Self-Advocacy Skills: A Portfolio Approach (First printed in *RE:view*, 33(4), 160-163.)

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Most issues of the *New RE:view* will include a legacy article that is reprinted from AER's earlier journal, *RE:view*. The following article by Cathryn S. Krebs originally appeared in the Winter 2002 issue of *RE:view*. In this article, the author describes how she employed a portfolio approach to enhance self-advocacy skills with her students. In her introduction to the legacy piece, she explains the efficacy of this approach in her current role as a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

Introduction by author Cathy Krebs: As I reread this article, it reminds me of the importance of teaching ALL students effective self-advocacy skills, especially those with special needs. Learning strategies for increasing independence and communication skills helps build self-confidence, creates problem-solvers, and encourages collaboration.

Now retired after thirty-plus years working as a TVI of students of all ages in a variety of settings (Virginia Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired and Fairfax County Public Schools), I use a variation of this activity in my current role as a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate), volunteering with children/youth who have experienced abuse and/or neglect, many with associated mental health challenges. Understanding mental health issues/needs and being able to clearly speak up for oneself is empowering and can help others be supportive, while providing benefits in a variety of life situations, including school or work. Self-advocacy can be taught and learned with practice and effort.

Original article: Self-advocacy is knowing what you want, what you are entitled to, and how you can effectively achieve your goals (Brinckerhoff, 1994). I think that when students with visual impairments understand their individual strengths and needs, they will be more assertive and be empowered to find and create optimal learning environments. Students with visual impairments need to be able to explain

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their disability in everyday language, to list their strengths and needs, to make choices about how they learn best, and to communicate effectively with their peers and teachers regarding reasonable and appropriate accommodations.

As middle school students approach high school, we expect them to be more independent. I asked four eighth-grade students in my vision resource room to begin a self-advocacy portfolio by writing "What I Know about My Visual Impairment" and "What I Would Like to Explore." All four had self-advocacy goals in their Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs). The following are some of their questions.

- What caused my eye condition?
- Will my children have a visual impairment?
- How many people have my eye condition?
- Is there a way to prevent it?
- Do kids and adults get this?
- How much research has been done on my eye condition?
- How can I meet someone with the same visual impairment?

Visual Impairment Research

During basic skills class time with the teacher of students who are visually impaired, the four students used Zoomtext (an enlarged screen reader) and JAWS (a speech synthesizer) to research online their individual situations as described in their eye reports. We also used resource books, large diagrams, a tactile model of the eye, and a conversation with an ophthalmologist. Because all four students initially had difficulty explaining their visual impairments in everyday language, they were eager to improve their awareness of their disability. One student even stayed after school to work on this project!

Several students had specific questions they needed to ask their parents or guardians. Two of the four students were comfortable talking to their parents or guardians about their visual impairments. One student, who had had radiation as an infant, wondered if the cancer might possibly recur. Another student wanted to know how functional vision was related to visual acuity measurements.

Students practiced orally explaining their visual impairments to each other and their peers and shared drafts of their explanations. Then they wrote "What I Found Out About My Visual Impairment."

Vision Vocabulary Lists

From the information they had gathered, we compiled a specific list of specific words and definitions related to their individual impairments. Two of the four students had

additional disabilities (spatial and memory problems and ADHD) that were important to understand in relation to their visual impairments. Word lists included parts of the eye (e.g., macula, optic nerve, optic disc, retina) and other vision-related words (e.g., bilateral coloboma, congenital, cortical blindness, eccentric viewing, enucleation, null point, nystagmus, oculist, ophthalmologist, peripheral vision, prosthesis, radiation, scotoma, tumor, radiation, and vision overloading). We discussed the words on their lists individually with each student and how the word helped them understand their functional vision.

Learning Strengths and Needs

After the research and vocabulary activities, students wrote about their learning strengths and needs. I encouraged them to talk to their peers, families, and school staff while completing their lists. Sometimes there was negotiation if a strength or need did not seem realistic.

Letter Writing

Using all the information in their self-advocacy portfolios, the students wrote letters to their ninth-grade teachers describing their visual impairments, how they learned best, and what they needed to be successful in the classroom. The students verbalized what they would write, and I guided their formulation by asking questions. Those steps helped them to communicate more effectively. Excerpts from their letters speak for themselves.

Student One: "When I was little, I had a tumor in my left eye, so the doctors had to remove it and replace it with a fake eye, called a prosthesis. On my right eye, I had a cataract, so the doctors also removed that. I have low vision in my right eye. I can see everything, but I cannot read small print or see things far away like the chalkboard. I am good at working on the computer and I am good at typing. …I am very good at socializing with people. Science is one of my weaknesses. Another of my weaknesses is working too fast and not checking my work. I am very weak at editing my work. Sometimes I need help."

Student Two: "I only have central vision and cannot see on the sides. It is difficult for me to locate things and impossible to read print. I can see the letter but too many things on a page are confusing. I use Braille "N Speak, which is a Braille notetaker. I also have some spatial problems like finding where I am and copying things. I sometimes have trouble locating things visually , but once I find what I am looking for, I can see it clearly.

I love to write, but spelling and comprehension are not my strong suits. I take tests orally and use a Braille copy when there is time. It is easier for me to concentrate

when there are no distractions…Before I take a test I like to get study guides in advance so I can be prepared. It helps me to know a week in advance."

Student Three: "I had some vision until the age of nine…I've had several different surgeries to attempt to bring back my vision, but all of them were unsuccessful. Having a Braille copy gives me that very same independence (as the sighted kids). However, my independence is limited in some respects, such as when the class watches a video, when there is a mostly visual project, or simply when the teacher draws diagrams on the board. Having a person available with good description skills is very helpful."

Student Four: "I can see most objects clearly, but not the details, and I can also see colors. However, I cannot see things that are tiny, far away, or faintly printed. My field of vision is impaired, so sometimes I have to turn my head to see things. If you cover one eye and slightly close the other, you may be able to get a feeling for what I can see. Sometimes I get stressed out, so it helps when I know long-term assignments, including novels, and tests ahead of "time."

Follow-Up Activities

After the letter-writing activity, we talked about ways to keep written records of "what works for me" in different classroom settings and ways to optimize learning styles with a variety of teaching styles. Talking to high school students with visual impairments, being around people with a positive, "can-do" attitude, and role-playing helped to give the eighth graders practice using a variety of strategies. Growing from mistakes, solving problems collaboratively, and learning to give and accept praise and criticism occurred as a result of this project.

This student-centered project, which could be done in a variety of school settings and with a wide range of disabilities, will continue through high school and will provide documentation of student growth. Revision will occur at least annually, or on an as-needed basis; the students will select the contents for each section. The self-advocacy portfolio serves as the basis for the IEP transition plan, which focuses on career information including interests; strengths and capabilities; challenging yet attainable vocational goals; and activity-based goals. Adding photos or videos; notes on observations of mentors in areas of interest; ideas about internships; comments by teachers, parents, rehabilitation workers, and employers; and selected journal entries related to vocational goals would strengthen the portfolio.

Summary

Students with visual impairments need to know how to assess themselves, set educational and vocational goals, understand what accommodations work best for

them, learn how to use resources and make requests, and determine how to solve the inevitable problems that will arise in high school. Ongoing instruction in self-advocacy skills helps students prepare for success as independent adults in the work world, as evidence by three evaluative comments made by the four students at the end of the first year of the project.

Student One. "Different things work with different teachers. I am not afraid to ask for the things I need to learn."

Student Two. "When people look at me they sometimes don't believe that I am blind and have many challenges. My teachers have tried to describe my vision to others, but I think it is better if I explain my own disability."

Student Three. "Job exploration is very important, but self-motivation is the key."

Student Four. "I get this very good feeling when I feel like I'm independent. In real-life you have to step out for yourself and say, "This is what I need help with.''

Reference

Brinckerhoff, L. C. (1994). Developing effective self-advocacy skills in college-bound students with learning disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 29,* 229–237.

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