

Self-Determination as an Educational Outcome

by Michael Wehmeyer

Among educators and educational researchers there is a growing awareness that a key ingredient of educational success is missing from the educational experiences of many students with disabilities. Educational success for such students is increasingly being measured by the attainment of adult outcomes such as *gainful employment and community involvement*. Because far too many students with disabilities are not attaining these, we must look further for factors that contribute to educational, and thus adult, success. One such factor is self-determination. In fact, Halloran (1993) identified self-determination as "education's ultimate goal."

For purposes of education, self-determination is best conceptualized as an outcome, a set of attitudes and abilities learned across the lifespan that are associated primarily with achieving adulthood and fulfilling adult roles. This article examines self-determination as an educational outcome, exploring educators' roles in its promotion.

■ Characteristics of Self-Determination

Self-determination refers to the attitudes and abilities necessary to act as the primary causal agent in one's life, and to make choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influence or interference. Self-determined individuals act autonomously, and are self-actualizing and self-regulating. Causal agency implies that it is the individual who makes or causes things to happen in his/her life and that a given action was purposeful or performed to achieve an end. It is a critical element contributing to an individual's quality of life, across settings, environments, and opportunities.

Attitudes contributing to self-determination encompass personal perceptions and beliefs about oneself and one's control in the environment that have an impact on the degree to which one is capable of becoming the primary causal agent in one's life. Personal perceptions about oneself include: (1) self-awareness - the capacity to think in terms of self-concepts (formed through experience with and interpretation of one's environment and influenced by evaluations of significant others, reinforcements, and attributions of one's own behavior), and to focus attention, process information, and act in relationship to these conceptualizations; (2) self-esteem - a sense of personal worth and competence based upon self-evaluations expressing an attitude of approval or disapproval and indicating the extent to which an individual believes him or herself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy; and, (3) self-confidence - certainty in oneself and one's abilities, feeling sure or having faith in oneself and one's abilities without conceit. The attitudinal components incorporating one's perceptions about control in one's

environment involve: (1) self-efficacy - a sense of personal mastery over one's environment and the expectation that one can successfully execute behavior(s) required to produce a specific outcome or outcomes; (2) outcome expectancy - an individual's estimate that the performance of a specific behavior will lead to a predetermined outcome; and (3) locus of control - the degree to which a person perceives contingency relationships between personal actions and outcomes, encompassing how an individual views reinforcement in his/her life (as primarily the consequence of one's own actions or as the result of outside forces).

Abilities contributing to self-determination consist of skills and proficiencies that enable one to become the primary causal agent in one's life and to make choices about one's quality of life. There are a number of such skills, but some are "core" and appear as components of most interventions to promote self-determination. These include the ability to make choices and decisions; to identify alternatives, recognize consequences, and locate resources to act upon decisions; problem identification and problem solving skills; goal attainment skills such as learning to set realistic, achievable goals and objectives; and self-organization skills. To promote the development of personal efficacy and self-awareness, individuals need to learn to recognize and identify physical and psychological needs, how these are met, and how they influence actions.

■ Education's Role in Self-Determination

Ensuring that students with and without disabilities are self-determined will be as complex and difficult a process as comparable efforts to ensure that students with disabilities attain *gainful employment or community involvement*. It has become increasingly obvious that an educational program that adequately promotes self-determination will not consist of unilateral efforts that only change curriculum, create peer mentor programs or structure environments. Instead, an effective educational emphasis to promote self-determination will encompass a host of alterations and adaptations as well as parallel emphasis in the student's home and community. Appropriate, functionally-derived curricula; environments that enhance opportunities to experience choice and to express preferences; interactions with peers without disabilities; access to adult role models; experiences with success; and control in decision-making all contribute to the eventuality that a student will become self-determining. In addition, it is clear that educational efforts to promote self-determination must span the student's learning experience.

Educators play a critical role in development of self-determination or the lack thereof. Unfortunately, the latter is

too often the case. The need to structure the special education classroom to meet educational, behavioral, and administrative requirements may result in an environment promoting dependence and limiting choice and decision making.

Teacher recognition of the importance of skills related to self-determination is the critical first step in promoting self-determination. If not already a focus for educators, there are a number of skills that are essential to becoming self-determined and which warrant instructional attention. Examples of these skills include learning how to access resources, communicate preferences, set achievable goals, plan and manage use of time, identify and solve problems, self-advocate, and, for some students, make choices. In addition to instruction in such skills, the methods and strategies teachers adopt can facilitate the acquisition and utilization of self-determination skills. Instructional models such as role-playing and self-control are effective methodologies for promoting autonomy and self-determination. The use of other strategies, such as relaxation training, metacognitive instruction, and brainstorming, while typically underutilized with students in special education, would also seem to hold promise.

Skill development goes hand in hand with the promotion of attitudes and perceptions critical to becoming self-determined. To enhance motivation and encourage self-determination, teachers should provide activities that optimally challenge the student. Educators can promote autonomy by supporting student initiation of activities and allowing choice. Of particular concern here is the control orientation of the teacher. Students with cognitive disabilities need to learn that they are causal agents for their own lives. Excessive external control is detrimental to this. Students need to be provided opportunities to express preferences, make choices, and then experience the outcomes. Recent efforts have focused on the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process; students can learn to assume more control and responsibility in their IEP, identifying and prioritizing goals or objectives, and taking a leadership role in the meeting.

What can educators do to promote expectations of personal competence and efficacy? Generally, success raises efficacy expectations. However, even within the experience of failure, the perception of progress can lead to expectations for success. A primary means of indicating success or progress is through verbal feedback or reinforcement. Positive feedback needs to be administered in a context and manner that is non-controlling, but honest. Students need to be provided rationale for the performance of activities, as well. Teachers should not leave choice to chance. They must plan for ongoing opportunities to make choices.

Finally, the educational process must empower the student and his/her family to become active, equal partners in educational planning, and must enable students to invest in their own futures by taking advantage of educational opportunities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education

Act (IDEA) now requires that student preferences and interests be a part of the transition planning procedure. Educational personnel must not only reach out to involve parents, siblings, and students, they must set the stage such that real control is shifted to these team members. Educational practices that strip the student of the perception of control will serve only to alienate students further from the process and limit self-determination. Perhaps the most flagrant violations in this regard involve the assessment process. The special education enterprise has been built on a deficit-based identification process during which professionals diagnose problems through testing and assessment procedures that rarely involve the student as a contributing member. In fact, the process often requires that the student remain unaware of the intent of the test.

On the other hand, no individual is completely autonomous or self-determined. This is even more applicable when one is talking about children or adolescents. Transferring control and responsibility to students involves instruction, structure, and support. Simply removing all previous structure is nothing more than an invitation to anarchy. Teachers, administrators, parents, related service personnel, and students need to work together.

Although many skill areas related to self-determination are more applicable to older students or students with mild disabilities, self-determination is not the sole domain of secondary education or students with mild disabilities. Making choices, indicating preferences, and developing self-awareness and confidence involve lifelong experiences and instruction, independent of level of disability. There are normative developmental courses for children's understanding of causality and the development of self-concept and self-awareness. Thus, while adolescence is a critical period for the development of many skills related to self-determination, instruction during elementary years also needs to nurture experiences conducive to these achievements.

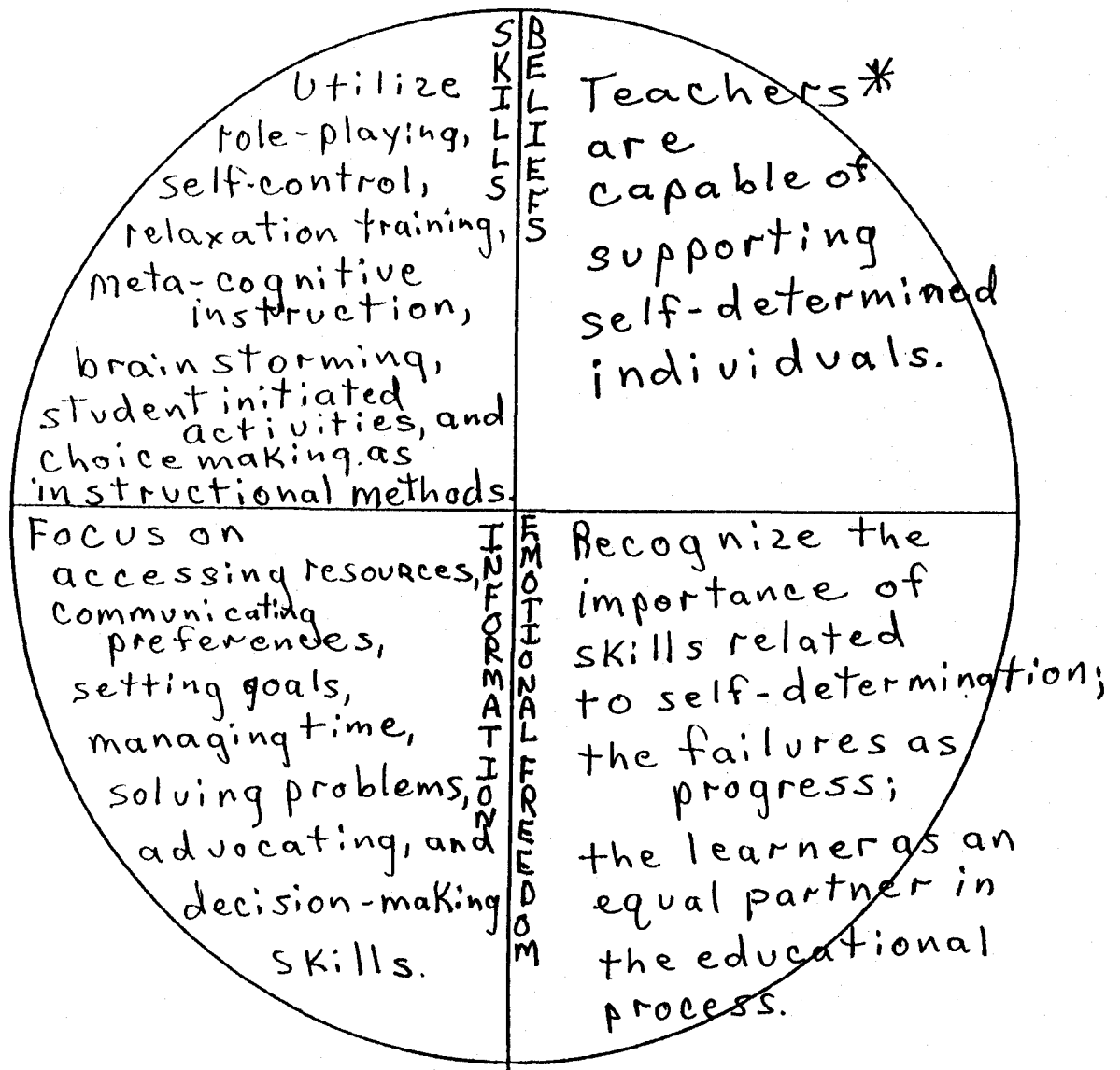
As is illustrated by this brief discussion, education's role in the development of self-determination for children and youth with disabilities is critical. There are curricular, methodological, and attitudinal orientations that promote self-determination, and these need serious attention from the educational community.

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Reference: Halloran, W.D. (1993). Transition services requirement: Issues, implications, challenge. In R.C. Eaves & P.J. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Recent Advances in Special Education and Rehabilitation* (pp. 210 - 224). Boston: Andover Medical Publishers.

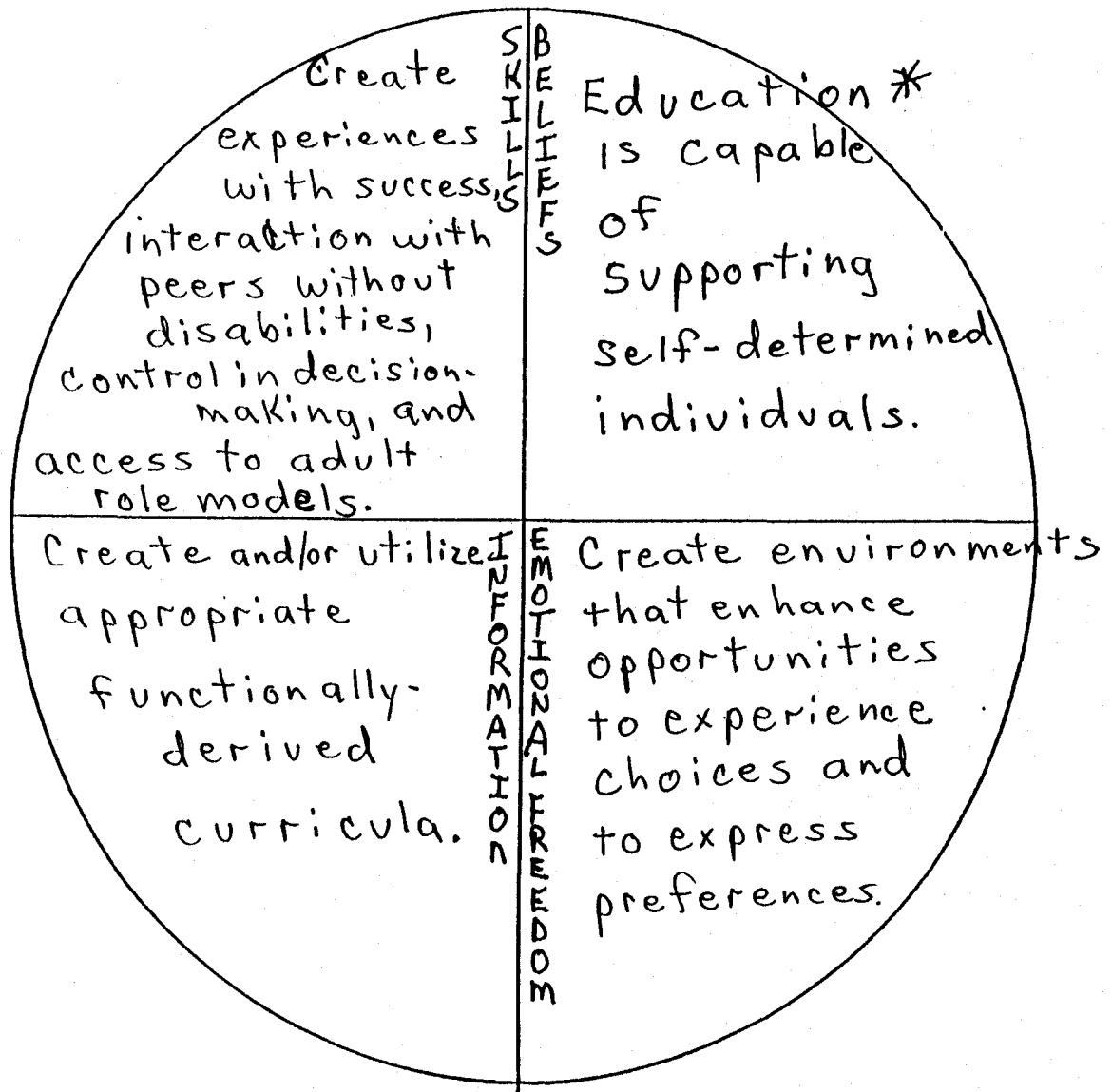
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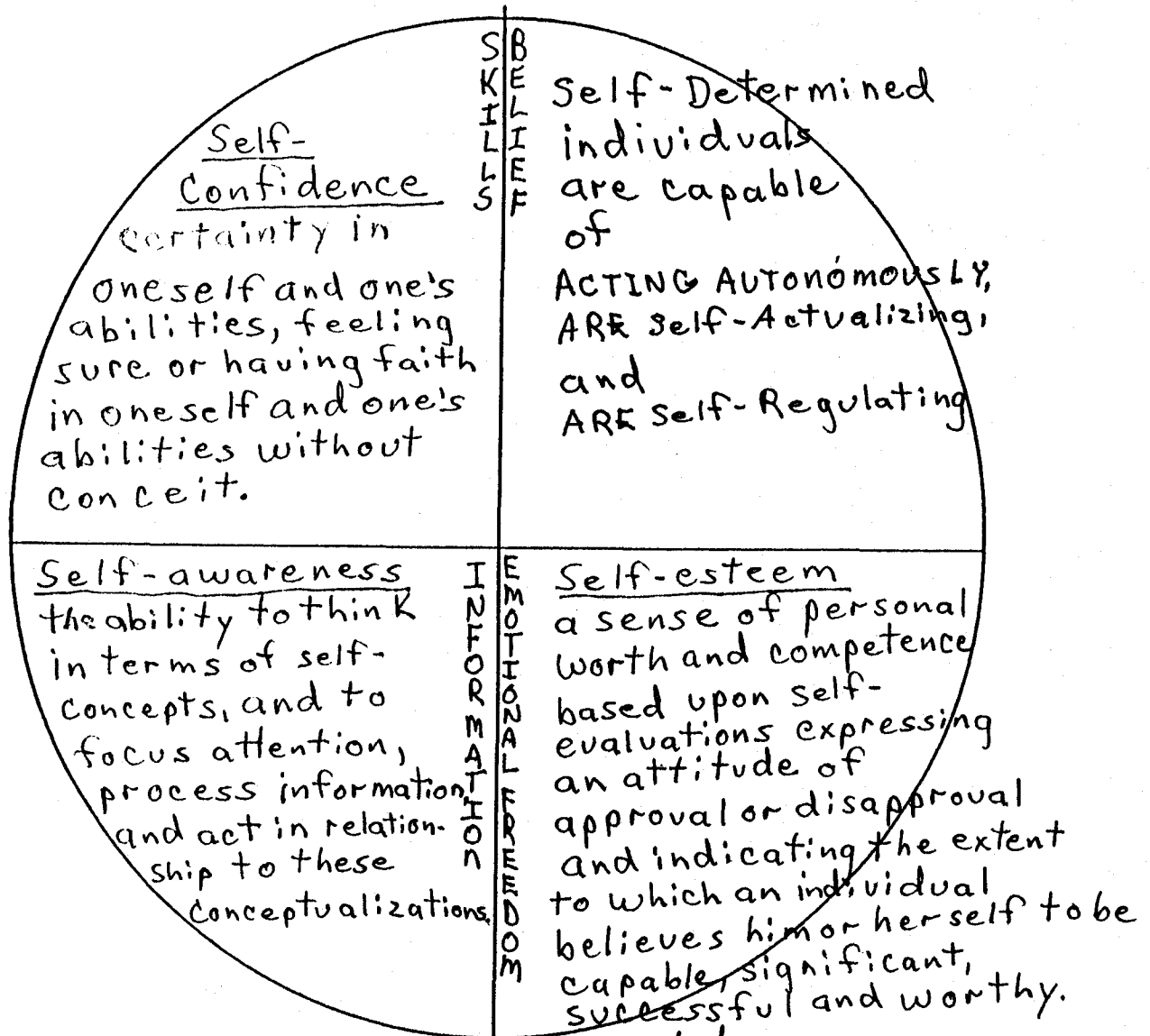
* Teachers =
 families, providers, educators
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* All institutions
Family, Public, Private
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