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Educators' support of the cultivation of self-determination and self-advocacy of students with disabilities

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Abstract

In a society that appears to take independence for granted at times, it has become more and more of a necessity for educators to combat this trend and foster independence within students. One way educators can foster independence is by supporting the cultivation of self-determination and self-advocacy within students during the school-age years. As part of this project, a literature review was conducted to compile the components of self-determination and self-advocacy of students with learning disabilities and mild cognitive impairments. Working definitions of these two attributes were then created from these components. This project will explore the cultivation of self-determination and self-advocacy within students through strategies involving classroom culture, classroom expectations, teacher-family communication, student-led Individualized Education Programs (IEP), and strategic lesson planning.

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EDUCATORS' SUPPORT OF THE CULTIVATION OF SELF-DETERMINATION
AND SELF-ADVOCACY OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

By

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Abstract

In a society that appears to take independence for granted at times, it has become more and more of a necessity for educators to combat this trend and foster independence within students. One way educators can foster independence is by supporting the cultivation of self-determination and self-advocacy within students during the school-age years. As part of this project, a literature review was conducted to compile the components of self-determination and self-advocacy of students with learning disabilities and mild cognitive impairments. Working definitions of these two attributes were then created from these components. This project will explore the cultivation of self-determination and self-advocacy within students through strategies involving classroom culture, classroom expectations, teacher-family communication, student-led Individualized Education Programs (IEP), and strategic lesson planning.

Educators' Support of the Cultivation of Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy of Students with Disabilities

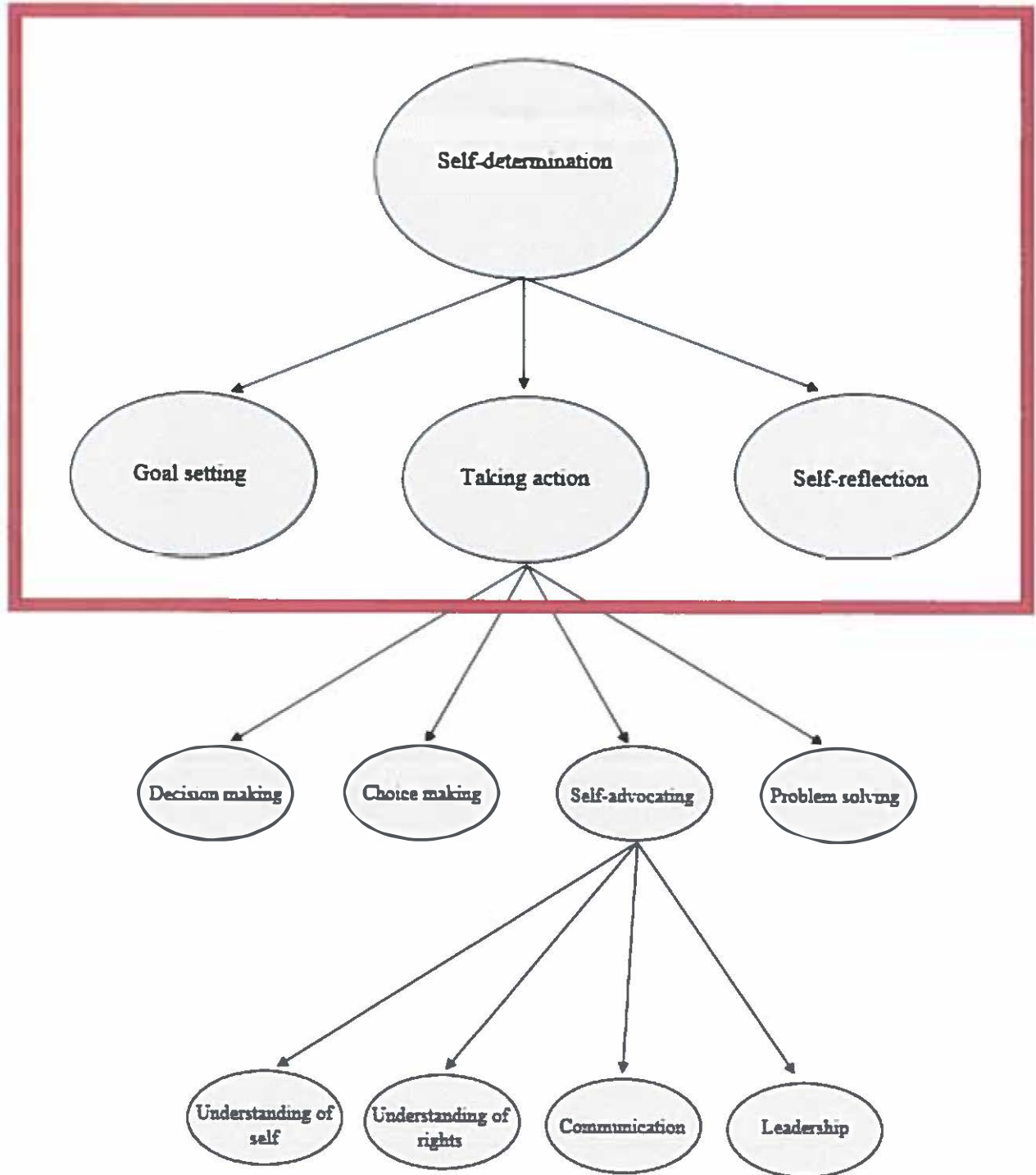
In a society that takes individual independence for granted, it has become more and more of a necessity for teachers to help cultivate self-determination and self-advocacy within students with differences. More than ever, individuals with learning disabilities and other mild disabilities are entering the workforce and creating independent lives for themselves (United States Department of Labor, 2012). However, compared to other demographic groups, individuals with disabilities are still separated by a society constructed gap. How can these individuals, labeled by society as being disabled because of their differences, move past this gap and live what is seen to be independent lives? One way for individuals with learning disabilities and other mild disabilities to increase their ability to live independent lives is by cultivating self-determination and self-advocacy during the school age years.

However, before one is able to create intervention to cultivate self-determination and self-advocacy, it is pertinent to have a working definition of what will be achieved. Field said that "self-advocacy is a term used almost interchangeably with self-determination...The term refers to taking action on one's own behalf; acts of self-advocacy lead to greater self-determination" (as cited in Test, Rowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005, p. 48). Since the two attributes maybe confused as being interchangeable to some, it is important to identify how this project distinguishes self-determination and self-advocacy from one another.

There is not one set description of what the components of self-determination within students with disabilities displays. However, many similarities are identifiable between how one researcher defines these components versus the explanation of another researcher. For instance, three of the five studies that were analyzed explicitly stated goal setting as a skill students with

disabilities who possess self-determination should demonstrate (Stang, Carter, Lane, & Pierson, 2009; Shogren, Palmer, Wehmeyer, Williams-Diehm, & Little, 2012; Mazzotti, Wood, Test, & Fowler, 2012). Holding an active role in this identified component of self-determination, goal setting provides students with an end point they can continuously use as a way to self-monitor themselves with or without assistance. Another element of self-determination is for a student with a disability to be able to act upon achieving the goal that they set. Many of the research studies identified different, yet similar, components of self-determination that fall under the category of taking action. According to these studies, students who possess self-determination may take action by making choices or decisions, problem solving, making a plan, or demonstrating self-advocacy (Stang, Carter, Lane, & Pierson, 2009; Shogren, Palmer, Wehmeyer, Williams-Diehm, & Little, 2012; Mazzotti, Wood, Test, & Fowler, 2012; Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, & Weigel, 2008). All of these actions may be utilized by students demonstrating self-determination depending on the situation and what they feel is necessary for them to take action and work towards achieving their individualized goals. The last component of self-determination that was identified through the work of Stang, Carter, Lane, and Pierson (2009) and Shogren et al. (2012) was students being able to self-reflect and regulate themselves. The ability to analyze and reflect on one's progress, feelings, and actions is an essential component of self-determination because reflection allows regulation of the student's actions towards achieving their goals. As a result of comparing different researchers' descriptions of the elements that make up self-determination within students with disabilities, the essential components of self-determination within students with disabilities that this project focuses on are goal setting, taking action, and self-reflection (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1

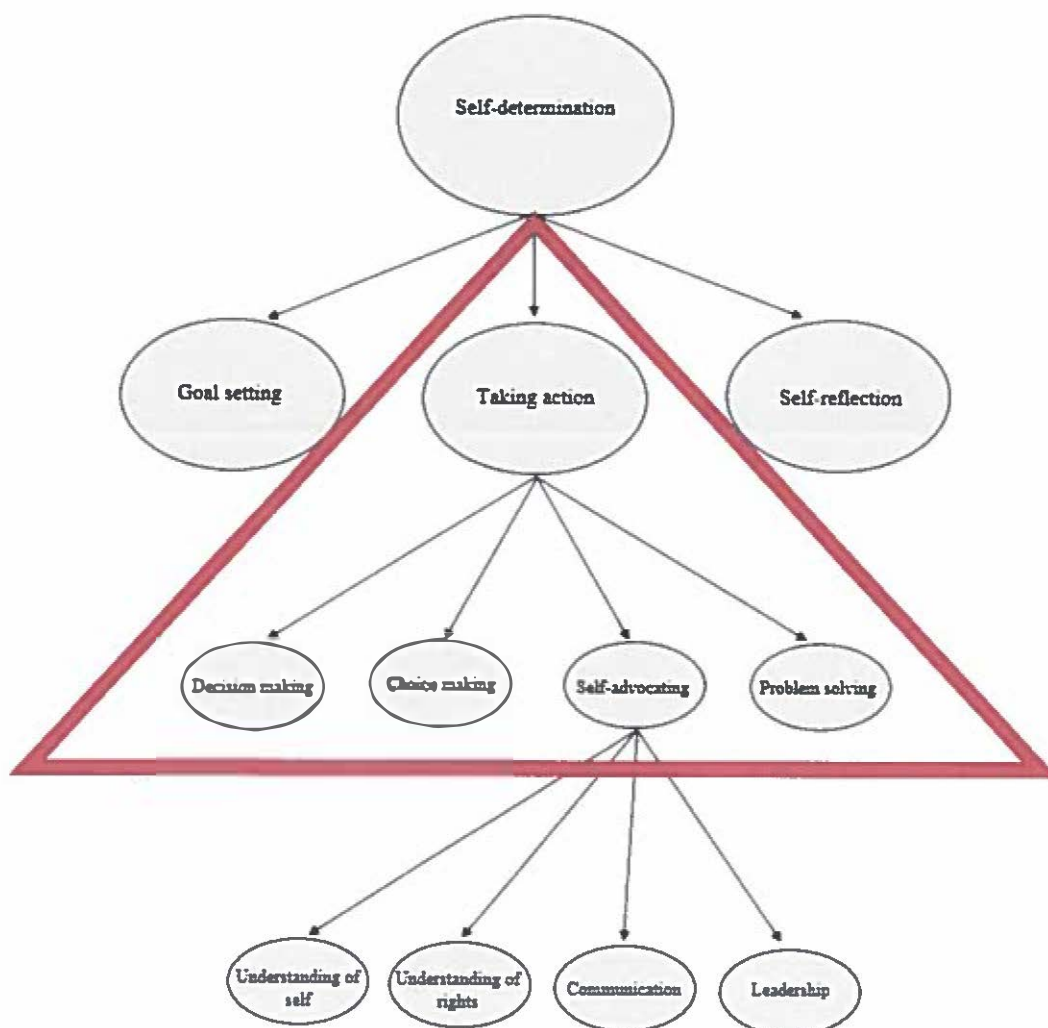


Based on my experience as a self-determined individual, I would argue that goal setting, taking acting, and self-reflection are the major components of self-determination. A time in which I demonstrated these attributes was when I was a senior in high school. Ever since I joined the Girl Scouts in second grade, I have been addicted to serving others. I was constantly earning new awards not because I wanted to be recognized for my service but because I was and will forever be dedicated to serving my community. Throughout my countless hours of serving my community, I have tutored many students. During what I thought would be my final year as an active girl scout, I wanted to do more than just tutor a few individuals. I wanted to reach more students. Therefore, my goal was to design, manage, lead, and be a part of a tutoring program at a local elementary school. However, I did recognize that this goal of mine was a large one, nonetheless and I was determined to see it through. While in high school, I played two sports, was a member of the National Honors Society, was on my church leadership team, was a girl scout, and was a student. Being a student at one of the largest high school campuses in the country was hard enough but to also have a learning disability at an academically competitive school was a fact that I was well aware of. Creating a tutoring program for elementary students might have been seen to some as an extra burden I did not need to carry. I on the other hand viewed my goal as just another way I could serve the people around me.

As a result, I designed a plan of action that utilized many action skills (*Figure 2*) described by Stang, Carter, Lane, and Pierson (2009); Shogren, Palmer, Wehmeyer, Williams-Diehm, and Little (2012); Mazzotti, Wood, Test, and Fowler (2012); Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, and Weigel (2008). For instance, I made the decision to recruit the help from my previous elementary resource room teacher to assist me in finding students to join my tutoring program; continuously problem solved to find new ways to balance my school, recreational, and social

life; and practiced self-advocacy skills when talking with students' teachers, my project advisor, and tutors. The action skills of decision making, choice making, problem solving, and self-advocating allowed me to take action on achieving the goal I set of creating a tutoring program at a local elementary school that ran three days a week for four months. My actions did not always produce the best results. Therefore, being able to reflect on my actions and problem solve, I was able to regulate my actions to lead to achieve my goal. As a result, by demonstrating the components of self-determination: goal-setting, taking action, and self-reflection, I have been able to progress as an independent individual and serve others.

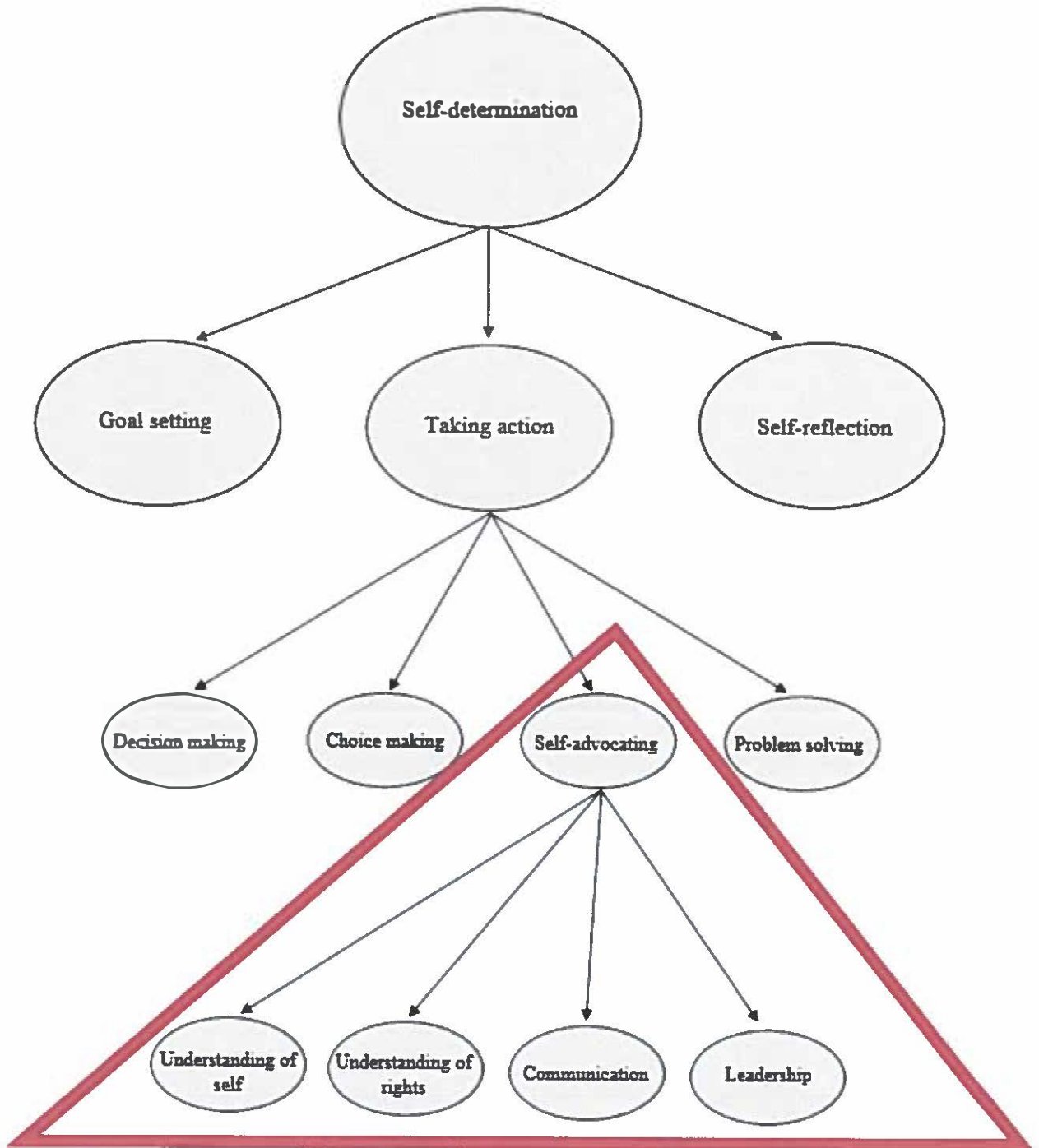
Figure 2



Based on this review of the literature, it has been decided that self-advocacy is a sub-component of self-determination. Therefore, self-advocacy is a skill that an individual may decide to use while taking action on his/her goal. Many similarities were found among the definitions of self-advocacy described in the literature. For instance, a majority of the literature explicitly stated that individuals need to have knowledge of who they are and what their rights are to be able to advocate for themselves (Cease-Cook, Test, & Scroggins, 2013; Daly-Cano, Vaccaro, & Newman, 2015; Grenwelge & Zhang, 2012). Although knowledge of self is necessary, an understanding of this knowledge is even more essential. An individual may know that the moon influences tides; however, does this knowledge guarantee that the individual has a deep enough understanding that he/she can explain this knowledge to another person? As a result, it is important that students with disabilities not only know who they are and their rights but they also have an understanding of themselves and the civil rights they are granted by being a member of this country. Next, all of the literature reviewed agrees that another component of self-advocacy is the ability to communicate this understanding of self and rights to others (Cease-Cook, Test, & Scroggins, 2013; Daly-Cano, Vaccaro, & Newman, 2015; Grenwelge & Zhang, 2012; Dryden, Desmarais, & Arsenault, 2014). Communication comes in many different forms, making it important that educators provide their students opportunities to engage with the most successful forms for each individual student. Lastly, Grenwelge and Zhang (2012) and Dryden, Desmarais, and Arsenault (2014) both stressed the importance of leadership in self-advocating individuals. Often times, the attribute of leadership is viewed as one person or a group guiding another group of people. However, leadership in the context of self, can refer to an individual's ability to have control over one's life. After comparing different researchers' descriptions of the elements of self-esteem, the essential components of self-advocacy within

students with disabilities that this project focuses on are an understanding of self, understanding of rights, communication, and leadership (*Figure 3*).

Figure 3



As a student who practices self-advocacy regularly, I can attest to the validity of these four components of self-advocacy. A time in which I am grateful for my understanding of self and my rights, my communication skills, and my leadership ability is when I was in seventh grade. All students at my middle school were required to take one semester of health class before graduating to high school. Health class counted as one of the two electives a student could choose to take during a semester. However, students who received academic support services in the form of resource room because of a disability only had the opportunity to participate in one elective each semester. Because I enjoyed playing the flute and was in the school band, this counted as my one elective I was allowed to take. I was first chair flutist throughout sixth grade and I planned to be the same in seventh grade. However, my resource room teacher wanted me to do otherwise. She strongly suggested that I end my band career so I would have an open elective to take health. I was greatly opposed to this because band was one of my stress relievers during the school day. I understood myself and what I needed. I proposed the idea to my teacher that if I used my recess and PRIDE (independent reading time) time to finish up any tests that I needed time on or read to me, I would be able to take health and not quit band. My teacher was concerned with how my academic performance would be on my homework if I did not have the extra hour at school every day to work on it during resource room. I suggested that I took health during the winter semester because that is when I am least busy with after school activities and would have more time at home to work on homework. In the end, I was able to advocate for what I thought I needed in school. I was in control.

To advocate for what I believed to be the best educational path for me, I demonstrated the four components of self-advocacy identified by the previous literature review. For instance, I showed my understanding of who I was by explaining how band helped me get through the

school day by being the perfect break from stress in the middle of the day. Also, I knew that it was my right to have the opportunity to participate in activities that I enjoyed. In this situation, the activity was seventh grade band class. Luckily, my family taught me at a very young age that I have a voice that is valued. Therefore, in seventh grade, it was not difficult for me to communicate to my resource room teacher and parents what I thought was the best for me in terms of what electives I took. This action also demonstrated my leadership ability and will to be in control of what electives I took just like every other kid. Altogether, the attributes of understanding of self, understanding of rights, communication, and leadership assisted me in seventh grade to advocate for what I felt I needed.

From the time one enters this world until the time he/she leaves, one trait that is constantly being strived towards is independence. Though sometimes it may seem otherwise, subconsciously, the desire for independence is always moving through us. One way to support the independence of individuals with learning disabilities and mild cognitive impairments is to foster the growth of self-determination and self-advocacy within individuals during the school age years.

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Classroom

Teachers' perspectives of fostering self-determination in school is vital information to understanding how the cultivation of self-determination and self-advocacy can be improved. Stang, Carter, Lane, and Pierson (2009) recognized that many youth with disabilities have disappointing postsecondary outcomes and weak self-determination skills that may be contributing to these outcomes. As a response, this research team conducted a study that interviewed 891 elementary and middle school teachers about the extent in which they provided and valued self-determination skills (Stang, Carter, Lane, & Pierson, 2009). The participants consisted of 768 general educators and 106 special educators from 6 school districts in a western state in the United States of America (Stang, Carter, Lane, & Pierson, 2009). During the interview process, the 891 educators were questioned about the extent to which they valued and provided their students with instruction in each of the domains of self-determination identified by this specific study (Stang, Carter, Lane, & Pierson, 2009). The seven domains of self-determination instructional identified by the research team were choice making, decision making, goal setting and attainment, problem solving, self-advocacy and leadership skills, self-awareness and self-knowledge, and self-management and self-regulation skills (Stang, Carter, Lane, & Pierson, 2009). Overall, the results indicated that together "elementary and middle school teachers generally attributed moderate to high levels of importance to each of the seven self-determination domains" (Stang, Carter, Lane, & Pierson, 2009, p. 99). While it may be comforting to know that educators value self-determination skills, it may be concerning that "the majority of educators reported that they at least sometimes taught each of the seven self-determination skills in their classrooms" (Stang, Carter, Lane, & Pierson, 2009, p. 99). Should self-determination instruction be infused into all that is done in the classroom?

Culture

I believe that both a classroom's culture and the developmental process of classroom expectations can play a valuable role in fostering self-determination and self-advocacy skills within students. First, the classroom culture that an educator encourages contributes greatly to students' overall educational experiences. For instance, if a teacher manages his/her students from a hierarchical stance, students may view learning as "what the older person says is correct and I should not have any questions." This view of learning diminishes the development of critical thinking skills as well as the cultivation of useful attributes such as self-determination and self-advocacy. On the other hand, if educators create a democratic culture within their classrooms, all three of these developmentally driven attributes, critical thinking, self-determination and self-advocacy, may be cultivated and given the opportunity to grow. However, before discussing the possibilities of a democratic classroom culture, one should have a moldable idea of democracy.

Although the idea of a democratic government was described in the Constitution of the United States of America, the role this type of government plays in each individual's life has changed and is changing as society evolves. Looking at our current representative democracy as an example, American citizens "limit themselves to the passive roles of voter and watchdog" (Barber, 1989, p. 355), while elective representatives are left alone to do the "real" governing. Whereas, a strong democracy described by Benjamin Barber (1989) is much more than being positioned at a look-out post. A strong democracy is present when each member of a community demonstrates ongoing engagement in the civic community (Barber, 1989). The passive role of voter in a representative democracy becomes an active role in a strong democracy because the citizen is valued. Therefore, citizens uphold a meaningful and effective way of participating in

the decision making process of the community. It can be said that a strong democratic society is citizen-owned, citizen-controlled, and citizen-driven (Democracy Watch, 2011). But are these values of a strong democracy limited to only government? Well, of course not. In particular, democracy can be applied to public schooling. I will be discussing how democracy is possible in the public school setting, and how my motivations for becoming a teacher are related to a democratic vision for classroom culture.

For a teacher to create a democratic classroom environment for his/her students, there are three major ideas that should be valued in the class. First, the creation of meaningful relationships between students and their teacher should be valued by both groups. For a valued relationship to form, each member must be open to learning (Michie, 2012). Some teachers may find it hard to view themselves as learners, but each time a new batch of students walk through their classroom doors, teachers have their own homework besides writing lesson plans. It is the teacher's responsibility to learn about the context of his/her teaching: the neighborhoods his/her students are from, the socioeconomic backgrounds of these neighborhoods, the cultures his/her students are exposed to, and the sense of community that is built in each neighborhood (Michie, 2012). By gaining a basic understanding of where his/her students are coming from, a teacher is able to create curriculum based activities that connect to the community in which his/her students live. By doing this, students will begin to recognize that their teacher is interested in learning about their community and students will become more open to learning. Tatum (1997) explains the concept of "not learning" as an individual's agreement to learn from a stranger who does not respect him/her, causing a major loss of self. What if the stranger respects the individual, for instance, a teacher respecting his/her students' community? Would the student agree to learn from the teacher who respects him/her, causing a gain of self in the student? I believe that this

combination of teachers' willingness to learn and show respect for their students leads to a gain of self within the students, which will begin to lay the foundation of forming meaningful relationships within a classroom.

As a result, by laying this foundation of creating meaningful relationships within a classroom, an educator would also be fostering self-determination and self-advocacy. One component of self-determination identified by a review of the literature is taking action. A subcomponent of taking action is self-advocacy and a component of self-advocacy is understanding of self, which students may gain in response to the foundation of meaningful relationships between teachers and students. Therefore, if educators visibly demonstrate their willingness and efforts to learn and their respect for their students in democratic classrooms, a foundation of self-advocacy would also be cultivated within students. While the creation of meaningful relationships is important in the formation of a democratic classroom, valuing every student's voice is as well.

Another aspect of a classroom environment that should be present if democracy is to take place is the idea of a valued voice. Students need to know that what they say is not only being heard by their teachers, but is also valued by their teachers as well as the other students in the room. Too often, individuals are left feeling as though what they think does not matter, which can lead to low self-esteem and low self-worth in the at-risk population (Tatum, 1997). One way to establish this idea of every voice holding the same degree of value is by first promoting public talk among students. Public talk, as described by Barber (1989), is built upon four characteristics. First, this specific type of "talk" requires individuals to listen as much as they speak (Barber, 1989). For "talk" to take place, both the process of interpreting and expressing must be present. Next, public talk is established when an individual's "talk" is affective and not

only cognitive, suggesting that many forms of voice are valued (Barber, 1989). This will allow both reflection and action to occur (Barber, 1989). Finally, the underlying characteristic is that it must be public (Barber, 1989). Public talk requires the participation of engaged individuals. Therefore, to promote this specific type of “talk” in a classroom, it is essential that the teacher emphasizes the process of reflecting. To ask students to reflect, the teacher is asking that students listen to each other and apply or reject what they have interpreted from what their classmates have said. By allowing students to take part in this process of public talk, they begin to learn the importance of valuing others’ “talk,” while also developing critical thinking skills. It’s like what Babe Ruth said, “The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don’t play together, the club won’t be worth a dime” (Baseball Almanac Inc, 2015, Quotations from Babe Ruth, para. 26). The success of each generation is a team effort; valuing previous generations’ voices as well as present voices allows reflection to bring success. Therefore, it seems only logical that the valuing of all voices in the classroom is essential in a democratic public school.

As mentioned before, essential elements of public talk are reflection and communication. Reflection is also a key component of self-determination and communication is an essential component of self-advocacy. Having the skill to reflect on what a peer has said and an individual’s own beliefs is a very similar process to self-reflection. Instead of deciding to reject or apply what he/she has interpreted from a peer, students practicing self-reflection will have the decision of rejecting or applying their own actions. Therefore, students may be able to generalize public talk reflection to self-reflection or educators can provide guidance for students to make this transition. Either way, the democratic practice of valuing other’s voices assists in fostering self-determination skills within the classroom. Also, communication skills which is a

component of self-advocacy is being cultivated during the process of public talk. Students are asked to listen as much as they talk which is a key aspect of communicating through social conversation. As a result, a democratic classroom environment that values the voices of all its members also practices key components of self-determination and self-advocacy.

Allowing students to take part in the decision-making process that is constantly taking place, students and teachers can contribute to the creation of a democratic society within a classroom (Barber, 1989). Students, at all ages, should have a voice in their own education. Barber (1989) suggests that one way to allow students to take part in the decision-making process is by promoting “students to interact together as a group over a question of common concern in a setting where the participants are empowered to make real decisions” (p. 356). For instance, when students are given the opportunity to make a decision about their own education, they are more likely to practice public talk among their peers because they can visualize how it will affect their lives. Students are given the time to critically think about their choices and act upon their decisions. Therefore, establishing this class decision-making process will develop a sense of inclusion and commitment to the classroom community within each student, possibly even the school community.

Students that are given the opportunity to engage in a class decision-making process will also be engaging in practices that foster self-determination and self-advocacy. An essential element of self-determination is taking action and to take action, an individual is often required to make decisions. By providing students with choices in the classroom, a teacher is continuously asking his/her students to make decisions. This democratic practice is also a vital component of self-determination. Not only does the decision-making process assist with the development of self-determination, it assists with the development of self-advocacy as well. One

component of self-advocacy identified by the previous literature review was leadership. This attribute in the context of self refers to an individual's feeling of control over his/her life. Being given the opportunity to make decisions that students can visually see affecting their lives, a sense of leadership and control is gained. Therefore, establishing a classroom culture that requires students to make decisions not only promotes a democratic classroom community, but also fosters components of self-determination and self-advocacy.

If teachers are to create effective citizens, providing students with opportunities to develop these characteristics of effective citizens makes the most sense (Giroux, 2012; Spring, 2008). It is ideal that the development of meaningful relationships, students' voices, and student participation in the decision-making process are valued in the classroom for democracy to begin to form in public schooling. As a result of practicing elements of democratic communities by educators, components of self-determination and self-advocacy can be fostered within students as well.

Establishing a career as a special education teacher has been my goal for a number of years and many experiences have fueled my desire to accomplish this. Since elementary school, I have experienced what it is like to be a student classified with a disability in the educational setting. I have experienced or observed a variety of the emotional, social, physical, and mental effects a disability can have on a student. I know what it feels like to start convincing yourself that you cannot do something because you have been told so many times by others that you cannot. On the other hand, I also know what it feels like to prove to your peers and superiors that they were wrong and become successful with the support of a special education teacher and family. It is my desire to be this support system for my students one day. I plan to do this by establishing a classroom that values meaningful relationships, student's voices, and the

participation of students in the decision-making process. By creating a democratic classroom environment that values these three ideals, I believe that I will be able to create a support system that my students can fall back on if they desire. Not only will my students have this physical support system to fall back on but they will also have the foundation of a mental support system as well. This mental support system will consist of the components of self-determination and self-advocacy cultivated within my students by the democratic practicing I value in my classroom. As a result, I will begin to fulfill my “obligation,” as defined by Michael Berube (2003), to increase the ability of students with disabilities to participate in our democracy as “political and moral equals” by first establishing an environment where they are viewed and treated as “political and moral equals.” However, I am aware that there may be a variety of challenges thrown my way having to do with standardized testing, common core, race, culture, and ethnicity that may challenge my ability to create a democratic classroom (Giroux, 2012; Michie, 2012; Tatum, 1997). Because of this, as I continue my course of study, I am determined to educate myself further about the different theories behind education. When I arrive at my first teaching job, I will carry a toolbox filled with a variety of different strategies to work through any challenges I may encounter. If my toolbox is unable to supply me with a strategy that works, I will find another toolbox among my colleagues that does. I am determined to not be pulled down by the undertow of public education (Michie, 2012).

Expectations

The process by which an educator uses to develop the expectations in his/her classroom can also be used as a valuable way to cultivate self-determination and self-advocacy within students. Demonstrated by Dr. Christopher Robin at Eastern Michigan University, the process of student created classroom expectations provides countless opportunities for components of self-determination and self-advocacy to be fostered. Below is an outline of one variation of the student created classroom expectations process.

Student Created Classroom Expectations

1. Educator explains the purpose of expectations
2. Educator asks students to brainstorm expectations they have for themselves in the teacher's classroom
3. Students are given the opportunity to share their individual expectations with the class
4. Individual student expectations are recorded in a format that is most accessible to the student
5. Educator shares and records his/her expectations for himself/herself with class
6. Educator asks students to brainstorm expectations they have for their teacher
7. Students are given the opportunity to share their teacher expectations with the class
8. Student lead discussion of teacher expectations is conducted
9. Students and teacher agree on student created teacher expectations
10. Student created teacher expectations are recorded for future reference

11. Educator asks student to brainstorm expectations they have for their peers
12. Students are given the opportunity to share their peer expectations with the class
13. Student lead discussion of peer expectations is conducted
14. Students agree on peer expectations
15. Peer expectations are recorded for future reference
16. Student created classroom expectations are referenced during classroom management
17. Self-reflection and whole group reflection on student created classroom expectations takes place four times a year or when necessary
18. Expectations are fluid and can be revised when classroom community determines necessary

Components of Self-Determination Fostered	
Goal setting	Self-created expectations is a form of goal setting. Students are asked to brainstorm, discuss, and agree on expectations that they believe should be followed to have a successful experience in the classroom. By agreeing to accept these expectations into their lives, students are setting the goal of abiding by these expectations in the classroom to have a successful experience.
Taking action	Participating in this classroom exercise provides students with the opportunity to take action during the discussions that are held throughout this process. For instance, during the discussion process of each category of expectations, students are given the chance to make decisions, make choices, problem solve, and advocate for themselves in regards to what expectations they feel are necessary to have a successful experience in the classroom.
Self-reflection	As part of this exercise, students are asked to individually reflect on their actions when compared to the class constructed expectations. Then, as a group, students are asked to review how the class' actions reflect or refute the class constructed expectation. This reflection process gives students the opportunity to take action to adapt expectations and/or actions.

Components of Self-Advocacy Fostered	
Understanding of self	This exercise gives students the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of who they are because it asks students to think of different necessities and preferences they personally may need for an environment to be considered safe.
Understanding of rights	By participating in this exercise, students are given the opportunity to brainstorm and discuss what rights they have as students/human beings and how their created expectations can reflect/protect these rights.
Communication	Participation in this classroom exercise provides the students with countless opportunities to practice communicating ideas and beliefs to their peers and teacher through class discussions. Students are never forced to talk during this activity, allowing them to communicate when they feel ready.
Leadership	This exercise gives students the opportunity to feel in control of their lives through the process of brainstorming, discussing, and agreeing on the expectations they will follow in their new classroom. This feeling of control over one’s life and self-leadership, gives students the chance to experience the feeling of ownership of their actions.

This past summer, I had the opportunity to facilitate the creation of expectations by students in an outdoor setting. While working as an overnight camp counselor, my co-counselor and I were to lead twenty-five girls for a week. By the end of the first day, I noticed that the girls were experiencing difficulties forming a group bond and following several of the actions valued in the Girl Scout law (Figure 4).

Figure 4 (Who We Are - Girl Scouts, 2016)

Girl Scout Law

I will do my best to be
honest and fair,
friendly and helpful,
considerate and caring,
courageous and strong, and
responsible for what I say and do,
and to
respect myself and others,
respect authority,
use resources wisely,
make the world a better place, and
be a sister to every Girl Scout.

As a way to work through this difficult time as a group, my partner and I decided to facilitate the girls through the process of creating overnight camp expectations. My partner asked that I be the lead facilitator for this exercise because I had the most experience with the topic.

Therefore, I asked the campers to create a circle on the floor of our cabin. I gave each of the girls a writing utensil and piece of paper. After this, I followed the process of student created classroom expectations outlined above. I explained what an expectation was and that we would be creating camp expectations because of the difficulties we have experienced as a group. At this point in the exercise, a majority of the girls were just *going with the flow*. However, after I began asking them to think about what they were expecting out of themselves while at camp, I noticed girls with pondering faces and others whispering with friends to brainstorm ideas. By the time the campers started sharing the expectations they had for themselves, I could feel the engagement of the group from the amount of focus radiating from the girls in the cabin.

As I facilitated the process farther, more and more girls began to share their ideas about what expectations should be held for their counselors and for their peers. Open discussions

about the pros and cons of different expectations were facilitated by the girls themselves through turn taking. Throughout the week, the girls held themselves accountable to follow the expectations they created because fewer and fewer difficulties were experienced between the campers in my unit.

As the camp session came to an end and the girls reflected on the expectations they had created at the beginning of the week, it was made very apparent this exercise fostered several components of self-determination and self-advocacy. For instance, the campers took action when they used their problem solving abilities to agree on what expectations they would be held accountable to. Also, this activity proved to foster the girls' self-advocacy by allowing them to practice the communication skill of turn taking during the camper lead discussions about peer expectations. Although other components of self-determination and self-advocacy were fostered through this activity, the ability to take action and communicate were the skills that the campers I worked with exhibited the most experience while completing the student created classroom expectations exercise.

Strategic Lesson Planning

By strategically creating lessons, educators can cultivate self-determination and self-advocacy while teaching subject specific content. Not only are there multiple elements of a direct lesson, there are many components of self-determination and self-advocacy. The direct lesson plan template that Eastern Michigan University student teachers are instructed to follow according to the Student Teaching Handbook (2014) is listed below.

Direct Lesson Plan Template

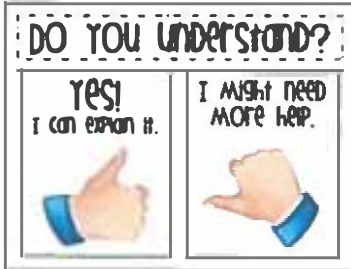
Topic • Duration • Materials • Standards/benchmarks • Objectives • Purpose •

Anticipatory Set • Input • Modeling • Checking for understanding • Guided practice • Closure •

Independent practice/Assessment • Adaptations/differentiation

(College of Education Eastern Michigan University, 2014)

There are many different ways the components of self-determination and self-advocacy can be supported during the different elements of a lesson.

Element of Direct Lesson Plan	Strategy	Components of Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Supported
Anticipatory Set	Ask students to work together in groups to simulate a process Ex: The transformation of a liquid to a gas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking action- decision making, choice making, problem solving, self-advocating • Communicating
	Ask students to imagine a time in their lives when... Ex: ...they felt excitement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-reflection • Understanding of self
Checking for Understanding	Give a signal response using a checking tool Ex:  <p>Source: http://everythingteachingtesol.blogspot.com/2013/03/checking-for-student-comprehension.html</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-reflection • Understanding of self • Communication • Taking action- choice making

	<p>Ask students to create their own goals for the concept being taught</p> <p>Ex: “I will be able to identify the differences between the different states of matter”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal setting • Leadership
Guided Practice	<p>Ask students to work in groups in which each group member is assigned a specific role</p> <p>Ex: Scribe, spokesperson, group moderator</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Leadership
	<p>Allow students to choose the environment in which they would like to complete their work</p> <p>Ex: Sitting at their desks vs. sitting on the floor vs. working independently vs. working with a partner</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of self • Taking action- choice making, decision making, problem solving self-advocating • Self-reflection • Leadership
Independent Practice	<p>Ask students to create their own rubric that will assess their understanding of the concept taught</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal setting • Self-reflection • Leadership
	<p>Allow students to choose the format in which they prefer to demonstrate their understanding of the concept to the educator</p> <p>Ex: Journal entry vs. skit vs. scrapbook page</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking action- choice making, decision making, problem solving, self-advocating • Understanding of self • Leadership

I will be beginning my student teaching in the fall of 2017. As I create lessons for the students I am working with, I will apply these strategies to my lesson plans. Throughout my experience teaching with these strategies that support the cultivation of self-determination and self-advocacy, I hope to observe the growth of the students.

Teacher-Family Communication

It is important for educators to not only analyze how self-determination skills can be cultivated at school but to also consider family efforts at home to cultivate these same skills. Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, and Weigel (2008) created a study that investigated how family and home environments can help support the development of self-determination skills within young students with disabilities. In particular, the researchers collected data from 31 children whose ages ranged between 3-8 years old and their families who attended public schools in rural and metropolitan areas in the Midwest United States of America (Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, & Weigel, 2008). The 31 children whose families participated in the study were identified by their families as having physical and/or mental disabilities. During the data collection process, a single guardian of a child participated in a semi-structured interview with two to three researchers at the family's home. The researchers asked questions that were geared towards bringing out the family's experiences associated with self-determination skills and opportunities their child has for choice, access, independence, and control. While at the participant's homes, photographs and observation notes were taken so further analysis could be done regarding how the home environment might have supported the cultivation of self-determination skills. The results of this study indicated that "families used a variety of strategies that can potentially provide opportunities for self-determination, and the use of those diverse strategies depended on home, child, and family contexts" (Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, & Weigel, 2008, p. 38). In particular, four strategy categories were coded from the data as being used to promote self-determination: engagement with the home and others, choice and decision making in the home environment, control and regulation of the home environment, and support of self-esteem in the home environment (Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, & Weigel, 2008).

While Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, and Weigel (2008) identified how families of pre-elementary and elementary aged children with disabilities promote the development of self-determination skills in the home, Zhang, Wehmeyer, and Chen (2005) suggest that parents' efforts to cultivate self-determination seemed to be more apparent in households in which the child is at the secondary level. Specifically, Zhang and his team of researchers (2005) surveyed a total of 293 parents and teachers of students with disabilities from the United States of America and Taiwan. Participants completed a survey about their behaviors towards fostering self-determination in their students/children with disabilities. The results of this study indicated meaningful similarities and differences of the two cultures' ratings of fostering self-determination within school age children with disabilities. First, at the elementary level, "when comparing the United States (U.S.) and Taiwan, U.S. parent ratings were higher than Taiwanese parent ratings, whereas Taiwanese teacher ratings were higher than U.S. teacher ratings" (Zhang, Wehmeyer, & Chen, 2005, p. 60). At the secondary level, U.S. parent ratings were higher than Taiwanese parent ratings; however, there was little difference between U.S. and Taiwanese teacher ratings. Overall, when comparing parent and teacher ratings, there was a significant difference between Taiwanese parent and teacher ratings; however, this was not the case in the United States (Zhang, Wehmeyer, & Chen, 2005). Therefore, Zhang's, Wehmeyer's, and Chen's (2005) research emphasizes that teachers and parents in both countries give greater efforts to foster self-determination at the secondary level than at the elementary level and parent-teacher ratings are more aligned in the U.S. than Taiwan.

Considering the work of Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, and Weigel (2008) and Zhang, Wehmeyer, and Chen (2005), the conclusion may be made that greater focus should be devoted to cultivating self-determination of children with disabilities at the elementary grade level.

Based on the results of Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, and Weigel (2008) family interviews, there are four strategy categories for cultivation of self-determination in the home environment that are already being implemented by some families who have a child with a disability. These four strategy categories can be aligned to the components of self-determination and self-advocacy identified earlier in this project (*Figure 5*). However, how can teachers use these strategies to influence and design instruction to assist families of elementary age children with disabilities and promote self-determination in the home environment?

Figure 5

Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, and Weigel (2008) four strategy categories for the cultivation self determination in the home environment alignment with the components of self-determination identified in this project (*Figure 5*)

	Components of Self determination								Self-reflection
	Goal Setting	Taking Action			Self-advocating				
		Decision Making	Choice Making	Problem Solving	Understanding of self	Understanding of rights	Communication		
1. Engagement with the home and others							X		
2. Choice and decision making in the home environment		X	X	X		X			
3. Control and regulation of the home environment								X	X
4. Support of self-esteem in the home environment					X				X

Newsletters

First, educators can use bi-weekly family newsletters to promote self-determination and self-advocacy in the home environment. A family newsletter is one platform of communication an educator may choose to use to engage with family members of his/her students. Just as a local newspaper provides its readers with information of changes, successes, resources, and suggestions in the local community, a classroom newsletter shares the same purpose. Educators can use family newsletters to notify families of any changes, successes, resources, and suggestions that may benefit the students' learning. Both paper and electronic copies of newsletters should be available for families to access as a part of creating an inclusive classroom. Aspects of family newsletters can be used as a platform for teachers to directly or indirectly provide families with ways they can assist in fostering self-determination and self-advocacy skills within their children.

Below is an example of a family newsletter intended to be used by a special education resource room K-12 teacher who works in rural Alaska. The first page of this newsletter provides families with a summary of what students have been focused on educationally as well as opportunities families have to become more involved in their child's education at school. On the other hand, the second page of this newsletter provides families with suggestions of how they can continue to foster their child's learning out of the school environment, as well. Specifically, under the heading "Creating a Home that Fosters Learning," suggestions are given for how families can foster the growth of the components of self-determination and self-advocacy within a child (*Figure 6*).

Figure 6

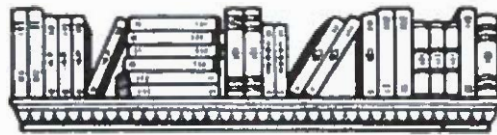
September 21, 2015

News from Room 7

By: Stephanie Porcan

Procedure Update

The check-out procedures for our classroom traveling library have been updated. Instead of each family only being able to check-out a single book for a week, families can now check-out a set of books (4-6 books) for a week. Because the remainder of my classroom books have arrived in the mail, I was able to make 30 sets of books for our traveling library. When checking-out a set, please fill out the classroom library log with the following information: student's name, set number, and date of check-out. This is a great opportunity to keep extra reading material in the home for everyone in the family.



Volunteer Opportunities

Our school is looking for adult volunteers to read aloud to our elementary classrooms. This opportunity will be available every Tuesday and Thursday from 11:30-12:00 p.m. If you are interested in volunteering, please sign-up in the main office during school hours.



A Peek into the Classroom

This past week, many of my middle school and high school students have been using their resource room time to work on their demonstration speeches for Culture Class. We have worked on creating detailed outlines for their speeches, peer editing, and practicing proper public speaking etiquette. Many students are becoming very confident in their work and are excited to give their speeches next week.

Next week, many of my elementary students will be starting new math units in their general education classrooms. I have met with each of my students' elementary general education teachers and discussed how each student will be supported through this upcoming unit. We are excited to see the students continue to grow during these next math units.



Teacher Contact Information

Email: sporcan@bbsd.edu
 Phone Number: (907) 815-8521

Available to meet between 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. Monday-Friday

September 21, 2018

Creating a Home that Fosters Learning

1. Organize your child's toys around the house on shelves and in cabinets that he/she can access without assistance.
2. Consider lowering light switches, placing stools under light switches, or creating a switch in which your child has independent access to.
3. Facilitate family meetings in which members' voices are valued and all family members have the opportunity to communicate their needs.

Family Activity

The next time you go out to find firewood, make it a family outing. Have your children bring spiral notebooks and pencils with them. As you look for firewood, have your children identify all the different types of trees they see. Have them keep track of their findings in their "tree journal" by writing descriptions and drawing diagrams of each type of tree. When you get home, discuss what types of trees they found.



Parent Feedback

I love to hear from you. If you have any suggestions of what you would like to see in my classroom newsletters, feel free to write them in your student's planner or contact me. Any feedback is greatly appreciated.

Questions to Ask your Child

"You are working on your demonstration speech for Culture Class. What do you plan on demonstrating and how will you introduce this to your class?"

"You are writing short stories in class this month. What genre did you choose for your story and how does your plot summary show this genre?"

"You are learning to use different objects to help you complete addition problems. Can you use some of your toys to show me how to complete an addition problem?"

There are a plethora of ideas that a teacher could suggest to families through a newsletter of different ways self-determination and self-advocacy could be cultivated within the home. A

list of possible family suggestions a teacher could consider including in a newsletter can be found below.

Opportunities for Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy in the Home

1. Organize your child's toys around the house on shelves and in cabinets that he/she can access without assistance.
2. Consider lowering light switches, placing stools under light switches, or creating a switch in which your child has independent access to.
3. Facilitate family meetings in which members' voices are valued and all family members have the opportunity to communicate their needs.
4. Consider giving your child the opportunity to choose what he/she would like to wear.
5. Display photographs of your child and samples of his/her schoolwork/artwork around the house.
6. Give your child the opportunity to reflect on their behavior. Consider guiding them through this process by asking questions such as "What was the result of your behavior?," "How did your behavior make you feel?," "What could you do differently next time?."
7. Allow your child to hold a variety of important roles in your family such as assistant cook, dog trainer, and master gardener.
8. Ask problem solving questions as situations arise. For instance, pose the question "There are 12 gram crackers left in the box. How can we evenly divide them among you and your sibling for a snack?"

9. Give your child the opportunity to choose what game is played, what topic is discussed, or what movie is watched during family bonding.
10. While the family is together, whether it be in the car, around the dinner table, or gathered by the television, give each member the opportunity to share one part of his/her day with the group.

Family Workshops

Additionally, educators can create and offer family workshops to promote self-determination and self-advocacy in the home environment. A teacher created family workshop is another platform of communication an educator may choose to engage with his/her students' family members. Just as teachers attend professional development conferences to ensure that they are providing students with the most supported, evidence based practices, families should also have the opportunity to educate themselves if they choose about different ways to support their children through parenting. Family workshops provide families with this educational experience if they choose to take advantage of this service. Additionally, besides providing teachers with a mode to introduce information to families, family workshops can support the formation of trusting relationships between educators and the families they are working with. Lastly, providing childcare for families in attendance can relay to parents how much effort the educator has put into the workshop and how much the educator would like families to attend. Therefore, a family workshop focused on the cultivation of self-determination and self-advocacy within the home can be used as a way for teachers to directly provide families with information regarding the support they can be offering their child.

Below (Figure 7) is a possible flyer that could be used by an educator to advertise a family workshop titled "Cultivation Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy within the Home."

This advertisement could be distributed physically and electronically to reach a greater number of families. Also, the flyer provides families with an agenda summarizing the context of the workshop. Therefore, possible participants in the workshop will know what to expect by attending the workshop and can decide if they would like to learn more about such topics.

Figure 7

Upcoming Family Workshop

“Cultivating Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy within the Home”

October 17, 2018 | 7:00-8:30 p.m. | Mrs. Egoak’s Classroom

Presented by Stephanie Porcari

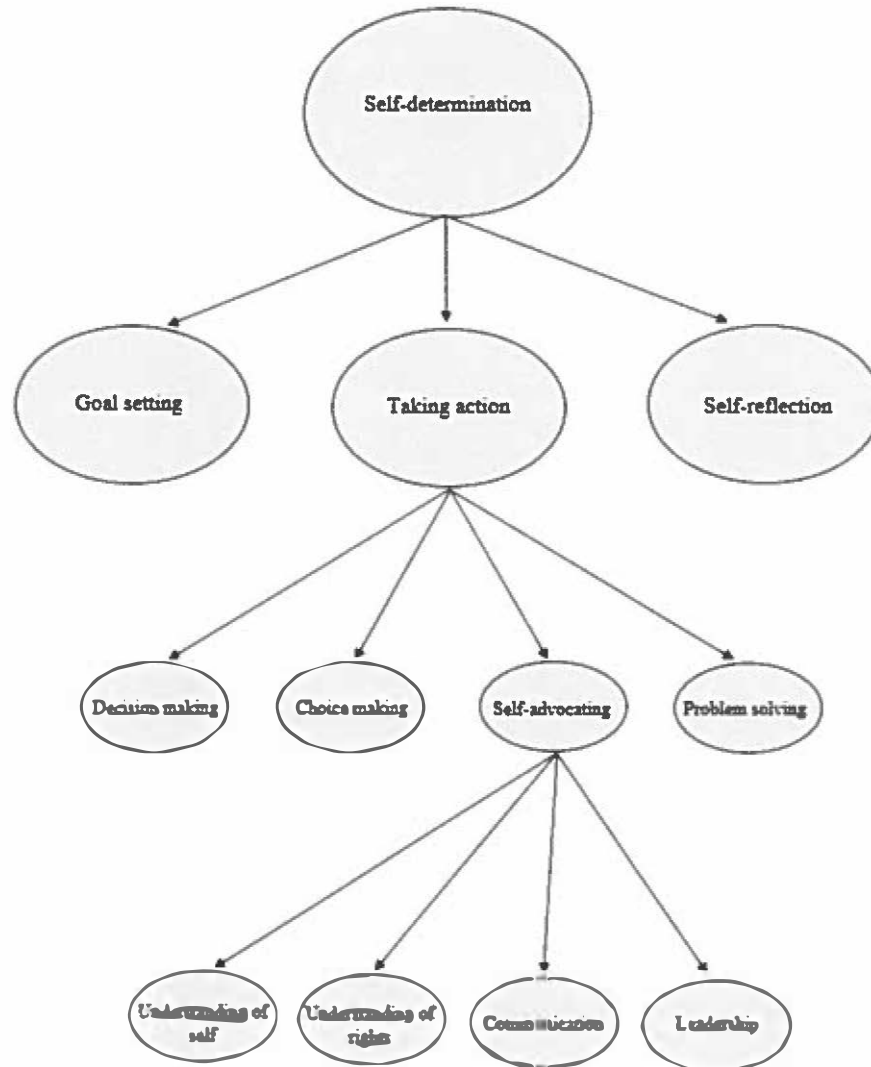
This workshop will help families understand the components of self-determination and self-advocacy and how families can support the cultivation of these two attributes in their children at home. Childcare will be provided by Mrs. Egoak’s high school class in the gymnasium for all children of those parents attending this workshop. Feel free to contact Stephanie Porcari (sporcar@bssd.edu) if you have any questions.

Workshop Agenda

Time	Item	Presenter
7:00 p.m.	Welcome and Introductions	Stephanie Porcari and Participants
7:15 p.m.	Modules Understanding the components of self-determination and self-advocacy Steps that can be taken to cultivate self-determination and self-advocacy within the home Examples of these steps put into practice by families	Stephanie Porcari
7:50 p.m.	Roundtable Discussion Participants will be able to discuss how the information presented applies to their families and what steps they can take to bring change.	Participants

Time	Item	Presenter
8:15 p.m.	Closing Remarks	Stephanie Porcari
8:25 p.m.	Parent Feedback on the Workshop	Participants
8:30 p.m.	Goodbyes	

Based off of the agenda, it can be said that the workshop will be divided into four parts: Introduction, Modules, Roundtable Discussion, and Conclusion. Specifically, there will be three modules that will focus on the understanding of the components of self-determination and self-advocacy, the steps that can be taken to cultivate these two attributes within the home environment, and examples of the implementation of these steps by families. First, to assist families with understanding the components of self-determination and self-advocacy, diagrams will be used as well as descriptions of each component. A diagram that demonstrates the connections between the components of both attributes can be found below (Figure 8). The next two models of this workshop were inspired by the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison which is devoted to advancements in human development, developmental disabilities, and neurodegenerative disabilities. Weir, Cooney, Walter, and Moss from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Carter from Vanderbilt University (n.d.) created a booklet titled “Fostering Self-Determination Among Children and Youth with Disabilities— Ideas from Parents for Parents.” Almost every component of self-determination and self-advocacy identified by this project are also identified in the parent resource booklet provided by the Waisman Center. For each component identified in the booklet, there is a page devoted to describing the component, strategies parents could use to support the component for their child,

Figure 8

and examples of ways each strategy could be used in specific home situations (Weir, Cooney, Walter, Moss, & Carter, n.d.). It is important for the educator who is using this booklet as a resource to customize the strategies and home situations that are presented at the family workshop to the culture and demographics of the community in which he/she serves. For instance, if the children of the families the teacher works with are in middle school, it would not be a beneficial use of time to speak about strategies and home situations that are appropriate for younger children.

Student-Led IEP

Another process in which educators should consider implementing to assist the cultivation of self-determination and self-advocacy of students with disabilities is student-led IEP meetings. Danneker and Bottge (2008) conducted a study in which they investigated elementary students' experiences leading their individual IEP meetings. Three boys and one female who identified as having at least one of the following disabilities: learning disability, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, emotional impairment, or other health impairment participated in this study. All four students participated in six 20-minute individual lessons that were meant to prepare the students to lead their next IEPs. The topics in which these lessons covered were (1) introducing the IEP process and the content covered, (2) creating invitations for the individuals who will be in attendance, (3) recognizing the student's strengths, hobbies, interests, and needs, (4) discussing progress on current IEP goals, (5) adjusting student's goals to address his/her current needs, and (6) identifying accommodations and/or modifications that may support the student. Next, the four students lead their IEP meetings while one researcher observed and conducted interviews with the student, parents, and teachers involved in each meeting. The results of these observations and interviews indicated that when the IEP meetings were student-centered, the elementary students practiced their self-determination skills, and that there was an increase in collaboration to problem solve among all members of the meeting. Therefore, the results of Danneker and Bottge's (2008) study indicates that the practice of student-led IEPs can be used as yet another way to assist with the cultivation of self-determination and self-advocacy of students with disabilities beginning in elementary school.

However, for special educators to implement student-led IEPs, they need to understand the best practiced preparation process to prepare their students. On the other hand, there has

been very little research conducted on student-led IEPs at the elementary level, resulting in no clear understanding of what best practiced instruction for student-led IEPs looks like. Therefore, until further research is conducted on elementary student-led IEPs, it would be beneficial if a literature review was conducted comparing the processes that researchers use to prepare elementary students to lead their own IEP meetings.¹ Nevertheless, by knowing the elements of a traditional IEP meeting and analyzing the six lessons Danneker and Bottge’s (2008) taught the four elementary students in preparation of leading their individual IEPs, the components of self-determination and self-advocacy that this process could foster are described below.

Components of Self-Determination Fostered	
Goal setting	The process of preparing for a student-led IEP provides students with the opportunity to have a role in the creation of his/her IEP goals. With the assistance of his/her special education teacher, the student can identify what he/she is struggling with and identify within a year’s time the amount of progress the student would like to make. IEP goals are broken down into mini-steps that are used to help measure the student’s progress throughout the year. This process of mini-stepping goals will demonstrate for students a strategy that can be used when working towards a progressive goal.
Taking action	By participating in student-led IEPs, students are able to practice many different ways to take action in their lives. For instance, students hold a role in the decision making process regarding their annual goals and make choices about the type of interventions they will receive based on their understanding of how they best learn.
Self-reflection	During the process of preparing for a student-led IEP, the educator would guide the student through a reflection of what the student feels his/her strengths are, what he/she is struggling with, what he/she can do to improve, and how others can help him/her in improving based on past experiences. Learning to reflect on one’s actions, strengths, struggles, and feelings is a difficult process that educators can support in many different ways throughout the school day.

¹ A continuation of my senior thesis will consist of conducting a literature review focused on elementary student-led IEPs and creating an elementary student-led IEP preparation process composed of the most successful processes used in previous research studies.

Components of Self-Advocacy Fostered	
Understanding of self	The process of preparing for a student-led IEP gives students the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of who they are because they are asked to think of different necessities and preferences they personally may need to make a learning environment welcoming to them. Students are asked to identify how they learn best, what their strengths and struggles are, their interests and feelings, and what others can do to help them. By answering questions like these, students are beginning to understand who they are and what they need to be successful.
Understanding of rights	By participating in a student-led IEP, students are introduced to their rights in the education setting. For instance, they have a right to receive free and appropriate public education. Therefore, if the school is not providing the student with the appropriate services the student needs to be successful, the school is putting itself in danger of a lawsuit.
Communication	By being an active participant during an IEP meeting, students have the opportunity to practice communicating their ideas, needs, and desires in a manner that can be understood by a professional audience.
Leadership	This exercise gives students the opportunity to feel in control of their lives through the process of brainstorming, discussing, and agreeing on their future goals and the steps that will be taken to achieve these goals. This feeling of control over one's life and self-leadership, gives students the chance to experience the feeling of ownership of their successes and achievements.

Beginning in third until twelfth grade, I attended all of my IEP meetings; however, I was never prepped or prepared for them. I did not led these meetings nor was I actively engaged in them. One the other hand, I did speak up when I felt the need to. For instance, I would say something if a teacher of mine did not allow me to have a pop quiz read aloud or if my teachers were marking me down because of my spelling errors. Unfortunately, I was never given the opportunity to lead my IEP meeting but I did have a voice in them when I decided to speak up.

Thinking back on my experiences during my own IEP meetings I remember feeling out of place. Sitting in the little corner office that you usually took your tests in listening to your parents and a few of your teachers talk about you is not the most pleasant experience. For crying out loud, it is a meeting about me. I remember thinking during these meetings, “Am I the only one in this extra small room wondering why I am not the one talking about who I am?” Should our students not be the ones who tell us about what their interests are, what they are good at or struggle with, how they like to learn, what we as educators can do to help them, and most importantly what their future desires are? By having students prepare for and lead their own IEP meetings, educators are cultivating their students’ self-determination and self-advocacy while increasing the students’ independence and quality of life.

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