Self-Advocacy Skills in Special Education: A Key Path to Empowerment and Integration

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Abstract
Self-advocacy competencies are the primary skills for students with special educational needs (SEN) in achieving educational inclusion, social integration, and effective transition into adulthood. This paper systematically considered theoretical foundations of self-advocacy, fundamental elements (self-knowledge, awareness of rights, communication skills, and negotiation strategies), development stages, and its practical functions in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, classroom accommodations, peer relationships, and transition planning. Also, this study reviewed the individual, setting and societal factors and outlines a step-by-step intervention framework, which includes direct instruction, situation drill, peer modeling, technology support, and adult support strategies. This paper concluded that incorporating self-advocacy education into the heart of special education teaching and the formation of an enabling ecology of student-family-school-community. It was recommended that schools should offer a dedicated self-advocacy course and provide training for parents. Teachers should teach students how to express their thoughts and feelings, create an open and supportive environment, give positive feedback, provide guidance and support, and encourage students to support each other.
Keywords: self-advocacy, special education, empowerment, self-determination, IEP

Introduction

In the traditional special education model, students with special educational needs (SEN) are often regarded as recipients of service. Although this model is well-tested, it quietly robs students of the ability to express their needs, participate in decision-making and control their own lives, leading to problems such as learned helplessness (Okorafor, 2023), over-dependency and struggling to adapt to adulthood.

With the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Kayess & Sands, 2020) establishing the basic principles of respecting the autonomy and independence of persons with disabilities and full and effective participation and integration into society, the cultivation of self-advocacy skills (Norris, 2024) has been a pivotal trend of special education reform across the world. Self-advocacy is the overall ability of a person to understand his or her own needs, rights and benefits, and to communicate and negotiate in order to get necessary support.

For special educational needs students, self-advocacy skills not only manifest in the pursuit of learning accommodation (such as additional time in which to complete examinations and use of assistive technology) but also include the following: (i) Acceptance of one's disabilities by oneself is a strong foundation of self-advocacy (Chambers, 2024). It does not merely comprise the recognition of one's own disabilities but also the knowledge that those characteristics do not affect one's worth and capability. Positive identification allows students to reduce the impact of self-stigma and enhance their self-confidence and self-worth. This is facilitated by positive education and positive environments, such as participating in peer support groups and psychological counseling, so that they can love

themselves and be proud of themselves; (ii) Knowledge of one's rights is another significant aspect of self-advocacy. SEN students need to know their rights enshrined in the law, such as the right to equal education and reasonable adjustment under the Hong Kong Disability Discrimination Ordinance (Petersen, 2007). Through dissemination of education and information, students can learn that they are entitled to receive appropriate support and services and can actively demand the implementation of these rights whenever necessary. Through role-playing and professional guidance, such rights awareness can be cultivated in students so that they can practically safeguard their rights; (iii) Problem-solving abilities are essential in case of discrimination or under-serviced situations. SEN students need to be educated to analyze the root of the problems and identify workable solutions. This includes awareness of the available resources, seeking help from support networks (e.g., teachers, parents or agencies in the community), and understanding the complaints process. This can be reinforced by families and schools through problem-solving activities and simulated experiences so that the students will not feel isolated when faced with problems; and (iv) Career autonomy involves students' abilities to participate in transition planning during the educational process and express their own life and work preferences. This means that students must be provided with the opportunity to participate in the development of individualized education plans (IEPs) and share their own thoughts and needs. Through career exploration, internship practice and vocational guidance, students can better know their interests and aptitudes and prepare themselves for their future careers. In addition, such autonomy not only improves the decision-making ability of students but also raises their sense of participation and belonging to society.

The objective of this paper is to build a theoretical foundation for self-advocacy; explore its basic skill framework; recommend evidence-based effective teaching and support practices; and consider the quandaries and future directions of current practice. Through systematic analysis, we emphasize the need to integrate self-advocacy teaching into a special education curriculum and individualized education program (IEP) goals toward a truly student-centered inclusive education. This will not only enhance the abilities of SEN students but also render them more independent and engaged in society.

Theoretical Foundations of Self-advocacy

(a) Social cognitive theory (Mujahidah & Yusdiana, 2023) -- It puts strong focus on the pivotal role of self-efficacy as a sole mediating variable in behavior change. Self-efficacy (Farmer, Xu & Dupre, 2022) refers to an individual's belief in his or her ability to prevail in specific situations or perform a task. Such a belief plays a key role in students' motivation, particularly in the self-advocacy domain. When students believe they can advocate efficiently, for instance, "I am able to explain my learning requirements clearly to the teacher", they become more confident. This kind of belief acts as a stimulus to their willingness to try and keep advocating for themselves. A high degree of self-efficacy significantly enhances students' motivation. When faced with challenges, students who believe in their own abilities will more likely persevere rather than give up. This persistence is necessary in school settings where difficulties are common. Having the ability to effectively finish an Individualized Education Program (IEP) self-report provides students with a tangible experience of their capacities. Such success reinforces their belief in their capacities, leading to increased self-confidence. Real-life situations in which students are actively engaged in decision-making activities further reinforce this impression. Witnessing peers speaking up for themselves successfully can be a compelling experience. When

students see their classmates self-advocate and be successful in doing so despite challenges, it provides the perception that they can self-advocate. This is founded in Bandura's theory of observational learning (Zhang et al., 2022), where individuals learn behaviors by observing others. Praise from adults is key to endorsing students' views of self-efficacy. Positive reinforcement and praise can help students break through doubts and reinforce their belief in themselves. For instance, when teachers compliment a student's advocacy, it not only builds the confidence of that student but also sets an example for others. Teachers can provide students with opportunities to practice self-advocacy in situations where there is not a lot of pressure. Role-playing activities can help build their confidence in asserting their needs. Set up peer-led workshops where students can watch and learn from each other's attempts at advocacy. By building a nurturing classroom climate, students can be efficiently encouraged to advocate for themselves. Teachers should focus on building a culture of support and utilize positive feedback systems (Zimmerman et al., 2024) to help students develop skills as well as build confidence. Specifically, students can be guided to reflect upon the impact of their advocacy behaviors on a continuous basis, and through careful consideration of good experiences and areas of improvement, they can feel the direction of development intuitively, thereby strengthening their sense of self-efficacy. Based on the self-efficacy theory of Vaughan-Johnston and Jacobson (2020), not only did the teaching practice empower students to become more confident advocates for themselves but also ensure their scholarship and become a strong foundation for future challenges in life.

(b) Self-determination theory -- It is developed by Ryan and Deci (2024) unveils the central contribution of the three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in exciting intrinsic motivation. When students are given space for self-determination decision-making during learning, the sense of education responsibility is significantly enhanced. The expression of autonomy can enhance concentration and interest significantly by giving them a sense of control over learning. The competence need is actualized through mastery efficacy in task and goal accomplishment, and the routines of self-advocacy continue to strengthen students' communication and problem-solving skills through demand expression and decision-making ability development. This theoretical framework points out that satisfaction of these three fundamental psychological needs is a core element in motivating individuals to make self-directed choices based on their own values. When students effectively advocate for themselves, they achieve a mastery that promotes their confidence and motivation overall. Relatedness is the need to feel connected to others and have a sense of belonging. Among self-advocacy, students flourish based on supportive peers, teaching, and family relationships. These have the capacity to open up spaces where they feel free to communicate and request assistance, which they require for their emotional well-being. Self-advocacy serves to directly address the psychological needs (Tapia, 2023) outlined in self-determination theory, hence enhancing students' intrinsic motivation. By self-advocating, the learners are taking control of their autonomy by choosing parts of their learning process. This independence meets their need for competence as they become able to make their needs known and then advocate for appropriate accommodation. Positive teacher-learner as well as peer relationships also improve the feeling of relatedness, fostering an environment that is conducive to successful self-advocacy. Studies suggest that special educational needs students who have more competence in self-determination (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2020) fare better as they proceed to college or the workplace. For example, such students will likely find suitable work, excel in academic settings, and effectively negotiate for necessary services to achieve desired outcomes. This is proof of the benefits of self-determination in education and the

applicability of self-determination in terms of future life decisions. It is essential to empower students with independence to make independent learning choices and advocate for their rights. Teachers should teach students self-advocacy skills like stating needs and gaining opportunities for learning or work. In addition, a positive classroom culture that promotes cooperation and peer support must be created. By promoting autonomy, competence, and relatedness, teachers can promote a classroom climate that not only supports students' intrinsic motivation but also equips them to manage challenges and opportunities in their school life and at the workplace.

(c) Empowerment theory (Rachmad, 2022) -- It demands the necessity of empowerment to enable student self-advocacy, especially for students with special educational needs. The empowerment process emphasizes enhancing individual competencies by providing skills, knowledge, and support that can enable students to control their lives and make healthy choices. Identification of environmental barriers is crucial for the students to succeed in self-advocacy. These may be physical, social, or systemic and may vary from a shortage of support services to negative peer or teacher attitudes, or a lack of facilities. Negotiation skills training through role-playing can be effective in encouraging students to communicate their needs and negotiate for the type of support they need. This hands-on learning increases their self-advocacy skills and confidence. Instructing the students to request assistance when needed reinforces a feeling of belonging and confirms their ability to manage challenges. It also tells them that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness, a valuable part of their overall development. The instructors can provide discussions and supply self-advocacy templates. As students grow in confidence, they can be more proactive in their roles, such as chairing their own IEP meetings or negotiating themselves. This gradual transition develops power for students and reinforces students' ability to take charge of their own advocacy. Organize workshops on self-advocacy and negotiation skills. These workshops can include interactive exercises that allow students to practice what is covered in a safe environment. Pair students with peers who have already become proficient in self-advocacy, creating a mentorship relationship. This can facilitate students' ability to have good role models and experience in the real world. Through an empowerment model, teachers can provide students with an opportunity to build skills, knowledge, and confidence to function throughout their school years and advocate effectively for needs, leading to greater independence and success in life.

(d) Disability studies' critical discourses -- They are critical of the traditional conceptualizations of disability, i.e., the prevailing medical model, which often sees disabilities as personal deficiencies or inadequacies. As opposed to this, the social model perspective is based on the role played by the environment and culture within society in shaping the lives of individuals with disabilities. This shift in thinking has profound implications for how we conceptualize self-advocacy and the rights of students with special educational needs. The social model implies that disability does not arise purely from impairment at an individual level but from the interaction between a non-accommodating society and individuals. This frame of reference recognizes how physical barriers, inaccessible environments, and disabling attitudes from society cause disabled people difficulty. The medical model traditionally interprets disabilities as deficits, and the resulting assumption that individuals need to be cured or corrected. The model tends to place power in the hands of medical professionals and experts, sitting individuals with disabilities outside of power. However, other models interpret the same situations differently. By making self-advocacy a priority, policymakers and teachers can create a setting in which

students feel encouraged to express their needs, help make decisions, and advocate for necessary accommodation and support. The war cry of "nothing about us without us" (Jodoin et al., 2023) is a call to bring individuals with disabilities into discussions and decision-making regarding their lives. The social model perspective and slogan also resist the traditional power dynamic where the experts were and continue to be thought to be experts. In invoking SEN students' participation in decision-making, we are shifting from a dependency discourse to one of cooperation and partnership. The critical perspectives of disability studies, and particularly the social model, radically change our understanding of disability by emphasizing how society counts and attitudes contribute.

Core Skills System for Self-Advocacy

(a) Self-awareness and acceptance (Klussman et al., 2022) -- It is a beginning step for an individual to comprehend his or her own diagnosis in a developmentally appropriate way. For example, students can learn to say, "My brain processes words slowly, but I think in pictures very well." This can allow students to recognize and accept their own uniqueness, their own physical and mental disabilities, and thereby reduce self-doubt and anxiety. Teachers can guide students to cultivate an "advantage mindset" to balance the impact of disability labels with their own strengths. For example, students can practice the following: "I have dyslexia, but oral expression and creativity are strong points." Rehearsal of this kind not only empowers students' self-esteem but also encourages them to use their strengths to the best of their abilities in learning and life and approach challenges in a more positive state of mind.

(b) Balance between rights awareness and responsibilities -- To cultivate students' rights awareness, we can start by explaining the major content of the Special Education Act. Students should be informed of relevant legislation and regulations, such as the United States' Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) reasonable adjustments and equal participation rights under the Hong Kong Disability Discrimination Ordinance. This not only makes them aware of their own rights and interests but also makes them take the initiative to fight for them whenever necessary. In the meantime, teachers are supposed to instruct the principle of "rights and responsibilities going hand in hand". If the students request an extension of examination time, they should complete the examination on time. Students can understand that with the pleasure of rights come accompanying responsibilities and hence become more mature and independent.

(c) Promoting good communication using "I-Statement" -- Students can be taught by teachers to apply "I-Statement" skill in expressing their needs. For example, "When I feel nervous in an examination, I have trouble concentrating, so I need the extension of examination time." Not only can this mode of articulation allow students to rationally and coherently express their needs but also allow teachers or support staff to readily comprehend and reply with appropriate support. This method is not only appropriate for classroom use but can also be applied to daily communication to allow students to build confidence and the ability to communicate on their own. Teach students how to collect data to support requests, such as timing homework completion to prove the necessity of extension. This makes students not only more persuasive but also more proactive and assertive in self-advocacy.

(d) Problem solving and negotiation -- Practice presenting a number of options, e.g., students can say: "I need these accommodations: A or B." This allows students to be flexible in problematic situations and think creatively, generating a range of possible responses. The art of compromise: learn that partial satisfaction is still worth it. For example, if you do not get a full extension, but get a key reminder, this also is a win-win negotiation result. Teaching

students to know the value of compromise can enable them to have the right attitude when facing real challenges.

(e) Help-seeking resource network -- Develop an "advocacy resource map" to define clearly resources such as parent, trusted teachers, peer helpers and appeal avenues. This allows students to obtain help readily when necessary and be more inclined to seek help actively. Use an APP to record needs or to give visual prompts, e.g., the "Advocacy Step Checklist". Not only does technology facilitate students' self-management ability, but it also makes them effective and well-organized in the process of self-advocacy.

These strategies and techniques can make SEN students' self-advocacy skill stronger overall, enabling them to be more assertive about communicating and requesting what they need at school and in life.

Development Stages and Teaching Strategies

(a) Staged ability development -- Stage detailed explanation is described as below.

(i) Awareness awakening – In this stage, the students are hardly aware of their own rights and remain passive in accepting arrangements made by others. The focus of teaching is on making them aware of basic rights and assessing their own strengths in order to promote self-awareness.

(ii) Practice participation -- Students begin communicating a few needs under adult guidance. The focus of this stage is to provide students with the opportunity to learn to communicate step by step in a supported environment through activities simulating IEP meetings and classroom accommodation requests.

(iii) Active application -- Students are able to independently apply advocacy and choose restricted channels of assistance. Educational focuses include negotiation techniques and conflict resolution skills to prepare students to deal with challenges effectively.

(iv) Diffusion of leadership -- Students are now able to lead others and participate in systematic support programs. Peer coaching and policy involvement training is the core of this level in order to challenge students to become more active advocates.

Table 1:

Staged ability development

Stage	Characteristics	Teaching Focus
Awareness Awakening	Passive acceptance of arrangements, unawareness of rights	Discovery of basic rights, self-strength identification
Participation Practice	Express some needs under adult direction	IEP meeting role-playing, classroom adjustment request
Active application	Initiate independently, seek limited assistance	Conflict resolution, negotiation plan
Leadership Diffusion	Lead peers, engage in systematic advocacy	Peer counseling, policy participation training

Source: Koca et al., 2023

(b) Instructional strategies that are evidence-based -- Use the self-advocacy (Schena, Rosales & Rowe, 2023) course to instruct step by step the following. Encourage students to come forward with their strengths and encourage them to have self-confidence. Instruct students to learn how to identify their needs and express their ideas clearly. Help students develop

listening skills towards others and learn how to gather information from conversations. Instruct students to seek ways to get things done and enhance problem-solving skills. Role-play to enable students to experience the process of communication among students, parents and teachers to build students' sense of involvement and confidence. Practice seeking barrier-free help in a shopping mall to enhance students' skills of applying things to real life situations. Invite disabled adults to share their advocacy experience, such as "How to apply for assistive devices in college", so that students can benefit from practical inspiration and advice. Role-play advocacy situations to instruct and remind of self-advocacy. Using visual reminder cards such as "my rights list", provide students with visual reminders of their rights. (c) Practice structure in IEP meeting -- Students fill out "my IEP priorities" to help them articulate their needs and goals. Give exclusive time for students to give the report, use PPT or video presentation so they can feel engaged. Set at least one yearly goal explicitly tied to self-advocacy such as "energetically advocate accommodation needs in 80% of courses", so that students know clearly where they are headed. Students rate their participation satisfaction and make plans for improvement, which not only promotes self-awareness but allows them to keep getting better in future advocacy.

These approaches and models are designed to comprehensively develop the self-advocacy ability of SEN students in such a way that they can express their needs and rights more confidently and effectively at school and in life.

Challenges and Breakthrough Paths

(a) The important barriers -- Executive function deficits hinder problem-solving ability and step planning among students, leading them to view things as difficult in the process of advocacy. For example, students are unable to plan or organize their thoughts in a proper manner or get confused when they need to make decisions, thus affecting self-advocate behaviour. Overprotective parenting (Bruysters & Pilkington, 2023) denies students opportunities for autonomy. When parents overstep or make decisions on behalf of the child, the students' self-confidence and autonomy cannot be built, and thus they are not capable of positively expressing their needs when faced with challenges. Teachers feel uneasy and nervous with the student-led pedagogy, and this could be due to them underestimating what students can do or being concerned with the class atmosphere. This concern could result in teachers becoming less supportive in facilitating self-advocacy-related activities, which will, in turn, affect students' engagement and performance. Stigmatization (Schormans, 2024) of the competence of people with disabilities by society and low expectations directly influences students' self-efficacy and self-cognition. Students, having once been judged negatively by society, may question their own competence and restrain themselves from self-advocacy behaviour.

(b) Culturally responsive practices -- Conducting "advocacy and co-learning workshops" is an easy way to address family concerns over "students' rebellion against authority". By collaborative learning, parents acquire not only how to assert their own rights but also how to empower children to voice their needs and opinions freely in a safe environment. The learning environment provokes parents and teachers to collaborate as they explore how they can create a supporting environment where students can feel comprehended and appreciated. For intellectually disabled students, the use of graphic rights guides is a highly efficient approach in helping them develop a deeper understanding of their rights. Through the use of visual aid, students can instinctively recognize more easily the rights they have and why they are necessary, thereby improving their self-concept. This graphic instrument may also

enhance students' perceptions of involvement. When students are finally able to take an active role in the learning process, they will be encouraged to feel that their voices count, which helps develop their own confidence. When they are faced with everyday issues, this confidence will encourage them to express their needs more assertively, and it will have a strengthening impact on their learning at school and in daily life. This makes certain that students and parents benefit from common learning and facilitate a more healthy and improved growth experience.

(c) Policy suggestions -- Integrating self-advocacy as a mandatory high school transition credit can not only enhance the ability of students to self-advocate but also lay the foundation for their subsequent work and life. This policy may encourage schools to take students' independence in course planning seriously. Establish a local "self-advocacy ability scale" (Cui et al., 2025) to carry out serious testing of students' self-advocacy ability. This would allow parents and schools to further value students' needs and provide more targeted support. Incorporate a practice module of student-led IEP in pre-service training to prepare future teachers to be more competent and confident in employing self-advocacy education. Training can make teachers more capable of identifying students' needs and encourage them to be more pedagogically flexible.

All these practices and policy measures combined form a total framework for facilitating the self-advocacy of SEN students and thereby promoting their active engagement and confidence in school and society.

Conclusion

Self-advocacy cannot be a student with SEN's additional skill but instead needs to become the core principle of the special education system. The transformation needs to start at multiple levels.

(a) Paradigm shift -- Teachers and parents should bring about the paradigm shift and enable students to be included in the decision-making process. Not only does it enhance students' autonomy, but also their sense of self-efficacy and makes them feel heard. By making decisions with students, students can take active participation in the learning process and, as a consequence, enhance their sense of responsibility and participation.

(b) Ecological support -- Parents should learn to let go appropriately and give children the opportunity to face challenges independently. Such letting go can enhance students' self-confidence and promote their initiative in problem solving. Teachers should provide support and guidance in the teaching process so that students can freely express their needs and opinions. Empowerment behaviour by teachers can be achieved through the development of student-initiated curriculum activities, thereby facilitating students' self-advocacy ability. Create a school culture that is inclusive in nature and allows peers to accept and support each other. If peers can understand and respect differences, then students will feel empowered to express their needs. Institutions and government should develop policies to protect SEN students' rights of self-advocacy, including providing them with the proper provisions and support in order for them to have equal opportunities for access and participation in education.

(c) Life-course approach -- Training in self-advocacy must be a continuous process from early child education to the adult service stage. This requires the education system and institutions involved to provide continuous support so that students can learn the appropriate self-advocacy skills at different stages of life.

When students can speak with confidence. "I know how I learn, this is what I need, let us work out a way together", this is not just a display of personal ability, but also a true

reflection of social inclusion. It shows the leadership and assistance they have been provided within the education system, as well as the development of society's acceptance and respect for people with disabilities. By doing so, we can indeed attain a student-centered educational system in which each student is able to unlock their potential in learning and life.

Recommendations

(a) School has to offer a special self-advocacy class to teach students how to voice their needs and rights.

(b) School has to provide parent training in facilitating their children's self-advocate ability.

(c) Teachers have to help students identify their strengths, weaknesses and needs, and help them learn about their own characteristics.

(d) Teachers have to teach students how to articulate their thoughts and feelings clearly and effectively.

(e) Teachers are required to create a warm and open classroom environment where students feel free to express themselves.

(f) Teachers are required to give positive reinforcement and feedback to the students' self-advocacy behavior in order to improve their self-confidence.

(g) Teachers are required to be actively involved, provide guidance and assistance, and help the students to self-advocate in the classroom and outside the classroom.

(h) Teachers are required to get the students to assist each other and form friendships and partnerships.

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