

Improving Self-Advocacy Among Students with Exceptionalities through
Student-Led IEPs: A Meta-Synthesis

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Abstract

This meta-synthesis explores the relationship between developing self-advocacy among students with exceptionalities through student-led IEPs. Students with exceptionalities often have a more difficult time developing and applying skills necessary for exhibiting self-advocacy. By providing students with an authentic opportunity to practice self-advocacy skills within the context of a school environment, educators better allow students to develop an awareness of self including strengths and needs, both of which are necessary to find success both within and outside of the school framework.

I. Introduction

1.1 Background

The purpose of this meta-synthesis is to evaluate what self-advocacy is, what role it plays in a student's life with regards to their self-efficacy, and best practices for developing self-advocacy among students with exceptionalities. The specific strategy of student-led iep is examined to determine if it is a best practice for developing self-advocacy.

Before discussing the best ways to help students of exceptionalities become better self-advocates and develop the self-determination skills necessary for them to find success both in and out of the classroom, it is important to examine the characteristics of the current generation of students being serviced in our public school system.

Today's generation of students have been dubbed "Millennials." The word represents a population of people born between the years 1980-2000. These people began, or will begin, entering their adolescent and adult years post 2000. While this makes up about half of the demographic of students currently enrolled across grades K-12, it is still very relevant to consider their framework in terms of general characteristics. The emphasis of this paper is to determine what the literature says about developing self-advocacy among students with exceptionalities, exploring specific

practices, most significantly student led iep, but the culture from which current students are coming from is an important and necessary consideration as well.

In their article, “The Millennial Student: A New Generation of Learners,” authors Michele Monaco and Melissa Martin describe seven general characteristics of the Millennial student. For the purposes of this literature review, particular emphasis will be placed on the characteristics that most apply with self-advocacy and self-determination development.

“Millennials are *sheltered*” (Monaco & Martin, 2007). A “regimented schedule of extracurricular activities has decreased opportunities for independent creative thought and decision-making skills” (Monaco & Martin, 2007). While students with special needs are more likely to have an increased difficulty in independent, creative thought and decision-making, what is already a naturally difficult task due to their exceptionality becomes compounded even more so due to the generational era they are living in. Students in this millennial generation have shown themselves as being limited in their ability to independently think and act as a result of their “parent-driven scheduled lifestyles with little ‘free’ time” (Monaco & Martin, 2007). In a way, this generation of students is just along for the ride. They are shuttled from one event to the next with little thought as to why and little input as to whether or not they want to participate. This is quite in line with the idea of education being something that happens to a person. Students with exceptionalities may feel like they have limited personal investment with

regards to their education because they have limited personal investment in their everyday life as a result of the generational age they are in.

According to the Psychology Dictionary, self-advocacy is “a process we use to make our own choices and to exercise our rights” (“Psychology Dictionary” n.d.). Self-advocacy can be viewed as a range of skills from basic survival skills to more complex skills necessary to solve disputes that may arise over the course of general, everyday living. It should be established too the difference between self-advocating and throwing a fit. Self-advocacy comprises a set of skills necessary to problem solve as it relates to a person’s general well being.

While pop culture and social media have provided platforms for many of today’s students to express their viewpoints on specific subjects more freely, there is a lapse in terms of their being able to effectively communicate with adults and peers in a personable way. Much communication through the filter of what one may consider to be self-advocating today is done from behind the screen of a device where interpersonal skills are not necessarily required. When students are faced with a concerning issue wherein they need to problem solve in order to compensate for their areas of weakness, often they are lacking the appropriate interpersonal skills to adequately advocate for themselves. While there is a social balance to be achieved between self-advocating and pontificating, the skill of self-advocating is nonetheless essential to the overall development of a student’s efficacy.

“Self-advocacy is a concept and skill associated with self-determination, and research has suggested that people who are self-determined have better post school outcomes” (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, Eddy, 2005). It is crucial to consider the developmental necessities of becoming a productive and successful citizens as well as a person who is able to properly problem solve basic scenarios seen in everyday life. Among the entire population of students, the demographic that comprises students with exceptionalities is likely to not fully develop these skills, or more accurately, struggle the most in developing these skills. However, self-advocacy and self-determination are essential because it is the avenue by which people, at its most basic level, meet their own personal needs. “The one skill set that appears to be associated with successful life outcomes is self-advocacy and self-determination” (Wilson Hawbaker, 2007).

Keeping in mind the overall goal of education is to develop productive, functioning, life long learners who can adequately problem solve, educators need to be able to effectively balance the tension of being solution minded as opposed to problem minded. Self-advocacy is more than the acknowledgement of a problem. It is the awareness of problem solving options and knowing how to discover those options when they cannot be found within oneself. The first step to being able to accomplish this notion is through an acknowledgement of one’s own strengths and weaknesses. “Knowledge of self and knowledge of rights are viewed as the foundations of self-advocacy, because it is necessary for individuals to understand and know themselves before they can tell others what they want” (Test et.al. 2005).

While there is a personal accomplishment in graduating from high school, there is a larger societal need for the graduation rates among all demographics to increase. In an ever increasingly competitive workforce, society as a whole is in need of students who are able to contribute to the general economic climate. “The United States will need a much higher percentage of its young people--including youth with disabilities--to earn postsecondary credentials and degrees in order to compete in a global marketplace and to be productive citizens” (“Improving college and career readiness,” 2013).

Essentially, we need to do more than work to get the graduation rate among students with exceptionalities to improve; we need to look beyond post secondary and help students identified as having special needs determine a path towards social efficacy. “While considerable progress has been made during the last decade, students with disabilities graduate from high school at lower rates than the general population” (“Improving college and career readiness,” 2013). As the focus shifts to preparing students with exceptionalities to not only graduate from high school but also look forward to post secondary training, so must the practices being employed and the paradigm of possibilities for this population of students also shift.

The stakes for a successful transition from high school to adulthood are growing ever higher. “Particularly for students with disabilities, it is important to focus on other critical skills, such as independence, self-determination, social and emotional skills and attitudes (e.g. maturity, resiliency, self-management, self-advocacy, and interpersonal relations), college knowledge (e.g. finding the right post-secondary education match,

understanding the college application process, and applying for financial aid), critical thinking, lifelong learning, and employment skills” (“Improving college and career readiness,” 2013).

Knowing how important it is to develop and nurture students who are ready to become not just functioning members of society, but active and innovative as well, educators must consider the impact of this population of students with exceptionalities in this framework as well. A passive approach to their contribution post high school can no longer be fostered. A key component to enabling students to being successful to this degree is self-advocacy. “Literature in both disability and educational research has identified the development of self-advocacy skills as crucial to the successful transition of students with disabilities into adult life” (Test et al., 2005).

Having established an obvious need to help students with exceptionalities to develop and apply self-advocacy skills, how to accomplish this must be discussed. The best ways to apply skills being learned is in an authentic setting, in a place unique to the school environment where it would happen in a natural setting. Student led iep is an appropriate place wherein this can occur. Not only does the iep setting provide opportunity for a student’s voice to be heard and known, it is also a chance for students to fully grasp what it means to be a person with an exceptionality. “An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes,

individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults” (Black & Leake, 2011).

Students need to first recognize their own strengths and weaknesses when developing self-advocacy skills. “An accurate assessment of one’s strengths, weaknesses, needs, and preferences along with confidence in one’s abilities is fundamental to effective choice and decision-making” (Hoffman, 2003). Having a complete picture of their strengths and areas where they need support will allow them to make better decisions in the course of everyday living as well as in the school setting.

Student led iepS provide students with one of the most real world experiences that can be given within the safety of the school environment. The more real world experiences students can participate in before leaving the safety net of the school, the better equipped they will be once they leave. “One essential emphasis of preparing students for adulthood should involve equipping them with the skills, attitudes, and opportunities needed to assume more active roles in directing their own lives and charting their future paths” (Carter et al., 2013).

“Students with disabilities also tend to have fewer opportunities for self-determination than their nondisabled peers and when they do have opportunities, they often lack the attitudes, skills, and knowledge to be able to respond appropriately” (Black & Leake, 2011). This again reinforces the concept of providing students with disabilities with unique opportunities to develop their self-advocacy. While they may have fewer opportunities to practice self-determination, being able to participate in their

own iep is a chance for students with exceptionalities to develop interpersonal skills, responsibility, and demonstrate knowledge of self, using a means that not many other students have.

1.2 Author's beliefs and experiences

Education is not designed to be something that happens to a student. My first year in the role of a special educator found me thinking about this notion. I was working with a few students over the age of 14 who had no stake in the iep process or in their education as a whole because the system is designed to leave students out of the decision making process.

I was working with 16 and 17 year old high school students who were unaware of the goals and objectives that had been written about them. They were unaware of the process by which those goals and objectives were written. What was most alarming to me, as a general educator coming into the special education field, was the fact that not only was student input not provided it was not sought out.

My high school students, who in a few short years would be expected to enter the adult world, were completely unaware of the iep process, the objectives they were expected to achieve, and the strategies by which they were going to achieve them. In a sense one of the most valuable teaching moments that would allow them to begin to tread the waters of adult decision-making was being completely forsaken.

Crystal's story

When I first began working with Crystal she was a 13 year old 6th grader who had recently been re enrolled in the public school system after having spent the previous three years homeschooling. At the time, I was a general education sixth grade teacher. Crystal was on an iep identified as a student with a specific learning disability although her full scale IQ was only 73. Through conversations with my colleagues and other community members I discovered she was one of six children whose mom was a known meth addict. Although they had paperwork showing she had been enrolled in a homeschool program, her performance in the classroom showed little evidence of having any access to instruction. Her age equivalency in reading and math were roughly 6.1-6.7 meaning she was performing nearly 7 years behind her same aged peers.

Crystal was very quiet, rarely speaking up in class. Most of her day was spent in the special education classroom with her younger sister who was performing at about the same level as Crystal. She passed sixth grade and I did not work with her again until her freshman year when I transitioned roles from general education to special education.

As a freshman, Crystal was still unbelievably quiet and shy. She did not have any friends with whom she socialized with, but she was kind, and her classmates in turn were kind with her. Crystal was enrolled in all of the general education classes, which were combined as 9/10 grade level due to the small size of the school. She was also enrolled in algebra I because that is the course taken at the freshman level. Three weeks into the school year, receiving feedback from her teachers and seeing her performance in these classes, it quickly became obvious that she was in over her head. While she had made

great strides in her education since I had seen her in sixth grade, she was still performing at about a fourth grade level in reading, writing, and math.

Because of the size of the school I was working in, my special education role was only half time. Only two hours of my day were devoted to special education, and of those two hours, most of the time was spent with speech students in the younger grades. As a result, I did not see the students on my caseload across grades 7-12 as much. All of their courses were inclusive with accommodations and modifications being made by the paraprofessionals and teachers through communication with me.

When it was quickly discovered that the courses Crystal was enrolled in were too difficult, even with one to one paraprofessional support, I met with the curriculum director of our district to develop a plan to help Crystal better succeed. She continued in the general education language arts, history, and science courses with paraprofessional support, but she was placed in an online math course targeted at her instructional level as determined by a placement test she took. It wasn't until about week six of the first quarter that Crystal was receiving targeted instruction based on her needs. Throughout this entire time, she was never part of the discussions regarding her schedule and course work. As a new special education teacher, and one with a full caseload of eleven students whose needs were to be met with only two hours a day, it did not dawn on me to bring her in on the conversations. I just knew she was in over her head and wanted to fix it as quickly as possible. Crystal never once told her paraprofessional, teacher, or myself that the work was too difficult. She never once complained about the amount of homework being

expected of her in these courses. She never asked if there was an alternative for her scheduled placement. She just came to class each day, tried her best to complete the assignments (often failing by a great margin), and went home. Essentially, her education was happening *to* her.

As the reality of this set in with me, I determined to find ways to help Crystal advocate for herself. I wanted her to speak openly and candidly with her paraprofessional regarding the content being taught and her workload. I wanted her to be upfront with me when it came time for planning her second semester. Despite not being able to work with her myself, I was able to touch base with her a few times a week to address her work and progress towards her iep goals. She was unaware of what her goals and objectives were, and I don't know for certain that she realized she was entitled to certain instructional practices to help her succeed. As the year came to a close, I was pleased with the progress she had made in speaking up for herself and expressing her educational interests. He expressed her interest in entering that field post high school and even worked to get core content classes finished early so that she could participate in an introductory online culinary arts class the final six weeks of the school year.

In late April, she applied for a grant to attend a summer internship through Chugach High School that would allow her to attend culinary arts classes and was awarded the grant. She spent the first five weeks of her summer in a hands-on culinary arts class in Anchorage. I was sad to leave Crystal knowing I wouldn't have the opportunity to follow up with her in the upcoming school year because I moved from

Kenny Lake that summer. My hope though is she is still developing her advocacy skills as a sophomore this year and taking advantage of the rights given to her as being a student with an iep.

Cora's story

Cora was a third grade student when I began working with her. She is the middle of three girls all one year apart. Her parents have not been an active part of her life since she was two years old. She was living with her grandpa in a Native village with her sisters, high school brother, and an older cousin.

Academically, Cora was placed on an infant learning program for developmental delays, was then transitioned onto an iep for speech and language. As a second grader, her eligibility category was changed from speech and language to learning disability. While she is consistently below her same age peers in all academic areas, the area of reading proved to be most difficult for Cora.

Knowing the chaotic home from which she was coming from, I took it upon myself to capitalize on every moment I had with Cora to improve her reading and improve her confidence in her reading. She made tremendous growth both in her fluency and in her comprehension from first quarter to second quarter. As we came back from Christmas break though, she had clearly fallen behind due to a lack of practicing her reading while on the break.

Much of the third quarter was spent getting her caught back up to where she was before the break and preparing for spring assessments. It was during this time too that her

grandfather took in another four children from the Native village due to OCS removing them from their mother's care. Needless to say this created a lot of tumult in the lives of Cora and all of the kids involved.

During one of our one on one sessions, Cora began to open up to me about life at home. She began telling a story of older cousins fighting over drugs, thinking the one had stolen from the other. She also shared with me the drinking that happens in the village. She ended the conversation stating matter of factly that she was going to end up drinking too, because "That's what everyone in my family does."

Over the course of the school year that I worked with Cora, I was desperate to figure out a way to help her become personally invested in what was happening at school. At her young age, her paradigm of school was that it was something she did because she had to. There was no connection for her between school and real life. To her, real life consisted of the moments she shared with me regarding life in the village. I cannot help but believe if she were to become an active part of her iep process, especially at this young age, she would be put on a better track to realizing her hard work in the classroom will provide her with another option, other than the one she is presently seeing and living.

If students were a part of the decision making process, a part of the entire iep process, I cannot help but think they would be more likely to achieve their goals. If students were a part of the iep process, I cannot help but think that students would become better at self-advocating.

Moving into my position this year of working solely with students in the middle school age range, I am becoming more convinced of the value in providing students with every opportunity to own their life path so to speak. I am working with students who have real struggles in executive functioning. As we move down the academic path together, these executive functioning issues are impeding their success. Students who appear to be apathetic are actually trapped inside themselves, unable to problem solve even the most basic of common classroom dilemmas, such as not having a pencil. Quite naturally the conclusion can be drawn that if the struggles with their executive functioning are impeding their academics, they are most definitely impeding their everyday life. There is an obvious need to help students develop self-advocacy.

I am faced with a two-fold issue: improving self-advocacy among students with exceptionalities and creating opportunities for students to be actively invested in their education. My question is, if the students were a part of the iep process, given an opportunity to express for themselves what their educational experience is like, what they would like to get out of their school experience, areas they would like to improve and focus their energies on, would we see an increase in self-advocacy among students with exceptionalities? Education was never meant to be something that happens *to* a person. It was meant to *empower* a person.

1.3 Purpose of this meta-synthesis

The purpose of this meta-synthesis was two fold. The first purpose was to determine what self-advocacy is and how it is developed. The literature search was

designed to create a framework from which to understand how do students successfully transition from high school to adulthood with a specific focus on the role self-advocacy plays in establishing this framework. The second purpose of this meta-synthesis was to determine whether or not student-led iep's are an effective tool in improving self-advocacy among students with exceptionalities.

While these were the two main purposes for this meta-synthesis, there were five specific focus points within these two purposes: generational considerations, self-advocacy defined, students with exceptionalities and post secondary education, developing self-advocacy, and student-led iep's.

2. Methods

2.1 Selection criteria

Articles for this meta-synthesis met the following criteria

1. The articles were peer-reviewed from educational journals.
2. The articles examined self-advocacy as it relates to students with exceptionalities.
3. The articles were research based with respect to the topic of student-led iep's.
4. The articles had an emphasis on or addressed in some capacity student post secondary transitions.

2.2 Search procedures

Searches were done using database resources as well as ancestral searches.

2.2.1 Database searches

Database searches were done using the Boolean search method within the Education Resources Information Center as well as the online database Google Scholar using the following search terms:

1. “Self-advocacy” and “special education”
2. “Self-determination” and “special education”
3. “Self-advocacy” and “student led iep’s”
4. “Self-determination” and “student led iep’s”
5. “Millennials” and “education”

The following articles were found using these search criteria: (Wilson Hawbaker, 2007; Mueller, Engiles, Peter, 2003; Johnson, Serrano, Veit, 2013; Danneker, Bottge, 2009; Campbell-Whatley, 2006; Evans Getzel, 2014; Black, Leake, 2011; (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, Eddy, 2005; Danneker, Bottge 2009; Denney, Daviso 2012; Hoffman, 2003; Carter, Lane, Cooney, Weir, Moss, Machalicek, 2013; Oblinger, 2003; Monaco, Martin, 2007; Fagen, 2001; Carter, Lane, Crnabori, Bruhn, Oakes, 2011; Lane, Carter, Sisco, 2012).

2.2.2 Ancestral searches

Ancestral searches were conducted using the cited works from the initial articles retrieved in the database search (Strauss, 2005; Moje, Young, Readence, Moore, 2000; Ward, Kohler, 1996; Wehmeyer, 1996; Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar, Alwell, 2009; Field, Hoffman, 2002; Martin, Marshall, Sale, 2004; Mason, McGahee-Kovac, Johnson,

Stillerman, 2002; Test, Fowler, Kohler, 2013; Field, Martin, Ward, Wehmeyer, 1998; Whitney-Thomas, Moloney, 2001; Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, Wood, 2001).

2.3 Coding procedures

The articles were coded according to 1. Publication type; 2. Research methods; 3. Participants; 4. Data sources; and 5. Study conclusions

2.3.1 Publication type

The journal articles retrieved were classified into five different categories. Research studies are conducted to prove a proposed hypothesis true or false. Theoretical studies examine and analyze the existing literature on a given topic. Descriptive studies are conducted with the purpose of describing a given topic or idea through observation and other qualitative data collection means. Opinion works provide an author's specific viewpoint on a given topic or idea. Guides serve to provide specific instructional practices to reach or advance towards a given goal.

2.3.1 Research design

The research articles gathered in this meta-synthesis were further categorized into one of two research data outcomes: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative data measures the quality of a given topic or subject matter through observation, interviews, and focus groups for example. Quantitative data provides data that can be measured numerically.

2.3.2 Participants

The participants in each of these studies included administrators, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, students with exceptionalities, and parents. Research methods included surveys, observations, and application.

2.3.4 Data analysis

For the purposes of this meta-synthesis, articles were individually examined for themes relating to one or more of these issues: 1. Self-advocacy; 2. Self-determination; 3. Student-led iep; 4. Post-secondary transitioning; and 5. Generational implications.

3 Results

3.1 Publication type

33 articles met the search criteria of this meta-synthesis. Of those 33 articles, 16 (48%) were research studies (Ward, Kohler, 1996); (Wehmeyer, 1996); (Martin, Marshall, Sale, 2004); (Mason, McGahee-Kovac, Johnson, Stillerman, 2002); (Field, Martin, Ward, Wehmeyer, 1998); (Whitney-Thomas, Moloney, 2001); (Wilson Hawbaker, 2007); (Mueller, Engiles, Peter, 2003); (Johnson, Serrano, Veit, 2013); (Danneker, Bottge, 2009); (Black, Leake, 2011); (Carter, Lane, Cooney, Weir, Moss, Machalicek, 2013); (Fagen, 2001); (Bruhn, Vogelgesang, Schabilion, Weller, Fernando, 2015); (Bellman, S., Burgstahler, S., & Hinke, P., n.d.); Shogren, Gross, Forber-Pratt, Francis, Satter, Blue-Banning, Hill, 2015). 5 articles (15%) were theoretical (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, Eddy, 2005); (Denney, Daviso 2012); (Monaco, Martin, 2007); (Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar, Alwell, 2009); (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test,

Wood, 2001). 8 articles (24%) were descriptive (Test, Fowler, Kohler, 2013; Moje, Young, Readence, Moore, 2000); (Strauss, 2005); (Lane, Carter, Sisco, 2012); (Carter, Lane, Crnabori, Bruhn, Oakes, 2011); (Oblinger, 2003); (Danneker, Bottge 2009); (Evans Getzel, 2014). 1 article (3%) was an opinion (Hoffman, 2003), while 4 articles (12%) were guides (Campbell-Whatley, 2006); (“College and career readiness,” 2013); (Field, Hoffman , 2002); (McGahee, M., Mason, C., Wallace, T., & Jones, B, 2001).

Table 1

Author(s) & Year of Publication	Publication Type
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Wilson Hawbaker, 2007	Research
Mueller, Engiles, Peter, 2003	Research
Johnson, Serrano, Veit, 2013	Research
Danneker, Bottge, 2009	Research
Campbell-Whatley, 2006	Guide
Evans Getzel, 2014	Descriptive
Black, Leake, 2011	Research
Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, Eddy, 2005	Theoretical
Danneker, Bottge 2009	Descriptive
Denney, Daviso 2012	Theoretical
Hoffman, 2003	Opinion
Carter, Lane, Cooney, Weir, Moss, Machalicek, 2013	Research
Oblinger, 2003	Descriptive
(Monaco, Martin, 2007	Theoretical
Fagen, 2001	Research
Carter, Lane, Crnabori, Bruhn, Oakes, 2011	Descriptive
Lane, Carter, Sisco, 2012	Descriptive
College and career readiness, 2013	Guide
Strauss, 2005	Descriptive

Moje, Young, Readence, Moore, 2000	Descriptive
Ward, Kohler, 1996	Research
Wehmeyer, 1996	Research
Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar, Alwell, 2009	Theoretical
Field, Hoffman , 2002	Guide
Martin, Marshall, Sale, 2004	Research
Mason, McGahee-Kovac, Johnson, Stillerman, 2002	Research
Test, Fowler, Kohler, 2013	Descriptive
Field, Martin, Ward, Wehmeyer, 1998	Research
Whitney-Thomas, Moloney, 2001	Research
Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, Wood, 2001	Theoretical
Bellman, S., Burgstahler, S., & Hinke, P., n.d.	Research
Bruhn, Vogelgesang, Schabillion, Weller, Fernando, 2015	Research
Shogren, Gross, Forber-Pratt, Francis, Satter, Blue-Banning, Hill, 2015	Research
McGahee, M., Mason, C., Wallace, T., & Jones, B, 2001	Guide

3.2 Research design, participants, data sources, and findings of the studies

Of the articles retrieved using the specific search patterns, ten fit the criteria of this meta-synthesis (Black, Leake, 2011; Campbell-Whatley, 2006; Carter, Lane, Cooney,

Weir, Moss, Machalicek, 2013; college and career readiness; Danneker, Bottge 2009; Denney, Daviso 2012; Hoffman, 2003; Monaco, Martin, 2007; Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, Eddy, 2005; Wilson Hawbaker, 2007;). The authors, year of publication, research design, participants, data sources, and findings are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Author(s) & Year of Publication	Research design	Participants	Data sources	Findings
Wilson Hawbaker, 2007	Qualitative	Students in grades 6th-12th	Student led iep meetings	Students who led their iep were found to be more knowledgeable about their disability, their

				rights, and their educational path.
Danneker, Bottge, 2009	Qualitative	4 students	Student led iep meetings	All participants involved in the student led iep meetings reported having a positive experience. Overall students, parents, teachers, and administrators appreciated the overall positive outcome.
Campbell-Whatley, 2006	Mixed design	4 teachers, 13 students	T.A.R.G.E.T. lesson plan model	Study found that many students felt a sense of pride in being able to openly discuss disabilities. They appreciated seeing firsthand other people with disabilities who have gone on to lead very successful lives. Their overall experience with the seven lessons was a positive one.
Black, Leake, 2011	Mixed design	Special education teachers from Oahu, Hawaii and	Interviews	Interviews revealed most teachers fall into two theoretical camps: individualism and

		Washington D.C.		<p>collectivism. There was a significant emphasis put on the cultural values of the families of the students being serviced as well.</p>
<p>Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, Eddy, 2005</p>	<p>Qualitative</p>	<p>This is a review of literature and input from stakeholders to examine and develop a framework for self-advocacy.</p>	<p>Literature review</p>	<p>Self-advocacy occurs at various levels of complexity during various times of a person's life. Students must have a knowledge of themselves in order to adequately self-advocate for themselves. Self-advocacy must be addressed and skills must be taught over the course of a student's education, rather than in a short time frame as they are heading into adulthood.</p>
<p>Denney, Daviso 2012</p>	<p>Qualitative</p>	<p>Students, parents, teachers, and administrators across several school settings</p>	<p>Model demonstration projects and follow up interviews; research article analysis</p>	<p>Increased self-determination skills among special needs students leads to more positive outcomes in</p>

				adulthood, but a lack of appropriate understanding and application of developing these skills among parents and teachers has led to a gap in implementation.
Hoffman, 2003	Qualitative		Practical applications to increase student self-determination	Use of specific instructional programs, coaching, mnemonic devices, and collaborative efforts greatly improve students' opportunities for developing self-determination
Carter, Lane, Cooney, Weir, Moss, Machalicek, 2013	Quantitative	68 parents	Surveys	Parent affirmation of the value of self-determination skills being directly taught was revealed.
Monaco, Martin, 2007	Qualitative	A review of the literature of work done by Neil Howe and William Strauss.	Surveys, observations, interviews	An introduction to the culture of the Millennial generation based on seven general characteristics that have been previously outlined by Neil

				<p>Howe and William Strauss. There are specific characteristics of this generation unique to previous generations. It is imperative for teachers to know these generational gaps and shift their practices to best meet students' needs based on the generation they are a part of.</p>
<p>College and career readiness</p>	<p>Quantitative</p>	<p>This is a brief providing context for policy makers regarding the need to better prepare students with exceptionalities for post secondary education</p>	<p>Interviews, surveys, studies</p>	<p>There have been significant gains in students with disabilities in terms of their graduation rates, but there is still much ground to be made up in ensuring their success beyond high school.</p>

3.2.1 Research design

Of the ten articles that met the research requirements, two (20%) of them were quantitative College and career readiness; Carter, Lane, Cooney, Weir, Moss, Machalicek, 2013; two (20%) were mixed design Black, Leake, 2011; Campbell-Whatley, 2006; and six (60%) were qualitative Monaco, Martin, 2007; Hoffman, 2003; Denney, Daviso

2012; Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, Eddy, 2005; Danneker, Bottge, 2009; Wilson Hawbaker, 2007.

3.2.2 Participants and data sources

The majority of the data analyzed in the sources collected in this meta-synthesis were from students across grades 6-12, while the rest were primarily comprised of professionals working in the special education field or parents of students with disabilities. Five (50%) of the sources analyzed data collected from students with disabilities (Wilson Hawbaker, 2007; Danneker, Bottge, 2009; Campbell-Whately, 2006; Danneker, Bottge 2009; Denney, Daviso 2012). One (10%) of the sources analyzed data collected from parents of students with disabilities (Carter, Lane, Cooney, Weir, Moss, Machalicek, 2013). One (10%) Black, Leake, 2011 analyzed data collected from professionals working in the field of special education. Three (30%) (Hoffman, 2003; Monaco, Martin, 2007; college and career readiness) analyzed literature of research projects. In addition to these sub categories of participants, the collection of sources also analyzed data collected from people with disabilities, paraprofessionals, general education teachers, and administrators as well as college and career readiness advocates.

Student led IEP meetings comprised three (30%) of the data sources collected. Surveys and interviews comprised four (40%) of the data sources collected. Literature analysis of existing data collected made up one (10%) of the data sources collected. Two (20%) of the data sources collected were comprised of demonstration projects.

3.2.3 Findings of the studies

The findings of the ten studies collected for this meta-synthesis can be summarized as follows.

Students who are actively involved in their own IEP exhibit a greater sense of purpose with regards to their educational path. There is an increase in their self-determination and self-advocacy as they are more aware of their disability as well as their rights with respect to the IEP.

Stakeholders IEP's including general education teachers, administrators, and parents have an overall more positive experience in participating in a student led iep. While there are some barriers or particular challenges to be mindful of, the overall experience for these stakeholders was a positive one.

Student culture is an extremely important factor to consider when working with students with disabilities. In addition to the family cultural construct, educators should also consider the generational culture of students being serviced.

The need for students to develop and implement self-advocacy skills is essential to their overall ability to achieve success. These skills should be taught over a long period of time as they are comprised of varying levels of depth and students' psychological development changes over the course of their overall development.

3.3 Emergent themes

Five themes emerged in the analysis of these 30 research articles presented in this meta-synthesis. These themes include: (a) the need for students with exceptionalities to develop self-advocacy skills (b) the generational and familial culture of the students being serviced must be considered in their education plans (c) graduation among students with exceptionalities (d) post high school tracks among students with exceptionalities and (e) using student led iep's as a means of developing self-advocacy, improving graduation rates, and providing better opportunities for students with exceptionalities post high school. These emergent themes and their implications are presented in table 3.

Table 3

Themed Clusters	Formulated Meanings
<p>There is a definite need for students with exceptionalities to develop self-advocacy skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-advocacy comprises a set of skills necessary to problem solve as it relates to a person’s general well being • the skill of self advocating is nonetheless essential to the overall development of a student’s efficacy • Students who have sufficient self-advocacy have better outcomes post high school • self-advocacy and self-determination are essential because it is the avenue by which people, at its most basic level, meet their own personal needs • Self-advocacy is more than the acknowledgement of a problem. It is the awareness of problem solving options and knowing how to discover those options when they cannot be found within oneself • Knowledge of self and knowledge of rights are viewed as the foundations of self-advocacy, because it is necessary for individuals to understand and know themselves before they can tell others what they want • Low expectations among staff working with students with exceptionalities can negatively attribute to their not developing self-advocacy skills necessary to their success • The development and application of self-advocacy skills has proven to be a determining factor in being successful in life • Students with exceptionalities have shown to be a population of people who lack the

	<p>natural inclination to develop self-advocacy skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In many school settings, there is not a consistent, systematic approach to helping students to developing self-advocacy • Having an accurate self picture is essential in developing self-advocacy
<p>The generational and familial culture of the students being serviced must be considered in their education plans.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Millennials are <i>sheltered</i> • Regimented schedule of extracurricular activities has decreased opportunities for independent creative thought and decision-making skills • Lack of confidence in working alone due to the high risk of failure • Tend to have big dreams or high expectations with no clear path as to attaining them • “Mobile nomads,” being connected digitally every day, hour, or minute of their lives • Have a great respect for cultural differences and a high tolerance for social groups • Struggle with independent thinking often choosing to see the big picture rather than small details that make up that picture
<p>The graduation among students with exceptionalities must be considered in helping them to develop self-advocacy skills.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a larger societal need for the graduation rates among all demographics to increase • Society as a whole is in need of students who are able to contribute to the general economic climate • We need to look beyond post secondary and help students identified as having special needs determine a path towards social efficacy • the practices being employed and the paradigm of possibilities for this population of students to graduate must also shift

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The stakes for a successful transition from high school to adulthood are growing ever higher
<p>Post high school tracks among students with exceptionalities must be considered as a significant reason as to why they need to develop self-advocacy skills.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development of self-advocacy skills is essential to a student’s successful transition from high school to adulthood • Statistics show a dramatic difference among students with exceptionalities and their completion of post secondary education programs • Statistics show it takes many students with exceptionalities twice as long as those without to complete post secondary training • Many students do not have a complete picture as to their strengths and weaknesses when they leave their supportive school environments • Students level of self-advocacy can be used as a determining factor in their likelihood to find success post high school
<p>Student led iep is a terrific opportunity as a means of developing self-advocacy among students with exceptionalities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student led IEP’s have shown to have a direct impact on a student’s ability to develop self-advocacy skills • Student led IEP’s provide opportunity for direct application of self-advocacy skills • Those who participate in student led iep have a more positive experience than those who participate in a traditional, teacher-led iep meeting • Adults are provided with a greater opportunity for authentic collaboration • Student led iep provide students with a sense of ownership • Students who participate in student led iep have an acute awareness and knowledge of their iep goals • There is a more balanced communication in student led iep as adults and students

	<p>alike are more apt to speak up during the meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents have a greater sense of what their child is capable of and what they are working towards • Parents see a greater sense of pride and responsibility in their students who have led their own iep • Student led iep provide greater opportunity for effective decision making • Students have a deeper understanding of their disability and how it impacts their learning
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4. Discussion

This section summarizes, in further detail, the main themes pulled from the meta-synthesis. These themes relate directly to my own practice.

4.1 There is a definite need for students with exceptionalities to develop self-advocacy skills

Keeping in mind the context of today’s generation of students as well as the research indicating students with exceptionalities having, in general, decreased abilities in executive function, the need to develop self-advocacy skills among this population of students has most definitely presented itself.

As a generation, today’s students, in general, struggle with decision-making as a result of a great majority of their life being dictated by a “regimented schedule” (Monaco & Martin, 2007). The general life style of being shuffled from one activity to the next, kind of going through life on an autopilot that has been set by someone else, leaves little opportunity to develop decision making skills essential to self-efficacy. This gap has also

created a decreased ability in self-advocacy skills. Often students will wait for an adult to tell them what they need to do next. Rather than taking ownership of the learning process, they assume that responsibility lies with someone else, most often, the adults in their lives.

Students with some exceptionality are doubly impacted by this depressed ability to make decision and advocate due to their disability. As educators working with special needs students, we must be acutely aware of how students' exceptionalities are affecting their ability to promote not only their own learning, but their access to the learning.

Beyond the walls of the classroom, self-advocacy is an essential skill key to a person's being able to adequately make choices and live within their given rights. Looking at self-advocacy through the lens of carrying on with everyday life, and seeing how many students with exceptionalities are lacking, it becomes obvious the need to garner their development.

4.2 The generational and familial culture of the students being serviced must be considered in their education plans.

Students come to school with predispositions shaped by the family culture from which they come. When considering the approach of a student's individualized education program, it is absolutely essential to filter all decisions through the generational and familial culture they live in. The most impactful learning happens when students are connected to the content or skill that extends beyond the confines of the school setting.

In addition to providing students the most meaningful learning experiences through the context of their family and generational culture, we must also provide learning avenues that best fit their cultural perspective. This includes providing accommodations and modifications that fit the framework of the culture.

In working with parents of students with special needs, it is essential to have their trepidations and emotional well-being at the forefront of every conversation and every decision made regarding their student. A child will best be served if he/she has the support of the entire team. The entire team will be at its strongest when the parents are feeling fully understood and listened to.

With specific regards to developing self-advocacy, students will naturally be inclined to follow the guidance and modeling of what they see at home. In the school setting, teachers will have the best chance for success in helping students develop self-advocacy when they provide context that fits the model of their home. Granted, not all students come from stable homes where sound decision-making is habit, however, the cultural values of home need to be considered when helping students develop decision-making skills.

4.3 The graduation among students with exceptionalities must be considered in helping them to develop self-advocacy skills.

Self-advocacy relates directly to a person's ability to exercise their rights in a given situation as well as make choices. These are two skills essential to a student's ability to find success in the formative years of their education. As students progress through the upper grades, more expectation is put on them to be responsible, to recognize when they need help, and then to seek that help out. Students who are unable to do this often find themselves struggling to keep up in school.

The generational culture has already created a chasm with regards to students being able to develop into decisive decision makers. Being a person with exceptionalities compounds and expands that chasm. Knowing how essential self-advocacy is in finding success in the classroom, teachers need to create mindful opportunities for special education students to develop self-advocacy. Opportunities would include role playing, daily or weekly planners with an emphasis on students asking questions about the tasks due, and inquiry-based lessons. Students need to be provided with opportunities to ask questions, have questions asked of them, and make decisions.

In giving students direct instruction and frequent opportunities to develop decision-making skills related both directly and indirectly to self-advocacy, teachers better shape the outcome of students with exceptionalities making it to graduation day. While some students on IEP's may not possess the cognition or access to their cognition to graduate from rigorous, accredited high schools, many of them do. Acknowledging the hindrance of a depressed ability to make decisions and self-advocate will propel teachers to lead students down a path that will provide a higher likelihood of success.

4.4 Post high school tracks among students with exceptionalities must be considered as a significant reason as to why they need to develop self-advocacy skills.

In addition to students eligible for special education services having lower graduation rates than those who are not in special education, this demographic also lacks in post-secondary education attendance and completion. While not all students possess the skill set necessary to be successful in the post-secondary educational setting, many students with special needs do. A significant element that determines whether or not a student will be successful in college is their ability to make decisions and self-advocate. Students need to possess the capacity to gauge and reflect on their academic path in order to ensure they are on the right track.

When considering the significance of decision making skills and appropriate self-advocacy capacity as it relates to being successful in a post-secondary setting, it is apparent that students on iep's must be given every opportunity possible to develop these skills within the safety net provided in high school. While the stakes in high school should not be considered low they are lower than those in the post secondary setting and there is a significant amount of support given in high school that is not found in the college setting.

In order to help improve the chances of students with special needs being successful in the post-secondary setting, every opportunity to foster the self-advocacy skills necessary to meet to demands of the college arena must be given.

4.5 Student led IEPs a terrific opportunity as a means of developing self-advocacy among students with exceptionalities.

Self-advocacy has been defined in this thesis paper as being able to make decisions and be assertive regarding one's needs and rights. This is the crux of what an iep is. It is a legal, binding document, which guarantees specific rights to a student to better ensure they will have a successful academic path. What better place than the development and presentation of an iep to help a student develop their self-advocacy skills?

The iep process requires an extensive examination of the strengths and needs of the student at hand. There is a level of acceptance of what is given in the reports that has the potential to be difficult. By including the student in this process, teachers give opportunity for students to validate their struggles as well as find triumph in their strengths. The more aware a student is of these two elements, the more apt they will be to advocate when the time is necessary.

By including students in on the accommodations and modifications section of the iep, teachers create the opportunity to create a level of accountability. In students knowing what modifications and accommodations should be being provided to them in the classroom setting, there is an increased likelihood when a situation arises that proves difficult or especially challenging for the student, they will advocate for themselves because they know what helps them learn best. So not only is being part of the iep

development an opportunity to increase self-advocacy skills but so is the afterward, back in the classroom.

4.6 Student led IEP's help create accountability among all of the members of the team and can be used to help students with exceptionalities to be more successful in the classroom because their learning is tied directly to a specific objective they are trying to meet.

Having the student at the heart of the iep process shifts the work from a top down method. Rather than the adults determining the best plan of action, the student is given a voice. While the expertise of the team members cannot be dismissed, neither can the voice of the student. If there is a hope to develop self-advocacy among students with exceptionalities, their voice must be central to their own education process. Education was not designed to be something that happens TO a student.

By including the student in the biggest decisions made about their education, there is a level of accountability attained that cannot be found anywhere else.

5. Conclusion

I had the opportunity to do a student led iep this year despite it being just my first year as a full time special education teacher. I chose the most difficult student on my caseload, because I knew he had the most gain from being a part of the process. There was a sense of freedom found in my new coworker's unabashed faith in my level of expertise, so I capitalized on it to get over my own sense of fear.

Two weeks into my new school year as I started to build relationships with the students on my caseload and build rapport with their parents, I picked the student who I wanted to work with on my little project. He was by far the most challenging student on my case-load, but I believed this project would have the greatest impact on him as a young man and his academic trajectory.

In early October, I ran the idea by his parents. While they were hesitant due to the emotional turmoil it may cause, they were excited by the idea and agreed to let me help their son conduct his own IEP which wasn't due until early March.

The first T that had to be established was Trust. I had to build trust with the parents, and I had to build trust with the student.

This trust was built by the second T: Transparency. I had to be as transparent as possible with both my student and his parents, so that they would begin to trust me and my judgment. This transparency led to the third T: Tough conversations.

We had behavioral, psychological, and OT experts in to observe and assess my student. The feedback and reports led to tough conversations, but because I was determined to create trust, I had to be as transparent as possible with BOTH the parents and their child.

These tough conversations came from a place of the fourth T: Team work. From the get go, I established a sense of team work with the parents and my student. They needed to know I was in their corner. I was in their son's corner. Every office referral, bad

day, frustrating outburst I was there in their son's corner advocating for him. Every great day, awesome report, I was there to praise him and celebrate with his parents.

The last T and perhaps most significant after trust was time. I invested a great deal of time both in and outside of school. I made it a habit to communicate with my student's parents either by a quick text on my lunch break or after the school day. I spent time on the phone talking with them, sometimes just being an ear to listen. I invested time during the day with my student. Going out of my way to greet him at his locker in the morning.

The iep process itself took time. We gave up a full 7 days of math instruction (the only class period I have him for) to write and create the slide deck he used for the iep meeting. As content teachers, giving up instruction time for non-content related activities can cause great anxiety. We need to embrace the notion that education isn't just about content. Students' development on a human level is just as significant as content, probably even *more* significant. Education was never meant to be something that happens to a student.

I can say confidently that my student who was part of this student led iep has the most knowledge of his strengths and challenges. He speaks more openly post iep about his ADHD and its impact on his learning. He can verbalize what his accommodations and modifications are. He is able to explain how he learns best and describe ways he needs support. I have a greater ability to hold him accountable than I do with any of the other students on my caseload because he was part of each step of the iep. I can talk candidly

about his goals and objectives as well as about the reports used to find him eligible for services. This student's education is in his hands.

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