TEACHING STUDENTS ABOUT THEIR DISABILITIES: INCREASING SELF-DETERMINATION SKILLS AND SELF-CONCEPT

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The purpose of this research is to report the results of a pilot study that examined changes in self-awareness and self-concept. Seven self-determination lessons were implemented with 13 elementary, middle and high schoolers with disabilities in learning (i.e., learning disabilities and mild mental impairments). The lessons focused on teaching students about their disability through self-awareness training, self-exploration, problem solving, self-concept and coping skills. Results revealed that students demonstrated significant changes in self-concept on the Piers Harris Self-Concept Scale using a pretest-postest design. Because pre-test-postest designs pose a threat to internal validity, teacher observation and recordings demonstrated that students exhibited increased selected skills in self-awareness.

Self-Determination is a combination of skills that facilitate self-regulated and goal directed behaviors. The skills interconnected to self-determination are multifaceted. To be determined is the ability to maneuver and process several interrelated dimensions of self: a) awareness (knowing), b) self -concept (perception), c) advocacy (support), d) realization (understanding), e) self-esteem (respect), f) acceptance (approval), g) empowerment (authority), h) reflection (image), i) control (management), and j) regulation (adjustment). In other words, students who are aware, understand, have a good image, and approve of themselves are more likely to have positive perception of self, will be able to mange and adjust to their environment. The self-determined student is able to set goals and exhibit self-control by responding to events in an independent, empowered, and self-realized manner (Wehmeyer, Argan, & Hughes, 2000).

Students taught appropriate self-determination related strategies, learn to serve as their own support system, while having greater control over their choices, behavior and lives. Generally, students with higher self-determined behaviors achieve better in school, have more positive adult outcomes and have stronger goal setting and self-assessment behaviors (Martin, Mithaug, Cox, Peterson, Van Dycke, & Cash, 2003). When students find that they are able to examine and determine their life path by exploring their strengths and weakness, they feel empowered and generally show signs of an elevated self-esteem and self-concept (Abrams & Brown, 1989; Flitton & Buckroyd, 2005; Meunier, 1990). Accordingly, self-concept can be altered and a change in perspective affects the general attitude of a student (Hiemstra & Brockett, 1994). Interventions that have a positive effect on one's self concept include activities that encourage positive self-reflection and active and concrete self-determined behaviors (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; Owens, Mortimer, & Finch, 1996; Pocock, Lambros, Karvonen, Test, Algozzine, & Wood, 2002).

Not everyone has the ability to engage in self-examination skills of this sort, on their own. Students with disabilities in learning have to work hard to develop competencies to self-examine and develop skills that strengthen self-concept (Cameron & Mills, 1995; Flitton & Buckroyd, 2005). Many times they want to master these skills, but are unable to do so without the guidance of teachers. Essential to students is an understanding of their strengths and limitations, while having an awareness of their inner capabilities (Cameron & Mills, 1995; Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Trainor, 2005; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001). Just as any other learner, students with disabilities in learning must act on their decisions and learn from the outcomes. How students respond to teaching and how they react to success and failure is determined by the attitudes and beliefs they have about themselves.

The question becomes, how can students with disabilities in learning be taught to exhibit goal-directed, self-regulated, confident behaviors while responding positively to the environment, if they have don't have a clear idea of what they can accomplish. Teaching self-determination systematically to learners, support the premise that these skills be pursued as tenaciously as any other credible skill taught to students with disabilities (Argan, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Browder, Wood, Test, Algozzine, & Karvonen, 2001; Field, 1996; Field & Hoffman, 1994; Gerber, Ginsberg & Raiff, 1992; German,

Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2000; Trainor, 2005; Wall & Dattilo, 1995; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997; West, Barcus, Brooke, & Rayfield, 1995). It is critical that students learn to deal with tension and conflict in their daily lives. Through self-examination, self-awareness they develop pro-social behaviors and develop self-determined.

Using Lesson Plans.
There are texts that help students understand their learning difficulties (Bowman-Kruhm & Wirths, 1999; Brown, 2000; Dunn & Dunn, 1993; Gehret, 1996; Fisher & Cummings, 1990; Paquette & Tuttle, 2003; Porterfield, 1999). Although these resources help students understand how they differ from others, they are not instructional text. Most students with learning difficulties need guidance, support, encouragement, and direct instruction to learn new concepts. The lessons used in the present article provide teachers an easy to use lesson plan format as a means of teaching self-determination methodologies to students with disabilities in learning. The series of lessons addresses the advocacy needs of students, by providing exercises in the specifics of their disability that assist them in coping with and understanding their characteristics. Once student's get to know themselves, they will find it easier to come to terms with their strengths and weaknesses and will be better prepared to cope with the challenges at school, home, and other environments. A lesson plan format would better facilitate strategic instruction in the classroom and would convey new concepts, thus the reason for this study.

The material in this study is presented to students in an easy to understand lesson plan format by their teacher in the resource room setting. Will skills taught through this venue improve self-awareness skills? Will an improvement in self-awareness skills improve student self-concept? Overall can it be concluded that students had increased self-determination skills? The purpose of this study is to ascertain if the self-determination lessons described in the article increase student self-concept and self-awareness. Self-concept is measured by the *Piers Harris Self-Concept Scale (1996).* Additionally, to obtain a qualitative measure, the article will examine teacher reports of student statements about the lessons to determine changes in self-awareness. This study acts as a pilot.

Method

Participants
Typically, the teachings of self-advocacy and self-determination in lessons have been limited to secondary-aged students and adult individuals with disabilities as they prepare to transition into the world of work. Yet, instruction for the foundation of these skills should begin in earlier years and continue through the multiple stages of development (Wehman & Kregel, 2004). However, it is the premise of this study, and it is supported by current literature, to determine if the skills should be taught in earlier years in elementary and middle school. There is support that the progression should unfold as the student matures. Wehman and Kregel (2004) describe the level of skill that should be taught at each stage: (a) awareness skills in the elementary years, (b) exploration in the middle school years, (c) preparation in the high school years, and (d) finally, placement in the post school years. The lessons in this article are geared toward students in the upper elementary, middle or high school grades, specifically grades 5 through 9. Therefore, the lessons were piloted on 13 students at varied age levels and grades. Students were in 4 classes for the mildly disabled in the elementary and middle school setting (n=13) in the Midwest. Two elementary cross-categorical teachers instructed 6 (4 males and 2 females) (n=6) students in a 5th grade inclusionary settings. Both elementary teachers taught 3 students each. One middle school cross-categorical teacher taught 4 (3 males and 1 female) (n=4) sixth-graders. One secondary cross-categorical teacher instructed 3 (2 females and 1 male) (n=3) students in the 9th grade. Nine students were labeled learning disabled and 4 mild mentally impaired as determined by state guidelines and were being serviced by licensed special education teachers. All students in each teacher's class were asked to participate and parental permission was sent to the child's residence. Students whose parents returned permission slips participated in the study.

Materials
Self-Concept Scale. The Piers Harris Self Concept Scale (1996) was used to measure self-concept before and after the self-determination lessons. The scale has an 80 item self-repot questionnaire designed to assess how children and adolescents feel about themselves. The test has a test-retest reliability range of .42 to .96. The median test-retest reliability was .73. The rational coefficients range from .88 to .92. The Piers Harris has been normed on African-American, Hispanic and children from other Ethnic Groups. Additionally, the norming process has been used with mental retardation, learning disabilities, behavior disorders and with children from 2nd to 12th grades.

The Lesson Format and Structure. Each lesson was scripted to include specific elements. The lessons were designed using the TARGET acronym as a basic framework:
T-Target the Goals and Objectives of the Lesson

𝔸-Assess Students' Knowledge and Implement Objectives
ℝ-Role Play Situations
𝔾-Generalize to Other School Situations
𝔼-Evaluate Student Attainment
𝕋-Test Transfer of Skills to Other Environments

- *Target the Goals and Objectives of the Lesson.* The goals and objectives of each lesson are defined and objectives are written in observable and measurable terms.
- *Assess Students' Knowledge and Implement Objectives.* Students' background knowledge of the lesson concepts are determined using discussion and questioning techniques.
- *Role Play Situations.* Each lesson suggests several role-play scenarios. Student generated situations are encouraged as they are more applicable to real life occurrences. Role-plays are enacted in student pairs or groups and can involve teacher-to-student or student-to-student interactions. Role-plays include inappropriate (negative) and appropriate (positive) reactions to problem situations. Analysis and feedback are provided for each role-play.
- *Generalize to Other Situations.* The student's ability to analyze and apply the skill across school situations such as the playground, in gym class, or math class, is assessed.
- *Evaluate Student Attainment.* Eighty percent skill level assessment is recommended but varies according to student's ability.
- *Test Transfer of Knowledge.* Skill practice is suggested in various environments away from school such as the home, community or work setting.

The Lesson Design. Often times, students will need to contend with individuals in their environment who do not understand what it means to have a disability in learning. Teachers, parents, students, employers and others, may be able to understand physical related disabilities, but may not be able to understand the needs of persons with a learning disability, attention deficit or mild mental impairments. The lessons were designed to address a number of disability related self-determination skills. Lesson activities: a) compared a disability in learning to a physical disability, b) explained eligibility procedures for special education, c) explored student strengths and limitations, d) addressed techniques related to advocacy, problem solving, anger control and social skills, and e) presented various academic and job related strategies. Various portions of the lesson are outlined and explained (Campbell-Whatley, 2004).

Lesson One: What Does it Mean to Have a Disability in Learning? Often times, students will need to contend with individuals in their environment who do not understand what it means to have a disability in learning. Teachers, parents, students, employers and others, may be able to understand physical related disabilities, but may not be able to understand the needs of persons with a learning disability, attention deficit or mild mental impairments. Students with a disability in learning usually have limited awareness of the type of special education class they attend and tend to believe their academic failure is related to lack of motivation rather than a disability in learning. Many times general education teachers and parents view the student as unmotivated and attribute academic deficits to idle behavior rather than a *disability* in learning (Campbell-Whatley, 1998; Campbell-Whatley, 2004; Lavoie, 1989). Lack of self-knowledge and the misinterpretation of teachers and parents create a vacuum, that stunts the ability of the student to problem solve, make choices, and increase self-esteem. Because students with disabilities focus on day-to-day challenges that are often compounded by a disability, the lessons will teach them to advocate for themselves and explain their needs in a non-threatening manner in various settings. Many students with disabilities do not understand that they *truly have a disability*. Sometimes they believe that they may not be *trying hard enough* or that they are *just lazy*. At the completion of the lesson, students identified their exceptionality category and provided examples of non-physical related disabilities. Students were asked several key questions; *Do disabilities exist that may not be physically visible? Can you expect a person who has one leg to walk just as everyone else does?* The role play exercise asked students to read a passage after being blindfolded. After the student realized the absurdity of the request, the group discussed the modifications, strategies, and methodologies to compensate for a disability. Disability as an indicator for additional assistance rather than proof of failure was emphasized.

Lesson Two: *Successful People with Disabilities in Learning.* The class session began with an open discussion of the career life goals and successes of several famous personalities with disabilities; including Stephen Hawkings, (physicist), Stevie Wonder (singer), Jim Abbott (ball player), Tom Cruise (actor), Nelson Rockefeller (past Vice President of the United States), Thomas Edison (American inventor), and Bruce Jenner (Olympic Gold Medal Winner). Students learned the definition of compensate and were asked various methods to counteract their disability. A school day in the life of one of the famous personalities was the imagined role play situation.

Lesson Three: *Characteristics Related to a Disability in Learning.* Categories of disabilities, their definitions, and characteristics were presented to students. With teacher assistance, students identified the particular characteristics related to their disability such as listening, paying attention, talking, working math problems, or reading. During role play activities, students determined how their disability could affect them differently according to the school, home, community or work environment.

Lesson Four: *Getting Into a Special Education Program.* Students were taught the steps in eligibility procedures in simple terms. Vocabulary words such as achievement, intelligence quotient, and psychometrist were discussed. Role playing situations included a mock Individualized Education Plan (IEP) conference.

Lesson Five: *Knowing My Strengths and Weaknesses.* Students discussed their strengths and weaknesses related to academics and behavior in various environments. Demonstrations and discussions accentuated areas of strength in one environment that could be an area of weakness in another environment. For example, having a large surplus of energy might cause a student to be distracted at school, but could assist with doing a boundless number of chores at home. A role play scenario involved a student who needed to use manipulatives to compensate for weaknesses in math, but the general education teacher refused the student the use of the modification.

Lesson Six: Problem Scenarios and Self-Advocacy. Students learned appropriate advocacy and problem solving techniques by exploring choices/helplessness regarding their disability. Latter discussions focused on strategies to produce positive outcomes to problems. Role plays concerned student situations using assertive rather than aggressive behaviors to solve problems.

Lesson Seven: Strategies for Handling Anger. When confronted with negative situations related to their disability, students learned basic techniques for handling anger. For example, students were asked to relate some recent situations where they responded in anger. Subsequently, they were asked to identify various physical signals as soon as the feeling of anger occurred (i.e., seeing red, sweating, turning red). Strategies to diminish anger were identified and listed. Role play activities involved specific situations related to having a disability. For example, one situation involved a student with a disability that raised his hand to ask a question. Another student whispered in his ear, *Shut up dumb boy, everyone knows the answer to that*.

Design and Procedures

The pretest-posttest design was used for the *Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale* on scores given before and after the intervention. While this design has limitations, it is considered appropriate for use with pilot projects and has been successfully used for some time to evaluate a variety of school-based improvement efforts (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). The approach however, has a number of threats to internal validity if there is no control group used in the study (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). Also, it is difficult to determine if the participants changed enough to demonstrate an effect in everyday life or if change was due to maturation (Singh, Greer, & Hammond, 1977). More valid interpretations can be made if additional information were available (Posavac & Carey, 2003). Designs that use a variety of variables and do not achieve the specific control of true experiments for many biases can thus yield highly interpretable results, but if carefully planned and applied in appropriate setting, they are quite useful (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

Coordinating Qualitative and Quantitative Methods. Qualitative and quantitative methods can be used in a way to complement each other (Campbell, 1978; Silverman, Ricci, and Gunter, 1990). Light and Pillemer (1984) said, "The pursuit of good science should transcend personal preferences for numbers or narrative" (p.143). The study uses a pre-experimental design with a mixed methodology, using quantitative and qualitative design to support change. A multi-site, multi-subject approach was employed using several sites and subjects rather than two or three. The procedure insures that a variety of types of subjects are included. The phenomena of examining increases in self-determination as students are exposed to the lessons are held up to the pre-post data collected on self-concept.

The Piers Harris Self-Concept Scale (1996) was orally administered by the special education teacher who instructed the students before and after the 7-week instructional period. The instrument, intended for use with students 7 to 18, required them to circle how they felt about themselves in a yes/no format (e.g., I am well behaved in school, I am smart, I have good ideas). To strengthen the results of the pre-post test design, the teachers recorded student comments during the lesson and used specific interview questions about each lesson to obtain qualitative information (Posovac & Carey, 2003). Students were encouraged to answer several informal questions addressed in the small group setting in which they were taught. Each lesson had role-plays, and various informal questions within the lesson to determine student's knowledge of the information and to encourage participation, self-examination, reasoning

skills, and healthy communication. The teachers assured that the students understood the nature of the interview. They used open-ended probing questions that assured and encouraged more than a yes/no response (i.e., Can you tell me more?). After the lesson students were asked these specific questions: a) What did you like most about the lesson? b) What did you learn in this lesson? c) What did you like least about the lesson? Although using a tape recording is the preferred method as this method provides complete information, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend hand-written notes as they are less threatening and keeps the interviewer involved. Teachers were encouraged to *jot* the responses and comments to informal questions during the lesson, as well as student answers to targeted questions. That same day, the teacher interpreted, summarized, and re-recorded student responses in an easy to read format. The teachers clarified the responses with students the next day.

Each lesson had a written component. Sometimes students may want to communicate a personal response that they may not want to share with the group. Therefore, they were asked to address the same questions on paper that they had discussed orally with the group. The teachers were asked to review the written component of the lesson and grade it by indicating the percentage of written responses to questions. In a separate setting, the four teachers administered the lessons to students 3 times a week, in 30 minute sessions, for 7 weeks, depending on the age and ability level of the students. Only one lesson was the focus of a given week.

Several student activity pages accompanied each lesson. Teachers asked specified lessons contained in the lesson during each session. Then, teachers asked the assigned questions after the lesson. The teacher wrote the responses to the questions during and after the lesson in the margin of the lesson plan. Additionally, students were required to list their answers on the student activity sheet. That same day, the teacher rewrote student comments and questions during and after the lesson. She noted if the comments were negative (students indicated that they did not learn very much from the lesson- i.e., *I didn't like this lesson; This is stupid*) or positive (students indicated that they learned (i.e., *I like the lesson; I learned that (students says what they learned)*). Also, the teacher indicated the percentage of written responses on each activity sheet that students submitted. Teacher expectations, application, and other delivery information were flexible.

Results

Results indicated that there was a significant difference in student self-concept before and after curriculum implementation. Improvement was evident as students had a significantly higher self-concept level. The curriculum positively affected students, as it increased their self-esteem. Means and standard deviations for the total score of the *Piers Harris Self-Concept Scale* (1984) pretest and posttest scores are presented in Table 1.

The teachers reported that the students written responses were in the range of 70% to 100% on the activities within the lesson. Students wrote oral responses closely resembled their written responses.

Table 1
Comparison of the Piers Harris Self Concept Scale Before and After the Implementation of lessons (n=13)

Self Concept Total Score	Before Implementation		After Implementation		*t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
	44	15.83	51.07	17.76	3.407

*p< .05

During *Lesson One: What Does it Mean to Have a Disability in Learning,* students expressed doubt that their parents or teachers would ever understand that they had a disability, but found it of value to learn more about themselves. One high school student said during the lesson that,

My mother would never believe that I really have a real problem. She just thinks I am lazy and that is that, but I am glad to know that my problem is real and I can start to help and believe more in myself.

Teachers reported that students thought the process to enter a special education class in *Lesson Four: Getting Into a Special Education Program* to be a lengthy process, but thought it helpful to understand the progression. When asked the question *What did you like least about the lesson?* One middle school student stated,

It's too long and takes too many people, but I am glad that I know what was happening to me.

Students were surprised that what they could do something well other than academics was of any value in school. One high school student expressed during *Lesson Five: Knowing My Strengths and Weaknesses*,

> *I thought things I did good at home didn't matter if I couldn't get the lesson in class*.

Teachers reported that students expressed the most excitement during *Lesson Two: Successful People with Disabilities in Learning*. They made notable sounds (i.e*., wow; I didn't know that; That is soooo cool*). One elementary student said during the lesson,

> *Do we have to stop talking about this? I can talk about this everyday*.

Students were able to identify their problem areas in *Lesson Three: Characteristics Related to a Disability in Learning,* but were not aware that it was the basis of their disability. One middle school student questioned during the lesson,

> *Just because I can't remember things, that means I have a disability*?

During the lesson, another said,

> *I never knew so many different, famous people had the same problems I did*.

Students practiced techniques to explain their disability to teachers, parents, employers, etc. in *Lesson Six: Problem Scenarios and Self-Advocacy*. Many students demonstrated pride (i.e., head lifted high, speaking in a commanding voice) in explaining accomplishments, while they shared the characteristics of their disability and learned to ask for help (i.e., *I have problems with this, can you or another student assist me?*).

One high school student said in response to the question *What do you like best about the lesson*?,

> *I always wanted to know what to say to a teacher who thought I was being lazy. If I could just tell her what I needed to do to get help. Well I was able to tell her and she did not call me lazy*.

Students thought the problem scenarios to be of value in *Lesson Seven: Strategies for Handling Anger*. One middle school student stated,

> *You always need to be ready to fight when somebody calls you a name, but I am glad to know that I have another way I can handle problems if I want to*.

Discussion and Summary

Several studies demonstrate the effectiveness of teaching self-determination skills (Argan, et al, 1999; German, et al., 2000; Martin, et al., 2003; Wall & Dattilo, 1995; Wehmeyer, Abery, Mithang, and Stancliffe, 2003; West, et al, 1995). Students exhibiting high levels of self-determination had higher school achievement, better adult outcomes, and were more goal-oriented (Gerber, et al, 1992; Trainor, 2005; Wehmeyer, et al., 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). The lessons in the present study, presented self-determination skills in a teacher-led format that provided exercises in self-knowledge and self-exploration that assisted students in coping with their disability. The 7-weeks of lessons were administered to 13 elementary, middle, and high school students in 4 separate resource room settings. There was a significant difference in pretest and posttest scores on the *Piers Harris Self Concept Scale* (1984), before and after implementation of the curriculum. Scores of 46 to 60 are considered average for the scale. Mean self-concept scores were below average (44) before curriculum implementation. After curriculum implementation, mean self-concept scores were in the average range (51).

Although this study reflects the realities of conducting school-based research, the absence of a control group in this quantitative design and the relatively small number of students in the study presents concerns about generalizations. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that a particular student receiving the same treatments used in this study would experience similar results. Drawing conclusions about the observed improvements in the absence of a control group must be done cautiously. Nevertheless, a quantitative design like that used in this study is appropriate when the project represents a pilot study. An experimental or additional study however, using a more rigorous design, is recommended (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982)

The qualitative information in the study lends support to the quantitative information. Students demonstrated a high average attainment skill level and comments were positive. Students continually stated that they learned more about their disability.

My mother would never believe that I really have a real problem. She just thinks I am lazy and that is that, but I am glad to know that my problem is real and I can start to help and believe more in myself.

Extended sessions and varied combinations of groups or pairs can provide reinforcement and increase skill attainment with lesson delivery. After formal sessions, it is best practice for teachers to reinforce the material by reminding students to apply acquired skills in various situations. The teacher can gage the student response to the situation and support and encourage appropriate responses and give

suggestions for inappropriate ones. Teachers should have realistic expectations and remember that the rate of application and skill attainment is based on individual skill levels.

Despite reasonable limitations, the results of this pilot effort lend support to the continuing development of self-determination curricula in the elementary and middle school settings. A pretest/posttest control group comparison study should also be undertaken to extend the generalizability of these findings.

The lessons can be expanded to address additional strategies. Lessons that explore the feelings and frustrations that students with disabilities encounter while offering strategies for coping with those emotions would be helpful. To further address and maintain positive self-esteem and productivity, another lesson might focus on reprogramming techniques to change negative inner self-talk to positive self-talk. Many students with mild disabilities have difficulty with relationships; therefore methodologies that assist with the development and maintenance of friendships are suggested.

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BOOK REVIEWS

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