

New Visions, New Futures: Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities

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Background

Self-determination for students with disabilities began to get federal attention in the mid-1980s. Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998b) defined the term self-determination as being:

...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 greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults. (p. 2)

Historical Background of Self-Determination

The current view of self-determination has been shaped by a variety of forces. These include:

Social. By the 1880s, most states and territories placed people with disabilities in institutions. Usually, there were separate institutions for the deaf, blind, mentally handicapped, or physically disabled. While usually these people were sent there for education or training, oftentimes they spent their entire lives in the institution.

Federal rehabilitation services began during and following World War I—when the emphasis was on rehabilitating veterans who were injured in the war. The goal was re-training veterans. It became the Federal-State Vocational Rehabilitation System. Social security later provided benefits to some of those unable to work.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the social change movement had great impact. Shreve (1982) hypothesized that five social movements of the 1960s and 70s contributed to independent living for the disabled. These were: *civil rights movement, consumerism, self-help, de-medicalization, and de-institutionalization.*

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The *civil rights movement* evolved into the disability rights movement in which the disabled demanded to be included in the mainstream of society. *Consumerism* came in when the disabled pointed out that they were consumers first and disabled second. They wanted the autonomy to make decisions about housing, services, and rehabilitation. *Self-help* came about when people with disabilities know how to best serve others who have similar or the same disabilities.

De-medicalization refers to removing the control of medical professionals from daily living. Personal assistance became a consumer right. Parallel to this was *de-institutionalization*. The disabled and their families wanted the disabled mainstreamed into their own communities. All five movements/factors contributed to the Independent Living Center movement—which was anchored in the principle of self-determination.

Legal. There were a number of Federal laws supporting the independent living movement and the right of self-determination for the disabled. The laws are summarized in Appendix A. The laws have had great impact on self-determination for people with disabilities. The laws and policy agenda emphasized empowerment of people with disabilities. Further, it fosters the concept of self-determination.

Federal Initiative. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) funded 26 demonstration projects in self-determination. The results were infused into state change programs (e.g., Transition to Work). Follow-up studies demonstrated the impact that self-determination can have on students with disabilities—especially in middle- and high-school levels.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded 19 state self-determination projects. These grants focused on students with developmental disabilities. The grants were aimed at having individuals and their families have more control and direction at choosing and purchasing services and for control over their own services.

Usefulness of Self-Determination Training

As a result of the social and political movement and of the OSERS model programs, self-determination emerged as a promising practice for training students with disabilities. Hasazi, Gordon, and Roe (1985), Siegel, Waxman, and Gaylord-Ross (1992), and Sitlington, Frank, and Carson (1993) have found that helping students acquire and exercise self-determination skills is a strategy that leads to more positive educational outcomes.

Several research studies showed the positive relationship between self-determination and positive educational outcomes (Perlmutter and Monty [1997]; Realon, Favell, and Lowerre [1990]; Schunk [1985]). Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) found that students trained in self-determination achieved higher pay, and longer-term employment after graduation than those not trained in self-determination.

The salient point of this discussion is that if educators train students with disabilities to use self-determination strategies, they can take charge of their educational programs, set goals, and better prepare for life after graduation from high school.

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Teaching Self-Determination

Special educators work on assisting students to become self-determined. This strategy helps students with disabilities develop the skills that they need to take charge of their educational programs, meet their educational goals, and prepare for life after graduation.

According to Field (1997), the focus on teaching self-determination skills has historical roots in the career development and transition movements. In a classic work on career development, Super (1983) identified a set of factors important to career development. These career-choice factors include:

- the ability to plan for near and distant futures;
- the ability to take control of one's own life (locus of control);
- an understanding of the relationship of time to goal attainment;
- a healthy self-esteem;
- the ability and willingness to explore careers and opportunities;
- the willingness to ask questions and seek solutions;
- the willingness to seek out and use resources; and
- the willingness to participate in school-based and community-based activities.

Cognitive factors identified by Super (1983) as important in career development include: (a) information for decision making, (b) decision-making skills, (c) self-knowledge, (d) work experience, (e) crystallization of personal values and interests, and (e) preferences in occupations. According to Super, young adults can develop a realistic vision of their strengths and limitations and a reality orientation by using these skills. Furthermore, this will assist them in identifying their needs, wants, and aspirations in order to focus their efforts to attain appropriate goals.

Self-determination skills benefit students with disabilities when used in a manner that appropriately matches each person's needs, interests, and goals. For example, students with more significant needs may express their self-determination by choosing the job they want after shadowing several and picking an illustration of their preferred one. Similarly, college-bound high school students may exhibit self-determination by selecting a college that matches their perceived interests and strengths.

Self-Determination Curriculum

Curriculum, instruction, and many other educational activities can be developed in a manner which promotes self-determination. The teacher must be focused on the self-determination process and is aware of individual student needs. To teach generalized self-determination skills and attitudes, educators must realize that self-determination is a function of the interaction between an individual's skills and the opportunities provided by their environments. Specific assessments and lessons must be designed to focus on the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and beliefs associated with self-determination.

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Conclusion

The concept of self-determination, which has emerged as both a civil rights issue and a curriculum need, can help students be more successful in education and transition to adult life. Self-determination holds great potential to transform the way in which educational services are planned and delivered for students with and without disabilities. Self-determination is an approach that celebrates and builds on the intrinsic value of each human being. Research data support the effectiveness of instruction based on self-determination principles for bringing about positive outcomes in education and employment settings. Voices of persons with disabilities attest to the importance of self-determination for each individual.

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APPENDIX A

Federal Laws Supporting Self-Determination for the Disabled

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Appendix A. Federal Laws Supporting Self-Determination for the Disabled.

Year	Title	Description of Act
1968	Architectural Barriers Act	Designed to eliminate architectural barriers in all federally owned/leased buildings.
1970	Urban Mass Transit Act	Required that all new purchases of mass transit vehicles be equipped for disabled.
1973	Vocational Rehabilitation Act – Section 504	Section 504 provided non-discrimination provisions in programs receiving federal funds.
1973	Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1973	Established special education as a right not just as a good thing to do.
1975	Developmental Disabilities Bill of Rights Act	Established protection and advocacy agencies in each state.
1975	Education of all Handicapped Children Act	Requires a free, appropriate public education for children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. Began the mainstreaming of children with disabilities into regular classrooms.
1978	Rehabilitation Act Amendments	Title VII, created Comprehensive Services for Independent Living Centers and operation of the centers.
1983	Rehabilitation Act Amendments	Mandated that each state has a Client Assistance Project (CAP).
1986	Rehabilitation Act Amendments	Created consumer control for Independent Living Center Boards and created work programs.
1988	Air Carrier Access Act	Provides for equal access on airlines.
1988	Civil Rights Restoration Act	Any organization or corporation receiving federal funds may not discriminate.
1988	Fair Housing Act Amendments	Prohibits discrimination in housing and mandates architectural universal design.
1990	Americans with Disabilities Act	Creates broad civil rights protections.
1990	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990	Requires students 16 and older to be invited to attend their IEP meeting.
1994	School to Work Opportunities Act	Promoted job training and self-determination for all.
1994	Goals 2000 Act	All children must be proficient in 2000.
1996	Telecommunications Act	Emphasized universal design in electronic communication systems. Disabled represented on board.
1997	IDEA Amendments of 1997	Transition planning must begin at age 14. Plus student must be informed of rights that they receive at the age of majority.
1998	Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments	Included universal design as part of requirements for electronic learning and testing.
2001	No Child Left Behind	Gives states a time limit to have all students be proficient in reading and mathematics.