Teaching Self-Advocacy for Students with Developmental Variations in Primary Grades

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Teaching Self-Advocacy for Students with Developmental Variations in Primary Grades

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Childhood Special Education

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Abstract
Sarah E. Sloane

Teaching Self-Advocacy for Students with Developmental Variations in Primary Grades

This research examined the argument that self-advocacy can be woven into curriculum as early as Kindergarten. Specifically children who have disabilities, referred to in this paper as children with “developmental variations”, are either not taught how to advocate for themselves or are not given the opportunity to do so. This paper explores the various components to teaching this skill to children with developmental variations and how it benefits them during their Individualized Education Plan meetings mandated by IDEA and the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (2000). The research has proven that with an advocacy framework that is innate for babies combined with the Self Determination Theory and Social Emotional Learning curriculums, children of all variations can learn how to advocate for themselves regardless of their maturity level or academic achievement level.

*Keywords*: self-advocacy, self-determination, Self Determination Theory, primary grades, Individualized Education Plan, Social Emotional Learning Curriculum, developmental variations
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Introduction

Individuals with developmental variations are typically not given opportunities to develop skills that allow them to advocate for themselves. However, humans are able to advocate for themselves starting at birth when they communicate their wants and needs by crying. In some cases, humans are supported to such an extent that we are not given opportunities to flourish individually and independently. The development of children can be strongly effected by adult influence and contribution. If the adults in a child’s life have certain biases, it is likely their children will be exposed to these biases as well. The influential figures in a child’s life may not have experience relating to people with developmental variations, which can result in children learning to view these variations in a negative or stigmatized way. Thus, once they get to school, if they have a peer with a developmental variation they may not be prepared to include them or view them as equals. This is when a teacher needs to work to create a sense of community and teach students respect for one another. On the contrary, depending on the variation, children might not realize their potential because they were not given opportunities to reach that potential. Also, if a child with a developmental variation has higher needs or cannot communicate conventionally, the adults in his or her life may not realize the child’s capabilities. An essential component to teaching children with developmental variations is to avoid learned helplessness and be aware of the Zone of Proximal Development in terms of what they can accomplish on their own and what they are able to complete with support. Adults tend to overprotect, over support, and coddle children in general, but especially those with developmental variations. Teaching children to advocate for themselves will also become a learning experience for those around them.
Teaching students advocacy skills starting when they are young will empower them to rely on themselves to get what they need. This can manifest itself in social, academic, and behavioral settings but will also impact students’ growth as individuals with developmental variations. The Individuals with Disability Education Act (2004), requires student involvement in determining the mandated services in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). In terms of their developmental variations, if students are taught to advocate as young as kindergarten, they will be more comfortable advocating for themselves in later IEP meetings where they are making a case for their services. Ideally, students will be able to lead their own IEP meetings in a setting that is predisposed towards their participation. In other words, the meetings would take place in an environment that is not necessarily around a conference table in a dreary office, with a lot of paperwork. There are many ways to teach self-advocacy and self-determination skills to children as young as five-years-old. A fundamental example of how this can be carried out is by teaching students that they have individual choice that can be generalized among a variety of settings. This means that students can be provided options to make their own choices in social, behavioral, and academic settings. Since the children are so young they may need a menu of options to choose from that the teacher can determine. This way, the students will still be getting an opportunity to make their own decisions.

Test et al. (2005), discuss a self-advocacy framework that involves teaching children knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership. This framework can be used as a basis for including self-advocacy and self-determination in a classroom. There are also self-advocacy and social emotional learning curriculums that can support teaching self-advocacy skills to children with developmental variations.
Teachers can teach and plan in ways that allow children to make choices, be the center of the plans on an individualized level, and learn through literature. Social emotional skills would include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, all of which link with self-advocacy and self-determination. Thus, including these skills in a curriculum should be relatively seamless because they are necessary for students to be active members of their classroom community.

Although it may seem like a daunting task, teaching children how to self-advocate and become self-determined can be accomplished even if it is on a small scale. The benefit that these skills will have on the future of these children will be invaluable. Due to children’s developmental variations and the stigmas associated with them, it is exceptionally important for them to have an understanding of their individual rights as members of a community. This paper will not only argue the theory related to implementing self-advocacy for young children with developmental variations, but will also suggest practices, strategies, and resources to carry out this philosophy.

**Self-Advocacy**

Humans intuitively express their wants and needs through various forms of communication starting at birth via different types of cries, advancing into gesturing, and eventually expressing themselves with written, oral, sign, or technology assisted language. For children with developmental variations, this can manifest itself in multiple ways depending on the individual variation. Regardless of the presence of verbal skills, or the use of an assistive technology device, children can learn to advocate for their wants and needs.
**Starting Young.** Since children’s wants and needs start so young and the content of those needs change based on development, it is crucial to consider the various levels of complexities. As an example, teaching a baby to reach for a bottle or a child expressing what they want to wear or where they want to go, is less complex but still recognizable as self-advocacy (Gasparini, 2014, p. 19). An example of a higher level of complexity is a child who can meet their human survival needs such as feeding themselves, but need support in expressing their needs in an academic or social setting. It is crucial to note how these wants and needs will change depending on development, whether a child is developing typically or not. Communication is necessary for children to express their wants and needs and learn their rights as a student and member of human society. However, the manner in which the communication manifests itself can, and will, vary. Whether it is a gesture or spoken word, “Communication skills in the context of self-advocacy develop subsequent to knowledge of self and knowledge of rights, so that when students decide what the want or need, they are taught effective ways to communicate those wants and needs” (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005, p. 51). If children learn to communicate their wants and needs when they are young, it will not only be beneficial at that point in their lives, but also will, “…facilitate more meaningful, seamless transitions” later in life because they will have the skills to advocate for themselves in various, generalized settings (Test et al., 2005, p. 52). It seems ineffective to support a child by giving them ownership or choices about their clothing or food, but not educating them nor including them on aspects of their academic lives that they can claim ownership over as well.
Individual Choice vs. Professional Judgment. In general, human potential is underestimated, especially humans who may have developmental variations. It is crucial to consider the concept of individual choice versus professional judgment in terms of a least restrictive environment (LRE), which is a principle of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) (IDEA). Individual choice should be an alternative to professional judgment in regards to decision making and other powers of authority that are typically not granted to individuals with developmental variations (Nisbet, 2004, p. 235). This type of individual responsibility does need to be supported in an inclusive, community-based environment whether it is a classroom, home, or other setting. Children who have developmental variations should not be underestimated and should automatically be included and given full access and opportunities to participate as members of their classroom community (Nisbet, 2004, p. 232). In fact, the IDEA and Developmental Disabilities and Bill of Rights Act (2000) states that,

Disability is a natural part of the human experience that does not diminish the right of individuals with developmental disabilities to live independently, to exert control and choice over their own lives, and to fully participate in and contribute to their communities through full integration and inclusion in the economic, political, social, cultural, educational mainstream of United States society.

(Nisbet, 2004, p. 232)

This perspective on disabilities (developmental variations) implies that it is a natural part of being a human and should include rights to make individual choices instead of being judged based on a professional evaluation or predetermined placement depending on ability. These individual choices are among ways for children to learn to advocate for
themselves starting at a less complex level and eventually becoming more complex with age and development.

The potential for children with developmental variations can be extremely high when given opportunities and taught skills to self-advocate. Individuals with developmental variations who have strong self-advocacy skills have the ability to change the perspectives of people around them who think they may be incapable of making decisions about their own lives and that they need professional guidance for protection (Test et al., 2005, p. 43). Thus, sometimes it is not that people do not see children’s potential but it is that the adults or supporters in their lives want to protect them which in the end has, “…negatively affected the autonomy of individuals with disabilities” (Test et al., 2005, p. 43). However, research has proven that in most cases, the way children with developmental variations are taught individual autonomy does not include any curriculum on self-advocacy nor does it include many opportunities for children to make choices throughout their daily routines (Test et al., 2005, Gasparini, 2014). In order to implement the research, it is crucial to understand and define self-advocacy with the goal of creating opportunities and making curricular choices for students to learn this skill.

**Conceptual Framework.** Test et al. (2005) suggests a conceptual framework for students with developmental variations. This framework is based on an evolved definition of self-advocacy that recognizes it as a civil rights movement, skill, and component of self-determination (Test et al., 2005, p. 45). The framework is comprised of four components of self-advocacy including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Conceptual framework of self-advocacy including following four components: knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership. (Test et al., 2005, p. 49).
According to the framework, each of the components of self-advocacy are interrelated and co-dependent and represent steps towards the achievement of self-advocacy. However, there is a logical order in how these skills should be taught. Knowledge of self includes not only becoming aware of but gaining knowledge of one’s own strengths and needs, interests, learning preference, and other attributes of one’s own developmental variation (Test et al., 2005, p. 50). Once this has been developed, the next step towards a child’s self-advocacy would be increased knowledge of individual rights. This includes rights as a citizen, as an individual with a developmental variation, and as a student receiving services through IDEA under federal law (Test et al., 2005, p. 50). Next, children should develop skills on how to communicate effectively to promote self-advocacy. This includes the components of negotiation, persuasion, compromise, body language, and listening skills (Test et al., 2005, p. 50). The communication component of the framework is critical because it incorporates communicating feelings and needs in an assertive but not aggressive manner (Test et al., 2005, p. 50). Lastly, the final component of this framework according to Test, et al. (2005) is leadership and, “…learning the roles and dynamics of a group and the skill to function in a group” (p. 50). This applies heavily to an academic setting because this set of skills will allow a child to function in a classroom community but also is related to their leadership and inclusion in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings related to their federally mandated services. Thus, although a child’s support system or set of advocates including his or her teacher or parents may have these advocacy skills, the child himself or herself needs to gain these skills to live a meaningful life and truly understand his or her role as a member of society.
Self Determination Theory

**Self Determination.** Self-determination is a concept that relates to and encourages self-advocacy. Merriam Webster defines self-determination as, “free choice of one’s own acts or states without external compulsion” (Merriam-Webster, 2015, n.p.). In the context of self-advocacy, Deci and Ryan (1985) define self-determination as, “…a psychological need based on a person’s free choice” (as cited in Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 2). Both definitions reference that this concept is based on a person’s own free choice and how intrinsic motivators affect their behavior. This relates to self-advocacy in terms of individual choice and a balance of extrinsic or external contributors to a child a with developmental variation’s function or success. Children need to learn the skills to, “…define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself” (Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 3). Once a child has been taught the four components in the self-advocacy framework, specifically in terms of knowledge of self, the child will be have a stronger foundation to become more self-determined on a daily basis. To accomplish this, students need opportunities to express their needs and interests and gain these self-determination skills as a, “…consequence of experiences and opportunities in multiple environments…without opportunities to apply the component skills of self-determination, students are more likely to become passive and dependent and to feel incapable of making choices and decisions (Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 7). Similarly to any other skill whether it is academic, social, emotional, or recreational, the skill will be strongest and most solidified if it is practiced in multiple settings and environments. In other words, these skills need to be generalized so a child can learn to use them reflexively. There are strategies to teach children with developmental variations how to
become more self-determined and gain stronger self-advocacy skills that will be discussed later in this paper.

**Self Determination Theory and Principles.** The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) designed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (1985), explains further about how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators affect behavior in relation to three innate psychological needs that include, autonomy, competence, and relatedness and four distinct types of motivation. The psychological needs and types of motivation are two principles of the SDT that link to self-advocacy. The three innate needs are necessary to be met for healthy psychological development and well-being.

*Autonomy* refers to opportunities to take action based on self-selected choices (i.e. volition). When teachers provide choice and acknowledge feelings, student autonomy increases. A sense of *competence* results from positive feedback, indicating that students are successful because of their own efforts. *Relatedness* is the ability to form secure attachments to other people. When students are autonomy oriented, they are able to develop more satisfying positive personal relationships. Satisfaction of these three needs results in increased intrinsic motivation. (Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 2)

It is critical for children to be their own source of a behavior (autonomy), feel effective in their actions (competence), and feel connected to others in a way where they gain a sense of belongingness (relatedness) (Ten Cate, Kusurkar, & Williams, 2011, p. 963). Along with these three psychological needs that are one of the principles of the SDT is the way in which one regulates their own behavior to match a type of motivation, with the ideal goal being intrinsic motivation and internalization. The four types of motivation include,
external regulation, introjected regulation, identification of regulation, and integrated regulation (Ten Cate et al., 2011, p. 963). They represent a spectrum of motivation in relation to SDT (Figure 2). External regulation is based solely on external demand, for example, rewards and punishment systems; with introjected regulation, an individual has yet to accept their own regulation of behavior and behave in order to avoid shaming or guilt; identification of regulation means the individual has started to behave autonomously; lastly, integrated regulation implies an individual is able to connect rules to their own norms and values and is intrinsically motivated (Ten Cate et al., 2011, p. 962).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Not Self-determined</th>
<th>Fully Self-determined</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Motivation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Type of regulation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Locus of causality</td>
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**Figure 2.** The spectrum of motivation according to SDT including the four distinct behavior motivators.

Thus, the goal is for a child to autonomously self-regulate and become fully self-determined without being controlled by external stimuli. Once a child is given opportunities to make choices on their own by regulating their behavior and gain competence from a variety of extrinsic motivators, and then form relationships with others; they will have a strong foundation for self-advocacy. However a barrier that must
be avoided in the motivational construct to supporting a child to becoming more self-determined is that if a child lacks confidence or negates their own ability, this can lead to deficits in cognition, motivation, and emotion. The result of this is, “students with disabilities often develop passive behavior as a result of being in highly structured programs where they experienced a lack of control and perceive themselves as incapable of academic success” (Feidler & Danneker, 2007 p. 2). This passive behavior is sometimes referred to as “learned helplessness” because there is a discrepancy in how much support is too much support where children with developmental variations are overprotected, underestimated, and not given opportunities to construct their own knowledge, make their own decisions, and self advocate. To determine the appropriate amount of support Lev Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, 1978 (ZPD) can be used. Depending on the difficulty of a task, the ZPD is the difference between what a child can complete independently, versus with assisted support. Vygotsky (1978) defines the ZPD as the, “…distance between the actual developmental level determined by individual problem solving and the level of development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (as cited in Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009, p. 217). The “zone” refers to the continuum of various levels of mastery and “proximal” implies that the skills that are limited by the zone will eventually develop or will emerge soon (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2009, 217). Thus, there are many instances where children do need support in completing a task, however it is critical to determine what the student can accomplish independently to ensure the student is not being overly supported where it becomes detrimental to them problem solving independently. It is crucial for children to select and pursue goals for ones self instead
without depending upon reinforcements and keeping in mind aspirations that continue to provide satisfaction to meet basic needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 55).

**Connection to Individualized Education Plan**

Self-advocacy including self-determination are skills that are not typically listed as IEP goals. Whenever possible or appropriate, an aspect of self-advocacy is that children should be invited to and included in their IEP meetings starting when their IEP is written and they begin receiving services. Although if at all, members of IEP teams typically choose an arbitrary age, usually around middle school age, where students are included in the IEP meetings. In fact, IDEA requires the transition process to include, “(a) inviting students to IEP meetings when needed transition services are going to be discussed and (b) ensuring that a coordinated set of transition activities are based on student needs, taking into account the students’ preferences and interests (Mason, McGahee-Kovac, & Johnson, 2004, p. 18). Thus, even though they are considered a member of their IEP team, students generally do not begin attending their IEP meeting until middle school, and that is even rare since according to the New York State law, they should be in attendance starting the year they turn fifteen-years-old. There are various reasons for this including that the adults on the IEP team feel that the child is not competent enough to understand what is happening or that they want to protect the child from learning about their variation. It is remarkable that teachers have not been encouraged to think outside the box of regulation. They respond with what they have to do not what is possible to do. Also, the IEP meetings are not usually held in environments appropriate for most children, especially those with developmental variations. The meetings tend to take place in an office or conference room during the school day. For a
child to be included and given autonomy, it might be necessary to think about less conventional ways to hold an IEP meeting. This could include taking place in the child’s classroom or home where they may be the most comfortable because, “what is restrictive for one person, may be inclusive for another person” (Nisbet, 2004, p. 231). Many times the influence of adults or supporters in the child’s life, although with good intention, tend to not be ideal for the child. The meeting should be held in the least restrictive environment for the child and family using the same principle applied to the child’s education according to IDEA.

**Self-fulfilling prophecies.** Excluding students from their IEP meetings and omitting self-advocacy related goals on their IEP could result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. When the teachers make all the decisions regarding a child’s education it is a perspective that, “…places students with disabilities in the passive role of recipient of decisions made by their teachers and parents” and students are then taught to rely on others making decisions for them, before they take actions themselves, also known as prompt dependence (Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 6). Whether a child has developmental variation or is typically developing, a child’s teachers and caregivers work hard to ensure their child is not passive and has an assertive role in his or her life and the lives of those around them. Therefore, taking away their right to make some decisions and speak for themselves regarding their lives can be detrimental to their personal evolution. Unfortunately, many educators maintain the perspective that students with developmental variations have deficits and are unable to make their own decisions; this philosophy leads educators to believing that the, “…educational planning process is too complex for students with disabilities to understand and make reasonable and informed decisions”
(Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 6). Just like any other student, a child with a developmental variation should be given the opportunity to make decisions and learn from those decisions, whether or not the outcome may be in their best interest. If students make choices where the results are not ideal, at least they can take responsibility for those choices and come full circle to learn consequences based on their personal and individual decisions. It is critical for all children to have experiences that allow them to learn from their own actions and therefore construct their own meaning and knowledge.

**Student-Led Meetings.** If students with developmental variations are given the opportunity to be leaders in something significant in their own lives, they will gain skills to become leaders in other environments as well. As previously mentioned, it is possible to have student-led IEP meetings as long as the IEP team members are willing to make changes that make it an appropriate environment for everyone involved, especially the child.

Students who have been trained to lead their own individualized education program (IEP) meetings are more effective at communicating their strengths, needs, goals, and thus, in requesting appropriate accommodations for their teachers. When students are actively involved in setting their own IEP goals, they experience a greater sense of self-efficacy and are more likely to display behaviors to attain those self-identified goals. (Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 4) Providing students with opportunities for ownership of their own future and education is a way to incorporate self-advocacy skills productively. Since there is such a range in developmental variations and how they may affect a child’s ability to function in certain settings, the level of student involvement will vary on a case-by-case basis especially
considering the capacity of younger children. For students who are higher functioning, they can participate by reading part of their plan aloud, discuss their individual strengths and challenges, and even suggest new goals for the future (Mason et al., 2004, p. 19). For those who have difficulties with cognitive or communication skills, picture prompts, alternative augmentative communication devices, or more basic responsibilities can be incorporated into the meetings so that they can still be student-led or so that the child can at least participate in a meaningful way. Since parents attend IEP meetings, early student participation would build trust in the school’s commitment to the student. Participation in IEP meetings will also provide opportunities for children to demonstrate skill application in the world. A child will be more comfortable leading their IEP meeting if they have been exposed to a self-advocacy and self-determination curriculum because the skills they learn will apply to a situation similar to their IEP meeting.

**Self-Advocacy Curriculum**

**General Skills and Teaching Strategies.** There are existing curricula that have been written and implemented with the goal of teaching self-advocacy to children. These curricula include general skills but also specified planning, grouping, and activities as well. The general or, “…common skills that should be addressed include knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, perspective taking (including negotiating skills and compromise, communication skills, listening skills, and goal setting) which are all aspects of the self-advocacy conceptual framework” (Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 8). When incorporating self-advocacy into curriculum, “…special education teachers instill self-advocacy skills by offering students choices in their assignments and instructional formats” where students are encouraged to make decisions and solve problems.
independently (Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 12). Teacher training may be necessary to implement a self-advocacy curriculum most effectively. However there are more simple ways teachers can promote and enhance self-determination skills including community-based learning projects, incorporating students’ personal life experiences, encourage goal setting, supporting intrinsic behavioral self-management, and infusing student choice throughout various aspects of the school day (Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 12). All of these strategies can be modified for younger children, especially because these skills are already incorporated into most kindergarten (and older grade-level) curriculums. Teacher modeling is also extremely effective in terms of teachers showing vulnerabilities and also making their roles in the classroom the facilitator or guide of learning and not the necessarily the leader or superior. This teaching philosophy will automatically incorporate autonomy, competence, and relatedness in terms of self-advocacy and self-determination. If children are aware of their partnership with teachers and are given opportunities and experience to make meaning on their own without relying on teacher knowledge or explanation constantly, they will begin to self-advocate independently.

**ChoiceMaker.** A specific curriculum that can be used to develop self-advocacy skills is the “ChoiceMaker Self-Determination Transition Curriculum.” This curriculum can be applied to various age and developmental levels and encourages people to choose goals and pursue them. ChoiceMaker argues that, “…little effort is expended to teach students how to gain control of their lives and to adapt to changes in their environment” which is a key component to self-determination based curriculums (Martin & Marshall, 1995, p. 148). It consists of three sections: choosing goals, expressing goals, and taking action (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007, p. 8). It is based on seven self-determination concepts,
which are self-awareness, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, decision-making, impendent performance, self-evaluation, and adjustment, each of which have certain skills specific to that concept (figure 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-awareness</th>
<th>Self-advocacy</th>
<th>Self-efficacy</th>
<th>Decision making</th>
<th>Independent performance</th>
<th>Self-evaluation</th>
<th>Adjustment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify needs</td>
<td>Assertively state wants &amp; needs</td>
<td>Expect to obtain goals</td>
<td>Assess situation demands</td>
<td>Initiate tasks on time</td>
<td>Monitor task performance</td>
<td>Change goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify interests</td>
<td>Assertively state rights</td>
<td>Set goals</td>
<td>Complete tasks on time</td>
<td>Change strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify &amp; understand strengths</td>
<td>Determine needed supports</td>
<td>Set standards</td>
<td>Use self-management strategies</td>
<td>Change standards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify &amp; understand limitations</td>
<td>Identify information to make decisions</td>
<td>Identify information to make decisions</td>
<td>Perform tasks to standard</td>
<td>Change plan</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify own values</td>
<td>Pursue needed support</td>
<td>Consider past solutions for new situations</td>
<td>Follow through on own plan</td>
<td>Change support</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obtain &amp; evaluate needed support</td>
<td>Generate new, creative solutions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Persistently adjust</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Conduct own affairs</td>
<td>Consider options</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Choose best option</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Develop plan</td>
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Figure 3. Self-determination concepts organized into synthesized constructs (Martin & Marshall, 1995, p. 149).

The three sections of choosing goals, expressing goals, and taking action contain specific teaching goals and objectives geared towards self-determination and transition which make this curriculum more realistic for teachers to implement (figure 4). Choosing goals is where, “…students learn the skills and personal information needed to articulate their interests, skills, limits, and goals across” (Martin & Marshall, 1995, p. 152). Once a child has chosen their goals, with the help of a teacher or any necessary service providers, the child moves onto expressing goals. This is where student-led IEP meetings are included because, “…students learn the leadership skills necessary to manage their IEP meetings
and to publicly disclose the interests, skills, limits, and goals that they gleaned from the Choosing Goals lessons” (Martin & Marshall, 1995, p. 152). In the final section, taking action, students use the goals from the previous sections but break them down into more manageable and achievable weekly goals (Martin & Marshall, 1995, p. 152).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>Teaching goals</th>
<th>Teaching objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: <strong>Choosing Goals</strong>&lt;br&gt;(through school &amp; community experience)</td>
<td>A. Student understanding&lt;br&gt;A1. Indicate goal setting purpose &amp; component</td>
<td>A3. Identify goal setting roles &amp; timelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Student skills and limits&lt;br&gt;C1. Express high school skills &amp; limits</td>
<td>C2. Express employment skills &amp; limits</td>
<td>C3. Express post-high school education skills &amp; limits</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Student goals&lt;br&gt;D1. Indicate options &amp; choose high school goals</td>
<td>D2. Indicate options &amp; choose employment goals</td>
<td>D3. Indicate options &amp; choose post-high school education goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: <strong>Expressing Goals</strong>&lt;br&gt;[E. Student leading meeting]&lt;br&gt;E1. Begin meeting &amp; introduce participants</td>
<td>E2. Review past goals &amp; performance</td>
<td>E3. Ask questions if don't understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Student reporting&lt;br&gt;F1. Express interests&lt;br&gt;(from B1-7)</td>
<td>F2. Express skills &amp; limits&lt;br&gt;(from C1-6)</td>
<td>F3. Express options &amp; goals (from D1-6)</td>
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curriculum including teachable goals and teaching objectives (Martin & Marshall, 1995, p. 150-151).

**Figure 4 (continued).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>Teaching goals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N. Student action</td>
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<tr>
<td>O. Student evaluation</td>
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<td>J. Student adjustment</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching objectives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G1. Break general goals into specific goals that can be done now</td>
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<tr>
<td>G2. Establish standard for specific goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>G3. Define feedback needed for specific goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>G4. Indicate motivation to complete specific goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>G5. Indicate strategies for completing specific goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>G6. Express belief that specific goals can be obtained</td>
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<tr>
<td>G7. Prioritize &amp; schedule specific goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>G8. Determine support needed to complete specific goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>G9. Obtain feedback on performance</td>
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<td>G10. Obtain support for completing specific goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>G11. Determine if goals are achieved</td>
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<tr>
<td>G12. Evaluate feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>G13. Adjust goal standard if necessary</td>
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<td>G14. Adjust motivation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>G15. Adjust or repeat strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>G16. Adjust or repeat method for feedback used</td>
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<tr>
<td>H1. Record or report performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>H2. Perform specific goals to standard</td>
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<td>H3. Obtain feedback on performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>H4. Motivate self to complete specific goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>H5. Use strategies to perform specific goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>H6. Observe support for completing specific goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>H7. Follow schedule</td>
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<tr>
<td>H8. Adjust or repeat method for feedback used</td>
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curriculum including teachable goals and teaching objectives (Martin & Marshall, 1995, p. 150-151). The choosing goals section needs to be extremely individualized based on the student’s most effective way to learn. This includes their interests, learning experience, and the environment that is best for them. Figure 5 represents a higher level preference sheet for teenagers or adults to fill out based on their “likes” and then if those likes are matched with their environment. This is geared towards older people or students because it is specifically written to assess their current job environment. However this can be adapted to a school setting and for younger children in terms of their learning style as well. Figure 6 is a modified version that is more appropriate for younger students and students that require more support due to their developmental variation.

![Figure 5. Job characteristics addressing child’s personal preferences for completing a task (Martin & Marshall, 1995, p. 153).](image-url)
Figure 6. Child work environment and school setting preference sheet, adapted from Figure 5 Job Characteristics form (Martin & Marshall, 1995, n.p.).
This version of a characteristics sheet allows the child to point to, color, or circle their preference and whether or not it is met at school. The images make it more age and developmentally appropriate and the topics are applicable to a classroom and home setting. Although this is technically part of the ChoiceMaker transition curriculum, filling out this type of sheet is another activity where students are practicing their self-advocacy skills. They are given the opportunity to make decisions independently but with boundaries because of the prompts they are given to choose from. This supports autonomy but at a maturity and developmental level appropriate for their needs at a young age.

This curriculum includes tools for teachers to use assess the child and for the child to self-assess. The teacher assessment is unique because it requires the teacher to not only take into consideration the student’s skills, but also if the school or classroom setting is providing opportunities for the student to practice those skills (figure 7).
Figure 7. Example of an assessment for a teacher to use based on student’s performance in section two: expressing goals (Martin & Marshall, 1995, p. 153).

For section three, take action, students are encouraged to plan out how they will achieve each goal they have set for themselves. Martin and Marshall (1995) provide a sample of how students can plan their weekly goals (figure 8), although this seems appropriate for a child who is older and has relatively high cognitive and fine motor (writing) skills (p. 154). Thus figure 9 is an adapted version of a similar worksheet that is differentiated for a kindergarten-aged student. Figure 9 includes more child-friendly language along with supplementary images and space for children to draw or write their answers. Some students may require picture cues to point to their responses if they do not have strong verbal skills; other students may perform best if they are given the opportunity to speak or type their answers. It is crucial to take the specific child’s strengths and challenges into consideration when asking them to complete any task, including this one.
Figure 8. Take action sample worksheet for students to set their weekly goals based on their broader goals (Martin & Marshall, 1995, p. 154).
Figure 9. Take action worksheet adapted and differentiated worksheet to apply to younger students with developmental variations that require a high level of support.

The ChoiceMaker curriculum allows children to have independence while still giving teachers opportunities to drive their students’ learning. It includes realistic goals both for teachers and students and can easily be differentiated depending on a child’s age, maturity level, and/or developmental variation. This curriculum has skills embedded into it that children can use throughout their lives such as choosing goals, expression goals, and taking action. Children with developmental variations will continue to grow by having experiences to make personal and individualized goals that are applicable to their daily lives.

**Person-Centered Planning.** There are curriculums designed to include a child with a developmental variation specifically in the planning process. The person-centered
planning method is, “…vision-based and relies on collaboration to identify hopes, interests, needs, and goals of a person with disabilities” (Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 8). Although the depth of these hopes, interests, needs, and goals may vary depending on the child’s age, a young child can still have input on this matter. The main goal of person-centered planning is for a child with a developmental variation to work with their team and, “…generate resources to improve the individual’s quality of life” (Feidler & Danneker, 2007, p. 8). This can be made applicable to children as young as kindergarten by using picture cues or verbal prompts to help a child determine his or her interests, which can then lead to learning his or her needs and goals. Using a mentor student (a child a few years older who has participated in a similar planning process) could help a younger child have a better idea of the end goal while presenting it in a child-friendly and non-intimidating way. Person-centered planning can seamlessly be incorporated into an IEP meeting because the content that would be covered in this planning would also be included in an IEP meeting.

**Children’s Literature.** An instructional practice that can promote self-advocacy for children with disabilities while maintaining academic skill development is children’s literature. As many educators would argue, literature is a teaching tool that can be used to cover various learning domains and content areas that are both academic and behavioral. Using books and stories when working with children with developmental variations allows children to relate to characters. It also will provide an opportunity for children who are developing typically to relate to and become more comfortable with developmental variations. Bodart (1980) defines bibliotherapy as a process or activity that is designed to help individuals (in this case, children) solve problems with the goal of
better understanding themselves (as cited in Borders & Paisley, 1992, p 1). Research has shown that bibliotherapy has a positive effect on students in the areas of self-advocacy and self-determination in terms of problem solving, prosocial behavior, and building relationships (Borders & Paisley, 1992, p. 1). From a psychological standpoint, literature allows children to develop moral and ethical values and has the, “…capacity to provide the ‘moral imagination’ that can enhance growth (Borders & Paisley, 1992, p. 2). Based on a study implemented with the purpose of evaluating the developmental effects of bibliotherapy, it was found that the, “…use of stories as a method for helping individuals solve problems or better understand themselves appears to have promise not only in motivating therapy but also personal growth” (Borders & Paisley, 1992, p. 6). Thus, children’s literature can be woven into curriculum not only with specific academic focuses, but also can be used to promote self-advocacy skills.

When putting the use of children’s literature into practice, it is critical to consider multiple factors to ensure that the strategies used are appropriate. One of the most important aspects to consider when choosing books that have characters with developmental variations is that the, “...books have well-developed structure and characters, appeal to children and teachers, include realistic portrayals and characters with disabilities, and address issues in special education” (Konrad, Helf, & Itoi, 2007, p. 65). These books must be evaluated for bias based on illustrations and storylines and character portrayals in terms of stereotypes (Konrad, Helf, & Itoi, 2007, p. 65). There are teaching strategies and activities that can be implemented for various levels of functioning for developmental variations. For example, a story can be read to a child and then an activity about comparing the character’s developmental variation to that of the
child could be implemented, promoting self-awareness skills. Another activity that promotes goal setting and self-management is that a teacher reads a book then leads a discussion about events that occurred in the story. Specifically “...pointing out situations in which a character used a good self-management technique or in which the character could have applied a better strategy” (Konrad, Helf, & Itoi, 2007, p. 66). Then the students can make suggestions of how the character could have handled the situation more appropriately. This is definitely an activity for children with strong verbal skills and higher cognitive abilities. To promote self-advocacy, students could also write, speak, or draw a letter on behalf of the character, advocating for their needs (Konrad, Helf, & Itoi, 2007, p. 66). There are many books and activities geared towards upper elementary and middle school grades, however there are ways younger students can learn self-advocacy skills through children’s literature.

To use children’s literature when working on self-advocacy and self-determination skills, is it not only helpful but necessary to ensure the books used have characters with developmental variations. An adult could read a child any book and simply setting a goal of finishing the book or a certain number of pages is promoting goal setting, self-awareness, and self-management, which are all components of self-determination while maintaining the inclusion of literacy development (Konrad, Helf, & Itoi, 2007, p. 70). As previously mentioned, it is crucial to use children’s books that lack bias and stereotypes, which can require extensive research. The literature does not have to have bells and whistles or an exceptionally unique message; it just needs to teach the goal, which in this case is acceptance, inclusion, self-determination, and self-advocacy. There are texts that do not draw attention to, sugar-coat, or negate developmental
variations but they embrace them and present them as realistic components to human
development and what it is like to live with a variation or live among a variation. These
texts include, Susan Laughs by, Jeanne Willis, A Boy and A Jaguar by, Alan Rabinowitz,
My Pal, Victor, by Diane Gonzales Bertrand, My Brother Charlie by Holly Robinson
Peete and Ryan Elizabeth Peete, and Just Because by, Rebecca Elliot. These books are all
appropriate for children as young as kindergarten and have content based in
developmental variations including autism, using a wheelchair, being nonverbal, and
having a stutter. They also include characters of various races and from different family
structures. These books are not just important for children with developmental variations
to read so that they gain confidence and self-awareness, but also for those around them
who may not be educated about or comfortable with developmental variations.

Small Group Work and Classroom Community. Collaboration is a key
component to building students’ self-awareness and self-advocacy along with becoming
more accepting of and being able to advocate for others as well. When children are in
small, consistent groups they are able to build relationships and also become more
comfortable with their peers. This allows them to gain motivation and confidence to
advocate for themselves and gain a presence in their community. Small group work
increases engagement where students are forced to interact and communicate to the best
of their ability, which naturally facilitates peer help-seeking (Gasparini, 2014, p. 29). The
nature of this learning setting makes for a less intimidating environment where students
are less inhibited to ask for adaptive support from peers and adult facilitators (Gasparini,
2014, p. 29). Small, heterogeneous grouping is ideal for children especially those that are
kindergarten aged. Since these young students are new to a school environment,
providing them with opportunities to learn from each other where some children may be developing differently, variation or not, will support the idea of “disability” as a variation, versus a stigmatized difference among humans. Without a strong and safe classroom community, the inner communities (small groups) will not function as effectively. A classroom community means that children feel a sense of belonging where, “belonging to a group means being needed as well as to need, and believing that you have something vital to contribute” (Charney, 2002, p. 22). A child’s contribution does not need to be conventional, it can be apparent by, “…listening with attention and responding with relevance, by showing concern for the feelings and viewpoints of others, by developing a capacity for empathy” (Charney, 2002, p. 22). Thus, it is not difficult to instill community and a sense of care in students. In fact, teachers do this every day by expecting children to know each other’s names, taking turns, sharing, being inclusive, being friendly, cooperating, and so much more (Charney, 2002, p. 25). Although it may seem like a large task to conquer, building community is essential to creating a classroom environment where meaningful learning can occur and children can be accepting and encouraging over others regardless of differences. It is the teacher’s job to model and facilitate within the setting where students are exposed to routines and norms. This will lead to children trusting their teacher, each other, and themselves, which has the intention to result in their increased comfort in seeking help and advocating without embarrassment or intimidation.

**Social Emotional Learning Curriculum**

One way to promote self-determination and self-advocacy in a school setting is by implementing a social emotional learning curriculum (SEL curriculum). The concepts of
self-efficacy and help-seeking are aspects of a SEL curriculum that will lead towards self-advocacy and self-determination. Self-efficacy can be described as a, “…student’s belief in his or her ability to be successful in specific situations. A child’s sense of self-efficacy has great impact on how he or she may approach goals, tasks and challenges” (Gasparini, 2014, p. 11). Self-efficacy is closely linked with a child’s self-esteem and determination. There are various types of help-seeking that relate to a child’s independence or need for scaffolding in terms of if they initiate or request for the help themselves. Regardless of the type of help-seeking, this is a skill that is crucial to weave into a SEL curriculum. There are some barriers to consider and to be aware of when children are new to help-seeking. This includes an internal conflict where the child does not want to be wrong or appear wrong in front of teachers or peers. For instance, “…the child who wants to learn but does not want to be perceived as incompetent or dependent must resolve these internal conflicts while at the same time weighting the const and benefit” (Gasparini, 2014, p. 18). Thus, the teacher must be acutely aware of the type of support a child may need, even if they are insecure about seeking the help, especially with young students.

Social emotional learning allows students to learn skills to help them manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, understand and share their own feelings and the feelings of others, build and grow positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2015, n.p). A SEL curriculum should include five core competencies. These are sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship sills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2015, n.p). These competencies align with the self-determination principles,
allowing for an all-encompassing SEL curriculum that includes self-determination and self-advocacy. The teacher’s role in a SEL curriculum, just like in any curriculum, is key. For the SEL curriculum it is the teacher’s perspective instead of being student-based like in the self-determination theory. The teacher can teach and model socialization agents including involvement, support for autonomy, and support for developmental competence, which are the three innate psychological needs associated with the self-determination theory (CASEL, 2015, n.p). These agents, “…facilitate the development of prosocial student self-regulatory mechanisms, including self-advocacy and interpersonal communication skills” (Gasparini, 2014, p. 24). A teacher’s involvement implies his or her, “…willingness to dedicate time, resources, nurturance, and affective closeness” (Gasparini, 2014, p. 24). To support autonomy, a teacher must support a student’s independence and mastery of goals without assigning unnecessary tasks and punitive consequences (Gasparini, 2014, p. 24). Lastly, the way in which a teacher supports development of competence is by having, “…consistent expectations, rules, [and] lessons that are within a student’s ZPD, and by [having] an understanding of dependent connections between students’ benefit and cost in relation to help-seeking” (Gasparini, 2014, p. 25). If teachers are able to support their students with developmental variations by being involved, allowing for a child to be independent, and maintaining high but realistic expectations for their students, the child will gain self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

For many students, their teacher is one of the best role models in their lives; thus, it is critical for teachers to model both social and academic behaviors that they want to see in their students. Many teachers consider modeling to only be showing positive or
“correct” behavior. However, some of the best learning experiences for students and teachable moments for teachers is when the teacher models by showing vulnerability. This is a way teachers can model help-seeking by demonstrating that no one knows all of the answers and everyone has something to learn (Gasparini, 2014, p. 61). If students have opportunities to observe that teachers are not superior beings that hold all of the knowledge and power, they will most likely become more comfortable in the setting to ask for help and confront peers. This leads to the how self-advocacy skills can affect positive conflict resolution. Establishing a strong classroom community and respect for peers will allow for conflict resolution lessons to occur in an SEL curriculum without tension (Gasparini, 2014, p. 65). Modeling in a way to create a strong classroom community where a SEL curriculum is present is key to prompting self-advocacy. Through a SEL curriculum related to self-determination, teachers must also explicitly support autonomy in their students. Teachers can do this by being aware of and acknowledging students’ perspectives, providing opportunities for autonomous work, praising quality work and providing developmentally appropriate constructive feedback, taking students wants and needs into consideration, and being empathetic with students (Ten Cate, Kusurkar, & Williams, 2011, 965). Some teachers do this automatically but having a different lens to support autonomy in their students will change their teaching perspective and the learning perspective of their students. Teachers need to consider that, “interpersonal communication and self-advocacy is a life long skill that is best cultivated through the fostering of trusting relationships, the creating of safe environments and communities, genuine caring, and positive reinforcement” (Gasparini, 2014, p. 72). By being open and honest with students including showing some of their own vulnerabilities,
teachers can instill confidence in their students to become active members of the classroom community without fear or intimidation.

There are strategies and techniques a classroom teacher can implement when using a SEL curriculum and including self-determination and self-advocacy in his or her teaching philosophy. Before practicing these strategies or choosing those that seem to be the most realistic or effective, it is crucial to remember that the, “…student should be the primary agent for choices, decisions, and actions, within the teacher’s guidelines” (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 20). This information can be gathered by determining students’ interests both as individuals and similarities and differences in group settings as well. Since some students may not be able to verbally share their interests, they can draw, gesture, or have someone from their support system share their interests as well (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 10). Teachers can also facilitate self-instruction with their students. Self-instruction, also referred to as “self-talk” is the, “…verbalization that a student does prior to performing a task” (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 43). Although literally “verbalizing” may not be appropriate for some kindergarten aged students (with or without a developmental variation), this can be modified to meet their individual needs. For example, students can be given picture cues, reminder stories (or social stories), or even have a concept pre-taught by the teacher. This learning strategy is especially important for, “…students with disabilities who have problems with short-term memory and retention of details, to rehearse their thoughts and perhaps give verbal cues to their actions in any problem solving activity” (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 43). This strategy would not be appropriate for students with extremely high needs or who may be nonverbal, but it would be appropriate for other students; therefore, teachers must
constantly be thinking of their students on an individual basis depending on what is appropriate for that student to reach his or her highest potential.

An SEL curriculum is also an opportunity for students to learn self-management including self-monitoring, self-evaluation and self reinforcement skills. Self-management, “…actively involves students in monitoring and controlling their behaviors” (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 47). Students can self-monitor by having awareness of their behaviors regardless of if they are positive behaviors or mistaken behaviors. Self-evaluation is less appropriate for younger students but teachers can model self-evaluation on themselves even with low-pressure, non-academic tasks that are not competitive. For self-reinforcements, the teacher and student can work together to determine whether a behavior should be reinforced. This does not have to be a reward or a tangible reinforcement, but it can also be a discussion about the positive behavior and its meaning. Children can learn to self-regulate behaviors in an SEL curriculum by gaining self-management skills that can be universally effective (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 51).

Within a SEL curriculum, communication skills training can also be incorporated. This program is an, “…assertive training and self-advocacy instruction co-occur with communication and social skills training” (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 53). If younger children with developmental variations are taught how to be more assertive or less passive, this should lead towards higher potential for them to manage their learning and social abilities independently. This training program can be part of an SEL curriculum but also can be seamlessly incorporated into the SDT or self-determination model of instruction. It is crucial to consider cultural differences among norms in a classroom, school, and home setting; social behavior is culturally determined (Palmer & Wehmeyer,
2002, p. 53). Thus, it is the teacher’s job to do the research and be proactive to create an, “…open, honest and accepting classroom community” (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 53). This may require a teacher to contact family members or past teachers to really learn about a child. There are also various activities that can be done with children not only for the teachers to learn about their students but for the children to learn about themselves and identify their individual wants and needs. An activity that can be done with young children either on their own or with an adult filling out the information for them (depending on the child’s cognitive and motor abilities) is Who am I? (figure 10). This activity allows for written and drawn responses; a student or adult can complete it. The information could also be digitally recorded or video taped. This is something that can be manipulated and individualized on a student-by-student basis based on their strengths and needs.
Figure 10. An activity for children to identify aspects of their strengths and challenges on an independently level, with adult support if necessary. Adapted from “Who Am I” (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 58).
Communication skills are critical when incorporating self-advocacy into a curriculum. Communication does not always mean verbally speaking which is especially important to remember when working with young children but specifically young children with developmental variations. However students can still learn to communicate and communicate for themselves by learning when it is appropriate to speak, gesture, blink, et cetera in various situations (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 56). When given opportunities or activities to communicate information about themselves, “…children can start to become their own advocate so they can learn to be safe and feel important” (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 58). Thus, implementing a SEL curriculum can act as a tool for teaching children with developmental variations self-advocacy skills and how to become more self-determined as well. It is crucial for teachers to be aware of the influence their experience, education, and planning will have on the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching self-advocacy to young children with developmental variations.

**Summary and Conclusion**

If self-advocacy skills are taught to students with developmental variations by embedding it into the curriculum, these children will have the information that can lead them to being self-determined, included, and intrinsically motivated members of the communities of which they belong. Adults can influence a child’s ability to self-advocate and become self-determined in both positive and less effective ways. Children who have developed typically will learn from adults around them in terms of how they respond to and respect children with developmental variations. If adults are constantly coddling or treating children with variations as inferior, other children will learn from this and do the same. Also, children with developmental variations can become dependant on others,
making them passive receptacles of information. Thus, it is crucial for everyone, variation or not, to have high expectations for the abilities of children with developmental variations.

As children develop, their communication skills and abilities will strongly influence how they advocate for themselves. This may be a gesture or spoken word, but allowing communication to occur and being patient enough for these communication skills to develop is essential. This leads to providing children with opportunities for individual choice and full participation in their lives and in the communities to which they belong. According to IDEA and the Developmental Disabilities Bill of Rights Act, individuals with developmental variations are mandated to be included and integrated into all aspects of society (Nisbet, 2004, p. 232). The self-advocacy framework developed by Test et al. (2005) provides a logical order to how knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership are interrelated and codependent in terms of how they should be taught. These skills can be taught as part of a curriculum that is designed to teach self-advocacy and self-determination to children with developmental variations. Self-determination requires people to be given free choice with a balance of extrinsic and intrinsic motivators that contribute to the outcome of their behaviors. The components of the self-advocacy framework lead towards self-determination. Once these skills are taught, the ideal purpose would be for children with developmental variations to generalize these skills so they can use them innately among all aspects of their lives. The Self Determination Theory (SDT) designed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (1985) further develops the concept of self-determination in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. This includes how behaviors relate to the three innate psychological needs
which include autonomy, competence, and relatedness, along with the four distinct types of motivation. The SDT allows a structure for children to learn how to self-regulate with autonomy and become self-determined without the control of external stimuli. Once a child is provided with the means to make choices on their own, regulate their own behavior, gain competence from extrinsic motivator, and build relationships with others, they will begin to build their foundation for self-advocacy. For children to gain these skills, it is important for their educator to consider Lev Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, 1978 (ZPD). Students need a chance to complete a task independently, but they may need some guidance to achieve the developmental level of the presented task.

There are many ways to instill independence in students with developmental variations within the curriculum but also within the future of their learning and the services they receive.

Students with developmental variations have IEPs that determine the services they receive at school to ensure they will be in the appropriate environment and successful learners. Once an IEP is initially written, there are IEP meetings that typically occur annually to review the students’ progress in meeting their written goals. Although the law states otherwise, children with IEPs are typically not included in their IEP meetings even though it is a meeting solely about them achieving success in school. This would be a place where a child could use their advocacy skills to communicate the supports they may need. For younger children, this type of setting is not developmentally appropriate. It is crucial to consider the environment that IEP meetings take place. If the meetings were in a space that was comfortable or familiar to the child such as their classroom or at home, and the information was presented on a level that is appropriate for their development,
they would be able to participate in the meeting more successfully. It is not only essential to include children in their IEP meetings ethically, but it will also provide them with yet another setting to self-advocate.

It may feel daunting to implement aspects of self-advocacy and self-determination in the classroom or daily routine of a child with a developmental variation. However, it can begin to be accomplished by starting with small changes that eventually build up to completely embedding these skills as objectives within the curriculum. These changes could include community-building activities, incorporating student’s personal life experiences, and encouraging students to choose goals, express goals, and taking action. Teachers can also integrate small group work and a strong classroom community into the students’ learning environment, which will encourage collaboration among peers and adults alike. It is the teacher’s role to act as the model and facilitator especially for younger children who need an adult in their life to look to as an example. Teachers can focus on these concrete teaching while teaching students knowledge of themselves, their rights, how to communicate, and how to lead.

More specific curriculums to implement in the classroom include the ChoiceMaker curriculum, person-centered planning, and children’s literature. These curriculums promote various components of self-advocacy and self-determination. ChoiceMaker curriculum encourages goal setting that can be personalized so they are realistic for both the teachers and student. Person-centered planning allows for the child with the developmental variation to collaborate on a developmentally appropriate level. They can collaborate with teachers and parents to make academic and life plans and goals. Children’s literature is especially applicable to younger students because the child
can relate to characters in the purposefully chosen books. Also, teachers can build lessons and activities from the messages or characters in the stories. Aside from academic based curriculum options, teachers can also include a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum in their classroom to promote self-advocacy and self-determination. Students will learn skills to manage their emotions and understand the emotions of others. It is not expected for teachers to implement all of these strategies and curriculums but to choose those that seem the most manageable for them and that are most appropriate for their students.

Individuals with developmental variations need to learn how to advocate for themselves and become determined on their own to reach their goals. If these individuals are taught skills to do so starting young surrounded by members of their support system who want to see them gain independence, they will be much more successful later in life. Due to the fact that variations can range so vastly, these skills are going to need to be heavily differentiated and individualized based on the child’s needs and environment of which they live. Some caregivers may think that they are protecting children from not involving them in their learning needs as an individual with a developmental variation, however the truth is that these children deserve to know what makes them who they are and how they can be the best versions of themselves. The most important way to encourage children to figure out how to become their finest, truest selves will be to give them an opportunity to be the main contributor in cultivating that person.
References


