Avengers: End Game* and most recently *Spider-man: Far From Home*, have provided blockbuster blowouts based on the stories of old.

Only time and a review of history will unveil the complete story of the future of comic books and the effective delivery of the medium. This study will focus on the extent to which superhero narratives serve as a tool to construct identity, specifically identity as a leader. Although these narratives were previously constructed through printed publications, an evolution in technology led to media outlets that presented superhero narratives in new forms. Some of these new forms are digitally centric. This study seeks to understand the relationship between superhero narratives, the means to which they are communicated and the extent of their impact, if any, on student leaders' perception of

leadership characteristics within superhero narratives. Moreover, addressing the influence media may have on student leaders' perceptions of self.

**Modern Role of Superhero Narratives in Schools.** Teachers and scholars have not traditionally viewed comic book literature as a serious means of learning positive behaviors or curricular content. Dr. Fredric Wertham's 1950s publication, *Seduction of the Innocent*, targeted comic books as being solely responsible for problems created in society. Wertham asserted that the popularity of comic books in youth culture and the mediums inclusion of negative violence as well as sexually charged messages was not only setting a poor example for youth, it was attributing to America's increase in juvenile delinquent behavior. Since the 1950's, scholars have pushed back at Wertham's research. Sabin (1993) posits that Wertham's rationale was delinquents read comics; therefore, all youths who read comics were delinquents. This heavy-handed approach by Wertham has been recognized as an effort to destroy the comic book industry. Although on a broad scale Wertham's concerns pertaining to youth and media exposure have remained a topic of contention for the past seventy years. This doesn't go without saying that society has come to realize that superhero narratives can have a positive impact on student learning.

Educational scholars recently recognized the benefit of comic books in modern education (Pelton et al., 2007; Sabin, 2013; Schwarz, 2002; Tatalovic, 2009). Educators are using comics in a variety of content areas in an effort to diversify learning opportunities for youth. The use of comic books in contemporary education is not restricted to youth. College professors within the medical profession use comic books to illustrate the importance of visual aids when learning medical procedures (Green & Myers, 2010, 2013, 2015). High school teachers use comic books to build literacy skills

while establishing an understanding of societal concerns throughout history (Frey & Fisher, 2008; Ranker, 2007; Stafford, 2010). Comic books allow for students to increase their abilities to read and write while delivering material in entertaining, non-traditional ways.

Comic books have proven to be a successful form of entertainment for nearly a century. Superhero narratives have spanned several decades. Although superhero narratives are traditionally found within the pages of comic books, they have now been given a second life through silver screen productions and their expanded presence in video games and television series (Harrigan & Wardrip-Fruin, 2009). The printed form of superhero narratives may not be as prominent as it once was, but the presence of superhero narratives through new means of media has allowed for today's youth to access these messages of old. While educators and scholars are becoming influenced by the medium of comic books and their impact on student learning, we have yet to see how the narratives of traditional superhero comics will factor into modern youths' perceptions of leadership. This study aims to explore the relationship between superhero narratives and student leaders' perceptions of student leadership.

## **Conclusion**

The current state of knowledge pertaining to student leadership development at the high school level is extremely thin. However, professional development theories have been implemented for higher education students. We have yet to know if the theories applied to higher education will work in the high school setting. History has demonstrated a trend of youth otherwise not being perceived as competent. However, advancements in technology and social media has allowed for a rise in student voice and

power (Couldry, 2012). While traditional leaders such as teachers, building-level administrators, and central office employees have usually gone through preparation programs to take on leadership responsibilities, today's youth are being placed in positions of leadership without formal training. Despite superhero narratives having a rich tradition of influencing identity in America, they have not been used within educational settings to improve understanding of leadership. Recent literature highlights educators' discernable efforts to implement superhero narratives in curriculum, proving to enhance student outcomes; however, similar tactics have not been used in developing students into leaders. This study will seek to find the connection, if any, that superhero narratives have with students' perceptions of student leadership and to what extent the means in which those narratives are communicated has an impact on the student's ability to articulate the connection between superhero narratives and leadership at the student level.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This study focuses on the concept of student leadership within the field of education and is an examination of whether there is a connection between superhero narratives, the means in which they are communicated, and student leaders' perceptions of student leadership. Perceptions of student leadership were investigated amongst a group of peer "student advocates" (student-selected representatives of leadership). Student advocates' understanding of superhero narratives, as it related to their perceptions of student leadership was investigated. Overall, superhero narratives were considered in terms of how they played a role in the perceptions of student leadership amongst a sample of peers. These inquiries shed light on the influence superhero narratives may have on student leaders' perceptions of student leadership as well as the modes of narrative delivery that align most successfully with modern youth culture.

This chapter describes the rationale and design for this study. The description of the methods for data collection and analysis for this study are also examined. The purpose of this arts-based qualitative study is to explore the effect, if any, superhero narratives have on student leaders' perceptions of student leadership at a small Midwestern high school. A planned formal process has been followed in an effort to systemically gather data and investigate the following research questions (Yin, 2013):

1. How do high school student leaders define their leadership?
2. What is the relationship, if any, between student leadership and superhero narratives?



## **Research Design**

An arts-based qualitative research design was used for this study, focusing on semi-structured in-depth interviews, triangulated with multi-modal journals (inquiry through participant exposure to comic books, audio recordings, movie segments, and video games) and focus groups to assure validity in data outcomes (Creswell, 2017; Modell 2005; Yin, 2013). Saldaña (2011) posits that arts-based research utilizes visual arts and media as a means to collect data or represent research findings. Arts-based research can unveil oppression (discovery) and transform praxis (invention) (Knowles & Cole, 2008). Moreover, arts-based research is often used in pursuit of social justice, seeking to engage audiences while evoking reactions (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2017; Barone & Eisner, 2012; Parsons et al., 2017)

This study seeks to understand if superhero narratives can be used as a means for student advocates to discover characteristics aligned with leadership practice through exposure to superhero narratives and to what extent this discovery, if any, may be leveraged as an opportunity to invent a greater understanding of leadership practice among student leaders. Moreover, these semi-structured in-depth interviews with student advocates sought to explore the construct of student leadership as well as the influence of media on narrative delivery. Broadly speaking, this research was qualitative in nature, falling beneath the umbrella of “grounded theory” a systematic set of procedures intended to identify key elements of a phenomenon in an effort to better understand the relationship between those elements within a given context and the process of the experiment (Charmaz, 2014).

## **Research Setting**

**Site (high school) Selection.** I selected one high school (and the student advocates who learn there) for this study based on recommendations provided by educational leaders. As a prerequisite to site selection, the high school I selected had been identified as utilizing students as leaders. Thus, staff within the organization had a working knowledge of student leadership within their context. The selection of the school was also based on efforts described in the school's student handbook that were related to student leadership. I obtained the school's student handbook from the school's website and corroborated the information through informal conversations with staff at the organization. More specifically, the school I selected for this study engages in a variety of efforts to improve student leadership, ranging from project-based curriculum that provides for community service opportunities to restorative justice practices when faced with issues pertaining to student conflict. Furthermore, I selected one school, refining the context of my study, allowing for an in-depth understanding pertaining to student leadership within that school.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the High School.

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Enrollment	440
Student Demographics	
American Indian	.2
Asian	.5
Black	9.1
Caucasian	72.3
Hispanic	8.4
Multiracial	9.1
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	.5
Free or reduced-price lunch eligible	60
Students eligible for special education	10
Students with limited English proficiency	4
Students who graduate on time (in 4 years)	99.08
Total number of classroom teachers	33
Average years of experience	7

---

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the high school I used in this study. The school is relatively small, enrolling 440 students in Grades 9 through 12. The majority of the students at the school are Caucasian, while the majority of its minorities identify as either Black or Multiracial. 60% of the school's students are eligible for free-or-reduced priced lunch. The school also serves a variety of students who receive Special Education support (10%) and students who are limited English Proficient (4%). During the 2018-2019 calendar year, 99.08% of its students graduated within 4 years. In total, the school employs 33 classroom teachers ranging from 0 to 20 years of experience.

**Participant (Student Advocates) Selection.** I used purposeful sampling to select participants. In order to recruit from this group of students, I sent an initial e-mail to the principal of the school, requesting to meet with the school's student advocates (See Appendix G). A recruitment e-mail was drafted and distributed to give potential participants details of the study (See Appendix F), and a letter of informed consent was distributed to potential participants and their parents during the time in which I met with the potential participants to present details pertaining to the study (See Appendix H & I).

Prior to establishing any contact with participants, this research study was sent through Indiana University's Institutional Research Board (IRB) for review. Due to the nature of the study's design, its selection of participants does include minors. Consequently, I completed the IRB course to establish an understanding in IRB policies and procedures. Participant protection is important to me as a researcher, therefore meeting all of the necessary qualifications for including my desired participants within my research was an absolute prerequisite to contacting them.

The following table (Table 2) shows the number of participants with correlating demographic characteristics pertaining to each one of them. This study included a total of 8 participants, all of which self-identified as student leaders through virtue of their role as student advocates, including 5 males and 3 females ranging from ages 14 to 18 years included. Participants attend a school where I was previously a teacher. I have no experience teaching any of the participants as they were never students in the courses I instructed. Student advocates, on average, have 1.5 years of experience; however, participants range from their first year to their fourth year as a student advocate. The ethnicity of student advocates is disproportionate to the ethnicity of the student body.

While 72.3% of the student body is Caucasian, 37.5% of all student advocates are Caucasian. Similarly, 9.1% of the student body is Black, however 37.5% of all student advocates are Black. Although, proportionately, a lower percentage of Caucasian students serve as student leaders, minority students serve as larger percentage of the student advocate group. Moreover, Multi-racial student advocates make up 9.1% of the school’s demographic, yet 12.5% of all student advocates and Asian students make up .5% of the school’s demographic yet 12.5% of student advocate representation.

**Table 2.** Study Participants by Demographic Characteristics

---

All study participants	8
Gender	
Female	3
Male	5
Average Age	15.75
Average Years of Experience	1.5
Grade Level	
Freshman	2
Sophomore	2
Junior	2
Senior	2
Race/ethnicity	
American Indian	-
Asian	1
Black	3
Caucasian	3
Hispanic	-
Multiracial	1
Native American or Other Pacific Islander	-

---

## **Sampling Strategy**

Using the purposeful-sampling approach, allowed me to gather data that aligns with students' perceptions of leadership. A specific sample of selected student advocates from a small Midwestern high school allowed for participants who could provide detailed information and enough data in interviews to illustrate a rich picture, describing their understanding of leadership. This approach ensured that all participants experience the concept of interest or study (Creswell, 2017, Lochmiller & Lester, 2015, Patton, 2002).

In order to address my research questions, this study required participants who were described as "leaders" by their peers. Given this, the selected participants were students who had been elected by their peers through a democratic voting process, signaling leadership status from their respective class (freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior). More description pertaining to the student advocates will follow.

Rather than defining the role of leadership and selecting participants based on those parameters, allowing for students to select leaders among their peers underscores the relationship between youth culture and perceptions of peer leadership. Therefore, I did not use a set of formal, established, guidelines during the peer selection process. Moreover, this study measured for student leadership status through the democratic peer voting process established by the school.

Peer students usually assign "student advocate" status as a means to elect a peer believed to conduct themselves as a leader for their graduating class. Student Advocates agree to their nomination, moreover, asserting an agreement in what constitutes as a leader. Therefore, the student advocates' perceptions pertaining to leadership are representative of the population that votes them into position. Although those who vote

student advocates into a position of leadership could be analyzed for the influence superhero narratives had on their decision process, this study focused on the perceptions of student leaders, not the individuals who define them as such. Next, I describe how this sampling approach is relevant to my study.

**Rationale for “Student Advocates” as Research Group.** Defining “student leaders” can be difficult, considering the complex and ill-structured nature of contemporary youth leadership in k-12 education. However, I determined that student advocates ably fit into the group of “student leaders.” The very nature of the student advocate is to engage in youth leadership practices in an effort to contribute student voice in the creation and implementation of policies and procedures as well as community engagement at the high school. Every year, two students per graduating class are elected by their peers as student advocates. The selection process is invariably reflective of the student body’s decision to elect youth leaders to represent their voice. Throughout the year, student advocates meet bi-weekly to discuss current policies, procedures, and community engagement efforts. From these discussions, student advocates create presentations to be shown to building-level leaders, community partners, and school board officials.

The criteria for electing student advocates are generic, varying slightly by language pertaining to graduating class and are kept wide in scope to allow for students to elect members they want to lead their school and community. The selection processes for all graduating classes are consistent. Elected student advocates must show: 1) a clear record of discipline (verified by the student’s disciplinary record), 2) academic success (defined as maintaining a 3.5 or higher GPA), 3) community support (verified, in written

form, from peer voting, and letters of recommendation from a building-level leader and parent/guardian). Winners are selected by their peers and vetted by building-level leaders to ensure that voters do not place students who demonstrate an inability to behave or perform well in a position of student leadership due to reasons such as popularity or misunderstanding. The aforementioned criteria indicate that “student advocate” status is considered a prerequisite to establishing “student leader” status.

I ensured efficacy and viability of this group selection by conducting an additional review of the student’s information pertaining to their GPA, disciplinary record, and community support as well as the voting outcomes constructed by their peers. Prior to doing a review of this data, I first received consent from the student’s parents, pursuant with the regulations established by the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

A total of eight student advocates served as participants in this study (two students advocates per grade level). Creswell (2017) posits that qualitative research designs require approximately five to ten participants if the study is to include long interviews as part of a descriptive study. This allowed for a wealth of information that provided rich data, aligned with specific examples, supported by literature and various student responses.

### **Recruitment**

In an effort to achieve a selective and ideal sample, I chose eight student advocates as the participants of this study. While contacting youth leaders in other settings would undeniably provide for a pool of diverse perspectives in youth leadership, it could have potentially provided too great of a response, deterring from this study’s



focus on student leadership. Also, a peer-voting process established as a norm at the site school identified two student advocates from every respective graduating class, allowing for an opportunity to compare responses not only between graduating class but also within graduating class to see if there were commonalities or differences amongst them. A similar approach could happen by using the entire student population, but the ability to gather data from two select representatives within graduating classes allows for an opportunity to dig deeper into individual participant data.

In an effort to enlist from this group of students, a recruitment e-mail was composed and sent to the site school's principal, requesting the principal to notify student advocates of an opportunity to be involved in this study. Attached to the recruitment e-mail was a letter informing potential participants and their guardians' details of the study, requesting to meet on a designated time and day at the site school in an effort to provide additional details pertaining to the study. The recruitment letter was revised in several drafts per suggestions from the Intuitional Research Board (IRB). A finalized e-mail/letter is placed in Appendix G.

I then met all of the potential participants at the site school, presented information explaining the study, and provided the students with research consent forms to be signed by themselves and their guardian if they were interested in participating. Potential participants were provided a week to return their forms signed to the school. All of the potential participants and their guardians responded with their written consent within seven days of meeting with them to discuss the study

Additional dates were then scheduled for participant involvement in semi-structured interviews, multimodal journal interviews, and focus groups. Dates and times

were determined by first contacting the site school's principal through e-mail to establish times I would be able to gather data from participants at his school. The principal provided several days and times, notifying the students and arranging for them to be available to speak during the predetermined times. I then met with the student advocated during these predetermined times for each of the aforementioned data collection instruments.

Prior to establishing any contact with participants, this research study was sent through IRB for review. Due to the nature of the study's design, its selection of participants was predominantly of minors. I completed the IRB course to establish an understanding in IRB policies and procedures. Moreover, participant protection is important to me as a researcher, therefore meeting all of the necessary qualifications for including my desired participants within my research was an absolute prerequisite to contacting them.

As a thank you and compensation for participant time, participants received a \$50 gift card to Amazon.com. The compensation was delivered to the school by myself upon the completion of the study. Participants could receive partial compensation if they were to decide they did not want to complete the study. However, all participants did complete the study. The \$50 gift card was not disproportionate to the amount of time student advocates spent participating in the study; moreover, establishing the compensation was not unduly influencing participants to contribute that otherwise wouldn't have.

### **Methods and Data Collection**

Three forms of data collection were executed in an effort to obtain data that best suits the questions pertaining to this study: 1) How do high school student leaders define

their leadership? And 2) What is the relationship, if any, between student leadership and superhero narratives? Each of the instruments focused on answering certain research questions. First, participants engaged in an interview intended to gather data pertaining to their initial perceptions of leadership. Second, participants were exposed to a variety of superhero narratives and asked to engage in a multi-modal journal interview in an effort to provide data pertaining to “The Seven C’s” of The Social Change Leadership Development Model, a leadership development framework to which potential comparisons could be drawn between participants’ perceptions of leadership and their perceptions of superhero narratives. Finally, participants met in a focus group to answer questions pertaining to their use of media, allowing for a central aspect of contemporary youth, media usage, to be considered in how they construct perceptions of self and others. The following is an in-depth explanation of how each of the instruments were utilized within this study.

**Interviews.** Interviews are a common method used to obtain data in qualitative research. Creswell (2017) states that interviews can be used to explore the views, experiences and beliefs of individual participants. I used semi-structured interviews to explore and define the areas my research aims to understand. The semi-structured interview process allowed for my participants to receive some guidance when being asked questions. In particular, my participants engaged with several questions pertaining to their perceptions of student leadership at their school.

On arranged dates and times, in-depth interviews were conducted with each student advocate. Long interviews (no less than 90 minutes each) provided rich and descriptive data pertaining to the extent in which superhero narratives impact their

perceptions of youth leadership and to what extent the means in which these narratives are delivered have an impact on their ability to perceive leadership qualities within superhero narratives. “Rich, thick description” is a valuable technique that allows readers of the study to make judgments and assess the extent to which the researcher successfully interpreted the findings (Creswell, 2017; Lochmiller & Lester, 2015; Patton, 2002). Through a detailed description, I “take the reader into the setting or the phenomena described” (Patton, 2002, p. 437), allowing the reader to successfully evaluate the analysis and conclusions; this is a common trait of “thick description” in case analysis, the ability to provide enough context so that a person outside the culture can construct an understanding of participant behavior (Geertz, 2008). I provided direct quotes from participants that are extensive, allowing for a rich analysis and description of participants. By directly quoting the participants, I established a valid/reliable qualitative study because the reader is provided an authentic look at data alongside the interpretations and findings (Patton, 2002). This approach also allowed for a transparent process that connects the results to data.

As recommended by Creswell (2017), interviews were audiotaped with the expressed informed consent of each interviewee, following a transcription process, prior to analysis. Recording was done digitally via the Samsung Voice Recorder application on a Samsung Galaxy S9+ cellular device. To ensure accuracy and quality, the audio files were sent out for professional transcription. Once I received the transcripts, I reviewed them for minor editing purposes and to familiarize myself with the content.

A consistent pattern and structure for interviews allowed for me to cover subject matter pertaining to the purpose of my study as well as explore related comments by the

participants. After beginning each interview with pleasant greetings, my initial questions were pulled from a pre-constructed guide to establish a rapport with the participants as well as gain perspective on each of their backgrounds (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). I used a flexible protocol, allowing for a shift in the order in which I asked questions with the intent to establish a meaningful/natural flow in conversation; all of the questions were effectively covered. When conducting focus groups, individual participants were asked questions, yet all participants were encouraged to interact with each other (Krueger, 2000). Rather than taking notes during the interview process, I engaged with participants, actively listening and providing questions in a sequence that did not disturb the natural flow of conversation. This provided for natural responses as well.

Before collecting data, I conducted three separate in-depth pilot interviews, testing my interview guide and process. The pilot interviewees were with individuals that were not aware of the research I had been doing thus far, allowing for responses that were authentic, not being influenced by prior knowledge of my literature review or methods. Based on the pilot interviews, I made necessary edits to questions and procedures that appeared to be flawed. After running pilot interviews (See Appendix A), and making necessary edits, my protocol and process were established for data collection. Similarly, I conducted pilot multi-modal interviews and focus groups with the aforementioned participants (See Appendix B & C).

At both the beginning and the end of my interview I thanked the participants for their time. As a gesture of appreciation, I sent each of the participants and their respective guardian a \$50 gift card to Amazon.com. I took notes immediately after the interview, collecting thoughts that may arise in response to the participants' answers. These notes

were stored in a journal. I refrained from disclosing this information as it is solely intended for research purposes.

**Student Journals.** The second form of instrumentation I used was the journal accompanied by a multi-modal interview process. Lindlof and Taylor (2017) describe journal writing as a type of connoisseurship by which the participants become connoisseurs of their thinking process and patterns. In particular, I provided a platform for participants to write and discuss their observations as student leaders. Participants engaged with several superhero narratives that drove the conversations I had with them. Prior to selecting each narrative, I reviewed demographic characteristics to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, and race. Each of the narratives were selected for their alignment to one of “The Seven C’s” of Social Change Leadership.

Narratives were delivered from varying sources of media (comic book, audio recording, movie, and video game). For example, during one session, I had participants listen to an audio recording of “*The Adventures of Superman*” (1945), a narrative where Batman, Superman, and Robin work together in an effort to stop crime, and then answer questions pertaining to commitment and collaboration. By interacting with each of the medias provided to them, participants were exposed to material that generated discussion pertaining to youth culture as well as student leadership. The aforementioned technique is prevalent in arts-based research where a variety of art forms are used to generate, interpret, and represent concepts pertaining to the topic of research. Moreover, the variety (visual, audio, kinesthetic, etc.) in which superhero narratives are delivered to participants was utilized as a tool to collect data/responses that may align. From these conversations, identifiable themes emerged.

The journal process lasted for one week, working congruently with the interview process. Each day of the week or a total of seven days, provided for exposure to a superhero narrative through a different means of media, accompanied by a series of questions that allowed for a better understanding of my research questions. Participants spent no more than thirty minutes with me for each session, for a total of three and a half hours, as they were exposed to superhero narratives through a variety of means and then answered interview questions verbally or within their journal. Participant responses provided insight into their perceptions of leadership demonstrated in each narrative and to what extent they perceive a connection between the narrative and their practice as a student leader. This was an adequate amount of time for me to see patterns in the student leaders' perceptions of leadership. Journals provided another means to which participants could demonstrate their understanding; they did not serve as a substitute for interviews.

**Focus Group.** The last form of instrumentation I used was a focus group. Focus group discussion is often used within qualitative research to gain in-depth understanding of social issues. This method seeks to obtain data from a purposely-selected group of participants rather than a statistically representative sample of a broader population (Morgan, 1996). Due to their position as student leaders, eight student advocates served as my purposely-selected focus group members.

Student advocates were divided into two groups of four. Meeting with two smaller groups allowed for a greater chance to have in-depth discussion with all participants in each of the groups. Each of the focus groups met with me for an hour to discuss and reflect upon their experiences as student leaders. The catalyst for participant conversation was a structured set of questions (See Appendix C). Participants were

recorded and transcribed. Upon completion of the transcription process, participants received a copy of the transcript and an opportunity to clarify their responses if need be. No issues were addressed by participants after they had reviewed transcripts, this verified the participant's response and insured valid data to be coded. The focus group functioned as a concluding method of moderated discussion. The moderated discussion focused on issues pertaining to student leaders' relationship with media and to what extent it may impact their experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes toward youth culture, youth leadership, and their understanding of narratives (See Appendix C).

An important aspect of qualitative research suggests that researchers identify and disclose their personal biases. Creswell (2017) suggests that the interviewer should answer their own research question(s) and consider a variety of viewpoints when doing so. Therefore, my interview guide went through several iterations, confirming that I clearly addressed my research questions as well my own perspectives. As a researcher, I engaged in a trial interview of answering the questions myself, considering them from the perspective of my participants. By doing so, I was able to engage in further revisions of my questions, ensuring that the questions are specific to the study's research matter yet open enough to allow for participants' experiences and ideas.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers must become familiar with their total set of data in order to approach it objectively and create coding schemas through "meaning units" (Creswell, 2017). Interviews, multi-modal journal interviews, and focus groups provided data to which I created "meaning units" that illustrated identifiable themes. After all three of the data collection instruments were completed, I began the data analysis process. First, the



various forms of data collection were transcribed and returned to participants to validate their accuracy. Then, after receiving confirmation of the transcripts' validity from participants, I engaged in successive rounds of reading transcripts to familiarize myself with the data. Transcripts were then uploaded to HyperResearch, a software system used for identifying passages that align with common concepts. These passages were later refined into codes known as "meaning units." Each of the "meaning units" were read and reviewed to determine the accuracy of the codes generated from them and to further identify additional codes. In addition to the identified "meaning units," I had a list of predetermined codes constructed from the Social Change Leadership Development literature, "The Seven C's" (See Appendix E). After continuous rounds of reviewing transcripts, meaning units, and their codes, I was able to draw conclusions based on phenomenological aspects related to the questions posited in this study. The following is a further explanation of terms and procedures related to the data analysis process of this study.

As stated by Creswell (2017), "phenomenological aspect(s)" of an experience can be found when utilizing an interview analysis. These aspects reveal a deeper understanding of certain experiences or phenomena that often aren't obtainable through quantitative instruments. In order to make sense of the data produced, I "horizontalized" the data (reviewing all text and considering them equally) and grouped it into "meaning units" by concentrating on the most meaningful statements (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, I listened to the audio format of the interviews, read and re-read transcripts multiple time, and compared the responses from participants, establishing a thematic analysis of information (Saldaña, 2015).

Data was coded with the intent of organizing patterns and themes that emerged from interviews. According to Anfara et al. (2014), data coding provides “meaning, structure, and order” to a given data set (p. 57). I approached the data coding process through several different iterations, establishing a viable process in constructing understanding of data in a meaningful way. Likewise, I eliminated data that was not deemed as useful to my study. Throughout the process of coding data, my perceptions of the data were critical in searching for underlying themes of significance to develop “meaning units” or codes to organize and make sense of the data (Creswell et al., 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

I used a qualitative data coding software, HyperResearch, to facilitate the process of managing the textual data obtained through interviews, student journals, and focus groups. Using the software, I conducted several different iterations of coding, narrowing the code list down to a final set of codes and themes (Charmaz, 2014; Tong et al., 2007). From these codes and themes, I identified those of the highest significance in the findings section of my study as “meaning units.”

I guided the data through several iterations of coding. The first iteration focused on themes related to my study’s research questions. The second iteration required me to condense some of the codes into themes, “meaning units,” making the data more manageable, ultimately removing codes that appear to be unnecessary, revealing critical themes that make sense of key themes of youth culture, youth leadership, and superhero narratives. A third level of iteration established a salient study by further tightening themes of the study. A final list of significant themes provided theoretical points for discussion and theory in the analysis and conclusion portions of this study.

## **Developing Codes**

The code development process took place in several different phases. The first phase required me to look at my research questions as they determined my initial codes. Since my research questions consider the impact superhero narratives and the means in which they are communicated have an impact on student leaders' perceptions of student leadership, it was important for me to have a way of organizing these themes of data. I initiated the process by looking at my research questions and interview guide (See Appendices A-C) to identify the data I needed. Since student leadership is paramount to my study, I developed codes based on "The Seven C's" of the Social Change Development Leadership Model. This way, whenever a participant mentioned skills associated with student leadership, I had a way to classify the information with specific meaning units.

Because my research questions are aimed at the effects of superhero narratives on student leaders' perceptions of student leadership, it was important for me to generate codes that identify meaning units for perceptions of leadership derived from superhero narratives. Therefore, under a master code of "hero," separate codes were created to classify repeated themes in participant's observations of leadership qualities through superhero narratives such as "collaborative" or "risk taking." These separate codes were used to identify repeated themes amongst participants, serving as a foundation of the analysis process. The same process was used to identify codes related to the impact varying media sources had on participants' ability to identify themes of leadership throughout their exposure to superhero narratives. This set of data was coded as "Media" with sub meaning-units that specify the particular means of media the participant spoke

to during their interview process such as “Comic,” “Radio,” “Movie,” or “Game”. This way, any comments or discussions of how particular means of media influence participants’ perceptions of student leadership are categorized in an identifiable set of data. This initial process of identifying master-codes and meaning units within each master-code was dependent of the interview guide and research questions. From there, I looked for emerging themes that alluded to new findings or questions I had previously not considered during the writing of my research questions and interview guide.

Emergent themes were identified through careful and repeated readings of the interview texts. In addition to careful reading of the interview texts, I further analyzed the two aforementioned iterations of coding. This process was important as it served as an opportunity for me to interpret what was most important to my findings, a process closely aligned with qualitative research (Anfara et al, 2014). Moreover, the process of becoming familiar with my data was dependent on my engagement with it, looking at data sets over a continued duration of time, searching for recurring/persistent themes that emerged from a variety of different data sources, and establishing what information most closely aligned with my research questions.

By being familiar with my research questions and data, I was able to notice interesting similarities between the comments made among my participants. This allowed for me to draw conclusions based on having multiple perspectives and statements that may or may not align with one another, resulting in credible findings when aligned with literature. For example, if when asked to identify actions that align with their understanding of leadership within a comic book, participants speak to a similar scene or characteristic(s) within a given scene, I compared their interpretations of these scenes to

their descriptions of student leadership in previous interview questions. Moreover, I aligned participants' ability to identify leadership traits within a variety of media to look for themes that emerged in terms of how a given media may have an impact on their ability to identify leadership qualities. Comparing these responses allowed for themes to emerge that prior to the interview process I was unable to identify.

### **Sample Excerpt from Coding**

The following is an example in which a participant has shared information with me and the extent to which I coded that information to fit my research questions. The finalized coding process was done with the assistance of HyperResearch, an instrument that helped in the categorization of my data set. Participants were shown a scene from *Captain America: Civil War* in which two of the superheroes, Iron Man and Captain America, argue over whether or not there are negative consequences to serving as a leader and whether or not those negative consequences outweigh the purpose they are trying to obtain as leaders. I then asked the participant to describe to me what happened during the scene.

After providing an explanation of what they believed happened in the scene, I delivered guiding questions that probed for their understanding of how the narrative may align with their own culture, asking them to recall a time in their life where they had encountered conflict with someone else and both parties had good intentions. Following the guided question, I asked questions pertaining to controversy with civility, one of "The Seven C's" of the Social Change Development Leadership Model (See Appendix B). Through this discussion, I was able to establish codes for "Congruence (SCDLM\_C)," "Controversy with Civility (SCDLM\_CC)," and "Real World Connections (RWC)." If a

student leader discussed several examples of what they believed to constitute as youth culture, each example was then established as a code. The codes postulated through the interview process lead to further codes as themes emerged.

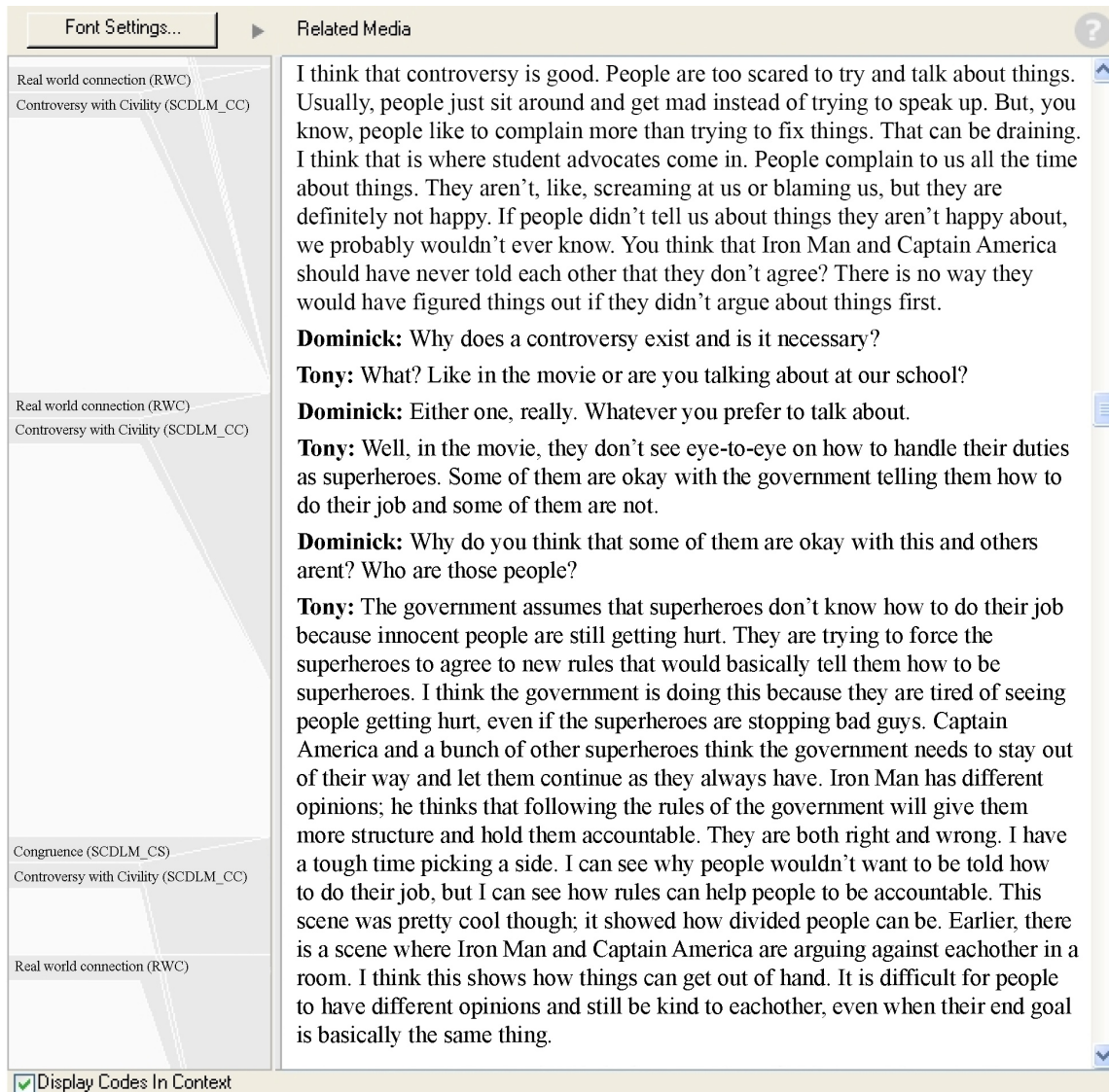


Figure 1: HyperResearch Example of Coding

**Code List.** The following is a code list including code-groups as well as sub-codes pertaining to each of code-groups:

- Youth Culture (YC)
  - Norms (YC\_N)

- Values (YC\_V)
- Practices (YC\_P)
- Superhero narratives influence youth leadership (SNIYL)
- Leadership thought process (LTP)
- Leadership as a mindset (LM)
- Real world connection (RWC)
- Peer Influence (PI)
- Intellectual risks (IR)
- Media (ME)
  - Comic (ME\_C)
  - Social Media (ME\_SM)
    - Instagram (ME\_SM\_I)
    - Snapchat (ME\_SM\_S)
    - Twitter (ME\_SM\_T)
  - Gaming (ME\_GA)
  - Broadcast Media (ME\_BM)
    - Movies (ME\_BM\_M)
    - Radio/Music (ME\_BM\_RM)
    - Television (ME\_BM\_T)
- Definition of leadership (D\_L)
- Definition of culture (D\_C)
- Definition of youth culture (D\_YC)
- Empathy (E)
- Communication (Co)
- Social Change Development Leadership Model (SCDLM)
  - Collaboration (SCDLM\_COL)
  - Common Purpose (SCDLM\_CP)
  - Controversy with Civility (SCDLM\_CC)
  - Consciousness of Self (SCDLM\_CS)
  - Congruence (SCDLM\_CON)
  - Commitment (SCDLM\_COM)
  - Citizenship (SCDLM\_CI)

Each of the codes within this list represent themes to be viewed within this study.

This list does include emerging themes as well as a reflection of the literature reviewed pertaining to my research questions. Emerging themes were added to provide a reflexive dialog between research questions and the participants involved.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity are often referred to as “standards” and “verification” in qualitative research. They speak to the extent to which a study is seen as either credible

or trustworthy (Howe & Eisenhardt, 1990). Fletcher (2016) notes that the methods of a study should be evaluated on how effectively they inform research goals, rather than their ability to agree to a set of conventions. A fundamental set of standards should be met within a credible study: An ability to provide data that will answer the research question(s) of study, reasonable background assumptions, and an application of methods that provide credible results (Morse et al., 2002).

Creswell (2017) identifies eight different techniques used by qualitative researchers to ensure validity. Of these eight techniques, researchers are encouraged to engage in at least two of these techniques: 1) persistent observation or prolonged observation 2) triangulation 3) peer-reviewed 4) negative case analysis 5) reflexivity/clarifying researcher bias 6) member checks 7) rich thick description and 8) external audits. My study includes five of these techniques: triangulation, clarification of researcher bias, peer-review or debriefing, member checks, and rich thick descriptions.

“Triangulation” occurs during the preliminary stages of research design. This technique is used when multiple theories, materials or methods are used to gather data pertaining to the research question (Yin, 2013). Although there are multiple approaches to triangulation, my study focused on “data source triangulation,” a technique that allows for a variety of data sources to be used. The three data sources I used were in-depth interviews, journals, and focus groups. There are various benefits to data triangulation. Data triangulation establishes greater validity due to its ability to utilize additional sources while simultaneously combating the inadequacies found in one-source research. Multiple sources provide further verification, allowing for a comprehensive data set. By



the data being supported in multiple types, it allowed for easier analysis to draw conclusions as well as an easier ability to identify inconsistencies across data sets.

Bias, although often inevitable, affects the validity and reliability of findings, distorting the truth (Bloomberg & Volpre, 2018). Therefore, it is imperative to clarify researcher bias and to take precautionary steps, mitigating instances in which bias would harm the validity of a study. Necessary precautions I have taken include framing questions neutrally, starting with general questions that transition from unaided questioning to aided questions, positive questions before negative, and behavior questions before attitude questions (Harding, 2018). Below, I describe three methods I utilized in an effort to obtain data that was both reliable and valid.

“Peer-review and de-briefing” is a technique within qualitative research that allows for the researcher’s work to be critiqued by a colleague or scholar. The critic looks to identify points that have been over emphasized or missed. Two scholars were asked to review my coding and findings in order to identify any potential blind spots and to evaluate whether my findings were supported by the data analyzed. Each of the scholars did not identify blind spots within my data; moreover, stating that they believed the findings were supported by the data.

“Member checks” also served as a beneficial way to add reliability to my research process (Anfara et al., 2014; Creswell, 2017; Lochmiller & Lester, 2015). As noted in my data collection section, each participant was given a transcript of their interview to confirm that it accurately reflected their responses and ideas. I did not receive feedback from participants, raising issues or problems. However, providing them the opportunity to review transcripts led to a data set that was authentic, allowing for an accurate analysis.

“Rich, thick descriptions” served as a catalyst for authentic data analysis, creating an accurate portrayal of my samples’ responses, diving beyond surface level responses, painting a holistic interpretation of data. How I employed “rich, thick descriptions” is discussed within the description of this study’s participants as well as the methods and data collection process sections.

### **Perspective and Limitations**

Although I do not have a direct relationship with the participants of my study, I did previously work in the same school district these students currently attend. I do have seven years of teaching experience that has shaped my perspective on student learning. In years prior, I have been a teacher in three different high schools. One of the common themes I have noticed among my previous students is that if materials are presented to them through a means that is interesting, an initial spark of interest will allow for development of curricular concepts. Many of my students have been willing to work extremely hard and commit hundreds of hours on works of art they otherwise would have never done. I am biased in believing the reason they were invested in their education was because I always learned about the students’ interests, leveraging them as a vehicle to deliver curriculum.

If I was teaching students about the critique process, I would commonly explain to them that there are two different kinds of comments, subjective and objective. I then gave them examples of objective and subjective comments and described how each of those examples have strengths and weaknesses. When giving examples I related them to recent movies, music, and entertainment.

While this had worked for me for the past several years, I don't know to what extent it can have an impact on a student's ability to develop as a leader. I'm also not certain if my relationship with the students as their teacher had an impact on their ability or willingness to be engaged. In this role, as a researcher, I took on a role in which I didn't have the same opportunity to form a relationship with the students. Intrinsically, I believed there was likely a relationship between superhero narratives and students' perceptions of student leadership, but I had no understanding as to what role that relationship may have played so far as its ability to be used in leveraging professional development and to what extent the means in which the superhero narratives were communicated matters.

This study was limited in that it was constrained on several different accounts. First, I was working with a small population in a very specific location. It was difficult to tell if the findings were applicable to another context. Second, research pertaining to student leadership at the high school level was limited, making it difficult to draw conclusions that are based on current research. Last, professional development and research pertaining to popular culture wasn't typically used to leverage outcomes. This is a significant hurdle that my research faced. While it may be valid in its findings, practitioners may not be open to the possibility of using popular culture to enhance the leadership abilities of student leaders. My hope was that the research would point to specific findings that would emphasize the importance of not only superhero narratives but also the means in which students are exposed to information. This was specifically important for a context that witnessed an increased access to media for the past decade and would likely continue to do so.

## **Summary**

This arts-based qualitative research design, within a grounded theory framework, made use of interviews, journals and a forum discussion to explore the connection, if any, between superhero narratives on student leaders' perceptions of leadership and the impact media had on their understanding of such. The participants in this study were a sample from a population of students at a small Midwest high school within the continental United States, identified by their peers as elected leaders through a democratic voting process. Student advocates were engaged in in-depth interviews, multi-modal journals, and a concluding focus group. Each of the aforementioned opportunities produced data to be collected, analyzed, coded, and interpreted within the context of my research questions. Chapters four and five will discuss the results from the data analysis and report on any perceived effects superhero narratives have on student leaders' perceptions of youth leadership.

## **CHAPTER 4: PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION**

### **Introduction**

The following is a description of each of this study's participants. The description of participants supports the qualitative research practice of providing a "rich, thick description," a detailed description of participants, allowing for the reader to be taken into the setting and phenomena being described (Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2014). Elements of "rich, thick description" contribute to the reliability and validity of qualitative studies such as this. Some pertinent background information is given for each interviewee along with a brief description of how each participant related to the themes of this study,

specifically their understanding of leadership prior to being asked interview questions pertaining to their perceptions of leadership.

The eight student advocates interviewed for this study were Robert, Tony, Carol, Hank, Janet, Luke, Steve, and Natasha (all pseudonyms). The following are brief profiles of each participant, utilizing a technique known as direct quoting. Direct quoting enhances the goal of “rich, thick description,” furthermore, promoting reliability and validity, providing readers a candid look at data as well findings, and allowing additional means of judging the interpretations (Creswell, 2017). Each profile serves as a perfunctory introduction, illustrating each student advocate, before entering into their comments regarding the analysis of this study’s research questions.

**Robert.** Robert is a freshman student advocate. He lives in a relatively rural, small town community where poverty rates are high, and the population is transient in nature. He lives close to the school and commutes by walking with his older brother. Robert is one of three children in his family, and though his oldest brother is at the same school as him, his youngest brother attends the school district’s only middle school.

Unlike his younger brother, Robert has lived in several different Midwestern cities during his youth, causing him to attend a variety of schools to which he claims he wasn’t able to keep friends for long due to the frequency of his family moving. Robert cited that his family had to move often because his mom struggled to find a steady job that could support him and his brothers. Consequently, Robert turned to videogames and music as a means to entertain himself. Robert’s philosophy for leadership is inherently driven by his family dynamics and in fact served as a key motivation for him to become a student advocate. He noted,

I guess that I felt that it (being a student advocate) was not only a way to maybe have an influence on my classmates, but to, you know, make life a little easier on others. I get the chance to use my role to help others. I usually feel lost at home, a little powerless, but my mom and brother make things better. I'd like to make things better for people at school. Who knows, maybe I can.

His definition of leadership is of a collaborative mindset which applies across a variety of contexts and scenarios in both entertainment and his everyday life, or as he stated,

Leadership to me, I think, is when people put others above themselves. Most people don't take time to understand that people usually need help, but they don't know how to ask for it or when they do it's too late. But it's important to understand that help can look different for different people and sometimes when someone tries to help, they are actually hurting. Leaders think about what they do and take ownership for what they have done.

This is a philosophy that he has actively attempted to instill in his practice as a student advocate, cultivating initiatives that allow for opportunities between the school and community to work together in an effort to solve problems.

Robert's interest in music and video games play a major role in his thought processes, both within and outside of the school. He has an active "Twitch" account where he broadcasts himself providing commentary while playing videogames, competes with and against others in an online community, and records music with some of his classmates for school projects.

**Tony.** Tony is a senior student advocate, serving as a member of several different organizations and clubs such as Best Buddies, Varsity Golf, Key Club International, and National Honors Society. Tony has had an extensive array of leadership opportunities outside of his role as a student advocate as well. At his school, he is a peer mentor, a position in which he assists younger students with their math after school. He also serves as an assistant to the principal's secretary for a portion of the school day. Outside of school, he serves as a member of the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, where he actively works to raise donations for research.

Tony has a younger brother who was born with leukemia; he is a freshman at the school. Consequently, this has an impact on Tony's understanding of leadership. His brother's cancer originally made him very upset about his life circumstance until recently, as he describes,

Growing up was difficult with my brother. It was bad enough that he had cancer, but I think what hurt me the most was that I felt forgotten. He received a lot of attention and I was left to do my own thing. That was tough on me and I was angry about it for a long time. Really, I think it just helped me to build my independence, to figure some things out by myself. It isn't that I don't think my parents love me; the situation just made it difficult for them to really take care of us both. I'm not going to lie, it is still tough on me, but I'm not angry; I just want to help others who are less fortunate; give back to my community and others.

Tony's philosophy of leadership focuses on his consciousness of self and others. He is aware of his beliefs, values, attitudes and emotions that motivate his interest in serving as a leader in his school and community. He commented on the importance of

consciousness within his definition of leadership, saying, “What leadership means to me is that you don’t just try and achieve something, you understand why you are making that attempt and to understand why you achieve success or not so you can hopefully avoid future mistakes.” He frequently considers his ability to understand situations as a skill that he can hopefully share with his fellow student advocates when they work together to achieve the successful implementation of policies and procedures.

Tony is an avid reader on a diverse range of topics, which is something he credits as a great escape from schoolwork. He also notes that his hobbies such as reading and working on his computer are continually influential on the way he thinks. Tony also enjoys spending his weekends with several members of his local church, watching movies, playing games, and going on trips.

**Carol.** Carol is a sophomore student advocate. She lives several cities away from the school, consequently causing her to commute nearly an hour to school every morning. Her family selected the school she attends because she prefers to work on projects. Outside of her role as a student advocate, she is an active member of the school’s drama department where she has starred in several performances. Carol is also a member of her local theater where she practices singing and acting on weekends. Prior to attending the school, she was homeschooled by her mother. She struggles to focus during her classes because she believes her classmates are distracting. Carol claimed that her frustrations as a sophomore led her desire to become a student advocate, as she commented,

I have anxiety; a lot of it and I just seem to not get things done. My mom drives me a far way to go to school, so we leave early in the morning. My days are always long because of theater and voice lessons. On top of it all, I can’t focus in



class because people are just so loud. I failed classes last year that I know I shouldn't have. I was just tired and stressed and I wanted to gain control of my life; I was feeling helpless. Sometimes students don't listen to teachers or principals, but I noticed that they usually listen to other students and sometimes too much. So, I was like, hey, let's fix this mess.

In terms of her definition of leadership, Carol noted that she had several, but they all hinged on one particular concept, inspiration. She described the role of a leader in a collaborative setting where they led by example rather than demand others to complete tasks. She continued to describe a leader as not only working to achieve a task, but also committed to improve a person. She attributed her definition to her involvement in theater as well as her ongoing passion of art. She explained, "I carry a sketchbook with me because it is an escape for me when I am stressed; doodling inspires me to not only create, but to just get better at something, to commit to something."

**Hank.** Hank is a junior at the school. He lives in a nearby metropolitan area of a bordering state. His family sent him to the school so that he could play baseball with his friends and avoid attending schools in his hometown. Hank aspires to play baseball in college. He is involved in the Key Club International where he works to form a bond between the school and immediate community. Additionally, he is responsible for forming community initiatives such as a day of service where students travel to neighboring locations such as nursing homes, art centers, animal shelters, and non-for-profit organizations to engage in community service activities. Hank described a strong passion for baseball as a core aspect of his leadership philosophy stating,

I think we have to, as athletes, fight the urge to say, “Sports are life.” No. They’re giving us a standard and it’s up to us to use our position to understand how that can be used to make our lives and world a better place. So, it’s important that you find opportunities to use the skills you learn from sports in a way that will benefit those around you.

He is involved with several interests; however, he doesn’t attribute all of them as having an influence on his practice as a student advocate. The outdoors has been a longtime interest of his as he is an avid fisherman/hunter; he also enjoys traveling with his family and playing videogames with his younger brother.

Hank cited various examples from his own practice as a student advocate in which he attributes baseball for providing him a sense of understanding leadership problems. He spoke of examples where controversy amongst himself and teammates or coaches had a negative impact on the team achieving a common purpose. He also spoke of examples where teammates had to put others before themselves to achieve a common purpose, something he often strives to emulate in his practice as a student advocate. Moreover, he provided a simple definition of leadership, stating, “It’s about supporting other people, not allowing them to keep their head down when they fail; find inspiration in your failure.”

**Janet.** Janet is a freshman at the high school. She attends the school with her twin sister. She describes her relationship with her sister as “difficult”. She has attended the same school as her sister her entire life and is used to being in classes with her. She has enjoyed her experience in high school, citing her gratitude for the variety of extra-curricular activities she has been able to be involved in. Not only is she a student

advocate, she is a member of the Yearbook Staff, choir, and softball team. Despite being involved in different extra-curricular activities than her sister, her classmates often confuse her for her sister. Janet described her opportunity to serve in a leadership role as a chance to form an identity aside from being a twin when stating,

I always got along well with my sister; we grew up doing everything together. She enjoyed drawing and theater, so our parents signed us up to take lessons together. I have always enjoyed being outdoors; science is my favorite subject; we went to a Saturday Science School on weekends during the Summer. I also like engineering; I'm in an engineering class where we learn to make bridges and I am having fun. Now that I am a student advocate, my classmates don't confuse me for my sister as much. They know that I am focused on school and I am involved in things. My sister is more focused on her boyfriend.

Janet's definition of leadership aligns with her need to separate herself from her sister while illustrating her involvement in her school and community. She noted that being a leader was about seeking out opportunities to not only separate yourself from others but to also find the common good in people to achieve a common purpose. She explained, "People are very different in some ways and they should be recognized for that, but that doesn't mean we don't all want to feel supported; a part of something bigger than ourselves."

**Luke.** Luke is a sophomore at the school. He lives with his mom in a neighborhood that is not far from the school. He is involved in a variety of clubs at the high school: Chess Club, Robotics, International Kiwanis Club, Cross Country, and Track & Field. He aspires to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and plans

on graduating from high school within three years. Luke excels in school, achieving high grades in classes and standardized tests. As a sophomore, he does not spend his entire day at the high school. Five of his seven classes are at a local community college where he seeks to earn an associate degree before graduating from high school. Luke was surprised when he was nominated as a student advocate claiming,

I have a difficult time understanding why my classmates elected me as a learner advocate. I don't have classes with them anymore and most of them never really talked to me when we did. They know that I take college classes; maybe they think that qualifies me to be a leader.

Luke has several hobbies outside of school. He plays card games such as Magic the Gathering, competing in tournaments at his local comic book shop and at larger events held within a nearby metropolitan area. When not competing at Magic the Gathering tournaments, he spends his time working on his computer at home. He uses his custom-built computer to play tactical games; his favorite is Counter Strike. Luke attributes his leadership skills to his involvement in Counter Strike, deriving his definition of leadership from his involvement as a gamer when he claimed,

Leadership is about bringing a group of people together to achieve a goal. Many of the strategic parts of being leader involve far more than words; it is more about actions. I first started playing Counter Strike without a microphone; this forced me to work with other people and understand what they were doing and how we could work together. From there, I realized leadership is about taking your position as a citizen of a community and making the environment you live in a better place.

**Steve.** Steve is a senior at the high school. He has a younger sister who serves as a junior class representative for student advocates. Aside from being a student advocate, Steve has been a member of the school's choir and theater programs. He recently started working on weekends at a local grocery store where he unboxes and shelves inventory. Steve aspires to join the Navy and traveling the world. When asked why he believes he was elected as a senior student advocate he claimed,

I care about people a lot and I think that comes through to others. I ask people how they are doing. I like to give high fives, make jokes; it makes me feel better. I sometimes need someone to talk to and it is tough for me to put myself out there. I think it has to work that way for other people too. Really, I'm a nice person and I think it helps.

When outside of school, he enjoys going for long walks, fresh air and the opportunity to think about things without distraction. While relaxing, he enjoys watching anime and playing video games related to his anime interests. Steve claimed that his interest in anime doesn't have an influence on how he defines leadership. He went on to explain that anime is a form of entertainment and an opportunity for people to imagine other worlds, not understand their own world. He defined leadership as, "...a commitment to motivate others towards actions..." Steve followed his definition of leadership by explaining that leaders can work towards goals that can either hurt or help society.

**Natasha.** Natasha is a junior at the school. Her brother serves as a senior student advocate. Aside from being a student advocate, she is a member of the school's

Cheerleading team. She described her involvement in school activities as obligatory when asked what extra-curricular activities she was a member of at her school. She explained,

my friends pressured me into joining the cheerleading team; I never wanted to, but I did it because they liked it and I thought it would be fun to spend more time with them. Now that I am a student advocate, I am making new friends that have similar interests as me. I may quit cheerleading next year; I don't think that it is very fun cheering for our school teams because they don't win very much.

Aside from reading, Natasha claims to not have hobbies outside of school. She enjoys reading nonfiction books about historical black figures such as Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and Barack Obama. She believes that her identity as a black female is important as she builds her understanding for what leadership is. Natasha defined leadership as,

Actions that are often seen as different from the usual, different in a way that can cause others to resist, doubt, and even hate others. Making the world a better place is difficult because there are so many people that have seen wrong things happen, but they never had the courage to stand up and say that it is wrong. I think people are getting better at pointing out the wrongs, but a leader corrects a wrong or least paves the way for positive change.

Natasha explained that being a student advocate is a unique opportunity to help advocate for student needs and to give a voice for those who are too afraid to speak up. As a student advocate, she mediates student conflicts during meetings in which her and an administrator sit down with students in an effort to improve moments of conflict. She

described her responsibility as a student advocate as “...exciting, a real opportunity to help people and their relationship with others.”

## **Summary**

The aforementioned descriptions of the eight student advocates interviewed for this study, Robert, Tony, Carol, Hank, Janet, Luke, Steve, and Natasha (all pseudonyms), serve to best inform the reader of the diverse circumstances in which each of these student leaders come from. Direct quoting provided “rich, thick description,” furthermore, promoting reliability and validity, providing readers a candid look at data as well findings, and allowing additional means of judging the interpretations (Creswell, 2017). Each profile serves as a perfunctory introduction, illustrating each student advocate, before entering into their comments regarding the analysis of this study’s research questions.

## CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

### Introduction

The results of this study were generated using qualitative research methods; specifically, through the analysis of data gathered during in-depth interviews, multi-modal journals, and focus groups of student advocates. This research focused on the extent to which superhero narratives had an impact on student leaders' perceptions of student leadership, if any. First, eight student advocates were interviewed with regard to their perceptions of leadership. Second, each of the eight student advocates engaged in a series of four different superhero narratives via a variety of media (comic books, radio broadcasts, television shows, movies, and video games). Each form of media was used to depict a different superhero narrative that was tied to "The Seven C's" of the Social Change Leadership Model, a framework to which the student advocates' responses were coded (See Appendix B). Last, participants were placed in focus groups where they were asked a series of questions in regard to their use of media. Along these lines, superhero narratives are considered, as well as their role in forming perceptions of leadership.

Results of this study are divided into two sections, each section including a detailed analysis of one of this study's research questions. In examining the first research question, a description of how student leaders define their leadership will allow for a thorough discussion of four emergent themes from this study: 1) Leadership as a Mindset; 2) Real-world Leadership; 3) Peer Influence; 4) Risk Taking. Then, an introduction to the Diderot Effect will assist in contextualizing the relationship between media consumption and leadership perceptions, illuminating two prevalent avenues of



media consumption: 1) Social Media and Gaming and 2) Broadcast Media. Both sections of the analysis will utilize a technique known as direct quoting.

The second section examines the second research question by analyzing each of the student advocates responses to superhero narratives as they relate to “The Seven C’s” of the Social Change Development model: consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship. Both sections utilize direct quoting to enhance the goal of rich thick description, furthermore, promoting reliability and validity, providing readers a candid look at data as well findings, and allowing additional means of judging the interpretations (Creswell, 2017).

### **Research Question 1 Analysis: Students Defining Leadership**

Q1) How do high school student leaders define their leadership?

The major findings of this study with respect to this research question showed that these student advocates defined leadership both broadly and contextually. The student advocates all incorporated some universal definitions of what leadership is. They also defined student leadership in context-driven ways specific to their involvement in activities within school as well as their outside hobbies. Along these lines, student advocates discussed the impact their media consumption had in constructing their understanding of themselves and the world around them. This included a student-centered focus on leadership, the fact that hobbies may provide an opportunity for leaders to practice their skills in a variety of contexts, and an ongoing mind-set cultivated towards achieving connections between the school and its community. In terms of how this leadership plays out in their school, the student advocates discussed examples from their

own practice that clustered around several themes: 1) Leadership as a mindset; 2) Real-world or “authentic” practice; 3) Peer influence; 4) Taking intellectual/educational risks.

This section first focuses on how student leaders define leadership. Then, the aforementioned themes pertaining to their own practice are illustrated with direct quotes from student advocates. Next, student advocates’ relationship with media consumption serves to enhance their perceptions of leadership. Finally, an introduction to the Diderot Effect will assist in contextualizing the relationship between media consumption and leadership perceptions, illuminating two prevalent avenues of media consumption to be discussed: 1) Social Media and Gaming and 2) Broadcast Media. All of the aforementioned findings are discussed as follows.

**Defining Leadership.** Since the notion of how leadership is defined by student advocates was the focus of one of the research questions of this study, “Definitions of Leadership” was one of the pre-determined codes in the HyperResearch software. In examining all of the textual data coded as “Definitions of Leadership,” there were some commonalities and interesting features in the way student advocates spoke about this.

In discussing how she defines leadership, Carol noted some core components of the classic leadership definition, but she situated these in a classroom focused context:

Well, I think being a leader has to be taken into consideration from the learner’s perspective. So, if it is something that students have never witnessed before from their principal and teachers or is something they aren’t used to seeing from their classmates, that’s the first step to leadership is understanding the place you are leading in and the people that make up that place. Usually it’s something where they’re like, “I have a say in how this works, no way?” ...That’s the first part of

being a leader, getting people to realize they can change things. Then the other part of that is it can't appear as controlling or a punishment, it's got to inspire someone to take action without the threat of punishment.

The relevant factors of "inspiration" and "motivation" are present in this definition, but Carol specifically ties it to the idea of her classmates and community. The notion of designing leadership specifically for your stakeholders is also a construct of effective business practice under Edward Freeman's stakeholder theory, asserting that a company's stakeholders include anyone affected by the company and its workings (Harrison et al., 2019). The fact that Carol mentions the importance of motivation deriving from inspiration, relates to the notion that leadership experiences have an emotional quality that makes them powerful (Rosenbach, 2018).

Carol also suggested the importance of trying new things to come up with solutions to complex problems. She mentioned the importance of novel leadership that relates to her peers' lives and are relevant to their world outside of school,

Leadership is when you step outside of what you are used to seeing to improve things for others and yourself. If in a classroom, a student advocate can take a concept being taught by a teacher and apply it to the students' lives, connect it to an activity that will help students understand the world a little better. For example, our anthropology and earth science class was learning about the impact of trash on our eco system; surprised by its impact on our society, we decided to create an initiative at our school. We collected thousands of bottlecaps from bottles and had them processed into a bench that we placed in a park next to our

school. Student advocates visited classes at the school to explain our initiative, set collection boxes in classrooms and created posters to be placed around school.

While she again specified qualities that are often associated with effective leadership practice, she also situated it specifically within the context of being a student advocate at her school, highlighting the relevancy of leadership in her practice as student advocate.

Carol identified the importance of a willingness to deal with multiple possibilities and problem solutions within her role as a student advocate. Within her definition of leadership, there are several key concepts for leadership in a learning setting. Having an ability to recognize and deal with complexity amongst multiple individuals has been noted as an integral part of the collective reflection process of leaders (Muth et al., 2019). Carol also reflected on leadership practices that we consider more rigid, claiming they are open with possibilities for creativity and flexible thinking, stating,

A lot of times, what I try to do is allow my peers to be creative and stress there isn't necessarily one right answer to some of the issues that are brought to the attention of student advocates...even in something that's considered a hard disciplinary issue, like rules related to technology use, where there are certain facts that need to be understood...Yet how you interact with technology, how you use it to research and present information and what you do with it is really what leadership is all about.

Tony highlighted the importance of innovative approaches in his role as a student advocate and his ability to manage complex situations with minimal resources, as he stated,

Being a leader means you are asked to do things most people can't do by themselves. This usually means you don't have the support you need to be successful. Luckily, we are really good at working together to try and make things work. The good news is there are eight student advocates. When we put our heads together, we are able to think of better ways to handle things.

Overall, in examining the definitions that these student advocates gave about leadership, several factors are present. While “creativity” and “effectiveness” were consistently mentioned, there were also some very contextual aspects specific to their role as a student leader. These include the necessity of collaborating when finding solutions to complex problems, and the belief that opinions from a variety of stakeholders are relevant to their decision-making process as leaders- which are characteristics referred to in effective leadership literature (Thompson & Miller, 2018). The features of “collaboration,” “citizenship,” and “consciousness of self” suggest that the Social Change Model of Leadership Development’s “Seven C’s” are congruent with some of the skills required for effective leadership development and practice.

**Leadership as a Mindset.** This was not an initial code selected for organizing the data nor was it a code to which I hypothesized would surface from the themes and ideas in HyperResearch. Rather it emerged in the data, as it became apparent in successive coding rounds that many of the student leaders’ comments pertaining to their beliefs about leadership indicated leadership is an ongoing mindset that requires a particular way of thinking.

Most of the student leaders in this study described leadership not as an integrated aspect of their thinking, not a process or skill that is alienated or discrete from other thought processes. Janet described it as a habit of mind and an openness of thinking:

It's really important for student advocates to act as leaders... It's a mindset more than anything and it has to be a big priority... I don't exactly speak up during meetings because I am not a person that talks much. But, if a student advocate wanted to speak up, I am not going to tell them that they can't, I'd say "Go for it, buddy!"

Similarly, Luke talked about his own leadership process involving a mindset that involves constantly thinking about his position as a leader. In many ways, leadership practices are not something he necessarily sits down to work on, but rather he is constantly thinking about and open to:

I will usually be spending time with friends, playing a game or something. I'll see something happen, and it will make me think, 'How does this relate to my school?' What I do is basically, I just go through life and always – I'm always looking for, "How can I apply that to my school?" I've trained my mind to look at something and think about how it has to do with me being a student advocate.

And then, I don't know, it pops in my head, it all makes sense.

By actively cultivating a mindset for leadership, Luke has found ways to continually be open to inspiration. He noted how he would sometimes get ideas for leadership while reading a book on an entirely different subject matter, such as the importance of teamwork, while reading David Cook's "Robot Building for Beginners (Technology in Action)." In this way, leadership inspiration can arise when a person is

actively engaged in a completely different subjects or activities. This openness of mind was described by student advocates in this study as a means of promoting leadership understanding and discovering new ideas where ever they may come from. On another level it connects to trans-disciplinary thinking in that good ideas are drawn upon from a variety of different experiences or subject matters and a certain amount of “cross-pollinating” of knowledge can take place to promote greater understanding of one’s self. If one keeps an open and alert mind as Luke put it, “trains the mind” to always be on the lookout for new ideas and inspiration, the propensity for leadership as a mindset necessarily increases.

For Steve, leadership arises from an openness of mind and a willingness to gather inspiration from others. He described the importance of keeping alert to leadership opportunities, and of collaboration both inside and outside of the classroom:

Leadership is something that... you are just open to, always looking for new ways of thinking. Just always keeping an open eye and ear to the people around you. I don’t think that we (student advocates) can expect to just stand and deliver without connecting to others. I’ve found that reaching out, learning from and sharing with my classmates helps me to be a better leader.

The significance of opportunities to collaborate, gather, and bounce ideas off other students was something that Natasha also highlighted,

Another important thing with being a student advocate is working with students, teachers, and community members. Anytime you involve more ideas, you are able to come up with better decisions. As long as you have one goal in mind, you can

begin brainstorming ideas to bounce off one another. The difficult part is making sure that you have time to work with others.

Steve and Natasha both noted the value of working with others to incite leadership practices. This is something that several other student advocates referred to at one point or another, and while it is an important point, it also denotes how student leadership practices can become tangled with effectiveness as a student advocate. A willingness to share ideas and learn from others is a behavior commonly associated with effective leadership practice. Open-minded thinking and ongoing learning have a place in Generation Z students' lives.

**Real-world Leadership.** The theme of “Real World Leadership” was also not a predetermined code, since there wasn't anything in the research questions to indicate this idea. However, it surfaced through the process of coding in HyperResearch, and all of the student advocates mentioned the importance of leadership with a focus on real or authentic leadership practices. Essentially, these student leaders all tended to engage in leadership practices that had a focus on real world applications, applications both inside and outside of their school. In asking them about leadership practices they felt were especially effective as leaders, all advocates spoke of initiatives they were involved in, citing examples of community service and instances in which students were engaged in planning, organizing, and executing tasks related to goals (i.e. authentic as opposed to theoretical).

As a senior student advocate, Tony served as a student advocate for the previous three years, routinely considering the real-world implications of his actions as a leader at the school:



One initiative would be around the topic of resources available to the school and community. I work with student advocates during weekly meetings to identify needs of the community and the needs of our school. We have created teams of students with goals that look to not only give back to the community but to also give to our school. The students are basically responsible to do what they believe should happen in the real world... and they're not only understanding what it means to be a leader, but really understand how the real-world works. That's an exciting thing to see, when students work to make their school and community a better place because they want to, not because they feel forced to.

Hank also stressed the need for realistic modes of leadership practice, which connect to the students' lives. He described an example of how, in teaching underclassmen how to swing a baseball bat in baseball practice, he sought a more realistic and meaningful way for his younger teammates to learn and practice the skill.

We start baseball practice with all of the teams together: freshmen, junior varsity, and varsity, so that they can see how it looks to swing a baseball bat. We work together to look at how each one of us stand, hold the bat, and swing through the ball. When I have classes with some of the baseball players, I talk to them about how important it is to follow steps because it will help them to be more successful, just like swinging a baseball bat; stay focused, after enough practice, things become easier. This is a skill I think everyone should have.

The "real world" component many of these student advocates engage in is often found in "effective" leadership practices. Bezzina and Bufalino (2019) have noted the importance of "authenticity" in leadership practice. The authors explained how in the

realm of leadership it is critical for leaders to have opportunities to engage in leadership practices that build community. These relationships are built by infusing lessons learned from the community into their work environment and vice versa. “Real” in this context, means in the lives of children, so that the activities students engage in are relevant and connected to their own lives. Therefore, it is clear that some of the “real-world” leadership practices that these student advocates utilize fit into the framework of authentic leadership suggested by Bezzina and Bufalino (2019).

As a freshman student advocate, Robert, noted that he always tries to ensure a real-world opportunity for his classmates to learn. He described how he often started the school day for his classmates, with an approach that brought them out of the classroom and started them thinking about their decisions in an authentic way.

I do announcements in the morning. I try and make things fun. Usually, I share information about sports and clubs, but I also try my best to make announcements positive. I complement the achievements of my classmates. This all happens before the school day starts. I think it makes people happy and helps them to learn about the positive things that we are doing outside of school.

Like some of the other student advocates discussed here, Robert seems to naturally draw on the notion of “authenticity” in leadership practice, informing the student body of achievements that are obtained by his peers outside of school, moreover, communicating the personal interests and achievements of the student body and teachers.

In a similar way, Steve gave an example in which he brought a lesson on the impact government has on social issues into a more authentic and realistic context for his peers as well:

I was assigned a project in our government class where we had to use what we learned about government to create a campaign. I met with my three teammates and the entire time they kept complaining about what was wrong with our school. I saw this as a chance for use to take their frustrations and create a project that campaigned for a positive change. The project focused on their criticisms of our school's technology rules, course options, and lunch schedule. However, we presented possible solutions, to our principals, that were focused on research related to what is best for students as we prepare for life after school, trying to make sure that we came across as positive instead of complaining without answers or suggestions.

Steve's real-world learning activities are perhaps even more deeply connected to the "authentic" leadership practices discussed by (Lyubovnikova et al., 2017). In making his classmates responsible for creating realistic solutions in a realistic context, they engage in much of the work that anyone creating an actual campaign would do: research, interview, write, present to a target audience, etc. Having principals review their proposal provides relevancy for his classmates. This raises the stakes and makes the assignment provided by the teacher more relevant to their own lives.

Steve described how when he was able to find ways to connect to students with leadership practices that were relevant to their own lives, even his sense of place within the school community was strengthened:

I have had a few really difficult classes throughout high school. I was struggling to do well in my classes or be involved in things outside of school. My grades and mood started to improve a couple of years ago when a senior student advocate

told me that school is more fun when you can relate to it. I started to really think about classes in the past I did well in. Usually, I found the class interesting because of the teacher, but the more that I thought about it, I liked the teachers because they got to know me, listened to what I was interested in, and somehow tied it into the subject. I want to be that kind of person for my classmates, even when the teacher doesn't.

Janet noted an example of leadership in which she was able to create a real-world application for her classmates within the environment of the school building. The real-world nature of her leadership practice is something that she felt created a more vibrant and exciting place for her classmates:

Student advocates are responsible for designing a community service day each year; this year, I decided to lead the community service project. I sent a survey to the student body where they picked different causes they wanted to support like hunger, homelessness, and some other things. From the responses, I reached out to places in the community that lined up with their interests. Students were then placed in groups that fit their interests. The feedback for the experience was great. In the past, students were just given a place to go and the feedback was usually negative, talking about how they didn't see how what they were doing is important. This past year, students were talking about how they can't wait to do it again next year.

With the statement, "I reached out to places in the community that lined up with their interests," Janet illustrates an important aspect of the philosophy that these student advocates generally seemed to have. That it is important to give their classmates real-life

context for learning new ideas. The success of her leadership practice was communicated through her classmates' increased interest and motivation to continue their involvement in the community. Extending learning beyond the classroom with the intent to make it a more relevant experience is an aspect commonly associated with "effective" teaching. However, these real-world experiences were often voiced by the student advocates in this study, when they were asked about some of the actions they have enacted as student advocates. The fact that they often viewed "real-world" learning as a means for successful leadership practice indicates that perhaps student advocates perceive successful leadership as an act that includes experiences that are relevant to their interests.

Carol offered an example of real-world relevancy in her leadership practice where she used an experience, she had during an acting lesson, to inform her approach in performing as a leader at her school:

I try to relate the things that I am learning outside of school with what I am doing in school. I was at an acting lesson where my coach was talking to me about the importance of how we say things. Sometimes the way we say things is more important than what we are saying. I remind the other student advocates about this when we share information with students. Students were wanting to use their cellphones in class, but our principals did not want this to happen. When we had to tell students about this, I thought about how this is news they didn't want to hear. We explained to the students the benefits of not having a cell phone in class and let them know that we understand their concerns like being able to contact home. We let them know that the school has a phone for them to use and although

some students were frustrated, many of them became more understanding because we showed that we tried our best and listened to them.

The student advocates' leadership practices are interesting examples of "authentic" approaches to solving complex problems within their school and community. Their approaches are relevant in not just the real-world sense, but to the student body as individuals. Student advocates mention how their own experiences inform their decision-making process but also how the lives of their peers inform their decision-making processes. This student-centered approach is often associated with "authentic learning."

The idea of "authentic" leadership is nothing new in the field of education, and it has long been touted as a significant way to help leaders achieve successful outcomes from their peers. Yet it was noteworthy to discover as such a persistent and important theme in the leadership practices of these student advocates. The theme of real-world approaches was not one of the questions directly covered in the interview protocol, yet it recurred through the discussions and in most of the leadership examples the participants provided. The notion of bringing leadership practices into the "real world" thereby was one of the crucial means by which these student advocates help make their initiatives relevant to their peers' lives and their own.

**Peer Influence.** The theme of "peer influence" in student leadership, emerged early in the coding with HyperResearch. While "peer influence" is not overtly signaled by the research questions, one of the interview questions does ask where participants have witnessed examples of leadership from somewhere other than adults at their school. This notion of peers being influenced by one another has a strong association with teenagers' decision-making process. This was a significant theme in that each student

advocate spoke or gave examples of leadership influences that came directly from peer influence.

Tony gave us numerous examples in which he learned leadership behaviors from his peers:

We do a lot of planning together as student advocates, where different student advocates might share different ideas about the school from their class perspective or their own... Ultimately, that's my real goal is to show them some of their ideas may show how they feel and others might show how their grade feels. As a freshman, I can remember when seniors would talk about how the school was before I got there and some of the things they were doing to make it a great place to be. I was usually pretty quiet because I didn't know how others would respond to my ideas and usually it helped me. I could think about things and then after listening to the older student advocates, I would have to re-think about how I felt about things because I didn't understand everything at first.

For Tony, his previous interactions with older student advocates left an impression that not only created an example of how to act as a student advocate, but also allowed for him to reflect on his own behavior. This is an important thing to note, because an argument could be made that introspection is an important ability for student leaders to possess. Yet as Tony noted, acting as a student advocate is not a practice that is done independently, often requiring student advocates to work with one another, increasing opportunities for student advocates to be influenced by one another.

As a sophomore student advocate, Carol is a major proponent of seeking connections between herself and her peers. She described how she proactively seeks out

opportunities to speak with students in regard to their concerns and perspectives of the school's learning environment:

I've tried to be involved in a few more activities that meet after the school day is over. The school offers activities like sports, theater, and even clubs for people that like boardgames, video games, or card games. Doing activities outside of school has given me the opportunity to talk with people that I never have classes with. I don't go into theater practice trying to ask people about teachers or other students, but it usually comes up. When some of my classmates talk about things they would like to do at school or things they wish would be changed, I usually ask them why and then I go back to the other student advocates to let them know. So, yeah, I'd say I listen to my classmates and their opinions matter to me.

Hank provided several examples of how he looks to senior student advocates when making difficult decisions at the school. For example, he often consults senior student advocates in making decisions during the planning stage of an initiative:

I think that I have had a lot of success when I don't work alone. I usually think of ideas for us to get involved in our community, but the details are always fuzzy. I like to ask others how they might plan a big project. I had the idea that we would do something about the environment. So, I heard of this thing where people collect bottle caps to reduce plastic waste and then they turn them into something that is good for the environment. I wasn't sure how we would collect the caps or what we would turn them into, but it felt like a good way to get everyone in the school involved. The seniors were saying that we should place boxes in each classroom and have us go out to classes to present, so students knew that they



would be contributing to a great cause. We also turned it into a competition where the classroom that donates the most would have an ice cream and movie celebration. The seniors thought that we should turn the bottle caps into a bench and place it into our local park. I took the idea and ran with it; the seniors always have great ideas.

The importance of peer influence in leadership practice is something that Janet feels strongly about, and she talked about this in regard to her own school as well as her community:

I'm always seeing how people try and look for an example to follow. Usually, people look to others that share something in common with them. I think that people usually have a goal of what they want to do or who they want to be and then they find someone that has already done what they want to do. Having that person gives people an example. This is sometimes good because it helps us understand how people do the things we want to do. Sometimes, this is bad when people look for others that may agree with their views that are negative. Really, I just think that people look for others to help support how they view themselves. Usually, at school, this is someone that is older than you and is involved in some of the same things.

The need to seek peer influence is not necessarily something that is always easy to do, as some student advocates noted, schedules and standardized curriculum often prevents students from being exposed to a variety of different people. Yet these exceptional student advocates find ways to do this, finding time to seek the views of a variety of students in an effort to best inform their practice as leaders. The fact that it may

be seen as something different and more effective than the norm is important. While this willingness to not only seek different perspectives but to also acknowledge their influence on their decision-making process may not be reinventing the wheel in leadership practice and theory, it is still something rather different and unique in the practices of youth leadership.

Like the other student advocates in this study, Luke has actively participated in influencing his peer student advocates by collaborating with others. By collaborating with freshmen student advocates, he has acknowledged the influence he has on student advocates that are younger than himself:

I think that great leadership is when you help other people make great choices for themselves. Look, I like to help other student advocates because I know what it feels like to be a freshmen student advocate. It can be tough getting used to a new school with new people and it is easy to just do what everyone else is doing. So, I make it easy on them; I act in a way that is respectful of others and I take things seriously, but I also like to have fun. One of the most challenging things is that freshmen are easily pulled into directions by their classmates. Because all of the student advocates have meetings together, I always make an effort to try and help them as much as possible and encourage the good choices they make.

Luke described his reason for doing this type of mentoring, noting that it promoted an engagement and interest that his peers seemed to exhibit for their role as student leaders. He described how his younger student advocate peers seemed to make more connections between the decisions they were making, and the ones made by their older peers.

Steve described an example in which he used a community service project to connect with his peer student advocates. This leadership practice was derived when he recognized the connection between teamwork and building friendships.

Earlier this year, I came up with the idea of running a fundraiser for children with cancer. The other senior student advocate, Tony, has a brother who was battling cancer and he was telling us what it was like. We organized to have an event where teachers' homerooms collected money to support. Before I knew it, younger student advocates were telling us about people in their family who have struggled with cancer. No one ever said it, but it definitely felt special to run the fundraiser; everyone seemed to connect and be excited about things. We raised are goal too, yeah.

Steve's example above is particularly interesting because it takes the notion of student leadership to the next level of authenticity. What he describes is more than just leadership in the local context of the classroom (i.e., something relatively secluded). His example actually considers the experiences his peers and community have faced to examine and illuminate an initiative that would benefit the school and its surrounding community. This recognizes that the individuals that comprise a school and community are often more deeply connected than we realize. His example not only considers the experiences of his peers to influence his decision-making process but is truly authentic in that he upholds the experiences of his community and classmates, using one to enlighten the other, so that both are more deeply understood. This has helped him to connect his leadership practice to different topics that his peers may be interested in, as he relates,

I definitely look for ways to connect to the community. One thing that I have learned... is that people are more motivated to work towards a goal if they feel connected to it. So, I would have to work with student advocates that have great ideas; and by the end of the year we would have conversations about how we can change some of the things we do to make the school better. We might start off thinking about issues at the school, but we always have discussions with students and people in our community. Before we know it, the conversations switches from how we can make our school a better place to how we can make our community a better place. I don't think this would happen if we didn't try to talk with other people.

Without a doubt, one of the most integral themes of this study and these interviews was peer influence and leadership practice amongst student leaders. Fundamentally this is the catalyst for what these student advocates perceive as effective leadership practice. It involves recognizing the ways in which different experiences and concepts in the community relate to the school environment. All eight of the student advocates in the study commented on the importance of not only connecting with others but also allowing their connections with others to influence their decision-making process, and more significantly, all eight provided examples of how this plays out in their leadership practice. In this way, it seems that student leaders' understanding of effective leadership is not only collaborative in nature, but is inherently considerate of the experiences of the individuals and context they serve to lead.

**Risk Taking.** Another key theme that emerged in the process of successive rounds of data coding with HyperResearch, was the notion of intellectual "risk taking".

Risk taking was not a theme necessarily indicated by the research questions, but most of the student advocates spoke of a willingness to take risks as a key element of leadership practice for them. This is not framed in the sense of haphazard or risky leadership, but in the sense of a willingness to try out new ideas and approaches in leadership practice. This openness to try things differently allowed them to come up with new and interesting approaches to leadership.

Natasha included this notion in her definition of leadership, highlighting the fact that something good doesn't always come out of taking risks, in that leaders are susceptible to failure; however, how a person handles failure can often reveal the extent of their leadership abilities:

It is important to think about the different possibilities and then take a risk to try and do something that might make school a better place but may not be the easiest thing to do... it is the little voice inside me that will say, "This is going to be tough, probably impossible, but you'll never know if you don't try." Sometimes if it is a big idea we are working towards at the school or in whatever work that we are doing, if it is successful, it feels like, "We did it! That really worked." If it doesn't, you think, "What went wrong; how can I learn from this?" So, it is about putting yourself out there, but it is also about forgiving yourself and not pushing blame on others when things don't go as planned.

Over the course of our interview, Robert described a multitude of leadership practices that he has tried as a student advocate. When asked about how he initiates his leadership practices, he noted that they always came from an enthusiasm for trying new things:

I just really like problem solving and taking on things that scare me at least a little bit – especially finding answers to things that aren't common sense. I like to try new things. For me, leadership is about trying new things – to see how they go and see what affect it has on other people.

Robert further stressed the fact that he considered risk taking as an integral component of quality leadership:

I would be willing to bet that many of the really good leaders don't always follow all the rules. I think that I... I follow the rules, but I've never been fearful of bending the rules for the sake of the bigger picture.

Janet likened leadership to the idea of intellectual risk taking, and noted how she actively tried to cultivate this factor in her school environment:

As a student advocate, I need to create the kind of place where students feel like it is okay to make mistakes and know that making mistakes is a part of everyday life. I would say it is about trying out different ideas, dealing with uncertainty, and learning from it. That's really important if you want to be a great leader, because if you can't learn from your mistakes other people are going to notice and stop listening to your ideas. People typically stay away from risks because they are afraid of failure, but a leader needs to sometimes take on the risks to help others.

This ability to reflect on leadership practice without fear of trying new things or breaking convention is a key component of how these student advocates described successful leadership practice. As Hank summed it up, saying “You have to be willing to make mistakes to be a leader. You have to...you just can't be afraid.”

For Tony, intellectual risk taking and trying out new things in his leadership practice were the most crucial aspects of his perceptions of leadership; and was a subject that he returned to throughout the interview process. Leadership is a process that he actively cultivates not just in himself, but for his peers as well, as Tony noted,

It needs to be about your willingness to try new things, make mistakes, learn from them...work with student advocates and other students at the school. For other students to see the risks student advocates take for the greater good of the school – I think it helps them understand that we are there to support them and we are willing to put ourselves out there. Ultimately, not everyone is going to agree with leaders all of the time. It is usually about how you approach things and as long as leaders are taking risks because they know it can pay off in a good way; I think that is what separates great leaders from the rest.

Tony, like many of the student advocates in this study, ultimately related intellectual risks, successes, and mistakes to one of the core constructs of not just their leadership practice, but what they perceive as successful leadership.

Student advocates defined their leadership both broadly and contextually, incorporating some universal definitions of what leadership is. This included a student-centered focus on leadership, the fact that hobbies may provide an opportunity for leaders to practice their skills in a variety of contexts, and an ongoing mind-set cultivated towards achieving connections between the school and its community. In terms of how this leadership plays out, student advocates discussed examples from their own practice that clustered around several themes: 1) Leadership as a mindset; 2) Real-world or “authentic” practice; 3) Peer influence; 4) Taking intellectual/educational risks. However,

I would be remised if I did not discuss student advocates' relationship with media consumption and the extent to which it may have an influence in cultivating their perceptions of leadership.

**Relationship with Media.** The relationship student advocates have with media use helps them to not only shape their understanding of self but also their understanding of others. More importantly, they observed the influence media has on impacting their leadership practice. The majority of student advocates had interests which tended to fall into categories of 1.) social media, 2.) broadcast media, and/or 3.) games. They noted media use allows them to establish a desired identity. Social media was noted as significant in communicating with a variety of individuals. Broadcast media was described as a means to be entertained. Games were desired for their ability to provide entertaining task attainment. All of the aforementioned themes of this research question are discussed as follows.

All eight student advocates in this study described the importance of media, which they explicitly credited with improving and informing their leadership practices. Any of their comments on media use were coded in HyperResearch under "Media", and sub code groups as: Broadcast Media (TV, Radio, Streaming Services), Gaming, Print Media (books, newspapers, magazines), and Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.). A more specific list of media use is listed below.

Interest in social media and games were among the most popular, with seven of the eight student advocates noting that they personally engage in social media or gaming, which they actively integrate into their leadership practice in a variety of different ways. In addition to social media or gaming, broadcast media interests were equally popular,



with seven of the eight student advocates consuming streaming services on a daily basis. These student advocates noted using a variety of media to access content related to their lives, ranging widely from interests in art, fashion, music, sports, writing, and other subjects of interest. Each of the student advocates' personal interests are briefly mentioned in the section on participant descriptions, and the following summarizes the various forms of media they each discussed during their participation in focus groups:

Table 1

*Participant Student Advocate*

Robert	Music; Social Media; Video Games
Tony	Movies; Social Media; TV; Printed Media; Video Games
Carol	Movies, Music, Social Media, Video Games
Hank	Music; Social Media; Video Games
Janet	Movies; Social Media; Video Games
Luke	Social Media; Video Games
Steve	Movies (Anime and Manga); Video Games
Natasha	Social Media; Printed media (biographies)

Most importantly, not only did all of these student advocates engage in several diverse interests, but these student advocates identified media consumption as a means to reinforce their desire to establish their identity. Evidence throughout the focus group interviews reveal that the use of media outside of school plays directly into their collective understanding of leadership. This is the focus of the next section.

**Relationship with Media**

**The Diderot Effect.** The Diderot effect is a sociological phenomenon related to consumption. The effect is comprised of two ideas: 1. Goods purchased by consumers are cohesive with their identity and 2. The introduction of a new possession that is deviant from the consumer's current complementary goods can result in a process of spiraling

consumption. This study will focus on the former aspect of the Diderot Effect, the relationship between goods being consumed and the consumer's identity.

All of the student advocates involved in this study described consuming a variety of media (as described above), stating that media consumption was an important part of their lives outside of their responsibilities as leaders, and more importantly, influenced their thinking within their role as student advocates. One of the student advocates, Robert, reflected on the importance of media consumption, particularly in forming his own identity, as he states, "We are what we eat." This was an emergent theme discovered during the review of text data, reinforced through the process of coding, because many of the student advocates comments echoed the sentiment that people consume information they closely relate to, consequently allowing them to more closely relate to information they consume on a regular basis. As Robert stated,

The things we are interested in outside of school definitely have influence on how we act in school...I think that is true for everyone. So, I am really into playing Counterstrike, I see how gaming with other people online connects to the things I do as a student advocate at school. If I am playing a videogame about Batman, like I did the other day, then I see how something about Batman applies to what we are dealing with at school. The Batman game had me thinking about what my role is in our community and what I could do to improve it. I think that is true all of the time, whatever it is that interests you...how things bleed into other parts of our life.

As Robert noted, an inclination towards media usage reveals itself in the work of a leader and adds vitality and variety to their perceptions of leadership. This kind of idea

was also expressed by Tony, a senior student advocate, whose diverse involvement in the community often utilizes media to communicate with others, bond with peers, and express interest in hobbies, or as he commented,

I use it (social media) all of the time. I use it when I'm bored so I can look at things that I like, doesn't everyone? I create pages for our fundraisers, and I share pictures on our school's accounts too... I usually comment or like things. To be honest, most people use social media to waste time or be entertained. I do that too, but I try and use it as a way to promote what we are doing at school. We use it to connect outside of school; sometimes just to chat and other times to plan projects.

Tony engages in a wide variety of media and considers his use to serve as an outlet in approaching his life and leadership practice,

I'm always using social media at home, and I have always been interested in sports – I enjoy golf and things like that. I can look at my favorite golf courses on Instagram and I really like watching YouTube reviews of golf clubs, balls and stuff like that. Sometimes, reading comments in YouTube videos, helps me to understand the video. Like, I may think that a golfer hit the ball really well, but the comments will talk about how he has an unorthodox approach to his swing...it helps me to better understand technical things.

Carol, a sophomore student advocate, engages in a variety of media to not only learn new skills, but to also share with others the skills she has learned. She sees this creativity as a part of who she is as a person and student advocate, and her media usage ties directly into her leadership practice, or in her own words,

I think I'm a little different from the other student advocates. I'm really into art and theater. Most of my time outside of school is spent painting, well, if I'm not in theater practice. One of my favorite things to do is listen to music and watch how-to videos on YouTube. It's really relaxing. When I'm done, I post my work to Instagram. I have an account just for my artwork. It makes me happy to see people comment on my posts and like my pictures. In a lot of ways, it makes me feel confident. I think the same thing goes for being a student advocate, the more I connect with other people, the more I feel like I am doing something important.

In this way, Carol's experience of personal creativity in her pursuits outside of school are expressed through media use; it reinforces her sense of identity and her confidence to act as a contributing member of her community. Similar to the other student advocates in this study, Carol expressed how she uses a variety of media to reinforce her sense of identity. The notion that the Diderot Effect explains the relationship between student advocates and their consumption of media helps to demonstrate how the participants in this study use media to not only communicate with others but to further consume more information pertaining to their interests in hopes of reinforcing their identity.

Hank also saw a connection between media consumption and the need to solidify his identity. However, Hank expressed that his use of media inadvertently constructs his sense of self as he often doesn't think of his need to consume media as a means to build a sense of identity. He described the subliminal effect of media on his decision-making process when describing how his media use has influenced his own ability to make decisions,

As a student advocate, we don't have to use media. In reality, you're going to have a tough time finding anyone who doesn't use media in one way or another. So many people watch viral videos and then decide to do the latest dance or challenge. People are doing dances and challenges they would have never done. I think that people do these things to build a sense of community and they aren't even realizing it. People like to bond over things they're familiar with. I'm guilty of it; I watch viral videos so I can try a challenge or to make fun of it with friends. Maybe I never thought of it like this, but it helps bring us together.

Janet, a freshmen student advocate, noted how her media use has found a way into her leadership practice. She incorporates her love for social media by constantly seeking opportunities to communicate with community members via social media applications such Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. She explains how social media provides her with the ability to reach people she otherwise wouldn't be able to. She further explains how her ability to connect with community members has strengthened her capacity to act as a leader at her school, as she describes,

There have been many times I have struggled to connect with the community. I've tried making posters and putting signs around town, but it never seems to work as well as when we post things on social media. The cool thing about Facebook is we can post things on our school's Facebook page and because hundreds of people follow the school's page, we already know a bunch of people are going to see what's going on. Usually, students use Snapchat and Instagram more, so we're pretty active in making sure that we post pictures there regularly. So, if we are planning to do a community services project, we can promote it by putting

flyers on a few different social media pages. It has really helped us to stay connected, to reach our goals.

Janet noted that using social media in her leadership practice had helped all of her students to either meet or exceed their expectations of connecting with the community in an effort to support current initiatives. In describing the impact of her own media use on her sense of fostering an identity, she summarized it as such, “I think that my voice as a student advocate matters more because of social media. I am able to reach more people and I think that strengthens my voice as a student advocate.”

**Social Media and Gaming: Applications in New Contexts.** It was notable to discover that the majority of the student advocates, seven of the eight interviewed in this study, described having an interest in either social media or gaming media. While it is true that many people, generally speaking, consume either social media or gaming media, to find that the majority in such a small sample of people profess to have such inclinations is a significant effect.

Under the HyperResearch code or category of “Media” many of the student advocates had commented about using some form of social media or gaming media to inform their practice as student leaders. Examining some of their statements on the topic helps us to understand whether these student advocates are simply using social media and gaming media for the sake of entertainment, or whether they also find social media and gaming media to be a way of enhancing their leadership practice.

For most of these student advocates having an interest in social media or gaming media has become a teaching tool for enhancing their understanding of leadership practice. For example, Natasha (a junior student advocate) has had enormous success in

seeking out communication with others via social media use. Her success with this practice started in her own school, spreading with the success of several community project initiatives. The inception of Natasha's ability to communicate with others via social media began with her own personal interest in communicating with peer groups outside of school,

I've always used social media to connect with friends. I can use it on my phone, computer, iPad, watch, whatever; it's just really easy to use. I never received any training on how to use it (social media). It seems pretty obvious; if we use it outside of school to talk with other people, I think it should be used to connect with people in the community too. Student advocates have to be careful when we use it; you really have to think about what you are posting and how other people may look at it. Before I post anything about school, we always run it by other student advocates to make sure it sounds good. Many times, we run it by our principal too.

Natasha described how her previous years serving as a student advocate revealed many of her own weaknesses, one of which being her struggle to effectively communicate with her peers. She noticed however, that she had hundreds of friends on social media. Deciding to make the most of her presence on social media, she thought about what allowed her to garner so many friends online, yet struggle to speak to people in person. She found that social media is a platform that allows for her to communicate in ways that people otherwise are unable to do without social media, as she stated,

I have a bunch of friends on Snapchat; I have a streak going with a few of them.

Here is the big difference though, you can really think about the way you want to

respond to people when you use social media. It all seems like it is fast and sometimes it is, but if you want to, you can really think about it. You have the power to change the way that people see you. You can take pictures at different angles, put filters on them, change them so you look just the way you want to. You can't do that in real-life. So, I can pretty much pick how I want other people to see me and I can send that picture to people all over the world. When you meet with people in person, it is just you, no filters, and that can be tough.

The notion of establishing an identity through social media may seem dishonest to anyone unfamiliar with social media. But as Natasha states, the critical point is not really the use of social media, but the fact that she is actively finding a means to portray herself in a way she prefers to be presented. However, she did stress that using social media as a means to establish identity is incidental to desire to be entertained, saying,

Most of my friends follow the same people on Instagram. We like the same actors and musicians, so we usually look at a lot of the things they like. It is fun to see what people are into. It really isn't about connecting with the celebrity; we never send them messages, but it does give us a chance to see what their lives are like.

While the use of social media may be contemporary, the larger notion of connecting with students in a way that utilizes media in a way that is relevant to their own lives is really key to the issue.

Luke (a sophomore student advocate) similarly noted that media use is an important part of his life and leadership practice, and that he believes every student advocate could find ways to draw their own media usage into their practice.



Gaming is a huge part of my life. I have been gaming since I was young. It is a huge hobby of mine. I probably game a few hours every night. I'm usually gaming online. The cool thing about games is that you get to work towards something. I like to compete, but I also get to play with people I don't even know. It is a challenge to work with people you don't know. I really like that part of playing online; trying to compete and win with people you don't know much about. I definitely think about gaming when I am doing things as a student advocate... mostly the competitive part of things. In some ways, being a student advocate is just like gaming; you are working with other people to try and accomplish something.

The notion that having an interest in gaming would bleed over into student leadership practices was also described by Janet, a freshman student advocate, who described it thusly,

Gaming is something I do. My sister and I like to play videogames every night after dinner. Sometimes, our parents play too. I guess you could say we're a gamer family. I grew up playing games because my parents played them. We played games for fun, but the older I got, I would play for bragging rights. Nothing is worse than losing to your sister. School is pretty much the same way; we compete to see who can get the highest grades. Whenever the student advocates organize something big, I look at it as a win; I go home and brag about it. It shows that I can do things my sister can't.

Janet later described her passion for playing a particular genre of video game, role-playing games. In role-playing games, players such as Janet have the opportunity to

create a fictitious character to live vicariously through in an effort to not only communicate with a virtual community but to also achieve goals which unlock rewards such as new abilities and clothing. She describes her approach to role-playing games, later explaining how it has a direct impact on her desire to both establish her own identity and achieve tasks as a student advocate,

I get sucked into role-playing games. I've spent hours creating my characters. I get to pick what they wear, where they go, and how they act. Then, you get to go on adventures to new places to try and earn things for your character. You even get to talk with other people. You really feel like you're a part of that world. Real life works the same way, the more you get out and explore, the more you learn about yourself. One of the coolest things about being a student advocate is that you start to understand yourself better by just getting involved. When you are a student advocate, you aren't alone. You have other student advocates around you to lean on and help you to make sense of things. I feel the same way about role-playing games; once I am a part of a community, I feel accepted.

Consumption of media such as social media and gaming are prevalent in the personal avocations of these student advocates, and interestingly enough their use of media manifests not just in their perceptions of leadership but it reveals itself in the formation of the student advocates desired identity. Janet, Natasha, and Luke's examples above illustrate the use of social media and/or gaming to construct their sense of identity while influencing their perceptions of leadership practice.

Robert, a freshmen student advocate, is also interested in social media and gaming, as he actively participates both,

I host a Twitch account where people subscribe to my channel and watch me play games. Videogames have been an important part of my life and so is social media. Twitch is the perfect way to blend them together. As people watch me play games, they can comment. I like to respond to their comments. Sometimes, there are too many comments and I can't get to them all. The chat part of Twitch is better than just playing a game because I can talk with other people. I'm not the only person playing. I subscribe to other channels. I can comment while they are playing too...it's just fun. Really, most of the people that I watch play games aren't really the best at playing the game, they just have really funny personalities. I keep that in mind as a student advocate...personality can go a long way.

Robert frequently carries these interests over into the school setting in a more engaging way. This demonstrates again the manner in which media and personal interests meld into perceptions of leadership. It also reveals the nature of student leadership in the manner in which student advocates collectively form their perceptions through their use of media. For example, he sometimes has his fellow student advocates create visual advertisements to describe initiatives, as he explains it,

We have some people that are really creative. They take a bunch of art classes and stuff. I follow them on Instagram. The cool thing is they really like creating promo videos for the school or flyers for things. Social media gives them the opportunity to reach more people and express themselves in a way that is helping a team. Art classes can be fun and stuff, but no one really sees what you're doing

until the art show at the end of the year. Plus, I saw their talents and thought it would be great for them to contribute. We all have different skills.

Robert talked about other student advocates merging their personal interests with social media and leadership practices. In this way he engages in identifying how social media can be used as a tool for student advocates to express themselves while simultaneously working towards leadership initiatives. This not only makes the use of social media more conducive for leadership practice, it assists in allowing a variety of skills to be practiced within the scope of leadership efforts. This allows student advocates the benefit of including their personal interests within their leadership practice. Equally as important is Robert's ability to use his role as a leader to manage the tasks of his peers, realizing the skills of his peers and how they can be expressed via media use in an effort to attain goals such as raising awareness of the school or promoting initiatives. As he describes,

It is pretty simple. I think everyone should be doing things that they enjoy. If you see that someone is good at something or that they like doing it, you should probably find a way to include it in what they do as a leader. I am not the only one who makes those decisions. Usually, we decide as a group that someone should be in charge of certain things because that is what they are good at. Senior student advocates have the final say though; if they don't agree with something, they aren't shy about it. Most of the time, we don't disagree about those things. Funny thing is, we follow each other on social media, and it becomes obvious what people are into because they like certain posts or share information about themselves.

Robert's description of media use by student advocates cuts to the core of how social media can be used as a means to not only establish one's identity, but for others to form assumptions about others. As Robert expressed, many individuals give away subtle cues about themselves through the content they like and share. The consumption of social media often leads to a collective understanding of how a person should be perceived or in some cases, establishing the individual's desires and abilities to perform tasks. He describes how his use of gaming can often serve as tool for understanding others as well,

When I'm on Twitch, watching other gamers, I usually watch them because they make me laugh. The more you watch them, the more you start to understand their personality too. I'll find myself saying some of the same jokes they make in front of my friends. My friends laugh at the same jokes too. It isn't just about jokes though. They are usually really good at gaming too and I can learn how to get a little better at some games too. Sometimes, too, I will watch them play games I have never played before. If I'm not sure about whether or not I want to buy a game, I just watch other people play it. If the people I follow on Twitch play a game I wasn't sure about, I usually get it because I trust them.

What occurs as a common thread among many of these student advocates is a tendency to allow their everyday use of social media and gaming to construct their collective perceptions of themselves as well as others and to further reinforce their use of social media to best understand the world around them. In other words, the consumption of social media and games is something that naturally flows into their leadership practice.

It seems abundantly clear in the described experiences of these student advocates that social media and gaming do influence their ability to collectively form perceptions of

themselves and others. The manner in which media consumption manifests in their leadership practices is frequently established through their avocations. However, social media and gaming allow an outlet for student advocates to express these interests.

This is an important point because it recognizes that media consumption nor avocations alone dictate the perceptions these student advocates form of themselves, their leadership practice, and others. In the previous discussion of the first research question, it was noted that several of the themes that arose from student advocate's perceptions of leadership were also hallmarks in what they identify as effective leadership. This is true in several themes such as peer influence or real-world (authentic leadership), and it serves to further solidify their use of social media and gaming as a means to cultivate an understanding of leadership. Ultimately, the relationship between social media use, gaming, and leadership is complex with areas of crossover and overlap. But on the topic of collective meaning making or the use of media and its place in the fabric of leadership, we are in an area that is uniquely and definitively connected.

The concept of media usage in avocations or outside life vs. media usage in leadership accomplishment is somewhat analogous to the "little c" (everyday creativity) vs. "Big C" (sublime creativity) paradigm discussed by researchers such as Barbot and Karwowski (2016). Barbot and Karwowski, among other creative researchers, assert that sublime creativity is most essential in understanding a topic. However, the lived experiences of these student advocates indicate that everyday media usage, often pertaining to personal avocations, has a profound impact on the way people attain their sublime leadership perspectives. Moreover, this connects to the Deweyan idea of "Art as Experience," which asserts there is an inseparable link between the classical aesthetic

experience of art and everyday activities and experiences. Dewey claimed that in order to understand aesthetic or learning experiences, one must first attain a grasp of understanding daily life. This makes aesthetic and learning experiences relevant to the individual (Dewey, 1934). As Dewey states,

So extensive and subtly pervasive are the ideas that set art on upon a remote pedestal, that many a person would be repelled rather than pleased if told that he enjoyed his casual recreations, at least in part, because of their aesthetic quality. The arts which today have most vitality for the average person are the things he does not take to be arts; for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip...The task is to restore confidence between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience. (Dewey, p. 5, 1934)

From this perspective, we can begin to see the connection between media usage and the process in which student advocates collectively form their sense of perspective. As Dewey suggested, there is a continuity of creative experiences that extends into areas of our lives. Similarly, social media consumption proves to be a constant in the daily lives of student advocates, propelling their collective understanding of not only their personal avocations but their leadership as well.

**Broadcast Media: Entertaining Influences.** While I have noted the varied means of media consumption by these student advocates, it is important to recognize that broadcast media was also a significant form of media consumed by the student advocates in this study; and this form of media consumption has its place in forming perceptions of

self and others. This fact is important in considering the collective meaning making process of these student advocates.

The student advocates' comments on this topic were organized in HyperResearch under the code "Broadcast Media." Specifically, seven of the student advocates talked about consuming broadcast media. It is interesting and notable to see that broadcast media is prevalent amongst these student advocates. Moreover, their comments on the subject regularly credit it with improving their leadership practice and thinking in general.

Tony discussed the impact of broadcast media on his thought process, noting that it was a key contributor to him formulating new ideas,

Watching movies helps me to think. Whenever I watch movies, I think about the story in one way or another. Movies are probably the best way to get your brain to come up with new ideas. After you watch a movie you come up with 1,000 good ideas. I really like going to the movies with friends. We usually talk about it afterwards...talk about parts we liked or didn't. Sometimes, one of us understands the movie differently than someone else too.

Tony asserts that watching movies allows for him to discover new ideas without the assistance of peer interactive. However, Tony does describe a notion that broadcast media consumption incites thinking that often results in discussion with peers. While discussing his perceptions of a movie's narrative with peers, he is simultaneously exposed to ideas he otherwise would have not considered. Interestingly enough, he has identified two ways in which consuming broadcast media has impacted his thought process.



Tony has found watching movies to be useful as an avocation and as a motivator in his ability to enhance his thinking skills. He reflected on this fact to further consider how the act of watching movies causes him to better understand the world around him,

I usually watch movies to relax; to get away from things for a while. It doesn't feel like I have to work really hard to think about movies. Looking at a movie is just relaxing. You kind of let yourself get lost in another world or character. You picture yourself in those worlds. It makes you think about the world you live in too. There isn't a pressure to get something right.

Carol noted that she has been watching movies ever since she was a toddler. She described the ways in which her exposure to movies at a young age has allowed her to develop a lot of "good ideas while taking couch vacations."

My family isn't really like other families. Not in a bad way. We just don't have the money to go to Florida during spring break or go on road trips, stuff like that. Ever since I was little, my dad would ask us if we wanted to go on "couch vacations." That was his way of spending time with us and escaping the real-world for a bit. We would watch movies together. I'd usually ask him a bunch of questions the entire time. Now that I am older, I feel like he is the one asking questions all of the time.

The connection between viewing movies and cultivating focused-thinking was something that was commented on by all of the other student advocates who claimed to consume broadcast media. Hank discussed the way in which another form of broadcast media, music, helps with this process for him,

I love listening to music. Unfortunately, not all of my teachers let us listen to music. I think it's a silly rule. I mean, I guess I could see how it would be a distraction for some people. Not for me. Music helps me to focus, relax...put me in a good mood. I don't know about you, but the more relaxed I am, the better I am at thinking about things.

The notion that media consumption and avocations have an innate relation to perceptions of self and others was also discussed by Tony who felt, similar to the other student advocates, that consumption of broadcast media provided clarity of mind that helped improve his thinking in general, as he put,

I like watching movies and tv the most. I watched a lot of tv with my brother growing up. His leukemia meant he wasn't able to go outside and play basketball with other kids in the neighborhood...do stuff like that. Not going to lie, I really didn't like my brother when I was little. I felt like no one ever paid attention to me because of him. But that didn't stop us from watching tv together. A lot of times, I used tv to give me focus. To wipe everything clean, so I can concentrate on something other than reality. I still do that. Funny thing is, once the tv is off and I am back to reality, I usually think about how things relate to what I just watched.

Steve also connected the notion that broadcast media consumption was useful for improving his thought processes in the sense that, for him, watching movies provides not just an avocation but a means of finding time to energize his thinking,

Movies are my favorite kind of media. For me, I like to watch anime. Balance is important too. So, I don't sit around and watch movies all day. I like to go on walks, and I have a job. The cool thing about anime is that it isn't really like other

movies. It's over the top with really powerful people, crazy planets...not anything like real life. Watching anime speeds up my brain. If I am feeling really tired from school, I go home, sit down, and watch some anime. I always feel more energized afterwards.

But as he further described, consuming broadcast media was useful not only for energizing his thoughts, but also for establishing clarity in his thought process,

One of the worst parts about school is that you're constantly moving from one class to the next. It's like you're flipping a switch in your brain to learn about different things every hour. That can wear on your brain. We aren't allowed to watch movies on our phone, computer, or anything like that. When I go home and watch some anime, it lets my brain take a break from school. Once the movie is done, I usually think about school or things that I need to do as a student advocate.

This notion of broadcast media consumption influencing the thought processes of these student advocates is something that Steve noticed in his own avocations, as well as those of the student advocates around him, as he puts,

It sounds like everyone here likes media. Most of us have talked about liking movies and social media. Maybe it is just a coincidence. I think our opinions matter as student advocates too. Looks like we may share some opinions. People at school usually listen to what we have to say because they know that we are going to stick up for them. I don't really know what this means.

Student advocates discussed examples from their own leadership practice that clustered around several themes: *leadership as a mindset, real-world or "authentic"*

*practice, peer influence, and taking risks.* All of the student advocates described having a relationship with a variety of different media. Each student advocate described how media consumption influenced their perception of self, others, and the world around them, impacting their leadership perceptions. The most prevalent forms of media being consumed were social media, gaming media, and broadcast media. Social media and gaming media were described for their ability to allow for ways in which student advocates may construct a sense of identity while simultaneously pursuing personal avocations. This proved to be significant for these student advocates who routinely mentioned a perceived connection between their leadership practice and their involvement in activities outside of school. Conversely, Broadcast media was frequently noted as an outlet to not only be entertained through, but to also relax, and cultivate new, potentially more creative ideas. Similarly, student advocates routinely mentioned a desire to approach their leadership with creative ideas.

### **Research Question 2 Analysis: When Superhero Narratives Meet Leaders**

Q2) What is the relationship, if any, between student leadership and superhero narratives?

In this research question the findings of this study are that superhero narratives are both important and highly valuable, in the experiences of these student advocates. “The Seven C’s” of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development: consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship were coded as separate transdisciplinary themes in HyperResearch. This was done in an effort to identify areas in which superhero narratives were either stronger, weaker, or absent from connecting to student leadership. Generally

speaking, values tended to be used in different but particular ways, as revealed and interpreted in the nature of the student advocates comments and responses to a variety of superhero narratives.

***Consciousness of self*** was thought to be integral in establishing an awareness of the attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and values that motivate leaders to act. ***Congruence*** was noted in being useful for determining the consistency in which a leader's behaviors and thoughts align with authenticity and honesty. ***Commitment*** was seen as establishing motivation amongst peers through duration, intensity, and passion. ***Collaboration*** was discussed for its ability to empower individuals and groups to work with one another through trust. ***Common purpose*** was considered in working with shared goals and values. ***Controversy with civility*** was identified as leaders openly and respectfully airing differences in opinion. ***Citizenship*** was noted for developing a sense of responsibility towards community through leadership experience. Essentially, themes amongst superhero narratives were highly valuable and relevant within these student advocates' understanding of leadership, each in their own way.

**Consciousness of self.** As the first value of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development it is the first step in developing effective leaders. Being conscious of one's self involves paying close attention to their own attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and values. The student advocates in this study generally saw consciousness of self as essential in developing an awareness of themselves, their learning, and leadership involvement. *All commented on the value of developing a greater understanding of who they are. This was evident in their response to Action Comics 1.*

Natasha discussed the importance of being conscious of one's self and noted it as an important skill not just for having a good overall sense of yourself, but in identifying opportunities to act as a leader, as she stated,

I don't think that Clark Kent was born knowing he was going to be a hero. He was saved by his family when they sent him away from his home planet and he crash-landed in a new place. Really, no one knew of his abilities until he was brought to the orphanage. While he was there, he lifted a huge chair and people were really impressed by his strength. As he got older, he learned throughout the comic that he has powers others do not have. Sometimes people don't realize what they are capable of until they are around others so that they have something to compare themselves to. Maybe, if he didn't know what he was capable of he wouldn't feel like he needs to help.

In this way, consciousness of self may be a skill that is developed over time, depending on exposure to new contexts and people. The ability to identify opportunities to act as a leader may align with one's perception of self. Natasha noted that she felt "consciousness of self" is an ability that she is highly focused on in general, and that this aids in her leadership, as she commented,

I definitely pay close attention to the world around me... some of the differences in things that others may not see. Paying attention to details helps my leadership because I'm always looking for ways to help out others. I don't think that I would spot chances to help others if I didn't understand myself first. I know what it is like to struggle or to feel like your voice doesn't matter; I don't want that for others.

As a senior student advocate, Steve also remarked on the fact the he felt he has a strong sense of self, and that it has helped him deal with a variety of leadership situations. He commented on the importance of understanding self, saying,

The key to being a great leader is being able to separate yourself from a situation, so that you can understand how your actions will impact others. If you don't understand yourself, it can be difficult to really understand some assumptions that you may have. Superman is aware of his different super powers and I think he knows when he should or shouldn't be using them. It's obvious that he is using his powers for good and I think he knows it too. I think that Superman sees himself as a superhero and because of that he feels the need to be a leader. If he didn't believe in himself, he could easily be wasting his powers.

This ability to make objective observations about one's abilities has thereby been a benefit in handling some of the stressful situations of leadership (e.g. troubled students), that might otherwise cause anxiety. The objectivity of self-reflection can thereby lead to a more accurate or constructive analysis of leadership practice. Luke has found this to be the case. He has found observation of self to be so critical in his maturation as a leader that he identified a similar pattern in Action Comics 1,

Superman wasn't always a man; he was a baby before everything. It took him awhile to grow into himself. I think there is a reason why the comic didn't show him as a baby for very long. Babies are spending more time figuring out the world around them than they spend figuring out themselves. If you want to have a positive impact on the world around you, you need to first understand the world

around you and how that shapes who you are. I have to know what each student needs at my school and I have to be observant to them all, including myself.

In this statement, Luke has not only highlighted the importance of self-observation as a first step toward effective leadership, he noted that it is important to his work as a student advocate in being observant about his peers and their needs.

Janet echoed this notion of self-observation as a critical skill in gauging peers. She explained how she needs to observe carefully to understand her own thoughts and emotions, but also identify ideas that might be useful in her leadership practice.

I definitely think about how the school can have a positive impact on my attitude; I'll be the first to admit that I try and gauge situations that are happening at school. I want to make sure that if I am talking with other students, I'm hearing what they are saying and doing, treating others the way that I want to be treated. It looks like Superman is doing the same as he is saving people. Maybe in some way or another, Superman saving other people helps to save himself in some ways.

Hank further stressed the significance of being observant of one's self as he compared his views on leadership to that of what he believes Superman's would be. He noted that being able to observe one's self is a skill that he had honed through his practice as a student advocate, and that it extended into other areas of his life,

Well, I have been accused of being able to find issues at our school that maybe others don't notice or maybe they don't want to talk about them. Something that I think is different about Superman and being a student advocate is that no one knows who Superman is. He has a secret identity and I think that allows him to do some things that maybe he couldn't do if his identity wasn't hidden. Me, I don't



get to put on a cape and change my hair. My classmates know that I am a student advocate while at school, home, or out spending time with friends. I can't really escape the decisions that I make; well, I guess I could if I moved completely or never went back to school. Knowing that I can't escape being a student advocate helps me to stay focused outside of school as well; I feel like I have a reputation to keep.

Hank's comments emphasized the value of self-observation when determining appropriate behaviors in a variety of contexts, i.e. school, home, and public settings. Highly skilled leaders must be able to notice a variety of things in their own respective contexts, right down to body language and subtleties of communication with peers. He noted that not only is self-observation a critical leadership skill, it is one that allows individuals to identify the importance of their actions in a variety of contexts. This falls in line with Komives and Wagners' (2016) framework for Social Change Development, and the fact that they can be learned, taught, and developed both inside and outside of their responsibilities within the school.

Carol highlighted the significance of self-observational skills not only in managing the groups of student advocates she works with, but for managing student conflicts and developing a community of learners as well. Additionally, being conscious of one's self aids in being able to learn and develop as a leader, she stated,

Being able to pause and think about your feelings gives you a chance to make better decisions. Sometimes, I think, people make decisions that come straight from their emotions without a lot of thought going behind them and this could be bad. Superman acts fast, but he can do that because he has an understanding of

what is right and what is wrong...to him and others. To me, most people aren't like Superman because they act out of emotion and sometimes later regret their choices. But, mistakes aren't always so bad if you learn from them.

Tony also talked about self-observational skills as a way of thinking that impacts his learning and appreciation for leadership. He observed that careful and curious observation about himself and topics pertaining to leadership practice is a desirable skill for student advocates, because he believes leaders should be engaged in learning. Prior research on student leadership has also found effective leaders to be engaged in self-reflective practices to enhance consciousness of self (Castelli, 2016). Tony commented,

Superman learns through doing, by saving others. What makes him special is when he saves people, they never tell him not to save them or get angry at him. Superman knows what is right, but he never really practiced how to stop a war from happening or how to save people that have been wrongfully convicted. He just kept putting himself out there and learning that what he was doing was right because the people around him accepted him for it.

Robert's remarks on "consciousness of self" noted the importance of a leader identifying their own values when acting, but like Tony, he also signaled the importance of understanding the values of others, saying,

It is important that a leader is confident in their decisions and I don't think confidence comes from a place of doubt. One thing that is important about being a leader is understanding how others see situations too. It is pretty much impossible to be a leader and have everyone's values be exactly the same. Reading the

Superman comic left me wondering if Superman would have stopped saving people if they told him to go away and never come back.

Robert also broadened this discussion of self-consciousness, to describe the fact that it is essential in identifying leaders, as he noted,

The Story of Superman would be totally different if he sat back and thought about how he could use his powers to hurt instead of help others. I do think that Superman could have easily been angry about not being raised by his own parents and not knowing much about where he was from, but he wasn't. They never really explained it, but he made the decision to use his powers for good. You've got to be aware of yourself, to be a great leader. You have to be aware of the world around you too...and then do something positive with it.

**Congruence.** As the second value in the Social Change Model of Leadership Development covered by this study, congruence works in two parts, including the act of recognizing thoughts and behaviors that are authentic and honest and the consistency in which these behaviors and thoughts occur. Consistency, in this study, involves recognizing repeated actions as well as irregularity in the patterning of these actions, while the recognition of thoughts that are authentic and honest in nature occurs through the identification of these patterns of action and the extent in which they align with the leader's self-proclaimed attitudes. *The student advocates in this study recognized congruence as an essential skill in being able to understand and assess the effectiveness of a perceived leader; this was evident in their continued analysis of Action Comics 1.*

Natasha identified with the concept of congruence in leadership, though she has frequently thought about it as dealing exclusively with understanding her peers, as she described,

Superman is consistent in how he treats other people. It is obvious to me that he is a good guy; someone who is going to protect other people. He responds to people who are in danger. I try and help students that need help. I try to help people in our community too. You know, if you see someone who comes to school every day and they just look run down, day after day, that is different than someone who comes to school and is struggling with something and then are great the next day. Those are two different situations that probably need different supports. Either way, it is about helping other people, regardless of their situation.

In this way, Natasha's notion of congruence corresponds to the Social Change Model of Leadership Development in that she looks for trends and commonalities in potential opportunities to assist others as a leader, and then problem solves by establishing authentic connections with her peers.

Steve noted that as an effective leader, he needs to be able to see abnormalities amongst peer student advocates in dealing with individual students, community members, events at school, or even in the community, as he stated,

Superman works alone. He doesn't have a side kick or someone to keep him in check. A good thing about being a student advocate is that we work in teams. We are constantly working to help out around the school, and it is obvious when someone does something that is out of character. Plus, students around school are quick to point out if we handle situations of conflict different for them than we

did for others. This is good though, it keeps everyone honest and we try to be, but mistakes happen too. Superman doesn't really make mistakes. He swoops in to save the day, without anyone to help him, and he doesn't fail. I could see if he was failing, he might look for a sidekick.

Luke commented on the difficulty of congruence in leadership practice, particularly in instances of student conflict. This ability to take responsibility for one's actions is useful in him solving problems or stabilizing trusting relationships, as he explained

People trust Superman because he is dependable and consistent. There are even sometimes when Superman acts quick enough before more people can even realize that there is a problem. I don't think people would trust Superman if he started to use his powers to do evil things. Sometimes, we have to deal with a student conflict and other students who aren't aware of everything that is going on might accuse us as not being fair or that we are playing favorites, and that is tough. We are in a position where sometimes fair isn't so clear. These Superman stories don't have any room for confusing; he is clearly the good guy.

Janet remarked on the importance of congruent behavior in that as a student advocate she needs to be able to emphasize her sincerity and honesty in hopes of not only gaining trust but also establishing the opportunity to potentially serve as a student advocate in the future, she noted,

Everyone trusts that Superman is doing the right thing. They keep letting him save them and they don't freak out when they see him. This has to be true because he has never given them a reason to not trust them. I have to look at being a student

advocate the same way. If I mess up and do something I shouldn't be doing, people won't vote for me to be a student advocate my sophomore year. I feel like I have something to prove.

Hank also focused on the need for congruence in his peers understanding the extent of his sincerity as a student advocate. He noted some questions he asks himself in examining the leadership practices of himself and others, as he stated,

Superman looks for opportunities to help and he does a great job of it. As awesome as he is, even he can't help everyone. For every person that he saved in Action Comics 1 there had to have been a bunch more in trouble too. You have to ask yourself how you decide what is worth your time as a leader? How is your answer going to show what you value? Are you consistent with your decisions?

Carol also emphasized the fact that understanding one's motivations was a skill that allows for them to fine-tune their leadership practice. Like Hank, she identifies the need for introspection to evaluate the extent in which individuals are congruent.

Interestingly enough, she sees how the need to prioritize tasks can create a misunderstanding of congruence by peers.

The people seem so helpless. I don't know if they really needed a superhero to save them. Some of the situations like the lady that was wrongly convicted of murder, she definitely needed Superman, but others seemed unnecessary. When Superman chased down the car that was holding Lois hostage, he smashes the car with his hands. I can see how some people would see that as not being consistent; he was willing to possibly kill other people to save Lois. When I read that, I thought that Superman was less about saving people and more about looking out

for what he values most. Superman even threatens to later smash a lobbyist into the ground for trying to convince politicians to start a war. For me, Superman reads like a comic that doesn't trust leadership.

Tony sees congruence as being a vital component of leadership practice. He attempts to foster habits that demonstrate an honest effort to improve his school and community in authentic ways, as he noted,

The whole idea behind Superman is that he is always there to save the day. I don't think of myself as saving the day. I do know that I care about our community and it is fun for me to take on projects that can help others. I'd like to think that I have been involved enough ways to show other students that I care about others. From leukemia fundraising to things like being an office aid at the school, I am just trying to help as much as possible. Yeah, Superman is definitely the kind of leader that has been helpful enough times that people can start to predict when he could probably come to the rescue. The stories become predictable; they show how something is going wrong and at no point do I ever think that Superman won't come to the rescue.

Robert highly identified with the concept of congruence, and similar to his focus in connecting with his peers in authentic ways, he proactively seeks opportunities to demonstrate his interest in providing authentic connections between his school and community.

Superman doesn't stay put in the office as Clark Kent. He gets out and uses his powers for good. Everything that Superman does is to make the world a better place. I think that this connects him to the community better. People know who he

is and that he will fight for good. People don't know that he is Clark Kent. So, you don't see people at Clark Kent's work expecting him to save the day, but you do see him consistently getting out and saving the day. The cool thing about Clark Kent is that he is a reporter so he can then post stories about how great Superman is; this strengthens Superman's image because he is always thought of as a good guy.

His comments on congruence signal the importance of consistency in how it relates to not only how leaders act but also how they are perceived by others; he has not only tied this into his perceptions of leadership but directly into his practice as well.

**Commitment.** Commitment is the third value of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development discussed with the student advocates participating in this study. Commitment involves establishing motivation amongst peers through duration, intensity, and passion. This is often done by concentrating on a particular goal and involving one's ideas and leadership processes to be driven by their respective goal, in order to boil it down to basics and grasp its essence; the use of social comparison may be used in determining commitment as well, which involves drawing comparisons between a group of similarly positioned individuals. *The student advocates in this study found commitment to be an extremely useful skill in their leadership practice, in that it helps them to clarify and explain the degree in which they not only trust peer student advocates but also their perception of one's ability to invest in their role as a leader; this was evident in their response to The Adventures of Superman (1945).*

Natasha noted the importance of commitment in her leadership, in that she at times needs to continually try to consider her position as a student advocate.



I think that Superman and Batman are motivated to solve the mystery and find their friends. As leaders, they know their friends are depending on them and giving up really isn't an option. They didn't get the answers they were looking for, but that didn't stop them; they just continued to ask new questions. You know, the story leaves you wondering what happens next because it stops before they solve the mystery. As a leader, many of my goals aren't solved in a day and new questions pop up all of the time. I think this is what makes being a student advocate an exciting thing, finding the answers to tough questions.

Similarly, Steve sees commitment as a vital part of leadership, and he attempts to cultivate and foster the skill of commitment in his fellow student advocates, stating,

The whole idea of commitment is making sense of not only the challenges we face but how we respond to them. Commitment can look different for different people, but I usually just look at it as not giving up. Some people may say there is more to it like having a love for something, but I don't agree with that. For me, commitment is about sticking things out, even when you don't want to. My classmates know that I am focused on achieving goals and I don't give up. I think that helps motivate them to be committed too. Batman and Superman are committed to finding their friends. They have to deal with a really annoying police officer, but that doesn't stop them.

So, in this way, commitment is recognized as a skill related to one's ability to not only respond to adversity but to also communicate to others their desire to achieve tasks.

Luke also discussed that as a student advocate he must demonstrate commitment to his peers. In acting as a student advocate, he works towards achieving a series of goals

to communicate to others that he is dedicated in his efforts as a leader, even when he may have limited resources,

I'm committed because I know that there are a lot of people that depend on me. I also don't like to let other people down when I know I have the opportunity to help them out. It is one thing to see that there is something wrong, but it is a totally different thing to ask yourself how you respond to it. When people see you responding in ways that show you care and even when it is tough, they start to believe in your commitment. Superman and Batman were committed to saving their friends. Commitment was their superpower, not flying or strength and I thought that was pretty cool. Sometimes you have to fix things without superpowers.

Janet also acknowledged her efforts in being committed to her role as a student advocate and how those efforts extend beyond the position,

The thing that comes to mind when I think about commitment is that it isn't something that you can just turn on and off. It is pretty simple to me. Either you are committed, or you are not. If Batman and Superman decided that they knew about the missing people and decided not to try and find them, we would probably wonder how committed they were. This is something that makes superheroes pretty predictable; you can usually bet that they are going to be committed to stopping bad things from happening. They are the same way when they aren't wearing their costumes too; you don't see them magically not caring about people. I think it is the same way for student advocates; we have to be caring in school and outside of school.

Thereby identifying the need for leaders to be consistent in their efforts both inside and outside of the contexts they serve. In her case, she identifies her context as the school and the outside as her community. Janet noted she often looks for connections between community and school. She defined this aspect of commitment as creating authentic connections in her practice,

The biggest thing about being a student advocate is that it is a job that asks you to help other people. I've learned this by working with other student advocates. I was never told this, but it seems pretty obvious to me. I don't think that Batman or Superman were ever told by other people that they need to be saving the world. Sometimes, when you want to have a positive impact, you just do it because it feels right, not because you are seen as a leader or because you are told to. I feel like if I wasn't a student advocate I would still try and help people. It may look different because I wouldn't have the same people to lean on, but I think that when someone wants to do good things, they look for ways to do it wherever they are. Look, Batman and Superman were at a carnival and they were still looking for ways to help others.

This understanding of commitment was a frequent consideration for Janet, and she portrayed how she was able to tackle complex concepts with her peers, by demonstrating consistent actions with fellow student advocates. She explained another example,

It is true, actions speak louder than words. My parents have always told me that and I think it has been working pretty well for me as a student advocate. I don't talk much during our meetings, but the other student advocates know that I am

willing to work hard on projects. I show up early to meetings; I volunteer my time on the weekends to be involved in things like a charity run we had at the beginning of the year, and I am the first person to volunteer to show students and their families around the school. When it comes time to make big decisions on projects, a lot of the older student advocates look to me because I feel like I have proved myself. I really don't talk much; maybe that is why they listen when I do; I don't know.

Hank also described how commitment was helpful to him in explaining consistency in a way that people can more easily relate to. He noted how he often does this through his involvement in extracurricular activities, stating,

I wish I was Superman. I like to take what I learn from outside of school to help what I am doing inside of school. Baseball is my passion and I have learned a lot playing baseball. You need to show up every day and that means even when you don't want to. It isn't easy to keep doing things when you have distractions.

Batman and Superman worked together to solve a mystery, but they just automatically trusted each other. I don't automatically have that kind of trust with other student advocates. In some ways, you have to prove yourself. It's like baseball, if you don't give up on yourself, people will believe that you won't give up on them. A big part of not giving up on yourself is being committed to improving.

Carol furthered this notion of commitment in order to move from abstract concepts of leadership to more concrete initiatives, as she stated this helped her fellow student advocates to think in more complex ways, "Without a doubt, I think of big ideas

without knowing how to accomplish them, knowing it will take a lot of work to make them come to life. And then once we figure out a plan, my goal is to follow through with achieving our goals.”

Tony also underscored how critical commitment is in the realm of leadership practice. Commitment for him is again about consistency. He noted that this is how he is naturally inclined to think about leadership, because this is how he behaves himself, stating,

Superman and Batman were similar to student advocates. We both have to be consistent and we are both held to a different standard. I don't think that I deserve the opportunity to slack. Part of being a student advocate is constantly caring about other people. I guess there is something that is different about us and superheroes; we have people watching over us. The police officer was helping Superman and Batman, but a police officer couldn't prevent them from doing what they wanted to do, even if he tried. Us, we have principals that keep us in check. We know that if we slip with our grades or behavior we can be removed. It has happened in the past and it has been really embarrassing for the person losing their position.

Robert stressed the importance of commitment in leadership because it helps clarify the most important parts of an individual's leadership practice. In essence, the behaviors that an individual habitually engages in reveals aspects of their values or desires if not their competency in their position. And like many other student advocates in this study, Robert found commitment to be a crucial aspect to the paradigm of teaching, he observed,

You can tell they want to solve the mystery. They keep asking people questions and not giving up. They are asking questions because they are trying to find help. They were able to get some answers because of the policeman they found. I don't think the policeman would have answered their questions if he didn't know that they were good people. As soon as they showed up the policeman made a comment about recognizing batman because of what he was wearing. It is small things like being committed to look a certain way that can show other people that you care. With superheroes it is about what they have done in the past and how they look. Both of those things build trust between them and others. Batman and Superman have built trust with people because they have been committed to helping out people in the past this allows them to be leaders with less doubt in the present or future.

In Robert's perceptions of leadership practice, as with all of the student advocates in this study, commitment is a central cog in acting and establishing a reputation as a dependable leader, and he noted the importance of superhero narratives in communicating this notion,

Stories like this show that commitment builds a trusting relationship between leaders and their peers. We know the values of superheroes, so we trust them. I think that superheroes can teach us a lot about how our identity is formed. This has allowed me to think about how I act and the decisions I focus on; how these things are either different from what I usually do or not.

**Collaboration.** The fourth value of collaboration involves two skills, the ability to work in groups and the capacity to garner trust through working relationships. For the purpose

of this study, “working in groups” is described as the social interaction student advocates engage in while working with no fewer than one other person in an effort to achieve a common goal. Trust is demonstrated through the student advocates expressed understanding that the individuals they work alongside are perceived as reliable. *The student advocates in this study found the skill of collaboration to be highly beneficial for helping to make leadership active and engaging for students.* They noted a variety of ways in which *The Adventures of Superman* (1945) demonstrates collaborative practices and how their practice as student advocates embodies the importance of collaboration.

Natasha commented on the importance of collaboration in her school and described the way that she ties it directly in with her community service projects. She then explained how her efforts as a student advocate align with the radio narrative presented to her, as she stated,

It may involve reaching out to community partners to get students more excited or something as easy as just talking with classmates about how they want to handle things. Batman reached out to the police officer for help. The police officer answered his questions and did his best to help him. Usually, I don’t think of superheroes as needing help from average people. When I think of superheroes, I think of people that can solve things by themselves. But, look, there are two superheroes that need help from a normal person. To me, I don’t think that student advocates are exactly like superheroes, but we definitely work with other people to try and fix things.

Natasha also noted the importance of working collaboratively to help strengthen her relationship with peers. She encourages an active, hands-on approach to her

leadership practices, so that she can get a real sense of what it feels like to work with other people in a variety of contexts, which she believes strengthens her ability to build trust, as she noted,

I do things like encouraging other students to try and work with each other. Sometimes, it can be tough to work with people you don't know because it just doesn't feel comfortable. We try and make things less awkward by pairing students together with common interests. You know, like community service day, people volunteer their time doing things that they are interested in like helping out at the animal shelter. I think this gives an opportunity for people to bond over something, start to trust one another and maybe make a friend. Looks like Superman and Batman are bonding because they both are looking for missing people. They definitely have that in common.

Steve also emphasized a collaborative approach to his leadership practice, describing the variety of ways he collaborates with others. This has helped him find ways to communicate with others in ways that incite expedient change, as he states,

I think that you can be more successful when you work in teams. Sometimes people look at things differently than you and that helps to make better decisions. People don't just see things differently; they also like to work together in different ways. We have a group we started on Snapchat; we text each other or send pictures. We also have a group calendar. These are different things that help us stay connected and make it way easier to work together. Sometimes, it is difficult for us to all sit down; I think it would be tough to stay connected if we didn't have our phones.



Steve has taken the concept of collaboration and described the ways in which student advocates try to stay connected to their peers. He described how it has become an important aspect of his practice. He then went on to compare his practice to the radio narrative,

There is no way this story is recent. I can tell by the voices; it sounds really old. I'm pretty sure that Batman uses technology to fight crime, but this story made it seem like he had nothing. Maybe if the story was newer, he would be using his tools to solve where the missing people were. These people are all working together by pretty much just talking to each other. If they had phones, Batman and Superman could have got text messages from the police officer and the police officer could have just stayed at where they first met. Now, the police officer has to leave where he was to help them. I think a phone just would have made things easier.

Not only has Steve adopted this concept of collaboration into his own leadership practice, but in his development as a leader and his work with new people, he stressed the need for this kind of activity and its ability to reinforce successful habits, commenting,

Connecting with other people is important. But, it is more than just connecting; it is about working with other people, learning about them, and trying to come up with chances to be successful. I definitely think that I have learned how to be a student advocate by working with other student advocates. I have watched other student advocates call local businesses or reach out to other students and as a freshman or sophomore, it was an opportunity for me to be like, "wow, okay, so this is how it is done, and this is why it is important..." But you really know that

you are having success when people tell you that you are. I've had other principals recognize the work that we do. That's exciting for me – motivates me to try my best. It makes a difference to have those connections.

Luke noted the importance of his collaboration in that it not only helps to establish purpose to the tasks he pursues as a student advocate, it plays directly into a student population that is inclined towards working with one another, as he stated,

Students here are really into working with each other. I think that working with other people is huge. Whether we are in project groups for our classes or working together during clubs; our school is all about teamwork. A lot of times, working with other people helps make what you're doing feel like it is really important, because you are working as a team.

In her leadership practice, Janet has found different ways to integrate collaboration to achieve goals. She described how she has students work together to resolve conflict rather than assume disciplinary measures enacted by principals will result in positive change, as she stated,

You can't really be successful when you work with other people unless you are willing to meet them in the middle and understand where they are coming from. There were many times that Batman and Superman weren't getting the answers they were looking for. They could have easily gotten into an argument with the police officer. They stayed calm and kept listening, asking more questions. One of the most important things to do when you are working with other people is to let them talk and to let yourself listen to them. When we have people that are arguing at school, we meet with them to get their view on things. Once we understand

where everyone is coming from, we sit down and give them the chance to talk about things in front of a student advocate and a teacher. We all work together to make the discussion positive and usually people leave our meetings feeling better. Sometimes when kids get in trouble with the principal they just walk away upset and do the same thing again. When we include everyone that is involved, we give them a chance to have their voice be heard.

In addition to integrating collaborative practices in resolving issues of conflict, Janet sees value in giving her peers the opportunity to work alongside one another, to focus and wake up their desire to work with others, as she remarked,

Sometimes I'll notice my classmates get frustrated or angry. I can usually tell because they are acting different in class. Like, they are quiet when they usually aren't, stuff like that. I don't want them to feel lonely, so I try and be there for them. Maybe, like the police officer was with Batman and Superman. He could see that they needed help and that they were stuck. I don't think that is normal for superheroes to get help like that, but they needed it. Maybe it will help them to solve the mystery, but I never really found out.

Janet cited examples other than helping classmates deal with their emotions where she used collaborative strategies within her practice as a leader, using some simple collaborative techniques,

Groups are more successful when they work together. There is a big difference between being in a group and working together on things. I've made the mistake of grouping students together for community service projects based only on their interests. You have to also think about personalities of people in groups and how

it can help or hurt if they're going to be successful. Not just personalities, but also thinking about what people are good at. When we start projects, we know which student advocates are good at making advertisement things like posters, public speaking, or organizing things. When people are taking on challenges that match what they are good at, they will probably be more involved. The tough thing is when you have someone that clearly doesn't want to try. This is when it is more important, to really think about how the other people could help motivate them.

Like Janet, Hank also uses collaborative practices designed to get his classmates engaged. He sees this as a chance to get their attention and wake them up a bit, as he stated,

Some of the things that I do in school... the kinds of things where they're actually involved, making plans to connect with someone in the community. It never really starts off as someone at the school knowing someone in the community. We usually think of ideas to connect with the community and then we start from there. Recently, we collected a bunch of bottle caps to raise awareness around plastic waste and recycling. We had the goal of raising awareness. The advocates all agreed that if we wanted people to donate, we should have someone come in. We were able to reach out to someone who runs a business where you can collect so many caps and then melt them into something. We all bounced ideas off each other after the speaker came in and decided it would be awesome to collect enough caps to have the speaker make a bench. We even worked together to talk about where it would be located when it was done.

Like the other student advocates in this study, Carol also incorporates collaborative methods into her leadership practice, in order to make the school a more active and engaging place. She identified similar techniques in the radio show, as she stated,

The policeman could have easily not given any information to Superman and Batman. I do wonder if the policeman would have treated anyone who came up to him about a missing person the same way. Not only did he help them, but he clearly didn't give up easily. When the policeman helps, he makes the mystery more interesting. He is giving clues and we get to find out if they lead to success or not. Until, well...you don't. In many ways, I think that being a student advocate is the same. You help other people to work together, but you don't always get the answers you are looking for. I can say this much, working with other people definitely makes things more fun. I'm not saying that Batman was trying to have fun, but it was more fun for me to listen to than if he had no one to talk to.

It is important to note that there are some differences to the way that these student advocates perceive and employ collaborative practices. While Tony viewed it just as importantly as the other student advocates, he homed in closely on the facet of trust building within collaboration, stating,

As a senior, I have been a student advocate for four years now. One thing is pretty clear to me; you usually are going to need other people to be successful. It is very difficult to be successful at things if you aren't willing to work with other people. Maybe more important, if you aren't trustworthy, people will find out really

quickly and they aren't going to want to work with you. This goes hand in hand, to gain trust you have to work with others, but no one wants to work with someone that isn't trustworthy. Being a student advocate means people already trust you and that it is more important that you don't lose it.

This notion of trust is important not only in his perceptions of collaboration, but also in the way he describes it to instill confidence within his other duties as a student advocate, commenting,

Once you get people to trust you, you definitely feel like you are able to take on bigger challenges. Knowing that people will support you gives you more confidence. In some ways, working with other people just makes you feel like you can take on more. I see classmates as teammates. The people that I go to school with can do great things. It is a big responsibility to get other people to believe in each other. I think the best way to start and believe in someone you don't know is to work with them.

As a freshman student advocate, Robert's understanding of collaboration comes from a place that considers empathy. Interestingly enough, the only other freshman student advocate, Janet, also immediately highlighted the concept of empathy in her collaborative practice. The empathy facet of collaboration is likely connected with effective leadership. Robert uses this sense of empathy to describe how he works with others,

I'm definitely more like the policeman than the superheroes. I try and help people out with their problems and answer their questions. The best way to help out other people is to listen. I've been in some project teams this year where people would

get frustrated with each other and most of the time it was because people weren't listening. I know that I want to be heard. When people are angry, it isn't always because of something that you do. I try to think of things this way. Just because someone isn't wanting to work with me doesn't mean it is because of me. But that doesn't mean I should dislike them or point fingers. If I am good at anything, it is listening to other people. I think other people know that about me.

**Common Purpose.** Common Purpose is the fifth value of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development investigated in this study of student leadership. This can include having the same purpose as a group of individuals or the intent to commit a similar series of actions as a peer group. *The student advocates in this study discussed common purpose as a useful skill helping to make ideas look or feel more tangible for students.* This was demonstrated in their response to a scene from *Captain America: Civil War* where two of the central protagonists get in an altercation pertaining to their understanding as to whether or not they are creating more harm than good by serving the public.

As one might imagine, serving as a leader presents the opportunity to demonstrate common purpose amongst a group of peers. Natasha commented on its importance in her school, and discussed the following example, in identifying the common purpose that unifies the protagonists in *Captain America: Civil War*, she noted,

We think of superheroes as people who protect others. They are dedicated to fighting evil, like villains. Usually, villains are the ones creating madness. I guess this means that superheroes usually focus on; it isn't very complicated, protect other people. This is where things get tricky in the movie. When Iron Man and

Captain America meet at the airport, they are pretty quick to point out their differences, starting a fight.

Natasha goes on to explain the differing perspectives of Iron Man and Captain America, relating it to her practice as a student advocate. In this way, common purpose is described as a value that is difficult to achieve even when members of a team have a similar goal. She provided the following example when she stated,

Iron Man thinks that Captain America is a war criminal because he is pretty messy when he saves other people and he usually doesn't stick with the team. Iron Man, well, he is more about sticking together as a team, even if it means following rules that stop him from using his powers. Both of them have very different ideas of what it takes to achieve a goal. Both of them had other superheroes support their view of how things should be handled too. I think both groups of superheroes really want to help people, but its sounds like Captain America team doesn't want to be told how to do it. We have similar situations as student advocates. We usually can all agree on what the goal is, but that doesn't always mean we have the same idea on how to reach it.

A common purpose allows student advocates like Natasha to explain difficult concepts in more tactile or real ways. Her approach in understanding common purpose has helped her relate large-scale ideas to her peers. She described another example of how this occurs in the classroom,

We started a clothing drive to help kids around school. Some kids don't have shirts, pants, shoes, stuff like that. Well, that is where things started. We then decided to take the clothes that were donated and hang them up in a room, like a



store, you know. We didn't want students to feel like they are too different, like, in a bad way. The room is like a store where they can pick out a couple of things and even try them on, no judging. We all believed that the point of collecting the clothes was to really just make people feel better about themselves. Helping out other people is fun; it makes you feel good too.

As a senior student advocate, Steve also relates the concept of common purpose to giving peers a hands-on sense of an idea. Like Natasha, he considers how student involvement can foster a sense of common purpose. He describes how, like the avengers, student advocates need a common purpose to successfully implement positive change for their school, stating,

The Avengers clearly don't agree on a lot of things. That doesn't stop them from getting things done. When it gets down to it, they work together because they know that if they don't, they won't be successful. I've watched this movie before, so I already know what happens. They disagree, but when things really matter, they get together for the greater good. People naturally disagree about things; no one thinks of things in exactly the same way and that's okay. The more we can get people to participate, the more attention we can get. So, when people see that enough people are working together to solve a problem, they are just more curious and sometimes more willing to help out.

Luke also talked about how he finds ways to discover common purpose within his peers, in ways that allow for self-discovery, as he offered the following example pertaining to student involvement in clubs,

The common purpose of a student advocate is to try and help other people. Help can look different ways too. Sometimes it means helping people that are arguing, helping create a new community service project, or just trying to help people that feel like they don't have a voice. Not everybody knows what is important to them. Sometimes, in high school, you feel the pressure to know what you are going to be doing for the rest of your life. Not everybody knows what they want to do after high school. We try to create clubs and opportunities for people to find out what they are interested in. Students are required to be in at least one club; I'm pretty sure it makes them feel like they belong to something; something where they know other people see things the same as them or at least like to do the same things.

In acting as a student advocate, Janet described how she models common purpose in an effort to strengthen morale of fellow classmates. She noted that modeling is an important aspect of establishing a common purpose and she finds morale to be improved when groups share a common purpose, iterating how she perceived this in the movie scene, stating,

I don't think the Avengers really have a common purpose. They look like they are divided. Maybe this is why they are fighting at the airport. There are definitely two different sides; a side that supports Captain America and a side that supports Iron Man. I guess you could say that each of those sides have a common purpose. Iron Man's purpose is to follow rules and stick together. Captain America's purpose is to show that rules can stop you from being successful. So, yeah, I don't

think the Avengers have a common purpose; I think that they're divided and that is why they don't get along.

Hank went on to explain how tension amongst the Avengers and its impact on common purpose can be perceived differently by movie viewers. He supported his explanation by describing an instance outside of his practice as a student advocate, he stated,

Captain America and Iron Man come from very different places. Iron Man is a millionaire genius that is used to being pretty reckless. Captain America is very selfless, the kind of guy that is willing to sacrifice himself. Our baseball team has a bunch of people like Iron Man and even a few like Captain America. I'm not talking about being rich or not. I mean, you know, just people looking at the world differently. We have that from student advocates too. Weird thing is, even if we look at things differently, we are all in it together. When you disagree with other people about things and you work through it, I think it makes you stronger. I think it helps strengthen your team.

Carol reflected on the fact that common purpose is valuable for moving between abstract ideas to concrete progress. In trying to take something conceptual and relate it in a concrete way, she is trying to make her practice as a student advocate more "real" to her classmates. This notion of a leadership practice that is considerate of a common purpose is a skill that builds a sense of belonging within the school community, as she noted,

Our common purpose as student advocates is to make school a better place for everyone. Sometimes, making it a better place can look different. Like, getting people involved. The good thing is, everyone at school wants to be a part of

something that accepts them. We all know we want school to be a fun place where we can get along, but making it that way isn't easy. When we start to think about what makes school a great place to be, we think of things that we can do to make things better. Big ideas become pretty do-able. So, if we want people to have fun, we think of field trips to recommend to teachers and then we all have something to focus on. We just...feel like we're in it together.

**Controversy with civility.** Controversy with civility is the sixth Social Change Model of Leadership Development value studied among students advocates in this research. Controversy with civility is described as leaders openly and respectfully airing differences in opinion. Simply put, controversy with civility is the act of acknowledging disagreements amongst a peer group and verbalizing these disagreements in a way that is respectful of others. When individuals air their differences in opinion they may be more likely to work with others in a way that not only allows for the ability to share their opinions but to do so in a civil manner. *The student advocates in this study spoke of the value of civil controversy, stating the belief that fruitful solutions emerge from a thoughtful approach to a variety of opinions and perspectives.* This was demonstrated in their response to a scene from *Captain America: Civil War* where two of the central protagonists get in an altercation pertaining to their understanding as to whether or not they are creating more harm than good by serving the public.

Tony noted the importance of civil controversy in developing an honest approach to his leadership practice. He framed this in the perspective of the current school climate, noting that civil controversy gives students a mental break, stating,

I think that controversy is good. People are too scared to try and talk about things. Usually, people just sit around and get mad instead of trying to speak up. But, you know, people like to complain more than trying to fix things. That can be draining. I think that is where student advocates come in. People complain to us all the time about things. They aren't, like, screaming at us or blaming us, but they are definitely not happy. If people didn't tell us about things they aren't happy about, we probably wouldn't ever know. You think that Iron Man and Captain America should have never told each other that they don't agree? There is no way they would have figured things out if they didn't argue about things first.

Tony's notion of civil controversy did not account for the extent in which the disagreement was respectful in nature, aside from him commenting on students not yelling at him. However, Tony did focus on the need to air differences in an effort to communicate a desire for change. Robert also views the importance of civil controversy as a means of communicating the intent behind one's actions. He provided an example of how this exists in his leadership practice when he stated,

Once a week, at least, we get together to talk about big projects or topics that come up in school. We don't always agree on things and people usually aren't shy about it either. The other day, someone wanted to have a project where students got to design their own t-shirts and we would sell them as a fundraiser so that each class could go on fieldtrips at the end of the year. A bunch of us thought it wasn't a good idea. We wanted to sell candy. The student advocates who wanted the shirts kept saying shirts cost more so it makes sense to fundraise with shirts, but they didn't really think about how often people would buy candy. If we didn't

talk about the differences, I don't think everyone would have agreed to us picking a candy fundraiser. But, hey, we didn't ditch the idea of making t-shirts, we just decided it would probably work better for something different.

Natasha further described how sometimes taking on controversy in a civil way can lead to strengthened relationships, making leadership a more enjoyable experience for student advocates. She explained how student advocates make daily efforts to handle conflict in a respectful manner, as she remarked,

The movie shows two different sides. Two sides that don't want to agree or see things eye-to-eye. When people disagree, they decide how they want to handle it whether they realize or not. You can disagree and be polite about it; you can disagree and be mad; you can disagree and just be quiet; there are so many ways to disagree about things. I don't think the movie did a good job of showing how people should handle disagreement. They talked for a bit and before you knew it, they were fighting. This makes it seem like fighting makes things better and I don't think that is always true. I know we tell other students; fighting makes things worse. Being respectful can help you understand each other; you're not destroying a relationship.

Steve also spoke to the value of having civil controversy between student advocates and other students. He described how civil controversy in leadership makes a tremendous difference in his classmate's ability to focus at school, as he put,

A big reason why we were voted as student advocates is because we get along with other students. You can't make everyone happy, but student advocates are people that are good at breaking bad news. Usually, when a student finds out that

they have received a referral from the office, they get really angry. To make things easier on people, we deliver the referral in an envelope. Everyone knows what the envelope is for. This way, we don't know exactly what the student did, but it gives them a chance to pause and chat with us about it. Usually, they will talk to us and it gives them a chance to think through things, have someone listen, and get advice.

This notion of controversy needing to be handled in a civil manner is akin to Whitehall et al.'s (2018) notion of intellect or abilities alone will not suffice in obtaining success when working in collaborative groups. Luke remarked on the fact that controversy is an inevitable part of life. He then went on to explain how controversy is often avoided by his peers, stating,

When people disagree, they don't have to solve things. I think that people get in arguments all the time. I'm sure that a lot of arguments are always solved. Most people get into arguments because they want to win. Winning usually means getting the other person to either look like they are silly or to admit that you are right. The problem is, too many people want to be right and even more people are afraid of looking like an idiot so they usually just avoid arguing or the only way they argue is if they find a group of people that agree with them. The movie is kind of the same, both Captain America and Iron Man have people that support them; maybe that is why they're so stubborn. No matter how smart people are, like Iron Man, he eventually realizes that he can't stop evil by himself; he needs Captain America. So, yeah, they fight, but eventually they work things out in a

way where they work to understand each other and that is when they finally have success.

Luke's recognition of controversy inevitably needing to be approached in a civil manner is similar to Komives (2016) notion of civility being an essential developmental phase of the Social Change Development Model, which sets the stage for the development of collaborative leadership practices. He describes how he upholds this sense of civility in the classroom and outside of the school,

People disagree all of the time. I don't think that's anything new, really. So, sometimes, I might be playing a game for example. When I play games online, we try and work together to be successful. You can't always talk things out because not everyone has a mic. Eventually, if you play with people enough, you learn how they behave, and you try and respond to things with that in mind. I could easily get frustrated at them...sometimes, I really do. When we win, it is usually because I don't flip out and decide to just do whatever I want...I respond. A huge thing about being a student advocate is being able to keep your cool, not flip out, and respond...really listen to people and respect them. I'm pretty sure everybody likes to be respected.

Janet noted that the tension associated with conflict is integral to generating an understanding of multiple perspectives, a skill that she attributes to successful leadership practice. She commented on the necessity of working in time for conflict resolution as a means to strengthen the morale of the school, stating,

I don't think that Captain America wanted to fight Iron Man and I don't really think that Iron Man wanted to fight Captain America. The problem is, well, they



shared their opinions and they really didn't agree, at all. Isn't that how things usually work? People share their opinions and instead of the other person listening, they argue and fight. I think that people disagreeing about things is good. At least you know where everyone is coming from. We let other students come to our meetings so they can bring up things that they don't like or things that they're upset about. Sometimes, things get intense, like uncomfortable. It is okay though; it is better to have awkward moments than a place with a lot of anger.

Hank reflected on the fact that he finds conflict to be one of the essential components of childhood. In his reflection, he noted the ability to handle controversy in a civil way is an indicator as to whether or not someone should be acting as a leader, as he remarked,

There is an argument between superheroes. I think it is pretty stupid. They are supposed to be working together to make the world a safe place and there they are beating up on each other. It just doesn't make sense to me. When I think of people who are leaders, I think of people that can handle disagreements in a way that doesn't need fighting or yelling. It is tough to respect someone that control themselves. It kind of seems like little kids who don't get their way...throw things and scream when things don't work out. The big thing here is we are talking about adults; they should be able to handle things much better.

Carol stressed the need for structure in handling controversy in civil ways. She explained how structure is often the most important component in providing an opportunity for controversy to be handled with civility, as she stated,

Most people need help when it comes to solving problems. It's easy to blow up on people. But, when you have someone who isn't involved in the argument, they can give you another opinion on things. Something that we do as student advocates is we deal with conflict all of the time. Students can schedule "check-ins," these are meetings between students or students and teachers. There are rules to the check-ins like not being able to speak when the other person is speaking, everybody gets a turn...you can't talk about what happens in the check-in with people that were in it. I think rules help to make things less messy.

**Citizenship.** As the seventh value in the Social Change Model of Leadership Development covered by this study, citizenship is identified as developing a sense of responsibility towards community through leadership experience. *The student advocates in this study recognized citizenship as a necessary step in cultivating a sense of purpose that drove their desire to act as a leader; this was evident in their analysis of a task to be completed in Batman: Arkham Knight, a videogame, where Batman is being directed by Alfred to complete a task that will allow Batman to stop criminals in the city from inflicting harm on citizens.*

Natasha identified the need to feel as though she is a part of a community, when describing citizenship. She drew comparisons between her desire to be a part of the school community and the relationship that Batman has with his own community, as she stated,

Batman and Gotham City go hand-in-hand. You can't really separate the two of them. I think this is what makes Batman special. Usually, Batman is trying to save the city. Other superheroes need to save a person, but Batman's stories are about

stopping a person from trying to hurt the city. If I am going to be here, I may as well try my best to make school a great place to be. It makes me feel good to see people happy at school, knowing I helped.

In this way, Natasha's notion of citizenship corresponds to the Social Change Development model in that she acknowledges the connection between her presence in the community and her need to serve it.

Steve described how a variety of factors contribute to his understanding of being a part of his community, as he stated,

We all have something in common. We are all at the same school and we see each other every day. Yeah, we have a community at our school. Community is bigger than just school though. So, yeah, I feel like I am part of our city too. I work at the grocery store too. Sometimes I see people while I am at work that I also see at school. At first, it was kind of weird, but seeing teachers at the grocery store and out in public doesn't feel so awkward anymore. I definitely think it helps that I am working a job and I am a student advocate; feels a little more connected.

Luke commented on the difficulty of citizenship in leadership practice, particularly in establishing identity. This ability to establish citizenship through identity is a common barrier for students, as he noted

Batman doesn't fight alone. He needs Alfred to give him cool weapons, police to give him clues, and even a sidekick sometimes... he always has people there to help him out. I think that makes him pretty confident, so he can do things. Not everyone gets help like that. Usually, people struggle to fit in. Most people want to have friends, someone to help them out. It can be tough making friends. When

people accept you for who you are, you feel like you are part of something bigger.

I think the help Batman gets from other people makes him feel like he is supported, and that the city needs him.

Janet remarked on the importance of cultivating trust within relationships to build a sense of citizenship. In doing so, she spoke of Batman's ability to form trusting relationships through his ability to successfully rescue them, she noted,

Everyone in Gotham leans on Batman because they trust him. Batman has proven himself within the city as a good guy and everyone trusts him. If you see someone sticking up for you, doing the right thing, you can't help but to support them too. People in Gotham don't question what Batman is doing. It isn't just average people that trust Batman; other people that are also trusted in protecting the city trust Batman, like the police. Everyone in the city of Gotham has that in common; they all trust that Batman will be there to save them when things get dangerous.

Hank also focused on the relationships between Gotham's citizens and Batman, noting several behaviors that indicate the respect Gotham's citizens have for Batman. In doing so, he explained the need to garner the respect of his fellow classmates, as he stated,

Everyone listens to Batman; no one ever argues with him. You'd think that after a while, people would start to lose some respect for him. You know, he has saved the city many times. If you think about it, he saves the city from the same people over and over again. I could see where people would stop listening to Batman after the 20<sup>th</sup> time of Joker attacking the city. But, I can see where they wouldn't disrespect him because they know that without him they likely wouldn't be able

to survive the attacks. I could see how people at the school could get frustrated with the student advocates. We try our best to help, but you can't always bat 1,000. I'm pretty sure that they know we always try our best though.

Carol emphasized the perceived responsibility of Batman protecting Gotham City as a means for him to establish citizenship. Like Hank, she drew connections between Batman's behaviors and that of student advocates, as she stated,

This makes me think about the added responsibilities that I have. Other students don't have to think about planning or organizing projects, dealing with conflicts, or finding ways to connect in the community, but I do. When the bat symbol goes out into the sky, Batman has a responsibility to respond and quickly. If the symbol went up and Batman refused to save the city, I don't see people trusting him to get the job done anymore. Once you start to do good things and you do it more than once, I think there is an added pressure to continue. Like, I think it is my responsibility to make the school a better place. I'm not really sure that other people think that, but I definitely do.

Tony sees citizenship as a vital piece of identifying desirable leaders. He explained his involvement in the community before being voted as a student advocate, as he noted,

The people in Gotham City are similar to people at our school; they decide who their leaders are. They could've easily decided Batman is not someone they want stopping crimes for them, but they didn't. Batman proved himself as someone that should belong in the city. Before I was voted into being a student advocate, I feel like I proved that I care about our community. I did leukemia charities, golf

lessons, church things, just a bunch, really. People usually want their leaders to reflect who they are in some way. I don't think people would want someone to be their leader if they didn't at least feel like they reflect the people they are representing.

Robert identified with the concept of citizenship, and similar to his focus in connecting with peers in authentic ways, he described how Batman's commitment to Gotham City reflects a level of authenticity that wouldn't exist if he had not been committed to one city.

Not a doubt, Gotham City is a huge deal. When I think of other superheroes, I think of New York City. I mean, how many superheroes do we need to save one place? Gotham is different because there is one superhero there and that's it. I know, there are police and other people trying to fight crime, but other places have that too. What makes Gotham special is Batman; you can't separate the two of them. It would just feel weird to have Batman move to another place and defend another city especially knowing that he left Gotham behind. Policeman and firefighters are the same way, they are assigned to a city and that is where they help others. I couldn't just get up, move to a different city, and be a student advocate there. We have student advocates here; most schools don't.

His comments on citizenship describe the importance of not only the person who is acting as a leader but also the contexts in which they serve and how those two aspects are definitively connected through citizenship. He reinforces his perceptions of leadership by drawing connections between the narrative and his own experience.

Cumulatively, student advocates were able to identify all of “The Seven C’s” of the Social Change Leadership Development Model within the superhero narratives that were provided to them. No particular value was missed nor emphasized. Moreover, student advocates were able to explain how the value existed within each of the narratives and related back to their practice, often providing example to illustrate their perspectives. Student advocates responses to superhero narratives proved to incite meaningful conversation in regard to not only how they defined the leadership practice of others, but also how these narratives can strengthen their responses, allowing them to provide examples of their practice and to further consider those practices as they relate to others.

### **Summary**

In terms of how they defined leadership, these student advocates did use some language to describe traits they believe should be encompassed within leadership. However, they additionally defined leadership practice in context-driven and student-advocate-specific ways. It would seem that leadership does have some generalized elements, which are applied and evaluated according to context. These student advocates cultivated leadership as a kind of advocacy, where leadership means being constantly aware of or looking for different inspirations and solutions in the world around them. In giving examples from their leadership practice, there were central themes that their leadership approaches clustered around. These included *leadership as a mindset, real-world or “authentic” practice, peer influence, and taking risks*. In summary, student advocates habitually consider how to integrate realistic examples, scenarios, or initiatives in their leadership; they connect the experiences of students inside and outside of school

to strengthen their desire to be involved; and they are willing to try new things or to take intellectual risks in an effort to support peers within their leadership practice.

A major finding of this study is that all eight of the student advocates noted that they engaged in a variety of media and avocations outside of their work as student advocates. Most notably, they all described ways in which their use of media deeply influenced their perceptions of self and others as a collective. The most popular types of media consumption were generally categorized as social media, gaming, and broadcast media. Student advocates with interest in social media and gaming described ways they constructed a sense of identity through their use of media, and specifically noted their desire to merge their use of media with their personal avocations into their leadership practices. Student advocates who described their consumption of broadcast media frequently noted that their desire to view movies and television or to listen to music had an impact on their thinking as well. They noted cognitive benefits such as clarity of mind, focus, problem solving, and stimulated creative thought processes, arising from consumption of broadcast media.

Finally, all of the eight student advocates were able to identify “The Seven C’s” of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development when being exposed to a variety of superhero narratives. Every student advocate in the study provided examples and discussion of how each of “The Seven C’s” were used in their leadership practice. In general, how they described their use of “The Seven C’s” within the superhero narratives revolved around their leadership practice. Moreover, their exposure to superhero narratives incited a deep level of introspection that was otherwise not present in their initial descriptions of leadership, providing a rich description of their leadership



perceptions and practices. *Consciousness of self* was thought to be integral in establishing an awareness of the attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and values that motivate leaders to act. *Congruence* was noted in being useful for determining the consistency in which a leader's behaviors and thoughts align with authenticity and honesty. *Commitment* was seen as establishing motivation amongst peers through duration, intensity, and passion. *Collaboration* was discussed for its ability to empower individuals and groups to work with one another through trust. *Common purpose* was considered in working with shared goals and values. *Controversy with civility* was identified as leaders openly and respectfully airing differences in opinion. *Citizenship* was noted for developing a sense of responsibility towards community through leadership experience. The superhero narratives discussed with these student advocates were able to incite a discussion pertaining to "The Seven C's" of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development, revealing a high level of relevance within their leadership practices, each in its own way.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

In recent years, the development of student leadership has become of increasing interest and value (Komives, 2016; Mitra, 2018). Bapasola (2018) notes that modern educational systems seek and encourage student leadership more strongly than ever. Moreover, learning communities are tasked with the responsibility of developing effective student leaders (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Adams and Velarde (2018) advocate the importance of student leadership development within 21<sup>st</sup> century education as a means to assist students in developing a strong leadership identity at an early stage. Despite all of this, as well as an apparent conviction in the field of leadership development that leadership practices and perceptions should be nurtured, there remains to be little known about the development of student leadership within the context of k-12 education. Similarly, a strong push towards developing curricular opportunities that involve the use of comic book culture has become prevalent in American education in recent years, with little evidence suggesting a preferred means of consumption i.e. comic books, radio, movies, television, and video games. The relationship between an exposure to superhero narratives and its influence on cultivating identity has been explored; however, the relationship between youth's media consumption and its influence on their development as leaders has not.

I sought to investigate to what extent superhero narratives had an impact on student leaders' perceptions of student leadership. In doing so, I explored the following questions: 1) How do high school student leaders define their leadership? And 2) What is the relationship, if any, between student leadership and superhero narratives? Within the framework of the Social Change Leadership Development Model, specific skills known

as “The Seven C’s” were emphasized and studied among these participants. The participants were students who were selected to serve as student advocates; a position that is voted upon by their peers through a democratic voting process and vetted by the school’s administration. Eight student advocates participated in three different activities: 1) In-depth interviews with regard to their perceptions of leadership, 2) Multi-model journal interviews examining their ability to identify “The Seven C’s” within superhero narratives and their own practice as leaders, and 3) Two focus groups of four student advocates responded to a series of questions pertaining to their use of media in constructing a sense of understanding themselves and the world around them. With the informed consent from participants, their responses were audio recorded and transcribed. I analyzed the transcripts using qualitative coding procedures, via three iterations of coding, allowing for several themes and strands of ideas to be revealed for this study (Anfara et al., 2014). These themes were analyzed in the preceding chapter with recommendations to follow.

The data revealed ways in which superhero narratives and media consumption inform student advocates’ leadership and thinking. It also highlighted the importance of media consumption among student advocates when collectively making meaning of a concept, and how this translates into successful leadership practice.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The fact that student leadership is somewhat abstract in nature makes it vulnerable to being marginalized at the policy level in education, particularly in a climate that is uncertain how to develop such a role. Yet, the necessity for building leadership aptitudes at a young age is not lost on many in the field, and there is a great need to understand

how leadership can be nurtured. Society is progressively becoming media-centric with youth engaging with information in new ways in an effort to not only understand themselves but the world around them as well. An ever-increasing interest in media within the field of education, coupled with the knowledge gap on this topic, means it is critical to consider and understand examples of how media consumption plays a role in the collective meaning-making process of student advocates within this paradigm.

Based on prior research pertaining to youth culture, leadership development, and superhero culture in America, the research questions for this study involve an examination of two strands among student advocates perceptions; (1) the importance and meaning of leadership and (2) how superhero narratives relate to student leadership, if at all.

**Defining Leadership.** Central to the research questions of this study is the notion of what leadership means to student leaders, how they define it and how it occurs in their leadership practice. The student advocates in this study incorporated some universal definitions of what leadership is. Additionally, they defined leadership in context-driven ways specific to their peers, school, and community. The contextual nature of their definitions is similar to Komives (2016) concept of student leadership which denotes leadership as something that is carried out by a group rather than by an individual. The findings of this study showed that these student advocates defined leadership both broadly and contextually. In terms of how leadership plays out in their school, the student advocates tended to discuss leadership concepts and examples that clustered around several themes: 1) Leadership as a mindset; 2) Real-world or “authentic” leadership; 3) Peer influence; 4) Taking intellectual/leadership risks.

All of the student advocates defined the standard elements of leadership as being authentic in theory and practice. Elements of authenticity (i.e. self-awareness and morality), as well as collaboration (i.e. cultivating relationships and working with others) are part of a collective understanding of what it means to serve as a leader (Komives, 2016). After this, definitions of leadership become more complex and nuanced. In asking eight different student advocates to discuss the meaning of leadership, there were eight subtly different interpretations of the concept.

Despite this, there were some common ways in which these student advocates viewed the construct. For instance, several of the student advocates stressed the importance of leadership being perceived as a mindset. The concept of acting as a leader is not something that is purely contingent of context, rather it is constant across a variety of contexts and scenarios. Leadership as a mindset was instantiated in statements like, “I’ve trained my mind to look at something and think about how it has to do with me being a student advocate,” or leadership as a mindset may be defined as applying the thought processes typically associated within the role of a student advocate in a variety of contexts. However, peer influence and risk taking were contextually defined as practices that are not only effective in acting as a leader but are influential in establishing relevance to the role of student advocates. In short, they embraced a student-centered perspective on their leadership practice.

One of the most pervasive and prevalent notions student advocates had about leadership is that it is an “ongoing mindset.” Leadership is not something that can be confined by a box or pulled out in specific moments when leadership is needed. Rather it is a constant mindset based on an openness to new perspectives and a willingness to try

new things, which is actively cultivated by student advocates – both when they are at school and when they are not. Several of these student advocates noted that they are always ready to make mental connections to leadership activities, even when they are engaged in tasks that aren't commonly associated with leadership practice. This skill for transferring ideas between disparate activities is similar to trans-disciplinary thinking because it draws on ideas from separate topics to be applied to leadership. Lastly, a common component of this mindset is a willingness to put themselves in their peers' position when considering initiatives and to think about what would be motivating from their perspective. This openness extended into a willingness to seek peer input about the activities or approaches they may find fun or engaging.

With regard to the issue of how leadership actually plays out within the various contexts of student advocates, there were several key themes that recurred as they provided examples and discussed elements of their approaches to leadership. These included *real-world leadership*, *peer influence*, and *risk taking*.

Throughout the various examples of leadership practice that each student advocate gave, one of the frequent threads was a tendency to create initiatives with a focus on real-world applications. Although this was instantiated in many different ways and with different forms of initiatives, all of the student advocates tried to root their practice in a real-world or “authentic” basis whenever possible. They generally believed that authentic leadership practices allowed for a meaningful connection between their peers and their community because initiatives proved to be more relevant, relatable, and interesting. This type of authentic leadership requires leaders to seek connections

between the initiatives they evoke, the members they collaborate with and the community they serve.

Another finding in this study was the tendency for this group of student advocates to be influenced by their peers. They all provided examples of instances in which their peers have influenced their perceptions of leadership. But they also described a variety of ways in which peers have influenced their leadership practice as well. Whether it is listening to peers during the school day or seeking constructive criticism from fellow student advocates, student advocates seek opportunities to consider the perspectives of those in their community. It seems clear that student advocates are able to maximize and enhance their leadership practice through intentionally finding opportunities to be influenced by others.

Key finding from these student advocates' perceptions of leadership suggest a willingness to take risks. This is not meant in the sense of careless or "risky" leadership, but rather a willingness to think "outside the box" in a conscious effort to approach intellectual or leadership risks, trying new approaches or ideas when approaching complicated topics. In describing how they devised leadership, most of the student advocates noted that one of the key ingredients in leadership practice is a willingness to take risks by trying different, new, or unknown approaches to ideas. They frequently noted that this was one of the best ways to advance their practice as leaders and to further discover which approaches to leadership work best for their practice. Several of the student advocates stressed that in order to be a leader, it is essential to take risks, proving to their peers that they are willing to face significant obstacles, and to ultimately demonstrate a willingness to learn from mistakes.

With regard to the issue of how leadership actually plays out within the various contexts of student advocates, I would be remised if I did not discuss the relationship between youth culture's relationship with media consumption. The student advocates' respective use of media proved to have an impact on the ways in which they formed an understanding of themselves as well as the world around them, both inside and outside of school. The following describes the impact media consumption has in constructing these student advocates' perceptions.

The eight student advocates in this study demonstrated various ways in which they consumed media. More often than not, media consumption was viewed as a means to connect with the various avocations of the student advocates of this study. Moreover, utilizing media consumption as a catalyst for expressing a variety of ways they weave their personal interests into their leadership perceptions.

One of the major findings of this study is that student advocates perceptions are highly influenced by their consumption of various forms of media. All of them not only noted a habitual use of various forms of media such as broadcast media, social media, and video games, but moreover they observed the vital importance that these activities had in impacting their perceptions overall and as leaders.

Every student advocate noted a combination of media consumption. Seven of the eight student advocates regularly engaged in social media or gaming avocations. Seven of the eight also pursued consumption of broadcast media in the form of television, movies, and music. They each gave credit to their use of media as being quite impactful toward their collective meaning making process. The impact of media consumption by these student advocates revolved around several themes such as: (1) the consumption of



various forms of media align with student's desired identity or interests (2) social media and gaming interests tend to work their way into cultivating perceptions of self, enhancing the understanding of leadership practice amongst student advocates and (3) broadcast media are a valuable way of focusing the mind on stimulating new leadership thought processes.

These student advocates frequently noted that outside pursuits always factor into their thinking about leadership practice, generally describing their relationship with media as a means of cultivating their identity. Media consumption in their personal lives naturally became connected to ideas and initiatives within their practice as student advocates. Often, student advocates accessed a variety of media in an effort to be exposed to content related to their avocations outside of school. They began to see connections between their personal interests, media consumption, and leadership practices, thereby finding interesting ways to act as leaders and develop their leadership perceptions. In short, accessing personal avocations through media spawns more creativity within cultivating their perceptions of leadership.

Another finding was that the impact social media or gaming has on leadership development was quite important. Within this small but unique sample, having seven of the eight student advocates describe such similar interests was noteworthy. Moreover, all of the student advocates who acknowledged using social media described leadership practices in which they used social media to establish an identity among their peers. Similarly, student advocates' use of gaming was defined as not only for entertainment but also a means to establish goal attainment strategies.

The notion of using social media or games might seem daunting to anyone unfamiliar with media usage and contemporary youth, and the same is true for leadership development. But it is important to stress the critical point here, which is not media consumption itself, but rather the fact that these student advocates found ways to co-opt their personal interests and media, utilizing them within their effort to understand leadership practices. Dewey (1934) viewed truly educative experiences as being both aesthetic and meaningful. In this way, student advocates that draw upon things they found aesthetically pleasing or entertaining, using them in their leadership to craft authentic opportunities for their peers.

Finally, the findings of this study showed that broadcast media, in terms of its consumption, was significant to these student advocates. Again, seven of the eight student advocates noted broadcast media was frequently part of their daily lives, such as movies, music, and television. The student advocates in this study observed the connection between consuming broadcast media and its influences in cultivating their sense of understanding themselves and the world around them. Their consumption of broadcast media led to the alleged benefits of providing opportunities to speak with others, establishing a clarity of mind, and invigorating new thoughts. Many of the student advocates also managed to work broadcast media influences into their leadership initiatives, recognizing the connection between media consumption and thought processes. Therefore, as with social media and gaming, consumption of broadcast media becomes interwoven with the leadership perceptions of these student advocates.

Within an educational and student leadership context, all of these findings lend further support to the work of Komives (2009, 2011, 2014, 2016) who asserted successful

student leadership development within the context of higher education revolves around developing values pertaining to “The Seven C’s.” Komives’ findings show that the experiences students are exposed to prior to entering college have a significant impact on their leadership development trajectory while in college. Based on evidence from my interviews with these eight student advocates, there is also credence to this in the context of high school student leadership development.

Research pertaining to “Big C” creativity has previously served as the most influential in determining our understanding of creativity while studies pertaining to “little c” creativity have often been dismissed for an inability to holistically describe what creativity is (Barbot & Karwowski, 2016). However, this study reveals that there is significance in the works of “little c” or everyday creative endeavors such as consumption, exposure, and use of media, and it seems that this can impact the sublime or “Big C” perceptions and practices of student leaders. Incorporating avocational activities such as media exposure that stimulate more thorough discussion of leadership perspectives may be used to inspire more significant forms of creative approaches to leadership development and practice.

There is also research indicating that when people engage in activities outside of their standard routine, the left side of the brain, often associated with logical thinking, yields to the right side of the brain where creativity is cultivated (Schutte, 2020). This may help to strengthen divergent thinking and promote a creative approach to student leadership development (Schutte, 2020). Essentially, the left hemisphere of the brain works in the background as the right hemisphere actively engages in tasks or ideas postulation. Moreover, analysis and creativity come together to find solutions to

problems that otherwise seem unsolvable. In this way, new ideas emerge, which is a catalyst for approaching complex topics such as perceptions pertaining to leadership.

**Superhero Narratives and Student Leadership Development.** Student leadership development skills have been studied and considered among respected researchers within the context of higher education and continue to be explored in new contexts (Komives, 2016; Logue et al., 2005; Marcketti, 2010). The notion of the Social Model of Leadership Development was a key emphasis in this study, determining to what extent student advocates were able to identify connections between leadership and superhero narratives, utilizing “The Seven C’s”: (1) consciousness of self; (2) congruence; (3) commitment (4) collaboration; (5) common purpose; (6) controversy with civility; (7) citizenship.

These leadership development skills – adapted and condensed from Komives (2009, 2011, 2014, 2016) – have been suggested as key developmental skills for student leaders within the context of higher education. Since “The Seven C’s” of the Social Model of Leadership Development have not yet been studied among student advocates within a high school setting, this study was an opportunity to initially understand and describe whether and how they are understood by a younger demographic. Specifically, superhero narratives served as a means to incite further discussion pertaining to their perceptions of leadership. The findings of this study are that, in the experiences of these student advocates, each of “The Seven C’s” are important in different ways.

All of the student advocates in this study described the importance of *Consciousness of self*, or the awareness of attitudes, beliefs, and emotions, for

developing leadership as well as an awareness of themselves, their learning, and involvement. Consciousness of self was a skill the student advocates in this study immediately identified with as an essential component of their leadership practice in terms of its ability to engage in leadership initiatives that are on-par with the needs of their peers and community. They talked about it in respect to its intrinsic (e.g., “If you don’t understand yourself, it can be difficult to really understand some assumptions you may have”) and extrinsic (e.g., “If you want to have a positive impact on the world around you, you need to first understand the world around you and how that shapes who you are,” or “I want to make sure that if I am talking with students, I’m hearing what they are saying and doing, treating others the way that I want to be treated”) nature. Overall, consciousness of self was considered to be an incredibly vital leadership skill on many levels – from identifying opportunities to act, to awareness of student needs and progress, to consciously seeking opportunities for growth and development as a leader.

*Congruence*, which involves recognizing thoughts and behaviors that are authentic and honest and the consistency in which these behaviors occur, was also discussed by all of the student advocates in this study as essential for understanding and assessing the effectiveness of a leader. This might include involvement in leadership initiatives or approaching issues pertaining to conflict at school. Student advocates noted that they needed to be able to recognize repeated actions as well as irregularity in the pattern of these actions, while the recognition of thoughts that were authentic and honest in nature occurred through the identification of these patterns in action and the extent in which they aligned with the leader’s self-proclaimed attitudes. The student advocates in this study not only observed patterns in students and the school over time, but also acted

on them constructively. Once student advocates identified patterns and irregularities, they made a discernable effort to respond while simultaneously assessing the extent in which they could trust the individual(s) they assessed.

The skill of *Commitment*, which is establishing motivation amongst peers through duration, intensity, and passion, was considered quite useful for the student advocates in this study. Overall, student advocates noted commitment was helpful as a way to clarify and explain the degree in which they not only trust peer student advocates but also their perception of one's ability to invest in their role as a leader. They all noted commitment as a skill that needs to be considered by student advocates at all times. How each of the student advocates described commitment varied a bit based on their perceptions, but in general was used in a variety of contexts. Commitment was described as one's ability to not only respond to adversity but to also communicate to others their desire to achieve tasks. Interestingly enough, the majority of student advocates emphasized how commitment establishes trust rather than identifying commitment as a skill that cultivates motivation. Student advocates often described commitment as a skill that communicates the values of individuals.

*Collaboration* involves two skills, the ability to work in groups and the capacity to garner trust through working relationships. For the purpose of this study, "working in groups" was described as the social interaction student advocates had while working with no fewer than one other person in an effort to achieve a common goal. Trust was demonstrated when student advocates described the people they work alongside as reliable. For the student advocates in this study, these were key ingredients in making leadership active and engaging. Student advocates frequently noted that at one level

working with others helped to strengthen their relationships with peers, and at another level working with others could help increase the level of understanding ideas while making the process of goal attainment more enjoyable. Collaboration may be as simple as working with others on projects and initiatives. But more often, collaboration exists in the policies and procedures that have grown accustomed to the student advocates in this study. For example, some student advocates resolve conflicts amongst their peers by organizing a meeting where a teacher, student advocate, and the individuals who are in a dispute meet in an organized environment that allows all parties to speak, listen, and pursue a constructive effort to resolve their issues. Similarly, student advocates acknowledged collaboration as a means to be exposed to new ideas and practice their ability to compromise in an effort to achieve a common goal.

The Social Change Leadership Model's skill of *Common purpose* was defined by the student advocates of this study as having the same purpose as a group of individuals or the intent to commit a similar series of actions as a peer group. Common purpose was frequently used by the student advocates of this study in order to make ideas look or feel more tangible to students. Many of them noted ways in which common purpose provided a point of interest to which a variety of people could work towards. While acknowledging people may have differing perspectives on how to obtain goals, student advocates agree that a common purpose unifies their sense of direction when working with others. The types of common purpose described by the student advocates in this study illustrate an effort to make a connection between their leadership efforts and their involvement in the community. For example, students unified over the opportunity of creating a clothing drive to support students of the school in a manner that doesn't ostracize them. Moreover,

the findings of this study showed that student advocates found ways to identify a common purpose, because it makes ideas and subjects more “real” or relatable to their peers and community.

The Social Change Model of Leadership Development’s skill of *Controversy with civility* was defined by the student advocates of this study as leaders openly and respectfully airing differences in opinion. Simply put, controversy with civility was recognized as the act of acknowledging disagreements amongst a peer group and verbalizing these disagreements in a way that is respectful of others. The student advocates in this study spoke of the value that comes from civil controversy, stating the belief that fruitful solutions emerge from a thoughtful approach to a variety of opinions and perspectives. Several noted the potential opportunity of strengthening relationships through civil controversy. Additionally, student advocates expressed the need for civil controversy as it can provide a “mental break”; the opportunity to eliminate bottled tension amongst peers that detracts from their ability to work with one another in a productive manner.

Finally, *Citizenship*, or developing a sense of responsibility towards community through leadership experience, was seen as a necessary step in cultivating a sense of purpose that drove the desire of student advocates to act as leaders. Overall, student advocates noted that citizenship was helpful in forming a connection between their presence in the community and their need to serve it. Furthermore, student advocates spoke of establishing a sense of identity through the act of citizenship. By virtue of their position as student advocates, they identified the influence they have on peers and conversely the influence their peers had in assigning their elected role of student



advocate. They all noted the importance of being able to cultivate a sense of identity within the community as they believed it reinforced the sincerity in which they conduct themselves as student advocates. In contributing to their community, student advocates build relationships with community members and peers, solidifying their bond with the community and their drive to be successful.

## **Conclusions**

The following conclusions can be drawn, based on the findings of this study. In the order of the research questions, the first major finding of this study revealed that student advocates noted basic elements of authenticity and collaboration in their definitions of leadership, but they additionally defined their perceptions of leadership in very contextual ways. Leadership has some generalizable elements, but these are instantiated and evaluated according to context. In terms of how leadership plays out in their school, there were key themes including *leadership as a mindset, real-world or “authentic” leadership, peer influence, and taking intellectual/leadership risks.*

The second major finding of the study is that student advocates engage in a variety of media in their outside lives which impacts their collective perceptions of themselves, their community, and their leadership practice. Student advocates with interests in social media and gaming noted various ways their use of media collectively informs their leadership practice, and student advocates who consumed broadcast media used movies, music, and television to collectively inform their perceptions of self and others. Student advocates frequently noted that “we are what we eat,” and it seems that those who engage in consuming media outside of their leadership practice are able to usefully draw on this while acting as leaders.

The final major finding of this study is that superhero narratives served as a useful tool in inciting students to discuss “The Seven C’s” of The Social Change Model of Leadership Development. All of the student advocates in the study provided examples and discussion on how the “The Seven C’s” were demonstrated within the superhero narratives and how these skills were each used in their leadership practice. In general, their exposure to superhero narratives incited a deep level of introspection that was otherwise not present in their initial descriptions of leadership.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study raises several issues about constructing perceptions of leadership, which have implications for educational policy in k-12 leadership, as well as leadership development in higher education. The results of this study revealed some interesting and important themes of leadership amongst student advocates, but also revealed some of the ways in which media consumption plays a role in student leaders constructing a sense of self, others, and the communities in which they exist in. First, student leadership development is considered in terms of its current state of development. Then, a discussion pertaining to the current scape of k-12 education draws connections between authentic learning opportunities and advancing student outcomes through educational policy. Finally, higher education is considered for its potential influence in establishing practices that are cognizant of “21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills.” Moreover, the following addresses this notion of “leadership in context,” then suggests how educational student leadership development, authentic learning experiences and educational policy, and higher education might consider infusing avocations such as media consumption pertaining to superhero narratives into leadership development.

**Developing Leadership in Students.** Leadership is, by its very nature, multifaceted and complex. Any act of leadership development arises out of a web of influences and existing ideas and is highly tied to the context that develops it. Because leadership is such a complex topic, and student leadership development within the high school setting is an ill-structured domain, it is clear that context will play an important role in any student leader's ability to exercise their perceptions and experiences within their leadership development and practices. Along these lines it must be noticed that most educational systems are making a discernable effort to infuse curricular opportunities that include the use of a variety of media to strengthen students' understanding of multiple content areas. Most of the student advocates in this study struggled to identify the influence their media consumption has on their perceptions of self, others, and community. As students' consumption of media continues to exist both within the educational setting and in their outside lives, many in this study expressed their consumption of media to serve as a means of entertainment rather than a tool to reflect on their practices as leaders, even though their responses to superhero narratives indicated a more thorough, descriptive explanation of what they believe leadership is. Despite their school providing them the opportunity to act as student advocates, the school also neglected to provide formal leadership development intended to assisting student advocates to develop as leaders.

In discussing what she considered the biggest challenges of student advocates Janet, a freshmen student advocate, referenced the lack of support she received from teachers and administrators. As she explained,

I would say I get frustrated. There really isn't a rule book or anything that helps me to understand what is expected of me as a student advocate. It feels great

being picked to be one and I think we do great things, but there are many times where I don't know how to handle things. If there were more teachers to help give us support, I think that things would go smoother. But our principal and teachers talk about our student handbook all time. They will talk about dress code and things like that, but there isn't really anything more than that. I like to follow the rules and know what is expected of me. The biggest struggle this year, being a new student advocate, is I'm still not really sure what I am supposed to do.

Overall, Janet remains motivated by her work as a student advocate, commenting that she feels the challenges of leadership are some of the most important ones that society must face, noting, "I have a responsibility to figure out answers to questions I don't know." But it must also be acknowledged that while she consistently practices engaging leadership practices, engaging herself and peers in authentic learning opportunities, the challenges of doing so are not small. Her resourcefulness in finding ways to connect her peers to their community through community service projects that align with their person interests has helped her to maintain her perceived effectiveness as a leader. The concern may then be that leadership development of student leaders is based on providing them opportunities to utilize their strengths rather than identify and strengthen areas of growth.

Carol, a sophomore student advocate had noted during our discussion about her perceptions of leadership, that she felt it was very important to make connections between herself and peers. Yet she also reflected on the fact that this was not something all of her peer student advocates were amenable to, stating,

I actually think that is one of the weaknesses of being a student advocate, no one ever helps us to make connects. It is pretty much assumed that we can easily talk with other people, get to know them, and build relationships. We have moved so far away from getting any help from teachers or principals, that it is assumed that we will just figure it out. I'd like to see some of the other student advocates get some help. I think it would be easier on us if everyone had those skills.

Carol furthermore commented on the challenges of more and more on leadership development, but with less time to adequately cover and explore ideas, noting that this seems to be a problematic direction for leadership practice, stating,

I feel more overwhelmed now than ever. I'm more experienced because I was a student advocate last year too. But...I feel like the pressure is building; I'm having to reach out to more people in the community and our school than last year. The other student advocates are great, but they usually all vote for me to speak to people. Even if I am really busy with school work. I just feel a bit trapped.

Carol, like the others in this study, maintains her commitment to acting as a leader, utilizing her innate ability to act as a liaison between the school, its students, and community. Yet the current state of leadership development within her role as a student advocate makes this increasingly difficult to accomplish.

Tony, a senior student advocate, also felt very strongly about developmental opportunities increasing his competency and confidence within his practice as a student advocate. He noted the ability to receive support, specifically in times of struggle,

allowing him to learn from his struggles rather than continuing to make the same mistakes, as he stated,

I've been a student advocate for the past three years. We never took any classes or anything on how to be a student advocate. It has been tough trying to figure out what to do or how it should be done. I've screwed up a lot and I don't think I would have really known what to do if it were for the student advocates who were older than me. Maybe, if I had a class or something like that, I wouldn't have made so many mistakes along the way.

At the same time though, a lack of leadership development does not always have to play a negative role. While at a national level, educational leadership development can be quite restrictive to innovation and creativeness in leadership, supportive peers within the context of leadership developmental practice can make a difference. Tony commented that he felt fortunate to have peers support him when taking some leadership risks, knowing that he would have others to lean on in the event that he was to struggle or fail. The end results of this key of leadership development norm is ultimately contingent on context:

I know I've been very lucky to have supportive student advocates. In some ways they haven't been controlling; they allow me to take risks and to try new things. Usually things work out. But I could definitely see things being completely different. If I didn't have other student advocates that were willing to give me the freedom I need. If I didn't have people to lean on when things get tough. I would definitely fail. I need the other student advocates. I wasn't trained on how I should

be handling many of the things that we do. Working with the other student advocates is my training.

Overall, the student advocates in this study manage to uphold their leadership energies and succeed at great lengths at their school. Yet they still, in this group of student advocates, struggle to work through or around certain aspects of their leadership development. This underscores some of the pitfalls of current student leadership at the high school level, which could be addressed through an infusion of leadership developmental opportunities that bridge their use of media outside of the classroom environment with their leadership practices within the classroom.

**Authentic Learning Experiences and Educational Policy.** A definitive focus on standardized testing has consumed educational policy in the United States of America for the past 50 years. Serving as a quantifiable measure of success, standardized tests have held school systems and individuals accountable for their learning outcomes. Consequently, teaching has been forced into a rigid position where teachers feel restricted in their curriculum practice. Terms such as “teaching to the test” and “drill and kill” have defined generations of education in the United States of America. Despite continued protest to the aforementioned approach to education, the need for accountability within education has persisted. If state and federal government is to be seen as an investor in education, they are certainly investing in measurable results.

One of the fundamental issues with standardized teaching approaches is that they adversely affect creativity, acknowledgment of collaborative processes, or the necessity of enjoying the learning process; in short, some of the central tenants in cultivating a sustained desire to learn while in school and throughout life (Saavedra, 2012).

Additionally, these approaches suppress creativity while detracting from opportunities to develop critical thinking skills (Olivant, 2015). When teachers are deprived of the opportunity to utilize creative approaches in making course content relevant to the lives of their students, they lose out on establishing authentic learning opportunities to enhance student outcomes (Sharp, 2018).

Such rigid approaches to education have led to an assumed path for students to transition from their k-12 setting and into Higher Education. Although students traditionally prepared for standardized tests in an effort to apply to Universities, the scape of education has changed significantly over recent years. Several prestigious universities are not requiring ACT or SAT scores for admission. In lieu of standardized test scores, universities are looking at the experiences applicants have established throughout their high school years. Experiences such as involvement in clubs and teams as well as contributions to their community are now more important than ever. In addition to a changing paradigm for college hopefuls is a shifting perspective of career interests.

An emphasis has recently been placed on “21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills” within the United States educational system. Standards such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity define the necessary skills for students who are increasingly interested in life paths that negate college education in preference for careers in the military or in trade work such as construction or mechanic work. While some may attribute an increased desire within students to pursue careers immediately out of school with job availability, substantial salary, or a lack of debt, high schools are faced with the task of preparing students for a variety of future career interests. Similarly, students are



faced with responsibilities previous generations had not experienced within the United States educational system.

Schools are steadily shifting their curricular interests toward an emphasis in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. With this shift has come the increased demand to make learning opportunities “authentic” for students, that is, finding ways to make the lessons learned within the classroom relevant to the lives of students outside of school. Likewise, the learning process has become increasingly less centered around the individual and more focused on collaborative learning. With these new paradigms in education, administrators, teachers, and students are urged to take risks with their learning unlike ever before.

One of the themes of this study was the willingness to take intellectual risks in leadership practice. While the “factory model” approach of high stakes testing has traditionally impeded the will to take intellectual risks in the classroom, recent advances in education are requiring schools to approach curriculum from a project-based methodology. Project-based learning emphasizes career readiness skills while simultaneously making learning authentic. Such a focus on authenticity is counterintuitive to a testing culture that has consumed educational policy in the United States of America. However, it does explain recent interest in cultivating student leadership development, acknowledging the role education can play in nurturing skills that otherwise are not assessed through a standardized test. As one of the student advocates, Hank, summarized this paradigm:

I think that most people in our school are really supportive and excited about learning. We feel more comfortable to take risks because we know that there are

other people to support us. We have to kind of, you know, find the answers.

Sometimes, the answers aren't so simple but it's fun because what we do as student advocates usually, in some way, relates to our lives in different ways.

It should be noted that Hank claims to have met the standards set forth by his teachers and peers (even within a low socio-economic, struggling rural district), due to his ability to find authentic opportunities to act within his role as a student advocate.

Educational policy approaches geared towards cultivating authentic learning opportunities where students not only access their personal interests but apply them to learned content in a way that benefits their community, would be an excellent step in advancing learning opportunities and developing student leaders in k-12 education.

In trying to facilitate the leadership practices of new and veteran student leaders alike, our educational policy might be well served to consider the efforts and accomplishments of student leaders such as the student advocates in this study. Involving student advocates in policy making and curriculum creation would be an excellent first step to opening the doors to student leadership development in k-12 education.

The kinds of leadership initiatives these student advocates mentioned, frequently used collaborative approaches to establish authentic connections between their respective communities and the individuals who inhabit it. Additionally, student advocates were able to provide detailed descriptions of their perceptions and practices of leadership when being prompted with superhero narratives through a variety of media. Using media consumption and authentic connections to student's lives, as opposed to test-driven approaches, would be another way to instantiate some of their successful approaches to describing their leadership. Many of them also described the importance of leadership

practice having an impact on their community. Educational research has long touted “authentic” learning as important for meaningful and motivational learning; the findings of this study show that attempting to tie leadership initiatives to the real world (as opposed to approaches that don’t involve students’ personal interests or their community) may be an interesting approach to leadership development. Additionally, “The Seven C’s” of The Social Change Leadership Development Model emphasized in this study were found to be valuable in the perceptions of student advocates. Therefore, policy makers might consider enfolded them into student leadership development opportunities, much in the way that the student advocates in this study innately identified them in their own practice.

By emphasizing “The Seven C’s” of The Social Change Leadership Development Model, policy leaders can enhance student leadership development while simultaneously focusing on “21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills.” Likewise, the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, a national advocacy organization that encourages infusing technology into education by providing schools, districts, and states with the tools and resources necessary to facilitate successful implementation, may be used as a resource in finding authentic connections between student media consumption and their maturation as leaders.

**Higher Education.** Educational leadership programs in higher education are intended to provide leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to educate students and prepare them for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and employability skills. Yet the role of student leadership is not always clear and varies within schools and programs. The findings of this study highlight the importance of “The Seven C’s” of The Social Change Leadership Development Model and superhero narratives among student advocates. Based on this, it

would seem that educational leadership programs would benefit from an increased focus on the various ways in which students' perspectives may be influenced through developmental practices and processes.

Helping preservice educational leaders to tap into their own media use is one important way that educational leadership programs could prepare leaders to consider the role media consumption has on their students as leaders and learners. This study shows that student advocates tend to engage in a variety of media and avocations that positively influence their leadership perceptions. Educational leadership students should be encouraged to actively spend time reflecting on their own media consumption and interests and incorporate these passions into their own leadership practices. This begins to build a bridge early in a leadership career between personal interests and professional goals and may help student leaders more easily fold media usage and avocations into successful leadership practice.

Including more theoretical knowledge pertaining to the influences of media on perceptions and practices of leadership may be useful for pre-service leaders, particularly in highlighting the relationship between student leadership development opportunities and student achievement or leadership effectiveness. Some researchers have suggested specific media applications to be used in leadership education programs (Murphy, 2018; Odom et al., 2019). However, most of the student advocates in this study defined leadership as an ongoing mindset and not as a subject they would treat separately from other aspects of their practice or thinking. Therefore, assimilating media usage pertaining to personal avocations, such as superhero narratives, more fluidly into educational

leadership programs would make sense, in light of the way that leadership thinking organically occurs in practice.

Giving pre-service educational leaders more opportunities to engage in a variety of coursework pertaining to personal avocations while simultaneously taking more traditional educational leadership courses may provide the possibility of them thinking about the applications their personal interests have on leadership practice. Cross-curricular experiences are effective and motivating perceptions of leadership; thereby, pre-service educational leaders might be required to take courses in contemporary media or anything of interest outside of their major specialization in leadership and integrate this cross-disciplinary knowledge into their leadership development coursework.

Additionally, leadership courses focusing on “The Seven C’s” of the Social Change Leadership Developmental Model may be useful in relating how contemporary media and personal avocations may influence the perceptions of leadership, and specifically on the development of student leadership. Overall, a theoretical understanding of student leadership should connect to practical applications, that give educational leadership students the opportunity to consider the influences media and personal avocations have on the development of student leaders.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was an exploratory and descriptive investigation of leadership and “The Seven C’s” of Social Change Leadership Development Model in the thinking and leadership practices of student advocates. Because this study provided strong and rich evidence of superhero narratives inciting a thorough reflection of student leaders’ perceptions of leadership within the conceptual framework of “The Seven C’s” of The

Social Change Leadership Development Model, it creates a basis for further meaningful research in this area. Eight student advocates from a small midwestern high school engaged in interviews, multi-modal journal interviews and focus groups, but to examine my findings in a more thorough light, more student advocates, from other schools, could be interviewed on the same issues. Essentially, the same study could be replicated with other student advocates to determine if the same kinds of results and findings would occur.

Also, a quantitative approach to this research topic could be used to indicate the impact superhero narratives have on student leaders' perceptions of leadership. Along these lines, a carefully constructed survey instrument could be used to gauge leadership perceptions and "The Seven C's" considered in the perceptions and practices of student advocates. Survey data could be collected from a larger population; perhaps all of the student advocates within the state, allowing for a more generalizable result as well.

Because this study was purely qualitative in nature, this type of quantitative component could also be added to qualitative processes such as the interviews, multi-modal journal interviews, and focus groups. By extending this work into a mixed-methods study, there is an opportunity to gather quantitative findings on leadership perspectives and the extent in which student advocates may identify "The Seven C's" within their descriptions of leadership, which could then be further explained via the focus group process.

There are a variety of possibilities for research on this subject. Observational research would be a fascinating opportunity to observe the leadership practices of student advocates and understand in more detail how superhero narratives play out in their

perceptions and exercises within the context of their practice. If possible, comparison studies would be valuable, between student advocates who engage in reflective practices such as the ones in this study, and student advocates that rely purely on the customs of their leadership development process. Comparison studies could also be done across age, ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic status in an effort to determine if superhero narratives may have differing impacts on a given group of individuals or if particular superheroes are more successful in developing some individuals as opposed to others.

Due to the scope of this study focusing specifically on the extent in which superhero narratives may or may not have an impact on student leaders' perceptions of student leadership, I focused exclusively on the varying modes of narrative delivery through an assortment of media. An extension of this study may focus on the impact superhero artifacts have on student leaders constructing perceptions of leadership. For example, rather than focus groups responding to a series of questions pertaining to their media use, they could interact with and answer questions pertaining to replicas of objects associated with superheroes such as Captain America's shield, Thor's hammer, Mjolnir, Wonder Woman's Lasso of Truth, Batman's batarang, etc. Similarly, focus groups could focus on media artifacts and questions pertaining to such, analogous to the modes of narrative delivery I had shared with participants during their multi-modal journal interview process. This would allow for participants to share their initial interpretations within a group context, removing the time participants had in this study between first engaging in a variety of superhero narratives through various modes of media, and then sharing their perceptions with myself and then with others.

Since student leadership is a complex but crucial topic in the field of education, and “The Seven C’s” have not been studied much in high school student leaders, the possibilities for research avenues are limitless.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The results of this study have been influenced by several limitations. The degree of honesty in which the participants in this study discussed their perceptions on leadership, superhero narratives, and their collective meaning-making process could have caused the data to be misconstrued. While speaking with each of the participants about their perceptions of leadership, conversation was both detailed and interesting. However, the sense of openness may have led to discussion of leadership perceptions that weren’t cultivated in their own practice as leaders. Conversely, gaining familiarity with the participants may have led to over-interpretation by me as the researcher. I attempted to account for these issues by using a variety of open-ended and specific questions on leadership, superhero narratives, and their collect meaning-making process, to allow for freedom and honest discussion as well as a chance to address the specific research questions. Also, I engaged in an extensive use of direct quoting to give the reader exposure to the data I had gathered alongside my interpretations.

My previous role as an educator within the same school district as the participants may have had an influence on their willingness to speak to me in regard to their perspectives. Although none of the participants within this study were ever a student of mine, their peers could influence their perceptions of myself, moreover, having an impact on the extent in which they were not only comfortable speaking to me but also the responses they shared. In addition to previously serving as an employee of the school



district, my seven years of teaching art education may have influenced my perceived value on the arts in developing perspectives.

Another related limitation is, while being asked about topics of leadership, the participants may have felt compelled to respond to questions in more affirmative ways than what were actually reflected in their practice. I attempted to control for this to some extent by asking for detailed, specific examples of how their leadership perceptions could be identified both in practice as well as within superhero narratives.

Also, the fact that data was gathered via recorded conversations could have affected the data. Despite informed consent always being done, it is possible the nature of recorded discussion might affect the content of the conversation that were had.

Additionally, my personal views on leadership, superheroes, or the collective meaning-making process could have affected the interpretation of data. This is always a possibility within qualitative interpretative analysis, and I attempted to use qualitative research procedures to address these limitations.

A delimitation of this study is that I confined my interviewees to a narrow sample of specific student advocates, who are not necessarily representative of the overall population of student leaders. A further delimitation is that the student advocates I gathered data from in this group had responded to my request to interview them on their perceptions of leadership. This also limits my sample of students inclined toward positive attitudes leadership within their context. My intent was to home in on the perceptions, practices, and experiences of a particular group of student leaders. A refined sample was a function of that.

## Summary

The purpose of this research was to contribute to the literature on student leadership development in the high school setting. The focus was on how superhero narratives impact the personal and professional perceptions of student advocates. Research has shown that youth culture is often associated with their consumption of media, which influences their thinking overall. This was also found to be true of student advocates in this study.

Prior research in education has suggested a link between media consumptions and effective learning, asserting that media consumption may have an influence on one's ability to acquire knowledge and skills. This research revealed that student advocates actively cultivate a constant mindset geared towards leadership and are always ready to draw on ideas from varied sources of media and avocations. They perceived their approaches to leadership as including real-world applications, peer influence, and intellectual risks. Additionally, "The Seven C's" of the Social Change Leadership Development Model: consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship were highly valued elements in student advocated perceptions of leadership.

The student advocates interviewed in this study indicated a prevalent use of media in their leadership practices and their lives overall. Literature pertaining to youth culture has previously noted the connection between contemporary youth and media consumption, often stating media's influence on contemporary youths' ability to construct meaning of themselves and the world around them. As one of the student advocates in this study framed it:

I think movies, videogames, things like that, really make life interesting. What a boring world it would be if we didn't have them. How many times can you remember a time where you and a friend bonded over a good movie or book...played a video game late at night? It (media) brings us together so we can talk about big ideas, share our opinions, and have a fun life.

Student leadership has become a subject of intense interest in education, yet the current state of educational leadership development does not necessarily uphold its importance or give it appropriate attention for the means in which it is developed. This research sought to better understand some of the elements of student leader's perceptions of leadership, and it offers some implications for how superhero narratives can serve the field of leadership development and research going forward.

## APPENDICIES

### APPENDIX A: Sample Semi-Structured Interview Protocols

#### Open-ended Warm-up Questions

1. Tell me a little about where you go to school. (*Possible probe: Tell me about your classrooms, setting, fellow students, teachers, and community*)
2. Why do you believe your fellow classmates nominated you as a student advocate? (*Possible probe: have you previously been in similar positions in schools?*)
3. Tell me about what it is like to be a student advocate? (*Possible probe: what are some of the challenges and rewards of being a student advocate?*)

#### Student Advocate Perceptions of Student Leadership

4. How do you define “leadership”? Or what does it mean to be a leader? (Possible probes: What does leadership mean in the general sense of the word? How do you define or judge leadership amongst your peers or adults and does those definitions/judgments differ?)
5. How do you come up with policies and procedures to be implemented at your school?
6. As someone who has been noted as a student leader, what do you think makes a student advocate effective or successful within and outside of the classroom?
7. What do you think makes a decision made by a student advocate successful?
8. What are some examples of actions you have enacted as a student advocate? (Possible probe: What kinds of actions or practices do you find that students respond well to?)
9. How would you describe the relationship between your role as a student advocate and the extent to which you believe every student advocate understands the role of student advocates at your school? (Possible probes: do you receive training to enhance your ability to be affective as a student leader? Do all student advocates receive the same amount of training? How could training impact your ability to work as a team?)
10. Do you have any outside interests or pursuits that you spend time on outside of your role as a student advocate? (Possible probes: Tell me a little bit about these hobbies. What do they mean to you and how have they enriched your life?)
11. Do your activities or interests outside of your role as a student advocate ever factor into your thinking about your school or peers? (Possible probes: In what ways does this tend to happen? Are there hobbies that influence your understanding of leadership?)
12. Aside from observing adults, in what ways do you form your understanding of leadership? (Possible probes: Have you noticed a specific event, place, or time that seems to bring about ideas of leadership?)

## APPENDIX B: Semi-Structured Journal Protocol

### Social Change Leadership Development

Preface: I have some questions about specific types of skills related to leadership development. You will be briefly interacting with a variety of different superhero narratives through several different means (comic books, audio recordings, video clips, and video games). Then, I will ask you a series of questions related to the narrative you interacted with and how it relates to your thinking and understanding of leadership.

*Comic Book: After reading the first issue of Superman in Action Comics*

#### Consciousness of Self & Others

13. What are the beliefs, values, attitudes, and emotions that motivate Clark to take action? What does it mean to be conscious of yourself and others? Is consciousness important for student advocates? Explain why student advocates should or should not demonstrate a different level of consciousness than their peers?

#### Congruence

14. How would you describe Superman's behavior in each of the scenes? What about each of the scenes is very similar about the way Superman acts and why do these similarities exist? (Possible probe: describe the behaviors and actions of each of the characters. Who do the characters interact with and why is it that they interact with these particular people?)

*Radio: After listening to "[The Adventures of Superman](#)" (1945) where Batman, Superman, and Robin work together in an effort to stop crime.*

#### Commitment

15. What motivates the hero to serve and what drives their collective effort in doing so? How are you committed to serving as a student advocate? What similarities and differences can you identify between the hero's commitment and your own? (Possible probe: What does it mean to be committed? Why would someone be committed? What would prevent someone from being committed?)

#### Collaboration

16. Who are the heroes involved in this scene? Are they able to achieve success alone or do they need to depend on one another or somebody else? What value is there in working with others? What impact does collaboration have on group effectiveness?

*Movie: After viewing a scene from Captain America: Civil War where two of the central protagonists get in an altercation pertaining to their understanding as to whether or not they are creating more harm than good by serving the public.*

#### Common Purpose

17. What do all of the Avengers have in common with one another? Why is it important for the Avengers to have a purpose? Describe a moment where The Avengers demonstrated purpose; was it demonstrated by an individual, group, or both? What is your common purpose as student advocates?

#### Controversy with Civility

18. Explain how the scene demonstrates controversy. What members are involved in the controversy and how would you describe their role in society? Why does a controversy exist and is it necessary? Does a controversy need to be resolved and how can it be beneficial or harmful?

*Video Game: After playing through an objective in Batman Arkham Knight where Batman is being directed by Alfred to complete a task that will allow Batman to stop criminals in the city from inflicting harm on citizens.*

#### Citizenship

19. Who depends on Batman? Without Batman, can they be successful? Who does Batman depend on? Without them, can Batman be successful? Why is it that Batman and Gotham City go hand-in-hand? (Possible probe: Why doesn't Batman serve in communities other than Gotham City? Are there other heroes in Gotham City?) The characters in this game are all citizens of Gotham; how are they similar to the students at your school?

## APPENDIX C: Focus Group Protocol

Preface: I have some questions about technology and its role in your life as a teenager and student advocate. Although each of the questions will be directed to a particular individual in this group, you may discuss your responses together and exchange in conversation pertaining to the questions. There are seven questions total. All participants are encouraged to share their perspective on the topics and respectful disagreement pertaining to the questions is acceptable and encouraged.

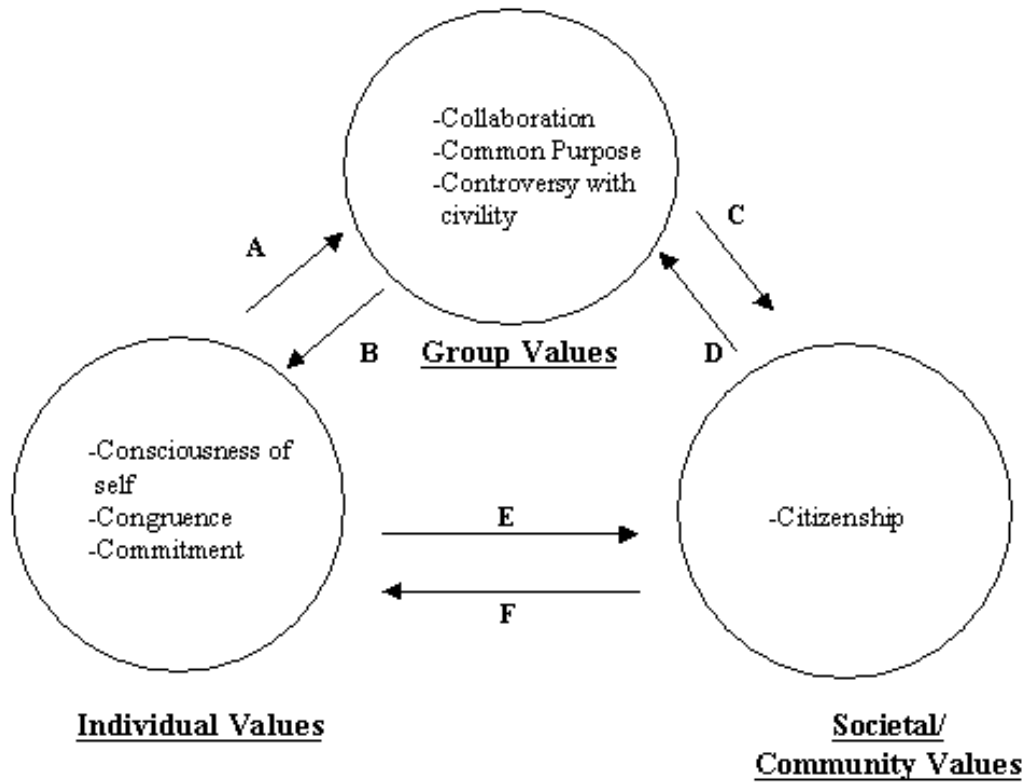
20. Describe which form of media was most enjoyable for you to interact with (comic book, audio recording, movie, or video game?) Why do you believe this form of media was most enjoyable for you? Do you believe that you learned anything from engaging with the superhero narratives through this means of media?
21. Describe which form of media was the least enjoyable for you to interact with (comic book, audio recording, movie, or video game?) Why do you believe this form of media was not enjoyable for you? Do you believe that you learned anything from engaging with the superhero narrative through this means of media?
22. How is media used at your school? How do teachers use it for learning? What are some of the rules associated with media use at your school? How do student advocates use media within their role as leaders? Do you agree with the rules and who created them? Explain why you do or do not.
23. What is your opinion of social media? How is social media useful for you as a student and teenager? Are there any reasons why social media may not be useful for you? Explain your relationship with social media. Do you feel like you have to be part of social media to fit into society? (Possible probe: How frequently do you use social media? Describe the first time you used social media; can you remember which grade you were in?)
24. Your peers have nominated you as a student advocate; do you believe that you are representative of your peers? What similarities do you share with your peers? What differences exist between you and your peers?
25. To what extent do you believe that your voice as a student should matter to the school? Why do you believe your school allows for student advocates? What are some of the advantages to having student advocates? What are some of the disadvantages of having student advocates?
26. Is media use a requirement or a suggestion for you as a student advocate? How do you think this impacts your abilities to act as a student advocate? How often do you receive opportunities to improve your professional knowledge, competence, skill, and effectiveness pertaining to your role as a student advocate? Describe to what extent you believe you are successful as student advocates and what recommendations you would make for student advocates to improve.

**APPENDIX D: Instrumentation Cross-Reference**

<b>Research Questions</b>		<b>Interview Protocol Items</b>	<b>Multi-Modal Interview/ Journal Protocol Items</b>	<b>Focus Group Protocol Items</b>
Question 1	How do student leaders define leadership?	Questions 4-12		Questions 20-26
Question 2	What is the relationship between student leadership and superhero narratives?		Questions 13-19	
<p>Note: Questions 1-3 on the interview protocol are “warm-up” questions, designed to start the conversation of student advocate perceptions of student leadership. They do not necessarily correspond to the research questions above.</p>				



**APPENDIX E: Social Change Development Figure**



**Figure 1. The 7 C's organized by level of focus**

## APPENDIX F: Recruitment Letter (Student)

Date

Dear Student,

Through careful screening of our current student population, you have been identified as a potential participant in a research study on the relationship between student leadership and superhero narratives among contemporary youth (i.e. student advocates). As a participant, you will be engaging in in-depth interviews, journal writing, and a focus group session. Participation in this research study is an opportunity to share your knowledge and skills, helping us to better understand student leaders and improve the development of young leaders like you.

Participation in this study is, of course, voluntary and you may decline to participate at any time without penalty. If you decide to participate and then change your mind, you may withdraw at any time without penalty. Your protection is a top priority of mine; therefore, your identity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms pertaining to your name, location, and school. By using information from student leaders to help us better understand the relationship between superhero narratives and leadership among student advocates, together we can help improve leadership and learning in education

If interested in participating, I will be visiting your school on [MONTH, DAY at TIME.] to provide an informational session regarding my research design in [Conference Room]. During the aforementioned date and time, I will provide student advocates with a consent form to bring home, review with their parent/guardian(s), and return to me within two weeks with their signatures if they so choose to participate in the study.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Dominick Stella, at [djstella@indiana.edu](mailto:djstella@indiana.edu) or 812.606.5761. I look forward to your reply on participation, and thank you sincerely in advance of your contributions.

Sincerely,



Dominick Stella, MS  
Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership  
School of Education  
Indiana University- Bloomington  
812-606-5761  
[djstella@indiana.edu](mailto:djstella@indiana.edu)

## APPENDIX G: Recruitment E-mail (Principal)

Date

Dear Principal,

I am writing to ask for your student advocates' participation as part of a dissertation research study on the relationship between student leadership and superhero narratives among contemporary youth (i.e. student advocates). As a participant, your student advocates will be engaging in in-depth interviews, journal writing, and a focus group session. Your students' participation in this research study is an opportunity to share their knowledge and skills, helping us to better understand student leaders and improve the development of young leaders.

Participation in this study is, of course, voluntary and your students may decline to participate at any time without penalty. If your student advocates decide to participate and then change their minds, they may withdraw at any time without penalty. Your students' protection is a top priority of mine; therefore, their identity will be protected through the use of pseudonyms pertaining to their name, location, and school. By using information from student leaders to help us better understand the relationship between superhero narratives and leadership among student advocates, together we can help improve leadership and learning in education

If interested in participating, I would like to propose that I visit your campus to inform your student advocates of the research design on [MONTH, DAY at TIME.] I ask that you please send the attached e-mail to your student advocates, inviting them to an informational session regarding my research design for [MONTH, DAY at TIME.], within an available conference room at your school. During the aforementioned date and time, I will provide student advocates with a consent form to bring home, review with their parent/guardian(s), and return to me within two weeks with their signatures if they so choose to participate in the study.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Dominick Stella, at [djstella@indiana.edu](mailto:djstella@indiana.edu) or 812.606.5761. I look forward to your reply on participation, and thank you sincerely in advance of your contributions.

Sincerely,



Dominick Stella, MS  
Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership  
School of Education  
Indiana University- Bloomington  
812-606-5761  
[djstella@indiana.edu](mailto:djstella@indiana.edu)

## **APPENDIX H: Letter of Consent (Parent/Guardian)**

### **INDIANA UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR RESEARCH**

Protocol Title: Unmasking Student Leader's Perceptions of Student Leadership

**Sponsor: Dr. Suzanne Eckes**

#### **ABOUT THIS RESEARCH**

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study. Scientists do research to answer important questions which might help change or improve the way we do things in the future.

This consent form will give you information about the study to help you decide whether you want your child to participate. Please read this form, and ask any questions you have, before agreeing to have your child in the study.

#### **TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY IS VOLUNTARY**

You may choose not to have your child take part in the study or may choose to have your child leave the study at any time. Deciding not to participate, or deciding to leave the study later, will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which your child are entitled and will not affect your child or your's relationship with Clarksville Community Schools.

#### **WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?**

The purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of the connection between superhero narratives and student leaders' perceptions of student leadership.

Your child was selected as a possible participant because they currently serve as a learner advocate.

The study is being conducted by Dominick Stella and Indiana University's Educational Leadership & Policy Studies Department.

#### **HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL TAKE PART?**

If you agree to have your child participate, they will be one of eight participants taking part in this study.

#### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THE STUDY?**

If you agree to have your child in the study, they will do the following things:

Engage in an interview, reacting to various forms of narrative delivery (i.e. comic book, audio, television, movie, and video game) by journaling, and meet with other participants for a concluding focus group.

- All activities will occur at Renaissance Academy, taking place every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 11am, during a free period in which they would not be missing class.
- Each activity and/or visit will last no more than 60 minutes
- Each participant will be involved in 9 meetings (1 interview, 7 journal responses, and 1 focus group) for a total of nine hours of participation that take place over the span of two months

### **WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?**

While participating in the study, the risks, side effects, and/or discomforts include:

- There is a risk of possible loss of confidentiality.

Several measures will be made to assure your child's confidentiality as a participant:

- Study codes will be used on data documents rather than recording identifiable information; a separate document that links the study codes to the participants will be locked in a separate location, restricting access to that of the primary investigator.
- Pseudonyms will be used when referring to your child as well as the school they attend and its location.
- All documents pertaining to interviews, journals, and focus groups will be safely stored in a secure data base.
- Information will not be discussed or released for purposes other than this study.
- All fact sheets containing identifiers (i.e., names and addresses) will be removed from instruments containing data after receiving from study participants.
- Study data and documents will be properly disposed, destroyed, or deleted.

### **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?**

The benefits to participation in the study that are reasonable to expect are: 1. A greater understanding of the participant's leadership practice and 2. The gratification of advancing the field of youth leadership development practice.

### **HOW WILL YOUR CHILD'S INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?**

Efforts will be made to keep your child's personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your child's personal information may be disclosed if

required by law. No information which could identify your child will be shared in publications about this study.

All documents, including audio recordings, will be stored from my phone to an IU server, utilizing IU box, with encryption. Once all documents are transcribed and de-identified, I will store them locally on an external hard drive that is protected by a password. All data will be destroyed via deletion upon completion of the study.

### **WILL MY CHILD'S INFORMATION BE USED FOR RESEARCH IN THE FUTURE?**

Information collected from Dominick Stella for this study may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers for future research. If this happens, information which could identify your child will be removed before any information or specimens are shared. Since identifying information will be removed, we will not ask for your additional consent.

### **WILL MY CHILD BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATION?**

Your child will get an Amazon gift card for being in this research study. Your child will earn a gift card for each activity they participate in:

1. The interview will provide a \$10 Amazon gift card for an hour of participation.
2. The journal will provide a \$30 Amazon gift card for three and a half hours of participation.
3. The focus group will provide a \$10 Amazon gift card for an hour of participation.

### **WILL IT COST MY CHILD ANYTHING TO PARTICIPATE?**

There is no cost for taking part in this study.

### **WHO WILL PAY FOR MY CHILD'S TREATMENT IF THEY ARE INJURED?**

In the event of physical injury resulting from your participation in this study, necessary medical treatment will be provided to your child and billed as part of their medical expenses. Costs not covered by your child's health care insurer will be your responsibility. Also, it is your responsibility to determine the extent of your child's health care coverage. There is no program in place for other monetary compensation for such injuries. However, your child is not giving up any legal rights or benefits to which they are otherwise entitled. If your child is participating in research that is not conducted at a medical facility, your child will be responsible for seeking medical care and for the expenses associated with any care received.

### **WHO SHOULD I CALL WITH QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?**

For questions about the study or research-related injury contact the researcher, Dominick Stella at 812.606.5761 or [djstella@indiana.edu](mailto:djstella@indiana.edu).

In the event of an emergency, you may contact Dominick Stella at 812.606.5761.

For questions about your child's rights as a research participant, to discuss problems, complaints, or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information or to offer input, please contact the IU Human Subjects Office at 800-696-2949 or at [irb@iu.edu](mailto:irb@iu.edu).

**CAN MY CHILD WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?**

If your child decides to participate in this study, they can change their mind and decide to leave the study at any time in the future. The study team will help your child withdraw from the study safely. If your child decides to withdraw, they must send an e-mail to [djstella@indiana.edu](mailto:djstella@indiana.edu) confirming their intent to withdraw from the study.

**PARTICIPANT'S CONSENT**

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Parent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Parent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:**

\_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX I: Letter of Consent (Participant)**

### **INDIANA UNIVERSITY ASSENT STATEMENT FOR RESEARCH**

Protocol Title: Unmasking Student Leader's Perceptions of Student Leadership  
**Sponsor: Dr. Suzanne Eckes**

#### **ABOUT THIS RESEARCH**

We are doing a research study. A research study is a special way to learn about something. We want to learn if superhero stories influence student leaders' understanding of student leadership.

#### **TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY IS VOLUNTARY**

Your participation is not required and you may choose to leave the study at any time. Deciding not to participate, or deciding to leave the study later, will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled and will not affect your relationship with Clarksville Community Schools.

#### **WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?**

The purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of a possible connection between superhero narratives and student leaders' perceptions of student leadership.

You were selected as a possible participant because you currently serve as a learner advocate

The study is being conducted by Dominick Stella and Indiana University's Educational Leadership & Policy Studies Department.

#### **HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL TAKE PART?**

If you agree to participate, you will be one of eight participants taking part in this study.

#### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THE STUDY?**

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

Engage in an interview, reacting to various forms of narrative delivery (i.e. comic book, audio, television, movie, and video game) by journaling, and meet with other participants for a concluding focus group.

- All activities will occur at Renaissance Academy, taking place every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 11pm, during a free period in which they would not be missing class.
- Each activity and/or visit will last no more than 60 minutes
- Each participant will be involved in 9 meetings (1 interview, 7 journal responses, and 1 focus group) for a total of nine hours of participation that take place over the span of two months



## **WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?**

While participating in the study, the risks, side effects, and/or discomforts include:

- There is a risk of possible loss of confidentiality.

Several measures will be made to assure your confidentiality as a participant:

- Study codes will be used on data documents rather than recording identifiable information; a separate document that links the study codes to the participants will be locked in a separate location, restricting access to that of the primary investigator.
- Pseudonyms will be used when referring to you as well as the school you attend and its location.
- All documents related to interviews, journals, and focus groups will be safely stored in a secure data base.
- Information will not be discussed or released for purposes other than this study.
- All face sheets containing identifiers (i.e., names and addresses) will be removed from instruments containing data after receiving from study participants.
- Study data and documents will be properly disposed, destroyed, or deleted.

## **WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?**

Two potential benefits of taking part in the study are:

1. A greater understanding of the participant's leadership practice.
2. Gratification of advancing the field of youth leadership development practice.

## **HOW WILL MY INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?**

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. No information which could identify you will be shared in publications about this study.

All documents, including audio recordings, will be stored from my phone to an IU server, utilizing IU box, with encryption. Once all documents are transcribed and de-identified, I will store them locally on an external hard drive that is protected by a password. All data will be destroyed via deletion upon completion of the study.

## **WILL MY INFORMATION BE USED FOR RESEARCH IN THE FUTURE?**

Information collected from Dominick Stella for this study may be used for future research studies or shared with other researchers for future research. If this happens, information which could identify you will be removed before any information or specimens are shared. Since identifying information will be removed, we will not ask for your additional consent.

## **WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATION?**

You will get an Amazon gift card for being in this research study. You will earn a gift card for each activity you participate in:

1. The interview will provide a \$10 Amazon gift card for an hour of participation.
2. The journal will provide a \$30 Amazon gift card for three and a half hours of participation.
3. The focus group will provide a \$10 Amazon gift card for an hour of participation.

### **WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO PARTICIPATE?**

There is no cost to you for taking part in this study.

### **WHO SHOULD I CALL WITH QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?**

For questions about the study or research-related injury contact the researcher, Dominick Stella at 812.606.5761 or [djstella@indiana.edu](mailto:djstella@indiana.edu).

In the event of an emergency, you may contact Dominick Stella at 812.606.5761.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, to discuss problems, complaints, or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information or to offer input, please contact the IU Human Subjects Office at 800-696-2949 or at [irb@iu.edu](mailto:irb@iu.edu).

### **CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you can change your mind and decide to leave the study at any time in the future. The study team will help you withdraw from the study safely. If you decide to withdraw, send an e-mail to [djstella@indiana.edu](mailto:djstella@indiana.edu) confirming your intent to withdraw from the study.

### **PARTICIPANT'S CONSENT**

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

**Participant's Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

### EDUCATION AND TRAINING:

**Indiana University- Bloomington**, *107 S Indiana Ave, Bloomington, IN*

Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, 2015-2020

- Honors: Outstanding Scholars Tuition Scholarship
- Activities: Martha McCarthy Law Institute, Phi Beta Kappa

**Indiana University- Bloomington (Kelley School of Business)**, *107 S Indiana Ave, Bloomington, IN*

MS. 4.0, in Strategic Management, 2018

**Indiana University**, *107 S Indiana Ave, Bloomington, IN*

B.S. 4.0, in Visual Arts Education with a minor in Art History, Aug. 2006-May 2010

- Honors: Founder's Scholar, Valedictorian Scholarship, National Society of Collegiate Scholars, Dean's List
- Activities: Indiana Collegiate Press Association Illustrator of the Year, Fine Arts Student Association

**Scuola Internazionale di Grafica Venezia, Cannaregio**, *1798, 30121 Venice, Italy*

Independent research in printmaking with an emphasis in intaglio, Summer 2009

- Honors: Marcy Murphy Printmaking Overseas Study Scholarship, Hutton Honors International Experiences Program Grant

### CERTIFIED EXPERIENCE:

**Jackson Creek Middle School, IN**

Assistant Principal & Special Education Coordinator, August 2019-2020

- Discipline
  - Enforcing attendance rules
  - Meeting with parents to discuss student behavioral or learning problems
  - Responding to disciplinary issues
- Special Education Coordinator
  - Coordinating and participating in case conferences
  - Drafting and establishing 504 Plans
- Developing and maintaining school safety procedures
- Staff development
  - Evaluating teachers and learning materials to determine areas where improvement is needed
  - Working with teachers to develop curriculum standards

- Professional development pertaining to 504 Plan and IEP compliance for educators
- Coordinating and planning class schedules
- Assessing data such as state standards and test scores
- Coordinating transportation for students
- Hiring and training staff
- Maintaining systems for attendance, performance, planning, and other reports
- Walking the hallways and checking in on teachers and classrooms
- Responding to emails from teachers, parents and community members

### **The Renaissance Academy, Clarksville, IN**

Visual Arts Educator, August 2017-2019

- Implemented high school fine arts curriculum, abiding state and national standards
- Department Head responsible for structuring the materials and supplies for all art courses
- Team-teaching experience with a collaborative course combining Art History and Sophomore English
- Teaching dual-credit Art History for Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana

### **Martinsville High School, Martinsville, IN**

Visual Arts Educator & Football Coach, August 2014-2016

- Implemented high school fine arts curriculum, abiding state and national standards
- Coached wide receivers and defensive backs on the varsity football (2015-016):
- Created the Graduate Assurance committee, assisting ‘high-risk’ students in graduating
- Maintained and facilitated weight training courses for students and members of the corporation
- Led student-athletes and Art Club members on educational field trips

### **Key Advisor to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Indiana Department of Education, IN**

Volunteer Instructor, 2016-2018

- Organizing the dissemination of special needs policy
- Drafting key components to student’s analysis and inclusion requirements
- Drafting alternative diploma options

### **Wawasee Community Schools, Syracuse, IN**

Visual Arts Educator & Football Coach, August 2011-July 2013

- Implemented high school fine arts curriculum, abiding state and national standards

- Coached wide receivers, defensive backs, and kickers on the varsity football team to two winning seasons:
- Created the Graduate Assurance committee, assisting ‘high-risk’ students in graduating
- Maintained and facilitated weight training courses for students and members of the corporation
- Led student-athletes and Art Club members on educational field trips, community service projects<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub> and school activities

**Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL**

Graduate Assistant, August 2010-May 2011

- Wrote course proposals, lectures, and demonstrations
- Managed, scheduled, and organized work-study employees
- Exhibited artwork managed The Working Method Contemporary Art Gallery
- Facilitated the upkeep and operations of the printmaking communal shop for students, faculty, and visiting artists

**Boys & Girls Club, Bloomington, IN**

Volunteer Instructor, 2006-2008

- Organized and taught art lessons to elementary students in an after-school setting
- Analyzed student-learning behavior
- Researched the impact of technology on the learning process

**STUDENT TEACHING:**

**Martinsville High School**, 1360, E Gray St, Martinsville, IN 46151

Student Teacher, January 2010 – May 2010

*College Supervisor:* Cheryl Gerdt

*Immediate Supervisor:* Vicki Heidenreich

- **Special Abilities:** Served as a Saturday art school instructor, responsible for teaching children of Indiana University Faculty that spoke English as a second language

**EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY:**

If you are looking for innovation, creativity and a relentless work ethic, look no further. I am dedicated to a life of learning and sharing my skills with others. I have experience in a diverse range of fields and I pride myself in having a broad range of skills within education. From my experience of collaborating with artists, educators, and students, to my commitment to refining my own craft, I welcome the opportunity to join you in striving towards perfection. Utilizing creativity as a vehicle of inquiry, I collaborate with students, colleagues, and stakeholders to invest in critical analysis, research, dedication, and time management tasks.

In a world driven by innovation and advancements, leadership enables its most devoted collaborators to not only flex their creativity, but to utilize tools and techniques beyond their rudimentary states. The employment market is saturated with college graduates and memorizing equations or facts simply isn't enough to obtain employment. Industries seek committed individuals that can follow rules, critically analyze their tasks and to use the equations and facts they learned from their studying in new ways. The educators I work with not only demonstrate an ability to produce superb learning opportunities, but more importantly, enable their students with the life-skills that will propel them in their chosen professions and lives.

Learning is not a one-size-fits all process. I take pride in the fact that my students leave my school with life skills. By creating opportunities that allow my teachers to convey information through demonstrations, hands-on activities, and lectures, we work with them to utilize their experiences in school as a tool to teach lessons about the importance of critical thinking. Through research, writing, and producing, my students “connect the dots” between core curriculum and more importantly, themselves. Similarly, I invest in researching current trends in education to best collaborate with colleagues to solve complex problems, allowing for the superb education all learners deserve.

It is important for me to know my students and their respective abilities and interests. If one were to ask a previous student to describe me in a single word, they would say, “demanding”. I understand what it takes to succeed and I accept the responsibility of seeing my students and faculty through to their fullest potential. Students and faculty confide in me because I am compassionate, respectful, and demanding. I assure that students, administrators, and parents are well aware of my expectations by providing habitual assessment. This allows me to not only be transparent in my leadership process but to also catch students before they fall through the cracks and place themselves in a position they may not be able to bounce back from.