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**Self-Advocacy Perceptions of Special Education Students  
in the General Education Setting**

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SPED 696 Capstone Project

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**Abstract**

Self-advocacy is an important skill that all students should learn. It plays a vital role in many aspects of life at home, in school, in the community, and at work. This is especially important for special education students who have more challenges than their peers. It begins by improving communication with teachers, giving students the confidence to voice their needs, and acquiring appropriate modifications and accommodations that allow them to show their true abilities and reach their full academic potential. Students that are able to self-advocate are more likely to be more successful in school as well as later on in their adult lives.

Literature states that there is an increasing demand for special educators to focus on teaching academic skills. Along with overseeing IEPs, transition planning, progress monitoring, conducting meetings, and providing accommodations and modifications, little time is left over to teach self-advocacy. Because of this, many students are struggling with making independent decisions, solving problems, setting goals, and accepting the consequences of their actions. The IDEA puts an emphasis on learning transition services in order to prepare for adulthood. Youth with disabilities have a lower rate of enrollment in post-secondary education than students without a disability, are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree, and have a much lower percentage of employment between the ages of sixteen and sixty-four. There are a number of different programs and curricula that are currently available and up-and-coming to support students in learning how to self-advocate. It is important that students play an active role in planning their transition from high school to post-secondary school and then on to employment and independent living. Though IDEA mandates student involvement in planning their IEP and transition, many do not have the proper knowledge, skills, or confidence to do so. By increasing

their self-advocacy skills, students can be more active in the planning process because they will have gained the knowledge needed to describe their own needs and preferences.

## **Introduction**

Self-advocacy can be defined in many ways. It is having the ability to communicate things that you need, asking for help and support, speaking up for yourself and supporting yourself, and also problem-solving and identifying an appropriate support system. For students, self-advocating is a necessary skill to have successful transitions from middle school to high school, high school to post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. For students with disabilities, being able to self-advocate also allows them to understand their ability and have knowledge of their own strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and needs (Cantley & Martin, 2020). By learning these skills, students will be able to have more confidence in their communication, make decisions and choices that have a purpose, and gain independence as adults. According to McConnell et al. (2013) (as cited in Cantley & Martin, 2020), self-advocacy is one of ten non-academic skill constructions used to predict successful transitions in students with disabilities. Speaking up for yourself and asking questions can be a scary thing for students though. In her book *Rising Strong*, Brene Brown (2017) states that “our bodies respond to emotion first, and they often direct us to shut down or disengage” (p.49). A strong fear surrounding the idea of self-advocacy can keep students from getting some of their needs met.

Federal special education laws and regulations require students of transition-age to go through transition education in order to prepare themselves for life after high school (Lingo et al., 2018). While self-advocacy, along with other skills associated with self-determination, is a skill necessary for all students, instruction has traditionally fallen on special education teachers, school counselors, or health teachers. With an increase in mental health concerns, counselors and

health teachers have had additional interventions and curricula added to their plates that leave finding time to explicitly teach self-advocacy difficult. The demand for special educators to teach academic skills has also increased (Lingo et al., 2018). The responsibilities of special educators are already quite demanding. With duties such as conducting various assessments, writing IEPs and evaluations, overseeing and advocating for students during meetings, providing appropriate accommodations and modifications, and keeping in communication and collaborating with general education teachers and parents, it is already difficult to fit in academic instruction let alone teaching students transition skills.

Middle school and high school-aged students are in a very formative period in their life. If they can be taught the benefits of letting themselves be vulnerable at this age, they can carry it on with them throughout life and have that positive perspective that allows others to trust and support them. With so much demand put in other areas, it is difficult to find time for direct instruction of self-advocacy skills. However, even the smallest bit of guidance can make a big difference. With the review of available research, literature, and curriculum, it can be possible to fit in some basic, yet essential, instruction.

### **Review of Literature**

The importance of teaching the self-determination skill of self-advocacy is clear across various literature. It is not only stressed to support students in achieving academic goals, but also those outside of school such as employment, integration into the community, and quality of life. The rate of high school graduation is climbing, however, students with disabilities are still almost three times as likely to drop out of high school than their non-disabled peers (Snyder et al., 2019, as cited in Robert & Parker, 2020). Research shows that students that are equipped with self-advocacy skills have more post-school success. Balint-Langel et al. (2019) state that

“without self-determination skills, students with disabilities may rely on other adults to make crucial decisions regarding their learning and post-school goals.” By fostering self-advocacy skills, teachers that give this instruction will equip students with the ability to actively participate in their educational programs and establish long-term goals for after school. In one study done by Balint-Langel et al. (2019), Self-Advocacy Strategy (SAS) was delivered to middle school students through self-paced computer-assisted instruction via compact disk rather than live teacher instruction. While results showed a significant difference in student participation, there was not a significant effect on their levels of self-determination. Other studies done in either special education classrooms, general education classrooms, or both measured positive changes in self-determination and self-advocacy using a validated measure (Burke et al., 2018). This reinforces the importance of teaching self-advocacy through direct instruction.

Though research has expanded and there are a number of articles identifying and discussing research on self-determination skills, very few of them are specific to self-advocacy. However, it is still consistently brought up as one of the essential non-academic behaviors associated with the success of students with disabilities in their post-school endeavors. Holzberg et al., 2019, (as cited in Robert & Parker, 2020), self-advocacy strategies also equip students with the skills they need to access their accommodations after school. When students learn to advocate, they are more likely to independently request accommodations when they are needed. Zhang et al. (2019) report that students with disabilities also have higher GPAs as a result of increased confidence from learning self-advocacy skills (Robert & Parker, 2020).

The main limitations of current research on self-advocacy are sample sizes and intervention duration. In most studies that have been done, sample sizes were relatively small consisting of anywhere from six to fifteen students. This may have been a factor in the

effectiveness of the intervention. The length of studies was also relatively short leaving the success of a year-long curriculum yet to be determined. In addition to these, the majority of studies did not state the time of year they were conducted in. Balint-Langel et al. (2019) noted that studies should avoid being conducted toward the end of the academic year in order to make certain that maintenance and generalization can be included. Another limitation that seemed common across research is the use of only one measure to determine success. In the future, multiple sources of data should be analyzed. Future studies should also be sure to include a control group. While some reviewed had a control group as a part of their study, many did not.

While curriculum for self-advocacy is still relatively new, there are a few great resources available to support instruction. *The Integrated Self-Advocacy Curriculum: A Program for Emerging Self-Advocates with Autism Spectrum and Other Conditions* by Valerie Paradiz is a student workbook that includes twelve units to lead students through lesson plans, worksheets, and activities, and creating a portfolio for documentation. Although this curriculum is primarily for students on the autism spectrum, it can easily be adapted for students with other disabilities. Not only does it assist with self-advocacy, but it also helps teach students the importance of understanding their disability, how the ADA works for them, and how to be an active part of their IEP team.

Another curriculum that is completely free to the public is from the Zarrow Institute on Transition & Self-Determination at the University of Oklahoma. The *Me! Lessons* for teaching self-awareness and self-advocacy is a ten-unit curriculum that is posted on their website for anyone to utilize. The curriculum not only consists of lesson plans, but it also includes role-playing case studies, PowerPoint presentations, video clips, worksheets, a student research project, and modifications (Lingo et al., 2018). These lessons were specifically designed and

socially validated to help educators teach their students with disabilities self-awareness and self-advocacy skills. It includes content about special education, personal strengths and needs, disability, IEPs, and self-advocacy (Cantley & Martin, 2020). It also comes with short assessments and pre and post-quizzes for students to take to show growth. A small study done by Cantley and Martin (2020) indicated students increased self-awareness of their strengths, needs, disability, and self-advocacy knowledge. It also emphasized the need for readily available lesson packages such as the *Me! Lessons*. After the study, students self-reported that they had learned how to explain their disabilities' impact on their performance at school. They could also inform their teachers about any accommodations they might need and tell others about their disabilities. Some students shared that they were able to make connections between their strengths, needs and preferences, and future career plans. If teachers still do not have enough time to teach the *Me! Lessons* as a whole, specific bell ringers have been designed to accommodate teachers' limited instructional time. The *Me! Bell Ringers* are used to quickly engage students in learning as they reduce the chaos during transition time. They consist of fifty ten-minute lessons that are dedicated to teaching self-awareness, self-advocacy, disability awareness, and student-led IEPs.

### **Mini Self-Advocacy Unit**

Due to the well-documented importance of teaching self-advocacy to students with disabilities and taking the limited instructional time into account, a three-lesson mini-unit was planned and taught to a small sample size of seventh-grade students to determine the effectiveness of a condensed self-advocacy intervention. (*The lesson plans can be found at the end of this document.*) The study was conducted with twelve students, six male and six female, ages twelve and thirteen. Seven of the students had their primary disability listed as SLD, two were OHD, and the remaining three had EBD, ASD, and VI listed as their primary disabilities.

Seven of the students were Caucasian and the other five were of varying ethnic/cultural backgrounds. The study was done over the course of six weeks. Pre-assessments were given before lessons were started. The three lessons in the unit were presented every other day during the first week of the study with *Me! Bell Ringers* given every two to three days throughout the full six weeks to keep students in the mindset of self-awareness and self-advocacy. Post assessments and student interviews were given at the end of the six weeks.

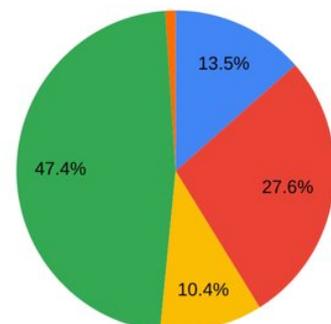
During the first lesson of the unit, self-advocacy was defined and its importance was discussed with students. The class worked together to fill out a chart regarding different scenarios where students would need to advocate and what outcomes would be both with and without self-advocacy. Initial pre-assessments were also given on this day. On day two, the five steps of self-advocacy from *Self Advocacy Skills - Self Advocacy Strategies* (2019) were discussed. The class used scenarios from the first lesson and went through each of the five steps and how they would be handled for those scenarios. At the end of this lesson, students wrote out different situations in which they advocated or should have advocated, on notecards to be used in the third lesson. At the end of the first week for the third lesson in the unit, students used scenarios on the previous note cards to role play and practice how they would advocate.

## **Results**

In addition to assessments students completed before the lessons were given and at the end of the six-week period, students were asked to fill out a provided Google form each time they advocated for themselves for additional data collection. Responses to each form were recorded in a Google sheet and

### **Forms of Advocacy**

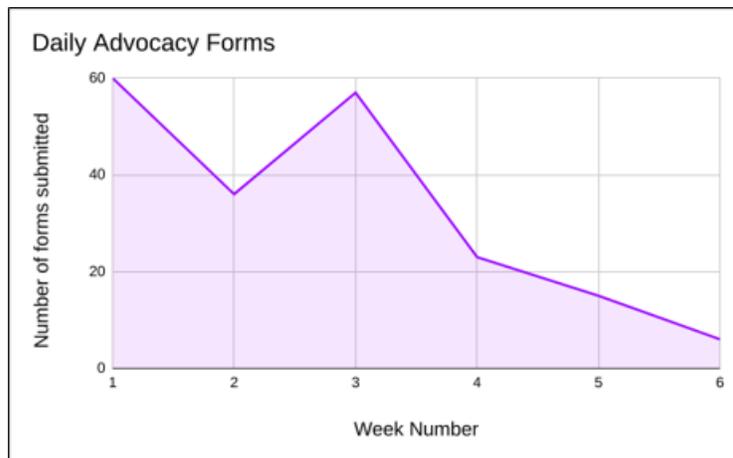
- I sent my teacher an email.
- I raised my hand and asked a question in class.
- Other
- Approached my teacher directly to ask a question.
- I sent my teacher a message on Go Guardian.



analyzed at the end of the study. Throughout the six-week time frame, 197 responses were collected. These responses revealed that 47.4% of the self-advocacy performed was done by approaching a teacher directly to ask them a question. Students were asked to rate the effectiveness of their efforts from 1 to 5 on the daily Google form ranging from not at all effective to extremely helpful. Nearly half of the responses came in stating that the student felt their



advocacy was extremely helpful. Responses peaked at 60 forms completed during the first week but dipped below 40 in the second. During the third week of the study, the five steps of



self-advocacy were reviewed and students were reminded to continue to fill out forms every time they advocated. Responses went up over 50 again. For the remaining three weeks there was an initial drop in submitted forms and then a gradual decrease. This is believed to be due to a

possible intrinsic motivation over time. “Perspective is a function of experience,” (Brown, 2019, p.15). Students were initially motivated to fill out forms with the promise of a piece of candy for everyone filled out. Over time, however, students mentioned that they continued to advocate, but were forgetting to fill out the form. This shows that the initial reinforcement of candy turned into alternate positive reinforcement of getting their needs met.

Student answers from the pre-assessment done before the beginning of the unit and the post-assessment at the end of the six weeks were compared. In both forms, students were asked to rate their comfort levels in specific scenarios. Before the intervention, there were no students that said they were always comfortable asking for help in front of the class. After six weeks, 16.7% were always comfortable with doing so. The number of students that were not at all comfortable with asking for help in front of the class decreased by 8.3%. Comfort levels also increased in regard to approaching a teacher and asking for help directly. The percentage of students that always felt comfortable sending an email to a teacher doubled and those that did not feel comfortable at all decreased by 8.3%. One finding that was particularly interesting is the change in students’ feelings about letting a teacher or para know what they need. Before the intervention, 41.7% of the students said they are always comfortable doing this. Post-intervention, this number dropped down to 8.3%, a difference of 33.4%. However, the number of students not comfortable with letting the teacher or para know what they need disappeared completely afterward. Other positive categories increased, but the number of students always comfortable in this situation dropped significantly. This could possibly be due to a couple of things. First, students could have misunderstood the question. Even though the form was reviewed by the teacher before students filled it out, some may have not been clear on what was being asked. It is also a possibility that the comfort levels of students increased along with

their independence in getting what they need. Therefore, students did not fill out a form because they did not need to turn to a teacher or para to help meet tier needs as they already took it upon themselves to do so. Two questions regarding how comfortable students felt sharing their feelings with their friends and asking their parents or guardians for help were also asked on the assessment. The collected data shows an increase for both of these situations as well.

A questionnaire involving the students' sensory and environmental as well as their social advocacy was given both before and after the unit. Results showed growth in student confidence and comfort level in multiple areas. At the end of the unit, 41.7% of students were more comfortable working with large groups of people and a third of the group were now more comfortable working in small groups than they were before. It was also reported that 25% were less nervous to be called on in class and 33.3% of the students needed fewer breaks to reset when frustrated.

A general feedback form was also given to participating students at the end of the six-week period. Three-quarters of the students shared that they felt it was now easier for them to self-advocate and they were actively doing so more than they did before. Eight students felt that these lessons and practice would help them advocate for themselves better next year when they move up to eighth grade. When asked what they learned from this experience, some responses were that there is nothing wrong with needing to ask questions, in order to get the help you need, you have to ask and not be afraid, to make sure that you ask clear questions, and to not wait until the last minute and hope to get an answer. Students were also asked to share how this experience has helped them. Most students stated that it has helped them be able to ask for help more. Others reported that they now ask for help right away when they are struggling with something and that they are not as nervous to ask for help when they need it. The student with a visual

impairment also shared that he is not able to tell his teachers when he needs bigger paper or a handout with a bigger font. At the beginning of the school year, he would not do this nor would he accept most help that was offered to him.

General education teachers were informed of this unit beforehand and were asked to report any changes they noticed after lessons were taught and reinforcement was given. Three out of the four teachers involved all reported noticeable growth. Two students in particular that were known to be very quiet and not at all proactive were reported to be advocating the most. One was beginning to take initiative to not only advocate for herself but make moves to get her needs met on her own and even ask peers for help when needed.

### **Reflection**

Overall, this study was very successful and helped students a great deal. It proves that even though we don't have a lot of time to go through much curriculum and give direct instruction for self-advocacy, just taking ten to fifteen minutes every few days can make a big difference. If done again, additional parent communication would be beneficial. Parents were made aware of and consented to this study, however, regular check-ins and feedback from them may have provided more data. Additionally, it would be in the students' best interest to provide parents and guardians with literature on self-advocacy including the five steps the students were taught in the unit, as well as resources to further support them at home. This type of unit would also be best started at the beginning of the school year, expanded, and revisited often to see true growth in students. Information regarding the effectiveness of this study is currently being compiled into an informational handout to share with other educators to consider implementing in their own classrooms.

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