

*Are We Practicing What We Are Preaching? An Evaluation of Self-Determination Instructional Components in IEPs at a Midwestern High School*

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*Abstract*

Promoting self-determination in students with disabilities is recognized as an integral component of education today. For most students with disabilities, self-determination should be addressed through instruction and in the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Yet, IEPs are rarely evaluated to determine if goals targeting self-determination are present. This report focuses on one such evaluation. Specifically, an evaluation was conducted to assess whether the IEP goals for 286 high school students with disabilities attending a suburban high school in the Midwest included components of self-determination. The purpose of this report is to describe the evaluation process, identify the outcomes of the evaluation, and provide a discussion of the results in relation to current research. Limitations and implications for practice are presented.

**Keywords:** individualized education program, program evaluation, self-determination, transition

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A large body of research has supported the development, enhancement, and practice of self-determination skills for students with disabilities beginning at a very young age (Hart & Brehm, 2013; Wu & Chu, 2012). Wehmeyer (2014) compared self-determination with “being the causal agent in one’s life” (p. 2). Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998) defined self-determination as “a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination” (p. 2). Self-determination is also recognized as a complex construct consisting of component elements (e.g., choice making, decision making; problem solving, self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-advocacy) that can and should be addressed through instruction (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007; Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004). Furthermore, certain components of self-determination (e.g., self-advocacy, self-awareness, self-management, and goal setting) are critical to the success of students with disabilities in postsecondary settings (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Morningstar et al., 2010).

Researchers have long contended that self-determination skills lead to more successful postsecondary transition outcomes (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). In a review of self-determination literature, Chambers et al. (2007) found that students with higher levels of self-determination skills were more likely to have positive postschool outcomes, especially in the areas of employment, postsecondary education, and independent living. Further substantiating the importance of enhancing self-determination skills during the transition process, Test, Fowler, et al. (2009) identified self-determination instruction (i.e., teaching self-advocacy and self-determination skills) as an evidence-based practice in transition with a moderate level of evidence based on the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center's Decision Rules for Determining Levels of Evidence. Evidence-based practices in transition are grounded in scientifically-based research that may potentially lead to improved transition services and more positive postschool outcomes for students with disabilities. Besides self-determination instruction, Test, Fowler, et al. also identified 31 other secondary transition evidence-based practices (e.g., teaching life skills, teaching job-specific employment skills, teaching safety skills, and social skills training). In a review of transitional and correlational literature, Test, Mazzotti, et al. (2009) recognized self-determination as an evidence-based in-school predictor of improved postschool outcomes. Results indicated self-determination was a predictor of education and employment with a potential level of evidence. Consequently, researchers support the continuous integration of self-determination skills into the education of students with disabilities to enhance the transition process (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Stang, 2008; Held, Thoma, & Thomas, 2004; Karvonen, Test, Wood, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004).

Legislation clearly underscores the importance of teaching, enhancing, and practicing self-determination skills (Denney & Daviso, 2012; Individuals With Disabilities Act [IDEA], 2004; National Council on Disability, 2004; Rehabilitation Acts of 1992 and 1998). For example, the IDEA of 2004 requires measurable postsecondary goals in the areas of education, employment, training, and independent living for students with disabilities, and these goals should be based on students' strengths, preferences, interests and needs (Konrad, Walker, Fowler, Test, & Wood, 2008; Morningstar et al., 2010). Although this legislation does not specifically mandate instruction to promote the enhancement of self-determination skills in students with disabilities, the emphasis on postsecondary goals that reflect students' strengths, preferences, interests, and needs indicates the significance assigned to self-determination (Konrad et al., 2008). Steere and Cavaiuolo (2002) asserted that self-determination skills are necessary for students to identify their postsecondary goals. These authors surmised that it would be challenging for students to plan their future if they did not have the skills to clarify their future goals. Additionally, self-determination and postsecondary goals are related to the development of annual goals in the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Effective self-determination skills provide the foundation for developing desired postsecondary goals, and postsecondary goals drive the development of annual goals (Steere & Cavaiuolo, 2002). Moreover, annual goals address skills students need to achieve those postsecondary goals.

Malian and Nevin (2002) emphasized that self-determination is an indicator of a student's future success, and students who have an IEP that includes self-determination goals and objectives have a greater chance for success when exiting school. Thus, the inclusion of self-determination skills in the annual goals of students with disabilities may enable them to progress on their postsecondary goals and ultimately achieve more successful postschool outcomes. For most students with disabilities, self-determination is an area of need and should clearly be addressed through goals and objectives in IEPs. Particularly, incorporating self-determination into IEP goals and objectives can promote instruction and subsequently facilitate self-determination skills in students with disabilities (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000; Wood et al., 2004). If these students are going to be successful in life, they will need self-determination skills that will empower them to face challenges, make decisions to overcome those challenges, and actively participate in their lives. Hence, the inclusion of self-determination goals in IEPs indicates that these skills should be included in the instruction of students with disabilities. Instructional materials and methods have been developed to promote the component elements of self-determination because instruction occurs at the component level (Wehmeyer, 1999). For many students with disabilities, self-determination skills are not the result of incidental learning; therefore, explicit instruction is necessary for students to acquire these skills (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Pocock et al., 2002; Schreiner, 2007).

Intervention research utilizing systematic instruction to enhance self-determination has been effective. Specifically, findings strongly support interventions incorporating instructional strategies that enhance component skills (e.g., self-advocacy, problem solving, goal setting, and self-regulation) or global self-determination. For example, Walker & Test (2011) implemented an intervention to teach college students to self-advocate for academic accommodations. As a result of the intervention, the students attained mastery of the skills and demonstrated between 7 and 11 of the target behaviors during generalization. Student social validity data also supported the impact of the intervention on the ability of the students to self-advocate for the needed supports. In a review of literature focusing on the effects of self-determination skill interventions on academics with children with learning disabilities (LD) and/or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Konrad, Fowler, Walker, Test, and Wood (2007) found that teaching self-determination skills to students with LD and/or ADHD holds the promise of improving academic skills. Most interventions included the components of self-management, goal setting, and self-advocacy, with self-management being the most prevalent. Although effects varied from very weak to very strong, stronger effects were noted for interventions in which self-management and other components of self-determination were combined. Wehmeyer et al. (2012) examined the impact of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) on the self-determination of students with disabilities. The SDLMI is a student-directed model of teaching that promotes self-regulated problem solving, goal setting, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and enhanced global self-determination. Results from Wehmeyer et al. (2012) indicated significant improvements in self-determination of the intervention group. This study established a causal relationship between the SDLMI and global self-determination.

Furthermore, enhancing self-determination skills may positively influence student outcomes in areas such as employment, postsecondary education, quality of life, and academics (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006). Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) surmised that students with higher self-determination have a greater chance of attaining employment and earning a higher wage than students with lower self-determination. McDougal, Evans, and Baldwin (2010) concluded that self-determination was a predictor of quality of life. Specifically, individuals with higher baseline self-determination identified greater perceptions of personal development and personal fulfillment over time.

To identify self-determination skill areas that special education teachers perceived to be most important for their students, Wehmeyer et al. (2000) identified seven instructional domains based on component elements of self-determination that are generally addressed through instruction. These domains include (a) choice making, (b) decision making, (c) problem solving, (d) goal setting and attainment, (e) self-advocacy, (f) self-management and self-regulation, and (g) self-awareness and self-knowledge. Carter et al. (2008) and Cho, Wehmeyer, and Kingston (2011) referenced these domains in survey research to determine the self-determination skills that teachers valued the most in relation to their students and addressed most frequently through instruction. Additionally, Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) utilized these seven domains to evaluate the transition goals in the IEPs of students with intellectual disabilities to determine the extent that self-determination instruction was occurring. These researchers contended that if a transition goal reflected one of the component elements included in the domains, then those skills were being taught. Based on previous research, these seven domains have been identified as skills that can be referenced in IEP goals and addressed in instruction.

Qualitative research studies have also demonstrated that self-determination is an important construct in the lives of students with disabilities. Specifically, the perspectives of parents (e.g., Grigal, Neubert, Moon, & Graham, 2003), teachers (e.g., Carter et al., 2008), students (e.g., Getzel & Thoma, 2006) and adults with disabilities (e.g., Stoner, Angell, House, & Goins, 2006) have been analyzed. Participants in these studies have further confirmed that self-determination skills are a fundamental area of instruction, a necessity for successful student outcomes, and an instrumental factor to enhance the quality of life for individuals with disabilities. Educators have access to best practices, strategies, and curriculum to develop these undeniably important and vital self-determination skills (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011). Yet, the question remains, Are these skills being addressed in IEPs? In this era of accountability, we, as educators, must evaluate not only student outcomes but also the content of educational programs by ascertaining if we are addressing the skills, such as self-determination, that will prepare students with disabilities for adult life.

Literature has identified “gaps between research and implementation of self-determination skills” (Denney & Daviso, 2012, p. 49). IEPs should be the starting point when investigating the implementation of self-determination skills, for if IEPs do not contain goals and objectives related to self-determination, the chances of self-determination skill instruction are minimal. Wood et al. (2004) stressed that “IEPs should

specifically target self-determination and transition plans, in the form of goals and objectives” (p. 9). Since self-determination skills continue to be critical to the transition process, best practices include incorporating these skills into the curriculum and the annual goals and objectives of a student’s IEP (Steere and Cavaiuolo, 2002). In essence, we must be accountable, identify and understand what is occurring in schools regarding the self-determination skills of students with disabilities by evaluating our current educational programs. For it is only through evaluation that we can recognize program strengths and identify areas of need.

Program evaluation, to be effective, must not only measure program outcomes but also provide accountability and identify areas of needed improvement (Peterson, 2002). To further illustrate this point, Scriven (1967) unequivocally declared that the primary purpose of an evaluation is to determine “the estimation of merit, worth, value, etc.” (p. 5) of that which is being evaluated. These tenets of program evaluation are the foundation from which we conducted this study. We strongly believe that educators should not shy away from program evaluation but embrace it, for it is only by evaluating a program, that we can effectively improve it.

The current program evaluation was an internal evaluation which is objective oriented. In other words, an internal evaluator, the first author, who was employed by a high school district in the role of a Special Programs Support Facilitator, completed the evaluation. As a Support Facilitator, her responsibilities included overseeing several district programs and promoting new data-based initiatives. IEPs are individualized programs for students with disabilities, and we contend we are evaluating one component (i.e., annual goals) of the students’ individualized programs. The program evaluation of the IEPs was proposed as a starting point to determine if self-determination skills were being incorporated into the instruction of students with disabilities, specifically through IEP implementation.

Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen (2011) identified advantages and disadvantages to internal evaluations; internal evaluators have knowledge of the organizational culture, the program history, the stakeholders, and administrators’ decision-making style. In addition, internal evaluators are more likely to use the results and advocate for change. However, Fitzpatrick et al. surmised that these advantages could also be disadvantages. Due to the proximity of internal evaluators to the program, they may not see apparent solutions as readily. Additionally, they may have biases and lack impartiality in the evaluation process. We attempted to minimize these concerns by using an external evaluator, the second author, to follow the audit trail, examine the data and its analysis, and review the recommendations.

The purpose of this program evaluation was to determine if a large high school in a Midwestern state included self-determination skills in the goals and objectives in students’ IEPs. Specifically, the IEPs of all students with disabilities who received special education services within this school were analyzed. The following evaluation questions were addressed: (a) To what extent are self-determination goals targeted in the IEPs of students with disabilities? and (b) Are there differences in the inclusion of self-

determination components in IEP goals when comparing disability area, gender, or grade level? Since the purpose of program evaluation is to make a judgment, we set criteria for these objectives and based those criteria on discussions between the evaluators, the program coordinator, and general practice. We set the objectives relative to these evaluation questions as: (a) Self-determination instructional components will occur in 80% of IEPs of students with disabilities and (b) There will be similar results of self-determination instructional components in the IEPs of students across disability, gender and grade level.

### *Method*

#### **Setting and Participants**

The evaluation focused on a low achieving suburban high school with a high minority and low income population. This school is located close to a large metropolitan city in the Midwest. Of the approximately 2,000 students in grades 9 – 12 educated at this school, 286 are students with disabilities. Due to an on-going decline in test scores for both students with and without disabilities, this school had been placed on the Academic Watch Status for the state. The racial/ethnic background of the high school consisted of 90.5% Black, 1.8% White, and 5.8% Hispanic. Students from low-income households comprised 68% of the school population. The mobility rate was 10.6%. Of the 286 students with disabilities in the high school, there were approximately 30% more males than females. Students received services across multiple disability areas, but the three most prevalent categories were specific learning disability (56%), intellectual disability (15%), and emotional disability (10%). Complete demographic data for the students with disabilities is provided in Table 1.

The 286 students who have IEPs were determined to be eligible for special education and related services as a result of eligibility meetings. Eligibility determination is uniform from school to school within the district and the state and based on requirements mandated by the IDEA, 2004. Once each student was deemed eligible, an IEP was developed and reviewed at least annually. The IEPs at this school conformed to the requirements imposed by special education law (i.e., IDEA, 2004) and were based on student strengths, parent concerns, evaluation results, and the individual needs of the students.

Table 1  
*Student Demographic Data (n = 286)*

Characteristic	Number	Percent of students with disabilities
Gender		
Male	185	65%
Female	101	35%
Disability		
Autism	12	4%
Emotional Disability	29	10%

Hearing Impairment	2	1%
Intellectual Disability	43	15%
Other Health Impairment	13	4%
Physical Impairment	7	2%
Specific Learning Disability	160	56%
Speech/Language Impairment	16	6%
Traumatic Brain Injury	1	>1%
Vision Impairment	3	1%
Grade		
9th	72	25%
10th	67	23%
11th	63	22%
12th	84	29%

Site selection for this evaluation was based on several factors. First of all, the school's vision statement recognizes the importance of preparing the students for their postsecondary future. Particularly, emphasis is placed on enhancing skills that will promote college and career readiness, and self-determination has been identified as a practice that may promote more positive postschool outcomes (Wehmeyer, 2014). Next, students at this school must complete a Senior Project, which is a graduation requirement.

The purpose of this project is to have students select and participate in activities (e.g., job shadowing, career research, college visits, service learning) that may promote their college and career goals. As a result of this requirement, the college and career goals of students with disabilities may be reflected in the annual goals of students' IEPs. Implications regarding the relationship between the Senior Project and the inclusion of self-determination goals in IEPs will be discussed later to determine if this requirement increased the likelihood of self-determination being addressed in the goals. Furthermore, this school was selected because it is located in a state in which students' IEPs must include postsecondary goals and transition services when the student is 14 ½ years of age. This means all students with disabilities in this school should have a transition plan with annual goals that reflect their postsecondary goals. This is not a federal mandate and some states do not require transition services to be included in an IEP until a child turns 16. Lastly, this school is located in a state that has established social emotional learning standards that define what all students should know and be able to do. These learning standards include component elements of self-determination (i.e., decision making, self-awareness, and self-management) that may be referenced in the annual goals of students with disabilities.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The IEPs of all 286 students with disabilities in grades 9-12 were collected and analyzed. Permission to obtain information for this evaluation was provided by the University's Institutional Review Board and the Director of Pupil Personnel Services for the school district. Confidentiality was secured by assigning all IEPs a numerical code and by not transferring student names to the database. Goals and objectives from each student's IEP

were collected from an electronic report, IEP at a Glance, which was generated from the electronic IEP program, Easy IEP™. IEP at a Glance is an individualized report that details the disability area, current goals and objectives, and accommodations for each student with an IEP. The school's data system, PowerSchool©, was referenced to obtain and verify the gender and grade level of each student.

Referencing the IEP at a Glance reports, the annual goals for each student were entered into a Microsoft Excel™ matrix by the first author. Descriptive statistics were then utilized to answer the evaluation questions and determine the extent that each corresponding objective was met. For this evaluation, the seven instructional domains utilized in previous research (i.e., Carter et al., 2008; Cho et al., 2011; Wehmeyer et al., 2000; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998) were referenced to identify which components of self-determination were included in the IEPs. Table 2 provides a brief description of each of these domains. Wood et al. (2004) contended that components of self-determination that are teachable and measurable should be included in the goals and objectives in students' IEPs. Since these instructional domains represent skills that can be taught and measured, these domains were utilized for the goal analysis. When the IEP goals were found to be too broad or too vague, the corresponding objectives were then examined for clarification. The second author conducted interrater reliability by examining 30% (75 IEPs) of the IEPs chosen at random. Interrater reliability was 98%. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the extent to which self-determination goals were present in the IEPs, the instructional domains of self-determination that were referenced in the goal, and if differences existed due to areas of disability, gender, or year in high school (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior). In total, 286 IEPs containing 1033 goals were analyzed.

Table 2  
*Seven Instructional Domains of Self-Determination*

Instructional Domain	Definition
Choice making (CM)	selection between alternatives based on individual preferences
Decision making (DM)	incorporates choice-making, but this is a process with specific steps or elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• define an issue or problem</li> <li>• collect information and consider options</li> <li>• use choice-making</li> <li>• implement a plan of action</li> </ul>
Problem solving (PS)	involves a specific situation that requires a response to function effectively
Goal setting (GS)	identification of goals, objectives, and tasks to achieve goals; actions to attain a desired outcome



Self-awareness (SW)	knowledge of one’s strengths, weaknesses, interests, and abilities, and how to use these to influence one’s quality of life
Self-advocacy (SA)	skills to speak up or defend a cause; to advocate on your own behalf
Self-regulation (SR)	process of monitoring one’s own actions (includes self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement)

Note. Definitions based on “The Development of Self-Determination and Implications for Educational Interventions with Students with Disabilities,” by M. L. Wehmeyer, D. J. Sands, B. Doll, and S. Palmer, 1997, *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, 44, p. 390-316.

### Results

#### Evaluation Question 1: To what extent are self-determination instructional components represented in the IEPs of students with disabilities?

Of the 286 IEPs that were examined, 89% (254 IEPs) contained at least one self-determination component and 11% (32 IEPs) did not include a goal that referenced a self-determination skill. Of the 1033 goals, 590 included at least one of the seven self-determination instructional components. The three most common components reflected in the goals were self-regulation, self-awareness, and choice making. The distribution of each of the components is represented in Figure 1.

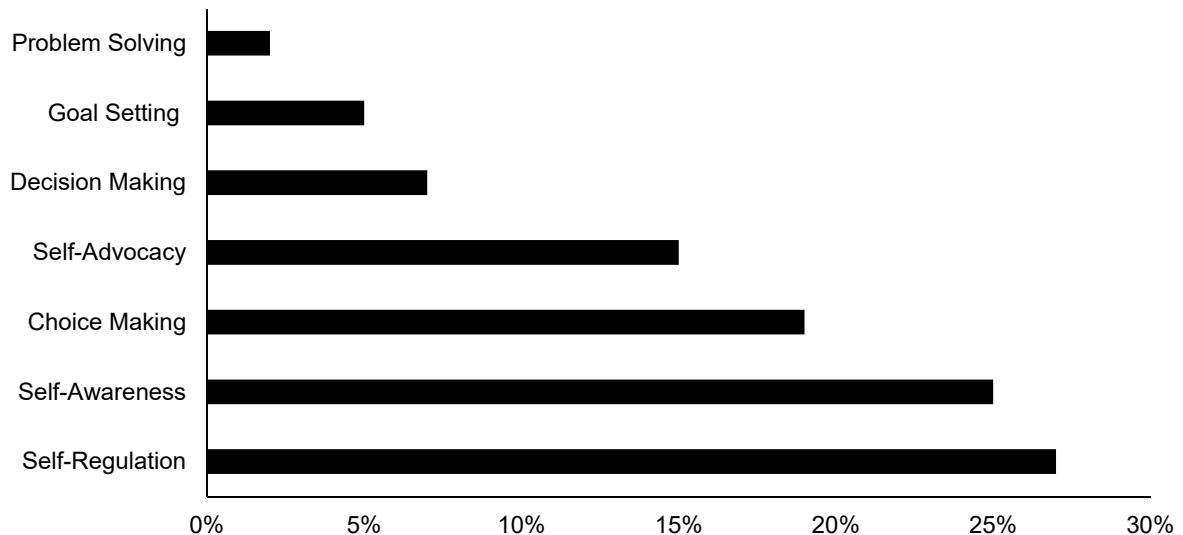


Figure 1. Self-determination component distribution based on 1033 IEP goals.

Consequently, we can answer the first evaluation question that 89% of the IEPs of students with disabilities had at least one goal that reflected a self-determination instructional component. In addition, the objective set for this evaluation question, that

self-determination instructional components will occur in 80% of IEPs of students with disabilities, was met.

**Evaluation Question 2: Are there differences in the inclusion of self-determination components in IEP goals when comparing disability area, gender, or grade level?**

Two analyses were conducted to determine if there were differences in the inclusion of self-determination components when comparing disability area, gender, and grade level. First, the prevalence of instructional components in the goals for each disability area was tabulated. The goals were analyzed to ascertain which instructional components were most often referenced and if differences existed among the disability areas. Results of this analysis indicated that self-awareness, self-regulation, and choice making were the top three self-determination components across all disabilities. However, self-awareness was most often cited in the goals of students with learning disabilities, whereas self-regulation was most prevalent in the goals of students with intellectual disabilities, emotional disabilities, autism, and other health impairments. Table 3 provides the specific number of instructional components across disabilities.

Table 3  
*Self-Determination Instructional Components by Disability Area*

Instructional Domain <sup>a</sup>	Disability <sup>b</sup>										Total
	AU	ED	HI	ID	OHI	PI	SLD	SLI	TBI	VI	
Choice Making	5	12	1	19	4	2	57	11	0	1	112
Problem Solving	1	2	0	0	0	0	6	3	0	0	12
Decision Making	1	8	0	5	2	1	20	3	0	0	40
Goal Setting	0	4	0	1	1	1	20	1	0	0	28
Self-Regulation	14	31	1	26	16	8	60	6	0	1	163
Self-Advocacy	1	11	1	16	6	7	41	1	1	4	89
Self-Awareness	9	16	1	17	5	1	84	11	1	1	146
Total	31	84	4	84	34	20	288	36	2	7	590

<sup>a</sup>Component elements of self-determination based on the instructional domains utilized by Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (2000).

<sup>b</sup>Disability Areas –Autism (AU), Emotional Disability (ED), Hearing Impairment (HI), Intellectual Disability (ID), Other Health Impairment (OHI), Orthopedic Impairment (PI), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Speech or Language Impairment SLI), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Visual Impairment (VI).

IEPs for each of the disability categories were then analyzed to determine the percentage of IEPs that contained self-determination instructional components across disability categories. In total, there were only 32 IEPs that contained no goals reflecting components of self-determination. The IEPs without self-determination instructional components were in all categories of disability except vision impairment and traumatic brain injury. Both of these categories had very few students; there was only one student identified with a traumatic brain injury and only three students were identified with a visual impairment. The final results of this analysis indicated that all disability categories, except for one (hearing impairment), had at least 86% of IEPs reflecting self-determination instructional domains. There were only two students identified as hearing impaired and that category had one student without a self-determination goal. Consequently, except for the category of hearing impairment, all disability categories had percentages ranging from 86% to 100% of self-determination instructional components represented in the IEPs. See Table 4 for the inclusion of self-determination components in IEPs by disability category.

Table 4  
*Inclusion of Self-Determination Components in IEPs by Disability Category*

Disability Category	Number of Students	Number of IEPs Including a Self-Determination Instructional Domain	Percentage of IEPs Including Instructional Domain
Autism	12	11	92%
Emotional Disability	29	27	93%
Hearing Impairment	2	1	50%
Intellectual Disability	43	38	88%
Other Health Impairment	13	12	92%
Physical Impairment	7	6	86%
Specific Learning Disability	160	141	88%

Speech / Language Impairment	16	14	88%
Traumatic Brain Injury	1	1	100%
Vision Impairment	3	3	100%
Total	286	254	89%

Similarly, no major discrepancies were noted between the inclusion of self-determination instructional components in the IEPs for males and females. Out of the 185 IEPs for male students, 20 IEPs, or 11%, did not include instructional components of self-determination. Of the 101 IEPs for female students, 12 IEPs, or 12%, did not include components of self-determination. After analyzing the overall number of goals that included elements of self-determination for males and females, the three primary instructional components were self-regulation, self-awareness, and choice making. Comparable results were identified between gender and self-regulation, self-awareness, and choice making; however, it should be noted that very few goals reflecting the components of decision making and problem solving were included in the IEPs for female students. Figure 2 displays the relationship between the instructional component elements and gender.

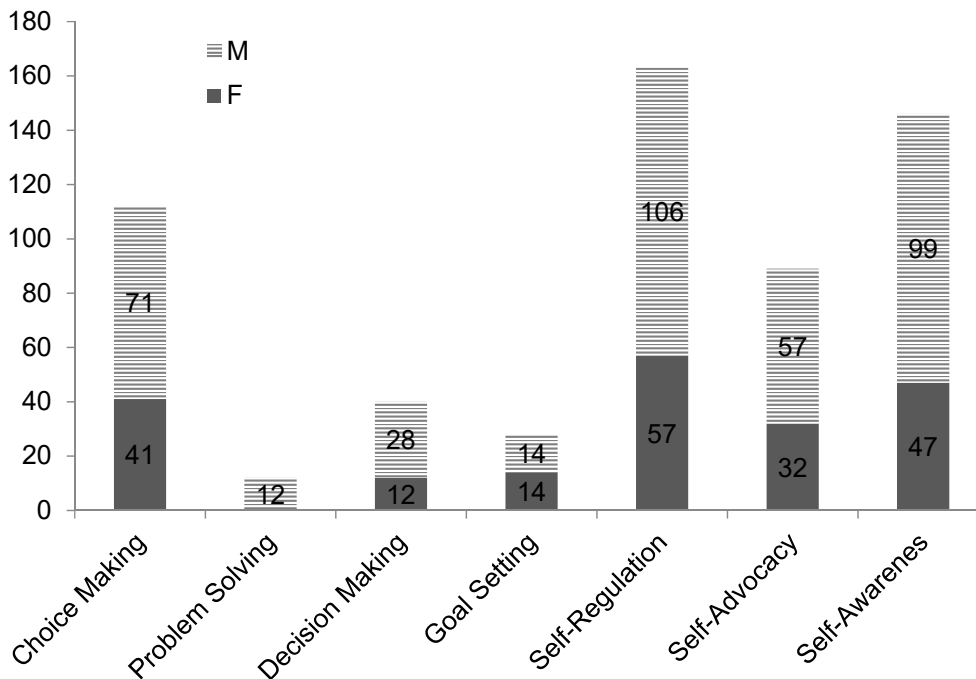


Figure 2. Elements of self-determination in relation to gender.

Out of 286 students, 72 were in the 9th grade, 67 were in the 10th grade, 63 were in the 11th grade, and 84 were in the 12th grade. Based on the comparison of grade level and

inclusion of self-determination instructional components, 89% of 9th grade students, 85% of 10th grade students, 89% of 11th grade students, and 92% of 12th grade students had IEP goals that reflected components of self-determination.

Furthermore, self-awareness, self-regulation, and choice making were the three dominant instructional components in the goals for students in 9th, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11th grades. Self-regulation and self-awareness were common elements for the 12th grade students; however, self-advocacy was the prevailing instructional component for 12th graders. See Figure 3 for the distribution of components based on the four grade levels.

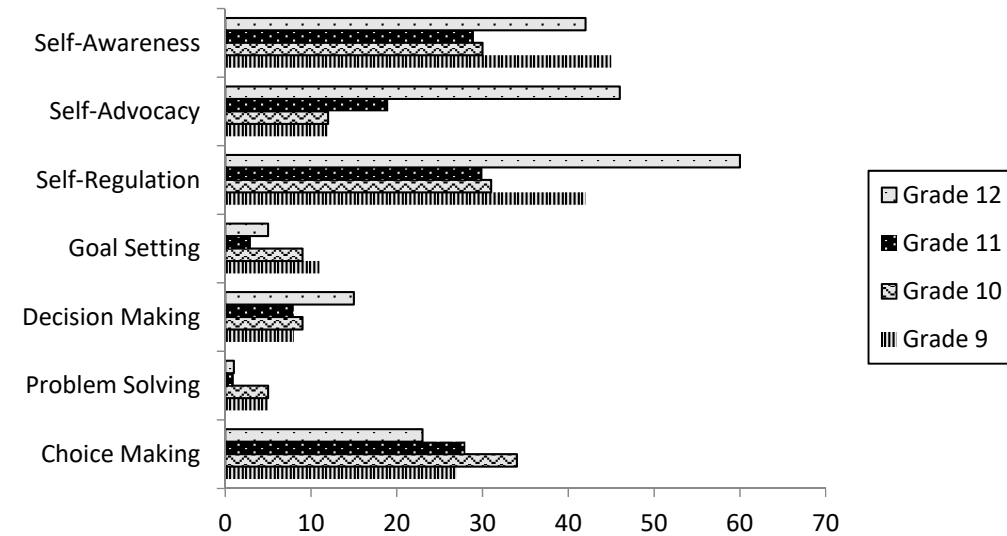


Figure 3. Elements of self-determination in relation to grade.

Accordingly, we feel that we can state that there were no major differences in the IEPs of students with disabilities when comparing disability area, gender, and grade level; the one exception is the category of hearing impairment that had two students, one of whom had no IEP goal that reflected a self-determination instructional component. IEPs are based on the individual students' needs and we do not have a concern over the varying frequencies of instructional components, such as students with behavior disorders having more self-determination goals reflecting the instructional component of self-regulation. However, we are concerned that female students did not have as many goals reflecting decision making and problem solving.

### Discussion

This evaluation was conducted to answer two questions: (a) To what extent are self-determination goals targeted in the IEPs of students with disabilities? and (b) Are there differences in the inclusion of self-determination components in IEP goals when comparing disability area, gender, or grade level? The comprehensive answers to these questions are described in the results. We also set objectives relative to these evaluation questions as: (a) Self-determination instructional components will occur in 80% of IEPs of students with disabilities and (b) There will be similar results of self-determination instructional components in the IEPs of students across disability, gender and grade level.

We can state that this evaluation has determined that both of these objectives were met, with the exception of the disability of hearing impairment. Based on the results of this evaluation, we determined and provided the following recommendations for the program: (a) continue to monitor self-determination instructional components in IEPs by evaluating a certain percentage of the IEPs each year (i.e., 30%), (b) further investigate why female students had fewer self-determination goals reflecting the instructional components of decision making and problem solving, (c) evaluate treatment fidelity of self-determination instruction by observation or self-reporting (using a fidelity checklist), (d) evaluate student outcomes by curriculum-based assessments and observation, and (e) promote the components of self-determination that were addressed less frequently in the IEP goals (e.g., problem solving, decision making, and goals setting).

According to Fitzpatrick et al. (2011) the primary purpose of evaluation “is to render judgments about the value of the object under evaluation” (p. 35). The purpose of this evaluation was to determine if the IEPs for students with disabilities at a suburban high school in the Midwest reflected the components of self-determination. Elements of evaluation sometimes mirror procedural components of research and make it challenging to distinguish between the two processes; however, the purpose or end result is indicative of the process. Thus, the current evaluation sought to provide information to make a judgment as opposed to adding knowledge to the field or advancing theory, which is a primary distinction between research and evaluation (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). Although the intent of this evaluation was to analyze the data to answer the evaluation questions, the outcomes can add to previous research.

Self-determination is regarded as a critical component of the curriculum, and results from this evaluation corroborate this assertion. The current evaluation supports findings from previous studies in which teachers regarded self-determination as an important construct (Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Carter et al., 2008; Cho, et al., 2011; Wehmeyer et al., 2000). The number of IEPs in this evaluation that comprised at least one goal reflecting an instructional component of self-determination substantiates this conclusion. Nonetheless, results from this evaluation found larger numbers of IEPs that included components of self-determination than did the Agran et al. (1999) and Wehmeyer et al. (2000) studies. Findings from the current evaluation indicated that elements of self-determination were included in 89% of IEPs; whereas, in the Agran et al. and Wehmeyer et al. (2000) studies most of the teachers reported that their students did not have self-determination goals in their IEPs. Agran et al. found that 55% of the respondents indicated that self-determination goals were not included, or only included in some of their students’ IEPs, and 31% of the teachers in the Wehmeyer et al. (2000) study reported that their students did not have self-determination goals in their IEPs. Thus, the identification of components of self-determination in 89% of the IEPs at this school is a promising finding.

Not only do the results of this evaluation surpass the findings by Agran et al. (1999) and Wehmeyer et al. (2000), but this evaluation is the first one to analyze IEP goals of students from 10 disability categories and identify that self-determination skills are being included in the goals. A previous study by Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) examined

transition-related goals in the IEPs of students with intellectual disabilities to determine if students were being taught self-determination skills. Findings from this study indicated that instruction to teach students skills associated with self-determination was not occurring. More specifically, not one goal was identified that substantiated students were being taught the component skills of self-determination (e.g., decision making, problem solving, and choice making). Therefore, findings from this program evaluation support the current emphasis on promoting the self-determination of students with disabilities as indicated by the inclusion of self-determination skills in 89% of the goals in the IEPs. The presence of these skills in 89% of the goals is also very encouraging. When self-determination skills (e.g., choice making, decision making, and self-regulating) are reflected in the goals of students with disabilities, these students may potentially achieve more positive postschool outcomes than students whose goals do not include self-determination skills (Malian and Nevin, 2002).

Besides determining the presence of self-determination components in IEP goals, the current evaluation identified which self-determination instructional components were reflected in the IEP goals. The findings indicated that the instructional components of self-determination included in the IEPs matched the elements that researchers have identified as significantly important to educators. In this evaluation the three most prevalent instructional components in the goals and objectives were self-awareness, self-regulation, and choice making. Both choice making and self-regulation have been recognized as key instructional domains that should be included in curriculum for students with disabilities. Specifically, educators in the Wehmeyer et al. (2000) study cited choice making, problem solving, and decision making as the most important instructional domains, and educators in the Carter et al. (2008) research rated problem solving, self-management, and decision making as the most essential self-determination instructional domains.

Since no previous studies were located that analyzed the inclusion or exclusion of self-determination instructional components in IEPs based on areas of disability, gender, or grade level, no comparisons with previous studies could be made. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) only examined the IEPs of students with intellectual disabilities. Nevertheless, the results of this evaluation indicate that self-determination goals in each of the disability areas, as well as those for male and female students and students in grades 9-12, were reflected in the students' IEPs. While the presence of self-determination goals in the IEPs emphasizes the value that teachers place on addressing the self-determination needs of all students with disabilities, the outcomes of this evaluation do not provide data to support whether these goals were addressed in instruction or if students made progress. As a result, future evaluations should seek to determine if self-determination goals are being implemented and achieved.

### *Implications for Practice*

Enhancing the self-determination in students with disabilities is regarded as best practice. To promote this practice, self-determination skills should be incorporated into the curriculum through instructional practices and reflected in IEP goals. Teachers have

identified self-determination as an important curricular component (Carter et al., 2008; Wehmeyer et al., 2000), yet it is through the implementation of the goal that instruction occurs. For students with disabilities, if the acquisition of self-determination skills is not specifically identified in the goals and objectives of the students' IEPs, the possibility remains that these skills may not be addressed. This evaluation provided a means to determine if the IEP goals at one suburban high school in a Midwestern state included self-determination components; however, this is only the beginning of a more comprehensive evaluation. Further evaluation of the instruction related to self-determination goals, the treatment integrity of interventions designed to implement the goals, and the student outcomes is warranted. Data that reflects both teacher implementation (a fidelity checklist and/or observation of instruction) and student outcomes (administration of self-determination assessments or detailed curriculum-based assessments) should be the next step to determine if self-determination instructional domains are being addressed and if they are producing positive student self-determination outcomes.

High schools share a common goal of seeking to prepare their students to be college and/or career ready so that they will attain more positive post-school outcomes. To achieve these outcomes, we must provide instruction to address self-determination skills that will enable all students to be the change agents in their lives. While instruction that promotes all components of self-determination is important, additional emphasis should be placed on incorporating self-actualizing components (e.g., problem solving, decision making, and goal setting) of self-determination into IEPs. Results from this evaluation indicated that fewer goals included these integral components, even though teachers have recognized decision making and problem solving as two of the most essential self-determination elements (Carter et al., 2008; Wehmeyer et al., 2000). Furthermore, for students to become productive citizens, they will need to identify and achieve attainable goals, make decisions based on those goals, and solve problems they will encounter along the way. As a result, these domains should be addressed in future research. In closing, incorporating self-determination into IEP goals will remain a focal point for students with disabilities to meet their individual needs; however, we must also acknowledge that promoting self-determination across the curriculum will benefit all students.

### *Limitations*

Resources and time limit all program evaluations, and this evaluation is no exception. Given more resources and time, the evaluators would have conducted a comprehensive evaluation focusing on instruction and student outcomes. However, IEPs are the guiding document for both instruction and student outcomes and offer strong evidence of the value placed on self-determination goals.

Another limitation is that this evaluation occurred in one high school and generalization to other populations is limited. Evaluation procedures are idiosyncratic to the program being evaluated; yet, we believe that application of our methods allow for school personnel to ascertain the presence of self-determination goals, which in turn can lead to specific recommendations for each school.



A final limitation of this evaluation is that the school required students to complete a Senior Project. Since this was a graduation requirement for all students, including those with disabilities, this requirement may have increased the likelihood that self-determination skills would be reflected in annual goals. It should be noted that quite a few of the goals in the analysis referenced the Senior Project. Thus, the Senior Project may have prompted IEP teams to include self-determination skills that may not have otherwise been addressed; nevertheless, this emphasis on college and career readiness skills that foster more self-determined students is a positive outcome.

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