

**Improving Self-Advocacy Skills in Secondary Education Students**

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## **Abstract**

This study followed a pre-experimental design. The study used a series of mini-lessons to teach students about what self-advocacy is, the significance and importance of self-advocacy skills, how the skills can be used both inside and outside the classroom, and how they could ask for help or their accommodations when presented with a difficult situation. The data for this study were collected through the use of interviews and pre- and post- intervention surveys. The results revealed an increase in the participants' knowledge of self-advocacy. No statistically significant difference was found between the willingness of special or general education students to ask for help or advocate for themselves after the mini-lessons; hence, the null hypothesis that the two groups would benefit similarly was retained. Further research on most effective ways to teach and encourage the use of appropriate self-advocacy skills to students with varied needs and abilities appears warranted in order to ensure student learning is supported in effective and economical ways.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Self-advocacy is a skill that is essential for the success of all students throughout their academic and post-academic lives. Despite its importance, many students of all ages and ability levels struggle with self-advocacy both inside and outside of the classroom (Douglas, 2004).

Students' lack of self-advocacy skills is a pervasive problem in part because many students lack knowledge of their disability or awareness regarding how it affects their learning. Additionally, students are sometimes unfamiliar with the accommodations they are afforded which are intended to address these effects of their disabilities on their ability to learn. Students cannot be expected to be self-advocates if they are unaware of their need for and entitlement to such accommodations or why those accommodations are important. According to Brinckerhoff (1994), high school students often start their post-secondary educational careers with little knowledge of their disability, its impact on their education, or how to access academic supports. In addition to being inadequately informed about their disability, many students are not exposed to training or instruction regarding self-advocacy until high school, if at all. Students who participate in such training sessions are those who are diagnosed with a learning disability (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005). This lack of training and instruction regarding self-advocacy for special education students with other disabilities helps explain why the lack of self-advocacy skills is a problem for many students.

Another reason students fail to self-advocate is that many parents of children with learning challenges tend to shield or rescue their child from situations which could require them to be advocates for themselves (Cohen, 2014). While this is likely done by most parents with good intentions, perhaps to protect their child from feeling "different" or being classified as "special needs,"-such protection can cause the child to lack exposure to challenging situations from which he or she could learn to self-advocate by practicing requesting services or accommodations needed for success (Brinckerhoff, 1994;

Cohen, 2014). Often it is not until such students enter college that they realize how much they have been shielded or rescued by their parents. Then, these students may find themselves overwhelmed by challenging academic situations, unaware of how to seek help or support, or unable or uncomfortable speaking to professors about their learning needs (Brinckerhoff, 1994).

The researcher, who teaches 10<sup>th</sup> grade World History, became interested in self-advocacy in students as she experienced an increase in the number of special education students in her classes. Despite the fact that most of her students had numerous accommodations identified in their Individual Education Plans (IEPs) many of these students appeared unaware of the availability of their accommodations and under-utilized accommodations that may have helped them improve their academic performance. The researcher also recognized that there were times during testing situations when she did not offer or provide accommodations to students who may have benefitted from them, as students did not self-advocate and ask to use them. These observations caused the researcher to wonder why the students rarely asked for their accommodations. For example, a student with the accommodation “selected reading sections” often participated in entire assessments without asking for that accommodation, even though its use (having the researcher to read a portion of difficult text for them during an assessment) would have helped the student perform more successfully on the assessments. As another example, the researcher had once forgotten to provide a student with his or her accommodations such as allowing use of a word box for the written portion of assessments. In that case, the student took the entire assessment without the accommodation to which he was entitled without asking for the accommodation. Upon realizing the mistake, the researcher offered to allow the student to re-write the written portion of the assessment while having access to the word box accommodation, which the student ultimately decided to do. The fact that students are sometimes willing to take and submit assessments without the accommodation to which they are entitled caused the researcher to wonder why students often do not ask for their use when they could help them and encouraged the researcher to learn more about improving self-advocacy skills among special education students.

Self-advocacy is a necessary life skill which many students, regardless of their ability level, will need to acquire to be successful in school and in life situations beyond high school. Educators are expected to teach their students content material as well as prepare them for life after high school. Part of preparing students for life after high school is teaching them how to be self-advocates so that they are able to gain access to the supports they need to perform to the best of their ability in a variety of settings.

### **Statement of Problem**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether instruction related to self-advocacy would be effective and associated with increases in special and regular education students' familiarity with self-advocacy and willingness to advocate for themselves at school by asking for help or access to their specific IEP accommodations.

### **Hypothesis**

The null hypothesis tested was that there would be no significant difference in how likely special education or regular education students were to ask for help or accommodations in their classes after they were provided a series of mini-lessons regarding benefits of self-advocacy

*ho: Mean rating of likelihood of asking for help or accommodations after mini-lessons for general education participants = Mean rating of likelihood of asking for help or accommodations after mini-lessons for special education participants*

### **Operational Definitions**

**Self-advocacy.** According to Schreiner (2007), self-advocacy is defined as “the ability to speak up for what we want and need, is an expectation for success both in college and employment” (p. 300). Douglas (2004) defines self-advocacy as “the process of recognizing and meeting the needs specific to one’s learning ability without compromising the dignity of oneself or others” (p. 224). For the purposes of this study, self-advocacy was defined as the ability or process of students asking for support or help so that they are able to overcome their learning challenges.



**Accommodations.** Accommodations are supports or modifications provided to special education students based on their learning needs. These accommodations are described in their IEPs and are intended to help students access curriculum content and materials. An example of requesting a specific accommodation would be a student raising his or her hand and asking for a specific portion of text to be read aloud to him or her if “reading selected sections” were an accommodation on his or her IEP.

**General Help.** This study used the term “general help” to refer to asking for help without requesting a specific IEP accommodation. An example of a general help request would be if a student raised his or her hand and asked for help answering a question. General help was the primary and only request made by general education students because they did not have IEPs and were not entitled to any specific accommodations.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Self-Advocacy is an essential life skill which all students, regardless of their ability level or participation in special education, must possess. This literature review begins by providing a definition of the term self-advocacy and an explanation of the significance of the skill. Section two explains why students struggle with self-advocacy despite attempts by many schools and school systems to improve self-advocacy among students. Section three describes programs currently used by school systems, universities, and recommended by researchers to improve self-advocacy. Section four examines the effect of self-advocacy on students' development and success. Finally, sections five explains the impact of self-advocacy skills in non-academic settings.

#### **Definition and Significance of Self-Advocacy**

Self-advocacy is the process of requesting help or support to meet one's learning needs. Self-advocacy involves speaking up for one's learning needs regardless of the academic situation (Schreiner, 2007). Students display self-advocacy skills when they request help during difficult situations. Special education students in particular also may display self-advocacy skills when they request their accommodations. A student asking for a selected section of text to be read to him or her during an exam is an example of the student displaying his or her self-advocacy skills.

Self-advocacy is an important skill that is essential to the success of all students regardless of their ability level (Van-Belle, Marks, Martin, & Chun, 2006). Students with strong self-advocacy skills are able to take ownership of their learning and IEP goals more successfully than their peers who have not acquired these skills. Students who utilize their self-advocacy skills are more likely to receive access to their accommodations, actively participate in their IEP meetings, and more successfully communicate and discuss with their teachers and professors the effect-of their disability on their ability to learn (Krebs, 2002).

Self-advocacy skills become especially important as students progress through their academic careers. Students with strong self-advocacy skills are more successful at expressing their perceived

academic strengths and weaknesses. After identifying areas of strength and weakness, students with strong self-advocacy skills are prepared more fully to use their knowledge and perceptions to be an active participant in the creation of their IEP goals (Hammer, 2004).

Aside from participating in the IEP process, strong self-advocacy skills are essential for high school students who plan to attend college. According to Brinckerhoff (1994), many college freshmen are unable to communicate successfully with their professors about their disability and learning needs. In addition to being unable to communicate effectively with professors, many college freshmen also struggle with accessing academic supports which they need to be successful (Ibid). Brinckerhoff reflects that many high school students entering college lack exposure to instruction regarding self-advocacy in secondary schools.

In addition to high school students, college students, specifically freshmen, also struggle with self-advocacy and requesting the services they need to be successful. The inability of college freshmen to access academic supports and effectively communicate with their professors regarding their learning needs and/or the challenges caused by their disability illustrates why self-advocacy skills are essential for all students. Self-advocacy skills enable all students to take an active role in and ownership of their education. General education students with strong self-advocacy skills have the confidence to ask for help when in challenging situations. Special education students with strong self-advocacy skills are able to request their accommodations confidently when needed, which can help ensure that they receive them and allow them to become an active and contributing member in their IEP meetings and succeed academically.

### **Struggling with Self-Advocacy**

Despite attempts by many educators and school systems to educate and improve self-advocacy skills among students, many students continue to struggle with self-advocacy, particularly as they begin college. As noted, this struggle may be due to a lack of exposure to instruction or training related to self-advocacy (Brinckerhoff, 1994). Without instruction related to self-advocacy, students often are unable to effectively communicate their academic strengths and weaknesses. As a result, they are

unable to explain to their college professors the effect of their disability on their ability to learn (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, Eddy, 2005). Students frequently enter college unaware of how to ask for their accommodations or academic supports because many high school teachers automatically provide students with their accommodations without the student needing to request them. Hence, the students never have experienced the need to learn self-advocacy skills in high school. As a result, many students enter college unprepared and unable to access the academic supports they need to be successful (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Test, et al., 2005). College is an academic setting that tends to be less supportive academically than precollege experiences and most college instructors expect students to be independent learners. A lack of self-advocacy skills in a less supportive academic environment that demands independence results in many students struggling to succeed in college.

In addition to a general lack of exposure to instruction regarding self-advocacy, students also struggle with self-advocacy skills because school systems tend to offer self-advocacy instruction only to high school students or only to students with learning disabilities. School systems that provide self-advocacy instruction primarily to students with learning disabilities may exclude general education students, gifted students, and students with other disabilities who also could benefit from receiving instruction on self-advocacy (Test, et al., 2005). School systems that elect to teach self-advocacy skills only to high school students may cause students to spend most of their academic career without self-advocacy skills even though they might have benefitted from those skills earlier (Test & Neale, 2004). Being able to advocate for oneself and ask for help when in a difficult situation is an essential life skill that is needed by all students to be as successful as possible regardless of their ability level or disability.

In addition to school systems failing to provide adequate self-advocacy instruction to students, another reason that some students struggle with self-advocacy skills is that their parents constantly “rescue” or “shield” them from difficult learning situations. This rescue or shielding behavior most often is done to prevent their child from being perceived as “different” or “special needs” (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Cohen 2014). In addition to the students’ parents rescuing or shielding them from difficult situations, students’ peers also may provide too much assistance or help, which prevents

special education students from experiencing challenging academic situations. Minimal exposure to challenging academic situations may prevent students from developing self-advocacy skills .

Goodley (1998) asserts that students continue to struggle with self-advocacy because often there is a focus on what people with disabilities cannot do rather than what they can do. Goodley notes that remedies to help disabled persons overcome the challenges they experience often are overlooked or not discussed. When self-determination and self-advocacy are overlooked, “people with learning difficulties suppress their sense of worth” (p. 444). Losing one’s sense of self-worth and a constant focus on what a person is unable to do can prevent the development or use of self-advocacy skills in people who could benefit from them, regardless of their ability level.

### **Programs Used to Improve Self-Advocacy**

School systems throughout the country utilize a variety of strategies and programs to improve students’ self-advocacy skills. The goal of most programs is to improve student participation in IEP meetings. A school system in North Carolina utilized a CD-ROM version of The Self-Advocacy Strategy to increase the quality of the contributions made by students with intellectual disabilities in their IEP meetings (Cease-Cook, Test, & Scroggins, 2013). There were three participants in the study and each participate received five lessons with each lesson focused on specific components of self-advocacy. Lesson one introduced the students to self-advocacy. Lesson two instructed students on how to conduct themselves physically and verbally during an IEP meeting. Lesson three inventoried the students’ academic strengths, weaknesses, various skills and behavior; lesson four introduced and taught students the IPLAN method for how to communicate effectively in an IEP meeting. Lastly, lesson five taught students how to communicate effectively and share their learning needs in an IEP meeting (Ibid). Utilizing a CD-ROM allowed the students to work at their own paces and speeds. The study found that the CD-ROM intervention successfully improved the student’s self-advocacy skills since the number of quality contributions provided by the students in their IEP meetings increased .

Another intervention program used by a school system was the IPLAN strategy (Hammer, 2004). The IPLAN strategy was used in a Midwest self-contained classroom to increase student participation

in IEP conferences. The participants involved in the study all had been diagnosed with a learning disability. The IPLAN strategy focuses on identifying one's learning strengths, weaknesses, goals, and interests. Once the students' perception of their academic ability and goals were identified, the researchers provided the students with instruction on how to listen, respond to questions, ask questions, and identify and state their learning goals as well as their academic wants and needs. The participants in the study reported by Hammer also were taught the SHARE communication strategy to help them effectively communicate and participate in their IEP meetings. SHARE is an acronym which stands for S, sit up straight, H, have a pleasant tone of voice, A, activate your thinking, R, relax, and E, engage in eye contact. Students are taught the SHARE communication strategy to enable effective communication regarding their learning needs, express their learning goals for the upcoming school year, and ultimately be an active participant in their IEP meetings. Hammer explains that prior to attending the IEP meeting, students practice the SHARE strategy with their special educator and rehearse what they would like to share in the meeting regarding their learning needs. Hammer reports that through the use of both the IPLAN strategy and the SHARE communication strategy, the students' self-advocacy skills improved. This improvement was demonstrated through an increase in the students' participation in their IEP meetings.

School systems and researchers also have attempted to improve self-advocacy skills by using a portfolio approach and implementing mini workshops. Krebs (2002) used the portfolio approach to improve and teach self-advocacy skills to her students and to help ensure their success during the upcoming school year. Krebs explains that the students started the portfolio first by researching their specific vision impairments and then identifying their academic strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the students wrote their future teachers a letter about their disability, its impact on their learning, and provided their future teachers with lists of the accommodations and supports that have helped them to be successful. Krebs noted that the portfolio approach was helpful in that it enabled the students to gain a greater understanding of their disability as well as advocate for their learning needs to their future teacher.

One other successful strategy to improve student self-advocacy skills is the workshop approach. Researcher Pearl (2004) utilized the workshop approach to improve self-advocacy skills and increase knowledge and acceptance of students with learning disabilities. Participants in the workshop included both general education and special education students. The approach began with special educators and special education students collaborating to create a series of workshops with the goals of increasing acceptance of students with disabilities and informing general education students of the effect of a learning disability on their peers' ability to learn. The workshops first focused on creating an environment of acceptance and understanding between general education and special education students. The second session of the workshop was a simulation, which allowed general education students to experience what students with a learning disability experience when they are presented with academic tasks such as reading, writing, or spelling. The simulation helped the general education students to gain a greater understanding of their special education peers and helped to promote acceptance. Pearl found that special education students improved their self-advocacy skills and increased their willingness to advocate for themselves since there was a greater level of acceptance and understanding of their learning differences by their general education peers. The second workshop also helped teachers gain increased understanding of their students with learning disabilities. In particular, teachers became aware of what the students experienced as a learner. The final workshop session involved a discussion and reflection on the students' experiences in workshops one and two. The students were asked to reflect on their experiences in the workshops and share in writing what they had learned (Ibid).

Students' self-advocacy skills or lack thereof can affect their academic performance either positively or negatively, which is why it is necessary for all students to possess strong self-advocacy skills. Teaching self-advocacy skills helps students gain awareness and skills to overcome the challenges they experience in academic settings. Cohen (2014) suggests utilizing a role-playing approach to teach students self-advocacy skills. Role-playing allows the students to practice effectively communicating about their learning needs with their teachers. Many students recognize that

they need additional support, but are uncomfortable asking for the help they need. Cohen asserts that role-playing allows students to practice asking for help in a setting with no stress or pressure and renders them more confident and comfortable when they are confronted with academic situations that require them to advocate for themselves. Being able to effectively and successfully ask for help and advocate for oneself often makes the difference between a successful academic career and an academic career plagued by frustrations and poor academic performance.

Finally, Boston University offered a series of self-advocacy seminars to inform students about their rights as students with a learning disability, as well as how to effectively communicate with their professors about their learning needs and their desired accommodations. The seminars provided the students with the necessary tools to be successful in the classroom (Brinckerhoff, 1994).

### **Implications of Self-Advocacy Related to Development and Success**

Test and Neale (2004) suggest “providing opportunities for younger students with disabilities to practice and demonstrate self-determination skills, may guarantee greater levels of success as they grow and meet the challenges of adulthood” (p. 136). They suggest that if students were taught self-advocacy and self-determination skills earlier in their schooling, secondary schools and colleges would not have to provide such intense and extensive programs to help students gain the self-advocacy skills they need to be successful in school.

Test, et al. (2005) recommend improving and teaching self-advocacy skills through a series of steps or components. The authors suggest that, as a first step, students focus on themselves, specifically their academic strengths, preferences, goals, and identifying the supports they need to be successful. In addition to recognizing and realizing their own learning preferences and needs, the authors suggest that during step one the students learn their rights as students with a disability. This involves understanding to what they are entitled with regard to accommodations, their rights in the community and school system, as well as how to address situations which violate their rights as a person with a disability. Once the students are aware of their rights and learning strengths and weaknesses, the next step is instructing the students regarding how to communicate their needs effectively. This step involves



helping students learn how to be assertive and ask for the help they desire as well as how to listen and use assistive technologies. The last step recommended by the authors is for the students to assume a leadership role. Assuming a leadership role allows the students to apply their self-advocacy skills to help others. Test, et al. suggest that students who become leaders within their IEP meetings ultimately might become leaders in the community to help advocate for others.

### **Effect of Self-Advocacy Skills in Non-Academic Settings**

Strong self-advocacy skills are necessary for success in both academic and non-academic settings. Students often face challenging situations in academic settings, which is why self-advocacy skills are emphasized and taught in an academic setting. However, students who experience challenging situations in school likely will experience them outside of school as well. According to Cohen (2014) self-advocacy skills can be applied to both academic and non-academic situations to help students overcome the challenges they are experiencing. The author states that self-advocacy skills can enable students to express their needs in a polite manner while also leading the students “down the path to independence with the ability to achieve their goals and fulfill their potential” (p. 14). Students with self-advocacy skills will gain confidence and independence from using them in non-academic settings, including collegiate or workplace environments.

Cone (2000) examined self-advocacy skills in a group setting and the impact of the self-advocacy group on those who attended the group. Self-advocacy skills were taught in a group setting. The instruction was designed to teach group members, many of whom possessed a cognitive disability, about their rights and responsibilities, training opportunities in the community and to help members gain additional skills which were needed to lead semi-independent lives. According to Cone, the self-advocacy group provided members necessary skills to be successful and lead semi-independent lives as well as offering a supportive community to help members process and identify solutions to challenging situations the members’ experiences in their daily lives. Leading an independent life and being able to overcome challenging situations experienced within one’s daily life are important goals of many individuals regardless of their ability level. Possessing strong self-advocacy skills helps many people

achieve the goal of an independent life.

### **Conclusion**

Self-advocacy is an essential life skill that can enhance success in both academic and non-academic settings. Despite the importance of the skill many people do not learn how to advocate for themselves until they are in a difficult situation which forces them to be a self-advocate. Self-advocacy skills are especially important for those who require additional assistance to be successful; therefore, it would be beneficial to teach self-advocacy skills throughout a person's life, beginning early in a child's schooling before or as they begin to face such challenges. School systems throughout the United States are in a position to teach self-advocacy to empower all students to learn and achieve success and to prepare them more effectively for life after high school.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether instruction on self-advocacy would be associated with increases or differences in special education and general education students' familiarity with or willingness to use self-advocacy after a series of mini-lessons on its potential benefits.

#### **Design**

The study followed a pre-experimental design. The independent variable of the study was the direct instruction offered through three mini-lessons regarding self-advocacy. The dependent variable was the participants' self-reported likelihood of self-advocating by asking for help or accommodations after the mini-lessons. Data were collected via interviews and surveys and summarized to learn more about participants' knowledge of their accommodations, the concept of self-advocacy, and their comfort with asking for help.

#### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 15 students (five girls and 10 boys) receiving special education services and 12 students (six girls and six boys) enrolled in general education, each of whom were enrolled in one of the researcher's two 10<sup>th</sup> grade World History courses. Of the special education students participating in this study, five were diagnosed with a learning disability, two with autism, one with multiple disabilities, one with a severe hearing impairment, and six with other health impairment.

#### **Instruments**

Three instruments were developed by the researcher and used to collect data for this study. These were designed to address topics of interest and ideas from the literature review. Descriptions of each follow.

#### **Pre-survey/Interview**

Initially, a brief pre-survey/interview regarding accommodations (see Appendix A) was administered to some of the students who received special education services during the inventory interview portion of the study to collect data regarding their familiarity with self-advocacy and the

accommodations to which they were entitled. (General education students were not administered this pre-intervention interview because they were not entitled to any accommodations since they did not have an IEP.) Despite incentives, only four of the invited 15 special education students opted to participate in this voluntary pre-survey/ interview

All 27 participating students were administered parallel surveys about self-advocacy via Survey Monkey before and after the mini-lessons were conducted. These surveys were administered using laptops during class and copies of the surveys are located in Appendix B. Only the researcher was able to access the students' answers; therefore, the students' responses were anonymous. The pre-and post intervention survey asked the students a series of questions about self-advocacy, why they may not ask for help, their comfort level with asking for help, as well as the type of help they most often requested.

### **Final Survey**

A final survey, a copy of which is located in Appendix C, was administered on paper to both the special and general education students in the classes at the conclusion of the self-advocacy mini-lessons. This survey contained questions about when and how students self-advocated. Responses to these questions provided information about the willingness of the general and special education participants to ask for help or to use their specific accommodations after the mini-lessons.

### **Procedures**

This study was comprised of three distinct phases: pre-intervention data collection, the mini-lessons, and post-intervention data collection. Descriptions of these follow.

#### **Phase One:**

##### **Pre-Lesson Survey/Interview for Special Education Student Participants.**

Before the mini-lessons intervention was initiated, a Survey/Interview for Special Education Student Participants was completed individually during homeroom period by four of the 15 special education students who participated in the mini-lessons. These were completed during homeroom to maintain the students' privacy and encourage the students to speak openly and truthfully. (All of the special education participants were invited to complete this interview: however, despite an incentive of

doughnuts and being given a pass to attend a discussion session with the researcher, only four students opted to complete the pre-intervention survey.)

The pre-surveys were individualized and contained a list of each participating special education student's accommodations from his or her actual IEP which was reviewed with the researcher who, as noted, was the participants' World History teacher. The students were asked about why they had an IEP and to review the list of accommodations and tell which ones they used, how often, and when. The pre-survey also asked participating students to identify which of the listed accommodations they did not use and state why. The researcher asked each question and recorded the students' responses. As noted, general education student participants were not administered a pre-survey because they were not entitled to specific accommodations since they did not have IEPs. A copy of the Pre-Lesson Survey/Interview for Special Education Student Participants is located in Appendix A

### **Pre- Intervention Survey for all Students**

All participants, both general education and special education students, were then administered a Pre- Intervention Survey a copy of which is in Appendix B. This survey was completed via laptops during class using Survey Monkey. This pre-intervention survey contained a series of questions pertaining to self-advocacy, the type of help respondents preferred, reasons why they might not ask for help, and their comfort level related to self-advocacy. A copy of the pre-intervention survey is located in Appendix B. To ensure confidentiality, the students' responses to each question did not appear on the screen and were accessible only to the researcher at the conclusion of the survey. The results of the pre-survey were disaggregated so that group responses by special and general education students could be compared as seen in Chapter IV.

### **Phase Two:**

#### **Intervention: Mini-Lessons regarding Self-Advocacy.**

Phase two of the study involved providing a series of three mini-lessons on self-advocacy to the students. The mini-lessons were offered at the beginning of class either on Thursdays or Fridays and involved direct instruction on understanding self-advocacy and particularly, how to advocate

successfully for oneself in the classroom. A description of the lessons follows.

### *Mini-lesson One*

Mini-lesson one focused on the meaning and importance of self-advocacy and how students can advocate for themselves both in and outside of the classroom. The mini-lesson began with students brainstorming about the definition or meaning of self-advocacy and why self-advocacy is important. After brainstorming, the students recorded the definition of self-advocacy and as a class, created a list of reasons stating why self-advocacy is important. The mini-lesson concluded with students investigating how they can advocate for themselves both in and outside of the classroom. This portion of the lesson began with the teacher presenting two scenarios read aloud to the students and then asking the class how the student in the scenario could advocate for himself or herself in the academic and non-academic situations presented. After the initial scenarios, students wrote academic scenarios in which the subjects were placed in situations that would require them to self-advocate.

### *Mini-lesson Two*

Mini-lesson two focused on self-advocacy in an academic setting. During mini-lesson two the students were asked to identify their academic strengths and academic weaknesses and then identify an academic situation which would be difficult for them. Prior to identifying an academic situation which would be difficult for them, the students first examined two scenarios presented. Each scenario presented a student experiencing an academic challenge. After reading the scenario the students were asked to identify an accommodation or type of help that would help alleviate the challenge presented in each scenario. Scenario one was investigated as a class and scenario two was investigated independently by the students, and then discussed by the class. After investigating two self-advocacy scenarios the students were tasked to identify or create an academic situation which would be difficult for them. After identifying the situation, the students then identified accommodations or types of help that would help them overcome the difficulty presented in their situation. This served as a model for the students as well as providing clear expectations of what the students were expected to accomplish. The students were given the opportunity to share their own difficult academic situations and how they

would overcome these difficulties with the class. After hearing their peers' situations, the class was provided the opportunity to share additional suggestions for how the student could overcome the difficult academic situation presented.

### *Mini- lesson Three*

Mini-lesson three covered how to ask for help and advocate for oneself in an academic setting. The lesson began with the students discussing as a class how they ask for help or accommodations in their classrooms. The researcher recorded students' answers as they were shared with the class. Next, the class created a concise list of techniques the students could use to ask for help effectively in the classroom. The students recorded this list in their journals. The goal of sharing a wide variety of strategies was that all students, regardless of their personality or demeanor, would feel comfortable asking for their accommodations or help. The last part of the mini-lesson involved presenting the students with various scenarios involving both academic and non-academic settings. The students were asked to read the scenarios and identify how the student in each assigned scenario could advocate for him or herself and ask the teacher for help or accommodations. The first scenario was completed as a class. Next, during class, the students completed each additional scenario independently, after which these scenarios were reviewed and discussed by the class. The purpose of this portion of the mini-lesson was to model for the students how they could ask for help in various situations they may encounter while at school.

Prior to beginning mini-lessons two and three, the students reviewed the term self-advocacy and the class briefly discussed why self-advocacy is important. The students kept all of their mini-lesson classwork sheets in their World History journals, which remain in the classroom.

### **Phase Three:**

#### **Post- Intervention Surveys**

At the conclusion of the three mini-lessons regarding self-advocacy, the students were re-administered the survey in Appendix B on Survey Monkey during their World History class time. Students also completed the survey which is located in Appendix C using the traditional pencil and

paper method of responding. The final survey asked the student participants about their comfort level with advocating for themselves in each of their individual classes and what type of help they most likely were to request in each of their classes. Unlike the Survey Monkey surveys, this final survey included a distinction between answers submitted by general education and special education students. The survey required the students to define self-advocacy, state why self-advocacy is important, and to rate how likely they were to ask for help in their classes after having received instruction on self-advocacy. The survey also asked about what kind of help or accommodations the students were likely were to request.

### **Data Summarization**

The results of the pre- and post-intervention surveys were tabulated in summary form and compared to determine whether the students, as a group, increased their knowledge of self-advocacy or willingness to advocate for themselves or ask for help or specific accommodations when experiencing difficult academic situations. Individual responses were not available from the surveys administered using Survey Monkey for this study.

Results are described in Chapter IV and a discussion about the results and related findings follows in Chapter V.



## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether instruction on self-advocacy would be associated with increases in special education and regular education students' familiarity with self-advocacy and to determine whether there would be a difference in their willingness to advocate for themselves by asking for help or access to their specific individualized education plan (IEP) accommodations.

#### **Results of Pre-Intervention Interviews with Special Education Students**

Four 10<sup>th</sup> grade students in the sample with IEPs were interviewed prior the intervention to identify why they thought they had an IEP and to investigate their familiarity with the accommodations to which each was entitled. Students were asked to identify which of these accommodations they used and how often and when they used them. The researcher made note of accommodations to which these students were entitled but of which they appeared unaware during the interview. Lastly, these four students were asked if there were any additional accommodations they would like to have but were not entitled to receive at the time of the interview. Each of these four students attended all three informational mini-lessons about self-advocacy.

Of these students, three were male and one was female, two had educational diagnoses of Other Health Impairment, one had an educational diagnosis of Specific Language Disability (SLD), and one had an educational diagnosis of Autism. Only the student with an IEP for Autism was aware of what her IEP intended to address ("social skills"). Two of the students indicated they did not know what their IEP was for and one was unsure about whether or not he even had an IEP.

Of the three students who were aware of their IEPs, only one was aware of and knowledgeable of her IEP accommodations. The first student interviewed was aware of 44% (four out of nine) of the accommodations to which he was entitled. The second student interviewed was unsure as to whether or not he had an IEP; therefore, the researcher was unable to ask him questions pertaining to his accommodations. The third student interviewed was aware of only 37% (three out of eight) of the

accommodations to which he was entitled. The fourth student interviewed was the most knowledgeable about the purpose of her IEP and her accommodations and was aware of and knowledgeable about all four accommodations to which she was entitled. Overall, the four special education students interviewed indicated they did not feel they would like more or other accommodations and, in fact, did not use some of the ones which they were afforded on their IEPs.

### **Data Regarding Mini-lessons**

#### **Attendance**

As seen in Table 1, attendance at the sessions was positive. 25 participants attended lesson one, 22 participants attended lesson two, and all 27 participants attended lesson three.

#### **Attendance at the Sessions**

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics Regarding Mini-lesson Attendance*

| <b>Mini-lesson</b> | <b>N</b> | <b>Percent in Attendance</b> | <b>S.D.</b> |
|--------------------|----------|------------------------------|-------------|
| 1                  | 27       | .9269                        | .267        |
| 2                  | 27       | .815                         | .396        |
| 3                  | 27       | 1.00                         | 0           |

### **Pre- and Post-Intervention Survey Results**

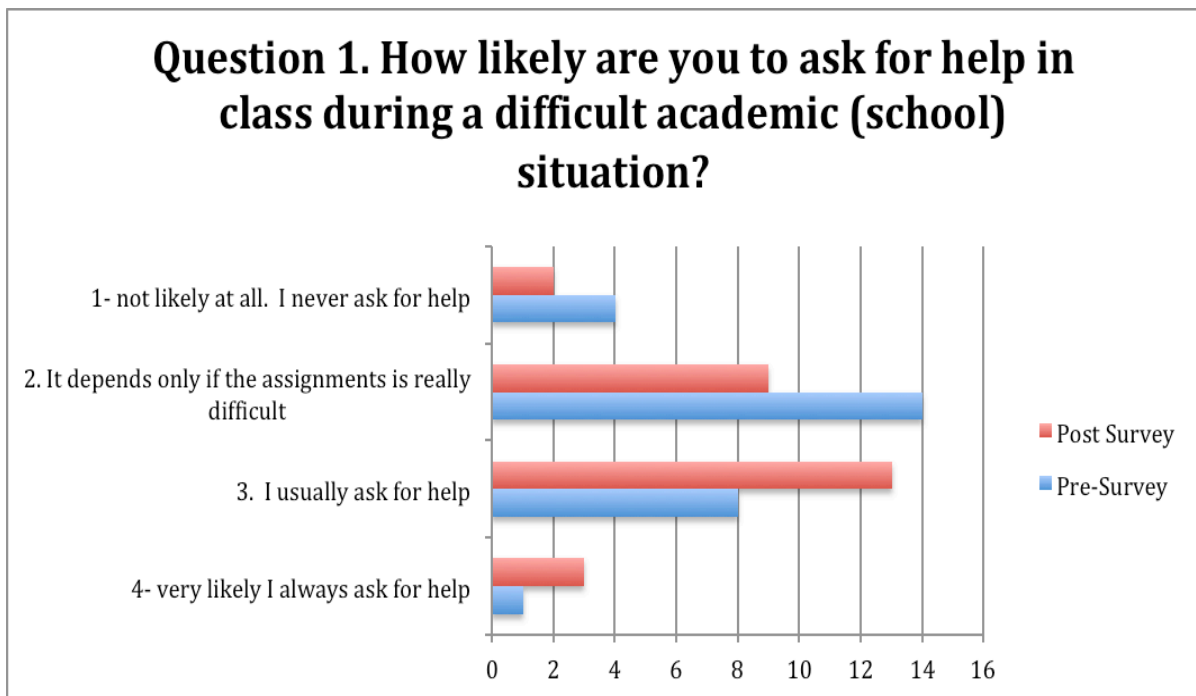
Both general and special education student participants completed identical surveys before and after the mini-lessons. Summaries of their responses to both surveys, aggregated for all respondents, follow. The data first appear in tabular form, aggregated for all respondents, and then in bar graphs which allow for comparison of the mean responses of the general and special education students.

Table 2

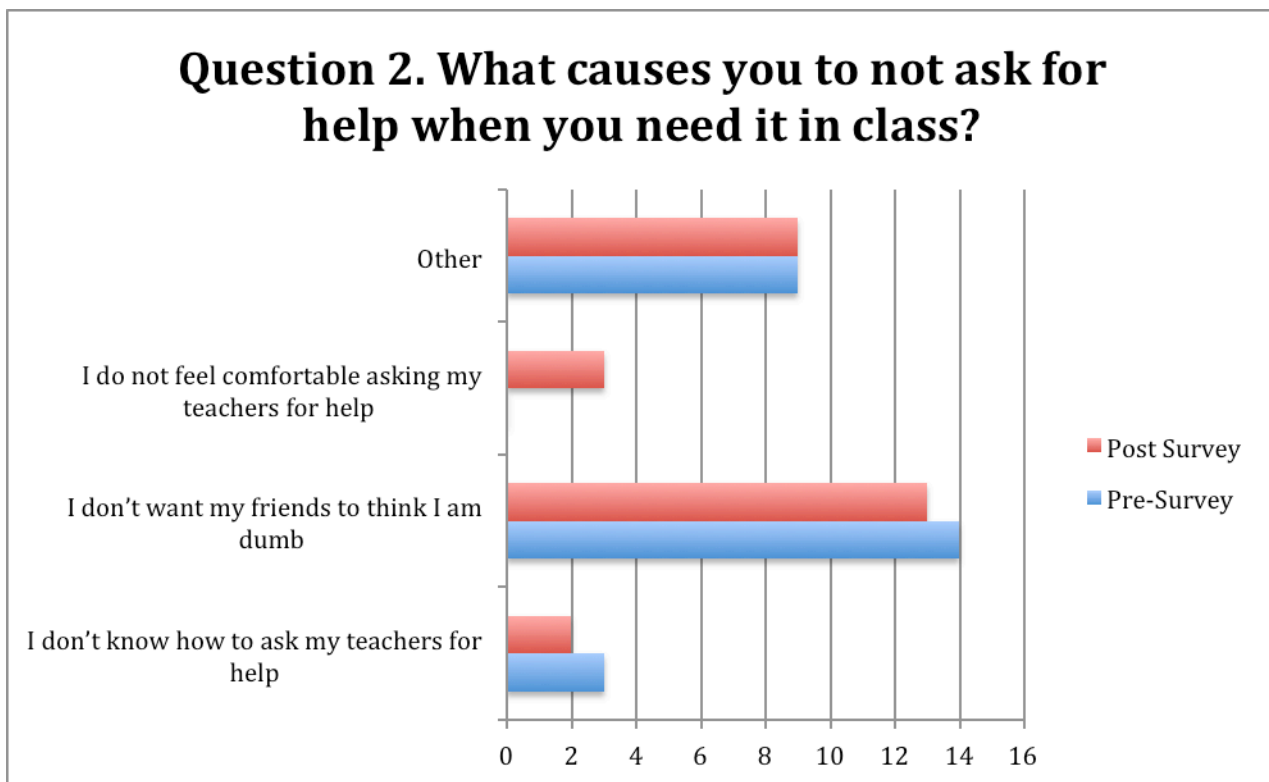
*Results of Pre- and Post-Intervention Surveys (Aggregated data from all participants)*

| ITEM  | Pre-Intervention Survey    | Post-Intervention Survey   |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>1. How likely are you to ask for help in class during a difficult academic (school) situation?</b> | <b>Number of responses</b> | <b>Number of responses</b> |
| 4- Very likely. I always ask for help   | <b>1</b>                   | <b>3</b>                   |
| 3. I usually ask for help   | <b>8</b>                   | <b>13</b>                  |
| 2. It depends only if the assignments is really difficult   | <b>14</b>                  | <b>9</b>                   |
| 1- not likely at all. I never ask for help  | <b>4</b>                   | <b>2</b>                   |

The mean responses to item 1 increased from a rating of 2.222 to 2.630 from the pre-to post-intervention administration for the aggregated sample.

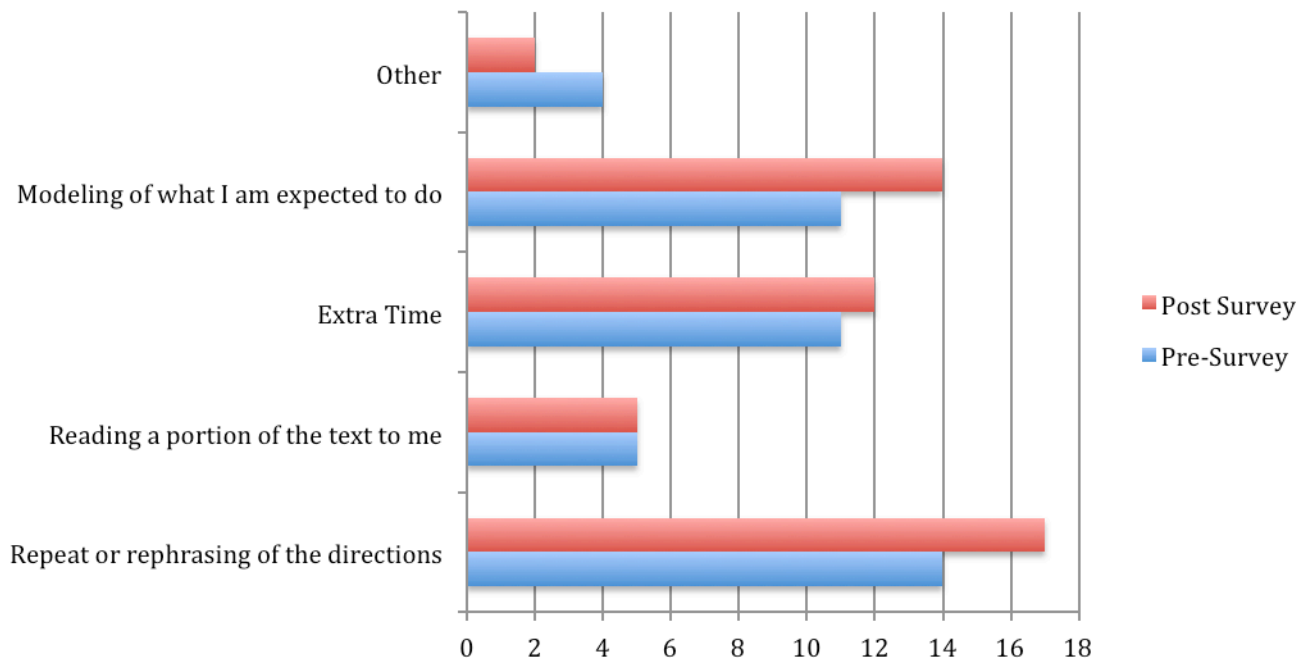


| ITEM   | Pre-Intervention Survey  | Post-Intervention Survey  |
|--|--|---|
| <b>2. What causes you to not ask for help when you need it in class?</b>                                   | <b>Number of Responses</b>   | <b>Number of Responses</b>  |
| a. I don't know how to ask my teachers for help  | <b>3</b>   | <b>2</b>  |
| b. I don't want my friends to think I am dumb  | <b>14</b>  | <b>13</b>   |
| c. I do not feel comfortable asking my teachers for help   | <b>0</b>   | <b>3</b>  |
| d. Other<br>Students will be given the option to provide a text response when they select the option other | <b>9</b><br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ego or pride= 1 student</li> <li>• Too lazy, confused = 1 student</li> <li>• When I need extra time= 1 student nothing = 1 students</li> <li>• I want to figure it out myself= 3 students</li> <li>Too shy= 2 students</li> </ul> | <b>9</b><br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ego or pride= 2 student</li> <li>• Nothing = 2 students</li> <li>• Too lazy= 1 student</li> <li>• Classes are boring, = 1 student</li> <li>• The teacher's reaction = 1 student</li> <li>• When I need extra time= 1 student</li> <li>• I try to do my best = 1 student</li> </ul> |

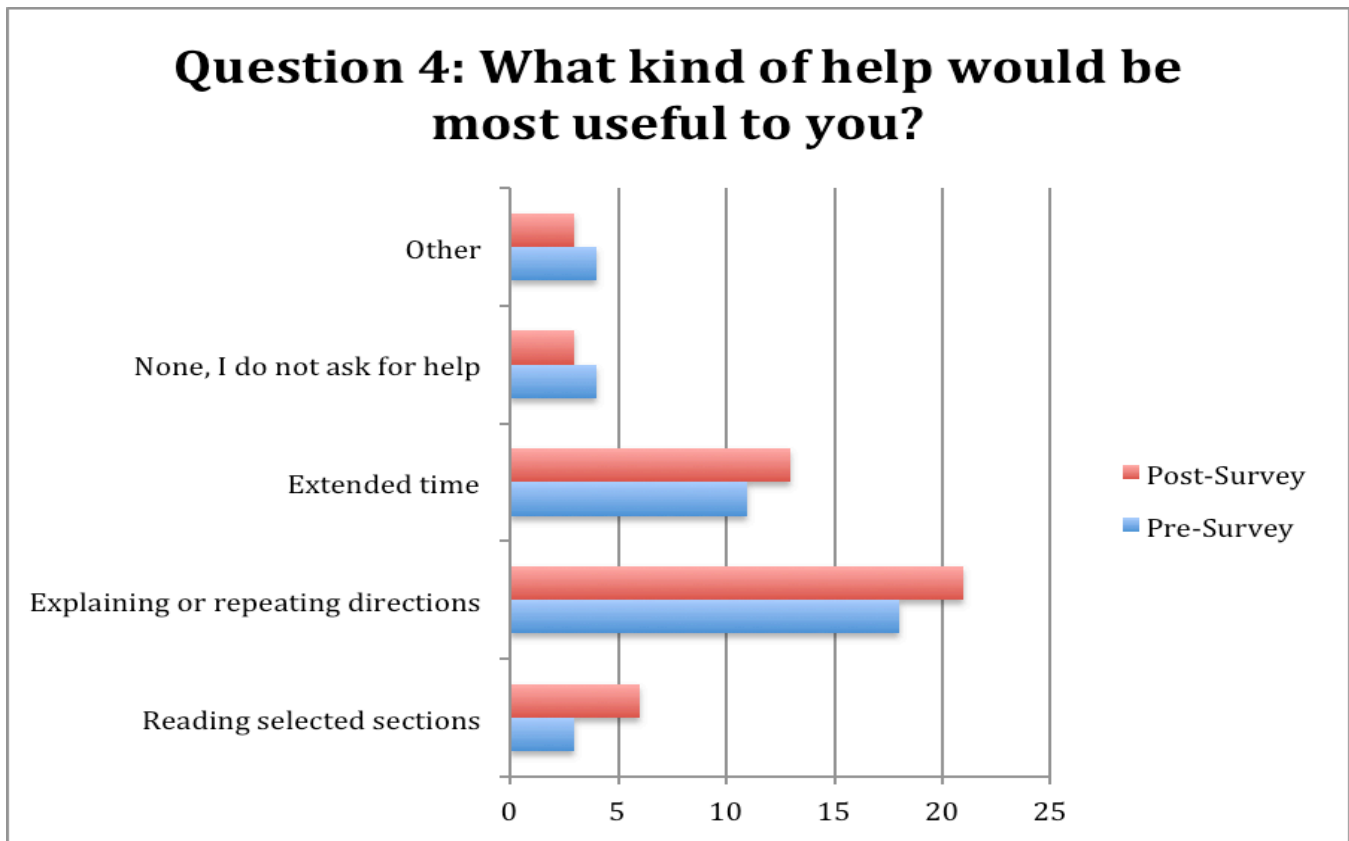


| ITEM  | Pre-Intervention Survey   | Post-Intervention Survey   |
|---|---|--|
| <b>3. What kind of help DO you ask for?</b> | <b>Number of Responses</b>  | <b>Number of Responses</b>   |
| a. Repeat or rephrasing of the directions   | <b>14</b>   | <b>17</b>  |
| b. Reading a portion of the text to me      | <b>5</b>  | <b>5</b>   |
| c. Extra Time                               | <b>11</b>   | <b>12</b>  |
| d. Modeling of what I am expected to do     | <b>11</b>   | <b>14</b>  |
| e. Other                                    | <b>4</b>  | <b>2</b>   |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Response: I ask how something works = 1 student</li> <li>• Student Response: Need help only in certain classes = 1 student</li> <li>• Student Response: Might not know what to do = 1 student</li> <li>• Student Response: Help to do my work the right way = 1 student</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examples Only if it's too difficult = 2 students</li> </ul> |
| f. None                                     | <b>6</b>  | <b>4</b>   |

### Question 3. What kind of help DO you ask for?

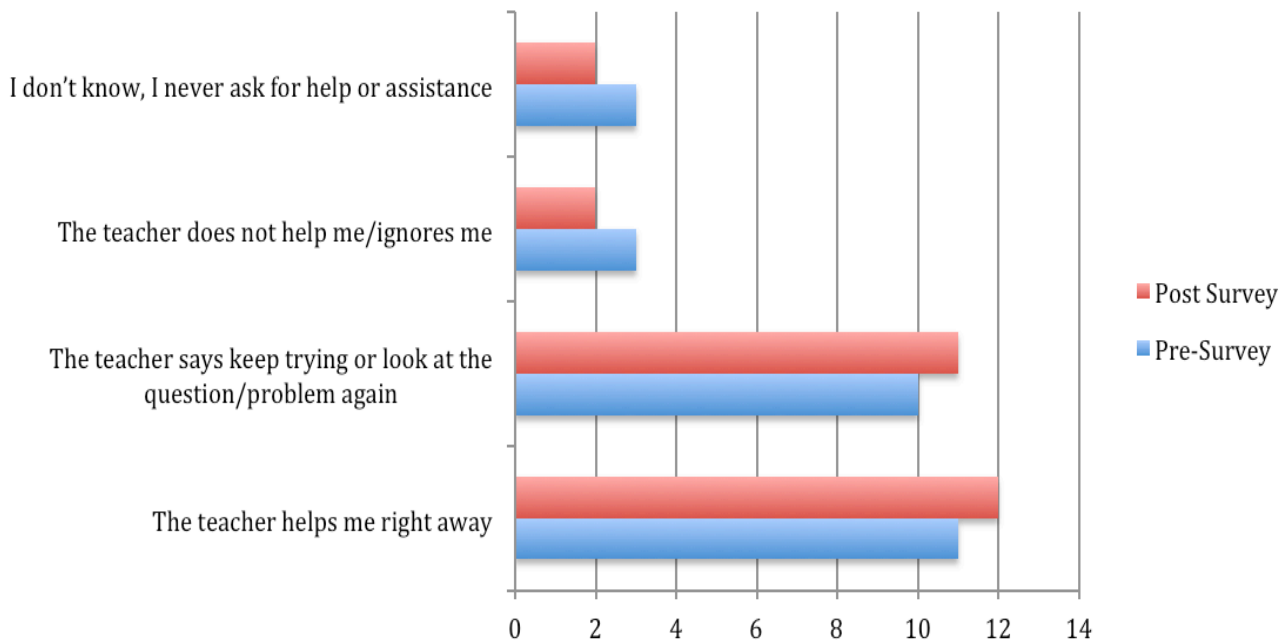


| ITEM   | Pre-Intervention Survey    | Post-Intervention Survey  |
|--|----------------------------|---|
| <p><b>4. What kind of help would be most useful to you?</b></p> <p>Students were allowed to submit multiple activities, which is why this column does not total 27. 27 is the number of participants in the study.</p> | <b>Number of Responses</b> | <b>Number of Responses</b>  |
| a. Reading selected sections   | 3                          | 6   |
| b. Explaining or repeating directions  | 18                         | 21  |
| c. Extended time   | 11                         | 13  |
| d. None, I do not ask for help   | 4                          | 3   |
| e. Other   | 4                          | <p>3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examples-=2 students</li> <li>• Group Work = 1 student</li> </ul> |

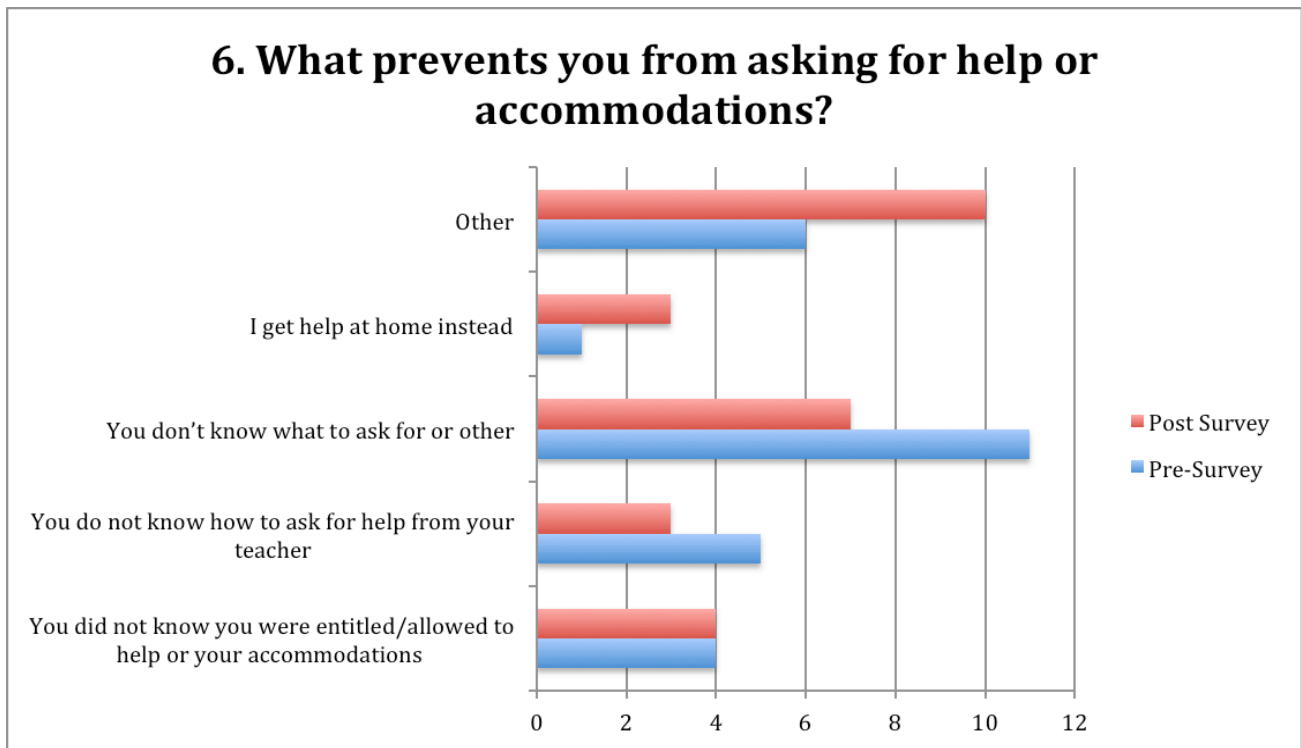


| ITEM   | Pre-Intervention Survey            | Post-Intervention Survey           |
|--|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>5. In your experience in high school how do teachers typically react when you ask for help when you are having difficulty with classwork?</b> | <b>Number of Student Responses</b> | <b>Number of Student Responses</b> |
| a. The teacher helps me right away   | 11                                 | 12                                 |
| b. The teacher says keep trying or look at the question/problem again  | 10                                 | 11                                 |
| c. The teacher does not help me/ignores me   | 3                                  | 2                                  |
| d. I don't know, I never ask for help or assistance  | 3                                  | 2                                  |

### Question 5. In your experience in high school how do teachers typically react when you ask for help when you are having difficulty with classwork?

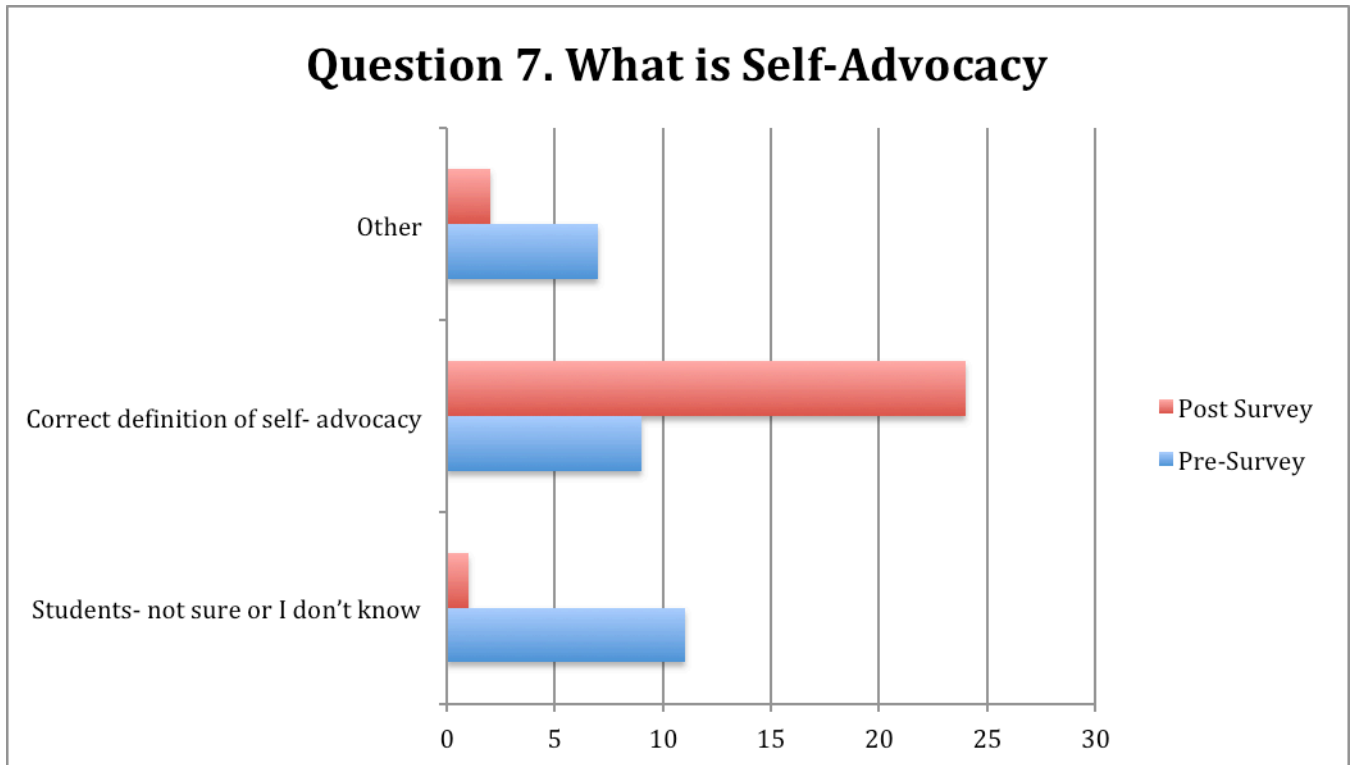


| ITEM  | Pre-Intervention Survey   | Post-Intervention Survey  |
|---|---|---|
| <b>6. What prevents you from asking for help or accommodations?</b>                                       | <b>Number of Student Responses</b>  | <b>Number of Student Responses</b>  |
| a. You did not know you were entitled/allowed to help or your accommodations                              | 4   | 4   |
| b. You do not know how to ask for help from your teacher  | 5   | 3   |
| c. You don't know what to ask for or other  | 11  | 7   |
| d. I get help at home instead   | 1   | 3   |
| e. Other - Students will be given the option to provide a text response when they select the option other | 6<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People staring at me = 1 student</li> <li>• Nothing = 1 student</li> <li>• Embarrassment = 1 student</li> <li>• I am confused = 1 student</li> <li>• I don't ask for help = 1 student</li> </ul> I don't like asking for help = 1 student | 10<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer reactions (4 students)</li> <li>• Teacher's reactions- ignoring me, or not helping (3 students)</li> <li>• I don't feel comfortable asking for help (2 students)</li> </ul> Thinking I can solve the problem without help (1 student) |

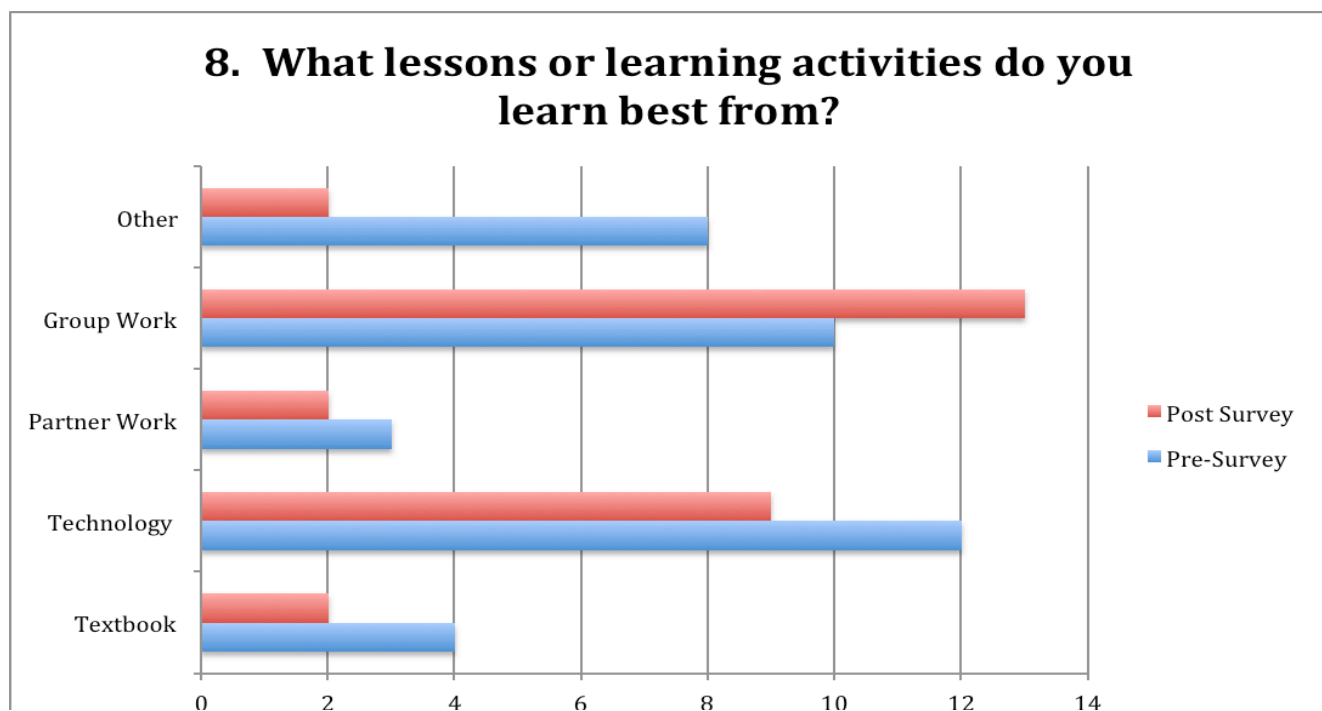




| ITEM  | Pre-Intervention Survey  | Post-Intervention Survey  |
|---|--|---|
| <b>7. What is self-advocacy?</b>            | <b>Number of Student Responses</b>   | <b>Number of Student Responses</b>  |
| <b>Students- not sure or I don't know</b>   | <b>11</b>  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Correct definition of self- advocacy</b> | <b>9</b>   | <b>24</b>   |
| <b>Other</b>                                | <b>7</b>   | <b>2</b>  |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working by yourself = 1 student</li> <li>• When someone has something they like or what they think = 1 student</li> <li>• Stating your views = 1 student</li> <li>• Self respect/awareness = 1 student</li> <li>• How a person feels about themselves that only they think = 1 student</li> <li>• Backing yourself up = 1 student</li> <li>• Having Confidence = 1 student</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self Confidence = 1 student</li> <li>• Self Respect = 1 student</li> </ul> |



| ITEM  | Pre-Intervention Survey   | Post-Intervention Survey   |
|---|---|--|
| <p><b>8. What lessons or learning activities do you learn best from?</b></p> <p>Students were allowed to submit multiple activities, which is why this column does not total 27. 27 is the number of participants in the study.</p> | Number of Student Responses   | Number of Student Responses  |
| Textbook  | 4   | 2  |
| Technology  | 12  | 9  |
| Partner Work  | 3   | 2  |
| Group Work  | 10  | 13   |
| Other   | <p>8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lecture = 1 Student</li> <li>• Note taking = 1 Student</li> <li>• History = 1 Student</li> <li>• Real life examples/stories = 1 Student</li> <li>• Visuals = 1 Student</li> <li>• Games = 1 Student</li> <li>• Individual work<br/>Hands on work = 1 Student</li> </ul> | <p>2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lecture = 1 Student</li> <li>• Movement = 1 Student</li> </ul> |



The pre- and post- intervention survey results suggest that after the mini-lesson series on self-advocacy, participants were more knowledgeable about what self-advocacy is and when and how to employ it. Initially, only nine-participants were able to define the term self-advocacy correctly, but after the mini-lesson series, 24 participants were able to define the term correctly. The change in results from the pre- to post- assessment suggests that the mini-lesson series helped the student participants recognize and define self-advocacy. Responses also indicated that the participants were more willing to ask for help and be self-advocates following the mini-lesson series. Prior to the intervention, only nine participants stated that they “always” or “usually” were likely to ask for help and four participants indicated they were “not” willing to ask for help at school. After the intervention, 16 participants stated that they were either “always” or “likely” to ask for help and only two participants indicated they were “not” willing to ask for help. The survey results also indicated that after the mini-lessons, fewer participants stated that their reasons for not asking for help were due to not knowing how or what to ask for, suggesting that the lessons did increase their knowledge about self-advocacy positively.

The post survey data provided useful data for understanding the students’ knowledge of self-advocacy, the students’ likelihood to ask for help in each of their high school courses, as well as the type of help they were most likely to request.

### **Final Survey Results (all participants)**

A t-test of independent samples was conducted to compare the general and special education students’ mean responses to Item 3 on the survey in Appendix C, which asked: “After having learned about self-advocacy, how likely are you to ask for help or accommodations in your classes?” Possible responses ranged from one: “a lot less” to five: “a lot more” likely. Disaggregated descriptive statistics and the t-test results follow in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics for Responses to Item 3 on Appendix C for Students with and without IEPs*

| <b>Responses to Item 3 on Final Survey (Appendix C)</b><br><br><i>After having learned about self-advocacy, how likely are you to ask for help or accommodations in your classes?</i> | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>S.D.</b> | <b>SEM</b> |
|---|----------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| Students with IEPs  | 14       | 3.929       | 1.072       | .286       |
| General Education Students  | 11       | 3.727       | .647        | .194       |

The results of the t-test for independent samples comparing the groups' mean responses to Item 3 follow in Table 3. They showed that the mean difference of .201 between the groups' means of 3.929 and 3.727 yielded a T value of .548 with a significance value of  $p < .589$ . Since this difference was not large enough to meet criteria for statistical significance at the .05 level, the null hypothesis that the likelihood of asking for help would not differ between the two groups after the mini-lessons was retained.

Table 4

*Results of t-test Comparing Mean Responses to Item 3 on Final Survey for Students with and without IEPs*

| <b>T</b>    | <b>df</b> | <b>Sig. (2-tailed) (p value)</b> | <b>Mean Difference</b> | <b>Std. Error Difference</b> | <b>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</b> |              |
|-------------|-----------|----------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|--|--------------|
|             |           |                                  |                        |                              | <b>Lower</b>                                     | <b>Upper</b> |
| <b>.548</b> | <b>23</b> | <b>.589</b>                      | <b>.201</b>            | <b>.367</b>                  | <b>-.558</b>                                     | <b>.961</b>  |

*Equal variances assumed*

In comparing the data collected from the pre- and post-mini-lesson surveys, it was noted that the participants were able to define self-advocacy more effectively after the lessons. The data also indicated that the participants were slightly more likely to advocate for themselves and ask for help after having received information and instruction on self-advocacy. As noted in Table 4, there was not

a significant difference in this likelihood between special and general education students. These results, along with observations are discussed in Chapter V.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether instruction on self-advocacy would be associated with increases in special education and regular education students' familiarity with self-advocacy and to determine whether there would be a difference in their willingness to advocate for themselves by asking for help or access to their specific individualized education plan (IEP) accommodations.

#### **Implications of the Study**

The null hypothesis, that special and regular education students would not exhibit a significant difference in how likely they were to ask for help or their accommodations in their classes after participating in a series of mini-lessons regarding self-advocacy, was retained. However, survey results indicated that after the mini-lessons, participants became more knowledgeable of self-advocacy and were slightly more likely to ask for help. 16 out of 27 participants indicated on the post-survey that they were very likely or usually willing to ask for help after having learned about self-advocacy. Prior to the mini-lesson series about self-advocacy, only seven participants indicated that they were very likely or usually willing to ask for help. Post-intervention survey results also revealed that only two participants stated that they would not ask for help at all after the mini-lessons, compared to four who indicated that they would not ask for help at all on the pre-survey. This decrease in the number of participants who stated that they would not ask for help at all and the increase in the number of participants who stated they were very likely or usually likely willing to ask for help indicates an increase students' willingness to use their self-advocacy skills which may be attributable to the self-advocacy mini-lesson intervention.

Data regarding the reasons why students' do not ask for help or their accommodations were also reviewed. Mini-lesson three instructed students how to ask for help, since the researcher suspected that participants' inability or unwillingness to do so could be what prevented them from self-advocating or asking for help. This suspicion was confirmed by the pre-survey results, which indicated that the

students did not ask for help because they did not know how, did not know what type or kind of help to ask for, and because they did not want their friends to think they were “dumb”. After participating in the mini-lesson series, five fewer participants indicated on the post-survey that these three reasons were what prevented them from asking for help.

In addition to data regarding self-advocacy, this study provided information about the participants’ learning preferences and most useful and most often requested accommodations and or types of help. Post-survey results indicated that the majority of participants found explaining or repeating directions and extended time to be the most useful types of help or accommodations. The results also indicated that the majority of participants most often asked for the following types of accommodation or help: extended time, repeating or re-phrasing directions, and modeling what they are expected to do on given assignments. With regard to learning preferences, the majority of participants indicated on the post-survey that they learn best from lessons or activities containing group work and using technology.

## **Theoretical Consequences**

### **Understanding Self-Advocacy**

The findings of this study indicated that students are not fully knowledgeable of the term self-advocacy or its meaning. The results also indicate that not knowing how to ask for help, not knowing what type of help to ask for, and the possibility of feeling or being perceived as dumb likely are reasons why students do not ask for help when it is needed. Based on the responses and results, it may be beneficial for schools to implement self-advocacy instruction to younger students and provide additional reinforcement instruction regarding self-advocacy to students throughout their academic careers. All participants in the study were in 10th grade; hence, nearly completing their secondary education careers. Despite this, many were unable to define self-advocacy and they cited not knowing how to ask for help and or what type of help to ask for as reasons why they did not ask for needed help or advocate for themselves. This lack of knowledge may affect the learning and motivation of students. If students were taught what self-advocacy is and why it is important, as well as how to ask for help and what type of help to ask for early on and throughout their academic careers, they might be more

comfortable seeking and obtaining help. Consequently, they might learn more effectively, develop self-confidence, and establish positive relationships with teachers in the process.

### **Lesson and Activity Preferences**

In addition to providing data on self-advocacy, the study also provided data as to the type of activities/lessons from which students feel they learn best. This information can be very useful to educators as they design instruction for students. The data from the post-survey results suggested that students believe they learn best when lessons or activities contain technology or group work. Educators can design instruction with such preferences in mind to increase engagement and student learning.

### **Self-Advocacy and Preferences Related to Help**

Participants also provided information about the type of help they most often do request and find useful. The data revealed that the majority of participants, whether they were general education or special education students, requested and found extended time and repeating or re-explaining directions to be most useful when they needed help. Participants also indicated that modeling what is expected of them was a type of help they often request. This information could be valuable to educators as they design and develop lessons. By creating lessons that include the above-mentioned supports and designing lessons that are flexible with regard to time, teachers would be able to accommodate students' requests for support without having to amend or eliminate content.

### **Threats to Validity**

Threats to the validity of the study included the fact that very few of the invited Special Education students completed the initial one on one pre-intervention interview. Additionally, the study contained a small sample which was not randomly assigned to treatment conditions, thus had few to no controls, and the main data point of comparison in the hypothesis was assessed with just one question which may have limited the reliability of the response.

The study began with a series of one-on-one interviews. The pre-intervention interview was intended to be completed with all 15 of the participants enrolled in special education; however, only four opted to complete it. The pre-intervention interviews were conducted during homeroom, before



school began, to maintain the students' privacy and encourage the students to speak openly and honestly about their IEPs. It may be that the 11 students who opted not to complete an interview decided to socialize with their peers or complete other assignments despite the food incentive offered to participants. The lack of participants in the pre-intervention interview likely affected the study's results because it limited the researcher's acquisition of information of the participant's knowledge about self-advocacy and their accommodations and their pattern of use or preferences regarding them.

A second threat to validity was the small overall sample size. The sample for this study consisted of 27 students who were enrolled in two classes within one school. If the study had been conducted with participants from a wider sample of classes and schools, the researcher may have gained a greater understanding of the students' knowledge of self-advocacy and willingness to ask for help/self-advocate, which could be more easily generalized to other students and schools. A larger sample also may have provided more accurate data as to the effectiveness of the self-advocacy mini-lesson series for a more diverse audience.

Finally, had the researcher had been able to identify each participants' answers in the Survey Monkey pre- and post-intervention surveys, a more thorough comparison of results from them might have been conducted. Such a comparison may have provided a clearer understanding of the effect of the mini-lesson series on each participant and each group's their self-advocacy skills.

### **Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature**

The current study connects to numerous prior studies pertaining to self-advocacy. The study contained a series of mini-lessons which utilized direct instruction and workshops or mini-lessons to teach self-advocacy to participants. Studies done by Test and Neale (2004), Van-Belle, Mark, Martin and Chun (2006), Hammer (2004), Brinckerhoff (1994) and Cease-Cook, Test and Scroggins (2013) all used direct instruction to teach about self-advocacy. Lessons in this study and the studies referenced were taught either through a teacher/instructor in a classroom or a CD-ROM computer program which directly instructed the students about self-advocacy.

In addition to each of the aforementioned studies utilizing a form of direct instruction, these studies also utilized a series of workshops or mini-lessons to instruct students on self-advocacy. Researchers Brinckerhoff (1994), Van-Belle, et al. (2006) used a series of workshops/mini-lessons to teach self-advocacy and researchers Test and Neale (2004), Cease-Cook, et al. (2013) all used a CD-ROM containing a series of lessons on self-advocacy to teach self-advocacy to students.

Regardless of the specific manner in which the material was delivered to the students, each of the aforementioned studies taught self-advocacy over the course of a series of lessons or workshops using direct instruction and all of the aforementioned studies indicated an increase in self-advocacy awareness among their participants. Results from the studies conducted by Cease-Cook, et al. (2013), Test and Neale (2004) and Hammer (2004) revealed an increase in the participants' use of self-advocacy skills as demonstrated in an increase in the participants' participation in their IEP meetings. Another study by Cohen (2014) also used scenarios and/or role-playing to teach students the importance of self-advocacy and how to ask for help and to teach students how to identify situations which require a person to be a self-advocate.

Lastly, the study was similar in terms of how the mini-lessons were implemented to the study done by Test, et al. (2005) which suggested that educators should begin teaching self-advocacy by conducting an inventory of students' strengths and weakness and then moving on to teaching communication and leadership skills. The current study began with a mini inventory of the students' strengths and weakness in mini-lesson one. The last mini-lesson in the series focused on communication; specifically, identifying methods or techniques to ask for help/be a self-advocate and participants brainstormed numerous ways to ask for help. The goal of this activity was to identify numerous ways of seeking assistance so that all students would be able to ask for help or assistance in a manner in which they felt most comfortable.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The findings of this study offer several implications for future research. The findings that few

participants knew what self-advocacy was prior to the mini-lesson series and that many students do not ask for help because they do not want to be embarrassed indicated that schools and school systems should provide instruction regarding the acceptability and importance of self-advocacy throughout a student's academic career, beginning in elementary school. Providing such instruction to all students may remove the stigma of asking for help or advocating for oneself, which hopefully would result in fewer students being reluctant to ask for needed help.

The study also revealed that there was no significant difference between special education and general education students' willingness or likelihood to ask for help or their accommodations after the mini-lessons. This finding was unexpected because special education students are entitled to accommodations. Therefore, it might be assumed that the special education students would be more comfortable asking for help or the accommodations to which they are entitled if they are not provided. Typically, the researcher has observed her special education students as seeming to assume that a teacher automatically will provide them with their accommodations when needed. However, some accommodations such as "read selected sections" can place the responsibility largely on the student to ask for the accommodations. Students may fail to ask for such accommodations and instead, simply attend entire classes wherein which they read and interact with texts or other course materials that are difficult for them to read and/or comprehend.

Future research could include an observational component to make the findings more useful and clear. In this study, an observation component could have occurred after the mini-lessons and the post intervention surveys were conducted. Researchers could observe students over the course of several class periods and record when and what types of help each student requests. These observations could be correlated with performance and task difficulty to determine if students requested help on work they found challenging and if their self-advocacy and/or the help or accommodation given actually improved their performance. This additional component would provide information about the success of the mini-lessons in terms of increasing or decreasing the student's willingness to self-advocate in his or her actual classes.

## **Conclusion**

Self-advocacy is an important skill for all students regardless of their academic ability level. Self-advocacy skills can be applied and benefit individuals in both academic and non-academic settings. Reviewing the literature and implementing this study has indicated that self-advocacy instruction needs to be infused throughout students' academic careers.

The participants in the study were eager to learn about self-advocacy and were very receptive to the content and activities in the mini-lesson series. They appeared to understand why being an advocate for oneself is important and provided very useful and practical answers regarding how people could be advocate for themselves when presented with scenarios during each mini-lesson. The findings and observations made in this action research suggest that teaching self-advocacy skills in elementary school and reinforcing their use throughout students' academic careers could help students more confidently ask for accommodations or help when needed, since doing so would be the norm at school. This, in turn, might benefit outcomes for both general and special education students.

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## Appendix A

### Pre-Lesson Survey for Special Education Student Participants

- What is the purpose of your IEP, why was it created?
  
- Aside from general instruction all students receive what types of activities help you learn the most and most easily?
  
- A list of the student's accommodations will be provided to them. The student will be asked to identify which accommodations they are aware of and how often and when they use their accommodations. The students will also be asked why they do not use or request the other accommodations they have not identified. I will possess a chart containing each student's accommodations so that I can easily make write down the students' responses to how often they use the specific accommodations or why they do not use their specific accommodations.
  - The students will not be initially told that all the accommodations on the list are their accommodations. The accommodation list will be initially presented to the students, as "here is a list of accommodations" identify the accommodations are you entitled to, and which accommodations do and do not use? I will tally the number of accommodations the students did not identify, as accommodations they are entitled were unaware of. I will inform the students that all the accommodations presented on the list are their accommodations.
  
- Would you like additional accommodations and if so what accommodations do you wish you had?

## APPENDIX B

### Pre- and Post- Intervention for all Students (administered via Survey Monkey)

1. How likely are you to ask for help in class during a difficult academic (school) situation?
  - 4- very likely I always ask for help
  3. I usually ask for help
  2. It depends only if the assignments is really difficult
  - 1- Not likely at all. I never ask for help
  
2. What causes you to not ask for help when you need it in class?
  - a. I don't know how to ask my teachers for help
  - b. I don't want my friends to think I am dumb
  - c. I do not feel comfortable asking my teachers for help
  - d. Other
    - i. Students will be given the option to provide a text response when they select the option other
  
3. What kind of help DO you ask for?
  - a. Repeat or rephrasing of the directions
  - b. Reading a portion of the text to me
  - c. Extra time
  - d. Modeling of what I am expected to do
  - e. Other
    - a. Students will be given the option to provide a text response when they select the option other
  - f. None
  
4. What kind of help would be most useful to you?
  - a. Reading selected sections
  - b. Explaining or repeating directions again
  - c. Extended time
  - d. Other
    - a. Students will be given the option to provide a text response when they select the option other
  - e. None
  
5. In your experience in high school how do teachers typically react when you ask for help when you are having difficulty with classwork?
  - a. The teacher helps me right away
  - b. The teacher says keep trying or look at the question/problem again
  - c. The teacher does not help me/ignores me
  - d. I don't know, I never ask for help or assistance
  
6. What prevents you from asking for help or accommodations?
  - a. You did not know you were entitled/allowed to help or your accommodations
  - b. You do not know how to ask for help from your teacher
  - c. You don't know what to ask for or other
  - d. I get help at home instead
  - e. Other
    - a. Students will be given the option to provide a text response when they select the option other
  
7. What is self-advocacy?
  
8. What lessons or learning activities do you learn best from?