

## Teaching Self-Advocacy Skills to Students With Learning Disabilities: The S.A.M.E. Program of Instruction

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**Abstract :** Teaching students to self-advocate has become a central topic in special education literature and practice. However, many special education programs do not address this important skill area. To this end, I created and implemented the Self Advocacy Made Easy (S.A.M.E.) program of instruction, intended to enhance the self-advocacy skills of young adults with mild to moderate disabilities. The effectiveness of S.A.M.E., the degree to which self-advocacy skills were acquired and demonstrated by the students, the level of parental support, and the impact of culture on the process, and teachers' beliefs and attitudes about the role of self-advocacy skills for their students were measured using action research that employed mixed methodology. Conducted at an overseas American International School, this action research study sought answers to these questions by providing an in-depth portrayal of the S.A.M.E. program, as well as the attitudes and perceptions of the stakeholders involved in the study (thirteen students, their parents, teachers and counsellors). The findings of this study were very positive. The S.A.M.E. program was found to be a valid and valuable instructional tool for teaching self-advocacy skills to students with learning disabilities and ADHD. The study showed participation in the S.A.M.E. program led to an increased understanding of the important elements of self-advocacy, an increase in students' skills and abilities to self-advocate, and a positive increase in students' feelings about themselves. Inclusion in the Student-Led IEP meetings, an authentic student assessment within the S.A.M.E. program, also yielded encouraging results, including a higher level of ownership of one's profile and learning needs, a higher level of student engagement and participation in the IEP meeting, and a growing student awareness of the relevance of the document and the IEP process to their lives. Without exception, every parent believed that participating in the Student-Led IEP led to a growth in confidence in their children, including that it taught them how to 'own' their disability and an improvement in their communication skills. Teachers and counsellors that participated in the study felt the program was worthwhile, and led to an increase in the students' ability to acknowledge their learning profile and to identify and request the accommodations (such as extended time or use of a calculator) they need to overcome or work around their disability. The implications for further research are many, and include an examination of the degree to which participation in S.A.M.E. fosters student achievement, the long-term effects of participation in the program, and the degree to which student participation in the Student-Led IEP meeting increases parents' level of understanding and involvement.

**Keywords :** self-advocacy, learning disabilities, ADHD, student-led IEP process

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