An Examination of the Importance and Implications of Self-Determination

By: Matthew Jurgens; Transition Specialist – Suffolk County

Today’s adolescents tend to have a very limited grasp of what their post-school future has in store for them. While the vast majority of educational professionals recognize the benefits of empowering students with the skills and competencies to succeed in their post-school endeavors (i.e. CDOS Standards), it is hard to ignore that the current educational system tends to fall short when it comes to addressing these, specifically in day-to-day instructional practice. Students are overwhelmed by the myriad demands from their curricular and co-curricular activities. Furthermore, many students are unmotivated because they cannot see the connection between the instruction that they are receiving today to the skills they will need to succeed in their life outside of school, as well as, in their post-secondary lives.

However, if we work toward infusing instructional practices to address Universal Foundation Skills, most notably those related to Self-Determination, we may instill in our students the notion that they hold control over how their life will unfold and that ultimately they will exist as a product of the skills they have learned and the choices they have made, rather than as a product of circumstance.

What is Self-Determination?

Self-Determination is a process that starts from a very early age and is built upon each and every year that we have a student in our midst.

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serve as an important starting point, they are not the only critical elements of Self-Determination. Figure 1 outlines each element of Self-Determination in detail.

Instilling these skills in our students may happen more naturally in some circumstances rather than others; i.e. we can work with a student on choosing between two options for a writing prompt (choice-making) more readily than we can facilitate a student’s understanding about how their disability manifests itself (self-awareness). Nevertheless, it is vital to recognize that teaching the aspects of Self-Determination is a process that starts from a very early age and is built upon each and every year that we have a student in our midst.

Elements of Self-Determination

Choice Making - Communicating preferences

Problem Solving - Identifying problems and generating solutions

Decision Making - Process of determining the best solution

Goal Setting and Attainment - Defining goals, assessing current status, and creating an action plan to evaluate progress

Self-Regulation - Examining an environment and choosing an appropriate response

Self-Awareness - Having comprehensive and reasonably accurate knowledge of own strengths and limitations (includes understanding one’s particular disability)

Self-Efficacy - Believing that one can accomplish their goals

Self-Advocacy - Communicating wants, needs, and accommodations appropriately

(Adapted from Wehmeyer, 1996)

Why is Self-Determination Important?

As the people who stand on the front lines of educating the future adult citizenry, we as educators are charged with the responsibility of developing each of these elements of Self-

(cont. on pg. 2)
Determination to the greatest extent possible within our students. While the justifications for doing so are plentiful, one can first turn to research for validation, as the importance of building Self-Determination capacities has endured a variety of field studies. To detail one of these, a study conducted by Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) found that students who exhibit strong Self-Determination skills, “were more likely to have experienced a greater number of positive adult outcomes, including a higher likelihood of being employed and earning more per hour than those who were not self-determined...[additionally, they] were more likely to have expressed a preference to live outside the family home [and] have a savings or checking account.” If it is indeed our goal as educators to foster as much independence and success in post-school environments for our youth as possible, then it seems rather clear that we need to begin to seize opportunities for teaching Self-Determination skills while we have the chance in whatever grade or class with whatever populations we serve. However, the current climate in special education is one that typically does not teach sufficient Self-Determination skills.

For many years, the culture of special education in schools, coupled with the disposition of many parents of students with disabilities, has led others to make decisions on behalf of students instead of empowering them to direct their own lives. As a result, a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) is created without any input or, at best, minimal input, from the student. Beginning at age 12, regulation affords students a direct opportunity to explore their own particular strengths and interests by virtue of completing a Level 1 Career Assessment. Moreover, for students age 15 and above, students, families, and educators, through an appropriate and relevant transition assessment battery, can facilitate discovery of a student’s strengths, preferences, and interests - this is what lies at the heart of self-awareness, which is a cornerstone of Self-Determination. In turn, this information is used to inform IEP development and create a more meaningful transition plan that includes individualized, skill-based Annual Goals and a Coordinated Set of Transition Activities that are focused on building student capacities related to their Measureable Post-Secondary Goals. Figure 2 below outlines how this quality transition planning process plays an integral role in students realizing self-determined goals.

Strategies for Implementing Self-Determination Concepts

Now, with the components and importance of Self-Determination in mind, ask yourself a quick question: How many of the students you currently serve really know what they are good at? Remember, too, that this is different than what students like to do (e.g. liking basketball does not mean you are good at playing the sport). Next, ask yourself a second question: How many of the students you serve are aware of their disability, how it manifests itself, and/or how to advocate for their particular needs and accommodations? To that end, it is incredible to consider that while Self-Determination as a concept in and of itself is not always realized by many, there are a multitude of curricula and resources available specifically designed to foster skills and knowledge of these capabilities. The resources in Figure 3 outline some which are free and downloadable.

One of the most natural opportunities for building Self-Determination in students with disabilities is direct involvement in their IEP development and Committee on Special Education (CSE) process as much and as early as possible. As such, for younger students, this might mean simply being invited to attend their CSE meetings, even for only a small time frame, and sharing what they like about school and what is difficult for them. For students 15 and older, rather than just attending, they can complete pre-meeting activities such as the Nothing About Me Without Me Planning Guide so that they have more capacity to contribute to the conversation during their meeting. Also, students can be incrementally prepared to lead a certain aspect of their meeting, or even facilitate the entire process. While this might seem like the deep end of the pool, practices such as these are occurring routinely in a variety of states and in small pockets around New York State. This includes here on Long Island, where educators from several districts are completing a pilot program on these processes with the RSE-TASC Transition Specialists. A variety of studies and literature overwhelmingly support these learning experiences. In fact, almost every element of Self-Determination can be addressed by explicitly and directly instructing students about what their IEP means, how it impacts their daily lives, and gives them the latitude to have input into its creation. Consider the following:

1) A student gains an in-depth understanding of Goal Setting and Attainment through examining and developing their Annual Goals; see Self-Determined Model of Instruction (SDMI).
2) A student achieves a greater sense of Self Awareness and Self Regulation as they actively review and reflect upon their Present Levels of Performance.
3) A student gains skills in Self-Advocacy by understanding their Program Modifications and Testing Accommodations and receiving instruction on how to ask for them accordingly.
4) Elements of Choice Making are embedded within a student having input over their Measureable Post-Secondary Goals as well as what Coordinated Transition Activities they will participate in to incrementally prepare them for potentially achieving those goals.

Who Am I? Where Am I Going? How Will I Get There?, these are the questions that all students should be pondering consistently. It is through having a cognizance of the elements of Self-Determination and making efforts to instill these skills in our youth that we can bring about a vital change in our students as we help facilitate their understanding of the bigger picture that the skills they are learning today translate into their successes in the world that they will be navigating tomorrow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources and Curricula for Teaching Self-Determination</th>
<th>Figure 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A practical, engaging curriculum from Oklahoma University that can be used in small or large groups. Contains 36 lessons on Self-Determination and includes strategies for preparing students for the CSE meetings.</td>
<td>imdetermined.org</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A variety of resources from the Virginia Department of Education. Includes training modules, lessons, films, and planners to facilitate the elements of Self-Determination.</td>
<td>Self-Determination Technical Assistance Center</td>
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From the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, this site has activities to build student understanding of their IEP, Self-Determination transition assessments, and samples of student presentations at their IEP meetings.
LONG ISLAND RSE-TASC REGIONAL WORKSHOPS

To Register for our Regional Workshops, you may visit our new and improved website by clicking on this link: http://www.esboces.org/Page/89, or...

Please go to http://webreg.esboces.org to register online. Under “Search Options”, pull-down and check RSE-TASC and then click “Search”.

Then, simply scroll down to register for the workshop you are interested in. Clicking on the hyperlinked workshop dates below will bring you directly to the respective MyLearningPlan® registration page.

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FOR A COMPLETE LISTING OF WORKSHOPS, VISIT OUR REGIONAL CATALOGUE

February
◊ New York State Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) Commencement Credential—Module II—The Three CDOS Learning Standards
  facilitated by Mr. Matthew Jurgens
◊ Beyond Suspensions: Responsive Discipline in the 21st Century
  Part II—Highly practical, hands-on workshop! Learn today, use tomorrow…
  (Suffolk) 2/14; (Nassau) 2/28
◊ Professional Learning Community for Approved Private/Non-District Schools
  (Western Suffolk) — 2/26/14
  facilitated by Mr. Laurance Anderson

March
◊ Evidenced Based Practices in Classroom Management (2 day training)
  facilitated by Ms. Michelle Levy & Mr. Gary Coppolino, Jr.
◊ Quality IEP: Present Levels of Performance to Goals
  facilitated by Ms. Arlene Crandall
◊ New York State Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) Commencement Credential—Modules I, II and III
  facilitated by Mr. Matthew Jurgens & Ms. Arlene Crandall
  (Hampton Bays)—3/27/14

April
◊ Bilingual PLC for Diagnosticians and Special Education Administrators
  facilitated by Ms. Elizabeth DeFazio-Rodriguez
◊ Tier 2 and 3 Systems of Support: Developing a Continuum of Intervention
  facilitated by Ms. Michelle Levy & Mr. Gary Coppolino, Jr.
◊ Transition in the IEP
  facilitated by Ms. Cathy Pantelides
  (Nassau)—4/11/14
Promoting Self-Determination in Youth with Disabilities: Tips for Families and Professionals

Promote Choice Making:
- Identify strengths, interests, and learning styles.
- Allow for mistakes and natural consequences.
- Prepare youth for school meetings.
- Provide choices about clothing, social activities, family events, etc.

Encourage Exploration of Possibilities:
- Identify young adult mentors with similar disabilities.
- Involve children and youth in service learning.

Promote Reasonable Risk Taking:
- Make choice maps listing risks, benefits, and consequences of choices.
- Build safety nets through family members, friends, and school.

Encourage Problem Solving:
- Teach problem solving skills.
- Hold family meetings to identify problems at home and in the community.
- Allow ownership of challenges and problems.

Promote Self-Advocacy:
- Provide opportunities for leadership roles at home and in school.
- Practice ways to disclose disability and accommodation needs.
- Encourage communication and self-representation.

Facilitate Development of Self-Esteem:
- Create a sense of belonging within schools and communities.
- Provide opportunities for individuality and independence.

Develop Goal Setting and Planning:
- Define what a goal is and demonstrate the steps to reach a goal.
- Make a road map to mark the short-term identifiers while working toward a goal.
- Support youth in developing goals and values.

Help Youth Understand Their Disability:
- Involve children and youth in their IEP Process.
- Identify and utilize support systems for all people.
- Develop a process that is directed by youth for self-identity.

Adapted from: Research to Practice Brief Improving Secondary Education and Transition Services Through Research

Figure 4

Resources

Zarrow Center for Learning Enrichment: http://www.ou.edu/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow.html?rd=1


PACER Center http://www.pacer.org/tatra/resources/self.asp

Graff, Ferguson, & Dearlove: Transition Assessments to Inform the Development of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Training Module


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