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Annah Lea Hill

*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

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PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS REGARDING THE PROMOTING OF  
SELF-DETERMINATION SKILLS IN STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC  
LEARNING DISABILITIES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Annah Lea Hill

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

August 2014

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Department of Professional Studies in Education

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Annah Lea Hill

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education

---

Valeri R. Helterbran, Ed. D.  
Professor of Education, Advisor

---

Shirley A. Johnson, Ed. D.  
Associate Professor of Education

---

Kelli R. Paquette, Ed. D.  
Professor of Education

ACCEPTED

---

Timothy P. Mack, Ph.D.  
Dean  
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: Perceptions of Teachers Regarding the Promoting of Self-Determination Skills in Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

Author: Annah Lea Hill

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Valeri R. Helterbran

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Shirley A. Johnson  
Dr. Kelli R. Paquette

Field et al. (1998) defined self-determination as a set of skills, beliefs, and knowledge that allows an individual to self-regulate and assume responsibility autonomously. This qualitative, multi-method (Creswell, 2011) study aims to explore the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education in regards to the promotion of self-determination in students with a specific learning disability (SLD) in third through ninth grades prior to the implementation of the transition plan of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). For the purpose of this study, five sub-skills of student self-determination are the main focus: self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy. These skills support the students in order to acknowledge their strengths, needs, and appeal for their rights. Preparing students to attend their IEP meetings is pertinent to their participation, development of self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulations, and self-advocacy as well as their self-empowerment throughout their lifespan. The data collected from focus group sessions, academic documents (lesson plans, goal pages, transition plan page etc.), and anecdotal notes are presented which includes the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education who interact with students with a SLD prior to the transition plan age.

*Keywords:* specific learning disability (SLD), self-determination, self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-advocacy

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I	DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY .....	1
	Introduction.....	1
	Theoretical Framework.....	5
	Self-Determination.....	8
	Self-awareness .....	10
	Self-concept .....	10
	Self-efficacy .....	11
	Self-regulation.....	11
	Self-advocacy.....	12
	Summary of Theoretical Framework .....	12
	Statement of the Problem.....	13
	Significance of the Problem.....	13
	Questions to be Researched .....	14
	Methodology .....	15
	Assumptions of the Study .....	16
	Delimitations of the Study .....	17
	Limitations of the Study.....	17
	Definitions of Terms .....	18
	Summary .....	21
II	REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE .....	23
	Fulfilling the Requirements of Educational Mandates Through Self-Determination.....	23
	The Individualized Education Program Process .....	24
	Self-Determination of Students With a Specific Learning Disability .....	25
	The IEP Team's Promotion of Self-Determination in Students With a SLD...28	
	Self-Determination Skills.....	31
	Self-awareness .....	32
	Self-concept .....	34
	Self-efficacy .....	37
	Self-regulation.....	39
	Self-advocacy.....	41
	Summary of the Sub-skills Related to Self-Determination.....	44
	Promoting Self-Determination.....	45
	Summary .....	48
III	METHODOLOGY .....	50
	Qualitative Research Approach .....	50
	Research Questions.....	52
	Research Design .....	52
	Procedures.....	53



Chapter	Page
Participants and Setting.....	54
Population and Sampling .....	55
Contacting Participants .....	55
Participants' Protection .....	56
Data Collection .....	57
Interview Questions .....	57
Method of Data Analysis .....	59
Triangulation.....	59
Ethical Considerations .....	60
Trustworthiness.....	60
Potential Research Bias.....	61
Summary .....	61
IV DATA AND ANALYSIS .....	63
Research Questions.....	63
Process for Analyzing the Data.....	64
Participants.....	64
Research Tools.....	69
Themes Within the Study.....	72
Personal Definitions and Introduction of Self-Determination .....	72
Student Self-Determination .....	76
Innate ability .....	76
Student initiative .....	76
Student responsibility.....	77
Self-advocacy instead of learned helplessness .....	78
Self-advocacy through asking.....	78
Self-awareness .....	78
Self-concept .....	79
Contributing member of society .....	80
School environment .....	80
IEP meeting discussions .....	81
Teaching Strategies to Promote Self-determination .....	82
Teachable Moments of Self-determination.....	83
Supports Needed .....	83
Changing Role of the Teacher .....	84
Impediments of Teaching Self-determination .....	84
Teacher Collaboration.....	84
Teacher Expectations and Additional Struggles .....	84
Teachers Supported Well.....	85
Parental Support.....	85
After School Considerations .....	85
Training to Teach Self-determination.....	85
Summary .....	86

V	SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	88
	Research Question 1 .....	90
	Research Question 2 .....	91
	Research Question 3 .....	92
	Research Question 4 .....	93
	Conclusions and Recommendations .....	95
	REFERENCES .....	103
	APPENDICES .....	111
	Appendix A - Superintendent Letter for Site Approval (Sample School District) ....	111
	Appendix B - Participant Letter (Special Education Teacher) .....	113
	Appendix C - Participant Informed Consent Form (Special Education Teacher) .....	115
	Appendix D - Interview Protocol.....	116
	Appendix E - Demographic Survey .....	120

## LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Relationship Between the Research Questions and Interview Questions.....	58
2	Demographic Survey: Initial Five Questions.....	67
3	Demographic Survey: Last Five Questions .....	68

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1 Self-determination skills selected for the purpose of this study .....	7

## CHAPTER I

### DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

#### **Introduction**

Legislation has encouraged the integration of students with special needs into the general education setting to work alongside their non-disabled peers. “Today, the term **inclusion** is used to refer to the provision of educational services to students with disabilities in integrated settings” (Colarusso, O'Rourke, Alberto, Hughes, & Waugh, 2007, p. 368) [bold type emphasis made by authors]. Since these students now have to complete the same curricula as their non-disabled peers as determined by their individualized education plan (IEP), they also need to develop self-determination skills in order to become more self-determined, independent, and self-advocate. The ability to self-advocate means that students must be able to explain their abilities, needs, and request accommodations (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1994). One area of special needs is known as a specific learning disability (SLD). It is defined by Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) 2004 as the following:

a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.  
(pp. 117-118)

For the purpose of this study, the only individuals with special needs who will be focused upon are students with SLDs. Students with SLDs, when reading textbooks in the content areas such

as science, social studies, and mathematics, may not understand the language of the textbook and need to be able to independently express their issues and concerns. Students benefit from being aware of their strengths and needs, as well as being able to stand up for their rights. "To become effective self-advocates students with SLD need to develop self-awareness skills and acquire knowledge about SLD" (Pearl, 2004, p. 44).

According to the mandates of IDEA 2004, educators in school-age programs are required to evaluate students (through the creation of an evaluation report which may also be known as an ER) to determine eligibility for special services. Once students have been evaluated and approved for special education services, they are to be provided with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team. For the purpose of this study, it is important to note that the acronym, IEP, is used interchangeably in the field of special education. When referring to the program and services, IEP stands for individualized education program. IEP is also utilized when referring to the legal document that is an individualized contract between the school district personnel, parents or guardians of the student, and the student (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). In some states, intermediate unit personnel also collaborate as members of the IEP team. An Intermediate Unit (IU) is an agency who provides educational services through the form of a contractual agreement in order to support the state education agencies and local school districts. Funding for their service is provided through federal, state, and district monies (AIU3, 2013). The teacher then provides services in a variety of educational placements: as an itinerant (a teacher who travels to various buildings to provide services (Scheetz, 2012), in a resource room (academic instruction and support for part of the day in a classroom which is not a regular education classroom (Jones, 2012)), or in a self-contained classroom (full day instruction and support away from the general education classroom peers (Jones, 2012)).

The IEP team's purpose is to ensure that each IEP is individualized and personalized as determined by each student's abilities and needs. The team determines the specially-designed instruction that is necessary for the students and creates goals for students to work on throughout the school year while anticipating progress toward mastery. It is not until the age of 16 that IEP teams are required by IDEA to invite students to attend (as their abilities permit) their IEP meetings. It is at this age that the teams begin to discuss the transition plan for the student. The transition plan is a plan for the future of the student prior to and upon graduation based on the student's interests and preferences (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007).

"While most (96%) students attend IEP meetings involving transition planning, the majority participate little or moderately (81%) while only a handful (15%) take an active leadership role in planning" (Cortiella, 2011, p. 22). The transition plan mandate set by IDEA 2004 is a federal guideline, but it does not state that the IEP teams have to wait until the age of 16 to invite the student to attend. Students receiving special education services need multiple opportunities to participate and be exposed to their annual IEP process (Danneker & Bottge, 2009). Danneker and Bottge (2009) state that there are few studies which analyze the benefits of inviting students to the IEP meeting prior to the age of 16. They assert that if the team believes that students can participate earlier, that is permitted; however, they believe that this does not occur often enough (Campbell-Whatley, 2008; Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston, 2012, Hart & Brehm, 2013). Since the IEP is based on the individual student and his or her interests, abilities, and needs, it is recommended that the student participate as early as possible (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Pocock et al., 2002).

In 1998, Wood and Test implemented a program funded through The United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, known as Learning and

Education About Disabilities (LEAD). The LEAD program utilized both qualitative and quantitative research-based methods pertaining to self-determination and self-advocacy when working with students in high school who had learning disabilities (North Carolina University, 2001; Pocock et al., 2002). The program was one of six programs which were selected through the Self-Determination Synthesis Project funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, Department of Education (North Carolina University, 2001; Pocock et al., 2002, p. 210). The researchers emphasized that the students needed to understand how they are able to receive special education services and the reasons for the services. Also recognized was the inability or reticence of many students with a SLD to discuss their abilities, needs, and accommodations with their teachers. Additionally, they wanted to ensure that the teachers and parents were also knowledgeable about students' skills, self-determination, and self-advocacy skills.

Possessing the ability to explain these areas means that the student would be described as having strong self-advocacy skills. "Self-advocacy refers to an individual's ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights" (Van Reusen et al., 1994). In this way, students can then take a more active role in their own IEP meetings starting at the transition planning age of 16 if they are provided the opportunities and are exposed to the process as a passive participant early on in the process. For example, Pocock et al. (2002) discussed a peer mentoring component which was included in the LEAD program and encouraged collaboration between high school students with a SLD and middle school students with a SLD who were scheduled to advance to high school. The high schools students, who were represented in the study, were able to provide advice through mentorship to the middle school students. This component promoted self-determination and self-advocacy skills in student mentors prior to the age of 16.



Student empowerment through self-advocating at their IEP meetings also supports the mandates of NCLB (Danneker & Bottge, 2009), which is beneficial for all who are involved in the IEP process. In a multiple case design, Danneker and Bottge (2009) provided training, conducted interviews, and observed IEP meetings to collect data on the benefits and barriers of student-led IEPs (where they were actively involved in their IEP meeting) in the elementary school setting. The results suggested that with appropriate training, elementary age students are able to communicate their needs, necessary accommodations, and strengths. "The traditional IEP process does not emphasize self-determination skills; however, student-led meetings in this study seemed to foster leadership qualities" (p. 229). Due to the limited amount of literature on promoting self-determination and self-advocacy among students with IEPs prior to the transition plan age, further research is warranted to determine how students can be involved prior to the transition plan age by increasing students' exposure to the process. The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Self-determination skills such as self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy assist students when required to explain their needs, their abilities, and appeal for their rights throughout their individual lifespans. Students with a specific learning disability (SLD) benefit from the development of their self-awareness and self-advocacy skills (Pearl, 2004). Once they have acquired the knowledge of their SLD, they are better able to self-advocate (Pearl, 2004). Students with a SLD typically need to be supported by their Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams in order to develop students' self-determination

skills prior to age 16 when the transition plan is implemented (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Pocock et al., 2002). In order to become self-determined, students benefit from the awareness of their specific learning disability (SLD) and the steps required to compensate for their areas of need. Figure 1 displays a more salient representation of the self-determination sub-skills which will be focused upon in this study.

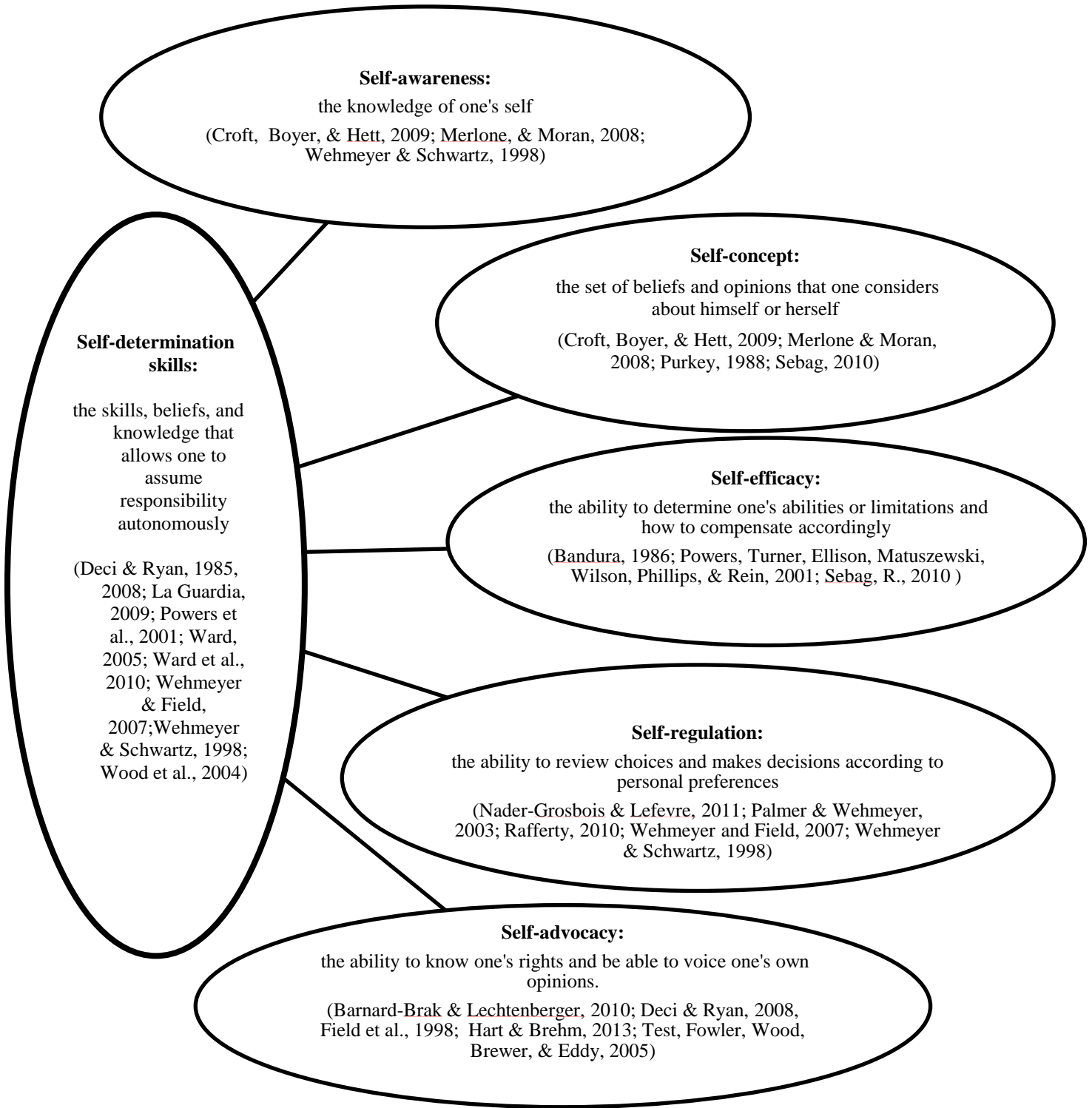


Figure 1. Self-determination skills selected for the purpose of this study

## **Self-Determination**

Self-determination is a conglomeration of skills, beliefs, and knowledge that allows an individual to self-regulate and assume responsibility autonomously (Field et al., 1998; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007). Students with a specific learning disability (SLD) benefit from experiences and opportunities where self-determination skills are promoted as vital skills for their future (Field et al., 1998; Hart & Brehm, 2013; Heller et al., 2011; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007). It is through the skills of self-determination that students with a SLD are given a voice. For example, students benefit when provided the opportunity to attend their IEP meetings prior to the age of 16, even as a passive participant (Danneker & Bottge, 2009).

Research suggests that self-determination be implemented and promoted through the student's IEP process (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Stang, 2008; Hart & Brehm, 2013; Hong & Shull, 2009). Current researchers suggested that teachers need to be knowledgeable about the students who they are instructing and be active participants of the IEP team. There is need for IEP teams to be more collaborative and accepting of students' preferences related to their academics (Cortiella, 2011; La Guardia, 2009; Ward, 2005; Ward, Lundberg, Ellis, & Berrett, 2010; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998).

Within the literature, there are various sub-skills of self-determination. For the purpose of this study, self-determination can be encouraged through the use of skills in the following areas: self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy (Carter et al., 2008; Croft, Boyer, & Hett, 2009; Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Hong & Shull, 2009; La Guardia, 2009; Sebag, 2010; Ward, 2005; Ward, Lundberg, Ellis, & Berrett, 2010; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). It is through the self-determination theory specifically that Deci and Ryan (1985, 2008) have encompassed many of the skills which are required for the

development and promotion of self-determination; self-awareness, self-regulation, autonomy, and self-motivated behavior. Psychologists have researched the area of self-determination and the stages that need to be followed in order to acquire it. Deci and Ryan published their exploration in the idea of the self-determination theory (SDT) in 1985. SDT is a theory that focuses on aspects of human motivation, development, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2008). They also explained that humans have basic needs that need to be met such as the sense of feeling in control of one's own life and being able to make personal choices. Through SDT, individuals can become motivated to develop the skills required for autonomy in the areas of family, education, and career to name a few.

Other researchers suggested that teachers and parents can support and enhance student self-determination (Ochoa & Olivarez, 1995; Milsom, Akos, & Thompson, 2004; Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998). Through their research and literature reviews, they suggested both informal and formal strategies for the practice of these skills. Ochoa and Olivarez (1995) suggested that students with a learning disability have lower social acceptance compared to their non-disabled peers. For peers to develop relationships, they need to become self-aware and then familiar with each other. Once self-aware, the peers can discuss each others' abilities, strengths, and needs. As Milsom, Akos, and Thompson (2004) stated, "Self-advocacy begins with a student developing accurate disability self-awareness and ends with a student effectively and appropriately communicating his or her needs to instructors and support services personnel" (pp. 397-398). Through self-awareness, self-efficacy and self-regulation, the skill of self-advocacy can be established. Students' understanding of self-advocacy in turn leads to self-determination (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998).

In 1988, The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) encouraged the implementation of the self-determination initiative (Ward, 2005; Ward & Meyer, 1999). The federal organization's objectives were to provide persons with disabilities the ability to make their own choices, as well as encourage them to become leaders in their communities. They wanted to assist persons with disabilities to take control of their own lives. As an initiator of the federal initiative, Ward (2005) explained that persons with disabilities needed to be provided opportunities to practice and enhance their self-determination skills which would in turn improve their chances of a quality education and asserted that self-determination is important for future endeavors and needed to be explicitly taught. Through the self-determination initiative, demonstration programs were reviewed and evaluated for best practices in the field of special education.

**Self-awareness.** Self-awareness is a key component of self-determination which, "refers to the capacity to become the object of one's own attention" (Morin, A., 2006, p. 359). Self-awareness is required for the understanding of personal abilities and limitations (Croft, Boyer, & Hett, 2009; Merlone & Moran, 2008; Trainor, 2005). Students with a SLD need to have the skill to explain their abilities and limitations to their teachers, family, and community. When explaining what they can and cannot do independently, students are demonstrating an aspect of self-determination, self-awareness.

**Self-concept.** Along with self-awareness, students begin to develop their self-concept when they demonstrate their awareness of their abilities and needs (Croft, Boyer, & Hett, 2009; Merlone & Moran, 2008; Sebag, 2010). Self-concept "may be defined as the totality of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence" (Purkey, 1988, p. 2). Such aspects

are supported in both the cognitive development theory of Vygotsky (1978) and the psychosocial theory of Erikson (Erikson, 1968). IEP teams may support students through the creation of a plan for implementing and scaffolding steps to enhance the student's self-awareness and self-concept which will then build upon the student's self-determination skills (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Morin, 2006; Pocock et al. 2002; Purkey, 1988).

**Self-efficacy.** A third skill which promotes self-determination is students' abilities to demonstrate self-efficacy in order to determine the extent of their abilities or limitations and how to compensate accordingly (Bandura, 1977; Powers, Turner et al., 2001; Sebag, 2010). Students who demonstrate strong self-efficacy are able to determine whether or not they can complete a specific task according to their own abilities. Baird, Scott, Dearing, and Hamill (2009) suggested that students with learning disabilities do not reveal as much academic self-efficacy as their peers without learning disabilities. Through questionnaires which were given to students with and without learning disabilities, it was also suggested that the students with a learning disability were not aware that intelligence could be enhanced and developed over time. Finally, Baird et al. (2009) suggested that when working with students with a learning disability, self-regulation should be promoted simultaneously.

**Self-regulation.** Self-regulation is another skill that promotes self-determination which may be important for students to be able to solve problems and set personal goals for their future (Nader-Grosbois & Lefevre, 2011; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Rafferty, 2010, Trainor, 2005; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Being able to self-regulate benefits students and promotes independence in order to remain self-determined. Although social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) supports the promotion of self-efficacy and self-regulation in individuals, much of the extent of research supports only some of the skills which lead to self-determination. For the

purpose of this study, Deci and Ryan's 1985 self-determination theory (SDT) is focused upon as it supported more skills which lead to self-determination. According to Deci and Ryan (2008), individuals become motivated to develop the skills needed for autonomy in the areas of family, education, and career, making the promotion of self-determination more generalizable for students with a SLD.

**Self-advocacy.** A final skill which may be needed to promote self-determination which this study focuses on is self-advocacy. Although SDT theory does not use the term *self-advocacy*, it is another component to be considered in the self-determination process of becoming independent (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In the field of education, self-advocacy is the ability to know one's individual rights and be able to voice one's own opinions about a particular situation (Field et al., 1998). Students with a SLD demonstrate their independence when able to efficiently communicate their abilities and needs. Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, and Eddy (2005) developed a conceptual framework for self-advocacy that entailed four main components: "knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership" (p. 43). Through the promotion of this skill at an IEP meeting, students with a SLD who possess self-advocacy demonstrate their abilities through effective communication and leadership as suggested by the researchers.

### **Summary of Theoretical Framework**

The components of self-determination which are most often mentioned in the literature, will be further addressed in Chapter II. Self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy are skills which assist in the development of self-determination in order to promote student independence and autonomy. As mentioned previously, students with specific learning disabilities (SLDs) thrive in the general education setting when utilizing a



curriculum or IEP that addresses self-advocacy and self-determination to promote their autonomy and independence (La Guardia, 2009; Ward, 2005; Ward, Lundberg, Ellis, & Berrett, 2010; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Enabling students to make informed decisions about their education and future benefits them. Providing students with the knowledge for being self-determined in order to advocate will promote their independence (Danneker & Bottge, 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams need to support the development of students' self-advocacy and self-determination skills prior to age 16 (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Pocock et al., 2002). When supported prior to the transition plan age, the students are better prepared to promote the skills that assist them when they are required to explain their needs, understand their abilities, and stand up for their rights throughout their lives. Students with a SLD can demonstrate self-determination skills more efficiently and effectively at an IEP meeting while communicating their abilities, interests, and needs when these skills are practiced and rehearsed in advance. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to determine the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan.

### **Significance of the Problem**

A *transition plan* is a plan within the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that enables the (IEP) team to determine the student's abilities and needs in the future, after graduation from high school (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007). Therefore, prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan, teachers of students with a SLD need to acknowledge and promote self-determination skills in their students. To date, there are few studies which provide information on the pertinence and incidence of self-determination

skills (such as self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy) in the IEP planning process prior to the age of 16 for which the transition plan is to be enacted. Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind 2001 (NCLB), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA), and other current legislation, classrooms have seen an influx of students identified with special needs in the regular education setting. A student's education plays an important role in the development of a student's identity. Educational organizations can support a student in the building of a positive self-concept and promote self-determination skills (Field et al., 1998). Students need to be able to make decisions, speak for themselves, and appeal for their rights in the educational setting (Poehls, 2009). "Students with LD go on to postsecondary education at a much lower rate than their nondisabled peers, and of those who do, few seek supports in college and few earn undergraduate or advanced degrees" (Cortiella, 2011, p. 2). All students can benefit from support in the area of self-determination; however, students with a SLD can benefit from utilizing this support service toward improving their chances of graduation and employment. "Few adults with LD access workplace accommodations or understand their rights under disability anti-discrimination laws" (Cortiella, 2011, p. 2).

### **Questions to be Researched**

1. What do teachers in the field of special education perceive as influences regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan?
2. What do teachers in the field of special education report as the self-determination skills and strategies that have been taught, encouraged, or modeled for students with a specific learning disability?

3. What are the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education regarding their accountability in the promotion of self-determination in students with a specific learning disability?
4. What general themes emerge from the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan?

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this interpretive qualitative study was to determine the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the promotion of self-determination skills, in students with specific learning disabilities, prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan. These skills assist students when required to explain their needs and stand up for their rights. Qualitative research was utilized to collect information on the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education, as well as the types of academic documents (lesson plans, IEP goal pages, IEP transition plan pages with all identifying information redacted) which are written for the promotion of self-determination for students with a specific learning disability in third through ninth grades.

During this study, the researcher used multiple sources and methods in order to maintain "trustworthy findings" (Barbour, 2007, p. 46). This approach is known as triangulation. "When qualitative researchers locate evidence to document a code or theme in different sources of data, they are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Therefore, teachers in the field of special education in southwestern Pennsylvania (those who teach or interact with students with a SLD in third through ninth grades) were the representatives of the population through purposive sampling. Qualitative data was collected

through audio and video recorded focus group sessions due to the researcher's hearing loss and for ease of analysis. The participants were asked to bring copies of academic documentation (lesson plans, goals page, and transition plan page with all identifying information removed and in a sealed envelope) that demonstrated the promotion of self-determination in students with a SLD in third through ninth grades. They were also asked follow-up questions for clarification and written descriptive notations of what they said were documented as well as audio and video-recorded. In addition, the academic documentation which the participants bring with them in a sealed envelope with all identifying information redacted was observed at a later date after the focus group sessions and one-on-one interview was conducted. No identifying information was requested or utilized in the process and all participants were given pseudonyms for anonymity. Electronic recording devices such as video cameras and audio recorders were utilized for the focus group sessions in order to collect data and create transcriptions of the data. Notations were made of the themes that emerged from both the focus group sessions and review of the academic documentation. Once the data had been collected from the interviews and the academic documentation, they were analyzed through the qualitative statistical software, NVivo 10.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

It is assumed that the sample is representative of IEPs which are written by teachers in the field of special education in southwestern Pennsylvania (those who teach or interact with students with a SLD in third through ninth grades). Due to their backgrounds and areas of expertise, the participants know and understand the concepts of self-determination, as well as the current mandates such as IDEA 2004. It is assumed that the participants also acknowledge that their students with SLDs need to develop self-determination skills to become self-sufficient upon graduation.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The study was restricted to interviews which were conducted with special education teachers of students with a SLD (in third through ninth grades) who participate in special education programs in southwestern Pennsylvania.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The primary limitation of this research is that the findings may not be generalizable to the school-age population of students in the southwestern region of Pennsylvania as only teachers who work with students with SLDs in third through ninth grades was the focus of this study. The sample size, which was established through purposive sampling (Silverman, 2001), may be considered small and eight of the nine participants come with a perspective of a rural school district, as such the data may not be able to be generalized without quantitative data. Another limitation is that the participants were all female. No male teachers were included in this study because none volunteered to participate. A third limitation is that once given Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the institution and site approval from the school district superintendents, the researcher began to send emails out to potential participants based on the information from the special education office and the school district website. Some of the websites were not up-to-date and the email addresses and teacher lists were not correct. The researcher could have also sent the invitation to participate out via traditional mailing with self-addressed stamped envelopes to return items such as the invitation, demographic survey, and the Informed Consent Form. Also, participation in the focus group sessions may have been hampered by the school day schedule and family obligations which was why many potential participants stated that they could not participate at this time. The school day schedule is sacred and is difficult to work around. Two superintendents and one special education supervisor were

willing to provide substitutes for the teachers who were interested in becoming participants during the school day. Finally, the researcher had the invitations to participate organized where the participants would all travel to a nearby university to meet for the focus group sessions. Although the schools were within 40 minutes or less, travel for the participants may have been an issue and confusing when the researcher changed to be flexible and went to the school district sites.

### **Definition of Terms**

For this study, the commonly used terminologies are defined as:

*An Evaluation Report (ER)* is created to determine if the student has a disability and to determine the student's educational needs (IDEA, 2004).

*Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)* for all school-age children is mandated through IDEA 2004 but was founded through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (IDEA, 2004).

*Inclusion and inclusive* refer "...to the act of providing appropriate educational services to students with disabilities in settings where they are integrated with their non-disabled peers" (Colarusso, O'Rourke, Alberto, Hughes, & Waugh, 2007, p. 368).

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA)* is the reauthorization of the original act that enhanced the implementation of Special education services (IDEA, 2004).

*An Individualized Education Program (IEP)* is the placement and services for students with special needs which may be equated to an individualized education plan (IDEA, 2004).

*Individualized Education Plan (IEP)* is a document which is designed to provide a student with free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010).

*Intermediate Units (IUs)* are agencies which provide educational services in order to support the state education agencies and local school districts. Funding for their service is through federal, state, and district monies (AIU3, 2013).

*Itinerant* teachers travel from school to school to provide special education services to students on their caseload (Scheetz, 2012).

*Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)* was established through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 for all school-age children who were to be placed in educational settings with non-disabled peers. It is currently mandated through IDEA (2004).

*Mainstream* is an educational placement which may be considered when the students who are receiving special education services are able to be in regular education courses with their non-disabled peers (Colarusso, O'Rourke, Alberto, Hughes, & Waugh, 2007).

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001* was published in order to provide specific regulations for schools to demonstrate student achievement and progression as well as highly qualified teachers (NCLB, 2002).

*Resource room* "...individualized or small group learning environments with the primary focus on core academic curriculum. Students in resource rooms had greater access to the general education school environment through both physical location and social opportunities" (Jones, 2012, p.38).

*Self-advocacy* is considered the next step in the self-determination process of becoming independent. Self-advocacy is the ability to know your individual rights and be able to voice your own opinions about your situation (Field et al., 1998).

*Self-awareness*, "refers to the capacity to become the object of one's own attention" (Morin, 2006, p. 359)

*Self-concept*, "may be defined as the totality of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence" (Purkey, 1988, p. 2).

*Self-contained* is "...characterized by physical and social isolation from the general education student population throughout most, if not all, of their daily school routine" (Jones, 2012, p.38).

*Self-determination* is defined as a conglomeration of skills, beliefs, and knowledge that allows an individual to self-regulate and assume responsibility autonomously (Field et al., 1998).

*Self-efficacy* the ability to determine the extent of one's abilities or limitations and how to compensate accordingly (Bandura, 1977; Powers, Turner et al., 2001; Sebag, 2010).

*Self-regulation* occurs when "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" (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007, p. 5).

*Special Education* may be considered as an educational service for students once they are evaluated and identified as needing special supports and services in school (Weintraub, 2012).

*Specific Learning Disability (SLD)* is defined by IDEA 2004 as:

(i) General. Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.



(ii) Disorders not included. Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (pp. 117-118)

A *transition plan* is a plan that is created within the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that enables the (IEP) team to determine what the student needs in the future after graduation (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007).

### **Summary**

Becoming informed of how students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) see themselves, as well as how others see them, is very important in the area of academics in order to empower students to become productive citizens during the school years and life after graduation (Eisenman, 2007). School personnel acknowledge that the students and parents have more insights on students' interests, abilities, and needs. The teachers, however, know the curriculum standards that need to be aligned to students' IEP goals. Collaboratively, the team can better support the students prior to and during their educational transition planning process if they are aware of and include self-determination skills in students' IEP process (Bandura, 1977; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Field et al., 1998; Pocock et al., 2002; Powers et al., 2001; Purkey, 1988; Sebag, 2010; Wehmeyer et al., 2007). Specifically, the team can support the development of students' self-awareness, self-concept, self-regulation, and other components of self-determination for the promotion of the student's independence and autonomy prior to the transition plan (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Pocock et al., 2002). Due to the nature of a SLD, support with reading, listening, speaking, or writing may be warranted; therefore, students with a SLD also benefit from utilizing a curriculum or IEP that addresses components of self-determination so that they can explain

their needs, understand their abilities, and stand up for their rights throughout their lives (La Guardia, 2009; Ward, 2005; Ward et al., 2010; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Given the limited research-base for the actual methods that promote self-determination and self-advocacy prior to the implementation of the transition plan in an IEP, this study provided data on the promotion of such skills in student created projects, current IEPs, as well as teachers' perspectives on these areas. Chapter II will provide a review of literature related to the promotion of self-determination in students with a SLD prior to the IEP transition plan age.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of this literature review was to investigate the promotion of self-determination in students with a specific learning disability (SLD), the perceptions in regards to the promotion of self-determination from teachers in the field of special education, as well as the promotion of self-determination skills prior to the individualized education plan (IEP) transition plan age. Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998) stated that "...unless students with disabilities acquire and develop the various attitudes and abilities associated with self-determination throughout their educational careers, from early childhood to high school, they will not be prepared to become self-determined young adults" (p.5).

This chapter reviewed research on the concept of self-determination and the promotion of self-determination skills in students with a SLD. Also reviewed are the procedures for fulfilling the requirements of educational mandates through self-determination such as the individualized education program (IEP) process, as well as self-determination skills of students with a specific learning disability (SLD) and the IEP Team's promotion of various sub-skills of self-determination skills in students with SLD. For the purpose of this study, the specific self-determination skills which were reviewed are as follows: self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy. The promotion of these specific self-determination skills in students with a SLD was synthesized.

#### **Fulfilling the Requirements of Educational Mandates Through Self-Determination**

According to the U. S Department of Education under the enactment of Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), students with disabilities who are in the regular educational setting are to be provided free appropriate public education in the least

restricted environment. It is required that school personnel ensure that students' needs are being met in the least restrictive environment as mandated by IDEA 2004 and No Child Left Behind 2001 (NCLB). In 2007, the federal law, No Child Left Behind, was amended to ensure that all students, even those receiving special education, were receiving an appropriate education in order to meet state standards ( No Child Left Behind Revisited, 2008). After the amendment, school districts began to be held accountable for their students' academic achievement. Students receiving special education services already had goals in place for them as found in their individualized education plans (IEPs). IEPs are the legal documents which school districts must create and implement for students who require special education services (Harr, Oliver, Ramanathan, & Socias, 2008). Some literature, in the field of special education, may also refer to IEP as the individualized education program (which is considered the student's placement and accommodations). Either way, the proposed situation for each student is to be individualized according to the student's needs and strengths. Through IDEA 2004, school districts are required to prepare students for life after high school (Ofiesh, 2006; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007).

### **The Individualized Education Program Process**

In order to fulfill the requirements and considerations of IDEA, students with disabilities are to have a multidisciplinary team of experts (Reiff, 2007). The team may consist of, but is not restricted to, the student, parents, principal, regular education teacher, special education coordinator, special education teacher, and other support personnel. The team decides which educational placement is most beneficial for the student within the least restrictive environment. For the purpose of this study, the acronym, IEP, has been found in the literature to be used two ways; when the team considers a program for which the educational placement is established for the individual student (individualized education program) and when the team creates the legal

documentation (individualized education plan). A written document, an IEP, is created to mandate the selected placement and ensure compliance of all who are involved. The student's IEP allows the school district, parents, and students to create an appropriate education plan for the students based on the student's individual strengths and needs. Through the IEP transition plan process, one of the main aims focuses to encourage students to self-advocate. "Advocacy is the key for developing self-determination and fostering basic civil rights" (Abernathy & Taylor, 2009, p.121). The transition plan was incorporated into the IEP process in order to support the student by requiring that the following be considered prior to graduation: post secondary education, employment, and living arrangements (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007). IDEA 2004 requires students who are 16 years of age or older to attend their individualized education program (IEP) meeting.

### **Self-Determination of Students with a Specific Learning Disability**

"Historically, students with disabilities have relied on their parents, teachers, and other involved adults to make choices and decisions for them and to advocate on their behalf" (Mishna, Muskat, Farnia, & Wiener, 2011, pp. 187-188). However, as early as the 1970s, psychologists have researched the area of self-determination and the suggested stages that need to be followed in order to acquire it so the students would not need to be reliant on adults. Deci and Ryan (2008) published their exploration of the idea of the self-determination theory in 1985. The self-determination theory (SDT) is a theory that focuses on the aspects of human motivation, development, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008). They presented various types of motivation that is needed for an individual to develop self-determination skills. They also explained that humans have basic needs that need to be met such as the sense of feeling in control of one's own life and being able to make personal choices. In accordance of the self-determination theory,

individuals can become motivated to develop the skills needed for autonomy in the areas of family, education, and career to name a few.

In 1988, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) began a self-determination initiative (Ward, 2005; Ward & Meyer, 1999). Although not specifically named, a group of individuals were charged to provide persons with disabilities the ability to make their own choices, as well as to encourage them to become leaders in their communities. They wanted to assist persons with disabilities to control their own lives and rely less on the adults around them. Ward (2005) explained that persons with disabilities need to be provided opportunities to practice and enhance their self-determination skills which would in turn improve their chances of a quality education. Ward (2005) stated that self-determination is important and needs to be explicitly taught. Through current research, it is suggested that this can be accomplished through the student's IEP (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Stang, 2008; Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Hart & Brehm, 2013; Hong & Shull, 2009). Teachers who are knowledgeable about the students whom they are supporting, instructing, and assessing provide more effective support. They are also active participants of the IEP team. They ensure that IEP teams are more collaborative and accepting of students' interests and preferences, as well as other considerations within the IEP process (student's disability, support services, and educational placement). One notable consideration within the IEP is determining whether or not the student has a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). It is defined by Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) 2004 as the following:

a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including

conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. (pp. 117-118)

In the fall of 2007, researchers Mitchell, Moening, and Panter (2009) conducted a two-year program to establish and facilitate student-led IEP meetings with middle school and high school students and their teachers. As part of the program, the researchers asked teachers to choose students who demonstrated the following: "...leadership skills, communication whether vocal or assistive technology and a desire to learn" (p. 231). They also asked teachers to take the role of a facilitator and not one as an initiator. The researchers specifically were looking for the students to be more accountable for their choices and self-determination skills. With the influx of students with specific learning disabilities in the mainstream setting, "... the demands of teaching, paperwork, and local, state, and federal initiatives leave few precious minutes for teachers to integrate new skills and strategies into existing schedules" (Mitchell, Moening, & Panter, 2009, p. 232). During the program, the researchers had the students learn about special education law, the process of receiving special education services, self-determination skills, and guardians' responsibilities. The main goal of the program was to encourage the students to become self-determined in order to then eventually mentor other students to lead their IEP meetings.

In another approach, a school-based intervention design, Mishna et al. (2011) shared their evaluative measures to improve self-advocacy skills of 68 middle school students (50 boys and 16 girls in grades six and seven) with a learning disability. The focus of the intervention was provided through group collaboration in order to promote self-awareness, problem-solving, and self-regulation. The student's current teachers at the time participated in the intervention, as well. The researchers interviewed the students with learning disabilities to assess their

knowledge of self-advocacy skills. They also provided workshops for parents, teachers, and students without learning disabilities. A component of the study was for parents, teachers, and students without learning disabilities to support those students with learning disabilities. At the end of the 18 month intervention, the students with learning disabilities self-reported an increase in their self-advocacy skills.

### **The IEP Team's Promotion of Self-Determination in Students with a SLD**

According to the U. S. Department of Education under the enactment of Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, students with disabilities who are in the regular educational setting are provided free appropriate public education in the least restricted environment. In order to fulfill the requirements and considerations of IDEA 2004, students with disabilities are to have a multidisciplinary team of experts. The team may consist of, but is not restricted to, the student, parents, principal, regular education teacher, special education coordinator, special education teacher, and other support personnel. The team decides which educational placement is most beneficial for the student within the least restrictive environment. An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is created to mandate the selected placement and ensure compliance of all who are involved.

Inclusion refers to the act of providing appropriate educational services to students with disabilities in settings where they are integrated with their non-disabled peers (Colarusso, et al., 2007). In the inclusive setting, students with disabilities are placed in the regular education setting with their non-disabled peers as well as be provided with appropriate support services. An IEP requires three criteria in order for the student to be provided free appropriate public education and participate in the least restrictive environment. A description of the student's disability and how it affects the student's ability in the general education setting is needed. Goals



are developed in order to ensure progression in the general education setting. Finally, a list of program modifications and support services are established to demonstrate how the student will obtain assistance in order to progress toward mastery of the IEP goal. Students who have disabilities, between the ages of 14 to 21, need support in the area of self-advocacy so that they are able to self-advocate for themselves during their IEP meetings when discussing their options for transition services (Field et al., 1998).

Transition services, in the amendments of IDEA 2004, occur when students turn 16. In the United States, certain states including PA permit, if the parents and the rest of the team feel that it is appropriate, students to attend earlier than 16 years of age. However, it is mandated through IDEA 2004 that students be invited to attend their own IEP meetings when a discussion of their transition from school to post-graduation was to be considered. IDEA also requires that the tasks which are selected for the transition plan include the student's well-being and what they choose to do. If the students are not willing to participate and provide such preferences, the team is required by IDEA to find other modes of determining the student's preferences in order to consider them in the transition plan.

The individuals who are involved in the student's IEP process ideally work as a team. Through this group effort, the IEP team collaborates in order to be aware of the student's strengths, needs, and rights. The team implements a process that informs the students of such. The team ensures that the students are practicing effective self-determination and self-advocacy skills prior to graduation.

Researchers have emphasized their frameworks for teaching students with special needs about self-determination and self-advocacy. While some state that a student must be self-determined in order to self-advocate (Mishna, Muskat, Farina, & Wiener, 2011; Wood,

Karvonen, Test, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004), others state that self-advocacy is only a skill within the promotion and development of self-determination (Cortiella, 2011; Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Field et al., 1998; Hart & Brehm, 2013; Heller et al., 2011; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007). For the purpose of this study, self-determination was considered the goal of the process and becoming empowered in order to self-advocate was considered skills that are needed to achieve the goal.

Field et al. (1998) stated that it is through self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-efficacy that the skill of self-advocacy can be developed. They further state that through the student's understanding of self-advocacy, self-determination is established. They defined self-determination as a conglomeration of skills, beliefs, and knowledge that allows an individual to self-regulate and assume responsibility autonomously.

Palmer, Wehmeyer, Agran, and Gipson (2004) expressed the need for students with severe disabilities to develop self-determination skills as a first step to participation in the general education curriculum. Encouragement of self-determination skills allows for the opportunity to learn strategies which can be implemented school-wide (2004). The researchers suggested that the students demonstrated great improvement in the areas of problem-solving skills and planning for their studies in the educational setting after being involved in a self-determination program (Palmer et al., 2004). They also suggested that once students become comfortable with the strategies, they will be able to use those same skills in the general education setting to ensure success in curricular content areas (2004). They stated that the students were able to accomplish the goals which were linked to the school district's standards at a level or expectancy or greater (Palmer et al., 2004). "This supports the hypothesis that instruction to promote self-determination can serve as an "entry point" to the general curriculum for students

with disabilities” (Palmer et al., 2004, p. 436). Students must be explicitly taught the above mentioned skills in order to achieve mastery of their IEP goals within the general education setting. Therefore, the educational philosophy utilized while implementing this process is that of essentialism. Essentialism is viewed as a more traditional philosophy when teaching (Ornstein, 2011). It promotes the cognitive growth and learning of knowledge that is needed to be competent (Ornstein, 2011). The teachers involved may need to explicitly teach essential skills such as goal setting, problem solving, decision making, self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-management to students with a SLD. These skills may in turn support students with a SLD to better participate in their IEP process. As suggested by Ofiesh (2006), "...the regulations make it clear that we as educators are still responsible to support students with learning disabilities as they move beyond Grade 12" (p. 886).

Although there is limited empirical evidence on the promotion of self-determination skills as early as possible, some researchers have begun to investigate this area through pilot studies, survey research, and action research (Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston, 2012; Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Hart & Brehm, 2013; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007). According to Hart and Brehm (2013), "Promoting students' self-determination at earlier ages and in order to increase more meaningful IEP participation is useful and important work for all professionals and parents to consider" (pp. 40-41).

### **Self-Determination Skills**

"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" (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007, p. 6). Heller et al. (2011) discussed how a life span approach considers the following social-ecological aspects which support the individual's self-determination: the role of

the individual's family, friends, community, and developmental abilities. "Birth through eight are critical years for cognitive, motor, language, social, and emotional development and, similarly, for the development of skills and abilities leading to later self-determination" (Heller et al., 2011, p. 32).

There are a variety of skills which promote the development of self-determination that researchers have suggested (Field et al., 1998; Pocock et al., 2002; Test et al., 2005; & Wehmeyer & Field, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the review of literature focused on the following sub-skills: self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy.

### **Self-awareness**

For the promotion of self-awareness and to increase the knowledge of a specific learning disability (SLD), strategies such as interests inventories, learning style assessments, and hands-on activities are utilized with students who have a SLD (Pocock et al., 2002) . The researchers noted that the majority of the student members of the program were diagnosed with a learning disability but that students with attention deficit disorder and hearing impairments were also members. These are just a few of the strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. Once the students have developed self-awareness, the teachers can then encourage the students to generalize their skills in order to become self-advocates. "Some programs help students to generalize their self-advocacy skills and knowledge to other environments, such as college or the workplace" (Pocock et al., 2002, p. 210).

In their article, Pocock et al. (2002) described the implementation process of self-determination skills in one program, Learning and Education About Disabilities (LEAD). It included strategies for the promotion of self-advocacy and other self-determination skills among

students with learning disabilities. The program originated because parents observed that the accommodations in the individualized education plans were not being met throughout general education setting and the school guidance counselor wanted the students to be more self-aware and knowledgeable about their disabilities. The guidance counselor considered that the students could not effectively explain their strengths and needs to their teachers. The LEAD students were divided into two groups. One group was established for ninth graders and another group was considered the advanced group. For the most part, there were teachers and student co-leaders available as facilitators so that the program maintained student accountability of the ones who were being educated throughout the process.

The LEAD program addressed four main content areas: "self-awareness and disability knowledge, support group, community presentations, and mentoring" (Pocock et al., 2002, pp. 211-213). In the first area, the students learned about their disability, academic strengths and weaknesses, test scores, and the special education process including mandates and legislation. In the second area, support group, the students support each other in discussing their feelings and obstacles within various situations. They discuss how to approach teachers when explaining their needs in the classroom. Since students mentoring other students, together they build a sense of confidence in each other. When it is time to move on to the third content area, community presentations, they collaborated to create presentations for individuals who need to be better informed about the student's disabilities. This area was also beneficial for the students with a SLD as it was videotaped and the students could provide each other with feedback and constructive criticism. In the final stage, mentoring, the students assisted in supporting younger students (those in elementary and middle school). Through modeling and role playing, the older

students wanted to share their experiences and discuss how they overcame their obstacles in the academic setting.

There were a few barriers throughout the execution of this program, the student's schedules as well as "...the disbelief among some general education teachers that learning disabilities even exist and that LEAD would be a beneficial class" (Pocock et al., 2002, p. 213). Overall, the LEAD student members were more comfortable with creating their own curriculum and lesson plans as a group. They preferred to discuss their own personal issues and collaborate to resolve them. The authors noted that the students preferred that approach over formal instructional materials.

### **Self-concept**

According to Wei and Marder (2012), "...relatively few studies have focused on the development of self-concept in students with disabilities, typically comparing only students with learning disabilities to their non-disabled peers at a single point in time" (p. 247). In 2008, Campbell-Whatley shared the results of a pilot study which assessed the self-awareness and self-concept of students who had learning disabilities and mild mental impairments. Thirteen students ranging from elementary, middle school, and high school, (grades five through nine) participated. The study aimed to increase students' self-awareness and self-concept through seven structured lessons and the direct instruction of their teachers. The lessons were organized in the form of the acronym, TARGET: "Target the Goals and Objectives of the Lesson, Assess Students' Knowledge and Implement Objectives, Role Play Situations, Generalize to Other School Situations, Evaluate Student Attainment, and Test Transfer of Skills to Other Environments" (p. 139). Through the specific scripted format of lessons, teachers were able to touch upon various self-determination skills. The author asserted, "How the students respond to

teaching and how they react to success and failure is determined by the attitudes and beliefs they have about themselves" (p. 137). The author contended that, for best practice, teachers needed to remind students to generalize their self-determination skills to situations outside of the academic setting. Through providing such expectations, teachers make students more accountable. The author also mentioned that the teachers were asked to write student comments (positive or negative) in the margins of the lesson plans. That strategy enabled the teachers to provide verbal feedback to the students which in turn promoted collaboration and supported the role play situations of the lessons. The results of the pilot study suggested that the curriculum "positively affected students, as it increased their self-esteem" (p. 141).

Adolescents, in particular, need to determine their sense of self-concept. Once they are able to identify with a group of peers and begin to network with others in the world around them, they then need to re-examine their self-concept. As adolescents meet and interact with new people, their ideas and concepts may change. With the changes in their schemata or thought processes, their self-concept may change as well. Identifying with a particular group is pertinent to development of a healthy identity and striving to become an independent individual. It is also in this stage where the individuals are struggling with being accepted. They are concerned that the identity that they have created for themselves will not be accepted by all peers, family members, or society. The individual's desire to be accepted minimizes embarrassing situations such as communication breakdowns, language miscues, and feelings of inferiority (Pearl, 2004). During this same timeframe, it is important to note that the individuals are changing physically as well. Too many changes at one time can cause an uncomfortable amount of stress which can lead to a regression in the student's self-awareness and self-concept, thus making relationship-building difficult.

Relationship-building as explained through Erikson's psychosocial theory focuses on the entire lifespan of the human being. The eight stages allow for a more intimate look at specific age groups. Erikson's developmental model can be applied to students who have a SLD and receive special education services. In Erikson's fifth stage, identity vs. identity diffusion, students attempt to demonstrate their self-awareness and self-concept skills through the investigation of their identity versus identity diffusion when they cannot identify with anyone (Erikson, 1968). They may choose a specific student organization to join or choose to not join student organizations at school. Prior to making such vital decisions, individuals must have a positive self-concept; they must develop an identity.



Erikson's fifth stage (identity vs. identity diffusion) occurs during the same time as the establishment of the transition plan which is an area within the student's IEP. The transition plan of an IEP enables the student and his or her IEP team to plan for the future after graduation (Pocock et al., 2002; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007). The student may be provided with interest surveys to determine what type of education after high school or career path might be chosen. Living arrangements also need to be considered at the time of the enactment of the transition plan. Students who are self-aware and who have developed a positive self-concept may be more willing to make choices and they feel in control of their lives (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Morin, 2006; Purkey, 1988). Providing the students with choices prior to graduation promotes their self-determination skills. Providing such empowerment as participating in their own IEP meetings will benefit the students when future peer or adult interactions occur (Danneker & Bottge, 2009). For students who are not able to participate due a lack of knowledge, understanding, or communication issues, the IEP team needs develop a plan to support the student.

Building relationships and developing intimacy with others is the next stage of Erickson's theory, stage six (intimacy vs. isolation), corresponds with 18-25 year-olds. This is the stage where the students try to develop intimacy towards others versus isolating themselves from others (Erikson, 1968) and develop more mature relationships with others. Due to language and communication breakdowns that may occur between normally developing students and with those who have a specific learning disability, relationships may be difficult to develop and maintain. Self-determination skills can facilitate communication and assist in the establishment of positive relationships. "If we ignore self-determination skills, we are contributing to students' lack of psychological vitality and health" (Fiedler & Danneker, 2007, p. 2). Interacting with

others can be an individualized education program (IEP) goal for students who have difficulty in this area. According to Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (1978), teachers must assess the student's problem-solving abilities in relationship situations without any adult assistance then determine the amount of support needed to master the goal independently. One activity in where the teacher can engage to support students in mastering this goal is role-playing. Students and teachers can take turns pretending various scenarios and acting out appropriate social rules of engagement and conversation (Campbell-Whatley, 2008; Pocock et al., 2002).

### **Self-efficacy**

Abernathy and Taylor (2009) suggested that, "If children reach age 16 unknowledgeable about their disability, their ability to participate in the educational decision-making process is compromised" (121). Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin (2000) suggested that through promoting students' active involvement in setting their own IEP goals, they in turn experience a greater sense of self-efficacy and are more likely to be committed to their academics. For the purpose of this study, the definition of self-efficacy which was utilized is the ability to determine the extent of one's abilities or limitations and how to compensate accordingly (Bandura, 1977; Powers, Turner et al., 2001; Sebag, 2010).

In a study of 1,518 sixth through twelfth grade students (107 students with a learning disability and 1,411 students without a learning disability) from two rural school districts, Baird, Scott, Dearing, and Hamill (2009) suggested that students with a learning disability portrayed less academic self-efficacy than those without a learning disability. The students with a learning disability also revealed (through questionnaires) that they did not know intelligence could be improve upon or changed in anyway. Baird et al. (2009) suggested that when working with

students with a learning disability on specific interventions to enhance self-efficacy, self-regulation should be promoted simultaneously. Klassen (2010) supported this area by suggesting:

Practitioners providing service to adolescents with LD need to focus not only on remediating and compensating for academic deficits, but also on building students' confidence to manage their own learning, because self-regulated learning plays an important part in human functioning long past the adolescent years. (p. 29)

Students with a SLD benefit from the understanding of their abilities and needs. "Not understanding the characteristics of one's own disability and being asked to participate in an IEP meeting would be akin to not understanding one's own work capabilities and participating in a job interview" (Abernathy & Taylor, 2009, p. 123). For students with SLDs, being able to explain their interests, abilities, and needs assists them when they are requested to make decisions and choices on a daily basis (Pocock et al., 2002).

### **Self-regulation**

Through self-regulated learning, "Self-regulation of behavior and activities, making simple choices, engaging in supported problem solving, and making decisions about everyday activities can be matched to a child's interests and capacities and become a focus of early intervention" (Heller et al., 2011, p. 32). One type of self-regulated learning method which is evidence-based practice is to facilitate self-regulation as suggested by, King-Sears and Bonfils (1999) an instructional design known as SPIN: "Select the student's target behavior for self-management ...Prepare materials and lesson plans for self-management ...Instruct the student using a 10-step process [and]...Note effectiveness..." (p. 96). It is important to note that the key words which the authors emphasized were S-select, P-prepare, I-instruct, and N-note. The

authors described the implementation of this process for students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbance who were in middle school. The instructional design was established to promote independence and self-determination of the participants. In order to progress through all ten stages, the instructors used lesson plans, modeling and role playing activities (with props and cue cards), and curriculum-based assessments (notations of the observations which were made of the student's actions).

The authors noted in their results that it was pertinent for the teachers to provide feedback to the student with a learning disability once an intervention concluded. They stated that encouragement increased student participation and time on task. The authors also emphasized the importance of generalization. The aim was for students to master the skill of self-regulation and one way to demonstrate mastery was to utilize the process in other situations separate from the student's academic setting. They discussed how SPIN could be used with a teacher in the field of special education, general education, or in the workplace.

"For students in early elementary grades (K-3), starting the process of becoming self-determined before adolescence gives added time for building the children's capacity for choice, decision making, goal setting, and problem solving that are essential for later self-determination" (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003, p.116). If the IEP team promoted the mandate set forth by IDEA, it can demonstrate that they are not restrictive by increasing the number of opportunities for which the students were able to participate as active participants in their academics (including their IEP meetings). The original model was known as the following: the self-determined learning model of instruction (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). According to Wehmeyer et al. (2000), it was used with adolescence with mental retardation, a learning disability, or an emotional or behavioral disorder to encourage self-determination, self-regulated problem-solving

and student-directed learning. The model consisted of three phases. Within each phase, the students answered a different question: Phase One- "What is my goal?", Phase Two- "What is my plan?", and Phase Three- "What have I learned?" (Wehmeyer et al., 2000, pp. 442-444).

It was through an adapted version of the model that Palmer and Wehmeyer (2003) encouraged teachers to teach "...self-regulated problem-solving and goal-setting skills" in early elementary school which they considered to be kindergarten through third grade (p. 115). The researchers described a study that included 14 teachers from the states of Kansas and Texas as well as 50 of their students (who were receiving special education support or were in the process of acquiring support services). The teachers, who participated in the study, were recruited in order "to implement the early elementary version of the *Self-Determined Model of Instruction*" (p. 120). They were trained by the research staff in both large group and one-on-one settings. Once they began working with the students, the teachers encouraged the students to write or draw their answers to the questions in each phase. If the students were not able to complete the task through writing or drawing, the teachers used a third strategy which was writing the answer while the students dictated the information to the teacher. After approximately two months, it was noted by one of the teachers that through peer support the students could have been more accountable by reminding each other of their goals. Another teacher noted that the model was easy to implement and could be initiated at the beginning of the school year wherein she could use the data to monitor progress every six weeks (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). The researchers acknowledged other comments by the teachers which demonstrated that, through the early elementary version of the self-determined model of instruction, the teachers were better able to enhance student self-regulation and self-monitoring skills. Although the model was not administered as a separate curriculum, it was a beneficial supplement (to the general education

curriculum) which promoted student-directed learning (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). The students were able to begin to establish personal goals, monitor them, and then evaluate their progress. This model prepared the students for future IEP meetings in that they collaborated with adults to enhance their own learning through self-regulation and self-monitoring.

### **Self-advocacy**

"Self-advocacy refers to an individual's ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights" (Van Reusen et al., 1994). "Self-advocacy has been identified as a critical component of overall self-determination" (Hart & Brehm, 2013, p. 48). It is pertinent that students who have a disability and are between the ages of 16 (or earlier if appropriate) and 21 receive guidance in the area of promoting themselves to become self-advocates. A self-described self-advocate, Turner (2007) stated that self-advocates "are confident, take charge individuals who know that making excuses and blaming others will take them nowhere" and that "...self-advocacy allows all who choose it, to navigate life under their own terms" (p. 70). Through a comprehensive review of research between the years of 1997 and 2003, researchers developed a conceptual framework for self-advocacy that entailed four main components: "knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication, and leadership" (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005, p. 43). Through the promotion of self-advocacy (a sub-skill of self-determination) at an IEP meeting, students with a SLD who possess self-advocacy demonstrate their abilities through effective communication and leadership as suggested by the researchers (Test et al., 2005).

Despite the successes in the literature, there has been growing concern that students were not being included in their own IEP process (Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston, 2012; Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Field et al., 1998; Hart & Brehm, 2013; Heller et al.,

2011; Mitchell, Moening, & Panter, 2009; Wood et al., 2004). The concern began the process of researching the amount of student attendance, participation, and the creation of goals which include the promotion of self-determination skills, within students' IEPs. Hart and Brehm (2013) suggested a model to be used with elementary age students (in inclusive settings) in the acquisition of self-advocacy skills, in particular, when it comes to their individualized education program (IEP) accommodations. The authors stated that students only need basic language skills in order to participate in the recommended 10 step model. A summary of the 10 step model by Hart and Brehm (2013) is as follows: First, the IEP team must obtain parental consent and maintain collaboration with the parents. The next steps are to assist students with academic goal setting and discuss the IEP process and accommodations. Then, the teachers are to promote the investigation of IEP accommodations and provide appropriate modeling within the classroom. It is at the fifth step that the teachers help the students determine the situations and locations for the accommodations. In step six, the teachers are to assist the students in understanding the importance of their accommodations. Step seven encourages the students to practice inquiries for their accommodations. In steps eight and nine, the students are to participate in role play situations where they only have cue cards to follow during their decision making and problem solving tasks. It was suggested by the authors that the students who were taking on the role of the teacher should have a script to follow. Students may have to determine both positive and negative situations and then determine their actions. In the final step, the teachers monitor the student's progress and continue to provide necessary feedback and support. The authors suggested that as the students progress, they may only need to be required to participate in such a 10 step model weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. Either way, the students are also supposed to monitor their own progress in collaboration with the teachers.

Promoting accountability is pertinent in the self-advocacy model (Hart & Brehm, 2013). Along with student accountability, the authors also suggested that the students be reminded that there is a team that works in collaboration with them (as the student is a team member too). It is pertinent that the students realize that "...students are not responsible for ensuring that their teachers implement accommodations as outlined in their IEPs" (p. 48). Team collaboration and effective communication is necessary for success in academics and beyond.

Grigal, Neubert, Moon, and Graham (2003) surveyed parents and teachers (in both special education and general education) to determine their views of self-determination regarding the IEP process. The researchers stated that the parents of students with disabilities supported the implementation of self-determination skills in high school, student attendance at IEP meetings, as well as students being instructed on how to participate at their IEP meetings. "The majority of parents also agreed that their child's school supported the development of important self-determination skills by teaching goal setting, providing opportunities to make decisions, and fostering the expression of interests and personal abilities" (Grigal et al., 2003, p. 106).

The researchers emphasized that parental support in the area of self-determination enhanced the promotion of the skills at school; however, the teachers who participated in the study "only slightly agreed that they were familiar with the concept of self-determination and how to teach it" (Grigal et al., 2003, p. 107). Students benefit when the adults whom they are working with are knowledgeable about self-determination and students' needs.

### **Summary of the Sub-Skills Related to Self-Determination**

As researchers have suggested, self-determination develops across a life span and through the promotion of various sub-skills (Heller et al., 2011; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007). Five sub-skills of self-determination were the focus of this literature review: self-awareness, self-concept,



self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy. Although students in the Campbell-Whatley (2008) study focused on their self-awareness (demonstrating knowledge of themselves) and self-concept (providing opinions of their abilities and needs), they also built upon other sub-skills of self-determination as they made choices with their peers (similar to what occurs during the development of self-efficacy and self-regulation when self-advocating). The students who participated in the Pocock et al. (2002), the LEAD study, also built upon other sub-skills that were not mentioned explicitly in the study. Studies suggest (Campbell-Whatley, 2008; Pocock et al., 2003; Ward, 2005) that through explicit and implicit instruction, students can be given the opportunities to explain their abilities and needs in the general education setting.

Though most students with a LD receive most of their instruction in general education classes, only 60% of students with LD have general education teachers who receive any information about their needs, indicating a need for more teacher training on the characteristics and instructional strategies essential to success for these students.

(Cortiella, 2011, p. 14)

It is important to maintain the awareness and understanding that the individuals seeking self-determination may not improve their quality of life without the support of the following social-ecological aspects: the role of the individuals' family, friends, community, school personnel, and developmental abilities (Field et al., 1998; Grigal et al., 2003; Heller et al., 2011). "The role of the family and educators should evolve to include the child in educational programming so that by age 16 or younger if appropriate, students are prepared to act as their own advocate"

(Abernathy & Taylor, 2009, p. 121).

## **Promoting Self-Determination**

Students take ownership for their educational experiences when they are active participants in their IEP meetings (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Hart & Brehm, 2013; Heller et al., 2011; Mitchell, Moening, & Panter, 2009). Researchers have suggested ways to promote these types of experiences such as Agran, Snow, and Swaner (1999) who stated that through the data of 69 surveys (of which they sent out 100), 55% of the respondents pointed out that their students' IEPs did not include self-determination skills. It has been identified in the literature that students need to become more independent and self-reliant. Some researchers feel that students retain their self-determination skills through the use of formal instruction. Ward (2005) said, "...self-determination is important and is best learned through participation in a specific curriculum" (p. 109). He also stated that the learning strategies should be student-directed in order to increase student participation and contribute to their success within the general education setting. He also suggested that "service professionals must be trained in methods of supporting self-determination along with the philosophy of why this is imperative" (p. 110). Students with a SLD have enhanced their self-awareness, self-concept, self-regulation, and other components of self-determination when given the opportunity to participate in a classroom setting where the curriculum or IEP addresses such skills (La Guardia, 2009; Ward, 2005; Ward, Lundberg, Ellis, & Berrett, 2010; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998).

Cho, Wehmeyer, and Kingston (2012) surveyed 223 elementary school special education teachers (who taught within the range of kindergarten through sixth grade in either a large city, small city, suburban or rural school district). Although the teachers indicated that they taught more than one type of disability category of the students of whom they taught, the most frequent

category selected was that of learning disability. The researchers wanted to know the teachers' perceptions of the importance of self-determination, whether the teachers explicitly taught self-determination strategies, as well as the amount of time that was devoted to the topic. They shared their findings of the barriers (such as "insufficient time", "insufficient training", and "students have other more urgent instructional needs" (p. 25)) elementary teachers encounter when attempting to incorporate self-determination strategies and skills into their lesson plans and daily routines. However, they suggested that their findings in this area were considered to be preliminary as most teachers in their study worked with students of diverse disabilities. The researchers stated that it was "important to learn whether elementary special educators' perception of the importance of teaching self-determination and the time they devote to teaching it are affected by ecological and instructional factors" (Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston, 2012, p. 20). They suggested that this specific information benefitted the school districts in improving their curricula. They also suggested that "special educators who taught in resource rooms plus self-contained rooms plus general education classrooms tended to place more value on teaching self-determination than did those who taught only in general education classrooms" (Cho et al., 2012, p. 26).

Students need to be involved in making decisions and choosing what is in their best interest (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Hart & Brehm, 2013; Mitchell, Moening, & Panter, 2009; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Wehmeyer et al., 2000). As the researchers suggested, the students need to be taught how to determine their personal strengths and areas of need. They need to be provided opportunities to enhance or develop the skills that are weaker than other abilities. As IDEA 2004 stated, the IEP teams is required to invite the student to attend the IEP meeting at the age of 16. Grigal et al. (2003)

noted that the first time the terminology of *self-determination* was considered and not just implied was through the amendments of IDEA 2004. Students were to have a say in the creation of their IEP goals, discussion of their strengths and needs, as well as their future plans prior to graduation. Once their goals are created, students were to be given opportunities to implement and practice their goals. They were also to be taught how to make choices and monitor the progress of their goals. Their team should support, *enduring*, a term used by Wiggins and McTighe in, *Understanding by Design* (2001). “The term *enduring* refers to the big ideas, the important understandings that will anchor the unit or course”(Wiggins & McTighe, 2001, p. 10). When teachers ensure that they promote enduring, students will understand that they are to generalize their knowledge and skills to other situations and not just focus on the situations from class, cue cards, or the group collaboration and role playing. Also, outside of the classroom includes providing a choice when establishing IEP goals for the students ensuring that their interests and preferences are being taken into consideration. Students benefit from being accountable for their choices and collaborating to solve problems. It is their right to appeal for the control of their IEPs and with the support from their IEP team; they become empowered (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Field et al., 1998; Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker, & Deshler, 1994).

### **Summary**

As suggested by the researchers included in this literature review, individuals who work with students who have a SLD need to build upon the student's self-determination in order to prepare them for their attendance at the IEP meetings which discuss their transition plans (if not before the mandated time). With such support, students thrive in the general education setting when utilizing a curriculum or IEP goal that addresses self-determination (or one of the sub-skills of self-awareness, self-concept, self-regulation, and self-advocacy) to promote their

autonomy and independence (La Guardia, 2009; Ward, 2005; Ward et al., 2010; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Konrad, Fowler, Walker, Test, and Wood (2007) suggested that "... there is a need to demonstrate that teaching students self-determination skills does not have to be done at the expense of academic skills instruction" ( p. 90). Enabling the students to make informed decisions about their education and future benefits them, as they are able to feel in control of their lives. Providing the students with the knowledge for self-empowerment in order to advocate will promote their independence and preserve their self-determination (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Field et al., 1998; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Van Reusen et al., 1994; Wehmeyer et al., 2000). As Field et al. (1998) eloquently stated, "Self-determination is a function of the interaction between an individual's skills and the opportunities provided by their environments" (p.119).

For the purpose of this study, the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with specific learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan was researched. Specifically, the study explored the perceived influences regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan. The researcher inquired about strategies which have been taught, encouraged, or modeled for students with a SLD and the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education regarding their accountability in the promotion of self-determination in students with a SLD. The final area of interest was to discover similarities and differences within the themes of the perceptions among the teachers in the field of special education regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan.

Chapter III provides a description of the research design and methodology which was implemented for this study.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the design and methodology of this study that examined the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the promotion of self-determination and self-advocacy skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan. These skills support students when they are required to explain their needs and appeal for their rights. Qualitative research approaches were utilized to collect information on the teachers' perceptions of self-determination skills for students with a specific learning disability (SLD) prior to the transition plan age of their individualized education plan (IEP). Focus group sessions were conducted. Documents were reviewed, (with names redacted) that demonstrated the promotion of self-determination skills in students with a SLD in third through ninth grades. The researcher maintained anecdotal notes during the focus group sessions as well. This chapter provides a description of the study including the study participants, research design, interview protocol, and data analysis tool. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations, elements of trustworthiness, and a summary of methodology.

#### **Qualitative Research Approach**

Qualitative research was chosen for this study with the purpose of exploring the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education. "Since the focus of qualitative research is on the quality of a specific phenomenon, there is a greater emphasis on *holistic description*—that is, description in thick, rich detail—of the phenomenon, setting, or topic of interest" (Mertler & Charles, 2011, p. 191). When utilizing this approach, researchers suggest several strong features that should be considered (Creswell, 2013; Mertler & Charles, 2011). First, there is an emphasis on a specific "philosophical assumption" (Creswell, 2013, p.20). This emphasis allows for another feature, where the researcher explores through the use of group

interviews rather than individual interviews. Through focus group sessions, and a "disability interpretive lens" (Creswell, 2013), the researcher can utilize the comments of the individuals in the group to ask follow up questions or allow the other individuals to speak of their specific experiences. The participants are able to formulate their responses based on each other's comments while having a more natural dialogue and less of a structure interview. A third feature, according to Creswell (2013), is the "philosophical discussion" (p. 78) which allows for the individuals to subjectively share their experiences while discussing a commonality objectively with others in the group interview. A fourth feature to consider is that the interviews do not have to be the sole method of data collection. Document reviews and observations can also provide pertinent information for the researcher. In this study for example, the researcher reviewed documents such as the student's IEPs and other projects that demonstrated the student's promotion of self-determination skills. A final feature to consider is data analysis. Through data analysis, the researcher is to "identify and describe aspects of each participant's perceptions" (Mertler & Charles, 2011, p. 205)

The main focus of the study was to explore the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with specific learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan; therefore, the specific approach of interpretive qualitative research was implemented (Creswell, 2013; Mertler & Charles, 2011). Group interviews like ones in this study where the researcher was actively moderating are considered focus groups (Barbour, 2012). During focus group sessions, the researcher encouraged active participation and dialogue. Although the groups for this study were determined through criterion sampling, the experiences and perceptions of the participants were still individualized. The participants were still able to have a difference in opinion which



enhanced the "holistic description" (Mertler & Charles, 2011, p. 191) and "philosophical discussion" (Creswell, 2011, p. 78).

### **Research Questions**

1. What do teachers in the field of special education perceive as influences regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan?
2. What do teachers in the field of special education report as the self-determination skills and strategies that have been taught, encouraged, or modeled for students with a specific learning disability?
3. What are the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education regarding their accountability in the promotion of self-determination in students with a specific learning disability?
4. What general themes emerge from the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan?

### **Research Design**

Multi-method interpretive qualitative research in the form of focus group sessions and analysis of academic documentation was utilized as primary strategies to collect information on the perceptions of special education teachers of students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) regarding the promotion of the student's self-determination skills, prior to the transition plan age. This type of interpretive research was chosen so that qualitative data could be collected in a more in-depth and detail-oriented fashion, as well as in a non-experimental manner and so that the researcher could utilize follow-up questions in order to elicit more information from the

participants as opposed to the usual survey research. Written descriptive notations of what the participants said were then documented.

## **Procedures**

Letters were sent out to superintendents of six school districts in southwestern Pennsylvania for site approval (Appendix A) and approval was given by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to begin the study. These were chosen for this study as a convenience sample prior to data collection. The responses from the site approval requests are saved and locked away at the researcher's home. Then, an introductory letter providing the purpose of the study and requesting voluntary participation was sent out via email (Appendix B). The letters inquired about potential participants for the study, as well as included informed consent form (Appendix C) and the interview protocol (Appendix D) for the participants to review. To ensure that there was no possibility of coercion, the researcher had no previous relationships with the participants. Participants were asked in the letter and in the informed consent forms to bring at least two documents that demonstrated the promotion of self-determination in students with a SLD. Qualitative data were collected through audio and video-recorded focus group sessions. The focus group sessions allowed for the participants to listen to each other's ideas, reflect on their own perceptions, and then respond accordingly.

The focus group sessions were conducted on January 13, 2014 and February 26, 2014. Due to family obligations and transportation issues, the researcher suggested a more flexible time for one of the participants and the one-on-one interview was conducted on January 16, 2014. Since the participants were asked to bring the items in a sealed envelope, reviews of the academic documentation (lesson plans, goals pages, and transition plan pages with all identifying information removed and in a sealed envelope) which demonstrated (according to the definition

of self-determination selected for the purpose of this study) the promotion of self-determination skills (skills, beliefs, and knowledge that allows an individual to self-regulate and assume responsibility autonomously (Field et al., 1998)) in students with a SLD in grades third through ninth grades were completed after focus group sessions. Upon arrival, the participants were asked to complete a brief demographic survey (Appendix E) regarding their years of experience, certifications, and establish that they currently work with students with SLD in any grade from third through ninth. The participants were asked follow-up questions for more in-depth and detail-oriented data and written descriptive notations of what they said were documented.

Once the qualitative data were collected, the interviews with follow-up questions (which were added for clarification as needed), documentation provided by the participants, and anecdotal notes were transcribed by the researcher making this a qualitative interpretive multi-method design study (Creswell, 2013). The researcher maintained trustworthiness of study through this process of observing multiple sources of data. This approach is known as triangulation. "When qualitative researchers locate evidence to document a code or theme in different sources of data, they are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Once all of the sources of information were transcribed by the researcher, the data was analyzed through the qualitative statistical software, NVivo.

### **Participants and Setting**

Two of the focus group sessions were conducted the teachers' school building and the one-on-one interview was at a local university in a designated classroom away from distractions. As per informed consent, the room was equipped with video cameras and audio recorders. The focus group sessions consisted of three 20-minute (approximately) sections:

1. knowledge and perceptions of self-determination

2. application of self-determination
3. suggestions for necessary support in self-determination

According to Schuman (1982), a three interview series allows the researcher to establish the context of the interviewees' experiences, encourages the interviewees to reconstruct their experiences, and then reflect on the meanings of their experiences. Supporting Schuman's strategy, in order to reduce the amount anxiety of the participants, Seidman (2013) suggested a 90-minute format for the interviews so that the participants are aware of the timeframe prior to the actual event. Due to the constraints of the school-day schedule and family obligations of the participants, the researcher kept the focus group sessions to 60 minutes.

Participants of the focus group sessions were teachers in the field of special education in southwestern Pennsylvania who were selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was also utilized as the teachers had to be supporting or working with students with a SLD. This type of sampling also assisted in the creation of commonalities between groups for the focus group sessions as the special education teachers have similar roles and responsibilities. No vulnerable subjects were included in this study. The participants were all adults (male and female) between the ages of 22 and 65. They were teachers who teach or interact with students with a SLD, in third through ninth grades, in the field of special education.

### **Population and Sampling**

#### **Contacting Participants**

Once the IUP Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval for the study and the superintendents provided site approval (which is under lock and key at the researcher's home), the researcher requested names and email addresses of the teachers within each district who were currently teaching students with a SLD in any grades from third through ninth. A letter

explaining the study (Appendix B), informed consent form (with potential dates for the interviews in which the participants were asked select according to their schedules (Appendix C)), and the interview protocol (Appendix D) were emailed and responses were collected. For the first focus group session (January 13, 2014) and one-on-one interview (January 16, 2014), the participants were sent reminder emails by the researcher (January 8, 2014) of the study one week after the initial email went out, January 1, 2014. The superintendents of two of the school districts also sent emails to the teachers to explain the purpose of the email and to ensure the email did not get lost in the potential participants junk mail box. The dates and times of the focus group sessions which were determined through the responses based on the choices provided in the informed consent forms were included in the emails, as well. The participants of the second focus group session (February 26, 2014) were sent emails reminding them of the session on January 16, 2014 (as it was originally organized for January and then moved to February). Then, due to the change of date, they were sent reminder emails again on February 14, 2014; February 19, 2014, and February 25, 2014.

### **Participants' Protection**

This study posed no known risks to participate because required that the documents have the student's names and other identifying information removed prior to the researcher reviewing them. The students were not interviewed or interacted with during this study. Teachers were asked to bring two copies of examples of each of the following items: the individualized education plan goals, transition plans, and student projects created in school that demonstrated self-determination of students with a specific learning disability with the names of the students redacted. The teachers had the choice as to whether or not to participate in the study. Prior to the focus group sessions, the volunteer participants could have simply utilized the contact

information from the introductory letter to notify the researcher that they would not be participating. If the volunteer participants choose to cease participation during the focus group sessions, they were permitted to leave as they wish. The teachers were not observed in the classrooms and the IEP goals, transition plans, and projects were only observed once the names and other identifying information had been redacted. Data were collected from the teachers during the focus group sessions.

### **Data Collection**

An interview protocol was utilized during the focus group sessions. The interview protocol was first shared with the superintendents of each school district when the researcher requested site approval. It was then shared with the participants prior to (via email) and upon arrival for the focus group sessions. Table 1 shows the relationship between the research questions and the actual interview question within the protocol.

### **Interview Questions**

The interview protocol (Appendix D) was piloted in order to determine any flaws, limitations, or other issues with the questions prior to the study. The questions in the interview included other in-depth and detail-oriented questions for more information, clarification of terminology spoken by the participants, and obtaining more specific answers. For example, teachers were asked to provide examples, repeat themselves, or if they had anything else which they wanted to add prior to moving on to the next question. Five of the nine participants stated that they appreciated being able to read and review the protocol prior to the focus group session. Four of the participants stated that they had to look up the term self-determination before the focus group session to ensure that they would be able to provide information during the discussion and examples of academic documents on the promotion of self-determination.

Table 1

*Relationship Between the Research Questions and Interview Questions*

Overarching Research Questions for this Study	Interview Protocol Questions
<p>1. What do teachers in the field of special education perceive as influences regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan?</p>	<p>1. In your own words, how do you define self-determination?            2. What has been your personal experience (exposure to) with self-determination when working with students in a k-9th grade setting?            3. What do you perceive as the importance in teaching self-determination skills and strategies to students with a SLD?</p>
<p>2. What do teachers in the field of special education report as the self-determination skills and strategies that have been taught, encouraged, or modeled for students with a specific learning disability?</p>	<p>4. From your experience, at what age has self-determination been introduced to the students with a SLD?            5. What specific self-determination skills and/or strategies have you taught or encouraged?            6. How have you modeled self-determination for students with a SLD?            7. How have your students with a SLD been reminded or encouraged to utilize their self-determination strategies and skills throughout their day?            8. Who do you collaborate with in regards to promoting self-determination in your students with a SLD?            9. In what ways do you collaborate with others in regards to promoting self-determination in your students with a SLD?</p>
<p>3. What are the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education regarding their accountability in the promotion of self-determination in students with a specific learning disability?</p>	<p>10. In what ways have you been supported/encouraged to promote self-determination in your students with a SLD?            11. In what ways could you be better supported when promoting self-determination in your students with a SLD?            12. In what ways could you promote self-determination in the future for your students with a SLD?            13. How well trained/prepared do you consider you are for teaching self-determination to students with a SLD?</p>
<p>4. What general themes emerge from the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan?</p>	<p>Themes were established from the responses of all of the questions asked.</p>

## **Method of Data Analysis**

Using the qualitative statistical software, NVivo 10, the researcher analyzed the transcriptions of the interviews, documents, and field notes. NVivo Software system was utilized to organize the data from the interview transcriptions, student documents, and field notes, then create themes and categorize the information accordingly. Thirty nodes, locations where data was organized once it was collected and then stored for analysis (QSR International, 2014), were created. Then themes and subthemes were established and then analyzed for relationships to the figure on page six (Self-determination skills selected for this study).

### **Triangulation**

A triangulation of multi-method approach was implemented in the qualitative design of the study. "When qualitative researchers locate evidence to document a code or theme in different sources of data, they are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). The participants were emailed introductory letters to provide the purpose of the study, obtain informed consent, and explain the process of the research design which employed focus group sessions. This study did not warrant the inclusion the student's viewpoints and perceptions on self-determination, only the perceptions of the special education teachers who worked with or supported students with a SLD were explored. Teachers were asked to bring academic documents (such as student's IEP goals, transition plan goals, and any academic student created projects) which demonstrated the promotion of student self-determination and were asked to remove all identifying information to preserve the students' anonymity.



## **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher had no previous professional relationship with the participants. The participants' names, schools, and districts remained confidential, as well. Each participant was given a pseudonym for the purpose of this study and will continue to be used in any future scholarly writings or presentations. At any time, the participants were completely free to withdraw from the study by contacting the researcher or simply excusing themselves from the focus group interview if they so desired. The following types of academic documentation were utilized: Individualized Education Plan goals (IEP goal pages with all identifying information removed), transition plan (with all identifiable information removed), and projects that promoted students' self-determination (with all identifiable information removed). Due to the concern of a low response rate and small sample size, six \$20 gas cards were utilized as incentives for participation. Upon completion of the focus group sessions, the researcher raffled off six \$20 gas cards with the participants. In compliance with federal regulations, all data will be retained securely for at least three years under lock and key in the researcher's home, and then destroyed.

## **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) coined the term *trustworthiness*. It is one way to validate information of a qualitative study. It provides for the potential for discrepancies to be explained and comparisons to be made based on multiple sources (Barbour, 2007). This multi-method assures the study utilized triangulation. Through the creation of themes and coding for appropriate categorization of the data, the findings were supported by other measures of data as suggested by Creswell (2013). The researcher was able to corroborate evidence that suggests that this study was trustworthy. This was done by using the following multi-methods: transcriptions of the focus group sessions, academic documentation (which was brought by the

teachers and reviewed at a later date to analyze the demonstration of the promotion of self-determination in students with a SLD), participants' responses (and notations on the interview protocols), and the researcher's anecdotal notes (on interview protocols).

### **Potential Research Bias**

The researcher acknowledged the importance of not inadvertently doing or saying anything during the interviewing process to bias the results of the study. The researcher ensured that approval or disapproval of responses during the focus group sessions for the special education teachers were not expressed with the participants of the study or anyone else who was not part of the study as confidentiality was also maintained. The researcher remained neutral and non-biased throughout the study as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) when they suggested "conformability" in qualitative research, not showing bias or emotions (either positive or negative) during the study and through the data collected.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the methodology of the study, research approach, participants, procedures, and methods of analysis were discussed. Students with special needs should be given opportunities to make decisions, speak for themselves, and appeal for their rights in the educational setting (Poehls, 2009). All students can benefit from support and encouragement in the area of self-determination; however, students with a SLD can benefit from utilizing this support service toward improving their chances of graduation and employment. This multi-method interpretive qualitative study was designed to determine if self-determination skills of students with a SLD in third through ninth grades are being promoted prior to the transition plan age and teachers' perceptions on their area of expertise, particularly the promotion of self-determination. Through the focus group sessions of teachers, academic documentation,

participants' responses (and notations on the interview protocols), and the researcher's anecdotal notes (on interview protocols), themes were created to make comparisons and explain discrepancies when utilizing triangulation to analyze the data. In Chapter IV, the description of the sample (participants), research methodology applied to the data analysis, and the presentation of data and results of the analysis are discussed.

## CHAPTER IV

### DATA AND ANALYSIS

Chapter IV reveals the findings of the qualitative data collected through focus group sessions, a one-on-one interview, and academic documentation with all identifying information redacted. The data were analyzed to demonstrate the relationship between this study's problem, purpose, and to address the research questions. The qualitative data support the existing research (and minimal empirical evidence) in the area of perceptions of teachers, in the field of special education, in regards to promoting self-determination in students (in third through ninth grades) with specific learning disabilities.

#### **Research Questions**

1. What do teachers in the field of special education perceive as influences regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan?
2. What do teachers in the field of special education report as the self-determination skills and strategies that have been taught, encouraged, or modeled for students with a specific learning disability?
3. What are the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education regarding their accountability in the promotion of self-determination in students with a specific learning disability?
4. What general themes emerge from the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan?

### **Process for Analyzing the Data**

The researcher conducted two focus group sessions (one with five participants and another with three participants), one individual interview (due to availability of the participant), and collected academic documentation from the participants which they perceived as promoting self-determination in their students. The same 13 questions were utilized for the focus groups and the individual interview. All data were transcribed by the researcher and also sent to a transcription company [Global Marketing Resources (GMR)] to ensure accuracy of the data collected due to the researcher's hearing loss. The data were coded and analyzed through the statistical software NVivo 10 (QSR International, 2014) to determine themes from the responses and documentation. When using NVivo 10, the researcher was able to code (or label) specific responses and academic documentation in order to create themes and subthemes. In order to create themes and subthemes in NVivo 10, the researcher created nodes to sort the items which were being coded into themes and subthemes (QSR International, 2014).

### **Participants**

Upon arrival to the focus group session, the participants completed a brief demographic survey and were assigned pseudonyms. The pseudonyms were changed to a different set of pseudonyms when the transcriptions were analyzed by the researcher (to ensure confidentiality and anonymity from other focus group participants). For the purpose of this study and to enhance readability, the pseudonyms are: April, Beatrice, Clare, Ellen, Fran, Isabel, Haley, and Gretchen. Table 2 and Table 3 display the pseudonyms of the participants and the results from the demographic survey. Of nine participants, eight were from a rural school district. The ninth participant, Fran, stated that she worked in a suburban school district. They all stated that they have a special education certification and provided services to students with a specific learning

disability. April, Ellen, Donna, Isabel, and Haley have been teaching for 11 or more years. Beatrice and Clare have been teaching between six to ten years and Fran and Gretchen have been teaching between one to five years. Haley is the only participant who had not taught students with specific learning disabilities her whole career. According to the demographic survey, even though she has taught for 11 or more years, she has been teaching students with a specific learning disability for only one to five years and has been in her current position for less than one year. Beatrice and Ellen are also new to their positions within the past year. Isabel has been in her current position between one and five years.

Five of the nine teachers stated that they were itinerant teachers who traveled to various grades within the same school district (April, Ellen, Haley, Gretchen, and Fran). Four also stated that they provided co-teaching services with regular educator teachers (Fran, Isabel, Haley, and Gretchen). Donna and Haley teach in grades seven through twelve and Haley also teaches in sixth grade. Ellen instructs in grades seventh through tenth. April teaches in both eighth and tenth grades and Gretchen teaches ninth and tenth grades. Isabel instructs in grades six, seven, and eight. Clare instructs third, fourth, and sixth grades. Beatrice stated that she instructs third through sixth grade and Fran instructs Kindergarten through fourth grade.

The participants stated that they support students with specific learning disabilities in the following ways: April and Donna provide directed study (assists with homework and studying for tests), Beatrice provides math support in a resource room, and Ellen supports her students through writing individualized education plan (IEP) adaptations and modifications. Clare provides pull-out (in a resource room) math support, remedial language arts, and READ 180. Fran, Isabel, Haley, and Gretchen stated that they adapt the grade level curriculum as needed, provide for small group time, and provide time for the students to read aloud as mandated by the

student's IEPs. Beatrice was the only participant who reported on the demographic survey that she provides support to students with a SLD in the area of social skills.

Table 2

*Demographic Survey: Initial Five Questions*

Participant Pseudonym	Do you <u>provide services</u> for students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) in any grades from third grade through 9th grade?	In what ways have you <u>taught</u> students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) in any grades from third grade through 9th grade?	In what ways have you <u>supported</u> students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) in any grades from third grade through 9th grade?	In which type of school do you currently work?	In which of the following special education settings do you teach in?
April	YES	reading, English study skills for core subjects	directed study- help with homework projects, and study for tests	rural school	inclusive, resource room, itinerant
Beatrice	YES	READ 180 social skills	Math support Resource	rural school	self-contained, inclusive, resource room
Clare	YES	pull-out math for grades 3,4,6 remedial language arts, READ 180 for 3,4,6 grades	Learning Support grades 4-6	rural school	inclusive
Donna	YES	math for students with SLDs	directed study- tutor or assist in work completion	rural school	inclusive
Ellen	YES	Learning Support, Regular Education. reading/English	Learning Support IEP writing adaptations/ modifications	rural school	resource room, itinerant
Fran	YES	co-teaching, replacement reading, math instruction, RTI groups	co-teaching, adaptations to grade level curriculum, positive behavior support plan	suburban school	inclusive, itinerant
Isabel	YES	co-teach	Adaptations	rural	inclusive
Haley	YES	co-teach	read aloud, small group, adapted materials	rural	resource, itinerant
Gretchen	YES	co-teach	read aloud, small group, extended time	rural	itinerant



Table 3

*Demographic Survey: Last Five Questions*

Participant Pseudonym	How many years have you taught in total?	How long have you taught students with SLDs?	How long have you been in your current position?	What grade levels do you teach students with a SLD currently?	What current Pennsylvania teacher certifications/degrees do you possess?
April	11+	11+	6-10 years	8,10	Special Education k-12
Beatrice	6-10 years	6-10 years	less than 1 year	3,4,5,6	Special Education k-12 Elementary K-6 middle level math
Clare	6-10 yrs	6-10 yrs	6-10 yrs	3,4,6	Special Education K-12 Elementary Education
Donna	11+	11+	11+	7,8,9,10,11,12	Elementary Education Special Education Math
Ellen	11+	11+	less than 1 year Regular Education 11+ yrs Special Education	7,8,9,10	Special Education K-12 English 7-12
Fran	1-5yrs	1-5yrs	1-5yrs	k,1,2,3,4	Instructional II: Special Education Elem. Education Middle school Math Middle school English
Isabel	11+	11+	1-5 yrs	6,7,8	Elementary Education, Learning Support, special needs, M. Ed.
Haley	11+	1-5yrs	less than 1 yr	6,7,8,9,10,11,12	Reading specialist k-12, Elementary Education K-6 Special Education K-12
Gretchen	1-5yrs	1-5 yrs	1-5yrs	9,10	M. Ed. and certification in Special Education, High School English Certification

## **Research Tools**

When the participant letters were sent out via email to the potential participants, they were given a four page packet. The first page was the demographic survey and the other three pages were the interview questions. Blank columns were provided for the participants and the researcher to take notes if they were inclined to do so during the interviews. The researcher ensured that the participants were made aware of the method for data collection through the invitation to participate, follow-up email, and a discussion prior to the commencing the interviews. The interviews were video and audio recorded in order to accommodate the researcher who has to compensate for a hearing loss and assure that the data being collected was accurate. An iPad was set up in the room for the purpose of videotaping and the digital audio recording device was placed on the table in front of the participants and researcher.

Academic documentation, which the teachers believed demonstrated the promotion of self-determination in students with SLD in grades third through ninth, was collected at the interviews. It was requested in advance that the academic documentation have all identifying information redacted and placed in a sealed envelope to be given to the researcher to ensure confidentiality.

In this study, academic documentation was provided in the forms of lesson plans, IEP goals, IEP transition plan goals, specially designed instructions (SDIs), rubrics, and student charts. The teachers reviewed the academic documentation that they were using with their students with SLDs. They determined which items promoted self-determination in their students and then confidentially and anonymously shared them with the researcher. The following is a discussion of the academic documentation which was collected at the focus group sessions in sealed envelopes.

One lesson plan encouraged students to prepare for a job. The students were asked to research potential jobs, review job applications, complete career interest inventories, and write a resume. Another lesson plan encouraged making choices during math class where the students were asked to create questions, collect data, present and share the final results. Self-awareness was encouraged in another lesson plan by requesting that the student independently read a selection and construct an expository paragraph. Self-efficacy was encouraged in the final lesson plan that was shared through the promotion of self-regulation and problem solving.

Through a chart which promoted self-advocacy, a sixth grade student was encouraged to keep track of his or her performance when asking teachers for support, homework, and test preparation materials. The student was given a chart to fill in when he or she independently asked questions of his or her regular education teachers in regards to his or her homework assignments and tests. This chart also benefitted the student when initiating the process as he or she was able to read the requirements and know what he or she was accountable for in the regular education setting when demonstrating self-determination.

The IEP transition plan goals sheet (which is in the form of a chart) stated that the service would be self-advocacy at the school as needed for duration of one year while working on his or her employment goal. The student was the only one listed as the person or agency responsible for the service. The guidance counselor was responsible for the job shadowing experience.

Within the specially designed instruction in the IEP, "at student request" was stated. Students were to request clarification of the assignment or test directions. They were to request assistance with reading the assignment or test. They were also allowed to request more time on an assignment or test. When completing an assignment or test they were allowed to request the use of scratch paper to create graphic organizer.

In a rubric which was shared for directed study, the student initiative was encouraged. The point value of a total score of eight is as follows: the student was to receive a point for arriving on time, two points for bringing the appropriate materials and being prepared for the directed study class, three points for taking the initiative to work independently and being mindful of the other students in the room who were working and cooperating with the instructional assistant, and two points for beginning the assignment without promoting and working diligently throughout the class period.

Examples of IEP goals were provided which demonstrated the promotion of self-advocacy through increasing reading fluency, comprehension, and completing writing prompt responses. The students' timed reading scores were graphed according to words correct per minute on first exposure readings. Other methods of evaluation were district assessments. The description for evaluation measurements does not include who was keeping track and reporting progress. In another set of IEP goals, the student was required to identify and analyze problem-solving situations in order to make choices. The student was evaluated while working with the school personnel. The IEP only stated that the progress to be measured while working with the school personnel, not that the student would collaborate about his progress. In the final IEP goal page that was collected, it was noted that the student was to demonstrate the requirement of having to advocate with the regular education teacher, instructional assistant, and the special education teacher in regards to homework assignments and assessments. Together, the interview transcriptions and academic documentation (lesson plans, IEP goals, IEP transition plan goals, SDIs, rubrics, and student charts) were explored by the researcher and themes were created. A discussion of the themes within this study follows.

## **Themes within the Study**

Thirty nodes (areas where data is collected, sorted, and stored for future analysis (QSR International, 2014)) were selected from the data which were collected through the focus group sessions and academic documentation. The researcher further explored the 30 nodes which were created in NVivo 10 from analyzing the interview transcriptions and the types of academic documentation then themes were established and narrowed down to create subthemes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The four major themes that arose were: a). Personal Definitions and Introduction of Self-determination, b). Student Self-determination, c). Teaching Strategies to Promote Self-determination, and d). Supports Needed. Some of the themes and subthemes relate directly to the specific self-determination skills which were selected for the purpose of this study (as found in figure one on page seven); self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy. A discussion of the themes and their relationship to figure one follows:

### **Personal Definitions and Introduction of Self-Determination**

A few individuals stated that self-determination is self-advocacy. They did not distinguish between the two. Some individuals shared how self-determination relates to self-awareness and self-concept. They did not report self-efficacy or self-regulation specifically during the interviews. During one interview, Fran shared the following definition of self-determination:

more to do with getting the students to understand their strengths and weaknesses and what to do with it. Not to rely on other people but to be independent, you always want to avoid learned helplessness and get them to recognize it in themselves and in other people because they also have to learn to collaborate.

When asked if she wanted to add anything else, she said, "I really feel like at the level of the kids I work with, it's just really, mostly about being self-aware." Similarly, Beatrice said the following:

the student actually doing things for themselves and not waiting for us to help them get started, perhaps even going up to a teacher and asking them if they can retake the test.

Similar to self-advocacy where they go out and they're the ones doing it. Also, when on a project where they get to pick the different parts of the project. Instead of just giving them an activity and saying this is what you have to do to do this.

Ellen followed that by saying, "I think doing the best on all of that, too. They want to do the best in what they can do." Donna added her personal definition of, "If they have intrinsic motivation to do well for themselves." Haley shared that self-determination is "self-advocacy, standing up for yourself." Isabel stated that it is "teaching children to like who they are, to look at that person and say, I'm a good person and I'm good at this, and feeling comfortable with themselves."

Gretchen shared that self-determination means, "being able to seek out their strengths and needs on their own and then, being able to stand up for themselves, to get what they need."

The participants were also asked to share their perceptions on when to introduce self-determination to students with SLDs. Fran stated, "I would say probably second, third grade is when it can be applied more effectively." Fran also stated:

They have to be taught to look at themselves that way [to be self-determined]. It may not come naturally or internally to assess themselves. It may have to be explicitly explained because a lot of students on my caseload, specific learning disability, isn't their only disability. It's usually comorbid with something else, so they sometimes need that direct instruction in those self-determination skills in order for them to retain it.

Clare also shared specific ways that self-determination is introduced at her school:

I would say, actually that's introduced even before I would see them at the third grade language arts. Honestly, I think any teacher in our district is trying to impress on the students: ...raise your hand when you have a question. That's a great thing to do. If you don't understand it, come up to my desk. Don't hesitate. Don't be scared to talk to any adult in the hallway if you have a problem. Trying to get them to be their own person. I would say that probably starts right at the get go."

Beatrice stated, "I think it's crucial to start in elementary." She also shared that she believes it "starts at kindergarten." She mentioned that the students are not identified as having a learning disability in kindergarten and that is why many teachers promote self-determination informally as Clare reported earlier. Isabel shared that fourth grade was a time when self-determination has been introduced at her school. Haley agreed with her and together they shared an experience which the students participate in during school. Their explanation follows:

Isabel: Yes, fourth grade and that's a big thing and then they had the guidance counselor in the elementary who is really good. They get a star; you know you're a star if you helped someone.

Haley: Oh, I remember that. I remember that.

Isabel: In fact, one of our little boys in sixth grade has a star because he helped someone in need.

Haley: A starfish award.

Isabel: The starfish, a pen, and then you had special lunch with the guidance counselor.

All of those things are important in building that self-esteem and that determination to be a good person, and to look out for others.

Gretchen stated she did not have current experience at the elementary level in regards to promoting student self-determination. She then shared her experience with her middle school (ninth grade) students:

because we are getting to the transition periods. You are now looking to see if some students need that self-determination and some don't. So, some of my students are more on the shy side, they're more quiet, they don't want to call out attention to themselves, and then I do have the students that they could care less. They'll – you know, they'll ask the teacher, they'll ask questions, so as I'm writing goals, or even just looking at the IEP, and that may be an area that a student needs some help in, either through a goal, or just through some specially designed instruction to get them more involved in their education.

April shared an interesting idea concerning the introduction of self-determination and that age may affect the promotion of it. April's experience is that:

I do think age has a lot to do with it. Because now I have some eighth graders and nothing seems to bother them. They don't mind asking teachers. But I know the tenth graders, something stops, there's a block now. They don't want to ask questions anymore. They have questions, and I'm sure they're thinking it, but saying it in front of their peers is not always the thing to do. I'm noticing teachers really addressing that now.

Making them [the students] responsible if they haven't asked questions.

The participants' personal definitions of self-determination varied as does the literature in the field of special education. Some reported that self-determination was asking for assistance, others said it was being determined to do the right thing, and yet others reported that it was not one specific area but a combination of multiple skills.



## **Student Self-Determination**

Student self-determination was the second main theme which was explored in this study. Participants shared many experiences and perceptions in this area; therefore, the researcher was able to explore the following subthemes within student self-determination. Clare shared the following statement:

Some of them have no more of a goal than to stay at home and live with mom for the rest of their life, and they have said that to me. And some of them think they're going to be the next President, so you have to encourage both ways. But there's so much that goes into it, nothing is textbook, that's for sure.

Clare's statement alludes to student self-determination through self-efficacy, one of the skills selected for the purpose of this study (As stated in figure one on page seven, it is the ability to determine one's abilities or limitations in order to compensate as needed).

While reviewing Clare's statements, the researcher was lead to explore the following subthemes:

**Innate ability.** Beatrice stated that "we probably all just naturally get that because you don't have that ... [for example] if I don't understand something I'm going to ask you for help."

**Student initiative.** As Beatrice stated in her definition of self-determination, students begin their work without having the teacher or teacher's aid encourage them to begin. She perceives that initiative as the students having self-determination. Donna also stated that "They [the students] have intrinsic motivation to do well for themselves." When discussing student initiative, Clare stated, "The young ones that I see don't always have that just yet." She said that "It's their lack of striving to gain information; it has nothing to do with them. They could just care less."

**Student responsibility.** Donna and Ellen shared their perceptions of student responsibility as part of self-determination.

Donna: ... where I teach at the junior high, that is when we really push the kids. If they have a missing assignment, or want to see if a teacher will take late work, they have to go ask them [the teachers], or they have to go talk to the teacher. We don't ask for them. We force them at the junior high level to go the teachers and communicate and ask. That's not our job [to ask for student assignments or extensions].

Ellen: And it is not even for us [it benefits the students in regards to their assignment grade], it's up to them. If they [the students] choose to take that opportunity; it is their choice.

Donna's response alludes to student self-determination skill of self-regulation through making such choices; however, she does not explicitly mention self-regulation (The ability to analyze choices and make decisions according to personal preferences).

Clare then shared,

"I work with third graders also, but my primary interest is fourth grade and sixth grade. I see a huge responsibility switch from those two grades. ... And we even tell them: this is why this is happening. You have to start being responsible for your own work. It's not my grade. I've been through sixth grade. You have to want to finish that book report. You have to want to turn in your math work because everything counts [toward graduation]. Another participant, April also shared her experiences of student responsibility. She said, "Are they doing their homework? Are they responsible for the things that they need to have prior to that?" Donna shared the importance of following through with student responsibility. She said, "So you put it in their hands, but you can help them and get the tools for them to do that." Donna's explanation describes how teachers should provide

the necessary "tools" for the students to be responsible and autonomous as found in self-determination skills (see figure one page seven).

**Self-advocacy instead of learned helplessness.** Some of the participants shared that they wished their students would develop better self-advocacy instead of what they perceive as learned helplessness. Beatrice shared, "whenever I worked with the older kids before, like some of them either have the self advocacy skills, or else they have learned helplessness where they do nothing." Clare agreed and stated, "They learned self-learned helplessness quick. By the time they're in third grade, they already have that down pat. So it makes it tough." Fran shared also shared her perspective on learned helplessness saying, "...Not to rely on other people but to be independent, you always want to avoid learned helplessness and get them to recognize it in themselves and in other people because they also have to learn to collaborate."

**Self-advocacy through asking.** Participants also shared that self-determination is promoted through students self-advocating and asking for assistance. Haley shared, "I think that they need to get used to not being afraid. They have to learn that they have to ask questions for everything." Similarly, Fran said,

"The kids need to learn that it starts with the teachers, because once they get a job, at some point they're going to have to ask the boss if they don't understand something.

They can't just do it. They can't just do something to get it done; it still has to be right."

**Self-awareness.** Fran described how she encourages self-awareness [one of the specific self-determination skills chosen for the purpose of this study] in her students in order to promote self-determination:

I do try to include a lot of lessons that I do with them that focus on being self-aware, social skill lessons, things that get them to understand that, yes, reading is harder for

them. But what strengths do they do have? Are they better at memorization? Are they better at word breaking? We try to work with them to figure out strategies that work best for them. I try to get them to own it because otherwise it's just me constantly telling them again and again.

When Fran discussed that students need to "own it", she also referred to student self-awareness, the knowledge of one's self and the specific reading strategies that support the individual student. For the purpose of this study, self-concept was another one of the self-determination skills selected to explore.

**Self-concept.** Included in Isabel's personal definition of self-determination was the idea of self-concept. She said that self-determination "...is teaching children to like who they are, to look at that person and say, I'm a good person and I'm good at this, and feeling comfortable with themselves." She also shared the following experience from teaching at the elementary school level:

We start working on that, you know? What are you good at? If you're having trouble, who do you go to? That kind of stuff and it's real hard to teach that concept of, I'm a good person, I like myself, because at this point, they're still at home with mom and dad a lot and if there's – there's a lot of issues, at that point, but as they get older, then that's something that you can say, well, what do you want – how do you want help? What kind of help do you need?

Clare then shared the following experience in regards to self-concept in students:

And I think sometimes the student also needs to know that just because you don't read the same as Suzie over there reads, doesn't mean you're not going to be as successful. There are so many other things going on for people than just your ability to do a certain thing.

You know, sometimes I think kids are shut down because – 'oh, I'm in the lowest reading group. It's so depressing and I'm not going to do anything. I'll just – I don't know what I'll do with my life.' And they don't understand that you can do anything you really want to. There are ways to use all kinds of things to help yourself out.

Fran believes that, "They have to be taught to look at themselves that way. It may not come naturally or internally to assess themselves."

**Contributing member of society.** Clare shared an experience that demonstrates the promoting of self-determination skills which she had with a third grader who kept giving her excuses for why his work was not finished and turned in on time. She told him, "We're teaching you to be contributing members of society and it has to start now. Your responsibilities are now." She went on to state, "And honestly, I don't think that some of their families specifically even tell them that they are responsible for anything."

**School environment.** Haley and Gretchen shared their perceptions on the school environment and how it affects the promotion of student self-determination skills. When discussing a rural school district, Haley said,

Everybody knows everybody. I mean people – the kids know more about the teachers. Like you know, they know I have kids, you know what I mean? And I think that, sometimes, they are just more comfortable in this school environment where the self-determination is a little bit easier, for some, because you get to know the kids better. We keep following them.

Then Gretchen shared,

Well, and they wind up having the same teacher multiple times, for multiple subjects, so you know, their ninth grade English teacher, they may see again in eleventh grade. Our

history teacher teaches tenth and eleventh graders, so they see the teachers through multiple years, where in a larger district, they might not see that. Your ninth grade teacher's your ninth grade teacher. You're never going to see them again. So, I can see self-determination that – being more difficult in a larger school district, where you don't know all the teachers all the time.

**IEP meeting discussions.** Fran shared that it is important to teach concepts of self-determination to students with SLDs:

I think that when students are identified with a specific learning disability and they enter into a special education program the chances of them becoming one of those kids with learned helplessness goes up greatly because they're given more support, which is what they need, but it's meant to be temporary. It's meant to be phased out. It's not always going to occur that way but that is the general intent.

Fran also explained what she tells the parents about the importance of student self-determination skills, "It's not about your child getting fewer services. It's about giving them the services that are appropriate for them to be independent doing it." Isabel shared a similar experience at her school. She shares her discussion with a student prior to an individualized education plan (IEP) meeting where the specially designed instructions (SDIs) are established. She said,

I used to tell the kids, ... sit down and make a list of the things that you like in class that help you, and the things that you don't need. I want to get rid of them. You're getting older; we need to keep funneling down your SDI's.

Donna concurred and added:

Going back to the IEP meetings, I think it's really important that when you have the parent there, the administrator there, or the student there that you discuss how self-

advocacy is so important for those students. They have to go to the teachers and speak for themselves, and come up with a plan of how they're going to get organized, or how they are going to get their work done.

### **Teaching Strategies to Promote Self-Determination**

When asked about the ways in which they have modeled self-determination skills for students with a specific learning disability, Haley said, "We do that. It's on a daily basis. I mean just talking with – even with the emotional support, and so my kids do have specific learning disabilities. Also, between my aide and myself, the way we converse." She elaborated by saying that the way in which they converse is how they model for the students. Besides modeling for students; Haley, Isabel, and Gretchen also discussed how they are constantly reminding the students or prompting the students to self-advocate and ask questions in regards to their homework, projects, and future tests. Gretchen added that "finding what their strengths are and building on that, even if it's something small, but taking that and building upon it" is important in promoting self-determination. Isabel added that teachers need to encourage students "to realize, I do have limitations, and I need to improve here." Awareness of their limitations is self-efficacy according to the definition selected for this study. She also believes that it is important to "share your life and your experiences." Donna, Clare, Beatrice, Ellen and April agreed. They believed that professional disposition, sharing your own personal experiences, and modeling positive attitudes benefits the students as well. They wanted to relate to the students and they suggested that they can demonstrate self-determination while co-teaching. Additionally, when discussing new computer software for mathematics in the elementary school level which promotes student self-determination, Fran shares her experience:

It's been really nice to see my students struggle through parts of that and also for some of them to purposely not want my help and actually say, 'I have this.' I then say, 'All right. Calm down.' So that has really helped.

**Teachable moments of Self-Determination.** Gretchen also believed in teachable moments where:

Some students just need encouragement. They just need some kind words, just some encouragement to talk to the teacher. [She suggests supporting students] by saying they're not going to bite you, if you need something, or need help, then you need to talk to the teacher. I think being direct, providing that guidance, is helpful.

April also believed "that they need to understand that self-determination can take them beyond their learning disability." Clare added:

I try to impress to the kids that you have to want to do these things. You're going to see math everywhere. I don't care if you're pouring cement, or insulating a house, or if you're saying: 'welcome to Sheetz, pump three is on.' Math is everywhere, so you're going to have to learn it.

### **Supports Needed**

Throughout the interviews, the participants shared a variety of supports that would be beneficial for them to promote self-determination skills in their students with SLDs. Many of the participants were concerned about implementing specific goals for self-determination. They stated that it is difficult to both measure self-determination and write goals that do not entail extra work on the part of the teacher and student. The following subthemes support their concerns:



**Changing role of the teacher.** April stated,

I think it has changed a lot over the years. I think we used to do more. I think we used to think our roles were to do more for them. I've learned recently, as long as I've been here that it's better for the student if you don't. That failing is okay sometimes, because it gets the students to a further place than if someone did it for them.

**Impediments of teaching Self-Determination.** Fran shared that there are daily impediments that make it difficult to "incorporate it [promoting self-determination skills] into the lessons that I do because you get so bogged down in is what I'm doing instructionally sound all the time? Does it match the standards? Is it part of Common Core?"

**Teacher collaboration.** Isabel, Haley, Donna, and Clare shared that they perceive the time spent collaborating with parents, their coteaching colleague, other colleagues, or an instructional assistant is beneficial in supporting their students with SLDs. Fran also stated, "my co-workers are really good and I even – I try to get as much input as I can from the parents as well because they know their kids much better than I do. So they're always a good resource."

**Teacher expectations and additional struggles.** April, Clare, Donna, and Ellen discussed how they are always trying to relate to their students. They try to build the student's self-esteem and self-concept. They also try to be realistic. Ellen stated, "... I mean, without discouraging them [students]. If you're reading at a first grade level, you're not going to be a doctor. I'm sorry; however, there are things in the medical field that we can explore, a medical assistant or that type of field. Be real about what they can do." April added, "I think as teachers we're not consistent, from year to year, from grade level to grade level as well. So even though

they're struggling with themselves, they're also struggling with what does this teacher expect from me?"

**Teachers supported well.** The participants described being well supported but that time was a major factor that impedes the promotion of self-determination skills. Clare shared, when you surround yourself with good people, that's one of the biggest bonuses for professional development. You don't want to become stagnate. But whenever you're surrounded by good people that you work with, it makes it more desirable to want to be positive for the kids and to push them forward for their own success.

**Parental support.** Collaborating with parents was suggested to be beneficial for students with SLDs. It was suggested that parental support and engagement was necessary for the IEP team to fulfill their mission. Donna stated,

It's based on their home lives, and their parental support. The kids who have a stronger parental support, academics are a priority at home. They are more self-determined. Students whose parents do not emphasize academics aren't as self-determined at school.

**After school considerations.** The participants also shared that parents themselves may be struggling with self-esteem and that may impede the consistency of a connection between what occurs at school and what is followed through at home. Beatrice shared, "We are always telling them [students] to ask for help, and then they go home and ask their parents and their parents can't do the math."

**Training to teach Self-Determination.** Ellen, Donna, and Beatrice shared that training is not always necessary. They suggested that implementing self-determination skills into

instruction comes with time and real life experiences. Fran perceived training differently. She suggested:

I definitely feel the more training [on self-determination] that we could have, specifically on this for the elementary grades, even third through sixth [would provide more support]. I think a bigger focus on that. Honestly, I think a bigger focus on the education of that with all students, even if other students in regular education were exposed to what a learning disability is and how it works. They can then be part of the process of a student with a learning disability becoming more independent because sometimes it's the other kids in the room being too helpful.

When asked if there was anything else that she wanted to add, Fran said, "I'm happy to do this but I hope they never put it in the IEP." Fran doesn't want the promotion of self-determination skills to be mandated through the IEP for students prior to the transition plan age.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the researcher's description of participants, data collection, and analysis techniques of this interpretive qualitative study which explored how teachers of students with SLDs promote self-determination when teaching in grades third through ninth (prior to the transition plan of the IEP). The focus group sessions, individual interview, and academic documentation were coded into nodes and analyzed by the researcher using NVivo 10 software (QSR International, 2014) to determine themes from the study. The themes were further divided into subthemes. While reviewing the themes and subthemes, the researcher noticed that a few individuals shared that self-determination is self-advocacy.

For the purpose of this study, they are not the same. Figure one on page seven displays the differences as self-advocacy is one skill within self-determination. Although the participants

only specifically reported self-awareness, self-concept, and self-advocacy as skills to promote self-determination; self-regulation and self-efficacy were alluded to in the descriptions of strategies and teaching methods. Most of the participants shared how they encouraged self-determination skills through modeling and informal discussions or teachable moments. Little was shared about specific programs, curricula, or activities used to promote self-determination skills in students with SLDs prior to the transition plan age. The participants suggested that collaboration with regular education teachers, parents, and other teachers in the field of special education is beneficial and supports consistency when promoting self-determination in students with SLDs. A summary of the findings as related to each research question, limitations of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for future research are presented in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As Grigal et al. (2003) noted, the initial mention of the term *self-determination* was included and not implied within the amendments of IDEA leading to IDEA 2004. Students were encouraged to speak for themselves in the establishment of their IEP goals, conversations pertaining to their strengths and needs, as well as their future plans prior to graduation. Self-determination as defined by Field and colleagues (1998) is a conglomeration of skills, beliefs, and knowledge that allows an individual to self-regulate and assume responsibility autonomously. This study explored the perceptions of special education teachers who teach students with specific learning disabilities (SLDs) in grades third through ninth regarding the promotion of self-determination (specifically self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy skills). The researcher also explored ways in which teachers promote self-determination prior to the implementation of the individualized education program (IEP) transition plan. As reported by the participants, IEP teams need to support the development of students' self-advocacy and self-determination skills prior to age 16 (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Hart and Brehm, 2013; Heller et al., 2011; Mitchell, Moening, & Panter, 2009; Pocock et al., 2002). These are the skills that assist students when they are required to explain their needs, understand their abilities, and appeal for their rights throughout their lives. Self-determination is not federally or state mandated until students are at least 16 years of age (some states, such as Pennsylvania, even mandate it at the age of 14).

Few studies provide information on the pertinence and incidence of self-determination skills (such as self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy) in students with a specific learning disability in third through ninth grades as well as teacher and

parent support (Ochoa & Olivarez, 1995; Milsom, Akos, & Thompson, 2004; Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998). Much of the research provides information suggesting the enhancement of the transition planning phase of the IEP process, postsecondary living and employment opportunities, and transitioning to college where the IEP is no longer valid. Research is needed in the area of elementary and middle school (specifically grades third through ninth) which provides opportunities and experiences to prepare the students for their IEP meeting which focuses on transition planning.

Through focus group sessions, an individual interview, and academic documentation, this multi-method interpretive qualitative study examined the perceptions of special education teachers of students with SLDs in grades third through ninth in regards to the promotion of self-determination skills prior to the age of the IEP transition plan. Purposive sampling was utilized to support the purpose of the study. Silverman (2001) stated, "Purposive sampling allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested" (p. 250). NVivo 10 was utilized to code the data, create themes (from a brief demographical survey, academic documentation, focus group sessions, and an individual interview) and categorize the themes into subthemes. A discussion of the four research questions, limitations of the study, conclusions, and recommendations follows.

### **Research Question One**

The first question stated: What do teachers in the field of special education perceive as influences regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan? Eight of the nine participants shared that their supervisors and principals encouraged the promotion in all students, not necessarily students with SLDs. Heller et al. (2011) also supported a lifespan approach which

includes all individuals who work and live with the students. Remaining consistent with students will enable them to understand how to generalize the use of self-determination skills in all environments and situations. All nine of the participants also shared that self-determination includes self-concept, self-esteem, self-awareness, making decisions, and independently following through with a task. They all perceived student prompting, modeling, and sharing of their own personal experiences as influences of the promotion of self-determination in students with SLDs in grades third through ninth, as well. They suggested that the students be told the purpose for activities and the reasons why prior to a task that involves the promotion of students' self-determination. They shared specific situations with the students to demonstrate when the students may need the skills which they were learning in school. The participants stressed that students improved in their self-determination skills when they were explicitly taught that their performance on grade level tasks leads to graduation, future employment, and a higher quality of life. The participants brought academic documentation which they perceived as demonstrating the promotion of student self-determination skills. As Palmer and Wehmeyer (2003) have suggested, implementing activities which support the students in early elementary grades to make choices, solve problems, and set goals in turn builds upon the essentials of self-determination. Other researchers have suggested encouraging students to discuss their IEPs, set academic and everyday living goals (Abernathy & Taylor, 2009; Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Grigal, Neubert, Moon, & Graham, 2003; Mitchell, Moening, & Panter, 2009; Trainor, 2005; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). During this study, there was no mention of specific programs, curricula, supplemental materials, or activities which they utilized in order to promote self-determination in students with SLDs in grades third through ninth except that of the bullying programs which were mentioned by four of the participants.

## Research Question Two

Similar information was collected from the participants in regards to the second question: What do teachers in the field of special education report as the self-determination skills and strategies that have been taught, encouraged, or modeled for students with a specific learning disability? Two of the nine participants shared that some students are ready to demonstrate self-determination in the early elementary grades (kindergarten through third grade) while some are not. Some stated that their role as the special education teacher has changed over the years and that they now encourage the students to ask more questions, collect their own assignments and any suggested revisions, and explain their disability to the regular education teacher (as well as the IEP team). One participant shared that she collaborates with the regular education teachers for the students in the elementary grades instead of inviting the students collaborate too. She would collect assignments, exams which need to be completed, and consult on the students' progress in the course. Six of the nine participants shared that they also encourage the students to attend and participate at the IEP meeting, not simply attend the meeting which is also suggested by Test et al. (2005). The participants did not state specific grades or ages, but did state that some students are not developmentally ready to attend. Some of the participants shared that they model self-determination in collaboration with the regular education teacher, instructional assistants, and parents. The teachers mentioned that they utilize a method known as 'thinking aloud in the classroom' when making decisions and solving problems. They encourage their students to do the same. They want to determine the students' thought processes in order to better assist them. Fiedler and Danneker (2007) also suggested that students be included in their IEP process. The participants reported that students should be asked about their strengths, needs, and accommodations prior to an IEP meeting. Some even shared that they encourage their



students to discuss potential IEP goals and ways to monitor their progress. They also said that they (and the instructional assistants) reminded their students, to demonstrate self-determination, as needed throughout the school day.

### **Research Question Three**

In regards to the third question: What are the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education regarding their accountability in the promotion of self-determination in students with a specific learning disability? The participants mostly perceived this as a collaborative effort. The participants stated that they encouraged both student and parental engagement which corresponds with Hart and Brehm (2013), as well as Grigal et al. (2003), where they suggested that this occurs for more meaningful IEP participation. They wanted parental input because parents usually know their child better than anyone else on the IEP team. The participants perceived the support from administrators and other colleagues as sufficient at this time. They did state that parents should be encouraged to demonstrate active engagement in the IEP process as well as interest in their child's academics (Carter, Weir, Cooney, Walter, & Moss, 2012).

A large majority of the participants (six out of nine) did not perceive trainings or self-determination curricula as necessary components when promoting self-determination in students with SLDs in grades third through ninth. Participants stated that a textbook or curriculum guide is not going to provide the real life experiences, role playing, modeling, prompting, and evaluation that a teacher in a classroom can readily provide. They reported that teachers know the students' abilities and needs prior to working with them on self-determination skills.

Time was also crucial to the preparation of lessons, activities, and events where the promotion of self-determination could be incorporated without extra work on the students' or

teachers' behalf (Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston, 2012). The participants shared that they have specific programs to follow in combination with the regular curriculum. One program that was mentioned in each interview was a bullying program. The participants shared that the bullying programs which their schools were using incorporated positive behaviors, improving self-concepts, and being determined to be a good person and help others. These programs, although not specifically for students with SLDs only, are perceived as beneficial for promoting self-determination in students. The participants did not report setting goals or self-regulation skills when discussing these programs.

#### **Research Question Four**

The fourth research question to be addressed: What general themes emerge from the perceptions of teachers in the field of special education regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with specific learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan? In general, four main themes emerged from analyzing the data of this study: personal definitions and introduction of self-determination, student self-determination, teaching strategies to promote self-determination, and supports needed.

As with the current literature, one of the main themes, personal definitions and introduction of self-determination, is not consistent in the field of special education (Field et al., 1998; Ward, 2005; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007; Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004). Both researchers and teachers perceive self-determination differently, as well as when to introduce self-determination skills with students. At the very least, consistency in the area of self-determination within the school district should be considered. The school district should come to a consensus of what constitutes self-determination and how self-determination should be implemented throughout the curriculum.

When consistent in regards to the definition and introduction of self-determination, students would be better supported through collaboration with teachers, administrators, parents, and other IEP team members (Carter, Weir, Cooney, Walter, & Moss, 2012; Grigal et al., 2003).

Through the data collected from the participants in the focus group sessions and the academic documentation, the second of four main themes, student self-determination, should be considered. The following should also be considered specifically for the student: having an innate ability for self-determination, demonstrating initiative and responsibility, having positive self-concepts in order to be self-aware, being supported in promoting self-advocacy instead of demonstrating what is perceived as learned helplessness, being explicitly told that they need to be contributing members of society and why, and being encouraged to demonstrate self-determination daily, as needed (Abernathy & Taylor, 2009; Campbell-Whatley, 2008; Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston, 2012; Heller et al., 2011; Klassen, 2010; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Pocock et al., 2002; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007).

In regards to the third main theme, teaching strategies to promote self-determination, sharing personal real life experiences is suggested by Isabel, Donna, Clare, Beatrice, Ellen and April to be more beneficial than a textbook or curriculum for promoting self-determination (Hart & Brehm, 2013). Daily prompting (as needed) and encouraging students to demonstrate self-determination is suggested to be more effective and more efficient than a specific program or curriculum as well (Campbell-Whatley, 2008). Also, as Fran suggested, allowing the students to grapple with an assignment a little bit before (the special education teacher) jumping in to assist will encourage the students to demonstrate their abilities and utilize their self-determination skills in a more comfortable environment prior to the regular education classroom (Abernathy &

Taylor, 2009; Campbell-Whatley, 2008; Klassen, 2010; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Pocock et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 2000).

The fourth and final main theme, supports needed, considers other issues outside of the school environment as well as the changing role of the special education teacher. Most of the participants of this study perceived that they were well supported by administration and colleagues but that parental support and expectations for their children in the area of academics could be improved upon. Eight participants stated that their administration provided training on goal writing, aligning goals to the state standards, and technological supports services available for when writing IEPs. Their colleagues collaborated with them to discuss how to support students with SLDs in the classrooms. Six of the participants stated that they want parents to be consistent when assisting with homework assignments at home and follow through with continued emphasis on academic growth. They also shared concerns that the parents who have low self-esteem share that perception with their children (Grigal et al., 2003). Fran suggested that teachers could benefit from training in self-determination with students in elementary grades (Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston, 2012). She also suggests that all students learn about specific learning disabilities and why it is important to assist only will permitted by the teacher.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

As the participants of the study stated, all students can benefit from support and encouragement in the area of self-determination; however, students with special needs can benefit from utilizing this support service toward improving their chances of graduation and employment after graduation (Eisenmen, 2007). The results of this study support the encouragement of teachers collaborating with their students who have specific learning disabilities in order to promote self-determination skills in their students prior to the transition

plan age (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Hart & Brehm, 2013; Heller et al., 2011; Mitchell, Moening, & Panter, 2009; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; ). Teachers who participated in this study have reflexively analyzed their approach to the implementation of each IEP in which they are involved. The students receiving special education services will benefit from the results of the study as their teachers (regular education and special education) may be reminded or become better informed about the concept of self-determination and the simple fact that it does not need to be taught as a stand alone lesson, rather infused into the school day (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Stang , 2008).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams can better support students prior to and during their IEP transition planning process if they are aware of the students' self-determination skills and enhance the areas which show deficit such as self-awareness, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy skills.

As suggested by Konrad, Fowler, Walker, Test, and Wood (2007), "self-determination interventions should be added to teachers' repertoires, along with evidence-based practices which has been shown to increase academic skills of students with LD and/or ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder]" (p.94). It is recommended that teachers become aware that students with SLDs benefit from working on their self-determination skills throughout the school day. (Klassen, 2010; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). Given multiple opportunities, students can learn to generalize self-determination skills throughout their daily lives. Self-determination skills infused throughout the students' content area courses, special courses (physical education, art, music, keyboarding), and other academic instruction benefits all who are involved in each student's IEP process. Konrad et al. (2007) suggested that teachers "use a combined strategy instruction-direct instruction approach and embed self-determination instruction where possible" (p. 111). A stand

alone curriculum is not necessarily required for the promotion of self-determination skills. Therefore, self-determination skills can be promoted while teaching instead of at the expense of academic skills instruction" (Konrad et al., 2007, p.90).

In order to infuse self-determination skills into the regular school day without creating a separate lesson plan for such skills, teachers can collaborate with students with SLDs. When collaborating, such skills as self-awareness and self-efficacy can be discussed in order to determine specific strengths, needs, and interests. Once those characteristics are determined, together they can set goals for the students to work on obtaining. It is beneficial that any goals established then coincide with teachers explicitly discussing self-determination skills and the purpose for setting goals, making decisions, monitoring progression and reflecting on progression.

Given these opportunities, students will develop empowerment in order to participate as essential team members in their own IEP meeting instead of simply attending and sitting at the table with their team members. Students benefit from knowing why they are required to participate in their individualized education plans (IEPs). It also benefits them to know that it is in their best interest to be self-aware, apply their self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-regulation skills while self-advocating as needed. Students with SLDs in the early elementary grades benefit from these opportunities prior to their transition plan meeting, as they have additional years of exposure to establish goals, make decisions, monitor and reflect on their progression toward an advantageous quality of life.

Students can gain empowerment through watching their own IEP meeting throughout their schooling. By the time the students are seniors, they should be able invite appropriate persons to their meeting (teachers, principal, parents, guidance counselor, and an Office of

Vocational Rehabilitation representative) and then lead in the discussion of their own IEP meeting. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial model (1968), students between the ages of 11 to 25 have to find their identity, sense of self-worth within society, and create relationships for positive networking. Planning for their transition is yet another issue during this period of time. Becoming informed of how students with SLDs see themselves and how those around them see them is very important for students to be successful in the area of academics and to establish a plan for life after graduation. Teachers can promote self-determination skills in their students with SLDs while also ensuring that students develop positive self-concepts. Teachers can support students before and during their educational transition planning process. In order to build on the students' understanding of their self-concept, a variety of activities can be implemented in the classroom.

Cortiella (2011) suggests that teachers may need training pertaining to specific characteristics of SLDs and instructional strategies which are evidence-based and pertinent for the academic success and enhancement of self-determination skills of students with SLDs. Training can begin with teacher preparation programs of pre-service teachers who plan to service students who need to be encouraged to lead their own IEP meeting (Nevin, Malian, & Williams, 2002). Pre-service teachers should be taught the most current research-based strategies for how to apply the following prior to the transition plan meeting: implementing lesson plans which incorporate self-determination skills, writing IEP goals and transition plan goals pertaining to self-determination skills, and enhancing the participation of the students at their IEP meetings. The same types of training can be continued in a more consistent timeframe within professional development trainings for teachers in regular education and special education. The trainings

should present the most current research-based practices and suggestions for IEP goal and transition plan goal writing.

To date, few studies have reported on specific goals (IEP and transition plan), lesson plans, and student created projects which demonstrate the promotion of self-determination skills prior to the transition plan of the students' IEP (Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Pocock et al., 2002). The results of this study suggest that teachers can incorporate self-determination skills into the students' daily academic schedule without impeding upon academic goals. It would benefit the students if more goals (with in lesson plans or IEPs) were written which explicitly state self-determination skills. "Further more, because students with LD [learning disabilities] are often enrolled in general education classes, postsecondary goals setting and self-determination should be embedded in course curricula" (Trainor, 2005, p. 244). The IEP team should encourage the student as a pertinent team member to discuss postsecondary plans, keeping in mind the current evidence-based practice of "person-centered planning" (Trainor, 2005, p. 244). Students should not feel intimidated as those who shared their experiences in a qualitative study on postsecondary transition planning. Trainor (2005) reported the following: "Many of the participants expressed their opinions that they felt scolded during transition meetings"(p. 244). Through encouraging discussion during the elementary school years while also involving students' family members, students with SLDs will develop a better sense of self-determination. Carter, Weir, Cooney, Walter, & Moss (2012) support parental involvement and state that parents should be encouraged to partner with the school district personnel for the development of their child's self-determination skills; specifically, "choice-making, decision-making, goal-setting, problem-solving, self-advocacy and leadership, self-awareness and self-knowledge, and self-management and self-regulation" (p.14). Students with SLDs benefit from the acknowledgment of the



importance of discussing postsecondary options with their family members as well as the rest of the IEP team.

As for this study, the researcher suggests that the participants continue to implement the promotion of self-determination their students with SLDs in grades third through ninth as they shared during the interviews and within the academic documentation. Collaboration as an IEP team is pertinent for the successful demonstration of self-determination of the student. Since the IEP process is team oriented, students can be accountable for collaborating with the team to ensure that they are following through with their responsibilities in becoming self-determined. Instead of having the student solely responsible for self-advocating, some of the IEP goals and transition plan goals could be evaluated by a rubric and some could be evaluated by the regular education teacher and the special education teacher consulting with each other and collaborating with the student on whether or not the student followed through on the directions. The students can also be accountable for collaborating with the teachers to graph and report their reading and writing progress. The same could be encouraged for when the students work on such skills as problem-solving, researching potential jobs, and participating in directed study. The final IEP goal which the researcher reviewed was the only one that specifically included the word "advocate". More IEP goals could include such words as those used for the purpose of this study: self-determination, self-concept, self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and self-advocacy.

As discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation, many studies of students with SLDs report on the events during and after the transition planning age of 16. For future studies should explore the following: the perceptions of students, parents, regular education teachers, and administrators and how they would provide more support for the promotion of self-

determination skills in students with SLDs prior to when they are mandated to attend the IEP and to demonstrate such skills. By involving students in the actual research, the researcher would promote student self-empowerment. Parents can also become empowered through the research process as the researcher acknowledges how parent's perceptions and voice are pertinent since they know their child better than anyone else on the team. Research on the specific methods and interventions which provide empirical evidence is also suggested. Teachers and students gain knowledge on the promotion of self-determination from networking and sharing explicit activities, lessons, goals and how to measure self-determination more effectively.

The educational curriculum, school personnel, and family members provide important contributions to the development of students' identities. School personnel and family members' support of students in the creation and enhancement of positive self-concepts and the promotion of self-determination skills leads to the student's ability to self-advocate (Carter, Weir, Cooney, Walter, & Moss, 2012; Field et al., 1998; Trainor, 2005). Students need to be able to make decisions, comment about their own opinions and concerns, and appeal for privileges within the educational setting (Poehls, 2009). After demonstrating self-determination skills in the educational setting, students can then begin to generalize their knowledge and apply their self-determination skills throughout their daily lives.

All students can benefit from support and encouragement in the area of self-determination; however, students with a SLD can benefit from utilizing this support service toward improving their chances of graduation and employment (Eisenman, 2007). Teachers of students with SLDs who acknowledge the promotion of self-determination skills in their students prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan can better prepare their students. As IDEA 2004 requires, students are to be invited to attend their IEP meeting by age 16, in most states.

Prior to being invited to this specific meeting, students with a SLD benefit from being given experiences and opportunities to discuss self-determination skills, their personal interests and needs, and prepare to speak for themselves and appeal for their rights.

This has been a federally mandated process for more than 10 years (IDEA, 2004). School districts are monitored to ensure compliance. Since this is to be a process, students can not just go in to the transition plan meeting and be expected to participate without explicit instruction, opportunities for experiences with their self-determination skills, and having more time to prepare for a meeting that determines their future (Abernathy & Taylor, 2009; Danneker & Bottge, 2009; Fiedler & Danneker, 2007; Hart & Brehm, 2013; Grigal et al., 2003; Heller et al., 2011; Mitchell, Moening, & Panter, 2009; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007). The researcher hopes that students are encouraged prior to the IEP transition plan meeting to use self-determination skills to sail the high seas throughout life for student empowerment and advocacy.

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Appendix A: Superintendent Letter for Site Approval (Sample School District)



Date: December 3, 2013

Dr. John Doe

Box 75

Sample School District

Sample Springs, PA 55555

Dear Dr. John Doe,

I am writing to request site approval from Sample School District in order to conduct research for my dissertation entitled, *Perceptions of Special Education Teachers Regarding the Promoting of Self-determination Skills in Students with Specific Learning Disabilities*. Self-determination skills are a collection of skills, beliefs, and knowledge that allow an individual to self-regulate, independently make decisions, and advocate for his or her rights. The perceptions of Special Education teachers regarding these skills are pertinent to the participation of students with a SLD in their own IEP process.

The participants involved, pending their willingness to participate, will include teachers of special education only. No students will be involved in this study. I am seeking your permission to contact these professionals who teach and support students with a SLD in grades third grade through ninth grade to request their participation in this study. When conducting this research, I will not interfere with the duties of your teachers of special education in the district (as they will have the opportunity to select a best available time on the Informed Consent form), nor will I interrupt the work of other district employees.

My research design involves conducting focus group sessions with the volunteer participants in order to explore their perceptions regarding the promotion of self-determination in students with a SLD. I plan to also ask participants to bring with them to the focus group sessions documentation that demonstrates the promotion of self-determination. All of the data collected, as well as participants' names, schools, and the district, will remain confidential to avoid placing any employees at risk or to reveal anyone's identity. Pseudonyms will be used in this study and in any future scholarly writings or presentations. At any time, the participants are completely free to withdraw from the study by contacting me or by excusing themselves from the focus group interview if they so desire.

Attached is the Indiana University of Pennsylvania IRB approved interview protocol that will be used to obtain the data for my dissertation. I am available to discuss all procedures in detail with

you should you have any questions or if you require clarification on the information stated above, please feel free to contact me.

If you approve conducting this research at your school district, in the manner described above, I would appreciate your response as soon as possible. You may grant permission in either a letter, email format, or by faxing a signed copy of page two of this letter back to me. The results of the findings from this study will be made available to you upon completion of the research project. I look forward to working with you and your teachers.

Thank you for your consideration,



**Principal Investigator:**  
Mrs. Annah L. Hill, M. Ed., CED,  
Doctoral Candidate  
Special Education and Clinical Services  
258 Davis Hall  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana, PA 15705  
(724) 357-5682  
a.l.hill@iup.edu



**Faculty Sponsor:**  
Dr. Valeri Helterbran, Ed. D.,  
Faculty Advisor  
Department of Professional Studies  
323 Davis Hall  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana, PA 15705  
(724) 357-2400  
vhelter@iup.edu

\*\*\*\*\*

**Site Approval Consent**

I approve conducting this research at Sample School District, in the manner described in the site approval letter.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. John Doe

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Please fax to: Mrs. Annah L. Hill, M. Ed., CED at 724-357- 7716

Appendix B: Participant Letter (Special Education Teacher)



December \_\_, 2013

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). I am currently conducting a qualitative research study entitled, "Perceptions of Teachers Regarding the Promoting of Self-determination Skills in Students with Specific Learning Disabilities."

This letter, informed consent form, and interview protocol was sent to you, a teacher of students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) in third grade through ninth grade, to ask you to participate in the focus group sessions of this study on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. The focus group sessions will be video and audio-recorded for the benefit of the researcher who has to compensate for a hearing loss and assure correctness of the data being collected. The purpose of this study is to determine the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the promotion of self-determination skills in students with specific learning disabilities prior to the implementation of the IEP transition plan. This study is also designed to explore whether or not teachers promote self-determination goals being written in IEPs for students with a specific learning disability.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The participants are free to exit the study by notifying me in advance of the focus group interview or by simply leaving the interviews at any time if they so desire, without being penalized. There are no known risks related to this research study. Participation or non-participation in this study is strictly voluntary and will not affect your job performance evaluation. In addition, your name will never be revealed or associated with the findings in any way. All information obtained will be kept strictly confidential and you will be given a pseudonym. As per federal guidelines, all material will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home and destroyed after a period of three years.

The following information is provided in order to help you decide and make an informed decision regarding your participation in this research study. You are to bring at least two copies of academic documentation (such as lesson plans, goal pages, and/or transition plan pages) with all identifying information removed and in a sealed envelope, which demonstrates the promotion of self-determination in students with a SLD. While the academic documentation is critical to

the collection of data, student participation is not requested at this time. No students will be involved in this study.

If you choose to participate, your name will be placed in a drawing and you will be eligible to win one of six \$20 prepaid gas cards. Please complete and return one copy of this voluntary consent form to the researcher (principal investigator) at Indiana University of Pennsylvania via fax (724-357- 7716) or email by \_\_\_\_\_. Please choose dates, which are listed on the informed consent form, of which you are best available to attend. Upon receipt of the informed consent forms, the researcher will send out an email stating which dates are convenient for most of the participants. Individual interviews can also be an option if the dates do not fit your schedule. The results of the study will be made available to you upon request. If you feel the need to exit the study after you have signed the consent form, you may do so at any time. Please feel free to contact me at (724) 357-5682 or via email if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



**Principal Investigator:**

Mrs. Annah L. Hill, M. Ed., CED,  
Doctoral Candidate  
Special Education and Clinical Services  
258 Davis Hall  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana, PA 15705  
(724) 357-5682  
a.l.hill@iup.edu

**Faculty Sponsor:**

Dr. Valeri Helterbran, Ed. D.,  
Faculty Advisor  
Department of Professional Studies  
323 Davis Hall  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana, PA 15705  
(724) 357-2400  
vhelter@iup.edu



Appendix C: Participant Informed Consent Form (Special Education Teacher)



Informed Consent Form

I have read and understand the information in the participant letter, on this form, and the interview protocol. I consent to volunteer to be a participant in the focus group sessions of this study in \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. I understand that the focus group sessions will be video and audio recorded for the benefit of the researcher who has to compensate for a hearing loss and assure correctness of the data being collected. I understand that my responses are completely confidential, I will be given a pseudonym, and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I also understand that I am asked to bring at least two copies of academic documentation (such as lesson plans, goal pages, and/or transition plan pages) with all identifying information removed and in a sealed envelope, which demonstrates the promotion of self-determination in students with a SLD. I understand that I will be eligible to win one of six \$20 prepaid gas cards.

**Focus Group Times:** Please select the days and times which you are best available to attend.

Monday, January 13, 2014: \_\_\_9-11AM \_\_\_1-3PM \_\_\_5-7PM

Tuesday, January 14, 2014: \_\_\_9-11AM \_\_\_1-3PM \_\_\_5-7PM

Wednesday, January 15, 2014: \_\_\_9-11AM \_\_\_1-3PM \_\_\_5-7PM

Thursday, January 16, 2014: \_\_\_9-11AM \_\_\_1-3PM \_\_\_5-7PM

Friday, January 17, 2014: \_\_\_9-11AM \_\_\_1-3PM \_\_\_5-7PM

I have received an unsigned copy of this Informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

Name (PLEASE PRINT)

Signature

Date

Phone number or location where you can be reached

Best days and times to reach you

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Annah L. Hill

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

<b>Interview Protocol</b>	
Three sections 20-30 minutes each (approx.) Please respond to the following questions in regards to students with a SLD in grades third-ninth.	
<b>I. Perceptions/Knowledge of Self-Determination</b>	
1. In your own words, how do you define self-determination?	<i>Spaces in this column are for the researcher's notations</i>
2. What has been your personal experience (exposure to) with self-determination when working with students in a third grade- ninth grade setting?	
3. What do you perceive as the importance in teaching self-determination skills and strategies to students with a SLD?	

**II. Application of Self-Determination**

*Spaces in this column are for the  
researcher's notations*

4. From your experience, at what age has self-determination been introduced to the students with a SLD?

5. What specific self-determination skills and/or strategies have you taught or encouraged?

6. How have you modeled self-determination for students with a SLD?

7. How have your students with a SLD been reminded or encouraged to utilize their self-determination strategies and skills throughout their day?

<p>8. Who do you collaborate with in regards to promoting self-determination in your students with a SLD?</p>	
<p>9. In what ways do you collaborate with others in regards to promoting self-determination in your students with a SLD?</p>	
<p><b>III. Suggestions and Needs for Implementing Self-Determination</b></p>	
<p>10. In what ways have you been supported or encouraged to promote self-determination in your students with a SLD?</p>	<p><i>Spaces in this column are for the researcher's notations</i></p>
<p>11. In what ways could you be better supported when promoting self-determination in your students with a SLD?</p>	

<p>12. In what ways could you promote self-determination in the future for your students with a SLD?</p>	
<p>13. How well trained/prepared do you consider you are for teaching self-determination to students with a SLD?</p>	

Appendix E: Demographic Survey

**Directions:** Please circle or provide a written explanation of the answer which currently pertains to you and your career:

Participant ____ Demographic Information				
Do you <u>provide services</u> for students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) in any grades from third grade through 9th grade?	YES		NO	
In what ways have you <u>taught</u> students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) in any grades from third grade through 9th grade?				
In what ways have you <u>supported</u> students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) in any grades from third grade through 9th grade?				
In which type of school do you currently work?	large city school	suburban school	rural school	
In which of the following special education settings do you teach in?	self-contained	inclusive	resource room	itinerant
How many years have you taught in total?	<input type="radio"/> less than 1 year <input type="radio"/> 1-5 years <input type="radio"/> 6-10 year <input type="radio"/> 11+ years			
How long have you taught students with a SLD:	<input type="radio"/> less than 1 year <input type="radio"/> 1-5 years <input type="radio"/> 6-10 year <input type="radio"/> 11+ years			
How long have you been in your current position?	<input type="radio"/> less than 1 year <input type="radio"/> 1-5 years <input type="radio"/> 6-10 year <input type="radio"/> 11+ years			
What grade levels do you teach students with a SLD currently?	K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12			
What current Pennsylvania teacher certifications do you possess?	Please list your certifications here:			