

Self-Determination Skills and Employability among Students with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT:

Self determination has been identified as a critical predictor of successful transition to adulthood for students with disabilities, yet its specific relationship with employability remains under examined in many educational and labour market contexts. This narrative review synthesises conceptual and empirical literature on self determination skills and employment related outcomes among students with disabilities, focusing on how core components of self determination autonomy and choice making, goal setting and planning, decision making and problem solving, self advocacy and self management, and self awareness and self regulation map onto contemporary notions of employability. The review highlights evidence that higher self determination is associated with more positive post school outcomes, including increased likelihood of paid employment, enhanced job quality, and greater independence, and that participation in self determination focused interventions can strengthen soft skills, work behaviours and career development competencies required in the labour market. It also examines moderating and contextual factors such as family expectations, instructional practices, work based learning opportunities, employer attitudes and disability inclusive policies that influence whether self determined students can translate their skills into real employment opportunities. Finally, the review outlines future directions for research, practice and policy, emphasising the need for longitudinal and context sensitive studies, integrated curricula, employer engagement and culturally responsive assessment. Overall, the article argues that systematically promoting self determination within inclusive education and transition systems offers a promising pathway to enhancing employability and narrowing persistent employment gaps for students with disabilities.

Keywords: Self Determination, Employability, Students With Disabilities, Transition To Employment, Inclusive Education.

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1. Introduction

Education systems worldwide are witnessing a steady increase in the number of students identified as having disabilities across school and post-secondary settings, reflecting both demographic trends and expanding definitions of disability. Recent data from higher education sectors indicate that roughly 13–21% of undergraduates report at least one disability, yet their participation and completion rates remain lower than those of their non-disabled peers, and their trajectories into adulthood are often marked by discontinuities at the point of leaving education (OECD ; 2011; Madaus, J et al; 2024 ; National Disability Center for Student Success ; 2025). Despite advances in inclusive education policies and support services, many students with disabilities encounter persistent barriers in the transition from school or college to adult life, including restricted access to meaningful work experiences, limited career guidance, and inadequate coordination between educational institutions, families, and employment services (Madaus, J et al; 2024).

In contemporary labour markets, the notion of employability extends far beyond job acquisition and encompasses a dynamic set of skills, personal attributes, and contextual opportunities that enable individuals to obtain, maintain, and progress in employment over time. Core elements of employability now include domain-specific competencies, adaptability, problem-solving, communication and teamwork, self-management, and a commitment to lifelong learning, all of which are particularly salient as work becomes more knowledge-intensive and fluid (Madaus, J et al; 2024). For persons with disabilities, however, employability is framed by additional challenges such as stigma, discriminatory hiring practices, inaccessible environments, and lower expectations regarding their capabilities, which can limit not only their access to employment but also the development and expression of the very skills that underpin employability (Shogren, K. A et al; 2018). As a result, graduates and school leavers with disabilities are more likely to experience unemployment, underemployment, and concentration in low-status, low-wage jobs, even

when they have completed formal education (OECD ; 2011).

So, self-determination has emerged as a central construct in special and inclusive education, referring to a constellation of skills and attitudes that enable individuals to act as causal agents in their own lives, making choices, setting goals, and regulating actions in line with their preferences and values. Functional and causal-agency models of it emphasises on the components such as autonomy, goal setting and attainment, decision-making, problem-solving, self-advocacy, and self-regulation, and position these as critical outcomes of schooling for students with disabilities (Wehmeyer, M. L et al ; 2009). In addition to above, empirical work has consistently shown higher levels in adolescence which are associated with more positive adult outcomes, including increased likelihood of post-school employment, better job quality & greater community participation among youth with intellectual, developmental, and learning disabilities (Sanford, C. B. ; 2011). Furthermore, interventions that explicitly teach the skills and embed students in self-directed transition planning have been linked to improved employment preparation and more successful movement from school to work (Dubois, P et al; 2023).

Thus, the purpose of this review was to synthesise current knowledge on self-determination skills and their relationship with employability among students with disabilities, drawing on theoretical and empirical literature that examines both school-based and post-secondary contexts. Specifically, the review aims to (i) describe how self-determination is conceptualised and fostered within inclusive education and transition services, (ii) summarise evidence linking self-determination to employment and employability-related outcomes, and (iii) discuss implications for educational practice, vocational and rehabilitation services, and policy frameworks that seek to improve labour-market participation and quality of life for students with disabilities. By bringing together these strands of evidence, the article intends to highlight self-determination as a crucial, yet often under-utilised, lever for enhancing employability

and advancing more equitable, disability-inclusive futures.

2. Self-Determination: Concepts and Components

2.1 Definition and Theoretical Background

In the context of disability and education, self-determination is commonly defined as a dispositional characteristic of individuals that reflects their capacity to act as the causal agent in their own lives, in service of freely chosen goals. Wehmeyer conceptualised self-determination as a functional construct comprising volitional, autonomous actions through which individuals initiate and regulate behaviour to achieve personally valued outcomes, particularly within educational and transition settings for students with disabilities (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 1999). More recent formulations, such as Causal Agency Theory, reconceptualise self-determination as a tendency to engage in self-caused, goal-directed actions that are volitional, agentic, and guided by action-control beliefs, and emphasise that self-determined people act to be causal agents in their lives while navigating contextual opportunities and constraints (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 2007 ; Shogren, K. A et al; 2021).

Within special and inclusive education, these theoretical perspectives frame self-determination as both an educational goal and a pathway to improved adult outcomes, including employment, independent living, and community participation for youth with intellectual, developmental, and learning disabilities (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 1995). The functional model and Causal Agency Theory share the assumption that it develops over time through the interaction of personal capacities (e.g., cognitive and social skills), opportunities for choice and control in everyday contexts, and supports and accommodations that enable students with disabilities to exercise agency despite environmental barriers (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 2013). As such, it was used not only as an explanatory construct in transition research but also as a foundation for designing curricula, assessment tools, and interventions aimed at improving post-school employability and broader quality of

life (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 1999 ; Shogren, K. A et al; 2015).

2.2 Core Components of Self-Determination

Operationalisations of self-determination in disability research and practice typically highlight several core components which includes autonomy and choice-making, goal setting and planning, decision-making and problem-solving, self-advocacy, self-management, self-awareness and self-regulation (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 1995). Autonomy and choice-making refer to the ability to initiate actions and make intentional selections among options based on personal preferences, rather than external control, and are seen as foundational to students' participation in educational and vocational decisions (Shogren, K. A et al; 2021). Goal setting and planning capture the capacity to identify personally valued, realistic goals and to develop actionable plans for their attainment, which is critical for academic progress, transition planning, and career development among adolescents with disabilities. Decision-making and problem-solving involve analysing situations, weighing alternatives, and selecting solutions, skills that support navigating classroom demands, transition options, and workplace challenges (Shogren, K. A et al; 2015). Self-advocacy and management encompass the ability to communicate needs, preferences, rights, seek information, negotiate supports and manage one's own behaviour, time, and responsibilities, which are vital for requesting accommodations and maintaining performance in employment settings (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 1995). Self-awareness and self-regulation relate to understanding one's strengths, limitations, values, and emotions and using this insight to monitor and adjust behaviour towards goal attainment, including coping with stress and setbacks during educational and vocational transitions (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 2013). Instruments such as The Arc's Self-Determination Scale and related measures operationalise these components in domains of autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realisation, providing structured ways to assess self-determination in students and adults with intellectual and

developmental disabilities (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 1999).

Developmentally, these components emerge and consolidate during adolescence and young adulthood, as students with disabilities gain cognitive and social maturity and are increasingly exposed to opportunities for choice, responsibility, and participation in planning their futures. Research grounded in the functional model suggests that self-determination grows through both enhanced capacity via acquisition of component skills such as decision-making and problem-solving and enhanced opportunity, through environments that provide frequent experiences of control, choice, and supported risk-taking (Shogren, K. A et al; 2021; Shogren, K. A et al; 2015). When schools, families, and service systems intentionally teach and support autonomy, goal setting, self-advocacy, and self-regulation, adolescents with disabilities are more likely to demonstrate self-determined behaviour, which in turn is associated with better transition outcomes, including higher rates of post-school employment and greater employability (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 1995).

3. Employability Among Students With Disabilities

3.1 Understanding Employability

In contemporary labour markets, employability was generally understood as a multidimensional construct that encompasses a set of skills, personal attributes, and external supports enabling individuals to obtain, retain, and progress in employment, rather than simply the state of being employed at a given time (Shogren, K. A et al; 2024). Employability frameworks highlight the importance of generic skills (e.g., communication, problem-solving, teamwork), personal qualities (e.g., motivation, resilience, adaptability), and contextual factors such as access to training, accommodations, and supportive policies in shaping individuals' ability to compete in and navigate the labour market (Gragoudas, S. ; 2014). In this sense, "employment" refers to having a job at a particular point in time, whereas "employability" refers to being prepared, competitive, and able to manage transitions across jobs and roles over the

life course, a distinction that is crucial when considering the long-term prospects of students with disabilities transitioning from education to adulthood (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 1995).

For students with disabilities, employability is closely linked to transition planning and the development of self-determination skills, because their labour-market success often depends on their capacity to understand their strengths and limitations, advocate for needed accommodations, and engage in proactive career decision-making (Gragoudas, S. ; 2014 ; Shogren, K. A et al ; 2018 ; Rasheed, S. A.; 2008). Studies on school-to-work transition and disability consistently emphasise that employability is not only about technical or vocational competencies but also about the ability to act as a causal agent setting goals, solving problems, and self-managing behaviour in educational and work contexts which directly connects employability to self-determination as a core educational outcome (Dubois, P et al ; 2023 ; Rasheed, S. A. ; 2008 ; Chao, P. C et al ; 2019; Burke, K et al ; 2024).

3.2 Employment Outcomes and Challenges

Across many countries, people with disabilities experience lower rates of employment, higher unemployment, and greater concentration in precarious, low-status jobs compared to their non-disabled peers, even when they have similar levels of education and training (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs ; 2024 ; Lauretani, F et al; 2023). These disparities are evident in the transition from school to adulthood where students with disabilities are less likely to enter paid employment quickly, more likely to work in part-time or temporary positions, and often encounter limited opportunities for career progression and skill development, which constrains their long-term labour-market trajectories (Lauretani, F et al; 2023 ; Gupta, V. ; 2025). Longitudinal studies following youth with disabilities after high school have shown that, without targeted supports and self-determination-focused interventions, many do not achieve stable employment or move into roles that match their preferences and capabilities (Chao, P. C et al ; 2019 ; Traina, I et al; 2023).

Barriers to employability for students and adults with disabilities arise at multiple levels. At the individual level, functional limitations, co-occurring health conditions, and low self-confidence or reduced expectations can affect participation in career exploration and job search activities (Harnisch, D. L. ; 1987). At the environmental level, stigma, discriminatory hiring practices, and inaccessible physical and social environments reduce access to quality jobs and advancement. In educational settings, barriers include limited or poorly coordinated career guidance, low expectations regarding academic and vocational potential, and insufficient opportunities for work-based learning or systematic transition planning. Together, these factors create a context in which students with disabilities must not only acquire employability skills but also overcome structural obstacles to use those skills effectively (Shogren, K. A et al ; 2018). Self-determination-oriented transition research has demonstrated that when schools deliberately foster goal setting, self-advocacy, and problem-solving, students with disabilities are more likely to attain paid employment, maintain jobs, and participate in their communities, suggesting that strengthening self-determination can partially mitigate some of these employability barriers (Agran, M et al; 2000 ; Wehmeyer, M. L et al ; 2020).

3.3 Key Employability Skills Relevant to Students With Disabilities

Within the employability literature, several clusters of skills are especially relevant for students with disabilities as they prepare to move from education into work. Soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability are central to functioning in diverse workplaces and are frequently cited by employers as critical for hiring and retention decisions (Scheef, A. R et al ; 2019 ; Young, K et al ; 2023). For students with disabilities, these soft skills intersect directly with self-determination components i.e. effective communication and self-advocacy support expressing preferences, negotiating accommodations, problem-solving and adaptability underpin the capacity to respond to workplace demands and changes and

teamwork links to social inclusion and collaboration with colleagues and supervisors (Agran, M et al; 2000).

Work-related behaviours punctuality, reliability, persistence, appropriate work habits, and adherence to workplace norms form another core dimension of employability. These behaviours often reflect self-management and self-regulation skills that are cultivated in school and community settings and can be explicitly taught and reinforced through transition programs, supported employment experiences, and self-determination curricula (Shogren, K. A et al ; 2018). Career development skills constitute a third important area and include job-search strategies, CV and application preparation, interviewing skills, knowledge of labour-market options, and career decision-making (Shogren, K. A et al ; 2019). For students with disabilities, effective career development requires not only generic skills but also an understanding of how disability-related needs interact with job demands, and the ability to plan for and request reasonable accommodations (Shogren, K. A et al ; 2018). Research on self-determination training and employment preparation has shown that interventions which explicitly target goal setting, decision-making, self-advocacy, and self-management can improve these employability skills and, in turn, increase the likelihood of successful transitions into work. Embedding instruction in soft skills, work behaviours, and career development within self-determination frameworks therefore offers a promising pathway to enhancing employability among students with disabilities (Shogren, K. A et al ; 2018 ; Agran, M et al ; 2000 ; Young, K et al ; 2023).

4. Relationship Between Self-Determination Skills and Employability

4.1 How Self-Determination Influences Employability

Self-determination influences employability through several interconnected pathways that operate during school, transition planning, and entry into the labour market (Gragoudas, S. ; 2014). Students who can set goals and make

decisions are more likely to engage in career planning, identify preferred job roles, and actively seek work-based learning and employment opportunities, rather than passively waiting for placements (Shogren, K. A et al ; 2024). Self-advocacy and effective communication allow students with disabilities to articulate their strengths and limitations, request reasonable accommodations, and negotiate workplace expectations, which is critical for both job acquisition and retention. Self-regulation and problem-solving skills support coping with workplace demands, managing time and behaviour, and adapting to changes in tasks or environments, thereby enhancing job performance and stability (Zhang, D et al ; 2023).

4.2 Evidence From Existing Studies

Empirical studies consistently show that higher self-determination is associated with more positive post-school employment outcomes for youth with disabilities (Gragoudas, S. ; 2014). Follow-up studies of secondary-school students indicate that those with higher self-determination at school exit are more likely to be employed, earn higher wages, and report greater community participation and overall life satisfaction in early adulthood (Shogren, K. A et al ; 2018 ; Zhang, D et al ; 2023). Group-randomised and longitudinal research further demonstrates that participation in self-determination training such as the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI), self-advocacy curricula, and student-led transition planning improves transition outcomes by increasing work experiences, job attainment, and stability of employment (Agran, M et al ; 2000).

Post-secondary and inclusive higher education programmes that explicitly incorporate self-determination components (e.g., goal-setting workshops, self-advocacy coaching, supported decision-making, and person-centred planning) show better employment and independent living outcomes for students with intellectual, developmental, and learning disabilities (Shogren, K. A et al ; 2024). For example, studies of post-secondary students with learning disabilities have found that those with stronger

self-determination skills exhibit greater academic persistence, more proactive career-related behaviours, and better integration into employment after graduation. Research also suggests variation across disability types which includes youth with intellectual disabilities and autism often start with lower average self-determination scores and face more barriers to employment, but they show substantial gains in employment-related outcomes when they receive intensive self-determination-focused instruction and transition supports (Rasheed, S. A. ; 2008 ; Strater, K. E et al ; 2019).

4.3 Moderating and Contextual Factors

The relationship between self-determination and employability is moderated by family, school, and broader system-level factors. Family expectations and support play a significant role in how self-determination and employability develop, youth whose families hold high, realistic expectations, encourage choice-making, and support career exploration tend to show stronger self-advocacy, goal setting, and engagement in work-based learning, which in turn improves employment outcomes (Gragoudas, S. (2014). Teachers, counsellors, and transition services influence self-determination by providing opportunities for student-led planning, teaching decision-making and problem-solving, and facilitating access to internships, supported employment, and community-based training (Simmons, L. ; 2021).

Inclusive policies, structured transition frameworks, and work-based learning opportunities also condition the impact of self-determination on employability. In systems where inclusive education is backed by robust transition planning, coordination with vocational rehabilitation, and employer engagement, self-determined students are more able to translate their skills into actual employment outcomes (Strater, K. E et al ; 2019). Conversely, in environments characterised by stigma, limited accommodations, and weak transition structures, even highly self-determined youth may struggle to find and retain suitable employment. Employer attitudes such as openness to hiring persons with disabilities, willingness to provide

reasonable accommodations, and valuing soft skills like initiative and self-management can amplify or dampen the contribution of self-determination to employability (Shogren, K. A et al ; 2024 ; Simmons, L. ; 2021).

5. Promoting Self-Determination to Enhance Employability

5.1 Educational and Training Strategies

Classroom-based approaches to promoting self-determination and employability typically focus on teaching goal-setting, decision-making, problem-solving, and self-advocacy, and on increasing students' active involvement in their own educational and transition planning (Simmons, L. ; 2021). Self-determination instructional models and curricula emphasise helping students analyse options, set personal and academic goals, link daily decisions to long-term outcomes, and lead their own IEP and transition meetings, thereby strengthening both their agency and their preparedness for the labour market (Field, S. ; 1996). Guides for promoting self-determination among students with disabilities recommend explicit instruction in self-advocacy, conflict resolution, and communication, alongside creating classroom environments where students routinely make choices, evaluate their work, and practise self-management skills that are directly transferable to workplace contexts (Field, S. ; 1996).

Work-based learning opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, and supported employment provide real settings in which students can practise self-determined behaviours, including initiating tasks, solving work-related problems, and negotiating expectations with supervisors. Experimental analyses of multi-component interventions in integrated work settings show that when students receive structured support to set work-related goals, monitor their own behaviour, and use self-management strategies, they are more successful in maintaining placements and developing employability skills (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 2023 ; Simmons, L. ; 2021). In addition, emerging practices use technology and online platforms to support self-management, career

exploration, and skills practice by enabling students to track goals, access information about careers and accommodations, and engage in digital self-advocacy activities, thereby extending self-determination instruction beyond the classroom (Mazzotti, V. L et al ; 2020).

5.2 Role of Families and Caregivers

Families and caregivers are central in shaping both self-determination and employability, particularly during adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Research and practice guides emphasise that encouraging choice-making and autonomy at home such as letting young people make decisions about daily routines, leisure, and personal goals lays the groundwork for later self-advocacy and independent decision-making in education and work contexts (Mazzotti, V. L et al ; 2020). Families who involve youth in transition planning and career discussions, rather than making decisions on their behalf, help them develop realistic expectations, an understanding of labour-market options, and confidence in communicating their preferences (Simmons, L. ; 2021).

At the same time, families must balance protection with opportunities for supported risk-taking, allowing youth to try new roles, experience partial failure, and learn from consequences, which is crucial for developing problem-solving and resilience (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 2023). Self-determination practice briefs note that when families hold high yet realistic expectations, provide emotional and practical support, and collaborate with schools and transition services, youth with disabilities are more likely to set ambitious goals, engage in work-based learning, and pursue competitive employment (Field, S. ; 1996).

5.3 Role of Employers and Service Systems

Employers and broader service systems play a pivotal role in determining whether self-determination skills can be translated into actual employability and sustained employment for students with disabilities. Creating supportive and inclusive work environments that recognise initiative, self-advocacy, and self-management,

and that provide reasonable accommodations, allows self-determined workers to fully use their skills and to progress in their careers (Wehmeyer, M. L. ; 2023). Disability-inclusive policies, diversity and inclusion programmes, and targeted efforts to reduce stigma and discriminatory practices are associated with better employment quality and participation for persons with disabilities, reinforcing the importance of employer attitudes and practices (Shahidi, F. V et al ; 2023).

Collaboration between schools, vocational rehabilitation services, and employers is essential for designing effective transition pathways that integrate classroom-based self-determination instruction with real work experiences. Systematic reviews of job transition programs for youths with disabilities highlight that multi-agency collaboration, supported work-based learning, and structured follow-up enhance both self-determination and employment outcomes (Traina, I et al ; 2023 ; Fisher, A. ; 1989). Research-to-practice briefs on self-determination and transition emphasise that policies which incentivise disability-inclusive hiring, fund supported employment and job coaching, and require coordinated transition planning under education and disability legislation create conditions in which self-determination can meaningfully enhance employability (Traina, I et al ; 2023).

6. Future Directions

- a. Conduct longitudinal studies that track self-determination and employability from school through adulthood across multiple transition points.
- b. Examine self-determination and employability in low- and middle-income countries, including India, and in diverse educational and labour-market contexts.
- c. Investigate disability-specific and intersectional patterns (e.g., intellectual disability, learning disability, autism, physical/sensory disability; gender and socio-economic status).
- d. Design and test rigorous interventions that integrate self-determination training with

employability skills in schools, vocational institutes and universities.

- e. Embed self-determination components (goal-setting, self-advocacy, problem-solving, self-management) into existing transition and employability curricula and evaluate their impact.
- f. Develop and assess family-focused programmes that help caregivers foster autonomy, choice-making and supported risk-taking while planning careers.
- g. Study employer-focused initiatives that build inclusive practices, recognise self-advocacy and initiative, and support reasonable accommodations.
- h. Explore the use of technology (apps, online platforms, serious games) to support self-management, career exploration and virtual self-advocacy training.
- i. Refine and culturally adapt self-determination and employability assessment tools for different regions and languages, including Indian context.
- j. Analyse how education, labour and disability policies incorporate self-determination and employability, and evaluate reforms aimed at improving transition outcomes.
- k. Implement participatory research that involves students with disabilities as co-researchers to capture lived experiences of agency, barriers and employment success.

7. Conclusion

Self-determination emerges from the literature as a pivotal, yet still underutilised, lever for enhancing the employability of students with disabilities by enabling them to act as causal agents in their own educational and vocational trajectories. When students are supported to set and pursue personally meaningful goals, make informed decisions, advocate for accommodations, and regulate their behaviour in response to workplace demands, they are better positioned not only to access employment but also to sustain and progress within it. Evidence from school, transition and post-secondary contexts consistently shows that higher levels of self-determination are associated with improved post-school outcomes, including greater

likelihood of paid work, better job quality, and increased independence, while self-determination-focused interventions can strengthen soft skills, work behaviours and career development competencies that underpin employability. At the same time, the impact of self-determination is shaped by family expectations, educational practices, employer attitudes and broader policy environments, highlighting that individual skills must be coupled with inclusive, well-coordinated systems to translate agency into real labour-market opportunities. Taken together, the findings support a clear conclusion for research, practice and policy: intentionally embedding self-determination development within inclusive education, transition planning and work-based learning, and aligning this with disability-inclusive employment policies, offers a promising pathway to narrowing persistent employment gaps and promoting more equitable, self-directed futures for students with disabilities.

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There was no attempt made to create or examine any empirical datasets in this particular article. An analysis of the literature that is directed by policy and a conceptual synthesis form the basis of this study.

Author Contributions

.....helped with the ideation, framework building, and writing of the text.....also helped with the theory building, supervision, and editing of the final product.

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