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Learning Self-Determination: Lessons  
from the Literature for Work with  
Children and Youth with Emotional and  
Behavioral Disabilities

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LEARNING SELF-DETERMINATION: LESSONS FROM THE LITERATURE FOR  
WORK WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL  
DISABILITIES

by

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Biography – Beth Ackerman is Coordinator for Special Education and Director of Field Experience at Liberty University after having taught for three years and being a principal for 6 years at a private day school for students with emotional/behavioral disabilities.

TEACHING SELF-DETERMINATION TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH  
EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL DISABILITIES

Abstract

Children and youth with disabilities perform more poorly in transitional outcomes than their non-disabled peers. Programs are facing many changes because of these outcomes. Definitions are being revised, and new categories of exceptionalities are being recognized. Accountability measures are being put in place for people with disabilities. However, there is an important, current issue identified by researchers and individuals with disabilities – the issue of self-determination. This article explores how self-determination can and should be taught to children and youth with disabilities.

TEACHING SELF-DETERMINATION TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH  
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Coleman (1966) states that a sense of purpose and destiny facilitates positive outcomes. Successful people assess their needs, determine their goals, plan actions, act, monitor their performance, and make any needed adjustments (Mithaug, Martin & Agran, 1987). Mithaug (1996) argues that few children succeed because of the instruction they receive. These children succeed because adults identify them as having a sense of purpose for their lives. They know what they like, what they can do, what they want and how to get it. Unfortunately, many children and youth leaving our special education programs lack a sense of purpose and destiny (White et al, 1982). They do not advocate for their own goals and interests (Allen, 1989). They often are not seen as being self-determined.

The Council for Exceptional Children (1994) reports 37% of youths with disabilities who participated in the National Longitudinal Transition Survey (NLTS) were living independently three to five years after graduation. This figure is 60% for the general population. Only 37% of the youths with disabilities surveyed had enrolled in postsecondary school as compared with 68% of youths without disabilities. Although the NLTS found that employment levels were about the same for general population as for

youths with disabilities five years after graduation from secondary school, these youths were earning less than \$12,000 per year for full-time, year-round employment.

Students with disabilities have only a 35% to 45% chance of finding full-time work after leaving school. The probability of future employment for students with disabilities decreases over time. For part- and full-time work combined, most studies report about a 60% employment level for persons with disabilities (Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; Wagner, 1989, 1991). Also, according to data provided by NTLS (1990), only 1.8% of the graduating students with learning disabilities go to four-year universities. The number is somewhat higher for two-year postschool institutions. However, most students complete only a few courses. After more than three decades of federal involvement in the education of children and youths with disabilities, these disturbing post school outcomes have led practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and parents of young people with disabilities to conclude that special education has not been effective (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, Wehmeyer, 1998).

The 1992 amendments of the Rehabilitation Act stated, “disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the rights of individuals to live independently, enjoy self-determination, make choices, contribute to society, pursue meaningful careers and enjoy full inclusion and integration into the economic, political, social, cultural and educational mainstream of American society” [sec. 101.2 (a) [3]]. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS), has funded both research and model demonstration projects to help persons with disabilities develop the attitudes and skills necessary for self-determination. This funding was implemented in response to the disappointing outcomes of students

with disabilities (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). There were twenty-six model demonstration projects developed as a result of this funding during the fiscal years 1990-1993. There were also various research projects that took place to define models of self-determination. As a result of this funding, self-determination was researched, skills were identified, and curricula were developed for children and adolescents with disabilities and for those who are at risk for failure in the communities and schools (Serna, 1999, Ward, 1992, Wehmeyer & Sands, 1996).

Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) conducted a follow-up study on adolescents with mental retardation and learning disabilities for which data regarding self-determination had been collected prior to their high school exit and one year after graduation. There were 80 students with cognitive disabilities from school districts in Virginia, Connecticut, Alabama and Texas. Students were recruited for participation if they were receiving special education services based on a cognitive disability (mental retardation or learning disability) and would be leaving school (either by graduation or certificate of attendance) at the completion of that school year (1994-1995). The mean age of the sample was 19.82 years ( $SD = 1.52$ ). The mean IQ for the group was 77.31. The analyses took into account the effects of differing levels of intelligence on self-determination. After the students left school, project staff conducted mail and telephone interviews to collect information about the students' outcomes. The Arcs Self-Determination Scale, a 72-item self-report scale that provides data on each of the four essential characteristics as well as overall self-determination, was given to the students and scored by project personnel. The student locus of control was also measured using the adult version of the Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Scale. Former students in the high self-determination group

were more likely to be employed than their peers in the low self-determination group ( $p = .009$ ). The resulting analysis concluded that self-determined students were more likely to have achieved more positive adult outcomes than peers whom were not self-determined (Wehmeyer & Schwarz, 1997).

Field, Hoffman, St. Peter, & Sawilowsky (1992) conducted a study of teachers' perceptions of students' self-determination. A suburban Midwestern high school of predominately Caucasian students participated in this study. Students with and without disabilities were randomly selected from a list of students receiving special education ( $n = 69$ ) and the general student body ( $N = 1,263$ ). The students were observed and teacher perceptions of the student' abilities related to these behaviors were recorded. The Chronbach alpha for the self-determination checklist was .87 with this sample of students. Cronbach alpha for the perception scale was .90 for this sample of students. The mean, standard deviation, and  $t$  tests ( $p < 0.05$ ) for differences between the two groups are reported. Of the self-determination areas observed, there was little difference between the behaviors of students with and without disabilities. They found that teachers' perceptions of their students' self-determination were significantly lower for students with disabilities ( $n = 48$ ) than for students without disabilities ( $n = 47$ ) despite the fact that behavioral observations resulted in little behavioral difference between the two groups.

The last few decades of research have empowered the movement of self-determination. Definitions, models, theories, and curricula of self-determination have been developed as a result of this research. However, there is a gap between these conceptualizations and the concept of self-determination as an educational outcome

(Wehmeyer & Sands, 1996). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 mandates the provision of outcome-oriented transitional services for students with disabilities. If self-determination can indeed improve transition services then researchers need to determine if the setting in which these children and youth receive services can affect the development of their self determination and if they are able to learn, retain, and generalize being self-determined into other settings.

Much of the literature related to self-determination in the field of special education is noncategorical. However, there have been a few studies that investigate specific populations of disabilities. Stine (1999) studied the effects of teaching self-determination skills to secondary students with learning disabilities. This study sought to teach students, using direct instruction and role-play activities, to recognize their special needs and convey those needs to a teacher. It was hypothesized that students who received training in self-advocacy and self-awareness would obtain higher scores on a teacher rating and a self-rating of self-awareness and self-advocacy than would students who did not receive training. The study was conducted using a pretest-posttest design with a control group. At the conclusion of the study, the students who participated in the training procedures showed significantly greater differences between pretest and posttest measures than did the students in the control group.

Fullerton (1995) created a program for students with autism and conducted a field test to determine if the suggested curriculum could increase knowledge and skills for self-determination. The primary purpose of Fullerton's program evaluation was to determine the impact on the curriculum, "Putting Feet on My Dreams: A Program in Self-Determination," on students, as perceived by parents. A total of 19 parents completed the

Self-Determination Descriptors Scale (SDDS) before and after the students participated in the program. Field-testing of the SDDS indicated adequate short-term test-retest reliability ( $r = 0.86$ ). Parents reported significant improvement in their sons' or daughters' skills and attitudes related to self-determination after participation in the program ( $t = 2.03, P = 0.033$ ).

These models of self-determination and the studies that have already taken place lay the groundwork to begin testing these models and theories of self-determination to determine their effect on the diverse disability classifications, and to decide whether or not self-determination can be an educational outcome.

#### *Definitions of Self-Determination*

Wehmeyer & Sands (1996), in the preface of their book, admit the fact that self-determination is simply another catchphrase. As new ideas and perspectives are developed, new words are added to the list, often even replacing or undermining words that were already there. They continue to state that the self-determination movement is no different. However, words are a necessary part of understanding the deeper message of “where we’ve been, where we’re going, and what we’re all about” (Wehmeyer & Sands, 1996, p. xiii). This is why it is important to investigate how the numerous researchers define self-determination. This section of the review will attempt to address these different definitions.

Deci (1980) was one of the first researchers to study the psychology of self-determination. Deci and Ryan (1985) define self-determination as “the capacity to choose and to have those choices be the determinants of one’s actions” (p. 38). Deci (1977) asserted that self-determined people (a) are given options to begin and govern

their behaviors, (b) search for and master challenges, (c) are creative, flexible, and competent, and (d) persevere, believing that they will achieve what they set out to accomplish. Deci (1977) often related self-determination to an individual's free will. This is also seen in The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1992) definition of self-determination which defines it as the "determination of one's own fate or course of action without compulsion; free will."

Ward (1992) believed that self-determination is a crucial goal for individuals especially as they enter adulthood. He defined self-determination as the attitudes that allow individuals to specify goals for themselves and the ability to accomplish those aspirations. Ward (1988) believes that traits underlying self-determination include self-actualization, assertiveness, creativity, pride, and self-advocacy.

Wehmeyer (1992) further defined self-determination as "the attitudes and abilities required to act as the primary causal agent in one's life and to make choices regarding one's actions free from undue external influence or interference" (p. 305). An agent is "someone who acts or has the power or authority to act" or a "means by which something is done or caused" (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1992). Self-determination involves autonomy (acting according to one's own priorities or principles), self-actualization (the full development of one's unique talents and potentials), and self-regulation (cognitive or self-controlled mediation of one's behavior). Wehmeyer further states that these processes provide the foundation for the development and use of intervention to enhance self-determination.

Wehmeyer and colleagues interviewed more than 400 adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities using self-report measures of self-determined behavior and

each of the essential characteristics (Wehmeyer, Kelchner & Richards, 1995, 1996). The sample included 407 individuals with mental retardation from self-advocacy groups (advocacy organizations established and run by people with mental retardation). The mean age for individuals in the sample was 36.34 (range 17 to 72). A series of self-report measures was used to examine each essential characteristic of self-determination and self-determined behavior. The various self-report measures include the following: Autonomous Functioning Checklist, Life Choices Survey, Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Scale, Means-Ends Problem Solving, Children's Assertiveness Inventory, Self-Efficacy for Social Interactions Scale, Personal Orientation Inventory, and portions of the National Consumer Survey. All questions from the surveys were read aloud, and individuals were assisted in recording their answers and given additional time. Based on their self-determination scores, these groups were then compared on measures of each essential characteristic. Scores from these essential characteristics differed significantly based on self-determination grouping ( $p < .05$ ). Their findings indicated that measures of behavioral autonomy, psychological empowerment, self-realization, and self-regulation were particularly potent predictors of self-determination status. Their work validated the definitional framework of self-determination.

West, Barcus, Brooke, & Field and Rayfield (1995) conducted a series of focus groups for individuals with disabilities, family members, professionals and advocates to elicit the characteristics and attributes of self-determined individuals. Semi-structured interviews were used to assess factors related to self-determination of individuals with disabilities. The participants interviewed were 61 individuals with disabilities who were nominated by professionals in the field as self-determined adults. Participants were

nominated from a variety of sources including advocacy organizations, disability service coordinators in higher education, and service agencies from both the public and private sector. Participants resided in the Central Virginia region, including the Richmond and Charlottesville metropolitan areas and the Tidewater region. Descriptors of self-determination in relation to individuals with disabilities were identified by data from four focus groups. A semi-structured interview instrument was used to elicit both quantitative (i.e., rating scales, yes/no) and qualitative data using open-ended follow-up questions which requested participants to expand upon their previous responses. Data from quantitative items were entered into a spreadsheet program and analyzed using the program's database functions. Results indicated that self-determined individuals are goal oriented, self-motivated, self-advocating, empowered, and continually re-evaluating their satisfaction toward their goals. The availability of financial resources and transportation were identified as critical factors that promote self-determination.

Hoffman and Field (1995) define self-determination as “one’s ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself” (p. 164). They further state that self-determination is “promoted, or discouraged, by facts within the control of individuals (e.g. value, knowledge, and skills) and variables that are environmental in nature (e.g. opportunities for choice-making, attitudes towards others)” (p. 164).

Serna and Lau-Smith (1995) offer the following description of self-determination:

Self-determination refers to an individual’s awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses, the ability to set goals and make choices, to be assertive at appropriate times, and to interact with others in a socially competent manner. A self-determined person is able to make independent decisions based on his or her ability to use resources, which includes collaborating and networking with others. The outcome of a self-determined person is the ability to realize his or her own

potential, to become a productive member of a community, and to obtain his or her goals without infringing on the rights, responsibilities, and goals of others. (p. 144)

Martin and Marshall (1995) summarized the evolving definitions of self-determination in the special education literature as describing individuals who:

Know how to choose-they know what they want and how to get it. From an awareness of personal needs, self-determined individuals choose goals, and then doggedly pursue them. This involves asserting an individual's presence, making his or her needs known, evaluating progress toward meeting goals, adjusting performance and creating unique approaches to solve problems. (p. 147).

Martin, Marshall, and Maxson (1993) listed self-determination components as the skill of an individual to decide goals for oneself based upon one's needs, interests and preferences, and the perseverance needed to reach those goals. Additionally, they cited personal self-determination characteristics as assertiveness, creativity, and self-advocacy.

The definitions of self-determination vary slightly, but overall they are very complimentary and consistent (Field, Hoffman, & Spezia, 1998). The actions of self-determined people enable them to fulfill roles typically associated with adulthood (Wehmeyer, Sands, Doll, & Palmer, 1997). Self-determination emerges across the life span as children and adolescents learn skills and develop attitudes which enable them to become causal agents of their own lives.

Based on these definitions of self-determination one can clearly see why this can be in direct contrast with the attributes of children and youth with various disabilities, and more specifically, emotional and behavioral disabilities. The federal definition of emotionally disturbed includes sub categories such as an inability to build or maintain satisfactory relationships with peers and teachers, inappropriate types of behaviors or feelings under normal circumstances, and a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or

depression. These characteristics do not match the characteristics of children and youth who know and value themselves and are seen as being self-determined. In addition their level of cognitive functioning is lower than their non-disabled peers, making the ability to develop self-determination a more difficult achievement.

### Theoretical Constructs

Self-determination is a theoretical construct that encompasses a number of psychological and behavioral attributes (West, Barcus, Brooke, Rayfield, 1995). An investigation of these theories aids in a better understanding of self-determination which also provides a framework for the understanding of how self-determination affects children and youth with emotional and behavior disabilities (Houchins, 1998). The theories that will be investigated include the Cognitive Evaluation Theory, the Self-Regulation theory, the Self-Efficacy Theory, and the Equal Opportunity Theory.

#### Cognitive Evaluation Theory

Deci and Ryan (1985) argue that the construct of self-determination is best described within the parameters of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In recent years, a considerable amount of research has been carried out on investigating the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1980, Deci and Ryan, 1985). Deci and Ryan (1985) describe intrinsic motivation as the “innate, natural propensity to engage one’s interests and exercise one’s capacities, and to seek and conquest optimal challenges” (p. 3). The behaviors of intrinsic motivation involve an innate desire to investigate, discern, and integrate the environment. Extrinsic motivation is characterized

by the influences of forces outside the individual. Forces not innate to them influence their behaviors.

Deci's (1980) Cognitive Evaluation Theory explores self-determination as it relates to the regulation of motivationally based behaviors or processes. His theory is that the highest level of extrinsic motivation can be incorporated with intrinsic motivation to form self-determination. Theorist originally thought that intrinsic motivation was a stimulus response phenomenon. Cognitive theorists such as Deci argue that internal motivation is the result of how a person perceives and interprets the reward. Thus the engagement in an activity to receive an award can encourage intrinsic motivation and result in self-determination. The process of internalization is represented on a continuum of less to more autonomy. Individuals who are more autonomous are controlled less by external factors. However, the more extrinsic motivational factors evolve, the greater the chance they will represent an individual's internal motivation. The process of achieving internal motivation using external factors includes external regulation, interjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation (Deci, 1977). According to the Cognitive Evaluation Theory, these extrinsic regulations, when incorporated with intrinsic motivation, create the greatest form of self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Kerr and Nelson (2002) state that motivational factors directly affect the behaviors of children and youth with emotional disabilities and again explaining where these children and youth may have difficulties with being self-determined.

### Self-Regulation Theory

The second theory that will be investigated is the self-regulation theory. Boekaerts, Pintrich, and Zeider (2000) define self-regulation as the "self-generated

thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals” (p. 14). The self-regulation theory (Mithaug, 1996) describes these different patterns of self-regulation by explaining how individuals vary in their capacity and opportunity to self-determine. This theory accounts for the fact that, while some individuals have substantial capacity and frequent opportunity, others may have ample capacity but few opportunities, others lack capacity but have frequent opportunities, and others lack both capacity and opportunity. If self-determination is affected by what a person wants in his or her life, then self-determination is determined by one’s capacity and opportunity to succeed or fail in what he or she wants (Wehmeyer & Sands, 1996).

Mithaug (1996) offers two steps to self-regulation. The first step is deciding whether or not to seek out and engage new opportunity for gain. Then they must do the best they can with what they believe they have available to them. The self-regulation theory explains how people take advantage of the opportunities available to them—that is, how they optimize adjustments to maximize gain.

Whitman’s (1990) theory of self-regulation incorporates ideas from both cognitive and behavioral theories. His theory states that there are numerous fundamental components that characterize self-regulation. The components can be divided into two areas: individual abilities and instruction. Whitman (1990) stressed the importance of the individual’s cognitive capacity. Those with higher levels of metacognition will be better able to self-monitor during and over successive periods of time. Individuals should also have the desire to be self-regulated (Whitman, 1990). If an individual is held accountable for his/her behavior, then self-regulation becomes a teachable skill (Whitman, 1990). According to Whitman (1990), self-regulation is a complex skill that can be taught using

behavioral and cognitive strategies. The impulse control of these children and youth with emotionally disabilities further show the inability to self-regulate their behaviors and actions (Hallahan and Kauffman, 2006).

### Self-Efficacy Theory

The third theory related to self-determination is Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory. His theory maintains that human behavior is affected by a sense of control (Boekaerts et al, 2000). Bandura (1977) defines self-efficacy as the "conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce a given outcome" (p. 193). Self-efficacy beliefs influence goal setting. The more capable people believe themselves to be, the better goals they set for themselves and the more firmly committed they remain on those goals (Bandura, 1977). When people fall short of attaining their outcome goals, those who are self-efficacious increase their efforts, whereas those who are self-doubters withdraw (Bandura, 1977).

To test his theories of self-efficacy and behavioral change, an experiment was conducted wherein severe phobics received treatments designed to create differential levels of efficacy expectations and then the relationship between self-efficacy and behavioral change was analyzed. Adult snake phobics, whose phobias affected their lives adversely, were administered for equivalent periods either participant modeling, modeling alone, or no treatment. The treated subjects either participated in handling a boa constrictor with the assistance of induction aids or observed a therapist perform the same activities with out ever actually handling the snake. Results of the microanalysis of congruence between self-efficacy at the end of treatment and performance on each of the tasks administered in the posttest are consistent with the findings obtained from the

treatment. Self-efficacy was an accurate predictor of subsequent performance on 85% of all the tasks. Subjects successfully executed tasks within the range of their perceived self-efficacy produced by the desensitization treatment.

The core issue of the Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977) focuses on the level of belief a person has about his/her abilities. The more efficacious an individual, the better one feels about his/her abilities. Those with a high level of self-efficacy will also exhibit a higher level of self-determination (Agran, 1997). A person with an emotional disability can be characterized as having an affective disorder making self-efficacy difficult to develop through depression or negative feelings about one self (Hallahan and Kauffman, 2006).

### Equal Opportunity Theory

Mithaug (1996) also examined self-determination from the perspective of the Equal Opportunity Theory. His theory is a combination of self-regulation theory and social reconstructionism. The theory is based upon the following propositions:

1. All persons have the right to self-determination
2. Psychological and social conditions of freedom cause some individuals and groups to experience unfair advantages in determining their future
3. Declines in prospects for self-determination among the less fortunate are due to social forces beyond their control
4. As a consequence of these declines, there is a collective obligation to improve prospects for self-determination among least well-situated groups (Wehmeyer and Sands, 1996, p. 161).

The action proposed by the Equal Opportunity Theory is to optimize prospects for self-determination among the less fortunate by improving their capacity for autonomous thought and action and by improving the opportunities available to them for effective

choice and action. Every person deserves an equal chance for pursuing a self-determined life.

### Children and Youth with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities

Research has documented that students with emotional and behavioral disabilities perform more poorly than their peers on nearly every transition outcome (Bullis, 2000 & Rylance, 1997). The dropout rates for students with behavior problems approach 58%-the highest of any special education category (National Transition Study of Education Students Statistical Almanac Series, 1990). It is important that new models for teaching these students the skills to succeed in life after exiting school are investigated. Learning self-determination skills may help produce more positive adult outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

Various social skills similar to skills learned in self-determination have been used in treatment for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (Mathur, Kavale, Quinn, Forness, and Rutherford, 1998). The Tough Kid Social Skills Book (Sheridan, 1995) recognizes many of the social skills that relate directly to self-determination (i.e., expressing feelings, having a conversation, solving problems, joining a group, etc.). Learning self-determination skills may be a treatment that can improve the day to day social functioning for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. There is a link to the needs of students with emotional disabilities and the components of self-determination.

There was one similar study found that addressed the theoretical and practical implications of introducing the Steps to Self-Determination Curriculum (Field &

Hoffman, 1996) into residential treatment programs for adjudicated youth (Houchins, 1998). Forty-seven residents participated in an experimental pretest/posttest control group design using the Self-Determination Knowledge Scale (Field & Hoffman, 1996). The dependent variable was the participants' self-determination level. His study found that those with an identified disability had significantly lower self-determination knowledge mean pretest and posttest scores than those without an identified disability. There were also no significant differences found between the treatment group and the control group. This was the only study found that specifically related to the self-determination skills of adolescents with behavioral problems.

The skills and abilities of youths with emotional disabilities appear to be in direct contrast to those of youth who are self-determined, suggesting the need for such data. The definition of "emotionally disturbed" describes this population as being unable to build or maintain satisfactory relationships with peers and teachers. The environments in which these children and youth are services need to be analyzed as these studies and theories discuss a multidimensional construct for becoming self-determined. One research study examined the perspectives of educators, parents and observed students' opportunities for becoming self-determined at a public high school (Carter, Lane, Pierson, Glaeser, 2006). The discovered that adolescents with emotional disability were judged to have limited capacity to engage in self-determined behavior, arguing the need for other programs to more engage students with emotional disabilities in opportunities to practice self-determination.

### Implications for Research

Learning self-determination skills appear to address some of the weaknesses of children and youth who have emotional and behavioral disabilities (Mathur, Kavale, Quinn, Forness, and Rutherford, 1998). Since research has documented these youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities perform more poorly than their peers on nearly every transitional outcome, it is vital that we search for programs that teach this population the self-determination that is needed for successful transition into adulthood (Bullis, 2000, Rylance, 1997). Studies suggest that the teaching of self-determination skills may help these students become more self-determined.

Future studies should also focus on whether or not students with emotional and behavioral disabilities exhibit self-determination. Researchers should further investigate this population to determine their level of self-determination and the implications of this trait on student transitions. Some longitudinal studies on the effects of self-determination on actual transitions would be valuable. This research could further investigate students that exhibit self-determination and if they are then able to put this they possess into practice.

The characteristics of environments that encourage and support self-determination need to be analyzed and evaluated so that these environments can be fostered in the various special education programs. Field, Hoffman, and Spezia (1998) describe the environments as having the following characteristics: availability of self-determined role models, curriculum variables, opportunities for choice, response to student behaviors, and availability of student supports. Researchers should investigate how programs designed for children and youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities compare in encouraging

self-determination. If these programs provide these opportunities for children and youth to be self-determined a longitudinal study could further investigate if these children and youth could generalize these traits into other settings.

### Summary

The primary purpose of this paper was to introduce the topic of self-determination. Although the definitions, models, and curricula differ in terminology or perspective, they share a common goal: giving a children and youth with disabilities the opportunity to become self-determined. It is evident by the review of this literature that the self-determination of children and youth with disabilities is a topic gaining momentum among researchers and practitioners in the field of disability services. Leaders in the field need to evaluate the effects of how their programs enable children and youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities to practice and demonstrate self-determination.

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