

Experiences of Special Educators in Creating Opportunities for Students to Practice Self-Determination

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Abstract

Self-determination skills are a potential predictor of post-school success for individuals with disabilities. This study examined the perspectives of special educators of students in preschool through age 22 in one school district who participated in multiple professional development and coaching sessions on self-determination including the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) and student involvement in the IEP process over a two-year period. Data were collected through interviews with eight special educators. Four major themes emerged from the data: personal knowledge of self-determination, educator perspectives on their roles in creating opportunities, strategies for developing self-determination, and parent involvement. Findings suggest that a primary perceived challenge in creating opportunities for students is a misalignment between teacher and parent understanding of self-determination and related goals. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: disability, self-determination, self-determined learning, self-directed learning, post-school outcomes, professional development

Experiences of Special Education Practitioners in Creating Opportunities for Students to Practice Self-Determination

Self-determination skills are vital for the social and academic success of students with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2016). In the *1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* section on transition services, self-determination was acknowledged as “the ultimate goal of education” (Halloran, 1993, p. 214). Shogren et al. (2015) defined this ultimate outcome, self-determination, as a:

*Dispositional characteristic manifested as acting as the causal agent in one’s life.
Self-determined people (i.e., causal agents) act in service to freely chosen goals.
Self-determined actions function to enable a person to be the causal agent in his or her life. (p. 258)*

At the heart of self-determination is a student's ability to make choices to work toward goals. Specifically, self-determination includes the following components: choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting, goal attainment, self-monitoring, self-advocacy, internal locus of control, self-awareness and self-knowledge (Wehmeyer, 1995). Wehmeyer (1995) explains that empowerment and self-determination can be used interchangeably and specifically defines it as, "an internal need contributing to an individual's performance of intrinsically motivated behaviors" (p.18). While there are myriad opportunities for children to practice self-determination every day from choosing their clothing to reflecting on why they earned a particular test score and how they might improve in the future, we must consider if the adults in a child's life are making choices for the child, or if the child is the one making choices.

While evidence exists to support the teaching of self-determination skills (Test, Fowler, Kohler, & Kortering, 2010), students also require relevant and authentic opportunities to generalize self-determination skills to real-world contexts and situations (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007). One strategy for accomplishing this involves providing opportunities for students to actively participate in their own IEP meetings. Actively participating during the IEP process allows students to self-advocate for services and supports needed to be successful in the school setting, as well as develop and analyze progress towards annual and postsecondary transition goals customized to their interests and plans for life after high school (Royer, 2017; Seong, Wehmeyer, Palmer, & Little, 2015). Other strategies include embedding self-determination skill instruction and practice opportunities within academic tasks and social situations in inclusive classroom settings (Miller, 2012; Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013), as well as outside of the classroom through vocational exploration and community-based instruction (Papay, Unger, Williams-Diehm, & Mitchell, 2015; Test, Bartholomew, & Bethune, 2015).

Research has shown that self-determination skills contribute to positive adult outcomes (Test, Fowler, Kohler, & Kortering, 2010; Test et al., 2009) and are a potential predictor of post-school success for individuals with disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2016). In a survey of 891 general education and special education teachers in elementary and middle schools, Stang, Carter, Lane, and Pierson (2009) found that the participants perceived that self-determination is important for students with special education teachers rating the importance higher than general education teachers. They also reported that middle school teachers were more frequently providing self-determination instruction than elementary school teachers, demonstrating a need for promoting self-determination in younger grades. For the education of students with exceptionalities to be recognized within the framework of self-determination, educators must be knowledgeable of the construct and prepared to create opportunities for their students to develop and practice self-determination skills. However, special educators' understanding of self-determination components and their implementation of strategies to address students' acquisition of all aspects of self-determination varies (Carter, Owens, Trainor, Sun, & Swedeen, 2009; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000b). How can a child become self-determined if there are few opportunities to develop the skills? Creating a shift in the adults' perspectives of student empowerment is crucial.

The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) (Wehmeyer et al., 2000b) provides a guide for educators to create opportunities for students to develop self-determination and has demonstrated efficacy in increasing access to the general education curriculum for students with

disabilities (Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, & Little, 2008; Lee, Wehmeyer, Soukup, & Palmer, 2010; Shogren, Palmer, Wehmeyer, Williams-Diehm, & Little, 2012). Although the SDLMI has a strong research base to support its efficacy, most studies have examined student outcomes rather than the experiences of educators in implementing the SDLMI with their students. Preliminary studies of educators' experiences show that utilizing the SDLMI affects educator perspectives of students' abilities and potential in self-determined actions (Shogren, Plotner, Palmer, Wehmeyer, & Paek, 2014). The need for professional development is underscored by a national survey of 1,219 special education practitioners' promotion of self-determination, which found that 60% of respondents were acquainted with self-determination (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000a). Although more recent studies (e.g., Carter et al., 2009) have shown that the familiarity with self-determination has increased, Cho, Wehmeyer, and Kingston (2011) identified the lack of formal training in self-determination interventions, such as the SDLMI, is one of the most significant hindrances special educators face in creating opportunities for students to develop self-determination skills.

Despite the extensive research on self-determination and the use of the SDLMI, no researchers have examined how educators are supported in their implementation of the SDLMI. Using the SDLMI, along with face-to-face and virtual professional development sessions, this study addressed a critical need in the field of transition of students with exceptionalities: educator professional development. Although the SDLMI has positive impacts on student transition including change in self-determination and academic achievement (Lee, Wehmeyer, & Shogren, 2015), scant evidence exists on the successful training of educators in the SDLMI.

This study examined how preschool through transition-age special educators identified, rethought, and reworked their everyday practices through the lenses of self-determination and created opportunities for students to develop and practice self-determination skills. We explored the experience of modifying educator practices to create opportunities reported to effectively enhance self-determination skills of students with variety of disabilities, grade levels, and educational environments. As self-determination skills must be explicitly taught (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007), opportunities for students encompassed educator directed instruction on self-determination related content, specifically goal attainment, through the implementation of the SDLMI. Through discussion during professional development sessions and grade level team meetings, educators were able to use specific examples from fellow practitioners to evaluate their own practices and develop additional ideas to provide opportunities for their students to grow self-determination skills. This qualitative study utilized interviews to understand the experiences of these special educators in applying knowledge gleaned during professional development and coaching sessions focused on self-determination. The purpose of this study was to explore the following question: *How do special educators create opportunities for their students to develop and practice self-determination skills?*

Method

Procedure

Participants completed nine professional development sessions focused on self-determination, the SDLMI, and student-led IEPs over the course of a school year, from here on referred to as Year 1. Educators infused self-determination strategies into their daily practice throughout Year

1 and began piloting the SDLMI and awareness of the SDLMI process with one to two students receiving special education services midway through Year 1. In the following school year, from here on referred to as Year 2, the participants expanded implementation of the SDLMI to all students on their caseloads. After a presentation on the Student-Led IEP process by McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones (2001), participants had students use their work with the SDLMI, and knowledge of their goals and progress toward their goals as a bridge to involvement in their own IEP meetings. In Year 2, participants trained other district special educators, those at similar grade levels, in the SDLMI who then used it with one or two students. Eight educators, who implemented self-determination instruction in Year 1, participated in interviews about their experiences with implementation of the SDLMI and the creation of opportunities to promote self-determination. The setting, participants, professional development and coaching sessions, and data collection and analysis are described below.

Setting

Professional development sessions occurred at a location central to the school district. Some sessions were led face-to-face and some sessions were facilitated virtually using a video conferencing platform. Three professionals in the field of self-determination presented the professional development and coaching. The majority of sessions were presented by two of the professionals, also researchers on this study. One face-to-face and one virtual session were led by only one professional who was present at all sessions. Participants were from a school district in a mid-sized suburban town consisting of over 80% White individuals and a median family income of \$68,000 (U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts, 2015). The district's long-term goal is to implement the SDLMI in classrooms, including students without disabilities.

Participants

Twenty special educators of students in preschool through age 22, in one school district, participated in nine self-determination related professional development sessions over a period of two school years. The practitioners taught in a variety of settings with students with disabilities including self-contained classrooms, community-based instruction, and inclusion in general education settings (co-teaching, push-in, and pull-out). The focus of this study is solely on data gleaned from semi-structured interviews with eight of the twenty practitioners.

The district Assistant Superintendent for Student Services selected one to two educators from each school in the district for a total of 20 participants in the initial implementation of self-determination instruction, training on SDLMI and Student-Led IEPs, and additional professional development and coaching sessions. Each of these educators had a minimum of four years of teaching experience in their current setting. This selected group, referred to as the Initial Implementation Group, piloted the SDLMI with one to two students on their caseload following training in Session 3. After the completion of Session 5, the selected group of educators were invited to participate in this study through an email sent by the district Assistant Superintendent of Student Services. Educators were offered an incentive of entry into a drawing to win a \$50 Amazon gift card, with additional entries possible for additional tasks including member checking and follow-up demographic questions.

Six educators completed a semi-structured (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) phone interview with one of the researchers. As data saturation had not been reached with the initial six interviews,

members of the Initial Implementation Group who had not yet participated in an interview were invited again to participate in the study after Session 8. Two additional special educators provided consent to participate in the study and were interviewed by one of the researchers. After analyzing interviews with eight participants, the data were saturated.

The eight participants in this study were all special educators; three taught at the elementary level, three taught middle school, one taught preschool, and one taught in a post-secondary setting (ages 18-22). The participants had 4-41 years of experience teaching (*mean* = 16.9) and 4-12 (*mean* = 6.25) of those years at their particular special education settings. Six participants taught in a *Learning Center* using pull-out instruction in small groups. Four participants also co-taught some classes in the general education setting, paired with a general education teacher. One participant taught in an inclusive setting with a mix of students with and without disabilities. One participant taught in a self-contained setting with students in a transition program. One participant additionally led instruction in small groups to support Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) interventions. The number of participants was limited due to the possible participant pool of 20 expert educators who completed extensive training on self-determination and the SDLMI professional development.

Professional Development Sessions

Participants attended a series of professional development sessions during Year 1 and Year 2 (see Table 1 for summary of educator professional development). Sessions were provided by national experts in the area of self-determination. Along with instruction in self-determination, the SDLMI, and student-led IEPs sessions included collaboration with colleagues to discuss goals and instructional ideas. After the professional development sessions, participants were challenged to identify, rethink, and rework their everyday practices through the lenses of self-determination to create opportunities for students to develop and practice self-determination.

All eight practitioners participated in the nine sessions outlined, with the exception of two participants who missed two sessions each in due to health and family emergencies. Approximately 10 administrators also participated in some professional development sessions. Although they did not participate in the study, their participation is notable because administrator support is the first step outlined in the Student-Led IEPs (McGahee et al., 2001). Three of the 20 professionals who participated in all nine sessions led their own professional development sessions near the end of Year 1 with all special education practitioners in the district. Two of those session leaders were participants in this study.

Table 1
Summary of Educator Professional Development Sessions

Session	Delivery	Participants	Length	Content
1	Face-to-Face	All Special Education Teachers Grouped by Preschool/Elementary, Middle, or High School/Transition	2 hours per Level	Self-determination 101 and Student-Led IEPs

2	Face-to-Face	District Symposium Open to All Educators, Three Sessions	1 hour	Self-determination 101 and Student-Led IEPs
3	Distance	Initial Special Education Implementation Group	3 hours	Implementation of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI)
4	Distance	Initial Special Education Implementation Group	3 hours	Follow-up on SDLMI Implementation, Progress Towards Goals, Planning, and Discussion of Evaluation
5	Face-to-Face	Initial Special Education Implementation Group	30 min. to 1 hour (individual), 3 hours (whole group)	Individual Observation and Coaching, Whole Group Feedback and Evaluation of SDLMI Implementation and Planning for Year 2 Implementation
6	Distance	Initial Special Education Implementation Group by Preschool/Elementary, Middle, or High School/Transition	2 hours Preschool/ Elementary and Middle, 1 hour High School/ Transition	Self-determination Implementation and Evaluation Plans for the New School Year
7	Face-to-Face	District Symposium Open to All Educators, Three Sessions (One reserved for The Initial Implementation Group)	1 hour	Self-Determination Foundation and Resources (All Educators), Student- Led IEP (Initial Implementation Group)
8	Distance	Initial Implementation Group	3 hours	Planning, Implementation of Student-Led IEP, Evaluation Tools
9	Face-to-Face	Initial Implementation Group	30 min. to 1 hour (Individual), 3 hours (Whole	Individual Observation and Coaching, Whole Group Feedback and Evaluation of SDLMI

Note: Year 1 encompassed Sessions 1-5 and Year 2 included Sessions 6-9. Administrators received one hour of Self-Determination 101 professional development and parents were invited, through the district special education advisory committee, to attend a two-hour workshop on self-determination and families at Session 5. Parents of children with and without IEPs were invited to attend a similar two-hour workshop at Session 9.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) were used to determine how educators applied concepts from the professional development sessions to create an educational environment rich with opportunities for students to develop and practice self-determination skills. Six interviews, ranging 20-35 minutes were completed after Session 5. Two interviews were completed after Session 8. Interview questions were designed to address the research question, including such questions as, *“In creating opportunities for students to practice self-determination skills, what have been some challenges you’ve experienced? Successes?”*

Interviews were audio-recorded then transcribed. Interview responses were then coded using Nvivo for Mac version 11.4.2 to determine themes. Two researchers used open and axial coding to independently examine each meaning unit (phrase, sentence or paragraph) then group meaning units into themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Themes were then examined for relationships between the themes. Each researcher compared transcripts to determine consistency across participants and examine for discrepant data. Each code, category, theme, and quotation was discussed between the two raters with any disagreements discussed until mutual agreement occurred. Themes were generated using deductive analysis to test Causal Agency Theory (Shogren et al., 2015) and implementation science (Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013; Fixsen, Naom, Blase, & Friedman, 2005). Themes that lacked sufficient support were discarded.

Trustworthiness

Participants were purposefully identified to represent of the population of special education practitioners who participated in the professional development and coaching. Researchers recruited participants until interview data reached saturation and no new themes emerged. Interview questions were designed to explore the research questions without leading the participant to a specific response. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using a professional transcribing service. Transcripts were then reviewed for validity by the researchers and through member checking. Trustworthiness was addressed through a variety of methods (Creswell, 2013) including interrater reliability in coding to increase the reliability of the themes. Validity was addressed through member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexivity. A peer check was used at each phase of the study from proposal to manuscript.

Findings

Through the process of coding, four broad themes of educator perspectives emerged: (a) personal knowledge of self-determination, (b) educator perspectives on their roles in creating opportunities, (c) strategies for developing student self-determination, and (d) parent involvement. The theme with the preponderance of the data was strategies, which included several categories that aligned with the components of self-determination. The themes shed light on how special educators create opportunities for their students to develop and practice self-determination skills and supported the theoretical framework of implementation science (Fixsen et al., 2013; Fixsen et al., 2005) and Causal Agency Theory (Shogren et al., 2015).

Personal Knowledge of Self-Determination

I'm already doing it. Self-awareness was an initial and primary skill that educators identified as necessary for students to develop self-determination skills. While this is an instructional strategy and will later be discussed under the theme of Strategies for Developing Self-Determination, it parallels the process educators experienced through expanding their awareness of self-determination within the context of their own teaching. All eight participants explained that when they learned about self-determination, they realized that although they may not have previously called it *self-determination*, they were already exhibiting practices of creating opportunities for students to practice self-determination. Some participants explained the change in perception of their teaching practices, which was highlighted by one participant, "It isn't an add-on to what we're doing. It's what we already do. It's just a shift in our perspective." While one participant said she already used most of the strategies discussed in the self-determination professional development sessions, other participants described how the increased awareness influenced their teaching practices, "It can be tied right into what you're doing already...very simple changes in your instruction like adding a graphing component where they can set a goal and watch their progress." Although educators were already creating some opportunities for their students to practice self-determination, understanding how to explicitly teach self-determination through the SDLMI increased the fidelity of implementation as another participant explained, "Now that I've had the training with [Authors], and [they've] put more structure around it, it makes it clearer how to implement it."

Definition of self-determination. Teachers were asked to define self-determination to take a pulse on their understanding and interpretation of self-determination. Although the definitions varied, all participants connected the definition to their own teaching practices to better internalize it and included a component of developing self-awareness in students. One educator described it as, "metacognition...understanding how you learn." Another educator defined it as, "figuring out how one can be successful; learning their strengths and weaknesses." Other participants conceptualized it more broadly in terms of the goals of self-determination, "students have opportunities to really grow towards independence and be able to live a life independent of the support that we provide them currently."

Other components of definitions included setting goals, planning, self-advocating, solving problems, and reflection. These descriptors mirror the SDLMI steps, (i.e., Set a Goal, Take

Action, Adjust Plan or Goal), as well as the components of self-determination (Wehmeyer, 1995). Some participants described it takes patience, similar to growth mindset (Dweck, 2016),

It's just an opportunity for growth and learning rather than it being an obstacle of just halting your efforts that you have to sort of fall and scrape your knee and learn how to get back up in order to keep going.

Another educator further described self-determination, “You’re never going to be able to sit there and go, all right, my kids are as self-determined as they can be...I like the way of looking at it as a process much more than an end result.”

Prioritizing self-determination. All participants discussed the significance of self-determination and the need to make it a priority. One educator explained it in terms of a daily practice, “It’s sort of growing what the expectation should be.” Another educator described a shift in her thinking, “It just took a while for me to sort of wrap my head around bringing it to the forefront, which is something that I’m now doing...now I make it the most important thing.” Other educators discussed that developing self-determination has become a priority of the district. One educator explained that after an outside transition specialist visited their district, who “lit [her] fire,” she decided to enter a master’s program in transition leadership. She is currently taking a course called, *Youth Development and Self-Determination* so she explained, “my whole world has turned into self-determination and making sure my students have opportunities.” Overall, it was clear that all participants believe in the power of developing self-determination in students, “If we don’t teach them these skills to become more independent, we’re really limiting the ability they have to live a full life.”

Educator Perspectives on Their Roles in Creating Opportunities

Enthusiasm for self-determination was apparent. Two of the participants joined one other educator who attended the professional development sessions to lead self-determination training for other special education professionals in the district. One educator explained, “We found some cool resources online like some videos to get everybody a little motivated by it.” With the demands placed on educators, buy-in is crucial for successful implementation.

Three educators discussed their role in setting expectations for the students and shifting responsibility to the student. One educator said that although students are reluctant to contact their teachers, she provides scaffolding for her students to lead this communication and develop self-advocacy skills. Another educator discussed her strategy of shifting the responsibility of encouragement to the students by providing reminders in the classroom,

When somebody’s saying, ‘Oh my God. I can’t do this. This is too hard.’ We stop what we’re doing, we go up to the board, we figure out what they need to say and then we talk about [it]. Sometimes they may just re-say it like, ‘It’s not that this is too hard, it may just take some time and effort.’

Rather than the educator encouraging students herself, she is building positive self-talk skills in students to lead their own self-reflection and perseverance.

An educator discussed another form of shifting responsibility, her students' involvement in the IEP process. One educator explained that when she prompted her student to make choices, his response was to ask what the educator wanted. Due to the supports and specialists needed in special education, it can be easy for adults to take the lead and for students to expect that dynamic. Although only two educators directly discussed self-determination opportunities in terms of shifting responsibility, all strategies are rooted in the student taking ownership.

Strategies for Developing Self-Determination

Building self-awareness. The primary category that emerged within strategies was the idea of building self-awareness in students. One participant explained the challenge of building self-awareness in students because, "they are not necessarily accurate in their reflection." When an inaccurate reflection is observed, one educator explained that is an important time to help them guide their reflection.

Self-monitoring allows students to draw conclusions based on data. If students were asked generally about their progress with a particular skill, the responses may diverge from the reality of the skills. However, several educators discussed the strategy of guiding students in monitoring their own progress by charting, keeping a graph, or highlighting to "visually observe progress." By making concepts more tangible, students are able to draw their own connections based on data, rather than emotion or speculation. One educator discussed how she loved the example of *The Little Engine That Could* from professional development sessions to explain self-determination. Using concrete examples to build self-awareness also connects to goal setting and progress monitoring, as students can be guided through creating small goals to take steps toward larger goals. One educator explained, "Make it as concrete as possible. It's much easier for them to measure if they did it or not." Another educator recognized, "It's not always that tangible and a lot of times just that everyday subtle change in their thought process is one of the most important successes."

Reflection was also identified by all participants as an important component of building self-awareness. An educator explained that she moved "reflection to the forefront" by adding self-reflection as part of the students' "ticket out of the Learning Center." Teachers can guide students in setting a goal, thinking about the steps to get there, then reflecting on that process. One educator talked about guiding questions such as, "What was easy about this one task?" or "Why didn't I complete this?" Another educator said that she creates opportunities for developing self-awareness by asking students to examine their mindset after they struggle to stay on task. She asks how they feel when they complete their work, encouraging them to be more efficient with their time. When their work is not completed, she asks them to reflect on why (e.g., anxiety or quantity of work). One of the elementary educators explained that self-awareness is more challenging at the elementary level, so she writes a note home to parents with the students to help them articulate what they did in school. She explained that it aided students with working memory and communication challenges. These are yet further examples of how educators utilized the self-determination professional development.

Choice-making and self-advocacy. The skill of choice-making and self-advocacy were not discussed as much as self-awareness but were identified by educators as skills that could be

developed to put students in the driver's seat. One educator told a story about a student choosing to move to a more challenging class after she asked him if he would like to try it. When the student was drawing and not taking notes, she asked him, "Do you want to stay in this class? Because it's your choice. You don't have to be here if you don't want to." When he replied by asking his educator if she wanted him to go back to the other class, she replied, "I want to know what you want to do." He decided to stay in the challenging class. This educator further explained that students want to be more independent and make their own choices that "they don't want somebody hovering over them and telling them what to do."

In terms of self-advocacy, one educator said that she tells her students they need to remind their general education teachers about their accommodations. She asks them to email the general education teacher to practice the steps they will need after they leave the school setting. Another educator said she has a student, who needs frequent breaks, practice self-advocacy by asking his educator for a break when he needs one. She feels this gives him more control. This educator also discussed how she coaches students to think about self-advocacy during reflection by reminding them about identified needs, "I don't know that unless you come and tell me that." Involvement in the IEP meeting was also discussed as an opportunity to practice self-advocacy skills. An educator said that student involvement "makes you sit back and really look at the whole picture, and kind of see through [the student's] eyes." Three educators said they have incorporated self-determination goals into student IEPs.

Goal setting and attainment. The emphasis on goal setting in the SDLMI was reflected in participant responses. After self-reflection, it was the second most discussed strategy. The discussion of goal setting and attainment was often connected to building self-awareness, self-monitoring, and growth mindset. One educator told a success story about a student who set a goal of getting accepted to a vocational high school, yet her grades were too low. To help the student in the goal setting process the educator guided her in setting many small goals that were tangible and measurable as stepping stones to get to the larger goal. When the student did not reach her initial goals, the educator guided her in reflection and the cyclical goal attainment process of the SDLMI. The student didn't reach her initial goals due to factors out of her control, so could she select goals in which she would have more control? The student was motivated by the goal setting process and ultimately raised her grades and then was accepted to the vocational school. The educator explained, "This was a direct...this was life changing for her."

Another educator explained that more support was needed in goal setting at the elementary level, but that after creating a worksheet that fit her students' communication needs to provide scaffolding, they were successful. Another educator said that she has her students use visual graphing and color coding to grade themselves on how they did for a goal. She also emphasized the importance of not only setting goals but following up on those goals. Another recommendation was to try something small, so the student could go through the process and learn the language and steps of goal setting. Teachers identified goal setting as a key component for creating opportunities for students to develop self-determination, with many strategies to help students set and attain goals.

Strategies at the preschool level. The preschool educator we interviewed discussed how she adapted the strategies to work on self-determination with her students, some of whom were non-

verbal. As scant resources are available for working with students on self-determination at the preschool level, this educator developed her own adaptations through understanding the communication abilities and needs of her students. She explained their focus was on practicing making choices between two options, practicing self-regulation through regulating their bodies in the setting, and self-advocacy through practicing saying, "I don't like that. Please stop."

During a visit to her classroom at the end of Year 2, she showed the researchers how she had used visual prompts for choice making and self-awareness development and collaborated with the occupational therapist to work on self-determination with students who are non-verbal. In response to her work with students who can verbalize, she described successes in interviewing students about their strengths and areas for improvement. While educators at the elementary level were utilizing an adapted Likert scale assessment ranging to a smiling to frowning face, the preschool educator explained the assessment was not yet appropriate for some of her students who may not yet fully understand the differences between the faces. However, her simple interview strategy provided opportunities for informal assessment.

Educator Perspectives on Parent Involvement

Although parent involvement is not emphasized in the SDLMI, its importance is discussed in other resources such as the Student-Led IEP. Some educators are parents themselves and told stories about utilizing strategies to develop self-determination in their own children. However, six of the educators discussed parents when asked about challenges in creating opportunities for their students to develop self-determination. As the current study only examined the perspectives of special educators, this finding does not incorporate the parent perspectives.

One challenge discussed by the participants was the perception that parents often wanted their children to have more guidance and structure than the educator thought was necessary. For example, one educator said a parent of a child with autism said to her, "I want you to write assignments for her in her book." The educator replied, "I'm not going to do that. I'm going to teach her how to use it online." She explained,

It was really a battle for a while. You know, the mother trying to get us to micro-manage. And the girl doesn't want to be micro-managed either...But, by the end of the school year, the mom was crying because she was so happy to see how far her daughter had come.

Another educator explained, "a lot of the parents, when they hear the ideas of self-determination, they think of it as a big thing and they don't even necessarily know that their kids are already doing those things, in every day interactions." Yet another educator said,

Families were a little reluctant to kinda let their child spread their wings...A lot of parents foresee themselves taking care of their children forever and don't really realize they're limiting them by not allowing them to develop the skills they need to find jobs and work in the community.

Another educator described her perception of parents as, "helicoptering or snow plowing their kids, moving stuff out of the way so things are easy for them and fixing it for them." This educator also said that she thought that low expectations played a role, along with the influence

of the parent's anxiety on the student. Although each interview focused on the school setting, it is notable that the majority of participants discussed parents when asked about challenges. Two educators explained their parent responses varied. One educator said, "It's hit or miss...some parents are eager, and some are petrified" while another explained,

It's been kind of a range of parents. We have some parents that just aren't willing to accept yet that their child needs additional support. Then we have other parents that are so open to accepting suggestions, and if we say, "Try this at home," they'll try everything in their power to try to get them to do it at home...Then they go home and do it, and then the child finally does it for them. They're just so excited because they haven't seen it.

Although she demonstrated some challenges with parents that were similar to the experiences of other educators we interviewed, she also provided a window of hope by explaining,

You just have to teach [parents] how to do it or break it down smaller. Once they learn how to do that, and they figure out their child can do it, they get so excited. Then they want more and more.

Supporting the potential outcome of parent involvement, another educator explained a parent reaction, "He said to me, 'I really feel like you understand my daughter and I appreciated that.' So, I'm really excited about that."

Discussion

The intent of this study was to investigate the experience of educators providing opportunities for their students to practice and enhance self-determination skills within practical contexts and situations. Current research emphasizes the importance of providing students with disabilities with self-determination skill instruction, as well as providing students with opportunities to practice these skills to enhance instructional relevance and promote skill generalization (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007; Shogren et al., 2015). In this study, the participants perceived that professional development sessions on self-determination and the SDLMI impacted their knowledge of self-determination, understanding of their role in creating opportunities for self-determination development, and their ability to implement strategies to increase self-determination skills.

This study identified potential challenges encountered by educators included allocating time for self-determination practice opportunities on a daily basis, perceived differences between self-determination development in school and home settings, and collaborating to prioritize and consistently provide practice opportunities across settings. These challenges necessitate further inquiry into how educators can provide their students with opportunities to practice self-determination skills and make these practice opportunities meaningful for their students.

Educator Professional Development

On a daily basis, special educators are tasked with facilitating academic skill instruction, collecting data and monitoring student progress, writing IEPs and leading IEP meetings, collaborating with colleagues and their students' family members, and performing countless

other duties that inevitably arise over the course of a typical school day. Given the many job responsibilities of special educators, the prospect of adding one more task in the form of self-determination practice opportunities may deter educators from consistently providing these opportunities to their students. Educators within this study shared that, rather than adding to an already busy daily schedule, providing self-determination practice opportunities actually enhanced the instruction they were already providing. In fact, many educators were providing self-determination practice opportunities without even realizing it.

Helping educators understand the meaning of self-determination and how seamlessly self-determination practice opportunities can be integrated into the daily schedule, as well as the manner in which these practice opportunities enrich daily instruction, may help to promote their consistent use in classroom settings. As indicated by the participants in this study, accomplishing this goal could involve professional development sessions that include defining self-determination, as well as guidance on embedding self-determination practice opportunities into daily routines. Self-determination skills such as problem-solving and decision-making are inherent components of academic skill instruction in general. Rather than teaching and providing practice opportunities related to self-determination in isolation, embedding both self-determination skill instruction and practice opportunities within academic instruction can (a) enhance instructional relevance; and (b) allow educators to efficiently teach both sets of skills by addressing them simultaneously (Bartholomew, Test, Cooke, & Cease-Cook, 2015; Konrad & Test, 2007). Self-determination skills such as setting goals, measuring progress toward goal attainment, self-advocacy, and self-awareness can be addressed by involving students to a greater extent within the IEP process (Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006; Martin et al., 2006). Opportunities, like student involvement in the IEP process support the development of problem-solving skills and an internal locus of control. Students with an internal locus of control know that they can influence outcomes in their lives, rather than interpreting events as outside of their control.

Collaboration with Parents

Educators and their students' family members share common goals related to student achievement and positive school experiences. Despite these goals, educators within this study consistently share that they perceived their collaboration with parents as a challenge when implementing opportunities for their students to practice self-determination skills. Specifically, the most common perceived concerns educators expressed involved parent hesitance to provide opportunities for their children to be independent and concerns that self-determination skills were not attainable for their children.

When considering collaboration between professionals and families to create opportunities for children to develop self-determination, cultural contexts must be considered. Self-determination is perceived and operationalized differently in some cultures (i.e., Shogren, 2012; Zheng et al., 2015). In a qualitative study of Hispanic mothers' perceptions of self-determination, Shogren (2012) found differences between the mothers' perceived development of self-determination at home and how self-determination was operationalized at school. The differences led to conflicts and the perception of mothers that their cultural values were not considered or respected. In addition to varying perceptions of self-determination, disability is also perceived differently across cultures (Halder & Assaf, 2017). It is unclear if cultural differences affected the perceptions of teachers in this study, but our findings support previous research underscoring the

need to understand perceptions of families in creating opportunities for children to develop self-determination.

While special educators bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the collaboration table related to education and self-determination, parents are often the most consistent members of their child's support system. Given this unique expertise, it behooves educators to (a) understand the cultural and familial perceptions of self-determination within the families of their students, (b) share the concept of self-determination and its value with parents while maintaining cultural awareness, (c) include parents when identifying and developing opportunities for their students to practice self-determination skills; and (d) empower parents to provide self-determination practice opportunities within the home and community settings. Collaborating with parents could assist them in seeing the practical benefits associated with practicing self-determination skills (Schultz, Able, Sreckovic, & White, 2016).

Professional development Session 6 focused on the Student-Led IEPs (McGahee et al., 2001). During this session, the researchers emphasized the importance of involving parents/guardians before they begin working with the student on leading their own IEP. Although educators attended nine professional development sessions, most parents did not receive training on self-determination. A group of 20-25 parents/guardians, primarily of students receiving special education services, attended a workshop on self-determination and families offered at the time of Session 5 and a group of approximately 30 parents/guardians attended a similar workshop at Session 9.

While educators can attend professional development as part of their contracted hours, attending a workshop is an additional unpaid task for parents who are busy, may not be able to attend due to work schedules or child care issues, may not have had prior exposure to information on self-determination, and may have different cultural values. While discussing parent involvement during Session 6, some educators replied that some of their parents never responded to their efforts to communicate (e.g., emails or paperwork sent home). Another educator in the session suggested that they each need to directly reach out to parents about student involvement in the IEP in a way that works for each family, which likely means phone calls home. As a result of educator concerns and best practices to include parents, the researchers offered a second parent workshop at Session 9. In addition, the researchers and educators will continue to consider how to better support parent involvement, understand perceptions of parents, and consider cultural differences. The participant who explained the excitement of parents once they understood strategies and tried them with their children captured the most significant implication for practice: parents can be integral to the success of students when they are empowered with the tools being used in the classroom. Likewise, gaining an understanding of strategies being used in the homes of students can inform practice in schools.

Limitations to the Study

The researchers of this study are positively biased to special education practitioner experiences in creating opportunities for their students to practice self-determination skills, as they contracted with the school district to provide self-determination professional development sessions throughout multiple school years. The researcher's priority was to support and encourage educators in the development of their knowledge and practice. This need to support educators

during interactions and interviews made it impossible for the researchers to be unbiased observers during data collection. The researchers are all former special education practitioners. The lens through which data were coded is biased by the researchers' prior knowledge and experience of working with students with exceptionalities. Additionally, all participants were from the same school district in one geographic region. Various cultures may have different perspectives of the value of self-determination and how it can be practiced at home. Cultural contexts of families, school districts, and geographic regions must be considered for successful implementation of professional development and strategies to develop self-determination.

Implications for Future Research

Findings of this study support previous research that utilizing the SDLMI influences educator perspectives of students' abilities and thus, ability to create opportunities for self-determined actions in students (Shogren et al., 2014). Previous studies (i.e., Thoma, Nathanson, Baker, & Tamura, 2002) showed that many educators are unfamiliar with specific instructional materials. Myriad strategies educators utilized could be attributed to their increased understanding of self-determination and supporting materials, as most participants discussed how the training aided their implementation. Although the data in this study support the need for self-determination training, more exploration and research are needed in the area of professional development on self-determination. Future research studies should also address parent and student perceptions and experiences related to self-determination. Since creating opportunities to practice self-determination skills is a collaborative process that requires active and ongoing student involvement, investigating student and parent perspectives could enhance the frequency, quality, and relevance of student opportunities to practice self-determination skills.

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