Self-Determination Interventions
Building a Foundation for School Completion

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ABSTRACT

This brief synthesis of theory, research, and practice examines the role of self-determination as a factor in school completion and considers the importance of teaching self-determination skills for all youth. Self-determination interventions can help students to develop the internal motivational architecture they need to achieve success in school and as young adults. Furthermore, educators can help students to apply self-determination strategies to personally meaningful goals, which further strengthens their engagement in school and likelihood of school completion.

BECOMING SELF-DETERMINED IS AN IMPORTANT developmental task. Individuals with higher levels of self-determination can readily muster behavioral resources for autonomous action and self-regulation along with internal affective resources of self-realization and psychological empowerment to accomplish their personal goals (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998; Zimmerman, 2002). Characteristics often associated with self-determination include self-awareness, goal setting, problem solving, self-evaluation, and self-advocacy. Young people with disabilities, who often experience lower rates of school completion and adult success, also tend to experience lower levels of self-determination than their peers (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996; Wehmeyer & Metzler, 1995). However, youth with disabilities who have higher levels of self-determination are more likely to obtain postschool employment and experience success in their adult lives (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997; 1998).

The purpose of this article is (a) to highlight the links between self-determination and school completion, which is the gateway to the important adult outcomes of employment and postsecondary education, and (b) to suggest the importance of self-determination interventions as essential tools in schools’ efforts to help young people with or without disabilities persist in school. When schools intentionally promote self-determination development, they can help all students to accumulate protective developmental assets that reduce the possibility of their becoming dropout statistics. Also, for those students in immediate danger of not completing school and for those enrolled in alternative education programs, teaching self-determination skills can be an effective prevention activity aimed at reducing students’ involvement in risky behaviors and tipping the scales toward their persistence in school. Focusing on interventions that promote school completion (not just dropout prevention) is in line with current thinking that the key to solving the dropout problem is to effectively engage students in the schooling process. School completion interventions take a proactive stance by teaching students the skills they need for succeeding academically, creating meaningful relationships, and managing the school environment in ways that enhance the student–school fit (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001).

SELF-DETERMINATION AND SCHOOL COMPLETION

Although there have been few empirical studies of the effects of dropout or school completion interventions, the most
promising programs appear to promote student engagement in school by attending to the alterable factors in students' complex lives (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003). Educators cannot affect a student's status as a person having a disability or coming from a low-income family or an African American, Hispanic, or Native American background—all factors associated with higher levels of dropping out. Educators can influence variables related to student involvement in education, which also predict dropout status, such as lower educational aspirations, lower achievement levels, more negative attitudes toward school, and seeing school as irrelevant. Furthermore, schools can increase the effectiveness of interventions by designing them in ways that take into account the multiple factors relevant to students' home, school, and community contexts, rather than targeting individual factors among the many that lead students toward dropping out (Lehr et al., 2003; Prevatt & Kelly, 2003; Rossi, 1995).

Scrutiny of successful dropout prevention programs suggests that four elements support students' engagement in school: (a) experiencing academic success; (b) perceiving that adults in school care about them; (c) receiving support to manage immediate personal concerns; and (d) connecting what they do in school to important personal goals (McPartland, 1994). These elements have a solid foundation in research-supported theory. Self-determination theory (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991) has drawn attention to the roles of students' perceived competence and self-determined motivation as influences on their educational behaviors and success. The theory also explains that adults' behaviors—especially being more supportive of students' developing autonomy versus being more controlling—affect students' perceptions of their own competence and influence whether they develop self-determined motivation. Students who feel competent see themselves as able to accomplish optimally challenging tasks and have the tools to initiate and regulate their behaviors. Self-determined motivation flows from the "competence one feels in mastering a task and the perceived freedom in defining and picking the task" (Wiest, Wong, Cervantes, Crank, & Kreitl, 2001, p. 111).

According to self-determination theory, self-determined motivation includes intrinsic motivation (I do something because I enjoy it) and identified or integrated regulation (I do something because it will help me reach a personal goal). These self-determined forms of motivation stand in contrast to external or introjected regulation (I am only doing this because I have to or ought to) and amotivation (I see no purpose in and cannot control this activity)—a common complaint of students who decide not to complete school (Kortering & Braziel, 1999; Lichtenstein, 1993).

Students' level of motivation and perceived competence can predict both their intention to drop out and their later status. Vallerand, Fortier, and Guay (1997) applied self-determination theory to a motivational model of persistence with a large sample of ninth- and tenth-grade urban students. They found that students who indicated that their teachers, parents, and administrators acted in more autonomy-supportive ways were more positive about their autonomy and competence and had higher levels of self-determined motivation. In turn, students with self-determined motivation were more likely to hold intentions to stay in school and ultimately did, in contrast to their peers with lower self-determined motivation, whose intentions to leave school were later enacted. Hardre and Reeve (2003) in their study of rural students also found support for the motivational model of school completion. They demonstrated that having the motivational resources of perceived competence and self-determination directly influenced students' intentions to stay in school, and these factors also influenced their academic performance. They also found that students' perceived competence and self-determined motivation had a stronger influence on their intentions to stay in school than the students' academic performance. This observation fits with Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay's (2000) finding that students' commitment to education was a critical influence on their decision to complete school. They recognized that students who did not do well academically, yet recognized the importance of education, were less likely to drop out than other students who also considered leaving school.

Recent discussions of self-determined learning theory (e.g., Martin et al., 2003; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Michaud, & Martin, 2000) have further highlighted the specific set of self-regulatory skills that are critical to the internal architecture of self-determined motivation. The affective elements of self-determination (i.e., self-realization and psychological empowerment) are supported by behaviors (i.e., autonomous action and self-regulation) that enable one to attempt a task and experience success as a result of personal effort. Through learning the self-regulatory skills of decision making, taking action, evaluating, and adjusting, individuals can better align their personal needs and interests with their actions and are more likely to experience personal control of the learning process. Although no studies have yet examined self-determined learning theory in relation to long-term outcomes of school completion, the components of self-determined learning theory mesh well with studies that link persistence in school to identifying personally meaningful transition goals, improving students' self-understanding in ways that enable them to advocate for themselves, and receiving support to achieve goals through a relevant curriculum (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Kortering & Braziel, 1999; Scanlon & Mellard, 2001).

Theory, research, and practice have suggested that to keep youth in school, educators must encourage students' perceived competence and self-determination. They can do this by teaching students the component skills of self-determination in autonomy-supportive school environments and by helping students to apply their developing self-determination skills to self-identified goals. Through self-determination interventions, students can learn how to
construct connections between schooling activities and their personal goals. They can improve their advocacy skills so that they get the kinds of services or adult supports they need. Also, they can learn to monitor their own success and adapt their plans, which provides them with the personal sense of control and increased autonomy that is an important influence on their decision to stay in school.

**Self-Determination Interventions**

Self-determination intervention targets may range from single skills (e.g., teaching choice making among a few concrete options) to more complex, multistep repertoires (e.g., using accepted communication strategies to recruit help from adults to attain personal goals). Common instructional targets include the skills and procedures related to choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, self-awareness and understanding, self-observation, evaluation, and reinforcement (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001). Research-validated interventions most often have examined choice making for individuals with mental retardation or self-advocacy skills for people with learning disabilities or mental retardation (Algozzine et al., 2001). Fewer studies have examined the effects of instruction related to other components (e.g., goal attainment), and there are not yet many research studies on the effects of comprehensive (i.e., multi-component) self-determination curricula.

**Steps to Self-Determination** (Field & Hoffman, 1996) is one example of a comprehensive curriculum that has gained empirical support and been recognized by the National Council on Disability (2004) as a potential intervention for youth at risk of dropping out. Across 18 sessions, students and teachers collaborate to learn the skills and procedures associated with knowing and valuing one's self as the basis for creating plans, taking action, and learning from experience. Information about other curricular options can be found in Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998) and Browder, Wood, Test, Karvonen, and Algozzine (2001).

It is important to note that the basic concepts underlying self-determination are not culture-bound. Needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy are evident across cultures and families (Zimmerman, 2002). However, the application of self-determination interventions must be adapted to family and cultural contexts, because families have differing expectations for their children's developmental milestones and social roles (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1996). Moreover, students often consider their families' goals, expectations, and decisions when planning their futures (Trainor, 2005). Although student factors become stronger predictors of school completion as students age, family factors continue to be important predictors through high school. Therefore, consideration of family contexts and goals must be an integral part of any intervention that intends to keep students in school.

**Autonomy-Supportive Instruction**

The skills needed for self-determination can and often must be taught explicitly to enable adolescents who have experienced less educational success to become proactive instead of reactive learners (Zimmerman, 2002). Therefore, comprehensive self-determination curricula that directly teach specific skills and provide frequent opportunities for practice may be required for some students. These curricula can be used as elements of dropout prevention programs for at-risk youth or infused into existing courses on life skills, career education, or family/consumer sciences.

Furthermore, opportunities to learn components of self-determination exist across grade levels in the general curriculum. Strategies associated with various models of problem solving, setting performance goals, monitoring completion of tasks, and evaluating products can be incorporated into many classrooms. An advantage of purposefully infusing self-determination development into the general curriculum for the benefit of all students is that doing so avoids the problem of calling attention to a particular group of students or to a specialized intervention, which often leads those students who are most in need of an intervention to reject it (Rossi, 1995). Educators can identify and teach these strategies as academically and personally useful tools for students (Martin et al., 2003; Palmer, Wehmeyer, Gipson, & Agran, 2004; Wehmeyer et al., 2000).

An example of an adaptable strategy approach for teaching self-regulated problem solving is the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI), which can be used with elementary and secondary students of varying ability levels. Teachers guide students through three instructional phases: (a) goal setting, (b) taking action, and (c) adjusting the goal or plan. Within each phase, students respond to a series of four questions that represent critical steps in the problem-solving process. For each question, teacher objectives are specified. Teachers provide educational supports within each phase based on the individual needs of the learners. (For more details, see Wehmeyer et al., 2000.)

Students must not only learn personally helpful strategic skills; they also must know that adults are monitoring their success and are ready to step in with support at any point where the student is experiencing difficulties (Benz et al., 2000; Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004; Kortering & Braziel, 1999; Rossi, 1995; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley 1998). Access to caring adult relationships is central to school completion interventions. However, promoting self-determination does not mean protecting students from failure. Rather, it requires that adults provide structured opportunities for students to take risks and learn from their mistakes. Students must be allowed to make personally meaningful choices.
in the schooling process, to experience the outcomes of the actions they select, to receive guidance in evaluating and adjusting their choices and actions, and to receive additional opportunities to attain success. When educators are autonomy-supportive in these ways, students’ intrinsic motivation and identified regulation increase, and they begin to internalize the value of schooling (Hardre & Reeve, 2003; La Guardia & Ryan, 2002).

Teachers can be autonomy-supportive by providing students with choices about their options and actions; acknowledging students’ feelings; incorporating student perspectives into activities; providing optimally challenging tasks; providing structure and guidance that highlight reasons for particular behaviors and activities; and minimizing the use of external contingencies, such as teacher-imposed goals or social comparisons (Hardre & Reeve, 2003; La Guardia & Ryan, 2002; Reeve, Nix, & Hamm, 2003). These approaches and others are identified in Figure 1, corresponding to the affective goals of a “watered-up” curriculum for adolescents:

- More student reflection, risk taking, and active participation;
- More emphasis on developing social responsibility and collaboration skills among students;
- More emphasis on fostering a sense of personal potency and enhancement of academic and social self-esteem;
- More social support for student achievement;
- More intensive and extensive instruction targeting critical areas of need; progress is carefully monitored. (Ellis, 1998, p. 92)

Numerous studies have noted that disengagement from school begins in the elementary years (Doll & Hess, 2001). Therefore, activities that promote the development of self-determination should be present in classrooms and schools during the early school years as well as provided during times when school engagement is threatened, such as the transitions into middle and high school. The transition from middle to high school can be especially critical. At this juncture, both students’ intentions to complete school and external requirements for compulsory school attendance may weaken. In their analysis of the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) data, Lan and Lanthier (2003) found—not surprisingly—that students who dropped out between 10th and 12th grade tended to have lower academic performance than their peers in eighth grade. However, other dropout-predictive factors (e.g., perception of school, motivation in school work) were similar at that point. Unfortunately, by 10th grade and beyond, the same students had lower scores on their relationships with teachers, perceptions of school, motivation in schoolwork, and participation in school activities. Self-determination interventions must start early to prevent this deterioration in performance, motivation, and engagement.

**APPLYING SELF-DETERMINATION SKILLS TO STUDENTS’ GOALS**

A common pathway to dropping out is increasing discipline problems and poor attendance, leading to course failure and retention—the latter being one of strongest predictors of dropping out. Students who have these experiences may benefit from developing goals and action plans that help them problem-solve around these issues. Sinclair et al.'s (1998) empirically validated *Check and Connect* program includes such a component. Even students who have patterns of school problems and limited family support that would make them

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| Help students to identify what they already know and what they want to learn about a topic. |
| Provide safe opportunities for students to discuss their personal interests and goals. |
| Allow students to select a topic of study that matches their personal interests. |
| Explain how particular knowledge, skills, and experiences will help students to achieve personal goals. |
| Allow students to choose among learning activities or arrange the sequence of activities. |
| Teach students how to determine an optimally challenging performance goal for specific tasks. |
| Allow students to select their personal performance goal for a task. |
| Develop individual performance contracts with students. |
| Suggest resources, activities, and people who can help students reach their goals. |
| Explicitly teach problem-solving and goal attainment strategies. |
| Have students record their performance results and monitor their progress toward goals. |
| Acknowledge students’ efforts to reach their goals. |
| Help students’ identify what they did well and where they need improvement. |
| Express the belief that students can meet challenges; offer support when needed. |
| Celebrate successes. |

**FIGURE 1.** Examples of Autonomy-Supportive Teacher Behaviors in the General Education Classroom.
likely candidates for dropping out often understand the value of a diploma and want to stay in school (Bounds & Gould, 2000; Kortering, Braziel, & Tompkins, 2002). Such students are prime candidates for an intensive dropout prevention effort based on self-determination that teaches students concrete and specific goal attainment strategies. An especially potent application of self-determination interventions would involve directly targeting students’ intentions and actions regarding school completion.

Based on his examination of NELS data, Finn (1993) emphasized that students’ successful school performance hinges on their sense of belonging and identification with school and their participation in school activities. The likelihood of students staying in school increases when they have the tools to respond to school requirements and are involved in relevant instruction and extracurricular activities. These findings were echoed by Dunn et al. (2004) in their study of variables affecting students’ decisions to drop out. In addition to disability status, predictive factors for staying in school included (a) perceiving that high school provided a general preparation for postschool life, (b) identifying a helpful person in school, and (c) identifying a helpful class. Unfortunately, 4 out of 10 students with disabilities surveyed in the second National Longitudinal Transition Survey (Cameto, 2005) reported that they did not feel they were a part of their schools. These school engagement factors suggest the importance of considering social activities and relationships in schools as another target for self-determination interventions. In particular, encouraging students to establish goals and action plans that involve (a) increased participation in classroom and school activities and (b) stronger relationships with caring adults may have the further effect of supporting their persistence in school. Interventions that do not intentionally target students’ social relationships may equip students with important skills, but they will likely fail to encourage the engagement necessary to keep students in school.

Evaluations of programs for at-risk youth with or without disabilities have affirmed the power of helping students to identify and achieve their personal transition goals (Benz et al., 2000; Powers et al., 2001; Taylor-Ritzler et al., 2001). For example, participants in the Youth Transition Program (Benz et al., 2000) who achieved four self-identified transition goals during their high school program were twice as likely to exit with a standard high school diploma. Furthermore, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 has reinforced the importance of student involvement in the transition planning process. By age 16, if not earlier, students are considered integral members of their Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams. IEPs must include the students’ postsecondary goals for further education, employment, independent living, and other important outcome areas. These goals must be measurable, updated annually, and based on the results of age-appropriate transition assessments. When identifying the transition services that will assist students to achieve their postsecondary goals, the IEP team must consider the students’ needs and take into account their strengths, preferences, and interests.

For students with disabilities, IEP planning provides a readily available and overarching framework for regularly engaging students in personal goal setting with supportive adults. Students with a variety of disabilities across all ages can be involved in their IEP meetings—even taking leadership roles—given direct instruction, opportunities for practice, and individualized environmental supports (Test et al., 2004). At this point, the research base on the emerging practice of student involvement in IEPs is insufficient to provide evidence of long-term outcomes. However, immediate benefits include improvements on global measures of self-determination as well as improved communication and advocacy skills (see, e.g., Powers et al., 2001; Snyder & Shapiro, 1997; Zhang, 2001).

CONCLUSION

For students with or without disabilities, self-determination is an important factor in attaining success in school and adult life. Schools can intervene to promote self-determination and at the same time lay a strong foundation for school completion by

- teaching the skills associated with self-determined behavior through the general curriculum and through specialized curricula;
- assisting students to apply self-determination skills to self-identified and personally meaningful short- and long-term goals; and
- providing autonomy-supportive school environments and adult guidance, especially during critical transition periods.

Successful school completion interventions must focus on students’ strengths and create a better fit between students and their school environments (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004). Self-determination interventions, by design, are complementary to these goals. According to Lehr et al., successful intervention programs also would attend to the multiple contexts that influence students, including family and work situations, and would be implemented over the long run. With thoughtful planning supported by further research, self-determination interventions may prove to be an excellent match in these ways as well.

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