

## **Preparing youth to exercise self-determination: quality indicators of school environments that promote the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and beliefs related to self-determination**

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If youth with disabilities are to be adequately prepared w maximize opportunities for self-determination in adulthood, they need to be equipped with the knowledge, beliefs, and skills that lead to self-determination in their educational programs. This article identifies quality indicators of educational programs that promote self-determination. The quality indicators are holistic in nature and address the self-determination of all members of the school community. Guidelines for using the quality indicators for program improvement are provided.

During the past decade, self-determination has emerged as an important concept in educational programs and service delivery for persons with disabilities. Several definitions of self-determination have been offered in the literature. Although these definitions vary in perspective and purpose, they are essentially consistent and complementary (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998). For the purposes of this article, the definition offered by Field and Hoffman (1994) will be used. Field and Hoffman define self-determination as "the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself" (p. 164). The model upon which their definition is based asserts that self-determination is affected by both environmental factors and individuals' knowledge, skills, and beliefs related to self-determination. The individual knowledge, skills, and beliefs that lead to self-determination are delineated according to five components: know yourself, value yourself, plan, act and experience outcomes, and learn. (For further information about the self-determination model, see Field & Hoffman, 1994.)

Between 1990 and 1996, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) implemented a major initiative to identify and develop practices and programs that would support self-determination for youth with disabilities (Ward & Kohler, 1996). Subsequent to this OSERS research and development initiative, language was added to the amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that mandated an emphasis on self-determination practices when transition services for youth with disabilities in K through 12 educational settings are developed. IDEA requires that students' preferences and interests be taken into account when planning for transition services. It also stipulates that students must be invited to participate in their individualized education programs (IEPs) when transition services are discussed.

An emphasis on self-determination is also evident in legislation and services affecting

adults with disabilities. The amendments to the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992 (P.L. 102-569) state that

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to live independently, enjoy self-determination, make choices, contribute to society, pursue meaningful careers, and enjoy full inclusion and integration in the economic, political, social, cultural, and educational mainstream of American society.

Furthermore, the Rehabilitation Act Amendments require that adults with disabilities be involved in the development of their individualized written rehabilitation plans. The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998, Title IV of P.L. 105-220 strengthened the concept of empowerment for persons with disabilities and emphasized the need for informed choice (Sitlington, Clark, & Kolstoe, 2000). In addition to the rehabilitation legislation, there have been many initiatives within the adult service sector focused on promoting self-determination for persons with disabilities (Pennell, 2001). For example, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation implemented a \$5 million program to help states change their service delivery systems to promote self-determination. The U.S. Administration on Developmental Disabilities also funded several initiatives aimed at promoting self-determination and self-advocacy for persons with disabilities.

If persons with disabilities are going to have meaningful opportunities to exercise self-determination, it is imperative that schools provide students with the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, and beliefs that will help them capitalize on and create opportunities to be self-determined. In order to promote self-determination competencies for students, schools need to create an environment that both explicitly and implicitly teaches the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that lead to increased self-determination. This includes direct instruction of self-determination related competencies. It also includes promoting self-determination throughout the school environment by providing role models of self-determined behavior and opportunities to exercise and learn from the application of self-determination principles in the school setting.

To provide guidelines for educational programs for the development of a comprehensive schoolwide emphasis on promoting self-determination, quality indicators of self-determination in schools were developed. These indicators were developed through a systematic effort that included the following steps:

1. Literature review. A thorough review of the literature related to self-determination in schools and service delivery for persons with disabilities was conducted. In addition, literature related to teaching and learning strategies was conducted to inform how the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and beliefs could best be taught within educational settings.
2. Interviews. Interviews were conducted with students with and without disabilities (Field,

Hoffman, Sawilowsky, & St. Peter, 1996b), adults with and without disabilities in a variety of occupations (Field, Hoffman, Sawilowsky, & St. Peter, 1996a), and teachers and administrators in K through 12 public education programs (Field, Hoffman, & Fullerton, 2001) to determine the factors that promote and/or inhibit the development and expression of self-determination.

3. Development of draft indicators and expert review. A set of draft quality indicators for self-determination was developed based on information obtained from the literature review and interviews. This information was submitted to a national panel of experts for their review and input. The national panel included persons with disabilities, family members of persons with disabilities, researchers, and educators. The indicators were also presented to special and general education teachers concerned with transition programming within the state of Michigan. Reactions to the draft indicators were also obtained from this group of practitioners.

4. Preparation of final indicators. The draft indicators were revised based on the input from the national panel and the special and general education teachers.

## Quality Indicators

The quality indicators for promoting self-determination in educational settings developed through this process are provided later along with examples of practices connected to the indicators. It is important to note that the practices appropriate for addressing each indicator will vary among different school environments. The sample practices are provided for example only and should not be considered necessary for all schools or as a comprehensive list of practices.

An emphasis on promoting self-determination for all members of the school community (students, parents, faculty, administrators, and staff) is evident throughout the list of indicators. This emphasis on self-determination for all members of the school community promotes students' learning about self-determination through role modeling provided by others within the environment and by creating a collegial community for learning. According to Bandura (1986), modeling is one of the most effective instructional strategies. The models provided within students' environments, positive or negative, greatly affect students' development of self-determination skills. Therefore, it is important to promote self-determination for all members of the school community to ensure that students' role models demonstrate positive learning experiences about self-determination.

Quality Indicator 1: Knowledge, skills, and attitudes for self-determination are addressed in the curriculum, in family support programs, and in staff development.

Sample indicators:

- A framework is used to guide systematic infusion of self-determination

components in the curriculum (e.g., Field & Hoffman, 1994; Ward & Kohler, 2001; Wehmeyer, 1996).

- A formal curriculum is used with students to specifically teach knowledge, skills, and beliefs for self-determination.
- Faculty and staff are provided with in-service opportunities to develop self-determination related skills, such as self-assessment of professional strengths and weaknesses, goal setting, and time management.
- Parent-to-parent support groups focused on parent advocacy are available for families.

It is important that self-determination skills be explicitly taught within instructional programs just as direct instruction is provided for academic skills such as math, reading, and writing (Field et al., 1998). Several curricular materials to meet this purpose were developed through the OSERS initiative previously mentioned. The Web page for the Self-Determination Synthesis Project at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte ([www.uncc.edu/sdsp](http://www.uncc.edu/sdsp)) contains a comprehensive listing of these materials. In addition, many teachers have designed their own instructional programs for self-determination skill development using guidelines provided in the self-determination literature (e.g., Field & Hoffman, 1994; Mithaug, Campeau, & Wolman, 1992; Wehmeyer, 1996).

Quality Indicator 2: Students, parents, and staff are involved participants in individualized educational decision making and planning.

Sample indicators:

- Students and parents are invited to attend IEP meetings and are encouraged to actively participate in those meetings.
- Students are provided with instruction to help them prepare for active participation in the IEP process.

As previously stated, the transition planning components of IDEA emphasize the importance of student self-determination in the IEP process when transition services are discussed. It is clearly the intent of IDEA to place the student at the center of the educational planning process. The legislation also affirms the importance of the team process to the development of IEPs. Therefore, it is critical to promote the meaningful and appropriate involvement of all members of the educational planning team if student self-determination is to be encouraged.

The IDEA requirements are supported by research on effective instruction. An emphasis on promoting meaningful involvement in educational planning by students, parents, and educators in a manner that is student-centered is likely to lead to positive educational outcomes as well as compliance with legislative mandates. Abundant research indicates that students who are involved in the development of educational goals are more successful in achieving those goals (e.g., Kohn, 1993; Perlmutter & Monty, 1977; Realon, Favell, & Lowerre, 1990; Schunk, as cited in Wehmeyer, 1992; Wang & Stiles, 1976). In

addition, family systems research indicates that family support of students' goals will help students attain those goals.

Quality Indicator 3: Students, families, faculty, and staff are provided with opportunities for choice.

Sample indicators:

- Students participate in their course selection.
- Students can choose from several options of how to complete class assignments.
- Families are provided with options for conference times.
- Families have meaningful input in the educational decision-making process.
- Faculty and staff are encouraged to express preferences and negotiate regarding teaching assignments and other duties.
- Faculty participate in making decisions related to curriculum standards and selection of curriculum materials.

Members of the school community need opportunities to practice their self-determination knowledge, beliefs, and skills in order (a) for those competencies to be seen as meaningful and (b) to retain and refine competencies after initial acquisition. Experiential learning in real settings is highly important to effective learning (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, it is important to model and practice self-determination throughout the school environment to enhance development of students' knowledge, beliefs, and skills related to self-determination. This can only be done if opportunities for choice are provided.

Quality Indicator 4: Students, families, faculty, and staff are encouraged to take appropriate risks.

Sample indicators:

- Students are provided with an opportunity to explore coursework and career opportunities that are new to them.
- Families are encouraged to suggest and experiment with new strategies at home to support the accomplishment of educational objectives.
- Faculty and staff are encouraged and supported, through the staff development and the supervision/evaluation process, to try new teaching strategies.

Fundamental to expressing and practicing self-determination in real settings is encouragement for appropriate risk taking (Field & Hoffman, 1994). Initiating action to achieve one's goals involves varying degrees of risk. Therefore, the concept of dignity of risk is important to promoting self-determination. Self-advocacy and self-determination both grew out of Nirje's (1976) normalization principle and the resulting focus on dignity of risk. Self-advocacy and self-determination in Nirje's conceptual framework provided people with severe disabilities choice and control (at least partially) within the norms and patterns of the mainstream. Individuals within the school community need to be

encouraged to take calculated risks. They need to celebrate and/or learn of the results from their actions. Instruction should be provided on how potential risks of intended actions can be minimized by strategies such as considering potential consequences to actions before acting and breaking large goals into small, doable steps with minimal risk (e.g., baby steps). Furthermore, safety nets need to be established so that individuals have the opportunity to recover from actions they later deem mistakes. As stated by Wehmeyer (1996), "Failure is only a learning experience if it is followed by success."

#### Quality Indicator 5: Supportive relationships are encouraged.

Sample indicators:

- Peer support programs, such as peer tutoring, peer mentoring, and peer counseling, are provided.
- Students have the opportunity to participate in team projects.
- Families are invited to participate in informal school activities through which positive relationships are formed.
- Team teaching is supported.
- Mentoring is provided for new teachers.

Several qualitative studies conducted with adults with and without disabilities in a wide variety of occupations and with students, both with and without disabilities, have found that developing supportive relationships with others is important to developing self-determination skills (Field, Hoffman, & Fullerton, 2001; Field, Hoffman, Sawilowksy, & St. Peter, 1996a, 1996b). For example, when secondary-age students were asked, "What is the greatest support to self-determination?" the most frequent response was "other people" and often the other person who was mentioned was a family member (Field, Hoffman, Sawilowsky, & St. Peter, 1996a). Conversely, when the same students were asked about the greatest barrier to self-determination, again the most frequent response was "other people," and often specific family members were identified.

Interviews conducted by Sarver (2000) found that adults with learning disabilities in postsecondary education settings placed a high value on the importance of relationships to supporting their self-determination. The importance of relationships was also underscored in the research of Ryan and Deci (2000). Ryan and Deci asserted that a sense of relatedness provides a secure foundation from which one can reach out to be self-determined.

The type of climate that exists within an educational institution has a strong impact on the types of relationships that are fostered and nurtured within that setting. Institutions that develop a culture in which positive relationships and communication patterns are promoted are taking an important step toward fostering self-determination.

#### Quality Indicator 6: Accommodations and supports for individual needs are provided.

Sample indicators:

- Accommodations necessary for students, family members, and staff members with disabilities (e.g., interpreters, modified texts, architectural features) are provided.
- Universal design principles are used in instructional and architectural design.

Effective supports are essential to maximizing one's ability to be self-determined. If proper accommodations and supports are not provided, individuals are handicapped by their environments in their ability to reach their goals. For example, if a person uses a wheelchair for mobility and the restaurant in which he or she desires to eat is on the second floor of an inaccessible building, she or he will be blocked from reaching his or her goal of eating at the restaurant. Reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities and the use of universal design principles create an environment that increases the opportunities for individuals to assert their self-determination.

Quality Indicator 7: Students, families, and staff have the opportunity to express themselves and be understood.

Sample indicators:

- All students are encouraged to participate in student government activities.
- Opportunities are provided for dialogue among students and staff during the school day.
- The expression of divergent opinions by students, families, and staff is encouraged by administrators.

A basic tenant of psychotherapy and counseling practice is that being listened to and understood is a highly empowering experience (Field & Hoffman, 1996). Placing an emphasis on listening in educational environments can create an environment in which students feel stronger, more respected, and more valued. It can also help students and other school community members develop valuable communication skills as they learn to listen to others acutely.

Quality Indicator 8: Consequences for actions are predictable.

Sample indicators:

- Clearly delineated behavior management plans are available for each classroom.
- The schoolwide code of conduct for students is explicitly stated.
- The managerial and decision-making structure of the school is clearly understood by students, families, faculty, and staff.
- Students can state their goals for educational programs.

An immediate reaction to the concept of self-determination in school settings is often a concern that a self-determination focus will interfere with good classroom management strategies, resulting in chaos. To the contrary, good classroom management practices that allow students to predict the likely consequences for their actions increase the degree of control students experience in the class as well as the opportunity for self-determination. In an orderly classroom, students can make informed choices about their actions and engage in those actions that will bring about the consequences they desire.

**Quality Indicator 9: Self-determination is modeled throughout the school environment.**

Sample indicators:

- The principal assumes leadership responsibility for conditions in the school.
- Teachers assume leadership responsibility for conditions in their classrooms.
- All school community members (e.g., students, parents, faculty, staff) are actively involved in the school improvement process.

The importance of modeling self-determination was previously discussed in this article. As far as school policies and activities are considered, it is important that those responsible for governing the school consider the implications of those policies and activities in terms of how they will support or interfere with providing opportunities for and modeling self-determination in the school setting.

## **Using the Quality Indicators for Program Improvement**

The quality indicators can be used by teams to assess their current self-determination implementation efforts. It is recommended that teams practice the steps of self-determination as they use the indicators to assess their current progress toward supporting student self-determination.

The first steps in this process according to the model of self-determination by Field and Hoffman (1994) are know yourself and value yourself. In the context of the program development process, knowing yourself involves assessing current strengths and weaknesses of the program related to self-determination. Valuing yourself focuses on believing in the importance of the school community members, the program, and the concept of self-determination enough to initiate and sustain the development of a new program emphasizing self-determination. To inventory present level of a school or program's performance relative to the self-determination quality indicators, team members should identify the ways they are and are not meeting the standard for each quality indicator. It may also be helpful for teams to rate the degree to which an indicator is being implemented on a scale of 1 to 10. If a numerical rating is used, it is a good idea for team members to assign ratings to each indicator individually first and then come together as a team to discuss their ratings and arrive at a team consensus rating. Alternatively, teams may choose to rate each item through group discussion.



After teams have developed greater self-awareness and belief in the importance of their role in supporting student self-determination, they need to plan, the next component of the self-determination model. Teams need to set goals and plan actions to meet those goals. The information from the self-determination self-assessment can be used to set goals for improving the opportunities provided by the program to help students develop the knowledge, beliefs, and skills they will need to become more self-determined. These goals may be at the personal, classroom, school, and district levels.

The next step in the self-determined program improvement process is to act. Considering the many conflicting demands experienced in the school community (e.g., high stakes testing, divergent community input, college entrance expectations, employer expectations), there is a tendency to become reactive rather than proactive. To develop a program that is focused on preparing students to be self-determined, it is essential to develop a proactive stance and to act on the goals developed. Developing and meeting regularly with a supportive team that holds members accountable for working toward their goals can help ensure that goals and plans are turned into action.

The final step in the self-determination process before the cycle begins again is experience outcomes and learn. At a specified point in time, teams need to assess their progress and celebrate their accomplishments. They also need to determine new goals for their program based on the experience and new knowledge they have developed. Program self-assessment should be conducted on at least an annual basis after the initial inventory to provide the opportunity for ongoing and continuous self-improvement. As a program grows and changes and staff changes occur, it is important to take new readings of current progress to ensure continuous program maintenance and growth.

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