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EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SELF-ADVOCACY: FOSTERING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS WITH MILD TO MODERATE SUPPORT NEEDS

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Abstract:
This study investigated the effects of a teacher-led six-week intervention designed to improve the self-advocacy skills of students with mild to moderate support needs. The intervention was delivered through multiple methods, including role modeling, explicit instruction, sentence scripts, and class discussion. Pre-intervention data showed that participants had a limited understanding of their IEPs, infrequent communication with teachers, and minimal engagement in requesting accommodations. After the implementation of the intervention, significant improvements were observed, with 90% of participants requesting accommodations and communicating regularly with teachers. Additionally, there was an increase in student behaviors in setting academic goals and reflecting on their self-advocacy behaviors. The participants also improved their academic performance in general education classrooms following the intervention. These findings underscore the potential of self-advocacy intervention to empower young adolescents to engage more effectively with their educational plans and achieve positive academic outcomes in the future. Recommendations for future research are provided.

Keywords: self-advocacy, young adolescents, mild to moderate support needs, accommodations, communication

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1. Introduction

An increasing number of students with mild to moderate support needs spend most of their time in a general education classroom and continue their education in postsecondary education (Ju *et al.*, 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), about 21% of students with disabilities continued to postsecondary education in 2019-2020, and a majority of them reportedly have learning disabilities (Zeng *et al.*, 2023). Low academic achievement and higher unemployment are persistent for the population, and educators are encouraged to prepare students for a successful transition to adult life and academic success in postsecondary education.

Self-determination is reported as a key factor for high school completion rates (Katsiyannis *et al.*, 2009; Roberts *et al.*, 2016), employment outcomes (Callahan *et al.*, 2011), and postsecondary academic success (Ju *et al.*, 2017). The concept of self-determination is highly regarded and supported in current legislation, state standards, and professional competencies (Lane *et al.*, 2012). Self-determined individuals are referred to as having qualities such as self-awareness, assertiveness, problem-solving, self-advocacy, choice-making, and evaluation. Most students without disabilities learn the skills through interactions with adults or peers, although students with disabilities need to receive targeted instruction to learn them. Those skills should be taught from an earlier age if students with disabilities are expected to exercise self-determination skills and improve high school completion and employment rates (Roberts *et al.*, 2016).

2. Literature Review

Self-advocacy is a key aspect of self-determination and refers to the ability to understand and communicate individuals' rights and responsibilities (Test *et al.*, 2005; White *et al.*, 2014). The main components of self-advocacy are knowledge of self, knowledge of rights under the law, communication skills, and leadership (Harper & Imel, 2012; McGahee *et al.*, 2021; Roberts *et al.*, 2016; Test *et al.*, 2005; Test & Neale, 2004). Self-advocacy skills have been successfully taught through peer tutoring, coaching, transition planning instruction, teacher-developed lessons, workshops, and published curricula (Roberts *et al.*, 2016).

Educators have reported the effects of various evidence-based interventions in developing self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities. According to the literature, Self-Advocacy and Conflict Resolution (SACR) training (Holzberg *et al.*, 2019; Palmer & Roessler, 2000; Walker & Test, 2011) was reported to successfully teach self-advocacy skills to students with mild to moderate support needs. The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) was another intervention that improved the self-determination skills of students with intellectual disabilities when it was delivered with fidelity (Shogren *et al.*, 2017; Shogren *et al.*, 2018). Scripted lessons, advanced organizers, role-playing, and modeling were also viable options for teaching high school students to understand and request accommodations (McGahee *et al.*, 2021).

Another study trained high school students in essential communication and self-advocacy skills to lead their transition Individualized Education Plan (IEP) processes (Hapner & Imel, 2012). The students worked with the researchers to determine their strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles and used the knowledge to develop their goals for the transition IEPs. The researchers presented a 50-minute lesson to the students who would be leading their IEP meetings. Over the course of several months, students learned their learning styles, goal-setting, and decision-making skills, as well as how to run their IEPs through role-playing with other students and the researchers. During the process, students developed self-observation and self-evaluation skills and improved their self-advocacy skills and knowledge of their IEP and the process that entails (Hapner & Imel, 2012).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) in the United States recommends that students with disabilities should be involved in their IEP process whenever appropriate. To make this possible, students need to learn self-advocacy skills. Researchers demonstrated that younger students with disabilities could successfully participate in their IEP meetings. Test and Neal (2004) taught three 13-year-old students and one 12-year-old student how to participate in IEP meetings using the Self-Advocacy Strategy (SAS) intervention developed by Van Reusen and his colleagues (1994). During the SAS, the participants learned to participate in their IEP or transition planning meetings through five steps, known as "I PLAN." After the intervention, the participants increased their understanding of their own IEPs and were able to generalize their performance in an actual IEP meeting. In another study, Dannerker and Bottge (2009) taught four 4th to 6th-grade students using a teacher-made curriculum, which included (a) reviewing IEP components, (b) identifying and developing students' needs, goals, and interests, and (c) identifying accommodations and modifications. The participants also rehearsed IEP meetings using scripts at the end of training. The results showed that they improved their self-determination skills and increased their self-confidence by taking ownership of their goals.

While a majority of research involved older students in high schools, a group of research shows that younger children could learn self-advocacy skills through classroom instruction. In an article by Hart and Brehm (2013), a set of steps for teaching elementary school students self-advocacy skills was developed for teachers to implement in their classrooms. The researchers shared that students needed to learn to advocate for themselves because their IEPs were not honored in their general education classes. Through observation, the researchers also determined that general education teachers struggled to implement aspects such as giving accommodations to their special education students (Hart & Brehm, 2013). In collaboration with parents, ten steps were taught to children to help them advocate for themselves in their general education classrooms. By using these steps, students learned to advocate for themselves, improved performance in their general education classroom, and gained more self-confidence.

Educators agree that self-advocacy skills should be fostered beginning in the early childhood years and continued until they enter adult life. Unfortunately, students with

disabilities are not exposed to self-advocacy strategies until high school, usually at age sixteen, when they are required to participate in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). It is oftentimes too late to teach students the mindset to learn to advocate for themselves after high school graduation. This skill acquisition is crucial since they must seek resources under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 and advocate for themselves in a postsecondary setting and afterward (Holzberg *et al.*, 2019). Thus, self-determination and advocacy skills are critical to succeed after completing K-12 school settings.

Self-advocacy skills have been highlighted as a key to a successful transition to postsecondary schools (Zeng *et al.*, 2023). Zeng and his colleagues interviewed 12 college students with learning disabilities to explore their experiences during their transition. The students reported self-advocacy skills as one of the critical skills required for a successful transition. Other skills included goal setting and attainment, self-awareness, decision-making, and being autonomous. The researchers also noted the importance of students' involvement during transition planning and parents' involvement as the predictor of a successful transition in which they served multiple roles as role models, teachers, mentors, and moral supporters throughout the transition (Zeng *et al.*, 2023).

Self-advocacy skill acquisition is a journey for students. So much of self-advocacy skills rely on self-reflection and responsibility, which must be taught at a much younger age. In an earlier study, Fiedler and Danneker (2007) described the barriers to teaching self-advocacy skills as inadequate teacher training, increasing focus on high-stakes testing and academic outcomes, increasing teacher workloads, and lacking initiative. Other barriers also included a lack of opportunities, limited knowledge of resources, and low expectations and encouragement (Zeng *et al.*, 2023).

To address the research gap, this study examined the effectiveness of self-advocacy training for young adolescents with mild and moderate support needs in a special education setting and its effects on their academic performance. The purposes of this study are (1) to evaluate the level of self-advocacy skills after the teacher-directed self-advocacy training and (2) to examine the participants' academic performance before and after the intervention.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and Settings

The study was conducted in a small rural community with a predominantly low-income population and a high percentage of Latinx students. Ten Latinx students participated, with nine of the ten participants receiving special education services under the category of learning disabilities and one participant under the category of other health impairment. Nine students attended 79% of their school day (302 minutes), and one attended 347 minutes (89%) in general education classrooms. All participants worked with multiple general education teachers, up to five teachers, and did not receive any

training on IEPs or self-advocacy skills prior to this intervention. Detailed demographics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' Demographics

Category	Values	Number (%)
Gender	Female	2 (20)
	Male	8 (80)
Age Range	12	1 (10)
	13	8 (80)
	14	1 (10)
Disability	Specific Learning Disability	9 (90)
	OHI (ADHD)	1 (10)

3.2. Self-Advocacy Intervention

The special education teacher in the classroom delivered self-advocacy intervention for six weeks in a small group format. The overarching goal for the self-advocacy training was for participants to understand their IEPs, set their goals, understand their rights, and communicate those rights with general education teachers. Prior to this study, none of the students attended their IEP meetings nor received instruction on their IEP accommodations. A parent/caregiver meeting was scheduled before the beginning of the study, and the purpose and procedures of the study were explained to them. Table 2 describes each lesson's goals, instructional materials and strategies, and lesson lengths for each session.

Table 2: Intervention Lesson Plans

	Lesson Objectives	Instructional Strategies and Materials	Lesson Length
Lesson 1	- To understand the components of an IEP	- PPT presentation - Class discussion	45 min/day X 5 days
Lesson 2	- To set personal and academic goals	- Explicit instruction - Modeled goal worksheet - Class discussion	30 min/day X 3 days
Lesson 3	- Asking for accommodations - To understand the grade book	- Step-by-step instructions - Role-playing with sentence starters	45 min/day X 5 days
Lesson 4	- To be reflective, using a checklist	- Teacher-made reflection checklist - Class discussion - Role playing	20 min/week X 6 weeks

The intervention was delivered for six weeks at the beginning of the school year and consisted of four lessons of different lengths. Lesson 1 began with instructions on each page of an IEP and lasted five instructional days. Each page in an IEP was discussed and explained in depth every day until all pages were covered. Following the initial instruction, the IEP was reviewed once a week for six weeks. In Lesson 2, participants were instructed on goal-setting skills through explicit instruction, modeling, and class discussion. At the end of the lesson, the participants filled out their academic and

personal goals. A sample personal goal sheet is shown in Figure 1. The goals were placed in each student's binder so they could review them as needed.

Figure 1: Sample Personal Goal Sheet

ID# _____ Date _____

My Personal Goal
This semester, I will _____
I will work on this goal because _____

My Academic Goal
This semester, I will _____
I will work on this goal because _____

Lesson 3 focused on the importance of asking for help and accommodations in general education classrooms. The participants received step-by-step instructions on how to request accommodations and participated in role-playing to practice the skills. A school grading book system was also introduced and explained during this lesson. The role-playing consisted of six steps: analyzing the situation, checking the accommodations list, getting the teacher's attention, requesting accommodations and asking for assistance, thanking the teacher, and reflecting on the experience. During the role-playing, the participants were provided with sentence scripts. This lesson lasted three instructional days. Figure 2 presents a sample role-playing script.

Figure 2: Sample Role-Playing Script

Step 1: Analyze the Situation
Do you need the accommodation to complete the assignment or assessment? If the answer is yes, go to Step 2.

Step 2: Accommodations List
Look at your Accommodations list. Think about what accommodation would work with the current assignment and why it would work.

Step 3: Getting the Teacher's Attention
Raise your hand and wait until the teacher calls on you.
Sentence Starter: "Excuse Ms. A, may I ask a question?"
"Ms. A, I need to talk to you, please."

Step 4: Ask the question or request your accommodation
Sentence Starter: "May I please _____?"
"I would like to use _____accommodation please."

Step 5: Thank the teacher
Sentence Starter: "Thank you, Ms. A. I appreciate your help"
"Thank you for letting me use my accommodations."

Step 6: Reflect on the Experience
Think about how you asked for help and what you can do next time when you need help.

In Lesson 4, students learned to check on their grades, find missing assignments, and check in with their teacher on their grades and accommodations in grading. The school grading system housed the participants' detailed grades on assignments and tests for each subject area. Following the instruction, the participants role-played in cooperative groups, with partners, and with the teacher until they felt comfortable asking for help on class work. Following the instruction and role-playing, students completed a weekly checklist to self-monitor their progress for six consecutive weeks. The teacher-made checklist required students to mark if they asked for help, asked for directions, or checked on their grades throughout the week. Participants also reported what went well for the week and what they wanted to change for the following week. The checklist was designed to allow the students to become more reflective in their daily academic life. Figure 3 shows a sample weekly checklist.

Figure 3: Self-Advocacy Checklist – Weekly Reflective Check-In

1. Did you think about your personal goals this week?
2. Did you think about your academic goals this week?
3. Did you ask for accommodation in your Science class this week? If so, which one?
4. Did you ask for accommodation in your History class this week? If so, which one?
5. Did you talk to your Science teacher about classwork you did not understand this week? If so, how many times?
6. Did you talk to your History teacher about classwork you did not understand this week? If so, how many times? _____
7. Did you check on your grade in Science this week?
8. Did you check on your grade in History this week?
9. What went well this week?
10. What will you do differently next week?

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

A pre- and post-test action research design was implemented to measure the participants' self-advocacy skills and academic performance. The effects of the intervention were reviewed through multiple data sources. First, grade point averages for the semester before and after the intervention were obtained and analyzed to examine the changes in the participants' academic performance. In addition, the participants completed pre- and post-intervention surveys to assess their understanding of IEPs and levels of self-advocacy skills and knowledge. The survey consisted of three Likert scales and six multiple-choice items. The participants also completed a weekly reflective self-checklist for six weeks after completing the instruction.

The pre-intervention survey data were analyzed to determine the participants' strengths and areas of improvement regarding their self-advocacy skills. Based on the data, a course of action was created to implement during the intervention period. Descriptive statistics were used to report the data from the weekly self-checklist and pre/post-intervention survey.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Pre and Post-Intervention Survey

The pre-intervention survey showed several findings that drove the six-week intervention. First, the majority of the participants stated they did not understand their IEP and all the pages that encompassed their IEP (M=3.1). After the intervention, the participants' understanding of IEP and their accommodations was increased (M=6.5). In addition, the participants demonstrated a weak belief in the importance of regularly communicating with their teachers about challenging classwork (M=7.5) and their grades (M=7.3) before the intervention was introduced. The results after the intervention show a higher level of perception of the importance of communicating with teachers about challenging classwork (M=9.1) and grades (M=9.8). Table 3 shows the survey results on the Likert scale items.

Table 3: Pre- and Post-Intervention Survey Results on Likert scale items (n=10)

	Pre-test (M)	**Post-test (M)**
[1]How well do you understand your IEP and your accommodations?	3.1	6.5
[2]How important is it to talk to your teachers about classwork you don't understand?	7.5	9.1
[2]How important is it to talk to your teachers on a weekly basis about your grades?	7.3	9.8

[1]: 1 = I don't understand my IEP at all. 10 = I understand everything about my IEP and accommodations.
[2]: 1 = It is not important at all. 10 = It is very important.

In addition, the survey results indicated that the frequency and the participants' requests for accommodations drastically increased after the intervention. Nine participants requested their accommodation daily or weekly. According to the participants' self-reports, nine out of ten participants reported that they met with their general education teachers for their challenging classwork monthly or never before the intervention. Following the intervention, one student met with the teachers daily, and six participants reportedly met the teachers weekly to discuss challenging classwork. When asked about their grades, six students never met with the general education teachers, and four students met monthly to discuss their grades prior to the intervention. Following the intervention, students' communication with teachers was drastically improved, in which five participants met with the teachers daily, and two participants met weekly. Table 4 shows the survey results on accommodations and communication with teachers.

Table 4: Pre- and Post-Intervention Results on Accommodations and Access to Teachers

		Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
How often do your general education teachers give you the accommodations on your IEP?	Pre	0	3	3	1
	Post	4	5	0	1
If your teacher does not give you the accommodations on your IEP, how often do you ask?	Pre	2	1	5	2
	Post	5	3	1	1
How often do you meet with your general education teachers to receive help with classwork you do not understand?	Pre	0	1	5	4
	Post	1	6	1	2
How often do you meet with your general education teachers to discuss your grades?	Pre	0	0	4	6
	Post	5	2	2	1

The last section of the survey asked participants about their goal-setting behaviors. Eight participants reported that they had never set an academic goal or yearly academic goals before the intervention. The result shows that students learned how to set personal and academic goals and increased the frequency of setting their goals. Table 5 presents the frequency of academic and personal goal-setting.

Table 5: Pre- and Post-Intervention Results on Setting Goals

		Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Never
How often do you set academic goals for yourself?	Pre	0	1	1	5	3
	Post	2	4	3	0	1
How often do you set personal goals for yourself?	Pre	0	0	5	4	1
	Post	1	5	3	0	1

After completing the post-intervention survey, a class discussion took place to gain narrative information on the participants' experiences. Most participants stated they did not understand their IEP or were unaware that their accommodations were written in their IEP prior to the intervention. The participants also reported that they did not know how to ask for accommodations and were afraid to ask if the teacher denied them.

4.2 Academic Achievement

Participants' grade point averages (GPAs) before and after the intervention were collected to evaluate the impact of the self-advocacy intervention on academic achievement. Their GPAs ranged from 1.7 to 4.0, with an average of 3.01 for the semester before the intervention. Participants' GPAs increased to an average of 3.29 and ranged from 2.7 to 4.0 after the intervention. A paired t-test analysis reports that the mean GPA between pre- and post-intervention was significant at 0.05 level. Table 6 shows the participants' GPA before and after the intervention.

Table 6: Participants' Grade Point Average Before and After the Intervention

Participants	Pre-Intervention (Spring Semester)	Post-Intervention (Fall Semester)	Difference (+/-)
1	2.5	2.7	+0.2
2	3.1	3.2	+0.1
3	1.7	2.4	+0.7
4	4.0	4.0	0.0
5	3.5	3.8	+0.3
6	2.1	2.7	+0.7
7	3.2	3.7	+0.5
8	3.5	3.8	+0.3
9	3.8	3.5	-0.3
10	2.7	3.1	+0.4
Mean	**3.01**	**3.29**	**+0.29***

* $p > .05$

4.3 Discussion

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a teacher-led self-advocacy intervention for young adolescents with mild to moderate support needs. Following the intervention, significant improvements were found in the participants' understanding of their IEP and willingness to speak up in class and ask for help and accommodations. Furthermore, participants increased the frequency of checking their grades and keeping track of their progress in their general education classes.

In a class discussion following the intervention and post-intervention survey, participants stated they felt more comfortable asking for accommodations in class. Participants also shared that they checked their grades more frequently and looked forward to the weekly grade checks so they could make sure their general education teachers did not make a mistake in their grades. The participants also enjoyed a positive change in their GPA after the intervention. The increase in grades was shared with the participants, and they were surprised that the self-advocacy skills they learned positively impacted their GPAs in only one semester. Self-advocacy in terms of grade improvement is a critical skill for students, especially in upper elementary and middle schools, when grades begin to count for participation in extracurricular activities and toward middle school graduation. Their success will lead to higher self-efficacy and assist them in communicating better and making their own life decisions. The findings from the current study confirm the previous studies that evaluated the effectiveness of self-advocacy interventions (McGahee *et al.*, 2021; Prater *et al.*, 2014; Test & Neale, 2004).

In a comprehensive review of self-advocacy intervention studies, Schena *et al.* (2022) reported that most of the selected studies involved participants who were in high school or older, and the average age of the participants from the 55 studies was 22.5 years old. Roberts *et al.* (2016) also stated in their review study that only six out of eighteen studies taught students in middle school or younger. While researchers encourage the teaching of self-determination skills at young ages, the literature does not reflect the needs of the field. The current study with middle school students also revealed that the

participants were not exposed to any IEP-related terminologies or the contents prior to the intervention. They had never seen their IEP, did not understand their accommodations, nor understood their rights as students in special education. It is crucial that educators teach IEPs to younger students with disabilities to enhance their advocacy skills and actively involve older students in planning and developing IEPs (Prater *et al.*, 2014).

The student population in the US is becoming more diverse than ever. California, where this study was conducted, is the most racially and ethnically diverse state, with 20% White, 56.1% Hispanic, 10% Asian, and 5% Black (California Department of Education, 2024). California is also the most economically diverse state in the country (California State Assembly, 2021). However, participants in the related literature do not accurately reflect the natural composition of the general population. The concern about racial and ethnic disproportional representation in self-advocacy studies is shared by Roberts *et al.* (2016). In their review study, out of 960 total participants, there were 292 Caucasians, 142 African Americans, and 68 Hispanic participants, which reflects the disproportionality. Furthermore, there was also a concern about providing balanced gender and disability representation in studies (Roberts *et al.*, 2016). It is noteworthy that the current study involved Latinx students in a low-income area, which tends to have lower academic performance and limited resources than their counterparts. The study confirms that young students from diverse backgrounds benefit from self-advocacy training in a traditional classroom setting, which consists of role-playing, social scripts, class discussions, and explicit instruction.

5. Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Research urges students to attend their own IEP meetings. However, the participants in this study did not attend and exercise their learned skills during the IEP meetings due to time constraints. In addition, no maintenance data was collected to evaluate whether the participants continued using the skills. Self-advocacy skills are lifelong living skills, and it is vital to examine the generalization and maintenance data.

Future research should involve participants in their IEP processes and examine its impact on students' advocacy skills (Test & Neale, 2004). In addition, this study included a small number of participants, limiting the findings' external validity. While the participants improved their academic performance in general education classrooms, additional data types, such as teacher interviews, could support the generalization effects. Schena *et al.* (2022) commented that sixty-seven studies in their review did not consistently collect generalization, maintenance, and/or social validity data and encouraged future researchers to develop a systematic plan to assess those data.

Many of the self-advocacy studies were conducted in educational settings, while advocacy skills are used in various settings throughout the day. More studies are warranted, encompassing all areas of the community, including employment, recreation, shopping, and healthcare-related settings (Schena *et al.*, 2022). Another area of research

that needs more attention is parents' involvement in self-advocacy training. Zeng *et al.* (2023) emphasized the critical roles that families play in supporting their children's self-determination and self-advocacy. Future studies need to examine the impact of parents' involvement in self-advocacy intervention. As discussed earlier, more studies are warranted to involve students and families from diverse backgrounds to ensure the proper gender composition and race/ethnic representation in self-advocacy intervention studies.

Schena *et al.* (2022) found that self-advocacy interventions are mainly categorized into three methods: behavioral skills training (BST), fixed session training (FST), and traditional instruction (TI). The behavioral skills training approach utilizes direct instruction, modeling, rehearsing, practice, and feedback until participants demonstrate a pre-determined mastery of the self-advocacy skills. The fixed-session training is similar to the BST; however, the instruction is provided in a fixed number of training sessions. Lastly, the current study falls into the traditional instruction category, which is delivered as a part of traditional instructional practices using the workbook, group discussion, and assignments. While many studies on various self-advocacy intervention strategies are promising, future research should be conducted to evaluate the efficiency as well as effectiveness of the interventions (Shogren *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, intervention fidelity needs to be addressed in the studies.

6. Conclusion

Self-advocacy skill acquisition cannot be taught to special education students in a short amount of time (McCarthy, 2007). Self-advocacy intervention, such as the one in this study, should begin at a much younger age in order to build confidence and self-esteem by the time puberty hits the students in the middle school setting. If self-advocacy skills were introduced in elementary school and those skills and requirements were built each year through middle school, when students enter high school in an inclusive setting, they would be ready to advocate for themselves and be responsible for their own education. The current study adds to the literature where young adolescents from diverse backgrounds learned self-advocacy skills and generalized the skills to improve their academic performance through the traditional instruction model.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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