

Premier’s Australian Association of Special Education NSW Chapter Research to Practice Special Education Scholarship

The importance of self-determination instruction for high school students with a disability and their future post school

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# Introduction

Important components of a successful transition from high school into independent life include having a student who, from an early age, demonstrates self-determined behaviour by working with their families, teachers, or other carers to set their own goals, monitor their learning towards these goals and see the rewards when goals are reached (Cavendish, W., Rodriguez, R.J. 2013).

Self-determination is an essential skill for all students including those at high risk or with a disability. Test et al. (2009) has shown that those students with high levels of self-determination are more likely to go on to postsecondary education, be competitively employed, and live independently after high school. Self-determination is defined by Wehmeyer et al. (1996) as “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence or interference”. A causal agent is making their own decisions and making things happen in his/her own life based on their own preferences and interests. They monitor and regulate their own actions, they set goals for themselves and direct their own lives.

As a special education teacher, I am aware that students with an intellectual disability often do not have the belief or the skills that will allow them to be self-determined learners. The lack of self-determination can prevent them from recognising their strengths and limitations and result in them facing more barriers as they transition from high school to an independent life (deFur, Getzel, & Trossi, 1996).

The Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards NSW (BOSTES) wrote a Statement of Equity Principles when developing the NSW curriculum which include:

* excellence
* respect and responsibility
* equity and justice
* inclusivity.

These four areas note that when teachers and schools are developing curriculum they must encourage every student, including students with disabilities to develop a positive sense of identity and self-respect and that students will participate actively and responsibly as individuals and members of society. Teachers must demonstrate that all students are achieving and experiencing success. To help students with disabilities be able to succeed in these principles it is important that teachers embed self-determination into their curriculum.

One of the major contributors to the research on self-determination is Professor Michael Wehmeyer. His research on self-determination is extensive and has led to the development of programs such as the *Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI)* and *Whose Future Is It Anyway?* Wehmeyer, Palmer, Shogren, Williams-Diehm & Soukup (2013), conducted a study to establish a causal relationship between interventions (including SDLMI) to promote self-determination and enhanced student self-determination. It was conducted on 371 high school students over five years and while all students did improve their self-determination skills as measure by the AIR Self-determination Scale, the group of students in the intervention group showed significantly greater improvement, indicating that providing instruction to promote self-determination enhanced the development of self-determination beyond that occurring normally. Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup & Little (2008) also showed that 65% of an experimental group attained targeted goal at expected level or higher using the Goal Attainment Scale.

SDLMI is a model for how teachers can instruct students to become causal agents in their own lives by encouraging self-determined learning. Teachers who implement this program find students with learning disabilities learn to problem solve, set goals, identify steps to meet their goals, self-regulate and adjust their goals. It has been shown to have significant effects on goal attainment, access to the general curriculum, student knowledge and locus of control for students with learning disabilities (Cavendish, W., Rodriguez, R.J. 2013).

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority’s (ACARA) social and personal capabilities require students to be able to assess their own abilities and be able to have a sense of self-worth and self-confidence, be able to identify their strengths and their limitations and write personal and academic goals to help prepare them for their roles as family, community or workforce members. Overlaying self-determination instruction into the curriculum would help address these capabilities.

# Focus of Study

As a special educator and faculty head teacher of Learning Support in a NSW Independent high school, we are continually tested by the challenges of educating and supporting students with various needs in our inclusive setting. It is imperative that we continue to explore, review, and adopt current evidence-based research and educational models that allow us to support the students to be fully engaged in their learning, to achieve academic success. We also need to provide them with the skills they need to achieve post-school success – independent living, competitive employment, and social acceptance on the same basis as students without disabilities.

The aim of my study tour was to investigate the various methods of self-determination being researched throughout the United States of America (USA) and the importance of having self-determination skills prior to finishing high school to help students with special education needs to succeed post school. Having discussions with researchers from the University of Oregon, the University of Kansas, as well as attending the Council of Exceptional Children Convention and Exposition Conference provided me with the opportunity to engage and develop professional dialogue with many people around the world – those completing research as well as teachers who are implementing self-determination in the classroom.

# Significant Learning

The following is a list of universities I visited and the people I spoke with**:**

* University of Sydney**:** Professor Roger Stancliffe**,** Dr David Evans
* University of New South Wales**:** Associate Professor Iva Strnadova, Associate Professor Terry Cummings and Dr Sue O'Neill
* University of Oregon, Eugene**:** Dr Dawn Rowe, Dr Valerie Mazzotti, Dr Lauren Lindstrom and Dr Brigid Flannery
* University of Kansas, Lawrence**:** Dr Michael Wehmeyer, Dr Karrie Shogren, Dr Susan Palmer and Dr James Thompson

The purpose of the study tour was to identify effective evidence-based self-determination programs that school teachers could implement into their curriculum to help students with learning disabilities become causal agents in their own lives. After discussions with the above, the knowledge gained on self-determination was immeasurable and highlighted many important findings:

## Characteristics of a self-determined person

Students who are self-determined have the following attributes based in three areas:

1. **Volitional Actions:** based on the conscious choices of the students that reflect their preferences, interests, values and goals.

A student is:

* 1. able to make choices and express their preferences
  2. able to self-initiate and plan by creating opportunities for themselves responding to opportunities or threats as they present themselves and putting a plan of their choosing in motion.

1. **Agentic action:** the skills needed to sustain action toward and achieve a goal.

A student is:

* 1. able to engage in making decisions
  2. able to set and attain goals
  3. able to self-direct by choosing their own goal, respond to challenges and opportunities faced
  4. able to self-regulate by checking their progress towards a goal
  5. able to self-advocate by acknowledging their weaknesses and strengths, can stand up and speak up for themselves.

1. **Action-Control beliefs:** sense of empowerment by knowing both what it takes to achieve their goals and how they can reach them. (Wehmeyer et al. 2017)

## 1. Importance of self-determination

In 2008, when the goals of education were determined by the Australian Education Ministers, they also identified criteria for successful learning and developing confident individuals.

Successful Learners:

* develop their capacity to learn and play an active role in their own learning
* are creative, innovative and resourceful, and can solve problems in ways that draw upon a range of learning areas and disciplines
* are on a pathway towards continued success in further education, training or employment, and acquire the skills to make informed learning and employment decisions
* are motivated to reach their full potential.

Confident individuals:

* have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness, and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing
* have a sense of optimism about their lives and their future
* are well prepared for their potential roles as family, community, and workforce members.

(MCEETYA, 2008, p.13)

As can be shown by these goals all students have the right to an education which allows them to gain the skills to be self-determined individuals. Research shows that self-determination is related to a host of more positive quality of life outcomes for people with disabilities, including better employment and independent living outcomes. Having self-determination skills leads to a/an:

* increase in competitive employment
* increase in post-school education options
* increase in leisure and social inclusion
* increase in engagement at school which leads to an increase academic success and a decrease in problem behaviours.
* reduction in off-task behaviours and an increase in on-task behaviours.

An example:



**Askia**

I made the decision to be self-determined and have been making my own choices, setting goals, and solving problems since my first IEP in the seventh grade. (Wehmeyer M. etal. A National Gateway to Self-Determination)

The latest data from the Survey of Disability, Aging and Carers, (2015) in Australia shows that people aged 15 – 64 years with disabilities (53.5%) fall way behind their peers without disabilities (83.2%) regarding post-school success in labour force participation rates. The unemployment rate while it has dropped from 1993, in 2015 it is still higher for people with a disability at 10% compared to those without a disability at 5.3%. Lower proportions of people with a disability were employed full-time (27.0%) compared to those without a disability (53.8%). The median gross income for a person with a disability was $465/week which was less than half the $950/week for people without a disability.

Completion of school and higher levels of education provide opportunities to meaningfully participate in society and the workforce, as well as achieve financial independence. Students with a disability who had Year 12 or equivalent, while there was an increase in high school completion rates from 35.6% in 2012 to 41% in 2015 is still well below students without a disability at 62.8% in 2015 (Survey of Disability, Aging and Carers, 2105).

## 2. Self-determination is linked to many areas of education

Self-determination is not a term that stands alone in research, actually throughout the tour it was discussed in context to many other areas of education especially for those students who were considered at risk, including students with disabilities, mental health disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders, learning disabilities and those not engaged in their schooling seem to all have research being conducted related to self-determination. In all cases when self-determination is included in their education the outcomes always improved.



Figure : Dr. Dawn Rowe (R)

Rowe, Mazzotti, Ingram and Lee (2017) showed that providing students that are at risk, with the opportunities to develop non-cognitive skills (goal setting, self-discipline, organisation and self-advocacy) you can build motivation and support their academic skill development. They suggest that non-cognitive skills are critical to ensuring these students persist in secondary education and successfully attain positive post-school outcomes. They also made note that academic and non-cognitive skills are interdependent and should not be taught in isolation from one another.

Kelly, Shogren and Pohl (2013) completed research looking at the impact of teaching self-determination skills had on the on-task and off-task behaviours of students with emotional and behavioural disorders (EBD). It has been shown that students with EBD are at a higher risk of school failure and have higher dropout rates compared to students with other disabilities. They have very difficult transitions to adulthood and are more likely to be living at home or be incarcerated post school. During the study, students were provided instruction in self-determination using the SDLMI and the findings showed that when self-determination skills were increased there was an increase in on task behaviour, and a decrease in off task behaviour, the students work completion rate increased, the students self-advocacy increased and the teachers noted an increase in confidence, achievement and focus in the students.

The greatest link for self-determination was the effect it had on the post-school transition of students. Discussions with Roger Stancliffe at the University of Sydney were focussed on the link between the successful transition of students post school, access to quality work experience during school and self-determination. Students need to be making decisions about careers they are interested in, what supports they will need to achieve in that work place and be able to know their strengths and weaknesses. This allows the work experience they have chosen during school to be of real world context, they are also fully engaged in the experience and leads to them being more motivated to achieve academic success during school providing opportunities towards the career of interest for them.

A study by Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenback and Little (2015) shows the relationship between self-determination instruction for students with disabilities and post-school outcomes. The focus of this study was the relationship between self-determination status when leaving school and adult outcomes one and two years after exiting high school. It also examined whether exposure to self-determination interventions while in secondary school impact the relationship between self-determination status when leaving school and adult outcomes one and two years post-school. Results indicated students who received instruction on self-determination had positive outcomes and had achieved employment, higher levels of community access, and were living more independently post school.

At the Council for Exceptional Children Convention in Boston, self-determination skills were also suggested as an integral part for the inclusion of all students especially in Universal Design for Learning, differentiated teaching and co-teaching. Each of these would use goal setting and attainment as part of the practice as well as providing choices for students, decision making skills, students using self-advocacy skills to determine what supports they will need to complete the work set.

## 3. Importance of engaging families, communities, teachers and carers

By involving all teachers, parents, carers, and especially students in the process of self-determination, the students become more independent in the decisions that they make, more academically successful and engaged in their schoolwork, contribute actively to their educational planning, and ultimately lead to a higher quality of life and more positive experiences post-school (Wehmeyer and Palmer, 2003).

## 4. Self-determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI)

The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) is a model that was developed initially by Mithaug, Wehmeyer, Agran, Martin, and Palmer (1998). Over the years it has been researched to examine the effects self-determination instruction has on students post school. The latest version developed by Shogren, Wehmeyer, Burke and Palmer (2017) is called The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction – Teachers Guide. It is a form of curriculum augmentation that can be used with the general education curriculum to instruct the students on self-determination skills.

Shogren, Plottner, Palmer, Wehmeyer, and Poek (2014) found that when SDLMI is implemented with students with disabilities there is a significant increase in teacher perception of student capacity and opportunity for self-determination to occur. Teachers found SDLMI provided a natural mechanism for self-determination instruction to be overlaid throughout the curriculum. An important aspect of enabling students to be self-determined is to create repeated opportunities for these skills to be practised and generalised throughout the day and the teacher’s perception was that SDLMI gave them this opportunity.

This research supports the work done by Shogren, Palmer, Wehmeyer, Williams-Diehm, and Little (2012). Their findings showed the importance of promoting self-determination and its identification as best practice in special education. An increase in self-determination is linked to high levels of paid competitive employment, independent living, increased community participation, success in post-secondary education, and increased quality of life. Using SDLMI to augment the general education curriculum, promotes increased academic skills, attainment of academic and transition goals. SDLMI was found to easily overlay the general education curriculum and creates opportunities for the generalisation of self-determined skills.

The SDLMI is designed to enable teachers to teach students to self-direct their own learning and to support students in becoming more effective at initiating and self-regulating action toward goal setting and attainment. The model involves students answering a set of questions that guide them to set a goal, create a plan to achieve that goal and self-evaluate progress toward that goal, altering the plan or goal as required. The model is made of three phases:

* phase 1: What is my goal?
* phase 2: What is my plan?
* phase 3: What have I learned?

## “I’m Determined” Program



The “I’m Determined” program is administered by the Virginia Department of Education and is designed to help students develop their self-determination skills. This program provides a variety of tools that are available online or as apps to educators, parents, and students.

There are three main tools in the “I’m Determined” program. The first is the One Pager. It provides a way for students to introduce themselves, their needs, preferences, strengths and interests. Student-centred planning becomes easier with this tool. The second tool is the Good Day Plan. This tool is used to help students identify factors that play a role in whether they have a good day or not. It helps to develop structures and routines and helps the student to write down steps to achieve the plan. The third tool is the Goal Setting tool. It is a visual representation of the steps needed to accomplish an identified goal.

In 2016, the Centre on Transition Innovations, Rehabilitation Research and Training Centre and the Virginia Commonwealth University completed a study on the validity of the tools. The results showed that all three tools facilitate development towards self-determination skills including self-awareness and knowledge, problem solving, decision making, self-advocacy, and choice making.

While the research is still required Loomis and Fontana (2011) completed a summary of Interview data that has promising impacts for students with disabilities. These include:

* increased confidence
* development of goal setting skills
* increase in self-advocacy and self-acceptance
* increase in technology skills
* increase in preparation for transition into post-school settings
* greater sense of control
* increased ability in public speaking
* improved behaviour
* increase in leadership skills
* increase in knowledge about their rights

# Conclusion

Self-determination is the ability for students to know and believe in themselves, to know what they want their future to be and how to make plans to achieve this future and to know what supports they will need to be able to take control of their life. Providing students with the opportunity to learn the skills needed to be self-determined people must be introduced early in their lives but then continued to be developed until adulthood. Obviously, parents play a role in this, but schools must also. We need to incorporate self-determination skills into our general education curriculum, so the skills can be easily generalised once school is finished. If the goal of MCEETYA, 2008, is to produce students who are successful and confident learners, to be engaged in their learning, reach their full potential in life, be optimistic about their futures and be well prepared for life in the community post-school we need to incorporate self-determination into our daily teaching practice.

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