Promoting Self-Determination: A Model for Training Elementary Students to Self-Advocate for IEP Accommodations

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Juliet E. Hart Barnett
Arizona State University

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Natalia and the rest of her third grade class were taking a unit assessment in mathematics. Natalia and her mother studied together all week, and she felt confident with the material. She knew how to successfully complete the problems on her own, but her reading disability made it difficult for her to read word problems independently. In order to address this concern, Natalia’s Multi-Disciplinary Evaluation Team decided that word problems would be read aloud as an accommodation in her most recent individualized education program (IEP), yet how this information was communicated to Natalia was not made clear.

As Natalia took the next mathematics tests, she kept saying to herself, “I know I can do this. It was so much easier when Mom read the problems to me at home. Maybe I can ask the teacher to read the problems to me, but I’m not sure if that is allowed. I don’t know what to do.” Natalia sat and stared at her paper, trying as hard as she could to read the problems on the page. Before she knew it, her teacher was collecting the tests, and Natalia had completed fewer than half of the problems.

Promoting self-determination among students with disabilities has been a principal focus of policy, research, and practice related to special education transition planning for nearly 2 decades (Ward, 2006), but how this occurs prior to the age required by law is not something that has received ongoing attention. Current research emphasizes the advantages of promoting self-determination in securing positive in-school and postschool outcomes for adolescents with disabilities (Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston, 2012), but how this occurs at the elementary level is limited. The outcomes of research do show though that youth and young adults with disabilities who have acquired self-determination skills have enhanced academic performance and more active class participation (Gilberts, Agran, Hughes, & Wehmeyer, 2001), improved employment and independent living opportunities (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003), and more positive quality of life and reported life satisfaction (McDougall, Evans, & Baldwin, 2010). All these outcomes provide great reasons to teach self-advocacy skills as early as possible to empower students to have the strongest future outcomes.

Self-determination refers to “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence or interference” (Wehmeyer, 1996, p. 24). Self-determined students assert themselves when appropriate, take pride in their accomplishments and abilities, and are able to act as self-advocates (Zionts, Hoza, & Banks, 2004). In their self-advocacy, students gradually assume a more proactive role and greater say in their IEP (Sebag, 2010); have knowledge of their own strengths, needs, and interests; effectively communicate their own choices and decisions; and are able to evaluate their own behavior (Kleiner, Harrison, Fisher, & Kleinkert, 2010). Increasingly, researchers have made calls to begin developing self-determination in students with disabilities from earlier ages, including early elementary-school age (Lee, Palmer, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2006; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003).

Promoting students’ self-determination at earlier ages and in order to increase more meaningful IEP partici-
pation is useful and important work for all professionals and parents to consider. However, a significant lag remains in the degree to which self-determination endeavors have been extended to and are reflected in the context of students’ daily, lived IEP experiences, within inclusive classrooms at the elementary level. Teaching self-advocacy skills in earlier grades for students in inclusive settings is important because as Simpson (2004) noted, specially designed instruction to meet their needs is not always provided, and, moreover, some observations of inclusive classrooms have shown teachers struggle to make curricular accommodations for students with disabilities (Dymond & Russell, 2004). Therefore, students with disabilities who are included in general education settings require self-advocacy and communication skills to enable them to advocate for the effective and consistent delivery of their designated IEP accommodations, which are designed to facilitate their successful acquisition of academic content and overall learning. Herein we describe a model that is both grounded in the research and easy for teachers to employ when teaching elementary students with disabilities to self-advocate on a day-to-day basis.

**Self-Advocacy Model for Obtaining IEP Accommodations**

In an overall effort to assist students in becoming more self-determined, we have developed and utilized a research-inspired model for students to become self-advocates with respect to their IEP accommodations. This model is intended for use with students in elementary grades who possess requisite basic language skills and who are most likely to be included in general education classes. Introducing IEP accommodations to special education students at an early age can be completed through 10 easy teacher actions and, of course, in collaboration with parents as presented in Figure 1. Following is a detailed
description of each step to use with students.

**Step 1: Obtain Parental Consent**

Parents’ participation in all decisions regarding the education of their child with special needs is underscored in Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Therefore, make sure to reinforce the notion that parents and family members are valuable partners in all aspects of the educational planning process for their children (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Shogren, 2013), including in efforts to develop their children’s self-determination and self-advocacy skills. As such, parental consent should be obtained before proceeding with the self-advocacy training process.

Also, remember parents may differ in their overall views and experiences with disabilities and inclusive education and therefore may experience conflict between encouraging self-determination (and greater independence) and keeping their children protected and clear of contexts that may lower their self-esteem (Lee et al., 2006). Seek to communicate with parents frequently and encourage them to openly express their concerns by actively listening and incorporating their ideas as part of your approach for assisting their child in developing the ability to self-advocate.

**Step 2: Assist Students With Academic Goal Setting**

Goal setting is an integral component of self-determination and its related behaviors (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). Begin by sharing IEP goals with students and/or asking them to develop academic goals they would like to accomplish by the end of the school year. This step is crucial because it helps students to begin considering their individual career aspirations and enables them to link progress in their academics while in school to successful employment in the future once they exit school. Teachers might use goal-setting templates and further discuss goal setting with their students. If students have difficulty generating goals, teachers can assist by providing examples of a few academically related goals for them such as improving in their understanding of what they read, increasing their knowledge and recall of math facts, writing complete sentences, staying on task, and so forth. A sample goal-setting template is provided in Figure 2.

**Step 3: Introduce Accommodations and IEP Concepts**

After students have determined their academic goals, let them begin planning how they are going to meet those goals. This planning process can be accomplished by asking students the following question: “What do you think you need in order to meet your goal?” Some students might respond with answers such as “I need help with not getting distracted during class” or “I need help finishing my tests on time.” You may also pose questions such as, “In what ways do you think you learn best?” and “What things could your teacher do to help you learn and be more successful in school?” Having students identify and record areas where they experience challenges during instruction, as well as possible solutions to assist them in overcoming their difficulties, will not only increase their own self-awareness but is also the perfect segue into the introduction of accommodations (see Figure 2 for additional details on goal setting).
access to the entire IEP document can be overwhelming for students.

**Step 4: Investigate and Model Accommodations**

The more students are involved in the investigation process, the more likely they will use their accommodations. Students need opportunities to learn which accommodations are most helpful for them, and then they need to learn how to make certain what they need is provided in each of their classes. Therefore, allow students to investigate their list of accommodations, even reading them together as needed. Encourage students to highlight items they feel are important or that they do not clearly understand.

After students have had an opportunity to investigate the list, discuss what the accommodations mean in student-friendly terms. For example, “use of manipulatives” can be described as using blocks or counters during mathematics lessons. “Provide peer tutoring during seat work” can be translated for students as “I can work with a partner.” Further, “flexible scheduling/timing during tests” may be translated in student-friendly terms as “I can take breaks during the test and complete it in parts or segments.” Translating accommodations for students will assist them in understanding how their teachers can and should change the classroom to ensure their disability does not affect their learning. Last, accommodations should be modeled so students can better understand and experience what they look like in the classroom.

**Step 5: Help Students Determine Where and When They Receive Accommodations**

Now that students understand what accommodations are, next ensure they know when and where their accommodations can be used. Are students able to use their accommodations in the general education setting? In which subject areas are they able to use the accommodations? If manipulatives or other resources are necessary, where are they located, when are students permitted to use the resources, and how do they retrieve them with minimal disruption? Teachers should model and discuss these topics with their students in detail. In addition, students need practice in applying this new information as a skill for success in the general education setting. To provide students with such practice opportunities, teachers can create activities that require students to match their learning needs, related accommodations, and time/location when the accommodations can be used (see Figure 3).

Depending on the student’s age and grade level, it may also be important at this point to differentiate learning activity or classroom accommodations.
from testing accommodations, particularly if these are described in different categories of accommodation in the student’s IEP. You may wish to describe any testing accommodations (and when these can be used) such as “extended time,” “use of a calculator,” “test taking in a room with reduced distractions,” “option of an oral test,” “use of spelling and grammar assistive devices for written exams,” and the like versus classroom instructional accommodations such as “use of note-taker,” “peer buddy,” “augmentative communication device,” or “graphic organizers.” Students will be more effective in their advocacy for their accommodations when they are clear on which accommodations accompany which types of classroom activities and when each can be invoked.

**Step 6: Help Students Understand the Importance of Their Accommodations**

Depending on the age and cognitive maturity level of the student, it may be appropriate to discuss the nature of the student’s disability and eligibility for services and accommodations. You may further explain that individualized accommodations are not intended to give the student an advantage over other students, to change the content of the work, nor to weaken academic rigor. To illustrate this point further, you might say,

> An accommodation is a change that helps a student overcome or work around their learning challenge. Allowing a student who has trouble writing to give his answers verbally is an example of an accommodation. This student is still expected to know the same material and answer the same questions just like the other students, but he doesn’t have to write down his answers to show that he knows the information. (NICHCY, 2010, para. 6)

Have students reflect on whether their accommodations have been administered to them when needed. Explain that,

> Sometimes teachers can be busy and forget to give you your accommodations. Other times, teachers might not know how or when they are supposed to give the accommodations. Either way, you need your accommodations in order to meet your goals. You need to know how to ask for your accommodations so you can do your best every day.

**Step 7: Help Students Determine How to Ask for Their Accommodations**

The thought of asking an adult for accommodations can be overwhelming for many students, so it is imperative that students have access to cues to remind them of the important steps in making the request. Students should be able to practice the skill repeatedly before they are expected to independently advocate for themselves. Figure 4 displays an example of a cue card with
Figure 4. Student Cueing System: How Do I Ask for my Accommodations?

Step 1
- Think: Ask yourself if you need the accommodation.
- Say: “Do I need this _____ accommodation to finish?”
- Example: “Do I need more time to finish this?”

Step 2
- Think: Check your accommodation list. Practice it in your head.
- Say: “I am allowed to have ______.”
- Example: “I am allowed to have extended time on my assignments.”

Step 3
- Think: Get your teacher’s attention appropriately.
- Say: Raise your hand. Say, “Excuse me.” Wait until the teacher calls on you.
- Example: “Excuse me, Ms. Jones. May I ask a question?”

Step 4
- Think: Ask the question.
- Say: “May I please ______?”
- Example: “May I please have more time to finish this assignment?”

Step 5
- Think: Thank the teacher and say “Good Job” to yourself!
- Say: “Thank you, ______.”
- Example: “Thank you, Ms. Jones. I appreciate you helping me with my accommodation.”
steps and graphical representations that students can use when asking for accommodations in the general education classroom. The addition of graphics or pictures on cue cards can assist students who are visual learners or who struggle with reading in using this tool to advocate successfully.

**Step 8: Introduce the Cue Card and Engage in Role-Play of the Process**

One way students can practice self-advocating for an accommodation is through small-group role play. Pass out the cue cards in Figure 4 to each student. Have one student act as a general educator while you play the role of a student asking for accommodations. In order to make the role play as realistic as possible, the student taking on the teacher role should have a script and a list of the related accommodations provided during the role-play. Use the role-play card verbatim so students can understand how the self-advocating process should look, feel, and sound. After your demonstration, discuss the process with the students. Ask students questions such as, “How did it go? Do you feel this is something you can do?” Discuss any feelings of uncertainty and have students work in pairs requesting various accommodations to further develop confidence and proficiency with the skill.

**Step 9: Describe and Practice Action Steps if Student Is Not Given Accommodations**

Students may be understandably concerned about what to do if their accommodations are not given to them after they ask for them. Although this is not a desirable outcome, it is important that students understand how to handle this situation respectfully and in such a way that still empowers them. Cue cards should include contingency steps for students to use if the teacher says “no” to the request for the accommodation. Moreover, when students practice this skill, it is imperative that they consider how they can “keep their cool.” If teachers still do not deliver accommodations following a second student request, students need to practice coping strategies for being rejected. Teach students to say “Thank you,” to return to their desks, and to verbalize to themselves, “I will do the best I can.” It is also important for students to document the lack of accommodation delivery by writing the instance down on a piece of paper and giving it to their special education teacher, case manager, or parent. This type of verifiable documentation enables special educators to dialogue with the general educator to determine the source of the problem, to make certain the general education teacher is included in the implementation of the IEP, and to ensure the general educator is aware of the required accommodation and how to execute it. In this way, professionals can work collaboratively to generate a solution that works for everyone and ensures the student receives the accommodation as directed in the IEP.

**Step 10: Monitor Student Progress and Troubleshoot Areas of Difficulty**

After the self-advocacy process has been introduced, role-played, and is in practice, monitor students’ progress on a weekly basis. Progress monitoring can be accomplished through weekly check-ins and brief conversations that give teachers the opportunity to reinforce students for their successes in self-advocacy as well as troubleshooting any problems students might have encountered. To track the consistency with which accommodations are delivered and to provide students and teachers with a simple way to document students’ efforts at self-advocacy, a sample self-monitoring checklist is provided in Figure 5.

This checklist in Figure 5 not only allows students to easily identify their own accommodations, but it also gives them a tangible mechanism for communicating their successes and challenges in obtaining their accommodations. Any student who seems to struggle with his or her self-advocacy skills can receive extra encouragement and additional practice as needed. As the year progresses and students become more adept with advocating for their accommodations, meetings can be reduced to bi-weekly or even monthly.

**Final Thoughts**

Natalia and the rest of her third grade class were taking a unit assessment in mathematics. Natalia and her mother studied together all week, and she felt confident with the material. She knew how to successfully complete the problems on her own, but her reading disability made it difficult for her to read word problems independently. “I know I can do this,” Natalia thought to herself. “It was so much easier when Mom read the problems to me at home. Maybe I can ask the teacher to read the problems to me. I am going to use my cue card to help me.” Natalia retrieved her cue card and quickly reviewed the steps and graphics.

Recalling the role-play activities she practiced with her special education teacher, Natalia began to think about the situation. “Do I need to have the problems read aloud in order to be successful? Yes, I do. I know I do better if the questions are read aloud. Am I allowed to have the problems read to me? Yes, my accommodations list says I can have math problems read aloud. Next I need to get Ms. Smith’s attention. What am I going to ask? I should probably say, ‘Ms. Smith, may I please have the questions read aloud?’ I think...”

Self-advocacy has been identified as a critical component of overall self-determination.
Figure 5. Sample IEP Classroom Accommodation Checklist

Student Name: ___________________________________________________________

These accommodations will help to make sure I have an appropriate individualized education program (IEP):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In Class</th>
<th>In Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>_____ Supplemental visual/graphic materials</td>
<td>_____ Directions and instructions repeated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Taped lectures</td>
<td>_____ Instructions given orally and in writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Long-range projects divided into smaller chunks</td>
<td>_____ Study guides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Extended time to complete assignments</td>
<td>_____ Daily or weekly study plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Work in groups</td>
<td>_____ Calendar to plan marking period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Peer buddy</td>
<td>_____ Time management instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Materials in large print</td>
<td>_____ Assignments given prior to class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Preferential seating</td>
<td>_____ Assignments divided into steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Examples given</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Written Assignments</th>
<th>Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>_____ Spell checker</td>
<td>_____ Highlight main points in text and notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Word processor/Use of computer</td>
<td>_____ Flash cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Proofreader</td>
<td>_____ Vocabulary notebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Dictating work to scribe</td>
<td>_____ Outline of the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Extra time</td>
<td>_____ Peer tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Pencil grip</td>
<td>_____ Taped text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>Exams/Tests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>_____ Preferential seating</td>
<td>_____ Word processor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Examples given</td>
<td>_____ Extra time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Calculator</td>
<td>_____ Oral exams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Talking calculator</td>
<td>_____ Tests given in a room with no distractions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Graph paper to line up problems</td>
<td>_____ Proofreader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Assignments divided into steps</td>
<td>_____ Use of study guides, notes, textbooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Extra help</td>
<td>_____ Alternative format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Use of manipulatives</td>
<td>_____ Graded on daily work rather than tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Work in groups</td>
<td>_____ Reduced number of questions per page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Peer buddy</td>
<td>_____ Provide tests in smaller segments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did I Receive Accommodations This Week?</th>
<th>Mon</th>
<th>Tues</th>
<th>Wed</th>
<th>Thu</th>
<th>Fri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I received my IEP accommodations in class today when I needed them.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not receive my accommodations in class today. However, after I practiced my cue card, approached my teacher and requested them, I received my accommodations.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not receive my accommodations in class today even though I needed and requested them. I will discuss this with my special education teacher.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not receive my accommodations in class today even though I needed them. However, I did not request them. I will discuss this with my special education teacher.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: See the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network web site (http://www.spanadvocacy.org) for additional information.
Research has demonstrated that enhanced self-determination is a major factor in improved postsecondary and quality-of-life outcomes for students with disabilities (McDougall et al., 2010). Self-advocacy has been identified as a critical component of overall self-determination. Whereas previous self-determination efforts have been geared toward increasing student participation in IEP meetings (Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006) and improving students’ general problem solving and goal setting (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003), we have described an easy-to-implement model for teachers to assist their students in self-advocating for their IEP accommodations specifically at the elementary level in inclusive settings.

To be certain students are successful as they advocate for their needs at this level, clarify that students are not responsible for ensuring that their teachers implement accommodations as outlined in their IEPs. Remind students there is a team of people working together to ensure their success, but that they are a member of the team and should take the lead in learning how to help themselves to be successful in school and life.

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