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Self-advocacy and self-determination skills in middle school and high school students: A Transition needs assessment for the East Rochester Union Free School District

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Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination Skills in Middle School and High School Students

A Transition Needs Assessment for the East Rochester Union Free School District

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Abstract

Students with learning disabilities have a unique need to acquire self-advocacy skills and an attitude of self-determination to facilitate their successful completion of secondary school, as well as to enable them to transition to college and the workplace. The following paper considers the issues of learned helplessness and locus of control with regard to the need for direct instruction in self-advocacy skills and other skills leading to self-determination for students with learning disabilities. Included are the results of a needs assessment survey conducted in grades 7-12 of a suburban school district. Forty-two students with learning disabilities were administered a survey that assessed (a) self-awareness of disability, (b) knowledge of the special education process, (c) knowledge of rights under the law, (d) attitudes and skills related to goal attainment, and (e) locus of control. An increased level of knowledge regarding issues related to self-advocacy and self-determination was found to be positively correlated with an internal locus of control. There was no correlation found between age and internal locus of control as is usually found with non-disabled populations. The results of this project support the need for direct instruction in self-advocacy skills for students with learning disabilities.

Literature Review

Introduction

A primary goal of education is to equip young people with the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to become productive members of society (Armstrong, Henson, & Savage, 1985). Implicit in this goal is the assumption that schools will do more than impart basic academic knowledge to students. It is expected that students will also learn how to think for themselves, make decisions, solve problems, and act in a responsible and independent manner (Fiske, 1991). In other words, it is expected that students will be able to act as self-determined individuals and advocate for their own needs.

By the time they leave high school, many non-disabled students will have acquired a firm foundation in the skills necessary for self-determination (Blalock & Patton, 1996). However, for students with learning disabilities, the acquisition of these skills may present a unique challenge. Often these skills, which require the ability to plan and initiate behavior, represent a deficit area for the student with a learning disability (Field, 1996). Likewise, the ability to appropriately initiate a conversation and request help from others may be difficult for these students (Hersh, Stone, & Ford, 1996). Due to its invisible nature, teachers and students frequently fail to acknowledge the existence of a learning disability (Field, 1996; Sachs, Iliff, & Donnelly, 1987). Students with learning disabilities typically display a passive attitude toward education, characteristics of learned helplessness (Hersh, Stone, & Ford, 1996), and a lack of self-awareness (Field, 1996) which may inhibit their ability to self-advocate and acquire the skills necessary for self-determination. Therefore, it is necessary to provide students with learning disabilities with direct instruction in self-advocacy and other skills that lead to self-determination (Cronin, 1996; Durlak, Rose, & Bursuck, 1994;

Field & Hoffman, 1996; Phillips, 1990; Sacks et al., 1987; Ward, 1996; Weimer, Cappotelli, & DiCamillo, 1994).

Is it Self-Advocacy or Self-Determination?

The literature does not always make a clear distinction between the terms self-advocacy and self-determination (Field, 1996). However, self-determination is generally accepted to be a more all-encompassing term which may include attributes such as pride, self-actualization, and creativity (Ward, 1992). The Self-Determination for Youth with Disabilities curriculum (Abery, et al., 1994) states that,

> Self-determination refers to the intrinsic drive of humans to be the primary determiners of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It generates the attitudes and abilities that lead us to take charge of our lives, to make choices, and to set goals based on our needs, interests, and values (p. 11).

Field and Hoffman (1994) define self-determination as, "The ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself" (p. 164). These definitions consider self-advocacy to be a skill necessary for self-determination.

Doll, Sands, Wehmeyer, & Palmer (1996) describe five essential components of self-determination. They are: (a) self-awareness and self-knowledge, (b) self-evaluation and attributions of efficacy, (c) choice making and decision making, (d) metarepresentation, and (e) goal setting and task performance. Normally, a child's ability to master these components improves as the child matures developmentally. Wehmeyer (1996) contends that an individual, at any given time, may be anywhere on a continuum from partly to fully self-determined. The degree to which an individual acts in a self-

determined manner may vary due to factors such as setting and age (Wehmeyer, 1996). However, the acquisition of skills that facilitate self-determination should be viewed as a life-long process which starts in early childhood and continues throughout adulthood (Abery, 1993/94; Ward, 1988).

Field (1996) differentiates between self-determination and self-advocacy. She notes that, "Self-advocacy refers to taking action on one's own behalf; acts of self-advocacy lead to greater self-determination" (p. 42). However, the Self-Advocacy Curriculum Teacher's Manual (as cited in Brinckerhoff, 1994) lists the following skills as necessary for self-advocacy: "1. Knowledge of what you want; 2. Knowledge of what you are legally entitled to; and 3. The ability to effectively achieve your goal" (p. 229). Although stated more concisely, these skills appear to require many of the same basic abilities as do the components of self-determination proposed by Doll, et al. (1996).

The issues surrounding self-advocacy are inextricably intertwined with those which surround self-determination. It is difficult to imagine that an individual could be self-determined without practicing self-advocacy. And it is equally as hard to imagine an individual practicing self-advocacy without first achieving some degree of self-determination. In an educational setting, practices designed to promote one of these constructs will, at the same time, facilitate the other. Likewise, research in one area should be applicable to the other. For the purposes of this paper, the term self-advocacy will be used to refer to observable actions taken by a student in an attempt to achieve a desired outcome. The term self-determination will refer to the underlying skills and attitudes, as well as actions, that allow a student to gain control over his or her life. It is assumed that both of these terms share the ultimate goal of enabling students to achieve individually appropriate levels of academic and social

independence.

Locus of Control

Studies (Ayres, Cooley, & Dunn, 1990; Chapman, 1988) suggest that motivational factors play a role in students' academic achievement outcomes. In turn, motivation may be affected by the degree to which a student feels that he has control over his environment and the ability to influence his academic success or failure (Ayres et al., 1990; Nowicki & Strickland, 1973; Nunn & Parish, 1992). This individual perception of control was described by Rotter (1966) and is known as the individual's locus of control.

An individual's locus of control may fall anywhere along a continuum which ranges from internal to external (Dudley-Marling, Snider, & Tarver, 1982). An individual with a strong internal locus of control feels that he possesses the ability to influence what happens to him in life (Rotter, 1996). In the school setting, a student with an internal locus of control would believe that his choice to study or not to study would influence the grade that he would receive on a subsequent exam. In contrast, a student with an external locus of control would perceive that his grade was dependent upon factors beyond his control, such as his innate intelligence, how well the teacher liked him, or simply luck.

Researchers have found that an internal locus of control is positively correlated with academic achievement and personal confidence (Klein & Keller, 1990). Because of this, it has been suggested that changing from an external to an internal orientation could be advantageous for underachieving students (Kistner, Osborne & Le Verrier, 1988; Nunn & Nunn, 1993). However, a differing theory suggests that an individual's locus of control merely represents a personality trait, and internality cannot be objectively rated as superior to externality (Dudley-Marling, et al.,1982). Wehmeyer (1996) asserts that,

"Individuals who are self-determined believe that they have the capacity to influence outcomes in their environment" (p. 118). Therefore, it is likely that students who are self-determined will exhibit internal loci of control.

Studies conducted with non-disabled children have found that locus of control becomes increasingly internal in children as they become older (LaMontange & Hepworth, 1991; Nowicki & Strickland, 1973). This same developmental progression has not been demonstrated in students with learning disabilities (Snyder, 1982). Instead, these students have been found to maintain an external locus of control (Chapman, 1988; Nunn & Parish, 1992). In instances where internal locus of control has been found in students with learning disabilities, it is typically internal for failure experiences but not for success experiences (Dudley-Marling, et al., 1982).

Because a learning disability by definition indicates an inability to accomplish certain academic tasks, it is possible that the external locus of control typified by students with learning disabilities demonstrates a realistic assessment of academic potential rather than a maladaptive stance (Chapman, 1988; Dudley-Marling, et al., 1982). The inability to succeed, regardless of the amount of effort expended, may contribute to the passive attitude that students with learning disabilities often adopt toward involvement in their own educations (Chapman, 1988; Nunn & Nunn, 1993). This passive attitude is closely related to the concept of learned helplessness and is antithetical to self-determination (Field & Hoffman, 1994).

Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness in the school setting refers to a student's perception that his effort will not affect a given academic outcome (Weiner, 1979). This is thought to be a result of classical conditioning (Maier, Seligman,

& Solomon, 1969) which occurs when a student experiences repeated failure. Learned helplessness has been associated with poor motivation, underachievement, and negative affect (Weiner, 1979).

Unlike their non-disabled peers, students with learning disabilities typically demonstrate an external locus of control for success and failure by the third grade (Chapman, 1988; Tarnowski & Nay, 1989). This suggests that these students, at an early age, have encountered so many failure experiences that they may be predisposed to developing attitudes of learned helplessness. Research (Hersh, Stone, & Ford, 1996) has shown that students with learning disabilities demonstrate more difficulty in recovering from failure situations than do their non-disabled peers. This results in a poor self-concept and acceptance of a learned helplessness attitude that may dominate the students' lives at school, as well as in other settings (Dean, 1985; Hersh et al., 1996). Additionally, after exposure to failure experiences, students with learning disabilities are less likely to persist at academic tasks than their non-disabled peers (Ayres, et al., 1990; Dudley-Marling, et al., 1982; Hersh et al., 1996). Learned helplessness is exhibited more often by students with learning disabilities than by the general student population (Hwang, 1992). This attitude has been associated with the overprotection of students, as well as with experiences of economic, academic or social deprivation (Powers, et al., 1996).

Overprotection

Failure experiences often provide opportunities for non-disabled students to learn. Learning takes place when a student receives feedback about his actions and is allowed to try the experience again using a different strategy (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1991). Students with learning disabilities are often denied this opportunity by well-meaning school personnel or family

members (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Feldman & Messerli, 1995; Halpern, 1994; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996; Weimer, et al., 1994). Although well-intentioned, the tendency of these individuals to act on behalf of students with learning disabilities in decision making situations effectively denies the students the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them (Deci & Ryan,1985; Weimer, 1994). Students have few incentives to take responsibility for decisions regarding their educations (Halpern, 1994). Wehmeyer and Kelchner (1991) speculate that, "The school experiences of students with cognitive disabilities contain a unique mix of overprotection and failure experiences that contribute to external perceptions of control" (p. 26). Their research suggests that students with learning disabilities hold perceptions of themselves and their school environments that are likely to result in limited academic involvement.

The tendency of educators and families to act on behalf of individuals with learning disabilities robs students of the opportunities necessary for self-determination. Wehmeyer (1996) states,

> Children and adolescents become self-determined adults through opportunities and experiences leading to success; through constructive experiences with failure; through opportunities to explore, take risks, and learn from their consequences; and by watching adults take control and make decisions. They learn by participating in decisions, making choices, and experiencing control at home, at school, and elsewhere. Self-determination emerges when children and adolescents perceive themselves as effective, worthy individuals who can engage in actions that affect outcomes in their lives (p.128).

It is important to remember that not all acts of self-determination successfully achieve desired outcomes (Wehmeyer, 1996). When a student

acts as the "primary determiner" of his behavior, he is acting in a self-determined manner regardless of the result of the action. If the outcome is undesirable, it provides the student with the opportunity to evaluate his actions and modify them in future situations (Wehmeyer, 1996). When school personnel and family members make decisions for students with learning disabilities, the students lose the opportunity to evaluate their own decisions based on the consequences of those decisions. Field and Hoffman (1995) point out that an individual has the right to make decisions and the responsibility to deal with the ensuing consequences. The comparison of success and failure experiences allows students to develop an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses (Ward, 1988). This is essential knowledge for students with learning disabilities to possess if they are to transition successfully to post-secondary education and/or the workplace (Wehmeyer, 1996).

Students Benefit from Direct Instruction

In recognition of the importance of self-determination to individuals with disabilities, the federal Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) began a self-determination initiative in 1988 in an attempt to empower individuals with disabilities with the means to contribute to decisions affecting their lives (Ward, 1996). Part of this initiative involved the Secondary Educational and Transitional Services for Youth with Disabilities Program component of OSERS which sponsored 26 demonstration projects designed to identify and teach self-determination skills (Ward, 1996). These programs were conducted during the 1990-1993 fiscal years (Ward, 1996). Many of the OSERS demonstration projects, as well as other independently developed curricula, have demonstrated that students with learning disabilities are able to

benefit from direct instruction in skills leading to self-determination (Cronin, 1996; Durlak et al., 1994; Field & Hoffman, 1996a; Phillips, 1990; Sachs, et at., 1987; Ward, 1996; Weimer et al., 1994). Research also suggests that, in addition to acquisition, students with learning disabilities are able to maintain and generalize self-advocacy and self-awareness skills (Durlak et al., 1994).

Research (Halpern & Benz, 1987) has shown that students with learning disabilities often do not learn self-determination skills on their own, from their parents, or through modeling their peers. Ward (1991) states,

> Skills necessary for self-determination *must* be taught to all children and youth; it is especially important for children and youth with disabilities. Expecting youth who have been overprotected and restricted in terms of self-determination to be functioning, independent adults is akin to expecting a nation that has lived under an oppressive, totalitarian system for centuries to govern by democratic principles immediately after a revolution. Self-determination just doesn't happen; it requires a great deal of preparation and practice (p. 12).

The need for students to have opportunities to practice skills leading to self-determination is repeatedly stressed in the literature (Barr, Hartman, & Spillane, 1995; Durlak, et al., 1994; Field & Hoffman, 1996b; Weimer, et al., 1994). Students may acquire a working knowledge of how to make decisions and assertively achieve their goals. However, only repeated practice will allow them to acquire the comfort level necessary to enable them to use these skills in stressful situations outside of the high school setting (Durlak, et al., 1994). In order to achieve this level of comfort during their high school years, Durlak, et al. (1994) state

> It is essential that students be given the opportunity to (a) participate in

> IEP meetings, (b) take general education classes, (c) ask for assistance, and (d) understand their strengths and weaknesses if they are to survive in the adult world. (p. 57)

Without instruction in self-advocacy and other skills leading to self-determination and the opportunity to practice these skills, students with learning disabilities are at risk of failing to complete their high school educations, future dependence, and underemployment (Martin & Marshall, 1995).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

The federal government acknowledged the fact that there exists a special need to plan for the transition of students with disabilities to postschool activities when it included transition services requirements in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 101-476). This act and the 1992 amendments (P.L.102-569) to this act require that transition needs and goals be documented for students with disabilities beginning at age 16, or younger if appropriate. The law defines transition services as:

> A coordinated set of activities for a student designed within an outcome-oriented process, that promotes movement from school to postschool activities, including postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living or community participation. The coordinated set of activities must be based on the individual student's needs, taking into account the student's preferences and interests and shall include instruction, community experiences, and the development of employment and other post-school objectives, and if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation, 34 CFR Sec. 300.18 (1992).

This law also requires that the student be invited to attend the planning meeting for the creation of his Individual Education Program (IEP). If he does not attend, documentation must be provided that proves that his interests and preferences were considered. It is evident that the spirit of this law supports the promotion of the principles of self-determination for high school students with disabilities.

Student Involvement

Students who are actively involved in planning and implementing their educational programs demonstrate an increase in motivation and positive academic outcomes (Wehmeyer & Kelchner,1991). One area in which a student with a learning disability could be expected to participate is in the creation of his IEP which includes goals and objectives for the coming year. However, students rarely participate in the planning processes for their IEPs (Martin & Marshall, 1995; Van Reusen & Bos, 1990).

Lovitt, Cushing, & Stump (1994) interviewed 29 high school students with mild disabilities and determined that, although many of the students attended IEP meetings, they were seldom active participants, and none of the students could identify any of the goals on their IEPs. An informal survey (Brinckerhoff, 1994) of 30 high school graduates at a Boston University orientation revealed that only a few students could identify the purpose of an IEP and fewer still knew what the letters IEP represented. The lack of involvement and passive attitudes of students with learning disabilities in their high school educations hinders their ability to develop educational and career goals (Brinkerhoff, 1994) and affects their chances for successful completion of high school and the transition to postsecondary education and the workplace (Blalock & Patton, 1996).

Transition

Researchers (Barr, et al., 1995; Durlack, et al., 1994; Halpern, 1994) have identified several abilities that appear to be crucial for a student with a learning disability to possess in order to make a successful transition from high school to postsecondary education or the workplace. These abilities are consistent with the skills that lead to self-determination, and include (a) a self-awareness of academic and social strengths and weaknesses, including a knowledge of what strategies are and are not successful (Durlack,et al., 1994; Barr et al., 1995), (b) the ability to self-advocate (Barr et al., 1995), as well as the ability to ask for help when needed (Durlack, et al., 1994), (c) an understanding of legal rights and responsibilities (Barr et al., 1995), and (d) the ability to self-evaluate skills (Halpern, 1994) and modify them as necessary (Barr, 1995).

The number of students with learning disabilities choosing to continue in formal postsecondary education is increasing (Barr, et al., 1995; Durlak, et al., 1994). A 1995 publication from HEATH Resource Center (Barr, et al.) noted that almost one third of all college freshmen who self-disclose disabilities have learning disabilities. It is probable that additional college students are choosing not to self-disclose their learning weaknesses (Feldman & Messerli, 1995).

When a student leaves high school, he loses the rights and safeguards mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Limited protection from discrimination is afforded by Section 504 of the amendments to the 1973 Vocational Rehabilitation Act (P.L. 93-112). However, students must possess a degree of proficiency in the skills necessary for self-determination if they are to experience success in a postsecondary school or work environment (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Therefore, the acquisition of skills leading to self-determination, including self-advocacy, constitute reasonable and

legitimate Individual Transition Plan goals for students with learning disabilities (Martin, Marshall, & Maxson, 1993).

Project Overview

East Rochester Union Free School District Transition Needs Assessment Project

In an attempt to meet the transition plan requirements mandated by IDEA, personnel from the East Rochester High School began having seniors with learning disabilities meet with representatives from the Office of Vocational Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID). This state agency is responsible for using federally allocated monies to assist individuals with disabilities in training for and obtaining employment. District officials were dismayed to find that many students meeting with VESID representatives were unable to explain their disabilities or identify how their disabilities would affect future education or employment opportunities.

Clearly, students lacking this basic level of self-awareness would be unlikely to be able to self-advocate for their needs after leaving high school (Barr, et al., 1995; Field, 1996). Many of the students with learning disabilities in East Rochester appeared to be disenfranchised from the educational process. This is consistent with findings (Ayres, Cooley & Dunn, 1990; Hersh, et al., 1996) that have suggested that students with learning disabilities typically exhibit characteristics of learned helplessness. If these students are unable to create successful experiences for themselves within the protected environment of the school, it is unlikely that they will go on to find success after graduation (Durlak, et al., 1994).

To assist these students, it is imperative that they be provided with instruction in self-advocacy skills and other skills leading to self-determination (Ward, 1996; Wehmeyer, 1996). Often learning disabilities prevent students from assimilating these skills in the same manner as their non-disabled peers

(Field, 1996). However, it has been demonstrated that students with learning disabilities are able to benefit from direct instruction in self-advocacy and skills leading to self-determination (Cronin, 1996; Durlak, et al., 1994; Field & Hoffman, 1996a; Phillips, 1990; Sachs et al., 1987; Ward, 1996; Weimer et al., 1994). Additionally, research by Durlak et al. (1994) suggests that these students are able to maintain and generalize this information. Self-advocacy and self-determination skills may be utilized repeatedly over a lifetime to facilitate a satisfying and successful lifestyle (Haring, Lovett, & Smith, 1990).

The following project was designed to assess the needs of East Rochester students with learning disabilities in grades 7-12 in order that the district could consider providing programming to facilitate the students' abilities to self-advocate and strive for self-determination. A survey was created to evaluate students' loci of control and levels of knowledge related to issues of self-advocacy and self-determination. This resulted in the collection of base-line information to assist the district with meeting the transition needs of its students with learning disabilities.

District Demographics

The East Rochester Schools enroll approximately 1,300 children in grades K-12 ("Grading Our Schools," 1997). Special education students make up 14.8% of this population ("Grading Our Schools," 1997). Free or reduced price lunches are received by 26.9% of the middle school students and 8.3% of the high school students ("Grading Our Schools," 1997). The high school suspension rate is approximately 11% ("Grading Our Schools," 1997). Both the East Rochester community and the school place a heavy emphasis on the school's athletic program. However, academics are not neglected. High school students may choose from 12 academic electives, 4 advanced placement

courses, and numerous clubs and extra-curricular activities ("Grading Our Schools," 1997).

Community Demographics

The Village of East Rochester is a suburb of the City of Rochester and is home to approximately 7,000 people (Bureau of the Census, 1990a). In this working class community, the median annual household income is $30,442 (Bureau of the Census, 1990b). Residents at or below the poverty level comprise 6.4% of the total population. This includes 8.1% of the children under the age of 18 (Bureau of the Census, 1990b). Of persons over the age of 25, 76.9% have graduated from high school and 18.3% have a Bachelor's degree or higher (Bureau of the Census, 1990a).

Participants

Participants in this project included a total of 42 students (28 male, 14 female) in grades 7-12 who were classified as Learning Disabled and who received resource room services. The students' ages ranged from 12-19 (see Table 1). Middle school participants (n=19) were in grades 7 and 8. Students in grades 9-12 comprised the high school participants (n=23). None of the students received direct instruction in self-advocacy or self-determination from the school district. All of the students met the New York State mandated criteria for learning disabilities which requires a 50% discrepancy to exist between expected achievement based on potential and actual achievement (State Education Department, 1993).

The number of students assessed was affected by fluctuating attendance rates caused, in part, by a head lice infestation at the time the survey was administered. It was necessary to eliminate two completed tests due to irregularities in student response style, and at least one student elected not to

Table 1
Number of Students of Given Age Within Each Grade

	Age							
Grade	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
7	7	4						
8		3	5					
9			5	4				
10				3	3	1		
11					1	2		
12							3	1

participate in the study. Table 2 indicates by grade and gender and the number of students in the district who met the criteria for participating in the project and the number who completed acceptable tests.

Measures

Students were administered a two-part survey. Part One (See Appendix A) consisted of 1 short answer and 13 multiple choice questions that assessed (a) self-awareness of disability, (b) knowledge of the special education process, (c) knowledge of rights under the law, and (d) attitudes and skills related to goal attainment. Examples of questions include: "What is your special education classification?" and "Can a student attend his/her own CSE meeting?" For all of the multiple choice questions, students had the option of selecting the "I do not know" response.

Part two of the survey (see Appendix B) consisted of the questions from the short form of the Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Control Scale for Children (1973). This scale is designed to measure a child's perception of his control over his environment (Lefcourt, 1991). Students were asked to circle "Yes" or "No" responses to indicate whether or not they agreed with 21 statements. The statements included items such as "Do you believe that most problems will solve themselves if you just don't fool with them?" and "Do you feel that it's impossible to change your parent's mind about anything?"

Lefcourt (1991) details the following information about the Nowicki-Strickland scale. The long form of this measure has been found to be associated with achievement scores but not with IQ scores. Students who receive scores indicating that they have an internal locus of control generally have higher achievement scores than do their externally scoring counterparts. Although studies on the reliability and validity of the Nowicki-Strickland scale

Table 2

Number of Students by Grade and Gender Meeting Criteria to Participate in Project and Number of Students Actually Participating

	Students[a]	
Grade/Gender	Eligible	Participated
7th	11	11
Male	5	5
Female	6	6
8th	14	8
Male	8	4
Female	6	4
9th	15	9
Male	13	7
Female	2	2
10th	11	7
Male	6	5
Female	5	2
11th	9	3
Male	3	3
Female	6	0
12th	7	4
Male	5	4
Female	2	0
Total Project	67	42
Male	40	28
Female	27	14

[a]East Rochester students classified as learning disabled and receiving resource room services.

have been limited, it is considered to be one of the better locus of control measures. However, it has been criticized because the majority of the items are phrased in such a way that agreeing with the statements results in a response indicating an external locus of control. On the short form, approximately 80% of the items are phrased this way.

Procedure

Students were administered the survey in small groups by their resource room teachers. Directions and individual items were read aloud by the teachers. Individual copies of the test were provided for students on which they could mark their responses and follow along as their teachers read. Students were allowed to utilize their usual testing modifications. The answer to question 2 was specific to each individual student, and the correctness of the responses given to this question were determined by the students' own resource room teachers.

East Rochester Union Free School District Transition Needs Assessment

Special Education Survey - Part One

Part one of the administered survey contained multiple-choice questions that measured students' knowledge in various areas relating to self-advocacy and self-determination. Each student received a score, ranging from a possible 0-14, which indicated the number of questions answered correctly. Table 3 indicates by grade the percentage of students responding correctly to each of the part one questions. Obtained scores for the total sample ranged from 2-10 with a mean score of 6.45 and a standard deviation of 2.5.

When considered separately, differences were observed between the high school and middle school samples. Overall, high school students demonstrated a greater fund of knowledge on part one than did middle school students ($t(40) = -4.21$, p (2-tail) = .0001). The mean score achieved by high school students was 7.69 with a standard deviation of 2.0. The mean score achieved by the middle school sample was 4.95 with a standard deviation of 2.2.

Self-Awareness

On part one, the performance of the students surveyed in the East Rochester School District was consistent with the literature in the area of self-awareness (Barr et al., 1995; Field, 1996). East Rochester students failed to demonstrate adequate knowledge in this area. Questions 1 and 2 of part one directly assessed students' knowledge in this area. Question 1 (What is your special education classification?) was correctly answered by 38% of the total sample. Question 2 (Each of you has an Individual Education Program [IEP].

Table 3
Percentage of students by grade answering correctly to individual questions on part 1

QUESTION	Grade 7 n=11	8 n=8	9 n=9	10 n=7	11 n=3	12 n=4	TOTAL N=42
1. What is your special education classification?	0	63	56	57	0	50	38
2. Each of you has an Individual Education Program (IEP). Indicate the test modifications that appear on your IEP.	27	0	22	43	67	50	29
3. A school district can change your special education classification without your own or your parent's consent:	9	13	11	0	0	25	10
4. Select the best meaning for the "compensate" as it is used in the following sentence: Sam is able to compensate for the difficulties he has with reading.	27	38	56	50	100	75	49
5. What is the purpose of a CSE meeting?	18	25	56	83	100	25	46
6. Because he has difficulty with math, John has become very good at using a calculator. This is an example of:	64	33	89	86	100	100	81
7. Can you decide not to use a modification listed on your IEP?	18	50	67	57	100	50	50
8. Can a student attend his/her own CSE meeting?	27	50	44	43	33	75	43
9. Which of the following is a goal?	100	75	100	100	100	100	95
10. The modifications listed on your IEP are (choose the best word) for your teachers to follow.	64	50	78	71	100	100	41
11. It is important to be able to predict the possible results of your actions because:	0	13	67	29	67	50	31
12. How often must your special education program be evaluated to determine whether it is meeting your needs?	27	71	63	43	33	75	50
13. When you encounter an obstacle to achieving your goal, the best thing to do is:	9	25	44	14	0	50	23
14. Which of the following is an important skill in active listening?	45	38	33	14	100	50	40

Indicate the test modifications that appear on your IEP [You may choose more than one answer for this question only.]) was correctly answered by only 29% of the total sample.

A student's self-awareness of his or her disability is a fundamental requirement for the ability to self-advocate and strive for self-determination (Field, 1996). The fact that the majority of the tested students in East Rochester were unable to correctly answer these two basic self-awareness questions suggests the need for a systematic approach to insure that students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for them to advocate for their needs. This may facilitate their successful completion of high school, as well as prepare them for postschool activities.

Knowledge of the Special Education System and Rights Under the Law

The students surveyed did not demonstrate an adequate understanding of the special education system or their rights under the law. Only 50% of the students tested knew that their special education program must be evaluated every year to determine whether or not it was meeting their needs (question 12). This suggests that many of the students surveyed are not taking an active part in the creation of their IEP goals and are, therefore, likely to exhibit poor motivation and behaviors consistent with learned helplessness (Fulk & Montgomery-Grymes, 1994). When students understand the special education system and their rights and responsibilities under the law, they are better prepared to take an active role in their own educational processes (Field & Hoffman, 1996b). These students are also more likely to experience educational success than are their less involved peers (Field & Hoffman, 1996b).

Attitudes and Skills Related to Goal Attainment

In the area of attitudes and skills related to goal attainment, the tested

students received some of their highest scores. On question 9 (Which of the following is a goal?) 95% of the students answered correctly. Eighty-one percent of the students were able to successfully complete item 6 (Because he has difficulty with math, John has become very good at using the calculator. This is an example of....) However, in this same area, only 23% of the students were able to select the correct response for item 13 (When you encounter an obstacle to achieving your goal, the best thing to do is....) Likewise, only 31% of the students chose the correct answer to complete item 11 (It is important to be able to predict the possible results of your actions because....) This suggests that, although students may be able to identify goals and theoretical coping strategies to assist them in attaining goals, they may not be sufficiently prepared to devise and modify their own goals and coping strategies under real-life circumstances.

Special Education Survey - Part two

Part two of the survey consisted of the questions from the short form of the Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Control Scale for Children. The students' responses to individual items on this measure were rated as being representative of either "internal" or "external" locus of control responses. The responses were tallied, and each student received two scores (each ranging from a possible 0-21) that indicated the total number of internal and external responses given.

The mean internal locus of control score achieved by the total sample was 12.54 (*SD* = 3.5). When considered separately, the high school and middle school students achieved mean scores of 12.43 (*SD* = 3.5) and 12.68 (*SD* = 3.5) respectively. No significant difference (t (40) = .23, P (2-tail) = .81) in

the internal locus of control scores was obtained between the two groups. Likewise, the external locus of control scores were similar for both groups (t (40) = .03, p (2-tail) = .97). High school students achieved a mean score of 8.17 (*SD* = 3.8) and middle school students achieved a mean score of 8.21 (*SD* = 3.5). The mean external locus of control score for the total sample was 8.19 (*SD* = 3.6).

Discussion

Developmental Trends

A significant positive correlation was found between students' scores on part one and age (r = .58, p (2-tail) = .0001). This positive correlation suggests that, even without formal instruction, students' knowledge of issues related to self-advocacy and self-determination increases as they become older and have greater exposure to the special education system. However, the mean score achieved by the 11th and 12th-grade students was 8.9 (out of a possible 14) which suggests that even the oldest and most knowledgeable students may lack the prerequisite information necessary for them to effectively utilize self-advocacy skills.

The results achieved by the surveyed students on the Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Control Scale for Children were typical of the results obtained in previous studies conducted with students with learning disabilities (Nunn & Parish, 1992; Snyder, 1982). Unlike their non-disabled peers, students with learning disabilities often fail to demonstrate a developmental trend for increasingly internal loci of control. No correlation was found between age and internality scores (r = .07, p (2-tail) = .66) or externality scores (r = -.14, p (2-tail) = .37). Nor was there a correlation found between grade and

internality scores (r = .01, p (2-tail) = .94) or externality scores (r = -.07, p (2-tail) = .65) on this measure.

Does Knowledge as Assessed on Part One Predict Outcome on Locus of Control Measure?

For the total sample, there was a significant positive correlation (r = 44, p (2-tail) = .003) found between scores obtained on part one and internality scores on part two. This suggests that students who have acquired knowledge related to self-advocacy and self-determination may tend to have a more internal locus of control than do students who have not acquired this knowledge. The literature (Ayres, et al., 1990; Chapman, 1988; Nowicki & Strickland, 1973) supports the contention that these students will also exhibit greater motivation and involvement in their educations.

Implications of Project Results

The project results indicate that the amount of knowledge possessed by students about issues related to self-advocacy and self-determination was positively correlated with an internal locus of control. Field and Hoffman (1996b) suggest that this knowledge may be necessary for students to effectively self-advocate and strive for self-determination. Klein and Keller (1990) found that an internal locus of control is positively correlated with academic success and self-confidence.

However, the surveyed students in East Rochester demonstrated a poor fund of knowledge about issues related to self-advocacy and self-determination. Therefore, it may be in the district's best interest to provide a structured program of instruction to all students with learning disabilities. Such instruction may assist students in increasing their self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses and help them to identify successful coping strategies.

The literature (Abery, 1993/94; Brinckerhoff, 1996; Feldman & Messerli, 1995; Field, 1996; Ward, 1991) suggests that the acquisition of skills leading to self-determination is a life-long process and supports the early introduction of instruction. Although the seeds of self-determination may be sown during early childhood (Abery, 1993/94), the increased self-awareness that typically begins during early adolescence makes middle school the appropriate place to begin formal instruction in self-advocacy skills (Weimer, et al., 1994).

Wehmeyer (1996) details the need for students with disabilities to have opportunities to make mistakes, receive feedback, and be allowed to try new strategies. Within the supported environment of the middle school, students with learning disabilities should be (a) provided with the necessary instruction, (b) allowed to practice self-advocacy skills, and (c) allowed to make mistakes and learn from them. These opportunities may facilitate students' abilities to self-advocate.

It is possible that students with learning disabilities entering high school with the fundamental ability to self-advocate might demonstrate developmentally increasing internal loci of control as is typical for non-disabled students. Additionally, it may be beneficial for students with learning disabilities to be allowed to to make mistakes and learn from them while they are in middle school and their grades are not part of a permanent transcript which will be viewed by college admission officers. Weimer et al. (1994) and Brinckerhoff (1996) suggest specific objectives related to self-advocacy for students to begin practicing during their middle school years.

Self-Advocacy/Self-Determination Program Implementation

Many districts seeking to implement programs to address the self-advocacy and self-determination needs of students with learning disabilities opt

to design their own programs that are specific to the needs of their students (Weimer, 1994). Other districts choose to use one of the numerous curricula that are available from both private and public sources. These curricula vary widely in the amount of information presented and requirements for time and other resources. Martin, et al. (in press) provide a review of many self-determination instructional materials and identify sources for each of them.

School districts should be aware that the review by Martin, et al. is not exhaustive and omits some curricula that focus strictly on self-advocacy skills. One such curriculum that deserves mentioning is the Students in Transition Using Planning curriculum (1988) which is available from Pacer Center, Incorporated. This affordable curriculum could be used as a framework and modified by districts desiring customized programs. Another helpful public source is the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY) that offers material for helping students contribute to the development of their own IEPs. The student materials from NICHCY are available in print and on audio cassette.

Project Limitations

The needs assessment conducted in East Rochester had numerous limitations. One major limitation of this project was the small number of subjects involved (especially in grades 11 and 12) which limited the ability to draw conclusions based on findings from the survey results. If a similar assessment were to be conducted again, it would be beneficial to try to survey every student with a learning disability, including both those who receive consultant teacher services and those who receive resource room services.

An improved project would involve comparing the results of the survey in East Rochester with results obtained from an identical survey administered to

students in a demographically comparable school district that provides students with instruction in self-advocacy and self-determination skills. This would suggest potential gains that could be anticipated with the implementation of such programming.

In future administrations, consideration should be given to modifying some of the questions on part one to be specific to procedures already in place in the district where the survey is being administered. If instruction in self-advocacy and self-determination is implemented, this survey may be considered for use as a pre and post-test to measure potential student gains. However, in that case, it might be most useful to substitute a criterion-based test for part one. Additionally, the use of the long form of the Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Control Scale for Children would produce more valid and reliable results than does the short form. Further research could track the internality scores of students receiving self-advocacy instruction to determine if they would more closely approximate the developmental trends typically demonstrated by nondisabled populations.

Summary

Despite the limitations of this project, it has served as a useful tool to gauge the knowledge level and locus of control of the participants. Major project findings, factors that promote the acquisition of self-advocacy and self-determination skills, and suggestions for increasing students' skills are outlined in Appendix C. The project results suggest the need to provide students with learning disabilities with direct units of instruction to promote the acquisition of skills leading to self-determination and the ability to self-advocate. This project has provided base-line information on which to construct a program to facilitate

the academic and social success of East Rochester's students with learning disabilities and to assist them with transition planning.

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Appendix A: Special Education Survey-Part One

SPECIAL EDUCATION SURVEY

We would like to know how much students in your school district understand about the special education system and how to achieve personal goals. Do NOT put you name on this paper. Instead, please supply the following information.

Gender: _____Male _____Female Age:_____ Grade:_____ District:_____

DIRECTIONS - PART I

Please provide a short answer to the first question. On the following questions, mark an X next to the letter that indicates the best answer. You should consider each question carefully. However, if you do not know the answer to any question, you may choose the "I do not know" response.

1. What is your special education classification?

2. Each of you has an Individual Education Program (IEP). Indicate the test modifications that appear on your IEP (You may choose more than one answer for this question only.)

A. ___ Extended time

B. ___ Separate testing location

C. ___ Use of a computer

D. ___ Use of a calculator

E. ___ Test read aloud

F ___ Spelling exemption

G. ___ Other (please list)_____

H. ___ I do not have test modifications on my IEP.

I. ___ I do not know.

3. A school district can change your special education classification without your own or your parent's consent:

A. ___ Only if the change is necessary to maintain classroom discipline/safety.

B. ___ If the majority of the voting members of the CSE agree.

C. ___ Never.

D. ___ I do not know.

4. Select the best meaning for the word "compensate" as it is used in the following sentence: Sam is able to compensate for the difficulties he has with reading.

A. ___ Sam is outgrowing his reading difficulties.

B. ___ Sam uses strategies to find out what written material says, even though he cannot always read the words.

C. ___ Sam receives money from the Federal government because he is considered to be a "student with a disability."

D. ___ I do not know.

5. What is the purpose of a CSE meeting?

A. ___ To conduct the Complete Skills Evaluation that is required before a student in special education can be promoted to the next grade.

B. ___ To serve as a court to settle disputes between the school district and the family of a special education student.

C. ___ To determine which program and services will best meet the needs of a student in special education.

D. ___ I do not know.

6. Because he has difficulty with math, John has become very good at using the calculator. This is an example of:

A. ___ Developing a strength to cope with a weakness.

B. ___ Failing to put effort into his school work.

C. ___ Giving up.

D. ___ I do not know.

7. Can you decide not to use a modification listed on your IEP?

A. ___ Yes.

B. ___ Only with your teacher's approval.

C. ___ No.

D. ___ I do not know.

8. Can a student attend his/her own CSE meeting?

A. ___ Yes.

B. ___ No.

C. ___ Only high school students may attend CSE meetings.

D. ___ I do not know.

9. Which of the following is a goal?

A. ___ Win the lottery.

B. ___ Likes to work with children.

C. ___ Graduate from high school.

D. ___ I do not know.

10. The modifications listed on your IEP are _____ for your teachers to follow.
(choose best word)

A. ___ requirements

B. ___ suggestions

C. ___ never

D. ___ I do not know.

11. It is important to be able to predict the possible results of your actions because:

A. ___ It helps you decide whether or not to go ahead.

B. ___ It helps you know your strengths and weaknesses.

C. ___ It helps you to be an active listener.

D. ___ I do not know.

12. How often must your special education program be evaluated to determine whether it is meeting your needs?

A. ___ Before 6th, 9th, and 12th grades.

B. ___ Every 2 years.

C. ___ Every year.

D. ___ I do not know.

13. When you encounter an obstacle to achieving your goal, the best thing to do is:

    A. ___ Select a different goal.

    B. ___ Find a creative way to get around it.

    C. ___ Keep trying anyway.

    D. ___ I do not know.

14. Which of the following is an important skill in active listening?

    A. ___ Thinking about what you are going to say next while listening to the speaker.

    B. ___ Interrupting the speaker when you hear something you disagree with.

    C. ___ Telling the speaker what you heard.

    D. ___ I do not know.

Appendix B: Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Locus of Control Scale for Children-Short Form

DIRECTIONS - PART 2

We would like to know how the attitudes and opinions of students differ depending on the age of the students. Please circle YES or NO to indicate your personal feelings about each of the questions below. All responses will be kept confidential.

1. Do you believe that most problems will solve themselves if you just don't fool with them?

   Yes NO

2. Are you often blamed for things that just aren't your fault?

   Yes NO

3. Do you feel that most of the time it doesn't pay to try hard because things never turn out right anyway?

   Yes NO

4. Do you feel that most of the time parents listen to what their children have to say?

   YES NO

5. When you get punished does it usually seem it's for no good reason at all?

   YES NO

6. Most of the time do you find it hard to change a friend's (mind) opinion?

   YES NO

7. Do you feel that it's impossible to change your parent's mind about anything?

   YES NO

8. Do you feel that when you do something wrong there's very little you can do to make it right?

   YES NO

9. Do you believe that most kids are just born good at sports?

   YES NO

10. Do you feel that one of the best ways to handle most problems is just not to think about them?

    YES NO

11. Do you feel that when a kid you age decides to hit you, there's little you can do to stop him or her?

    YES NO

12. Have you felt that when people were mean to you it was usually for no reason at all?

YES NO

13. Most of the time, do you feel that you can change what might happen tomorrow by what you do today?

YES NO

14. Do you believe that when bad things are going to happen they just are going to happen no matter what you try to do to stop them?

YES NO

15. Most of the time do you you find it useless to try to get your own way at home?

YES NO

16. Do you feel that when somebody your age wants to be your enemy there's little you can do to change matters?

YES NO

17. Do you usually feel that you have little to say about what you get to eat at home?

YES NO

18. Do you feel that when someone doesn't like you there's little you can do about it?

YES NO

19. Do you usually feel that it's almost useless to try in school because most other children are just plain smarter than you are?

YES NO

20. Are you the kind of person who believes that planning ahead makes things turn out better?

YES NO

21. Most of the time, do you feel that you have little to say about what your family decides to do?

YES NO

THANK YOU !!!!

Appendix C: Project Findings; Factors that Promote the Acquisition of Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination Skills; Suggestions for Increasing Students' Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination Skills

Project Findings

- 38% of students surveyed knew their special education classification

- 29% of students surveyed knew the test modifications that appear on their IEPs.

- The average score achieved on part 1, which assessed student knowledge in areas related to self-advocacy and self-determination, was 6.5 out of a possible 14.

- The amount of knowledge possessed by students increased with age. The average score achieved by 11th and 12th grade students was 8.9.

- A significant positive correlation was found between knowledge of issues related to self-advocacy & self-determination and an internal locus of control.

- The internality of the students surveyed did not increase with age as would be expected with nondisabled students.

Factors that Promote the Acquisition of Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination Skills

- Self-awareness of academic and social strengths and weaknesses.
- The ability to self-evaluate skills and modify them as necessary on an on-going basis.
- Knowledge of what coping strategies are and are not successful.
- The ability to ask for help when needed.
- An understanding of legal rights and responsibilities.

Suggestions for Increasing Students' Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination Skills

- Provide direct units of instruction to teach self-advocacy skills.
- Begin instruction during middle school years and continue throughout high school.
- Provide students with feedback regarding acts of self-advocacy or failure to self-advocate.
- Provide students with a standardized procedure to follow to obtain testing modifications.
- Include students in IEP planning sessions.
- Provide opportunities to practice self-advocacy skills, make mistakes, and learn from them.