

# The Benefits of Teaching Self-Determination Skills to Very Young Students with Sensory Loss

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## Abstract

Students can become self-determined young adults with improved outcomes if they learn the necessary skills early. Participants in this qualitative study were seven teachers of the visually impaired or orientation and mobility specialists and seven teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain an understanding of how self-determination skills are being taught to preschool- or elementary-age students with sensory loss and the barriers they face when teaching those skills. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How do professionals who work with elementary-age students with sensory loss teach self-determination skills?
2. How do professionals who work with elementary-age students with sensory loss perceive their role in teaching self-determination skills?
3. What barriers to teaching self-determination skills do professionals who work with elementary-age students with sensory loss perceive?

Results from this study show that professionals play different roles when teaching self-determination. Those roles are (a) helping and supporting students to build independence, (b) helping students become more self-aware, (c) facilitating opportunities for students to practice self-determination, and (d) collaborating with parents and other team members.

The barriers fall into three broad categories: (a) difficulty collaborating with families, (b) lack of professional understanding of self-determination and how to teach it, and (c) language barriers (for students who are deaf or hard of hearing).



## Introduction to This Research Study

I am the mom of two boys who are deafblind resulting from Usher syndrome, our oldest being 22. I did not learn about the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) until our oldest son was in high school. Until that point, our son's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team was focused solely on supporting his academic progress. He also had an orientation and mobility specialist who worked with him on cane skills and a teacher of students with visual impairments who consulted on an as-needed basis. Once I started researching the ECC, I saw that self-determination is one of its nine core components and became interested in learning more.

Since doing this research study, I have seen the benefits of teaching self-determination firsthand. My oldest son is now graduated from college and living independently. We still have challenges—the pandemic has been tough—but he was a lot more prepared for living across the country without us than he would have been if we hadn't focused on self-determination in high school.

As you'll read in the findings, self-determination is something that can—and I think should—be taught and practiced at a young age. My youngest son was in elementary school at the time I completed this study. As a result of the knowledge I gained, I wanted to figure out a way for him to work on these skills early so he wasn't in the same situation as my older son. I worked with his teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI) and the rest of the team, and added self-advocacy and self-determination goals into his IEP. He's been working on these goals for a few years now and is an active member of his IEP team, making his own choices—with our support.

I don't think any of this would be possible without a strong relationship with our son's IEP team. One of the findings of this study is how important parent involvement is in teaching self-determination. But participants also shared that parents can be a barrier if they don't buy into the goal, and don't work on these same skills at home. I can see how families can benefit from embracing self-determination for their children, but the perceived barrier isn't a simple answer. It's not that all parents don't want to collaborate on self-determination—It just may not be the right time for some families or they may not know where to start.

I hate to admit this but as a busy mom of four boys, I was aware that many times it was easier to just make decisions for my children instead of fostering their ability to make their own choices, which is what self-determination is. When I decided to do this study, I was at a point in my life where I was—to put it simply—exhausted. I was constantly fighting for their IEP needs and each day blended together. I knew that my then high school-age son wanted to live independently and go to college but this wasn't going to be possible if he didn't make his own decisions and advocate for himself. My son, at that point, hadn't even been involved in his IEP, other than the minimum requirement. I embarked on this study to learn more about self-determination—the benefits and challenges of teaching it.



Once I embraced working on these goals I saw real benefits, not just for my sons but for me too. I watched my role shift as my sons became stronger self-advocates as a result of the work on self-determination goals. I found that shifting my focus to supporting their advocacy efforts (advocating with them) instead of fighting so hard to advocate for them was more effective and allowed me to spend more time on nonadvocacy-related activities. It also had a positive impact on our family's quality of life: I was less worried about our son's future.

Teaching self-determination must be individualized because every child who is deafblind has unique needs. What I realized while doing this study is that many people (parents, educators, and vision and hearing professionals) have difficulty defining what self-determination is and, because of competing priorities, find it hard to fit this into an already packed agenda. Others don't think self-determination is possible for all students. My hope with this study is to increase awareness of the benefits of self-determination so more families will have the opportunity to incorporate self-determination goals into their child's IEP.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain an understanding of how self-determination skills are being taught to preschool- and elementary-age students with sensory loss, and the barriers professionals face when teaching those skills. For this study, I did not focus specifically on self-determination for deafblindness, rather visual impairments and deafness and hard of hearing more broadly. The following research questions addressed in this study were:

1. How do professionals who work with elementary-age students with sensory loss teach self-determination skills?
2. How do professionals who work with elementary-age students with sensory loss perceive their role in teaching self-determination skills?
3. What barriers to teaching self-determination skills do professionals who work with elementary-age students with sensory loss perceive?

## What is Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy?

Self-determination is important because it allows students to become causal agents in their own lives. As the practice of inclusion has been implemented, it has necessitated research focused on how students with disabilities can be causal agents. The psychological construct of self-determination is relevant to students with disabilities because they are at a higher risk for overdependence and a quality of life that is more determined by others and less determined by the individual (Wilton & MacCuspie, 2017). If students with disabilities can learn to be self-determined, they may be better equipped to take control of decisions that impact their futures.

Self-determination is 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. When acting by these skills and attitudes, individuals have a greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults. (Field et al., 1998, p. 2).

Self-advocacy is one of the characteristic elements of self-determined behavior as outlined by Wehmeyer et al. (1998). Because students with disabilities are at risk of overprotection by those who are in positions of authority, self-advocacy skills are vital (Wilton & MacCuspie, 2017). Training in self-advocacy is a way to promote the leadership skills needed for students to participate in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, which fosters student empowerment and builds on self-determination skills.

## Relevant Previous Research on Self-Determination

Previous research shows that self-determination can lead to better in-school and post-school student outcomes, such as increased independence and participation in college, career, and community experiences (Cho et al., 2011, 2012; Lee et al., 2006).

Until this decade, self-determination research has primarily been focused on exploring the importance of self-determination for students with disabilities, especially at the common transition age of 16 (Cho et al., 2012; Wagner et al., 2012). More recently the focus of research has shifted from the benefits of teaching self-determination at transition age to the benefits, strategies, and barriers to teaching self-determination at a younger age (Cho et al., 2011, 2012). Palmer and Wehmeyer (2003) found that, even at a young age, students can learn about themselves and be involved in educational decision-making. Because self-determination looks different over time, and different supports are needed at different ages, researchers began looking at various age groups (Shogren, 2013). Still, there is less research on teaching self-determination skills in elementary school and earlier than research on transition-age students (Cho et al., 2012; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003).

Although teachers understand the importance of self-determination at the elementary school level, there are documented barriers to teaching self-determination (Agran et al., 1999; Cho et al., 2011, 2012; Karvonen et al., 2004; Thoma et al., 2002). The most commonly reported barriers are (a) more urgent needs, (b) insufficient time, (c) lack of training, and (d) a perception that students are too young (Agran et al., 1999; Cho et al., 2011, 2012; Karvonen et al., 2004; Thoma et al., 2002). Another challenge is how to collaborate with families to ensure the same goals are worked on at home and at school (Lee et al., 2006).

Teachers' perceptions of self-determination have been shown to vary based upon the disability category (Cho et al., 2012), with some teachers thinking that self-determination is not possible for all children—especially the most severely impacted students. We must expand the self-determination research focused on different disability categories, especially for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, students who have a visual impairment, or students who are deafblind. Very little is written about self-determination for these students.



For students who are visually impaired, there is clear need for direct intervention in the area of self-determination (Sacks & Silberman, 1998), which is why it is one of the areas that students with visual impairments are taught as part of the ECC (Hatlen, 1996; Sapp & Hatlen, 2010). Although self-determination is one of the areas of the ECC, scant research exists on teaching self-determination to students with visual impairments.

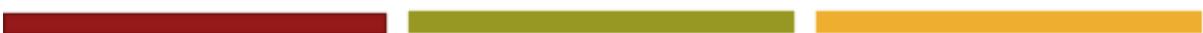
Lohmeier et al. (2009) surveyed professionals about their views of the ECC, who stated their commitment to teaching all its areas but said they often did not have the time to teach self-determination skills (Lohmeier et al., 2009). Their findings are similar to the results of a study by Agran, et al. (2007), which reported that teachers spent the most time teaching academic and other compensatory areas of the ECC and often had little time left to teach self-determination.

Roy & MacKay (2002) reported that students with visual impairments believed that their future outcomes were more dependent on things outside of their control than they were for their sighted peers. For students with visual impairments, access to the causal structure of events is often mediated by their families, educators, or interpreters, resulting in overdependence and making self-determination skills critical (Wilton & MacCuspie, 2017). Students who are visually impaired may have lower self-esteem, be more passive, and have higher levels of learned helplessness than their sighted peers (Agran et al., 2007).

Early learning of self-determination skills is also essential for children who are deaf or hard of hearing (Luckner & Muir, 2002; Luckner & Sebald, 2013). Self-determination can be practiced by promoting student involvement in the transition and IEP process, having students problem-solve challenging social situations, asking students to establish their own literacy goals, and encouraging students to set up meetings with teachers to discuss issues they may have (Luckner & Sebald, 2013).

Family plays an important role in fostering self-determination (Lee et al., 2006; Luckner & Sebald, 2013; Wehmeyer, 2014). As cited in a review of the literature by Chambers et al. (2007), most parents place a high value on self-determination (Grigal et al., 2003; Lee et al., 2006) but not all do, so it is important to ask families rather than make assumptions. Because home is where most people learn to set and attain goals, family involvement is paramount to a child's ability to learn self-determination skills (Lee et al., 2006; Wehmeyer et al., 1999).

Like professionals, families may not understand self-determination or know how to support teaching self-determination skills to their children (Luckner & Sebald, 2013) so it is important to engage them in these efforts. Efforts to promote self-determination are more successful when families and professionals collaborate (Lee et al., 2006; Wehmeyer, 2014). Educators should remember that parents may feel conflicted because they want to teach their children to be independent but also want to keep them safe (Lee et al., 2006). While working with parents, educators should always respect family values, cultural background, and family input (Lee et al., 2006) because these may play into how receptive a family is to work on these skills.



# Methodology

## Sampling Procedures

The target population for this study was educators who work with students who have sensory loss: teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, teachers of students with visual impairments, and orientation and mobility instructors. To obtain the most comprehensive sample possible, participants for this study were recruited in two ways: (1) via announcements posted on social media designated for teachers of students with visual impairments and teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and (2) via state listservs for professionals who serve children with sensory loss. Participants were selected among individuals who were currently working with the preschool to age 21 student population as a teacher of students with visual impairments, as an orientation and mobility specialist, or as a teacher of students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

## Participants

Participants in this qualitative study were seven teachers of the visually impaired or orientation and mobility specialists, and seven teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Thirteen participants were from four western states in the United States, and one was from a western province in Canada. Two participants were male and ten were female. Ten participants have been working in the field of visual impairments for over ten years, and most have worked in more than one district. All participants have experience working with students of a varied age range—mostly 3 to 21—and most are itinerant teachers. Of the seven vision professionals, two participants were dual-certified, one was an orientation and mobility specialist, and four were teachers of students with visual impairments.

## Interviews

The interview protocol consisted of 13 interview questions and included a demographic questionnaire and a set of open-ended interview questions. Follow-up/probe questions were developed and asked of participants as needed. The interview protocol included questions about the importance of self-determination, experiences when teaching self-determination skills to elementary-age students, the role of the family, and professional development for teaching self-determination skills to students with sensory loss. Participants were asked to complete the demographic questionnaire and were provided copies of the interview questions in advance. All interviews were conducted over the phone and audiotaped following a semistructured interview protocol. Each participant was interviewed once, and interviews averaged 30 minutes.

## Data Analysis

Each audiotaped interview was transcribed verbatim by an outside transcription company. Data was then analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding procedures. Using NVivo, the



researcher independently open coded the data. After all interviews were coded, the researcher used axial coding to identify relationships between the codes. During this stage, the open codes were grouped into larger related categories. The researcher then identified which categories were prominent in more than half of the transcripts. These categories were collapsed into agreed-upon themes. To increase reliability, preliminary findings were sent to participants as a form of member checking. Seven participants responded to the request to review findings with their agreement on themes. The last step in the data analysis identified quotes that related to each theme.

## Findings

### Professionals Play Many Different Roles in Fostering Self-Determination

The professionals we interviewed identified four primary roles they have when teaching self-determination to students with sensory loss:

- (1) helping and supporting students to build independence,
- (2) helping students become more self-aware,
- (3) facilitating opportunities to practice self-determination, and
- (4) collaborating with parents and other team members.

These roles are not mutually exclusive and professionals working with a child play many roles, often simultaneously.

### Helping and Supporting Students to Build Independence

Participants shared how important it is to support students in building their independence. Participants also mentioned the negative impact of adults doing too much for a child, which can result in the child experiencing the “Fairy Godmother Syndrome,” when objects appear without the child understanding where they are coming from (Ferrell et al., 2014). If children do not understand where things are coming from and if decisions are made for them, it can result in learned helplessness. This can be avoided by explaining (narrating) to children where things are coming from and by encouraging students to do things for themselves (Ferrell et al., 2014). Participants indicated that it is best to start teaching independence to children when they are young—before they develop learned helplessness.

Building independence with very young children can begin by offering choices, such as decisions about what they want to wear, eat, or drink. In elementary school, building independence involves teaching students how to move independently from one classroom to another on their own and how to have control over determining what schoolwork needs to be done. When helping a student to become more independent, one teacher of students with visual impairment



(TVI), Carolyn, stated that the goal is to reduce the number of prompts and to have the student gradually learn how to do things on their own.

Participants mentioned the following skills they teach to build independence.

**Having a growth mindset.** Jennifer, another TVI, talked about the importance of teaching a growth mindset to young children:

*I started using it in preschool this year for little kids. One student was having huge breakdowns, and I thought, how am I going to get her to buy into how amazing she is? So, you teach her that you are not born smart, like you become smart by having a growth mindset. Like teaching her that everything you want, you can do if you really want to do it.*

**Teaching self-advocacy skills.** Self-advocacy is an important part of self-determination. Participants noted that teaching self-advocacy often begins when students are at a young age and that these skills are crucial to a student learning to be independent. Participants observed that, although self-determination goals are not often listed in IEPs, self-advocacy goals more frequently are. Participants also noted that, sometimes, self-determination and self-advocacy are referred to interchangeably or are confused, but they are very different concepts. All participants agreed on the importance of teaching self-advocacy early.

The teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing (TOD) study participants placed a big focus on self-advocacy, stating that it is especially important for students learning in a noisy classroom, working with interpreters, or working with adults or students who are unfamiliar with deafness and hearing loss. One TOD, Joan, described the importance of self-advocacy when working with those who are unfamiliar with deafness and hearing loss:

*Students need to know that they can speak up for themselves, knowing that teachers don't know everything and that the teachers are not always right. . . . I think it is important for them to realize that they do have a say in their education and that they can be part of it.*

Students who have interpreters, however, must be careful to not rely on interpreters to advocate for them.

**Thinking ahead.** Participants expressed the importance of helping students think about their future in goal-setting and future planning. Jennifer, the TVI, stated that adults should not directly ask a student what they want to do when they grow up. Instead, she suggests starting by asking what interests they have and then helping them to brainstorm ideas for the future. Once a student has ideas for the future, they can be introduced to people who work in those career areas. Another TVI, Judy, described the importance of having younger students attend at least part of their IEP meeting because it can help to ensure that the student is at the center of



planning for their future. She says that having students involved early can really help them when they get to middle and high school.

***Providing predictability and routine.*** Participants shared how important predictability and consistency are to children with sensory loss. If a child has a routine they are likely to have a greater sense of ownership of their schedule, and that helps them to be more self-determined. The TVIs mentioned the importance of helping families create routines for their child; routines can help children who have difficulty understanding cause and effect.

***Providing choices.*** If a student is going to be independent, they must be given opportunities to make choices for themselves; children can learn to make their own choices at an early age. Lisa, a TVI, stated that it starts with helping children have choices. She added that it is important for the choices to be real and not informed choices. For instance, not just asking a child which of two adult chosen activities they want to do but to find out what the child's interests are. Children can work on choice making at an early age. Jennifer, the TVI, had a preschooler working on three sets of goals: Braille, technology, and one other. Jennifer let the student choose which skill to work on, helping him feel more in control of his routine.

Even students with significant support needs can make their own choices. Carolyn, the TVI, stressed the importance of working with families to provide choices and gave an example of how even the most significantly impacted students can make their own choices:

*For kids who have significant additional disabilities, a lot of times adults have made every single decision for them. So, they don't speak up—don't use their assistance communication devices—don't have any idea of their choices. One of my students listened to the same audio book for a year because her parents told everyone it was her favorite. . . . [In working with this student] I found out that Junie B. Jones was not her favorite book after all.*

John, another TVI, warned that we must not think that self-determination is just choice-making.

***Supporting students.*** As students build self-determination skills, professionals can provide support by helping them be self-aware, being honest, providing immediate feedback, and teaching related skills such as problem-solving and social skills.

## **Helping Students Become Self-Aware**

Self-awareness skills are important for all children with sensory loss, but the TODs indicated that teaching a student self-awareness was their primary method for teaching self-determination. All participants talked about how important these skills were for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, which is why they begin teaching these skills as early as preschool. Strategies for teaching self-awareness include:

- ▶ giving students the tools to respond when asked about their disability,



- ▶ helping students figure out who they are,
- ▶ looking at the whole child and not just the disability,
- ▶ teaching students about empowerment and Deaf culture,
- ▶ helping students understand their hearing or vision loss,
- ▶ helping students identify when they missed some information because of the hearing loss, and
- ▶ helping them find their voices.

Teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing talked a lot about helping students understand deafness and hearing loss and giving students tools on how to talk about their hearing loss. Paige, a TOD, explains this need:

*Kids get teased or they'll just be asked about their cochlear implants or hearing aids. They have to be prepared with an answer or else they will think they are being teased at times when people are just asking them about what is on their ears or heads. I think with kids with hearing loss, it is really important to start at a young age, and give them tools, give them sentences that they can say when they are asked.*

Professionals who work with students who are visually impaired also mentioned the importance of self-awareness. For vision professionals, teaching self-awareness was one strategy for teaching self-determination, whereas for teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, it was the primary way to foster self-determination. The study participants who work with students who are visually impaired said that the work typically starts by talking with the student about their vision loss, how it affects them, and what accommodations they need. It entails helping the student and family understand that the child is capable, as well as teaching the student ways to communicate their vision loss and related needs to their peers. Judy, the TVI, stated that “it is also making sure that a student knows what an IEP is and why they use a closed-caption TV or different vision aids and what may be different about you than the peer sitting next to you.”

Part of the support that the team provides is being honest with a student about their future. Judy said, “It is important for students to know that all the supports don’t necessarily follow them and that they will not have professionals and teachers hand-holding them once they leave school.” This honesty is helpful when teaching a student the importance of becoming a strong self-advocate. Supporting a child can also mean making sure they receive immediate and honest feedback about situations as they happen—which helps students build from and ultimately draw upon self-determination skills across a wide variety of instances and situations.

### **Promoting Opportunities for Students to Practice Self-Determination Skills**

Another role that professionals play is finding ways for students to practice self-determination skills—setting up opportunities for them to show what they can do in each of the areas of



self-determination. Justin, a TVI, facilitates opportunities for a child to work through a task or process that is giving them difficulty, which he says results in a sense of self-determination and self-advocacy and intrinsic motivation. Lisa, another TVI, adds:

*When kids have had a lot of experiences in a variety of forms and have gone out and tried different things—like going out and playing games with their sibling's outdoors. Again, it's not easy, but when kids take part in everyday activities, I see that it's more likely that that youngster is going to be a confident person.*

Facilitating opportunities for students involves giving them the opportunities to make choices for themselves. Lisa explains:

*It starts with helping the children to have choices. Recognizing that, 'Oh, I can make a choice for myself. I can either wear the green shirt or the red shirt. I don't know the colors maybe, but oh, I like the softness of the red shirt today. That's the one I want.' That's the decision they have made.*

Another example for young children is described by Judy, the TVI:

*A child's parents may tell them, 'Oh, you need to go hug grandma.' Well, maybe they don't want to hug. So it's understanding that this is my body, this is what I want, and I don't want to do that. Not forcing things and allowing them to have a voice even early on, to not put them in situations that may have a lifelong impact.*

## **Collaborating with Families and Other Team Members**

Because self-determination goals are often set at home, family involvement is vital to teaching self-determination. All the participants in our study were clear on how important collaboration is because self-determination will not work if only one person is working on the goals. If everyone is on the same page, other team members can reinforce and also work on the same skills. Participants stated that they were often the ones who brought up the topic of self-determination most frequently with families and the rest of the educational team.

One of the TODs, Katie, shared that she starts relationship-building with parents early—before a student starts the school year. She says that communication is critical. “Most of the time, it’s informal like, ‘This is what I’ve seen at school, maybe you could talk to them about that at home,’ and be on the same page on what we are talking about.”

Another participant, Justin, a TVI, described the importance of facilitating opportunities at home to work on IEP goals, such as those related to self-determination. The dialog and correspondence between what’s happening at home and what’s happening at school, he shares, benefits the child.



Lisa, a TVI, had similar experiences and stated that a parent’s role in self-determination starts at infancy by providing their child with choices. But later the parent’s role expands and becomes about letting go, all while giving the child room to explore and make mistakes.

Families may not be familiar with self-determination and its importance, so educators may need to help families understand it by providing explanations and resources. John, a TVI, talks about the importance of involving the family:

*Families are the primary motivators of change in children’s lives. I think the really important thing is not just working with the student, but working with the family, so that the locus of motivation, I’ll say, shifts from the family onto the student, and the student recognizes that they are the primary motivator of change in their lives. And, in that way, I think we support self-determination. . . . I see my role as encouraging families to provide opportunities for self-determination, opportunities for them to act on their own preferences, to act on their own desires, and to evaluate the outcomes of those actions.*

Family involvement in fostering self-determination is critical, but participants in this study also found collaboration with families to be complex. Families may have differing views on the importance of self-determination based on cultural or other factors. Participants mentioned how important it is for the IEP team to understand these complexities and to have effective communication about shared goals.

### Barriers to Teaching Self-Determination to Very Young Students

All the participants in our study agreed that it was best to start exposing children with sensory loss to self-determination at an early age. However, like previous studies, participants shared barriers to teaching self-determination to students. Although this study focuses on teaching self-determination to elementary- and preschool-age students, the barriers mentioned are not unique to any particular age group. The barriers fall into three broad categories: (a) difficulty collaborating with families, (b) lack of professional understanding of self-determination and how to teach it, and (c) language barriers (for students who are deaf or hard of hearing). Time was not found to be a barrier in this study, although past research found it to be a barrier.

#### Difficulty Collaborating with Families

Families—or more specifically lack of collaboration with families—were mentioned as a possible barrier to teaching children self-determination skills. If collaboration does not go well, the efforts to foster self-determination can fall short. Participants said that it can be frustrating to work on these skills at school and realize that they are being worked on at home. If parents are not on the same page as the rest of the IEP team, participants stated that teaching self-determination will not work since most goal setting, choice-making, and future planning happens at home.



But participants recognized that a lot of the frustration might happen because families may not be well-informed—they may not be familiar with self-determination and its importance—so educators may need to help parents understand it. For various reasons, parents may also not know what goals are being worked on at school. Participants shared that they sometimes try to partner with parents to work on self-determination goals at home, with varied success.

One way that educators can raise families' awareness is by helping them understand how to avoid creating learned helplessness in their children—when parents always make choices for their children. Avoiding learned helplessness is important because teaching self-determination is harder when you must first reverse any learned helplessness that has been conditioned earlier.

The importance of family involvement in promoting self-determination can be found in previous literature (Lee et al., 2006; Wehmeyer, 2014). Participants in this study took it further and suggested that lack of collaboration with families could be a barrier to successful teaching of self-determination. Participants shared these strategies for removing this barrier: (a) teaching parents what self-determination is, (b) ensuring parents know what goals are being worked on at school and how important it is for the same goals to be worked on at home, and (c) helping families to understand how to avoid "learned helplessness."

### **Lack of Educator and Family Understanding of Self-Determination**

Lack of understanding of self-determination can be a barrier to teaching it; not only do families often not know what self-determination is, professionals often have similar confusion. Participants mentioned factors that contribute to educators' lack of understanding:

- ▶ lack of formal training on self-determination,
- ▶ lack of knowledge of whether self-determination should be an overarching skill that is infused in all curriculum areas or whether it should have specific goals,
- ▶ misconception that self-determination is only for the academically able,
- ▶ differing or unknown definition of self-determination, and
- ▶ confusion between self-advocacy and self-determination.

Participants all saw the importance of self-determination, but not all participants had the same definition and understanding. They were up front about the fact that they were not confident in their definition. One TVI stated, "It's really important to demystify self-determination because many teachers labor under a misconception that self-determination is only for our most academically able, highest-functioning students. They think that if total independence is not possible, then we're not thinking of self-determination for that learner."

There was no consensus among the participants as to whether self-determination should have specific and separate goals or whether it should be infused in other goals. John, the TVI, said that because "it's one of those topics that is so broad, we might think that we're working on it



just by touching on a couple of different areas, but we need to put a direct emphasis on it.” Others felt like it is easier to work on self-determination skills while working on other areas.

Some participants have attended workshops or training on self-determination; however, any formal training they have received was sought out by them directly. The TODs had less exposure to self-determination than the vision professionals. All of the TODs mentioned not having any previous training in self-determination specifically but had received training in self-advocacy and promoting self-awareness. Orientation and mobility instructors and TVIs often learned about self-determination as part of their pre-service training on the Expanded Core Curriculum. TODs often learned about self-advocacy only in their pre-service training. Half of the TOD participants even admitted that they looked up the definition before the interview and then realized that self-advocacy and self-awareness were ways to promote self-determination. The TVI participants said they became interested in self-determination because of their personal and professional experiences but not because of training they received.

### **Communication Skills as a Barrier**

Most of the TOD study participants mentioned lack of communication skills as a barrier, especially for very young children. Students often do not have the language skills to communicate their choices, which can result in frustration. This is something that the TVIs also could relate to for their students who were nonverbal or relied on augmented communication devices. TODs said that they must first work on language skills before they could work on self-determination. Students who are just developing language first learn how to express their needs through language—before self-determination can be worked on. Often this starts by gestures or pointing, eventually leading to increased language.

TODs were concerned that some students have an overreliance on their interpreter and use their interpreter for things that are outside the interpreter’s role. As a student gets into middle or high school, participants said they sometimes see interpreters doing too much for students, which hinders their learning of self-determination. Part of teaching self-determination to students who are deaf and use interpreters is to teach them the skills they need in order to use the interpreter; part of that training is knowing the interpreter’s role.

## **Discussion**

Results from this study contribute to a broader body of research on effective ways to teach self-determination skills to very young students who have sensory loss. One of the most important strategies is collaboration with families and other professionals who work with the child, because working on these goals in a silo is not effective. To effectively foster self-determination requires team members to have a relationship with families and feel comfortable having honest conversations about what the family wants for their child now and in



the future. Families may not be ready for these conversations or for working on self-determination goals, so it is important that professionals meet families where they are at.

Participants in this study also shared barriers to teaching self-determination to very young students. Because families are such an important part of leading these self-determination efforts, participants categorized parents as potential barriers to fostering these skills. If parents do not buy into working on self-determination goals or do not follow through to reinforce these skills at home, it is hard for students to make progress. Families have a lot of competing priorities and busy schedules, so they may find it easier to make decisions for their children instead of taking the time to allow children to make their own choices.

Another barrier is families' lack of understanding of what self-determination is. Self-determination is a term that professionals and families alike often confuse with self-advocacy and self-awareness. Parents may have never heard of self-determination and may need someone on the IEP team to inform them.

Past studies that examined barriers to teaching self-determination have identified the barriers of insufficient time and more urgent needs (Agran et al., 1999; Cho et al., 2011, 2012; Karvonen et al., 2004; Lohmeier et al., 2009; Thoma et al., 2002). None of the participants mentioned those barriers as a concern; perhaps they were creating ways to infuse self-determination into the curriculum throughout the day so they did not feel it took more time.

There were distinct differences between how the participants who are teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing thought of and taught self-determination versus how vision professionals thought of and taught self-determination. Vision professionals learn about the Expanded Core Curriculum as part of their teacher training—of which self-determination is one of its nine skills. There isn't an equivalent for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, so most TODs teach students to become self-determined by focusing on self-advocacy and self-awareness. The vision professionals also described self-advocacy and self-awareness as important but they focused more on choice-making and future planning as a means for fostering self-determination.

### Implication for Practice

Study participants mentioned communication challenges with parents and family, and a professional lack of knowledge as primary barriers to teaching self-determination skills to elementary-age students. But all professionals saw value in finding ways to start teaching these skills to very young students. Strategies for addressing these challenges include:

- ▶ providing trainings for parents on the Expanded Core Curriculum and self-determination,
- ▶ providing similar trainings for professionals who work with children with sensory loss,



- ▶ ensuring that parents are active participants in IEPs and ensuring they know what goals are being worked on at school, and
- ▶ developing a communication plan with families to help all parties collaborate in working on shared self-determination goals.

Most of the participants had to learn about self-determination on their own; about half of the TODs actually looked up the definition before they participated in the interviews to be sure they had a correct definition. Many of the participants sought out professional development opportunities themselves later in their careers after they learned of the benefits. Teacher preparation programs should include self-determination in their curriculum, sharing the benefits. None of the TOD participants learned about self-determination in their teacher preparation programs and wished there was an emphasis on not just self-advocacy and self-awareness but also other areas of self-determination, such as choice-making.

The bottom line is that more professionals and parents need to be aware of the benefits of self-determination—how being self-determined can help a student be causal agents in their own lives, leading to better transition outcomes. Starting to teach these skills to students at a younger age can help make postsecondary transition much easier.

### Limitations

While the results of this study contribute to the research base about how self-determination skills are being taught to elementary students who have sensory loss, there are limitations. This study utilized a small sample; therefore, generalization of findings should be made with caution. Most of the participants had a personal interest in self-determination, so we cannot assume that findings would be the same if we interviewed professionals who were not interested in the topic. An extension of this study to further investigate the family perspective might provide more insight into why some professionals saw parents to be a barrier to the successful implementation of self-determination goals.



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## **Quality Assurance Process**

Independent peer review is an integral part of all Lane of Inquiry research projects. Prior to publication, this document was subjected to a quality assurance process to ensure that: the problem is well formulated; the research approach is well designed and well executed; the data and assumptions are sound; the findings are useful and advance knowledge; the implications and recommendations follow logically from the findings and are explained thoroughly; the documentation is accurate, understandable, cogent, and balanced in tone; the research demonstrates understanding of related previous studies; and the research is relevant, objective, and independent. Peer review was conducted by outside research professionals.

