Intervention Specialists’ Support of Self-determination in the Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how intervention specialists support self-determination in young adults with mild to moderate disabilities in the Southeast Appalachian Region of Ohio. Participants in this study included five highly qualified middle school intervention specialists who were working with students identified with mild to moderate disabilities and being served with current Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Participants engaged in individual interviews to determine how they support self-determination in their classrooms. In three cases, the questions were addressed through email rather than face-to-face depending on the interviewee’s preference for the interview process. The goal of this research was to determine if self-determination is important for students with less severe disabilities and to reveal how these concepts can best be taught to young adults. The current literature provides a definition of self-determination, how it relates to transitioning, teaching strategies, assessment strategies, institution involvement, and commonalities. Currently, discussion of self-determination and student transition plans has increased, but effective implementations of available supports were found to be lacking.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................. 3

Table of Contents .............................................................................................. 4

Introduction ....................................................................................................... 6

Review of Literature .......................................................................................... 6
  Defining Self-determination ............................................................................ 7
  The Need for Self-determination ................................................................... 7
  Guardianship and Planning ............................................................................ 8
  Supporting Self-determination ....................................................................... 9
  Assessing Self-determination ....................................................................... 12
  External Variables and Considerations .......................................................... 14
  Summary ......................................................................................................... 17

Methods ............................................................................................................ 17
  Demographics ............................................................................................... 18
  Participants .................................................................................................... 19
  Procedure ..................................................................................................... 20
  Instrument .................................................................................................... 21
  Data Analysis ................................................................................................. 22

Results .............................................................................................................. 23
  Defining Self-determination ........................................................................... 24
  Strategies Used to Teach Self-Determination .................................................. 25
Effectiveness of Strategies .................................................. 26
Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Involvement ...................... 26
Discussion ........................................................................... 27
Supporting Self-determination .............................................. 28
Assessing Self-determination ............................................... 28
Guardianship Communication ............................................. 29
Implications for Practice .................................................... 30
Conclusion ........................................................................... 31
References ........................................................................... 33
According to studies, the qualities needed for a young adult to become self-determined can be taught through appropriate training and by using various assessments (West, Corbey, Stephens, Jones, Miller, & Wircenski, 1999). This study was designed to see if intervention specialists believe self-determination can be achieved through these practices. With the results of the current study, intervention specialists can evaluate their current practices and further investigate the value and possibility of integrating self-determination support into their work with students with mild to moderate disabilities. The need for this study was based on the high number of students with mild to moderate disabilities who appear not to be receiving the training and skills necessary to lead self-determined lives while transitioning to adulthood.

**Review of the Literature**

The purpose of this study was to determine how intervention specialists support self-determination for young adults with mild to moderate disabilities specifically in the Southeast Appalachian region of Ohio. This segment includes information on current literature found regarding self-determination for young adults with mild to moderate disabilities. Defining self-determination is the focus of the first section of this paper and addresses other authors’ understanding of self-determination. The second portion reports on why there is a need for self-determination and how it can benefit students with mild to moderate disabilities. In the third section the importance of planning for life transitions and the role of a student’s parents or guardian is discussed. The methods for how to support self-determination and its importance for young adults is addressed in the next section. The following section addresses how to assess self-determination to be sure students are improving in the skills they are learning. The sixth segment discusses variables and considerations that help intervention specialists when choosing
appropriate supports for individual students. A summary of all of the literature is provided in the final section.

**Defining Self-Determination**

Wehmeyer and colleagues (2011) presented a universal understanding of the term self-determination as meaning “to give right to independence and self-governance” (p. 19). Self-determination is defined as “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence or interference” (Lee, Palmer, Turnbull & Wehmeyer, 2006, p. 36-37). This definition of self-determination is not biased toward any group of individuals and reflects the central idea of what it means to be self-determined. This idea of what it means to be self-determined is consistent with current literature. Self-determined people have a greater ability to take control of their lives in order to become successful members of society (Field & Hoffman, 2007). To be in control of one’s life requires engagement in personal goal setting, self-regulating, and practicing independent behavior (Korbel, McGuire, Banjerjee, & Saunders, 2011). Understanding one’s strengths and limitations can help individuals with appropriate decision making that will influence their lives. A controlled life involves making decisions, making choices, and problem solving (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Stang, 2008). Taking a position with personal beliefs, showing self-advocacy skills, and exhibiting leadership ability will help someone hold positive perceptions of what control is (Field & Hoffman, 2007). And finally, acquiring self-awareness and self-knowledge through applying self-determination skills will promote self-efficacy (Field & Hoffman).

**The Need for Self-Determination**
Specifically, for the purpose of this research, self-determination was defined as independent thinking and making choices that affect an individual’s quality of life.

The U.S. Department of Education made self-determination a federal initiative in the 1990’s which allowed researchers and practitioners to study the concept of self-determination with regards to transition programming for students with disabilities (Field & Hoffman, 2007). When preparing for a life transition, self-determination should not be considered a separate component of the transition process, but should be the central organizing concept (Field & Hoffman). A national survey showed that two thirds of intervention specialists indicated that their students had personal goals related to their education that addressed self-determination on their Individualized Education Plan (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Stang, 2008). And yet, research shows that young adults lack some skills, knowledge, and beliefs that could enhance their self-determination (Carter, Lane, Pierson & Stang). Many new beginnings take place in life and it is important for intervention specialists to help prepare students with mild to moderate disabilities to be able to make decisions on their own.

**Guardianship and Planning**

It is imperative, when supporting young adults to become self-determined, to insure all aspects of the individual’s lives are reflected. Students who plan on entering postsecondary school after leaving high school need to consider social, academic, and personal domains and the opportunities they have available to them (Korbel, McGuire, Banjerjee, & Saunders, 2011). If students are not planning on attending postsecondary school they may be entering the workforce or arranging for independent living. Life after high school can be very overwhelming for students with disabilities and their parents because many times their future is unknown (Ankeny
& Lehmann, 2011). If students do not develop the appropriate and necessary self-determination skills, they might miss out on significant opportunities. Self-determination can help individuals make choices, further their education, find and keep a job, manage transportation, deal with medical professionals, maintain relationships, participate in leisure activities, and maintain a supported or independent living situation (Korpi, 2007). Individuals with disabilities can perform all of these tasks without the consent from an adult after the age of eighteen unless their parent/guardian takes legal control of their lives.

A vital factor in the transition process is guardianship. Students with disabilities gain rights as adults when they turn age eighteen and become their own guardian (Korpi, 2007). If the court does not appoint the student’s parents as their legal guardians then it is up to the individuals to make their own life-altering decisions (Korpi). According to Dr. Pam Beam (personal communication, December, 2011) special educators should inform students with disabilities and their families about the guardianship process early because if the parents feel it is necessary to gain guardianship they need to take action far before the student’s eighteenth birthday. Dr. Beam was unaware that her own child, who has significant disabilities, would gain guardianship of his own life once he turned eighteen and she was blindsided when she no longer had a say in the decisions her son made. Learning self-determination skills can aid a student in making appropriate decisions if and when they become legal adults.

**Supporting Self-Determination**

Self-determination skills can be learned by inviting students to become active participants in their IEP meeting (West, Corbey, Stephens, Jones, Miller, & Wircenski, 1999). To ensure student ownership they must be taught the IEP process and format. Students must identify
strengths, needs, and goals in order to make appropriate decisions (West et al.). The final goal to ensuring student ownership is to have student-led IEP meetings (Test, Mason, Hughes, Konrad, Neale & Wood). Before they can feel confident in leading IEP meetings they may want to start by simply introducing members involved in the meeting or by presenting small components of the meeting (Test et al.). There are other ways to teach students self-determination skills in a school-based setting.

Role playing various situations can be a very useful strategy to use when teaching students how to display appropriate behavior. Situations should be centered on skills that students might need when they transition into adult life (West, Corbey, Stephens, Jones, Miller, & Wircenski, 1999). Allowing students to set up their own class schedule in a simulation setting will help them to construct their own class schedule if they move onto postsecondary education (West et al.). Once students are in postsecondary education they need to know how to ask for appropriate accommodations in the classroom and having them role play scenarios where they are asking for accommodations will help them in not only postsecondary education, but in home, work, and community settings as well.

Some students will be transitioning into independent living; therefore, practicing appropriate skills associated with moving out of their homes would be beneficial (West, Corbey, Stephens, Jones, Miller, & Wircenski, 1999). Setting up a role play situation where a student meets with a medical provider will help this meeting run more smoothly if and when the time comes (West et al.). One last situation that is crucial for students who have a goal of entering the workforce is interviewing for a job (West et al.). Interview scenarios can be simulated right in the classroom and all students can benefit from this practice. Practicing these various situations
will help the child become more confident and better prepared to independently handle these transitions when they occur in real life.

When students transition to adult life, they may not have the same supports they did in high school. Allowing students to participate in group functions and retreats that focus on cohesiveness and supportiveness will help them develop self-determination skills (Pocock, Lambros, Karvonen, Test, Algozzine, Wood, & Martin, 2002). Incorporating guest speakers into retreats such as school psychologists and successful members of the community with learning disabilities allows students to see “real-life” prospective on the areas of cohesiveness and supportiveness (Pocock et al.). Additionally, giving students a chance to talk about their own disabilities as a way to understand their disability in regards to their strengths and limitations allows students to practice valuable communication skills (Pocock et al.).

Self-determination skills work best when there is collaboration among institutions (Korbel, McGuire, Banerjee, & Saunders, 2011). When institutions work cooperatively, they foster meaningful communication and gain flexibility in meeting a wide variety of students’ needs and interests (Korbel et al.). Creating partnerships between the domains of a child’s life and planning programs in advance that teach self-determination is essential when considering a child’s life after high school (Korbel et al.). Communication between high schools, colleges, and vocational schools is crucial. For example, college level career services can anticipate questions that students with disabilities might ask and begin to develop appropriate guidance in advance. Disability services at vocational schools or colleges can plan self-help scanning stations for students to independently create alternate texts and media when they get to the new institution (Korbel et al.). Additionally, intervention specialists need to help young adults with the communication process. When students move from one institution to another it is common for
them to depend on other people to help them get the support they need to be successful (Korbel et al.). If institutions share information with one another about new ideas that promote independent living they will be better prepared to facilitate students with disabilities and create comfortable environments where students can exercise self-determination.

**Assessing Self-Determination**

It is also necessary to assess students’ understanding of self-determination in order to determine if they have the essential skills for life after high school. There are a variety of assessment strategies available; it is just a matter of choosing the right one. One way to determine a student’s level of self-determination is with the AIR Self-Determination Scale and User Guide (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998). The scale can be used with all grades, K-12, and can be used with adults. The first step in using the AIR scale is to develop a profile of the student’s level of self-determination (Field et al.). This helps identify a student’s strengths and areas of improvement regarding self-determination. Next, it is important to set goals and objectives for the student based on the identified areas of strengths and areas of improvement (Field et al.). It is necessary for students to be involved in creating their own goals and objectives because it allows for greater student involvement.

The last step in using the AIR scale is to increase the student’s capacities and opportunities by coming up with strategies to teach self-determination to the individual (Field et al, 1998). Capacity refers to the student’s ability, knowledge, and perceptions while opportunity refers to the student in both school and home settings (Field et al.). The three components of self-determination the AIR scale focuses on are thinking, doing, and adjusting and uses a five point Likert-type scale to rate the student’s self-determination skills with one being never and
five being always. Educators, students, and parents can all use this scale because there are three different forms depending on the user.

Another way to assess a student’s self-determination skills is through Arc’s Self-Determination Scale, – a self-report measure used with adolescents with mild cognitive and learning disabilities (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Little, Garner, & Lawrence, 2008). Arc is a community-based organization advocating for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This scale looks at four domains including autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization. A four-point Likert-scale is used to rate story completion items, ability to make choices between two options, and requires a student to make goals while breaking them into smaller steps (Shogren et al.). It is up to the student and the person administering the assessment as to whether or not the scale is read to student or the student reads the scale. This scale could be administered in a group setting with up to fifteen students at one time if the students have appropriate supports (Shogren et al.). This scale seems very useful in determining whether or not a student has acquired the appropriate skills necessary to be self-determined.

A curriculum-based assessment and planning tool administered to students in middle and high school grades is the ChoiceMaker Self-Determination Assessment (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998). This assessment works best if it is used for determining self-determination skills in students with emotional or behavioral disabilities and mild to moderate learning problems. Three areas the assessment measure includes choosing goals, expressing goals, and taking action. The first part of the scale rates the student’s skills related to self-determination on a four-point scale. The second part of the assessment focuses on the student’s
profile and the third part provides student objectives and goals. Teachers can determine their priorities in correspondence with each student’s score.

The Self-Determination Assessment Battery focuses on measuring cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998). This assessment allows for student, parent, and teacher perspectives to be taken into consideration with an emphasis on the individual’s control and potential targets for instructional intervention. Five-components are used to assess a student including know yourself, value yourself, plan, act, and experience outcomes. The first component of the scale is a multiple-choice and true/false format which assesses the student’s cognitive knowledge of self-determination. A Self-Determination Observation Checklist is the second component of the battery which assesses student behavior. The third component is a self-report instrument the student completes in order to measure both affective and cognitive characteristics of self-determination. There is also a teacher and parent perception scale in the format of a questionnaire using a five-point Likert-scale assessing student behavior, abilities, and skills of self-determination. All of the components of the Self-Determination Assessment Battery do not have to be used together or all at one time (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998).

**External Variables and Considerations**

Intervention specialists need to consider the student’s individual needs when choosing the appropriate assessment tool to use. Findings from a study by Wehmeyer et al. (2011) reviewed how the self-determination construct is understood with consideration of moderator variables in order to design interventions that address individualized needs of young adults with disabilities.
Moderating variables included gender, age, life stages, cognitive ability, religious beliefs, and experiences of oppression, segregation, and discrimination.

Walker et al. (2011) introduced a social-ecological approach for promoting and enhancing self-determination in individuals with developmental disabilities. The authors presented a five-level model based on the interaction of person and environmental factor. Through these factors, a series of social mediator variables are constructed: social effectiveness, social capital and social inclusion. The authors proposed that these variables successfully influence the improvement of self-determination efforts and the efficacy of implemented interventions (Walker et al., 2011).

The social-ecological model by Walker et al. emphasizes the complexity of interactions occurring between person and environment-specific variables and how those account for significant changes in human behavior and enhanced human functioning. The authors note that such models are strength-based, emphasizing a person’s capacities and abilities. The importance of focusing on a child’s strengths rather than weaknesses is critical. If an intervention specialist happens to pay more attention to a child’s weaknesses, it is possible the child may be more susceptible to failure. By focusing on a child’s strengths, the intervention specialist is ultimately supporting the development of self-determination in the child.

Professional development for intervention specialists is important and research shows that students with mild to moderate disabilities benefit from an educator who is properly trained to support self-determination in the classroom. Professionals who are not prepared to support the development of early foundations for self-determination create the possibility of fostering learned helplessness and the students may also face challenges when adapting to new environments. Therefore, it is important for education professionals to learn and implement
methods for helping children establish the ability to have positive control over their environment.

Blasco, Flaco, and Munson (2006) discuss Project SELF, an interdisciplinary model that helps prepare graduate students to serve young children with disabilities and their families.

Blasco et al. (2006) discuss the importance of self-determination within the context of the family. It is important to understand the role of the family in providing primary support for developing self-determination in young children. Project SELF began at Portland State University for graduate students focusing on serving young children with disabilities. Students participating in this program had to meet certain requirements including course requirements, field experiences and student teaching. Graduate students also had to attend seminars and participate in participatory action research projects (PAR) working with a family of a child with significant and multiple disabilities (Blasco, Flaco, & Munson, 2006).

Project SELF was evaluated through several formative and summative assessments. Faculty members conducted on-going evaluations of the course work and seminars, as well as satisfaction surveys. Faculty also reviewed students’ reflective journals, videotaped sessions with their PAR project children and their presentations (Blasco et al.). Students attended focus groups in which they were asked to reflect on their experiences and their thoughts about self-determination. From the PAR projects completed by the students, results showed an improvement in the children’s self-determination as well as the parents’ that participated in the projects (Blasco et al.).

Self-determination is an important part of the transition process and research shows that self-determination leads to an improved quality of life for individuals with disabilities (Thoma & Getzel, 2005). In a national study funded by the U.S. Department of Education approximately 62% of teachers reported teaching self-determination “often” while 29% of teachers reported
teaching self-determination “sometimes” (Thoma & Getzel, 2005). This is an issue that can be improved by intervention specialists assessing students to determine what each individual is lacking in the area of self-determination. Furthermore, intervention specialists need to include activities for students with disabilities that will foster self-determination as part of their transition plans (Thoma & Getzel). The strategies used depend on the individual student and the intervention specialist’s preferences as to which strategy works best for each situation.

Summary

The current research reveals the importance of self-determination, strategies that support self-determination, and ways to assess a student’s understanding of self-determination. A common trend seen in the reviewed literature is for intervention specialists to understand there is a connection between self-determination skills and social interactions. Also, that an individual’s cultural background will determine which strategy for learning self-determination works best for them. It is important for intervention specialists to consider all of the options available for students after their high school careers. This will allow students to have choices and to become more assertive about what it is they want for themselves. The current research reports barriers to teaching self-determination in the classroom due to lack of time and the demographics of students. The purpose of this study was to investigate ways that intervention specialists support self-determination for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

Method

This section includes details regarding the methodology of the research. The first section describes the general area where the study took place in order to provide context for the study and includes census information as well as information from the school district report card. The next section describes the research participants. In the third section, the procedures used to
gather data are discussed including a description of the instruments used. How the data was analyzed is the focus of the final section which describes the procedures used to make sense of the data collected.

**Demographics**

This study was conducted in the Southeast Appalachian region of Ohio. More specifically, participants were teachers of middle and high school students in grades two rural counties in Southeastern Ohio. According to the United States Census Bureau from 2012, many people in the Appalachian region of Ohio were experiencing poverty and the economic situation was low.

In 2011 County A, the percent of persons below poverty level was 31.5%, the population was estimated to be 64,304, and the percent of white, non-Hispanic residents was 90.3%. County A is comprised of five school districts. According to the Ohio Department of Education, the school district report card for District A in that county indicated that the district’s designation was classified as continuous improvement in the 2009-2010 school year. The district met 18 of the 26 state indicators and the adequate yearly progress was not met. The Performance Index reflects the achievement of every student enrolled for the full academic year and ranges from 0-120. The average performance index for the school district was 94.3 and the district was below the value-added measure (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.).

According to the Ohio Department of Education, School District B in County A is designated under academic watch for the 2009-2010 school year. The number of state indicators met out of 26 was 12 and the performance index was 85.8 on a scale of zero to 120. The adequate yearly progress was not met and the school district was below value-added measure (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.).
In 2011, County B had a population of 13,367, the percent of persons below poverty level was 20.8%, and the percent of white, non-Hispanic residents was 97.1% (U.S. Department of Commerce, n.d.). The Ohio Department of Education indicated that the school district’s report card in County B indicated that the district’s designation was effective in the 2009-2010 school year. The number of state indicators met out of 26 was 11, and their adequate yearly progress was not met. The performance index average was 90.1 on a scale of zero to 120. The district also scored below the value-added measure (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.).

Participants

Participants consisted of five highly qualified middle school intervention specialists working with students identified with mild to moderate disabilities being served with current Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Participant 1, Dave, is an intervention specialist at the high school in County A, School District A, and chose to respond to the interview questions via email. Participant 2, Tina, is an intervention specialist at the middle school in County A, District B and chose to respond to the interview questions via email. Participant 3, John, is an intervention specialist at County B’s middle school and chose to respond to the interview questions via email. Participant 4, Kim, is also an intervention specialist at County B’s middle school and chose to discuss the questions in person. Finally, participant 5, Chelsea, is also an intervention specialist at County B’s Middle School and they also chose to meet in person to discuss the questions. None of the participants were selected from a larger group.

The participants benefited from participating in this study solely by having a conversation about self-determination. It is hoped that the conversation between the interviewee and interviewer sparked ideas about how teachers can support self-determination for young adults with mild to moderate disabilities. As a result, some participants may be considering more ways
they can intentionally support self-determination in the classroom rather than by chance. The idea of increasing professional development opportunities concerning self-determination supports could be another result of the interviews.

**Procedure**

After gaining approval from the University’s Internal Review Board (IRB), the researcher contacted potential participants for the study. First, the researcher contacted the local county director of transition services via email to present the research question to him and to ask him to identify intervention specialists that would be appropriate participants. The researcher emailed potential participants and sent them a copy of the consent form along with the interview questions that were used. Once a few intervention specialists were contacted, snowball sampling was used to identify other potential participants. The interviews were preferably scheduled face-to-face, but some participants that could not meet in person addressed the questions through email.

Participants may have experienced some discomfort while participating in this research they may not have had a concrete understanding of self-determination which may have caused some confusion during the interviews. Some of the participating intervention specialists may not have had specific practices devoted to supporting self-determination for young adults causing discomfort with the interview questions. In order to minimize these discomforts the researcher provided a definition of self-determination in the initial email sent out to potential participants. Participants had an overview of the questions and topics that would be covered prior to the face-to-face or email conversation which allowed the participants to prepare for the interview.

Assuring participants that their responses would be confidential was the first step in the implementation process. The researcher started the interview by thanking the participant for
taking time out of his/her day to contribute his/her thoughts to the study. The researcher explained the purpose of the research and read the focus of the study being sure to ask if the participant had any questions prior to beginning the interview. The consent information was presented to the participant and he/she signed the consent form.

After each interview was completed, the researcher thanked the participant again. Participants had a chance to ask any questions they had related to the interview. Once the interview was complete, the researcher shook the participants hand and placed the information from the interview in a locked safe in order to keep the information confidential. All interviews were transcribed from the audiotapes. The audiotapes and transcriptions were kept in a locked safe until after the data was analyzed and the paper was written.

**Instrument**

A 15-item interview protocol was used in the interviews for the study. The researcher asked the questions in the order they are presented below. The researcher made the interview more than a conversation by using skills such as questioning, probing, asking for clarification, listening, asking for explanations, and posing alternatives. When listening to a participant, the interviewer engaged in active listening and paid close attention to what the participant was saying. The researcher wrote down the participants’ responses and used a tape recorder to record the interview as well. Some of the questions were straightforward, allowing answers to be compared, but some were more individualized leading to stories that are of value as individual pieces of data.

Following is a list of interview questions:

1. How do you define self-determination?
2. How important do you feel self-determination is for students?
3. Give an example of how you teach or encourage self-determination in your classroom.

4. Are your methods for teaching self-determination stand-alone or within lessons?

5. Do you use different strategies depending on the students or are they the same activities for all students?

6. How do you know if it’s effective or not?

7. If it’s not effective, what do you do?

8. Are your students involved in their IEP meetings? In what way(s)?

9. If yes, what impact do you think it has on students?

10. When is an appropriate age to start teaching self-determination skills? Is it different for different students?

11. What students do you feel would benefit most from activities to build self-determination skills?

12. Do you share what you are doing to teach self-determination with the student’s guardian/parents? Why or why not?

13. Give an example of a parent/guardian you have encountered that undermined his/her child’s self-determination.

14. What kind of professional development opportunities does your school provide for teachers related to the topic of self-determination?

15. Do you believe teachers need additional training in how to teach self-determination? Why or why not?

Data Analysis

The focus of the study was to explore how intervention specialists support self-determination in young adults with mild to moderate disabilities. The qualitative research
methods used to collect the data started with the identification of topics or themes found within the data. The first theme that emerged was how intervention specialists define self-determination. Once participants had a definite view of the meaning of self-determination, they were asked to talk about their perception of how important self-determination is for students. Another theme focused on strategies that each intervention specialist uses in his/her classroom was identified and the outcomes of these strategies were addressed. Student and parent involvement in supporting self-determination was discussed and the importance of their involvement was determined. The last portion of the interview and a major theme focused on professional development for intervention specialists and whether or not this is necessary for intervention specialists. All responses were analyzed by the themes identified above.

Results

Overview

An analysis of the data revealed, an overarching theme across all findings in the study was that teachers perceive self-determination skills as very important for young adults with mild to moderate disabilities. All of the techniques the intervention specialists used to teach self-determination in their classes were imbedded within lessons and were not separate stand-alone learning activities. The strategies used for promoting self-determination varied, as did the ways to determine the effectiveness of the strategies. Every interviewee agreed that the strategies they chose to use for each student varied depending on each student’s individual need. Every intervention specialist indicated their students were a part of the IEP process, but in some cases the student’s grade level was a determining factor as to whether or not they attended the IEP meeting.
The ideas regarding the appropriate age for self-determination skills to be introduced to students was not consistent across the five intervention specialists, but all agreed that every student in their classrooms could benefit from self-determination regardless of their disability. Communication with the parents about self-determination in the classroom was important to all of the intervention specialists and they all inform parents about what they are working on in the classroom. One out of the five intervention specialists did encounter a guardian that actively undermined his/her child’s self-determination.

Participants also indicated that professional development opportunities were available to them, but they reported that none of the material covered during the professional development was ever directly related to self-determination. All five intervention specialists agreed that they needed additional self-determination training and professional development opportunities in order to meet the needs of each of their students.

Defining Self-Determination

The differences between perceptions of self-determination among the five intervention specialists are reported in this section. When the participants were asked to define self-determination all responses were different. However, some key components were common to each response such as, “leadership”, “goals” and “decisions”. For example, Dave said, “Self-determination is the ability for an individual to make decisions on their own, regardless of their background disability.” John responded, “(It is) the ability to succeed no matter what the odds against you might be.” Kim defined self-determination as “a child setting their own goals and reaching towards completing them. (Also,) that child knowing what limitations they have in their life and working hard to overcome them and build on their strengths.” Chelsea’s response was similar to Kim’s although Chelsea added the idea that students that are self-determined take on a
leadership role with their peers and they guide their peers to do better.” Finally, Tina defined self-determination as “an individual making their own choices with interests and preferences. Also, it’s about students choosing their own place of residency, meals to cook, movies to watch, jobs to have, and mistakes to make.” She thinks of it as “someone living a life built by one’s self and not by another person.” Regardless of how they defined it, every intervention specialist believed self-determination to be very important for their students.

**Strategies Used to Teach Self Determination**

The ways in which each intervention specialist taught and encouraged self-determination in their classrooms was different. John indicated that “a lot of (his) students think that they are stupid because they are in special classes. (He) tries to show them how to succeed and give them confidence.” Dave believes “students need to understand themselves to make positive decisions in their lives. (He) gives them equations that challenge them, to see how well they respond in times of confusion.” Tina “encourages the students to think for themselves and speak up for themselves.” The students in her class “role play scenarios often about asserting self while identifying feelings, interests, consequences for actions, and making choices rather than being told what to do.” Kim and Chelsea both said “they ask their students what they want to learn.” They both also indicated that they connect the students learning to their everyday lives in order to show them how it is related to the real world. Chelsea explained that her students “get excited about having a choice in what they are learning.” All participants agreed that self-determination skills are taught within lessons and that all of their students are different so they differentiate which strategy to use with each individual student.

**Effectiveness of Strategies**
Determining whether or not the strategies used to support self-determination are effective is an issue that was taken into consideration. The five participants all had different ways of determining whether or not their students were making progress with becoming more self-determined. John indicated “self-determination will manifest itself in the classroom or in any extracurricular activities.” Dave said he can tell when “they are understanding the material and are confident in themselves. If they are not understanding, they tend to shy down and give up at times.” Tina can tell her strategies are effective when she “hear(s) another student using or sharing with others when they don’t think (she) is listening.” Chelsea said, “I can tell by asking them questions and listening to their answers. It is different with all students, but some of my students start to pick up on routines and do things independently without direction.” Kim monitors the effectiveness of her strategies by “(the students) ability to remember certain facts from a lesson and be able to relate them to something in their everyday lives.” If their strategies were not effective, the teachers all reported they would “try harder, try different approaches, and reinforce that the student has potential.” Every student is different and it was agreed that monitoring the effectiveness of self-determination is sometimes a challenge.

**Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Involvement**

All of the intervention specialists agreed that their students are involved in the IEP process, but some of them said that it depends on the student’s grade level. Tina indicated that her “7th -12th graders attend their meetings and are asked about future plans, interests, and possible goals” they have for themselves. She thinks that “being involved in their IEP planning and meetings allows them to think about what their needs are and how they can be met.” The students are also exposed to “who can help them along the way.” Dave has all of his students attend the meeting along with the parents. He thinks that “this way (the student) knows what is
expected of them. They understand the modifications that (he) provides for them and he makes sure that (the student) understands the IEP.” He said that by doing this “students have added goals to their IEP’s in the past and (that) being aware helps them build their confidence in the general education classes.”

The other three intervention specialists had students attend their IEP meetings depending on their grade level. All of these intervention specialists teach at the same middle school in County B. Kim said she “asks (students) questions about what they want to be when they grow up and what they want to improve during next school year. She does this before every student’s IEP meeting and the student does not attend the meeting unless they are moving onto high school. Allowing 8th graders to attend their IEP meetings “makes the transition a little smoother from middle school to high school.” John agrees that “just the 8th grade students are involved because the high school tried to get an idea of which classes (the student) is going to enroll in next year.” John thinks that “most of the students are intimidated in the meeting” and this has an impact on the student.

**Discussion**

The results of this study support previously reviewed literature related to self-determination. This study was conducted to determine how intervention specialists support self-determination for young adults with mild to moderate disabilities. Literature reviewed discussed the importance of teaching students to become self-determined individuals, strategies used by intervention specialists for supporting self-determination, effectiveness of the strategies, student involvement in the IEP process, parent involvement in supporting self-determination, and professional development related to the topic of self-determination. As stated in the literature
review, self-determination skills are extremely important for young adults with mild to moderate disabilities to learn.

The results showed that every participant thought supporting self-determination in the classroom is important. Interestingly, every intervention specialist had a different definition for self-determination; all had different strategies for supporting it in the classroom. These findings are closely related to those reported in the literature on self-determination because all definitions of self-determination were different and there were a variety of strategies used to support self-determination.

**Supporting Self-determination**

The support strategies found in the literature were stand-alone lessons on self-determination rather than being built into lessons which is different from how the five participants described they taught self-determination. One strategy was similar both from both interviews and the literature which was student participation in the IEP process. Student participation in the IEP allows students to set their own goals and understand what is expected of them academically, intellectually and socially.

Some new strategies that were not included in the literature, but mentioned by the participants included role playing real life scenarios, participation in retreats, and collaboration among the institutions involved in a student’s life. The effectiveness of these strategies was described very differently in the literature as compared to the interviews.

**Assessing Self-determination**

Assessing the effectiveness of the strategies for supporting self-determination is essential to understanding whether or not students have the skills they need for living independent lives. One way to determine a student’s level of self-determination is with the AIR Self-Determination
Scale and User Guide (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998). This was not mentioned by the participants, but could be beneficial to intervention specialists in determining their students’ self-determination skills. Another assessment for self-determination is ARC’s Self-Determination Scale, – a self-report measure used with adolescents with mild cognitive and learning disabilities (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Little, Garner, & Lawrence, 2008). ARC is a community-based organization advocating for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This scale examines four domains including autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization. The participants did not mention this assessment tool in the interviews nor did they mention the ChoiceMaker assessment.

A curriculum-based assessment and planning tool administered to students in middle and high school grades is the ChoiceMaker Self-Determination Assessment (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998). This assessment works best when used for determining self-determination skills in students with emotional or behavioral disabilities and mild to moderate learning problems. The Self-Determination Assessment Battery measures cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998). This assessment allows for student, parent, and teacher perspectives to be taken into consideration with an emphasis on the individual’s control and potential targets for instructional intervention. A comparison of the interviews and the literature indicates differences with regard to understanding of assessment and indicates a need for professional development related to assessing self-determination.

**Guardianship Communication**

Parental and guardianship expectations varied between the interviews and what was found in the literature. The five intervention specialists involved their students’ parents and
guardians in the IEP process and in the students’ learning, but they did not mention direct conversations regarding self-determination. The literature revealed how important it is for intervention specialists to inform a student’s parent or guardian about what legally happens with the rights an individual will have once they turn eighteen. Students with disabilities gain rights as adults when they turn age eighteen and become their own guardian (Korpi, 2007). If the court does not appoint the student’s parents as his/her legal guardians then it is up to the individual to make his/her own life-altering decisions (Korpi). This is a very important consideration for the five intervention specialists that was not mentioned during any of the interviews.

**Implications for Practice**

This information is important for educators and related professionals due to the serious impact that a lack of self-determination skills can have on individuals with mild to moderate disabilities. The data from the present study adds new information related to middle and high school students with less severe disabilities to what is found in the current literature addresses. Much of the current research focuses on promoting self-determination for college level students and adults. The current literature emphasizes transitioning from high school to college level courses or transitioning into vocational tracks. The literature also focuses on supporting self-determination in individuals with more severe disabilities rather than individuals with mild to moderate disabilities. The reported barriers revealed in the interviews and the confirmed by current literature include teaching self-determination in stand-alone lessons in the classroom due to lack of time and the demographics of students. The literature and interviews both support the idea of trying to provide intervention specialists with professional development opportunities on how to support self-determination based on a lack of time and insufficient funding.
This study resulted in findings that will contribute to knowledge transfer among educational public services. Knowledge transfer will help improve the effectiveness of supporting self-determination in educational settings. Young adults with mild to moderate disabilities need more support for gaining self-determination skills from their educators which will lead to an enhanced quality of life for each individual. An increased awareness for the need to promote self-determination in educational settings can provide motivation to intervention specialists working with these individuals. This research provides intervention specialists with techniques on how to better support self-determination among young adults with mild to moderate disabilities. These trends in education related to self-determination and professional development should be addressed which will contribute to the understanding of teaching practices in the schools, specifically for enhancing self-determination for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

**Conclusion**

There are many techniques available to intervention specialists relating to self-determination that can help individuals with disabilities become independent thinkers and self-determined individuals. Although some support for self-determination skills was reported in this study, there is still a gap between what supports are found in the literature and what the intervention specialists actually do and are able to do in the classroom. Results show that intervention specialists try to support self-determination in the classroom, but believe their professional development opportunities are not related to the topic of self-determination and that additional training on this topic is needed. Individuals with mild to moderate disabilities will continue to rely on other people in their lives because they have not been taught the appropriate skills necessary for them to obtain and maintain an independent lifestyle. Educators and related-service
professionals should have access to the knowledge on how to support self-determination for young adults with mild to moderate disabilities. Individuals with disabilities in middle and high school need assistance now in order to help them be successful in their adult lives.
References


