

Self-Determination: The Engine Powering Transition Planning and Education

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) established transition education as a fundamental directive of secondary education for students with disabilities. To operationalize this directive, the first paragraph of the law indicates schools need to provide students with disabilities with services that meet their needs and prepare them for postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. Educators use transition planning to implement IDEA's (2004) requirement to develop students' postschool and annual transition goals and specify transition services needed to facilitate attainment of transition goals. Engaging students in the transition process is one way to support students with making decisions about their futures, thereby fostering their ability to develop and exhibit self-determination. To ensure students have an active role in planning their future, the need for teaching students self-determination skills becomes obvious as IEP teams seek to discover students' interests, skills, and desires.

What Is Self-Determination?

Numerous self-determination definitions exist, and each defines self-determination a bit differently depending on the definition's theoretical origins. Self-determined individuals make choices, set goals, develop plans to attain their goals, take action to implement the plans, solve problems, evaluate progress, and make adjustments to the plan and their strategies as needed to attain their goals (Rowe, Alverson, et al., 2015; Wehmeyer et al., 2000).

What the Research Says

Self-determination skills are correlated with improved education and employment outcomes for students with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2021). In addition to improved postschool outcomes, self-determination skills are associated with increased academic performance (Fowler et al., 2007; Konrad

et al., 2007). Students with disabilities do not automatically develop self-determination skills. These skills must be taught. In fact, Algozzine et al. (2001) identified 51 high-quality studies that documented individuals with disabilities who had learned self-determination skills through direct instruction. Because self-determination includes so many skills (e.g., solving problems, setting goals, evaluating progress), it is important to collect ongoing assessment data to know which skills students have developed and which skills students still need to develop (Rowe, Mazzotti, et al., 2015). Maintenance of these skills requires ongoing opportunities to practice across people and settings (Algozzine et al., 2001).

Although learning self-determination skills is often prioritized for students who are of transition age, these skills can be taught to all students, regardless of age or disability (Raley et al., 2018; Shogren & Wehmeyer, 2017). For example, goal setting and attainment are skills that students can learn in elementary school. Learning these skills at an early age allows multiple years for students to practice and refine their skills (Shogren & Wehmeyer, 2017). Without these skills, it is difficult for students to share their strengths, preferences, interests, and needs within the transition planning process mandated by IDEA (2004). Understanding this connection between self-determination and transition planning is important because students who are actively engaged in their transition planning are more likely to have improved postschool education and employment success (Burnes et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2006).

Guidelines for Practice

- Self-determination skills do not appear automatically as students age and progress through school. Educators must teach these skills.
- In order to know which skills to teach, educators need to use one or more self-determination

assessments as part of their overall transition assessment battery.

- Goal setting and goal attainment are foundational self-determination skills. Students with disabilities should begin learning these skills in the late elementary school years and continue to learn and practice these skills throughout their remaining school years (Shogren & Weh-meyer, 2017).
- A variety of resources exist on self-determination. Review the “additional resources” section to gain insight on how to teach essential self-determination skills.

Additional Resources

Transition Tennessee’s Pathways to Self-Determination
transitiontn.org/self-determination/

Kansas University’s Self-Determination Site
selfdetermination.ku.edu/

Transition Tennessee’s Self-Determination FAQs
transitiontn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/SD_FAQS_06-18-2018_FINAL.pdf

The I’m Determined website sponsored by the Virginia Department of Education
www.imdetermined.org

The Zarrow Center website at the University of Oklahoma
www.ou.edu/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow

The To Be Self-Determined website established by Sharon Field and Allan Hoffmant
www.beselfdetermined.com

The Beach Center at the University of Kansas website
beachcenter.lsi.ku.edu/beach-self-determination

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