

Introduction to Special Topic Issue on Self-Determination

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Over the past two decades, promoting the self-determination of students with disabilities has become a best practice in secondary education and transition services (Wehmeyer, Abery, Mithaug, & Stancliffe, 2003; Wehmeyer, Agran, Hughes, Martin, Mithaug, & Palmer, 2007). Self-determination refers to self- (vs. other-) caused action—to people acting volitionally, based on their own will. Volition is the capability of conscious choice, decision, and intention. Self-determined behavior is volitional, self-caused or self-initiated action.

Theoretical Models of Self-Determination

There are several theoretical models of self-determination that have emerged from research and practice in special education. Wehmeyer and colleagues (Wehmeyer, Abery et al., 2003; Wehmeyer et al., 2007) proposed a *functional model of self-determination* in which self-determination is conceptualized as a dispositional characteristic (enduring tendencies used to characterize and describe differences between people) based on the *function* a behavior serves for an individual. Self-determined behavior refers to “volitional actions that enable one to act as the primary causal agent in one’s life and to maintain or improve one’s quality of life” (Wehmeyer, 2005, p. 117). *Causal agency* implies that it is the individual who makes or causes things to happen in his or her life and that the individual acts with an eye toward causing *an effect to accomplish a specific end or to cause or create change*.

Self-determination emerges across the life span as children and adolescents learn skills and develop attitudes and beliefs that enable them to be causal agents in their lives. These skills and attitudes are the *component elements* of self-determined behavior, and include choice making, problem solving, decision making, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy, and self-management skills. The model has been empirically validated (Shogren et al., 2008; Wehmeyer,

Kelchner, & Richards, 1996); operationalized by the development of an assessment linked to the theory (Wehmeyer, 1996); served as the foundation for intervention development and provided impetus for a variety of research activities (see Wehmeyer et al., 2007).

Field and colleagues (Field & Hoffman, 2002; Hoffman & Field, 2005) proposed a *five-step model for promoting self-determination* in which self-determination is either promoted or discouraged by factors within the individual's control (e.g., values, knowledge, skills) and variables that are environmental in nature (e.g., opportunities for choice making, attitudes of others). The model has five major components: *Know Yourself and Your Environment, Value Yourself, Plan, Act, and Experience Outcomes and Learn*.

The five-step model was developed over a three-year effort (Field & Hoffman, 2002) that included over 1,500 student observations and interviews with more than 200 individuals. The model has provided the framework for intervention development, particularly the *Steps to Self-Determination* curriculum (Hoffman & Field, 2005) and its related assessment tools (Field, Hoffman, & Sawilowsky, 2004).

Abery and colleagues (Abery & Stancliffe, 1996; Stancliffe, Abery, & Smith, 2000) proposed an *ecological model of self-determination* that defines the self-determination construct as “a complex process, the ultimate goal of which is to achieve the level of personal control over one’s life that an individual desires within those areas the individual perceives as important” (p. 27). The ecological model views self-determination as driven by the intrinsic motivation of all people to be the primary determiner of their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Self-determination, accordingly, is the product of both the person and the environment - of the person using the skills, knowledge, and beliefs at his/her disposal to act on the environment with the goal of obtaining valued and desired outcomes. The ecological model within which people

develop and lead their lives is viewed as consisting of four levels: the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and *macrosystem* (See Wehmeyer et al., 2003 for more detail). The ecological model has been empirically evaluated (Stancliffe et al., 2000), operationalized in the development of assessments (Abery, Stancliffe, Smith, McGrew, & Eggebeen, 1995a, 1995b), and has also provided a foundation for intervention (Abery, Arndt, Greger, Tetu, Eggebeen, Barosko et al., 1994) and research (Stancliffe et al., 2000).

Mithaug (Wehmeyer et al., 2003) hypothesized that self-determination is an unusually effective form of *self-regulation* markedly free of external influence in which people who are self-determined regulate their choices and actions more successfully than others. Mithaug suggested that individuals are often in flux between existing *states* and *goal* or desired states. When a discrepancy between what one has and wants exists, an incentive for self-regulation and action becomes operative. The ability to set appropriate expectations is based on the person's success in matching his or her *capacity* with present *opportunity*. Capacity is the person's assessment of existing resources (e.g., skills, interests, motivation), and opportunity refers to aspects of the situation that allow the individual to achieve the desired gain. The experience generated during self-regulation is a function of repeated interaction between capacity and opportunity. Mithaug (1998) suggested that "self-determination always occurs in a social context" (p. 42) and that the social nature of the construct is worth reviewing because the distinction between self-determination and other-determination is nearly always in play when assessing an individual's prospects for controlling their life in a particular situation" (p. 42).

The Importance of Self-Determination for Students Receiving Special Education Services

Research has documented that if provided instruction to promote self-determination, students with disabilities can acquire knowledge and skills pertaining to self-determination and

its component elements (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar, & Alwell, 2009; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Shogren, Williams-Diehm, & Soukup, 2012; Wehmeyer, Shogren, Palmer, Williams-Diehm, Little, & Boulton, 2012). Also, self-determination status has been linked to the attainment of more positive academic outcomes (Konrad, Fowler, Walker, Test, & Wood, 2007; Fowler, Konrad, Walker, Test, & Wood, 2007;), greater access to the general education curriculum (Lee, Wehmeyer, Soukup, & Palmer, 2010; Shogren, Palmer, Wehmeyer, Williams-Diehm, & Little, 2012) and more positive transition outcomes, including better employment and independent living outcomes (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenshark, & Little, in press; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997), and more positive quality of life and life satisfaction (Lachapelle et al., 2005; Nota, Ferrari, Soresi, & Wehmeyer, 2007; Shogren, Lopez, Wehmeyer, Little, & Pressgrove, 2006; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998).

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The following manuscripts were prepared by doctoral students at the University of Kansas Department of Special Education as part of their involvement in a seminar focusing on self-determination and its application in the educational context. Students selected component elements of self-determination (e.g., choice making, problem solving, autonomous functioning, etc.) to explore in greater depth. Together, we hope the manuscripts contribute to knowledge in the field pertaining to the important area of self-determination.

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