

Understanding my disability: exploring how student awareness influences self-advocacy for
academic accommodations

by

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B.S., Kansas State University, 2000
M.A., Kansas State University, 2002
M.S., Fort Hays State University, 2023

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Special Education, Counseling, & Student Affairs
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

This quantitative quasi-experimental study examined how explicit instruction in disability awareness and IEP literacy influences secondary students' knowledge of their disability, understanding of accommodations, and self-reported confidence in requesting academic supports within general education settings. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the study explored the relationship between disability awareness, IEP literacy, and students' perceived readiness to advocate for academic supports among students identified with Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Emotional Disturbance (ED), and Other Health Impairment (OHI).

The study was conducted in a rural Kansas high school using a cluster-randomized pretest–posttest control-group design. Students in the experimental group received explicit instruction through Lessons 7–9 of the NEXTUP Transition Curriculum, which focused on understanding disability, identifying accommodations, and developing help-seeking strategies. Quantitative data were collected using lesson-specific pretests and posttests, the Disability Checklist, and the Accommodations and Modifications Awareness Questionnaire. Independent-samples *t* tests were conducted due to unmatched pretest and posttest samples, and effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) were calculated to determine practical significance. Qualitative responses were analyzed using abductive thematic analysis to provide additional context.

Findings indicated statistically significant improvements in students' knowledge of their disability and supports, understanding of accommodations, and self-reported confidence in requesting academic supports following explicit instruction. Large effect sizes suggested meaningful practical impact. Qualitative findings further indicated increased self-awareness, improved understanding of how accommodations support learning, and greater self-reported perceptions of readiness to communicate needs in general education settings.

These findings support the integration of explicit IEP-literacy instruction within secondary transition services and highlight the role of structured instruction in promoting student awareness and self-reported perceptions related to self-advocacy. Implications suggest that embedding IEP literacy into existing instructional contexts may strengthen students' perceived preparedness to advocate for supports, though future research is needed to examine the impact on observed advocacy behaviors over time.

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This accomplishment is not mine alone—it belongs to all of you.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to every student who has ever sat in a classroom, unsure of how to ask for what they need.

To the students with disabilities who were told to stay quiet, who were misunderstood, overlooked, or underestimated—this is for you. Your stories, your strength, and your voice are at the heart of this research.

To my son, Keith, who reminds me daily why advocacy matters. Being your mother has deepened my understanding of what it means to fight for access, equity, and opportunity. You are my greatest motivation.

To the teachers who keep showing up, who are willing to listen, learn, and do better—this work is for you, too. May we never stop growing in how we support and empower our students.

And finally, to the little girl I once was—the one who learned to be strong, to speak up, and to never stop asking questions—this is the promise kept.

Preface

The journey to this dissertation has been both personal and professional—a blend of lived experience, years in the classroom, and the quiet questions that lingered long after the school day ended.

As an educator, I have spent decades working with students of all abilities, witnessing first-hand the power and potential of those who too often go unheard. As a mother, I have seen the world of education through the eyes of a child navigating support systems and advocating for their own success. These roles have shaped not only the questions I ask, but the purpose behind my work.

This study began as a search to understand how students come to recognize their needs and learn to speak up for themselves within a system that doesn't always make room for their voices. Writing this dissertation has required more than research; it has required reflection, vulnerability, and persistence. I am grateful for the mentors, students, colleagues, and loved ones who have walked this path with me. Their encouragement fueled the long nights and early mornings spent writing, reading, and rewriting.

With humility and hope, I offer this work to the students who persist, the teachers who care, and the shared vision of a more inclusive educational future.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE, 2024), there has been a 2% increase from 2012–2013 to 2022–2023 in the number of students aged 6–21 receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In 2022–2023, about 15% of the resident population (7.5 million) were served. The most common disability among these students was specific learning disability (SLD), accounting for 32%. Furthermore, 66.7% of these students received their instruction in general education classrooms for 80% or more of the school day. When students are placed in general education classrooms, accommodations and modifications are expected to be implemented to address their unique needs.

Although IDEA requires schools to provide accommodations and modifications as students' right to a free and appropriate education, the degree and consistency of their application can vary (Hart & Brehm, 2013; Steffes, 2006; Bagley & Tang, 2018). Students often experience inconsistent access to accommodations due to a variability in how supports are communicated and implemented across classrooms. This is partly due to a common assumption that the responsibility for accommodations primarily falls on special education teachers (Hart & Brehm, 2013; Steffes, 2006). This assumption is further supported in Bagley & Tang (2018), where special education teacher interviews yielded data that “they are first and foremost advocates for their students” (p. 54).

Additionally, while schools have a legal obligation to provide accommodations and modifications, it is often assumed that secondary students can independently advocate for their own rights, which can lead to accommodations being overlooked (Henegen & Weaver, 2018). Overall, the research indicates while secondary students may acknowledge they have a disability supported with an IEP; they lack the understanding of their disability thus impacting their understanding of how to advocate for the accommodations laid out in their IEP (Carter et al.

2010; Cawthon & Cole 2010; Hart & Brehm 2013; Smith 2011; Steffes 2006). As cited by Dorr (2023), Agran and Hughes (2008) report that only 20% of high school students indicated they received instruction on self-advocacy skills, specifically IEP literacy instruction. Secondary students are recommended to be provided with guidance on self-advocacy within the required transitional services on their IEP according to Carr (2023). Nonetheless, this aspect remains deficient. Secondary students continue to lack explicit instruction in how to recognize their learning needs, understand their disability, or effectively request accommodations (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Carter et al., 2010). This gap in *IEP literacy*—students’ understanding of their Individualized Education Program (IEP) and the rights it affords—can reduce their confidence and understanding of self-advocate (Agran & Hughes, 2008).

Developing self-advocacy skills is a critical component of self-determination and long-term success for students with disabilities (Durlak et al., 1994; Test et al., 2005). Research also indicates when students have self-advocacy skills, they can request appropriate accommodations and modifications and they are more likely to experience academic success and smoother postsecondary transitions (Koca et al., 2023). The present study focused on enhancing these skills through targeted instruction in disability awareness and advocacy using the district-approved *NextUp Transition Curriculum*.

Rationale for the Study

Students with disabilities face challenges in accessing academic accommodations within general education. While federal legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees supports, students often need to advocate for their needs (Carter et al., 2010; Smith, 2011; Steffes, 2006). Effective self-advocacy is influenced by students' understanding of their disabilities, highlighting the importance of IEP literacy (Agran & Hughes,

2008) for comprehending how disabilities impact learning (Test et al., 2005). Research shows that self-advocacy is crucial for academic success and independence (Durlak et al., 1994; Carter et al., 2010) but many students lack the necessary skills (Castro, 2015; Lopez et al., 2019; Cawthon & Cole, 2010).

Students' development of self-advocacy skills is greatly influenced by the guidance and support of well-trained educators (McDonald, 2018; Smith, 2011). The study aimed to explore how students' understanding of their disabilities influences self-advocacy in general education, informing interventions that support student autonomy and equitable learning access. Despite the well-documented benefits of teaching self-advocacy, a clear gap remains between the research and the practices implemented in secondary schools. Specifically, instruction that fosters self-awareness and advocacy remains underutilized at the secondary level, particularly in ways that prepare students for postsecondary education and adult life (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Madaus et al., 2018). A significant contributor to this gap is the lack of instruction in IEP literacy—a critical tool for helping students understand their disability and associated supports (Agran & Hughes, 2008). Without this foundational knowledge, students may be unaware of how their disability affects their learning, a key element of the “knowledge of self” domain within the broader self-advocacy framework (Test et al., 2005).

Research consistently shows that self-advocacy plays a vital role in both academic success and long-term independence for students with disabilities. Durlak et al. (1994) highlights self-advocacy and self-determination as essential components of successful school-to-life transitions. Students who comprehend their learning challenges and the accommodations available to them are more likely to express their needs clearly and to persist in the face of academic barriers. Carter et al. (2010) also emphasize that self-awareness is strongly associated with increased student initiative in seeking educational support. Nonetheless, many students with learning disabilities, emotional disorders, or other health impairments lack the necessary skills to

navigate these processes effectively (Castro, 2015; Lopez et al., 2019). For example, Cawthon and Cole (2010) found that while students were aware of the services they received, they often lacked deeper knowledge of their own disabilities or the contents of their IEPs.

Developing self-advocacy skills is essential for students with disabilities, yet these abilities often depend on the level of support and guidance they receive from educators. Teacher perceptions and training strongly influence how effectively students learn to understand and express their needs (McDonald, 2018; Smith, 2011). Although some teachers encourage active student participation in educational planning, others may limit independence out of concern for readiness. Moreover, Cawthon and Cole (2010) found that participation in IEP meetings alone does not ensure students' understanding of their disabilities or rights, highlighting the importance of explicit, skill-based instruction in self-advocacy.

While previous research has examined educator training and perceptions, fewer studies have investigated how students' own understanding of their disabilities influences their understanding of advocate for needed accommodations. This study addressed that gap by directly measuring the effect of explicit IEP-literacy instruction on students' knowledge and self-reported perceptions related to self-advocacy. Given these findings, this study aimed to examine how secondary students' understanding of their disabilities—whether identified as a specific learning disability, other health impairment, or emotional disturbance—affects their understanding of self-advocacy within general education settings. The *NextUp Transition Curriculum* (Council for Exceptional Children, n.d.) provided structured, evidence-based lessons that build disability awareness, IEP literacy, and advocacy skills. Implementing these lessons in the learning-center setting was expected to enhance students' self-reported confidence in requesting accommodations and foster greater autonomy. Accordingly, this study sought to measure the impact of explicit IEP-literacy instruction on students' knowledge and self-reported perceptions related to self-advocacy.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how explicit instruction in disability awareness and IEP literacy influences secondary students' knowledge of their disability, understanding of accommodations, and self-reported confidence in requesting academic supports within general education settings. Specifically, the study investigated the impact of structured instruction delivered through the NEXTUP Transition Curriculum (Lessons 7–9) on students' understanding of their learning needs, identification of appropriate supports, and self-reported confidence in requesting accommodations. The study focused on measurable changes in knowledge and perceived readiness for self-advocacy rather than direct observation of advocacy behavior.

Research Questions

The primary focus of this dissertation was to examine how explicit instruction in disability awareness and IEP literacy influences students' knowledge of their disabilities, accommodations, and self-report confidences in requesting academic supports. The central research question guiding this study was:

How does explicit instruction in disability awareness and IEP literacy influence secondary students' knowledge of their disabilities, accommodations, and self-reported confidence in requesting academic supports within general education settings?

This question reflected the broader aim of the study: to investigate how disability awareness and advocacy-related knowledge and understanding intersect to shape educational access and equity for students with disabilities. To support a deeper understanding of this relationship, the following sub-questions guided the study:

- a) To what extent does explicit instruction (Lessons 7–9 of the NEXTUP Transition Curriculum) improve students' knowledge of their disability, rights, and academic accommodations?

- b) To what extent does explicit instruction influence students' self-reported confidence and perceived readiness to request accommodations in general education settings?
- c) How do students describe changes in their understanding of their disabilities, accommodations and confidence in requesting academic supports following explicit instruction?

These research questions were informed by a pilot study conducted with general education teachers in a rural high school. The pilot explored initial perceptions regarding student disability awareness and self-advocacy and helped refine the design and direction of the full dissertation study.

Definitions of Key Terminology

To ensure consistency and clarity, the following key terms are defined as they apply to this study:

Accommodation

A change in how a student accesses information or demonstrates learning without altering the instructional content or performance expectations (Kansas State Department of Education [KSDE], 2023; McGlynn & Kelly, 2025). Examples include extended time, preferential seating, or access to assistive technology.

Advocacy

The act of speaking or acting on one's own behalf to obtain necessary supports, resources, or rights. In this study, advocacy refers specifically to students' understanding of how to request and communicate their need for academic accommodations (Test et al., 2005; Castro, 2015).

Disability Awareness

An individual's understanding of their disability and how it affects learning, performance, and behavior. Disability awareness encompasses both cognitive understanding and personal acceptance of one's exceptionality (Ryan & Deci, 2000; McDonald, 2018).

Disability Identity

A person's self-concept as an individual with a disability, including awareness of both strengths and challenges, which influences self-advocacy and empowerment (Gill, 1997; Olney & Brockelman, 2003).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

A federal law that guarantees students with disabilities the right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and requires the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to outline services, supports, and transition planning (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

A legally binding plan developed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) that outlines a student's present levels of performance, annual goals, accommodations, and services required to ensure access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE).

IEP Literacy

Students' understanding of their Individualized Education Program (IEP) and the rights it affords

Modification

A change in *what* a student is expected to learn that alters the depth, breadth, or complexity of the content. Modifications adjust curriculum expectations, unlike accommodations, which modify access (KSDE, 2023; McGlynn & Kelly, 2025).

Self-Advocacy

A foundational component of self-determination involving a student's ability to understand their learning needs, express those needs effectively, and make decisions that support their success (Test et al., 2005; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007).

Self-Determination

A motivational construct emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness as essential to goal-directed behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within this study, self-determination underpins the development of self-advocacy skills and disability understanding.

Transition Curriculum

A structured instructional framework designed to prepare students with disabilities for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. The NEXTUP Transition Curriculum (Council for Exceptional Children, n.d.) is the district-approved program used in this study to teach disability awareness and advocacy.

NEXTUP Lessons 7–9

The three lessons from the NEXTUP Transition Curriculum implemented in this study: *Understanding My Disability* (Lesson 7), *Knowing My Rights and Accommodations* (Lesson 8), and *How to Ask for Help* (Lesson 9). These lessons provide direct instruction in IEP literacy and self-advocacy.

Learning Center Teachers

Special education resource teachers who provide targeted interventions and individualized instruction to support students with disabilities in meeting their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and accessing the general education curriculum.

Summary

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE, 2024) reports a 2% increase in the number of students aged 6–21 receiving services under IDEA, with 7.5 million students, or 15% of the resident population, being served in 2022–2023, primarily for specific learning disabilities. Despite IDEA’s mandate, the implementation of accommodations varies. Research underlines the crucial role self-advocacy plays in students’ academic success, while also highlighting a gap in students’ understanding of their disabilities and their ability to communicate their needs for accommodations. Many students demonstrate limited knowledge of their disabilities and accommodations, emphasizing the need for explicit instruction and structured supports to promote self-advocacy.

The purpose of this study was to examine how explicit instruction in disability awareness and IEP literacy influences secondary students’ knowledge of their disability, understanding of accommodations, and self-reported confidence in requesting academic supports within general education settings. The primary research question guiding this study asked how explicit instruction influences these outcomes, with sub-questions examining (a) the extent to which instruction improves students’ knowledge of their disability, rights, and accommodations, (b) how instruction influences students’ self-reported confidence and perceived readiness to request

accommodations, and (c) how students describe changes in their understanding of their disability, accommodations, and communication of their needs following instruction.

The study contributed to the growing body of literature emphasizing self-advocacy and self-determination for students with disabilities. By centering student voice, the study highlighted how understanding one's disability can support empowerment and more equitable classroom access. The findings inform how schools integrate IEP-literacy instruction within transition services, guide professional development for special education teachers, and support compliance with IDEA's transition requirements.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature informing this study, including the legal foundations of special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), key concepts such as specific learning disabilities, accommodations, and modifications, the theoretical frameworks of self-determination and self-advocacy, and instructional approaches that support students' understanding of their disabilities, accommodations, and self-advocacy-related knowledge.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) often face unique challenges when navigating the general education environment, particularly when it comes to understanding and advocating for their academic needs. The primary research question guiding this study— *How does explicit instruction in disability awareness and IEP literacy influence secondary students' knowledge of their disability, understanding of accommodations, and self-reported confidence in requesting academic supports within general education settings?*—focuses on the intersection of self-awareness, communication, and educational equity. A growing body of literature emphasizes that students with disabilities must not only receive appropriate supports but also possess the knowledge and skills necessary to recognize their own needs and request the accommodations to which they are legally entitled (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Test et al., 2005). However, this process is often complicated by limited disability-awareness instruction and inconsistent opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals.

Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and informed by research on self-advocacy and disability identity (Carter et al., 2010; McDonald, 2018), this chapter reviews literature that explores how students' understanding of their disabilities supports the development of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—core elements of self-determination that empower students to communicate their needs effectively and seek equitable access to learning opportunities. By examining studies related to disability awareness, IEP literacy, and accommodation use, this chapter establishes the theoretical and empirical foundation for examining how explicit instruction in these areas can strengthen secondary students' knowledge of self-advocacy concepts within general education settings.

This literature review begins by defining and contextualizing specific learning disabilities and exploring the legal and educational frameworks that provide for accommodations and modifications under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Following this, the chapter examines self-determination theory and its relevance to students with disabilities, particularly in relation to autonomy and motivation within school environments. A detailed discussion of self-advocacy is also included, highlighting its foundational role in successful transitions from secondary to postsecondary education. The review then considers how students learn about their disabilities and how this understanding shapes how they describe and communicate their needs and request appropriate accommodations in academic settings. In doing so, the chapter provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the personal, educational, and institutional factors that influence the self-advocacy process for students with specific learning disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

To understand how students with disabilities navigate academic environments and advocate for themselves, it is first essential to define the nature of the disabilities in question. Specific learning disabilities represent one of the most commonly identified categories under special education law, yet they are often misunderstood or mischaracterized by both educators and students. These disabilities affect critical academic functions such as reading, writing, and mathematics, and are typically linked to deficits in cognitive processing rather than intellectual ability. Clarifying what constitutes a specific learning disability—along with how it is classified and recognized in educational and psychological contexts—provides the necessary foundation for examining the supports available to these students and how their own awareness of these disabilities shapes their advocacy. The following section explores the definition, classification, and common manifestations of specific learning disabilities.

Specific Learning Disabilities

Specific learning disabilities are commonly described in educational and psychological literature as conditions in which a student's academic achievement does not align with their potential, primarily due to impairments in core cognitive processing skills (Koca et al., 2023). According to the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD-11), such challenges are categorized under “developmental learning disorders” (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018). These disorders can manifest in a variety of forms, including difficulties with working memory, reading (dyslexia), written expression (dysgraphia), mathematics (dyscalculia), and other distinct learning-related impairments.

Accommodations and Modifications

Students who are identified with specific learning disabilities (SLD) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are legally entitled to receive educational support through accommodations or modifications outlined in their Individualized Education Program (IEP). Despite these protections, many students experience uncertainty about the distinctions between these two types of supports and how each affects their learning experience.

Definition & Difference of Accommodations and Modifications

According to McGlynn and Kelly (2025), *accommodations*—also referred to as adaptations—are changes to the learning environment, instructional methods, tools, or assessment formats that help students access the same content as their peers. These adjustments modify *how* a student learns or demonstrates knowledge without changing the academic standards or expectations. For example, providing a student with dyslexia with audiobooks instead of printed text allows access to grade-level content without reducing rigor.

In contrast, *modifications* involve altering *what* a student is expected to learn or demonstrate, thereby adjusting the curriculum or performance criteria to meet the student's

individual needs (McGlynn & Kelly, 2025). Examples include reducing the length or complexity of assignments or providing alternative content that aligns with the student's learning goals. Understanding these distinctions enables students to more effectively communicate their educational needs and advocate for the specific supports necessary for equitable participation in general education classrooms.

Students Understanding and Use of Supports

While accommodations and modifications are essential components of individualized instruction for students with disabilities, their effectiveness is significantly influenced by the student's awareness of these supports and their understanding of how to utilize them appropriately (Test et al., 2005). The literature increasingly emphasizes that fostering student understanding and engagement with their own educational needs is a key element of successful inclusion (McGlynn & Kelly, 2025). The connection between a student's abilities and their capacity to act underscores the importance of self-determination, encompassing the skills and mindsets needed for students to set goals, make informed decisions, and advocate for their learning needs. Consequently, discussions in academic circles go beyond offering assistance to exploring ways in which students can gain empowerment in managing their educational journeys by fostering self-determination skills.

Self-determination

Concept and Importance of Self-Determination

Self-determination has been highlighted in various studies as crucial for improving outcomes for students with disabilities (Agran, Snow, & Swanner, 1999; Weimer & Schwartz, 1998; Mason et al., 2004). It involves a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable individuals to engage in independent, goal-directed behaviors. Central to this concept is the intrinsic motivation of the learner (Carter et al., 2009).

In special education, self-determination has gained particular significance in the literature on transition to postsecondary settings (Carter et al., 2009). Theoretical models such as those proposed by Deci and Ryan (2002) and Wehmeyer et al. (2003) explain how young people achieve self-determination through experiences that foster choice, problem solving, and self-regulation. Similarly, Mithaug et al.'s (1993, 2003) self-determination learning theory suggests that students' self-determination develops through adaptive skills and opportunities in their environments that allow them to make choices aligned with their interests and needs. These opportunities strengthen students' self-knowledge, goal identification, persistence, and confidence. Experiences at school and at home that allow students to practice decision-making and self-advocacy can therefore enhance their sense of control and ownership over learning.

Development of Self-Determination

Although the importance of self-determination is widely recognized, many students with disabilities continue to receive limited explicit instruction in these skills. When schools provide structured opportunities for students to learn about their strengths, needs, and goals, students demonstrate greater independence and engagement in both academic and transition planning processes (Shogren et al., 2015). Promoting self-determination equips students to take an active role in their own education, developing the motivation and confidence necessary to advocate effectively for appropriate supports and accommodations in general-education settings. Understanding the theoretical foundations of self-determination provides a basis for exploring how these principles contribute to self-advocacy.

Self-determination Theory

Core Components: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness

Self-determination theory, as outlined by Ryan and Deci (2000) is a framework that explores human motivation and personality by emphasizing individuals' innate resources for personal growth and self-regulation. The theory blends conventional research methods with a comprehensive framework focused on human development and self-motivation, highlighting the impact of internal factors on personality development. Deci and Ryan's theory, as mentioned by Rogers and Tannock (2013), posits that well-being and motivation derive from fulfilling three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

The theory asserts that meeting these three needs is crucial for individuals to develop and function optimally. Given that students typically spend a significant amount of time in school, with Desilver from the Pew Research Center (2023) indicating that students spend around 175 to 180 days and 900-1170 hours in the classroom on average, it becomes evident that creating a school environment that supports students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness can enhance their satisfaction and motivation in school (Rogers & Tannock, 2013).

Rogers & Tannock's (2013) study found that school support has a significant indirect effect on school engagement via self-determination. Furthermore, self-determination is the strongest predictor of school engagement thus students with disabilities who were taught self-determination skills had higher school engagement after the intervention. Research indicates that supportive school environments enhance student engagement by meeting these psychological needs and that explicit instruction in self-determination skills strengthens students' sense of agency (Rogers & Tannock, 2013). Moreover, self-determination has been found to be a strong predictor of school engagement; students with disabilities who receive targeted instruction in self-determination demonstrate increased participation and persistence after interventions.

Implications for Students with Disabilities

Building upon the foundational principles of self-determination theory, the literature suggests that students who experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness within supportive educational environments are more likely to engage in proactive, self-directed behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These behaviors are particularly important for students with disabilities, as they navigate the expectations of inclusive classrooms and the need for academic support. One of the most critical manifestations of self-determination in educational practice is self-advocacy. As an applied outcome of self-determination, self-advocacy reflects a student's ability to understand their learning needs, express those needs effectively, and actively participate in decisions affecting their education. The following section explores self-advocacy in greater depth, including its definitions, key components, and implications for students with disabilities in secondary school settings.

Self-advocacy

Definition of Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy derives from self-determination (Koca et al., 2022). Field et al. (1996) found that self-determination skills, such as self-advocacy, are crucial for success beyond secondary education. Self-advocacy encompasses a student having a comprehensive understanding of their disability and being conscious of both the strengths and weaknesses arising from the functional limitations imposed by the disability, as well as being capable of effectively communicating legitimate needs for academic or physical accommodations (Hartman, 1993 as cited in Stober et al., 2021). In a special education setting, self-advocacy is seen as when a person speaks up for what they need (Castro, 2015; Koco et.al., 2022). The basis for self-advocacy is that the student will benefit from advocating for themselves (Castro, 2015). Increasing awareness of their disability empowers students to advocate for the supports

necessary for success in academic and community settings. Graduating from high school without the essential advocacy skills can be a barrier for many students (Stober et al., 2021).

Components of Self-Advocacy

According to Test et al. (2005), individuals with disabilities perceive self-advocacy as comprising four essential elements: knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, knowledge of advocacy, and knowledge of leadership.

Knowledge of Self

The first aspect is "knowledge of self," which involves understanding one's strengths, weaknesses, goals, learning styles, support needs, interests, disability characteristics, and responsibilities. Merchant and Gajar (1997) found that educating students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) about their disabilities helps them set realistic goals, recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and identify effective interventions and accommodations. Brinckerhoff (1994) also states that self-awareness enables students with SLD to comprehend and advocate for their learning needs and preferences.

Knowledge of Rights

The second component, "knowledge of rights," involves knowing human and educational rights. Pocock et al. (2002) suggest that when students are explicitly taught about their rights, their confidence and understanding of self-advocate improve.

Knowledge of Communication

The third element, knowledge of communication, requires individuals to express their self-awareness and rights using assertiveness, negotiation, and problem-solving skills. Effective communication is essential for students with disabilities as they navigate group projects, classroom interactions, and advocacy situations (Schena et al., 2022).

Knowledge of Leadership

The final component, *leadership*, involves advocating not only for oneself but also for others with similar challenges. Leadership skills help students take active roles in group decision-making, such as participating in IEP or transition meetings (Allen et al., 2001). Developing leadership capacity empowers students to build confidence, foster collaboration, and engage in collective advocacy efforts that support equitable learning environments (Schena et al., 2022).

IEP and Advocacy Literacy

Importance of IEP Literacy

Students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) often face educational and instructional challenges that can impede their access to and progress within the general education curriculum. These difficulties can lead to underachievement, retention, or disengagement when students' learning needs are not adequately addressed (Gilmour et al., 2019; Fletcher et al., 2019; Yakut, 2021). Self-advocacy helps mitigate these barriers by equipping students with the knowledge and skills to understand their rights, recognize their learning needs, and effectively request appropriate accommodations and modifications (Pocock et al., 2002). When students develop these competencies, they are better positioned to navigate academic challenges, participate meaningfully in their learning, and eliminate barriers that limit access to the curriculum.

Fielder & Danneker (2007) found that students who identify with mild to moderate learning disabilities can learn self-advocacy skills. Beale (2005) and Levinson, along with Ohler (1998), emphasize the importance of students understanding their disability and their accommodations. Students should be aware of the level of support needed for their post-secondary experiences; they must learn to advocate for themselves since they no longer have the same support system as in secondary education. Beale stresses that students should practice

expressing their needs effectively to disability support staff and instructors to ensure they receive the necessary assistance.

Instructional Approaches to Teaching Self-Advocacy

These skills need to be taught in a systematic and explicit manner (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007). Literature suggests the most effective methods for training self-advocacy skills are direct instruction and discrimination training. Research studies by Fiedler & Danneker (2007), Merchant & Gajar (1998), Sievert, Cuvo, & Davis (1988), and Test, et al. (2005) as well as Pocock, et al. (2002), Walker & Test (2011), and White & Vo (2006) support the effectiveness of a seven-step direct instruction procedure involves providing an operational definition of the target behavior, demonstrating the skill through role-play, asking clarifying questions, rehearsing the skill, receiving feedback, showcasing skill mastery, and undergoing generalization training. These programs typically focus on communication, self-awareness, leadership, and assertiveness skills at either the group or individual level. In research conducted by Walker and Test (2011), a direct instruction approach was implemented to enhance the capacity of three high school students in recognizing classroom accommodations. The program was structured to enable students to pinpoint and engage in conversations about their accommodation requirements with peers, along with honing their advocacy abilities through practice and feedback. The training involved demonstrating sample scenarios of students requesting accommodations, role-playing exercises to facilitate rehearsal, and providing detailed feedback on performance.

By honing self-advocacy skills and embracing their disability, students can effectively request adaptations that align with their specific requirements, thereby reducing task difficulty and enhancing their control over their learning experiences (Schena et al., 2022). Additionally, by practicing self-advocacy skills and embracing their disability, students can improve their understanding of secure accommodations beyond secondary school. Self-advocacy involves building self-awareness, discussing their disability with parents and teachers, and articulating

their academic requirements; these are essential steps in obtaining the necessary accommodations (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). This proactive approach empowers students to navigate educational settings effectively and advocate for the support they need.

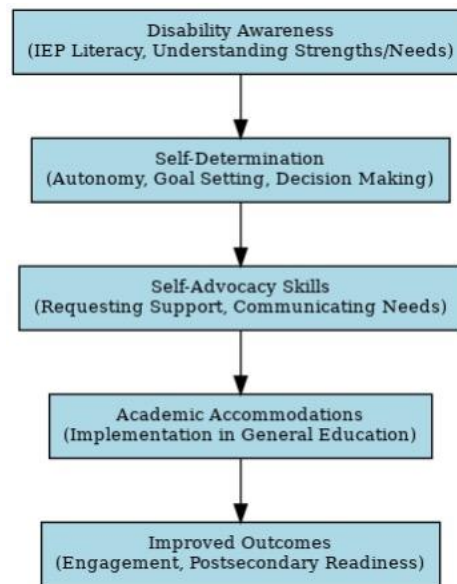


Figure 2.1 Components of self-advocacy
(adapted from Test et al., 2005).

While the advocacy literacy of students equips them with the tools to communicate their needs effectively and access necessary accommodations, the attitudes and perceptions of teachers in educational settings significantly influence the implementation and success of these efforts. Understanding the dynamics between students' self-advocacy development and teacher attitudes is essential for creating inclusive learning environments that prioritize student empowerment and success.

Environmental Factors Influencing Student Advocacy

Although this study focuses on students' understanding of their disabilities, it is important to acknowledge that the classroom environment also shapes opportunities for self-advocacy. Students' opportunities to practice advocacy skills often depends on how responsive and supportive their learning environments are (McDonald, 2018; Cawthon & Cole, 2010).

When teachers provide consistent accommodations, encourage student participation in learning decisions, and foster open communication, students gain confidence and competence in expressing their needs (Bagley & Tang, 2018).

In contrast, inconsistent implementation of accommodations or limited understanding of disability-related supports can create barriers that discourage students from self-advocating (Hart & Brehm, 2013; Steffes, 2006). Research suggests that students thrive in inclusive classrooms where expectations are clear, supports are routinely applied, and collaboration between general and special education staff models advocacy and shared responsibility (Cawthon & Cole, 2010). These environmental factors, while not the focus of this study, provide important context for understanding how student learning environments can either promote or hinder the development and expression of self-advocacy skills.

Addressing the Needs of Students with Emotional Disturbance and Other Health Impairments

Students with emotional disturbance (ED) and other health impairments (OHI) often struggle with sustaining engagement, regulating emotions, and avoiding work in general education classrooms. A common barrier is limited understanding of their Individualized Education Program (IEP) and the accommodations available to them. Cawthon and Cole (2010) found that while students may know they receive services, they often lack deeper knowledge of their disability or IEP contents, which reduces their understanding of self-advocacy. Structured instruction in IEP literacy—such as reviewing goals or practicing how to request supports—has been recommended to increase independence and carryover into postsecondary settings (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Agran & Hughes, 2008).

Although students with emotional disturbance (ED) and other health impairments (OHI) benefit from supportive learning environments, the development of self-determination and

advocacy skills remains central to their academic success. Students who are taught to set personal goals, make informed choices, and reflect on their progress demonstrate greater persistence, improved emotional regulation, and stronger engagement with learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Rogers & Tannock, 2013; Wehmeyer et al., 2003). Integrating opportunities for goal setting and self-reflection within transition planning is particularly important, as many students leave high school unprepared to advocate for themselves in postsecondary or workplace settings (Lopez et al., 2019).

Carr (2023) emphasizes that explicit instruction in self-advocacy—integrated within transition and IEP-related learning—helps students with ED and OHI develop the skills needed to identify their needs, request accommodations, and navigate adult environments with confidence. By focusing on self-awareness and proactive communication, students strengthen their capacity to participate meaningfully in educational decisions and secure equitable access to learning opportunities across contexts.

Summary

Students with disabilities face ongoing challenges in understanding and advocating for their academic needs within general education settings. This literature review explored how students' understanding of their disabilities affects their understanding of self-advocacy, focusing on self-awareness, communication, and equitable access to education. The review examined the definitions and classifications of specific learning disabilities (SLD), the legal framework for accommodations and modifications under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the theoretical foundations of self-determination and self-advocacy.

Research consistently demonstrates that fostering students' understanding of their own disabilities and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) enhances their understanding of how to identify, communicate, and request necessary supports (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Test et al.,

2005). Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) underscores that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for developing self-directed behaviors, including advocacy. Self-advocacy, as a learned skill, involves knowledge of self, rights, communication, and leadership, empowering students to take an active role in decisions about their education.

Studies highlight that explicit instruction in IEP literacy, disability awareness, and advocacy skills can improve student engagement, independence, and long-term outcomes. When students are taught how to interpret their IEPs, understand their accommodations, and practice communication strategies, they gain confidence in their understanding of how to advocate across academic and postsecondary environments (Carter et al., 2010; McDonald, 2018). Additionally, contextual factors such as supportive classroom environments and opportunities for choice and reflection further promote students' self-determination and advocacy development (Bagley & Tang, 2018; Rogers & Tannock, 2013).

While prior research has established the importance of self-advocacy instruction, limited studies have examined structured, curriculum-based IEP literacy interventions within secondary resource settings using quantitative outcome measures. This gap highlights the need for research that evaluates the impact of explicit, curriculum-based instruction on students' knowledge of their disability, understanding of accommodations, and self-reported confidence in requesting academic supports within authentic school contexts.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used to examine the impact of explicit instruction in disability awareness and IEP literacy on secondary students' knowledge and self-reported confidence in self-advocacy, including the study design, participants, data collection and analysis procedures, and measures to ensure validity, reliability, and ethical integrity.

Chapter 3 - Methodology and Pilot Study Foundation

This chapter presents the methodology used in the present study and the preliminary pilot study that served as the foundation for the research design. The study employed a two-phase design. Phase One consisted of a qualitative pilot study conducted with general education teachers to explore perceptions of student disability awareness, self-advocacy, and accommodation use. Findings from this pilot study informed the structure and focus of Phase Two, the primary quantitative quasi-experimental study examining the impact of explicit instruction in disability awareness and IEP literacy on secondary students' knowledge and understanding related to requesting academic accommodations. The chapter is organized to first describe the pilot study and its methodological implications, followed by a detailed description of the primary study's design, participants, procedures, and analysis.

Research Design Overview

The present dissertation employed a sequential, two-phase research design. The initial phase was an exploratory qualitative pilot study intended to inform the development of the primary study. The second phase was a quantitative quasi-experimental study using a pretest–posttest control-group design to evaluate student outcomes following targeted instruction. This design aligns with practitioner-oriented educational research in which formative qualitative inquiry is used to strengthen the validity, relevance, and contextual responsiveness of an intervention.

Phase One: Pilot Study (Methodological Foundation)

Purpose of the Pilot Study

The purpose of the pilot study was to inform the design of the primary dissertation study by examining how general education teachers perceive student disability awareness, self-advocacy, and the implementation of academic accommodations. Specifically, the pilot study

sought to identify perceived barriers and facilitators to student self-advocacy within inclusive classrooms. Insights from the pilot study were used to refine the research questions, determine the instructional focus of the intervention, and guide the selection of outcome measures for the primary study.

Pilot Study Research Design

The pilot study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore teachers' lived experiences working with students with disabilities in general education settings. This approach was appropriate for capturing how educators interpret student behaviors, responsibilities related to accommodations, and the role of disability awareness in self-advocacy. Structured interviews were used to ensure consistency across participants while allowing for in-depth reflection aligned with the study's guiding questions.

Pilot Participants

Participants in the pilot study included three general education core content teachers representing English, mathematics, and social studies. Purposeful sampling was used to select teachers with consistent experience instructing students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Participants had direct responsibility for implementing accommodations and interacting with students receiving special education services, making them well positioned to provide insight into student advocacy behaviors.

Pilot Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through individual structured interviews lasting approximately 40 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A standardized interview protocol (Appendix A) was used to elicit teacher perspectives related to student self-advocacy, understanding of disability, responsibility for accommodations, and perceived barriers to

implementation. The structured format supported reliability and minimized variability across interviews.

Pilot Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using abductive thematic analysis. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times to identify recurring patterns and concepts related to disability awareness and advocacy. Initial codes were developed inductively from the data and then organized into broader thematic categories. Analytic memos and reflective journaling were maintained throughout the analysis process to support credibility and reduce researcher bias. Trustworthiness was further supported through peer debriefing and careful documentation of analytic decisions.

Pilot Study Findings as Methodological Implications

Rather than serving as standalone results, findings from the pilot study were used to inform key methodological decisions in the primary study. Several themes emerged that directly shaped the intervention and research design.

First, teachers consistently emphasized that student disability awareness was perceived as a prerequisite for effective self-advocacy. Students who lacked understanding of their disability or learning needs were viewed as less likely to request or utilize accommodations. This finding informed the decision to center the intervention on explicit instruction in understanding one's disability.

Second, teachers described inconsistent student knowledge of accommodations and IEP-related supports. This informed the inclusion of structured IEP literacy instruction within the intervention, specifically focusing on helping students identify, understand, and articulate their accommodations.

Third, teachers perceived accommodation implementation as a shared responsibility but noted that students often lacked readiness to participate actively in that process. As a result, the primary study emphasized measurement of student knowledge, confidence, and perceived competence related to advocacy rather than reliance on teacher-reported outcomes.

Finally, teachers highlighted the importance of general education contexts as the setting in which advocacy behaviors must occur. This finding supported the decision to focus outcome measures on students' readiness to advocate within inclusive classrooms rather than within special education settings alone.

Findings from the pilot study were not treated as standalone results but instead were used to inform the methodological decisions of the primary study. Teacher perceptions regarding student disability awareness, accommodation use, and advocacy readiness directly shaped the intervention focus, instructional sequence, and selection of assessment instruments. The following section describes the design and procedures of the primary quantitative study that was developed in response to these pilot-informed considerations.

Phase Two: Primary Quantitative Study

Research Design

The primary study employed a quantitative cluster-randomized quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control-group design. Cluster randomization was used, with Learning Center teachers serving as the unit of assignment to either the experimental or control condition. This approach preserved natural classroom groupings while minimizing contamination across conditions and allowed for examination of the effects of explicit instruction in disability awareness and self-advocacy.

Specifically, the study examined whether participation in NEXTUP Transition Curriculum Lessons 7–9—focused on Individualized Education Program (IEP) literacy,

disability understanding, and self-advocacy—improved secondary students’ knowledge, of self-advocacy and their self-reported confidence in requesting academic accommodations in general education settings.

Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and informed by the concepts of disability identity and student empowerment, the study was designed to evaluate the extent to which structured instruction may enhance students’ competence, autonomy, and relatedness—core psychological needs that support motivated, goal-directed behavior. The research employed a cluster-randomized quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control-group design with an embedded qualitative reflection component to capture both measurable outcomes and students’ self-reported growth.

Conducted in a rural Kansas high school, the study included students with active IEPs under the categories of Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Emotional Disturbance (ED), or Other Health Impairment (OHI). Purposeful and criterion-based sampling ensured that all participants are engaged in Learning Center (resource room) instruction and participate in general education classes where accommodations are applied. This design enabled an authentic evaluation of how self-advocacy instruction influences students’ understanding of academic access and self-reported confidence.

Researcher Positionality

I am a special education teacher at this school for the past four years. My role as a high incidence special education case manager and ELA content teacher is primarily advocating for students with disabilities in the school setting. The advocacy for students and the empowerment of individuals to utilize their voices has been a central theme in both my personal and professional pathway. My commitment to this work is informed by my own experiences as a

student within an educational system that frequently fell short in meeting the needs of diverse learners. As a sophomore in high school, I came to realize that my learning style differed significantly from that of my peers, an awareness that became particularly pronounced during my geometry course. Unfortunately, my academic struggles were met with a lack of understanding and support from my teacher, which resulted in a diminished sense of self-efficacy. This experience, characterized by a hesitancy to seek clarification and a consequent underperformance, ultimately silenced my voice in the classroom. This silence highlighted the systemic barriers faced by students whose learning needs are not recognized or appropriately addressed.

Over the following years, I worked diligently to rebuild my confidence and reclaim my voice, eventually finding success when I learned to advocate for myself. This personal journey of self-discovery and empowerment motivated me to pursue professional avenues where I could facilitate similar opportunities for others, particularly through teaching and tutoring students who, like me, struggled to identify and embrace their unique learning strengths. While my lived experience provides me with a deep empathy for the challenges faced by students with learning differences, it also acknowledges the limitations of a singular perspective. Though I have encountered difficulties within the educational system, my experience represents only one facet of the broader array of challenges that students with diverse learning needs face.

The central focus of my research is student advocacy, underpinned by the belief that an understanding of one's exceptionality is fundamental to the development of self-advocacy skills. By investigating this topic, I aim to contribute to the broader discourse on student empowerment, advocating for an educational paradigm where students are equipped to assert their academic and social needs without the encumbrance of systemic obstacles. My ultimate objective is to foster an educational environment in which all students are not only heard but also supported in their

pursuit of success, ensuring that they are empowered to navigate the complexities of their educational journeys.

Context of Study

The comprehensive dissertation project was conducted in a rural Kansas high school serving students in grades 9–12. The participant pool included a diverse sample of secondary students with an active IEP (under the categories of SLD, ED, or OHI). All participants received instruction in a Learning Center (resource room) and attended at least one general education class where academic accommodations are implemented. Focusing on students rather than teachers allowed for a direct examination of how explicit instruction in self-advocacy and disability awareness—delivered through NEXTUP Transition Curriculum Lessons 7–9— influences students’ understanding of their disabilities and how to request academic accommodations. This context supports an authentic investigation of the relationship between disability awareness, self-advocacy instruction, and equitable access to learning opportunities for students with disabilities (Carter et al., 2010; Test et al., 2005; McDonald, 2018).

School Setting.

This research was conducted in a rural high school in Kansas, located in the Midwestern region of the United States. The study focused on secondary students with disabilities who receive targeted academic support in Learning Center (resource room) settings. According to the 2025–2026 Kansas Educational Directory, the school employs approximately 12 special education teachers and 134 general education teachers, serving a total student population of about 2,000. Of these, roughly 450 students are identified as having disabilities and receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Approximately 200 of these students are enrolled in a Learning Center course, where individualized instruction and transition-focused supports are provided. This setting offers a

representative environment to examine how explicit instruction in self-advocacy and disability awareness through NEXTUP Transition Curriculum Lessons 7–9 influences students’ understanding of their disabilities and their understanding of request academic accommodations.

Participants

Student Sample. Participants included secondary students with disabilities receiving special education services under the categories of Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Other Health Impairment (OHI), or Emotional Disturbance (ED). Eligible students must (a) have an active IEP, (b) be enrolled in a Learning Center (resource room) at the high school, and (c) attend at least one general education class.

A projected total of 100 students across approximately 10 learning center sections was expected to participate in the study. Based on class rosters and typical enrollment, this number is expected to yield approximately 50 students per group, though exact numbers may vary depending on random assignment.

All students and their parents/guardians received written information describing the study and provided informed consent (parent) and assent (student) (Appendix I) prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and students could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Teachers. Ten learning center teachers who provide daily resource instruction were included for the purpose of group assignment only. These teachers did not serve as participants but as the randomization clusters that determine student group placement. Each teacher’s existing learning center roster established which students are assigned to the experimental or control condition.

Although teachers were not participants in this study, they played a critical role in implementing the instructional intervention. All teachers were certified special education professionals responsible for delivering individualized resource instruction and supporting students with IEPs in accessing the general education curriculum. No formal teacher

demographic data was collected; however, all Learning Center teachers were certified special education professionals with prior experience working with students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Teachers implemented instruction within their regularly scheduled Learning Center classes using standardized curriculum materials. To support consistency across classrooms, structured lesson materials and fidelity checklists were used to ensure that key instructional components were delivered as intended. No teacher-level data were collected or analyzed.

Group Randomization Procedure

A cluster randomization procedure was used to assign the ten learning center teachers to either the experimental or control group. Randomization was completed using Microsoft Excel's random number generator to ensure each teacher has an equal probability of being assigned to either condition.

- **Experimental Group:** Teachers assigned to the experimental condition will implement NEXTUP Transition Curriculum Lessons 7, 8, and 9 (Appendix D & E), focusing on self-advocacy, disability awareness, and requesting accommodations.
- **Control Group:** Teachers assigned to the control condition continued their standard Learning Center instructional activities, including goal-supporting interventions, during the same three-week period. After completion of the posttest, these teachers were invited to implement the lessons as part of a waitlist control design.

All students enrolled in a teacher's Learning Center class were automatically assigned to the same condition as their teacher. This method maintains natural class structures, minimizes disruption, and prevents intervention contamination across groups. The randomization process and results were documented for transparency and replicability.

Teacher Training and Implementation Procedures

Prior to the start of the study, Learning Center teachers assigned to the experimental condition were provided with structured guidance on implementing NEXTUP Transition Curriculum Lessons 7–9 and administering the associated pretests and posttests. Because the curriculum is district-adopted and familiar to staff, training focused on standardizing implementation procedures rather than introducing new instructional content.

Teachers received a brief orientation that included (a) an overview of the study purpose and procedures, (b) directions for administering lesson-specific pretests and posttests using Microsoft Forms, and (c) expectations for delivering each lesson using the provided curriculum materials. Teachers were instructed to administer pretests prior to beginning each lesson and posttests immediately following lesson completion to maintain consistency across classrooms.

To support consistency of implementation, teachers were provided with standardized instructional materials, including educator lesson outlines, embedded video content, guided discussion prompts, and student activities. Teachers were expected to follow these materials during instruction to ensure that core lesson components were delivered across Learning Center settings.

Teachers completed a fidelity checklist following each lesson to document the extent to which key instructional components (e.g., video viewed, discussion conducted, worksheet completed) were implemented. Because fidelity data were based on teacher self-report, they reflect reported implementation rather than independently verified observation.

Implementation occurred within teachers' regularly scheduled Learning Center classes over a three-week period. Teachers in the control condition did not receive training on the lessons during the intervention period and continued typical instructional practices. Following data

collection, control group teachers were provided access to the instructional materials as part of the waitlist control design.

Data Collection

Instruments

Multiple instruments were used to measure changes in students' knowledge of disability awareness, understanding of accommodations, and self-reported perceptions related to self-advocacy following participation in NEXTUP Transition Curriculum Lessons 7–9 (Appendices D & E). These instruments assessed students' understanding of key concepts and their reported awareness of supports rather than direct measures of self-advocacy skills or observed behavior. Each instrument aligns with the study's quantitative and qualitative components and is embedded within the existing district-approved NEXTUP framework.

Lesson Pretests and Posttests

A series of lesson-specific pretests and posttests were used to measure changes in student understanding following each of the three NEXTUP Transition Curriculum lessons (Appendices D & E). These assessments evaluated students' understanding of key instructional content, including knowledge of disability-related terminology and concepts, as well as understanding of personal accommodations and Individualized Education Program (IEP) components.

These brief assessments were adapted into a Microsoft Form directly from the NEXTUP Transition Curriculum and aligned with Lesson 7 (Understanding My Disability), Lesson 8 (Knowing My Rights and Accommodations), and Lesson 9 (How to Ask for Help) (Appendix B). This adaptation supported consistent implementation across classrooms while streamlining student participation and data collection.

The assessments included matching, multiple-choice, and short-answer items designed to measure students' comprehension of lesson material. Pretests were administered prior to instruction, and posttests were administered following completion of each lesson.

Because individual student responses were not matched across time points, analyses reflect group-level differences in understanding between pretest and posttest samples. These measures assessed students' understanding of content rather than direct application of self-advocacy skills or observed behavior.

Educator Lesson Outlines and Curriculum Videos

Each participating Learning Center teacher utilized the NEXTUP educator lesson outlines (Appendix D) and accompanying curriculum videos (Appendix E) for Lessons 7–9. These resources provide structured instructional guidance and ensure consistent delivery across classrooms. The outlines specify learning objectives, discussion questions, key vocabulary, and video prompts.

Teachers completed a brief implementation fidelity checklist (Appendix H) after each lesson to document completion of instructional components (e.g., video viewed, discussion conducted, worksheet completed). This documentation verified uniform lesson delivery and provided fidelity data for later analysis. Because fidelity data were based on teacher self-report, they reflect reported implementation rather than independently verified observation.

Terms to Know Sheet

To reinforce comprehension of key vocabulary and concepts, students received a Terms to Know sheet (Appendix C) corresponding to each lesson. The sheet included definitions and examples of essential self-advocacy and disability-related terms (e.g., “accommodation,” “modification,” “self-determination,” “advocacy statement”). Students referred to these sheets during lesson activities and discussions. The vocabulary component also aligns with several pre/post assessment items, strengthening instructional validity.

Disability Checklist

At the completion of Lesson 9, students completed the Disability Checklist (Appendix G) to measure their understanding of their own disability, strengths, needs, and educational supports. This informal transition assessment was designed to help students identify how their disability affects learning, recognize their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, and evaluate their level of involvement in the IEP process.

Accommodations and Modifications Awareness Questionnaire

In addition, students completed the Accommodations and Modifications Awareness Questionnaire (Appendix F) to evaluate their knowledge, comfort, and perceived understanding of advocate for appropriate classroom supports. This informal transition assessment identifies what students currently know about their accommodations, how well they understood the purpose of these supports, and how confident they felt in communicating their needs.

The instrument included multiple sections addressing:

- Understanding and awareness of accommodations and modifications.
- Communication with teachers and case managers about supports.
- Comfort level in requesting accommodations.
- Planning for future use of supports in postsecondary or workplace settings.

Open-ended questions invited students to explain which supports are most effective, what additional accommodations might be helpful, and how they would communicate their needs in new environments. Descriptive analyses of responses highlighted changes in self-advocacy awareness and perceived competence following the intervention.

Fidelity Checklist

Teachers in the experimental group completed a simple checklist (Appendix H) after each lesson documenting completion, time spent, and any modifications. This ensures the intervention is delivered consistently across sections and provides evidence of implementation fidelity.

Table 3.1 Summary of Instruments

Instrument	Purpose	Format	Timing	Data Type
Lesson 7 Pre/Post Test	Measure knowledge of personal disability and strengths	Matching, Multiple choice, short answer	Before and after Lesson 7	Quantitative
Lesson 8 Pre/Post Test	Measure understanding of rights, accommodations, and responsibilities	Matching, Multiple choice, short answer	Before and after Lesson 8	Quantitative
Lesson 9 Pre/Post Test	Assess skill in requesting help and self-advocacy strategies	Matching, Multiple choice, short answer	Before and after Lesson 9	Quantitative
Educator Lesson Outline & Video	Provide structured, consistent instructional delivery	Curriculum guide and multimedia	During each lesson	Fidelity
Terms to Know	Support comprehension of key vocabulary and lesson concepts	Reference handouts	During each lesson	Instructional supports
Disability Checklist	Measures students' understanding of their disability, IEP components, and the relationship between learning strengths, needs, and supports.	Yes/No and short answer questions	After Lesson 9	Quantitative/Qualitative
Accommodations and Modifications Awareness Questionnaire	Assesses students' knowledge, recognition, and comfort in using classroom accommodations and modifications	Likert-scale and open-ended items	After Lesson 9	Quantitative/Qualitative
Fidelity Checklist	Verify consistent instructional delivery of NEXTUP Lessons	Teacher Verification Form	After each lesson	Fidelity/Implementation

Instrument	Purpose	Format	Timing	Data Type
	7-9 across Learning Center sections			

Data Collection Summary

Data were collected using multiple instruments embedded within the district-approved NEXTUP Transition Curriculum to measure changes in students' knowledge, skills, and confidence related to self-advocacy and disability awareness. These instruments align with the study's quasi-experimental design, capturing both measurable gains in understanding and qualitative reflections on student growth during participation in Lessons 7–9 (*Understanding My Disability, Knowing My Rights and Accommodations, and How to Ask for Help*).

All assessments were administered digitally through Microsoft Forms to ensure accessibility and consistency across Learning Center classrooms. Student responses were automatically compiled and exported to Microsoft Excel for scoring, organization, and statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, independent-samples *t* tests, and effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) were calculated using Excel-based functions. Four tools were used to collect data:

1. Lesson-Specific Pretests and Posttests

Each of the three NEXTUP lessons include a brief pretest and posttest developed from the curriculum materials. These assessments will measure growth in students' understanding of disability-related concepts, knowledge of accommodations, and understanding of apply advocacy strategies. Each test will consist of matching, multiple-choice, and short-answer items, administered immediately before and after instruction. Comparisons of pre- and posttest scores provide quantitative evidence of knowledge gains within each lesson.

2. Disability Checklist

The Disability Checklist were administered prior to and after the completion of Lesson 9, this instrument assessed students' understanding of their disability, IEP components, and educational supports. The checklist included yes/no and short-answer items that gauge knowledge of disability impact, familiarity with accommodations, and awareness of participation in the IEP process.

3. Accommodations and Modifications Awareness Questionnaire

Completed before Lesson 7 and again following Lesson 9, this questionnaire evaluated students' knowledge and comfort in identifying, using, and requesting academic supports. The assessment included Likert-scale and open-ended items addressing recognition of accommodations, perceived effectiveness, and confidence in communicating needs to teachers and support staff.

4. Fidelity Checklist

To ensure procedural integrity, Learning Center teachers completed a short verification form after each lesson documenting time spent, components completed (e.g., videos, discussions, and student reflections), and any modifications to instruction. These checklists confirmed consistent implementation of the NEXTUP lessons across all sections.

Collectively, these instruments provided both quantitative and qualitative data that, when triangulated, will offer a comprehensive picture of how explicit instruction in disability awareness and self-advocacy impacted students' understanding, confidence, and understanding of request academic accommodations in general education settings. The findings informed practical interventions that empower students with disabilities (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Lopez et al., 2019).

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data from the Microsoft Forms assessments were exported to Microsoft Excel for organization and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics consistent with quasi-experimental educational research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Paired-sample t tests were conducted to compare pretest and posttest results within the experimental and control groups for each of the three NEXTUP Transition Curriculum lessons, identifying significant changes in knowledge and advocacy skill acquisition. Independent-sample t tests will compare growth scores between the experimental and control groups to determine the overall effect of the intervention. In addition, effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to measure the magnitude of observed changes, providing a measure of the practical significance of the results. While statistical tests indicate whether observed difference are likely not due to chance, effect sizes convey the strength and educational relevance of those differences. This approach aligns with Merriam and Tisdell's (2015) recommendation that researchers interpret findings in ways that extend beyond statistical significance to reflect meaningful, real-world implications.

Descriptive statistics-including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions-were computed for both the Disability Checklist and the Accommodations and Modifications Awareness Questionnaire to summarize patterns in students' understanding, confidence, and advocacy-related competence at baseline and post-intervention (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were drawn from open-ended responses embedded within the Disability Checklist and the Accommodations & Modifications Questionnaire. These responses were analyzed using abductive thematic analysis (Thompson, 2022), combining inductive coding with deductive interpretation guided by Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the self-

advocacy framework developed by Test et al. (2005). Student reflection responses were analyzed for themes that correspond to the quantitative growth patterns in self-awareness and advocacy competence. The analysis followed four sequential stages (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015):

1. Initial Reading and Open Coding - Student reflections were read repeatedly to identify statements related to disability understanding, awareness of supports, and expressions of advocacy confidence.
2. Categorization and Pattern Development - Codes were clustered into broader categories representing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of self-advocacy growth.
3. Theme Formation - Broader themes were developed to represent trajectories of students' developing awareness, competence, and autonomy.
4. Triangulation and Interpretation - Qualitative themes were compared with quantitative findings from pre/posttests and the student-survey instruments to identify converging or divergent patterns of growth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Integration of Findings

Integration of quantitative and qualitative results occurred through convergent triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Quantitative improvements in lesson pre/post scores, disability understanding, and accommodations awareness were interpreted alongside qualitative themes describing students' perceptions of growth, autonomy, and self-advocacy. The convergence of these data sources allowed for a deeper understanding of how explicit instruction in IEP literacy and self-advocacy through the NEXTUP Transition Curriculum support the development of competence, autonomy, and relatedness-the core constructs of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and enhance students' understanding of request and use academic accommodations effectively.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the researcher maintained reflective journals, analytic memos, and an audit trail documenting all analytic decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative data were anonymized and aggregated when reported. All quantitative data were anonymized and reported in aggregate, while qualitative data were securely stored and shared only for verification.

Summary

This chapter described the two-phase methodology used in the present study, with a qualitative pilot study serving as the methodological foundation for the primary quantitative quasi-experimental design. The pilot study provided critical insight into teacher perceptions of student disability awareness and self-advocacy, which informed the development of the intervention, research focus, and outcome measures used in the primary study.

By integrating the pilot study within the methodology chapter, this dissertation demonstrates a coherent, design-informed research process in which exploratory qualitative findings strengthened the relevance and validity of the primary study. The following chapter presents the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses examining changes in students' disability awareness, advocacy knowledge, and self-advocacy readiness following explicit instruction.

Chapter 4 - Results

The current study explored the effects of explicit instruction in disability awareness, IEP literacy, rights and accommodations, and self-advocacy communication skills. This chapter presents the quantitative and qualitative results examining the impact of explicit instruction delivered through the district-approved NEXTUP Transition Curriculum. Data were collected through instruments embedded within Lessons 7–9 (Understanding My Disability, Knowing My Rights and Accommodations, and How to Ask for Help) to measure change in students' knowledge and understanding.

The analyses presented in this chapter address the study's research question and following sub-questions:

Primary Research Question: How does explicit instruction in disability awareness and IEP literacy influence secondary students' knowledge of their disability, understanding of accommodations, and self-reported confidence in requesting academic supports within general education settings?

Sub-Questions:

- a) To what extent does explicit instruction (Lessons 7–9 of the NEXTUP Transition Curriculum) improve students' knowledge of their disability, rights, and academic accommodations?
- b) To what extent does explicit instruction influence students' self-reported confidence and perceived readiness to request accommodations in general education settings?
- c) How do students describe changes in their understanding of their disability, understanding of accommodations and their use, and self-reported confidence in requesting academic supports following explicit instruction?

Four instruments were used: lesson-specific pretests and posttests, the Disability Checklist, the Accommodations and Modifications Awareness Questionnaire, and teacher-completed fidelity checklists. Together, these instruments yielded complementary quantitative and qualitative data.

It is important to note that discrepancies in pretest and posttest sample sizes were influenced by teacher participation. All Learning Center teachers were initially included in the cluster randomization process and assigned to either the experimental or control condition. Participation was expected as part of district-supported implementation of the NEXTUP curriculum; however, two teachers did not complete study procedures as intended.

One teacher declined to implement the lessons and associated assessments prior to the start of the intervention due to time constraints within their instructional schedule. A second teacher initially consented to participate and was included in the cluster randomization but did not complete the required procedures during the study period. This teacher, who rotated between classrooms and did not have a dedicated instructional space, was unable to consistently administer the digital assessments or deliver the lessons as designed. As a result, data from this teacher's assigned group were incomplete, including limited or missing assessment responses.

These variations in implementation contributed to mismatched pretest and posttest sample sizes and reduced the understanding of match individual student data across time points. Consequently, independent-samples *t* tests were conducted rather than paired-samples analyses, as the data did not meet the assumptions required for matched comparisons.

Quantitative Results (Sub-question 1)

Lesson 7: Understanding My Disability

Lesson 7 focused on developing students' understanding of their disability and how it affects their learning, with pretest and posttest data analyzed using independent-samples *t*-tests

due to unmatched participant groups. As shown in Table 1, students demonstrated an increase in disability-related knowledge following instruction. Pretest scores ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 0.99$, $n = 66$) reflected limited baseline familiarity with disability terminology and self-awareness concepts, while posttest scores increased to $M = 9.39$ ($SD = 2.80$, $n = 54$). An independent-samples t test indicated that this difference was statistically significant, $t(df) = 10.31$, $p < .001$. Effect size was calculated using pooled standard deviation from the independent samples. Cohen's $d = 2.05$, indicating a large practical effect.

Table 4.1. Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for Lesson 7 Pretest and Posttest

Measure	Pretest (n=66)	Posttest (n=54)
Mean	5.26	9.39
Standard Deviation	0.99	2.80
t-value	-	10.31
p-value	-	< .001
Cohen's d	-	2.05

Lesson 8: Knowing My Rights and Accommodations

Lesson 8 focused on developing students' knowledge of their rights, accommodations, and modifications. As shown in Table 2, students demonstrated gains following instruction. Pretest scores ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.05$, $n = 59$) indicated limited baseline knowledge, while posttest scores increased to $M = 9.12$ ($SD = 2.95$, $n = 43$). An independent-samples t -test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant, $t(\text{approx.}) = 12.38$, $p < .001$, with a very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 2.81$). Effect size was calculated using pooled standard deviation from the independent samples. Cohen's $d = 2.81$, indicating a large practical effect. This result suggests that explicit instruction in rights and accommodations is associated with increased student understanding of accommodation-related concepts and awareness of available supports, rather than direct application or use of those supports.

Table 4.2. Descriptive and Inferential Statistics for Lesson 8 Pretest and Posttest

Measure	Pretest (n=59)	Posttest (n=43)
Mean	3.29	9.12
Standard Deviation	1.05	2.95
t-value	-	12.38
p-value	-	< .001
Cohen's d	-	2.81

Lesson 9: How to Ask for Help

Lesson 9 focused on helping students develop effective communication and self-advocacy understanding, particularly in knowing how to ask for help. As shown in Table 3, students demonstrated gains following instruction. Pretest scores ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.53$, $n = 56$) reflected limited baseline familiarity with advocacy scripts and help-seeking strategies, while posttest scores increased to $M = 9.69$ ($SD = 3.92$, $n = 48$). An independent-samples t-test confirmed that this improvement was statistically significant, $t(\text{approx.}) = 8.36$, $p < .001$. Cohen's $d = 1.74$, indicating a large practical effect. Thus, the magnitude of $d = 1.74$ suggests that students made gains in knowing how to ask for help, using self-advocacy scripts, understanding help-seeking steps, and understanding how to apply communication skills taught in NEXTUP Lesson 9. These findings demonstrate that explicit instruction in advocacy communication produced strong and meaningful improvements in students' readiness to engage in self-advocacy.

Self-Report Findings (Sub-question 2)

Disability Checklist: Test versus Non-Test Comparison

The Disability Checklist measured students' knowledge of their disability, understanding of IEP components, and awareness of accommodations. The checklist was administered following completion of Lesson 9 to both the test and non-test groups. When comparing students who received the NEXTUP instruction (test group) with those who did not (non-test group),

descriptive differences emerged across nearly all areas assessed. These differences highlight the impact of explicit instruction on students' disability awareness and IEP literacy.

Prior to presenting the results in Table 4.3, it is important to clarify how the data were summarized. The Disability Checklist was administered following completion of Lesson 9 to both the test and non-test groups. The number of student participants included in each group reflects those who completed the checklist (test group: $n = 42$; non-test group: $n = 23$).

For each checklist item, responses were recorded as “yes” or “no.” The percentages reported in Table X represent the proportion of students within each group who selected “yes” for each item. For example, a value of 88.1% indicates that 88.1% of students in that group reported agreement with the statement. These data are descriptive in nature and reflect students' self-reported knowledge and awareness rather than direct measures of understanding or observed behavior.

Table 4.3. Side-by-Side Comparison of Disability Checklist Responses (Percent “Yes”)

Item	Test Group (%)	Non-Test Group (%)
I know what my disability is.	88.1	78.3
I know how my disability affects learning.	90.5	91.3
I know what an IEP is.	90.5	73.9
I know my strengths & weaknesses.	97.6	73.9
I know my accommodations.	83.3	78.3
I have read my IEP.	59.5	60.9
I know my annual goals.	88.1	73.9
I feel involved in the IEP process.	78.6	73.9

Students in the test group consistently demonstrated stronger IEP literacy, including clearer understanding of their disability, strengths, and annual goals. While knowledge of how a disability affects learning was similar between groups, the test group outperformed the non-test

group across nearly all other items. Similar percentages were observed for the item “I have read my IEP.”

Accommodations & Modifications Awareness: Test vs. Non-Test Comparison

The Accommodations and Modifications Awareness Questionnaire assessed students’ knowledge of their academic supports, their comfort level in requesting accommodations, and their perceived effectiveness of such supports. This questionnaire was also administered following Lesson 9 to both groups. Comparing the test and non-test groups revealed descriptive differences between groups.

Prior to presenting the results in Table 4.4, it is important to clarify how the data were summarized. The Accommodations and Modifications Awareness Questionnaire was administered following completion of Lesson 9 to both the test and non-test groups. The number of student participants included in each group reflects those who completed the questionnaire (test group: $n = 42$; non-test group: $n = 23$).

For Likert-scale items, percentages represent the proportion of students within each group who selected a given response option (e.g., “very comfortable,” “somewhat comfortable”). For example, a value of 30% indicates that 30% of students in that group selected that response. Open-ended responses were reviewed to identify general patterns in student perceptions but were not quantitatively coded. These data are descriptive in nature and reflect students’ self-reported understanding and perceptions rather than direct measures of behavior or application of self-advocacy skills.

Table 4.4. Side-by-Side Comparison of Accommodations Awareness Responses

Item	Test Group	Non-Test Group
Discussed accommodations with a teacher/case manager	65%	53%
Believe accommodations are appropriate	82.5%	55.2%
Expect to need accommodations after high school	32.5%	18.5%
Understand accommodations “very well”	32.5%	30%

Comfortable requesting accommodations (very comfortable)	30%	25%
Comfortable requesting accommodations (somewhat comfortable)	35%	50%

Students in the test group reported higher confidence that their accommodations were appropriate and demonstrated stronger understanding of how supports help them learn. The test group was also more likely to anticipate needing accommodations after high school, suggesting improved understanding of recognize what supports they require for transition planning. Comfort in asking for accommodations revealed a nuanced pattern: the test group had more students at the highest comfort level (“very comfortable”), while the non-test group showed more moderate comfort (“somewhat comfortable”).

Qualitative Findings (Sub-question 3)

Qualitative responses from both the Disability Checklist and the Accommodations and Modifications Awareness Questionnaire were analyzed using thematic coding aligned with the study’s methodology. Students’ short-answer responses provided rich insight into their understanding, perceptions, and readiness to advocate for their needs. Clear differences between test and non-test groups emerged across several themes.

Theme 1: Increased Awareness of Supports

Students in the test group identified accommodations with greater accuracy and specificity (e.g., extended time, read aloud, separate setting, breaks, graphic organizers). In contrast, responses from the non-test group more frequently included incomplete or generalized statements such as “help on tests” or “I’m not sure.”

Theme 2: Understanding the Purpose of Accommodations

Test group students more often articulated *why* a particular support helps them (e.g., “extra time helps me process,” “a quiet room keeps me from getting overwhelmed”). In contrast, non-test group explanations were more limited (e.g., “because I get it,” “it just helps”). Explicit

instruction appears to improve students' functional understanding of how accommodations connect to their learning needs.

Theme 3: Increased Understanding of Advocacy Communication .

Students who completed the NEXTUP lessons demonstrated greater confidence and clarity in explaining their needs to teachers. Common responses included statements such as, "I would tell a new teacher I need more time and why," or "I would ask for a quiet testing space because it helps me focus." Non-test group responses often indicated uncertainty, avoidance, or lack of language needed for advocacy. This suggests that explicit instruction directly strengthens students' communication skills and their understanding of engage in self-advocacy.

Theme 4: Recognition of Additional Needs

Students in the test group more frequently identified areas where additional support could help them (e.g., reading help, math scaffolds, organization support, chunking tasks). Non-test group students often responded with "none" or "I don't know," indicating less metacognitive awareness. Instruction in Lessons 7–9 appears to encourage students to reflect more deeply on their learning differences and needed supports.

Theme 5: Interest in Learning About and Using Accommodations

The test group expressed a desire to continue learning how to use accommodations effectively and to strengthen their self-advocacy skills. Responses included: "I want to learn when to ask," "I want to practice using my accommodations," and "I want to get better at speaking up." Non-test responses were more likely to express uncertainty or lack of direction. This suggests that explicit instruction may help cultivate internal motivation for self-advocacy.

Summary

The quantitative and qualitative results from Lessons 7–9 paint a clear picture of how structured instruction in disability awareness and self-advocacy is associated with changes in

students' understanding of themselves and their educational supports. The evidence demonstrates strong, consistent gains across knowledge domains as well as shifts in students' self-reported perceptions and readiness to communicate their needs. These findings not only address the study's research questions but also provide a solid foundation for interpreting how and why these changes occurred. The following chapter discusses these results in greater depth, connecting them to the theoretical framework, existing literature, and implications for practice.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Building upon the results presented in Chapter 4, this chapter interprets the findings and discusses their implications. The purpose of this study was to examine how explicit instruction in disability awareness and IEP literacy influences secondary students' knowledge of their disability, understanding of accommodations, and self-reported confidence in requesting academic supports within general education settings. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and informed by research on self-advocacy, disability identity, and IEP literacy, this cluster-randomized quasi-experimental study examined how instruction delivered through NEXTUP Lessons 7–9 supports the development of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—factors associated with students' readiness to engage in self-directed behaviors such as self-advocacy. Chapter 4 reported quantitative gains and qualitative themes; this chapter interprets the findings in relation to the research questions, situates results within the existing literature, discusses implications for practice, acknowledges study limitations, and identifies directions for future research.

Overall Findings

The findings of this study indicate that explicit instruction in disability awareness and IEP literacy is strongly associated with meaningful improvements in secondary students' understanding of their disabilities, knowledge of accommodations, and perceived readiness to engage in self-advocacy. Throughout all three lessons, students who participated in the intervention demonstrated consistently higher levels of knowledge and confidence compared to their peers, with statistically significant results ($p < .001$) and large effect sizes. These outcomes suggest that targeted, structured instruction can effectively address gaps in students' understanding of their learning needs and available supports.

At a broad level, the most notable gains were observed in students' understanding of accommodations and their associated rights, indicating that this area may be particularly responsive to explicit teaching. Students not only demonstrated increased recognition of the supports available to them but also showed greater clarity in understanding how and why these supports are used within academic settings. This pattern highlights the importance of moving beyond passive exposure to accommodations toward intentional instruction that builds both awareness and functional understanding.

Qualitative findings further reinforce these results, illustrating meaningful differences in how students developed and communicated their understanding of their learning needs. Students who participated in the intervention provided more specific, accurate, and detailed descriptions of their disabilities and accommodations, often identifying concrete supports and explaining their purpose. In contrast, students who did not receive the instruction more frequently demonstrated limited awareness, generalized responses, or uncertainty. The alignment between quantitative gains and qualitative patterns strengthens confidence in the overall findings and suggests that the instruction supported not only knowledge acquisition but also students' ability to meaningfully describe and reflect on their learning experiences.

Taken together, these findings suggest that disability awareness and IEP literacy are not inherently developed through standard educational experiences but can be significantly enhanced through structured, curriculum-based instruction. The results support the use of the NEXTUP curriculum as a practical and scalable approach for building foundational knowledge related to self-advocacy. While the study does not measure direct application of advocacy behaviors, the observed increases in knowledge, clarity, and self-reported confidence indicate that such instruction may serve as a critical precursor to students' ability to engage in self-directed support-seeking within general education settings.

Findings Related to Research Question 1

Quantitative findings indicated statistically significant improvements across the instructional domains assessed. Effect sizes across lessons were large, suggesting substantial practical gains. The following sections summarize the instructional effects for each lesson.

Lesson 7: Understanding My Disability. Students demonstrated significant improvement in their understanding of disability terminology and personal learning needs following Lesson 7. Pretest scores reflected limited baseline knowledge, whereas posttest results showed substantial growth, with an effect size of $d = 2.05$. These results align with prior research indicating that many adolescents with disabilities have limited disability knowledge but can develop this knowledge through explicit instruction (Agran & Hughes, 2008; Carter et al., 2010; Cawthon & Cole, 2010).

Lesson 8: Knowing My Rights and Accommodations. Lesson 8 produced the strongest gains among the three lessons, with an effect size of $d = 2.81$. These findings suggest that instruction targeting rights and accommodations may address a common gap in IEP literacy and strengthen students' understanding of available supports and their intended use.

Lesson 9: How to Ask for Help. Students demonstrated statistically significant gains in their understanding of help-seeking and self-advocacy-related concepts following Lesson 9. With an effect size of $d = 1.74$, the results indicate a substantial difference in posttest scores, reflecting increased student knowledge of communication strategies and how to request academic support.

Qualitative responses further supported these findings, with students providing more detailed and specific descriptions of what to say and when to ask for help. These patterns suggest increased understanding and awareness of help-seeking processes based on students' self-reported responses. These findings align with Test et al.'s (2005) self-advocacy framework, which emphasizes communication as a key component of self-determination. However, results

reflect students' reported understanding rather than direct measurement of their understanding of how to apply self-advocacy in practice.

Findings and Interpretations for Sub-question 1

Across measures, findings for Sub-question 1 suggest that disability awareness, understanding of accommodations, and knowledge of advocacy-related communication strategies are strengthened through explicit instruction. These results support the effectiveness of the NEXTUP curriculum as a tool for building IEP literacy and increasing students' understanding of supports within general education settings. Findings support the implementation of structured, curriculum-based instruction to promote students' knowledge and awareness related to self-advocacy.

Findings and Interpretations for Sub-question 2

Descriptive results from the Disability Checklist and Accommodations and Modifications Awareness Questionnaire reflect students' self-reported confidence and perceived readiness to request academic supports. Students in the test group generally reported higher levels of understanding of their accommodations and greater self-reported confidence in requesting supports compared to the non-test group. These findings provide descriptive evidence of differences in students' perceptions following instruction.

Qualitative Themes Related to Sub-question 3

The qualitative findings reveal important shifts in students' self-awareness and understanding of their needs. Analysis of open-ended responses revealed differences between groups and yielded five themes describing students' awareness, reasoning, and perceived readiness related to advocacy.

Theme 1: Increased Awareness of Supports

Students in the test group demonstrated greater accuracy and specificity when naming their accommodations, indicating a more comprehensive understanding of the supports provided to them. Their responses frequently included concrete examples such as extended time, separate setting, or read-aloud. In contrast, students in the non-test group often provided vague statements or admitted uncertainty, indicating more limited awareness of the accommodations listed in their IEPs.

Theme 2: Understanding the Purpose of Accommodations

A second theme reflected students' understanding of why particular accommodations were helpful. Test group responses demonstrated deeper conceptual understanding (e.g., “extra time helps me process information,” or “a quiet room keeps me from losing focus”). These statements suggest that students developed a clearer understanding of the purpose of accommodations—knowledge that may support self-advocacy.

Theme 3: Increased Understanding of Advocacy Communication

Students who completed Lessons 7–9 described greater clarity in how they might communicate their academic needs. Responses often included more specific language, explanations, and examples of what they would say to a teacher. This indicates increased understanding of advocacy-related communication and aligns with the communication component of Test et al.'s (2005) self-advocacy framework. Non-test group responses tended to reflect uncertainty or avoidance.

Theme 4: Recognition of Additional Needs

Students in the test group more frequently identified additional supports they believed would help them (e.g., reading assistance, math scaffolding, organization strategies, chunked tasks). Such responses suggest increased self-awareness and reflection on their learning needs. In

contrast, non-test group students often responded with “none” or “I don’t know,” indicating more limited understanding of how to reflect on unmet needs without structured instruction.

Theme 5: Motivation to Learn and Use Accommodations

A final theme reflected students’ increased interest in learning about and using their accommodations. Test group responses commonly included statements about wanting to better understand when and how to ask for help. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory constructs of autonomy and competence, suggesting that instruction may support students’ perceived readiness to engage in self-advocacy-related behaviors.

Collectively, these qualitative themes demonstrate that explicit instruction is associated with students’ understanding of their disabilities, accommodations, and how to communicate about their needs. The instruction provided students with the vocabulary, reasoning, and self-reflective capacity to participate more meaningfully in discussions about their learning. These findings highlight the importance of structured, curriculum-based instruction in promoting students’ knowledge, awareness, and perceived readiness related to self-advocacy.

Interpretation of Findings Through Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) identifies three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that underpin motivated, self-directed behavior. The findings of this study align with each of these components and illustrate how explicit instruction in disability awareness and self-advocacy may support their development. Explicit instruction may have functioned as an autonomy-supportive approach by providing structured opportunities to build knowledge, rehearse communication, and reflect on learning needs.

Autonomy

Students demonstrated increased understanding of when and how to request support, as well as greater familiarity with language used to communicate their needs. Structured practice

within Lessons 7–9 provided opportunities to develop awareness of advocacy-related processes and consider how to engage with teachers.

Competence

Pre/post gains across lessons indicate growth in students’ understanding of their disabilities, rights, and accommodations. Development of this foundational knowledge reflects increased competence, a central component of self-advocacy.

Relatedness

Students’ self-reported responses indicated increased comfort and clarity in describing how they might communicate with teachers about their needs. These patterns suggest strengthened awareness of how to engage in academic interactions and perceived readiness to seek support.

Collectively, these findings illustrate potential mechanisms through which self-determination may be supported. Consistent with prior research (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Shogren et al., 2015), structured opportunities to build knowledge, practice communication, and reflect on learning needs appear to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness—key elements associated with students’ understanding of self-advocacy within general education settings.

Implications for Practice

Findings highlight the effectiveness of explicit instruction in disability awareness and self-advocacy and suggest several implications for strengthening special education practice and promoting student autonomy, competence, and self-direction.

IEP Literacy Should Be Explicitly and Systematically Taught

Findings support structured instruction that directly teaches students about their strengths, needs, goals, and accommodations to promote meaningful participation in the IEP process.

Accommodations Must Be Explained, Modeled, and Practiced

Gains observed in Lesson 8 suggest that when students are explicitly taught what their accommodations are and why they are provided, they develop greater clarity in understanding those supports and how they are intended to be used.

Self-Advocacy Instruction Should Begin Before High School

Findings suggest that introducing self-advocacy instruction in late elementary or middle school may strengthen long-term development of disability awareness and advocacy-related knowledge.

Collaboration with General Education Teachers Is Critical

Qualitative findings indicated that students described greater clarity in how they might approach teachers following instruction, suggesting that collaboration between general and special educators may further reinforce students' understanding of communication processes and consistent accommodation implementation.

Curriculum-Based Approaches Enhance Equity and Consistency

The strong gains associated with the NEXTUP curriculum support the value of structured, curriculum-based approaches to promote consistent and equitable access to self-advocacy instruction.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. Although the findings provide strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of explicit instruction in disability awareness and self-advocacy, certain methodological and contextual factors may influence the generalizability and interpretation of the results.

Uneven Group Sizes and Teacher Non-Participation

One notable limitation of this study was the uneven sample sizes between the pretest and posttest groups and between the test and non-test conditions. Although teachers were randomly assigned to the intervention and comparison groups, two Learning Center teachers in the non-test group declined participation. One teacher cited significant time constraints within their class schedule, and the other lacked a consistent instructional space, moving classrooms each hour, which made it difficult to implement the required assessments with fidelity. Because both non-participating teachers were part of the comparison group, the size of the non-test group was reduced, contributing to the unequal group sizes observed in the study. As a result, independent-samples analyses were used instead of paired-samples comparisons, limiting the understanding of attribute changes to individual student growth over time. The use of independent-samples analyses limited the understanding of model within-student change trajectories over time.

Cluster Randomization and Instructional Variability

The use of teacher-level (cluster) randomization, rather than randomization at the individual student level, may have introduced instructional variability. Although teachers received common materials and fidelity checklists, differences in instructional style, pacing, or emphasis may have influenced student outcomes. Additionally, because the intervention occurred in Learning Center (resource) settings, students' experiences may differ from those in other types of resource or support classrooms.

Short Intervention Window

The instructional sequence occurred over a brief timeframe, which may limit insights into the long-term impact of the lessons. Although the study was originally intended to take place earlier in the semester, implementation ultimately occurred during the final four to five weeks of the term. This timing may have influenced student attendance, engagement, and motivation, as

end-of-semester schedules, competing coursework demands, and fluctuating attendance patterns can affect student participation. While students demonstrated significant immediate gains, the study did not include follow-up assessments to determine whether students maintained, expanded, or applied their self-advocacy knowledge across settings or school years.

Self-Report Measures

Portions of the data relied on student self-report instruments, which may be influenced by social desirability, recall bias, or students' perceptions of expected responses. Although qualitative responses provided additional context and depth, these measures reflect students' perceptions and reported understanding rather than objective verification of knowledge or observed behavior.

In addition, fidelity of implementation was measured using teacher-completed self-report checklists. While these checklists provided documentation of lesson delivery across classrooms, they reflect reported implementation rather than independently verified observation. As a result, variability in how lessons were delivered may not be fully captured.

Future research should incorporate direct observational measures of fidelity to examine the extent to which teachers implement the lessons as intended, particularly when provided with minimal training. This would strengthen confidence in the consistency of implementation and provide additional insight into how instructional delivery may influence student outcomes.

Single-Site Study

The study was conducted within one high school in a single Midwestern district. Demographic, cultural, and instructional factors unique to this school context may limit the generalizability of the findings to other districts or states. Additional research across multiple sites would strengthen external validity.

Limited General Education Data

While the study focused on students' understanding of their disabilities and accommodations, general education teacher perspectives were not included. Because self-advocacy occurs primarily within general education classrooms, the absence of this perspective limits understanding of how students' increased advocacy readiness translates into actual classroom interactions.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study offer strong evidence that explicit instruction in disability awareness and self-advocacy was associated with improvements in students' knowledge and self-reported confidence. At the same time, several opportunities exist for expanding and deepening this line of inquiry. Consistent with recommendations from scholars such as Test et al. (2005), Shogren et al. (2015), and Ryan and Deci (2000), the following areas warrant further investigation.

Examine Sustained Self-Advocacy Behaviors Through Longitudinal Research

Although students demonstrated immediate gains, this study did not measure how well these skills were maintained or applied across time or settings. Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether explicit instruction is associated with sustained self-advocacy behaviors in general education classrooms, during transitions, and throughout secondary schooling. This aligns with existing literature suggesting that self-determination develops gradually and requires ongoing reinforcement (Wehmeyer et al., 2013).

Strengthen Generalizability Through Multi-Site Replication

Because this study was conducted in a single high school in one district, future research should examine the implementation of NEXTUP or similar curricula across diverse districts, demographic contexts, and instructional models. Multi-site studies would help determine the

extent to which results are consistent across settings—an important step identified in prior self-advocacy and IEP literacy research (Agran & Hughes, 2008).

Incorporate General Education Teacher Perspectives

While students are the primary agents of self-advocacy, general education teachers play a crucial role in the implementation of accommodations and the reinforcement of advocacy behaviors. Research exploring teachers' perceptions, expectations, and experiences would shed light on how self-advocacy skills are supported—or constrained—in the classroom. Prior studies highlight the importance of relatedness and supportive teacher-student relationships in promoting autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000), reinforcing the need to understand educator perspectives.

Investigate Disability Identity Development

Student reflections in this study indicated increased self-awareness and recognition of their learning profiles, suggesting early development of disability identity. Future research could examine how explicit instruction influences students' self-perception, resilience, stigma navigation, and sense of belonging—areas highlighted as critical in disability identity scholarship (Carter et al., 2010; Shogren et al., 2015).

Examine the Effects of Earlier Self-Advocacy Instruction (Pre–High School)

The limited baseline knowledge observed in this study mirrors findings across the literature showing that students often reach high school without foundational understanding of their disability or supports (Carter et al., 2010; Test et al., 2005). Future research should examine the effects of beginning instruction in late elementary or middle school, where earlier exposure may produce even more substantial gains and support long-term development of self-determination skills.

Conclusion

Findings indicate that explicit instruction in disability awareness, IEP literacy, and self-advocacy was associated with improvements in students' knowledge, confidence, and readiness to engage in educational decision-making.

Findings highlight the role schools play in preparing students with disabilities to participate in their education. By strengthening students' disability awareness and understanding of how to request support, schools can foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These outcomes are particularly important as students transition to more demanding academic environments and, ultimately, to postsecondary education and adult life.

In conclusion, findings support the use of structured curricula such as NEXTUP to develop students' disability awareness, accommodation knowledge, and understanding of advocacy-related communication. Implementing structured self-advocacy instruction may strengthen student access and participation in general education settings and support transition outcomes aligned with IDEA.

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Appendix A - Standardized Interview Protocol

Teacher Interview Questions:

1. How do you define student self-advocacy and why do you believe it is important in an educational setting?
2. Share your perspective on the significance of promoting self-advocacy skills for all students in the classroom.
3. What specific skills do you think are essential for special education students to thrive in a general education environment?
4. In your opinion, who bears the primary responsibility for implementing accommodations – yourself, the student with disabilities, or is it a shared responsibility? Please elaborate on your reasoning.
5. How crucial is it for special education students to have an understanding of their specific disabilities?
6. To what extent do you believe it is important for special education students to independently request accommodations in your classroom?
7. Have you observed instances of self-advocacy skills being demonstrated by special education students in your classroom?
8. If so, why do you think these skills are or are not being demonstrated by the students?
9. From your perspective, do special education students or their general education peers tend to display higher levels of self-advocacy?
10. What factors do you think contribute to this trend?
11. What are some of the obstacles you face when implementing learning accommodations in your classroom?
12. Conversely, what advantages or benefits have you observed as a result of implementing learning accommodations in your classroom?

Lesson #7 | 2025-26
Exploring Self-Advocacy
Building Your Advocacy Network



Terms-to-Know: Each of the following terms will be discussed during Video Lesson #7. Determine how much you already know by selecting the correct term.

- _____ 1. Speaking up for yourself, your needs, and your rights in a respectful way

A. Self-Advocacy B. Self-Awareness
- _____ 2. Finding a solution to a difficult problem

A. Problem-Solving B. Advocacy Network
- _____ 3. A group of people you choose and trust who help speak up for you, support your goals, and make sure your needs are heard

A. Problem-Solving B. Advocacy Network
- _____ 4. A knowledge and understanding of your own personality or individuality

A. Self-Advocacy B. Self-Awareness
- _____ 5. Believing in yourself and your abilities

A. Confidence B. Independence
- _____ 6. Being able to do things on your own and make your own choices without needing someone else to always help or decide for you

A. Confidence B. Independence

Learning Outcome Questions: Answer each of the following questions to the best of your ability.

- A. What does self-advocacy mean, and why is it important in school, work, and your personal life?

Post-Assessment

Matching: Match the following terms with their definitions.

_____ 1. A knowledge and understanding of your own personality or individuality	A. Advocacy Network
_____ 2. Believing in yourself and your abilities	B. Confidence
_____ 3. Speaking up for yourself, your needs, and your rights in a respectful way	C. Independence
_____ 4. Finding a solution to a difficult problem	D. Problem-Solving
_____ 5. A group of people you choose and trust who help speak up for you, support your goals, and make sure your needs are heard	E. Self-Advocacy
_____ 6. Being able to do things on your own and make your own choices without needing someone else to always help or decide for you	F. Self-Awareness

Multiple Choice.

- _____ 7. Why is self-advocacy important?
- A. It lets you avoid problems forever.
 - B. It makes everyone else do your work.
 - C. It means you don't have to make choices.
 - D. It helps you build confidence and independence.

Pre-Assessment

Terms-to-Know: Each of the following terms will be discussed in Video Lesson #8. Determine how much you already know by selecting the correct term.

- _____ 1. A federal law that requires public schools to serve the educational needs of eligible students with disabilities
A. IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) B. ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)
- _____ 2. Supports that help you learn or do tasks in a way that works best for you, without changing what you're expected to learn
A. Accommodations B. Modifications
- _____ 3. A U.S. law that protects people with disabilities from being treated unfairly at work, in public places, and on transportation
A. IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) B. ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)
- _____ 4. Believing in yourself and your abilities
A. Confidence B. Disability
- _____ 5. Changes to what you're expected to learn or do, making the work easier or different based on your needs
A. Accommodations B. Modifications
- _____ 6. A physical, mental, or emotional difference that can make it harder for someone to do certain activities
A. Confidence B. Disability

Learning Outcome Questions: Answer each of the following questions to the best of your ability.

- A. Why is it important to understand your disability and ask for the help you need?

Post-Assessment

Matching: Match the following terms with their definitions.

_____ 1. A U.S. law that protects people with disabilities from being treated unfairly at work, in public places, and on transportation	A. Accommodations
_____ 2. A physical, mental, or emotional difference that can make it harder for someone to do certain activities	B. ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)
_____ 3. Supports that help you learn or do tasks in a way that works best for you, without changing what you're expected to learn	C. Confidence
_____ 4. A federal law that requires public schools to serve the educational needs of eligible students with disabilities	D. Disability
_____ 5. Changes to what you're expected to learn or do, making the work easier or different based on your needs	E. IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)
_____ 6. Believing in yourself and your abilities	F. Modifications

Multiple Choice.

- _____ 7. Which law ensures that students with disabilities receive special education services?
- A. ADA
 - B. IDEA
 - C. IEP
 - D. POV

Disclosing Your Disability & Requesting Accommodations
Becoming an Advocate in Your Community

Pre-Assessment

Terms-to-Know: Each of the following terms will be discussed in Video Lesson #9. Determine how much you already know by selecting the correct term.

- _____ 1. Keeping your information private and not sharing it with others without permission
A. Confidential B. Disclose
- _____ 2. Tools designed, made, or adapted to help you perform a particular task
A. Assistive Devices B. Job Coach
- _____ 3. Speaking up for yourself, your needs, and your rights in a respectful way
A. Community Advocacy B. Self-Advocacy
- _____ 4. Changes or supports that help an employee with a disability do their job
A. Reasonable Accommodations B. Job Coach
- _____ 5. To make something known
A. Confidential B. Disclose
- _____ 6. A specialist who helps you learn to perform job tasks
A. Reasonable Accommodations B. Job Coach
- _____ 7. Speaking up or taking action to support the needs and rights of people in your community
A. Community Advocacy B. Self-Advocacy

Learning Outcome Questions: Answer each of the following questions to the best of your ability.

- A. Why is it important to share information about your disability, and how do you decide when and whom to tell in school or at work?

Disclosing Your Disability & Requesting Accommodations
Becoming an Advocate in Your Community

Post-Assessment

Matching: Match the following terms with their definitions.

_____ 1. Speaking up or taking action to support the needs and rights of people in your community	A. Assistive Devices
_____ 2. Tools designed, made, or adapted to help you perform a particular task	B. Community Advocacy
_____ 3. Speaking up for yourself, your needs, and your rights in a respectful way	C. Confidential
_____ 4. Keeping your information private and not sharing it with others without permission	D. Disclose
_____ 5. A specialist who helps you learn to perform job tasks	E. Job Coach
_____ 6. Changes or supports that help an employee with a disability do their job	F. Reasonable Accommodations
_____ 7. To make something known	G. Self-Advocacy

Multiple Choice.

- _____ 8. What does "disclosing a disability" mean?
- A. Making the disability known in order to request help or accommodations
 - B. Not telling anyone about your disability
 - C. Telling everyone about your disability
 - D. Asking for a raise

Appendix C - Terms to Know (Lessons 7-9)

Lesson # 7 | 2025-26
Exploring Self-Advocacy
Building Your Advocacy Network



Terms-to-Know

	Advocacy Network	A group of people you choose and trust who help speak up for you, support your goals, and make sure your needs are heard
	Confidence	Believing in yourself and your abilities
	Independence	Being able to do things on your own and make your own choices without needing someone else to always help or decide for you
	Problem-Solving	Finding a solution to a difficult problem

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Terms-to-Know

	Accommodations	Supports that help you learn or do tasks in a way that works best for you, without changing what you're expected to learn
	ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)	A U.S. law that protects people with disabilities from being treated unfairly at work, in public places, and on transportation
	Confidence	Believing in yourself and your abilities
	Disability	A physical, mental, or emotional difference that can make it harder for someone to do certain activities

Disclosing Your Disability & Requesting Accommodations
Becoming an Advocate in Your Community

Terms-to-Know

	Assistive Devices	Tools designed, made, or adapted to help you perform a particular task
	Community Advocacy	Speaking up or taking action to support the needs and rights of people in your community
	Confidential	Keeping your information private and not sharing it with others without permission
	Disclose	To make something known

Appendix D - Educator Content Outlines (Lessons 7-9)

Lesson #7 | 2025-26



Educator Content Outline

MAIN TOPIC	KEY TERMS
Exploring Self-Advocacy	Confidence Independence Problem-Solving Self-Advocacy Self-Awareness
Objectives: - Gain an understanding of self-advocacy, including its definition, principles, and importance across various settings. - Identify and apply self-advocacy skills in various settings, such as school, work, and personal life.	
1. Introduction (5 minutes) - Prompt: "What does self-advocacy mean to you?" - Remind students that they have already discussed advocacy and advocates earlier in the year. - Define <u>self-advocacy</u>: Speaking up for yourself, your needs, and your rights in a respectful way. 2. Core Principles of Self-Advocacy (10 minutes) - Purpose: Teach the foundational skills that strengthen self-advocacy. - Key Principles & Educator Prompts: <u>Self-Awareness</u>: Knowing your own personality, strengths, needs, and individuality. - Communication: Expressing yourself clearly and respectfully. - Responsibility: Taking charge of your goals and decisions. <u>Problem-Solving</u>: Finding solutions to challenges and knowing when/where to seek help. 3. Why Self-Advocacy Matters (10 minutes) - Key Benefits: - Builds <u>confidence</u>: A belief in your abilities. - Builds <u>independence</u>: The ability to make decisions and act without constant help. - Helps secure accommodations and support. - Supports achievement of personal, academic, and career goals.	

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Educator Content Outline

MAIN TOPIC	KEY TERMS
Your Rights & Understanding Your Disability Objectives: - Understand one's disability while fostering self-awareness, seeking appropriate accommodations, and advocating for one's needs. - Develop knowledge and awareness of disability-related rights and legal protections in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).	Accommodations ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) Disability IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act) Modifications
1. Introduction (5 minutes) - Define disability as physical, mental, or emotional differences that may affect thinking, learning, movement, or communication. - Emphasize empathy: many disabilities are not visible. Avoid assumptions. 2. Why Understand Your Disability? (5 minutes) - Prompt: Why should you take the time to understand your disability? - Connect to self-awareness → empowerment and confidence. - Understanding disability helps identify supports needed for success. 3. Accommodations vs. Modifications & Requesting Them (10-15 minutes) - Define accommodations: Supports that don't change learning expectations. - Examples: extra time on tests, note-taker, quiet setting. - Define modifications: Changes in what is expected or taught. - Examples: shortened test, alternate reading assignment. - Provide a visual/chart activity: Compare accommodations vs. modifications. - Requesting accommodations & modifications: - Preparation: Think about past supports that worked. - Carry over: Supports don't reset each year. - Involvement: Participate in IEP and transition planning meetings. - Practice: Discuss needs with family, friends, and staff. 4. Disability Rights (10 minutes) - Rights include: - Free and appropriate education. - Accommodations and modifications access.	

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Educator Content Outline

MAIN TOPIC	KEY TERMS
Disclosing Your Disability & Requesting Accommodations Objectives: - Understand one's disability while fostering self-awareness, seeking appropriate accommodations, and advocating for one's needs. - Develop knowledge and awareness of disability-related rights and legal protections in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).	Assistive Devices Confidential Disclose Job Coach Reasonable Accommodation
1. Introduction (5 minutes) - Define <u>disclose</u> – to make something known. - Explain disability disclosure as sharing information about a disability to request support. - Discuss why disclosure matters: success at school, work, and in the community. 2. School vs. Workplace Accommodations (10 minutes) - Prompt: What are the differences between accommodations at school and accommodations in the workplace? - Examples of school accommodations (calculator use, text reader, paraprofessional support). - Examples of work accommodations (service animals, seating adjustments, written instructions, <u>assistive devices</u>, <u>job coach</u>). - Clarify <u>reasonable accommodations</u> and what "reasonable" means in different settings. - IDEA → schools must provide accommodations for eligible students. - ADA → prevents discrimination and requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations. 3. When to Disclose (10 minutes) - Prompt: When should you disclose your disability and request accommodations? - School: Disclose early (before major tests, assignments, or events). - Workplace: disclose during the hiring process or when job tasks require it. - Community: Real-life example (bus driver lowering a ramp).	

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Appendix E - Video Lesson Transcripts (Lessons 7-9)

Hey there, I'm Charlie, and this week's NextUp Lesson is all about advocacy. Corey is covering Exploring Self-Advocacy in the main topic, and Nida will discuss Building Your Advocacy Network in our secondary topic. Personally, I'd like to use this time to advocate for something, too. Instead of grades, students should get candy. A's will earn you a king sized chocolate bar of your choice. From there the candy gets smaller. If you fail, you get Sixlets or wax lips or something. That'll teach you a lesson. I'm going to start working on making this a law. I'll be back later for the NextUp League, but in the meantime, here's Nida to answer this week's student question.

Welcome back to our Student Question segment! I'm Nida, and this week's question comes from a classroom of students in Illinois. They want to know, "How do you ask the boss for more hours? Specifically, when you feel like you are doing a good job?" Thank you all so much for that great question. This is a perfect question for this week's lesson, because Corey is about to tell you all about Exploring Self-Advocacy, and situations like this are an excellent opportunity to practice that skill. I'll let Corey do the honors of covering that topic, but I have some simple tips for you now. It's fantastic that you want to get more hours at work; it shows that you have a strong work ethic. Work ethic means having strong beliefs about working hard and being disciplined in how you approach tasks. Most employers will recognize that dedication when you ask for more hours, so don't be too nervous about asking, especially when you think you're doing a good job. There are a couple of things I would consider before approaching your supervisor for more hours. First, make sure you have this conversation at an appropriate time. That means not only asking to meet with your supervisor when neither of you is busy with work, but also making sure you have been working at this job long enough to ask for more hours. You'll have a better chance at getting what you want if you've established a positive relationship with the company you're working for. I'd give it at least a few weeks to see if those increased hours start coming in without you having to ask for them. Maybe your employer is still testing things out to check that you're a good fit. If you have a workplace evaluation coming up, that would be a perfect time to have a conversation about working more hours. Once you have a time set up to talk with your employer, I recommend preparing in advance for the conversation. You said you feel like you're doing a good job, and that's great. I'm sure your supervisor has noticed, but you'll feel even more confident if you have examples of that hard work, even if it's just in the form of a few stories about your success at work so far. So, whether you bring your "employee of the month" certificate or a few notes with some talking points, try to come up with some evidence of why you deserve more hours. Consider discussing your interest in the company and your aspirations for career advancement. When the boss knows you're planning to stick around and contribute to the company for a long time, they'll be more likely to schedule you more often and teach you more skills. Many employers would be glad to have workers ask them for more hours, so I have a good feeling that your conversation will go well. However, if the opportunity to come in more often is denied, don't freak out. It may just not be a good time, or your employer might want to teach you some more skills before giving you more responsibilities. Politely ask the employer what you can work on to accomplish this goal in the future. Listen respectfully and thank them for their time and advice. Then, make sure you work on those

Hi there, I'm Charlie, and this week's lesson continues our unit on Self-Advocacy. In this week's main topic, Corey will discuss Your Rights & Understanding Your Disability. In the secondary topic, Nida will talk about Building Confidence. Huh, last week we were Building our Advocacy Network, this week we're Building Confidence. I hope next week we finally get to take a break and build some Lego sets. We can dream. Well, now I know what I'm doing after this, but first, Nida is here to answer this week's student question.

I'm Nida, and our student question this week comes from Illinois. "What is the best way to get specific information about a career that you are interested in?" I love receiving questions like this because it shows that we have students who are thinking about what they want to do in the future. Exploring your career options now is a great idea as you're choosing which classes to take in school, what extracurricular activities to involve yourself in, and making plans for potential postsecondary education. So, thank you to the students who sent in that question. Here are my tips for getting more information about the careers that interest you. A few weeks ago, a student asked me how they could job shadow a musician, which was their field of interest. When you find a job you want to learn more about, a job shadow is a good option. A job shadow is the opportunity to meet with someone in a particular field and observe them doing their work. If you know someone who works in the field you're interested in, you could ask them if they'd be open to letting you shadow them on the job. If you don't already have a connection to the industry, you can ask family members or teachers if they might know anyone who would let you shadow them. There are also many videos online where you can watch people performing their daily job tasks if you can't find someone to shadow in person. I just mentioned asking people you know about the career that interests you. Many opportunities and learning experiences can come from expressing your interests to others. We'll talk more about this in Lesson #11, but it might be helpful to start exploring networking now. Networking means building relationships with people who can share advice, information, or job opportunities. If you were here last week, you might remember me talking about building an advocacy network. They're very similar ideas, but for today's question, I'm talking about professional networking; people who can connect you with more information about the careers you're interested in. Even if your network can't get you a job offer right away, those people could help you do some more research on your interests and help you work towards your career goals. Lastly, there's nothing wrong with taking to the internet for this one. There are tons of resources online that could give you more information on any job you'd like. However, we have a couple of suggestions. O*Net is a fantastic website where you can take an interest inventory if you're not already sure what you want to do, and then you can check out O*Net's My Next Move Page to learn more about it. So, definitely check out mynextmove.org if you're searching for a one-stop shop. You could also check out some hiring websites, like Glassdoor, and find reviews from people who have worked for specific companies or in specific industries. There, you can read about their experiences. Just remember that angry people are more likely to leave reviews than happy people, so don't let yourself get too discouraged by what you find. It's just another way to learn more about people's experiences in your field of interest. So, thank you again for submitting that question.

Hey there, I'm Charlie. This is NextUp Video Lesson #9, where Corey will be talking about Disclosing Your Disability & Requesting Accommodations in the main topic, and Nida will bring us a secondary topic on Being an Advocate in Your Community. And me? I'll be doing donuts on my bike in the parking lot until they call me back in to do the NextUp League. I hope you all have fun, though. As always, we're starting things off this week by answering a student-submitted question.

Welcome to our Student Question segment. My name is Nida, and this week's question came from Mrs. Dyer's class in Illinois. They want to know, "What is the best way to get a job quickly?" Thank you very much for sending in that question; I'm happy to answer it. First, I need to say that the average job search actually lasts about five months. However, that's taking into account all types of jobs, and entry-level positions are usually on the quicker side of the hiring process. We'll talk more about this soon, next week in fact, when we start our Job Search unit. However, I have a few words of wisdom for you right now. If you want to get a job quickly, my biggest piece of advice is to stay open-minded about the jobs you're willing to work. A lot of the places that hire the fastest are places that people are often quickest to rule out as a job they're not interested in. Fast food and large retail stores often have faster hiring processes than office jobs or other positions that require more experience. You might also consider asking people you know if you could help them with any odd jobs like yard work or babysitting, where you could be paid cash or through an app, if the goal is to make some money quickly. Sometimes it's easy to become closed off to certain possibilities, so I just wanted to remind you of those options. I'd also recommend applying for multiple jobs at once if you're not doing that already. Unfortunately, every company is going to take a different amount of time to get back to you, and there's not really any way to predict how long that will be. So, instead of waiting around, keep applying to any jobs that you find. Websites like Indeed are good for this. You might end up having to choose between more than one job offer, but that's a great problem to have. At the very least, the more applications you submit, the more likely you are to get a job offer. Just make sure you're always submitting high-quality work for each position. Additionally, it's always a good idea to get involved in your community and ask the people you know about job opportunities. It's been proven that most jobs come from knowing someone associated with the company. It helps an employer trust you if you know someone who is already working for them. Finally, make sure you follow up on your job applications. If you don't get any communication from the employer after a week or so, you can reach out to them about your application status by email, phone call, or visiting in person, depending on the work environment. Remind them of your name and the position you applied for. Let them know that you are excited about the opportunity, and ask if they have a timeline for when you might hear back from them. This lets them know you are truly interested in the position and may help you stand out from other people who applied. Thank you very much to the students who submitted this question. There isn't just one surefire way to get a job quickly, but I hope these ideas help. Remember to have patience and to keep an open mind. Who will be the next person to submit a question for me to answer? Go to nextup.work and share your thoughts under Student Resources. You know the drill; I'll be back soon to deliver

Appendix F - Accommodations and Modifications Awareness

Transition

Assessment



Accommodations and Modifications Awareness

Assessment Rationale: Completing the *Accommodations & Modifications Awareness* assessment will help students understand what they currently know about their accommodations and modifications, how they are used, and how they feel about advocating for themselves in school and future settings.

This informal assessment can be used to:

- Identify student awareness and understanding of supports.
- Recognize gaps in self-advocacy skills.
- Determine future instruction needs for transition planning.

Section 1: What I Know About My Accommodations

1. Do you know what accommodations or modifications you have on your IEP or 504 Plan?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

2. If yes, list any accommodations or modifications you know you have:

3. Where do you use your accommodations or modifications? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ General education classroom
- ☐ Special education classroom
- ☐ Testing situations
- ☐ During homework or assignments at home
- ☐ Other: _____

Appendix G - Disability Checklist

Transition

Assessment



Disability Checklist

Assessment Rationale:

The *Disability Checklist* is designed to determine students' understanding of their disability and their strengths and needs. This assessment can also help students establish a starting point for participating in a student-led IEP meeting.

Directions: Check yes or no for each of the following statements. Answer honestly.

Domain	YES	NO
I know what MY disability is.		
I know how MY disability affects my learning.		
I know what an IEP or ARD is.		
I know what MY strengths & weaknesses (barriers) are.		
I know what accommodations I have in my classes.		
I have read MY IEP or ARD.		
I know who is invited to MY annual meetings.		
I feel like I am involved in the MY IEP or ARD process.		
I know what MY annual goals are and how to reach them.		
I feel like I am getting the support I need in school.		

Briefly answer the following questions:

- 1.) Who is in my support system at school?

Appendix H - NEXTUP Transition Curriculum Fidelity Checklist

Research Title: Understanding My Disability: Exploring How Student Awareness Influences Self-Advocacy for Academic Accommodations

Teacher Name: _____ Date(s): _____

Lesson Number: ☐ 7 – Understanding My Disability ☐ 8 – Knowing My Rights and Accommodations ☐ 9 – How to Ask for Help

Class/Section: _____ Number of Students: _____

Part A. Lesson Implementation

Implementation Step	Description	Completed (✓)	Notes / Comments
Lesson Preparation	Reviewed lesson plan, objectives, and materials prior to instruction.		
Video Component	Played the designated NextUp curriculum video in full.		
Vocabulary Review	Conducted 'Terms to Know' vocabulary review before or during lesson.		
Guided Discussion	Led structured discussion or reflection following video.		
Student Worksheet Completed	Verified all students completed the worksheet or related activity.		
Lesson Pretest Administered	Pretest administered through Microsoft Forms prior to instruction.		
Lesson Posttest Administered	Posttest administered immediately following instruction.		
Student Participation	Majority of students ($\geq 80\%$)		

	actively engaged in lesson activities.		
Time on Lesson	Approximate total instructional time (minutes):		

Part B. Instructional Fidelity

Fidelity Indicator	Description	Verified (✓)	Notes
Lesson Delivered as Designed	Followed NextUp script and pacing with minimal modifications.		
Materials Used Correctly	Videos, worksheets, and vocabulary sheets used as instructed.		
Student Engagement Observed	Students participated in discussion and demonstrated understanding.		
Technology Functioned Properly	All digital tools (video, Forms, etc.) operated without issue.		
Lesson Timing Appropriate	Total lesson time between 30–45 minutes.		
No Major Deviations	No major alterations affecting lesson objectives.		

Part C. Teacher Reflection

1. What aspects of this lesson were most effective for your students?

2. Were any modifications made during implementation?

3. Additional comments or observations:

Teacher Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Verification: _____ Date: _____

Appendix I - Parent Consent and Student Assent Form

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Title of Study: “Understanding my disability: Exploring How Student Awareness Influences Self-Advocacy for Academic Accommodations”

Principal Investigator: Dr. James Teagarden, Department of Special Education, Kansas State University

Graduate Student Researcher: Rebekah Thornton-Savage, Ed.D. Candidate, Kansas State University

Contact: rebekaht@usd383.org or rebekahann@ksu.edu | 618-924-0349

IRB Contact: Dr. Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506 | (785) 532-3224

Dear Parent/Guardian,

You and your child are invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether your child should participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information and feel free to ask any questions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how secondary students’ understanding of their disabilities (specific learning disability, other health impairment, or emotional disturbance) affects their understanding of self-advocate within general education settings. In this study, your child will participate in an explicit IEP-literacy instruction curriculum implemented in the learning-center setting, and we will measure changes in their disability awareness, IEP literacy, and self-advocacy behavior.

Procedures

If you agree for your child to participate, they will take part in the following:

- Pre-instruction assessment of their knowledge/awareness of their disability and self-advocacy behaviors.
- Participation in the NextUp Transition Curriculum lessons (approximately [insert number] lessons, each lasting about [insert duration] minutes) delivered over [insert period].
- Post-instruction assessment of the same knowledge/awareness and behaviors.
- Optional follow-up check [insert if applicable].

Your child’s participation is voluntary. They may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of services.

Duration

Your child's total time commitment will be approximately [insert total hours or weeks].

Risks

There are minimal risks. Participation involves completing assessments and engaging in instruction. Some students may feel uncomfortable answering questions about their own disability or self-advocacy; they may skip any question they prefer not to answer.

Benefits

There may be no direct benefit to your child. However, the study may help improve instructional practices for students with disabilities and strengthen their self-advocacy skills in the future.

Confidentiality

Your child's responses and data will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely, and only the research team will have access. Results will be reported in aggregate only; no individual will be identified by name. Data will be kept for at least three years following study completion, in accordance with federal regulations.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Your child's participation is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to let your child participate, and your decision will not affect your child's relationship with the school, teacher, or district. You or your child may withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or loss of benefits.

Questions

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Rebekah Thornton-Savage at rebekahann@ksu.edu. If you have questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Lisa Rubin at (785) 532-3224.

Consent

I have read and understood the information above. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and all my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to let my child participate in this study.

Child's Name (printed): _____

Parent/Guardian Name (printed): _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: ____/____/____

Investigator Signature: _____ Date: ____/____/____

Student Assent Form

Study Title: “Understanding my disability: Exploring How Student Awareness Influences Self-Advocacy for Academic Accommodations”

Researcher: Rebekah Thornton-Savage, Kansas State University

Faculty Advisor: Dr. James Teagarden, Department of Special Education, Kansas State University

IRB Contact: Dr. Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, (785) 532-3224

Hello! I’m Ms. Thornton-Savage, and I’m doing a study about how students with disabilities understand their IEPs, their rights, and how they ask for accommodations in school. I’d like you to help by participating. Before you decide, here is what you need to know.

What’s this about?

We want to learn more about how students like you understand your disability and how you ask for help and accommodations in class. You will take part in some special lessons and complete two short surveys—one before the lessons and one after.

What will you do if you join?

- You’ll fill out a short questionnaire about your knowledge and how you ask for accommodations.
 - You’ll participate in 3 lessons that teach about your disability, your IEP, and how to advocate for yourself.
 - At the end, you’ll fill out the questionnaire again.
- All your answers are private, and you can choose not to answer any question you don’t want to.

How long will it take?

The entire study will take about one month.

Are there any risks?

It’s low risk. You might feel a little uncomfortable answering questions about your disability or your IEP. If you don’t want to answer, that’s fine.

Will you get anything out of it?

You probably won’t get anything special, but the lessons may help you in asking for what you need to succeed. Also, your participation will help other students in the future.

Do you have to do this?

No. You don't have to join. If you do join and then change your mind, you can stop at any time. It will not affect your grades or services.

Who to talk to?

If you have questions, talk to me, Ms. Thornton-Savage, at rebekahann@ksu.edu. If you want to talk about your rights or concerns, you can contact Dr. Lisa Rubin at (785) 532-3224.

Do I agree to join?

If you want to join, write your name below (you'll get a copy of this assent form too).

Student Name (printed): _____

Student Signature: _____ Date: ____/____/____

Investigator Signature: _____ Date: ____/____/____

Appendix J - IRB Approvals



Office of Research Integrity,
Compliance and Security

TO: James Teagarden
Spec Ed, Counsel & Student Aff
Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number: IRB-13313

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 11/14/2025

RE: Proposal Entitled, "Understanding my disability: Exploring How Student Awareness Influences Self-Advocacy for Academic Accommodations."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written - and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §104(d), category:Exempt Category 1.**

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, the University Research Compliance Office, and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 11/14/2025 5:50 PM ET

