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Teaching Self-Determination Skills to Male Adolescents with Mild/Moderate Disabilities

ABSTRACT. The importance of teaching self-determination skills to all students is extremely important, but it especially vital that all adolescent males learn these skills as they seem to struggle the most with self-advocacy, communication skills, and self-efficacy. This article will focus on many facets of self-determination and will present interventions specifically for adolescent males.

KEYWORDS: Self-determination, mild/moderate disabilities, male students, adolescents

Introduction

The Education of Handicapped Children Act (Luft, 2015, p. 94–142) passed in 1975 in the United States to ensure that every child with a disability received a free and appropriate education (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This led to the revelation of inadequacies in post-secondary outcomes with transition skills (Ryndak et al., 2014). In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) added the mandate that schools would need to develop a way to facilitate access for students in a variety of postschool activities that included employment, post-secondary education, vocational training, participation in the community and living independently. With this declaration, it has become imperative for students to learn skills that help them advocate for self, set goals, make informed decisions, and take responsibility for their own actions. Hence, this is known as self-determination, and it is the ability to have control of one's own life with purpose and value (Field et al., 1998).

Additionally, in 2013 the United States Department of Education reported that due to the lack of opportunities through the education process, students' post-secondary outcomes were negatively impacted (Luft, 2015). Furthermore, when self-determination skills are not developed adequately it can affect the overall quality of life, along with having the negative feelings of efficacy, satisfaction, fulfillment, empowerment, and sense of belonging (Brown, Hatton & Emerson, 2013). Hence, promoting self-determination skills of students with disabilities has become a best practice in secondary education and transition services (Test et al., 2009). The purpose of this article is to examine the effects of teaching self-determination skills to male adolescents in a segregated setting and to determine if they can use these skills in the general education classroom.

Importance of Teaching Self-Determination Skills

Research has revealed the importance of learning self-determination skills for students with mild/moderate disabilities such as mild autism or learning disabilities, curricula developed to teach these specific skills, and in some studies, the research was based on assessments that were given to the students to complete to determine if students had self-determination skills.

Wehmeyer and Schwartz defined self-determination as "acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influences or interference" (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998, p. 22). Eventually, the definition was rewritten to include behaviors that are self-determined are actions that are voluntary to help improve an individual's quality of life (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007). Overall, an individual's quality of life will improve when that person is able to self-regulate. Therefore, when an individual is able to show self-determination, they demonstrate independence, and have the ability to control impulses and emotions. An individual that is self-determined is able to respond to situations with confidence and control. Consequently, with the development of self-determination skills an individual has the proficiency to understand strengths and limitations and are able to make decisions that are informed (Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013).

For adolescents, it has become best practice in special education and transition services to promote self-determination for multiple reasons (Field et al., 1998; Wehmeyer et al., 2011; Wehmeyer et al., 2007). Meanwhile, studies have provided evidence that there is a correlation between students who possess self-determination skills with the ability to be academically successful (Konrad et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2010) along with positive transition outcomes that include more employment and independent living (Martorell et al., 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). This is especially true of males.

Equally important are the multiple studies that have shown that a person's corresponding self-determination is affected by individual and environmental factors (Nota et al., 2007). Moreover, male adolescents who receive instruction on self-determination skills in secondary special education affords them the ability to become more autonomous in their own learning, attain self-regulation and decision making skills while the levels of self-determination increase. Learning self-determination skills may be a major factor influencing adolescents in attaining important post-school outcomes (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998), and this is in association with an improved quality of life (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Therefore, male adolescents with disabilities that have developed self-determination skills have taken on a more noticeable role in their discussion of transition and support services (Eisenman, 2007; Field & Hoffman, 2002; Lane & Carter, 2006).

Special Education Teachers and Self-Determination Skills

Research has determined that teachers are aware of self-determination and its importance; however, the emphasis placed on the significance for curriculum, teaching practices, transition planning, and IEP development has not been a high priority (Mason, Field & Sawilowsky, 2004; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Fortunately, educators understand the importance of teaching students self-determination skills and the benefits it provides (Carter et al., 2008; Thoma et al., 2008). Consequently, it has become more prominent to teach students with disabilities to become more engaged in their own self-determination behavior when discussions arise in regards to supports for these students (Eisenman, 2007; Field & Hoffman, 2002; Field, Sarver & Shaw, 2003; Lane & Carter, 2006).

Research has revealed through various disability categories, and it has been reported by teachers, that they have not received adequate training or information to enable them to promote self-determination in the classroom setting. Meanwhile, teachers do not have the ability to control out-of-school experiences of their students. However, they are capable of providing classroom circumstances that may create engagement of certain situations, develop interests, and encourage the development of internal motivational resources (Deci, 1995; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Reeve, 1996; Sansone & Morgan, 1992). In addition, special education teachers understand and are more familiar with how self-determination works, even though general education teachers agree that students with disabilities have the capability to learn and practice the skills to develop self-determination in school. Subsequently, these concepts can be applied in college preparation classes, as well as career technology classes when all teachers understand the importance of self-determination (Grigal et al., 2003).

Interventions for Self-Determination Skills

Self-determination intervention objectives may vary from single skills to more complex, multiple step skills. The common instructional objectives include learning skills and procedures associated with choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, self-awareness, and understanding self-observation, evaluation, and reinforcement (Algozzine et al., 2001). Consequently, multiple studies have indicated that when male adolescents receive interventions on self-determination with explicit instructions to promote these skills they can become involved in their own educational planning. Therefore, males especially will benefit from these interventions and it will enhance their self-determination and all related skills (Wehmeyer et al., 2013). Wehmeyer et al. (2013) indicated students who were consistently exposed to interventions involving self-determination subsequently showed an increase that was significant in the development of self-determination skills that went beyond what occurs naturally.

Moreover, it is important to understand the basic concepts underlying self-determination are not bound by culture. Thus, across all cultures and families, it is evident that competence and autonomy are needed. However, the adaptation of self-determination interventions must meet

varying expectations of families and their cultures for their child's developmental milestones and social roles (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1996). Thereupon, when planning their futures, students will take into consideration their families' goals, expectations, and decisions (Trainor, 2005).

Curriculum and Supports

Carter and Kennedy (2006) stated that schools are now held accountable for providing educational goals based on standards that coordinate with the general education curriculum for those students with disabilities, cognitive or significant, and they were not exempt from these new expectations.

Many teachers believe that students would succeed during and after high school if they were taught self-determination skills (Wehmeyer et al., 2011); therefore, self-determination is an important curricular area (Carter et al., 2008). Hence, the promoting of self-determination skills can be a means for students with disabilities to progress effectively with the general education curriculum as they learn how to problem solve and make decisions. Consequently, there are student-directed strategies, and other various ways to address the general education curriculum content. Additionally, state standards usually include the skills of goal setting, problem solving, decision making, and making choices, as a result, all are behaviors that are part of self-determination skills. Subsequently, there are a variety of instructional and curricular designs that can enable teachers to implement instructional focus (Test et al., 2000; Wehmeyer et al., 2003; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007).

Luckner and Sebald (2013) argued educators are the people who have the abilities to provide opportunities that are meaningful by embedding self-determination skills in the curricula. When developing self-determination skills, it can be a means for students to be productive in moving forward with the general education curriculum due to helping them learn skills, such as problem solving and decision making. Along with teaching students directed strategies for learning, it is a way to address general education curriculum content because most states have standards that contain self-determination objectives with self-determination skills, such as goal setting, problem solving, decision making, and choice making (Wehmeyer et al., 2004).

Accommodations and Self-Determination Skills

Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP) have accommodations included in the plan in order to provide supports that help students be successful in the general education classroom. Moreover, academic accommodations change the “input and/or output method used by the teacher and/or the student related to the intended instructional outcome” (King-Sears, 2001, p. 73).

According to Prater, Smith Redman, Anderson, and Gibb (2014), it is the responsibility of the general education teacher to ensure that students with disabilities can attain access to the general education curriculum. Furthermore, when accommodations are provided it helps promote a student’s access and success with the curriculum. Subsequently, when students can self-advocate for their accommodations they can directly affect their own learning.

Additionally, Prater et al. (2014) developed four self-advocacy lessons that were taught to three special education English classes of high school students with learning disabilities. Moreover, self-advocacy skills were a necessity for students with learning disabilities to be successful in the general education classroom and for life after high school (Prater et al., 2014). Furthermore, when students are taught skills that involve self-advocacy they have increased confidence in the classroom and are willing to participate on a greater level compared to before the students learned their self-advocacy skills (Stang et al., 2009).

Equally important, when students need to be taught how to self-advocate it will take more time and effort on the part of the special education and general education teachers. When students are able to identify the accommodation that is needed and understand their own strengths and weaknesses, it will give them the control over their own education, henceforth, taking more responsibility for their own education (Prater et al., 2014). To this end, when students learn self-determination skills, including self-advocacy, the likelihood they will be able to use these skills in every aspect of their life increases (Stang et al., 2009).

Transition and Self-Determination

Based on federal regulations in the United States, it is mandated that schools must implement evidence and research-based practices for transitions, especially in regard to students with disabilities. Thus, empha-

sizing the significance of student-centered planning, the student's self-determination and involvement, along with the importance of taking the family's view point into consideration. Therefore, it is apparent from research-based practices that both perspectives of the student and family must be taken into consideration on how they interact with the school and community (Cumming & Smedly, 2017).

Cameron (2012) revealed that from a special education viewpoint, transition planning usually refers to individual education and vocational supports to prepare students for life after high school. Presently, the importance of students experiencing multiple transitions throughout their years in school cannot be disputed. Subsequently, having a learning disability can cause the difficulty of transitions to be exacerbated. When transition planning occurs, it normally involves not only the student, but their parents, teachers, community members, and outside agencies (Cummings & Smedley, 2017).

Meanwhile, it is crucial for students with learning disabilities, along with their families, to receive the necessary transition support during early transitions as it can have a great impact on these students and their families (Forlin, Kuen-Fung Sin & Maclean, 2013; Hanewald, 2013; McIntyre, Blacher & Baker, 2006). Furthermore, students with learning disabilities experience common transitions, which include home to early childhood education (pre-school), early childhood education to elementary school, elementary school to middle (junior high) school, middle school to high school, and from high school to post school (Cummings & Smedley, 2017).

Kohler (1993) developed techniques for transition programming and identified five necessary areas for effective transitioning. However, Landmark, Ju, and Zhan (2010) have recently recommended eight practices that were built on Kohler's original five practices. Subsequently, the research that has been recently published includes 1) work experience, 2) participation in an employment program, 3) enrollment in general education, 4) family involvement, 5) social skills training, 6) daily living skills, 7) self-determination training, and 8) community or agency collaboration (Cumming & Smedley, 2017).

Facilitating student involvement in transition and educational planning along with making decisions is an area of primary focus for interventions to promote self-determination (Martin et al., 2006; Mason, Field & Sawilowsky, 2004; Test et al., 2004). Hence, this involvement has the possibility to impact student self-determination in various ways.

Thereupon, the process of transition planning is goal oriented, includes problem solving and decision making activities, and adds context for students to learn and practice these components of self-determination behavior. In addition, when students are able to contribute to their own future planning, it teaches the students that they can self-regulate and self-direct the action for their future. Research shows that there is a reciprocal relationship between student involvement and self-determination, hence, student involvement promotes self-determination and increased self-determination promotes greater student involvement (Williams-Diehm et al., 2008).

Assessment of Self-Determination Skills

Shogren, Garnier Villarreal, Dowsett, and Little (2014) revealed the need for careful assessment of self-determination and creating an understanding of contextual components because that will influence each student individually on interventions that are based on key factors for self-determination. Therefore, when a higher understanding of the significance of the contextual components across the varied ecological systems exists in the form of community, school, student, and family, it subsequently derives the possibility to allow an understanding that is greater for the development of self-determination (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2005).

The National Longitudinal Transition Survey 2 (NLTS2) assessed students' self-determination directly, as well as, gathered data from areas that included families, teachers, administrators, and records from schools with a variety of environmental and personal factors. Furthermore, the data that was compiled from the NLTS2 took place over a 10-year period from a sample of youths with disabilities that compiled secondary and post secondary experiences of students' nation wide. Consequently, this allowed the opportunity for factors to be examined at the student, family, and school level (Shogren et al., 2014).

Shogren et al. (2014) indicated that the understanding of specific factors in regards to self-determination is necessary to design an effective intervention, as well as implement and evaluate the intervention for students in order to promote self-determination with diverse disabilities. However, it has been determined that there is limited amount of information on the impact of ecological and individual factors on stu-

dents' self-determination (Shogren et al., 2014). As a result, the researchers used Arc's Self-Determination Scale and the AIR Self-Determination Scale to examine the relationship between ecological factors and various individual factors for students who self-reported their level of self-determination and it was determined that opportunities at the school was not a predictor of a student's level of self-determination (Shogren et al., 2014). Additionally, it was identified that a student's attendance at their own IEP was not a predictor of self-determination, however, the student's rating on the transition empowerment showed the student's level of self-determination (Shogren et al., 2014).

Consequently, research has determined that methods to increase self-determination for males in both educational settings are necessary and activities need to be developed, evaluated, and shared with teachers (Shogren et al., 2014). Meanwhile, Halloran (1993, p. 214) identified self-determination as the "ultimate goal of education" and; hence, declared it to be a critical component for a successful transition to adulthood (Field et al., 1998) and a major element for an individual's quality of life (Schalock, 1996).

High Poverty Youths and Self-Determination

Male students with disabilities are faced with additional challenges that are related to their disability including a spectrum of medical, communication, cognitive issues, and a lack of various supports (Emerson, 2007; Parish, Rose & Andrews, 2010). Furthermore, the negative effects of poverty on these students are especially noticeable due to being disproportionate members of society as a single parent, low-income, and racially or ethnically diverse homes (Fujiura & Yamaki, 2000).

Research has indicated that self-determination skills, such as goal setting, problem solving, and self-advocacy may be conducive in addressing the challenges in high-poverty schools and neighborhoods that are under resourced. It has been suggested that oppression, segregation, and discrimination, which are often associated with high-poverty environments, hinder the development of self-determination skills especially when it exists with a disability (Wehmeyer et al., 2011).

Meanwhile, research emphasized the teaching of self-determination and self-advocacy skills to male adolescents with disabilities to provide

them with opportunities to use these skills in their daily activities in an inclusive school setting and within the community that is outside of the self-contained special education classroom.

Summary

In the United States since 1975, every student with a disability is guaranteed to receive a free and appropriate education (U.S. Department of Education). Since 2004, it has been mandated that schools must provide students with ways to promote post school outcomes, such as living independently, employment, post-secondary education, vocational training, and participation in the community (Field et al., 1998).

Rowe et al. (2015, p. 27) expressed that self-determination is defined as “the ability to make choices, solve problems, set goals, evaluate options, take initiative to reach one’s goals, and accept consequences of one’s own actions.” Hence, self-determination interventions taught in high school can build upon a student’s internal motivation that is needed to be successful in school and as young adults. Meanwhile, male adolescents who experience lower levels of self-determination than their peers usually experience lower rates of school completion and success as an adult (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007). However, male adolescents with disabilities who experience success in their adult lives and obtain employment have developed higher levels of self-determination (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998).

Teachers who teach special education are aware of and understand the importance of self-determination skills; however, the emphasis placed on curriculum, teaching practices, transition planning, and IEP development is not a high priority (Mason, Field & Sawilowsky, 2004; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). However, when male adolescents receive self-determination interventions they can become more involved in their own educational planning when given definitive instructions (Wehmeyer et al., 2013).

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