



CONCEPTUALIZING SELF DETERMINATION FOR INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Dr. Hemant Singh Keshwal

Associate Professor in Special Education, Madhya Pradesh Bhoj (Open) University, Bhopal

Paper Received On: 20 JULY 2026

Peer Reviewed On: 24 AUG 2026

Published On: 01 SEPT 2026

Abstract

Self-determination act as an essential foundation for achieving inclusive development, independent living, and enhanced quality of life for people with disabilities, aligning with legislative frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and India's Right of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016. This article synthesizes important conceptual frameworks that defines self-determination in disability research and special education, including the Knowledge and Skills Model, the Functional Model, Self-Regulation Theory, and the Ecosystem Model. It highlights how developing core components, such as goal setting, problem-solving, self-advocacy, autonomy, and psychological empowerment— enables the students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to transition into adulthood successfully. Furthermore, the paper addresses how fulfilling basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) addresses academic, social, and developmental challenges. The analysis stresses the collaboration required among educators, families, and ecological support systems to foster self-determination skills, driving third stage of inclusive education and empowering individuals with disabilities to actively shape their own future with dignity.

Keywords: self-determination, inclusive development, intellectual disabilities, special education, quality of life, autonomous action, disability rights

Introduction:

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities affirms the fundamental right of individuals to make personal choices and to participate fully and inclusively in society—a principle echoed in India's Right to Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016 (RPWD Act 2016). Within disability research, self-determination has emerged as a central concept due to its strong influence on quality of life and success in achieving key educational and adult-life goals.

At its core, self-determination is based on the idea that people should have control over their own lives. Students with intellectual disabilities who demonstrate self-determination skills are more likely to navigate the transition into adulthood successfully, particularly in areas like employment and independent living (Wehmeyer & Schwartz,

1997). A self-determined individual typically sets personal goals, makes informed decisions, identifies alternatives, resolves challenges, advocates for themselves, recognizes the support they need, and can assess the results of their actions (Martin & Marshall, 1995).

Historically, people with intellectual disabilities have often been viewed as lacking competence or capability, making it unsurprising that discussions around self-determination rarely included them. However, over the past twenty years, the concept has gained prominence in disability policy, education, and support services (Wehmeyer & Bolding, 2001). It is now recognized that self-determined individuals actively shape their environments to achieve specific objectives—such as securing a job—and that these intentional efforts contribute to improved lifelong outcomes and enhanced personal capabilities.

Models of Self-Determination

Self-determination has become a key concept in the context of individuals with disabilities, leading to the development of several theoretical models that frame it as a personal attribute. These models play an essential role in clarifying and advancing the idea of self-determination by breaking down complex behaviors into understandable components, thereby supporting practical application in real-life situations. Various conceptual frameworks have been introduced, marking some of the earliest efforts in special education to define and operationalize self-determination.

1. The Knowledge and Skills Model

Field and Hoffman (1994) proposed a model emphasizing how self-determination is influenced by both personal factors—such as values, knowledge, and abilities—and external conditions like access to choices and societal attitudes. This framework integrates internal emotional aspects with practical competencies that support self-directed behavior. It consists of five core elements: knowing oneself, valuing oneself, planning, taking action, experiencing outcomes, and learning from those experiences. The first two elements establish an internal foundation, while planning and acting reflect the skills required to act on that foundation. To be self-determined, individuals must understand their goals, value them, and have the capabilities to pursue them. The final stage involves reflecting on results—both successes and setbacks—to strengthen the knowledge and skills that foster greater self-determination over time (see Figure 1.1). Research by Field (1996), supported by Frankland et al. (2004), continues to identify and clarify the environmental influences that shape this process.

2. Functional Model of Self-Determination

Wehmeyer (1993) argued that self-determination cannot be fully captured by categorizing behaviors alone and should instead be understood in terms of the function those behaviors serve in a person's life. From this perspective, self-determination is characterized by four key features: autonomous action, self-regulated behavior, psychological empowerment in responding to life events, and actions that align with personal growth and fulfillment. It is seen as a stable trait—consistently present across time and settings—describing individuals who regularly exhibit these behaviors. Central to this view is the concept of causal agency, defined broadly as the individual's capacity to initiate and influence events in their own life. A causal agent is someone who actively brings about

change and achieves goals through purposeful action (Wehmeyer, 2001). As children and adolescents develop the necessary skills and mindsets, they gradually become causal agents in their own lives. These evolving capacities provide the basis for designing educational and institutional practices that promote self-determination.

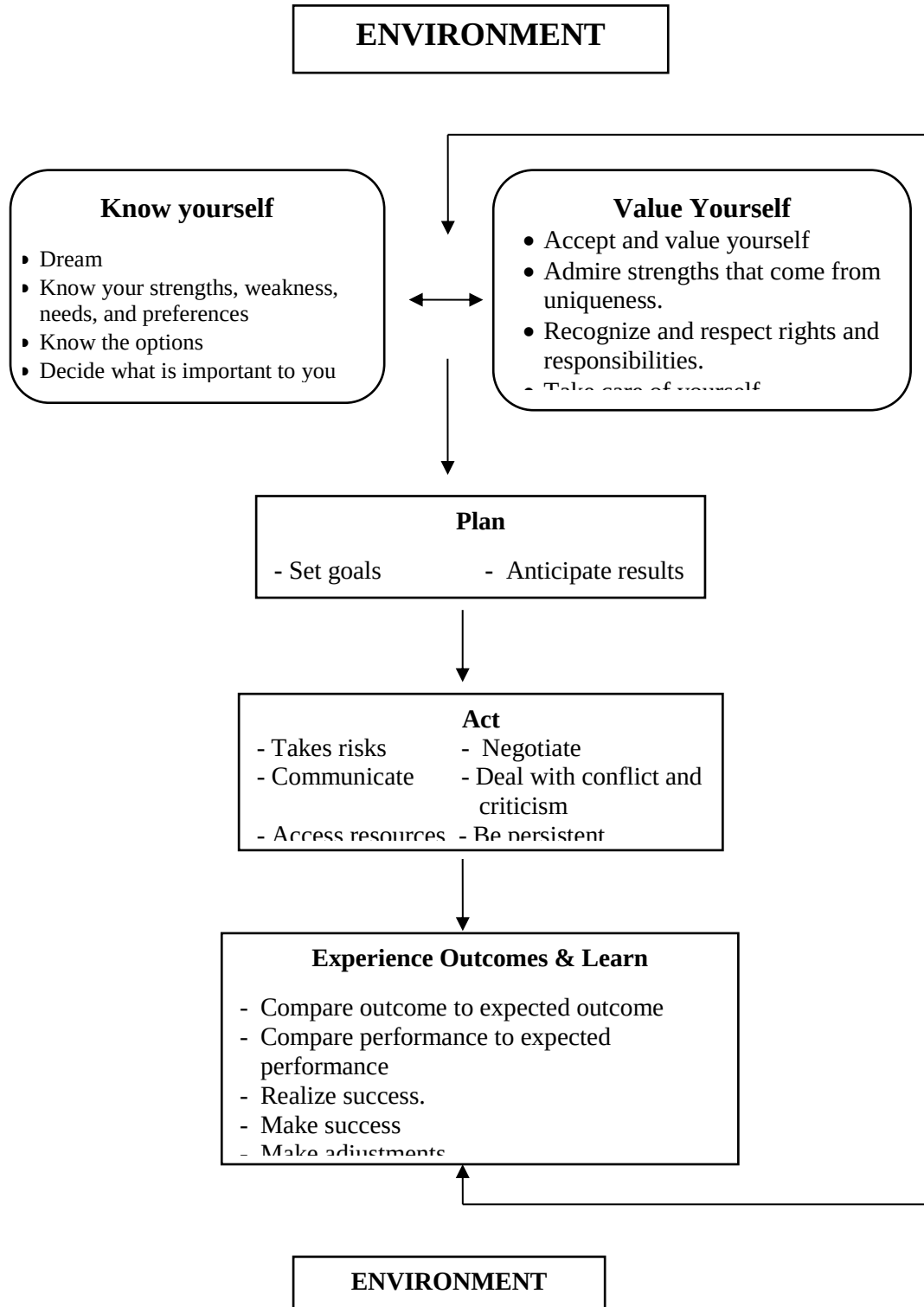
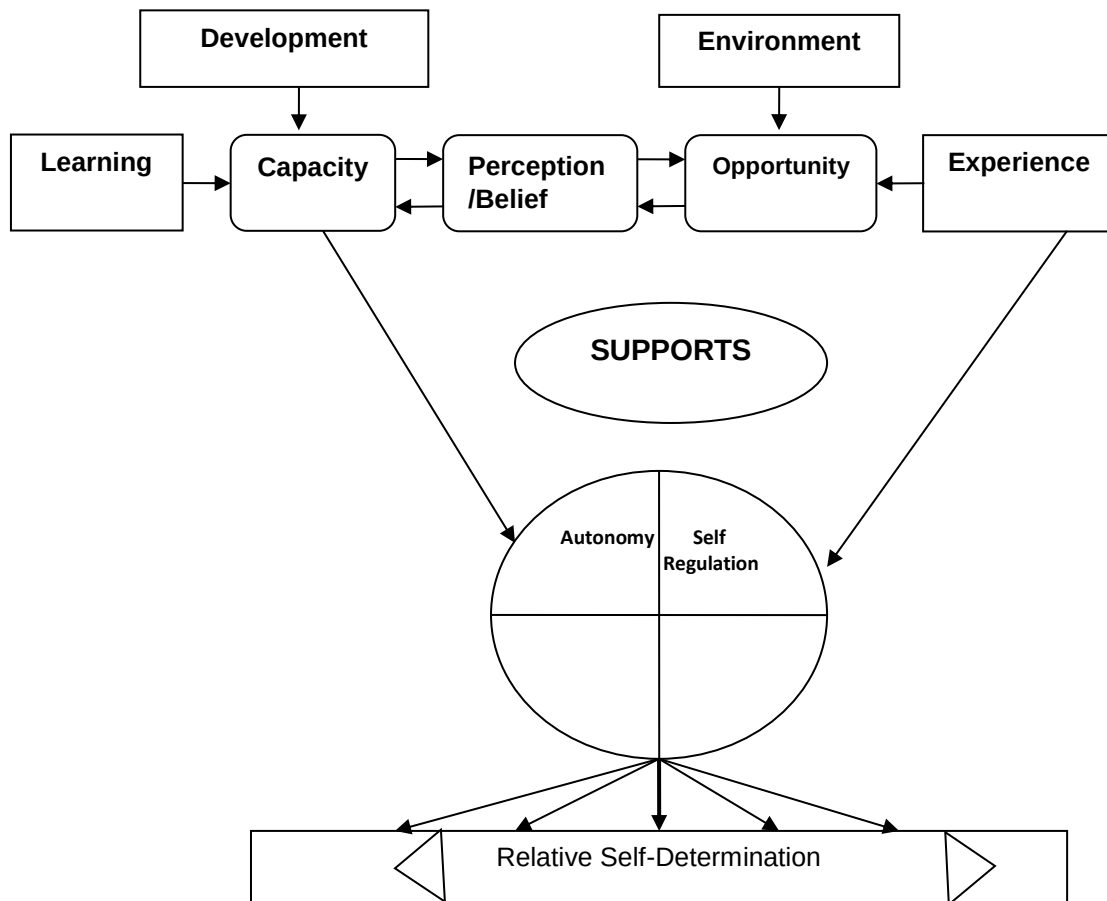


Figure : 1.1 Model of self-determination by S.Field & A Hoffman**Figure: 1.2 Wehmeyer's Functional Model of Self-determination****3. Model Based on Self-Regulation Theory:**

Mithaug's (1991) model of self-determination is grounded in self-regulation theory, which views self-determined individuals as those who effectively manage their own decisions and behaviors with minimal external influence. According to Mithaug et al. (2003), such individuals are more autonomous in defining their goals and determining how to achieve them. Within this framework, self-determination is considered a specific type of self-regulated behavior. The theory identifies four key factors that influence progress toward goal attainment: prior progress made toward the goal, expectations about future progress, decisions aimed at advancing further, and reactions to the outcomes of those decisions. It is proposed that when all four elements are functioning at their best, individuals achieve the greatest possible advancement toward their objectives.

The model outlines six sequential stages:

- i. The person recognizes and articulates their personal needs, interests, and capabilities,

- ii. They establish goals and expectations aligned with these personal characteristics,
- iii. They make decisions and develop plans to reach those goals,
- iv. They carry out the planned actions,
- v. They assess the outcomes and effectiveness of their efforts,
- vi. They revise their strategies and actions as needed until the goals are met.

4. Ecosystem Model of Self-Determination:

Abery (1994) introduced a model of self-determination shaped by participatory decision-making and planning processes. This model emphasizes that self-determination arises from a combination of skills, knowledge, and motivation, and is significantly shaped by environmental contexts. Drawing from an ecosystems perspective, it conceptualizes self-determination as the result of ongoing interactions between a person and the various environments they engage with. Abery built his framework on the work of Bronfenbrenner and Garbarino, organizing environmental influences into four levels:

Microsystems: immediate environments where daily activities occur, such as family, school, religious communities, and peer groups;

Exosystems: broader social systems that indirectly affect the individual, like workplace policies or local governance;

Mesosystems: connections and influences between different microsystems (e.g., how academic experiences affect job performance);

Macrosystems: overarching cultural values and societal structures, including prevailing attitudes toward disability.

At the core of Abery's model is the self-determination process, supported by three individual-level components: skills, knowledge, and motivation. The skills component encompasses decision-making, self-regulation, self-advocacy, and problem-solving. The knowledge component includes declarative knowledge (factual understanding of one's surroundings), procedural knowledge (know-how for interacting effectively with environments), and self-knowledge (awareness of one's abilities and limitations). The motivational component involves self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to succeed), locus of control, and how individuals interpret the causes of their successes or failures. Unlike other models, this approach places greater emphasis on the dynamic interplay between individuals and their surrounding environments.

Turnbull et al. (2004) argue that promoting self-determination and student-led learning is a crucial component of third-wave inclusive education practices. This shift reflects a strengths-based understanding of disability, focusing on developing students' capabilities rather than addressing deficits. A key aspect of effective support systems is empowering students to take increasing responsibility for their own learning and development.

Studies have shown that higher levels of self-determination are associated with better adult outcomes for youth with special educational needs, particularly in areas like employment and independent living (Emerson et al., 2001; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997), as well as improved overall quality of life (Lachapelle et al., 2005; Nota et al., 2007). Moreover, many educational standards for all students now include competencies linked to self-determination—such as goal setting, decision-making,

problem solving, self-advocacy, and self-management. When schools provide instruction in these areas across the curriculum, all students benefit. With appropriate teaching methods, students with special needs can develop the knowledge and skills necessary to become more self-determined.

Influence of self-determination on students' academic success:

Self-determination theory plays a transformative role in the educational experiences of students diagnosed with intellectual by thoughtfully addressing their fundamental psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Slemp et al., 2021). The studies of Oluoch and Gogo (2022) indicated that these students frequently struggle academically compared to their peers without IDD, facing numerous challenges that span various critical areas, including participation in classroom activities, attentiveness during instruction, academic motivation, social skills development, and self-regulation, such as completing assignments punctually. Furthermore, the adolescents with ID often grapple with increased susceptibility to social, health, and economic hurdles as they transition into adulthood, making the support of their educational environment even more crucial (Bigby et al., 2022; Slemp et al., 2021).

Conclusion:

Fostering an inclusive society requires a strong focus on developing self-determination skills among individuals with disabilities, as these abilities are crucial for achieving independent living and enhancing overall quality of life with dignity and respect. Parents and educators both have a vital role to play in supporting the development of these skills.

References:

- Abery, B (1994). *A conceptual framework for enhancing self determination*. In M.F.Hyden, & B.H. Abery (Eds.), *Challenges for Service system in transition* (pp. 345-380). Brooks, Baltimore.
- Bigby, C., Douglas, J., Smith, E., Carney, T., Then, S.-N., & Wiesel, I. (2022). "I used to call him a non-decisionmaker—I never do that anymore": Parental reflections about training to support decision-making of their adult offspring with intellectual disabilities.
- Emerson, E, Robertson, J., Gregory, N., Hatton, C., Kessissoglou, S., Hallam, A., Jarbrink,H., Knapp, M., Netten, A., Walsh, P.N. (2001). *Quality & costs of supported living residences & group homes in the united kingdom*. *American Journal of Mental Retardation*, 106, (3), 401-415.
- Field, S. and Hoffman, A. (1994). *Research in self determination : Interim research report*, pp 230. Wyne State University, Detroit.
- Field, S., (1996). *Self determination & instructional strategies of youth with learning disabilities*. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 29 (1), 40-52.
- Frankland, H.C., Dorine, Turnbull, A.P. & Lavine Blackmountain. (2004). *An exploration of the self determination construct as it relates to the Dine (Navajo) culture*. *Education & training in Developmental Disability*, 39 (3), 191-205.
- Lachapelle, Y. Wehmeyer, M.L. Haelewyck, M.C. Courbois, Y., Keith,K.D., Schalock, R., Verdugo, M.A. & Walsh, P.N. (2005). *The relationship between quality of life & self determination: An International study*. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 49, 740-746.

- Martin, J.E. & Marshall, L.H. (1995). *Choice Maker: A comprehensive self determination transition program*. *Interventions in School Clinic*, 30, (3) 147-156.
- Mithaug, D.E., (1991). *Self determined kids: Raising Satisfied and successful children*, Lexington, M.A. Lexington Books.
- Mithaug, D.E., Mithaug, D.K., Agran, M., Martin, J.E. & Wehmeyer M.L. (2003). *Self determination learning theory: Construction, Verification & Evaluation*, Eds. Mahwah, Erlbaum, N.J., p 213.
- Nota,L., Ferrari, L., Soresi, S. & Wehmeyer, M.L. (2007). *Self determination, social abilities & the quality of life of people with intellectual disability*. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 51(11), 850-865.
- Oluoch, D. O., & Gogo, J. O. (2022). *Relationship between intrinsic teacher motivation and teacher amotivation and student academic performance in public secondary schools in Gem Sub-County, Kenya*. *African Educational Research Journal*, 10(2), 134–142.
- Slemp, G. R., Lee, M. A., & Mossman, L. H. (2021). *Interventions to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs in organizations: A systematic review with recommendations for research and practice*. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 94(2), 427-457.
- Turnbull H.R., Turnbull B.P., Whemeyer, M.L. & Shank, M. (2004). *Exceptional lives* (5th ed.). pp 564. Prentice Hall, Columbus, OH.
- Wehmeyer, M.L. (1993). *Perception of developmental disorders & psychological empowerment of adolescents with mental retardation*. *Education & Training in Mental Retardation & Developmental Disorders*, pp 276, Prentice Hall, NewYork.
- Wehmeyer. M.L. and Palmer, S.B.(2003). *Adult outcomes for students with cognitive disabilities 3 years after high school: The impact of self determination*. *Journal of Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*, 38(2), 131-144.
- Wehmeyer, M. L. (1996). *Self-determination as an educational outcome: Why is it important to children, youth and adults with disabilities?* In D. J. Sands & M. L. Wehmeyer (Eds.), *Self-determination across the life span: Independence and choice for people with disabilities* p15–34. Brookes, Baltimore
- Wehmeyer, M.L. & Schwartz, C. (1997). *Self-determination and positive adult outcomes: A follow-up study of youth with mental retardation or learning disabilities* *Exceptional Children*, 63(2), 245-255.
- Wehmeyer, M. L. & Bolding, N. (2001). *Enhanced self determination of adults with intellectual disabilities as an outcome of moving to community-based work or living environments*. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 45, 371-383.