HAMMILL INSTITUTE
ON DISABILITIES

$SAGE

Implementing the SDLMI With Students With Significant Support Needs During Transition Planning

Kathryn M. Burke, PhD[1] iD, Karrie A. Shogren, PhD[1] iD,
A. Anthony Antosh, EdD[2], Terri LaPlante, MEd[2],
and Laurie H. Masterson, MEd[3]

Abstract

Self-determination, defined by acting as the causal agent in one's life, plays a critical role in the transition from high school to postsecondary education, employment, and community living for all students, including students with significant support needs. The *Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction* (SDLMI) is a teaching model designed to enable teachers to promote self-determined action by focusing on the goal setting and attainment process. In this article, we focus specifically on the implementation of the SDLMI with students with significant support needs, including those who have complex communication needs. We describe the SDLMI process in detail with specific examples for implementation with students with significant support needs based on several recent research studies.

Keywords

self-determination, students with significant support needs, transition planning

Gabriel is a high school junior taking a U.S. History class co-taught by Ms. Mannion, a general education teacher, and Mr. Cummings, a special education teacher. In this class, Gabriel is being exposed to a new process to set and go after his goals in school and beyond. Ms. Mannion and Mr. Cummings both received training on the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI), a teaching model that enables teachers to support all students to develop self-regulated problem-solving skills they can apply when going after their goals. Mr. Cummings is working with Ms. Mannion to organize SDLMI delivery for the whole class. He also provides additional targeted supports for Gabriel, who receives special education services under the educational classification of intellectual disability. Gabriel has a secondary diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, and he also has complex communication needs. He expresses himself mainly using an application on his iPad. All 24 students in the class are juniors and beginning to think about their futures. So, Ms. Mannion and Mr. Cummings plan to use the SDLMI to encourage all students to set goals related to both what they are learning in history class and what they would like to do postschool. Mr. Cummings provides targeted instruction during a transition planning period to provide additional support for Gabriel in using the SDLMI to meet his individualized learning needs. Ms. Mannion and Mr. Cummings identified two broad goal areas within which students would select goals

related to the class based on their interests and preferences (consistent with SDLMI implementation protocols): general academic skills and career-design.

In this article, our focus will be to describe practice-based strategies for implementing the *Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction* (SDLMI) with students with significant support needs, including complex communication needs, in the context of general education and transition planning. Gabriel's case study is intended as an exemplar and represents a composite of students and teachers who have used the SDLMI with students with significant support needs.

Self-Determination in Research and Practice

Self-determination is defined by acting as a causal agent in one's life; that is, having the skills, opportunities, and

[1]University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA
[2]Rhode Island College, Providence, RI, USA
[3]Coventry High School, Coventry, RI, USA

Corresponding Author:
Kathryn M. Burke, Department of Teaching and Learning, Temple University, Ritter Hall 349, 1301 Cecil B. Moore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA.
Email: kburke@temple.edu

supports to engage in goal-directed actions (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Forber-Pratt, et al., 2015). Enhanced self-determination has been linked to a successful transition from high school to postsecondary education, employment, and community living for all students, including students with significant support needs (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenbark, & Little, 2015). Self-determination can be enhanced through targeted instruction and opportunities to practice and use skills associated with self-determined actions (e.g., choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, planning, self-management, self-advocacy, self-awareness, self-knowledge) across contexts, with effective supports and accommodations.

The SDLMI (Shogren, Raley, Burke, & Wehmeyer, 2018; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000) is an evidence-based practice in transition (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2016), and findings from over a dozen quasi-experimental or single-case design studies (Lee, Wehmeyer, & Shogren, 2015) and large-scale, randomized control trial studies (Shogren, Palmer, Wehmeyer, Williams-Diehm, & Little, 2012; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Shogren, Williams-Diehm, & Soukup, 2013) provide evidence for the efficacy of the SDLMI. In 2017, Hagiwara, Shogren, and Leko reviewed the research on the SDLMI, finding 13 of the 21 studies examining the SDLMI included students with intellectual disability and resulted in significantly enhanced goal attainment across multiple curricular areas. However, it is not clear the degree to which the students included in these studies had significant support needs, or if they did, how these needs were specifically addressed in instruction. Students with significant disabilities require ongoing pervasive supports across life domains (Taub, McCord, & Ryndak, 2017), including supports to engage in interventions like the SDLMI when implemented in the general education classroom and in transition planning (Burke et al., 2019; Raley et al., in press).

Over the past 3 years, teachers of students with intellectual disability in Rhode Island (RI) received training and implemented the SDLMI with transition-age students with intellectual disability in an effort to enhance postschool integrated employment outcomes (Burke et al., 2019; Shogren, Burke, et al., 2018; Shogren, et al., 2019). Other sources more fully describe the research design and outcomes of the RI project, but it is important to note that researchers have documented increases in goal attainment and overall self-determination for participating students. However, these sources have not provided explicit examples of the instructional and educational supports utilized by teachers to enable students with significant support needs to engage with the SDLMI. In the following section, we share examples based on SDLMI implementation with students with significant support needs in RI, focusing on how teachers can effectively support students to set goals, take action, and self-evaluate progress and outcomes, consistent with the three phases of the SDLMI.

The SDLMI in Practice

Preliminary Conversations

The SDLMI includes three phases—*Phase 1: Set a Goal, Phase 2: Take Action,* and *Phase 3: Adjust Goal or Plan* (see Figure 1; Shogren, Raley, et al., 2018). In each phase, teachers support students to answer four *Student Questions* by meeting corresponding *Teacher Objectives* that guide instruction. *Educational Supports* are suggested to enable teachers to support students to respond to the Student Questions and develop the skills associated with self-determined action that are needed to meet *Teacher Objectives*. Before beginning Phase 1 (*Set a Goal*), the SDLMI implementation protocol emphasizes the need to engage in "preliminary conversations" about the purpose of the SDLMI. During these conversations, teachers work with students to establish the purpose of the SDLMI (students learn to solve problems; set and go after goals) and the roles of students and teachers when using the SDLMI, emphasizing the process can look different from typical instruction. Specifically, the teacher acts as a facilitator and advocate as well as an instructor. Students learn to act as self-directed and active learners as well as self-advocates for what they need to be successful. Teachers also introduce four key terms used throughout instruction—*goal, problem, plan*, and *evaluate*. One of the most important considerations when implementing the SDLMI with students with significant support needs is to use means of representation and communication the student can access easily. This may include oral language, written language, illustrations, videos, or in-person examples.

Understanding the respective roles and key terms may happen at different paces for students, according to their learning needs and background experiences, preliminary conversations can continue until each student grasps the core concepts, without time limits. These concepts will continue to be reinforced over the course of implementation as the terms come up during instruction. Two common challenges reported among the 60-plus teachers implementing the SDLMI in RI were balancing time and differentiation; such issues will be discussed in the following sections. However, it is important to remember that the SDLMI is designed to be a cyclical process, meaning students move through the SDLMI phases repeatedly as they work toward goals. Therefore, students will continue to grow in their knowledge and skills as they set new goals and develop new action plans for achieving goals over time.

When Ms. Mannion and Mr. Cummings begin preliminary conversations with the whole class about the SDLMI, they see some students grasp the key terms and roles immediately, while other students need more support. In order to differentiate based on students' needs, they break the class up into small groups, where students are challenged to represent the key terms visually. In Gabriel's group, he works with a classmate without a disability to find a visual for each key term (goal, problem, plan, and evaluate) in his communication
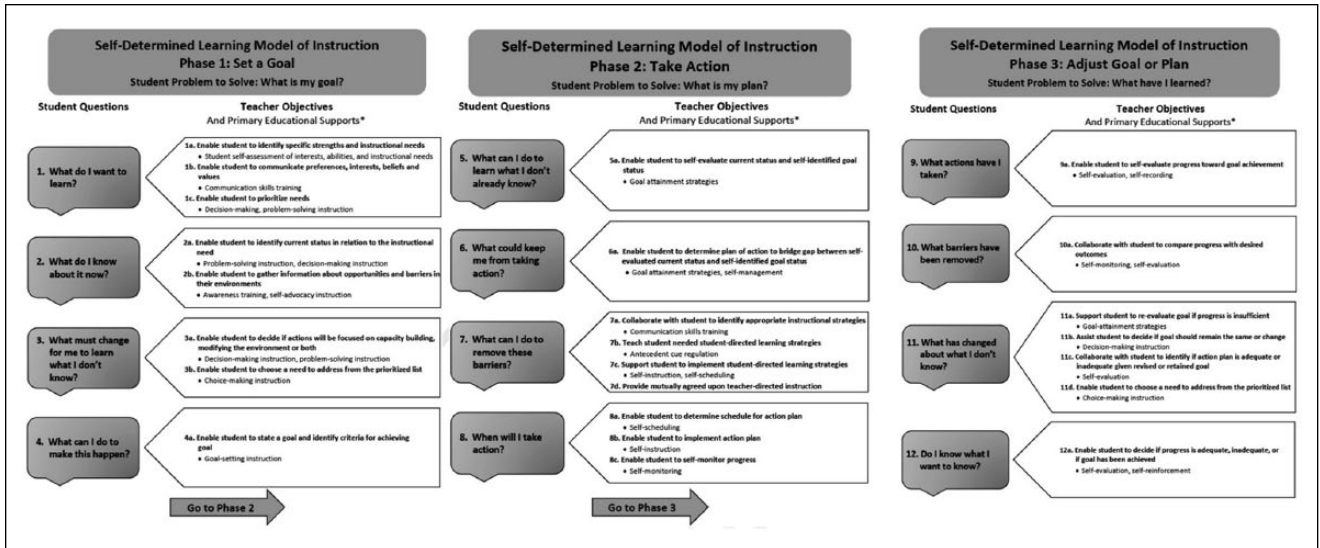
Figure 1. Phases of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction.
Note. Reprinted with permission from Shogren, Raley, Burke, and Wehmeyer (2018).

app on his iPad. They print out each visual and make a chart with the key terms and their definitions. Moving forward, during Gabriel's transition planning instruction period, Mr. Cummings reviews the terms and visual representations created during the whole class activities.
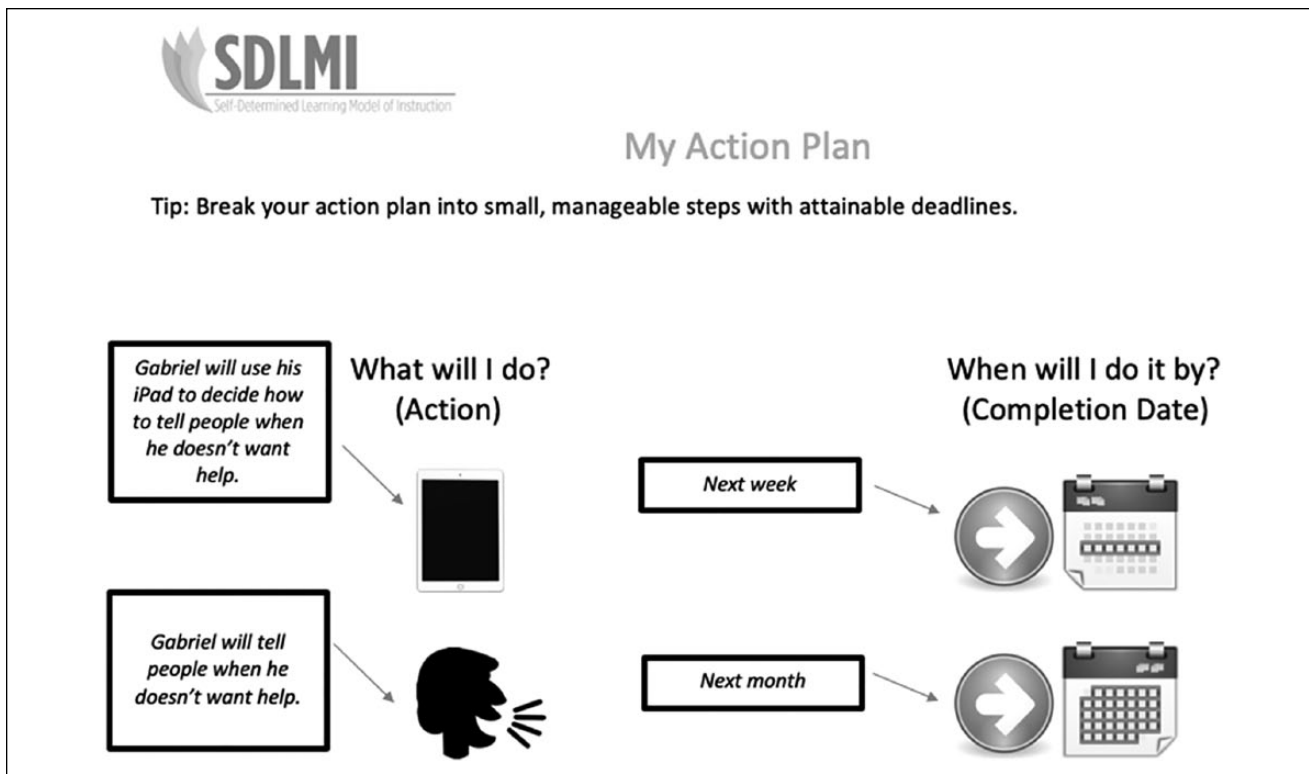
Phase 1

The problem for the student to solve in Phase 1 is "What is my goal?" (see Figure 1). In Phase 1, students pose and respond to questions asking what they want to learn, what they know about it now, what needs to change for them to learn what they do not know, and what they can do to make this happen. One special education teacher described her instructional practices changing as a result of SDLMI implementation as she shifted to "providing students choice in learning what they want to learn." Choosing what they want to learn can be overwhelming for some students, and sometimes, the targeted goals must be linked to the content area. Therefore, SDLMI implementation protocols encourage teachers to create goal "buckets" that students can work within to develop their own individualized goal. This scaffolding allows each student to select an individualized goal, while still enabling the teacher to support the whole class with instruction and supports tailored to the designated goal buckets. For example, teachers may develop three goal buckets for a history class: (a) class preparation (e.g., reading history assignments before class and studying for tests), (b) class engagement (e.g., taking detailed notes and engaging with classmates in small groups), and (c) working on a career goal linked to the class content (e.g., career experiences in local government and working on public speaking skills). Students can then

choose one bucket and develop a personalized goal related to this area as they explore and learn about their preferences and interests in Student Question 1. Later in Phase 1, students set a specific and measurable goal based on their responses to the previous questions, guided by goal setting instruction from the teacher.

As students begin Phase 1, Ms. Mannion and Mr. Cummings encourage students to think about a goal related to classwork and postschool life, within two broad goal buckets: building academic skills in U.S. History and career-related interests linked to U.S. History. Students start the process with Student Question 1, "What do I want to learn?" Gabriel decides to set a goal related to academic skills in U.S. History based on conversations in class and during targeted one-on-one time with Mr. Cummings during transition planning. Specifically, Gabriel wants to work on how he uses the supports he needs during class activities. Gabriel has expressed the desire to do more things on his own, with less support from teachers and paraprofessionals.

During the next class session on the SDLMI, the teachers support students to answer Student Questions 2 and 3 to establish what they know about the goal now and what needs to change for them to learn what they do not know. Students represent what they know about the goal now in a variety of ways—writing, drawing, or filming video clips of themselves demonstrating what they know. Because Gabriel needs additional time to work on these questions, Mr. Cummings invites several peers to come to a transition planning period to support Gabriel in "role-playing" his chosen goal, talking through opportunities, barriers, and needs that arise. This is an effective way for all students to get more exposure to SDLMI instruction, as in the general education classroom, instruction is typically implemented

Figure 2. Gabriel's Phase 2 action plan.
Note. Italic text has been added to further describe the visual action plan to the reader.

in short, 15-minute mini-lesson blocks, delivered twice per week (Raley, Shogren, & McDonald, 2018).
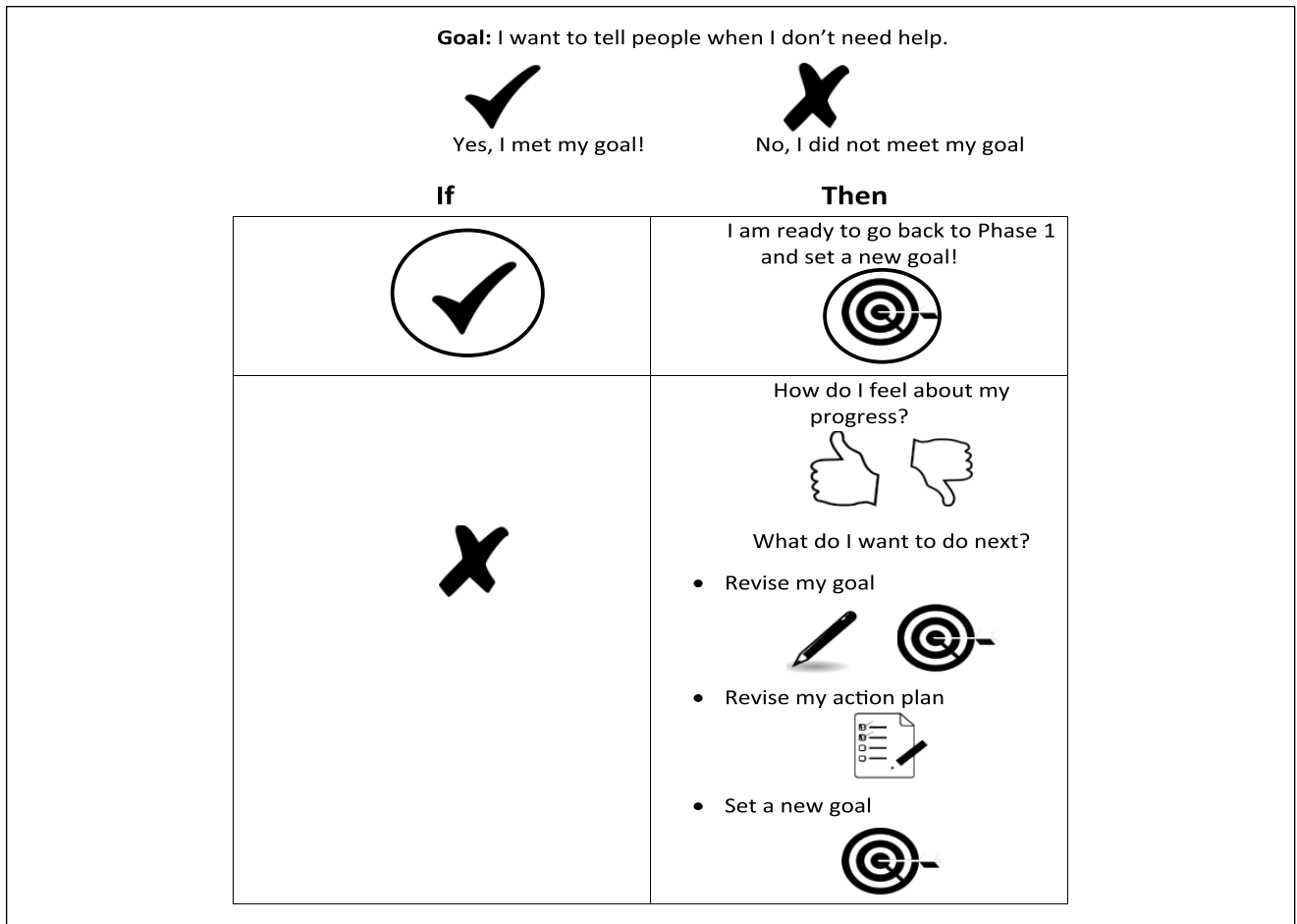
Phase 2

In Phase 2, students work to solve the problem, "What is my plan?" in relation to the goal they set in Phase 1 (see Figure 1). In answering the Student Questions, students identify what they can do to learn what they do not know, what could keep them from taking action, what they can do to remove these barriers, and when they will take action. As the SDLMI involves 3 phases and 12 Student Questions, some students with significant support needs may experience challenges building upon prior steps of the process. It can be useful for students to return to prior Student Questions and review their responses or the key concepts, as needed.

Mr. Cummings supports Gabriel to return to the goal he set in Student Question 4 to prepare to answer Student Question 5. From visual options showing "stay quiet," "walk away," and "talk to the person," Gabriel identifies he currently stays quiet when someone offers support in history class when instead he wants to talk to the person to express whether or not he wants the support offered. The class breaks into three groups to answer Student Questions 6-8 and create action plans: students writing their action plans on their tablets, students writing their action plans by hand, and students representing their action plans with visuals. Gabriel chooses to represent his action plan with visuals, with support from peers. In their groups, students spend a few minutes focusing on each classmate's goal, brainstorming and providing peer support to develop action plans. In Gabriel's group, classmates support him to answer Student Question 6 and identify what is keeping him from taking action on his goal, which is to communicate when he does not want help or support that is offered in class.

Mr. Cummings provides additional instruction and supports for Gabriel with Student Question 7 ("What can I do to remove these barriers?") during his transition planning period by discussing and acting out ways he could potentially let people know when he does not want help, which includes putting a sticky note on the corner of his desk that can show people, putting on his headphones (which Gabriel wears when he wants to reduce sensory input and is a known way that he communicates he does not want to talk), or communicating using his iPad. Then he answers Student Question 8 ("When will I take action?") and chooses when to start implementing his plan, focused on using his iPad to communicate his preferences about supports. See Figure 2 for Gabriel's visual action plan.

Goal: I want to tell people when I don't need help.

Yes, I met my goal!   No, I did not meet my goal

If   **Then**

I am ready to go back to Phase 1 and set a new goal!

How do I feel about my progress?

What do I want to do next?

- Revise my goal

- Revise my action plan

- Set a new goal

Figure 3. Gabriel's Phase 3 decision-making activity.

In class, Ms. Mannion and Mr. Cummings want to provide added accountability for students who might struggle to consistently record their progress and leverage peer-to-peer support for goal attainment. So, they pair up students for check-ins at the beginning and end of class to self-monitor and record their progress on their goals. Students can choose from different tracking sheets. Gabriel chooses to mark his progress on a calendar template on his tablet, marking days when he meets his goal as green and days when he does not as red. He can then review this template with his partner, who is using a similar calendar template. The teachers also organize a monthly class check-in, where they document student progress on their goals and celebrate successes (and brainstorm additional supports needed for success).

Phase 3

Students solve the problem, "What have I learned?" in Phase 3 (see Figure 1). At this point, students have set their goals and implemented their action plans, and now teachers use the SDLMI process to enable students to reflect on their progress. They will describe, in answering the Student Questions, the actions they have taken, the barriers they have removed, and what has changed about what they do not know. To answer Student Questions 9 and 10, some students may benefit from using photo or video visual supports to recall their goal-oriented actions during the process, which the teacher can facilitate by guiding the student to return to their visuals from Student Questions 6 and 7. To continue supporting students in Phase 3, teachers may create simple graphs and bar charts and engage students in self-evaluating their progress, supporting key data visualization skills that are needed to evaluate progress.

In Student Questions 11 and 12, students decide what has changed about what they do not know and if they know what they want to know. If students decide they achieved their goal after evaluating their progress, the next step is setting the next goal in their goal sequence, returning to Phase 1. If they do not, then they will focus on revising their current goal or action plan. This important step helps students learn to act flexibly, determining what works and does

not work for them, and learning how to identify different pathways to achieve their desired outcomes.

Mr. Cummings supports Gabriel to return to the options from Student Question 7 (putting a colored sticky note on the corner of his desk, putting on his headphones, or communicating with his iPad), as Gabriel indicates his efforts have focused on indicating whether he needs support using his iPad. When it becomes time to evaluate their self-monitoring data, the teachers support students to make graphs to visually depict their self-monitoring data to compare how many days they met their goal with how many days they did not. Ms. Mannion and Mr. Cummings support students with a decision-making activity to answer Student Question 12 (see Figure 3), and Gabriel identifies he is ready to set a new goal because he met his current goal!

Conclusion

Overall, Ms. Mannion and Mr. Cummings find students are much more engaged not only in their goal setting and attainment, but in history class overall and during transition planning instruction. Ms. Mannion thinks the flexibility of the model allows them to differentiate based on students' needs while still guiding the whole class through the process, and Mr. Cummings cites the organization and consistency of the process as a good fit for Gabriel, in particular. Ms. Mannion also feels the SDLMI truly enhanced her implementation of the curriculum in history as students focused on how what they were learning applied to their goals and their lives. One outcome the teachers did not anticipate is the increase in self-confidence they see in their students! Students are showing increased engagement with the curriculum, and classmates with and without disabilities are supporting one another to be successful going after their goals in the class. Gabriel is more comfortable self-advocating when he wants to try something on his own. Both Ms. Mannion and Mr. Cummings plan to continue to use the SDLMI, supporting students to engage with the goal setting and action planning process, repeatedly.

The SDLMI is an evidence-based practice for enabling students to enhance skills associated with self-determination and set and attain goals, learning to self-regulate and act with behavioral flexibility (Shogren, Raley, et al., 2018). As previous research shows, the SDLMI is appropriate and accessible for all students, including students with significant support needs (Raley et al., in press), and leads to enhanced school and postschool outcomes (Shogren et al., 2012; Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenbark, & Little, 2015). In this article, we described SDLMI implementation with students with significant support needs. With thoughtful planning, collaboration between students and teachers, and an emphasis on differentiation and communication, the SDLMI can be a valuable tool for enabling students with significant support needs to self-direct their learning process, setting and going after goals that are important to them in the general education classroom and in transition planning. For more resources on the SDLMI, go to www.self-determination.org.

ORCID iDs

Kathryn M. Burke (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1271-3257
Karrie A. Shogren (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7925-1299

References

Burke, K. M., Shogren, K. A., Raley, S. K., Wehmeyer, M. L., Antosh, A. A., & LaPlante, T. (2019). Implementing evidence-based practices to promote self-determination: Lessons learned from a state-wide implementation of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, *54*, 18–29.

Hagiwara, M., Shogren, K. A., & Leko, M. (2017). Reviewing research on the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction: Mapping the terrain and charting a course to promote adoption and use. *Advances in Neurodevelopmental Disorders*, *1*, 3–13. doi:10.1007/s41252-0170007-7

Lee, S.-H., Wehmeyer, M. L., & Shogren, K. A. (2015). Effect of instruction with the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction on students with disabilities: A meta-analysis. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, *50*, 237–247.

National Technical Assistance Center on Transition. (2016). *Evidence-based practices and predictors in secondary transition: What we know and what we still need to know*. Charlotte, NC: Author.

Raley, S. K., Burke, K. M., Hagiwara, M., Shogren, K. A., Wehmeyer, M. L., & Kurth, J. A. (in press). The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction and students with extensive support needs in inclusive settings. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*.

Raley, S. K., Shogren, K. A., & McDonald, A. (2018). How to implement the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction in inclusive general education classrooms. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *51*, 62–71. doi:10.1177/0040059918790236

Shogren, K. A., Burke, K. M., Anderson, M. H., Antosh, A. A., Wehmeyer, M. L., LaPlante, T., & Shaw, L. A. (2018). Evaluating the differential impact of interventions to promote self-determination and goal attainment for transition-age youth with intellectual disability. *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities*, *43*, 165–180. doi:10.1177/1540796918779775

Shogren, K. A., Burke, K. M., Antosh, A. A., Wehmeyer, M. L., LaPlante, T., Shaw, L. A., & Raley, S. K. (2019). Impact of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction on self-determination and goal attainment in adolescents with intellectual disability. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, *30*, 22–34. doi:10.1177/1044207318792178

Shogren, K. A., Palmer, S. B., Wehmeyer, M. L., Williams-Diehm, K., & Little, T. D. (2012). Effect of intervention with the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction on access and goal attainment. *Remedial and Special Education*, *33*, 320–330. doi:10.1177/0741932511410072

Shogren, K. A., Raley, S. K., Burke, K. M., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2018). *The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction: Teacher's guide*. Lawrence: Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities.

Shogren, K. A., Wehmeyer, M. L., Palmer, S. B., Forber-Pratt, A. J., Little, T. J., & Lopez, S. (2015). Causal agency theory: Reconceptualizing a functional model of self-determination. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, *50*, 251–263.

Shogren, K. A., Wehmeyer, M. L., Palmer, S. B., Rifenbark, G. G., & Little, T. D. (2015). Relationships between self-determination and postschool outcomes for youth with disabilities. *The Journal of Special Education*, *48*, 256–267. doi:10.1177/0022466913489733

Taub, D. A., McCord, J. A., & Ryndak, D. (2017). Opportunities to learn for students with extensive support needs: A context of research supported practices for all in general education classes. *The Journal of Special Education*, *51*, 127–137. doi:10.1177/0022466917696263

Wehmeyer, M. L., Palmer, S. B., Agran, M., Mithaug, D. E., & Martin, J. E. (2000). Promoting causal agency: The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction. *Exceptional Children*, *66*, 439–453. doi:10.1177/001440290006600401

Wehmeyer, M. L., Palmer, S. B., Shogren, K. A., Williams-Diehm, K., & Soukup, J. H. (2013). Establishing a causal relationship between interventions to promote self-determination and enhanced student self-determination. *The Journal of Special Education*, *46*, 195–210. doi:10.1177/0022466910392377