

Advocating for Self-Advocacy

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## Introduction

Self-advocacy is a skill that was conceptualized as part of a broader socio-political movement led by a community of people who had a variety of disabilities in the 1970s (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005). It is a skill that helps people communicate their needs and ensure that those needs get met; and, as one person who trained others in self-advocacy described, “it helps people to have a voice [and] to have choices” (Manthorpe, Rapaport, Hussein, Moriarty, & Collins, 2005). Importantly, self-advocacy puts people in charge of their own lives in various aspects, including, but not limited to, medical care and education. In the classroom, self-advocacy is made up of four components: communication, knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, and leadership (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005). Together, these sub-skills help students take charge of their own educations, improving their learning experiences through increased motivation, engagement, and even achievement (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Unfortunately, self-advocacy is not frequently taught to students (“Agents of Their Own Success,” 2018), and many students struggle with it (Andrews, 2018). When self-advocacy is taught, it is taught to students with diagnosed learning disabilities during special education instruction (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005). However, students in all classroom settings stand to benefit from self-advocacy instruction (Andrews, 2018). Expanding this instruction can especially help marginalized students, who often have less experience with self-advocating (Calarco, 2014).

I was fortunate to have the opportunity of observing a self-advocacy curriculum being taught at the Churchill Center & School in Saint Louis, Missouri in the summer of 2016. This private school serves high-potential students with learning disabilities. At Churchill, students work one-on-one with a teacher to assess their strengths and weaknesses and learn how to

communicate their needs to other teachers and peers. While such a model is commendable, it is important to recognize its limitations. After all, Churchill has a unique demographic, ample funding, and staff trained to teach individual students about self-advocacy (See **Appendix 1**). Meanwhile, many U.S. public school teachers have limited funding and are overburdened with increasing class sizes and the pressures of standardized testing (Strauss, 2014; O'Day & Smith, 2016; Vogt, 2009; Klein, Zevenbergen, & Brown, 2006). Thus, with these limits in mind and the desire to expand self-advocacy education, this project seeks to understand the benefits of self-advocacy and provide clear, practical suggestions for teachers for teachers to use in their classrooms.

### **Methodology**

This capstone contains two parts: a literature review of the research on self-advocacy and a guidebook for teachers to promote their students' self-advocacy.

In the literature review, I first introduce self-advocacy and how it came to be. I then established the importance of self-advocacy by examining the theoretical underpinnings of self-advocacy as described by research done in the fields of developmental psychology and disabilities studies. In describing the rationale for self-advocacy, I also included research done in related fields, specifically by looking at other educational materials that aligned with self-advocacy's core principles: for example, I examined the research on social and emotional learning (SEL) to address the development of self-knowledge. I also added educational research examining the results of self-advocacy instruction to further demonstrate the importance of the current project.

I then reviewed the primary literature to assess the quality of current self-advocacy guides. In this analysis, I utilized educational research that assessed the requirements for quality

self-advocacy instruction and compared those requirements with existing guides. Having established the state of existing curricula, I also researched the complementary role of teacher training. In the final section of the literature review, I addressed the challenges teachers face in teaching and encouraging self-advocacy by reviewing various bodies of research, primarily from the fields of sociology and psychology, to identify the reasons why students are not self-advocating. I also used this research to explore self-advocacy differences between students of different backgrounds.

In addition to reviewing the primary and secondary literature written on self-advocacy, I conducted five interviews with public school teachers from a medium-sized city in New England to provide additional context for the state of self-advocacy in classrooms (demographics of the teachers and their schools are summarized in **Figure 1a** and **1b**). While interviews with teachers 1, 2, and 3 were conducted in person at a public location, interviews with teachers 4 and 5 were conducted by phone to accommodate the teachers' busy schedules. These interviews guided the literature review and the design of the guidebook.

**Figure 1a. Teacher Demographics**

ID	Gender	Ethnicity	Grade(s)	Subject	Years of Experience
1	M	Black	6	Math	0-5
2	M	White	11-12	Social Studies	15+
3	F	White	11-12	English	11-15
4	F	Black	6	Science	15+
5	F	Hispanic	4-7	Special Education	11-15

**Figure 1b. School Demographics**

Teachers	Grades	Free and	Student:	Type
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	Served	Reduced Lunch	Teacher	
1	K-8	35%	16:1	Magnet
2	9-12	39%	9:1	Magnet
3	9-12	61%	12:1	Public
4, 5	K-8	62%	14:1	Magnet

*“K-12 School Ratings and Statistics,” 2019*

I used a variety of methods to recruit these teachers. Teachers 1 and 3 were recommended to me by a coworker, and I had previously shadowed with teacher 2. Teachers 4 and 5 were recommended to me by a peer who was working at the same school as the teachers.

In each interview (see **Appendix 2**), I first asked about each teacher’s background to start an open dialogue with the teachers. I then wanted to learn what was already being done in classrooms, what could be done, and what could not be done in terms of self-advocacy, so I asked questions about how they recognize students who need academic help and how they address those students’ needs. Next, I asked about the ways in which they were already fostering the individual components of self-advocacy—communication, knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, and leadership—as well as the skill of self-advocacy itself. Moreover, I used my knowledge of existing self-advocacy guides to inform my questions regarding specific strategies and techniques that teachers were using and that teachers could potentially use.

These responses from this interviews helped as I made the guide and also provided contextual examples that highlighted both the challenges and successes of teaching self-advocacy. I wanted to collect teacher responses as benchmarks showing what is actually feasible for whole-class instruction in a public school to help create a guide that felt implementable and realistic. I also used the interviews to capture these differences in each teachers’ approach to teaching students self-advocacy (or its components) in order to make the guide applicable to a

larger audience. Most importantly, I looked to the interviews for stories and strategies that allowed the guide to be more than a set of statistics concerning self-advocacy.

In addition to referencing teacher responses, the guide incorporated the secondary literature, highlighting techniques that have been shown to be effective in fostering self-advocacy and results from teaching self-advocacy effectively. This research was included to explain to someone using the guide why self-advocacy is important and why the guide should be used. With regard to the organization of teaching self-advocacy, each component of self-advocacy has its own section. Each section explained the relevance of each sub-skill, provided practical strategies that could be used in the classroom to teach the sub-skill, and used examples from the interviews.

## **Literature Review**

### **A Brief History**

Part of the present research is inspired by the research done in disability studies, a field in which researchers have thought carefully about how to empower the voices of people with disabilities across sectors such as health, education, and policy. The desire to do so was first brought to attention with the People First movement, which was brought to the United States in 1974 (“History of People First,” n.d.). The name for this movement came from a man with an intellectual disability saying, “I want to be known as a person first,” which emphasized that people with disabilities are more than just labels (“Self Advocacy,” 2007; Hall, 2013).

At the time, people with disabilities were frustrated that professionals were the ones determining what services people with disabilities needed across sectors; they, too, wanted a say, so they defined and outlined the importance of self-advocacy (Hall, 2013). Self-advocacy can be defined as “an individual’s ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert his or

her interests, desires, needs, and rights. It assumes the abilities to make informed decisions. It also means taking responsibility for those decisions” (Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1994). The members of the People First movement taught self-advocacy to empower those with disabilities to fight for justice and against discrimination (Hall, 2013). Even today, the movement encourages people with disabilities to take charge and work together for justice (“Self Advocacy & Social Groups,” 2018).

There are two types of self-advocacy: group and individual (Ryan & Griffiths, 2015). The former comes in several varieties depending on the organization and the group (Ryan & Griffiths, 2015), and the latter is the focus of this paper. Both center on “the ability to speak up for what [one] want[s] and need[s]” (Ryan & Griffiths, 2015), but individual self-advocacy is more narrowly focused on “speaking or acting for oneself and deciding what is best of oneself,” as opposed to group self-advocacy which advocates around a common cause (Ryan & Griffiths, 2015).

Individual self-advocacy can be used in many fields of life to benefit people of all ages (Vash, 1991); however, it is particularly useful in the classroom for those in school (Fabian, 2007; Ryan & Griffiths, 2015). In the classroom, self-advocacy—composed of knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership (Test et al., 2005)—has been found to increase help-seeking both immediately and in the long term (Holzberg, Test, & Rusher, 2018). At present, there exist national and state legislation that require schools to teach students with disabilities how to self-advocate, but despite this, self-advocacy instruction is poor (Fielder & Danneker, 2007). Furthermore, self-advocacy instruction is not just for students with disabilities—it is a skill from which all students can benefit (Andrews, 2018; Lopez, 2016); thus, self-advocacy instruction that must be expanded, a belief held by many teachers: special

education teachers who were trained in self-advocacy instruction believed that self-advocacy instruction should also be taught to students without disabilities and integrated into traditional instruction time (Lopez, 2016). Critics may fear that teaching students with and without disabilities may diminish the benefits of the skill for students with disabilities and increase the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities, but a University of Houston study of 91 third-grade students found that providing appropriate accommodations (such as those for which students would self-advocate) improved reading scores for students with decoding challenges without unfairly benefiting students without decoding challenges (Fletcher et al., 2006); thus, providing accommodations to students with and without disabilities does not augment the performance gap but rather, helps close it (Smith, 2011).

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

Research from various fields of study explains why self-advocacy is such a crucial skill. Largely, self-advocacy is effective because it give students a say in their education and because it helps teachers better address the needs of their students. Additional benefits arise because of the specific ways in which self-advocacy is taught and because of benefits derived from self-advocacy's components.

**Empowering the Student.** Self-advocacy asks students to take responsibility for their needs; this responsibility must be adapted to specific situations and to students' strengths and weaknesses. Thus, self-advocacy requires students to take an active role in their education and shows students that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of control (Sloane, 2016). Moreover, self-advocacy gives students the ability to seek guidance and help rather than falling into a learned helplessness mindset (Sloane, 2016). In a social experiment on college students, for example, Marc Zimmerman of the University of Michigan (1990) showed that

empowering students through skills development and providing a sense of control (which self-advocacy provides) can help promote hopefulness. This control also improves decision-making in social, behavioral, and academic settings and encourages students to create larger visions for their future and plan accordingly, extending the benefits of self-advocacy beyond school (Sloane, 2016; Martin, Marshall, & Maxson, 1993). Additionally, because self-advocacy puts the students at the helm of their educations, it “enable[s]” them to fully participate in class and take the necessary actions when that is not the case (“Self-Advocacy Instruction,” 2018).

Because self-advocacy gives students additional responsibilities for their educations, students are more likely to “exercise influence over events that affect their lives,” a capacity known self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy promotes student motivation for learning and has been used to predict student achievement (Schunk, 2001). The effect is also self-reinforcing: when students demonstrate self-efficacy, they are encouraged to further influence their own learning and development and are empowered to make meaningful decisions and choices (Van Reusen, 1996). Self-advocacy also promotes self-determination, which is similar to self-efficacy in that it concerns “taking control and making decisions that affect one’s life” (“Self-Advocacy & Self-Determination,” 2017), but it refers specifically to the “intrinsic, self-sustaining form of motivation” that drives the satisfaction of needs (Garrin, 2014). Strengthening this drive has been linked to increased autonomy, self-regulation, self-realization, and empowerment (Dennis Cavitt, 2014).

On the other hand, students are harmed when they are not taught to self-advocate. Deborah Smith of Claremont Graduate University and Naomi Tyler of Vanderbilt University describe that without knowledge about self-advocacy, children can have difficulties with decision-making, planning, working towards goals, and social competency (2010).

**Empowering the Teacher.** Self-advocacy also works because it improves the ability of teachers to meet the needs of their students. Without advocacy, teacher accommodations often do not do enough to help students (“Self-Advocacy Instruction,” 2018), especially because students with disabilities vary greatly in their needs. Students hard of hearing, for example, can hear incompletely, mishear, or miss hearing spoken information but are often still held accountable for fully receiving and comprehending spoken information (“Self-Advocacy Instruction, 2018). Those with expressive language difficulties and impaired social skills find it especially difficult to self-advocate (“Self-Advocacy,” 2013). These difficulties are combined with limited confidence and low self-esteem to limit students requesting additional assistance (“Self-Advocacy,” 2013). Preparing students to self-advocate can thus help teachers address specific student needs. For that reason, teaching self-advocacy is particularly helpful for students whose problems might go unnoticed by even the most observant teachers (“Self-Advocacy Instruction,” 2018).

**The Environment for Self-Advocacy.** As teachers strive to create an environment that allows for self-advocacy (Gasparini, 2014; see *What is Effective?*), they are simultaneously creating an environment that also helps foster student resilience, which is associated with decreased future behavioral problems and psychopathology as well as increased emotional competence (Bai & Repetti, 2015). As an additional benefit, this environment also establishes clear guidelines for relationships between students and peers as well as between students and teachers (Gasparini, 2014).

**The Components of Self Advocacy.** Each of self-advocacy’s four components also has distinct educational benefits. For example, knowledge of self allows students to assess their needs, and communication ensures that students can communicate their needs to teachers. These

two components work in tandem to foster student agency and center the educational experience around students’ needs. The benefits of each individual component are summarized in **Figure 2**.

**Figure 2. Theoretical Underpinnings of Self-Advocacy’s Sub-Skills**

Sub-Skill	Supporting Research
<p>Communication</p>	<p>Communication allows students to make clear their needs and negotiate for them, which can increase student enthusiasm inside the classroom (Stodden et al., 2003, Test &amp; Walker, 2011, Diloyan, 2017).</p> <p>Fostering these skills also increases students’ communication with teachers and adults outside of the classroom (Diloyan, 2017). This component also concerns communication between peers, who can serve as valuable resources for self-advocacy (Test &amp; Walker, 2011).</p> <p>Because effective communication requires negotiation and mutual understanding, teaching this component also improves social competency (Shore, 2004a).</p>
<p>Knowledge of Self</p>	<p>Self-awareness is critical in developing strategies to address weaknesses and identify strengths (Daly-Cano et al., 2015; Van Reusen, 1996).</p> <p>Knowing their strengths and weaknesses helps students independently set personal goals and select appropriate “action plans” (Mithaug, Horiuchi, &amp; McNulty, 1987).</p> <p>Self-awareness is also crucial to self-acceptance and influences how one interacts with others (Daly-Cano et al., 2015). Specifically, it can reduce negative emotions, defensiveness, self-blame, and rumination and moderate responses to distressing events; it is also associated with happiness, other positive feelings, and forgiveness (Stuntzner &amp; Harley, 2015).</p>

<p>Knowledge of Rights</p>	<p>At its core, students’ knowledge of rights helps protect them against rights abuses by teachers and school officials by providing specific strategies for addressing rights’ violations (“You Have a Right to...,” n.d.).</p> <p>Additionally, students should be taught that they have a right to a quality education and to ask for help; rights’ education is crucial for this as greater knowledge results in more successful self-advocacy (Test &amp; Walker, 2011).</p> <p>It is also important for students to learn about their rights because they interact with the world around them and have responsibilities in that world (Kwok, 2008). For this reason, rights instruction has tremendous positive effects after graduation in a variety of settings (“From Theory to Practice,” 2014).</p>
<p>Leadership</p>	<p>Leadership is a critical aspect of self-advocacy, specifically when it comes to decision making (Pennell, 2001). In group settings, leadership skills translate into better relationships with group members as students are able to understand each other’s different roles (Pennell, 2001).</p> <p>Furthermore, teaching this skill provides student with strategies for preparation and organization (Van Reusen, 1996), and in a similar vein, leadership training promotes self-management skills and independence (Martin et al., 1993). Lastly, this skill helps students be assertive (Martin et al., 1993).</p>

**Efficacy**

Self-advocacy is learned in various settings. For example, children can learn about it informally from family members through messages of support and encouragement (Daly-Cano,

Vaccaro, & Newman, 2015), but formal instruction from trained teachers is necessary to observe consistent benefits (“Instruction in Self-Advocacy Progression,” 2017; Gordan, 2016).

Many studies describe the benefits that come with formal instruction of self-advocacy. For example, being taught self-advocacy skills has been linked to higher graduation rates, increased use of educational services, and improved relationships (Tedla, 2017). Moreover, these benefits exist for students of all ages: a meta-analysis of 25 studies on various self-advocacy interventions found that research-developed interventions and published curricula could teach self-advocacy skills to children of a variety of ages (Test, Fowler, Brewer, & Wood, 2005). These results show that self-advocacy instruction can be effectively utilized in the classroom.

The benefits of self-advocacy also extend beyond graduation. Self-advocacy predicts successful transition into life after high school, including both post-secondary education and employment (Tedla, 2017; “Self-Advocacy,” 2013). In fact, students with disabilities who had been trained in self-advocacy at an early age regularly mentioned self-advocacy as something that assisted in the transition to college (Daly-Cano et al., 2015). Self-advocacy skills also translate into benefits as graduates interact with the world around them, helping graduates confront injustice, build strong relationships, foster self-confidence, work towards goals, and manage their career trajectories (Lucio, 2011).

### **Self-Advocacy Curricula**

**What is Effective?** There is a wide range of self-advocacy curricula already available to teachers, but an effective curriculum that develops trusting relationships, creates safe environments, demonstrates caring, and uses positive reinforcement will best foster self-advocacy (Gasparini, 2014). When such environments are developed, self-advocacy flourishes (Friedel, Marachi, & Midgley, 2002). Moreover, effective curricula go beyond providing

instructions for students to follow: “Regulations and requirements ... do not foster self-advocacy, rather when students independently use their voices to call attention to their needs advocacy flourishes” (Centerrino, 2016). In a review of the literature on self-advocacy instruction, Deborah Merchant and Anna Gajar of The Pennsylvania State University (1997) identified key components of self-advocacy instruction that have been further delineated by other authors (Walker & Test, 2011): provision of a clear, operational definition of self-advocacy; demonstrations of the skill through role-play; opportunities for children to ask questions about the skill and rehearse the skill; feedback; student demonstration of skill mastery; instruction on generalization. Providing clear definitions is especially important because there are multiple components of self-advocacy: without clear instruction explaining what self-advocacy is and how each component supports strong self-advocacy, it is difficult for students to acquire the skill in its totality (Gordan, 2016). Additionally, research has shown that including the historical impact of self-advocacy can promote the use of the skill by students (Qing, 2018).

**What is Available?** Presently, most curricula are designed for students with disabilities (learning, developmental, intellectual, and physical) and come from state governments and non-profit organizations like The National Autism Resource and Information Center and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (“Stepping Forward,” 2003, Ashkenazy, n.d.). The combination of this targeted audience and authorship from special interest groups limits guides in two ways. First, it directs these guides towards students or parents, often ignoring the teacher (Fielder & Danneker, 2007), which limits classroom implementation because engaging educators is imperative for self-advocacy education (Eisenman, 2001). Second, it restricts self-advocacy instruction to those who have a diagnosed learning disability, but I argue that all students can use self-advocacy because not all students in general education settings are equally equipped for self-advocacy (see

*Challenges to Self-Advocacy*). Moreover, because additional funding is often given for the target population of these guides, certain suggested strategies are possible only in certain schools and settings. For example, some guides suggest that teachers look to “additional classroom, course, extracurricular, and out-of-school” resources to help students (“Self-Advocacy,” 2018), but such resources may not be available for all teachers. Churchill is another example of resources which may not be accessible to public schools, as it provides one-on-one tutoring to teach students about self-advocacy. Such instruction is not possible for many schools due to high numbers of students and budget cuts (Vogt, 2009; Strauss, 2014).

A closer look at the specific content of these guides reveals how they are unsuitable for immediate use by teachers. The numerous suggestions and goals are often presented in an extremely cluttered way, making it hard to distill the core concepts (“Transition Guide,” 2015; Anderson, 2012). For example, many guides provide worksheets and activities without explaining their importance or provide short aphorisms without clear steps for implementation, such as the teacher should “create a supportive, positive environment,” and “[t]he student will..[a]ppropriately ask for repetition of messages missed” (“Speak Up! Guide,” n.d.; Weimer, 2009; Anderson, 2012). In these cases, educators may ask how they can create a supportive and positive environment and what is the appropriate way for students to ask for missed messages. There are, however, guides that do provide concrete steps for teachers. For example, guides can provide specific questions teachers can ask their students and anecdotal examples of self-advocacy (Cox, n.d.); however, such guides do not provide methods for teachers to assess their students’ responses (Cox, n.d.). Other guides outline principles for fostering the appropriate classroom environment to support self-advocacy, without providing enough details for an untrained teacher to adequately do so (“Building Self-Advocates,” 2016). For teachers, guides

must also provide practical advice for what to do when things do not go as expected (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007). Finally, self-advocacy is a skill that benefits students of various ages (Vash, 1991), so guides should offer ways in which teachers of students of all ages can instruct students in the various sub-skills of self-advocacy; specifically, “each concept should be taught in authentic settings whenever those ‘teachable moments’ arise, regardless of the student's age” (Fielder & Danneker, 2007). These factors are summarized in **Figure 3**.

The flaws arise because many self-advocacy guides are not made with teachers in mind (“Ten Self Advocacy Steps,” 2000; “Stepping Forward,” 2003). These guides focus specifically on student needs and may not explain how teachers can work with students to address those needs. To be clear, these guides are important because they clearly outline areas in which students may need help, but they do not necessarily address how self-advocacy curriculum could be practically brought into the classroom by the teacher. Additionally, these types of guides are focused on helping students with disabilities become self-advocates. And while the skills taught in these guides can also apply to general education students, adaptations need to be made when considering the public-school classroom to accommodate for the large class sizes, the need for teachers to cover state standards, and the limited funding and time.

**Figure 3. The Usability of Self-Advocacy Guides**

Curriculum Name	Teacher Strategies	Student Worksheets & Activities	Troubleshooting	Broadly Applicable (Age Group)
Guide to Self-Advocacy Skill Development	No	No	No	No (Preschool - Grade 4)
Stepping Forward	No (Incomplete)	Yes	No	No (6-12)
Speak Up!	No (Incomplete)	Yes	No	Yes
Self-Advocacy	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Self-Advocacy Instruction	No	No	Yes	Yes
Building Self-Advocates	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Teaching Strategies to Build Self-Advocacy	Yes	No	No	Yes
ME!	Yes	Yes	No	No (9-12)

Additionally, while self-advocacy has four components (Test et al, 2005), but not all guides give these skill groups equal attention. One comprehensive guide provides ample information and activities for students to learn about their rights and themselves and works to hone their leadership skills but only briefly mentions that students need to be “assertive” communicators (“Stepping Forward,” 2013). Other guides fail to cover an entire skill set (see **Figure 4**). Most commonly, guides fail to teach students about their rights (Anderson, 2012) or about leadership (“Self-Advocacy,” 2013, see **Figure 4**). Moreover, while there is research that explains the importance of self-advocacy and each of its individual components (described above), this research is rarely cited in guides, making it hard for teachers to explore additional research or understand why a particular strategy works in their classroom.

**Figure 4. The Components of Self-Advocacy in Existing Guides**

Curriculum Name	Self-Knowledge	Knowledge of Rights	Communication	Leadership/Agency
Guide to Self-Advocacy Skill Development	Yes	No	Yes	No
Stepping Forward	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Speak Up!	Yes	No	No	Yes
Self-Advocacy	Yes	No	Yes	No
Self-Advocacy Instruction	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Building Self-Advocates	Yes	No	Yes	No (Briefly mentions)
Teaching Strategies to Build Self-Advocacy	Yes	No	Yes	No
ME!	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Other existing self-advocacy guides work specifically for people with disabilities in non-education-related fields, such as mental health (“Technical Assistance Guide,” n.d.); legal protection (“Self-Advocacy Guide to Guardianship,” 2009); government lobbying (“Self-Advocacy Summit Guide,” 2012; Hare, 2007); and more. These guides can be particularly useful, but tend to focus on adults, are inapplicable in the school setting, and focus on only some of the areas of self-advocacy. For example, *Self-Advocacy Guide to Guardianships* focuses on rights knowledge, and the *Self-Advocacy Summit Guide* focuses on leadership. Additionally, some guides may focus on group self-advocacy: the *Self-Advocacy Summit Guide*, for instance, describes its goal to “strengthen[ing] state level activities [...and...] developing recommendations for ... the national level” (“Self-Advocacy Summit Guide,” 2012). Allowing groups to advocate for their own needs is critical, but I focus on self-advocacy at the individual level.

**Related Curricula.** Few curricula exist to help general education teachers incorporate self-advocacy into the classroom. Instead, many of the resources for general education teachers focus on increasing students' help-seeking behaviors. And while this behavior is an important aspect of self-advocacy, self-advocacy extends beyond asking for help as it also includes negotiating goals, developing trust, and achieving fulfillment (Shore, 2004b). To encourage help-seeking behavior, many solutions have been proposed. Non-verbal cues, such as hand indicators, can be taught to students so that students more easily communicate their level of understanding and needs (Malone, 2012). While these tactics are helpful, they are not sufficient in so far as they do not address the culture of help-seeking in the classroom and fail to teach students the sub-skills that would allow them to be effective self-advocates.

There are also general educational curricula that teach students how to express their needs appropriately. This skill has been largely addressed by the field of social and emotional learning (SEL) which requires self-awareness and communication of needs ("Framework for Systemic Social and Emotional Learning," 2017). Still, this area is lacking. SEL is tailored for students to master emotional identification and communication of emotion regulation needs and not academic ones ("What is RULER?," 2013). Although these social and emotional skills carry over into self-advocacy generally, they do not completely cover academic needs. Generally, a strong self-advocate is aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and is able to have conversations about them (Lee, n.d.). Like other self-advocacy, guides that teach skills to identify and talk about these areas tend to focus on the parent and teachers who are able to foster self-awareness directly, usually in a one-to-one setting (Morin, n.d.); this tailored self-awareness instruction is not applicable for a teacher serving many students ("Self-Advocacy Skills and Self-Determination in Personalized Learning," n.d.).

### **The Necessity of Training for Teachers**

While there are many ways to teach students about self-advocacy, the literature consistency shows the importance of training. Training is essential for teachers because it helps them understand students' rights and learn how students can participate in the community (Gordan, 2016). For example, teachers can learn about employment, transportation, housing, and recreational opportunities through training (Gordan, 2016). Teachers can also learn about establishing the right classroom environment for self-advocacy: a study of over 960 students found that students are less afraid to self-advocate when their teachers are supportive and enthusiastic, teacher traits which also allow students to focus on learning and developing skills (Friedel, Marachi, & Midgley, 2002). The study also showed that students were more likely to demonstrate their skills when they were able to perceive that their teachers' goals were not to embarrass (Friedel, Marachi, & Midgley, 2002). Finally, informed teacher feedback improves the success rate student's self-advocacy (Walker & Test, 2011). Because the teachers' attitudes and behaviors so greatly influence students' self-advocacy, training is a must.

### **Challenges to Self-Advocacy**

There are many reasons why students do not self-advocate. At the community level, those in power may fear empowering people who are different, and teachers may question the added liability that comes with giving students additional responsibilities regarding academic decisions, especially as self-advocacy changes the nature of the student-teacher relationship (Pennell, 2001). Teachers, parents, and other adults often do not know how to teach self-advocacy or focus too much on the outcomes which self-advocacy instead of focusing on the process and developing the skill, which stunts its development (Stuntzner & Harley, 2015). At the societal level, U.S. culture highly values independence, which includes individuality and choice

(Armstrong, 2018). On one hand, this is beneficial to the cause of self-advocacy, which empowers individuals to make the decision that they themselves deem necessary; however, self-advocacy also requires that someone recognizes when they need to ask for help. Yet as Armstrong (2018) writes, “bias against interdependence permeates the United States’ educational and criminal justice systems.” Such a bias causes people to neglect the fact that interdependence can co-exist with autonomy and that an overemphasis on independence can lead to isolation, creating a social discourse that limits the willingness to seek help (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Narvaez, 2010; Johnson, Oliffe, Kelly, Galdas, & Ogrodniczuk, 2011).

Individually, students may either have personality traits (such as shyness) that make it hard to self-advocate, or they may lack awareness of self-advocacy or one or more of its components (“Self-Advocacy and Victims with Disabilities,” n.d.). Alternatively, students may feel embarrassment and discomfort, causing them to hesitate to reach out for help (Bohns & Flynn, 2010). In a similar vein, students may fear exposing their own weaknesses (and the potential reaction to doing so), being labeled, or having their requests denied (Stuntzer & Harley, 2015). Other students may not know how to communicate their specific needs (Vazire & Carlson, 2010). Without the proper instruction and classroom environment, these barriers are hard to surmount, demonstrating the need for teacher intervention.

Moreover, these barriers are intensified by a variety of factors. Socioeconomic class, for example, often plays a large role in the classroom and in students’ readiness for self-advocacy. For example, middle-class families tend to create home environments where students are encouraged to express their desires more frequently (Calarco, 2014), which in turn, can create a sense of entitlement that affects how students interact with adults (Lareau, 2002). This experience is observed through the students’ behavior in the classroom: children from middle-

class families are more likely to seek assistance from the teacher than are children from working-class families (Calarco, 2014). Consequently, students from middle-class families are more likely than their peers from poor or working-class families to receive necessary accommodations (Lareau, 2015). This differential treatment compounds other disadvantages that low income students face (Fulwood III, 2013).

Gender identity also shapes how students navigate the world around them. Boys use more assertive language, speak more in class, and get more teacher attention (Davison, 2013); these skills naturally translate into a form of self-advocacy, which means girls have a disadvantage when it comes to being self-advocates. Furthering the problem, teachers are often unaware of these behavioral differences and the ways in which they may treat boys and girls differently (Davison, 2013). This difference in self-advocacy has future life consequences: as noted in the *Harvard Business Review*, women were less likely to negotiate than men for what they wanted—both in the laboratory setting and in the business world (Babcock, Laschever, Gelfand, & Small, 2003).

Racial dynamics also affect students' self-advocacy. In institutions of higher education, Black students feared speaking out and being stereotyped as an “angry Black” person, preferring to self-silence as opposed to self-advocate (Laufer, 2012). Black students also noted feeling a lack of respect from teachers, that their teachers had negative perceptions of them, and fearing others' judgements which reduces their desires to self-advocate (Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, & Garrison-Wade, 2008). Asian Americans also face racial pressures, feeling that they are held to higher academic standards (Lee, 1994). Consequently, many Asian American students think that they are supposed to overcome challenges without assistance, preventing them from asking for academic and social help (“We’re Not Even Allowed to Ask for Help,” 2011).

As the previous paragraphs suggest, students' relationships with self-advocacy vary widely. Unfortunately, many differences in self-advocacy ability fall on demographic lines, meaning that those least willing or able to self-advocate are those from marginalized groups. Educators have a great opportunity to help level the playing field by teaching self-advocacy to their students, ensuring that all students can utilize a skill that provides numerous benefits. Still, teachers will face barriers encouraging their students to self-advocate equally, with biases shaping how they teach and assess student behavior (Garcia, 2018), and it is important to recognize that self-advocacy is not a magical solution that will resolve all of the existing inequalities in our school system. Nonetheless, teaching students to self-advocacy is an important step that can help students begin to address the many challenges they face both in and out of school.

### **Findings**

In conducting my literature review, I found a lack of rights education in existing curriculum guides, a factor that I wanted to carefully think about when designing my own. However, the task proved more challenging than I anticipated given the field's current focus on those with diagnosed disabilities who are given explicit legal protections, through legislation like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). As such, guides (see "Stepping Forward," 2003; Cantley, P., Little, K., & Martin, J., 2010) focus on teaching students how to understand the rights provided under these protections. This education is crucial, but may not be directly applicable to other students. As such, I searched for literature that looked beyond this to understand how educators approach teaching about students' rights. While I did find research on teaching students about certain rights (e.g. freedom of speech), this work was not sufficient to

provide teachers with suggestions and strategies for broadly teaching students about their rights with respect to self-advocacy.

My interviews highlighted the vast diversity of teaching styles and approaches to fostering self-advocacy, but I was happy to find out that many of the teachers I interviewed had an idea of what self-advocacy was and were thinking about ways to incorporate it into the classroom. Even when they claimed not to teach self-advocacy, their teaching styles already incorporated many good techniques for fostering it and its sub-skills. While it is extremely beneficial to teach students skills in this way, direct instruction in self-advocacy is still necessary (Gordan, 2016). Direct instruction of self-advocacy allows teachers to “target specific personal and environmental conditions” and improves the ability of students to generalize the skill of self-advocacy for other contexts (Gordan, 2016).

Some teachers were skeptical of the ability of a guide to help foster the skill of self-advocacy, especially because they were concerned with a variety of other challenges in the classroom such as difficult student behavior and lack of funding. Thus, the guide attempts to provide strategies for teaching self-advocacy in light of some of these challenges to help alleviate the concerns mentioned by these teachers. Still, it is important to emphasize that this guide is merely a starting point for change that needs to be accompanied by larger, systemic reforms that address inherent inequalities and other challenges that students face.

### **Summary of Interviews**

I first interviewed a middle school math teacher, Teacher 1. He described several ways to bolster student confidence and leadership using a variety of teaching strategies (e.g. discussing answers in pairs) and assignments (e.g. group assignments). He also used student-generated data to identify struggling students and found ways to assist these students. These ways were time

intensive, so may be challenging to implement broadly. Teacher 1 also emphasized the importance of getting to know students (both in and out of the classroom) as a means to understand their role in the classroom. Finally, Teacher 1 explained how putting himself in a vulnerable position by acting in a school play allowed him to demonstrate that even he as the teacher had challenges that required him to self-advocate, sending an encouraging message for his students to do the same.

My second interviewer, Teacher 2, was a high school history teacher who had a variety of strategies that he used to promote self-advocacy in his classroom, such as having students defend their answers and give presentations. Moreover, he discussed the role of formative assessments as a way to gauge self-efficacy. In terms of grading these and other assessments, he emphasized the importance of reporting on not only letter grades but also key competencies that are necessary for mastery of certain material. He underscored the difficulties of quantifying self-advocacy and the role of self-assessment. Like Teacher 1, Teacher 2 also emphasized the importance of knowing his students well enough to assess the different ways in which students can self-advocate.

Teacher 3 was an English teacher who seemed excited to discuss ways in which students could be self-advocates in the classroom. She noted that teachers should not be afraid to let their students be self-advocates, pointing out the fact that there are different ways in which the teacher can control the environment. Moreover, she noted the importance of making sure that every environment was comfortable, safe, and conducive to self-advocacy, noting that shame is one of the main reasons students do not reach out for help. She noted compassion and respect as a way to construct such an environment in a way that emphasizes the capability of students and

recognizes that they deserve to succeed. Finally, she mentioned the importance of having students take ownership of their mistakes, for which students should not be blamed.

Of the teachers interviewed, Teacher 4, a middle school science teacher, seemed the most skeptical of self-advocacy. She pointed out how her main focus was fulfilling state requirements in light of the wide range of skill levels in her class; for example, even though she was a science teacher, she had to provide extra assistance to some of her students who lacked strong reading skills. Despite these challenges, she still found ways to incorporate several subskills in her classroom. Like Teacher 1, Teacher 4 utilized group instruction as an opportunity for leadership and for helping students feel confident in their skills, and like Teacher 2, Teacher 4 underscored the importance of self-assessment, noting her use of interest surveys of skill surveys which she used to tailor projects to student strengths.

Teacher 5, the only special education teacher I interviewed, brought an entirely new perspective to the table. Because she worked with students both in and out of their general education classrooms, she had a unique understanding of self-advocacy and how it could be improved. In terms of the relationship between a general education class teacher and their student, Teacher 5—like several of the other teachers—pointed out the need for creating personal relationships with students to help them feel safe and confident, feelings which Teacher 3 had identified as necessary for self-advocacy. In addition to self-assessment, which was also mentioned by other teachers, Teacher 5 highlighted that students needed to be given clear feedback that they could use to assess their mistakes and find ways to address them. She also described how rubrics could be used to not only outline expectations but also as a way for students to assess the quality of their own work. Moreover, she emphasized the importance of teachers explicitly explaining student rights, especially because of the lack of parents' and

students' preexisting knowledge of rights. In terms of specific self-advocacy instruction, Teacher 5 identified role-plays as a helpful tool that addressed key obstacles to the skill: lack of confidence, fear, and lack of awareness.

### **Limitations**

#### **The Interviews**

Each of the teachers interviewed gave up their time voluntarily, thus the selection is biased towards teachers who were willing to speak on “encourag[ing] their students to seek help” and “the practices [used] in . . . classes to assist students academically.” These teachers may have been willing to speak to me because they felt confident in their abilities or had received some training on the topic, and thus, teachers who lack these skills may have been excluded from the sample. While this biasing of the sample is a concern in regards to how easily self-advocacy could be implemented into schools, the expertise of these teachers is still helpful in understanding how self-advocacy could be taught to a larger population of students. Also, (as seen in **Figure 1b**), four of the five teachers interviewed came from magnet schools (due in part to the large number of magnet schools in New Haven: 20 out of 48 schools in the New Haven Public Schools district are magnet schools; “Our Schools,” n.d.). Perhaps, then, these teachers do not represent other public school teachers because students (and their parents) self-select to attend magnet schools, affecting the teaching conditions. Still, two of the teachers taught in other school settings previously which may increase the generalizability of their findings.

Another limitation to the research was that I conducted two interviews over the phone. As a result, the conversations were not as fluid conversationally because of unstable connections. Moreover, because there was no face-to-face contact during the phone interviews, it was hard to understand exactly how the teachers were responding to the question emotionally—for example,

did the teachers seem to recognize the concept of self-advocacy? With which components of self-advocacy were they comfortable? With which were they unfamiliar? About which were they nervous? But as an unintended advantage, I did feel more comfortable asking more pointed question to get more specific answers, allowing specific implementations of teaching strategies to become apparent.

In all interviews, the nature of the study may have restricted the results. For example, the interviews were recorded to accurately capture what the teachers said. But the recording may have limited teachers' abilities to respond completely honestly. Specifically, they may have been hesitant to criticize their school leadership, school environment, broader policies, or other aspects of their jobs. Additionally, my identity as the interviewer also impacts the teachers, and it is important to acknowledge how my race (Asian) and status as a Yale undergraduate influence how teachers engage with and respond to me. As described in **Figure 1a**, no teachers were of my race, which may have limited the comfort of teachers discussing racial challenges they or their students face (Krysan & Couper, 2003), a particular concern given the racial differences in self-advocacy attainment (*Challenges to Self-Advocacy*). For the phone interviews, teachers were unable to identify my race visually, but my last name was known to the teachers, who may have been able to infer my racial identity from my name. Generally, I tried to let teachers steer the direction of the conversation as much as possible so as not to make them feel any pressure associated with cross-race interviews, and I did not ask questions that specifically mentioned race, but they may have nonetheless felt this pressure. It is my hope, however, that their answers are still able to illuminate self-advocacy teaching strategies that work for a unique and diverse range of students.

I also conducted a limited number of interviews. Because I only interviewed five teachers, my understanding of how public school teachers would think about and approach teaching self-advocacy is not generalizable to all teachers. Still, my sample's wide range of disciplines and experience provide unique insights that can be useful to many other public school teachers.

Finally, I did not collect information from the teachers about their school environments or their administrations, as I did not set out to ask about this when I composed my interview questions. Research has shown that these factors critically impact what teachers can do in and out of the classroom in terms of self-advocacy ("Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination in Personalized Learning," n.d.). Thus future studies should also examine the role of administrators and analyze which administrative factors facilitate self-advocacy instruction and which factors impair it.

### **The Guide**

While significant research has gone into each component of the guide, the guide has not been tested in the field. Thus, future studies that pilot and test the use of this guide are necessary to determine if it can effectively bring about the benefits of self-advocacy (*Theoretical Underpinnings*) as seen in other pilot studies (*Efficacy*). In such studies, specific strategies of how the guide should be implemented should be carefully devised and documented so that the study could be replicated.

This guide does not include the teacher training that is described as crucial above (*The Necessity of Training Teachers*). However, it hopefully presents teachers with the benefits of self-advocacy to encourage teachers to do their own research into the ways in which students can engage with the community among other self-advocacy resources.

Typically, this guide is also limited. While children can theoretically seek help for any variety of causes, this guide and the research materials found within it focus on self-advocating within the academic setting (e.g. using self-knowledge to recognize needs such as getting homework printed out on colored paper, extra time for reading instructions, explanations given twice, learning strategies; leadership to initiate discussions concerning these needs; communication to clearly communicate them; and knowledge of rights to feel entitled to these accommodations). Of course, many of the techniques described can extend to seeking help for other issues, such as home-life difficulties or mental health challenges, but that is beyond the present scope of this paper. In other words, the guide is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather, it is the starting point for teaching a tool that can allow students to address a wide variety of issues.

Finally, while this guide highlights the lack of student self-advocacy, it is not an indictment of students not reaching out for help; rather, it argues that teachers must be the ones who take notice of why their students shy away from getting help when they need it and figure out what can be done to change help-seeking mindsets and the classroom environment.

### **Recommendations**

Based on my research and interviews, it is clear that better research is needed to strengthen our understanding of self-advocacy. Specifically, researchers should use more rigorous study designs to more clearly demonstrate the teaching strategies for and the benefits of self-advocacy, particularly for students who do not receive formalized accommodations from their education providers. Even with this lack of understanding, however, several lines of research suggest that self-advocacy is beneficial to all students (Tedla, 2017; Andrews, 2018). Thus, education policymakers should work to increase self-advocacy instruction in general

education classrooms so that the skill is more broadly accessible to students, especially those who might have limited access to self-advocacy in other contexts.

Fortunately, my interviews revealed that the foundations for teaching self-advocacy are already there, as many teachers already taught several self-advocacy components in their classrooms, but this is not enough. Teachers should work to teach self-advocacy more explicitly and incorporate it into the classroom through methods outlined in the guide. To better prepare teachers, education researchers should design best practices for training educators on how to teach self-advocacy. This training is crucial because it has been shown that engaging educators and connecting them with the appropriate resources is essential for high quality instruction that effectively teaches self-advocacy and ensure that it is able to benefit the student beyond college (Gordan, 2016; Daly-Cano et al., 2015). Further resources should go into developing and implementing teacher training. A counterpart of this training is administrator support, which is crucial to ensuring that teachers are teaching self-advocacy with the training and resources that they need. While I did not get the chance to assess the state of administrator support of self-advocacy, research should also be done on how administrators should be trained and how they can best support their teachers.

As mentioned previously, Test, Fowler, Brewer, Wood, and Eddy (2005) outline four components of self-advocacy, three of these are easily translated to a broader implementation of self-advocacy instruction: communication, knowledge of self, and leadership. However, most of the literature on helping students gain knowledge of rights focuses only on specific legislation for those with disabilities (e.g. IDEA), which is not directly applicable to students who do not have disabilities. Further research should be conducted on how students without explicit legal

accommodations can be taught to think about their rights to a quality education and how to ensure that they are fulfilled.

### **Conclusion**

Self-advocacy can benefit students in myriad ways. Still, instruction in the skill is lacking, especially in general education settings. This lack of instruction disproportionately affects already marginalized students who are the ones who typically need it the most. As such, this project outlines the theoretical framework of self-advocacy and reviews several studies that test its efficacy to design a guide for public school teachers that is informed by interviews with public school teachers. While this guide provides some suggested strategies to address the current lack of self-advocacy instruction and to support the inclusion of self-advocacy instruction in public school classrooms, it is yet to be tested. In general, more research needs to be done to further explore and develop the criteria for effective self-advocacy curricula for future guides and the exact benefits that self-advocacy can provide in diverse general education. Moreover, self-advocacy instruction must be accompanied by long-term solutions to other problems such as overworked teachers and racial inequality. Alone, self-advocacy education is not able to fix the inequalities in our public schools. Without a multi-faceted approach that addresses the needs of all children and provides training and support for their teachers, self-advocacy instruction is only a small step towards leveling the playing field that could truly thrive in a more equal school system.

### **Appendix 1. Churchill Center & School Background**

Churchill is a private school located in the suburbs, serving high-potential elementary and middle school students who have learning disabilities. The students it serves are predominantly white (>90%) and have high socio-economic standing (tuition is \$34,400 per year, and only 9% of students receive financial aid). Students must apply for the school and must have a diagnosis of one or more of the following: dyslexia; dysgraphia; dyscalculia; processing disorders; specific learning disabilities in reading, math, and written language; nonverbal learning disorders; and ADHD. Because of its unique demographics, Churchill does not serve many of the students I hope to reach with my guide (e.g. students of low socio-economic standing, students without diagnosed disabilities—i.e. without special education services, and students of color). Still, I choose to study self-advocacy in action at Churchill to understand how it is taught, how teachers train to teach it, how students use it, how it is assessed, and when it fails. In this project, Churchill serves as the gold standard not because it necessarily teaches self-advocacy the best but rather, because it is a well-funded private school with ample time for one-on-one instruction, an average class size of nine, and well trained teachers. These conditions are hard to find in most school settings.

**Appendix 2. Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about how you got into teaching.
2. How do you shape your classroom environment? This feels like it should go here. Every other answer actually evolves from how they answer this and they may give you lots without your needing to ask many follow up questions.
3. Tell me about how your students deal with academic challenges.
  - a. What signs do your students show when they are struggling?
  - b. How do you know if there are children who are struggling academically but do not speak up? What methods do you use to help them? This seems to beg to go here.
4. In what ways do you work with students who need extra academic help? This looks like “What kinds of strategies exist in your classroom for all students to utilize if/when they need help?” maybe collapse into one question.
5. What other techniques do you use to encourage children to seek help?
6. Can you tell me about the ways in which asking for help is viewed by students in your classroom?
  - a. How do you combat negative attitude towards help-seeking?
7. What obstacles might you expect for children seeking help?
8. In what ways do you empower children in your class today?
  - a. What opportunities for leadership exist in the classroom?
  - b. What activities are used for self-reflection in the classroom
  - c. How do you have students think about their rights?
  - d. Do you see students advocate for themselves in class? If yes, how?
9. If someone handed you a curriculum that was focused on improving self-advocacy, what would be your immediate reactions? Would you include aspects of such a curriculum in your class? This looks like the second to last question – it’s a kind of summary and gives them a chance to reflect on what they’d like to see, or what they might have wanted (or not).
10. Anything you’d like to add or that I didn’t ask?

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