Self-Determination and Culture: An Intervening Variable

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For nearly 20 years now, researchers have delved into the concept of self-determination. Though highlighted in other fields – medicine, social work, counseling and so forth, the concept of self-determination was taken to a different level in the field of education and particularly in the area of special education and transition planning. This occurred when self-determination became a part of the federally mandated Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and transition process through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Bremer, Kachgal, & Schoeller, 2003).

Wehmeyer (2007) suggested that self-determination implies actions which are volitional in nature. It refers to being cognizant of ones' thought processes and actions as choices are made toward a better quality of life. Zhang and Benz (2006) referred to self-determination as the right of an individual to be in charge of his/her life. Trainor (2005) suggested that self-determination is rooted in the European normalization movement. Zhang and Benz (2006) and Trainor (2005) concurred that the Anglo-European perspective of the normalization and independence movements undergird the self-determination concept, to the exclusion of non-Euro-American cultures. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) compared the beliefs, practices and values of the Anglo-European outlook to that of other less dominant ethnic groups represented in the US and found significant differences. According to Kober, Usher, and the Center on Education (2012), 83% of teachers are white and of Anglo-European descent. It may be reasonable to assume, therefore, that most teachers subscribe to the Anglo-European perspective on self-determination with limited knowledge of what this concept means to minority groups.

Self-determination in special education may be viewed through the lens of a number of models including the functional model (Wehmeyer, 2007), the self-regulated problem-solving model (Mithaug, Campeau, & Wolman, 1992 as cited in Wehmeyer 2007), and the ecological

model, (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 as cited in Wehmeyer, 2007). The functional model emphasizes that self-determined behaviors must be defined within the context of the purpose or utility of such behavior for the student. The self-regulated model sees self-determination as a subset of self- regulation without the outside influences. The crux of the ecological model is the contextual factors that are at play in the development and application of self-determination. Despite the model used, researchers agree that a positive correlation exists between self-determination and positive adult outcomes (Wehmeyer et al., 2003; Wehmeyer, 2007).

A substantial body of knowledge recognized the benefits of increased self-determination on the individual during the transition process for students with disabilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2003; Wehmeyer, 2007; Shogren, 2011). Shogren (2011) suggested that self-determination functions both as a *means to the end* of achieving positive life outcomes, as well as *the end* of being a positive life outcome in itself. Moreover, the concept of self-determination is beneficial and has lifespan implications for individuals both with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) (Wehmeyer, 2007).

In special education, it is considered best practice for students with special needs to be taught how to be self-determining (Field & Hoffman, 2002), particularly during the high school to adulthood transition period. An empirically validated body of research exists which corroborates the effectiveness of varied curricular and instructional methods that facilitate and improve self-determination skills of students with special needs (Test et al., 2009). A dearth of research exists, however, in the application and relevance of self-determination skills to students of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds.

The United States is becoming increasingly more diverse. In 2000, the US Census Bureau projected a decrease in the population of White non-Hispanic Americans to 52% by 2050. There

was also a projected increase in the percentage of Hispanic Americans to 22%, African Americans to 16%, and Asian Americans to 10%. In the 2008 projection, however, it was predicted that by 2045, Whites will no longer represent mainstream USA. This trend is of course reflected in schools as well as in special education (Special Education Programs, 2011).

The 30th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act reported that Black students accounted for 20.6% of the population of students with special needs (Special Education Programs, 2011) whereas Blacks only accounted for 14.6% of the US population (US Census Bureau, 2011). This phenomenon has been referred to as the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. This overrepresentation is also reflected in the transition outcomes of high school students with considerable variation across racial and ethnic groups (Newman et al., 2011).

According to Wehmeyer at al. (2011), moderating variables exist that influence the outcome of successful self-determined individuals, which include age and life stages, gender, culture, religious beliefs and spirituality and experiences of oppression, segregation and discrimination (Zhang & Benz, 2006; Wehmeyer at al., 2011). This paper, however, will emphasize only the effects of culture in the quest for self-determined individuals. The purpose of this paper is to explore the special education literature to determine how self-determination is perceived in minority cultures and the possible cultural issues which affect self-determination. This paper may serve to fill in small gaps in the self-determination-culture phenomenon and serve as a platform on which to conduct further research.

<div align="center">Article Reviews</div>

Trainor, A. A. (2005). Self-determination perceptions and behaviors of diverse students with LD during the transition planning process. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *38*, 233-249.

Trainor (2005) used inductive inquiry to investigate the self-determination perceptions and behaviors of students with learning disabilities (LD) during the school to work transitioning process. The participants were European-American, African-American and Hispanic American male adolescents. The research also examined the role of teachers and parents in planning opportunities within the transition process as perceived by the participants. The researcher utilized various data collection tools including focus groups and individual interviews, observations, and document reviews as part of this qualitative study. Such tools have the tendency to elicit rich, deep data on the topic under investigation as well as reveal other important, overlooked variables.

Categorical content analysis as well as the N4 Classic software was used to analyze recurring themes in the interviews. A spreadsheet tool was used to record the rate of recurrence of the variables in the document reviews (Trainor, 2005). Observation and field notes were examined physically and used to supplement and triangulate the data, rendering the findings more reliable. Findings revealed only a subtle difference in self-determination perceptions and behaviors within the groups. However, five themes emerged out of the data: "missing connections between individual transition plans and post-secondary plans, participating on the periphery, relying on family for transition planning, attempting self-determination, and actualizing self-determination efforts" (Trainor, 2005 p.238). These themes reflected the range of perspectives regarding participants' culture (Trainor, 2005).

Trainor (2005) commented that the data appeared to subtly indicate that students of culturally different backgrounds understand or perceive self-determination differently. However due to limited opportunities provided by the school to live out self-determination skills during transition planning it was difficult to represent these differences accurately. As a result, the

research questions were not answered because they all hinged on the assumption that one would experience self-determination in a manner which reflected one's cultural identity (Trainor, 2005). This brought to light the phenomenon which has been discussed in the literature how school culture variables can encumber and complicate students' ability and opportunity to practice self-determination skills.

A noteworthy observation in this study was the participants' illustrations of instances where self-determination was practiced at home. The possibility of the Pygmalion effect must be considered in this study for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the students were aware that they were participating in the study and could have embellished their self-reports because of their perception of what the researcher was looking for. Secondly, the participants were receiving more than a usual amount of attention which may have led them to play out what they perceived to be the correct responses. The researcher did acknowledge however, the possibility that such opportunities reported by the students may have been over-reported or inflated. As a result, caution needs to be used when reporting and interpreting the results of this study.

Another concern and cause for caution in interpreting the study was the extent to which transition plans complied or failed to comply with federal transition policies. This unplanned variable had implications for opportunities for self-determination skills and the transition process. The writer is of the opinion that the fidelity of the transition process should have been taken into consideration or controlled for in order to attain more valid conclusions.

This paper presented a logical but short literature review that provided a critique of the relevant studies as well as acknowledged gaps in the existing research. However, the writer did not build on a conceptual framework which underpinned this research. Perhaps the exploratory nature of this study negated a conceptual framework. The researcher was clear in delineating the

limitations of this study and provided implications and recommendations for further practice and research.

Zhang, D. (2005). Parent practices in facilitating self-determination skills: The influences of culture, socioeconomic status, and children's special education status. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *30*(3), 154-162.

Zhang (2005) used a mixed method, survey type investigation to study how culture, socioeconomic status and children's special education status influenced how parents engaged in facilitating self-determined behavior. The data were manually coded and analyzed for group differences using ANOVA and t-tests.

There has been a proliferation of studies investigating the concept of self-determination particularly in transitions in special education (Zhang, Wehmeyer & Chen, 2005; Wehmeyer, 2007). Research suggested that a strong connection exists linking enhanced self-determination skills to positive adult outcomes for all students (Zhang, 2005). However, how socioeconomic status, parent education, and culture impacts this effort is a budding area of research, which justified the importance of this investigation.

The research questions focused on whether "culturally diverse parents, parents of lower socioeconomic status, and parents of students with disabilities, engage in self-determination practices on the same level as their peers" (Zhang, 2005, p. 156). Based on the cultural backgrounds represented in this study it appeared Caucasians and non-immigrant families provided more opportunity to practice the skills of self-determination. A noteworthy observation in this study was that in contrast to documented belief (Chen, Wang, Chen, & Liu 2002; Zhang, 2005), Asian and immigrant parents appeared to exercise less parental authority and priority than their Caucasian counterparts (Zhang, 2005). Zhang attributed this phenomenon to a limitation

of the sample not being truly representative of Asian culture as each Asian participant held at least a bachelor's degree.

On the question of parents with low socio-economic status (SES) engaging in self-determination practices at the same level as those with higher SES, results corroborated the findings of previous studies (e.g. Chen et al., 2002). The findings revealed that parents who went to higher education and had increased income provided more opportunities for children to engage in self-determining behavior. The results also revealed that parents of students with disabilities provided fewer opportunities to practice self-determination skills.

This study used a convenience sample of 136 parents of multi-grade students with and without disabilities. These participants were between the ages 20 to 54. This age range, if not controlled for generational differences, may serve as an extraneous variable. This is because according to Bronfenbrenner, (as cited in Wehmeyer, 2007), parents of different generations (e.g. the baby boomers, generation x-ers) vary in their child rearing practices. Therefore, results may be due in part to the child rearing practices or styles of the various generations of parents included in the study.

Zhang (2005) reported that his self-made measure of self-determination was not piloted because it was a variation of three field-tested self-determination instruments. However, the author believes that despite the fact that the instruments were a variation of the previously piloted scales, the new product should have been exposed to pilot testing as a measure of increasing test validity and reliability of this new adaptation.

One major limitation of the study centered on fact that the convenience sample of participants where all chosen from a college community and therefore not representative of the population. Findings need to be interpreted with caution.

Leake, D., & Boone, R. (2007). Multicultural perspectives on self-determination from youth, parent, and teacher focus groups. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, *30*(2), 104-115.

This qualitative study used a participatory action approach (focus group) to evaluate the perception of teachers, youth and parents of diverse ethnicities with regard to cultural influences on self-determination. Leake and Boone (2007) chose participants which closely resembled the target population and engaged them in natural inquiry. One hundred and twenty-two participants were divided into 20 focus groups. Eight groups consisted of youth only, eight of parents only and four groups of teachers only.

Responses were transcribed and coded by three trained individuals to ensure inter-coder reliability. Atlas.ti software was used to analyze the data particularly for cultural issues relevant to self-determination. A number of salient themes emerged from the research. The first theme highlighted family as a value. Family, in spite of how it may be conceptualized, significantly influences the self-determination for CLD individuals. It also appeared that CLD individuals identified more strongly and were more committed to their families.

The second theme was based on child rearing and opportunities for self-determination. It was observed that opportunities to practice self-determination skills were often limited for CLD students and those with disabilities in particular. Children are expected to be seen and not heard. The third theme focused on education as a value. This theme was not unanimous among all the groups (i.e., while East Asians were reported to value education, native Hawaiians thought less of it for various reasons).

The fourth theme highlighted decision-making within families and transition. In many CLD cultures, major decisions are made within the context of the family. It is not what you want

but what is best for the family. The fifth theme focused on generational conflict over transition goals. This conflict is usually even more apparent when younger generations become acculturated in the mainstream while older generations retain cultural traditions (Leake & Boone, 2007). The sixth theme highlighted interdependence vs. independence. Many CLD families do not consider independent living a major goal for their children with disabilities despite the fact that this is highly valued in mainstream culture. This ideology was also held by African-Americans. With regard to more serious emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), all parents indicated their value for independent living for youth (Leake & Boone, 2007). In general the research emphasized the need for individualization when planning and implementing self-determination interventions.

Two theoretical frameworks underpinned this study, the distinction between individualism and collectivism ideologies and the concept of bicultural identities. Despite the fact that the concepts of individualism and collectivism seemed closely linked to the issue of self-determination, Leake & Boone (2007) did not clearly define and explain this theoretical framework. It was interesting to note too that the researcher posed neither research questions nor a hypothesis. This may lead one to believe that the research was without direction.

Considering that some students with EBD may have the tendency to demonstrate shyness, mistrust and anxiety (Leake & Boone, 2007), it was commendable that they used a naturalistic inquiry approach in this study. The goal of naturalistic inquiry is to describe, appreciate, or interpret experiences as they are lived by the participant. It was also commendable that the research included multiple coders in an effort to increase inter-coder reliability.

Doval-Cortijo, E. (2008). Self-determination for students with disabilities from a Hispanic

background in transition from school to work. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation)

Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond: Virginia.

The rationale for the study was to understand how the self-determination phenomena functions in the school to work transition for students with disabilities who are of Hispanic descent. This study employed a phenomenological design which used document analysis, interviews, and participant observation to collect qualitative data. These methods are quite appropriate for use in a phenomenological study as they elicit richer, more in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon. Because of the nature of some of the data collected, particularly the self-reports, the researcher tried to address the issue of validity and reliability through the use of triangulation.

The instruments used in this study were the Arc's Self-Determination Scale, a widely used norm reference instrument. However the Interview Protocol should have been piloted before use in spite of it being adapted from the Arc's Self Determination Scale and designed by a panel of experts. The participants were six young adults of Hispanic descent between the ages of 18-23 who were participating in the school to work transition.

A summation of the major themes suggested that the function which self-determination plays in the transition from school to work of Hispanic students with disabilities are significantly affected by their culture and family values. This family and cultural influence also impacted other parts of the transition process (e.g., level of engagement of the transition team, policy implementation at school). In general, the data suggested that students were more influenced and motivated by family regarding their post school decisions as opposed to school or personal choice (Doval-Cortijo, 2008)

It was commendable and noteworthy how the researcher selected an appropriate theoretical framework and was able to link it to the problem with ease. The ecological theory advanced by Bronfenbrenner (1979, as cited in Wehmeyer, 2007) helped to create the context which helped to support the concept of self-determination as it was used in this study. The various aspects of the framework were adequately defined and such relationships clearly identified.

In this study, there was one primary research question; however there were 16 sub questions. Whereas there appeared to be too many sub-questions, this may have been due to the author's unfamiliarity with qualitative studies. However, all of the research questions and sub-questions were answered. There also appeared not to be an operational definition of the variables involved. The researcher did discuss, however, the confounding variables and limitations of the study so that practitioners who read it can be cautious with the findings. For example, some limitations of qualitative studies are their small sample size, presence of the researcher (Doval-Cortijo, 2008), and the convenience sample used, all of which may act to limit generalizability or act as confounding variables in the study.

Zhang, D., Wehmeyer, M. L., & Li-Ju, C. (2005). Parent and teacher engagement in fostering the self-determination of students with disabilities. *Remedial & Special Education*, *26*(1), 55-64.

Zhang et al. (2005) examined the behavior of American and Taiwanese parents and teachers in encouraging self-determination in elementary and secondary students. There were 293 participants in the study, 90 parents and teachers from Taiwan and 203 from the US. Results revealed that whereas American and Taiwanese teachers reported comparable levels of promoting or encouraging self-determination behaviors, there was a significant

difference between the parents of the two countries. American parents appeared to demonstrate significantly higher self-determination fostering efforts than parents from Taiwan. The results also revealed that encouraging self-determination behaviors by parents and teachers in both countries was more apparent at the secondary than the elementary level (Zhang, et al., 2005).

Some items were influenced specifically by country and/or parent/teacher differences. For example, there appeared to be significant interaction effect between country and father's educational attainment in the Taiwanese context (Zhang et al., 2005). That is, as father's educational attainment increased so did fathers attempts at facilitating self-determination. This was not the case for American fathers. It would be interesting to investigate how parental education affects the facilitation of self-determined behavior in children and young adults. Limitations and recommendations for further research were discussed.

Despite the fact that the instruments used in the study were adapted from a validated source, the instruments were pilot tested for understandability and then readjusted. This is a very commendable exercise which is not generally done with instruments that have been adapted from already established and validated instruments. Piloting an instrument increases its reliability and validity. It was important that the teachers from the elementary and secondary levels be treated statistically to ensure comparability. This is to rule out other extraneous variables which may be present as a result of the differences in these two groups. These differences have the potential to confound the results, rendering them invalid. The Compute software procedure was used to achieve this end. The researcher was able to distinguish between actual findings and interpretations without confusing the reader however the findings were not discussed in relation to previous research.

Critical Analysis: Emerging Themes

A synthesis of the research revealed five emerging themes. Firstly, *self-determination looks different in different cultures*. All five studies demonstrated some level of variation on particular behaviors or aspects associated with what self-determination means to participants in each study. In some cultures, there were stronger emphases on a familial orientation relative to personal orientation. The researchers all reemphasized the multifaceted and intertwined nature of culture. In fact, Zhang (2005) and Zhang et al. (2005) suggested that cultural factors such as disability status, ethnicity, immigration status, and nationality all influenced the facilitation of self-determined behavior by the family. In sum, this theme proposed that culture is important and should be taken into consideration when planning transition and self-determination goals for students from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Secondly, *the concept of self-determination as advanced in the field of special education presently is not culturally sensitive*. The current movement for increased student involvement in planning their future goals may not always support the values held by diverse cultures (Trainor, 2005). In some qualitative studies, students commented on feelings of disconnect between instruction and their personal goals. These findings were in keeping with the findings of other researchers such as Zhang and Benz (2006) who suggested that self-determination practices typically reflect mainstream values and is neither aligned with nor embracing of diverse values.

Thirdly, there is *need for empirical research to conceptualize an inclusive concept of self-determination.* There is currently a small body of research that emphasizes the need for the reexamination of self-determination to include diverse populations. This research should answer questions related to how self-determination can be applied to various functions and provide direction in facilitating familial self-determined goals (Zhang & Benz, 2006). Implicit in this theme was the need for the involvement of individuals of diverse backgrounds in the research

process as well as the cultural variables identified in Leake and Boone (2007). This must be taken into consideration in order to neutralize the mainstream values reflected in the self-determination concept today.

Fourthly, students are affected by a number of sectors in the environment (e.g., community, school, family). Therefore, *there is need for education of these various sectors.* The family needs to be educated about self-determination and how this can benefit the individual within their context. Continuous training is also needed in the educational system instructing teachers and education staff on how to infuse cultural values into instruction to facilitate opportunities to promote cultural awareness in self-determination (Leake & Boone, 2007).

Implications for Leadership

A summary of the research underscored the importance of increasing self-determination skills of students from CLD backgrounds in an effort to increase the likelihood of positive adult outcomes. These findings are important and should be strongly considered by the stakeholders when planning and implementing programs for CLD students during their school to work transition process. The following is a discussion of three implications of the above findings to leaders.

Self-determination has a positive effect on post-school outcomes; however, these outcomes may be mediated by the intervening variable of culture (Wehmeyer, 2007). In light of that, this study synthesized research from five empirical studies that investigated how culture affected self-determination of culturally and linguistically diverse individuals. The findings can inform stakeholders of the challenge ahead as it pertains to developing self-determination strategies that are culturally free from bias and/or individualized to the needs of all including

CLD students. The following is a discussion of three implications of the above findings to leaders.

A key implication of the findings is that leaders need to know the research. While a major criterion for becoming a leader is knowledge, no leader can ever possess all the knowledge needed to run his or her organization successfully. However, *a good leader must equip himself with the knowledge necessary in order to sell his product, to sound convincing when he puts forth an argument, or to obtain buy-in.* The leader must become very familiar with the literature and convinced that what he is about to embark on is justified. A leader will be better able to facilitate buy-in from his colleagues when his/her clear conviction is reinforced and accompanied by empirical evidence of the success of the method.

Another important suggestion for leaders to keep in mind is that *ideas are usually better developed and executed if done as a team.* It may be more productive for a leader to get a small group and sell the idea. Obtaining buy-in can sometimes be very difficult. A leader may choose a small in-group of teachers; this may be the best teachers, most influential, or most vocal and sell them on the concept of enhancing self-determination for all students including those from CLD backgrounds. In keeping with aspects of social identity theory Tajfel and Turner (1979, as cited in Rubin & Hewstone, 2004), it is very likely that the energy and enthusiasm of the in-group will filter to the out-group so the majority is sold on the idea. This in-group can serve as a team that will deal with the heavy lifting associated with implementing the self-determination initiative.

A leader needs to engage the stakeholders in a *needs assessment*: where are we now, where do we need to be and when, and how do we get there. This will help to set the stage for actual performance towards the goal of providing more culturally relevant self-determination

instruction. Out of this activity, a leader is likely to see topics like training, family involvement, and models.

Teachers and staff need to be trained not only in self-determination instruction but culturally relevant self-determination instructional strategies. It is important to note that not only teachers should get this training but all adults in the building would need to have strategies to facilitate self-determination for all students when the opportunity presents itself. For example, cafeteria workers, custodians, and bus drivers all have interactions with students, which may serve as opportunities to foster self-determination. This training must be ongoing in order to keep the interest and momentum going. Beyond training for teachers and staff, a leader may offer to speak with local colleges to discuss ways in which pre-service teachers may be trained even before they get to the school.

An assessment of the cultural makeup of the school, including socio-economic status, and parental education of the students with special needs will indicate what type of self-determination model may work best. One cap certainly does not fit all as it pertains to self-determination. A leader may also seek professional opinion (i.e. consultants) to ensure that there is a good fit between the model chosen and the cultural needs of the school. It is also important for the leader to keep in mind that regardless if a decision to use a certain model has been made, it can be changed if ongoing evaluation suggests that the model is ineffective.

Self-determination has a positive effect on post-school outcomes; however these outcomes may be mediated by the intervening variable of culture (Wehmeyer, 2007). In light of that, this study synthesized research from five empirical studies that investigated how culture affected self-determination of culturally and linguistically diverse individuals. The results revealed that the concept of self-determination is important for individuals of CLD backgrounds

however, its expression may be different in diverse cultures. Therefore in order to better serve students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, stakeholders must consider such differences and incorporate them into the preparation of students with disability for life outside of school. This study offers to illuminate stakeholders on the challenge ahead as it pertains to developing self-determination strategies that are culturally free from bias and/or individualized to the needs of all including CLD students.

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