Evaluating self-advocacy in high school students with learning disabilities through case study analysis

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ABSTRACT

Students with learning disabilities continue to make advancements in their preparation for post-secondary studies and are one of the largest growing populations to enter colleges and universities. However, it is estimated that only forty percent of students with a learning disability report it to their post-secondary schools, creating difficulties for students to successfully transition to the new academic expectations. Research shows one significant reason for the lack of reporting is students’ deficiency in their ability to self-advocate. The current study looks at seven high school students with identified learning disabilities, who receive special education services, to evaluate their understanding and use of self-advocacy skills in their high school setting, in their preparation for transition into post-secondary education. Through the use of the Constructivism-Interpretivism paradigm, with an inductive approach, this case study analysis produced five primary themes and ten associated sub-themes. Analysis of semi-structured interviews and artifacts reveal themes of Awareness, Security, Communication, Experiences, and Motivation. To understand how, from the perspective of the students, these themes emerged and what role they play in the students’ understanding, development, and use of self-advocacy, two research questions guide the analysis: (1) How do high school students with learning disabilities view the role of the school and educators in their development and use self-advocacy skills? and (2) How do high school students with learning disabilities understand the role of self-advocacy skills in their preparation for post-secondary studies?

Keywords: Self-advocacy, Self-determination, Special education, high school, students with learning disabilities, transition, post-secondary transition
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Chapter One

Introduction

Problem Statement

Students with learning disabilities continue to make advancements in their preparation for post-secondary studies and are one of the largest growing populations to enter colleges and universities (Lynch & Gussel, 1996; Meglemre, 2010). However, it is estimated that only forty percent of students with a learning disability report it to their post-secondary schools (Meglemre, 2010). Research shows one significant reason for the lack of reporting is students’ deficiency in their ability to self-advocate (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; Schreiner, 2007; McCarthy, 2007; Trainor, 2002). An inability to self-advocate results in students with learning disabilities not receiving the necessary accommodations that allow them to bridge the gap between their disability and the expectations, so as to achieve academic and social success in their transition into college. Many students only seek assistance after they have experienced college difficulties, while others abandon their studies altogether (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; McCarthy, 2007).

Since the passage of landmark legislations, such as Section 504 of the Americans with Disability Act in 1973, the Education for All Handicapped Children of 1975, the Individuals with Disability Education Act of 1990 and subsequent revisions in 1997 and 2004, students with learning disabilities have gained the rights to appropriate education and accommodations. These students have moved from being isolated by their learning disability to being included into appropriate education that has raised expectations they will be prepared for post-secondary studies (Meglemre, 2010; Yuan, 1994). Research shows that two years following the enactment
of EHA there was a 300% increase in the identification of students with learning disabilities served in public schools (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002). In 2005 the second National Longitudinal Transition Study, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs to evaluate 11,270 youths, ages 13 through 16 as they transition into early adulthood, showed that thirty percent of all students with a learning disability participated in post-secondary studies within two years of their high school graduation. In community colleges the rate of attendance was equal to that of their non-disabled peers (Lynch & Gussel, 1996; Meglemre, 2010). While some barriers of disability have been reduced through regulations, students continue to struggle in their transition to post-secondary studies.

Significance

Brinckerhoff (1994) defined self-advocacy as “…the ability to recognize and meet the needs specific to one’s learning disability, without compromising the dignity of oneself or others” (p. 230). Skinner (1998) argued that an individual self-advocates, “…when they demonstrate understanding of their disability, are aware of their legal rights, and demonstrate competence in communicating rights and needs to those in positions of authority.” (p. 281). Research shows (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; Lynch & Gussel, 1996; McCarthy, 2007; Meglemre, 2010; Skinner, 1998; Trainor, 2002) students with learning disabilities leaving high school often lack the skills to self-advocate. This is partially attributed to a lack of understanding and practice with the skills associated with self-advocacy. In public schools, secondary education students are advocated for by special education liaisons, parents, and caseworkers, as is required by disability regulations (McCarthy, 2007; Schreiner, 2007). The responsibility for advocacy changes to the student as they leave secondary education and enter into post-secondary studies. The significance of students becoming part of these changes in responsibilities was
acknowledged in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997 (IDEA 1997) and strengthened in the revisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004), within the transition plan requirements (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; Skinner, 1998). Regulations attempting to support the importance of transition services for students with learning disabilities can lack the specificity as to how this should be done, what criteria will be used to measure success, and how any direct instructional support should be provided (Meglemre, 2010; Skinner, 1998). While there is a need for students to understand their abilities and barriers, the regulation and practices have perpetuated an isolation of the student in understanding who they are and how they can transition. Regulations and requirements of organizations do not foster self-advocacy, rather when students independently use their voices to call attention to their needs advocacy flourishes. Students need to be heard as to their understanding of what self-advocacy is, what it means when they apply it, and how it can either assist or hinder them as they develop the next stages of their educational stories.

**Deficiencies in Studies on Self-Advocacy**

Test, Fowler, Brewer, & Wood (2005) found studies reflecting a positive correlation between an individual’s self-determination and positive adult outcome in the literature, but did not identify studies regarding the positive correlation between self-advocacy and adult or student outcomes. In addition, research into the perceptions of teacher and the role of self-advocacy showed that teachers surveyed stated the importance of students having self-advocacy skills, but less than half reported providing direct instruction of these skills (Test et al., 2005).

Studies conducted regarding self-advocacy skills and high school students have primarily focused on increasing the student’s participatory role in the individual education program.
meetings (Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, Greene, Gardner & Lovett, 2006; Test et al., 2005; Test & Neale, 2004) or acquiring specific skills sets (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Lynch, & Gussel, 1996; McCarthy, 2007). Brinckeroff (1992, 1994, 1996) found that students do not employ self-advocacy either because they do not understand the skills or lack the practice of using these skills because others have acted as their advocate.

The lack in the specific skill development or the lack of students’ awareness to use self-advocacy skills does not fully explain the difficulties students face in their transition to post-secondary education. While research has shown that instruction in self-advocacy skills temporarily improved students’ advocacy, these gains were not sustained for extended periods when the external supports (instruction, parents, educators) were removed (Brinckeroff, 1992, 1994; Durlax, 1994). Additional research into what motivates students to be aware of the need to self-advocate and choose to self-advocate will provide clarity into the difficult transitions that students with learning disabilities face.

Contributions to the Literature

Completing research on the motivations for students with learning disabilities at the high school level to use self-advocacy skills will add to the limited base of literature within the field. This will have three potentially positive impacts: (1) provide a foundation for educators working with learning disabled students to understand the importance of developing self-advocacy skills early within the student's’ high school education, (2) provide the foundation for a longitudinal study in measuring the effects of early self-advocacy instruction on the abilities of post-secondary students’ application of advocacy skills, and (3) provide the basis for policy changes for increased specificity for transition needs and services to students with learning disabilities.
Students with learning disabilities continue to advance in what they are able to accomplish, but must gain the skills to become effective advocates for their needs within post-secondary studies.

**Positionality Statement**

A primary goal of research is to acquire answers to the questions that have been developed through careful, meticulous, and often time consuming review of the previous studies (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). In doing so the researcher must be aware of ethical and bias assumptions that may skew the focus of data collection, interpretation, and presentation. Researcher impartiality is not absolute; as individuals we bring to the research our own stories that have shaped our perceptions and beliefs. These in turn can influence our judgment and create research bias. Absolute purity in research may not be obtainable, but validity can be increased through disclosure of the researcher’s story that has shaped their perception increasing not only the understanding of self-awareness, but the reduction of research bias through such awareness (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009).

As scholar-practitioners we directly or indirectly have a goal of developing self-awareness; as we develop our educational course, choose what we research, gain awareness of what exist outside our understanding and challenge assumptions we may have. With the presence of self-awareness in the research and our potential impact to those that participate in the research and who may be affected by it we expand the foundation of social justice (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009).

**Social justice.** While no one definition may completely explain social justice, Lee (2007) in a review of the literature, including the works of Hooks (1997), Hartnett (2001), and Lee and Hipolito Delgado (2007) provided this:
… social justice involves promoting access in equity to ensure full participation in the life of a society, particularly for those who have been systematically excluded on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender, age, physical or mental disability, education, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics of background or group membership. Social justice is based on a belief that all people have a right to equitable treatment, support for their human rights and a fair allocation of societal resources (p.1).

Social justice is not a new concept; individuals will often support that society needs to be just, that within their practices there is the goal for representation in which the voices of all are able to be heard (Mondale & Patton, 2001). However, this is not always a true reflection of the practices within the principles, thoughts, and beliefs, which are often shaped by the majority. As scholar-practitioners we need to advocate and expand the voices of those marginalized through ethical and self-aware research.

As the researcher of this study my self-awareness with regard to marginalization is focused on socioeconomic disparity (Anyon, 1981, 1995). In trying to identify why some acquired privilege over others, the role of socioeconomics was more apparent than the roles of other marginalized classes (race, religion, sexual orientation, age, or disability) in how privilege or “capital” was acquired (Bourdieu, 1983). While awareness of all aspects are needed to increase social justice, the environment that an individual is raised in (for this researcher the environment of a rural, working class, and a predominantly white culture), is a primary influencing factor in shaping a potentially biased perception. As such, the roles of social class and economic advantage are seen as primary influences to access more privileges that enhance future opportunities (Anyon, 1981, 1995). While this may have been an accurate perception within the past environment of the researcher, maintaining the same perception in conducting
research is biased and can allow for the continuation of marginalization limiting how findings can be applied.

Additional contributing factors of positionality include that the research was conducted within the location that the researcher is employed. As such, it was important to understand potential personal biases that could affect both the approach to the research and the analysis of data. In addition, the researcher’s presence within an environment that is known led to preconceptions and assumptions of outcomes before evidence is collected, potentially restricting what is selected for inclusion or exclusion. To reduce potential biases the research was reflective of both external influences (administration, school community, and students) and internal influences (researcher’s perceptions and role) to minimize effects. While self-awareness is an important step in developing trustworthiness, additional external checks and balances were used to reduce any negative research effects (Creswell, 2012).

**Intellectual Goals**

The historical struggles of students with learning disabilities are well documented in the literature (Alper, Schloss, & Schloss, 1994; Beach, 2007; Dorn, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 1996; Mondale & Patton, 2001; Paul, French, & Cranston-Gingras, 2001). Once shunned from entrance into schools, they are now entering into post-secondary studies (Dorn et al., 1996; Janiga & Constanbader, 2002). While their journeys appear successful, many students face hardships because of not reporting their disabilities or lacking the understanding of how to gain assistance. The research shows one significant reason for the lack of reporting is a deficiency in students’ abilities to self-advocate (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; McCarthy, 2007; Schreiner, 2007;
Trainor, 2002). Universities and colleges are attempting to advance their students’ advocacy skills, but often interventions at this level are too little and too late.

Within this researcher’s practice as a School Psychologist and as Chair for Special Education Services for a public high school serving students age 13 to 22, an attempt to understand what students with learning disabilities need to become independent through their ability to self-advocate has been a focus. While teachers, administrators, and parents express that students need to take responsibility for their actions, it is rarely articulated as to what specific skills students require or what may motivate these students to employ the skills in order to be successful self-advocates. One skill set that appears to differ between students who succeed and those who struggle is the ability to advocate for one’s needs. With this in mind the researcher has developed two intellectual goals to explore:

- To develop an understanding about whether the ability to self-advocate is due to the lack of a specific skill set or the student's’ choice to apply skill sets they currently have in order to advocate for their needs and wants in order to be successful in school and prepare for transition to post-secondary studies.
- To develop an understanding of what motivate students with learning disabilities to engage or disengage in their choice to self-advocate.

**Research Questions**

The intellectual goals guided the overall frame of the research, but in order to focus the research a qualitative study with high school students who have an Individual Education Program were used to answer the following questions:
• How do high school students with learning disabilities view the role of the school and educators in their development and use self-advocacy skills?

• How do high school students with learning disabilities understand the role of self-advocacy skills in their preparation for post-secondary studies?

**Theoretical Framework**

Brinckerhoff (1994) defined self-advocacy as “…the ability to recognize and meet the needs specific to one’s learning disability, without compromising the dignity of oneself or others” (p. 230). Skinner (1998) argued that an individual self-advocates, “… when they demonstrate understanding of their disability, are aware of their legal rights, and demonstrate competence in communicating rights and needs to those in positions of authority.” (p. 281). At the center of these two definitions of self-advocacy is the ability for one to choose their action. This belief of choice developed through the Existential/Humanistic psychology movements of the 1940’s and 1950’s (Bugental, 1964; Corey, 2012) and was a move from the original psychological theories of psychoanalysis and behaviorism, in which the actions of an individual were often seen as externally control as a response to environmental stimuli, deterministic or as a result of unconscious drives (Bugental, 1964; Corey, 2012; Skinner, 1953). The shift of philosophies from one in which individual action is externally determinate to one in which there is choice, although choice within the context of external influences, shows that “we are the authors, or architects, of our life, and therefore are always more than the victim of circumstances.” (Corey, p. 174).

Within the literature, self-advocacy is represented as a component of self-determination. (Meglemre, 2010; Pearl, 2004; Schreiner, 2007; Test et al., 2005; Ward, 2005). Deci and Ryan’s (1985, 2001) work in understanding the motivations behind individuals to choose or not to
choose an action led to the formation of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Ryan and Deci (2000) defined Self-Determination Theory as “… an approach to human motivation and personality that uses traditional empirical methods while employing an organismic metatheory that highlights the importance of humans’ evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation (p. 69).

SDT’s foundation is based on the belief that individuals have free choice in the actions and decisions they make. In order for individuals to acquire self-determination three innate psychological needs must be present: autonomy, competence, and relatedness combined to develop an individual’s self-determined ability (Figure 1.1). Autonomy refers to an individual’s ability to make decisions and choices free from the restrictions and influences of others. However, decision making is not done in isolation of one’s environment and an individual’s decisions does influence the environment that they are in. For example, students with learning disabilities face obstacles within their learning, but can be the designers of accommodation plans that support their learning, rather than the passive recipients of plans developed by adults. While the students may retain the ability to choose how such plans are designed they are not isolated from the educational environment and must collaborate with others in order to implement the components of their plans (Deci, Koestner & Mitchell, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Moening & Panter, 2009; Wood et al., 2004). Without autonomy individuals can experience Amotivation, a sense of disengagement that can often be expressed through negative affect, such as the choice not to engage or advocate for their needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Salkind, 2008).

In SDT the role of Competence shows that “…people have an intrinsic need to be competent and master optimal challenges…” (Wehmeyer, 2004, p. 347). When individuals are provided with positive feedback as to those areas that they are performing well in it has been
seen to increase motivation and productivity. In contrast, when individuals receive negative feedback, punishment, or develop a sense of incompetence then productivity and motivation decreases (Deci, 1971, 1975; Grolnick, & Ryan, 1987; Vallerand, Koestner, & Pelletier, 2008). “Motivation concerns energy, direction, persistence …all aspects of activation and intention.” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 69). Within SDT the role of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, provides an understanding as to why some choose to act and others remain passive in their choice.

Intrinsic motivation is present in humans from an early age, in the intuitive nature of babies and young children to explore, seek out information, and to gain new experiences. Individuals are rewarded by the fulfilment of their own curiosity and through the novelty of the information they gain. The intrinsic nature of reward can be self-perpetuating, contributing to growth in areas of cognition and social development (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vallerand, et al., 2008). Intrinsic motivation, while shaped and assimilated by the individual, requires an environment of support. Environmental support can be acquired through positive reinforcement of the student’s action, the availability of resources that allow for a student’s growth, or an atmosphere of acceptance in which those beliefs and action that can marginalize are reduced or better yet removed. Intrinsic motivation is not the only reason for individuals to act; extrinsic motivation also plays a role.

Deci and Ryan (2000) in the development of SDT’s mini-theory and organismic integration theory (OIT) established the defining characteristics of extrinsic motivation as “…the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome…” (p. 71). While this appears to contrast with the innate reward seen in intrinsic motivation, individuals do not need to be passive in the process, acting only as the result of external forces. Extrinsic motivation can range from amotivation, a loss of any interest, to passive participation, or to active integration of
the external reward to a level in which intrinsic integration begins (1985; 2000). Students are often placed in the position to be inactive recipients of information; the passive nature of lecture format in classrooms can lead students to act simply because they respond to extrinsic expectation of society, family, peers, and educators (Beach, 2007; Maehr & Meyer, 1997; Pearl, 2004). Students’ passive learning, as a result of external environmental design, is an example of Deci and Ryan’s non-self-determined level of extrinsic motivation; in this the drive to be motivated comes from the expectations of others and not the intrinsic desire to learn. In order to move from the non-self-determination students to intrinsic motivation students require the ability to be active participants in choices or acquire an understanding as to the purpose of the choices. This then can move students’ motivation from that of passive disengagement, fostering amotivation to active participation, which enhances intrinsic motivation (Beach, 2007; Ryan, 1995). Within this rationale developed through SDT and in the framework of self-advocacy, students provided with the skills, awareness, and an environment that fosters support become active participants in their education and advocate for their needs (Maehr & Meyer, 1997; Pearl, 2004).

*Relatedness,* SDT’s third psychological need is the belief that what an individual does and accomplishes matters to themselves and others (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Salkind, 2008). Within the activities of individuals the awareness that what they are doing allows for them to connect with others is important. Humans are innately social beings, their desire to interact and belong are powerful motivators (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Salkind, 2008; Vallerand, et al., 2008).

As the literature shows within the capacity of individuals to be self-determined they have a need to develop autonomy, competency, and relatedness (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Salkind, 2008; Wehmeyer, 2004). In meeting the psychological needs an
individual’s motivation moves from that of being externally modulated to one of intrinsically motivated. Self-Determination Theory provides a theoretical framework necessary to explore research on self-advocacy in students with learning disabilities. The research study questions provide the focal direction to understand, from the perspective of the individual (the student with a learning disability), what skills they see as necessary to advance their autonomy (the ability to advocate for themselves and their interests), build their competency (the ability to practice advocacy skills in current studies in preparation for post-secondary studies), and obtain a sense of relatedness (to connect with those around them as they develop the ability to advocate).
Chapter Two

Literature Review

One of the largest growing populations to enter into post-secondary studies of colleges and universities are students with learning disabilities (Lynch & Gussel, 1996; Meglemre, 2010). While this can be seen as a favorable statistic, many of these students lack the advocacy skills to transition successfully from their guided high school special education support to the independence of requesting accommodations that aide in compensating for their needs (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003). As a result, many students lack the ability to understand or fail to request support until they have experienced difficulties. These difficulties can then lead to the eroding of a student’s motivation to continue with their studies or a persistent state of frustration and anxiety in questioning their ability to succeed. (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; McCarthy, 2007; Schreiner, 2007; Trainor, 2002). Colleges and universities are attempting to support students with learning disabilities in their efforts to gain self-advocacy skills so as to acquire necessary accommodations, but these attempts are often too little and too late.

The federal and state regulations for the provision of services and accommodations to students with learning disabilities differ between public K-12 institutions and post-secondary programs (Field et al., 2003). Within the context of public K-12 institutions, regulations such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act require schools to find, evaluate, and service students with a disability who qualify. This is in contrast to post-secondary institutions, which under the regulations of Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1973, are only required to provide reasonable accommodations to individuals who qualify and disclose the need for support (Field et al., 2003). The failure to provide students with learning disabilities the
advocacy skills necessary for their transition to post-secondary studies creates a significant deficiency in their ability to acclimate to their new academic setting and successfully transition (Brinckerhoff, 1996; Trainor, 2002). In a case example, Skinner (1998) summarized the difficulties students who do not possess advocacy skills can face:

This was the moment that Allen, a freshman at a large university, had dreaded the most. He found himself face-to-face with his history professor. He had approached the professor after class with the intention of discussing his disability in written expression. Although Allen found himself studying two to three times as much as his peers, he had failed the first examination owing to a lack of time and a multitude of grammatical, spelling, and style errors (p.278).

Skinner continued to express that Allen had difficulty in communicating what his actual disability was, how it impacted him, and the accommodations he needed to succeed. The reasons behind Allen’s inability was that while in high school others advocated for his needs, they acquired the accommodations necessary, and as the student with the disability he was unaware how to justify his needs.

Brinckeroff (1994) reports that students transitioning from high schools with learning disabilities not only lack awareness of their needs, but may further feel “…intimidated by the size of the campus, the number of students enrolled, and the decentralization of support services” (p.229). With such a barrage of new experiences the students are often overwhelmed and without the acquired and practiced skills of self-advocacy often lack the ability to navigate these issues. As previously stated, colleges are attempting to address the lack of self-advocacy awareness, but students need to develop and utilize advocacy skills while they are in secondary education.
programs so that they can achieve mastery before graduating (Brinckerhoff, 1996; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Trainor, 2002).

Self-advocacy as presented within the literature is seen as a component of self-determination (Lynch & Gussel, 1996; Thoma, Baker, & Saddler, 2002; Thoma, Williams, & Davis, 2005; Ward, 2005; Wehmeyer et al., 2003; Wehmeyer, 2004). Since the mid 1970’s self-determination has been recognized as a key determinant for individuals with disabilities to live, work, and lead fulfilling lives (Wehmeyer et al., 2003; Wehmeyer, 2004). Nirje (1972) expressed that self-determination equated to the basic human rights of respect and dignity. Nirje identified the ability to make choices, assert one’s self, self-regulate, know one’s self, be independent and advocate for one’s self as components of self-regulations. While advocacy groups and legislation have supported the need for self-determination and self-advocacy, they have fallen short on identifying how these skills are taught to students at the secondary level and what the students themselves understand as the role of self-advocacy (Konrad, Fowler, Walker, Test, & Wood, 2007; Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004). Research has shown that early intervention through direct instruction of self-advocacy skills can reduce the difficulties secondary students face in the transition to post-secondary studies (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; McCarthy, 2007; Phillips, 1990). While self-advocacy is seen as an important component of self-determination, research has fallen short on identifying a unified theory of what self-advocacy is and how it can be empirically measure to ensure that the skills often identified as self-advocating are needed and offer sustainable and positive outcomes.

This literature review provides a comprehensive background of self-advocacy, along with the historical construct of special education and the meaning of self-determination for individuals
with disabilities. In addition the author reviewed what has been previously researched with regards to the secondary and post-secondary levels in the field of education.

**Historical Perspective of Special Education**

“Education for all” is a common sense statement in the 21st century, but its origins and growth were slow, laborious, and fraught with turmoil. The history of special education is the history of civil unrest within a young nation; civil unrest that expanded the way a nation’s citizens felt and thought, and ultimately acted (Beach, 2007; Mondale & Patton, 2001). Access to education was not always the consideration for all children. Children with disabilities; physical, mental, or learning, were often shunned or overlooked (Dorn et al., 1996). Historically, individuals with disabilities have been viewed on the outskirts of society's norms. Seen as demonically possessed in the middle ages, the disabled and mentally ill were subject to rituals and exorcisms in an attempt to remove curses and possessions (Alper et al., 1994; Paul et al., 2001). As science advanced and people’s awareness grew, the disabled were seen as in need of support. In the 1600’s, facilities were constructed to house and essentially contain disabled individuals seen as a potential harm to themselves or to others (Dorn et al., 1996; Paul et al., 2001).

During the mid-1800’s the work of Dorothea Dix, a retired educator, and others began the classification of individuals who, with varying levels of support, were capable of achieving new skills. The move from isolation to education was beginning (Alper et al., 1994). Additional professionals in the fields of medicine and psychology advanced the understanding and lessened the ignorance regarding the types of disabilities and what individuals with disabilities were capable of accomplishing (Alper et al., 1994; Paul et al., 2001). Although understanding grew,
the need for civil action would be required to provide alternatives to the isolation of institutions, appropriate access to education, equity in schools, and specialized instruction (Dorn et al., 1996; Mondale & Patton, 2001).

Beginning in the 1950's, with the United States coming of age in its moral and ethical responsibilities, the Civil Rights movement successfully advanced the rights of minorities (African-Americans, women, children, and disabled), and prompted substantial changes to education. Civil rights victories such as Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954), Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1971), and Mills v. District of Columbia Board of Education (1972), brought to light not only the deficiencies in education for children, but the ethical issues of appropriate and humane treatment of individuals (Alper et al., 1994; Paul et al., 2001). The United States passed Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) and two years later Public-Law 94-142, Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. These granted rights of access to a “free and appropriate” education to all disabled children, regardless of their ability to learn (Stainback, W. & Stainback, S., 1992). Legislation grew out of the advocacy for the disabled to be removed from institutions and into public schools. Additionally, students without disabilities who struggled to learn gained support (Paul et al., 2001).

The growth of transition planning. In 1990, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was renamed into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The change was not only in name; the revised law significantly expanded the focus for schools indicating the necessity of being aware of the transitional needs students with disabilities face as they moved from high school into adult life (Cortiella, 2012; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, 2004). IDEA went through two
reauthorizations: first in 1997 and again in 2004. In the 1997 reauthorization, it was expressed that a primary purpose of disability services was to guarantee that children with disabilities would be prepared for employment and independent living. Requirements were added in 1997 to align the student’s post-secondary goals with their curriculum and to include students in meetings starting at the age of 14 (Mazzotti et al., 2009; U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, 2004).

IDEA 2004 continued the expansion of transition planning to reduce what was seen as negative post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities. The President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education found that students with disabilities were significantly underemployed, leaving school more often without a diploma and presenting with lower rates of attendance in post-secondary institutions as compared to their non-disabled peers (Cortiella, 2012). In an attempt to correct these concerns, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004) was reauthorized on December 3, 2004 and became effective on July 1, 2005. In conjunction with the reauthorization, the U. S. Department of Education through the Office of Special Education Programs required states to develop State Performance Plans in December, 2005 around 20 indicators, on which data is to be submitted annually as part of annual performance reports. Indicator 13 of IDEA 2004, which highlighted student transitions and required a set age for the transition services to be in place, increased the standards for outcome oriented transitional goals, and the development of transitional goals based on the ability and interests of the student in the areas of employment, living, education, and when appropriate independent living skills.

In addition, schools were required to provide a Summary of Performance (SOP) to families (Cortiella, 2012). The SOP is an overview of a student’s disability and the services that
they received through their IEP while in school. The SOP needs to contain the student’s strengths, area of needs, and transitional data. Public schools are not required to provide an evaluation as the student ages out of services at 22 years old or receives a diploma (Cortiella, 2012; U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, 2004). The SOP was the government’s attempt to provide the student with a cohesive overview of their interests, strengths, and needs, which could be used as they applied for post-secondary disability services (Cortiella, 2012; U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, 2004). Students with disabilities and their families have reached many milestones that have brought them from isolation into the mainstream education, while schools have moved from regulation ambiguity to increased levels of accountability. However, even with increased regulations many students with learning disabilities continue to fall short in their ability to transition and be successful in their post-secondary studies (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Lynch & Gussel, 1996). While regulations can require institutions to be accountable, schools can still fail to help their students understand their needs and how to advocate for them.

While regulations are designed to provide systems with the framework to implement action, often what is left out of their development are the views and voices of those the regulations are intended to serve. In transition planning the role of the student is often one that involves completing externally designed activities seen to aide in their understanding of their needs and future goals (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Trainor, 2005). Research studies into student transition planning activities (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Cortiella, 2012; Janiga & Constenbader, 2002; Mazzotti, et al., 2009; Phillips, 1990; Trainor, 2005) report that students often have limited engagement in the process or development of their services plans, including the IEP or transitional plan. Trainor (2005) reported that students participating in a study of high school
students with learning disabilities were often not aware that they had a disability, felt they were not engaged as active participants of the meetings, and that while they did attend the meetings, others often discussed their needs and future goals only asking for their agreement to the information. Similarly, Cawthon and Cole (2010) noted that students who had not taken an active role in previous disability planning meeting often showed limited awareness of their needs, rights, or ability to acquire support. In their study of college students with learning disabilities, while most participants knew they had a disability, 91% did not know if they had a disability plan; participants with the awareness of having a disability plan reported limited knowledge as to the content of the plan (goals, benchmarks, progress report) or the team members’ responsibilities.

The growth of legislation to support students with learning disabilities has provided the contextual framework for schools to design and implement programs, activities, and increase accountability, but well intentioned policies and those servicing them are falling short on supporting the growth of SDT psychological principles in students with disabilities (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Cortiella, 2012; Deci & Ryan, 2001; Mazzotti, et al., 2009). The external environmental design of policies has inhibited the student’s voice and active participation. In turn this creates barriers to the development of autonomy, competency, and relatedness. As Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000, 2001) postulate that while individuals possess the ability to choose, they are still making decisions in the context of environmental influences; environments that provide positive support will increase the intrinsic motivation of individuals to take action, while reliance on extrinsic motivators limit the long-term maintenance of action. With this, students transitioning from secondary to post-secondary education become limited in their ability to actively self-advocate for their needs, abilities, and future goals.
**Self-Determination**

In 1972, Benget Nirje expressed the need for individuals with disabilities to have choices in the decisions that would affect their lives. Nirje argued that these individuals had the right to participate in decisions which would affect their independence: education, living, and personal activities. Nirje proposed that self-determination was the ability for a person to make choices, assert oneself, self-manage, to have knowledge of oneself, and to self-advocate. Through his writings, he equated the ability of individuals to be self-determined with the basic rights of respect and dignity, which all individuals should have.

Wehmeyer (2004) argued that in order to develop a common understanding of what self-determination is, there is a need to understand how the term has been and is used in the literature. Wehmeyer stated that “…promoting and enhancing self-determination of children, youth, and adults has become a priority in several disability-specific disciplines, including special education, vocational rehabilitation, and community-based services and supports” (p. 337). What he found were inconsistencies in the use and understanding of what self-determination entailed, resulting in confusion and a lack of cohesiveness in the development of policies and interventions for individuals.

Wehmeyer (2004) reviewed the meaning of self-determination (self and determinism) in the fields of philosophy and psychology. In understanding the terms he found that determinism was seen as the ability for an individual to have free will (philosophical construct) as expressed in their ability to choose (psychological construct). However, the ability to choose is not without influence from external pressures such as national, political, or group affiliations. In being self-
determined individuals are influenced by these external influences, but still can maintain the autonomous ability to choose (Wehmeyer, 2004).

Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000, 2006) defined self-determination as being based on the psychological needs of individuals to have free choice. They believed that three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, combine to develop an individual’s self-determination ability. Autonomy refers to an individual’s ability to make decision and choices free from the restrictions and influences of others. For example, students with disabilities should have the ability to propose the accommodations and goals they need to be successful for their IEP, rather than having to allow adults to make the determination and simply request the student’s consent (Mitchell, Moening, & Panter, 2009; Wood et al., 2004). Competence develops as students acquire positive and constructive feedback on their decisions. Building on what students know and what they learn from feedback they can develop competency in their decision making process. Relatedness develops as the trust between students and those working with them grow. In the development of trust the students can understand how their decisions and action allow for them to advance their own needs, while remaining a member of the social groups that connect them to their school, family, and community (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007). Through a sense of shared commitment individuals develop relationships that foster trust and understanding, allowing an increased ability to relate to one another. Deci and Ryan argued that when these skills develop and self-determination exist individuals move from an extrinsic to intrinsic focus of motivation, which advances their active role in decision making and independence (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Wood et al., 2004).

In contrast to the development of self-determination and a sense of internal control, Fiedler and Danneker (2007) state that “deficits in cognition, motivation, and emotion result
when a person repeatedly experiences negative outcomes that he or she believes are beyond his or her control” (p. 2). This can result when learning disabled students, often in a highly structured program, have little if any say in what they are provided. If success is not obtained with the program developed for them, students feel a detached sense of ownership to affect change. This moves the perceived ability to succeed from an internally controlled option to one that is controlled by external factors. When this pattern continues, students develop what is known as learned helplessness or the loss of motivation to change their outcome even when the ability exist (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Seligman & Maier, 1967).

Field, et al. (2003) in reviewing the defining traits of self-determinism, also found multiple definitions within the fields of special education and disability literature. However, even within the differences the definitions maintain commonalities. Field, Martin, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998) provided a strong representation of the common understandings for self-determination:

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have a greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society (p. 2).

In looking at the defining characteristics of self-determination three concepts are present: self-knowledge, autonomy, and opportunity. Individuals need to have an understanding of their own identity; they also need to know their likes, dislikes, wants, and needs. In adding to their
growth they need to be able to make autonomous decisions and succeed or fail based on those choices (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007).

**Self-Advocacy**

Self-advocacy has been referenced as a component of self-determination, and has been used interchangeably with the term (Meglemre, 2010; Pearl, 2004; Schreiner, 2007; Test et al., 2005; Ward, 2005). Brinckerhoff (1994) defined self-advocacy as “…the ability to recognize and meet the needs specific to one’s learning disability, without compromising the dignity of oneself or others” (p. 230). An individual self-advocates, “… when they demonstrate understanding of their disability, are aware of their legal rights, and demonstrate competence in communicating rights and needs to those in positions of authority” (Skinner, 1998, p. 281). In a collective review of 25 definitions of self-advocacy by Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy (2005) they found common concepts in the definitions of self-advocacy including individual’s rights (human, civil, and legal), speaking for one’s beliefs, self-knowledge, independence, making choices, identifying needs, taking responsibility, and leadership. Test et al. constructed a framework (figure 2.1) that combined these traits into four key areas: knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, the ability to effectively communicate, and leadership (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Test et al., 2005).

Knowledge of self is an individual understanding their own likes, dislikes, strengths, limitations, and interests (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007). To foster knowledge of self within the framework of education students need exposure to assessments and curriculum to explore who they are. With this feedback, they are better able to understand their skills and areas of needs (Pocock, Lambros, Karvonen, Test, Algozzine, Wood, & Martin, 2002). Knowledge of rights is
the individual’s awareness in understanding the legal and civil regulations that guide the right to acquire support (Field et al., 2003). As students transition from high school to post-secondary studies they lose many of the protections afforded them through IDEA, but can access accommodations through Section 504 of the Americans with Disability Act (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Test, et al., 2005; Washington, 1994). However, understanding alone does not provide students with the ability to obtain support. Students need to be able to effectively communicate their strengths and limitations so that others can provide appropriate assistance and accommodation. (Price, Wolensky, & Mulligan, 2002; Schreiner, 2007). Leadership was recognized as the ability for individuals to take an active role in the advocacy of their needs and those of others. In developing these skills, the students move from an understanding of self to the ability to advocate for others. Only with skill development and with the ability to use the skills in settings that will provide positive feedback can students achieve mastery and autonomy.

**Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy, divergent paths.** Self-determination and self-advocacy are often terms used interchangeably, but they are not exactly the same. Wehmeyer’s (2004) review of self-determination looked at the components of the term (self and determinism) and found that determinism was seen as the ability for an individual (self) to have free will as expressed in their ability to choose; Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000, 2006) stipulated self-determination as being based on the psychological needs of individuals to have free choice and Field, et al (1998) defined self-determination as, “… a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior…” (p.2). While these definitions share common components of awareness of oneself and choice
(free will, autonomy) they fall short on presenting the active nature of the individual’s choice or how the outcomes of their choices shape future actions.

Test et al., (2005), based on their review of the literature developed the conceptual framework of self-advocacy (FSA). While FSA shares commonalities with self-determination, the conceptual framework expands the understanding of the actions individuals take in their roles as advocates over the theoretical nature found within SDT. “Knowledge of self and knowledge of rights are viewed as the foundations of self-advocacy, because it is necessary for individuals to understand and know themselves before they can tell others what they want.” (Test et al., 2005, p. 45). The next building block of advocacy is communication; individuals must be able to articulate their needs in order to advocate, negotiate and problem solve. Leadership, the final component of FSA, expands on the active nature found in advocacy. Leadership promotes individuals to move from the central focus of self to a community focus of advocating for others.

While SDT and FSA share similar concepts that individuals must understand their wants and needs, it is not enough to be self-determined. To engage in change and internalize the active nature of change individuals must self-advocate with self-awareness and communication to not only gain for their needs, but for those they choose to lead. Research focused on self-advocacy provides insight into understanding the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of individuals as they transition from the external structure of secondary education into post-secondary studies.

Research and government financial support has been provided to implement studies and programs on self-determination, but in review of the research (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; Lynch & Gussel, 1996; McCarthy, 2007; Meglemre, 2010; Skinner, 1998; Trainor, 2002) there have been limited studies on how the active process of advocacy is developed in high school students with learning disabilities. Furthermore, the studies have lacked the perceptions of the
students in how they develop, use, and understand the role of advocacy as they prepare for post-
secondary studies. It is time to change from the theoretical understanding of individuals
acquiring determinism to identifying how and why individuals choose to advocate for their
wants, needs, and future goals as they prepare for transition to post-secondary studies.

**Advocating for Change**

Since the passage of landmark legislations, such as Section 504 of the Americans with
Disability Act in 1973 (Section 504), the Education for All Handicapped Children of 1975
(EHA), the Individuals with Disability Education Act of 1990 and the revisions in 1997 and 2004
(IDEA, 1990, 2004), students with learning disabilities have gained the rights to appropriate
education and accommodations. These students moved from being isolated because of their
learning disability to becoming included in appropriate education, thus creating expectations that
they will be prepared following graduation for post-secondary studies (Meglemre, 2010; Yuan,
1994).

In 2005, the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 showed that thirty percent of all
students with a learning disability participated in post-secondary studies within two years of their
high school graduation. In community colleges, their rate of attendance was equal to that of their
non-disabled peers (Lynch & Gussel, 1996; Meglemre, 2010; U.S. Department of Education
Office of Special Education Programs, 2004). However, it is estimated that only forty percent of
students with a learning disability actually report it to their post-secondary schools or advocate
for the necessary accommodation needed to succeed (Meglemre, 2010). Students leaving high
schools often lack awareness of their disability and the ability to advocate for their needs
(Brinckerhoff, 1994). While well intended educators have been compliant with regulations to act
as advocates for their students and families supportive of their children with learning disabilities, students’ lack of self-advocating has limited their ability to understand and communicate their needs as the external support terminates (Brinckerhoff, 1996; Field et al., 2003).

External supports alone have not created the problem of self-advocacy faced by students with learning disabilities. Ward (2005) found in a review of programs from 1990 to 1993, that the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) awarded grants to thirty projects designed to advance self-determination skills. While the grants resulted in over thirty-five curriculums targeted at advancing self-determination skills, few showed positive development of students’ advocating skills. Additionally, few of these programs had a longitudinal research component to assess if students were able to sustain the knowledge and use the skills they had developed through exposure to the curriculums. For example, The ChoiceMaker Self-Determination Transition Curriculum, developed by Martin and Huber Marshall at the Center for Educational Research at the University of Colorado, focus on increasing students’ understanding of how to choose and express goals within the design of their education plans. Students did show a rise in the ability to increase their choice making during the development of their plans (Martin, et al., 2006) initially, but the gains were often short-lived and not maintained when the program ended. Students trained in The Self-Directed IEP increased the amount of time they communicated in their team meetings and reported increased positive perceptions of their meetings (Martin et al., 2006). Still, even though there are gains seen in the short-term, studies continue to show limited transfer of the skills acquired to other setting within their educational settings or as students leave high school and enter college (Test & Neale, 2004; Thoma et al., 2005; Ward, 2005; Wood et al., 2004).
While these programs focused on increasing students’ awareness of choices or communicating in a group format, these programs lacked the focus on additional skills seen as necessary for successful transitions by Test et al. (2005). As mentioned, Test et al. recognize that students need knowledge of self and the ability to communicate, but they also need knowledge of rights and leadership. In a review of 20 studies by Test et al., 15 of the studies focused on knowledge of self and all had components of communication. Less often studied showed students’ lack the knowledge of their legal rights (eight of twenty) and the leadership of taking action (four of twenty).

To further understand why there is limited transfer of self-advocacy skills to post-secondary studies, research needs to explore the relationship between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations and how they influence students’ choice to either act or not to act (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2006). In understanding what drives the change in students from responding because of external motivators (rewards, requirements, punishments) to internalizing advocacy skills provides insight as to why skills acquisition may not continue beyond the stages of instruction (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2006). As students’ understanding moves from task oriented activities seen as having a beginning and end, completed as a requirement or externally regulated (extrinsic motivated) to internalizing the need for the skills into their value system, their levels of autonomy and competency elevates. Self-advocacy training needs to include not only awareness of self and the ability to communicate, but must advance students’ knowledge of their rights and ability to take action beyond the familiar confines of their educational setting (Schreiner, 2007; Sievert, Cuvo, & Davis, 1988). In order to understand if providing direct instruction in self-advocacy skills in the four areas discussed by Test et al.
(2005) has the ability to modify students’ motivational drive, their thoughts and experiences need to be understood.

**Summation**

Students with learning disabilities constitute one of the largest growing populations to enter into post-secondary studies (Lynch & Gussel, 1996; Meglemre, 2010). Through civil actions and the development of regulations requiring equity in education, students have gained access to free and appropriate education. Even with these advancements, students with disabilities who lack self-advocacy skills seek out and request post-secondary supports less than half the time. This outcome results in students experiencing difficulties they may otherwise not have had to endure.

Completing research on the effects of supporting self-advocacy skills to students with learning disabilities at the high school level adds to the limited base of literature within the field. This has three potentially positive impacts: (1) providing a foundation for educators working with learning disabled students to understand the insights of the students as part of developing self-advocacy skills in the students’ high school education programs (2) providing the foundation for a longitudinal study in measuring the effects of early self-advocacy instruction on the abilities of post-secondary students’ application of advocacy skills and (3) providing the basis for policy changes for increased specificity for transition needs and services to students with learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities continue to advance in what they are able to accomplish, but must gain the skills to become effective advocates for their needs within post-secondary studies.
Chapter Three

Methods

Methodology

Students with learning disabilities continue to make advancements in their preparation for post-secondary studies and are one of the largest growing populations to enter colleges and universities (Lynch & Gussel, 1996; Meglemre, 2010). However, it is estimated that less than half of students with a learning disability report it to their post-secondary schools in order to acquire the support needed to be and remain successful in post-secondary studies (Meglemre, 2010). Research shows one significant reason for the lack of reporting is students’ deficiency in their ability to self-advocate (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; McCarthy, 2007; Schreiner, 2007; Trainor, 2002).

Self-Determination Theory provides a theoretical framework to explore research on self-advocacy in students with learning disabilities. Using a qualitative methodology the study sought to understand the perspective of students with learning disabilities, identifying what skills these individuals see as necessary to advance their autonomy (the ability to advocate for themselves and their interests), build their competency (the ability to practice advocacy skills in current studies in preparation for post-secondary studies), and obtain a sense of relatedness (to participate in the development of their supports and to maintain some control of the process). While SDT provides the theoretical framework for this study, the SAF constructed by Test et al., (2005) advances the awareness that to have determination without action does not fully prepare students as they move from their known environments and external support network to
unfamiliar education setting that require their independent advocating ability. This understanding was achieved through investigating the following research questions:

- How do high school students with learning disabilities view the role of the school and educators in their development and use self-advocacy skills?
- How do high school students with learning disabilities understand the role of self-advocacy skills in their preparation for post-secondary studies?

Research studies provide the opportunities to explore the motivations behind why or how individuals choose to act. In order to gain such a personal understanding the stories of these individuals must be developed through an emerging process of dialogue, clarification, and observation. In doing this approach qualitative research design offers the ability to develop awareness without preconceived ideology. While guided by frameworks, the stories and experiences of those involved in the process, the participants, supports, researchers, shape and redefine the questions and paths to developing the final path the study will take (Creswell, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005; Yin, 2009).

Qualitative research is guided by assumptions and beliefs known as paradigms (Creswell, 1998). Through the Constructivism–Interpretivism paradigm, the interactions between researcher and the students seeks to understand the world not as a static representation of natural law, but rather a fluidly change dynamic shaped and altered by the views and perceptions of the students (Ponterotto, 2005). This paradigm supports the inductive nature of qualitative research in which the researcher, through interacting with the subjects develops the awareness of emergent themes to explain the central phenomenon of investigation.
Previous research methodologies and studies have looked to understanding the role of students’ self-advocacy through studying self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Field et al., 2007; Konrad et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wehmeyer, 2004), self-advocacy skills deficits (Brinckerhoff, 1994, 1996; Fiedler et al., 2007; Phillips, 1990) and self-advocacy skills development (Martin et al., 2006; McCarthy, 2007; Meglemre, 2010; Schreiner, 2007; Test & Neale, 2004) often from the perspectives of educators and families of students with learning disabilities. These studies provide valuable insights into many aspects of motivation, but lack the view of the student. They need to uncover the stories of those students who experience the barriers of learning disabilities, the experiences they face, and what they find as motivators to succeed in order to determine why sustained application of advocacy skills training is not continuing into post-secondary studies.

In developing the understanding from the perspective of the students as to what they see as their priorities, the barriers, and their future, research may better be able to enhance the intrinsic motivation of the students (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Externally imposing regulations, trainings, and plans is not producing the positive results as students move into the next stages of their education; post-secondary studies research needs to move from the external understandings of what is hypothesized to motivate to one which explores the innate thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of those affected. This allowed for research that looks through those impacted to understand what motivators exist for intrinsic drive and builds the positive understand of how advocacy can be sustained as student move from the externally regulated environments of high schools to the independent environments of post-secondary studies.
Research Design and Tradition

Research has looked to quantitatively understand if students acquire self-advocacy skills (Meglemre, 2010), but few studies have explored how students perceive the role of self-advocacy or why the use of self-advocacy is important to their continued growth as a student. Qualitative methodology provides the ability to explore the experiences of the students with self-advocacy and gain an understanding of the complexities they perceive in the development and use of these skills within the context of their organization, the school.

The study was completed using a within, multi-case study analysis. The selection of the case study methodology is based on Yin’s (2009) criteria of when the use of case study approach is beneficial and Merriam’s (2009) description of what a case study is. Yin stipulates that in some situations there is a distinct advantage in using the case study approach; these include understanding a contemporary set of events in which the researcher is applying a “how” or “why” question and has little or no control over the manipulation of behaviors (p. 13). Furthermore, the case study approach has benefits over such research methodologies as historical methods with the additional ability to use direct observation and interviews in addition to records review (Yin).

Merriam (2009) explains that “a case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system [emphasis added]” (p. 40). A bounded system is one that has actual or theoretical limits, such as studying a school, a program, an individual or group. To assess if there is a bounded system the research ascertained how:

…finite the data collection would be…whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite time for observations. If
there is no end, actually or theoretically…then the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case. (p. 41)

In the context of this study the bounded system is defined within both the limits of the setting (high school) and in the criterion selection for the participants (students with learning disabilities). The focus gained an “in-depth” understanding of the phenomenon of the experience students with learning disabilities experience with regards to self-advocacy and the use of case study provided the appropriate methodology to gain this insight.

**Participants, Recruitment and Access**

Selection of participants to be included in the research was through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of participants who have unique knowledge of the research question(s) and with whom the researcher can have access (Creswell, 2012). The sample will use a criterion approach in which students for inclusion will need to have the following criteria:

- Students currently in grades 9 to 12
- Minimum age 14 (defining age for students to receive transition planning services)
- Identified as having a learning disability, receiving specially designed services, in a full inclusion setting, as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B (2004)

Students who initially meet the criteria had a letter of invitation (see Appendix) sent to them and their guardians (Northeastern University, 2012). The letter explained the reason for research, any known potential risks and benefits, information regarding confidentiality, security
of records, and contact information in the event they are interested in participating. Students’ families that respond with interest in participating were contacted by electronic mail or telephone so that any further questions can be answered.

In conducting qualitative, inductive research, the focus is on the process of discovery and uncovering emergent themes as they are experienced through the participants within the study. The final number of participants included in the case study was guided by the process of data collection and analysis. The goal of data collection is to acquire “…saturation or the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data.” (Guess, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p. 59). Guess, et al., found that in determining sample size for the achievement of saturation up to twelve participants were needed, but that recurrent themes were seen within six participants. To achieve saturation it was expected that eight to twelve participants would be included in the research.

The site of the study is a suburban high school with a student population of 1200. The high school is located within an upper middle socioeconomic community, with a graduation rate of 94% and a post-secondary attendance rate of 91%. Special Education services are provided to 12.1% of the student population through both an inclusive and pull-out model. (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012).

Access to the site and participants was initially include acquiring permission from the district’s superintendent and building principal. Letters, describing the basis of the study, the rewards and potential risks to student, staff, and families will be provided (see Appendix). To access participants within the class setting, permission was obtained from the staff involved. The staff will be provided with the same informational letter as presented to the superintendent and
administration. The current role of the research as the school’s psychologist and the special education team chair allows for access to students’ records, students, staff, and the site of the study. In addition to the letter of information regarding the study, oral communication with the researcher’s supervisors was completed to clarify any issues of ethics, role responsibilities, and the completion of assigned duties, which may be in conflict with the study. Confidentiality of the staff, location, participants, and families involved were maintained through the use of pseudonyms in the collection process and in the writing of the study.

Data Collection and Data Storage

Yin (2009) stipulates that several approaches in data collection enhance both the quality of the data and the future validity of the findings. Once informed consent is received by the parents of the identified participants, assent will be requested from each participant under the age of 18. When both consent and assent is received data collection began and include document review, observation of the students, focus group, and individual interview follow-up. Document review included such data as the participants’ school guidance file (i.e. transcript, attendance record, discipline record) and special education records (assessments, progress reports, and individual education plan). The researcher gained access to these documents through permissions granted by the school administration. Furthermore, access to these documents was described within the informed consent form (see Appendix).

Observations of students were conducted during their special education team meetings and within a sampling of their content courses. Students’ verbal and nonverbal behaviors were recorded through field notes on an observation protocol (see Appendix). Completing observations before having participants engaged in a focus group allowed the researcher to
develop an understanding of the students’ routines, engagement in their course, existing advocacy abilities, and the communication styles of those who interact with them as opportunities for self-advocacy arise. In completing observations the researcher was not engaged in student activities and maintained a non-participatory role (Creswell, 2012).

Following the completion of observations participants were invited to be part of a focus group exploring student self-advocacy. The focus group interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview process of providing open-ended questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) with follow up questions for additional details as necessary to clarify answers and to allow for the equal participation of participants (see Appendix). The focus group lasted no more than 75 minutes and was conducted in an informal atmosphere with the students. Interviews were audio and/or video recorded and transcribed by the researcher or professional transcriptionist.

Individual interviews were conducted with students as follow-ups to the focus group and to review data acquired from observations and/or document review (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviews lasted no more than 60 minutes, which is comparable to the length of a student’s academic period. The semi-structure interview protocol from the focus group was used as the framework for individual interviews. When needed, follow-up questions and prompts were provided for the participants to expand their answers. Student participants may, if they or their families choose, have an adult present during the interviews. Interviews were audio and/or video recorded and transcribed by the researcher or professional transcriptionist (Creswell, 2012).

Confidentiality was maintained for participants through the use of pseudonyms in place of identifying information, maintaining all collected data in a secure location accessible only by the researcher, and recordings were securely disposed of following the completion of transcriptions. As is required, informed consent documents are maintained for three years.
Data Analysis

Within case study methodology there is no singularly defined approach to the analysis of the data collected. Stake (1995) presents the need of making a detailed description of the case. In order to do this, Stake notes four forms of data analysis including categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, establishing patterns, and naturalistic generalizations that can be used, but not always together, to develop detailed description of the case. Within the four selected forms two, categorical aggregation and establishing patterns were used for data analysis and are seen to provide increased internal validity to the study (Yin, 2009).

Categorical aggregation included collecting multiple instances within the data, from records, observations and interviews, which represent emergent themes. In order to develop categories inductive coding will be utilized (Saldana, 2013) including pre-cycle data organization, first cycle and second cycle coding methods. Pre-cycle coding included multiple readings of transcripts and reviews of field notes in order to understand initial patterns being presented and to assist in the development of analytical memos. First cycle coding will begin to reduce the randomized data patterns into general codes that allow for cohesion of the information. During second cycle coding the use of Elaborative Coding method supported the development of the case study analysis narrative. Coding was supported through the use of a commercially available qualitative organization software program.

Stake’s (1995) “patterns” is also consistent with qualitative inductive coding methods. The focus of first and second cycle coding is to continually reduce the data to a refined set of categories, which support emergent patterns repeatedly seen within the data. Pattern matching seeks to establish if the current analysis reflects previous trends or findings from other similar
studies uncovered during the literature review. This in turn guides the development of interview questions, the selection of what records are reviewed, and the setting for observations.

Within the research on the analysis of data in case study methodology (Creswell, 1998, 2012; Yin, 2009) there is a common understanding that a lack of systematic analysis techniques exist. However, there is little disagreement that in order to conduct a case study there needs to be initial thought in designing some level of structure that will guide the collection of data. As suggested in Yin (2009), the use of general strategies was employed to provide an initial framework for data collection based on the research design and questions. Without this framework, case studies often collect a tremendous amount of information, which can cause researchers to become stalled in their analysis.

Eisenhardt (1989) did not disagree with the systematic approach to the collection of data or with the need for a framework to be established. Eisenhardt did find that traditionally “…authors have developed theory by combining observations from previous literature, common sense, and experience. However, the tie to actual data is often been tenuous” (p. 532). Eisenhardt proposed that the development of theories should come from within and cross case analysis. With this approach emergent theories are more likely to be testable within the stage of data collection and analysis so that refinement is possible within each stage of the process. Furthermore, with these approaches researcher’s bias can continually be challenged so as to advance the overall validity of the study. Eisenhardt’s perspective, while not contrasting with that of other researchers, does add to the specificity of how data is collected, refined, and analyzed. This approach can be incorporated within all stages of coding and in the development of analytic memos that were used to develop the narratives in reporting study findings.
**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness can be established through a combination of both internal and external processes aimed at increasing validity and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Internally, Lincoln and Guba find that through activities such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation, studies increase their credibility. Externally, activities such as peer review, auditing, and member checking provide for others to review and evaluate the research findings. Another potential concern within studies is with researcher bias. This was addressed through both internal and external processes focused on increasing credibility.

Prolonged engagement is a process of establishing the researcher within the environment with sufficient contact and time as to allow for decreasing the effect a nonmember can have on a community. Additionally, prolonged engagement allows the research to increase their awareness to subtle inaccuracies in the actions and information provided from the participants (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As an established member of the site in which the study is proposed, the researcher has the benefit of familiarity of potential participants, teachers, administration and families. As such, there will be reduced transitional interference when the study begins allowing for increased reliability of data.

Sustaining engagement without focus limits the knowledge that the researcher can obtain. Through persistent observation within the context of the participants’ environment and through contact with them in the forms of interviews, data was compared and checked for consistencies. Furthermore, with prolonged engagement, critical issues such as the discontinuation of participants, the change of access to the study site, or the need to adjust the approach can be alleviated.
Although immersion within the environment is a benefit, researcher bias is a factor. To reduce this, self-reflection through analysis of the acquired data and external member checking will be employed. Self-reflection will be a process in which any preconceived assumptions will be tested against the acquired data. When there are discrepancies, preconceptions will be acknowledged and refuted. To minimize negative influence on the setting, the staff, the students, or the families, clear guidelines were provided within the informed consent and when obtaining access to the site for the study. Any participants that choose not to be part of or continue with the study were free to do so without any concerns.

Triangulation was the final internal approach to establishing validity. Triangulation is the use of multiple data sources to strengthen credibility of findings (Yin, 2009). Triangulation can be applied in methods and analysis. Multiple methods, including interviews, observations, and records review were used to acquire data. This allows for analysis triangulation, which included comparing emerging themes derived from first cycle coding across the multiple sources for consistency.

External processes to increase trustworthiness were provided by activities during the research and maintenance of appropriate data sources following the study. Member checking was used during first cycle coding to establish agreement in the emerging themes and subsequently during second coding and on final review. In the event there are significant differences in the themes determined by the researcher and a second member, consensus agreement was used to establish themes; and if necessary, additional interviews were conducted to further evaluate consistency of themes (Creswell, 1998). To further ensure validity transcripts will be available
to participants for review in order to allow for clarification and accuracy of transcribe data. Data was securely stored for review by an external independent source.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

There is no other more important function than to protect and care for those who have volunteered to participate in research (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To that end both legal and University regulations set out clear guidelines for the informing and protection of human research participants.

While the primary investigator for the research will be the doctoral student’s committee advisor, it will remain the responsibility of the doctoral student to conduct the research. The doctoral student will be required to complete the Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) mandated training that has been developed and provided by the National Institute of Health (National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research, 2011; Northeastern University, 2012). Certificates of completion for this training will be maintained on file for review. No research was started until the application to the IRB had been approved. Final determination as to evaluating the level of risk involved to the participants was at the discretion of IRB (National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research, 2011).

To support and ensure ethical practices, participants were provided with informed consent (see Appendix). Informed consent included the nature of the research, the potential for risk and the potential for benefits to the participant. The informed consent showed that the participants were under no obligation to participate in the research and they could choose to discontinue their involvement at any time. Informed consent was provided to the parents or
guardians of the students who meet the criteria for the study. All questions were answered and any information clarified regarding the consent before it is signed.

The proposed research included children and adolescents, so additional caution was considered in not only obtaining parent/guardian consent, but in obtaining assent from any minor involved in the research. The informed consent used was reviewed with parents and participants, and their signatures were acquired when they decided to participate. All documentation was provided at the level of understanding of those receiving the information and additional oral explanations provided when needed. While parents/guardians retained the legal right to consent to their children’s participation, the subjects had full ability to disagree to participate in the research if they so choose.

Confidentiality was provided and maintained through several approaches. The data collected on the participants was coded so as to eliminate any personal details, such as name and address; participants were identified through pseudonyms.

Data collected and coding of participants’ identifying information were stored in a location that was locked and accessible only by the researcher. Any files maintained on a computer were password protected. All collected data that was not required to remain for future audits was securely disposed of following the completion of the research. This included recordings, interviews, and documents that personally identify the participants.
Chapter Four

Data Analysis

Students with learning disabilities are one of the largest growing populations to enter colleges and universities (Lynch & Gussel, 1996; Meglemre, 2010). However, it is estimated that less than half of students with a learning disability report it to their post-secondary schools in order to acquire the support needed to be and remain successful in post-secondary studies (Meglemre, 2010). Research shows one significant reason for the lack of reporting is students’ deficiency in their ability to self-advocate (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; McCarthy, 2007; Schreiner, 2007; Trainor, 2002).

Brinckerhoff (1994) defined self-advocacy as “…the ability to recognize and meet the needs specific to one’s learning disability, without compromising the dignity of oneself or others” (p. 230). Skinner (1998) argued that an individual self-advocates, “… when they demonstrate understanding of their disability, are aware of their legal rights, and demonstrate competence in communicating rights and needs to those in positions of authority.” (p. 281). Research shows (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; Lynch & Gussel, 1996; McCarthy, 2007; Meglemre, 2010; Skinner, 1998; Trainor, 2002) students with learning disabilities leaving high school often lack the skills to self-advocate. This is partially attributed to a lack of understanding and practice with the skills associated with self-advocacy. In public schools, secondary education students are advocated for by special education liaisons, parents, and caseworkers, as is required by disability regulations (McCarthy, 2007; Schreiner, 2007). The responsibility for advocacy changes to the student as they leave secondary education and enter into post-secondary studies. The significance of students becoming part of these changes in responsibilities was acknowledged in IDEA 1997 and strengthened in the revisions of IDEA 2004, within the
transition plan requirements (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; Skinner, 1998). Regulations attempting to support the importance of transition services for students with learning disabilities can lack the specificity as to how this should be done, what criteria will be used to measure success, and how any direct instructional support should be provided (Meglemre, 2010; Skinner, 1998). While the need exists for students to understand their abilities and barriers, the regulations and practices have perpetuated an isolation of the student in understanding who they are and how they can transition. The need to self-advocate does not begin with the regulations that state the expectation for the organizations to provide for the needs of students with identified learning disabilities. Also it does not rest on the shoulder of the individuals tasked with providing the required interventions; rather it begins with the students and their ability to advocate. With this their voices and views need to be heard in their understanding of what self-advocacy is, what it means when they apply it, and how it can either assist or hinder them as they develop the next stages of their educational stories.

Self-Determination Theory provides a theoretical framework to explore research on self-advocacy in students with learning disabilities. Using a qualitative methodology the study sought to understand the perspective of students with learning disabilities, identifying what skills these individuals see as necessary to advance their autonomy (the ability to advocate for themselves and their interests), build their competency (the ability to practice advocacy skills in current studies in preparation for post-secondary studies), and obtain a sense of relatedness (to participate in the development of their supports and to maintain some control of the process). While SDT provides the theoretical framework for this study, the SAF constructed by Test et al., (2005) advances the awareness that to have determination without action does not fully prepare students as they move from their known environments and external support network to
unfamiliar education settings that require their independent advocating ability. This understanding will be achieved through investigating the following research questions:

- How do high school students with learning disabilities view the role of the school and educators in their development and use self-advocacy skills?

- How do high school students with learning disabilities understand the role of self-advocacy skills in their preparation for post-secondary studies?

Research studies provide the opportunities to explore the motivations behind why or how individuals choose to act. In order to gain such a personal understanding of their motives, the stories of these individuals must be developed through an emerging process of dialogue, clarification, and observation. In utilizing this approach, qualitative research design offers the ability to develop awareness without preconceived ideology. While guided by frameworks, the stories and experiences of those involved in the process: participants, supports, and researchers, shape and redefine the questions and paths to developing the final path of the study (Creswell, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005; Yin, 2009).

Qualitative research is guided by beliefs known as paradigms (Creswell, 1998). Through the Constructivism–Interpretivism paradigm, the interactions between the researcher and the students seek to understand the world not as a static representation of natural law, but rather a fluidly changing dynamic shaped and altered by the views and perceptions of the students (Ponterotto, 2005). This paradigm supports the inductive nature of qualitative research in which the researcher, through interacting with the subjects, develops the awareness of emergent themes to explain the central phenomenon of the investigation.
Previous research methodologies and studies have sought to understanding the role of student self-advocacy through studying self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Field et al., 2007; Konrad et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wehmeyer, 2004), self-advocacy skills deficits (Brinckerhoff, 1994, 1996; Fiedler et al., 2007; Phillips, 1990) and self-advocacy skills development (Martin et al., 2006; McCarthy, 2007; Meglemre, 2010; Schreiner, 2007; Test & Neale, 2004) often from the perspectives of educators and families of students with learning disabilities. These studies provide valuable insights into many aspects of motivation, but lack the view of the student. They need to uncover the stories of those students who experience the barriers of learning disabilities, the experiences they face, and what they find as motivators to succeed in order to determine why sustained application of advocacy skills training is not continuing into post-secondary studies.

In developing the understanding from the perspective of the students as to what they see as their priorities, their barriers, and their future, research may better be able to enhance the intrinsic motivation of the students (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Externally imposing regulations, trainings, and plans is not producing the positive results as students move into the next stages of their education; post-secondary studies research needs to move from the external understandings of what is hypothesized to motivate to one which explores the innate thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of those affected. This allowed for research that looks through those impacted to understand what motivators exist for intrinsic drive and builds the positive understanding of how advocacy can be sustained as student move from the externally regulated environments of high schools to the independent environments of post-secondary studies.
Within this researcher’s practice as a School Psychologist and as Chair for Special Education Services, an attempt to understand what students with learning disabilities need in order to become independent through their ability to self-advocate has been a focus. While teachers, administrators, and parents express that students need to take responsibility for their actions, it is rarely articulated as to what specific skills students require or what may motivate these student to employ the skills in order to be successful self-advocates. One skill set that appears to differ between students who succeed and those who struggle is the ability to advocate for one’s needs. With this in mind the researcher has developed two intellectual goals to explore:

- To develop an understanding if the ability to self-advocate is due to the lack of a specific skill set or the student's’ choice to apply skill sets they currently have in order to advocate for their needs and wants in order to be successful in school and prepare for transition to post-secondary studies.
- To develop an understanding of what motivate students with learning disabilities to engage or disengage in their choice to self-advocate.

Review of Research Questions

The intellectual goals will guide the overall frame of the research, but in order to focus the research, a qualitative study with high school students who have an Individual Education Program will be used to answer the following questions:

- How do high school students with learning disabilities view the role of the school and educators in their development and use self-advocacy skills?
- How do high school students with learning disabilities understand the role of self-advocacy skills in their preparation for post-secondary studies?
Review of Theoretical Framework

Within the literature self-advocacy is represented as a component of self-determination. (Meglemre, 2010; Pearl, 2004; Schreiner, 2007; Test et al., 2005; Ward, 2005). Deci and Ryan’s (1985, 2001) work in understanding individuals’ motivation to choose or not to choose an action led to the formation of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Ryan and Deci (2000) defined Self-Determination Theory as “…an approach to human motivation and personality that uses traditional empirical methods while employing an organismic metatheory that highlights the importance of humans’ evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation (p. 69).

SDT’s foundation is based on the belief that individuals have free choice in the actions and decisions they make. In order for individuals to acquire self-determination three innate psychological needs must be present: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, combined to develop an individual’s self-determined ability (Figure 1.1). Autonomy refers to an individual’s ability to make decisions and choices free from the restrictions and influences of others. (Deci, Koestner & Mitchell, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Moening & Panter, 2009; Wood et al., 2004). Without autonomy individuals can experience Amotivation, a sense of disengagement that can often be expressed through negative affect, such as the choice not to engage or advocate for their needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Salkind, 2008). Competence shows that “…people have an intrinsic need to be competent and master optimal challenges…” in order to find value in their commitment (Wehmeyer, 2004, p. 347). Individuals who receive positive feedback in areas that they are performing has shown to increase motivation and productivity. In contrast, when individuals receive negative feedback, punishment, or develop a sense of incompetence then productivity and motivation decreases (Deci, 1971, 1975; Grolnick, & Ryan, 1987; Vallerand,
Relatedness, SDT’s third psychological need is the belief that what an individual does and accomplishes matters to themselves and others (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Salkind, 2008). Within this definition the individual’s belief that they belong or are a valued part of the group comes through.

Within SDT the role of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, provides an understanding as to why some choose to act and others remain passive in their choice. “Motivation concerns energy, direction, persistence … all aspects of activation and intention.” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 69). Intrinsic motivation is present in humans from an early age, in the intuitive nature to explore, seek out information, and to gain new experiences. Individuals are rewarded by the fulfilment of their own curiosity and through the novelty of the information they gain. Intrinsic motivation, while shaped and assimilated by the individual requires an environment of support. Intrinsic motivation is not the only reason for individuals to act; extrinsic motivation also plays a role. An extrinsic reward can be to simply accomplish a set task so as to move onto the next opportunity, but with this the innate reward can be lost, so the internal drive to seek out may be limited and result in Amotivation or reactive learning experiences.

Self-Determination Theory provides a theoretical framework to explore research on self-advocacy in students with learning disabilities. Using a qualitative methodology the study sought to understand the perspective of students with learning disabilities, identifying the skills these individuals see as necessary to advance their autonomy, build their competency, and obtain a sense of relatedness. While SDT provides the theoretical framework for this study, the Self Advocacy Framework (SAF) constructed by Test et al., (2005) advances the awareness that to have determination without action does not fully prepare students as they move from their known
environments and external support network to unfamiliar education settings that require their independent advocating ability.

**Review of Methodological Approach**

Qualitative research is guided by assumptions and beliefs known as paradigms (Creswell, 1998). Through the Constructivism–Interpretivism paradigm, the interactions between researcher and the students seeking to understand the world not as a static representation of natural law, but rather a fluidly change dynamic shaped and altered by the views and perceptions of the students (Ponterotto, 2005). This paradigm supports the inductive nature of qualitative research in which the researcher, through interacting with the subjects, develops the awareness of emergent themes to explain the central phenomenon of investigation.

Research has looked to quantitatively understanding if students acquire self-advocacy skills (Meglemre, 2010), but few studies have explored how students perceive the role of self-advocacy or why the use of self-advocacy is important to their continued growth as a student. Qualitative methodology provides the ability to explore the experiences of the students with self-advocacy and gain an understanding of the complexities they perceive in the development and use of these skills within the context of their organization, the school.

The study was completed using a within, multi-case study analysis. The selection of the case study methodology is based on Yin’s (2009) criteria of when the use of case study approach is beneficial and Merriam’s (2009) description of what a case study is; Yin stipulates that in some situations there is a distinct advantage in using the case study approach. These include understanding a contemporary set of events in which the researcher is applying a “how” or “why” question and has little or no control over the manipulation of behaviors (p. 13).
Furthermore, the case study approach has benefits over such research methodologies as historical methods with the additional ability to use direct observation and interviews in addition to records review (Yin).

Merriam (2009) explains that “a case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system [emphasis added]” (p. 40). A bounded system is one that has actual or theoretical limits, such as studying a school, a program, an individual or group. To assess if there is a bounded system the research needs to ascertain how:

…finite the data collection would be…whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite time for observations. If there is no end, actually or theoretically…then the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case. (p. 41)

In the context of this study the bounded system is defined within both the limits of the setting (high school) and in the criterion selection for the participants (students with learning disabilities). The focus is to gain an “in-depth” understanding of the phenomenon of the students with learning disabilities experiences with regard to self-advocacy and the use of case study provides the appropriate methodology to gain this insight.

Within case study methodology there is no singularly defined approach to the analysis of the data collected. Stake (1995) presents the need of making a detailed description of the case. In order to do this, Stake notes four forms of data analysis including categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, establishing patterns, and naturalistic generalizations that can be used, but not always together, to develop detailed descriptions of the case. Within the four selected forms,
two: *categorical aggregation* and establishing *patterns*, will be used for data analysis and are seen to provide increased internal validity to the study (Yin, 2009).

Categorical aggregation included collecting multiple instances within the data from records, observations, and interviews, which represent emergent themes. In order to develop categories, inductive coding was utilized (Saldana, 2013) including first cycle and second cycle coding methods. The approach to first cycle coding included multiple readings of transcripts and reviews of field notes in order to understand initial patterns being presented. During second cycle coding the use of Elaborative Coding method supported the development of the case study analysis narrative.

Stake’s (1995) “patterns” is also consistent with qualitative inductive coding methods. The focus of first and second cycle coding is to continually reduce the data to a refined set of categories, which support emergent patterns repeatedly seen within the data. Pattern matching seeks to establish if the current analysis reflects previous trends or findings from other similar studies uncovered during the literature review. This in turn guides the development of interview questions, the selection of what records are reviewed, and the setting for observations.

Within the research on the analysis of data in case study methodology (Creswell, 1998, 2012; Yin, 2009) there is a common understanding that a lack of systematic analysis techniques exist. However, there is little disagreement that in order to conduct a case study there needs to be initial thought in designing some level of structure that will guide the collection of data. As suggested in Yin (2009), the use of general strategies were employed to provide an initial framework for data collection based on the research design and questions. Without this framework, case studies often collect a tremendous amount of information, which can cause researchers to become stalled in their analysis.
Eisenhardt (1989) did not disagree with the systematic approach to the collection of data or with the need for a framework to be established. Eisenhardt did find that traditionally “… authors have developed theory by combining observations from previous literature, common sense, and experience. However, the tie to actual data has often been tenuous.” (p. 532). Eisenhardt proposed that the development of theories should come from within and across case analysis. With this approach emergent theories are more likely to be testable within the stage of data collection and analysis so that refinement is possible within each stage of the process. Furthermore, with these approaches the researcher’s bias can continually be challenged so as to advance the overall validity of the study. Eisenhardt’s perspective, while not contrasting other researchers, does add to the specificity of how data is collected, refined, and analyzed. This approach can be incorporated within all stages of coding and in the development of analytic memos that will be used to develop the narratives in reporting study findings.

Participants

Selection of participants was completed through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of participants who have unique knowledge of the research question(s) and with whom the researcher can have access (Creswell, 2012). The sample used a criterion approach in which students for inclusion needed to have the following criteria:

- Students currently in grades 9 to 12
- Minimum age 14 (defining age for students to receive transition planning services)
- Identified as having a learning disability, receiving specially designed services, in a full inclusion setting, as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, Part B (IDEA, 2004)
A database search, using the school’s Aspen X2 Student Information Web-based district data management software, provided 128 potential students who met the initial criteria. Additional criteria were added to refine the potential pool of participants. These included students who would receive a high school diploma. Within these criteria two segments of the subject pool were decreased, students who did not take the state required high school examination (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessments System), and/or would not meet the additional graduation requirements for credit attainment.

With the addition of these criteria 13 students were removed from the subject pool for a remaining 115 students that could qualify. In order to further refine the participant pool the participants’ special education teachers’ input was attained. The request was to review the list of their students who met the criteria for participation and to remove any students they felt may not benefit from participating in the study. The criteria the special education teachers were to use for this determination included if participation in the study would interfere substantially (put student further behind in their studies or limit their ability to complete required classwork) with their students’ academics and if with the time remaining in the academic school year the students would like to participate (study was targeted to start in late May so would require seniors to return to school after their graduation date in order to participate). After special education teachers reviewed their students, 33 students were removed from the participant pool, these included 22 seniors, and each student was spoken with and asked if they wished to return for the study following graduation and declined to. An additional 11 subjects were removed using the criteria that it could substantially interfere with their end of year academic demands (academic work completion rates, class attendance, and preparation for final examinations).
Within these 11 participants there were three in grade 11; four in grade 10; and four in grade 9. The final participate pool after the additional criteria included a total of 82 possible participants. Letters were sent (N=82), 18 calls and emails were received from interested individuals and/or their families, after additional discussions seven completed the final requirements of returning consent and assent in order to participate in the study and remained for the completion of data collection.

**Participants’ Profiles**

Research attempts to confirm, challenge, or discover what has not previously been seen within the literature of various subjects. However, there can never be a more fundamental focus that any and all research is to create the basis for understanding or affect change for society and its people. Qualitative research seeks to understand the qualities and lives of those that have participated, given of themselves, to become part of the research change process. Their stories, lived experiences, tell not only who they are, but give foundation to their perceptions which has shaped their responses and actions within the research process. Analysis in qualitative research cannot begin or progress without understanding those who are part of the living change.

**Samantha.** Samantha is a 15 year old young woman coming to the end of her 9th grade year in high school. She receives special education support through her IEP under both a Health and Neurological disability. Samantha’s IEP (2015) reports that her “…Health and Neurological disabilities continue to impact her ability to feel confident and comfortable with self-advocating. Although improvements this year have been noted, certain social situations continue to be challenging for her to navigate. She struggles with identifying and utilizing the appropriate resources available to her in order to share her academic, social, and other concerns.” Samantha has a complicated health history including Benign Rolandic Epilepsy, asthma, and bladder
reflux. She takes prophylactic (Amoxicillin) daily, uses a Flovent inhaler and Albuterol inhaler as needed for asthma. In May of 2008, an EEG showed drowsiness potentiated right central spikes and such seizure semiology and EEG findings were consistent with Benign Rolandic Epilepsy (IEP, 2015). Samantha is seen as having a “…a kind personality and strong work ethic. She is a caring student and has persevance in all she does” (IEP team, 2015). Samantha can be hard on herself; her parent’s concerns from the IEP reflects she is disciplined, but puts a lot of pressure on herself. Samantha acknowledges that she can be stressed at times, and notes she is “concerned about being recommended for honors level humanities next school year.” Samantha seems a shy student with downcast eyes on first meeting, shoulders slightly slumped forward, and talking in a quieter voice as she answers. As sessions continue she shows a slight smile and has a short giggling laugh that make the corners of her mouth turn up. She is slower to answer, thoughtful in her responses, and asks questions to clarify when she is not sure. Samantha states that having the support in school has helped shape her future goal to attend college, study to be a special education teacher and minor in English with the focus on working in middle school. The clarity of her vision reverberates the focus and discipline others see in her.

Samantha’s IEP Team vision and one of her plan’s goals is to increase self-advocacy. She is seen to have the understanding of what she needs, but at times does not effectively communicate those needs. In interview she confirms these views with her understanding of what self-advocacy is, “…it means to like speak for yourself and ask questions when you need help. Like talk to the teacher directly to get help.” Yet, while she understands what the term means, her hesitance to advocate comes through, "I do during strategies [special education classroom] and to some teachers, but it’s harder with some teachers… Some teachers don’t really like when I ask for extra time… So it just makes it harder because they’re not listening."
Samantha expresses that she has increased her communication with teachers and staff, and as time has passed in the school year she sees that her comfort has grown and that she is more confident asking for support. Looking at the change and ability to communicate more effectively Samantha was asked if her teachers have changed, become more accepting? “I think I have, because like I got more comfortable around them. [How] Just by like getting to know them, like telling if they say they could be accepting [of her]…”

Samantha expresses throughout the interview her awareness of who she is, of what it means to know yourself. She is aware that it takes her time to warm up, to know that while it may appear she is not engaged in a class she likes to take notes and listen to discussions both from the teacher and her peers surrounding her. This gives her the time to think, analyze, and process the information, which she understands takes her a bit longer.

Samantha is less confident in expressing her knowledge of the rights she has, which comes with being in special education. The technicality of what it means to have knowledge of rights confuses her, “[Interviewer] Do you have a disability?” “[Samantha] I don’t know… I probably should know, though … I have an IEP.” These responses reflect the literature (Brinckerhoff, 1994, 1996; Fiedler et al., 2007; Phillips, 1990; Martin et al., 2006) where concerns with student’s lack of knowledge of rights may interfere with their ability to gain the supports necessary to be successful in their transition to college. However, while the technicalities may elude her, the essence of her rights does not, “I get accommodations, it’s like maybe a modification like on a test or something… like having extra time to finish something or an extension… [teachers have] to like allow the accommodations.” Samantha expresses the increased responsibilities on her as a student, which requires her to engage with others to access her accommodations. It becomes clear as the interview continues that her comfort level has risen;
her speech fluency patterns increase and she becomes more conversational rather than producing simple statements. It is clear she has the capacity to communicate her needs.

The barriers to advocating for Samantha do not rest on what she knows, but rather how she perceives being accepted or allowed to engage for herself. She articulates that when in elementary school, others, teachers and staff would act for her, “oh, I’ll do it for you so you don’t need to do it.” She found it more accepting as she moved into the higher grades to speak for herself. While she knew this was difficult, she understood others were now giving her the autonomy necessary to develop her advocacy skills. However, with every statement of understanding there follows uncertainty about how she may be perceived and a sense of dwindling confidence to act where she feels less sure of her understanding. And there is a lack of feeling that she belongs, is safe, and supported to choose.

“Well, if I knew [I] was like 100% right, then I would feel more confident to do it. But, if it was like 50% sure I was right, then I probably would just like stop and just go with like what the teachers say.”

Samantha is clear that her comfort level affects her choice to advocate. She expands on this sense of security and belonging as she explains her feelings in previous years with how she felt students who received support or were in special education classes were thought of; “… When kids our age hear it, they like kind of make fun of it… So it’s kind of embarrassing so we don’t really talk about it a lot. It's better now in high school; in middle school it was really embarrassing people thought you’d spaz out in class. Like that’s what I thought strategies was.” She is now more reflective on how past supports were helpful and how because of these and her own abilities, she sees a future that can include her vision and success.
Emily. Emily is a 15 year old female student completing the 9th grade who receives special education services through an IEP that supports her Specific Learning disability in the area of math. Emily is seen by her family and special education Team as … “a kind and caring student; she is very social and likes soccer, skiing, and swimming.” Emily’s IEP shows that with her specific learning disability in math … “she struggles with math problem solving including understanding place value, single operations, interpreting transformation of figures, and finding angles and sides. She benefits from having these concepts broken down into small steps and demonstrated with repetition to ensure mastery.” Yet, while she is provided services under a disability in the area of math, Emily shows additional struggles… “Emily also presents with weaknesses in memory retrieval and comprehension. She benefits from material being presented multiple times in order to increase retention. Emily struggles with the retention of vocabulary. It is also challenging for her to comprehend larger ideas and concepts in class at times.”

Emily’s Team expresses in her plan that she benefits from larger ideas being broken down, having verbal information placed in context in order to enhance retention, and using additional memory supports, such as repetition, mnemonics, and the use of visual aids are recommended. In addition, Emily benefits from additional time to process through information presented to her on assessments. In reviewing her school counseling record and transcript Emily shows that she is able to accomplish the ability to understand and access her math curriculum through maintaining above average grades in her math course; even while being placed in the higher of the two Algebra math curriculums.

Emily has thought about her future, she expresses her vision to include attending college, possibly in New Hampshire so as to be able to enjoy her interest in skiing. She is considering majoring in fields that will allow her to study and prepare for becoming a defense attorney, FBI
agent, or an entrepreneur. Emily begins the interview appearing confident, she is quick to greet the interviewer and engage in conversation. She explains her thoughts with some hesitations and is frequent to use spacing words such as “like,” or “ummm” to allow her time to think about her answers. Her face expresses much insight, as she is careful to consider what is being asked her eyes slightly squint, jaw flexes, and she lifts her head as if looking for information on a shelf above her gaze. Emily’s initial appearances does show a confident and articulate young women, but as the session continues and she becomes engaged in conversation the inflections in her voice, the wringing of her hands, and shifting in her chair show some concerns with anxiousness.

Emily speaks of her understanding of special education services; she is keenly aware of what it means to be in special education, the rights she can have, and the challenges that she faces. When asked if she has a disability she is direct, “a math disability.” She explains that she knows by, “… just going over my IEP and being tested.” In her answers there is little sense of regret or embarrassment, simply clear statements and to the point. Emily is less quick to respond in describing her learning style, she shows knowledge of who she is and how she learns, but is contemplative, “like I have to see things, like either having pictures or some sort of visual that I can understand what’s going on easier.”

While the nuances of the legal terminology slightly escape her understanding, Emily is able to articulate some of her rights governed by her IEP. She speaks of her accommodations: to have extra time, to have access to study guides and to have vocabulary pre-taught. She is able to describe her ability to advocate when her accommodations are not being provided, but how at times her ability to clearly communicate what she needs can be difficult; “asking if teachers have study guides, if I can get those beforehand just to get more studying time.” “Well, I approach my English teacher to ask about this [the teacher].” Emily did not feel she was getting the right
information from the teacher who repeatedly stated to read the packet that was handed out, “I didn’t get a clear answer, I didn’t understand what he said. So I kind of just let that be. I don’t think he understood what I was trying to ask for.” In the end she did return to speak with the teacher and did find out that the reading packet, while not given early to her, would be out well before the test.

Emily shows some difficulty with the vocabulary used to explain terms associated with her IEP, but is quick to ask questions for clarification. She explains that she does have opportunities to take on leadership roles in the school, through clubs and sports. For her she has enjoyed working in classroom groups and to take an active role in guiding and helping others. While it may be difficult to hear any feedback from teacher or staff that is not positive, Emily finds feedback helpful and it helps her to understand how and why decisions are being made. In the role of autonomy, she is clear in her understanding, she knows she can make decisions for herself, with regard to her courses, goals of her IEP, and future choices. However, she is also aware that her choices are within the larger structure of requirements for graduation and that others, staff and family, may have more information and they listen to her interest, but may make other decisions for her. Through the interview it is clear that Emily presents with the confidence of wanting and knowing she can succeed with the typical apprehension that many adolescents have over understanding their future. She is engaging and while may have difficulty at times fluidly articulating her ideas, she perseveres and advocates for who she is.

**Holly.** Holly is a 15 year old female student completing her 9th grade year in high school. She receives special education services through her IEP for a Health disability. Holly’s IEP reports that her “Health disability impacts her in all curriculum areas. Work completion and effective study skills impact her performance in every subject due to inattention and seizures.”
The school’s assessments and evaluations show that Holly is a cognitively average individual with above average reasoning abilities in how she processes both verbal and visual information. While Holly shows strong reasoning abilities she does struggle with her ability to attend to information and managing her absence seizures …,

“…she struggles with focusing on independent work during class. At times, Holly struggles to utilize the resources available to her … [she] finds it challenging to plan and organize long-term assignments and … independently initiate and effectively carry out the steps of longer assignments. She struggles to sustain attention when instruction is delivered aloud with no accompanying visuals.”

Regardless of the potential barriers that surround her, Holly is seen as “…a polite and enthusiastic student … interested in animals and art… also enjoys karate and plans to teach it in the future.” Actually, Holly does not simply enjoy Karate, but is an accomplished 4th degree black belt and an instructor at her school. Holly aspires to be an author, actress, singer, or teacher and would like to attend college after high school.

Holly’s team vision and overview of her strengths are easily apparent as she begins the interview. Holly presents with a kind confidence showing through her quick smile and easy eye contact at first meeting. She answers effortlessly and engages in conversation easily. Holly reiterates her future goals of wanting to teach others and gives some examples of what she has been involved in; teaching at karate, working in summer programs, and looking out for her brother since he also has learning disabilities and can use the support. Holly shows her awareness of what self-advocacy is, she expresses that it means “…that you can kind of do things for yourself like if you need to go see a teacher, you can do it like by yourself.” Holly easily
communicates her version of self-advocacy in the actions one takes to resolve what one may need. Holly provides an example of her self-advocacy as she explains that when having difficulty in her foreign language class she approached her Spanish teacher and began a morning tutoring to improve her understanding. Not only did she arrange this for herself, but when she found out her older brother was having trouble in Spanish she made him come with her. The actions taken by Holly show the qualities of communication and leadership noted in research by Test et al. (2005). Holly shows on the surface no visible signs of her identified disability. She is fluid in her thought processes, though while she may have some tangents of thoughts they are no more than a peer her age. There seems little barrier for her associated with the health related concerns, and yet that is often the case for other students who have to deal with the intermittent difficulties associated with medically based learning disabilities.

Holly’s knowledge of herself in terms of her learning style is clear and concise, “I'm in many different categories, mainly kinesthetic, a bit of, or both audio and visual and occasionally musical.” She is quick to respond to the question if she has a disability, “I have absence epilepsy,” and is aware that she has an IEP and has read through the document. She explains that her family members have been advocates for her, but also have expected that she be knowledgeable about the process and be aware of what she needs. Her explanation of the rights associated with her IEP is similar to the other students; she responds first to the formal statement of what is knowledge of rights with hesitation and confusion, but is able to describe the ability to have accommodations, understanding that these are ways to change how she may approach learning, or that others without a plan may not be able to receive them. However, she is further able to discuss some of her IEP goals, what they are for and how they are trying to support her learning.
During the interview Holly’s responses show both the foundation of what Deci and Ryan, and Test et al. frame as the principle needs of self-determination and self-advocacy; she is aware of who she is, has a sense of understanding of her rights, communicates effectively, and shows leadership ability. In addition to these she does feel competent in what she knows, while understanding that there is more to learn, she has a sense of autonomy to make decisions on her own behalf, yet again incorporating the views of others, and a belief that she does belong within her community and school. Holly does present as a more proactive student when it comes to the components of self-advocacy, it may be a reflection of her innate nature to be extroverted as she explains, and nonetheless she is able to show adaptation to her own needs while looking out for others simultaneously. All skills that have served her well so far are reflected by her team’s views and her positive progress in school, regardless of her learning needs.

**Jasper.** Jasper is a 16 year old male student finishing his 10th grade school year. Jasper is receiving special education services to support his identified Neurological disability. His special education team notes that Jasper’s disability affects his progress in all of his curriculum areas. Jasper’s disability is comprised of multiple diagnoses; he has a diagnosis of ADHD-predominately inattentive type, and Developmental Dyslexia. These combine to affect how he is able to sustain attention, intake information, process, retrieve, and communicate his thoughts.

During observation in the classroom it is easily seen that transitions are difficult for Jasper as he moves from one activity to the next. Furthermore, he can become reluctant to begin activities that he perceives as difficult or that may require a substantial amount of effort to complete. Jasper is not what some term as “lazy,” he has struggled over the years with the ability to read and access information; additionally when he has completed the initial stages of
collecting information, he struggles to succinctly be able to analyze and express his thoughts. Jasper appears to benefit from prompting, and he works in a slow and methodical manner. At times he becomes distracted by his own thoughts or he perseverates on a situation that has caused him some anxiety. His team reports that “Jasper also has difficulty with being distracted in class by his school supplies (clipboard, white out, pens, etc.) and has demonstrated difficulty with task transitions or turning in assignments in spite of teacher direction that it is time to move on or that class is over.” Jasper’s IEP shows that even with prompting and clear teacher expectations:

    He has difficulty meeting deadlines …. He requires individual support to complete most long term assignments and longer writing pieces. At times he also falls behind in his daily homework. Jasper works on in-school assignments at a very slow pace and has tendency to obsess over unrelated or unnecessary details or facts.

Although, while Jasper shows many struggles academically with his expression of thoughts and the completion of his work, he is seen to show positive academic knowledge; “He does understand most of the material that is presented to him in school, demonstrates solid meta-cognitive skills, and has no difficulty asking questions when he needs to.”

    Jasper comes to the interview with a slightly quirky presence, shorter in stature as compared to his peers, a large backpack slung over his shoulder, which appears to have substantial weight as he slumps forward to carry it. He is polite and quick to greet with a hello; his eye contact is also as quick to come and go. Jasper is pointed to a seat, where he, with observable effort thrusts his backpack onto the table, opens it and begins to pull out numerous items, from a pencil bag to a ream of paper. During this time he responds to casual conversation,
but rarely makes eye contact, and while he does answer it does not stop his motion to unpack what he feels he needs. It appears that if he were to interrupt this ritual he would simply forget what is needed and have to begin the process over again. After several minutes Jasper completes his unpacking and then without acknowledgement simply sits down, finally casting his eyes toward the interviewer as if showing his readiness for the next task.

Jasper is told why the interviews are being done and as quick as the first statement from the interviewer can be spoken Jasper is discussing how he likes to draw, shuffling his pencils and paper around, because it helps him focus; “Teachers see it as me being distracted… they don’t always understand it helps me focus.” He continues to speak of loosely connected ideas and none that were directly linked to the initial statement of why the interviews were being done. Most of the interview continues in this manner, with a question being posed and sometimes it is begun to be answered, while other times it is met with a tangential discussion of what he was thinking about. Regardless, what is expressed by his special education team is apparent in his thought process that even with the tangential thinking he is still remaining aware of the information shared with him, because when he is redirected and can focus he is able to express his ideas about the interview questions without the need of repetition.

Jasper is asked if he knows what self-advocacy is and if he is able to self-advocate, he responds, “It means to be able to neatly and organized—neatly and organizing, coordinate with what you’re doing and able to do what you need to do and focus on it and not get off track. Have everything like scheduled.” The effort he shows to contain his thought process is evident in his answers as in the focal present of what he is thinking. “I try to as much as possible, but I usually sometimes get off track and sometimes I don’t really think that well about it and I’m—
sometimes I mess up.” His answering is similar to other questions; he expresses what it means to have knowledge of yourself and how you can find out about this,

Like being able to know how you individually can plan according to what you want to do and like how you can remember that you need to do something and keep your mind on that so that you don’t fall out of place. One way is that you can connect to maybe something you like, or you could find something you like and then look and find more things like that if you like it, but then like if you go on and you find that it’s not really all that cool or interesting to you, you could go and find another topic or another thing connected to the actual subject or maybe not connected to the subject

He continues to loosely connect to the topic until the question is posed, “Do you have a disability?” He simply states, with eyes in full contact, “Yes.” Even when asked what his disability is he expresses with clarity, “It is dyslexia, which is comprised of—can be comprised of many different things. It’s not just one thing and it’s not—it can vary.” His answers appear well rehearsed as if he has been taught the specifics of what causes him learning difficulties in order to gain the assistance he needs. Yet he is short in his containment of such straightforward answers and he proceeds to return to his verbose descriptions of thoughts processing through his mind. While Jasper’s explanation of self-advocacy was not clearly defined to the criteria of Test et al. or Deci and Ryan he, like many other students, described the use of accommodations as a support granted through his IEP and that these are a right he has that other student do not have. In addition, as has been seen in his answers the insight is ever present,

It exists because there are people, including me, that don’t really have the ability to do stuff like everyone who doesn’t have a disability and it makes it harder for those who
don’t—who have a disability to do stuff. So therefore people get this plan so that they can like learn and be at the same area and be with their grade, yet despite like them having a disability, basically allowing them to go with their grade and be able to learn and do all the other stuff with help so that they can graduate at the same time instead of being held back for like another year just so they get like twice the—so they, instead of being held back, so they know everything. It’s like helping people to get to the same area that everybody else is, in the groups that they know.

Jasper’s insights into how his disability was identified, the difficulties he and his family had in working to gain school support, and how it affects his learning, are clear. Although he uses his communication skills with limited efficiency, his discussions allow for an external oral processing of ideas and in the end he is able to articulate his thoughts. Jasper’s responses present similar understandings as seen in previous interviews in his awareness of what special education is and the processes associated with it. Jasper is able to identify how he learns, his areas of need, and that he has a role in gaining access to the supports necessary for learning. He may show difficulty in expressing his ideas, but with patience the listener can find the clarity in his thoughts as they are sifted through his oral discussions.

Jasper’s thoughts can initially be all encompassing, connecting ideas from numerous concepts, but with time and processing he often returns to a single idea, struggling to complete, or knowing he needs to complete, his academic work. His knowledge of self in how long activities take him is visible in the stress and anxiousness he presents in his responses. When asked if he knows his legal rights associated with special education he initially provides a historical account of how special education came to existence:
IEPs were developed and how people learned that they needed these to help people that had disabilities and how, in the past, people with disabilities were almost farther behind than people who are fighting for rights of like—we were learning about how there was—while there was racism in the world, they were saying—there was a thing that said while people of different races were trying to get the ability to sit anywhere on a bus, people with disabilities were fighting for the right to get on a bus, because people with physical disabilities would not be able to use public transportation, because they didn’t have wheelchair access on busses. And during times when people didn’t know about mental disabilities, they used to just put them in an almost prison like area, because if they couldn’t be—they didn’t know what to do and therefore they thought we can’t have these people around, so they just locked the people who were with the mental disabilities, like learning disabilities and stuff like that, up in like a prison like school building.

After being redirected to focus on his specific rights he is limited in his response as to not knowing the full extent, but then returns to the ever present stress in needing to complete tasks:

I’ve been, like, I usually think about like how I need to get something done or that I need to make sure I get this in or that in. It’s not really usually about what affects me in terms of like what I can do and cannot do, but I usually make sure I try to follow everything that’s being told to me and not getting like off track—topic or like failing to remember what people say.

Although, while Jasper may fluctuate in his ability to identify the specifics, he is aware of what he can do if there are concerns associated with his IEP. He states he has the ability to talk with a teacher, his family, and if needed he can use his special education teacher as a resource.
Jasper is not sure what supports are available in college. He does not feel he has had the time to learn about possible supports he could access. He expresses his comfort with sharing information with others and states that he would disclose his disability and needs in order to acquire support in post-secondary education. He shows a desire and sees the ability within himself to be a leader, as he sees it to take action when others may not. He recounts the time, in middle school when his sister was having a seizure on their school bus. While he was not able to understand what was occurring, he was able to direct others for help, call his mother for assistance, and inform the paramedics when they arrived; “…I took leadership and I made sure to tell them like the important things like … medications she had taken, what she was allergic to … to make sure that there was no problem in like treating her.” While he shows the attributes of leadership he is also reticent to be a leader:

I don’t think I would want to lead anyone unless I knew exactly what it was that I was leading them in or I was comfortable with everybody and I knew everybody that I was in charge of leading, because I wouldn’t want to like say, “Oh, here’s what we need to do,” and then be completely wrong and feel like I failed to help people.

Jasper shows that when he has a belief in his abilities he is able to allow himself to be a positive risk taker, to advocate not only for him, but act on behalf of others. However, his self-consciousness can lead to a deflated sense of competency that will influence his choice not to act, because the outcome may have adverse repercussions. Jasper does feel within the context of his team meetings he is heard, has the ability to be autonomous in the choices he makes, while still be aware that others are there to provide support. While he did not always feel supported and recounts times he felt bullied in primary and middle school, he sees the support he has now
within his special education course provides a sense of belonging and the ability to have the support he needs.

**Jack.** Jack is a 17 year old young man coming to the end of his 10th grade year in high school. He receives special education support through his IEP for a Specific Learning disability, associated with basic reading skills and reading comprehension. Jack’s team notes that his disability affects progress in all areas of his academic curriculum due to difficulty acquiring reading decoding skills, comprehending grade level text, and in the completion of essays. Specially designed instruction and accommodations that assist Jack in accessing his curriculum include the use of graphic organizers, editing conferences, and extended deadlines in order to meet the requirements for written work. His team reports that “he requires frequent check-ins for organization of materials and for managing his time for long term projects.” Jack assessments and educational records show he has short term memory limitations and a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, for which he takes medication. Jack’s records report he has difficulty focusing in the classroom. He will also make impulsive choices that demonstrate little reflection on outcomes and consequences.

Jack’s IEP shows that he is concerned with the ability to complete academic work efficiently and to successfully complete the foreign language requirement in order to graduate. Jack was removed from foreign language in the middle school in order to be able to attend additional special education support classes. Now he reports struggling to keep up with the material and to have the ability to remember due to the amount of information. Regardless of Jack’s learning needs, he has future aspirations. His vision as indicated in his IEP shows he “…wants to go to college and study business and marketing after graduating from high school.”
While this is a longer term goal his short-term goals include, “…continue to work on his reading, writing, organization and self-advocacy over the next school year … improve his overall grades… continue to explore his interests for post-secondary planning as he progresses through the transition planning process.” Jack’s transitional year into high school shows he struggles with many of the academic subjects, often receiving grades in the low average to below average range. His cumulative examinations, such as mid-terms and finals were particular areas of difficulty in that many were either below average or failed. While his initial year was difficult Jack did show improvement in his second year of high school; many of his assessments and performance evaluations showed improvement in his core content course, including English, math, science, and history.

Jack presents as a polite young man, he is short with his answers, simply stating what he thinks and adding very little afterwards. His awareness of what self-advocacy is focuses more on the ability to complete tasks, “…like, applying for yourself”, versus the ability to acquire resources, support, or communicate his needs. He is uncommitted in his answers of if he has the ability or could self-advocate, simply answering, “Sometimes” with no further explanation. Yet, he begins to show possible reasons for his answers when the discussion centers on if he is included in decisions or if he receives assistance. When asked if he feels his teachers or family members know what types of supports he needs he replies, “Sort of… I feel like everything’s just kind of like, by the books. If I need something like, to learn it this way, it’s kind of like no; we need to do it that way. It’s like just going along with the course.” He feels that he is made to fit others’ molds and is hesitant within the setting of classrooms to ask for a different approach, “If there’s like 20 other students in that class and they’re all learning it like that [way], then I don’t think they should change everything just to apply to me.”
While he expresses some doubt as to how supported he is in classes, Jack is able to articulate that he does receive accommodations through his IEP. He explains that he believes he has a disability, but only because he read it within the IEP. While he understands that he is a visual learner, he is not clear how this ties into the support he receives or needs in order to be successful in school. Jack has limited understanding, as other students showed, with the specifics of his rights within special education. He expressed not knowing what specifically his responsibilities were, or what those of his family and teacher were. He has not explored post-secondary supports, expressing he was not aware that there were any available.

Jack does feel a sense of connectedness to his school; he feels that this comes from his social ability and enjoying being around others. He has been engaged in school through activities, but still these connections appear not to alleviate his sense that he is sometimes just going through the motions that others put in play. In his IEP meetings he believes, “… they kind of tell me what is going on, like what will happen…whoever’s in the meeting tells … based on test and everything, I’ll have them just go off on that.” When he does receive feedback he presents mixed feelings of if it is helpful; “It depends if I can understand it. If it’s just like no – they don’t ask if I am like, understanding it.” Within Jack’s answer there is some awareness of knowledge of self and of the rights he can have. He presents with the ability to communicate, if he chooses, but lacks a clear sense of autonomy in the decisions that are made for him. Furthermore his statements regarding feedback present some negativity toward his levels of competency, “It’s mostly just, I need to do better… get higher grades…” Jack linked these statements to the possibility that others see him as not being able to attend college because, “My grades aren’t good enough or I just can’t.” Through the interview Jack was always respectful in his statements and explanations of others views, but the negativity and sense of detachment from
the ability to shape his choice ultimately provides a disconnect between his statements of being connected to his school and community and an actual feeling of belonging.

**George.** George is a 17 year old young man completing the 10th grade. He receives special education support through his IEP for a Health disability associated with difficulties in regulating attention and concentration. George’s special education team notes in his IEP that he struggles with organization, homework completion, and following directions. He also has difficulty with writing assignments and tests. School evaluations show George to have low average to average ranges of achievement, “George demonstrates a relative strength in the area of mathematics, achieving a high average score on the subtest measuring math problem solving.” George is seen to have overall low average cognitive abilities, with significant weaknesses in symbolic memory recall, “…when seven of George's cognitive test scores were compared, he demonstrated a significant relative weakness on the Visual-Auditory Learning test.” George expresses that he will often study the night before a test, but when he goes to take the test he forgets what he has studied.

George’s family reports in the IEP that they “…would like to see him more invested in his academic performance and improve the quality of his finished product. They are concerned with his memory and how it relates to the inconsistency of his academic performance.” Their concerns are echoed within the observations from his special education team and in the formal evaluation the school has completed. George also expressed concerns in his last IEP team meeting that he, “…is concerned about his ability to pay attention in the classroom. He would like to develop a better understanding of the topics he studies in class, and develop strategies to make understanding new topics easier.” Yet, as has been seen with many of the students interviewed, their learning disabilities do not stop them from looking to the future and setting
goals. George has expressed he would like to go to a four year college after graduating from high school. While he is not currently focused on a specific school or major George does respond with understanding that college is important. In order to achieve his future goals his team has developed two specific learning goals that will need to be achieved; self-advocacy and organization study skills. George’s self-advocacy goal includes academic needs and the ability for George to seek out support from his teachers in order to clarify questions and concerns regarding his assignments. While this is focused on the academics, the goal’s benchmark will support George’s communication with his teachers.

George came to the interview appearing at ease and conversational. He stated not completely understanding why he was there, but that his mother had said it would be good for him to go. George is an agreeable young man, appears happy and uses quick comments and acknowledgments through shaking yes with his head, but at times it is apparent that he either has not understood the question or may not be attending to the information. To check for understanding George is often asked to explain a question or expand his answers, with this he would often stop his conversation, adjust his posture to a more upright position, think about the question with pausing thought and then ask for repetition. His attention concerns were visible, but more for a sense that he simply wished to be doing something else and not as a significant barrier to his ability to understand or comprehend what was being discussed.

George is articulate and is able to express his thoughts well. When he is unsure of an answer he shows that he is willing to attempt a guess. Even though his initial answers are short and reactive he is engaging. He explains his understanding of self-advocacy as the actions a person takes; “Isn't it like when you want to go ahead by yourself and like go ahead and ask for others’ help. Is that what it is?” He continues to explain self-advocacy through an example he
provides, “I like stayed after in the library and I did it [an essay] all myself and got it in on time… I just went for it. I mean I had notes that I had from class and all that.” George shows some awareness in that he understands that to self-advocate is to act for oneself, but does not expand his view to what that may entail. His responses to other questions show a similar approach, in understanding what it means to know oneself, he repeats the question within his answer, “knowing of what you can do.” In asking how he becomes aware of himself and what this can mean to help with his learning George explains that in some classes he was exposed to information to show his learning style, but that these lessons were short-lived and in the beginning of the school year. Although while there were some individual lessons George’s awareness as to how his teachers use the information to benefit students shows the difficulty in individualized instruction. “Not to like one individual; I feel like they take in like everybody's account and then they like change it so that they can try and teach everybody but like in a way that they can help individually.”

George articulates that while he feels his family and teachers may not understand his future goals, they more than he, know what he may need to be successful. George reflects that in college “I feel like, like in college I feel like there should be like extra, like a Strategies class in college. Like if you want to take that, if you can have a choice to take it or not.” George is expressing some of his awareness in the rights he has over other students, which are granted to him through his IEP. The “strategies” course is provided to students who received disability services in order to support their completion of their goals in a sub-separate setting outside of their regular classroom. His awareness of the contents of his IEP and the rights and responsibilities associated with the IEP are reflective of his peers who were interviewed. “I have extra time on essays and tests… and projects. That's really all I know really.” George is
aware that the difference between what he may receive with special education supports and what his peers without may get does differ; “I feel like they [teachers], if they like know you have an IEP, then they'll like understand more and like help. They'll want to help you more as an individual. Like if it was like me versus someone else who doesn’t have an IEP, I feel like I could get like more one on one time.” George expresses that the additional individual attention does help his learning. He acknowledges that having his support services gives him a place and time to reflect and that there is someone to give that extra help when it is needed. He is able to express why he has an IEP, “I have ADHD and like some dyslexia. “ He mentions that while he was not part of the discussion he is aware because he was with the doctor and his family when they discussed the information. He cannot explain how the diagnosis led to the IEP, but simply explains that his family felt he needed help.

George feels a connection and sense that he belongs within his school community. He speaks of being connected through school clubs and sports. “The sports are like I feel like a good connection, because I remember like when I was younger, it wasn't like through the school that you did the sports but now, in high school it’s like its high school sports.” He feels this makes him part of the school. While he feels socially connected this does not transfer to his independence to resolve academic difficulties for himself. He expresses that decisions of the IEP or if there are conflicts with being supported in the classroom are often resolved between his family and his special education teacher. He feels his responsibility is focused on completing the work assigned. He does not bring his earlier action oriented belief of self-advocacy to the present questions regarding responsibilities, communication, and conflict resolution. With his focus being that his responsibility is on completing the work assigned he notes, “…if I don't get it done, they'll like have a fall back system…..”
George has expressed his future will involve going to school. He has described that he has difficulty and that he does require the assistance of others. While he has spoken about self-advocacy, in his defining of what he feels it is, he has an external orientation of control as to who will take care of difficulties and even when he is unable to maintain his identified responsibilities there will be others that can resolve the concern. This focus continues with his understanding of post-secondary supports. He is unaware of what supports may exist, he is unsure what he could do to find out, and he has not yet attempted to discuss or find out what may need to be done to secure support. George is not acting inappropriately, but his responses reinforce the research which shows one fault in self-advocacy is the level of supports available to students with disabilities (Konrad, Fowler, Walker, Test, & Wood, 2007). That these supports, often the individuals involved in the students’ lives act as a barrier and the student becomes sheltered from having to act on their own behalf (Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004). George, similar to his peers, lacks the specific understanding of the key terms and systemic process associated with special education, but he retains an awareness of his abilities, what he may acquire that is different from other students, and what constitutes positive communication and interactions. However, George like some and unlike others has a circle of support that he relies on to resolve his concerns, which insulates him from applying self-advocacy.

Sean. Sean is a 16 year old young man finishing his 10th grade year in high school. Sean, as with the other interviewees, is supported through special education. Sean is categorized as having a specific learning disability, primarily associated with his ability to comprehend what he reads. Sean is seen as “…a friendly, pleasant, polite student who is hardworking. Outside of school, Sean is interested in sports, especially golf and basketball.” (IEP, 2015). Sean’s special education team presents their concerns trying to blend a level of support and independence;
We recognize that school is difficult for Sean and we want to find the right level of support that provides challenges for him…We would never want to challenge him beyond a level that he is capable of, but we don't want to sell him short either.

Sean’s team is clear in their vision for him that he “…has future goals that include …going to college … studying either science or broadcasting … and would still like to be involved with athletics at the collegiate level.” With these future goals the team recognizes that Sean will be required to increase his levels of independence and become enrolled in challenging academic coursework. The team presents the need for Sean to advocate for what he needs and “with hard work, perhaps he can move from an IEP to a 504 plan in the course of the next three years.” With this the team’s focus is to remove the restrictive nature of pull-out specially design instruction to be replaced with accommodations that Sean would use and engaged in order to increase his access to the curriculum.

Sean presents in standardized assessments as having a range of measured abilities. He shows below average to high average abilities in his cognitive functioning, with memory and language comprehension in the low ranges. Sean shows stronger applied abilities with low average scores in his ability to perform basic reading skills (phonetic and sight word recognition), but struggles with the recall and inferential understanding of material read at grade level. Sean’s strengths within the cognitive testing are seen in his measures of phonemic synthesis and measures of induction and inference visual analysis associated with patterns recognition (IEP, 2015). With this blend of skills and with both the concerns and vision for Sean he and his team developed special education IEP goals in the areas of reading comprehension, organization, and self-advocacy. Sean’s self-advocacy goal focuses on increasing awareness of his learning style, communicating with his teachers, and asking for assistance when it is required.
The team does recognize that Sean is able to communicate within his classroom in order to participate in discussions and to evaluate his performance.

During the interview Sean presented as cooperative, engaged, and polite. He was approachable and quick to respond to questions. While there were times that he seemed unaware of what the questions may be asking he sparingly requested clarifications or repetition of the information. These observations appear to confirm some of the views he and his special education team have in regard to his need to ask for assistance, but his willingness and ability to engage in conversations. In the interview Sean expressed his understanding of self-advocacy as the action he takes in order to communicate with others; “…you go ask her [the teacher] a question or see her like after school just to get some help.” He feels he does a “…pretty good job…” self-advocating, but does not further articulate what areas he either is strong in or needs to improve. Sean’s understanding of himself focuses from a weakness position, “…like knowing what your weaknesses are…”, but he has a positive twist, “…trying to get help… so you can be successful.” Sean’s answers often reflect an external sense of responsibility. One in which others may need to help him so that he can be successful. He spends little time on exploring what he individually can do to improve his skills outside a repeated statement of asking for assistance or speaking with his special education teacher if problems in the class arise.

As seen within the literature, areas suspected of causing students with learning disabilities difficulty in post-secondary studies are their lack of awareness and understanding of the systemic process for special education, their understanding of what a disability is, and skills deficit on how to communicate (Brinckerhoff, 1994, 1996; Fiedler et al., 2007; Phillips, 1990). Sean’s answers are reflective of these concerns; when asked if he has a disability he responds with “I don’t think so.” While he is aware that he has an IEP he is unsure what the abbreviation
stand for or what it contains outside the ability to have extended time for tests. In a review of his IEP the document shows that Sean has twelve listed accommodations, one being for the extended time to complete test and quizzes. As seen within his team’s vision and in his answers to interview questions Sean does have the ability to communicate his ideas, but will often let others speak for him. He explains this choice in an example of when he felt his rights of not receiving accommodations occurred. “I wasn’t getting the accommodations…I was guaranteed. Like, I wasn’t getting extra time or enough time for tests…the teacher wasn’t really doing a good job advocating or teaching the curriculum to me.” When asked what he was able to do to resolve the situation he stated, “I talked to the strategies teacher and it was…and I like told my parents, they had a meeting to talk about what the…like what accommodations I had.” Sean is asked by the interviewer, “Were you at that meeting?” he simply stated “No.” When first reviewing Sean’s answers he shows limited understanding of the process and is often quick to engage his ability to communicate in order to allow others to resolve situations. However, with further exploration Sean articulates a concerning thought. He is asked if it would have been a good idea for him to be at the meeting; “I don’t know. I feel like it didn’t really affect the meeting if I was there or not.”

Sean explains that at times he does not always feel supported within his classes. He feels that the teachers can go too fast with their teaching; he reflects on this and states the teachers do not have the chance to be able to teach the content thoroughly and they do not ask questions of their students to evaluate the class’ understanding. When Sean moves away from the more personal nature of what happens in his school to thinking about the future he appears more confident in his ability to self-advocate. He explains that he would speak with professors to be able to receive the accommodations he needs, he states he can be persuasive to influence others
in changing their minds, and is able to communicate clearly what he may need. There is a sense of contradiction in Sean’s answers, while he appears confident in his future role to self-advocate he shows limited signs now of enacting the skills, rather allowing others to speak for him.

Sean does feel he is listened to during times of decisions and while others may make choices for him other than what he would have, he responds by answering they have more knowledge of what is necessary for success in the future so he often agrees with their decisions. When he is unsure he will question why a decision was made, but more to understand the process and not to disagree. Sean is not completely unaware of his rights; as with his peers he articulates his rights in understanding that he receives accommodations or adjustments to how teachers work with him because of his IEP. He does present with the comfort to communicate and does feel a sense of belonging and autonomy within his school community, but will often acquiesce to the decisions of others.

As has been revealed in the literature, some barriers to students’ self-advocacy are the regulations that guide the legal obligations of the special education process within the primary and secondary levels of students’ education. The responsibilities of providing supports falls legally on the school, and through the collaboration of teachers, support staff, and families students can often experience an insulating effect where they are not required to act for themselves and cannot be allowed to fail so others step in and make the decisions (Schreiner, 2007; Test & Neale, 2004). This can result in amotivation and a sense of paralysis on the part of the student to engage in the process and can leave them vulnerable to future conflicts when these supports are removed.
Theme Development

Within the focus of qualitative research, discovery of emergent themes is paramount. The deductive process of evaluating an existing theory gives way to the inductive process of exploring data in the attempt to discover emergent themes from the experiences of the participants within the study. Reviewing the data, gathered from the various sources within the study: semi-structured interviews, student and systemic artifacts, observations of the students, and researcher analytical memos, also for the development of these themes. The analysis of data included the steps of pre-organizing, coding, evaluating emergent themes and sub-themes, and interpreting meaning. Through this process hundreds of individual units of information were able to be reduced into five cohesive themes, each with supporting sub-themes. The five themes include: awareness, security, communication, experiences, and motivation. The following section provides the definition and discussion of the themes and sub-themes. Theme definitions and discussions, generated from the data are followed by the source data table that shows how participants supported the themes and the location the data was collected from. Interviews consisted of one-to-one semi-structured sessions while artifacts included students’ Individual Education Program, observations, and cumulative school records.

Awareness. Awareness is defined by an individual’s ability to have an understanding of who they are and how the processes of disability supports affect them. Within students’ awareness two sub-themes emerged; self-awareness and process awareness. Self-awareness included the participants’ understanding of their interests, strengths and weakness in their learning styles, preferences, satisfaction and dissatisfaction within their learning environments. In the sub-theme of process awareness, participants’ understanding of what special education
was, what the terms associated with disability support were, and how to implement their rights under disability regulations was assessed.

Research into student self-advocacy has expressed that students can lack the skills and understanding of who they are, what they need, their rights, and the protection they are afforded under special education regulations (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Field et al., 2007; Brinckerhoff, 1994, 1996; Meglemre, 2010; Schreiner, 2007). Participants’ responses clearly showed that participants have ‘awareness’ into their own abilities; their strengths and weaknesses.

**Self-awareness.** Self-awareness included participants’ understanding of their learning strengths, weakness, preferences, along with their insight into their disability. Additionally, participants’ self-awareness showed their future orientation towards selecting goals, consideration of post-secondary options, and what they may need to accomplish their visions. All participants (N=7, 100 percent) showed a level of understand for self-awareness; within interviews participants accurately defined their learning profiles in which they articulated how they accessed, processed, expressed information acquired within their classroom environments. Within the interviews, participants’ explanations included such statements as, “I know I like to write stuff... (Samantha), “I like to go to the library… And I just go for it” (George), “If I really want to get it done, I will do it, but sometimes I’ll procrastinate wait until the end.” (Jack). Some subjects were more articulate with their learning styles, “I'm in many different categories, mainly kinesthetic, a bit of audio and visual and occasionally musical.” (Holly). Comparing subject responses with artifact analysis there was consistent confirmation that supported the participants’ accurate insights into who they were and how they approached learning. Within the IEPs and student cumulative school records, participant’s knowledge of what they had difficulty with, their expressed interests, and future goals they had set were able to be verified. In all, there was a
strong understanding of self-awareness by the participants, but the articulations of their knowledge varied from highly specific definitions to general statements of needs and interests.

**Process awareness.** Process awareness encompassed the participants’ understanding of the procedures and rights within the context of disability support services. The participants were evaluated as to their knowledge of the disability process and the rights provided based on having a disability plan. These included knowing if they have a disability, how determination of eligibility was completed, understanding they have an IEP and what it may contain, knowing the responsibilities of the parties involved (self, family, school), how to redress violations of their plan, and if they had an understanding of support after high school. In determining the level of awareness (formal versus informal) participants who at least had knowledge that a plan existed, what it allowed for support, and the ability to redress violations was considered reasonable to determine a ‘formal level’ of awareness. With this based on participant’s responses in interviews and supporting evidence within their IEP, 71 percent (N= 5) had a formal level of understanding as it related to disability process and rights. The remaining two subjects were unaware that they had a disability, but were aware they had an IEP that provided classroom accommodations. When the level of awareness criteria was expanded, to include specific definitions and steps of formal process within disability rights and responsibilities, subjects’ awareness showed a decline in advocacy ability. Including subjects knowledge of supports after high school, 28 percent were aware (N =2) and with the inclusion for formal awareness of the responsibilities of each party (student, school, and family) involved awareness was at 28 percent (N = 2).

While the subjects’ articulation of the formal process was limited in understanding specific terms, they were able to discuss their understanding that they did receive supports, which they were aware that other students without a disability plan did not. In this subjects most
often associated disability services with the ability to have accommodations; an alternative approach to accessing their curriculum (extended time to complete examination, extended deadlines to turn in assignments, the ability to use alternate settings to complete testing, and the ability to have materials adjusted to their learning needs) and to have someone available to provide supports as needed to redress concerns (special education teacher, guidance counselor, or parent).

Participants did present with knowledge in who they were and what they were permitted to receive within the context of disability and learning services. They showed a high rate (100 percent for self-awareness, 71 percent for formal process awareness) to support the conclusion that they maintain an understanding of self and process that support their overall awareness within disability learning supports.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-theme/Participant</th>
<th>Self-Awareness</th>
<th>Process Awareness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasper</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
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</table>
Security. When participants were asked if they could define self-advocacy they presented with the ability to describe speaking up for themselves, working with others, and communicating what they wanted to expressed. When participants were asked if they would self-advocate several expressed a concern or a hesitation to advocate based on their perceptions of what or how others may react. In this responses included “…it just kind of like depends on the way they teach, and some teachers don’t really like when I ask for extra time…”, “…feels like I’m bothering them.”, “I can [self-advocate], but I wouldn’t. I am not afraid to, but it’s just like I’m just kind of afraid to talk to teachers…”, and “They [classroom teacher] won’t get what I am saying.” Participants avoided self-advocating when they felt there was limited or no security to express their needs. In this, if subjects felt the possibility of negative reactions or disapproval they would not engage in advocacy. The theme, security, is defined as an environment comprised of physical and personal attributes, which create the belief that an individual belongs and is supported. The two sub-themes, belonging and support, are the participants’ subjective views as to what allows them to feel a sense of security and as a result choose to advocate.

Belonging. Belonging comprised the participants’ belief that they were included in an environment that allowed them to be who they were and connected. This included being part of a group with similar attributes (learning needs, interests, and activity engagement) and the ability to access learning supports without fear of disapproval. In evaluating subjects’ responses for belonging on the basis of similarities to their peers, 71 percent had formal awareness that their inclusion and those of their peers into the Strategies for Learning classroom (location of their special education services outside the regular education environment) was based on having a disability that required support. In addition 85 percent (N = 6) responded to believing they either
had the ability to or were actively engaged in extracurricular activities (athletics, music, clubs, or drama), with 86 percent expressing a belief that these engagement allowed for a connection to their classroom and school community.

Support. The defining aspects of support include participants’ beliefs that they could engage, without fear of negative judgement or that the reason for not engaging was due to their perceptions of negative judgement and a sense that the environment was not supportive of their needs. Subjects’ responses as to when they chose not to engage, due to fear of negative support was primarily connected to interaction within the curriculum classrooms. 71 percent (N = 5) of subjects reported during interviews that there was a sense they would not be understood, not be given the time to explain their needs, or that the classroom structure did not foster a supportive environment. However, in review of the student concerns section of subjects’ IEPs, there were no reported concerns associated with these types of negative perceptions. In contrast to the negative views, positive views of support that fostered the choice to engage were seen to be both within the curriculum classrooms and the student’s Strategies for Learning classroom. Positive views of support included responses that as relationships were fostered in the classrooms they understood what curriculum teachers wanted and that they felt the ability to communicate with them without fear of reprisal. 85 percent of subjects (N = 6) responded that they could seek out the advice or guidance of their special education teacher when they were asked who or where they could go to identify information or to use accommodations.

Participants’ beliefs that they were secure in being able to be who they are, connected to a community, and positively supported had a substantial effect in their choice to engage advocacy. An average of 85 percent of participants reported that with positive support and connection to community they would engage in communication and advocacy. In comparison 71
percent reported avoiding interactions with personnel that could support their needs when there was a negative support perception. The following chart indicates how participants reported belonging and what types of support they encountered that shaped their choice to for a sense of security.

Table 2. Participants’ response set for sub-themes of Security and source location.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-theme/Participant</th>
<th>Belonging</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>N, P</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>S, C</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Interview, Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>S, C</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Interview, Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasper</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>S, C</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>N, P</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>S,C</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>N, P</td>
<td>Interview, Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>N, P</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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</table>

**Communication.** Communication is defined as the ability of the participants to engage with others to express their thoughts and convey meaning through reciprocal discussion. With
this theme two supporting sub-themes developed, articulation of thoughts and ability to process information in order to engage in conversation. During interviews participants provided multiple examples of communicating with others (teachers, parents, school staff, and peers) in order to acquire action, clarify information, or express their ideas. They were able to describe the differences between what they determined to be positive communication skills (eye contact, listening to others, and being clear in what you say) and negative communication skills (not engaging in communication, not expressing your thoughts, going off-topic, and having a one-sided conversation without listening). When specifically asked if they could communicate all subjects stated they could (N = 7). However, in reviewing their IEPs two subjects were noted to have difficulty in communicating with others (Samantha and Jasper) either due to their emotional regulation or their ability to clearly articulate their thoughts.

**Articulation of thoughts.** Articulation of thoughts developed through the analysis of participants’ statements to questions of communication skills, leadership ability, in the review of IEP data that included parent/staff concerns and testing data in the areas of language comprehension and expression. The basis of the sub-theme comprises the individual’s ability to convey the meaning they have to others with clarity and without repeated requests to explain their responses or the need to have additional clarification provided to them in order to be able to respond. An individual’s ability to articulate their thoughts aids their ability to communicate their needs and interests so as to be connected with others and develop the sense of belonging that strengthens their sense of security and choice to advocate. After reviewing data and the coding that arose from interviews and artifact 57 percent of subjects (N = 4) were seen to be able to articulate their thoughts with clarity.
**Information processing.** Information processing, within the context of communication is defined as the participants’ ability to take in information (verbal and nonverbal), develop an understanding of the information, be able to provide a cognizant response and fluidly adapt to changes in the conversation. In this definition it is necessary to further define two areas, two types of information an individual encounter and fluid adaptation to changes in conversation. Communication has two distinctive parts: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal information is the spoken part of speech, while nonverbal is the visual symbols the person sees and interprets. Nonverbal communication can include the gestures, facial features, and body posture that is used when receiving or expressing information. These combine to provide meaning within the communication. Fluid adaptation is based on cognitive science and describes an individual’s ability to adjust their reasoning to changes that may or may not have been expected without significant disruption in their ability to maintain the conversation. Analysis of participants’ information processing required review of their responses during interviews for the answers they provided and based on the rate of communication. A base evaluation of rate of conversational exchange was determined by observing and engaging in conversations while timing the exchange of responses (range of 0.39 to 3.15 seconds with a mean of 1.47 seconds). Evaluating if participants’ rate of communication included determining if participants required longer times (50% based on a typical accommodation extension provided within IEPs provided a mean of 2.20 seconds or greater with a range from 0.58 to 4.73 seconds) to respond. 57 percent of subjects (N = 4) were seen to have fluid information processing abilities.

Communication by participants allows for the exchange of information so as to connect with others, access resources, and express thoughts. In the process of defining communication two areas; articulations of thoughts and information process showed that 57 percent of
participants were able to both communicate with clarity and have a fluid response in their communications. Responses provided by subjects with lower communication abilities also corresponded to views with perceptions of negative support and disconnection in a sense of belonging.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-theme/Participant</th>
<th>Articulation of thoughts</th>
<th>Information processing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Source</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C = With clarity</td>
<td>F = Fluid process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UC = Without clarity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>UC</td>
<td>Interview, IEP,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>Jasper</td>
<td>UC</td>
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<td>Jack</td>
<td>UC</td>
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<td>Sean</td>
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**Experiences.** Experiences are defined as the ability for individuals to use self-advocacy skills in their environments, which allows the development, practice, and refinement of these skills to strengthen automaticity in their application. Within the responses of the participants two sub-themes developed that supports experiences: opportunity and leadership. Research into self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and self-advocacy (Test et al., 2005) shows that individuals need to have the ability to use skills in order to develop an understanding of how and when to apply them to situations. The components of self-advocacy that are already proven in the research literature by Test et al. (2005) were used to evaluate if participants had the both opportunity and the ability to employ leadership. The skills that were used to evaluate self-advocacy was that individuals applied their knowledge of self and rights, communicated to share information regarding their knowledge, and shown acts of leadership. With these criteria in place all participants did show they had some level of experiences that allowed for their use of self-advocacy.

**Opportunity.** Opportunity is the ability for participants to use skills of self-advocacy in situations where they can acquire feedback, refine the practice of these skills, and achieve an outcome, favorable or not favorable. With opportunity individuals are able to identify what skills they have, which skills are areas of strengths, and which skills continue to need development. Without opportunity individuals cannot practice and are left to rely on the interventions from external sources. In interviews all participants indicated some opportunities that allowed them to apply their knowledge of self, their awareness of the rights they had, and communicate with others to convey their needs and goals (N = 7).

Participants’ interview responses, artifact analysis, and observations showed two forms of opportunity arose for subjects; formal and informal. Formal opportunity included situations that
were designed to elicit responses and engagement from participants. These included classroom discussions, such as “Student Lead Discussions” (SLD) where they were assigned topics to discuss, develop pervasive arguments, and counter others’ opinions and views. These classroom based activities allowed the subjects to use the awareness of themselves and their ability to communicate (with both articulation and information processing) their ideas and views. Other formal opportunities included the participant's’ attendance at special education team meetings. During these meetings they were directly included in the discussions relevant to their self-advocacy skills, ability to communicate with other, interests, concerns (general and specific), and vision for future plans. When subjects’ team determined that the ability to self-advocate was a specific goal to be addressed by their plan, subjects provided their insights into their areas of need and what strengths they currently possessed. These formal events provided directed opportunities to elicit responses from subjects and allow their participation in the development of their awareness, communication, and expressions of connecting to others who were part of their support programs.

Informal opportunities were less structured in design as compared with formal opportunities, and only 57 percent of subjects were able to articulate informal opportunities that were available to them. Subjects’ descriptions of informal opportunities included the ability to interact outside the classroom sessions or away from formal meetings with staff that allowed for them to use self-advocacy skills. Examples provided by subjects included discussing the use of accommodations for coursework and testing, the ability to be persuasive in obtaining extra days for project completion, discussing concerns regarding their level of responsibility in a group project, or working with support staff to develop discussions for rights they are allowed.
Leadership. Leadership is taking an active role in the design, organization and follow through of an activity, task, or belief (Test et al., 2005). The sub-theme grew from previous research on self-advocacy, but was included within the study to delineate and identify that if subjects were provided the ability to speak or act for others would they so choose. All of the participants (N = 7) identified the ability to take leadership roles in their school and community through classroom activities, athletics, within clubs, and through employment. While all were able to identify the ability to take a leadership role only six of the seven participants accepted the role and acted in a leadership capacity (85 percent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant/ Sub-theme</th>
<th>Opportunity</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F = Formal</td>
<td>A= Available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IF = Informal</td>
<td>P= Participatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>F, IF</td>
<td>A, P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview, IEP, Observations</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A, P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>F, IF</td>
<td>A, P</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jasper</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A, P</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Interview, IEP, Observations</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>F, IF</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
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Motivation. Motivation is the driving force that allows us to move forward and accomplish tasks. Motivation has been determined to have two primary modes; internal (intrinsic) and external (extrinsic). The defining characteristics of the theme motivation are not developed specifically by this study, but rather use the works of Ryan and Deci (2000) to provide the definitions that assess how the participants utilized motivation in the processes of self-advocating. The theme of motivation developed from analysis of the participants’ responses to questions associated with components of self-advocacy, as identified by the works of Deci and Ryan (2000), and by the research of Test et al. (2005). In this participants’ responses to questions of understanding self and their rights, the ability and choices made in acquiring information for decisions, and resolving conflict provided coding nodes that, when refined, are reflective of the sub-themes for internal and external motivation.

Internal. Internal motivation is defined as participants acting based on their wants, views, and needs. In this they are rewarded by the internal factors such as self-exploration, sense of accomplishment, or desire of outcomes that they have self-determined. The analysis of interview responses and artifacts, specifically the descriptions of participants within their IEPs, progress reports, and transition plans shows that all subjects exhibited some level of intrinsic motivation sub-themes in their decision making and actions. 71 (N= 5) percent of subjects presented with internal motivation for knowledge of themselves and use of the information to support learning.
With this participants and supporting documents expressed the subjects’ awareness of their interests, learning styles, and general goals for education. Forty-three (N=3) percent of subjects showed an internal focus with relation to knowledge of rights. While subjects could recognize some components of their rights (accommodations) they were reliant on the external structures to be in place that would support their rights (team meetings, support personnel, and parents). 100 (N=7) percent of subjects showed an internal drive in their decision making for general requirements of education (course selection, participation in activities, post-secondary goals). While subjects were aware of external requirements, such as graduation requirements or course requirements, their use of first person pronouns and the connections of answers in the explanation of their decisions showed a primarily internal decision making focus. Internal motivation decreased with the engagement of subjects in their conflict resolution. In this 43 (N=3) percent of subjects’ answers presented as fulfilling their drives as compared to allowing others to resolve conflict or having the conflict resolve based on external requirements.

**External.** External motivation is defined as participants acting based on their expectations outside their control. They can believe it is a requirement, that another has more authority or knowledge, or that in order to obtain some reward (academic grades, school credit, complete requirements) they will comply with the external expectations. Subjects showed external motivation as a driving force 29 (N=2) percent for knowledge of self, 57 (N=4) percent for knowledge of rights, and 57 (N=4) percent for conflict resolution. Decision making was not significantly affected by external factors.
Table 5. Participants’ response set for sub-themes of Motivation and source location.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant/ Sub-theme</th>
<th>Internal Motivation</th>
<th>External Motivation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KS = Knowledge of Self</td>
<td>Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KR = Knowledge of Rights</td>
<td>KS = Knowledge of Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D = Decision Making</td>
<td>KR = Knowledge of Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CR = Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>D = Decision Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CR = Conflict Resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>KS, D</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>KS, KR, D, CR</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>KS, KR, D, CR</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasper</td>
<td>KS, KR, D</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>D, CR</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>KS, D</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Interview, IEP</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Summation

Research speculates (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; Lynch & Gussel, 1996; McCarthy, 2007; Meglemre, 2010; Skinner, 1998; Trainor, 2002) students with learning disabilities leaving high school often lack the skills to self-advocate. This is partially attributed to a lack of understanding and practice with the skills associated with self-advocacy. Studies conducted regarding self-advocacy skills and high school students have primarily focused on increasing the student’s participatory role in the individual education program (IEP) meetings (Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, Greene, Gardner & Lovett, 2006; Test et al., 2005; Test & Neale, 2004) or acquiring specific self-advocacy skill sets (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Lynch, & Gussel, 1996; McCarthy, 2007). The research findings do not fully explain the difficulties students face in their transition to post-secondary education. Previous research methodologies and studies have looked to understanding the role of student self-advocacy through the perspectives of educators and families of students with learning disabilities. These studies provide valuable insights into many aspects of motivation, but lacked the view of the student.

The current study looked at seven high school students with various identified learning disabilities, which based on evaluations and a collaborative team based decision, receive special education services through the implementation of an individual education program. Through the use of Constructivism-Interpretivism paradigm with an inductive approach the case study analysis produced five primary themes and ten associated sub-themes. Analysis of semi-structured interviews and artifacts reveal themes of Awareness, Security, Communication, Experiences, and Motivation. While some of these themes support findings within the literature
others redefine the focus of previous research and challenge their conclusions. Chapter five will discuss the findings of the analysis and how these both support and challenge existing research findings. Furthermore chapter five will look at the limitations of this study, the potential biases that may have occurred and the approaches to reduce biases to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. Finally, chapter five will look to provide recommendations for existing practices currently in use and to suggest future areas of research.
Chapter 5
Discussion of Findings

Students with learning disabilities constitute one of the largest growing populations to enter into post-secondary studies (Lynch & Gussel, 1996; Meglemre, 2010). Through civil actions and the development of regulations requiring equity in education, students have gained access to free and appropriate education through their high school years. Even with these advancements, students with disabilities who lack self-advocacy skills seek out and request post-secondary supports less than half the time. This outcome results in students experiencing difficulties they may otherwise not have had to endure.

Brinckeroff (1994) found that students with learning disabilities who lack the skills to self-advocate are often at a disadvantage to succeed in post-secondary settings. Brinckerhoff (1994) defined self-advocacy as “…the ability to recognize and meet the needs specific to one’s learning disability, without compromising the dignity of oneself or others” (p. 230). Brinckerhoff (1994) defined self-advocacy as “…the ability to recognize and meet the needs specific to one’s learning disability, without compromising the dignity of oneself or others” (p. 230).

Research (Janiga & Constanbader, 2002; Lynch & Gussel, 1996; McCarthy, 2007; Meglemre, 2010; Skinner, 1998; Trainor, 2002) has looked at student’s self-advocacy and self-determinism, primarily from the perspectives of the school, their staff, and the families that provide the supports to students with learning disabilities. However, there is limited research that provide the views of the students themselves, their perceptions of the barriers they face, the supports they know to have and will use, their motivations, their understanding of who they are,
and the reasoning behind the choices they make. Without this perspective understanding the efficacy of programs, regulations, and interventions cannot be truly understood.

It is important to provide an overview of the high school and the community in which these student are apart. This will provide for possible future areas of research that scholars can initiate and will be further reviewed in the limitations of the study. Westport High School is a comprehensive high school of 1200 students. Their school profile indicates that the student body ethnicity is 91.8% Caucasian, 1% African American, 2.2% Hispanic, and 2.2% are Asian. The high school offers a diverse program of studies comprised of both core academics and electives. Students are required to obtain 110 credits to graduate with a minimum of four years in English, three years of math, science, and history, two year of foreign language, and additional courses in the arts and computer sciences (School profile, 2015).

The high school’s profile shows that between 2012 and 2014 93% of students went on to a four year college program, while 2% attended at least a two-year or specialized post-secondary program. In 2015, 395 Advance placement exams, in 15 subject areas were completed by 326 students (31% of the student body). In 2015 43% of the 326 students who took Advance Placement tests were honored as AP Scholars in comparison to the national average of only 19%. Students averages (and comparison state averages) on the College Board Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) for 2015 were 577 Critical Reading (508), 576 Math (521), and 574 for Writing (497), for a combined average of 1727 out of out 2400 (combine state average 1526). 256 SAT subject tests were completed in 10 subject areas by students, with a mean score range from 636 to 701 (School profile, 2015). The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education shows the high school has a 100% passing rate for the required state based test.
The high school is located in an upper class socioeconomic community 15 miles south of a metropolitan city. The community, incorporated in 1635, is home to a 100 acre town forest, state park, and harbor with direct access to the ocean. The community is home to 22,000 residents, primarily working in professional level employment fields of business, finance, medicine, and education, provide substantial support to the schools through repeated tax overrides for funding needs, including a new (2015) synthetic surface stadium, eight lane track, concession stands, and additional athletic facilities. The town’s mean tax rate is 12.49%, average home sale price is 625,000 dollars, and 51.4% of the household incomes exceed 100,000 dollars (24.5 exceed 200,000 or more dollars per year).

**Discussion of Findings**

The current study looks at seven high school students with various identified learning disabilities, which based on evaluations and a collaborative team based decision, receive special education services through the implementation of an individual education program. Through the use of Constructivism-Interpretivism paradigm with an inductive approach the case study analysis produced five primary themes and ten associated sub-themes. Analysis of semi-structured interviews and artifacts reveal primary themes of Awareness, Security, Communication, Experiences, and Motivation. To understand how, from the perspective of the students, these themes emerged and what role they play in their understanding, development, and use of self-advocacy the analysis of the data must be able to answer to original research questions posed.

**Research questions.** Educators and parents often express that students need to take responsibility for their actions, it is rarely articulated as to what specific skills students require or what may motivate these students to employ the skills in order to be successful self-advocates.
While past research studies focused on students’ skills deficits and increasing their participatory roles in the special education process; they sought answers from the perspectives of the adults that often acted as the barriers to the students’ independent growth in the use of their skill sets. With this in mind the study looked to expand the focus of previous research to develop an understanding if the ability to self-advocate is due to the lack of a specific skill set or the student’s choice to apply skill sets they currently have in order to advocate for their needs and wants in order to be successful in school and prepare for transition to post-secondary studies. With this as a basis the following research questions were posed.

_**How do high school students with learning disabilities view the role of the school and educators in their development and use self-advocacy skills?**_* Analysis of semi-structured interview responses and artifacts shows that students’ view the role of the school and educators differently. At a macro-level of review the school presents as the external systemic structure that provides both the requirements and opportunities for self-advocacy. At the micro-level of review the interactions, connections, and instructions with educators foster the student’s individual abilities to develop, use, and refine their self-advocacy skill sets. Data that supports this conclusion includes the themes of awareness, security, communication, and experiences.

Within the theme of _awareness_ subjects’ responses reflected the school’s policies and procedures. These included the requirements of developing IEPs, holding special education meeting in which they were a part of, having documents that could be reviewed to acquire information as to their rights, opportunities, responsibilities, and ways to redress concerns. Within the theme of awareness these macro-level structures reflected the subjects’ process awareness. At a micro-level of review subjects’ responses and supporting artifacts showed that the individual interactions within their courses and with their educators not only provided for
process awareness, but also for self-awareness. All subjects reflected on the ability to identify components of self-awareness either within the course contents, classroom activities, or when interacting with their educators. The interplay between the macro-level of the systemic structure that primarily formed the process awareness and the micro-level interactions with educators to develop the self-awareness was in how the subjects’ choose to explore what was not known. When subjects were unclear of a policy, they responded that they could use their special education teachers, guidance counselors, or teachers with whom they had become more interactive with as a resource to acquire information or process information with. In reverse, when subjects identified difficulties with educators they were able to use their awareness of policies and process to acquire engage in resolution to alleviate concerns.

Within the theme of security the systemic structure of the school provided the ability for 71 percent of subjects to report that they are able to have courses with peers of similar attributes (course levels, support classes, and extracurricular courses) and 85 percent of subjects reported a sense of community, which when used allowed for connections to peers and educators. Within the context of subjects’ feeling supported 71 percent showed a sense of negative support, but within this subjects qualified their responses to indicate that with sustain connections with their educators they felt that they were increasingly listened to and were able to positively resolve conflicts when they occurred. Subjects’ sense of security increased when they were provided feedback that explains or clarifies the educators’ decisions and actions. In this the subjects may not have agreed with the decision, but found clarity in why the decision was made.

Communication and the supporting sub-themes of articulation of thoughts and information processing emerged as factors for how students view the role of school and educators in their self-advocacy. Interviews showed school structured activities within the
expectations of the curriculum, such as student lead discussions, challenged their ability to articulate their thoughts and efficiently process information when put under stress to respond (multiple inquiries, student debates, or group work). At the level of the educator, personal interactions where seen as promoting the ability of students to use or develop self-advocacy skills through communicating. Interviews showed that both positive and negative interactions occurred for subjects in the acquisition of accommodations in their classrooms. When subjects felt a profound sense that they were secure (knew they were in the right or felt a belief they were supported) they would articulate their understanding of their rights or attempt to resolve conflicts. When subjects felt they were not supported within the resolution of conflicts they often sought out support through their special education teacher where they were able to develop their ideas, explore what they were attempting to say, and engage in a communication mentoring from their supports. In both scenarios subjects showed the use of educators to advance their communication skills, in particular their ability to process information so as to articulate their ideas.

The theme of Experiences has two sub-themes (opportunity and leadership) that emerged to support the understanding of how school and educators were seen as supports for students’ self-advocacy. Opportunity, the ability for participants to use skills of self-advocacy in situations where they can acquire feedback, refine the practice of these skills, and achieve an outcome, favorable or not favorable, was seen within the context of the school’s structure and within the student’s interactions. The school’s structure that fostered opportunities was noted in the courses that were offered to the students, the extracurricular activities (clubs, drama, music, sports), and within the instructional design of their courses. Subjects noted in interviews that through interactions with support staff they were able to have the ability to advocate for their
desires, goals, and needs within their course selections. While understanding that certain requirements needed to be maintained subjects noted the ability to discuss the positives and potential negatives that could come with the selections of courses or the levels within the courses. This enhanced their sense of autonomy and motivation to positively engage in the opportunities. Additional scenarios that supported subjects’ experience for self-advocacy was in the extracurricular activities. In these subjects noted a variety of leadership roles they could have that supported their communication skills, the ability to resolve conflict, develop sources of security (belonging and support), and to have a venue to express their own interests and talents that may not be readily seen through academics. Interactions with educators and with support staff personnel provided the opportunities to use all facets of self-advocacy skills that have been reviewed within the literature. These include the ability to express knowledge of themselves, knowledge of their rights, the ability to communicate, and to take leadership roles (Test et al., 2005).

Students with learning disabilities view the role of the school and educators in their development and use self-advocacy skills at two levels; the macro systemic and the micro interactions with their educators. At the macro-level the school’s regulations, requirements, and structure provide subjects with formal processes and opportunities to use self-advocacy. At the micro-level the interactions and connections with educators (teachers, school support staff, and administrators) provide the personal sense of security and communication, which allows the subjects to develop and cultivate their advocacy skills.

*How do high school students with learning disabilities understand the role of self-advocacy skills in their preparation for post-secondary studies?* Students’ understanding of the role of self-advocacy skills in their preparation for post-secondary studies is limited. Within
interviews no subject was able to correctly identify what supports for learning disabled students were available in a post-secondary setting. Seventy-one percent of subjects (N = 5) specifically stated they did not know, while 29 percent (N = 2) stated you could transfer what was provided in high school for supports to post-secondary. In response to how students could find out 57 percent (N = 4), while not specifically knowing how to collect information postulated that they could acquire information through teachers, parents, medical providers, or on-line. However, when asked if they had tried to acquire information 86 percent stated no (N = 6).

Students’ understanding the role self-advocacy has in post-secondary studies is limited. The subjects’ interview responses showed a lack of understanding of the difference between the requirements within special education rights and what is available or allowed in disability regulations, such as the Americans with Disability Act. While not having an understanding of the differences most of the subjects have not attempted to explore the difference between high school supports and those potentially available in post-secondary. Without knowledge of post-secondary requirements, supports, or processes subjects are unable to have an understanding of the role self-advocacy has in preparation for the transition. Analysis of artifacts documents, specifically subjects’ IEPs and progress reports there was limited specificity as to the requirements or responsibilities for students in developing an awareness or understanding of how current advocacy skills will be used or affect post-secondary studies.

**Developing a new model.** Current models of Self-advocacy have been developed through the original works of Deci and Ryan’s in Self-determinism (1985, 2000, 2001, 2006) and refined through Test et al. (2005) framework for Self-advocacy (2005). Test et al., moved from the theoretical nature of self-determinism to an application based framework of self-advocacy (FSA). While FSA shares commonalities with self-determination, the conceptual framework
expands the understanding as to the actions individuals take in their roles as advocates. In FSA Knowledge of self and Knowledge of rights are viewed as the foundations of self-advocacy, because it is necessary for individuals to understand and know themselves before they can tell others what they what.” (Test et al., 2005, p. 45). Communication is seen as necessary since individuals must be able to articulate their needs in order to advocate, negotiate and problem solve. Leadership, the final component of FSA expands on the active nature found in advocacy. Leadership promotes individuals to move from the central focus of self to a community focus of advocating for others.

Test et al. FSA placed the action of self-advocacy first on an individual’s ability to have knowledge of themselves and of their rights. In the current study, awareness of self was seen as a strong component across participants, but awareness of process, including understanding of disability procedures, rights, and recourse of grievances was a weakness among the participants. Test et al. then commits to the belief that the acts of communication and leadership were necessary for individuals to self-advocate. These components were also seen within the current study’s findings. Communication, the ability to process information fluidly and the ability to articulate one’s thoughts, and Experiences, providing opportunities to practice self-advocacy were seen as higher skills within participants who both believed they were self-advocates and used self-advocacy, through the determination of interview responses and artifact analysis. However, Test et al. framework does not explain that even when participants presented with the skills to self-advocate they chose not to. Additionally, participants who lack the skills associated with what Test et al. would constitute necessary to self-advocate chose to advocate for themselves to the best of their know how.
The current study shows that the theme of Security was a foundation that all participants expressed as the motivation behind choosing to act or not to act. Participants expressed their reticence to advocate if they believe there was the potential for negative recourse from teachers, parents, or other supports. Furthermore, participants expressed a desire to seek the support of their special education teachers to provide them a means to resolve conflict or to work through their concerns before attempting to resolve the conflict. Participants who were perceived to lack the skills to advocate expressed that in a supported environment, either their strategies for learning course or with staff they felt were approachable, they would attempt to advocate and work through concerns as they presented themselves. These findings are reflected in the literature; Brinckeroff (1994) reports that students transitioning from high schools with learning disabilities not only lack awareness of their needs, but may further feel “…intimidated by the size of the campus, the number of students enrolled, and the decentralization of support services” (p.229). Brinckeroff reported that students would choose to not report that they had a learning disability or that they had received supports in high school. Some of these reasons are reflected in the student’s view of how the information may bias the university against them or how their professors may react to the need for such supports as accommodations in their courses.

Test et al. FSA model places the primary focus on individuals advocating based on their knowledge, communication, and leadership abilities. These still remain necessary skills, but some individuals, who may not possess these skills will choose to act if there is a sense of security present. This shifts the current model for self-advocacy from a skills based model to one that requires a sense of security as the foundation for individuals to choose to act; with or without the skill set present (figure 1.2)
Limitations

A primary goal of research is to acquire answers to the questions that have been developed through careful, meticulous, and often time consuming review of the previous studies (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). Even with the most meticulous attention to details no single research study is without limitations. While imitation exists they do not necessarily reduce the quality of the findings, but provide opportunities to expand research into other areas, approaches, or contexts. Through the stages of this research three areas of limitation arose: sample size, study setting, and potential researcher bias.

Through purposive sampling, within the context of a bounded system seven subjects participated in the study that allow for the understanding of their awareness and use of self-advocacy. Saturation, the repetition of codes and themes was reached with six participants (Creswell, 1998, 2012; Yin, 2009). While these participants meet with the expectation of case study research generalization of such personal themes can be limited to encompass all adolescents, age 14 to 18 with learning disabilities in their understanding and use of self-advocacy.

The study took place in a comprehensive high school, located within an upper class socioeconomic community. As presented early in this chapter the community provides substantial support to the school system and with this has high academic expectations that include high academic achievement as indicated through their core curriculum requirements and college readiness standardized assessments, diversity of courses, and commitment from the school to have a high percentage of their students attend post-secondary studies. These community expectations can influence the way in which courses are instructed, families engage in attention to their children’s academics, and the supports available within the school for
students to develop advocacy skills. With this the subjects understanding and use of self-advocacy skills may be skewed to this community and should be explored in a different setting for clarity of results.

Researchers must be aware of ethical and bias assumptions that may skew the focus of data collection, interpretation, and presentation. Researcher impartiality is not absolute; as individuals we bring to the research our own stories that have shaped our perceptions and beliefs. These in turn can influence our judgment and create research bias. Absolute purity in research may not be obtainable, but validity can be increased through disclosure of the researcher’s story that has shaped their perception increasing not only the understanding of self-awareness, but the reduction of research bias through such awareness (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009).

As indicated in previous chapters I recognize my potential bias within the concept of socioeconomic influences. This can bias the way in which I see the data and interpret the results of the subjects. To counteract this several approaches were used to enhance trustworthiness. Internally, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation were used to increase credibility. Prolonged engagement included contact between the researcher and the subjects for seven months prior to the start of the study and six months following the completion of data collection. This allowed for clarification of data gathered in the study. Persistent observation was obtained through the completion of observations in subjects’ core academic subjects, special education course, team meetings, and elective courses. Triangulation of the data was completed and is presented within the chapter four’s analysis of the theme. Source locations (semi-structured interviews, observations, artifact analysis) are indicated in each of the theme tables.

Externally, peer review, auditing, and member checking provided opportunities for others to review and evaluate the research findings. The researcher was fortunate to have a colleague
on-site who had completed their doctoral dissertation within the timeframe of this study. Their insight allowed for challenging codes, themes, and the rationale behind the development of the codes and themes. Following the completion of second stage coding and theme development data analysis, along with interview transcripts was shared with subjects who choose to review the information. Their confirmation and challenges further validated themes that emerged.

**Recommendations**

The intent of research is to provide validation of existing theories or to explore the emergence of potentially new theories that can add to the literature, but more importantly provide for positive growth of society and its citizens. Through the current case study two recommendations to current practices and two for future areas of research are suggested:

- Expand the understanding and awareness of educators working with learning disabled students as to the importance of developing self-advocacy skills early within the student's' high school education,
- Evaluate policy changes for increased specificity to transition needs and services for students with learning disabilities with a focus on post-secondary studies.
- Develop and complete a longitudinal study measuring the effects of early self-advocacy instruction on the abilities of post-secondary students’ application of advocacy skills.
- Complete future research that challenges the current study’s limitation based on sample, location, and factors associated with social justice.

**Implications for current practices**

**Foundation for educators.** Within the process of special education, schools and their educators are charged with providing services to their students that allow for the growth in
identified goals, which decrease the negative effects of students’ educational disabilities. Ward (2005) found in a review of programs from 1990 to 1993, that the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) awarded grants to thirty projects designed to advance self-determination skills. While the grants resulted in over thirty-five curriculums targeted at advancing students’ skills, few showed positive long-term retention of advocating skills. Curriculum design and approaches to instruction need to include the understanding of how the role of motivation affects students’ choice to engage or not to engage advocacy skills (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2006). Research in the field of college retention (Harter, 2000; Ishitani, 2008) looks to enhancing the roles of support, belonging, and security through various interventions, such as first year programs that develop partnerships between peers, professors, and college support staff; to foster students’ personal connections to their college communities. Outcomes show that students will seek out supports more often when they feel a sense of connection to their colleges. Similar approaches of supporting students’ emotional need for security through a sense of belonging and support are needed within the secondary focuses of transition planning and developing self-advocacy skills.

In order to accomplish the task of increasing educator awareness in the application that support has in the motivation of students with learning disabilities there needs to be system wide professional development provided. Two factors consistently act as barriers in the advancement of educators’ professional skills; time and costs. Support, as a theme is based on the interactions of individuals in their roles as mentors and leaders to providing the sense of security to those who may have limited understanding in the skills of self-advocacy. With this it is feasible that through current existing professional peer mentorships for early career educators and even within the training programs of universities’ internship requirements, the development of professional
learning communities can provide opportunities for training that reduce both the costs to systems and utilize the interactive staffing times that are already in place as part of existing training programs or state education requirements.

In developing these professional learning communities educators and their administrators will need to have an awareness that diversity of professional skills and diversity of academic grade levels are essential in developing a comprehensive program that will set the foundation for support to students early in the student’s education career, but continue that support, with developmentally appropriate adjustments, through their last years of secondary education.

**Policy changes.** Within special education current policies and regulations focus the responsibility for action only with the local education agencies (IDEA, 2004). While the responsibilities of providing an appropriate education are with the schools, the concepts of partnerships between schools, families, and students are repeated throughout the regulations (IDEA). Policy makers need to review the responsibilities families have in the development and the actions they apply to increase students’ success. Families have a major role in the development of their children’s education. Families need to have a responsibility to ensure that they, along with the schools are responsible in their approach and actions so as to ensure the highest levels of success for students with learning disabilities. Policy changes need to look toward balancing the responsibilities of families with that of the schools. Without active family supports schools may not be able to develop the skills necessary for students to advocate in post-secondary institutions.
Implications for future research

**Longitudinal study.** The current study looks at a static representation of the understanding high schools students have with the development and use of self-advocacy skills. Many of the pre-existing findings that focused on student skills deficits in the areas self-advocacy skills has not been supported in the current study (Test et al., 2005). Student do show their awareness as to their learning needs, the process of disability requirements, the ability to communicate, and the need to have experiences to explore and refine their skills. With the inclusion of enhancing their sense of security and belonging future research needs to evaluate, longitudinally if this new focus actually leads to direct results in the students applying their advocacy skills within post-secondary institutions and into their future exploration of employment.

**Challenging study limitations.** The current study has limitation, based on where the study was conducted and the sample size. While these have been taken into consideration as the findings were analyzed, the need to expand this research case study to other setting that have a more diverse student population for ethnicity, socioeconomic status, parents education levels, and variation in existing school-based support will enhance the findings and scholars’ awareness of the concerns associated with social justice for all. Limitations within research provide opportunities for scholars to expand the literature base and for practitioners to develop interventions that will assist the most diverse students’ needs.

**Summation**

As scholar-practitioners we seek to develop research that looks to expanding the knowledge based and provide for the ability to develop future actions for society. In the current
study seven high school students with education learning disabilities participated in a qualitative case study to evaluate the understanding and how they choose to use their skills of self-advocacy. Subjects showed that they retained an awareness as to their learning styles and needs, that they had an awareness of the disability process and how it affects their ability to acquire support for their learning. Subjects showed that they can communicate and understand the need to have opportunities to practice and use skills of self-advocacy; furthermore that they have the ability to lead. These findings support the literature (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2006; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Meglemre, 2010; Pearl, 2004; Schreiner, 2007; Test et al., 2005; Ward, 2005) related to self-determinism and self-advocacy and challenge in that these areas are needed for students to understand the role of self-advocacy, but they challenge the findings that students lack these skills. In the current study students’ choice, motivation to use self-advocacy was seen to be grounded in a sense of being secure, through beliefs that they would be supported, have positive views from others as to their needs, and have the ability to work through concerns without fear of negative retribution. When students believed they belonged they more often chose to advocate, with or without the skills presents.
Resources


Cawthon, S.W., & Cole, E.V. (2010). Postsecondary students who have a learning disability: Student perspectives on accommodations access and obstacles. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 23*(2), 112-128.


Figures

Figure 1- Self-Determination Theory Psychological Needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Figure 2- Conceptual Framework of Self-Advocacy (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005).

Figure 3- Security as the Foundation for Self-Advocacy (Centerrino, 2016).
Self-Determination Theory Psychological Needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
Figure 3

Security as the Foundation for Self-Advocacy (Centerrino, 2016).
Appendix

Letter of introduction and site access permission

Informed consent letter

Institution Review Board Application

Observation protocol

Interview protocol
Letter of introduction and access permission

Stephen L. Centerrino
353 Middle Street
Braintree, MA 02184

Dorothy Galo, Ph.D.
Superintendent of Schools
Hingham Public Schools
220 Central Street
Hingham, MA 02043

Dear Dr. Galo:

As a doctoral student of Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies I am requesting the ability to conduct research within the Hingham Public Schools. My doctoral study is titled *Evaluating self-advocacy in high school students with learning disabilities through case study analysis*. Enclosed is a description of the study, specifics as to what areas of access are being requested, and a copy of the consent form that will be presented to families and students. The university advisor and principal researcher is Kristal Clemons, Ph.D. who will provide supervision of the research.

I thank you for considering my request to have the Hingham Public Schools be part of my doctoral education research.

Sincerely,

Stephen L. Centerrino

Evaluating self-advocacy in high school students with learning disabilities through case study analysis

**Purpose of the study**

Past research demonstrates that students with learning disabilities continue to increase their participation in post-secondary studies such as college. However, less than half of these students communicate their needs for accommodations and assistance to the college that could allow for increased levels of success as they transition from high school into college studies. Previous
research has look at the reasons behind the lack of disclosure in the applications of regulations related to disabilities, in how programs teach student skills to advocate, and in understand the transition process from the perspective of educators and families. What has not been well documented in the perceptions of the students and how they define, use, and determine the importance of self-advocacy. The current study seeks to learn, from the perspective of the students what they see as the barriers and successes that foster their self-advocacy in transitioning from high school to college.

**Participant Recruitment, Access, and Safeguards**

Selection of participants to be included in the research will include student meeting the following criteria:

- Students currently in grades 9 to 12
- Minimum age 14 (defining age for students to receive transition planning services)
- Identified as having a learning disability, receiving specially designed services, in a full inclusion setting, as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B (2004)

Students who initially meet the criteria will have a letter of invitation sent to them and their guardians. The letter will explain the reason for research, any known potential risks and benefits, information regarding confidentiality, security of records, and contact information in the event they are interested in participating. Students’ families that respond with interest in participating will be contacted by electronic mail or telephone so that any further questions can be answered and consent/assent can be obtained. When both consent and assent is received data collection will begin and include document review, observation of the students, focus group, and individual interview follow-up. Document review will include such data as the participants’ school guidance file (i.e. transcript, attendance record, discipline record) and special education records (assessments, progress reports, and individual education plan). Observations will comply with current school policies and contractual requirements as identified by the Hingham Public Schools. Furthermore, the site based administration will be contacted to confirm access approval of the site facility.

Confidentiality will be maintained for participants and sites through the use of pseudonyms in place of identifying information, maintaining all collected data in a secure location accessible only by the researcher, and any recordings will be securely disposed of following the completion of transcriptions.
Permission for Access
Access is granted to Kristal Clemons, Ph.D. and Stephen L. Centerrino for the purpose of conducting doctoral research in the Hingham Public Schools. The duration of access will be for the 2014-2015 academic school year, but may be extended with the verbal consent of administration. Questions and concerns regarding any aspects of the study can be directed to Stephen L. Centerrino (Centerrino.s@husky.neu.edu).

Dorothy Galo, Ph.D., Superintendent of School
Hingham Public Schools

Kristal Clemons, Ph.D.
Principle Researcher/ Advisor
Northeastern University

Stephen Centerrino
Doctoral Research Student
Northeastern University
Informed consent letter

Consent to Participate in Research

Evaluating self-advocacy in high school students with learning disabilities through case study analysis

Adult Consent Form

We invite your child to participate in a research study conducted through Northeastern University by Stephen Centerrino as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Education. Kristal Clemons, Ph.D., is Northeastern University faculty advisor and principal researcher for this study. Your child’s participation in this study is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to allow your child’s participation.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Past research demonstrates that students with learning disabilities continue to increase their participation in post-secondary studies such as college. However, less than half of these students communicate their needs for accommodations and assistance to the college that could allow for increased levels of success as they transition from high school into college studies. Previous research has look at the reasons behind the lack of disclosure in the applications of regulations related to disabilities, in how programs teach student skills to advocate, and in understand the transition process from the perspective of educators and families. What has not been well documented in the perceptions of the students and how they define, use, and determine the importance of self-advocacy. The current study seeks to learn, from the perspective of the students what they see as the barriers and successes that foster their self-advocacy in transitioning from high school to college.

DURATION AND LOCATION

Your child’s participation in this study will last for approximately (2) 75 minute sessions that includes participation in a focus group with other peers and in an individual interview. These sessions will not be required on the same day and will not interfere with their content course. This study will be conducted at Hingham High School, 17 Union Street, Hingham, MA.

PROCEDURE

If you volunteer your child to participate in this study, we would ask you to allow following things:

1. Read this consent form and ask any questions. Sign the consent form if you desire to allow your child to participate.
2. The researcher will meet with your child to describe the study, answer any of their questions, and ask for their assent to participate.

3. The researcher will review your child’s school counseling and special education file.

4. Your child will participate in a focus group that will not last longer than 75 minutes, with peers to discuss aspects of self-advocacy.

5. Your child will participate, if needed in one individual interview, lasting no longer than 75 minutes.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
Risks involved in this study may include the student feeling uncomfortable around peers in discussing topics such as accommodations, disability, and teachers. To reduce any potential of discomfort participation in the focus group will be encourage, but is not required and questions can be discussed in a private setting within the school. Students will be provided with the reassurance that confidentiality will be maintained and that no information will be shared with their teachers.

ANTICIPATED BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS
There are no direct benefits to you or your child, but general themes of areas that may improve transitional practices for students with learning disabilities can be shared with the school.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION
All families and students have the right to choose not to participate in this study. You may also choose to withdraw your child at any time from the study and they may also choose to discontinue the study at any time.

CONFIDENTIALITY
When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity, your child’s identity, or the school in which the study was conducted. If photographs, videos, or audio-tape recordings will be used for educational purposes, the identity of participants will be protected or disguised.

Your information will be kept confidential and secure by locking forms in a file box. All subjects will be identified by a code number. The list of code numbers with the subject names will be kept in a separate lock box in a different location. All data entered into computers will be password protected. This information will be stored for three years and then destroyed.
PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation and your child’s participation in this research is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, that will not affect your relationship with Northeastern University or Hingham Public Schools. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

WITHDRAWAL OF PARTICIPATION BY THE INVESTIGATOR

The investigator may withdraw your child from participating in this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so. If your child experiences any significant discomfort during the research, they may have to discontinue, even if they would like to continue. The investigator will make the decision and let you know if it is not possible for their continuation.

NEW FINDINGS

During the course of the study, you will be informed of any significant new findings (either good or bad), such as changes in the risks or benefits resulting from participation in the research or new alternatives to participation, that might cause you to change your mind about continuing in the study. If new information is provided to you, your consent to continue participating in this study will be re-obtained.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

In the event of a research related concern, please immediately contact Stephen Centerrino at 617-633-9552 or

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

If you have any questions about this study, you may call Stephen Centerrino 617-633-9552
SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT

I have read the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this form. I agree to allow my child to participate in the study.

________________________________________
Name of Child- print

________________________________________
Name of Parent- print

__________________________________
Signature of Parent        Date        Address

Assent of minor

I have read the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this form. I agree to participate in the study.

________________________________________
Signature of Student        Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

________________________________________
Signature of Investigator        Date
APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL FOR USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Before completing this application, please read the Application Instructions and Policies and Procedures for Human Research Protections to understand the responsibilities for which you are accountable as an investigator in conducting research with human participants. The document, Application Instructions, provides additional assistance in preparing this submission. Incomplete applications will be returned to the investigator. You may complete this application online and save it as a Word document.

If this research is related to a grant, contract proposal or dissertation, a copy of the full grant/contract proposal/dissertation must accompany this application.

Please carefully edit and proof read before submitting the application. Applications that are not filled out completely and/or have any missing or incorrect information will be returned to the Principal Investigator.

REQUIRED TRAINING FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Under the direction of the Office of the Vice Provost for Research, Northeastern University is now requiring completion of the NIH Office of Extramural Research training for all human subject research, regardless of whether or not investigators have received funding to support their project.

The online course titled “Protecting Human Research Participants” can be accessed at the following url: http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php. This requirement will be effective as of November 15, 2008 for all new protocols.

Principal Investigators, student researchers and key personnel (participants who contribute substantively to the scientific development or execution of a project) must include a copy of their certificate of completion for this web-based tutorial with the protocol submission.

Certificate(s) Attached
☐ Certificate(s) submitted previously – on file with the NU’s Office of Human Subject Research Protection
A. Investigator Information

Principal Investigator (PI cannot be a student) __Kristal Moore Clemons, Ph.D.
Investigator is: NU Faculty __x____ NU Staff __________ Other __________
College: College of Professional Studies________________________
Department/Program School of Education ________________
Address _____360 Huntington, 42 BV, Boston, MA 02115____
Office Phone _______________ Email k.clemons@neu.edu

Is this student research? YES __x____ NO _______If yes, please provide the following information:

Student Name Stephen L. Centerrino__ Anticipated graduation date: August 2015
Undergrad ____ MA/MS ____ PhD ____ AuD ____ EdD __x__ DLP ____
College: College of Professional Studies____

Department/Program School of Education
Full Mailing Address 353 Middle Street, Braintree, MA 02184
Telephone ______781-849-0526 Primary Email centerrino.s@husky.neu.edu
Cell phone ____617-633-9552 Secondary Email scenterrino@hotmail.com____

B. Protocol Information
Title __Evaluating self-advocacy in high school students with learning disabilities through case study analysis.__
Projected # subjects ____10____
Approx. begin date of project 11/15/2014__ Approx. end date ____6/30/2015__
month, day, year month, day, year

It is the policy of Northeastern University that no activity involving human subjects be
undertaken until those activities have been reviewed and approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

- Anticipated funding source for project (or none)  none

Has/will this proposal been/be submitted through:
- NU’s Office of Research Administration and Finance (RAF)
- Provost
- Corp & Foundations

C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Will Participants Be:</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children (&lt;18)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeastern University Students?</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalized persons?</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoners?</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitively Impaired Persons?</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non or Limited English Speaking Persons?</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>People Living outside the USA?</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pregnant Women/Fetuses?</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other? (Please provide detail)</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<th>Does the Project Involve:</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blood Removal?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigational drug/device?</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audiotapes/videotapes?</td>
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</table>

Please answer each of the following questions using non-technical language. Missing or incomplete answers will delay your review while we request the information.

D. What are the goals of this research? Please state your research question(s) and related hypotheses.
The researcher has developed two intellectual goals to explore:

- To develop an understanding if the ability to self-advocate is due to the lack of a specific skill set or the students’ choice to apply skill sets they currently have in order to advocate for their needs and wants in order to be successful in school and prepare for transition to post-secondary studies.
- To develop an understanding what motivate students with learning disabilities to engage or disengage in their choice to self-advocate.

Research Questions

- How do high school students with learning disabilities view the role of the school and educators in their development and use self-advocacy skills?
- How do high school students with learning disabilities understand the role of self-advocacy skills in their preparation for post-secondary studies?

E. Provide a brief summary of the purpose of the research in non-technical language.

Within this researcher’s practice as a School Psychologist and as Chair for Special Education Services, an attempt to understand what students with learning disabilities need to become independent through their ability to self-advocate has been a focus. While teachers, administrators, and parents express that students need to take responsibility for their actions, it is rarely articulated as to what specific skills students require or what may motivate these student to employ the skills in order to be successful self-advocates. One skill set that appears to differ between students who succeed and those who struggle is the ability to advocate for one’s needs.

Completing research on the motivations for students with learning disabilities at the high school level to use self-advocacy skills will add to the limited base of literature within the field. This will have three potentially positive impacts: (1) provide a foundation for educators working with learning disabled students to understand the importance of developing self-advocacy skills early within the students’ high school education, (2) provide the foundation for a longitudinal study in measuring the effects of early self-advocacy instruction on the abilities of post-secondary students’ application of advocacy skills, and (3) provide the basis for policy changes for increased specificity for transition needs and services to students with learning disabilities.

F. Identify study personnel on this project. Include name, credentials, role, and organization affiliation.
Principal Investigator/ Faculty Advisor:

Kristal Moore Clemons, Ph.D.
School of Education
College of Professional Studies
360 Huntington, 42 BV
Boston, MA 02115
k.clemons@neu.edu

Student Investigator:

Stephen L. Centerrino, M.Ed., CAGS
School of Education
College of Professional Studies
360 Huntington, 42 BV
Boston, MA 02115
Centerrino.s@husky.neu.edu

G. Identify other organizations or institutions that are involved. Attach current Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals or letters of permission as necessary.

Hingham Public Schools
Hingham High School
17 Union Street
Hingham, MA 02043
Superintendent: Dorothy Galo, PhD.
Principal: Paula Girouard McCann, Ed.D.

H. Recruitment Procedures

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Describe the participants you intend to recruit. Provide all inclusion and exclusion criteria. Include age range, number of subjects, gender, ethnicity/race, socio-economic level, literacy level and health (as applicable) and reasons for exempting any groups. Describe how/when/by whom inclusion/exclusion criteria will be determined.</td>
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Selection of participants to be included in the research will be through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allows for the selection of participants who have unique knowledge of the research question(s) and with whom the researcher can have access. The sample will use a criterion approach in which students for inclusion will need to have the following criteria:
- Students currently in grades 9 to 12
- Minimum age 14 (defining age for students to receive transition planning services)
- Identified as having a learning disability, receiving specially designed services, in a full inclusion setting, as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B (2004) and Code of Federal Regulations 34 CFR § 300.8 Child with a disability.

Participant selection can include any gender, race/ethnicity, and/or socio-economic level. Participant number will be between 4 and 8 subjects for the case study. The reason for this is to acquire saturation within the data. The study focus is to provide insight into students with disabilities self-advocacy awareness; as such the exclusion of non-disable students is necessary.

Describe the procedures that you will use to recruit these participants. Be specific. How will potential subjects be identified? Who will ask for participation? If you intend to recruit using letters, posters, fliers, ads, website, email etc., copies must be included as attachments for stamped approval. Include scripts for intended telephone recruitment.

Access to the site and participants will initially include acquiring permission from the district’s superintendent and building principal. Letters, describing the basis of the study, the rewards and potential risks to student, staff, and families will be provided (see Appendix). To access participants within the class setting, permission will be obtained from the staff involved. The staff will be provided with the same informational letter as presented to the superintendent and administration.

When permission is obtained from the Hingham Public Schools a filter search through the use of the school database software program Aspen X2 will be conducted by Stephen Centerrino. The filter search will have the criteria for inclusion entered as the filter parameters. Students who meet the criteria for study inclusion will have a consent form (see Appendix) sent to them and their parent/guardians by Stephen Centerrino. The letter will explain the reason for research, any known potential risks and benefits, information regarding confidentiality, security of records, and contact information in the event they are interested in participating. After the student’s family returns the consent form allowing for the participation of their child in the study, the student will be contacted, have the study explained to them, their ability to assent to participation, or their ability to not participate in the study. Any student who does not wish to participate will be allowed to withdraw from the subject pool, even if their parent has given permission to participate.
What remuneration, if any, is offered?

No remuneration will be provided.

I. Consent Process

Describe the process of obtaining informed consent*. Be specific. How will the project and the participants’ role be presented to potential participants? By whom? When? Where? Having the participant read and sign a consent statement is done only after the researcher provides a detailed oral explanation and answers all questions. Please attach a copy of informed consent statements that you intend to use, if applicable. Click here for consent form templates.

If your study population includes non-English speaking people, translations of consent information are necessary. Describe how information will be translated and by whom. You may wait until the consent is approved in English before having it translated.

Students who meet the criteria for study inclusion will have a consent form (see Appendix) sent to them and their parent/guardians by Stephen Centerrino. The letter will explain the reason for research, any known potential risks and benefits, information regarding confidentiality, security of records, and contact information in the event they are interested in participating.

After the student’s family returns the consent form allowing for the participation of their child in the study, the student will be contacted, have the study explained to them, their ability to assent to participation, or their ability to not participate in the study. Any student who does not wish to participate will be allowed to withdraw from the subject pool, even if their parent has given permission to participate.

If your population includes children, prisoners, people with limited mental capacity, language barriers, problems with reading or understanding, or other issues that may make them vulnerable or limit their ability to understand and provide consent, describe special procedures that you will institute to obtain consent appropriately. If participants are potentially decisionally impaired, how will you determine competency?

The study will include students, ages 14 to 18 that have been identified as having learning disabilities. To protect and ensure clarity of the study consent information and their ability not to participate instructions will be provided using the student’s identified accommodations that
provides them with appropriate access to their educational information and content. Stephen Centerrino, a trained school psychologist in the identification of learning disabilities and in the development of individual educational programs and disability accommodations plans will be providing the review of the consent details. Parents may be present, if they choose to, during the description of the study to their child and assist in the clarification of any information.

The study will include students, ages 14 to 18 that have been identified as having learning disabilities. To protect and ensure clarity of the study consent/assent information and their ability not to participate instructions will be provided using the student’s identified accommodations that provides them with appropriate access to their educational information and content. Stephen Centerrino, a trained school psychologist in the identification of learning disabilities, the development of individual disability educational programs and an in providing learning strategies skills to student with disabilities will be providing the review of the consent/assent details. Parents may be present, if they choose to, during the description of the study to their child and assist in the clarification of any information.

*If incomplete disclosure during the initial consent process is essential to carrying out the proposed research, please provide a detailed description of the debriefing process. Be specific. When will full disclosure of the research goals be presented to subjects (e.g., immediately after the subject has completed the research task(s) or held off until the completion of the study’s data collection)? By whom? Please attach a copy of the written debriefing statement that will be given to subjects.

Full disclosure can be provided at onset. In the event that unforeseen details of the study significantly or substantially alter the previous parameters of the consent families and students will be contacted with the new information and provided the opportunity to consent/assent to the new details.

J. Study Procedures

Provide a detailed description of all activities the participant will be asked to do and what will be done to the participants. Include the location, number of sessions, time for each session, and total time period anticipated for each participant, including long term follow up.

With both consent and assent received data collection will begin and include document review, observation of the students, focus group, and individual interview follow-up. Document review will include such data as the participants’ school guidance file (i.e.
transcript, attendance record, discipline record) and special education records (assessments, progress reports, and individual education plan). The researcher will gain access to these documents through permissions granted by the school administration. Furthermore, access to these documents will be described within the informed consent form (see Appendix).

Observations of students will be conducted during their special education team meetings and within a sampling of their content courses. Students’ verbal and nonverbal behaviors will be recorded through field notes on an observation protocol (see Appendix). Completing observations before having participants engaged in a focus group will allow the researcher to develop an understanding of the students' routines, engagement in their course, existing advocacy abilities, and the communication styles of those who interact with them as opportunities for self-advocacy arise. In completing observations the researcher will not be engaged in student activities and will maintain a non-participatory role.

Following the completion of observations participants will be invited to be part of a focus group exploring student self-advocacy. The focus group will consist of 5 to 10 participants. Interviews will be conducted using a semi-structured interview process of providing open-ended questions with follow up questions for additional details as necessary to clarify answers and to allow for the equal participation of participants (see Appendix). The focus group will not last more than 60 minutes and be conducted in an informal atmosphere with the students. Interviews will be audio and/or video recorded and transcribed by the researcher or professional transcriptionist.

Individual interviews will be conducted with students as follow-ups to the focus group and to review data acquired from observations and/or document review (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviews will last no more than 60 minutes, which is comparable to the length of a student's academic period. The semi-structure interview protocol from the focus group will be used as the framework for individual interviews. When needed, follow-up questions and prompts will be provided for the participants to expand their answers. Student participants may, if they or their families choose, have an adult present during the interviews. Interviews will be audio and/or video recorded and transcribed by the researcher or professional transcriptionist.

Who will conduct the experimental procedures, questionnaires, etc.? Where will this be done? Attach copies of all questionnaires, interview questions, tests, survey instruments, links to online surveys, etc.
Stephen Centerrino will conduct all experimental procedures, including document review, observations, and interviews. Kristal Clemons will have full access, as the primary researcher to all aspects of the procedures and be able at any time to participate and/or supervise procedures.

K. Risks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identify possible risks to the participant as a result of the research. Consider possible psychological harm, loss of confidentiality, financial, social, or legal damages as well as physical risks. What is the seriousness of these risks and what is the likelihood that they may occur?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The potential for risk to any student in this study is small. However, risks may include a student feeling uncomfortable discussing topics such as accommodations, disability, and teachers. To reduce any potential of discomfort participation in the focus group will be encourage, but is not required and questions can be discussed in a private setting within the school. Students will be provided with the reassurance that confidentiality will be maintained and that no information will be shared with their teachers, peers, or family. There is no financial obligations on the part of students or families so financial loss will not exist, the study does not require physical interaction between the researcher(s) and students or students to student.

Describe in detail the safeguards that will be implemented to minimize risks. What follow-up procedures are in place if harm occurs? What special precautions will be instituted for vulnerable populations?

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION

All families and students have the right to choose not to participate in this study. They may also choose to withdraw their child at any time from the study and they may also choose to discontinue the study at any time.

CONFIDENTIALITY

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal their identity, their child's identity,
or the school in which the study was conducted. If photographs, videos, or audio-tape recordings will be used for educational purposes, the identity of participants will be protected or disguised.

Their information will be kept confidential and secure by locking forms in secure file box. All subjects will be identified by a code number. The list of code numbers with the subject names will be kept in a separate lock box in a different location accessible only by the research, all data entered into computers will be password protected. This information will be stored for only three years and then destroyed. Retention of information is provided to allow the university to review how the study was conducted.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Their participation and their child's participation in this research is voluntary. If they choose not to participate, that will not affect their relationship with Northeastern University or Hingham Public Schools. If they decide to participate, they are free to withdraw their consent and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

WITHDRAWAL OF PARTICIPATION BY THE INVESTIGATOR

The investigator may withdraw their child from participating in this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so. If their child experiences any significant discomfort during the research, they may have to discontinue, even if they would like to continue. The investigator will make the decision and let the student/family know if it is not possible for their continuation.

NEW FINDINGS

During the course of the study, student/families will be informed of any significant new findings (either good or bad), such as changes in the risks or benefits resulting from participation in the research or new alternatives to participation, that might cause them to change their mind about continuing in the study. If new information is provided to them, their consent/assent to continue participating in this study will be re-obtained.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS
In the event of a research related concern, student/families will be informed to contact Stephen Centerrino at 617-633-9552 or email at Centerrino.s@husky.neu.edu. If student/families have any questions or concerns relating to the safety or confidentiality of subjects they will be informed to contact Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator, College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University's Institutional Review Board at 617-390-3450 or email to k.skophammer@neu.edu. In the event that concerns arise the research team will meet with the IRB to evaluate the concerns and collaborate to resolve issues.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

They may withdraw their consent/assent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. They are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of their participation in this research study. If they have any questions about their rights in this research, they may contact Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator, College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University's Institutional Review Board at 617-390-3450 or email to k.skophammer@neu.edu. They may call anonymously if they wish.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

If there are any questions about this study, they may call Stephen Centerrino at 617-633-9552 or email to Centerrino.s@husky.neu.edu.

L. Confidentiality

Describe in detail the procedures that will be used to maintain anonymity or confidentiality during collection and entry of data. Who will have access to data? How will the data be used, now and in the future?

CONFIDENTIALITY

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal their identity, their child's identity, or the school in which the study was conducted. If photographs, videos, or audio-tape recordings will be used for educational purposes, the identity of participants will be protected or disguised.
How and where will data be stored? When will data, including audiotapes and videotapes, be destroyed? If data is to be retained, explain why. Will identifiers or links to identification be destroyed? When? Signed consent documents must be retained for 3 years following the end of the study. Where and how will they be maintained?

Information will be kept confidential and secure by locking forms in secure file box. All subjects will be identified by a code number. The list of code numbers with the subject names will be kept in a separate lock box in a different location accessible only by the research. All data entered into computers will be password protected. This information will be stored for only three years and then destroyed. Retention of information is provided to allow the university to review how the study was conducted.

M. If your research is HIPAA-protected, please complete the following;

Individual Access to PHI

Describe the procedure that will be used for allowing individuals to access their PHI or, alternatively, advising them that they must wait until the end of the study to review their PHI.

Not Applicable

N. Benefits

What benefits can the participant reasonably expect from his/her involvement in the research? If none, state that. What are potential benefits to others?

There are no direct benefits to the families or their children, but general themes of areas that may improve transitional practices for students with learning disabilities can be shared with the school to potentially improve post-secondary planning. The school will be offered a completed copy of the research to keep and to share for the benefit of understanding, reviewing, or modifying their programs to students.

O. Attachments

Identify attachments that have been included and those that are not applicable (N/A).

| n/a | Copy of fliers, ads, posters, emails, web pages, letters for recruitment * |
| n/a | Scripts of intended telephone conversations* |
| x  | Copies of IRB approvals or letters of permission from other sites |
| x  | Informed Consent Form(s)* (see our templates for examples) |
Debriefing Statement*

Copies of all instruments, surveys, focus group or interview questions, tests, etc.

Signed Assurance of Principal Investigator Form *(required)*

NIH Human Subject Training Certificate(s) *(required if not already on file at HSRP)*

*(Approved forms must be stamped by the IRB before use)*

**P. Health Care Provision During Study**

Please check the applicable line:

___x___ I have read the description of HIPAA “health care” within Section 4 of the Policies & Procedures for Human Research Protection. I am not a HIPAA-covered health care provider and no health care will be provided in connection with this study.

_______ I am a HIPAA-covered health care provider or I will provide health care in connection with this study as described in Section 4 of the Policies & Procedures for Human Research Protection. This health care is described above under “Study Procedures,” and the Informed Consent and Health Information Use and Disclosure Authorization form will be used with all prospective study participants.

If you have any questions about whether you are a HIPAA-covered health care provider, please contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection at n.regina@neu.edu or (617) 373-4588.

Completed applications should be submitted to Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection with the exception of applications from faculty and students of the College of Professional Studies, which should be submitted to Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator for CPS.

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Nan C. Regina, Director  
Northeastern Univ., Human Subject Research Protection  
360 Huntington Ave., Mailstop: 960 Renaissance Park  
Boston, MA 02115-5000  
Phone: 617.373.4588; Fax: 617.373.4595

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CPS applications only

Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator  
Northeastern Univ., College of Professional Studies  
Phone: 617.390.3450;  
k.skophammer@neu.edu
The application and accompanying materials may be sent as email attachments or in hard copy. A signed *Assurance of Principal Investigator Form* may be sent as a scan, via fax or in hard copy.
Observation Protocol

Study: Evaluating self-advocacy in high school students with learning disabilities through case study analysis  
Facility Location: _____  Setting: ______________  Observer: Stephen Centerrino  
Role: Non-Participant  
Date: ______________ Duration: _________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>I.M.</td>
<td>Knowledge of Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E.M.</td>
<td>Knowledge of Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competency</td>
<td>I.M.</td>
<td>Comm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E.M.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness/Belonging</td>
<td>I.M.</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>E.M.</td>
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</table>

I.M. = Internal motivation, E.M. = External motivation

Page ___ of ______
### Semi-Structured Interview protocol

**Study:** Evaluating self-advocacy in high school students with learning disabilities through case study analysis

Facility Location: __________________________  Setting: Individual

Date: __________  Start Time: _________  End Time: _________  Duration: _________

Session Recording  Video  Audio

Observer/ Facilitator: Stephen Centerrino

**Introduction:** Hello and thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to get your understanding of what self-advocacy is and how it is used by you within school. While I will be asking some questions to guide our conversations please feel free to discuss ideas, questions, and comments that you think of. The session will not last for more than 65 minutes and while I encourage you to participate please do not feel any pressure to. If you would like we can discuss any thoughts or ideas you may have in private.

Do you have any question before we begin?

Ok let’s begin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General</strong></td>
<td>Do you know what the term Self-advocacy is?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you feel that you advocate for yourself?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge of Self</strong></td>
<td>What do you think Knowledge of Self means?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within your classes do you have opportunities to learn about yourself? Such as your learning style, what areas you are stronger in, what areas you may need help in?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you feel that you teachers or your family understand what your future goals are, what types of support you need, or your personal interest? Why or why not?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you have a disability?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you have an IEP (Individual education program)? Do you know what is in the plan or</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
what the plan is for?  

Do you feel a sense that you belong within your classes? Your school? Do you have a sense that you feel connected to your school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge of Rights</th>
<th>What do you think Knowledge of rights means?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you know what accommodations are?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you know what are the responsibilities of your teachers, family or you are within special education?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you know what supports you may be able to have after high school in college or employment? Do you know how to find out about them?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Have your teachers or family discussed your rights as a student with a disability? Have you learned about your right?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you know what you can do if your rights are violated?</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>What does the term Communication means? Can you give some examples?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are some important characteristics of good communication? What are some examples of poor communication?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you feel that you could communicate with your teachers, your family if you needed to get support or to discuss concerns if you are not receiving the supports you require?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you feel you can clearly articulate your Thoughts and ideas?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you think you could be persuasive?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you participate in your team meetings? Do you feel you are able to communicate what you</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Do you feel that you have opportunities to be a leader? If so, some examples. If not, why?</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Have you had the chance to advocate for yourself or for the needs of others? When? What happened?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you feel there are opportunities for you to be a leader in your CLASS?-SCHOOL?-COMMUNITY?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you want to lead others?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>When educational decisions are made do you feel you have a say in them?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you feel pressure to make decision in a certain way be others? Who?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are your plans after high schools?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are these your plans or someone else’s?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you feel pressured to select goals that may not be what you want (courses, going to college, a certain college, choosing a certain job)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competency</td>
<td>What you get feedback on your decisions do you feel it is beneficial, that it helps you understand why decisions are made or what choices you may have?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is the feedback you get from teachers/family regarding education positive?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Closing. Thank you for participating in the interview. Do you have any questions, comments, or concerns? Thank you for coming and have a great day.