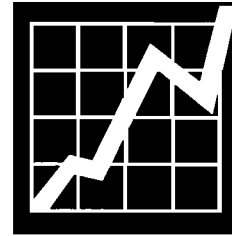


CHAPTER 1

The Importance of Self-Determination During Transitions



Think back to a major transition in your life—starting your first job, graduating from high school, beginning your first semester at college, getting married, having a child, moving, getting a divorce. As you were navigating this transition, what were you feeling? Who helped you? What kinds of things did people who were paid to assist you (e.g., teachers, counselors, attorneys) do that were helpful to you? What did they do that was not helpful or, that was possibly even hurtful? How about your family and friends? Which of their actions were helpful? Which were not?

We have posed these questions to hundreds of workshop participants, and their answers have been overwhelmingly consistent. During transitions, people report that they experience a wide range of intense emotions, from fear of the unknown and grief over the loss of what they are leaving to anticipation and excitement about new beginnings. From professionals, they say they need information, a listening ear, guidance, and support. From family and friends, they need listening, encouragement, a sense of belief in their capabilities, and, often, concrete resources such as childcare, assistance with living arrangements, or money. Always, we hear that the actions most harmful to the individual's transition process are second-guessing, unsolicited advice, criticism, and being told what to do. This holds true for the actions of both paid professionals as well as family and friends.

One of the key ways we define ourselves and develop a sense of identity is through the choices we make while navigating the transitions in our lives. Fostering a sense of self-determination during the transition process is critical to promoting successful transitions for students both with and without disabilities. By helping students in transition to experience that sense of self-determination, we can help create a more successful and meaningful process of change for the student.

WHAT IS SELF-DETERMINATION?

A transition program director once asked, "How can I promote self-determination if I don't know what it is?" For this individual, self-determination was a vague term with little, if any, meaning for the concrete realities and tough questions facing students in transition (e.g., Where will I live? What kind of work will I do? Will I have enough money to support myself?). However, self-determination is a concept that *must* be addressed if those tough questions raised during life's transitions are to be answered in meaningful and lasting ways for the student. For example, can you imagine

- being happy in a job for which you did not apply and in which someone else placed you?
- living in a place you did not choose?
- relaxing with friends you did not select?

Many of us have occasionally wandered into situations that were not of our own choosing, and sometimes they have worked out. Most of the time, however, we are not as successful or as happy in those settings that we had no voice in choosing. Those experiences certainly do not make as great a contribution to our sense of personhood as those experiences that we do consciously choose.

Self-determination has been defined in many different ways. Some of these definitions include:

- the attitudes, abilities, and skills that lead people to define goals for themselves and to take the initiative to reach these goals (Ward, 1988, p. 2)
- the capacity to choose and to have those choices be the determinants of one's actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 38)
- determination of one's own fate or course of action without compulsion; free will (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1992)
- one's ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself (Field & Hoffman, 1994, p. 164)

These definitions vary only slightly, and overall they are highly consistent and complementary. When we ask workshop participants to say the first words that come to mind when they hear the word *self-determination*, we often hear terms like "control," "choice," "confidence," and "self-esteem." These terms are clearly related, both to each other and to the definitions provided earlier.

The transition from school to work and community is one of the first major transitions in which adolescents have the opportunity to assume a more adult role and, subsequently, more responsibility and control. Promoting self-determination during this time provides an excellent opportunity to enhance the success of students' transitions while at the same time equipping them with lifelong skills that will enable them to become more and more self-determined. These early self-determination skills are critical life skills that can help students to be more successful in the subsequent transitions they will experience during their adult years.

Self-determination is affected by the knowledge, skills, and beliefs of the individual as well as the conditions in the individual's environment. To promote self-determination during transitions, it is important to

- help students develop the knowledge, skills, and beliefs that will allow them to exercise greater control during the transition process by providing opportunities to develop greater self-awareness and by teaching decision-making, goal-setting, and negotiation skills; and
- create environments that encourage self-determination by providing opportunities for choices and decision-making, chances to learn from experiencing the consequences of actions, and support for risk-taking.

A model for self-determination is provided in Figure 1.1. The model addresses the affective, cognitive, and behavioral components that affect self-determination.

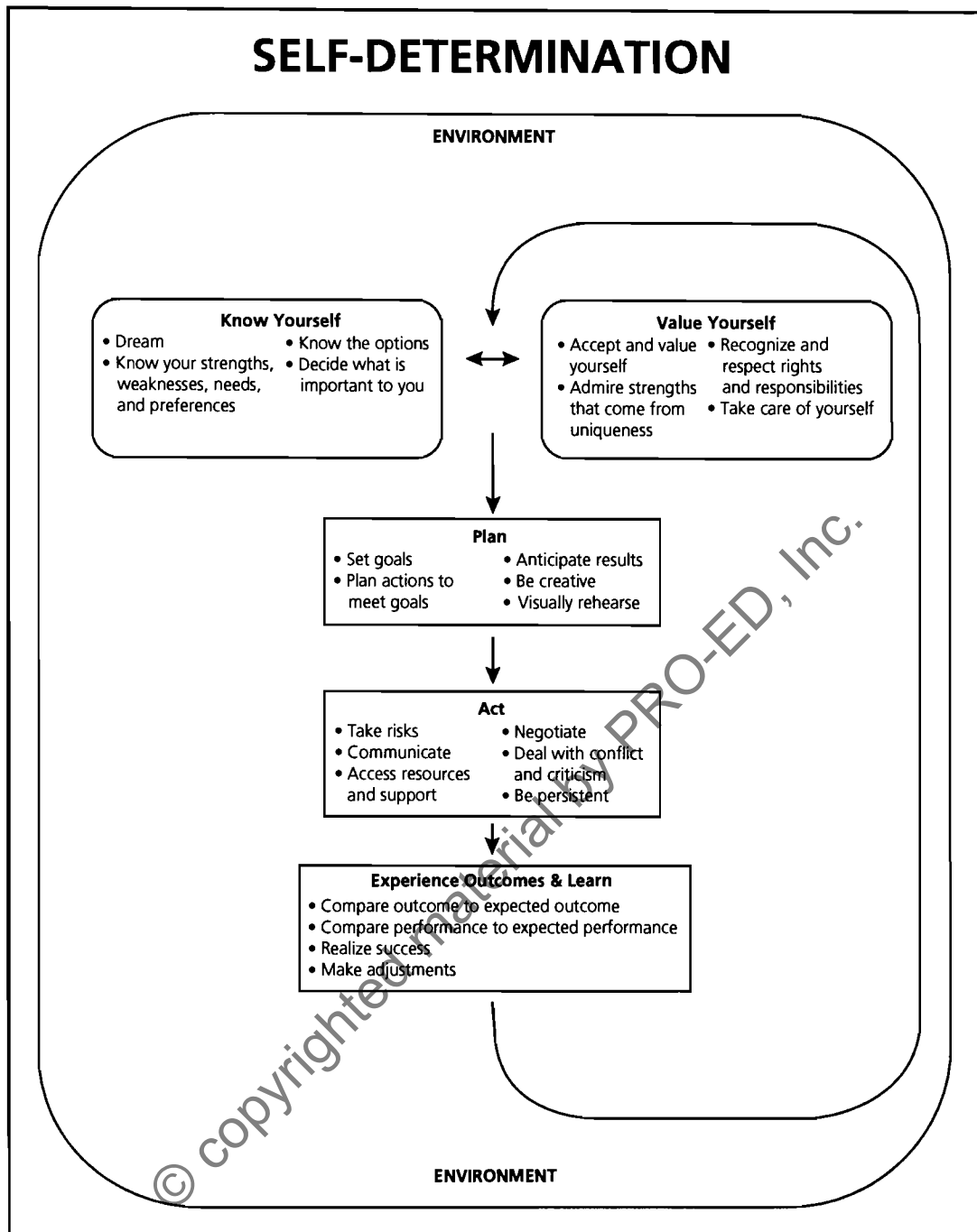


FIGURE 1.1. Model for self-determination. From “Development of a Model for Self-Determination,” by S. Field and A. Hoffman, 1994, *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 17(2). Copyright 1994 by CDEI. Reprinted with permission.

It has five major components: (1) Know Yourself, (2) Value Yourself, (3) Plan, (4) Act, and (5) Experience Outcomes and Learn. The first two components, Know Yourself and Value Yourself, describe the internal processes that provide the foundation for self-determination. The next two components, Plan and Act, delineate the skills needed to act on the foundation of Knowing Yourself and Valuing Yourself to achieve the desired outcomes. The final component, Experience Outcomes

and Learn, includes celebrating one's successes and learning from those successes as well as the mistakes one has made in the self-determination process. Both the internally focused foundation and the externally focused action stages are necessary to be self-determined. One of these on its own is incomplete and without real purpose or meaning without the other.

Characteristics of Self-Determined Individuals

The specific characteristics of the individual that contribute to self-determination are listed in the self-determination model provided in Figure 1.1 and are further described in subsequent sections of this manual. The following components of self-determination provided by Wehmeyer (in press) are consistent with the elements presented in the model:

- choice making
- decision making
- problem solving
- goal setting and attainment
- self-observation skills
- self-evaluation skills
- self-reinforcement skills
- internal locus of control
- positive attribution of efficacy and outcome expectancy
- self-awareness
- self-knowledge

Characteristics of Environments that Encourage and Support Self-Determination

Environmental considerations are also highly important to encouraging self-determination. We can all think of work or school environments that encouraged us to blossom and those that made it extremely difficult to experience a sense of self-direction. School environmental variables, which include both classroom and school-wide factors, affecting self-determination include:

- availability of self-determined role models
- curriculum variables
- opportunities for choice
- patterns of response to student behaviors
- availability of student supports (Field & Hoffman, 1996a)

Each of these environmental factors is briefly discussed in the following sections.

Availability of Self-Determined Role Models

Modeling is a highly effective instructional technique (Bandura, 1986.) Although there is abundant research to support the effectiveness of modeling to change behaviors, one has only to watch a toddler telling the family dog "no, no" just as

she has been told “no, no” by her parents to be assured of the strength of modeling strategies.

Much of the modeling that takes place in schools is done unconsciously and is not considered part of the formal instruction. However, given the research on the effectiveness of modeling, it is clear that the types of role models students are exposed to in schools, both formally and informally, is a significant factor in the development of student behaviors.

Teachers who model self-determination can make a significant impact on the development of self-determination in their students. If teachers are passive or blame external circumstances for conditions in their classrooms, students will likely learn from those teachers to explain events in their lives in a similar manner. On the other hand, teachers who model a proactive, positive, problem-solving style in their classrooms provide students with many opportunities for vicarious learning about self-determination. It is most appropriate for teachers to assume a co-learning role with their students in the self-determination process. By becoming co-learners in self-determination, teachers can model important skills and reinforce the fact that learning about self-determination is a lifelong process. Mentor programs, peer tutoring, and cooperative learning strategies also have the potential to promote many positive lessons about self-determination through modeling.

Curriculum Variables

If self-determination is to be encouraged within a school, it is important that the individual characteristics that contribute to self-determination noted earlier be specifically addressed in the curriculum. Students are not expected to develop reading skills without specific instruction in reading. In the same way students cannot be expected to acquire the skills necessary for self-determination without instruction specifically aimed at the development of those skills.

Self-Determination Curricula. Several curricula have been developed specifically to promote the development of skills for self-determination in students both with and without disabilities. As an example of the types of materials available, some of those curricula are briefly described here.

The *Take Charge* model (Powers, 1993) is a student-directed program for self-determination. The foundation of this model is a student self-help guide that focuses on (a) dreaming for the future, (b) identifying and accomplishing personal goals, and (c) building partnerships with others. Mentoring and community-based activities are key elements in the program. Additionally, the parental component focuses on helping parents support self-determination in their children.

Steps to Self-Determination (Field & Hoffman, 1996b) is designed to help secondary students with and without disabilities develop the knowledge, skills, and beliefs that lead to self-determination. It is based on the model of self-determination provided in Figure 1.1 and addresses each of the five components in that model: Know Yourself, Value Yourself, Plan, Act, and Experience Outcomes and Learn. Actively setting and working toward goals is a focus of the curriculum. To promote modeling, it is suggested that teachers complete the activities along with the students, including establishing and working toward their own goals. The curriculum was designed to be used in a variety of scheduling arrangements and has been infused into general and special education classes.

Putting Feet on My Dreams (Fullerton, 1994) provides a variety of experiential, self-assessment, and student-directed learning activities to promote

self-determination. A focus of the curriculum is the development of a self-portfolio for each student. Communication skills, learning styles, and organizational skills are emphasized. Intended for use with high school students with and without disabilities, it was designed to be used within a curriculum framework that makes self-determination the overarching theme for the student's educational program.

Each of these curricula can be incorporated into existing instructional efforts and does not require the deletion of other important instructional activities in academics or life skills. Self-determination curriculum efforts should augment and re-focus existing instructional efforts—not replace current curriculum.

Curricula aimed at promoting self-determination by specifically supporting student involvement in transition planning are described in Chapter 4. Additionally, this guide offers many instructional strategies aimed at helping students acquire specific skills, knowledge, and beliefs related to self-determination within each of the subsequent chapters. A complete review of instructional materials aimed at teaching self-determination can be found in *A Practical Guide to Teaching Self-Determination* (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1997).

Instructional and Communication Strategies. In addition to curriculum content, the types of instructional and communication strategies selected will influence the development of self-determination in the classroom. Field and Hoffman (1995) identified 10 cornerstone instructional strategies that are consistent with teaching self-determination. These cornerstones are:

1. *Teachers are co-learners* with students in the self-determination process.
2. *Modeling* is a powerful instructional strategy for teaching self-determination skills.
3. *Cooperative learning* can enhance the development of positive relationship skills and contribute to self-determination instruction.
4. *Experiential learning* is necessary to generalize self-determination skills to real settings and to develop an increased sense of self-efficacy and self-determination.
5. *Inclusive or integrated instruction* is appropriate for self-determination instruction.
6. *Participation of students' families and friends* in instruction can provide students with additional support for self-determination and address family systems issues that affect self-determination.
7. *Listening* to students is an important component of any self-determination instructional effort.
8. *Team teaching* can enhance self-determination instructional efforts by giving students more diverse perspectives about experiences related to self-determination.
9. The *appropriate use of humor* can promote the acquisition of self-determination skills.
10. Naturally occurring opportunities, or *teachable moments*, should be used to strengthen self-determination skills instruction.

Opportunities for Choice

Students need opportunities for choice if they are to practice the self-determination skills they acquire. There are many different ways to provide choice within the classroom and school environment. For example, students can be involved in selecting the courses they take, the educational goals toward which they will work, and, from a menu of options, the types of assignments they will complete. It is important for students to have support and guidance in the choice-making process as well as an opportunity to reflect on what they have learned and achieved as a result of these choices. This will assure that the choice-making process is indeed a learning experience.

All choices involve some degree of risk. Although students need to be afforded the dignity of experiencing some risk, there are many ways to minimize the risks associated with choice-making. First, it is important that students begin with the opportunity to make choices about smaller decisions (e.g., what to eat, what to wear), and that they gradually assume more responsibility for larger decisions (e.g., what course to take, which career to pursue) as they become more skillful in making decisions. Additionally, as students learn to make choices and decisions, they should be taught the skills needed to anticipate potential consequences so that they can assume a more protective role for themselves. After a student has examined the potential consequences of a particular action, he or she may decide not to take that action or to modify the action. Finally, opportunities for choice should be constructed so that there is a safety net established whenever possible. For example, if a student chooses an assignment that later proves to be too difficult, there should be opportunities for him or her to seek assistance with the work or to complete an alternative assignment at a later time.

Response to Student Behaviors

Responses by teachers and other school personnel to students' actions affect students' level of encouragement to express themselves, initiate actions, and take risks as does the type of climate within the school or classroom. This climate, in turn, is affected by the types of communication and reinforcement patterns used within a school.

Listening is an important element in a school or classroom that encourages self-determination. Being heard and understood is an incredibly empowering experience. To create a setting that promotes self-determination, students should have ample opportunity and encouragement to express themselves. Adults in those schools that encourage self-determination spend a significant amount of time listening to students, allowing them to develop a keen understanding of students' needs, hopes, and desires.

The *appropriate use of humor* is also an important communication skill that supports self-determination. Appropriate humor can be an effective communication device to deflect criticism and conflict. It can also help individuals decrease the anxiety and anger that accompany conflict and enable them to deal with issues more effectively.

Use of *win-win negotiation strategies* and *behavioral interventions* that encourage student responsibility also contribute to a school climate that encourages self-determination. Win-win negotiation strategies emphasize striving for negotiations that satisfy both of the individuals involved in the negotiation. Specific steps in win-win negotiations are further described in Chapter 5.

Behavioral interventions that foster motivation, self-esteem, and creativity, and that encourage an internal rather than external locus of control, are also recommended to promote self-determination (Field & Hoffman, 1996a). This would include using positive reinforcement to encourage appropriate behaviors rather than using punishment to extinguish inappropriate behaviors. It also would include involving students in the decision-making process of establishing behavioral targets. Additionally behavioral strategies should encourage appropriate student experimentation and risk-taking. Therefore, reinforcing successive approximations of desired behaviors is appropriate. Finally, research indicates that an overreliance on teacher-controlled reinforcement reduces internal motivation. Although the use of reinforcement can be useful in helping students acquire desired behaviors, the potential negative consequences of contingent reinforcement on internal motivation should be considered when developing any behavioral program.

Availability of Student Supports

Students often need support and guidance as they begin to practice self-determined actions. The needs for support will vary with each individual student. Individualized support may include

- providing students with information;
- listening as a student verbalizes his or her plans;
- helping a student identify options; and
- asking questions that will help the student reflect on and learn from the self-determination process.

Support needs to be tailored to meet the specific needs of each individual student. As teachers listen carefully to their students, their unique needs become more obvious. In addition to the individualized supports already discussed, it is important to make sure that any accommodations or supports students need to deal with their disability are provided.

CAN SELF-DETERMINATION BE TAUGHT?

“Can self-determination be taught?” is a frequently asked question. Although individuals need to define for themselves whether or not they are experiencing a sense of self-determination, the skills and attitudes that lead to self-determination and the skills to make the necessary arrangements in the climate and environment of the school can definitely be taught.

Many individuals contribute to developing or inhibiting self-determination in students. Parents, teachers, and other school personnel, such as administrators, counselors, and psychologists, all play important roles in the self-determination of youth during transitions.

Teachers can infuse self-determination skills training into their curriculum and can ensure that the classroom and school environment encourages student self-determination. They can provide guidance and information for families to learn more about how they can support self-determination. Finally, they can work to become more self-determined themselves, thereby providing good role models for their students.

Families can encourage self-determination through the opportunities and support they provide for adolescents to exercise self-determination. They can work with the school to encourage curriculum efforts aimed at self-determination, and they can provide real-life opportunities to practice self-determination and to learn from those experiences.

Counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other support services staff can contribute to self-determination curriculum efforts in the classroom and can foster a climate that promotes self-determination in the school. The content of many self-determination curricula focuses on skills (e.g., self-awareness, self-confidence, communication) that support services staff often focus on extensively. By teaming with classroom teachers or by providing instruction through their own departments, counselors, psychologists, and social workers can make a very positive impact on self-determination skills instruction.

Administrators play an important role in supporting self-determination throughout a school. Administrators probably hold the most influence over establishing self-determination as an important element of the school climate. Additionally, administrators can support self-determination for teachers through the types of in-service that are provided and the workplace climate that is created. For example, collaborative staff evaluation procedures in which teachers are encouraged to set and measure progress toward their own professional goals can encourage self-determination in teachers, as can using participative school management practices.

The purpose of this manual is to provide a practical resource that will help teachers promote self-determination in their classrooms, programs, and schools. Sample strategies, activities, and materials that promote student skill building and supportive environments for the development of each of the five components of the self-determination model are provided. An additional section, Putting It All Together, provides strategies that support the combination of these five components to achieve greater overall self-determination. The final section provides a descriptive listing of additional reading on self-determination.

The strategies identified in this guide are examples and are intended to stimulate thinking about additional strategies that could be used in the classroom. The creativity of teachers in locating, adapting, and developing resources to meet the needs of their individual students is the most essential ingredient to implementing quality instruction for self-determination. Therefore, creativity and adaptation are encouraged when considering any of the strategies described in this manual. We hope that this manual will provide a jumping off point that enables teachers to design the self-determination interventions that will be most successful for their setting. Self-determined teachers, who know and value themselves and their students and who adapt and design instruction to meet their specific needs, will be the most successful at implementing a self-determination curriculum.

The target audience for this guide is school personnel. Therefore, the strategies will focus primarily on what teachers can do to encourage self-determination in their students. Given the importance of teachers also experiencing a sense of self-determination themselves, a section of each chapter will focus on strategies teachers can use to promote the development of these component elements of self-determination within themselves. The final section, Additional Resources, provides a listing of materials for further reading about self-determination.