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A Survey of School Psychologists to Promote Support for Developing Self-Advocacy
Skills in Students with Disabilities

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Abstract

Self-advocacy is a critical skill for effective communication and for individual assertion of interests, needs, and rights (Hengen & Weaver, 2018). It is especially important for people with disabilities to be able to self-advocate, which includes understanding their own abilities and rights and being able to voice when they need assistance or when their rights are being violated (Hengen & Weaver, 2018).

Even though self-advocacy has been determined to be a necessary skill for students with disabilities to develop, research indicates that self-advocacy instruction is often not provided to students with disabilities. Furthermore, while researchers have shown that teaching students to participate in their IEP meetings helps to prepare them to be successful self-advocates after high school (Barnard-Brak and Lechtenberger, 2009), there is often inconsistent inclusion of students in their educational planning meetings. Thus, there is a need to identify supports for developing self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities.

This research project reviewed the literature to inform the development of a mixed-methods survey to examine school psychologists' perceptions and experiences in supporting students with disabilities' self-advocacy skills. The results indicate school psychologists recognize self-advocacy skill development as a critical tool for students with disabilities' success; however, several barriers exist which prevent school psychologists from directly supporting students in this area.

Introduction

Self-advocacy has been defined in the disability literature by multiple researchers since the 1980's. Many of the definitions of self-advocacy for people with disabilities often include knowing one's strengths and needs, being able to communicate wants and needs, and making decisions for oneself (Test et al., 2005). Other definitions focus on what self-advocacy means for people with disabilities within society and include elements such as asserting one's legal rights, living as equal citizens, and pursuing the interests of the group.

According to Roberts et al. (2016), many researchers also conceptualize self-advocacy as a subskill within self-determination. The concept of self-determination encompasses the skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to behave in ways that are goal-directed, self-regulated, and autonomous (Cmar et al., 2019). Similar to the definitions of self-advocacy, self-determination also includes understanding one's strengths and needs and believing in one's capabilities.

Literature Review

In 2005, researchers developed a conceptual framework of self-advocacy in order to further the understanding of self-advocacy as it relates to people with disabilities (Test et al., 2005). Within this framework are four major components of self-advocacy—knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership—with knowledge of self and knowledge of rights as the foundation of this framework (Test et al., 2005). In order to develop this conceptual framework, Test et al., (2005) conducted a literature review as their primary source of information; however, input was also

provided from various stakeholders such as adults with disabilities, teachers, and self-advocacy curriculum developers.

According to Test et al. (2005), the first step in establishing self-advocacy skills is becoming aware of "one's own interests, preferences, strengths, needs, learning style, and attributes of one's disability" (p. 50). The next step is being aware of one's rights as a person with disabilities and as a student receiving special education services (Test et al., 2005). Once an individual has established their knowledge of self and knowledge of rights, learning how to communicate effectively is the next step. Within this framework, communication involves relaying information, such as feelings, needs, and desires, with assertiveness and being able to say "no" to things that are undesirable (Test et al., 2005). The final part of establishing self-advocacy skill is learning leadership, which involves being able to advocate for oneself and others. In this study, leadership specifically included student involvement in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings and transition meetings.

Benefits of Self-Advocacy to Students with Disabilities

Over the last couple of decades, literature in disability and educational research have established self-advocacy as a crucial skill for students with disabilities to achieve successful outcomes (Roberts et al., 2016; Test et al. 2005). However, a lot of the research in this area has focused on preparing high school students with disabilities for post-secondary life. Pocock et al. (2002) recognized self-determination as a critical component to transitioning to the adult world. Moreover, studies that focused on self-determination found significant differences in the knowledge of transition planning among students with disabilities (Roberts et al., 2016).

A study conducted by Wehmeyer et al. (2007), examined the role of self-determination in student participation within the transition planning process. The researchers observed that a student's total score on the Arc's Self-Determination Scale was the strongest predictor for the student's score on the Transition Planning Knowledge and Skills Questionnaire (Wehmeyer et al., 2007). Likewise, the students with high self-determination scores indicated they were present at their last IEP meeting, and they knew what their IEP goals and objectives were (Wehmeyer et al., 2007).

In another study, Trainor (2005) analyzed students' perceptions of self-determination during the transition planning process. For the study, student participants stated which self-determining behaviors they used during the transition planning process. According to Trainor (2005), the students indicated various actions such as the use of self-knowledge in setting goals, taking actions to meet their goals, self-advocating their interests and needs to school staff, and seeking help from their parents as needed. The students in this study also reported that "they viewed themselves as being responsible for transition planning," while parents were viewed as a support system for their decision-making and goal attainment (Trainor, 2005, p. 243). The students' indication of these actions and abilities being important and useful to them in planning their next steps after high school strengthens the argument for needing to support the development of these skills in students throughout their time in primary and secondary schools.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is particularly difficult for people with disabilities. According to Roberts et al. (2016), people with disabilities tend to face greater challenges during this time because they are quickly moving from dependence to independence. Additionally, when students with disabilities leave their school

environment, "they do not understand their strengths and needs well enough to explain the accommodations they need beyond school life" (Test et al., 2005, p. 44). The ability to self-advocate becomes necessary for people with disabilities to acquire because services are not typically provided in post-school settings unless there is a request for support (Roberts et al., 2016).

Although there is clear support in the literature for students with disabilities to develop self-advocacy skills, the research shows self-advocacy skills are often not a part of the instruction for these students (Test et al., 2005). Furthermore, students with disabilities tend to be provided with greater supports from parents and teachers than students without disabilities; thus, opportunities for students with disabilities to self-advocate are lacking in school and community settings (Roberts et al., 2016).

Self-Advocacy Programs

Several programs have been designed to promote the development of self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities. One such program is *I'm Determined*, which is a statewide project in Virginia to help students with disabilities gain the necessary skills to be successful in college and career (Moore & McNaught, 2014). The project, funded by the Virginia Department of Education, focuses on providing direct instruction as well as opportunities to practice skills related to self-determined behavior (Moore & McNaught, 2014). The components of *I'm Determined* include choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting, leadership, self-advocacy, and self-awareness, which are all subskills of self-determination (Moore & McNaught, 2014).

There are five primary intervention strategies used within *I'm Determined* to support student development of self-determined behaviors: The One-Pager, Good Day

Plan, Goal Setting and Attainment, Student-led IEPs and Conferences, and Lesson Plans on the components of self-determination (Moore & McNaught, 2014). The One-Pager is an activity in which students write out their strengths, preferences, interests, and needs to help improve communication with their teachers; the Good Day Plan requires the student to identify factors that impact whether or not they have a good day; Goal Setting and Attainment ensures that the student writes out their goals and the steps needed to achieve them; Student-led IEPs and Conferences allows students to participate in their IEP meetings as well as the development of their IEP document; and Lesson Plans are created so that self-determination skills are embedded into the course content. Moore and McNaught (2014) noted that "encouraging student participation in the IEP, goal setting, the One Pager, and the Good Day Plan was an effective strategy" (Moore & McNaught, 2014, p. 253). Overall, *I'm Determined* produced outcomes such as increased self-acceptance, leadership, and advocacy skills in students with disabilities (Moore & McNaught, 2014).

There are many other programs and curricula available to teach students self-advocacy and self-determination skills such as *Empowered*, which is an activity-based curriculum to teach self-determination skills to students with visual impairments (Empowered – activity-based self-determination curriculum, 2022). *Standing up for Me* is another curriculum, which was developed in Florida for students in exceptional student education, that helps students enhance their self-advocacy skills (Standing up for me: Project10, 2002). Additionally, *Whose Future is it Anyway?* includes 36 sessions to help students improve their self-determination skills and prepare for IEP meetings (Whose future is it anyway?, 2014). Although multiple self-advocacy curriculums exist, it is

unclear how frequently any one program is used or what school districts they are commonly used in.

Student Participation in Special Education Meetings

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004 (IDEA) mandates that students with disabilities are provided specialized education and other services to guarantee them a free and appropriate public education (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). As a part of this federal mandate, students aged 14 and older must be invited to their IEP meetings when post-secondary transitioning will be discussed.

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) facilitates the coordination of special education services for all students with disabilities in public schools and is produced during a school-based team meeting (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). This legal document is intended to help students with disabilities achieve their educational goals (Moore & McNaught, 2014). Because the process aims to provide students and their families with legal protections, Anderson and Keys (2019) describe the IEP as "an essential component toward equality for students with disabilities" (p. 326). The only way to effectively promote self-advocacy skills in students is to provide them with opportunities to practice implementing these skills. Therefore, practitioners should encourage students with disabilities to participate in their own IEP meetings (Roberts et al., 2016).

Every student can participate in the development of their own IEP. Further, Moore and McNaught (2014) found that "students who participate in their IEP meetings typically know more about their disability, rights, goals, and accommodations" (p. 249). These students are also able to demonstrate multiple skills related to self-advocacy such

as goal setting, planning, public speaking, and self-evaluation (Martin et al., 2006).

However, IDEA leaves the involvement of students under the age of 14 to the discretion

of the school or parents, which ultimately can lead to inconsistent inclusion of younger

students in the IEP process (Anderson & Keys, 2019).

The IEP process, much like the larger educational system it is within, is affected

by social inequalities. One example of social inequality present in this process is students

are often excluded from participation in their IEP meetings, despite them being the focus

of the meetings (Anderson & Keys, 2019). Further, even when students are present in

their meetings, asymmetrical interactions between students and other stakeholders (e.g.,

educational staff or other advocates) can disempower students in planning their own IEP

(Anderson & Keys, 2019). This type of interaction could look like teachers,

administrators, and/or parents talking the entire meeting and not inviting the student to

share their own thoughts, concerns, or questions.

A study conducted by Martin et al. (2004), which examined the perceptions of

more than 1,600 IEP meeting participants, found that students frequently do not know the

reasons for their meetings, do not understand what is being said in the meetings, and do

not talk as much as other participants in the meetings. Without specific instruction,

students attending IEP meetings usually do not know what to do and feel as if they are

unheard by the adult participants (Martin et al., 2006). Additionally, research indicates

that students learn how to effectively participate in IEP meetings "when they are taught

effective leadership skills, are provided the opportunity to participate, and when the adult

IEP team members expect student participation" (Martin et al., 2006, p. 300). By

participating in the IEP process, students with disabilities are able to enhance the leadership and advocacy skills they will need for life beyond high school.

Current literature suggests student participation in the IEP process is linked to positive outcomes for students. A study conducted by Barnard-Brak and Lechtenberger (2010) found a positive correlation between student participation in the IEP and academic achievement across time. They concluded that students who participate in IEP meetings demonstrate higher motivation, a greater ability to achieve goals, and a better understanding of the IEP than students who do not participate. Furthermore, they found participation to be associated with increased self-determination skills and better postschool outcomes for students with disabilities.

The IEP team is often the decision-making body for students in special education, and many districts expect increased participation from students as they mature (Hengen & Weaver, 2018). In order to improve students' understanding of their IEP and to increase student participation in IEP meetings, several researchers developed a program titled *Self-Directed IEP* (Martin et al., 2006). *Self-Directed IEP* is "an evidence-based intervention that teaches students to be active participants in their IEP meetings with an end goal of leading a meeting" (Hengen & Weaver, 2018, p. 24). The program, which incorporates videos, student assignments, and role playing to teach IEP leadership skills to students, has proven to be successful in increasing the self-advocacy of students. Students with learning, intellectual, and emotional disabilities increased their IEP meeting attendance and participation after completing the *Self-Directed IEP* lessons (Martin et al., 2006). Likewise, these students engaged in leadership behaviors, expressed their interests and skills, and remembered their IEP goals (Martin et al., 2006).

Role of School Psychologists

Based on an assessment of self-advocacy skills conducted by Hengen and Weaver (2018), it was found that educators likely have to teach students about their disability, their rights, and effective communication and leadership skills. Nonetheless, there is still a discrepancy between "teachers' belief that self-advocacy skill development is important and their lack of knowledge about how to teach it" (Test et al., 2005, p. 51). Consequently, teachers have reported a need for training in the areas of self-advocacy instruction and available curricula (Test et al., 2005).

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Practice Model delineates the official policies for the delivery of school psychological services (NASP, 2020). Domain Four of the practice model states that school psychologists provide "services that promote resilience and positive behavior, support socialization and adaptive skills, and enhance mental and behavioral health" (NASP, 2020, p. 5). The ability to self-advocate can be considered an adaptive skill, and as such, falls within the realm of services that could be provided by school psychologists to students.

Although some research on students' self-advocacy skills has discussed the implications for school psychologists, there is still a gap in the literature regarding school psychologists' involvement in the development of self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities. This study aims to uncover the current involvement of school psychologists in supporting students with disabilities in establishing self-advocacy skills.

Methodology

Purpose of the Current Study

Through a review of the literature, I, the researcher, discovered discrepancies between what the research has established regarding developing self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities and what is put into practice in K-12 education. Moreover, there is a gap in the literature concerning the involvement of school psychologists in student self-advocacy development. Thus, the researcher examined the field of school psychology through an analysis of the role of school psychologists in supporting the development of self-advocacy in students with disabilities. The results will be used to suggest school psychology practices for improving students' self-advocacy skills. The following research questions will be used in this investigation:

1. Is there a relationship between the self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities and their active participation in the special education process (e.g., IEP meetings and Eligibility meetings)?

2. What curriculums and practices are schools using to teach students with disabilities self-advocacy skills?

3. How do school psychologists define their role in supporting students with disabilities to develop self-advocacy skills?

4. What is the perceived competency level of school psychologists in supporting the development of self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities?

5. What needs (e.g., resources, trainings, personnel, processes, etc.) do school psychologists perceive for teaching self-advocacy skills to students?

Participants

Participants in the study were selected and obtained from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) email list for school psychologists. A convenience sampling

method was utilized, allowing current school psychologists who were practicing in the state of Virginia to participate in the study. However, school psychologists who were not employed by school districts were excluded from this study. Using the VDOE email list, school psychologists were emailed a recruitment letter that linked them to an online survey containing informed consent. A power analysis using G*Power (version 3.1.9.4) was conducted to determine the minimum sample size for this study. A sample size of 29 was estimated using an effect size of .50, a significance level of .05, and a power of .80 for a bivariate correlation analysis. In total, 38 school psychologists in the state of Virginia responded to the survey, and 32 of those respondents fully completed the survey. The age range of participants was 25 to 67 years old with the average age being 46.77 years old with a standard deviation of 11.40 years. Most of the participants 73.7% ($n =$ 28) identified as women, while 21% ($n = 8$) of the participants identified as men, and 5.3% ($n = 2$) of participants chose not to identify their gender. Altogether, 84.2% ($n = 32$) of the respondents identified as White, 5.3% ($n = 2$) identified as Black, 2.6% ($n = 1$) identified as Asian and Latinx, and 5.3% ($n = 2$) chose not to answer. The majority of participants 86.1% ($n = 31$) reported their highest level of education was a master's or specialist level degree, and 13.9% ($n = 5$) reported they obtained a doctorate degree.

Table 1

Demographics

Descriptor	Variable	n (%)
Gender	Female	28 (73.7)
	Male	8 (21)
Race	White	32 (84.2)

	Black	2 (5.3)
	Asian	1 (2.6)
	Latinx	1 (2.6)
Level of Education	Master's or Specialist	31 (86.1)
	Doctorate	5 (13.9)

Instrumentation

A survey was developed by the researcher based on the literature review and

research questions and is included in Appendix A. The survey began with a

demographics section which provided information for the analysis of the responses. The

survey itself included Likert scale items, multiple choice questions, and open-ended

questions to measure the school psychologists' perceptions of the students' self-advocacy

skills. Included within the survey was a scale the author created to quantify and measure

the perceived competency of school psychologists to teach self-advocacy skills to

students with disabilities.

In addition, the 13-item Self-Advocacy Scale (SAS)—constructed by Hawley et

al., (2016) for persons with an acquired brain injury—was adapted by the researcher to

measure school psychologists' perceptions of the students with disabilities within their

schools. The SAS was included as item number 21 in the current survey. Participants

responded to a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *1* (*Not Confident*) to *4* (*Very Confident*)

on statements about the students with disabilities within their schools. A total score was

computed by summing participants' responses. All of the items on the SAS were

reviewed by experts for content validity, and the items showed evidence of concurrent

validity with previously established scales such as the General Self-Efficacy Scale, the Advocacy Activity Scale, and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Hawley et al., 2016). Additionally, a Rasch analysis determined the SAS has a person reliability of .90 (Hawley et al., 2016).

Design and Analysis

The research questions were explored using a mixed methods design, incorporating quantitative and qualitative data from the survey. Research question one explored the relationship between self-advocacy skills and the active participation of students with disabilities in the special education process. A correlational analysis was used to analyze research question one. For research question two, a survey question was used to obtain information from a sample of school psychologists in the state of Virginia about the use of curricula to teach self-advocacy skills, and descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data collected for this question. Additionally, open-ended questions were included in the survey to identify curriculums and practices used to teach self-advocacy skills in schools across Virginia, and inductive coding was used to derive themes associated with both the curriculums and the practices. Qualitative analysis and descriptive statistics helped to answer research question three about school psychologists' role in supporting students with disabilities' self-advocacy skills. For research question four, the researcher used descriptive statistics to examine the perceived competency level of school psychologists. To analyze research question five about school psychologists' perceived need for teaching self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities, a mixed methods approach was also utilized which included coding to derive themes associated with the school psychologists' perceptions.

Results

Research Question 1

To examine the relationship between the self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities and their active participation in the special education process, the researcher ran a Pearson's correlation between the Self-Advocacy Scale and items that measure students' attendance in special education meetings and students' participation in special education meetings. There was not a statistically significant relationship between the Self-Advocacy Scale and items measuring students' attendance in special education meetings ($r = .298$, $p = .104$), but there was a trend in which greater attendance in special meetings yielded a higher score on the Self-Advocacy Scale. The results showed 8.88% of the variance in the Self-Advocacy Scale was explained by the students' attendance in special education meetings. There was also not a statistically significant relationship between the Self-Advocacy Scale and items measuring students' participation in special education meetings ($r = .198$, $p = .342$). However, the trend indicated greater participation in special meetings yielded a higher score on the Self-Advocacy Scale as well. The results showed 3.92% of the variance in the Self-Advocacy Scale was explained by the students' participation in special education meetings.

Table 2

Correlation Between the Self-Advocacy Scale and Items Measuring Students' Attendance and Students' Participation in Special Education Meetings

Variable	Students' Attendance	Students' Participation
Self-Advocacy Scale	.298	.198

Research Question 2

According to the survey results, 3.1% ($n = 1$) of participants reported there is a curriculum used in their school(s) to teach students with disabilities self-advocacy skills, while 43.8% ($n = 14$) of participants reported their school(s) do not have a curriculum, and 53.1% ($n = 17$) of participants were unsure if their school(s) used a curriculum. Additionally, the survey respondent who indicated a curriculum is used in their school(s) reported the *I'm Determined Project*.

Research Question 3

The majority of school psychologists surveyed (76.5%; $n = 26$) do consider supporting students with disabilities' development of self-advocacy skills to be a part of their role. However, 8.8% ($n = 3$) of respondents do not consider this to be a part of their role, and 14.7% ($n = 5$) of school psychologists surveyed remain neutral towards the idea. When survey respondents shared their impressions of the importance of improving self-advocacy supports for students with disabilities, the three themes found included a need to understand one's disability, strengths, and needs; the importance of self-esteem and independence for life after graduation; and a need to be assertive and to be able to ask for help/supports. To this end, a school psychologist reported, "Self-advocacy skills are very important for students with disabilities to learn so that they have the tools they need to request services and accommodations that work for them." In terms of understanding one's strengths and needs, another participant stated, "Self-advocacy skills are very important, particularly as students get older and become more independent. They need to understand their strengths and challenges so that they are able to goal set and effectively action plan."

Four themes also emerged as school psychologists described their role in supporting the self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities; the themes included (1) impeding contextual factors, (2) conducting informal assessments of students' self-advocacy skills, (3) a need for tools to share with teachers and parents, and (4) this support being primarily given at the secondary-education level. School psychologists report several contextual factors, such as heavy caseloads and being seen as a test giver, as barriers to their ability to support students' self-advocacy skill development. A survey participant stated, "Again, my role has been reduced to that of a 'test giver.' If there were lower ratios in my county, I could help students to be aware of their disabilities and help them develop self-advocacy skills." However, some school psychologists stated they are able to conduct informal assessments of students' self-advocacy ability during their evaluations and provide goals relating to this area in their IEP's. A few of the school psychologists who serve elementary schools indicated self-advocacy skill development is not a part of their role but is something that school staff focus on in middle and high school.

Although school psychologists do perceive supporting students' self-advocacy skills to be a part of their role, 69.7% ($n = 23$) of respondents indicated other staff in their building(s) are supporting students with disabilities in this area, while 9.1% ($n = 3$) reported other staff are not supporting students in this way, and 21.2% ($n = 7$) were unsure. Based on the responses from school psychologists who stated other staff in their school(s) do support students in this way, the researcher discovered the most likely person(s) to be providing self-advocacy skill support to students with disabilities are special education teachers. This was reported by 65.63% ($n = 21$) of school psychologists

surveyed. Additionally, other responses included school counselors (37.5%; $n = 12$),

school social workers (15.63%; $n = 5$), case managers/special education coordinators

(21.88%; $n = 7$), administrators (9.38%; $n = 3$), and speech language pathologists and

behavior specialists were both reported equally (6.25%; $n = 2$).

Table 3

Percentage of Other School Personnel Supporting Students' Self-Advocacy Skills

Variable	n (%)
Special Education Teachers	21 (65.63)
School Counselors	12 (37.5)
Case Managers/Special Education Coordinators	7 (21.88)
School Social Workers	5 (15.63)
Administrators	3 (9.38)
Speech Language Pathologists/Behavior Specialists	2 (6.25)

School psychologists stated having other staff in their building(s) who support

self-advocacy skill development in students impacts their role in three ways- it facilitates

consultation, allows them to focus on other responsibilities, and enables them to support

students through the IEP process. One survey participant shared, "It allows me to provide

support to students by providing recommendations and consultation support to these staff

members, especially as a member of school-based intervention teams." Other school

psychologists indicated different job roles take priority. One participant said, "While I

may be willing and capable [to support students' self-advocacy skills], the opportunity is

not available for me to do this."

Research Question 4

Overall, most school psychologists also reported feelings of competence about their ability to support self-advocacy skill development in students with disabilities. The survey responses indicated 97.1% (*n* = 33) of school psychologists believe they have a supportive attitude towards supporting self-advocacy skills in students, 73.6% (*n* = 25) believe they are knowledgeable enough to support self-advocacy skills in students, and 61.7% (*n* = 21) believe they are skillful enough to support self-advocacy skills in students. Still, several of the school psychologists surveyed were not sure of their competency level in this area. One respondent reported feeling neutral in terms of having a supportive attitude, 20.6% (*n* = 7) of respondents felt neutral about their knowledge while 5.9% (*n* = 2) did not believe they were knowledgeable in this area, and 26.5% (*n* = 9) felt neutral about their skill level while 11.8% (*n* = 4) did not believe they were skillful in this area.

Figure 1 *Frequency of Reported Levels of Competency*
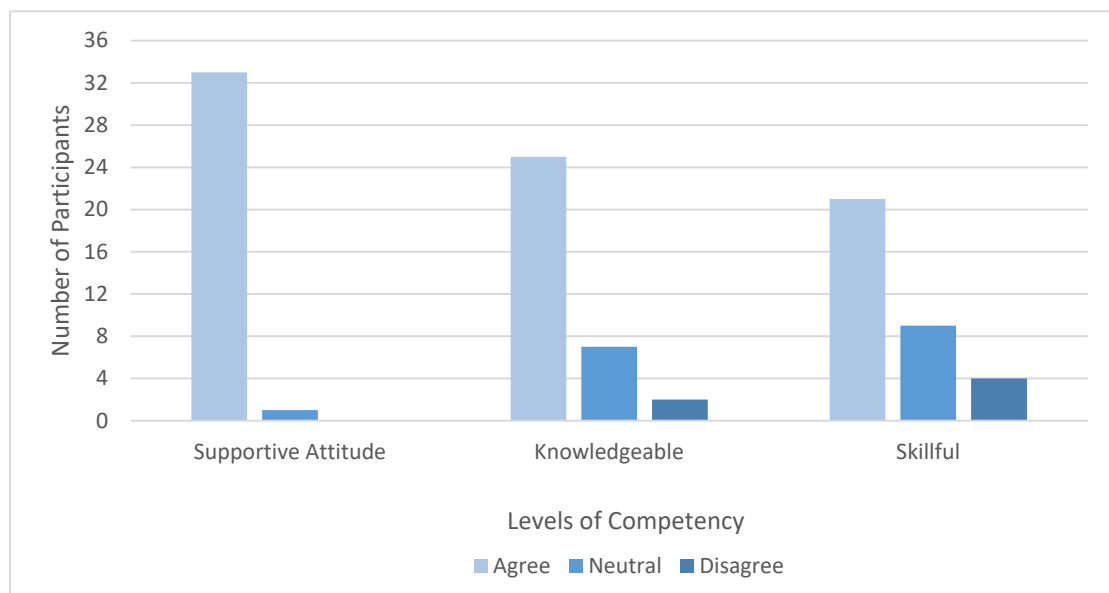
Research Question 5

Almost all of the school psychologists surveyed reported their school(s) could use additional resources to support self-advocacy skill development in students with disabilities. Specifically, 55.3% ($n = 21$) of respondents reported professional development trainings would be useful, 34.2% ($n = 13$) reported additional personnel, 21.1% ($n = 8$) reported implementation of different processes, and 23.7% ($n = 9$) reported different curriculums would be beneficial to their school(s). Only 5.3% ($n = 2$) of participants indicated their school(s) did not need additional resources to support students' self-advocacy skills. In response to how can school(s) improve how self-advocacy skills are developed in students with disabilities, the three themes found were talking to students and parents, a system for preparing staff to support students, and improving contextual factors. School psychologists perceived talking to parents and students about their disability and how it impacts their strengths and needs could help reinforce self-advocacy skill development. Additionally, respondents stated improving contextual factors, such as lower school psychologist to student ratios and more funding, would also improve support for developing students' self-advocacy.

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Discussion

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A review of the literature on self-advocacy skill development in students with disabilities revealed clear discrepancies between the importance of developing these skills in students and what practices are actually being implemented in K-12 schools to support students in this area. Furthermore, there was not an adequate amount of research on the role of school psychologist in supporting the development of self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities. As a school psychologist in training, I was interested in

uncovering the current involvement of school psychologists in supporting students with disabilities in establishing self-advocacy skills.

Even though there was not a statistically significant correlation between students with disabilities' attendance and participation in special education meetings and the school psychologists' ratings of these students on the Self-Advocacy Scale, the positive trend of the relationship was expected given the information from the literature review. A connection may exist between the level of self-advocacy of students with disabilities and their ability to practice and utilize these skills by participating in their special education meetings. This is based on the percentage of variance within the Self-Advocacy Scale explained by the students' attendance and participation in their meetings.

The majority of school psychologists reported either their school(s) do not have a curriculum to teach self-advocacy skills to students or they are not aware of whether or not their school(s) use a curriculum. This data continues to indicate there is a gap between what the literature recommends—directly teaching self-advocacy skills to students—and what is being implemented in practice, which means a lot of students are not being explicitly taught self-advocacy skills in school. Additionally, the literature shows many curriculums exist to teach self-advocacy skills, but only one curriculum, the *I'm Determined Project*, was reportedly being used by one survey participant's school.

Much of what was stated in the literature concerning the role of school psychologists in supporting self-advocacy skill development in students was further strengthened by the current survey data. Although school psychologists internalize supporting self-advocacy skills as a part of their role, they perceive several barriers within their school(s) that impede their ability to fully support students in this area. A

reoccurring theme from survey respondents is the emphasis of assessment within their job duties. As an example, a participant shared, "We need better funding. Lower the school psych to student ratio. I have very little, if any, time to meet with students for issues unrelated to testing or crisis management. There's just not enough time in the day."

One way school psychologists have been able to indirectly support students is by collaborating with teachers and other staff. A survey participant stated, "I often collaborate with other staff when it comes to supporting students' self-advocacy skills. This can be done by providing recommendations after completing a psychological evaluation, helping write IEP goals, or collaborating with staff to lead intervention groups (i.e., social skills or executive functioning skills groups)."

As a school psychologist in training, I was taught how to advocate for students, but I did not receive instruction on how to teach self-advocacy skills to students. Many other school psychologists may also not receive specific instruction on teaching self-advocacy skills to students. Thus, the researcher included survey questions to analyze how competent school psychologist practitioners feel about supporting self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities. The survey data does indicate the majority of school psychologist practitioners feel competent about supporting students in this area. Most respondents reported they have a supportive attitude and feel knowledgeable about supporting self-advocacy skills in students, but fewer respondents believe they are skillful. It makes sense, then, that the majority of survey respondents also reported that they need professional development trainings to better support self-advocacy skill development in students with disabilities.

Limitations of this Study

One limitation of this study is the use of a convenience-sampling method. The VDOE email list is not a true representation of the population of school psychologists in Virginia. Any practicing school psychologist whose contact information may have changed within the last year could have potentially been missed; this was indicated by several emails that bounced back to sender. Altogether, a total of 463 emails were sent and the response rate was 6.91%. Additionally, pre-existing attitudes and motivations are not accounted for in the survey responses which limits the generalizability of the results. There were also not enough participants included in the study which may have resulted in the insignificant findings. If there were more survey respondents, the probability of finding a statistically significant correlation would be greater. Also, there is no present evidence of validity for all of the survey items utilized. Readers should interpret the results of this study with caution.

Implications and Future Research

Currently, school psychologists across the state of Virginia are working collaboratively with other personnel to support students and conducting brief assessments of students with disabilities' self-advocacy skills to inform the inclusion of self-advocacy skill goals in their IEP's. School psychologists can expand upon their role by seeking continued professional development to support students' self-advocacy skills and by providing in-service training to special education teachers and other school personnel. Furthermore, the *I'm Determined* program is an additional resource school systems can invest in to streamline the process of teaching students with disabilities self-advocacy skills. As agents of change, school psychologists should engage in continued advocacy within our school systems for increased funding to provide additional resources and

school psychologist positions in our school districts. This could greatly impact our ability to support students with disabilities' self-advocacy skill development by reducing or eliminating barriers that currently impede this process.

Future research in this area could look at the difference in structure between school systems that are currently able to implement self-advocacy skill curriculums and the ones that are not. Likewise, it would also be relevant to examine the difference in structure between school systems where school psychologists are directly supporting students with disabilities' self-advocacy skills and the ones where they are not able to do so. Another area to study for future research would be the long-term effects of teaching self-advocacy skills to students beginning in elementary school versus starting the process in middle school or high school.

Conclusion

Self-advocacy skills are critical skills for students with disabilities to develop. Additionally, these skills should be explicitly taught to students, and opportunities to practice and utilize these skills should be frequently offered to students as well. As school psychologists, supporting the development of self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities should be a part of our role in schools. Although there may be barriers within school systems to implement this work, school psychologists are trained to advocate on behalf of students and create systems-level change. As noted within this study, school psychologists are able to collaborate with special education teachers and other personnel to indirectly support students with disabilities' self-advocacy skills. Additionally, school psychologists can conduct presentations within their school systems to demonstrate the importance of providing direct instruction on self-advocacy skills to students with

disabilities. Lastly, school psychologists in the state of Virginia can promote access to

I'm Determined within their school districts to support explicit self-advocacy skill

instruction.

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Appendix A. Survey

Demographics

Q1 Please indicate your race.

- o   Asian
- o   Black
- o   Latinx
- o   Native/Indigenous American
- o   Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- o   White
- o   Prefer not to answer

Q2 Please indicate your gender.

_____

Q3 Please indicate your age.

(Numeric input) _____

Q4 Please indicate your highest earned degree.

- o   Master's Degree (M.A., M.Ed., Ed.S., Psy.S., etc.)
- o   Doctorate Degree (Ph.D., Psy.D., Ed.D., etc.)

Survey Questions

Q1 Are you a school psychologist in the state of Virginia?

- o   Yes
- o   No (terminate)

Q2 Are you currently employed by a school system?

- o   Yes
- o   No (terminate)

Q3 Indicate the degree to which you agree with this statement: I consider supporting students' development of self-advocacy skills a part of my role as a school psychologist.

- o   Strongly disagree
- o   Disagree
- o   Neutral
- o   Agree
- o   Strongly agree

Q4 Indicate to what degree you agree with the following statements.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

I think that I am knowledgeable
in supporting the development of self-
advocacy skills in students with
disabilities.

I think that I am skillful in supporting
the development of self-advocacy skills
in students with disabilities.

I have a supportive attitude towards
the development of self-advocacy skills
in students with disabilities.

Q5 Have you received any training or professional development related to supporting
students with disabilities' self-advocacy skills?
- o   Yes
- o   No (Q7)

Q6 Please describe how the training(s) have impacted your practice.

_____

_____

Q7 Do other staff or personnel in your school(s) provide self-advocacy skill support to
students with disabilities?
- o   Yes
- o   No (Q10)
- o   Not Sure (Q10)

Q8 Please specify the roles of these personnel (e.g., special education teacher, school
counselor, etc.).

_____

Q9 How does this influence your role in supporting students' self-advocacy skills?

_____

Q10 Based on your prior experiences, briefly describe your impression of the importance
of improving self-advocacy supports for students with disabilities.

_____

Q11 Within your school(s), is there a curriculum used to teach students with disabilities
self-advocacy skills?

- o   Yes

- No (Q13)
- Not Sure (Q13)

Q12 Please list which curriculums or practices are currently being used to teach students with disabilities self-advocacy skills in your school(s).

_____

Q13 Do students in your school(s) attend special education meetings (e.g., IEP meetings or Eligibility meetings)?

- Yes, often
- Yes, sometimes
- No (Q16)

Q14 Do students in your school(s) actively participate in these special education meetings?

- Yes, often
- Yes, sometimes
- No (Q16)

Q15 Which type of active participation occurs most often?

- Asking questions
- Responding to questions
- Sharing thoughts/opinions

Q16 Do you meet with students before their special education meetings?

- Yes, often
- Yes, sometimes
- No

Q17 Do you meet with students after their special education meetings?

- Yes, often
- Yes, sometimes
- No

Q18 Do you discuss assessment results with your students?

- Yes, often
- Yes, sometimes
- No

Q19 What resources, if any, could your school(s) use to improve the development of self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities?

- Professional development Trainings
- Additional personnel
- Implementation of different processes
- Different curriculums
- N/A

Q20 Please describe ways in which your school(s) could improve how self-advocacy skills are taught to students with disabilities.

_____

_____

_____

Q21 Please rate your perceptions of the students with disabilities in your school(s) on each of the items below.

	Not confident	Somewhat confident	Mostly confident	Very confident

The students can accurately
describe their disability

The students can identify
their strengths and weaknesses.

The students can identify
accommodations which support
their needs.

The students can communicate
their needs in a way that is respectful
of others.

The students can negotiate with other
people to get their needs met.

The students can be assertive in
expressing their learning needs.

The students can control their emotions
when they are talking to people about
their needs.

The students can keep track of important
information that they need.

The students can get their questions

answered during a special education meeting.

The students have knowledge
of their legal rights.

The students can work with other people
to solve problems.

The students can listen to other people
and consider their point of view.

The students can deal with stress so that
it does not interfere with their life.

Q22 What else would you like to share about your role in supporting students with
disabilities in their self-advocacy skills?

_____

Appendix B. Informed Consent

Consent to Participate in Research (confidential research)

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kiarra Steer under the supervision of Dr. Debi Kipps-Vaughan from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to examine the current role of school psychologists in supporting the development of self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her Ed.S. research project.

Research Procedures

This study consists of an online survey that will be administered to individual participants through QuestionPro (an online survey tool). You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to supporting the development of self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require approximately 15 minutes of your time.

Risks

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

Benefits

Potential benefits from participation in this study include contributing to a limited body of research regarding school psychologists teaching self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities.

Incentives

You will not receive any compensation for participation in this study.

Confidentiality

The results of this research may be presented at future conferences such as NASP 2023.While individual responses are obtained and recorded online through QuestionPro (a secure online survey tool), data is kept in the strictest confidence. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. Aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information will be destroyed. Final aggregate results will be made available to participants upon request.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

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Chair, Institutional Review Board
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Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form through email. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age. By clicking on the link below, and completing and submitting this confidential online survey, I am consenting to participate in this research.

Kiarra Steer   07/26/2021
Name of Researcher (Printed)   Date

This study has been approved by the IRB, protocol # 22-284.