Inclusion

A "Snapshot" of Current Practices: How Are Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Displaying Self-Determination
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Abstract:	Although self-determination has received increased attention as a critical component in quality education programs, there is limited current research about how and in what way students are displaying self-determined behaviors. To that end, a 29-item questionnaire was developed to which 118 school system personnel reported how a sample of students with intellectual and other disabilities in different grades employed self-determination strategies. Respondents were predominately white, female, had more than 10 years of experience, and largely worked with students with multiple disabilities at the elementary-level. In all, the majority of students across grades were not taught specific self-determination skills. Also, students at the elementary-level participated less in attending IEP meetings or discussing their challenging behaviors than students at the secondary level, and typically received little or no instruction in self-determination. For those students who did receive instruction, self-instruction, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation were a several of the strategies reported as being used by students to manage and regulate their behavior. The implications of the findings are discussed.

A "Snapshot" of Current Practices: How Are Students with Intellectual and Developmental

Disabilities Displaying Self-Determination

Abstract

Although self-determination has received increased attention as a critical component in quality education programs, there is limited current research about how and in what way students are displaying self-determined behaviors. To that end, a 29-item questionnaire was developed to which 118 school system personnel reported how a sample of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in different grades employed self-determination strategies. Respondents were predominately white, female, had more than 10 years of experience, and largely worked with students with multiple disabilities at the elementary level. In all, the majority of students across grades were not taught specific self-determination skills. Also, students at the elementary level participated less in attending IEP meetings or discussing their challenging behaviors than students at the secondary level, and typically received little or no instruction in self-determination. For those students who did receive instruction, self-instruction, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation were several of the strategies reported as being used by students to manage and regulate their behavior. The implications of the findings are discussed.

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A Snapshot of Current Practices: Examining How Are Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Displaying Self-Determination

Self-determination has received much attention in the last 2 decades. As a consequence, more committed efforts to promote and enhance the self-determination of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities have been reported (Wehmeyer, 2015). On the other hand, a critical limitation of this body of research has been including students with intellectual or developmental disabilities placed in a variety of educational settings (Alsaeed et al., 2023; Raley et al., 2020). As Wehmeyer (2015) noted, self-determination has become an essential component of recommended instructional practices because of its overall positive impact on students' learning and development. Historically, students have had limited opportunities to make choices or have controls over their environments and the current commitment to enhancing students' self-determination seeks to correct this situation; that is, by teaching students with intellectual and developmental disabilities ways to control their lives and behaviors and achieve desired outcomes via self-initiated actions and decisions.

Rather than continue to depend on an instructional model in which the students' learning (behavior) is controlled by external agents (e.g., teachers, support personnel), self-determination allows students to have greater responsibility for their own learning and behavior management. Traditionally, a student's role in behavior management has largely been of a passive nature and has essentially involved responding to the cues, consequences, and supports delivered by a teacher or other assigned adult (Agran, 2015). Such a passive role has only encouraged dependency, minimized motivation, and restricted student engagement in and ownership of their own development and learning (Wehmeyer et al., 2007; Zirpoli, 2012).

Although the value of self-determination has been well acknowledged, there are varied definitions of what it is and how it is manifested (Agran & Hughes, 2014). As Agran and Hughes noted, self-determination is thought by some as a desired outcome, by others as a set of strategies to increase students' control over learning experiences, while for others it is psychological construct involving intrinsic motivation (Wehmeyer, 2004). Based on Deci and Ryan's *Cognitive Evaluation Theory* (1985), which explained how people have an intrinsic need to act in self-determined ways, Wehmeyer (2004) developed the *Causal Agency Theory* to better understand how people become more self-determined and, in effect, the causal agents in their lives. People act as causal agents when they become motivated to set and act upon achieving self-selected goals. To maximize their attainment of such goals, *Causal Agency Theory* suggests opportunities, supports, and instruction need to be provided to enable students to enhance their self-determination (Shogren & Raley, 2022). With such supports and learning opportunities, students can contribute to or serve as agents of their own behavior change. Historically, students have traditionally served only a passive role in their learning and development (Wehmeyer et al., 2007), responding to the cues and consequences of others. Such dependency minimized their motivation to learn and assume a more active role in decision making that could impact their lives. As Shogren et al. (2015) noted, self-determination allows individuals to "make or cause things to happen in their lives, rather than others" (p. 252).

Although the need to promote students' self-determination has been advocated for some time, research on the extent to which teachers systematically instruct their students on how to be more self-determined suggest that relatively few students with intellectual and developmental disabilities appear to have received or benefit from such instruction. In a national survey Wehmeyer, Agran, et al. (2000) reported that although 60% of the respondents (teachers) in their

sample were familiar with the term self-determination, one-third indicated that no goals related

to self-determination were included in their students' IEP meetings, one-third did not involve

their students in any kind of educational decision making or planning, and many said that they

did not believe that their students would benefit from such instruction in self-determination.

Also, Agran et al. (1999) reported that 55% of teachers in their sample did not include any self-

determination-related skills in their students' IEPs, and 59% stated they spent little or no time

discussing self-determination with their students. Interestingly, secondary-level teachers appear

to value self-determination greater than elementary-level teachers and believe they are better

prepared to teach self-determination than elementary-level teachers (Mason et al., 2004).

Also, despite calls to provide self-determination instruction across ages and grades, the

extent to which educators are providing this instruction with younger children remains uncertain

(Stang et al., 2009). Although it has been suggested that self-determination is a developmental

process through childhood, most self-determination research has focused on secondary-level

students or adults (Carter et al., 2011; Palmer, 2010), typically when students are developing

transition plans or exploring post-school educational options. As Erwin et al. (2009) noted, most

efforts to understand and support self-determination have dealt solely with adolescents and

adults, despite the fact that self-determination skills have been shown to enhance an individual's

life experiences from childhood through adulthood (Danneker & Bottge, 2009). To that point,

Brown and Cohen (1996) suggested that special educators need to provide opportunities for self-

determination to young children to develop skills that will serve as building blocks of self-

determination in later years.

Consequently, little is known about self-determination for elementary-level students

(Stang et al., 2009). Although children can display self-determination at a young age (Martin et

al., 2000), and have even been taught to lead their own IEP meetings, teaching students to be

more self-determined appears to be more important for secondary-level teachers than

elementary-level teachers (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Mason et al., 2004). In all, Cho et al.

(2011) remarked that elementary-level teachers are unaware of their potential role in promoting

the self-determination of their students.

Shogren and Turnbull (2006) suggested that since early childhood is a critical time for the

development of cognitive, social, and emotional skills, it also is a critical time for children to

begin to develop self-determination skills. Indeed, this is an optimal time to provide children

with opportunities to express preferences, make choices and decisions, and assume some control

over their environments—all of which are important components of self-determination (Erwin et

al., 2009). Erwin et al. suggested that both practitioners and parents may not understand that

children can acquire these initial self-determination skills at this age and how these skills learned

early will be of great value of for the child in later life.

As noted previously, self-determination can be manifested in various ways. In particular,

there is a strong body of research that has suggested that student involvement in IEP or behavior

intervention planning (BIP) meetings provide rich opportunities for students to have a voice and

apply self-determination skills (Martin et al., 2006; Wehmeyer et al., 2004). Eisenman et al.

(2005) indicated that teaching students to become more involved in their IEP meetings is a way

to take advantage of the relationship between this planning process and self-determination.

Diegelmann and Test (2018) noted that student-focused planning promotes self-determination.

Additionally, students can have a meaningful role in providing input to their behavior

intervention plans. To that point, there is limited research on the specific strategies students are

taught and how they are applied relative to age and grade level (Agran & Brown, 2015). Further,

much of what we know about self-determination has been based on literature reviews, albeit

dated. Potentially, what would be of interest is to have a current "bird's eye view" of which

strategies students are actually using in different contexts.

The purpose of the present study was to obtain current preliminary data on how students

with intellectual and developmental disabilities across grades levels displayed or employed

selected self-determination skills; in effect, to provide a "snapshot" of current self-determination

practice. A survey was disseminated to a sample of teachers of students with intellectual and

developmental disabilities who were knowledgeable about their students' use of self-

determination strategies across different contexts. Additionally, a qualitative inquiry was

conducted on the students' involvement in IEP planning meetings. There were four primary

objectives of the investigation. The first objective was to determine which self-determination

strategies relative to disability were taught to students in the sample; specifically, were students

asked to participate in and use these strategies in IEP planning and/or in other capacities. A

secondary objective was to determine if there was a difference in frequency of responses

between teachers' reports exhibited by students across types of intellectual and developmental

disabilities. A third objective was to inquire what, if any, instruction had the teachers received on

how to teach their students to be more self-determined. Last, a qualitative analysis was

conducted as to why students were not receiving self-determination instruction.

Specifically, four primary research questions were addressed:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Which self-determination strategies do students use?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What role have students had in participating in their IEP planning

meetings and/or in developing their support plans?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): Was student use of self-determination strategies differentiated by type of disability?

Research Question 4 (RQ4): What factors were responsible for limiting self-determination instruction?

Method

Participants

Selection criteria for potential participants involved identifying professionals who were knowledgeable about their students' use of self-determination and/or served in some capacity, either directly (e.g., active participation in IEP meetings) or indirectly (e.g., providing input on a student with a BIP), to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The pool of participants was inclusive of potential stakeholders (e.g., special education teachers, general education teachers, paraprofessionals, behavior specialist, case managers, psychologists) who served students with intellectual and developmental disabilities across varied grade level providers (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school).

Survey Distribution

Purposeful sampling was used to identify potential participants using both formal and informal professional development networks between Institutions of Higher Education and school districts (Pennington et al., 2021). Links to complete the survey were sent to potential participants nationwide. Researchers used a web-based survey in an effort to eliminate barriers related to geographic location as well as to increase the survey sample size (Gosling et al., 2004). Offering the survey online ensured participant anonymity as participants were not asked to identify their location or school district.

The pool of potential respondents received an email inviting them to complete an online survey investigating the use of self-determination strategies by their students. The email included a web link to the online survey using Qualtrics. The link started with an informed consent statement, followed by the survey questions. Potential participants also received a subsequent email 2 weeks following the original email. The survey was kept open for approximately 6 weeks. There were no incentives offered for participation.

Prior to any participant recruitment and survey distribution, researchers obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct the investigation and all procedures were followed as stated. Also, IRB approval was attained for the constituent participating universities. For participants to continue to the survey, they had to read the informed consent and select the option agreeing to participate in the study.

Survey Instrument

The researchers created a 29-item questionnaire for the purpose of this study that included 27 multiple choice questions, one Likert Scale (Note: A 5-point scale from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree* was used), and one open-ended item divided into two sections. Although the present study was not specifically designed to be a replication, several of the questions included in the sample were adapted from the validated survey used in Wehmeyer, Agran, et al. (2000). The first section asked respondents to provide demographic information concerning their gender, ethnicity, population, grade level of students served, years of experience, and the role in which they provided special education services to students with disabilities. The second section asked respondents about their students' involvement in IEP meetings, what input they provided, and, specifically, if they led these meetings. Next, respondents were asked which self-determination strategies were taught, what involvement may

students have had in their support plans, and the roles of self-determination in addressing

students' needs. The following items were included: (a) asking the respondents to identify if their

school used a tiered level of support program, (b) indicating the role of positive behavior

supports within that program, and (c) describing how this approach may have been used to

address challenging behaviors. Additionally, respondents were asked to identify the role self-

directed instruction played within those tiered models and how self-determination instruction

may have been used to address challenging behavior. Other items included the role of parental

input in requesting self-directed instruction within plans addressing challenging behavior and the

types of challenging behavior their students exhibited. The final item provided space for

respondents to submit any additional comments for the research team's consideration. The

questionnaire took approximately 15 min to complete.

A first draft of the survey was reviewed by three faculty members at the first author's

university who had extensive knowledge about self-determination; the colleagues were not

affiliated with any of the authors in joint research projects. The reviewers were asked to evaluate

the clarity of the questionnaire items and response options, logical order of items, number of

questions, and overall readability of the survey. Based on the feedback received, a subsequent

revision was made.

Data Analysis

Following 6 weeks of data collection, responses were downloaded from Qualtrics and

descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies, percentages) were calculated using a Statistical Package

for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS version 26, 2019) spreadsheet. For the purpose of our

analysis, respondents were sorted into two groups. The first group, also known as the "target"

group, included respondents who identified that they worked with students with intellectual and

developmental disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, multiple disabilities. The second group,

also known as the "other" group, included all additional respondents (e.g., educators who worked

with students with learning disabilities). Because respondents could choose multiple disability

categories, researchers were unable to separate respondents who selected intellectual disability,

autism spectrum disorder, or multiple disabilities due to overlap. Respondents serving students in

preschool and early elementary grades may have served students who are determined eligible for

special education services under the disability category of developmental delay.

One open ended item (i.e., "Are there any additional comments you would like to

share?") and anecdotal comments were coded using inductive coding analysis (Creswell, 2007)

for both groups combined. The third author read all anecdotal comments and responses to the

open-ended item, reviewed for common themes, and coded the data through content analysis

using QSR International's NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software. The second author

independently reviewed each coded response ($n = 16$) to determine if there were any

disagreements in application of the codes. The researchers then conferenced via Webex to

discuss and resolve any discrepancies. Inter-coder reliability was measured between the second

and third author using Krippendorff's alpha test (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

Results

One hundred and eighteen ($n = 118$) respondents participated in the study. Of those 118

participants, 81 participants were disaggregated into the *target* group (i.e., participants working

with students with intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and multiple disabilities)

while the 37 remaining participants were grouped as *other*. The following sections include

descriptive statistics (e.g., mean and percentages) to summarize data from both groups. Our

analyses are based on descriptive statistics (measures of central tendency, variability, and

frequency distribution), so claims of significant differences were not made (see Limitations).

Since some respondents did not respond to each item, the number of participants who responded

to each item is noted across all survey items (see Tables 2 and 3). Percentages are based on

number of respondents, respectively.

Participant Demographics

When looking at the two groups of respondents combined, 110 participants responded.

The respondents were predominately female (93.6%) and had more than 10 years of experience

working with students with disabilities (60%) as special education teachers (90%). In terms of

ethnic origin, 100 participants responded, and those respondents were predominately White

(70%). Across all 118 respondents, most participants served students at the elementary level

(42.7%), followed by middle school (20%), high school (23.6%), and then preschool (3.6%). A

small percentage (10%) indicated they served students in "other" settings, including the school

district's central office and at schools serving students across all levels (K-12). When asked to

describe the population of students they served, participants had the option to make multiple

selections. Based on the 172 responses, 14.5% of responders served students with severe

intellectual disability, 31.4% of responders served students with mental disability, and 20.3% of

responders served students with autism spectrum disorder (see Table 1).

Engagement in Self-Determination and Student Input

Developing Support Plans

Participants were asked, "Which of the following self-determination or student-directed

learning strategies are included in support plans?" Eighty-one participants (69%) responded that

self-determination served as a means for their students to communicate their wants and needs.

Within those, 74% were in the target group and 26% were in the other group. A total of 51

participants (43%) reported they taught students to obtain attention for a teacher or

paraprofessional after completing a task. Within these participants, 73% fell within the target

group and 27% were in the other group. In terms of teaching students to appropriately end an

activity, 44 participants (37%) indicated it was a strategy they included in student support plans.

Of those participants, 77% were in the target group and 23% were in the other group. Forty

participants (34%) responded that they taught students to count or monitor their own behaviors.

Of those respondents, 70% were in the target group and 30% were grouped as other. Forty-eight

(41%) of participants reported teaching students to verbally rehearse appropriate responses to a

problem situation. Participants implementing this strategy included 77% from the target group

and 23% from the other group. The strategy least utilized was teaching students to reinforce or

praise their own behavior with only 32 participants (27%) reporting implementation. Of those

participants, 78% of participants were in the target group and 22% were grouped as other.

Finally, 52 participants (44%) reported they taught students to identify reasons leading to their

challenging behavior and ways to stop engaging in that behavior. Of those participants, 69%

were from the target group and 31% from other. Table 2 provides a disaggregated breakdown for

each group.

Student Input

Participants were asked about the kind of input students provided in these support plans

and within their own IEP or BIP meetings. Forty-eight participants (41%) reported that students

described their challenging behavior and discussed why they thought they engaged in that

behavior. Of those participants, 71% were in the target group and 29% were in the other group.

Out of 118 total participants, 57 (48%) responded that students set their own behavioral goals

representing 74% of the target group and 26% of the other. Many participants—specifically, 65

(55%) --reported that students identified triggers for their challenging or problematic behavior.

Seventy-two percent of these participants were in the target group and 28% in the other group.

Forty-nine participants indicated that their students identified ways to control their problematic

behavior. Of those, 71% were in the target group and 29% in the other. Finally, 35 participants

(30%) said students determined ways to evaluate their performance as a part of their behavior

support plan. Of those participants, 80% were in the target group and 20% in the other. Table 3

provides disaggregated data for this survey item.

Comparison Across Disability Groups

There were relatively few respondents in the other group, nevertheless, the finding that

students in the target group received self-determination instruction two to three times greater

than the other group was of interest. Also of interest was the fact that only approximately 20% of

the other group reported that their students exhibit challenging behavior compared to the target

group in which approximately 75% of the respondents reported that their exhibited such

behaviors. Additionally, the findings also revealed that few respondents in the other group

received little or no instruction about self-determination, although respondents who served

students with emotional disorders or autism comprised approximately 40% of the sample,

students no doubt who could potentially benefit from such instruction.

Types of Challenging Behaviors

For the multiple selection set survey item, "What types of challenging behaviors do your

students exhibit," 110 out of the total 118 participants selected a response. This indicated that the

majority of the respondents indicated that their students displayed one or more of the challenging

behaviors from the list of options. A total of 95 participants (81%) said they worked with

students who exhibited physically aggressive behaviors. Significantly fewer participants in the

other group reported that students exhibited challenging behaviors, i.e., 74% in the target group

and 26% in the other group. Seventy participants identified as working with students who exhibit

verbally aggressive behaviors. Of those respondents, 77% of participants were in the target group

and 23% were in the other group. In terms of demonstrating self-injurious behavior, 40

participants (34%) selected this response with 80% of those participants in the target group and

20% in the other group. Most participants (81%) said that they worked with students who

engaged in disruptive behaviors. Within those 95 participants, 74% were in the target group and

26% were in the other group. Fifty-seven participants (42%) responded as working with students

who exhibit tantrums. Of those participants, 79% were in the target group and 21% were grouped

as other. A total of 50 (42%) participants identified serving students who engaged in property

destruction. Within that category, 82% of participants were in the target group and 18% were in

the other group. Finally, 49 participants (41%) worked with students who engage in self-

stimulation. Of those respondents, 80% of participants were grouped as target and 20% were

grouped as other. Table 4 provides a disaggregated breakdown for each group across types of

challenging behaviors.

Professional Development

Lastly, participants were asked to identify all the pathways in which they received

training and/or acquired knowledge with regards to implementing self-determination and

student-directed instruction and strategies. Similar to the previous findings, this survey item also

was a multiple selection set. Out of 118 total participants, 28 (24%) reported participating in an

in-service training or workshop. Of those participants, 71% were in the target group and 29%

were in the other group. Twenty-three participants (20%) reported that relevant instructional

materials had been shared with them by a colleague. Within those respondents, 78% were in the

target group and 22% were other. Only 30 participants (25%) reported learning about self-

determination in their college or teacher preparation programs. Eighty-three percent of those

participants where in the target group with 17% in the other group. Finally, 29 participants (25%)

indicated they received instruction through information sharing and discussions with colleagues.

Of those participants, 72% were in the target group and 28% were in the other group. Table 5

includes disaggregated data for this survey item.

Qualitative Analysis

There were 16 open-ended comments from respondents within the survey specifically

relating to whether students participated and/or led their own IEP or BIP planning meetings.

These data were read, open coded (Saldaña, 2016), and collapsed into four themes: (a)

nonparticipation, (b) necessary support, (c) unfortunate enthusiasm, and (d) encouragement.

Nonparticipation refers to responders' comments about the students not participating in their IEP

or BIP meetings. The necessary support refers to responders' comments about the need for more

support from administrators and colleagues regarding student participation in IEP or BIP

planning meetings. The third code, unfortunate enthusiasm, refers to respondent comments

regarding their interest or want for greater student involvement within their IEP or BIP meetings

while also acknowledging students are not currently involved. The final code, encouragement,

refers to respondent comments regarding the current level of support respondents felt from their

administrators and colleagues. The Krippendorff's alpha test results to determine inter-code

reliability on reduction of codes to ordinary themes was high ($\alpha = 0.916$), indicating the second

and third author agreed (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Themes and the types of comments

respondents provided are displayed in Figure 1.

When looking at grade level groups, 43% of the respondents who shared comments and taught at the elementary school level discussed "nonparticipation" to describe the extent to which students displayed self-determination. This most shared theme included two types of respondent comments: either respondents cited the students' young age or the perceived limitations of the student's disability (e.g., multiple disabilities) as reasons for them not to participate in nor lead their own IEP meetings.

Even though 60% of respondents indicated they had been teaching for 10 years or more, for comments grouped within the "necessary supports" theme, the primary rationale for decreased student participation centered on the lack of teachers' knowledge and experience to facilitate student participation in IEP or BIP meetings. Specifically, respondents mentioned a lack of training or knowledge specific to behavior management and the IEP or BIP process overall.

The third theme, "unfortunate enthusiasm," was somewhat contradictory in that it included a number of elementary teachers highlighted the importance of student participation in their own IEP or BIP meetings and that such participation was important for student accountability of their own behavior, yet they noted that few students currently participated in these meetings. These statements were often provided by secondary educators in middle and high school grades who also voiced the importance of accountability.

Finally, lack of "encouragement" was the least shared theme among respondents, which indicated that students did participate, at some level, in their own IEP meetings. Those comments included descriptions of having high levels of team support and were provided predominately at the high school level. Additionally, these comments were only provided by professionals who

indicated they had 10 or more years of experience working with students with challenging

behavior.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to obtain current preliminary data on the use of self-

determination strategies by a sample of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities

across grades, and to assess how prepared teachers were in delivering self-determination

instruction. Further, the study sought to understand the reasons why students may not have

received self-determination instruction. To that end, a survey was disseminated to a sample of

knowledgeable teachers and other stakeholders about the nature of support plans for students, the

role students played in the development of those support plans, the role students assumed in IEP

meetings, and the self-determination skills they employed in those meetings.

In general, the 118 respondents were predominately White female special education

teachers who worked at the elementary level with more than 10 years of experience. The intent

of the present study was not to provide an exhaustive and comprehensive state of the science

report on self-determination, so we make no claim that the data reported herein provide a report

card on national patterns or trends. Instead, our intent was to provide a "snapshot" on the current

use of self-determination by a sample of students with intellectual and developmental

disabilities. Previous studies that addressed the use of self-determination by students with

intellectual and developmental disabilities were conducted 20 years ago (Agran et al., 1999;

Wehmeyer, Palmer, et al., 2000). There is of course no standard by which to assess if students in

given school districts are receiving systematic instruction relating to self-determination. That

said, self-determination is considered a best practice and we as educators must endeavor to

provide such instruction to the greatest extent possible. What the results in the present study do

suggest is that the majority of the respondents in the sample did not report that they taught their

students how to be more self-determined and that practices such as participating in IEP meetings

or having students provide input to their behavior support plans are generally not being provided.

These findings were in a way no different than those reported by Wehmeyer, Agran, et al. (2000;

i.e., majority of students were not receiving self-determination instruction, teachers did not feel

qualified to provide such instruction). We cannot conclude that little progress has been made in

terms of advancing self-determination instruction as we have two different samples at two

different points of time. Nevertheless, this finding may suggest that students are continuing not

to receive formal and systematic instruction, despite the notoriety self-determination has received

in the last 2 decades, and that such instruction needs to be supported and encouraged as they can

provide students with rich opportunities to practice self-determination skills.

Of those students who were taught to be more self-determined, students described their

challenging behavior and discussed why they thought they engaged in that behavior. Such

challenging behaviors like physically aggression, property destruction, and self-stimulation (see

Table 4) were identified. Also, they were taught to set their own behavioral goals, identify ways

to control their problematic behavior, and determine ways to evaluate their performance as a part

of their behavior support plan. Interestingly, a noteworthy finding was that the majority of

respondents indicated that their students were encouraged to provide input on their problem

behaviors and what triggered them. This finding was similar to what Wehmeyer et al. (2004)

reported. Wehmeyer et al. taught 10 students with intellectual and developmental disabilities,

behavior disorders or autism spectrum disorder to be actively involved in their own functional

assessments. Student input was compared to staff observations. There was a high level of

agreement in identifying the problem behaviors and the antecedents that appear to trigger them.

Although such a comparison was not conducted in the present study, it is encouraging that the respondents reported that a number of the students appeared to be aware of the antecedents that triggered their behaviors. The findings in the present study did not reveal the specific strategies students used and how these strategies were monitored but did suggest that students, at least in part, were engaged in problem solving (identifying the antecedents that triggered their behaviors) and self-evaluation (acknowledge that they did engage in problem behavior), two important self-determination skills.

Self-determination can be manifested in various ways, from setting goals to monitoring progress in achieving these goals to consequating performance. There is no magic number of how many self-determination strategies a student needs to perform to be considered self-determined or which strategies were most important. The strategies included in the survey were selected to provide a general assessment of strategies that could be used to promote self-determination across grades. What we believe is of interest (if not concerning) was the fact that relatively few teachers taught any of these skills.

Additionally, we were interested in students' contribution to their IEP meetings and found that teachers who worked at the K-5 grade levels were more likely to report that their students were not attending IEP meetings and discussing their behaviors compared to those working with students in high school. This finding is not surprising in that self-determination instruction and, specifically, instruction on how to lead their own IEP meetings has generally involved older students (Palmer, 2010). Although self-determination is a developmental process through childhood, most self-determination research has focused on secondary-level students or adults (Palmer, 2010); thus, as previously indicated, little is known about self-determination for elementary-level students (Shogren et al., 2022; Stang et al., 2009). We suggest that this

represents a limitation in the self-determination research, especially in light of the fact that

children can display self-determination at a young age (Martin et al., 2000) and have even been

taught to lead their own IEP meetings. Not surprisingly, the findings of the present study support

this observation by suggesting that students at the elementary level participated less at IEP

meetings than secondary-level students, and they were generally not asked to provide input on

their problem behaviors. To that point, older students have had years more experience with their

problem behaviors and dealing with them than younger students.

Also, teaching students to regulate their own behavior continues to be a major concern of

special educators, so further examination of ways to promote the self-determination of younger

students is warranted (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Shogren et al., 2022). As has been reported,

teachers working at the high school level were more likely to report students being encouraged to

provide input when conducting an FBA compared to those working at an elementary school.

Although we did not conduct a statistical analysis to determine if there was a robust

difference between the exhibition of self-determined behaviors by the targeted group (severe

intellectual disability) when compared to the other group, a difference was observed between the

two groups. There were relatively few respondents in the other group so caution in terms of

arriving at conclusions need to be at best tentative. Without knowing why, the respondents chose

to provide their students with self-determination instruction, we can only speculate that they may

have felt that students in the target group are in greater need to learn these skills or can benefit

more from such instruction. This belief may be due to the fact that students in the target group

exhibited more challenging behavior than that of the other group, but this remains unknown. This

issue warrants further research.

Approximately 50% (range: 34-56%) of the respondents reported that their students were taught to use varied strategies. It is encouraging that a number of students were being taught to be more self-determined, nevertheless, many, conversely, were not. This in part may be due to the fact that only one-third of the teachers in the sample received formal training about self-determination. It has been well acknowledged that the majority of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are not taught to be more self-determined because their teachers do not know how to teach it (Wehmeyer, Agran, et al., 2000). Along these lines the present study suggests that this may be the case as many of the respondents admitted they do not know how to teach students to be more self-determined. We did not ask the respondents how in depth the training was that they may have received and if they learned how to systematically teach students to use self-determination skills, so we cannot comment about whether students were specifically taught to use these skills. Informing teachers on how to teach their students to be more self-determined—in particular, as it pertains to behavior intervention and support--continues to be a critical need. Personnel preparation efforts need to be increased in disseminating the importance of PBS and self-determination in college-level instruction and in-service training sessions. Additionally, there is a need for mechanisms to be in place in school environments to reward teachers for getting students involved in being causal agents in their own lives (e.g., attend IEP/BIP meeting, lead meeting) at the elementary school level.

Last, a qualitative analysis aimed at assessing the degree to which students participated and/or led their own IEP or BIP meetings uncovered four themes: (a) nonparticipation, (b) lack of necessary support, (c) unfortunate enthusiasm, and (d) lack of encouragement. All of these served as deterrents that may have served to discourage teachers from providing self-determination instruction. The fact that few students participated in their IEP meetings is not

surprising given that few students are actively taught to have a meaningful role in such meetings (Martin et al., 2006). That said, the belief by a number of the respondents that the nature and/or severity of the student's disabling condition or their age precludes the students' active participation is disheartening even though research suggests that students can at least in part engage in such participation.

Limitations

As previously noted, there is limited research that has addressed the relationship between self-determination and the extent to which students are taught to and practice these skills, particularly for students at the elementary grade level. Although the aim of the present study was to examine this relationship, there were a number of limitations. First, although the aim of the study was to obtain input from teachers across grades, the majority of respondents taught at the elementary level and thus their input was specific to that grade level and not necessarily applicable to older students. Nevertheless, the input provided by respondents from other grades was helpful in at least providing a broader picture of educators' perceptions about self-determination. Further, it is well known that secondary-level students have been provided more instruction in self-determination than elementary-level students (Shogren et al., 2022). The present study confirmed this fact but did not discuss in depth the reason for this discrepancy. That said, future research on how to provide self-determination instruction to younger students is encouraged.

Second, the data obtained were all based on self-report and did not include input from students. Since this paper is characterized as being a "snapshot" of how self-determination as understood by teachers is manifested among students in the sample, actually asking the students would have provided the best "inside view." Further, no IEP, student records, or observational

data were collected to support the information provided nor was a statistical analysis conducted. Thus, we were not able to determine the significance of our survey findings, nor can we claim any generalizability beyond the sample investigated. For example, such an analysis may have revealed significant relations across demographic variables, strategies taught, nature of student involvement, and problem behaviors addressed. Future research is needed to identify such possible relationships.

Third, future research is needed to assess the correspondence between what teachers reported about their students' display of self-determined behaviors and what their students actually do; specifically, how and to what extent are their students apply these skills across classes. Although the survey was relatively brief (29 questions), the study addressed three separate but related instructional areas; that is, teaching students to become more self-determined, teaching students to be involved in developing their support plans, and teaching students to become more self-determined and potentially lead their own IEP meetings. Our aim was to assess which and to what extent the students were provided opportunities to learn and practice self-determination skills. Admittedly, the survey could have included more questions about self-determination strategies. Further research is clearly warranted and should include not only teacher voices (both special and general educators), but also voices of their students.

Given the school districts in which the survey was distributed, we presumed that respondents would come from both urban and rural areas and as such might be teaching students who have been labelled with different categorical labels owing to the policy of their respective district or state. Consequently, we designated five different populations to classify the students who were targeted; however, there were two obvious problems with such categorization. First, we assumed that the respondents selected a category based on the student's IEP and not their

own opinion of what they thought was the appropriate classification. Second, since the

respondents were allowed to check all disabilities that applied, we do not know which disability

was the primary one. In hindsight we should have requested that only one disability be selected.

Last, the sample size was admittedly small, and we do not suggest it was representative.

Also, because the survey was disseminated across several states, we do not have details

regarding the location of respondents, nor did we attempt to recruit respondents equally across

grade level or population of disability served. Further, since the survey was accessible via an

online survey link, we do not know the relative size of the potential pool of respondents or the

response completion rate. Nevertheless, the fact that the data were disaggregated based on

gender, ethnicity, professional role, and grade level provide insight on responses relative to

demographics, given the sample reported.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Directions for Future Research

Based on the importance of self-determination, considered to be one of the components

of a quality education program and best practice for students with intellectual and developmental

disabilities, there is an increasing need for school systems to prioritize it as an instructional goal

and develop policy for its sustained implementation in school settings. For example, Shogren et

al. (2015) commented that with the emphasis on inclusive practices, the mandate to promote

access to the general curriculum, and the use of multi-tiered schoolwide systems, there is a

critical need to come up with plans to teach all students self-determination skills. Additionally, it

is incumbent on school districts to actively promote self-determination for all students with

support needs as an instructional goal.

Unlike other studies that have examined self-determination, the present study requested

input from teachers across all grades and provided a comparison of students' self-determined

behavior. In all, the present study confirmed that teachers across grades continue to be reluctant to or uninformed about ways to teach students with intellectual and developmental disabilities how to be more self-determined. The irony, as Palmer (2010) noted, is that students across different ages, knowingly or unknowingly, perform several self-determination skills and need to be encouraged to perform them more often (e.g., become more aware of their actions, enhance their self-efficacy). Also, as noted previously, although there is evidence that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities can be taught to have an active role via self-determination in contributing to their behavior support programs and participating in their IEP meetings, the extent to which this is done as reported in the research remains limited.

Stang et al. (2009) suggested that although teachers may value self-determination, there is limited research on the extent to which self-determination skills are being taught and monitored. This need is particularly important for elementary-age students to learn to manage their problem behavior while they are young so that this skill develops more fully with time and age. Although research has been reported on teaching students with disabilities how to become more involved in participating in their IEPs (Martin et al., 2006), we are still in need of systematic procedures to teach all students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to have a greater role in developing and providing input at their IEP meetings. Although IEPs are always child-specific, learning what roles and contributions students can make relative to grade levels would be of value. Similarly, it would be of value to better understand ways in which students can contribute more to their behavior support plans; specifically, which strategies under which conditions can be effective in teaching students how to have greater control of their responding.

It would be unrealistic to presume that young children can lead IEP meetings or develop behavior intervention plans. As Danneker and Bottge (2009) noted, we do not yet know the

boundaries in which and how we can more fully involve students in their IEP meetings. That said, determining approximately when they can begin to assume such responsibility would be of value regarding initiating and providing self-determination instruction.

The findings of the present study revealed that less than half of the educators in the sample taught their student to be more self-determined nor did the educators report than their students had active roles regarding IEP development or behavior support planning. To that point, Mason et al. (2004) suggested that to study the longitudinal effects of self-determination, instruction should begin at the elementary level so that the use of self-determination can increase in developmental increments. Further, not only do teachers need to learn how to teach self-determination but they need to learn how they can present opportunities to students on an ongoing basis to practice these skills.

The sample in this study was admittedly limited, nevertheless, this snapshot does suggest that self-determination is not being prioritized as an instructional goal, given the many benefits it can yield (see Agran & Hughes, 2014). In addition to providing teachers more training on how to promote the self-determination of their students, it is most important that teachers need to better understand that students already have a number of self-determination strategies in their repertoires and can potentially contribute much to an IEP meeting (Danneker & Bottge, 2009).

Conclusion

As noted in the paper, this study is a snapshot that provides a "bird's eye" view of current practice regarding whether students in our sample were being taught to become more self-determined and to have a participatory in developing their IEP or BIP meetings. Compared to older students, students at the elementary level participated less in attending IEP meetings or discussing their challenging behaviors and received little to no instruction in self-determination.

For those who did receive some instruction self-monitoring, self-instruction, and self-evaluation were a few of the strategies taught that allowed students to manage and regulate their behavior. Although self-determination has received much attention across the course of the last 2 decades, practical implementation of these strategies to improve the overall quality of life for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities is still struggling to find its place in school environments and school systems need to develop policy that increases the likelihood of self-determination strategies being implemented in their schools.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics Table for all Respondents

Demographics	Total Participants Who Selected a Response	%
Gender		
Male	7	6.4
Female	103	93.6
Grade Level Taught		
Preschool	4	3.6
Elementary	47	42.7
Middle school	22	20.0
High school	26	23.6
Other	11	10.0
Ethnic Origin		
White or Caucasian	70	70.0
Black or African American	16	16.0
Hispanic or Latino	2	2.0
I chose not to respond	12	12.0
Role/Responsibility		
Special education teacher	93	93.0
Behavior Specialist	2	1.8
Other	5	4.5
Years of Teaching Experience		
Less than 1 year	22	20.0
1-2 years	8	7.3
3-5 years	10	9.1
More than 5 years	16	14.5
More than 10 years	54	49.1
Population Mostly Served		
Severe intellectual disability	21	17.8
Emotional disorder	16	13.6

Multiple disabilities	45	38.1
Autism spectrum disorder	32	27.1
Other	42	35.6

Note. Percentages are based on the total number of responses. For some survey items, participants could select all that apply.

Table 2

Self-Determination Strategies Taught

Response Options	Total participants Who Selected a Response		Target		Other	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Teach student a reliable way to communicate a need or concern	81	69%	60	74%	21	26%
Teach student to obtain attention from a teacher or paraprofessional after a task is satisfactorily achieved	51	43%	37	73%	14	27%
Teach student to appropriately end an activity	44	37%	34	77%	10	23%
Teach student to count or monitor a target behavior	40	34%	28	70%	12	30%
Teach student to verbally rehearse an appropriate response to a problem situation	48	41%	37	77%	11	23%
Teach student to reinforce or praise his or her behavior	32	27%	25	78%	7	22%
Teach student to suggest why they are behaving inappropriately and how they can stop behaving that way	52	44%	36	69%	16	31%

Note. Percentages are based on the total number of responses. Participants could select all that apply.

Table 3

Student Input for Student Support Plans

Response Options	Total participants Who Selected a Response		Target		Other	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Describe the target behavior (problem behavior) and discuss why they think they display it	48	41%	34	71%	14	29%
Set behavioral goals	57	48%	42	74%	15	26%
Identify what they believe triggers he problem behavior	65	55%	47	72%	18	28%
Identify what they (students) do to control the problem behavior	49	42%	35	71%	14	29%
Determine a way to evaluate their performance	35	30%	28	80%	7	20%

Note. Percentages are based on the total number of responses. Participants could select all that apply.

Table 4

Topography of Challenging Behavior Exhibited by Students

Response Options	Total Participants Who Selected a Response		Target		Other	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Physically aggressive	64	54%	50	78%	14	22%
Verbally aggressive behavior	70	59%	54	77%	16	23%
Self-injurious behavior	40	34%	32	80%	8	20%
Disruptive behavior	95	81%	70	74%	25	26%
Tantrums	57	42%	45	79%	12	21%
Property destruction	50	42%	41	82%	9	18%
Self-stimulation	49	41%	39	80%	10	20%

Note. Percentages are based on the total number of responses. Participants could select all that apply.

Table 5

Methods for Providing Self-Determination Instruction

Response Options	Total participants that selected a response		Target		Other	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
In-service/workshop was provided	28	24%	20	71%	8	29%
Relevant instructional materials have been shared	23	20%	18	78%	5	22%
I learned about self-determination in college	30	25%	25	83%	5	17%
Information sharing/discussion with colleagues	29	25%	21	72%	8	28%

Note. Percentages are based on the total number of responses. Participants could select all that apply.

Figure 1

Factors Limiting Self-Determination Instruction