Research Paper

Differences in self-advocacy among hard of hearing and typical hearing students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Self-advocacy is considered a protective factor of psychosocial and academic problems among students with special needs.
Aims: To asses self-advocacy among students with hearing loss and compare it to that of typical hearing students.
Methods and procedure: The current study examined 27 hard of hearing (hh) students and 27 typical hearing students, all studying in mainstream classes. They completed the Hope Scale, a self-esteem scale, a self-efficacy scale, and a measure of self-advocacy statements. Data regarding the hh participants' spoken language abilities were collected through their itinerant teachers.
Outcomes and results: HH students reported lower levels of self-esteem than the typical hearing students. Emotional self-efficacy was positively correlated with age among the hh students, and hope and effort were negatively correlated with age among typical hearing students. Some significant positive correlations emerged among the hh participants between their syntactic and pragmatic abilities and several self-advocacy indicators.
Conclusions and implications: Interventions aimed at enhancing self-advocacy among hh students should focus on intensifying their self-esteem as well as their syntactic and pragmatic abilities.

1. Introduction

Self-advocacy is speaking up or taking action for oneself. It includes defending one's rights and fighting for appropriate services (Williams & Shoultz, 1982). Thus, the acquisition of effective communication skills is paramount for successful self-advocacy (Schoffstall, Cawthon, Tarantolo-Leppo, & Wendel, 2015). Students with hearing loss who are mainstreamed may encounter various challenges during their school years (e.g., Marschark & Albertini, 2004). Good self-advocacy skills may assist them in handling such challenges. However, since many of them face acute communication barriers, their ability to express their needs and preferences to others may be impaired (e.g., Eriks-Brophy et al., 2006).

Only few studies have examined self-advocacy among students with hearing loss in general and mainstreamed students in particular and most of them focused on self-advocacy interventions and not on children's skills per se (e.g., Luckner & Muir, 2002). In addition, most of these studies related to self-advocacy as a one-dimensional construct and not as a complex one, as suggested by leading scholars in this domain (e.g., Kozminsky, 2004; Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005). Furthermore, no comparison was made with individuals with typical communication skills. Consequently, the knowledge about the ability of students with hearing loss to advocate for themselves is limited. The current study adopted a broad conceptualization of self-advocacy (Kozminsky, 2004) and examined various aspects of self-advocacy among hard of hearing (hh) students in comparison with typical hearing students studying

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1.1. Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy is considered a developmental process in which the individual gradually gains confidence in expressing ambitions and emotions, taking responsibility over his or her life (Kozminsky, 2004). In general, there are two types of self-advocacy: group self-advocacy and personal self-advocacy. Group self-advocacy includes joint activities of people with similar needs which are aimed at promoting social justice for the whole group. In contrast, personal self-advocacy includes actions of an individual, such as expressing thoughts or emotions in an assertive way, developing the ability to choose and decide, acknowledging formal and informal rights, and making changes in the environment. In this type of self-advocacy, the individual is not part of a group and the advocacy act is perceived as a natural and obvious action based on the assumption that a person is responsible for his or her own choices in life (Kozminsky, 2004; Zegar & Baumann, 2012). The current study focused on personal self-advocacy.

Different scholars have addressed the issue of self-advocacy with most of them tending to focus on only one specific aspect. Weiner (1985), for example, described the motivation for self-advocating. He suggested that people tend to look for the causes of their successes and failures. Individuals who perceive their successes and failures as processes which are related to their own planning and efforts, have stronger motivation to engage in activities which will help them attain future success. Ellis (1962) emphasized the diverse ways in which people respond to the same or similar events. This diversity is largely the result of differences in cognition or belief systems and may impact individual behavior, including the action of self-advocacy. Yuan (1994) focused on the actual action of self-advocacy. He proposed a structured way of verbalizing self-advocacy statements. First he suggested using a positive statement aimed at attracting the listener's attention and expressing a readiness to progress, then a statement describing the individual's difficulties and problems and the way in which they affect his or her behavior, and finally a statement suggesting a solution which takes into account personal and environmental resources and difficulties. For example, if a hh student in a mainstream class finds it difficult to follow an assignment's instructions which are given orally, he or she may approach the teacher and phrase a request accordingly: "I want to be sure I will do the assignment according to your instructions (a positive statement), but I find it difficult to follow and remember them when they are given orally (difficulty description). Could you please write them down (a suggested solution)?".

More recently, Test and colleagues (Test et al., 2005) proposed a model of self-advocacy involving four components: two related to knowledge (knowledge of self and knowledge of rights) and two related to skills (communication and leadership). According to this model, in order to self-advocate individuals should first know and understand themselves; then, they need to communicate this knowledge effectively to others; and finally, by developing leadership skills, they can move from individual self-advocacy to advocating for a group of individuals with common concerns.

Another model put forth by Kozminsky's (2004) suggests three components that are essential in order for individual self-advocacy to occur: *knowledge*, *motivational features*, and *skills*. The knowledge component includes personal knowledge (of one's special needs, difficulties, and strengths), as well as environmental knowledge (regarding one's rights, duties, and existing facilities which may help a person to advocate himself or herself). The motivational features component includes characteristics essential for self-advocacy such as self-determination, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and internal locus of control. The skills component includes skills that ensure the efficiency of the self-advocacy act such as goal setting, decision- making, self-control, problem solving, working with others, assertive communication, and the use of self-advocacy statements. Since Kozminsky's model was more comprehensive in nature, including not only components of knowledge and skills but also motivational features which are considered the fuel of self-advocacy (Kozminsky, 2004), and since understanding of the relationships between these three components is limited, the current study adopted Kozminsky's conceptualization of self-advocacy. Specifically, we examined the knowledge component through awareness of strengths, the motivational features component through self-esteem and self-efficacy, and the skills component through the usage of self-advocacy statements.

Self-advocacy is especially important when considering students with special needs in general and those attending mainstream classes in particular, since it is considered one of the most efficient ways to promote and encourage the social integration of these students (Pitlyk, 2007). Additionally, most teachers in general settings are usually less trained to work with students with special needs and have more difficulty including them. Indeed, a number of studies reported teachers' concerns regarding their own professional competence and knowledge for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities in their classrooms (Forlin, 2001; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, & Earle, 2006). Consequently, students with disabilities in mainstreamed classes may have a greater need for self-advocacy than students in special education classes. The current study focused on hard of hearing (hh) students attending mainstream classes.

1.2. Self-advocacy among HH students

Although there are audiological criteria for being hh, the current study adopted a more functional and social definition of this concept in which a person with hearing loss who prefers to communicate through spoken language and places more importance on blending into the hearing world then being part of the Deaf community is perceived as hh (e.g., Michael, Cinamon, & Most, 2015). Indeed, students who are hh tend to study in mainstream classes and to use spoken language as their main mode of communication (e.g., Allen, 1992; Mitchell & Karchmer, 2011).

Studying in a mainstream school can be quite challenging for students with hearing loss if only because of the mere fact that they are often the only children with hearing loss in the entire school (Pitlyk, 2007). Although integration of students with hearing loss in mainstream classes may contribute to them academically as well as socially (e.g., Antia, Jones, Luckner, Kreimeyer, & Reed, 2011), it