

Self-Determination Among Learners with Developmental Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

The study describes the presence of opportunities for learners with developmental disabilities that pertain to the different components of self-determination, and the trends supporting the increase in opportunities of these learners. It also explored the views that parents hold about the importance of independence in the seven areas of life (personal care, community involvement, recreational and leisure activities, independent living, supported employment, marriage and family, and managing finances). The results of the study revealed that a positive relationship exists between parents' and teachers' perception of learners' level of ability and the opportunities that are provided for these learners to practice skills that lead to self-determination. Parents who have a positive and optimistic view of their children's capacity to be independent tend to encourage engagement in learning through opportunities to practice skills on a daily basis. It is thus recommended that learners with developmental disabilities be given more opportunities to engage in life experiences that foster the development of self-determination. Teachers are also encouraged to provide opportunities that will challenge their students optimally and help develop essential skills. Finally, parents should also complement the school initiatives by increasing the emphasis on the development of self-determination skills in the home.

Key words: self-determination, developmental disabilities

Prior to any strategy that encouraged a more positive perception of people with disabilities, these individuals were dehumanized and treated as if they were incapable and were not useful citizens to society (Ward, 1996). The emergence of self-advocacy movements and the increase in the visibility of individuals with disabilities paved the way for a more positive treatment and support of these people.

When people with disabilities were provided increased opportunities to have access to some form of education, special schools were established on the premise that these people could be taught better if they were separated from the 'normal' population. Individuals with disabilities were then sent to these institutions and were detached from the community. It was only until Nirje (1969) introduced the concept of normalization that people with disabilities were given access to the conditions of everyday life that resembled, as closely as possible, those of their non-disabled counterparts in society (Drew & Hardman, 2003).

Empirical evidence has been established linking the importance of self-determination as an educational outcome if youth with disabilities were to achieve a positive adult outcome after they leave high school (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). According to Wehmeyer (2000), "Self-determined behavior refers to volitional actions that enable one to act as the primary causal agent in one's life and to maintain or improve one's quality of life." He states that self-determination involves four essential characteristics: (1) autonomy, (2) self-regulation, (3) psychological empowerment, and (4) self-realization. A characteristic belonging to each component is essential but is not sufficient to produce a self-determined behavior. He described self-determination

as a process of gradual change. In order to achieve successful integration into the community, individuals with disabilities must attain a level of competence to associate with society. However, acquiring a set of skills leading to self-determination is not enough to make an individual self-determined.

Autonomy. An individual displays autonomy if he or she acts (a) according to his or her own preferences, interests, and/or abilities; and (b) independently, free from undue external influence or interference. He stresses that the degree to which an individual becomes autonomous depends on the interdependence of all the members of his or her family, friends, and other people with whom the individual interacts daily.

Self-regulation. This component is reflected in an individual if he or she is able to make decisions about what skills to use in a given situation, to examine the task at hand and the skills available in his or her repertoire, to formulate, enact, and evaluate a plan of action.

Psychological empowerment. This is achieved when the person believes that he or she (a) has the capacity to perform behaviors needed to influence outcomes in his or her environment, and that he or she (b) can attain the desired or anticipated outcomes if he or she performs the behaviors.

Self-realization. An individual is self-realizing if he or she capitalizes on the awareness and knowledge of one's strengths and abilities to act in a beneficial way.

The four essential characteristics of self-determination are represented by several elements that are referred to as

teachable skills that can be incorporated to instructional activities to help individuals with special needs achieve a degree of self-determination. The different skills involved are choice-making, decision making, problem-solving, goal-setting & attainment, self-regulation, self advocacy, positive perceptions of control, efficacy and outcomes expectations, self-awareness, and self-knowledge (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007; Schloss, Alper & Jayne, 1993; Wehmeyer, Yeager, Bolding, Agran, & Hughes, 2003; Wehmeyer, Kelchner, & Richards, 1996; Martin, Mithaug, Coz, Peterson, Dycke & Cash, 2003).

The process of self-determination is complex. It involves the interplay of both psychological and physical abilities that are pertinent to an individual. Furthermore, it includes a synergistic relationship between the individual and his or her environment. Several studies have stressed the importance of environmental factors that impact the development of self-determination (Grigal, Neubert, Moon, & Graham, 2003; Morton, 1997; Stancliffe, 2001; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000; and Zhang, Wehmeyer & Chen, 2005;). Among the factors that directly influence this development are parental support, family involvement, and provisions of opportunities in the home and school settings.

RESEARCH AIMS

The study explored the dimensions of self-determination as a set of skills in the Philippine context. A survey was conducted with parents and teachers in selected areas of Metro Manila in order to obtain information regarding the opportunities that learners with developmental disabilities have to practice skills that lead to self-determination.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study employed a total of 125 parents and 91 teachers of individuals with developmental disabilities in selected areas around Metro Manila. A non-probability sampling was utilized in the selection of the sample. The qualification for parents is based solely on the nature of their child's disability. Thus, only parents of children with developmental disabilities were fit to participate in the study. Parents were recruited from the different organizations that cater to individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. The organizations were limited to those that work solely with families of individuals with Down syndrome and with autism. Due to the unavailability of an organization that caters to families of individuals with mental retardation, a ministry for the individuals with special needs was approached for this study. Further, teachers and colleagues referred additional parent-participants. Meanwhile, schools were approached and a formal letter of request was submitted to school directors stating the intention of this research. Other teachers who participated in the study were contacted through referrals. The teachers were selected on the basis of the nature of their students' disabilities. Particularly, these teachers were so chosen because they work closely with students with mental retardation, Down syndrome and autism.

Instruments

Two survey questionnaires were used for this study, one for the parents and one for the teachers. The instruments are similar but not entirely the same. Each instrument contained four sections (A-D).

Common to both questionnaires are sections B and D. Section B was designed

to measure the degree of assistance the child or the students need(s) in accomplishing several activities under seven areas of adaptive skills (communication, community living, functional academics, health and safety, home living, self-care and advocacy, and social skills). Under each area of adaptive skills are statements that describe specific aspects of each area.

The participants rated the learners based on the degree of assistance they need in performing the tasks described above. There were 31 items for this section. For each item, the participants chose the answer that best describes the ability of the learners (no assistance, minimal assistance, moderate assistance, and maximum assistance).

Section D of the survey questionnaires examined the views that parents and teachers have on the value of independence in major areas of life for learners with developmental disabilities. The seven major areas measured in this section are: personal care, community involvement, recreational and leisure activity, independent living, supported employment, marriage and family, and managing finances. For each area, the participants were given a range of opinion statements to choose from. Each statement reflects the varying degree of importance that the participants attribute for each major area. The respondents chose the statement that best reflects their opinions. They also provided an explanation for the position they took.

Sections A and C of the questionnaires have been designed according to the nature of the participants.

Parent Survey. The first section (Section A) of the parent questionnaire asked for information on the parents' age, gender, marital status, and educational attainment. Additional information was sought about their

child's age, disability label and the type of school attended.

Section C of the questionnaire contained 25 items that represent a series of skills and characteristics under each of the four domains (autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization) of self-determination. The items were designed in order to measure the degree of opportunities that LDDs have to practice these skills. For a more accurate evaluation, the item statements described skills that are applicable in the home setting. This is based on the assumption that (1) the parents can observe the child's behavior at home, and (2) that because LDDs exhibit the skills, the opportunities to practice these skills could be observed. The participants were instructed to indicate the opportunities available to the child, which would allow him or her to practice the skills described in each number, by choosing the most appropriate option (never, rarely, sometimes, frequently, and always).

Teacher Survey. Section A of the teacher survey gathered demographic information on their gender, degree or certificate earned, teaching background (general or special education), length of teaching experience, grade level currently taught, and the type of school. Section C of this questionnaire also contained 25 items that represent a series of skills and characteristics under the four domains of self-determination. The items, however, reflect skills that are more appropriate in the school setting. In the same manner, the teachers were asked to indicate the opportunities available to LDDs, which would allow them to practice the skills described in each number.

Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were run using software for data processing, more particularly, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The tables provided information on the demographic profile of the respondents, frequency and correlation analysis for all data gathered.

For the parent output, a description of the parents' gender, marital status, and educational attainment were derived. Information about their child's age, label of disability, grade level, and type of school attended was also obtained. For the teacher output, the initial tables depicted demographic profile about the respondents' gender, educational and teaching backgrounds, and years of teaching experience. Information on the predominant label of disability and grade level currently handled is also gathered.

Parents' and teachers' perceptions of their child's/ students' level of functioning ability were gathered through scaled survey questions (No assistance =4; Minimum assistance = 3; Moderate assistance = 2; Maximum assistance = 1). To obtain the mean level of ability for each child or group of students, the responses were scored and weighted means were computed. Weighted means was used because each area does not

contain the same number of items. The groupings for the level of ability were obtained based on the results of the mean levels of functioning ability.

The opportunities that parents and teachers learners were measured using the average mean that reflected the scores derived for each of the four domains. The frequency response categories were translated to interval ratings as follows: Always = 5; Frequently = 4; Sometimes = 3; Rarely = 2; and Never = 1. The t-test was utilized to derive the dominant set of skills that learners are most frequently given the opportunity to practice.

Likewise, the method was also used to compare within groups based on the learners' label of disability, mean level of ability, parents' educational background, and teachers' years of teaching experience. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to compare means for the different domains across the different levels of ability.

RESULTS

Opportunities for Self-Determination

Table 1 shows the mean ratings of parents and teachers on the survey items that indicate opportunities for LDDs to practice skills that pertain to the four

Table 1. Mean Ratings for the Home and the School Settings

Self-Determination Domain	Home Setting Domain Mean	School Setting Domain Mean
Autonomy	3.45	2.59
Self-Regulation	2.68	1.75
Psychological Empowerment	2.91	2.23
Self-Realization	3.06	2.02
Overall Mean Rating	3.03	2.15

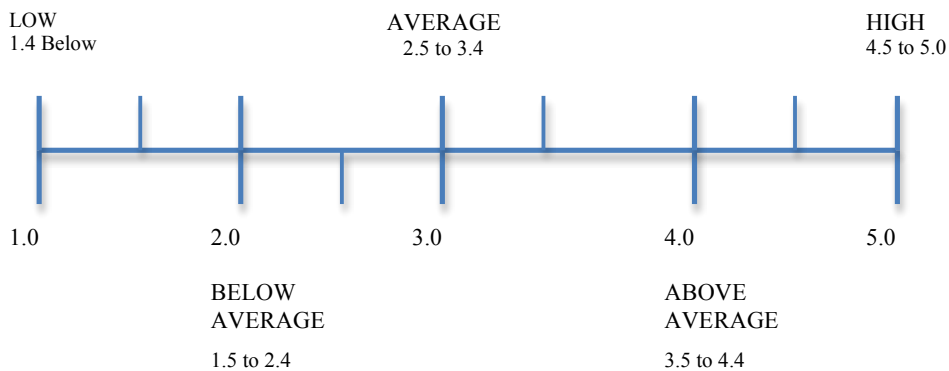


Figure 1. Availability of Opportunities Scale

domains of self-determination (autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization). For both home and school settings, the findings of the study show that parents and teachers give the highest opportunities for LDDs to practice skills that lead to autonomy. These skills relate to the learners' ability to make choices, and express preferences based on personal interests and available choices. The domain that received the lowest rating was self-regulation. This means that fewer opportunities are given to LDDs to practice skills such as decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, and self-monitoring, evaluation, and reinforcement.

Although it is evident that LDDs have opportunities to practice skills pertaining to the four domains of self-determination, the mean ratings for the home and the school settings are not exactly the same. Figure 1 depicts the ranges wherein the interpretation of availability of opportunities to practice self-determination may be judged. Evidently, the opportunities for LDDs are more available in the home setting. The mean ratings reported by the parents show that, overall, LDDs are given average opportunities to practice skills at home. The school provides below average degrees of self-determination

opportunities. These findings suggest that instruction in the school setting must be given more focus and direction in order to foster self-determination among LDDs.

Perceived Level of Functioning Ability and Opportunities for Self-Determination

Based on the results of the participants' perceived level of functioning ability of LDDs, three groupings were derived: low ability, medium ability, and high ability. The low ability grouping comprise of learners that need maximum assistance in the performance of adaptive skills that relate to seven areas of life activities. The group that belongs to the medium ability grouping, on the other hand, requires moderate to minimum assistance. Finally, the high ability group represents learners that need only minimum or no assistance at all in performing important adaptive skills.

An ANOVA was administered in order to compare the means across the four domains by the three levels of ability groupings. Table 2 shows the summary of the findings.

The results show that, across the two settings, the association between opportunities for each domain and level

Table 2. ANOVA Table: Comparison of Means- Domains by Level of Ability

	Home Setting		School Setting	
	F-stat	p-value**	F-stat	p-value**
Autonomy	13.18	0.00	22.05	0.00
Self-Regulation	22.04	0.00	17.62	0.00
Psychological Empowerment	23.72	0.00	16.25	0.00
Self-Realization	22.88	0.00	23.07	0.00

** highly significant

Table 3. Results of Comparison of Mean Domain by Educational Level of Parent

	Educational Attainment by Group	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	p-value (t-test)
Autonomy	College Level and Below	44	3.16	1.05	0.16	0.01 **
	College Grad and Post Graduate	80	3.61	0.93	0.10	
Self-Regulation	College Level and Below	44	2.48	0.93	0.14	0.05 *
	College Grad and Post Graduate	80	2.78	0.97	0.11	
Psychological Empowerment	College Level and Below	44	2.81	0.89	0.13	0.21
	College Grad and Post Graduate	80	2.96	0.99	0.11	
Self-Regulation	College Level and Below	44	2.95	0.85	0.13	0.12
	College Grad and Post Graduate	80	3.13	0.82	0.09	

*significant **highly significant

of ability proved to be significant in all cases. As the level of ability increases, so do the domain scores increase. The availability of opportunities for learners with developmental disabilities increases with higher perceived level of ability.

Parents' Educational Background and Opportunities for Self-Determination

In addition to the findings explored in the previous section of this study, the researcher also investigated if the opportunities to engage in tasks leading to self-determination are impacted by the level of parents' educational attainment.

Table 3 shows that there is a significant difference between the opportunities for self-determination given by parents to their children and their educational background.

For both autonomy ($p=.01$) and self-regulation ($p=.05$), parents' with college and/or postgraduate degrees scored significantly higher ($p < .05$) than parents who only attained college level or below.

Teachers' Length of Experience and Opportunities for LDDs

The length of experience is grouped according to the following categories: 1-2 years; 3-5 years; and 6 years above. The results show that, at $p<.10$, the variables are significantly different only for the domains on Self-Regulation ($p=0.07$) and Psychological Empowerment ($p=0.05$). This means that teachers who have more years of teaching experience tend to give LDDs more opportunities for self-regulation and psychological empowerment.

Thus, it may be concluded that there is a relationship between the variables. Teachers' experience has an impact on the degree to which they make self-determination opportunities available to students. If teachers are given the knowledge and techniques to teach self-determination to LDDs, they will build on the teaching skills as they grow in experience. Field and Hoffman (1996) state that just as it is important for students with disabilities to learn self-determination skills, educators also need an environment that provides encouragement for self-determination and specific instructional efforts and supports to increase their self-determination.

Disability Labels and Opportunities for Self-Determination

Another aim of this study was to explore the relationship between the four domains of self-determination and the specific labels of disability (Mental Retardation, Down Syndrome, and Autism). A one-way ANOVA was applied to compare means between the three groups of disabilities. A significant difference between groups was found at $p < .05$. Using the multiple comparisons of means, the findings revealed that individuals with Down syndrome scored higher for opportunities in the area of psychological empowerment.

It was suggested that disability factors have an effect on the degree of opportunities that are given to LDDs. Learners' personal characteristics may have an association with the opportunities that are available to them. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to examine disability factors that contribute to self-determination opportunities, it is recommended, nevertheless, that this idea is taken into consideration.

Parents' Views About the Importance of Independence

Parents believe independence is important for individuals with developmental disabilities. With the exception of marriage and family, majority of the parents regard independence as an important aspect of major life areas (personal care, community involvement, recreational and leisure activity, independent living, supported employment, and managing finances). Overall, They want their children to achieve optimal development in terms of self-determination.

The common themes of the responses of parents with respect to the concept of achieving independence are:

1. It is important for their children's future because parents will not always be around to support them.
2. Individuals with disabilities gain a sense of self-worth when they gain independence in major areas of life.
3. Their children need to be productive members of the society.
4. Individuals with disabilities should live 'normal' lives. It is beneficial for them to be involved with and to be integrated to the society.

DISCUSSION

Parents and teachers have a supportive and facilitative role in the development of self-determination for all individuals. However, for parents and teachers of LDDs, this role may pose serious challenges. Although LDDs have opportunities to self-determination skills, the degree of the availability of opportunities differs across the home and the school setting. The school setting reported below average ratings for opportunities.

Furthermore, the results from this study revealed that a positive relationship exists between parents' and teachers' perception of learners' level of ability and the opportunities that are provided for these learners to practice skills that lead to self-determination. The availability of opportunities for learners with developmental disabilities increases with higher perceived level of ability. Thus, a thrust towards interventions to promote higher adaptive skills abilities is necessary to increase the opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities to engage in tasks that will lead to self-determination.

Consistent with our expectations, the findings of the study conveyed that parents' educational background and teachers' length of experience play a role in the opportunities given to these individuals. The results suggest that the higher the level of educational attainment of parents and the longer the teachers' experience in teaching, more opportunities for self-determination tend to be given to LDDs.

LIMITATIONS

The results of this study revealed that learners with developmental disabilities have opportunities to practice skills that lead to self-determination. Moreover, this study was able to identify factors that lead to differences in opportunities received by these learners: perceived level of ability, type of disability, and parents' educational background. However, it is important to note that factors other than the ones considered may also contribute to the matrix of self-determination that is proposed. The possible factors that affect opportunities for children will require a wider scope of study, thus, it is one of the recommendations suggested. This may help account for additional variance in the degree of opportunities that are present

for learners with developmental disabilities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

It is encouraging that parents and teachers support the importance of developing self-determination among LDDs. They agree that these individuals must be exposed to learning experiences that will help develop skills that lead to self-determination. Despite the compelling views on the essentiality of independence and of self-determination, difficulties in fostering this development remains to be palpable.

There are apparent differences in the responses of parents regarding their perception about the importance of independence in the seven major areas of life. Some parents are withheld by the idea that their children are incapable of becoming independent due to their disability. They believe that their children need care and protection because the society does not readily offer a safe place for individuals with developmental disabilities. As a result, educators and support group leaders are encouraged to design more specific programs to help parents and caretakers understand the concept of self-determination and its importance for positive life outcomes.

The responses of participating teachers also suggested that there are perceived difficulties in teaching skills that lead to self-determination. They contributed this factor to the lack of collaboration between the home and the school. They also conveyed lack of familiarity with the concept of self-determination. If self-determination is considered as an important educational outcome, higher education institutions must place high priority in making it an integral part of their curriculum. Teacher training programs that focus on theoretical and practical knowledge about

self-determination must be emphasized. Strategies for teaching skills that lead to self-determination must be integrated to instructional programs. These strategies then must be applied and constantly evaluated.

It is indeed challenging to support the development of self-determination for individuals with developmental disabilities. A lot of factors come to play in this process, including parental values, parenting practices, personal beliefs and practices that are influenced by culture. However, it is still a challenge that imposes valuable gains. Thus, making it a journey worth traveling. Continuous efforts to support the development of self-determination among learners with developmental disabilities by providing opportunities for these individuals to practice skills in both the home and the school setting will ultimately bring about positive adult outcomes for our learners.

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