

# Putahi Rangahau Ngatahi Centre for Community Research and Evaluation



## Integrating Self-Determination Principles in Youth Programming for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

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### The challenge

Crafting inclusive and empowering spaces for young individuals with intellectual disabilities.

This fact sheet summarises a critical review of the relevant research literature that explored the influence and significance of self-determination in working with young people with intellectual disability (ID). Intellectual disability refers to a range of conditions that affect intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, encompassing various limitations in everyday social and practical skills (Wasserman, 2012). This broad definition emphasises the diverse challenges and potentials of individuals with ID, highlighting the importance of customised approaches to support their growth and development.

**Inclusion** refers to the *deliberate and continuous involvement* of individuals with ID in various settings, such as educational environments and broader community interactions. This enables them to develop a sense of belonging and contribute actively (Cross et al., 2017).

Renwick et al. (2019) proposed a conceptual framework of belonging that is central to the experiences of youths with intellectual and developmental disabilities in their communities. The framework identifies four key dimensions through which these individuals establish a sense of belonging, listed below. This paradigm shift moves away from traditional inclusion views that focus solely on participating in “normal” activities like employment or independent living. Instead, it highlights the significance of social relationships, meaningful roles, and community norms for fostering a sense of belonging among young people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The framework acknowledges that **inclusion goes beyond mere participation in activities**. It emphasises the significance of experiencing a sense of belonging and having a valued role within a community.

The belonging framework developed by Renwick and colleagues (Renwick et al., 2019) illustrated four major categories and their sub-categories, which represent the avenues through which belonging occurs. Based on input from 24 youth with IDD, these categories are:

- **Social Relationships**, including Friendship, Family, and Romantic Relationships;
- **Meaningful Roles**, encompassing Employment Volunteering and Hobbies;
- **Community Norms** like Acceptance, Respect, and Inclusion; and
- **Self-Advocacy** featuring Self-Determination, Self-Expression, and Self-Esteem.

**Empowerment** is vital for young individuals with ID to **gain agency and access opportunities** that allow them to make decisions and influence changes in their lives (Wehmeyer, 2020).

The empowerment and inclusion of youth with ID require recognising their unique needs, celebrating their abilities, and honouring their aspirations. Understanding the factors that promote self-determination among young people with ID is crucial for enhancing their empowerment and fostering inclusion in various aspects of life (Haelewyck et al., 2005).

## How does self-determination fit into the picture?

Self-determination encompasses various aspects such as problem-solving, decision-making, goal-setting, self-advocacy, and self-awareness. These skills enable individuals to act aligned with their goals and desires. Self-determined behaviour refers to actions allowing individuals to control their lives and improve their quality of life (Palmer et al., 2004). Building on this definition, four essential characteristics of self-determined behaviour can be identified:

- autonomy,
- self-regulation,
- empowerment in initiation, and
- self-realization in action (Shogren et al., 2013).

Strong self-determination skills allow individuals to set personalized goals based on their interests, strengths, and preferences. Possessing these skills is strongly associated with positive academic outcomes, employment, and quality-of-life outcomes.

Promoting self-determination is essential for individuals with ID, enabling them to exercise agency and lead fulfilling lives. Studies have shown that self-determination is associated with enhanced quality of life, increased participation in education and employment, integration into the community, greater autonomy, and overall well-being (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2016).

Students with ID often exhibit lower levels of self-determination compared to their peers without disabilities (Chou et al., 2017). This discrepancy emphasises the importance of targeted interventions and support in enhancing self-determination skills among individuals with ID. Incorporating self-determination principles into youth programming can promote inclusion and empowerment for young people with ID, fostering in them a sense of belonging and independence.

## What do we know about self-determination and youth with ID?

Research by Palmer et al. (2004) showed that teaching self-determination skills to students with intellectual disabilities (ID) can positively impact their engagement and performance in the general curriculum. Interventions focusing on problem-solving, decision-making, goal-setting, and self-management resulted in significant improvements for these students. The findings suggest that developing self-determination skills can help students with ID access the general curriculum.

Practitioners must understand self-determination and its significance when designing programmes for individuals with ID. Practitioners working with people with intellectual disability should prioritise developing decision-making, problem-solving, and goal-setting skills to promote self-determination among this population (Sanchez et al., 2020). Therefore, practitioners should consider incorporating activities and strategies that foster these skills into their programmes.

The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction is a successful teaching method that enables teachers to assist students in taking charge of their learning. It supports students in setting educational objectives, developing action plans, and assessing their progress autonomously. This model promotes student self-determination and improves access to the curriculum for students with disabilities. Incorporating self-determination skills in the school curriculum can positively impact academic achievement and post-school outcomes for students with IDD (Palmer et al., 2004).

By focusing on self-determination, educators can empower students with intellectual disabilities to become active participants in their learning process. Furthermore, the study's results highlight the importance of incorporating self-determination skills into the school curriculum for all students, not just those with disabilities. By teaching individuals with ID how to set goals, make decisions, and manage their learning, educators can equip them with valuable skills that will serve them well throughout their lives.

While the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) was developed for the school context to empower young people to exercise greater educational self-determination, it can be adapted for other contexts (Shogren & Raley, 2023). Implementing the SDLMI in other youth programmes can lead to positive self-determination and goal attainment changes for these individuals. Practitioners should involve these young individuals in goal-setting while emphasizing developing self-determination skills to reduce disparities in employment and other outcomes (Shogren et al., 2019).

Students with ID have diverse transition goals, including academic achievements, financial literacy, interpersonal relationships, and community inclusion. Practitioners supporting individuals with ID in developing self-determination skills should prioritise creating ample opportunities for choice and advocacy, alongside providing essential support. Inclusive and community-based arrangements can significantly enhance autonomy and lead to better outcomes. Accurate assessment of factors influencing the connection between self-determination and outcomes is essential for tailored interventions.

Research has demonstrated that promoting self-determination skills and opportunities can have a long-lasting impact on the overall well-being and future aspirations of individuals with ID. Additionally, people with ID who reported higher levels of self-determination were likelier to report future goals related to education, employment, and independent living (Di Maggio et al., 2019).

## Tests and tools

Research highlights the impact of support staff and service managers on individuals with ID. In some cases, participants felt disempowered and reliant on staff, which hindered their ability to make decisions and engage in the community. This highlights the need for support staff and service managers to adopt a person-centred approach that promotes autonomy and empowers individuals with intellectual disabilities (Abbott & McConkey, 2006). There are some measurement and pedagogical tools that can help practitioners to do this.

### The Self-Determination Inventory-Adult Version

The "Self-Determination Inventory-Adult Version" (Di Maggio et al., 2019) to measure self-determination, includes 22 items assessing different aspects of self-determination such as autonomy, decision-making abilities, expression of thoughts and emotions, and asserting preferences. Participants rated each item on a three-point Likert scale, indicating their perceived ability for self-directed actions and effective communication. The inventory has been shown to possess satisfactory psychometric properties when used with adults with ID (Di Maggio et al., 2019, pp.30-34). Assessments like the SDI-A Version help identify strengths and areas for improvement in terms of self-determination. This information serves as a basis for interventions promoting goal setting and self-determination among individuals with intellectual disabilities.

### The Self-Determined Learning Model Of Instruction

Integrating self-determination instruction into existing curricula empowers students to take control of their learning and acquire important skills for their education and future careers. This research provides evidence supporting the positive impact of implementing the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction on goal achievement in transition-age youth with ID. By equipping them with strategies for self-regulation and problem-solving, the SDLMI enables students to establish and accomplish their personal goals. Furthermore, involving youth with ID in goal-setting can help reduce employment disparities (Shogren et al., 2019).

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