



***To Understand the Idea of Self-Advocacy.
Building the Competences of Inclusive Education Teachers
to Support Students With Diverse Educational Needs
Zrozumieć ideę samorzecznictwa. Budowanie kompetencji
nauczycieli edukacji włączającej w zakresie wspierania
uczniów ze zróżnicowanymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The objective of this article is to explore the concept of self-advocacy of people with disabilities and to present experiences that shape its understanding among teachers in inclusive education. The study aims to examine how content related to self-advocacy is received in the context of social inclusion within teacher education programs.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The central research questions are: How do teachers understand the idea of self-advocacy? What instructional methods are most effective in fostering their understanding of this concept within academic education? This research report forms part of a broader study conducted by the authors. It includes a small-scale experimental approach to teaching the concept of self-advocacy to prospective teachers (N = 184) and an analysis of their responses to an assignment on the subject.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The theoretical section of the article explains the meaning of self-advocacy, outlines its origins, and discusses its role within the inclusive education system. The empirical section presents the research findings, including examples of work submitted by students in pedagogy programs.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The majority of respondents had not come across the term “self-advocate” prior to the study. They primarily associated it with a person who acts on behalf of an individual with a disability, and viewed self-advocacy as the protection of the rights and interests of people

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with disabilities, though not necessarily through independent action. The creative task designed for the study was shown to enhance understanding of the concept.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH:

The findings have practical implications for academic training of future teachers, particularly programs focused on inclusive education. Developing self-advocacy skills is essential for all individuals. It is recommended that the proposed instructional approach be integrated into teacher training programs to promote a deeper understanding of self-advocacy.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, SELF-ADVOCATES, SELF-ADVOCACY, DISABILITY, TEACHER EDUCATION**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie idei self-advokatury osób z niepełnosprawnościami i doświadczeń związanych z kształtowaniem jej rozumienia wśród nauczycieli edukacji włączającej. Celem badania jest identyfikacja sposobu, w jaki treści związane z self-advokaturą są odbierane w kontekście idei włączenia społecznego w trakcie kształcenia nauczycieli.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Głównym problemem badawczym jest pytanie: Jak nauczyciele rozumieją ideę self-advokatury? oraz Jaki sposób prowadzenia zajęć skutecznie przybliży ich do zrozumienia tej idei w warunkach edukacji akademickiej? Raport z badania to część większego projektu autorek. Przedstawia prosty eksperyment w nauczaniu koncepcji self-advokatury przyszłych nauczycieli (N = 184) i analizę ich prac na ten temat.

PROCES WYWODU: Część teoretyczna wyjaśnia, czym jest self-advokatura, opisuje jej genezę i miejsce w systemie edukacji włączającej. W części empirycznej zaprezentowano wyniki badań, w tym przykładowe prace studentów pedagogiki.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Większość ankietowanych nie spotkała się wcześniej z terminem „self-advokat”. Utożsamiają go z osobą występującą w imieniu osoby z niepełnosprawnością, a ideę self-advokatury z ochroną praw i interesów tych osób, ale niekoniecznie samodzielnie. W jej zrozumieniu pomagają zaprojektowane kreatywne zadanie.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I ZNACZENIE APLIKACYJNE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Wyniki mogą zostać wykorzystane w kształceniu akademickim przyszłych nauczycieli edukacji włączającej. Kompetencje samorzecznicze potrzebne są wszystkim. Warto wprowadzić do kształcenia nauczycieli proponowane zajęcia, które umożliwią pogłębienie zrozumienia idei self-advokatury.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **EDUKACJA WŁĄCZAJĄCA, SELF-ADWOKACI, SAMORZECZNICTWO, NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚĆ, KSZTAŁCENIE NAUCZYCIELI**

Introduction

Inclusive education is progressing within the Polish educational system, alongside broader changes in societal attitudes towards individuals with disabilities and other groups with diverse learning needs. Increasingly, these individuals are voicing their expectations, in line with the Madrid Declaration's principle: "Nothing about us without us!" (Charlton, 2000). This aligns with the rise of the self-advocacy movement, which began gaining traction in Poland at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries (Podgórska-Jachnik, 2009), though its origins can be traced back to the earlier disability rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Pinning down the exact historical origins of the self-advocacy movement is challenging (Goodley, 2005). It is generally believed to have originated in Sweden (Atkinson, 2002) and is closely associated with Bengt Nirje, an advocate for social integration, deinstitutionalization, and normalization. In 1969, during a presentation titled "Towards Independence" at a congress in Dublin, Nirje outlined the history of the movement he had spearheaded. The first self-advocacy conferences were held in 1972 in Sweden, followed by similar events in England; in 1973 in Canada; and in 1974 in Oregon (Department of Administration, 2014). The movement adopted the name *People First*, echoing the declaration of its founders: "We are tired of being called retarded – we are people first" (cited in Jakubas-Śródecka, 2023, p. 32).

In Poland, the self-advocacy movement is most closely associated with the activities of PSONI – the Polish Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities. The first meeting of Polish self-advocates took place in 1995, and in 2001, the first self-advocacy workshops were organized in Łuczniczka. Since then, PSONI has continued to advance these efforts by establishing local chapters across the country (Abramowska, 2014). The organization also publishes materials through its "Self-Advocate's Library," which promotes the methodology for creating easy-to-read (ETR) texts.

There are many definitions of self-advocacy, all emphasizing the active role of individuals with (intellectual) disabilities in managing their own affairs, while recognizing that they may require and request assistance. This dynamic is perhaps best encapsulated by the phrase originally used in a different context: "Help me to do it myself" (Montessori, 2018, p. 256). While the limitations stemming from disabilities are acknowledged, the focus remains on enhancing individuals' capacities and increasing their autonomy. This encompasses both agency and the capacity to exercise one's legal rights. Respecting self-advocates means simplifying complex, academic definitions of self-advocacy with simpler, universally understandable ones, such as: "the ability to speak up for one's own desires and needs" (Schreiner, 2007, p. 300). Anyone who possesses this skill is their own advocate, while those whose capacity for self-advocacy is constrained in any way experience a form of oppression. Therefore, providing compensatory support is essential – though this support should not equate to substitution. While advocacy by others is important in certain circumstances, self-advocacy must always remain the priority.

A number of scholars (Parchomiuk, 2014; Griffiths & Ryan, 2015; Jakubas-Śródecka, 2023, among others) underscore both the personal and social dimensions of self-advocacy.

They connect it not only to individuals representing themselves but also to advocating on behalf of others in similar circumstances, which ultimately blurs the distinction between general advocacy and self-advocacy. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the central idea, which centers on articulating one's own needs and rights, and demanding that they be recognized. The self-advocacy movement epitomizes the rights-based model of disability. Its essence lies in affirming the rights of individuals with disabilities and empowering them to make choices and voice their needs. This movement also seeks to raise legal awareness, enhance the competencies of self-advocates, and reshape societal attitudes to create a more inclusive society. The outcomes of working with self-advocates have been promising (Jakubas-Śródecka, 2023), as such work contributes to the independence of young adults with intellectual disabilities and improves their ability to communicate effectively on their own behalf. Importantly, these skills can be cultivated as early as during school education, as self-advocacy-related content is already embedded in the curriculum, even for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. However, for these efforts to be successful, teachers – particularly those involved in inclusive education, as most students with disabilities are now enrolled in mainstream schools – must first understand the core principles of self-advocacy. Drawing on their experience working with individuals with disabilities and training educators, the authors have developed a workshop model for inclusive education, with self-advocacy as a central theme.

Methods and Research Tools

This article presents the findings of a pedagogical experiment designed to identify effective methods for teaching the concept of “self-advocacy,” a foundational idea within inclusive education. The experiment, which was conducted in controlled yet natural settings during scheduled academic courses, exemplifies a type of natural pedagogical experiment (Pilch & Bauman, 2001). The main research questions guiding the study were: How do teachers understand the concept of self-advocacy? And what instructional methods most effectively help them grasp this concept in the context of higher education?

The study, conducted between 2022 and 2024, engaged 184 participants (96.8% female), comprising students from pedagogical programs and teacher training workshops at universities in Łódź and Wrocław. Group A (N = 96) was introduced to the concept of self-advocacy through a two-hour lecture on inclusive education, accompanied by a recommended reading (Podgórska-Jachnik, 2009) and brief YouTube videos about self-advocates. Group B (N = 82), after receiving a similar lecture, was assigned a task: “Search the term ‘self-advocacy’ in an online image search engine and select an image or poster that, in your opinion, best represents the essence of the self-advocacy movement (paste it into your response file).” Participants were also asked to justify their choice, with the option of creating their own symbol or drawing if they preferred. Both groups were provided with the same supplementary materials. Given the limited time available

for the sessions, we designed a simple yet creative and engaging evaluation level task for students that followed Bloom's revised taxonomy, and encouraging making critical judgements: assess, critique, judge, justify, and argue (Munzenmaier & Rubin, 2013).

Both pre-tests and post-tests consisted of two simple multiple-choice questions: "Who is a self-advocate?" (true/false responses) and "What associations come to mind when you think of self-advocacy?" (not graded, but used to analyze associations). The pre-test also included an additional question: "Were you familiar with the term self-advocate before?" Additionally, we analyzed the content of Group B's responses to the task, which served as the independent variable, while the dependent variable was the learning outcomes achieved. The research was carried out between 2021 and 2023, with the post-test sample size totaling $N = 178$, as a few participants missed the final sessions.

Results of the Scientific Analysis

Analysis of Student Teachers' Work

The work produced by student teachers in Group B during the experiment, coupled with subsequent discussions, revealed that a straightforward task in an innovative format not only captured their attention but also led to insightful reflections that demonstrated their grasp of the core principles of self-advocacy. The selection of visual materials is particularly noteworthy.¹ Many students opted for posters specifically designed to represent the activities of self-advocates, such as those created by various advocacy organizations. Others chose a range of images, including magazine covers related to disability and posters from blogs on development (not exclusively centered on people with disabilities). Interestingly, a common search term used was "self-determination" rather than simply "disability," which signals the students' focus on the substance of the task – understanding the fundamental aspects of self-advocacy.

In our view, many of these reflections were deeply insightful, characterized by inclusive thinking, which is best conveyed through the participants' own words. Their statements generally expressed solidarity with people with disabilities, reflected through frequent phrases such as "just like us," "the same needs," and "everyone needs..." – rather than pity or sympathy. The broad spectrum of actions undertaken by self-advocates was highlighted, with a strong emphasis on the importance of "having a voice" and articulating one's personal needs. The most frequently selected symbols included a megaphone, microphone, banner, and puzzle piece – the latter representing a component of a larger puzzle, symbolizing the integration of various elements into a cohesive whole.

In most cases, students expressed their ideas freely and in their own words, though some did incorporate fragments of academic definitions. Many responses were particularly

¹ We do not hold the copyright for the graphics, so we are providing descriptions and source links instead.

vivid and emotive, with an overwhelming prevalence of positive sentiment.² We noted enthusiastic remarks that reflected genuine interest and engagement with the task, as evidenced by phrases such as “I found this fascinating,” “It really captivated me,” and “I liked it immensely.” For us, this enthusiasm confirmed the appeal of the task, but also the students’ keen interest in a topic that was unfamiliar to most of them, as expressed in remarks like “I didn’t know this before,” “I hadn’t realized that,” and “I hadn’t encountered this earlier.”

A particularly interesting and significant observation, especially in the context of inclusive education and working with diverse groups, is that participants began to recognize the relevance of self-advocacy for all individuals, not just those with disabilities. This is well illustrated by one student’s comment: “I feel that something like this is necessary for everyone. Just because someone is able-bodied doesn’t mean they automatically know how to express their needs or stand up for their rights. Everyone should learn how to be their own advocate” (K.K.). This is an important insight, as the competencies of self-advocacy are indeed valuable for all individuals. What distinguishes people with disabilities in this regard is the presence of additional factors that can threaten their autonomy, as well as the particular communication barriers they may face. Below, we provide a few examples of the descriptions of the selected graphics.

GRAPHIC 1: The heading reads “SELF-ADVOCACY,” followed by seven icons labeled: 1) speaking up for yourself, 2) staying informed, 3) knowing your rights, 4) finding support, 5) problem solving, 6) self-determination, 7) asking for help.
(<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/importance-self-advocacy-lindsey-eaton>)

Many individuals with disabilities wish to be heard and to speak up for themselves because they have a unique understanding of their own experiences. They live through these situations and are directly affected by them. ... The scale here symbolizes balance, representing their awareness of their rights and their desire to be treated equally, just like everyone else. The image of the hand holding people, or “people in hand,” suggests that people are within our reach – they are there to support and help us. People with disabilities can also be a source of help to others, and sometimes, because of their shared experiences, they are in a better position to provide support than someone who has not faced similar challenges. ... Of course, they can ask for help when needed, but they do so on their own terms, without expecting pity or sympathy from others (O.S.).

² We also conducted a sentiment analysis using the application <https://sentimenti.pl/analiza-wydzwieku-emocjonalnego-analiza-tekstu-sentimenti/>, focusing on so-called “emotional temperature” and emotion profiles. While this analysis is quite fascinating, the limited scope of this publication does not allow for its presentation here.

GRAPHIC 2: The heading reads “SELF-ADVOCACY,” and below is a hand holding a flyer with the word “ADVOCACY” presented as an acronym, where each letter stands for:

- A ALWAYS ADVOCATE FOR YOURSELF**
- D DETERMINE WHAT YOUR NEEDS ARE**
- V VOICE YOUR CONCERNS**
- O ONLY YOU KNOW HOW TO FEEL**
- C COSNSIDER SOLUTIONS**
- A ASK FOR HELP**
- T TELL OTHERS WHAY YOU NEED**
- E EDUCATING OTHERS IS IMPORTANT**

(<https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/667658713531876551/>)

I really appreciate how the word “advocate” is broken down into an acronym, with each letter reinforcing the core values of the self-advocacy movement. It teaches us that we should stand up for themselves, define our needs, speak openly our concerns, and remember that only we truly know how we feel. It also emphasizes the importance of considering possible solutions, asking for help, and communicating our needs to others. Educating others is also central to the process (Z.W.).

GRAPHIC 3: A table is scattered with paper and pencils, while two hands, one holding scissors, are seen cutting out letters. The cut-out letters spell “YES, I CAN.” Nearby is the caption, “Instilling Self-Advocacy in Your Grade-Schooler.”

(<https://globalstudentnetwork.com/instilling-self-advocacy-to-your-grade-schooler/>)

The simple phrase “Yes, I can” opens the door to numerous interpretations. It demonstrates that a wide range of tasks and actions can be accomplished by those who are willing to speak up for themselves. ... Self-determination, however, requires courage ... Many people hesitate to take control of their lives, often due to a lack of confidence or belief in their own agency. ... This particular illustration struck a chord with me because it symbolizes the concept of “taking matters into your own hands.” I think that the hands cutting and arranging the paper letters represent the act of self-advocacy. ... The scissors shape the letters into a cohesive form, and those same hands organize them into a meaningful message. For me, the phrase and the letters serve as the final product of a larger process – the realization of one’s full capacity for self-advocacy (W.B.).

GRAPHIC 4: A word cloud fills the silhouette of a person, featuring terms such as learning; personal; coaching; life; development; skills; goals, professional; training; help; business; guiding; leading (https://www.yougotintowhere.com/admissions-blog/2016/08/26/self-advocacy-be-the-boss-of-your-education?rq=self%20advocacy)

I believe the poster I chose perfectly encapsulates the essence of this movement. It illustrates both important values and rights arranged within the outline of a person. One striking example is the word “success” prominently displayed in the image. Many people mistakenly assume that having a disability disqualifies one from achieving success. However, a powerful counterexample to this myth is Stephen Hawking, the distinguished physicist and mathematician... Hawking’s achievements are a testament to the fact that individuals with disabilities are just as entitled to success and rights as anyone else (S.T.).

GRAPHIC 5: A group of people shout into a megaphone labeled SELF ADVOCACY. Their voices cause walls that separate them from officials seated at desks to collapse. One turned-around official remarks, "Thought I heard voices." Below, a caption reads: "USE OUR VOICE – BREAK THE WALL." (<https://www.voicestogether.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Break-Down-the-Walls.pdf>)

In this poster, the people are shouting through a megaphone because they want their voices to be heard. Their outcry causes the walls separating them from the officials at their desks to come crashing down, which symbolizes the removal of barriers. The caption reinforces the message of the self-advocacy movement: simply using your voice can break down walls. In my view, this illustrates that, today, everyone has the right to speak out about their needs, rights, and opinions without facing exclusion (A.S.).

We regret having to limit ourselves to just these few examples, as the other submissions also contain a wealth of insightful reflections and associations. These collected works offer rich material for further discussions with students.

Analysis of Educational Outcomes

The concepts of self-advocate and self-advocacy were previously unfamiliar to the vast majority of participants. Only 31 out of 184 individuals (16.8%) had heard of it prior to the sessions, with only a few individuals in each group being aware of the terms, so the results of the post-test in groups A and B were compared with the pre-test results of the entire cohort.³ Most participants initially associated self-advocates with legal representatives (88%) or spokespersons appointed to advocate for individuals with disabilities (69%). Less than half believed that a self-advocate could be a person with a disability, and even then, they imagined this person representing an organization supporting people with disabilities (45.7%) or advocating for others in similar situations (38.6%). Only one in four participants (26.1%) recognized that a self-advocate could be a person with a disability advocating for themselves. A few respondents mistakenly thought a self-advocate could be any well-meaning individual acting on behalf of someone with a disability, but this incorrect interpretation was almost entirely absent in the post-test.

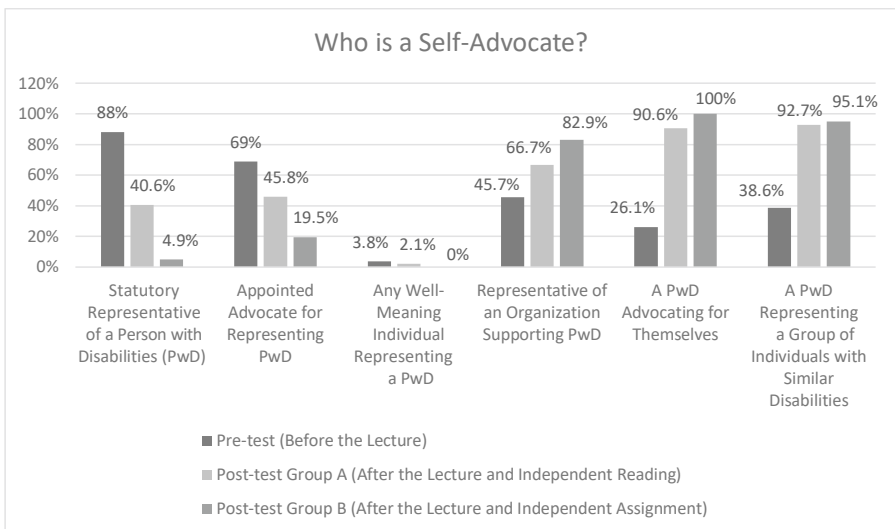
The post-test results for groups A and B demonstrate that, after the sessions and recommended independent study, students' understanding of self-advocacy had significantly improved. The majority now understood that a self-advocate is specifically a person with a disability advocating for themselves. This awareness was stronger in group B, which had completed an additional independent task. As shown in Figure 1, after the sessions, the vast majority of students in both groups correctly associated self-advocates with individuals

³ Groups A and B the concept of self-advocacy and their understanding of it as well as their prior familiarity were comparable. Although the results allow for separating the pre-test data for Groups A and B, we chose to present them together due to space constraints and to enhance the clarity of the findings.

with disabilities representing their own interests (group A: 90.6%; group B: 100%) or those advocating for others with similar experiences (group A: 92.7%; group B: 95.1%). Notably, it was recognized that a self-advocate does not need to be a formal representative of an organization – this association appeared in 66.7% of group A and 82.9% of group B.

The most notable difference between the groups was in their ability to move away from the misconception that a self-advocate is someone other than the individual with the disability. It was the independent analysis of self-advocacy in group B's additional task that helped reduce the number of participants equating self-advocates with spokespersons (19.5%) or legal representatives (4.9%). Despite these improvements, the belief that a self-advocate is someone other than the person themselves remained strong, particularly in group A, where it persisted at 40.6–45.8% despite participants having learned the definition and scope of self-advocates' roles.

Fig. 1. Associations With the Concept of Self-Advocacy Before and After Sessions With Additional Reading (Group A) and Both Reading and Independent Tasks (Group B)



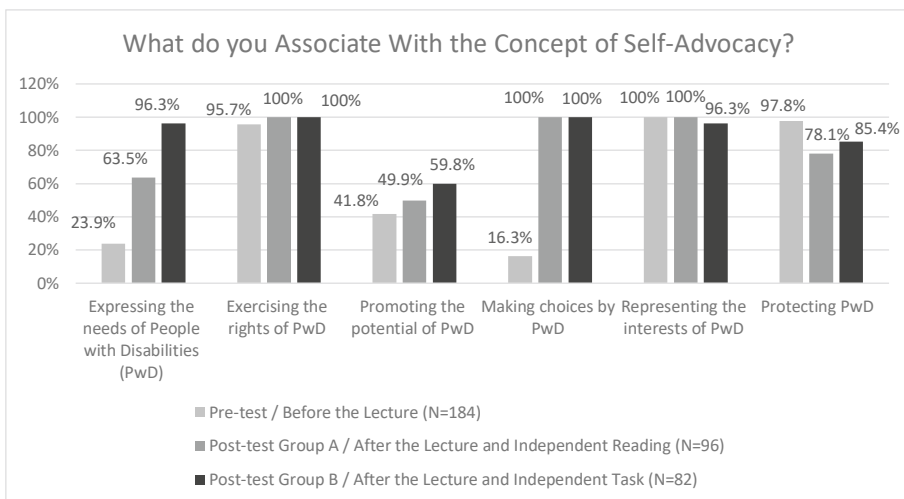
Source: original research.

The following graph illustrates shifts in participants' understanding of self-advocacy over the course of the study. In the pre-test, most associations were linked to advocating for the rights of individuals with disabilities (95.7%), protecting their interests (100%), and ensuring their safety (87.8%). However, personal aspects such as expressing one's needs (23.9%) and making independent choices (16.3%) were barely acknowledged. In reality, self-advocacy is grounded in rights and choices, with an emphasis on empowering individuals to recognize and express their own needs. This perspective was most clearly grasped by participants in Group B.

While the understanding of the role of choice in self-advocacy improved equally across both groups (100% in Group A and B after the sessions), the key difference lies in how each group perceived the importance of expressing personal needs. After completing the additional task, 96.3% of Group B recognized this critical aspect, compared to only 63.5% of Group A, who did not engage in as in-depth exploration of the concept.

There was little change in whether students in either group associated self-advocacy with promoting the potential of people with disabilities (41.8% of all students in the pre-test; 49.9% in Group A and 59.8% in Group B post-test). These findings suggest that participants do not view promotion as the primary goal of self-advocacy. However, they may interpret it as a byproduct – a means of asserting one’s agency and advocating for the right to speak on one’s own behalf. Overall, both instructional approaches delivered the expected results, demonstrating that the topic resonated with students and could serve as a valuable entry point into broader discussions on inclusion and empowerment.

Fig. 2. Associations With the Concept of Self-Advocacy and the Scope of Potential Actions by Self-Advocates Before and After Sessions With Additional Reading (Group A) and Both Reading and Independent Tasks (Group B)



Source: original research.

Conclusions

The classes and research have, in the authors’ opinion, yielded valuable insights. The terms “self-advocate” and “self-advocacy” are not commonly understood in everyday discourse, which explains why few of the student teachers were familiar with these concepts. There was a recurring difficulty in accurately identifying who qualifies

as a self-advocate. The term “advocate” often shifts attention toward advocacy in the sense of representing others, which may stem from stereotypical views of individuals with disabilities as dependent and in need of care, thus reinforcing the idea that they require representation. Despite the limited duration of the course (a single lecture), both groups experienced a significant shift in perception towards the importance of “self”: the autonomy in articulating one’s own needs and the activism involved in addressing them.

Students who participated in the creative task of selecting and justifying a visual representation of self-advocacy were better able to grasp the essence of self-advocacy. A noteworthy additional effect, which emerged in subsequent discussions, was the heightened motivation among these students to independently explore further information on self-advocates and their role. While self-advocacy is not the only concept related to the broader inclusion movement, we believe it is a fundamental one that sets the stage for crucial educational tasks. A teacher who does not fully grasp the essence of self-advocacy cannot effectively nurture these competencies in their students. Our simple pedagogical experiment demonstrated that this concept can be taught in a straightforward yet effective way. We strongly recommend incorporating this method of teaching self-advocacy into academic curricula.

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