



## The relationship between self-determination and academic achievement for adolescents with intellectual disabilities



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### ABSTRACT

Previous research has demonstrated that for students with intellectual disabilities, improved self-determination skills are positively correlated with productivity and organization during school and quality of life outcomes in adulthood. Despite extensive investigation in these areas, the predictive relationship between self-determination and academic achievement for students with intellectual disabilities has not been fully established. This study utilized the sample from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 of 480 adolescents with intellectual disabilities in the United States in an attempt to provide a possible empirical explanation of the relationship between academic achievement and self-determination, taking into account the covariates of gender, family income and urbanicity. The structural equation model was found to closely fit the data: all path coefficients were statistically significant. The results of this study identify a strong correlation between self-determination and academic achievement for adolescents with intellectual disabilities, indicating a linear relationship of these skills and supporting an increased focus on the teaching of self-determination skills.

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## 1. Introduction

Academic achievement, typically defined as proficiency in reading and mathematics, has consistently been identified as a predictor of post-school success, including social inclusion, economic self-sufficiency, and overall quality of life (Day & Newburger, 2002; Greene, 2000; Kutner et al., 2007; O'Neill, 2001; Swanson, 2004). Moreover, research has explicitly related higher levels of achievement in reading, writing, math, and problem-solving skills with improved post-school outcomes for students both with and without disabilities (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997; Schneider, Kirst, & Hess, 2003). In order to secure these positive post-school outcomes for students, educational policy and research continues to focus on promoting academic achievement.

Scholarship in post-school outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities has identified self-determination as an important attribute. Specifically, researchers have documented (a) the efficacy of self-determination interventions for

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students with intellectual disabilities, (b) a positive relationship between self-determination and post-school outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities, and (c) a positive relationship between self-determination and access to the general education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities (Agran, Blanchard, & Wehmeyer, 2000; Agran, Blanchard, Wehmeyer, & Hughes, 2001; Brooks, Todd, Tofflemoyer, & Horner, 2003; Craft, Alber, & Heward, 1998; Hughes et al., 2002; McCarl, Svobodny, & Beare, 1991; Moes, 1998; O'Reilly, Lancioni, Gardiner, Tiernan, & Lacy, 2002; Rock, 2005; Warner & de Jung, 1971). Furthermore, self-determination has been shown to be positively correlated with school engagement and adult outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities (Agran et al., 2005; Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006; Sánchez & Roda, 2003; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schalock, 2001; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997, 1998). Despite this body of research, studies overall exhibited a “lack of focus on academic skills in the self-determination literature for students with mental retardation/developmental delays” (Fowler, Konrad, Walker, Test, & Wood, 2007, p. 281). The current study incorporated structural equation modeling to investigate the direct relationship between self-determination and academic achievement for students with intellectual disabilities.

## 2. Theory

Working within theories of human agentic behavior, Wehmeyer and Little (2009) describe a self-determined person as the “origin of his or her actions, [who] has high aspirations, perseveres in the face of obstacles, sees more and varied options for action, learns from failures, and overall, has a greater sense of well-being” (p. 868). Wehmeyer (2005) has also defined self-determined behavior as “volitional, intentional, and self-caused, or self-initiated action” (p. 115). Self-determined behavior differs from “other-determined behavior” by specifying self as the primary causal agent as opposed to behavior caused by external forces (Wehmeyer, Abery, et al., 2011). Self-determined behavior is affected by environmental factors as well as by individual knowledge, values, and skills (Field & Hoffman, 2001, 2007; Hoffman & Field, 2005).

The influence of self-determination interventions on students with disabilities has been the focus of substantial research. Researchers have explored various methods to increase self-determination, including evidence-based practices that use choice-making, goal-setting, and self-advocacy to increase students' self-determined behavior (Ezell, Klein, & Ezell-Powell, 1999; Fullerton & Coyne, 1999; Martin et al., 2003; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Lee, Williams-Diehm, & Shogren, 2011). Findings indicate that interventions are effective for improving self-determination (Chambers et al., 2007). Research has also examined the impact of self-determination skills on class participation and direction-following skills (Agran et al., 2005; Fowler et al., 2007; Konrad, Fowler, Walker, Test, & Wood, 2007; Lee, Wehmeyer, Soukup, & Palmer, 2010). Studies have used a variety of methods to assess the effect of self-determination interventions on quality and productivity in language arts and math; however, the existing research has focused primarily on skills such as organization and productivity rather than on academic achievement outcomes (Fowler et al., 2007).

It is documented in the academic literature that individuals with developmental or intellectual disabilities are less likely to exhibit self-determined behavior due to their limited choice-making opportunities (Wehmeyer, Kelchner, & Richards, 1995, 1996; Wehmeyer & Metzler, 1995). As reported by Wehmeyer and Palmer (2003) and Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997), higher self-determination scores were correlated with more positive post-school outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) showed that self-determination skills corresponded with a positive quality of life for people with intellectual disabilities; this finding was replicated in an international survey of adults with mild intellectual disabilities (Lachapelle et al., 2005). Moreover, though it is a common assumption that cognitive limitations result in limitations in self-determination skills (Wehmeyer, Abery, et al., 2011), research has demonstrated that the opportunity to make choices was the most significant variable predicting levels of self-determination (Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003; Wehmeyer, Palmer, et al., 2011).

Many moderating variables such as culture, gender, age, cognitive ability, religious beliefs, environment, and experiences of oppression have all been shown to impact self-determination (Duvdevany, Ben-Zur, & Ambar, 2002; Kurtz-Costes, Rowley, Harris-Britt, & Woods, 2008; Nota, Ferrari, Soresi, & Wehmeyer, 2007; Shogren et al., 2007; Wehmeyer, Abery, et al., 2011; Wehmeyer & Bolding, 1999, 2001; Wehmeyer, Palmer, et al., 2011). Student achievement is also influenced by moderating factors including socioeconomic status, gender, and urbanicity. For example, research has found that family and community poverty are frequently associated with negative effects on academic achievement (Blackorby, Chorost, Garza, & Guzman, 2004; Hattie, 2009; Sharkey, 2009; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2006). The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) classifies additional covariates as demographic: age, ethnicity, family (e.g., support, expectations), and school characteristics and experiences (e.g., grade retention, absenteeism, behavior at school) (Wagner et al., 2006). The complex nature of the interrelationships between factors complicates research on the relationship between self-determination and academic achievement for students with intellectual disabilities.

To advance scholarship on the relationship between self-determination and academic achievement, this study applied a structural equation model developed by the authors (Zheng, Gaumer Erickson, Kingston, & Noonan, 2014) that found a positive linear relationship between self-determination and academic achievement for adolescents with learning disabilities. To test the hypothesized linearity of the variables for adolescents with intellectual disabilities, two research questions were investigated:

A. Is there a direct relationship between self-determination and academic achievement for adolescents with intellectual disabilities?

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