Fostering self-determination among students with disabilities has become a powerful focus in special education programs based on arguments that self-determination skills are essential to the successful transition from school to work for individuals with disabilities (e.g., Field, 1996; Field, Martin, Miller, Ward & Wehmeyer, 1998a; Wehmeyer, 1997; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). However, several studies of the self-determination status of individuals with disabilities often do not have a choice in where they live, the career they pursue, and the way they spend their money; students with disabilities lag well behind their nondisabled peers in taking responsibilities for their action; and individuals with disabilities lack the opportunities to make choices and decisions.

Although over 450 articles have been published on the topic of self-determination, the primary focus has been on the need to teach individuals with disabilities specific skills about making their own decisions and how to teach these skills. A few articles provide empirically validated links between self-determination instruction and post-school outcomes (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001). The lack of studies on outcomes may be explained by widespread teacher reluctance to implement and include self-determination objectives in individualized educational programs (IEPs) (Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998; Zhang & Stecker, 2001). There is an urgent need to move beyond pronouncements of the importance of the concept and focus on specific strategies those teachers and parents can use to promote self-determination of students with disabilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2000; Zhang, 2001b; Zhang & Stecker, 2001).

In this study by Zhang, et al., they investigated teachers' and parents' practices in fostering self-determination skills of high school students with mild disabilities. Specifically, it was designed to answer three research questions: (a) How frequently do parents and teachers of high school students with mild disabilities engage in recommend practice for fostering students' self-determination? (b) Are there any differences between teachers and parents in terms of how frequently they engage in these recommended practices? and (c) Do student's demographic variables affect parents and teachers' ratings of their practices?

The results from Zhang, et al.'s study appear encouraging. Over half of the teachers reported frequent engagement in activities such as assisting students in (a) linking goals set for self and daily decisions made, (b) determining steps to progress towards goals, and ((c) requesting academic and social supports from teachers. Fewer than half of the teachers, however, indicated frequent engagement in activities such as assisting students in determining (a) programmatic and course-related plans, (b) post-school plans, and (c) own schedules. The relatively low frequency of engagement in these items may be attributed to the fact that programmatic and course plans as well as career decisions are generally addressed at the beginning of the academic year and during IEP/transition meeting. Nonetheless, opportunities for meaningful engagement in activities that promote self-determination must be provided on a daily basis and across activities (see Doll et al. (1996). Further attention should be placed on opportunities for generalization of these skills across settings and individuals (see Field et al., 1998b).

In contrast, parental engagement in self-determination activities appears less promising. Fewer than half the parents reported frequent engagement in self-determination activities. Such low engagement
may be explained, in part, by the fact that some of the activities appear more appropriate for teachers and that parents traditionally have been less prepared and willing to complement skills taught at school. It is essential that parents reinforce and implement self-determination skills, as many home-related activities are crucial in reaching independence. Home settings also present realistic opportunities to generalize skills taught at school.

No statistically significant differences were found in teacher/parent responses across disability or placement types. This finding may be viewed positively if the underlying assumption is that self-determination skills involved in the study are essential elements of expanded independence regardless of disability category and placement setting. However, if lack of significant differences means that one formula works for all, thus limiting attention to individualized needs, the approach is prone to serious problems. Consequently, there is need for additional research. As Algozzine et al. (2001) pointed out, limited information is available on how to individualize instruction of self-determination skills to students with autism, sensory impairments, and emotional and behavioral disorders.

In summary, the road to enhancing the prospect of independence for students with disabilities through self-determination activities is still in a formative stage. Efficacy studies that validate instructional and behavioral interventions (e.g., self-determination) and large-scale implementation of these interventions will improve the lives of those with disabilities and ensure continuous support for special education.

References


