

The Journey to Self-Advocacy Through Picture Books

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**Rationale**

As I reflect back on my tenure as a diverse learning teacher, I have witnessed countless times students with diverse learning needs sitting quietly in their seats waiting for a teacher to check in with them to ensure understanding of what they are supposed to do. Students come into school with a multitude of strengths and areas of weakness and at some point, they will need help and support from their teachers. When students are unclear about a teaching point in a lesson, often they will ask a question or signal that they do not understand in some manner that gets the teachers attention, whether by raising their hand or perhaps creating a behavioral disturbance that becomes disruptive to the lesson, which then the teacher responds in an appropriate manner, i.e. answering the student's question who has their hand raised or reprimanding the student creating the behavioral disturbance. Too often, I have witnessed the student on the latter end of that scenario when a teacher comes to me looking for advice because "Johnny keeps acting out in my class and I am so frustrated and do not know what to do!!"

On the opposite end, I have also witnessed students sitting passively and not asking any questions. These students will sit quietly in their seats and either do nothing, just waiting because they are unsure or will work on the work and do the entire assignment wrong because they are unsure of the lesson or work they are supposed to complete. When students behave in this manner, they are often overlooked by a teacher until the assignment is turned in and graded. It is then that the teacher can see the student needed assistance.

By 4th grade, most students have developed and learned appropriate skills needed to self-advocate for themselves and receive help within the classroom that they need to address areas of misunderstanding. Students with disabilities often have not fully developed these skills or struggle to fully understand when they need help.

Inclusion is a movement in the educational system that provides special education support in the classroom. It has been my observations and experiences that when students are fully included they often will rise to the challenges that the non-disabled peers do. Through this rise in expectations, students with disabilities have had their educational bar raised and have often raised too or exceeded those expectations. With this rise in expectations, students should be able to self-advocate for their needs.

I plan to look into the effects of the inclusion environment and how explicit self-advocacy skill instruction can improve the educational outcomes of students with and without disabilities. What happens when self-advocacy skills are taught to students and how does this improve the already high bar set in the classroom for those students with and without disabilities.

**School Context:**

Helen C. Peirce School for International Studies is an International Baccalaureate World School located in the Edgewater neighborhood of Chicago. Peirce is rated Level 1+ by Chicago Public Schools, which is the highest rating a school can receive from CPS based on attendance and standardized testing data. Peirce has a total student population of 1,081 students and serves children in Pre-K through eighth grade.

The mission of Helen C. Peirce School of International Studies "is to guide students to take ownership of their learning through experiential engagement and reflective thinking. We

provide a balanced curriculum designed to meet the academic, cultural, and social-emotional needs of our diverse student body. All members of the Peirce community are committed to growing as productive, globally-minded citizens. Through our rigorous Primary Years and Middle Years Programmes and a differentiated instructional approach..." It is through this experiential and differentiated approach that all students are able to reach their full potential and become productive, globally-minded citizens.

According to the Chicago Public Schools' school profile website, Peirce has a diverse student body in multiple ways. According to the site, 39.8% of students are Hispanic, 38.2% are White, 9.7% are Black, 6.2% are Asian, and 6.1% identify as Other. 51.6% of students at Peirce are classified as Low-Income. Almost 18% of students are English Language Learners, and Spanish is the dominant language beyond English spoken at the school, although there are many other languages spoken by the students at Peirce, including Arabic and Polish.

Peirce has a Diverse Learner population of about 13%. Students at Peirce with diverse learning needs are often fully included. Of the students with disabilities, 83% are educated in a co-taught classroom for their entire day. 17% have both separate settings and inclusion as part of their educational program. The administration at Peirce has inclusive education as a high priority and has grown the Diverse Learning department from 5 diverse learning teachers to 15 within the past five years. This has been an important part of our current administration's vision for the school. Research and best practice shows that students with disabilities who are educated in inclusion environments outperform students who are educated in a resource room.

Peirce is also an IB (International Baccalaureate) World School. Peirce has been authorized by IB for both the Primary Years Programme and the Middle Years Programme. Peirce partners with Senn High School for the continuation of the Middle Years Programme, and many students who graduate from Peirce's programming go on to Senn High School. The Primary Years Programme (PYP) focuses on an inquiry and transdisciplinary model of teaching. According to the IB website, "the PYP challenges students to think for themselves and take responsibility for their learning as they explore local and global issues and opportunities in real-life contexts." After students leave the PYP, they move to the Middle Years Programme. According to the IB website, "The MYP is a five-year programme, which can be implemented in a partnership between schools, or in several abbreviated (two, three or four year) formats. Students who complete the MYP are well-prepared to undertake the IB Diploma Programme (DP) or Career-related Programme (CP)." As I have worked with the IB programme over the past few years, I see students' love for the in-depth inquiry into the units of study. Students enjoy the open-endedness of the exploration that IB promotes. For students with disabilities, I have found that the rigor and open-endedness allows for differentiation in content and product. For example, at the end of the unit in our classroom, a student will complete a project to show their understanding of the central idea and lines of inquiry versus taking a test. All students are able to show understanding through the project regardless of their ability level, which naturally lends itself well to supporting students in the inclusive environment.

I have the privilege of co-teaching with a very dynamic teacher. We have been co-teaching together for 5 years. In these years together, we have developed a great relationship where we are working to be able to meet all of the needs of all of the students within

our classroom. While building the relationship and structures we have in place together was not easy and took time and effort, it has been a strength for our classroom and our students. The biggest realization, and something we tell to other co-teaching teams that observe our work, is that Ms. Sweeney is the content specialist, where she plans content that is to be taught, while I, as the special educator, am the access specialist, where I ensure that all students whether they have disabilities or not can access the content she has planned. We have 28 wonderful fourth-grade students. There are 14 boys and 14 girls. The students in our room have many diverse learning needs and come from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Within our classroom of 28 learners, there are 7 students with diverse learning supports and services. Of those seven, all have a diagnosis of Learning Disabilities, although it is believed that one or two may also have mild Intellectual Disabilities. Together with my co-teacher, we differentiate the content taught to allow these 7 diverse learners and all 21 other students to successfully access the content and standards. We do this in a variety of ways, including small group instruction, modified assignments, collaborative projects, and station teaching. Four of our diverse learners are fully included in our classroom and therefore get all of their supports and services from myself, the Diverse Learner teacher, within the general education classroom. Three students receive English/Language Arts and Math supports in a separate setting classroom, which means I do not deliver their diverse learning supports, but they are included for Science and Social Studies, where I provide the diverse learning supports they need.

Our students have four specials classes each week: Music, Physical Education, Art, and Spanish. At the midpoint in the year, the students' specials will change and instead of Music, students will receive Dance as their creative arts special. Students also have weekly talking circles and social/emotional lessons through the Second Step program, which I often lead, in which students learn important conflict resolution skills as well as other important social/emotional skills needed to participate fully in their everyday school life.

The overall environment at Peirce is open and inviting. There is strong parental involvement building-wide. We have an active Parent Service Organization that organizes many events throughout the year, including Literacy and STEAM nights and a yearly Book Fair. We also have a large Friends of Peirce organization that fundraises close to \$100,000 each year to support programming at Peirce. Along with strong parent involvement, we have many community partnerships that support the programming at Peirce. These partnerships include arts organizations that partner with each grade level; for example, the Barrel of Monkeys organization has a six-week residency with the fourth-grade classrooms where students are taught creative writing and drama. All of these programs help the students of Peirce to be well-rounded students when they graduate from our school. I see the work of the community and parents on a daily basis, as I watch students benefit from the technology and programming that these organizations provide for the students. For example, watching fourth graders improve their writing through our Barrel of Monkey's art partnership has been extraordinary. Watching quiet and shy students or reluctant writers come out of their shells to write and perform excellent and often silly stories has been a joy.

### **Challenges & Limitations**

There were quite a few challenges and limitations throughout this project. The first challenge came in October when there was a Teachers Union work stoppage. This work stoppage did not affect data collection but did delay the beginning of teaching lessons on self-advocacy. Another limitation came from a lack of research and understanding of self-advocacy in the elementary school years. As a teacher, you can generally find lessons on the internet for any topic. Since self-advocacy is not a skill generally taught in the elementary years, I was unable to find lessons and therefore had to make up the lessons taught. It was not until I had completed my literature review to see the main skills needed to effectively self-advocate that I was able to put together a clear direction of the explicit lessons and skills I wanted to teach my students. Another challenge came in a conversation with my principal about balancing teaching of self-advocacy skills and our social/emotional curriculum, Second Step. I told her that my co-teacher and I had been replacing our weekly Second Step lessons with the self-advocacy lessons. This was met with resistance and we were told to continue Second Step with fidelity and to find other times in our week for the self-advocacy lessons. The final limitation and challenge came in March when schools were closed due to the Global Pandemic. Three weeks of instructional time were considered “Act of God” days and students were not required to participate in online learning activities. After that, we began true remote learning but due to circumstances, not all students have completed every assignment so data and case studies have not been complete because students have not completed all of the work assigned.

### **Question**

What happens when I teach my students self-advocacy skills in an inclusion classroom?

- How do students express their needs?
- What happens to students’ self-esteem and/or social-emotional wellbeing?
- What happens to students’ growth?
- What strategies help empower self-advocacy?

### **Literature Review**

#### *Self-Advocacy Importance & Key Skills*

There are many definitions and meanings used for self-advocacy. A review of the literature finds several different definitions but all have common themes among them. Schreiner (2007) defines self-advocacy as the ability to speak up for what we want or need. Schreiner (2007) further states that self-advocacy is an important skill that leads to higher high school completion rates, and adults with self-advocacy skills gain better employment opportunities. Roberts, Ju, and Zahng (2014) define self-advocacy as “an act that a person with a disability engages in to demand supports” (p. 209). They then conceptualize self-advocacy as four main components including knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership. The common themes between these two definitions include the communication of needs, wants, and supports.

The literature also shows why the teaching of self-advocacy is such an essential part of the curriculum, especially for students with disabilities. Hart and Brehm (2013) share ideas for how self-advocacy skills translate into later outcomes. The research states that positive outcomes for post-secondary work in adolescents who were taught self-advocacy skills. Similarly, Hart and Brehm (2013) share that a look at research states that positive outcomes for post-secondary work in adolescents who were taught self-advocacy skills. Self-advocacy skills in the elementary level have little to no research as to how they translate to students later outcomes. In other words, there is little to no research on whether teaching self-advocacy skills in elementary school affects or improves a student's educational outcomes later in their education career. The research states that positive outcomes for post-secondary work in adolescents who were taught self-advocacy skills. Zickel & Arnold (2001) state that students need self-advocacy skills to reach educational independence. With self-advocacy skills, students become more confident learners with high expectations for themselves. In order for this to happen, we need to explicitly teach the skills needed and make them as important as reading comprehension or math facts.

Similarly, Hart and Brehm (2013) share that a look at research states that positive outcomes for post-secondary work in adolescents who were taught self-advocacy skills. Hart and Brehm (2013) believe based on the results of adolescents who have been taught self-advocacy that starting to teach these skills at an earlier age (early to middle elementary school) will result in further positive outcomes for students, especially those with disabilities, later in their educational journey. There has not been explicit research of teaching self-advocacy skills in the elementary school classroom to support these ideas and therefore, the research being conducted in this paper is vitally important.

They believe that self-advocacy is most important for students with disabilities educated in inclusive classrooms where students may have a higher ability to advocate for themselves and/or have more support from the benefit of having two teachers in the classroom to support them:

Students with disabilities who are included in general education settings require self-advocacy and communication skills to enable them to advocate for the effective and consistent delivery of their designated IEP accommodations, which are designed to facilitate their successful acquisition of academic content and overall learning. (p. 41)

The research also shows similar themes in the specific skills that students should be taught to successfully self-advocate for themselves. These themes include knowledge of their own strengths, needs, interests, and can effectively communicate their choices and decisions. Zickel & Arnold (2001), recommend self-advocacy circles which are a way to explicitly teach students the skills necessary to begin to self-advocate for themselves. A circle is divided into four quadrants, each representing a stage of self-advocacy. These quadrants include: reflecting, goal setting, speaking up, checking.

### *Awareness of Self*

The first key skill to be taught to students to effectively self-advocate is an awareness of themselves. This includes many aspects but mainly requires students to understand their

strengths and weaknesses, what their interests are, and other aspects of themselves as students.

Schreiner (2007) states that self-awareness, also known as self-realization, is the element at the basis of self-advocacy and determines success in college and employment after a student leaves the K-12 environment. Self-awareness was determined through knowledge of one's IEP, knowledge of the student's special education program, and knowledge of the student's disability. Since most students do not inherently understand self-awareness and self-realization, these skills must be explicitly taught.

In Schreiner's (2007) study, 49 students were given the Self-Advocacy Survey where the students in the study were from rural and suburban schools in Pennsylvania. The students in the study ranged from 15-19 years old and all had different types of disabilities. When looking specifically at Self-Awareness as determined by a set of fifteen multiple-choice questions on the survey, with scores ranging from 5.0 to 10 and an average score of 9.8. Boys scored higher than girls in self-awareness and:

students labeled as having serious emotional disturbance or attention-deficit disorder demonstrated the strongest awareness about the nature of their special education programs, each with an average score of 11.5. Students identified as having learning disabilities or cognitive deficits scored an average of 10, knowing more about what their special education program entailed than they knew about their own specific IEP or disability. Finally, students with severe or multiple disabilities demonstrated considerably lower self-awareness, with average scores at 9.3 and 8.1, respectively. (p. 301)

Students' educational settings were also looked at when looking at self-awareness. Students who were primarily educated in general education settings with special education supports had the highest self-awareness score of 10.8 while students educated in separate half-day schools scored the lowest at 8.5. In the middle were students educated in separate resource rooms scored a 9.0. It seems that students who are educated in general education settings would have higher self-awareness scores, as they generally tend to have higher self-awareness which is why their educational programs support that of inclusion.

Similarly, Test, Fowler, et.al. (2005), share a conceptual framework developed by the authors where knowledge of self and knowledge of rights are considered the foundation of self-advocacy, "because it is necessary for individuals to understand and know themselves before they can tell others what they want" (p. 43). Knowledge of self is important because students need to know their own interests, strengths, and weaknesses so they are able to understand how what, and when to self-advocate for themselves. Specifically for students with disabilities, knowledge of rights as a person with a disability is especially important. Understanding these rights allows students to advocate for themselves when these rights are being violated or not being met.

### *Strengths and Weaknesses*

As students begin to understand who they are and start practicing self-awareness, they are then able to identify their strengths and weaknesses. When students are able to identify their strengths and weaknesses, they can identify solutions for how to leverage their strengths to overcome challenges.

Zickel & Arnold (2001) state that the first part of a self-advocacy circle consists of reflecting. In this stage of the circle, students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. Once their weaknesses are identified, students decide which of their weaknesses stand in their way of doing their best and brainstorm how they can overcome these specific weaknesses.

Hart and Brehm (2013) also believe that students should be able to identify areas where they struggle. Once they understand which academic areas they struggle, students can set goals as well as identify accommodations and modifications that will help them be successful in that challenging area.

### *Goal Setting*

Once students have an understanding of themselves and their strengths and weaknesses they are ready for the third component of structured self-advocacy instruction which is goal setting. When students set goals based on their weaknesses, they both understand themselves and what they need to work on. Goal setting also makes them focused on making improvements that further their understanding of themselves and their overall school performance.

Zickel & Arnold (2001), share that after students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses they should begin goal setting. While goal setting, students create goals based on their strengths and weaknesses to improve their school performance.

Hart and Brehm (2013) believe that to learn self-advocacy skills, students should start with academic goal setting and planning. Having students identify areas where they struggle and creating plans for how to reach the goal they set is the perfect start to gaining student self-awareness. From this goal setting, specifically for students with disabilities, teachers can then work with students to identify accommodations needed to meet the academic goals they set for themselves. Students should explore different accommodations so they are able to select ones that will actually benefit them and help them to meet their goals. Giving students the opportunity to model and explore what each accommodation looks like within the classroom will allow them to see which of these accommodations will work best for them and which accommodations will not. This will further allow students to understand their own strengths and needs, as well as to further participate in the IEP planning process.

### *Communication*

Communication is the last piece of the direct skill instruction necessary for self-advocacy. When students understand the previous skills and can utilize them, they then learn to communicate their wants and needs. Students who can communicate wants and needs are able to utilize communication to self-advocate for themselves to help reach their goals. Students who can self-advocate will perform better in school and have stronger long term outcomes.

Zickel & Arnold (2001), share that the third part of a self-advocacy circle is Speaking Up. In this part of the circle, students then develop language to share with their teachers around the modifications and accommodations they need to meet their goals. Also within the area of communication is the last section of the self-advocacy circle, checking. This is where students

then check in with their teacher regularly to ensure the modifications are being implemented to ensure they are reaching their goals.

Hart and Brehm (2013) state that once students understand which accommodations they need to be able to meet their goals, it is important for students to then understand how to communicate that they need the specific accommodation providing students with sentence stems and allow them to practice communicating with the teacher that they need the specific accommodation to be successful.

Test, Fowler, et.al. (2005) state that communication is so important because once a student understands themselves and their rights they need to be able to communicate effectively with others. In this case, communication goes beyond just being able to speak to others effectively but also having students negotiate, persuade, and compromise in a situation where they are self-advocating for themselves.

Test, Fowler, et.al. (2005) also believe that listening skills are another important communication tool when self-advocating also. Students who have strong listening skills are stronger in self-advocacy because they are able to listen carefully to what is happening around them and understand when they need something.

### *Results and Other Considerations of Self-Advocacy Instruction*

Within the research, there have been many positive outcomes as well as strategies to take into consideration when teaching students directly how to self-advocate for themselves.

Zickel & Arnold (2001) describe how they practiced Self-Advocacy circles with an inclusion classroom of fourth-graders. They practiced self-advocacy circles with students in role-play situations for 10 hours. After that, students were to use the skills on their own. In one example, after a teacher gave a writing assignment and pre-writing organizer, a student with a learning disability approached her teacher asking for a different organizer so she could get her ideas down in a different way that worked best for her.

In a different study, Downing & Schriener (2007), suggest that students be explicitly taught self-advocacy skills through the inclusion of self-advocacy as an IEP goal. With explicit self-advocacy goals in a student's IEP, students with multiple disabilities or those with more severe disabilities who scored lowest on the measure will be able to learn the skills necessary for college and career readiness.

Test, Fowler, et.al. (2005) also share the importance of self-advocacy by discussing the last component of their framework, leadership, which in this case is where students learn to navigate the roles and dynamics of a group. Being able to navigate themselves in a group is important to self-advocacy skills because most work in school requires students to cooperate with others. Being able to self-advocate for their needs and wants within a group is important to the success of the group.

The authors make the following recommendation: "To effectively promote self-advocacy, practitioners should provide students with opportunities to practice self-advocacy skills. Some effective approaches include IEP participation or leadership and advocating through writing" (p. 218).

The authors also found that many of the studies they reviewed had an overrepresentation of students diagnosed with learning disabilities versus many other types of

disabilities, along with most participants being male and in high school. The authors suggest that in future research, students should have a wide range of disabilities, gender equality, and larger age distribution to be a successful study. They also suggest that the study look beyond the student's classroom environment to see if the self-advocacy skills taught are generalized beyond the classroom. This is important because there has not been a lot of research done by teaching self-advocacy skills for students in elementary school.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The data collection methods that were used have been broken into two parts, the first is before the school closure and then there were some data collection methods that were shifted after the school closure.

**Explicit Instruction/Projects/class read alouds:** Students participated in explicit instruction on the areas of self-advocacy including Awareness of Self, Strengths and Weaknesses, Goal Setting, and Communication. Each skill was taught using a picture book along with a discussion and project.

**Student reflections:** Students completed bi-weekly a 5 question survey on when they needed help throughout the week and what they did to get the help that they needed. These reflections were completed with students prior to the school closure.

**Case Studies:** As data was evaluated, a group of 6 students was looked at closely. These students are a mix of general education students and students with special needs. One of these students over self-advocated for himself, while others rarely used self-advocacy skills to seek the help they needed in the classroom. Students were chosen based on self-advocacy observations at the start of the year. The students chosen were a mix of those with IEP's and without, boys and girls, and students who over self-advocate for themselves and under self-advocate for themselves.

**Classroom observations and Journal:** Students in the case study group were observed at various times throughout the day to identify if they were using self-advocacy skills to gain the help that they might have needed. A journal was kept as reflections on the lessons and classroom observations.

### **Data, Analysis, and Interpretation**

#### **Case Studies**

**Elijah:** Elijah is a student who at the start of the year over self-advocated. Every time an adult would give directions he would raise his hand to ask a question, provide a thought, or ask for help. Elijah does need support to stay motivated but is not a student with an IEP or slated to receive one. He does benefit from being in the inclusion classroom as he benefits from the extra set of eyes from an adult to keep him on task and motivated. Elijah is a hard worker when he is motivated. He enjoys being social with friends and working in groups.

**Aniyah:** Aniyah is a new student to Peirce. She has a very transient past. She is a student with many skill gaps in her abilities but does not have a documented disability. She is a pleasant and

kind girl. She has spent a lot of time navigating the social dynamics of the classroom because in previous schools the method to solve problems was to fight or become physical, but that is not the strategy that students at Peirce use when problems arise. Aniyah has come very far in closing her academic gaps in reading where she has gone from the 1st percentile to the 10th percentile on the NWEA MAP. Aniyah, when overwhelmed, will shut down, put her head down, sigh, and refuse to complete the work assigned. Most of this happens when she perceives something that is too challenging for her. Aniyah loves art especially when she can draw or paint. She is very talented when drawing or painting and puts a lot of effort into those types of assignments. When thinking about self-advocacy, Aniyah will generally not self-advocate for herself but rather engage in task avoidant behaviors as mentioned above.

Jude: Jude is a student on the Autism spectrum. He has a jovial personality and loves to laugh. Jude likes to read, especially Dog Man and Diary of Wimpy Kid books. Jude loves gym class and any activity where he can be active. Jude is liked among his peers and interacts with others in the classroom appropriately. In terms of academics, Jude needs a lot of support from the adults in the room to complete assignments and understand what he needs to do to complete the assignment. Jude enjoys work that allows him to be artistic. In terms of self-advocacy, Jude tends to over self-advocate for himself. He will ask questions or ask for help anytime an adult asks if anyone has questions or even when he is able to complete something independently.

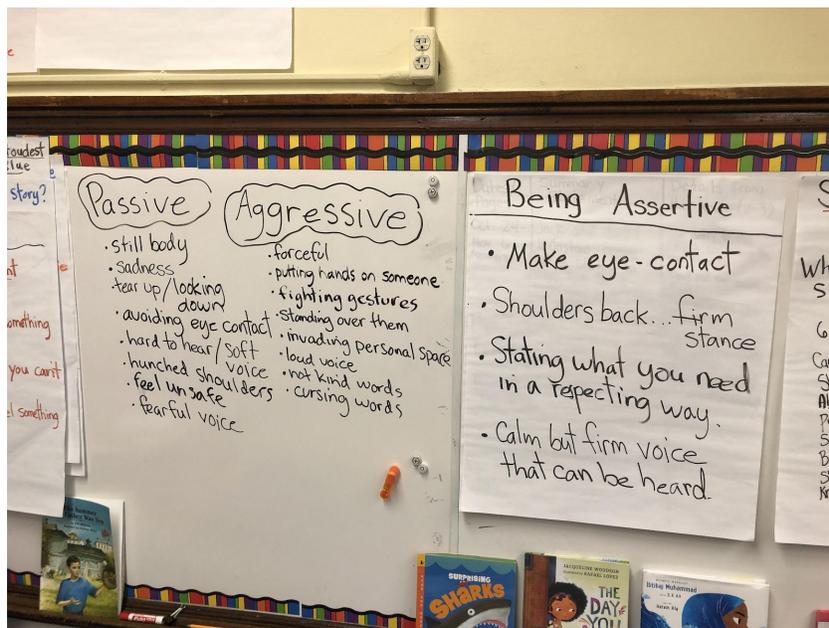
Ayanna: Ayanna is another student in the classroom with an IEP. Her identified disability is Learning Disability. She is a very hard worker and always completes all of her work. Ayanna enjoys being with her peers and gets along with them. She likes to read and draw. Ayanna struggles with reading comprehension, especially the higher level comprehension questions required for much of the reading done in the intermediate grade levels. Ayanna also struggles at multi-step math problems or higher-level thinking in math. Ayanna is a very quiet and diligent student. Ayanna will often not self-advocate for herself until a teacher or adult checks in with her to see if she needs help, instead, she will continue working and completing work incorrectly or she will sit and wait until an adult is able to check in with her and help her.

Sydney: Sydney is an active and fun girl. She is very social and well-liked among her peers. Sydney has an IEP for a learning disability in math only. She loves art, music, and dance. Sydney also loves fashion. She will always have a hairband in her hair and lipgloss on her desk. She has a very spunky personality. Sydney is able to complete grade-level reading work with minimal support. She often will struggle with writing because of her documented ADHD which makes it difficult for her to organize her thoughts and ideas. Sydney struggles in math and often it is because she perceives that she is unable to complete something or thinks that the math is too challenging. Sydney will often not self-advocate for herself, even when a teacher checks in with her she will say that she does not need help when it is obvious that she is struggling.

### **Projects/discussions/instruction/read-alouds**

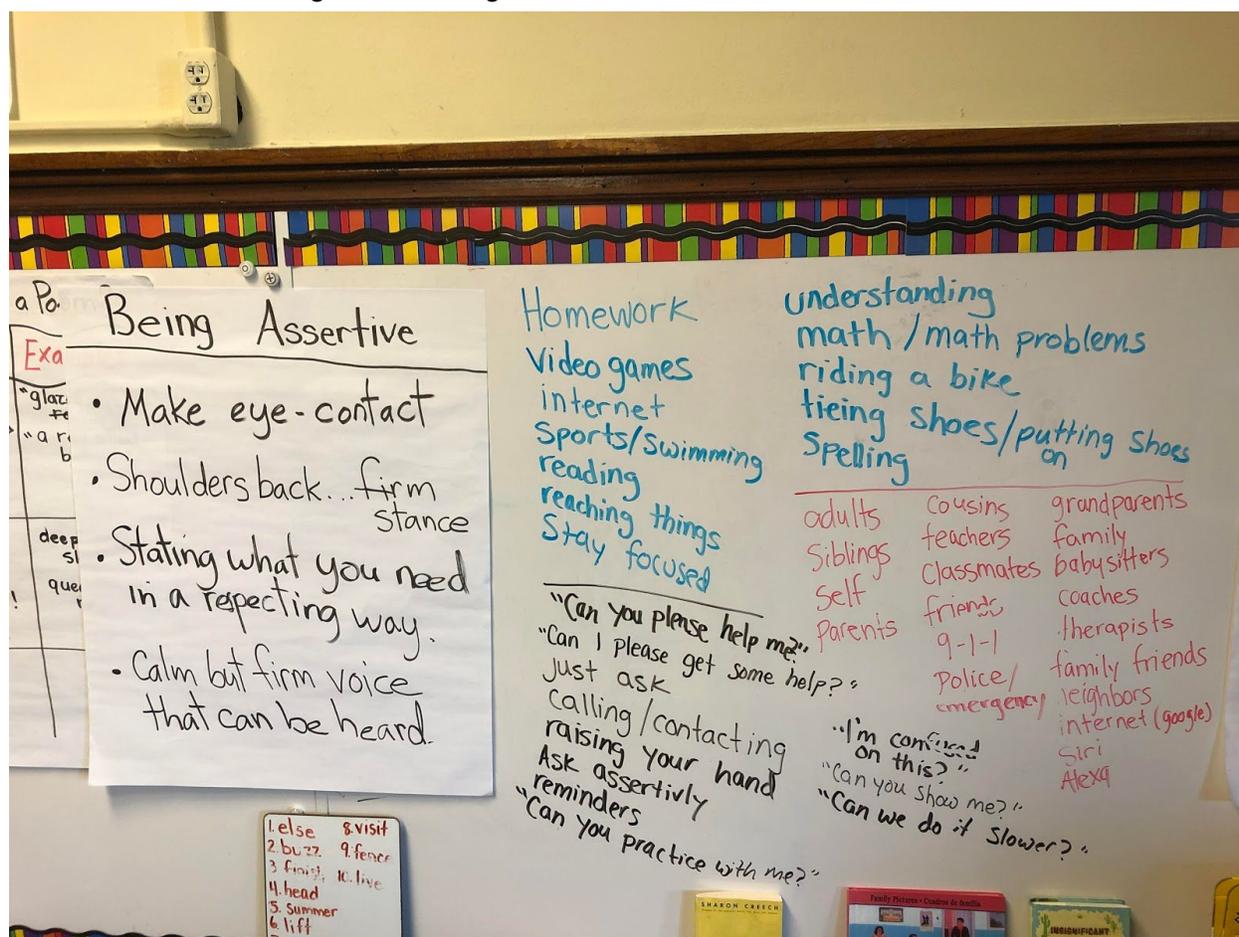
The lesson reflections that follow come from my teacher journal. In this journal, I outlined the lesson structure and materials. I also reflected on how the students responded to each lesson objective and the results of this lesson.

Lesson 1 began on November 27, 2019, This week I introduced the first lesson of my explicit instruction on self-advocacy skills. We reviewed a previous second step lesson on passive, assertive and aggressive communication skills. We completed the original second step lesson during the third week of school. I took time to evaluate the lesson and decided that re-teaching the same lesson might be redundant, so instead we spent time reviewing the lesson. I was pleasantly surprised by the students' memory of the types of communication. My co-teacher and I spent time reviewing the types asking the students to identify the three ways to communicate what we want and need. The students were able to identify Aggressive, Passive, and Assertive. We then asked for them to identify what classifies each type of communication (How do you know someone is communicating in an aggressive way? Passive way? Assertive way?) Students were able to identify what each type of communication looks like and sounds like. (See photo) When we began to discuss assertive communication, two students raised their hands and said: "We have a way to show assertive communication." So we asked them to show us. The students stood up, faced each other, and began a role play. One student (Aurora) said "Celeste, You are stepping on my foot and it hurts, please stop" to which Celeste responded, "Oh I am sorry, I didn't realize I was stepping on your foot." It was the perfect demonstration of the four characteristics of assertive communication looks and sounds like. We then had students identify the characteristics of assertive communication. Students then worked with scenarios where they identified how they would respond in an assertive manner to certain classroom situations. I plan to next work to teach students when they need to be assertive to get help.



Lesson 2 was taught on December 4, We started with a review of the types of communication. When we reviewed passive, aggressive, and assertive communication we discussed why assertive communication is the best way to get what you want and need. Students did a great

job of being able to identify why assertive communication is the best way to communicate wants and needs. After we discussed communication, we began to talk about times in our lives where we need help. Students shared times when they needed help and we wrote them on the board. Students had lots of ideas beyond just school including sports and swimming, learning to tie shoes, riding a bike, using the internet, and playing video games. Once we brainstormed that list, we talked about who they get help from. Again, students had a lot of really great people beyond just parents and teachers, including family friends, therapists, 9-11 and emergency personnel, and Siri and Alexa. Finally, we discussed and brainstormed ways to ask for help when you need it. Students were able, through direct questioning, to think beyond just saying "I need help" or raising my hand. They came up with ideas such as "Can we do it slower?", "I am confused on this," calling or contacting someone.



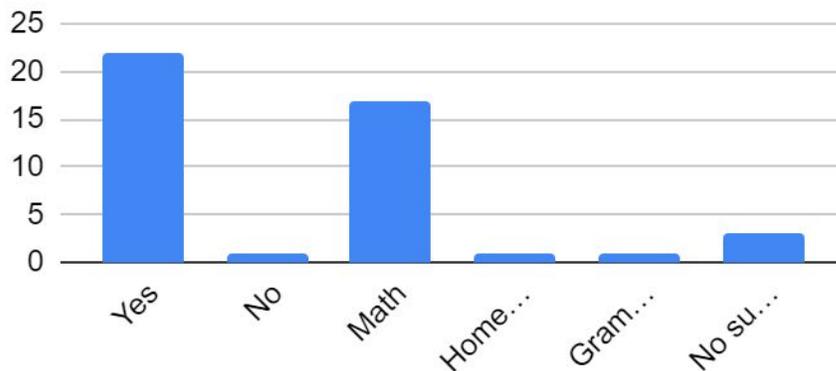
After the brainstorming session, we began to discuss how important asking for help is and that it is important to understand when you need help. We talked about how important it is to struggle through some things before asking for help. We used the example of ST Math, a computer-based math problem-solving program as the basis for this part of the discussion. We talked about how often there are challenging puzzles that students must solve and that if they asked for help right away, they would never be able to learn how to complete the puzzles

independently. We also talked about how great it feels when they struggle on a puzzle and then are able to accomplish it on their own!

On December 6, 2019, it was the first time I gave the student reflection to students. During this reflection, 23 of the 28 students completed the reflection. The reflection consisted of four questions:

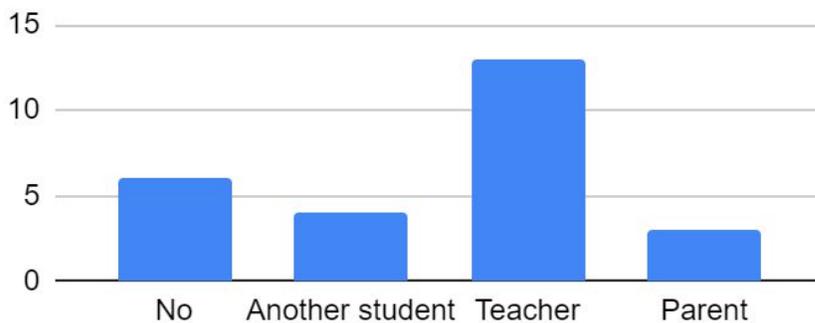
- Was there a time you got stuck on something this week?
- If so, how did you get unstuck?
- What did you, yourself, do to get unstuck?
- Was there someone who helped you? If so, who?

### Q1: Was there a time you got stuck...



Q1: Was there a time you got stuck on something this w...

### Q4: Was there someone who helped...



Q4: Was there someone who helped you? If so, who?

As I reflected on what I was really looking for in my results, I decided to focus only on questions 1 and 4 where I could look closely at if they got stuck on something and if an adult or someone helped them get unstuck, or in other words, were they able to self-advocate for themselves to get help from another person.

When looking at the class as a whole, most of the students said that they needed help with something. The majority of the students needed help in math or a math-related assignment. This makes sense during this week because my co-teacher and I taught a more complicated

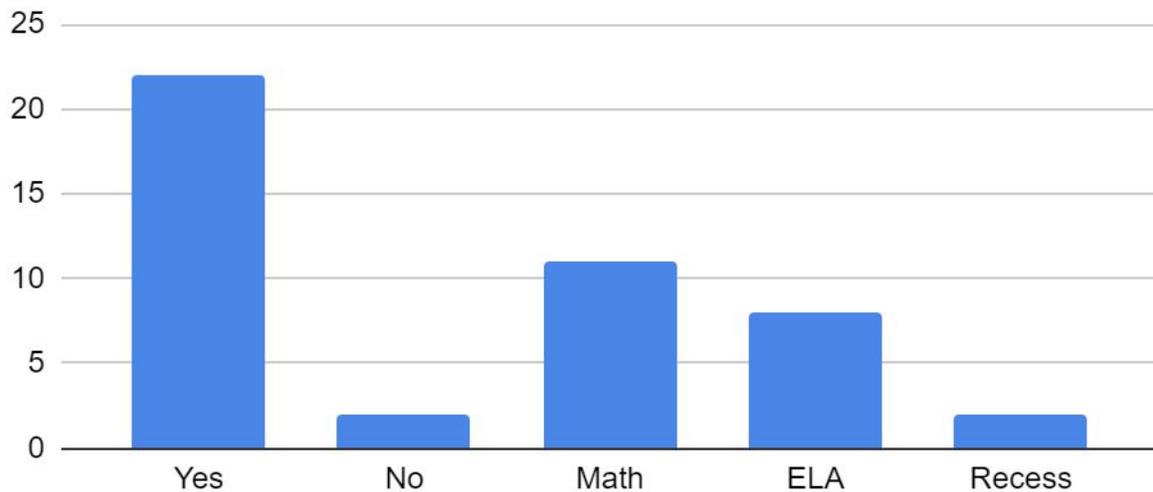
strategy for multiplying 2 digit by 2 digit numbers, which was difficult for many of the students to understand.

Some students in Q2 said I asked the teacher for help, but then in Q4 when it asked if someone helped you, they either said no or did not identify that a teacher helped them get unstuck. I believe this to be the case because the student had already identified who helped them get unstuck, so they may have interpreted Q4 as asking if there was anyone else that helped them to get unstuck, in which case the answer would be no because a teacher had helped them as identified in Q2. Some students seemed to struggle with understanding what they did to get unstuck or get help. Since this was new to them and we had not discussed closely what the questions meant, since we would discuss these throughout the series of lessons, the wording and the idea of “getting stuck and unstuck” may have been confusing for students who were unfamiliar with the idea. Along with this, students at the age of nine and ten are often not reflective and live in the moment so for them to go and reflect on an entire week may be challenging for some.

As I look closely at the responses from my case study students and how they responded to this reflection I found that Sydney did need help this week and to help herself get unstuck she was assertive and asked for help from another student. Jude got stuck on something and someone helped him. He responded that a nice boy helped him and that if someone was stuck he would help them. Ayanna did need help and asked the teacher for help and tried again. Aniyah and Elijah did not complete the survey this week. Looking even closer at their responses I notice that they did not put a subject area or what it was that they got stuck on, although the question does not explicitly state the need to indicate a subject area or what they got stuck on. They all needed help but did not specify what it was they needed help with. Jude’s responses to the survey questions did not always make sense, where he responded to question 2 with “a nice boy helped me” and Q4 with “I help someone”. Again, as a student with a disability, it would make sense for him to struggle through a reflection without much guidance or support.

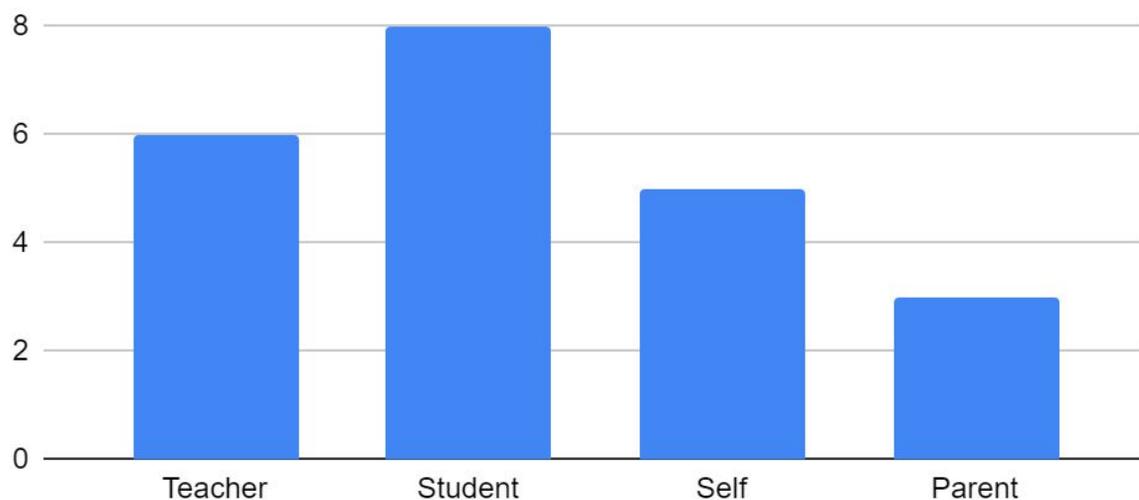
On January 10, 2020, the students took the survey reflection again. On this reflection, 24 out of 28 students completed the reflection and there were some shifts in the data from the first reflection in December. In this reflection, students were more balanced in the subject area where they needed help. 22 students indicated that they needed help to get unstuck on something. Of those 22, 11 students indicated math as the area they needed support, and 8 indicated ELA as the area they needed support.

Q1: Was there a time you got stuck on something this week?



Q1: Was there a time you got stuck on something this week?

Q4: Was there someone who helped you? If so, who?



Q4: Was there someone who helped you? If so, who?

When I look at the whole class as a whole, what I found intriguing was whom they asked support from. The data shifted in question 4 where in the previous reflection, asking the teacher for help was the most common response. In this reflection, students turned to their peers for

support more than a teacher. Students identified that they were able to use their own strategies to get unstuck, where 5 students indicated that they themselves were able to get themselves unstuck or solve the problems using their own strategies.

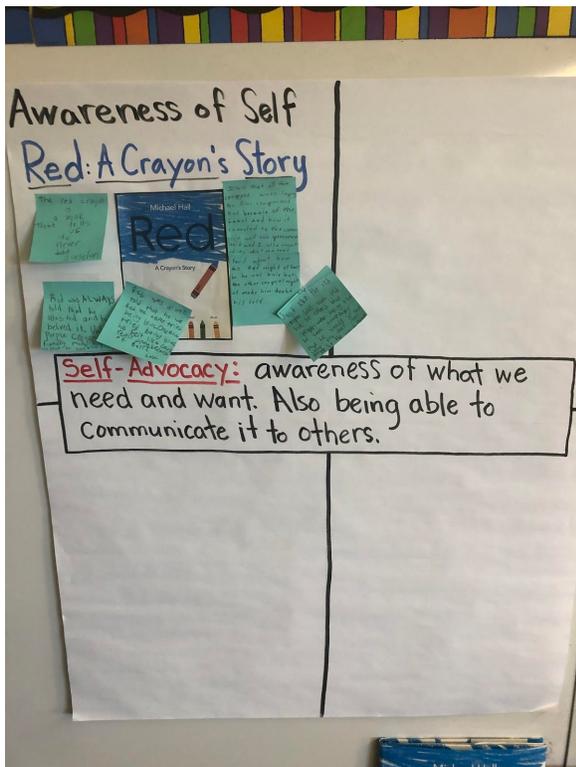
Looking more closely at the responses to the survey from my case study students, I noticed that more case study students went to the teacher as compared to the rest of the class. To be able to ask a peer for support on an activity requires a lot of confidence in yourself and others, it also requires that you have the ability and understanding to ask a peer for support. 2 of the 5 asked the teacher for help this week, one student used a situation from outside of school and another student was able to solve the problem himself and get unstuck. Sydney did need help this week. Sydney was one of the 6 students who asked the teacher for help this week. When she asked for help her teacher told her to try harder. Jude needed help because the internet was not working on his computer. Jude used his dad for support to help him and was able to get back on the internet. Jude also wrote that if someone helps you, you should always help them back. Ayanna needed help when in her book club. To help herself get unstuck she first asked her partner and then asked the teacher for help. Elijah was stuck on ST Math. To get unstuck, he first had faith in himself that he could solve the puzzle. Through perseverance, he was able to solve the problem on his own. Aniyah again did not complete the survey.

The third lesson was taught January 29, 2020, In this lesson, we introduced the definition of self-advocacy. We started by talking about how we can advocate for other people at school or in our community and discussed how we advocate for them to help people get what they want or need. We talked about how in order to advocate for others we need to understand when we, ourselves, need or want things and can communicate to get them effectively. We defined self-advocacy as “awareness of what we need and want. Also being able to communicate it to others.”

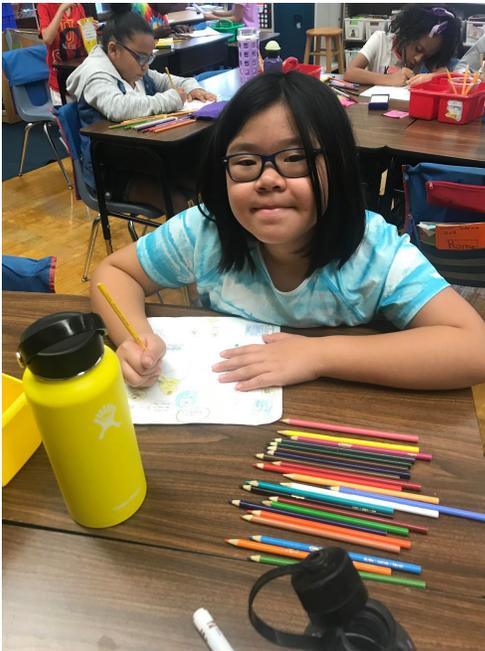
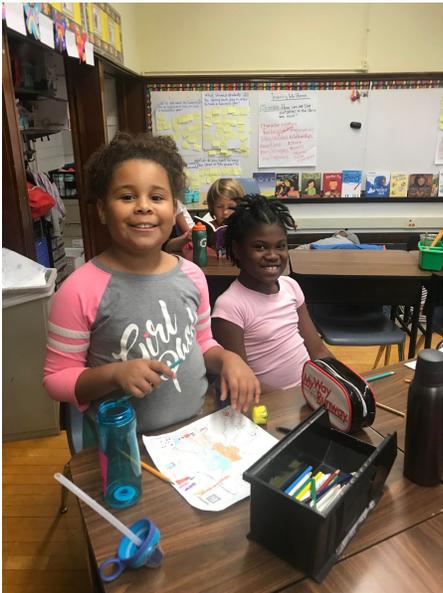
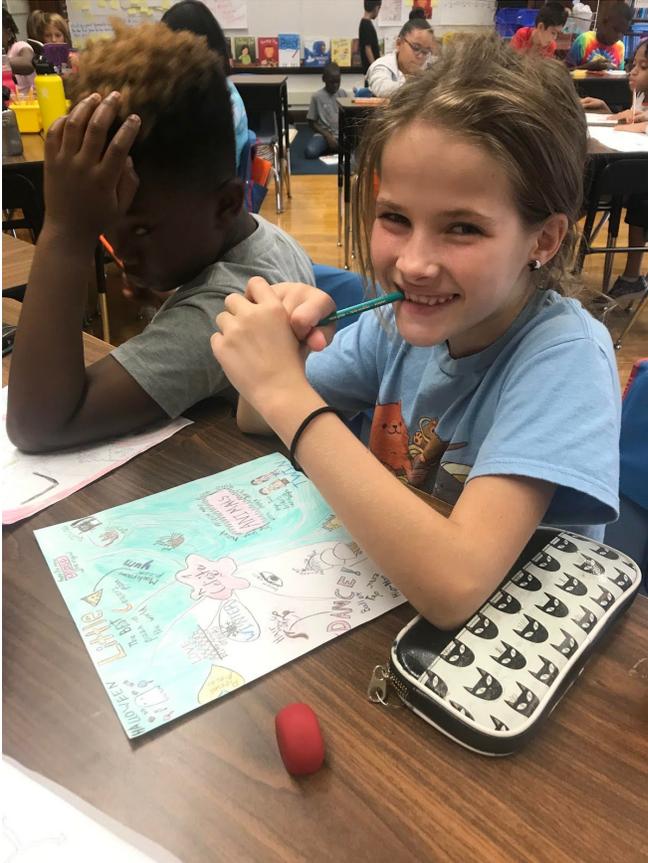
We then talked about how it is important to understand ourselves in order to be able to understand what we want or need. We connected the idea of awareness of self to identity. At the start of the year, we completed many read alouds related to the idea of identity and what identity is. Students created identity maps to show who they are. We reviewed the books that we had read in the beginning of the year. These books include: “The Day You Begin”, “The Invisible Boy”, “The Wall in the Middle of This Book”, “Enemy Pie” and a few others. We discussed how each of them had themes that helped us understand who we are and what our identity is.

We then read the book, “Red: A Crayon’s Story”, which is a story about a blue crayon wrapped in a red wrapper and is expected to be red. Everyone in the story is upset that he is not drawing in red, despite “being” red. In the middle of the book, a purple crayon asked the “red” crayon to draw an ocean and he did. Once he did that, everyone realizes he is a blue crayon and loves the work and drawings he does. We had a discussion about how the story showed the importance of understanding yourself and how when we understand yourself we can

communicate our needs and wants to others. We also talked about how the purple crayon in the story helped advocate for the red crayon. Students did an amazing job of connecting the story to the overall idea of awareness and self-advocacy.



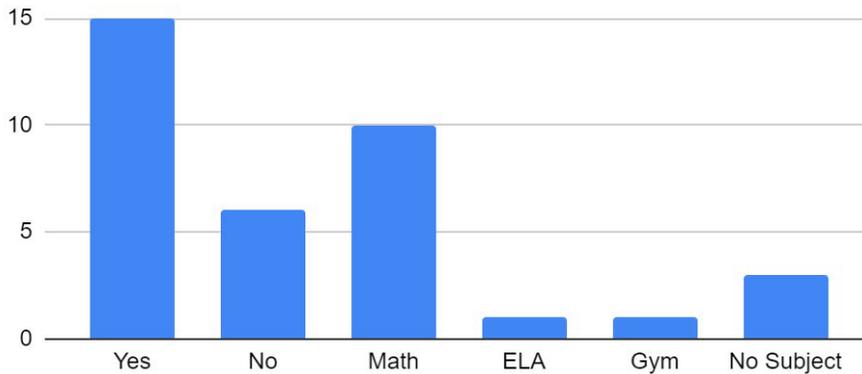
This story and the topic of awareness of self-related directly to work we did at the start of the year when we focused heavily on identity. During the beginning of the year, students learned about identity, which as a class we defined “who you are as a person”. Similarly to how students are learning about self-advocacy through picture books, they began the year by learning about identity through picture books. Students learned the importance of identity and understanding of who they are as people. Through this work, students then began to create identity maps that showed their interests, families, hobbies, and more.



2/20/2020

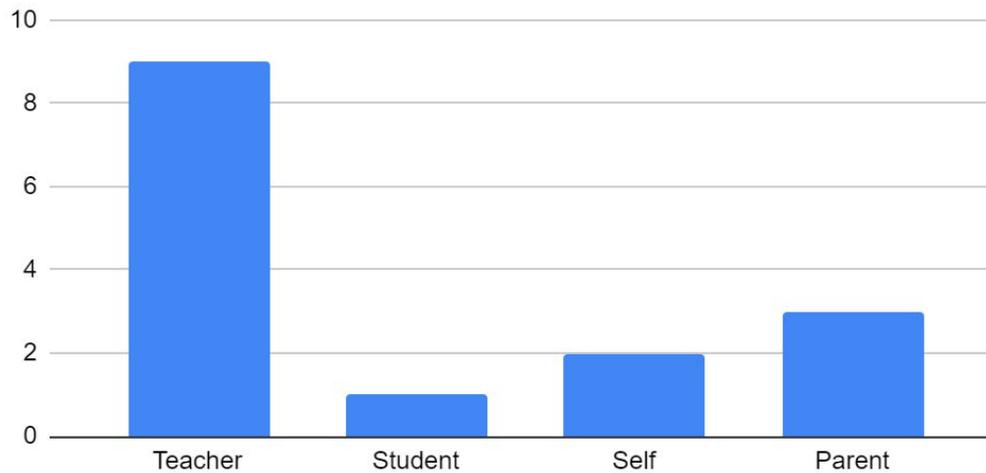
The students again took time to complete the reflection on February 20. 21 of 28 students completed this reflection.

Q1: Was there a time you got stuck on something this week?



Q1: Was there a time you got stuck on something this week?

Q4: Was there someone who helped you? If so, who?



Q4: Was there someone who helped you? If so, who?

This reflection showed another shift in data, having a higher percentage of students identify that they didn't get stuck on something. 15 students identified that they needed help over the course of the week and 6 students identified that they did not need help. Again, math was the area most students identified needing help and asking the teacher became the strategy most students used to find the help they needed.

Looking closely at the responses of my case study students, I found that 2 of the 5 students needed help this week in something. Of those students, both ended up asking the teacher for help but the student without a disability, Elijah, was able to first ask a friend before going to the

teacher, where the student with a disability, Jude, relied on the teacher for help. Ayanna stated that she did not need help this week. This could be because she actually did not need help in anything but it also could be the result of her not being able to think about a specific time that she needed help. Sydney and Aniyah did not complete the reflection this week.

When thinking closely about the results of the three reflections, it seems as though math was a common thread as an area where students needed help or were getting stuck. Math seems to be a challenging content area for this group of students more than in previous years. This group of students is the first group that has had Japan Math or a version of it since Kindergarten, where the focus is on solving one problem and talking through the math used to solve it. This way of teaching math focuses less around direct teaching and more around having conversations about math strategies.

I find this interesting because knowing this group of students, especially those with learning disabilities or those at risk, need to have more direct instruction to grasp concepts. This has shown as we work through abstract concepts or concepts that require multiple steps such as the two by two-digit multiplication that we taught during these series of reflections.

As I look to use this data and reflect on how to shift math instruction the first change that I would consider making is moving to smaller math groups. This shift allows students to feel more comfortable and confident in being able to ask questions and self-advocate for themselves when they need help. Another shift I would make to instruction would be to balance problem-solving with direct content and strategy instruction. This would allow students to continue working on their problem-solving skills while also learning directly the strategies and content necessary to master grade-level content standards.

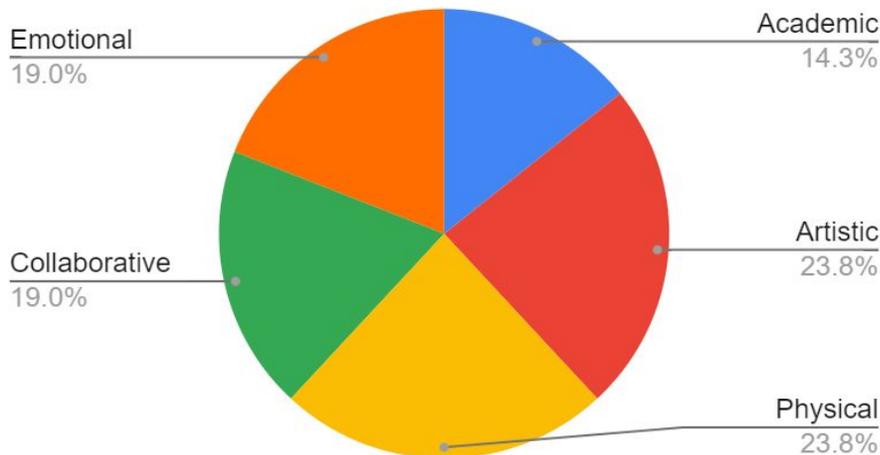
On March 11, 2020 We introduced the second picture book to students today, [I Will Never Get A Star On Mrs. Benson's Blackboard](#). We read this with a focus on strengths and weaknesses. Time got short so we were only able to read the book. We had a project lined up for the students to create a piece of art with themselves in the center surrounded by pictures and words showcasing their strengths and weaknesses. Since schools were closed in the middle of this lesson, we were unable to complete the project in school. Instead, students completed it at home with their parents. We then had students complete a reflection based on the piece of art that they completed.



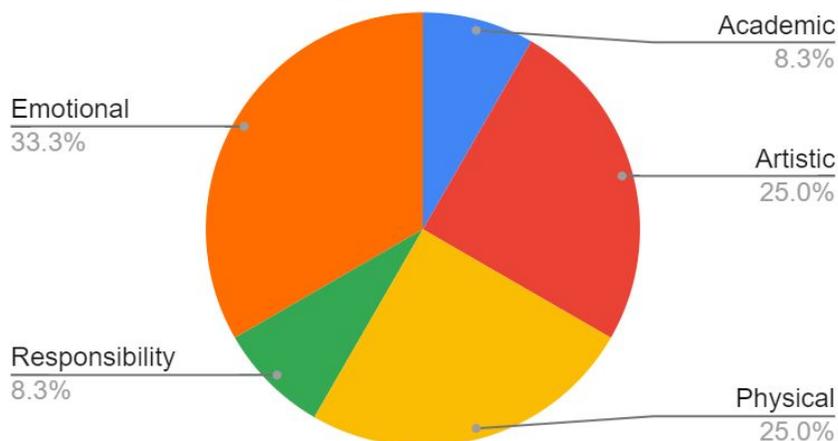
March 17, 2020 was the day that the governor of Illinois closed all schools temporarily due to the global Coronavirus Pandemic. At this time teachers thought it would be a two-week closure and we would be back to business as usual. Little did we know that weeks later, our school year would be completed remotely. This shift from in-person learning to remote learning required me to make a shift in my teaching of self-advocacy skills. Since many picture books are available to be read online, I was able to record myself reading them or find celebrities reading the specific books I was using to teach the skills. The projects students completed around the stories became online reflections and online projects. The piece that was missing in this shift was the class discussion and being able to completely connect the specific skill back to self-advocacy and why that skill was so essential in being able to self-advocate.

On March 20, 2020, students were asked to complete a reflection after creating the art piece that described the art along with their strengths and weaknesses. This reflection and art piece were both done post school closure. The reflection was completed on-time by 8 of 28 students. In the reflection, students were asked to describe the drawing of themselves and how the drawing is connected to their strengths. The reflection also asks students to describe the drawings they used to show their strengths. It asks them to reflect on things that are challenging for them and who can help them improve in those areas. Finally, the reflection asks students to connect their understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses and how it is connected to self-advocacy.

### Strength Categories



## Weakness Categories



Based on the data specific strengths and weaknesses were grouped into categories which include:

Academic including things such as reading, math, spelling, etc.

Artistic which includes drawing, singing, etc.

Physical which includes sports, swimming, dancing, etc.

Collaborative which includes projects, games, etc.

Emotional which includes friendships, speaking up, being funny, etc.)

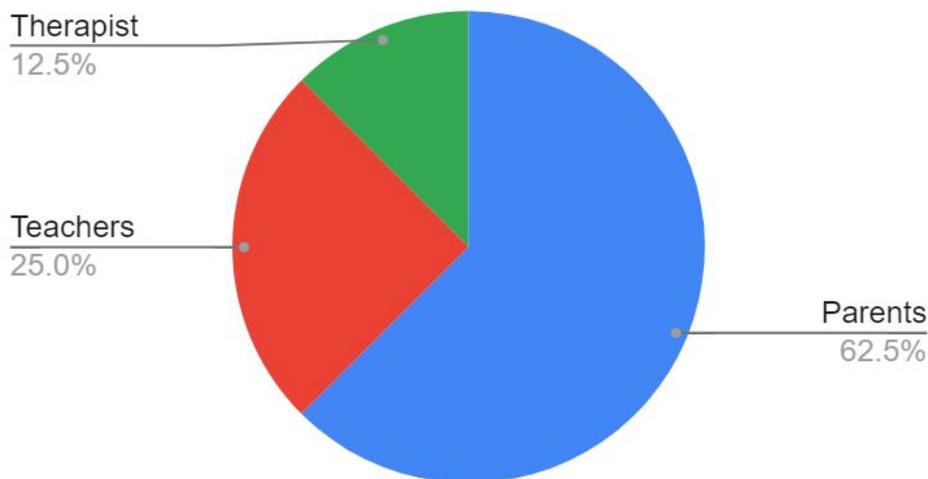
As students listed a strength in their reflection it was coded as the category it fit, so if a student listed Basketball, running, Board games, riding bikes, blowing bubbles and jump rope it would be coded as Physical- 5 (basketball, running, riding bikes, blowing bubbles, and jump rope) and Collaborative- 1 (board games).

Results show that students tend to show strengths in artistic (23.8%) and physical (23.8%) categories with collaborative and emotional areas following close behind at 19.0%. Not many academic strengths were listed.

When looking closely at weaknesses and areas of growth, data were grouped into similar categories although Collaborative was replaced with Responsibility which included chores and things requiring students to show responsibility. 33% of student responses listed emotional areas as something to grow in. These included friendships, being funny and telling jokes to others, speaking up, letting people know their opinion, etc. Both artistic and physical came in 2nd with 25% of student responses in these areas. Students identified riding a bike, playing a sport, drawing, and singing as some areas of growth. Responsibility and Academic came in both at 8.3% with students identifying household chores and reading as areas they can grow in.

Next, students were asked who can help them improve in areas where they needed.

## Who Can Help Improve Weaknesses



Students responded with parents, teachers, and a therapist. I anticipated that friends would be a choice students would have made but actually no students identified friends or peers as a person to help them improve. Parents were identified at 62.5% followed by teachers at 25%.

With this data it was completed by only a small number of students, this was also an assignment completed during the time when students were not required to complete work for a grade. In fact, none of the case study students completed this reflection. The fact that we were not in school also played a role in the responses. More students shared strengths and weaknesses beyond just academics, which I would anticipate to have been different had the reflections been completed in school. I also expect that since students are home with family during the school closure, teachers were not as high of a person who can help improve weaknesses since their parents were the adults that students turned to when they need support.

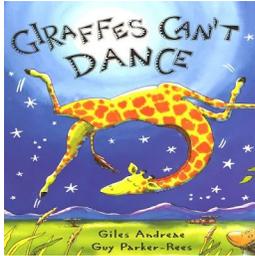
It also is likely that if this reflection were completed in the classroom the results would be very different, as students would have focused much more heavily on academic responses and less on the outside of school responses. Students also may have responded that their peers and teachers are people they turn to for support versus such a high percentage of parents.

The ideas presented by students may actually be more accurate as to what they really feel are areas of strength and weakness for them, where we take away the academic focus. Although when thinking about the areas they will most likely self-advocate it will happen in the academic setting so understanding and identifying the academic strengths and weaknesses is important. Finally, students were asked to connect their understanding of strengths and weaknesses to the importance of self-advocacy. Students responded in various ways including:

- **“I think it will help me get better at my areas of growth and it will help me be aware of my strengths.”**

- **“You know what your strengths and weaknesses are so you can get better at them, I know you’re not perfect at everything but at least try.”**
- **“It will help you, self-advocate, by letting you know when you might need help on a certain thing”.**

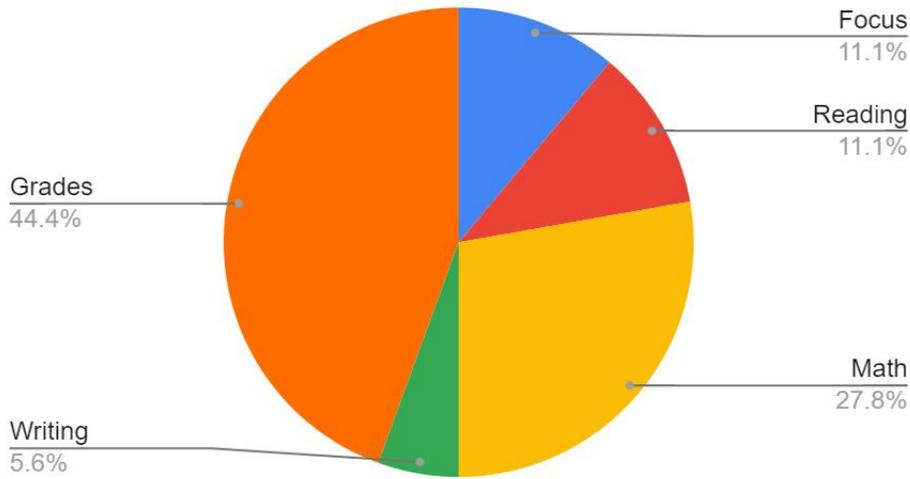
The next lesson on April 14, 2020, used the story [Giraffes Can't Dance](#) where we focused on goal setting. This is incredibly important for students as we move into true distance and e-learning.



In this lesson, students listened to the story [Giraffes Can't Dance](#), for which I recorded myself reading the book for students to watch. Students then completed a reflection about the book. In this reflection, students were asked to think about the main character and if he were to use self-advocacy skills how the book would be different. Students were also asked about the importance of goal setting and finally how setting goals help you self-advocate. After the reflection, students completed a project where they created vision boards. Each student created a set of slides to showcase who they are as people and goals that they had for themselves. They set goals in the areas of academics and school, personal wellness, and interests, and hobbies. Each slide had a goal along with pictures and words that shared what the students were going to do to meet the goals.

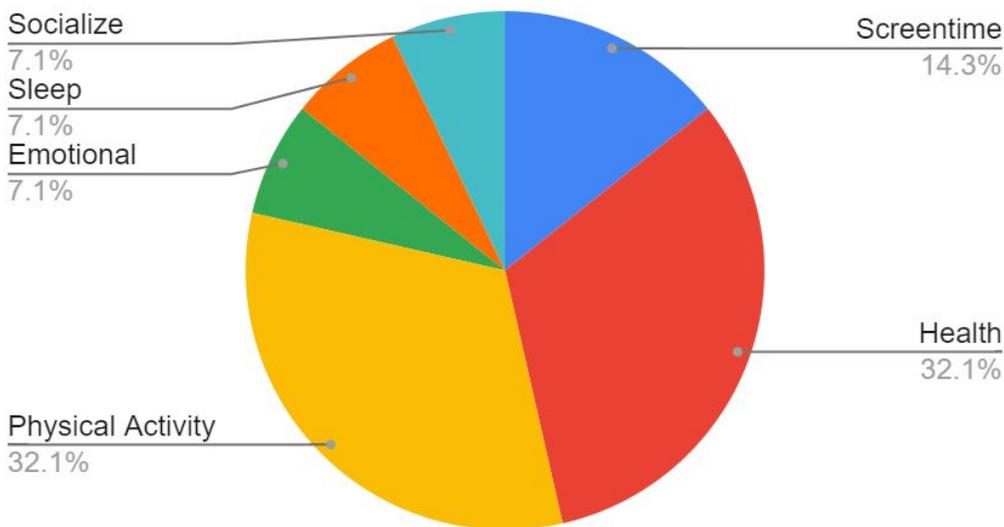
When looking closely at the slides the students created, 19 students completed the assignment. The goals the students set for academics were able to be grouped into five areas: Focus (staying focused on academics or remote learning), reading, math, writing, and grades (getting better grades, getting straight A's, etc.).

### Academic Goals



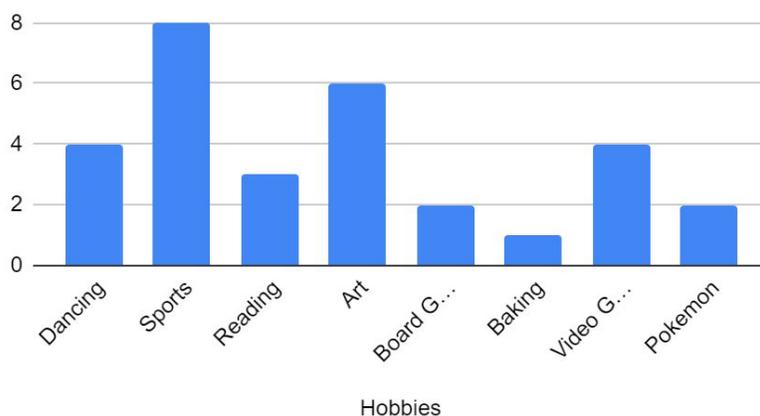
Students were also asked to create Personal/Wellness goals. In this area, goals were grouped into categories which included Socialize (spending time with others in a safe way), Sleep, Screentime (reducing time on screens), Emotional (talking about feelings, doing what you love, and being balanced), Health (washing hands, eating healthy, losing weight), and Physical Activity (walking, sports, running in place.)

### Personal Goals



Last, students were asked to create goals around their Hobbies and Interests.

### Hobbies & Interests Goals



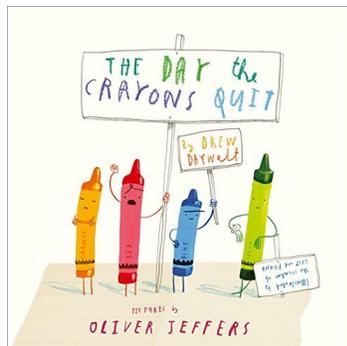
When looking at the goals the students set for themselves the goals varied based on the student's individual strengths and weaknesses. Sydney for example, wrote an academic goal to get better at math. Sydney has a learning disability in math so this goal would be an appropriate goal for herself. Other students, many of whom already have straight A's, wrote goals to get straight A's in all subjects. Students who set this goal more than likely want to keep that going, especially when grades are uncertain based on remote learning.

When looking at the goals set for personal wellness, many students wrote goals around screentime, health like washing their hands or getting more physical activity. The students are writing goals based on their current situations of being quarantined in their houses and so to them limiting screen time which could easily be a way to pass time is a great goal. Many students set goals around handwashing, which has been an important message sent during this time, therefore those are excellent goals for students to set as well as realistic and timely.

Finally, many students set goals around increasing physical activity which when parks are closed and outside time is limited, is a realistic goal for students to set that they want to make sure they continue or increase physical activity.

In this activity, Elijah created goals for himself to complete his work every day. He also wanted to stay home and not go outside, as well as play board games and run in place. This would make sense for Elijah given the current Pandemic situation that students are trying to navigate where we are told to stay home, so his personal wellness and hobbies goal includes staying at home and running in place. Sydney, as mentioned above, wrote goals that include improving in math, an area where she struggles a lot, as well as getting exercise and washing hands, which is also linked to the current health crisis. Ayanna set an academic goal of reading more chapter books but did not complete the rest of the activity. Aniyah and Jude did not complete the activity.

The final lesson will be connected to communication using the book [The Day The Crayons Quit](#).



For this lesson, students listened to the story through a video of someone else reading the book and reflected on how different colored crayons communicated their wants and needs. The students were able to choose the crayons that they wanted to think more closely about and then wrote about how they communicated their wants and needs. The reflection also asked the students to think about how they communicated, what they do at school to communicate when they want or need something, and finally why communication was so important.

When closely at the case study students' responses, Sydney shared that she communicates with her parents by telling them she needs them. She raises her hand at school to communicate what she needs or wants, and she communicates through talking with her friends. Ayanna responded that she asks for quiet time at home and does not communicate at school or with her friends by responding with "nothing". Elijah, Jude, and Aniyah did not complete the assignment. When thinking about the responses of Sydney and Ayanna, they make sense of their personalities. Sydney is very talkative so communication is not an issue with her and she is able to communicate her wants and needs easily when she knows that she wants or needs something. Ayanna's responses were interesting because she asks for quiet at home and responded "nothing" for communicating at school and with her friends. Ayanna is a very quiet child and would often "get lost" in the crowd if a teacher did not check in with her. Ayanna's learning disability also affects her comprehension. Asking an abstract question such as how do you communicate at school and with your friends may have been challenging for her to understand and think about.

### **Putting it all together**

As a summative task to put together all of the learning about self-advocacy, students were asked to put together a slideshow that showed what they learned around the four pillars of self-advocacy. Students were given the task of reviewing the picture books that were read along with their previous assignments.

## Self-Advocacy Project

We have learned about self-advocacy this year in SecondStep. We have read different books that have helped us understand parts of self-advocacy and how important they are. Now, we are going to put them all together to create a project about yourself and how important self-advocacy is.

[You will create a slideshow](#) to explain each part of self-advocacy and what it means to you. You will use words and pictures to explain. You also can listen to any of the stories we read as a review.

The four parts of self-advocacy and the books we read:  
 Understanding your Identity: [Red A Crayon's Story](#)  
 Knowing your Strengths and Weaknesses: [I Will Never Get A Star on Mrs. Benson's Blackboard](#)  
 Goal Setting: [Giraffes Can't Dance](#)  
 Communication: [The Day the Crayons Quit](#)

## Your Project

## Introduction

Give your project a title.

## Identity

Include your name. Have at least 5 words and pictures that show who you are.

## Strengths and Weaknesses

List 3 strengths.  
 List 3 areas of growth.  
 Include words or pictures with each strength and area of growth.

## Goal Setting

Include at least 2 goals you have (at least 1 should be school related).  
 Include pictures that relate to your goals.

## Communication

Include words and pictures to show how you communicate best and why communication is important.

## Self-Advocacy

Explain why self-advocacy is important to you. **If possible, record a video of yourself explaining and insert it into your slide. If you can not insert your video, record it and email it to Ms. Sweeney ([cmsweeney1@cps.edu](mailto:cmsweeney1@cps.edu)) and Mr. Trad ([emtrad1@cps.edu](mailto:emtrad1@cps.edu)) and we will add it to your slides!**

At the completion of the project, each student's slide show was completely different and represented their own personalities. Students used pictures of their families, themselves, their interests, and hobbies. They shared their strengths and weaknesses. They shared their goals and also how they communicate and why it is important. Finally, students shared why self-advocacy is important. These were the responses that stood out the most for me! It showed the results of the learning in a few simple sentences. Some students shared their thoughts in a video, others wrote out their ideas, and some did both. Some quotes that stood out to me were:

"Self-advocacy means you get what you want or need in a respectful way. It is important to me because I need to get what I want and what I need. It's good to learn how to advocate for yourself so when no one else is around you can still get what you need." - Aurora

"Self-advocacy is being able to speak up for yourself. People can't take advantage of you when you have self-advocacy. You won't follow what other people are doing and you can be yourself if you have self-advocacy." - Omolara

"It's important to me because you keep emotions to yourself and family. Self-advocacy is also

important because you need to be comfortable with yourself and others.” - Micah

“Self-advocacy is important because it explains who you are. It explains your dislikes and likes. It explains your identity. It explains what you want and need. It explains that you’re a special person. And if nobody knew all about you, there’d be no parties, conversations, playdates, and, most importantly, nobody would know who you are.” - Gus

“Self-advocacy is important because without it people wouldn’t know how to get what they need or want.” - Josh

As I reflect on the students in my case study, the work that they completed truly reflected each of them as learners, and the results of the data show that they each bring a unique set of skills to the classroom. Each of the students progressed in such different ways over the course of the year in terms of self-advocacy.

**Elijah:** At the beginning of the year, Elijah would over self-advocate for himself, always raising his hand and asking questions at each point directions were given. As the year progressed, Elijah began to advocate for himself only when needed. He would ask questions that were related directly to what he needed. This continued while in remote learning after the school closure. Elijah participated in all activities and asked important questions about assignments when needed.

**Aniyah:** Aniyah made a lot of progress academically over the time we were in school. She grew from the 1st percentile in reading to the 10th on NWEA. She was able to begin to identify when she needed help and would ask for help rather than engaging in task avoidance or distracting behaviors. After the school closure, Aniyah stopped working and was completely disengaged in our remote learning work. Despite several meetings with her parents, there was little to no work completed.

**Jude:** Jude made a lot of progress over the year both academically and with his self-advocacy skills, even during our remote learning. At the beginning of the year, Jude would tap a teacher to get their attention for the support he needed. As the year went on, Jude would raise his hand for support or would wait for the teacher to come to him. One thing that was an interesting change in Jude was the responses that he wrote for the student reflections given in December, January, and February. Jude’s first reflection response was almost incoherent and made little sense but as he progressed, he began to identify how he needed help and how he got the help he needed (his dad, a classmate, etc.). Jude also often asked for extra help during remote learning, asking for Google Meetings with his teachers to do extra practice when he saw that he needed it.

**Ayanna:** Ayanna also made a lot of progress throughout the year, and her self-advocacy skills increased as we moved into remote learning. Ayanna, at the start of the year, would sit and wait for a teacher to check in with her. While she still would often do that while in the classroom, remote learning has helped her to advocate for her needs. When Ayanna didn’t understand either she would ask for help or have her mom send an email letting her teachers know she needed some extra help then she would attend some extra small group practice sessions that we provided for students.

**Sydney:** Sydney is so social that she would be the student you wouldn't think had any issues with self-advocacy skills, but actually she was a student who didn't want to appear different from her friends. Sydney would work so hard without realizing that she actually needed help until a teacher would check in with her, at which point she would become frustrated. During remote learning, Sydney has enjoyed the small group work that we have and she has attended the small group extra practice sessions, even when she was the only one in attendance. She has become more confident in herself and the support that she needs and is beginning to realize when she actually needs help.

### **Conclusion**

As I think about the year-long teaching of self-advocacy skills I learned a lot about my students as well as myself. The dynamics of a classroom can be a challenging area for students to navigate, especially when the student has a disability. I realized as I was teaching the skills just how layered classroom interactions can be for a student. While teaching the skills and having students reflect on their interactions and where they needed support, many students with disabilities relied on their teachers as a support system. Most students were able to begin to reach out and utilize their peers as a network of support when they needed help. As I reflected myself at the layers needed to be able to navigate the classroom environment to move beyond the teacher as a support, I realized that a student needs the necessary skills to communicate effectively, a relationship established with the other classmate, and also the confidence to be able to reach beyond the teacher and reach out to another student.

I also learned that despite many disruptions to the year, students were able to connect the skills taught with the importance of self-advocacy. This was shown through their summative projects where each student was able to show what they learned and why it was connected to the goal of self-advocacy. While not working in person and being able to facilitate discussions to explicitly connect the skills to the importance of self-advocacy, students were able to produce high-quality work that makes the connection.

While I was unable to watch the full transformation of this year's students to begin to self-advocate for themselves in person, there have been moments that students have been able to do this while working remotely. In fact, I would venture to say that students have had to use self-advocacy skills more while working remotely than when in the classroom to ensure that they are getting all the support that they need and are able to be successful.

As I look forward to future classes, starting the year with teaching the skills will be empowering to watch students learn and grow. Having a full year of the ability to practice the skills of self-advocacy will be very interesting.

I also believe that there should be further research in the skills specifically necessary to navigate a classroom environment as a student with a disability.

### **Policy Recommendations**

#### **Classroom & School**

- Continue to incorporate self-advocacy instruction into SEL lessons.

- Share resources with other teachers to begin self-advocacy instruction in their classrooms.
- Align self-advocacy skills and lessons with an established SEL curriculum.

District

- Understand the importance of self-advocacy at younger grades
- Provide teacher training to teach necessary skills.

National

- Value the importance of self-advocacy at younger ages.
- Invest in the creation of a self-advocacy curriculum for elementary aged students.

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