

1 Self-Determination

What Is It and Why Is It Important to Students With Disabilities?

The purpose of this book is to provide educators a user-friendly guide to instructional and assessment strategies that enable teachers to promote the self-determination of children and youth with (and without) disabilities. We approach this task with several assumptions that need to be clear from the onset. First, we believe that issues pertaining to self-determination are important for all students, not only for students with disabilities. Thus, to the extent practicable, this book addresses methods, materials, and strategies that can promote the self-determination of all students, not excluding students with disabilities. We would also emphasize that when we refer to “students with disabilities,” we mean students across all Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) categorical areas, including students with more severe disabilities. Quite simply, we believe that promoting self-determination is a critical instructional objective for all students, and although the focus of this text is primarily on instruction for students receiving special education services, the context in which special educators must necessarily operate today necessitates that the topic not be approached from a disability-only perspective.

This brings up several related assumptions. One is that although issues of self-determination have historically been a focus for secondary educators and transition services, we believe that an instructional focus across the life span is critical for student success. Thus, again to the degree

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practicable, we identify instructional strategies that are important across elementary, middle/junior, and high school years. Also related to the assumption that instruction to promote self-determination is important for all students is our belief that such instruction should be provided in the context of the general education classroom and linked to the general education curriculum. While there are some specialized strategies to promote self-determination linked to special education–specific practices, primarily to the Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning process, our intent is to identify instructional and assessment activities that can be implemented with students in the general education classroom and linked to the general education curriculum.

This latter focus, instruction linked to the general education curriculum, has been motivated by policy initiatives in the past few years that mandate that the educational programs of all students receiving special education services be driven by the general education curriculum as well as unique student learning needs. As we discuss in Chapter 2, it is a relatively simple task to tie instruction to promote self-determination to the general education curriculum. In so doing, teachers provide students with disabilities the opportunity to learn new skills that will enable them to progress in the general education curriculum and enhance their self-determination.

We begin, though, with an overview of, and introduction to, the self-determination construct and its application and importance to the education of students with disabilities.

SELF-DETERMINATION: WHAT IS IT?

In 1990, when we began our work in the area of self-determination and students with disabilities, there was virtually nothing from special education research or practice that answered the question “What is self-determination?” or addressed its importance for students with disabilities or provided direction for instruction. The following models define and describe self-determination.

A Functional Model of Self-Determination

In 1992, Wehmeyer proposed a definition of self-determined behavior in which such behavior referred to “the attitudes and abilities required to act as the primary causal agent in one’s life and to make choices regarding one’s actions free from undue external influence or interference” (p. 305). At the heart of that definition was the notion of *causal agency*. The adjective *causal* is defined as expressing or indicating cause; showing the interaction of cause and effect. The term *agent* is a noun that means

one who acts or has the authority to act or, alternatively, a force or substance that causes change. Self-determined people are causal agents in their lives. They act with authority to make or cause something to happen in their lives. Causal agency implies more than just causing action, however; it implies that the individual who makes or causes things to happen in his or her life does so with an eye toward causing an effect to accomplish a specific end or to cause or create change; in other words, the individual acts volitionally and intentionally. As opposed to implying strictly that an individual simply causes some event to happen, causal agency implies that action is purposeful or performed to achieve an end.

In 1996, Wehmeyer refined this definition to reflect the types of self-determined behavior. It is common for conversations about self-determination to degrade into queries whether “choosing” to park in one parking spot versus another or other seemingly inconsequential actions are expressions of self-determination. There is an equal tendency to equate self-determination only with the most consequential of decisions, such as marriage, divorce, home buying, and so forth. Neither extreme is, in our estimation, accurate. What was missing from the original definition was that, small or large, self-determined actions contribute to one’s quality of life. Thus, in 1996, Wehmeyer refined the definition to include this attribute, suggesting that self-determined behavior is “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions *regarding one’s quality of life* [italics added] free from undue external influence or interference” (p. 24).

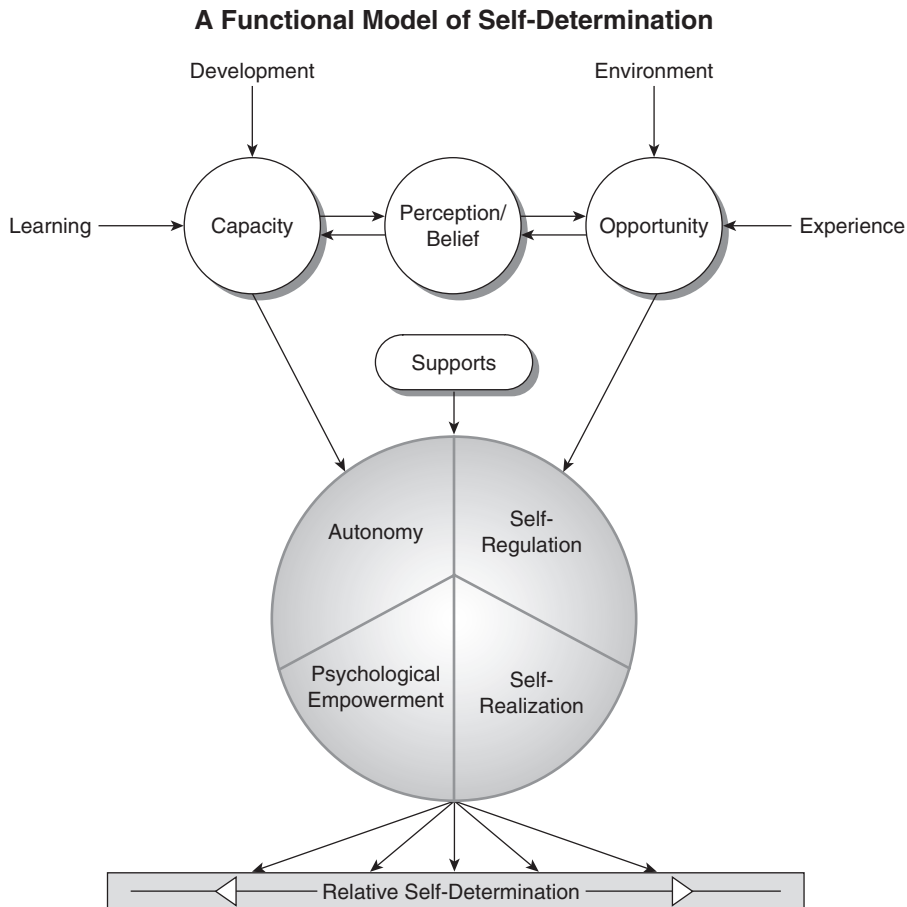
Wehmeyer (2006) further refined the definition, proposing that “self-determined behavior refers to volitional actions that enable one to act as the primary causal agent in one’s life and to maintain or improve one’s quality of life” (p. 117).

These are definitions of the term *self-determined behavior*; and, as such, it is important to identify what is meant by this class of behavior. Self-determined behavior refers to actions that are identified by four essential characteristics: (1) The person acted autonomously; (2) the behavior(s) are self-regulated; (3) the person initiated and responded to the event(s) in a psychologically empowered manner; and (4) the person acted in a self-realizing manner. These four essential characteristics describe the function of the behavior that makes it self-determined or not. People who consistently engage in self-determined behaviors can be described as self-determined, where the word *self-determined* refers to a dispositional characteristic. Dispositional characteristics involve the organization of cognitive, psychological, and physiological elements in such a manner that an individual’s behavior in different situations will be similar (though not identical). Eder (1990) described dispositional states as frequent, enduring tendencies that are used to characterize people and are used to describe important differences

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between people. As such, people can be described as self-determined based on the functional characteristics of their actions or behaviors. This functional model is depicted graphically in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Wehmeyer's Functional Model of Self-Determination



Essential characteristics of self-determined behavior. People who are self-determined act autonomously, self-regulate their behavior, and are psychologically empowered and self-realizing. The term *essential characteristic* implies that an individual's actions must reflect, to some degree, each of these four functional characteristics. Age, opportunity, capacity, and circumstances may impact the degree to which any of the essential characteristics are present, and as such, the relative self-determination

expressed by an individual will likely vary, sometimes over time and other times across environments. Nonetheless, these essential elements need to be present—each characteristic is a necessary but not sufficient characteristic of self-determined behavior.

Wehmeyer (1999) provided a detailed examination of this theoretical model, but briefly, behavior is *autonomous* if the person acts (a) according to his or her own preferences, interests, and/or abilities; and (b) independently, free from undue external influence or interference. The degree to which people are autonomous reflects the interdependence of all family members, friends, and other people with whom they interact daily as well as the influences of environment and history.

Self-regulation “enables individuals to examine their environments and their repertoires of responses for coping with those environments to make decisions about how to act, to act, to evaluate the desirability of the outcomes of the action, and to revise their plans as necessary” (Whitman, 1990, p. 373). Self-regulated people make decisions about what skills to use in a situation, examine the task at hand and their available repertoire, and formulate, enact, and evaluate a plan of action, with revisions when necessary.

Psychological empowerment consists of the various dimensions of perceived control (Zimmerman, 1990). This includes the cognitive (personal efficacy), personality (locus of control), and motivational domains of perceived control. People who are self-determined are psychologically empowered based on the beliefs that (a) they have the capacity to perform behaviors needed to influence outcomes in their environment, and (b) if they perform such behaviors, anticipated outcomes will result. Finally, self-determined people are *self-realizing* in that they use a comprehensive, and reasonably accurate, knowledge of themselves and their strengths and limitations to act in such a manner as to capitalize on this knowledge in a beneficial way. Self-knowledge forms through experience with, and interpretation of, one’s environment and is influenced by evaluations of others, reinforcements, and attributions of one’s own behavior.

Self-determination and quality of life. Wehmeyer framed causal agency, and self-determination, within the concept of quality of life. Quality of life is a complex construct that has gained increasing importance as a principle in human services. Schalock (1996) suggested that quality of life is best viewed as an organizing concept to guide policy and practice to improve the life conditions of all people and proposed that quality of life is composed of a number of core principles and dimensions. The eight core principles forwarded by Schalock emphasize that quality of life is composed of the same factors and is important for all people (independent of disability status), is experienced when a person’s basic needs are

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met, and is enhanced by integration and by enabling individuals to participate in decisions that impact their lives. The core dimensions of quality of life include emotional well-being, interpersonal relations, material well-being, personal development, physical well-being, self-determination, social inclusion, and rights.

Component elements of self-determined behavior. Self-determination emerges across the life span as children and adolescents learn skills and develop attitudes that enable them to become causal agents in their own lives. These attitudes and abilities are the component elements of self-determination, and it is this level of the theoretical framework that drives instructional activities. Table 1.1 depicts these component elements.

Table 1.1 Component Elements of Self-Determined Behavior

Choice-Making Skills
Decision-Making Skills
Problem-Solving Skills
Goal-Setting and Attainment Skills
Self-Regulation/Self-Management Skills
Self-Advocacy and Leadership Skills
Positive Perceptions of Control, Efficacy, and Outcome Expectations
Self-Awareness
Self-Knowledge

Because many of the interventions proposed in this book address these component elements, we will not go into any depth on these elements at this point. However, describing the component elements is important for two reasons. First, instruction occurs at this level. That is, there are instructional strategies, methods, materials, and supports that enable educators to “teach” self-determination by enhancing student capacity in each of these areas, as described in subsequent chapters.

Second, each of these component elements has a unique developmental course or is acquired through specific learning experiences, and it is by describing the development of each of these component elements that we can describe the development of self-determination (Doll, Sands, Wehmeyer, & Palmer, 1996; Wehmeyer, Sands, Doll, & Palmer, 1997). The development

and acquisition of these component elements is lifelong and begins when children are very young. Some elements have greater applicability for secondary education and transition, while others will focus more on elementary years. As such, promoting self-determination as an educational outcome will require not only a purposeful instructional program but also one that coordinates learning experiences across the span of a student's educational experience.

A Five-Step Model of Self-Determination

Over a three-year research effort, Field and Hoffman (1994) modified a process described by Gordon (1977) to develop a model of self-determination. That process included the following steps: (a) reviewing the literature, (b) conducting interviews, (c) observing students in a variety of school settings, (d) considering internal expertise, and (e) considering external expertise. The model-development process included over 1,500 student observations and interviews with more than 200 individuals. The model was reviewed by panels of experts (including consumers, parents, educators, and adult service providers) in three states and was revised based on their input. In addition, a national review panel of experts provided input on the model and oversaw the model-development process.

Later, the model was revised to clarify and emphasize key elements of self-determination. The revised model (Hoffman & Field, 2006) highlights the importance of these contributing factors to self-determination:

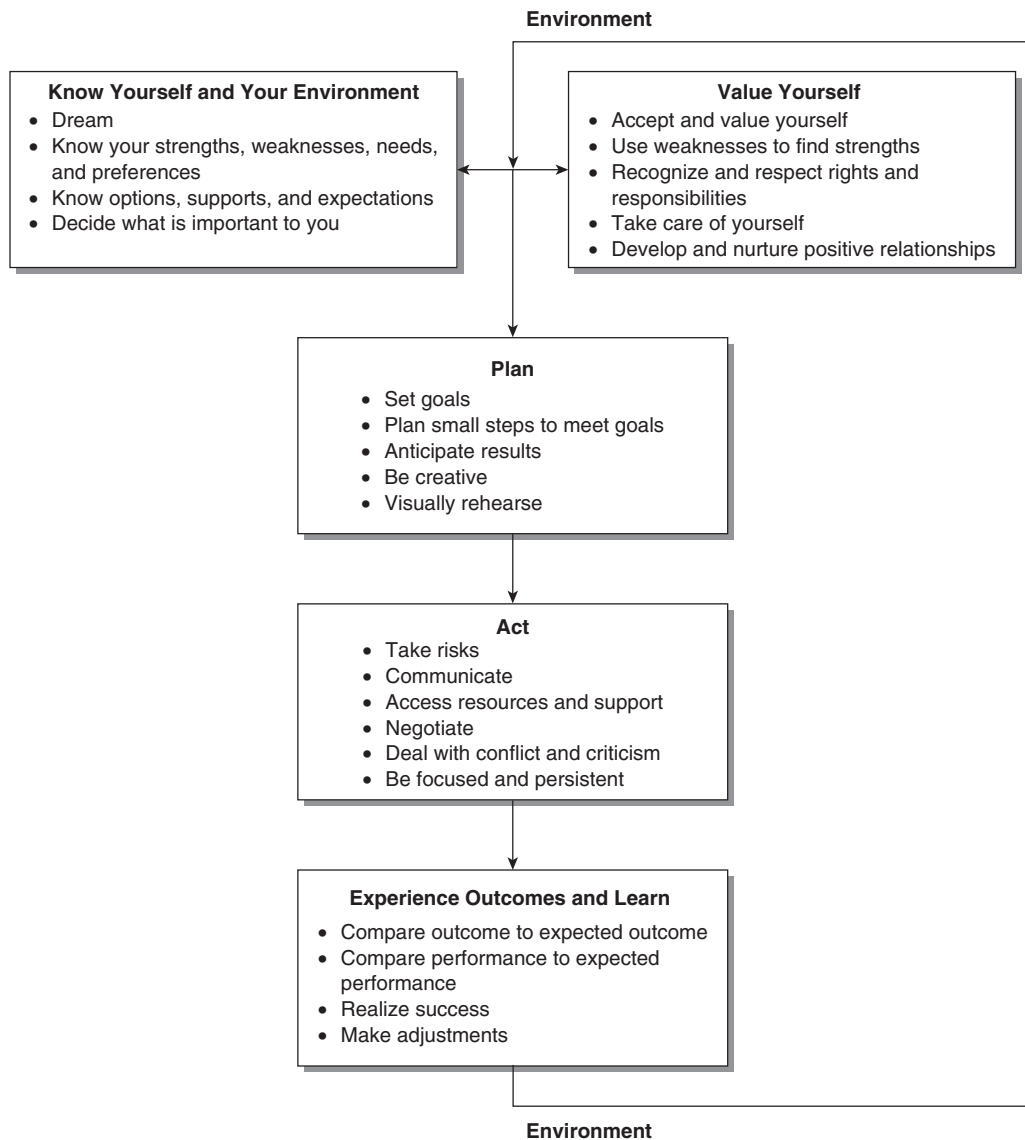
- Understanding of the environment in which one is trying to express self-determination
- The ability to establish and maintain positive relationships
- Skill in focusing on goal(s) the individual has set

Hoffman and Field's (2006) model is depicted in Figure 1.2. As described in this model, self-determination is either promoted or discouraged by factors within the individual's control (e.g., values, knowledge, skills) and variables that are environmental in nature (e.g., opportunities for choice making, attitudes of others).

The model addresses both internal, affective factors and skill components that promote self-determination. The model has five major components: Know Yourself and Your Environment, Value Yourself, Plan, Act, and Experience Outcomes and Learn. The first two components describe internal processes that provide a foundation for acting in a self-determined manner. The next two components, Plan and Act, identify skills needed to act on this foundation. One must have internal awareness as well as the

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Figure 1.2 Five-Step Model of Self-Determination



SOURCE: Hoffman, A., & Field, S. (2006). *Steps to self-determination* (2nd ed.). Austin, TX: PRO-ED.

strength and ability to act on that internal foundation to be self-determined. To have the foundation of self-awareness and self-esteem but not the skills, or the skills but not the inner knowledge and belief in the self, is insufficient to fully experience self-determination. To be self-determined, one must know and value what one wants and possess the necessary skills to seek what is desired. The final component in the self-determination model is

Experience Outcomes and Learn. This component includes both celebrating successes and reviewing efforts to become self-determined so that skills and knowledge that contribute to self-determination are enhanced.

Environmental indicators. As stated above, self-determination is affected by environmental variables as well as by the knowledge, skills, and beliefs expressed by the individual. Field and Hoffman (2001) identified nine indicators of environments that support the expression of self-determination.

1. Knowledge, skills, and attitudes for self-determination are addressed in the curriculum, in family support programs, and in staff development.
2. Students, parents, and staff are involved participants in individualized educational decision making and planning.
3. Students, families, faculty, and staff are provided with opportunities for choice.
4. Students, families, faculty, and staff are encouraged to take appropriate risks.
5. Supportive relationships are encouraged.
6. Accommodations and supports for individual needs are provided.
7. Students, families, and staff have the opportunity to express themselves and be understood.
8. Consequences for actions are predictable.
9. Self-determination is modeled throughout the school environment.

SELF-DETERMINATION: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES?

We have defined the self-determination construct and provided two theoretical frameworks constructed within efforts to apply the self-determination construct to the education of students with disabilities. In the next chapter, we overview issues pertaining to the promotion of self-determination in the context of standards-based reform and the general education curriculum. Before doing so, however, we believe it is important to answer the “so what” question. That is, does promoting self-determination matter? Is promoting self-determination important to students with disabilities?

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Impact of Promoting Component Elements of Self-Determined Behavior

We begin with evidence that promoting the component elements, identified in Table 1.1, benefits students. A comprehensive review of the impact of component elements of self-determined behavior on adult outcomes is beyond the scope of this chapter, but a brief overview should adequately make the point that there is abundant evidence that promoting the component elements listed in Table 1.1 can result in more positive adult and transition outcomes, including improved employment, community living, and community integration outcomes for students with disabilities.

For example, providing opportunities for and enhancing the capacity of youth and young adults with disabilities to express preferences and make choices have been linked to multiple outcomes of benefit to transition. There is an emerging database showing that incorporating choice-making opportunities into interventions to reduce problem behaviors of children and youth with disabilities results in improved behavioral outcomes (Shogren, Faggella-Luby, Bae, & Wehmeyer, 2004). Research has generally found that when students with autism are provided opportunities to make choices, reductions in problem behavior and increases in adaptive behaviors are observed (Frea, Arnold, & Vittimberga, 2001; Reinhartsen, Garfinkle, & Wolery, 2002).

Cooper and Browder (1998) found that teaching young adults to make choices improved outcomes of community-based instruction. Watanabe and Sturmey (2003) found that promoting choice-making opportunities in vocational tasks for young adults with disabilities increased engagement in the activities.

Teaching effective decision-making and problem-solving skills also has been shown to enhance positive school and transition outcomes for youth and young adults. Teaching young women with intellectual disabilities to make more effective decisions improved their capacity to identify potentially abusive social interactions (Khemka, 2000). Datillo and Hoge (1999) found that teaching decision making, in the context of a leisure education program, to adolescents with cognitive disabilities improved their acquisition of socially valid leisure knowledge and skills.

Limitations in social problem-solving skills have been linked to difficulties in employment, community, and independent living situations for students with developmental disabilities (Gumpel, Tappe, & Araki, 2000). Wiener (2004) confirmed the importance of problem solving to social integration for students with learning disabilities, and Bauminger (2002) showed that teaching students with high-functioning autism social and interpersonal problem-solving skills led to improved social interactions.

Storey (2002) reviewed the empirical literature pertaining to improving social interactions for workers with disabilities and determined that problem-solving skills contributed to more positive workplace social interactions. O'Reilly, Lancioni, and O'Kane (2000) found that incorporating instruction in problem solving into social skills instruction improved employment outcomes for supported workers with traumatic brain injuries. Finally, several studies (Agran, Blanchard, & Wehmeyer, 2000; Palmer, Wehmeyer, Gibson, & Agran, 2004; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000) show that teaching students with severe disabilities a self-regulated problem-solving process enables them to self-direct learning and to achieve educationally relevant goals, including transition-related goals.

Similarly, there is research linking enhanced self-management and self-regulation skills to the attainment of positive outcomes. For example, teaching students self-monitoring strategies has been shown to improve the (a) critical learning skills and classroom involvement skills of students with severe disabilities (Agran et al., 2005; Gilberts, Hughes, Agran, & Wehmeyer, 2001; Hughes et al., 2002); (b) math skills of students with learning disabilities and English language learners (Uberti, Mastopieri, & Scruggs, 2004); (c) reading comprehension of students with learning disabilities (Jitendra, Hoppes, & Zin, 2000); (d) math performance by students with severe emotional disturbances (Levendoski & Cartledge, 2000); and (e) on-task behavior of students with autism (Coyle & Cole, 2004).

Research on these and other component elements of self-determined behavior provide strong, though indirect, evidence that youth who are more self-determined achieve more positive adult outcomes. Further, there is an evidence base pertaining to instructional strategies to promote these component elements. Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, and Wood (2001) conducted meta-analyses of studies reporting intervention strategies to promote component elements of self-determined behavior. The average effect size (ES) across these studies was 1.38, with a standard deviation of 3.74 and a standard error of 0.37. The ES measurements indicated that most studies reported changes in self-determination-related outcomes reflective of a moderate gain as a result of instructional interventions. The single-subject studies demonstrated stronger effect sizes. According to Algozzine et al. (2001), the median percentage of nonoverlapping data (PND) between the treatment and baseline phases was 95% with a range of 64% to 100% for the studies, indicating that participants acquired skills related to self-determination at a relatively high level.

Impact of Promoting Self-Determination

There are only a few studies that provide direct evidence of the relationship between self-determination and student outcomes. Wehmeyer and

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Schwartz (1997) measured the self-determination of 80 students with learning disabilities or mental retardation and then examined adult outcomes one year after high school. Students in the high self-determination group were twice as likely (80%) as youth in the low self-determination group to be employed (40%), and earned, on average, \$2.00 an hour more than students in the low self-determination group who were employed. There were no significant differences between groups on level of intelligence or number of vocational courses taken. Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003) conducted a second follow-up study, examining adult status of 94 students with cognitive disabilities one and three years postgraduation. One year after high school, students in the high self-determination group were disproportionately likely to have moved from where they were living during high school, and by the third year, they were still disproportionately likely to live somewhere other than their high school home and were significantly more likely to live independently. For employed students, those scoring higher in self-determination made statistically significant advances in obtaining job benefits, including vacation, sick leave, and health insurance, an outcome not shared by their peers in the low self-determination group.

Sowers and Powers (1995) showed that students with disabilities involved in instruction using the TAKE CHARGE materials (described in Chapter 3) to promote self-determination increased their participation and independence in performing community activities. Finally, Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) examined the link between self-determination and quality of life for 50 adults with intellectual disabilities. Controlling for level of intelligence and environmental factors, they found that self-determination predicted group membership based on quality of life scores. That is, people who were highly self-determined experienced a higher quality-of-life; people who lacked self-determination appeared to experience a less positive quality of life.

In summary, there is an expanding base of evidence suggesting that higher self-determination and increased capacity in the component elements of self-determined behavior result in better educational and adult outcomes for youth and young adults with disabilities. Chapter 2 explores issues pertaining to promoting self-determination in the context of standards-based reform efforts.