Culturally Diverse Parents' Perspectives on Self-Determination

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Abstract: Current research examining self-determination in cultural contexts has yielded mixed findings. This qualitative interview study collected rich information from parents of four major cultures about their understanding of self-determination and their daily engagement in self-determination related activities with their children with disabilities. Various culturally-related patterns were found indicating differences between parents of mainstream culture and other cultures. Differences existed in the following areas: understanding the concept of self-determination; talking to the child about strengths and weaknesses; promoting self-efficacy; and teaching independent living, goal setting, problem solving, and decision making skills. Implications and recommendations for future research are provided.

Since early 1990s, the concept of self-determination and its related practices have been widely studied and, as a result, many research and practice materials have been published on this topic. For example, a quick search of the Educational Resources Information Center’s (2007) online resources identified 316 journal articles, 40 conference proceedings and 69 books. The concept of self-determination and its related values and practices have been widely accepted by the disability community as essential for quality assurance in education, services and independent living (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; Schloss, Alper, & Jayne, 1993; Zhang, Wehmeyer, & Chen, 2005). When applied to education, self-determination revolves around fostering an interest in students to learn, value education and have confidence in their strengths (Zhang & Benz, 2006). Based on a review of research on the benefits of self-determination, Zhang and Benz found that student self-determination helps with staying in and completing school and enhances student post-school outcomes. Self-determination skills have been used to increase student involvement in educational decision making such as participating in the individualized education program (IEP) process (Test & Neale, 2004), leading the IEP meeting (Martin, Marshall, Maxson, & Jerman, 1996; Warger & Burnette, 2000) and planning for transition to adulthood (Wehmeyer, Garner, Yeager, & Lawrence, 2006). These skills also have been applied to enhance positive classroom behaviors, academic performances, school completion and transition results (Bremer, Kachgal, & Schoeffer, 2003).

Given that parenting styles impact children’s acquisition and development of self-determination skills (Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Zhang, 2002; Zhang, et al., 2005), researchers believe that parents of students with disabilities play a critical role in promoting self-determination skills in home settings (Sands & Doll, 1996; Wehman, 1998). Therefore it is recommended that parents foster self-determination skills on a daily basis by offering opportunities for their children to set simple goals, solve simple problems, make choices and decisions and evaluate the outcomes of their decisions (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Sands & Doll, 1996; Zhang, 2006). However, because the concept of self-determination has its roots in the normalization movement that originated in Europe, the values inherent in most efforts to promote self-determination are values associated with Anglo-European cultures and societies.

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In recognition of this European origination and the fact that the U.S. society has become increasingly multiethnic and multilingual, researchers have begun to examine self-determination and its related practices within cultural contexts, especially non-Western and collective cultures (Landmark, Zhang, & Montoya, 2007; Leake & Boone, 2007; Trainor, 2005; Zhang, 2006).

In a panel presentation on human rights and cultural diversity, Zhang (2007) suggested four approaches to examine cultural differences regarding parental involvement in fostering their children’s self-determination skills: 1) compare international cultures that are believed to be different (e.g., collective versus individualistic), focusing on students with disabilities; 2) compare immigrants and non-immigrants in the U.S.; 3) compare sub-cultural groups (e.g., African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Caucasian cultures) within the U.S.; and 4) compare international cultures that are believed to be different, focusing on students without disabilities. These approaches will facilitate the understanding of parent self-determination practices within the context of their original culture and adjustments to the new culture.

Research has already been conducted using some of these approaches. In terms of comparing international cultures and focusing on students with disabilities, Lee and Wehmeyer (2004) investigated the application of the self-determination concept in Korean schools; while Ohtake and Wehmeyer (2004) compared Japanese exemplary special education practices and values associated with self-determination and the application of the concept into the Japanese culture. Both studies found that self-determination related practices and values were shared by schools and teachers of these two Eastern cultures. Similarly, Zhang, et al. (2005) found that U.S. teachers had similar levels of engagement in fostering self-determination as teachers in Taiwan. However, with regard to parents, Zhang et al. found that U.S. parents reported higher levels of engagement in self-determination fostering behaviors than parents in Taiwan.

Zhang (2006) compared immigrant and non-immigrant parents regarding their self-determination practices and found that children from Caucasian non-immigrant families were more involved in doing household chores and interacting with salespeople in their daily lives and that Asian immigrant parents did not emphasize parental authority as hypothesized, but valued family priorities over individual goals as much as Caucasian and non-immigrant parents. These findings seem to support the assumption that Anglo-cultures encourage independence, and children from these cultures are provided with more opportunities from their parents to practice these skills. The findings also suggest that self-determination related parenting practices can be accepted and valued by non-Western cultures and may be related to education and exposure to Western culture.

Several researchers investigated the concept and practices of self-determination within one or more sub-cultures in the U.S. and found that self-determination is common among these sub-cultures. Kuperminc, Blatt, Shahar, Henrich, and Leadbeater (2004) conducted a survey with 448 African American, Caucasian and Hispanic students aged 11 to 14 and found that students from these different ethnic groups possessed similar self-awareness and beliefs. Frankland et al. (2004) examined family structures and social factors in the Dine (Navajo) culture and compared them with the essential characteristics of self-determination. They found that self-determination characteristics were highly relevant in Dine culture and self-determination had considerable utility and heuristic value in the culture. Goff, Martin, and Thomas (2007) conducted a phenomenological qualitative study to investigate the impact that survival conflicts might have on the academic orientation of today’s African American students and how these conflicts perpetuate their disproportional representation in special education. Their findings suggest that self-determination can empower African American students to address and end their disproportional representation in special education. Trainor (2005) conducted a qualitative study with 15 adolescents with learning disabilities from three cultural groups: African American, European American, and Hispanic American. Findings indicated only subtle differences among diverse participants, all cultural groups exhibited component skills of self-determination and
most participants perceived their home environments to be facilitative of self-determination.

By contrast, findings from other studies suggest differences between the mainstream culture and diverse cultures. Bui and Turnbull (2003) synthesized literature on person centered planning and found that Asian American families who have children with disabilities had some values of person centered planning that were not explicitly consistent with Asian American cultural values. A focus group study conducted by Leake and Boone (2007) suggested differential practices between cultures. These researchers conducted focus group interviews with 122 youth with emotional and/or behavioral disorders, parents and teachers from Hawaii and Washington, DC. The participants represented seven cultural groups. Their findings indicated that parents from certain non-mainstream cultures, for example the Samoan culture, tended to limit their children’s opportunities to voice their opinions and make choices, although these are common childrearing practices of the mainstream culture.

Given the contradictive findings of research in this area, more research is needed to further investigate whether and what self-determination practices are utilized by parents of children with disabilities. Because many of the previous studies did not directly interview parents, there is a lack of in-depth information from the parents themselves about their beliefs and daily practices related to self-determination. The purpose of this study was to gather rich qualitative information from parents about their perspectives and practices regarding self-determination as conceptualized by Wehmeyer (1997). Because most of the past research targeted limited disability and cultural groups, this study was designed to be more inclusive of disability groups and cultures.

Method

Participants

This study was an extension of another study by Landmark, et al. (2007). Thus, nineteen of the 20 participants in this study also participated in the previous study. The participants were 20 parents of 20 high school students with disabilities in a South Central state. Nineteen of the students were selected by utilizing a two-step sampling procedure. First, students with disabilities 14 years of age and over in one local high school were sorted into four racial/ethnic groups (i.e., African American, Asian American, European American, and Hispanic American). Next, eight students from each of the groups, excluding the Asian American group, were randomly selected for inclusion in the sample. The Asian American group at this school consisted of only one student, so that student was selected. Another Asian American student from a similar school district was recruited to be a part of the sample, making the total sample 26 students. Due to incorrect contact information or disconnected telephone lines, six students had to be dropped from the sample. Thus, the final sample consisted of 20 students. Student demographic information was obtained from school district records (refer to Table 1 for an overview). Thirteen of the students were considered economically disadvantaged as indicated by their participation in the free (n = 11, 55%) or reduced (n = 2, 10%) school lunch program.

Parents of these students became the participants of this study. The participants included 1 (5%) foster parent, 2 (10%) step-parents, and 17 (85%) natural parents, of which 2 were non-custodial parents. Three (15%) of the participants were more comfortable speaking a language other than English (1 Chinese, 2 Spanish). Thirteen (65%) of the parents were females and 7 (35%) were males.

Instrument

The instrument consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions that were developed based on Wehmeyer’s (1997) conceptualization of self-determination and on a review of the research literature related to self-determination practices of culturally diverse parents who have children with disabilities (Zhang, 2006; Zhang, et al., 2005). The interview questions covered all component elements in the Wehmeyer model and were classified into the following two areas: 1) What understanding do parents have of self-determination?, and 2) What practices do parents engage in to pro-
The use of a semi-structured interview protocol allowed the interviewers to clarify or expand the questions in order to obtain the most complete information from each participant (Riessman, 1993).

**Data Collection**

Data collection occurred via telephone calls to the parents over a period of four months. Three callers conducted the telephone interviews after being trained in the protocol. Multiple phone calls at various times of the day were needed in order to contact the parents. A scripted information sheet about the study was read to the parents so that they could make an informed decision regarding participation in the study. After verbal consent, the interview was conducted and audio-taped. Transcription of the tapes occurred following the interviews.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed systematically via content analysis (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the telephone transcripts were unitized into units of data that were then printed on index cards. A unit of data is the smallest piece of information that can be interpreted independently (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One of the research team members conducted a primary sort of the units in order to obtain the emergent categories. In this manner, the categories “emerge” when the team member looks individually at each of the units and groups units.
appearing to be similar in idea or tacit feeling together into the categories and sub-categories (Erlandson, et al., 1993). After this primary sort, the unit index cards were removed, shuffled and re-sorted using the emergent categories from the primary sort. This was done to ensure that the categorical content was true to the categorical names. A tertiary shuffling and re-sorting of the units into the categories was conducted by a different team member in order to further enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. Discrepancies between the team members’ sorts were remedied by having the team members discuss their rationales for the classification decisions and then come to a consensus regarding the most appropriate categorization. Finally, the two team members checked each category to ensure that the units contained in each category was representative of the category classification.

Results

The unitization of the data yielded almost 600 units, which were then classified into seven broad, emergent categories. The emergent categories included understanding of self-determination, strengths and weaknesses, independent living skills, self-efficacy, goals, decision making, and problem-solving. Each of the broad, emergent categories was further sorted into more specific sub-categories and by cultural group.

Understanding of Self-Determination

Thirty percent ($n = 6$) of the parents did not know what the term self-determination meant. These parents were all culturally diverse parents: three Hispanic American parents, two African American parents and one Asian American parent. The responses from the parents who did provide an answer to this question were classified into sub-categories that included self-knowledge, self-reliance, the determination to succeed and the individual as the causal agent. The parents who felt that self-determination was an individual’s ability to know and understand oneself were all European American ($n = 3$). Similarly, the ability to rely on oneself as the definition of self-determination was provided by one of the European American parents. The parents who felt that self-determination was a determination to succeed in life included African American ($n = 3$), European American ($n = 1$), and Hispanic American ($n = 1$) parents. These parents felt that self-determination was a driving force in a person’s life that helps one to achieve one’s goals. Most of the parents (35%, $n = 7$; 3 European American, 2 African American, 1 Asian American, 1 Hispanic American) believed that self-determination referred to an individual being the primary decision maker in their own lives, in other words, being the causal agent in one’s life. For example, one of the European American parents stated that self-determination means that “THEY make the decisions about their own lives. They’re the primary decision-maker of their own lives.”

Strengths and Weaknesses

Parents were asked if they spoke to their children about their children’s strengths and weaknesses. Twenty percent ($n = 4$; 2 African American, 2 Hispanic American) of the parents reported that they did not talk about strengths and weaknesses with their child, and there was not any evidence elsewhere during the interviews to indicate that they did discuss strengths and weaknesses. One of the Hispanic American parents reported that he had very limited time due to working so many hours; thus, he did not have time for this type of conversation with his child.

Regarding the parents who did discuss their children’s strengths and weaknesses, when asked how frequently they discussed this topic with their child the responses ranged from “as needed” to “daily.” Some of the strengths as reported by the parents included having a good personality, being a hard worker, being a high achiever, being artistic and having good math and science skills. Some of the children’s weaknesses, as listed by the parents, included being naive, being aggressive, having poor social skills and having difficulty learning. A summary of the reported strengths and weaknesses of the children by their parents and by cultural group is found in Table 2.

Independent Living Skills

Although the parents expressed a desire that their children be independent adults one day,
the European American parents seemed to be more proactive than the other parents when it came to preparing their children for independence. For instance, one of the European American parents had placed his daughter on the waiting list for subsidized housing, and another European American parent frequently discussed group home living arrangements with her daughter. However, all of the parents (n = 20) allowed their children to learn and practice independent living skills including completing household chores, engaging in recreational activities (e.g., going to the movie theater), working, making appointments, budgeting, driving, paying bills, making purchases and ordering meals at restaurants. The skill categories most frequently practiced included completing household chores (100%, n = 20), making purchases (40%, n = 8; 4 European American, 3 African American, 1 Hispanic American) and ordering meals at restaurants (30%, n = 6; 4 European American, 1 African American, 1 Hispanic American).

**Self-Efficacy**

Most of the parents (90%, n = 18) believed that their children possessed self-efficacy. The parents who did not believe that their children had self-efficacy were the two Asian American parents. One of the Asian American fathers said that his son “often worries . . . that he won’t be successful. . . He said, ‘What happens if I cannot find a job—if I cannot find a girlfriend?’” The other Asian American parent did not believe that his son could experience self-efficacy because of the severity of his disability.

Fifty-five percent (n = 11; 5 European American, 4 African American, 2 Hispanic American) of the parents said that they taught their children self-efficacy by using praise and encouragement. For instance, one of the African American parents shared how she tried to promote self-efficacy in her daughter by telling her, “You can do that, you can do that,” repeatedly. Twenty-five percent (n = 5; 2 Hispanic American, 1 African American, 1 Asian American, 1 European American) of the parents stated that they did not teach self-efficacy to their children, including the European American parent who felt that the construct of self-efficacy could not be taught.

**Goals**

Some of the parents (20%; 2 Hispanic American, 1 Asian American, 1 African American) reported that they did not talk to their chil-

### Table 2

**Children’s Strengths and Weaknesses as Reported by Parents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Membership</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Cooking skills</td>
<td>Academic skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Musical ability</td>
<td>Chores</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Hyper-activity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-starter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>Academic skills</td>
<td>Language skills</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Artistic</td>
<td>Chores</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attention span</td>
<td>Naivety</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Determined</td>
<td>Negative attitude</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Achiever</td>
<td>Repetitive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Slow learner</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work ethic</td>
<td>Uncooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Will not take risks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic American</td>
<td>Artistic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Electronics ability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Everything</td>
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</table>
children about having and setting goals. One of the Asian American parents said that he did not talk to his son about goals because of his son’s limited communication abilities. When parents did speak to their children about goals, the types of goals related to many different aspects of the children’s lives. For example, some of the short term goals related to homework completion, behavior and recreational activities such as vacations or going to the movies. The long term goals primarily related to postsecondary issues such as education, training, employment, and independent living.

In fact, the majority of the parents (65%; 6 European American, 4 African American, 2 Hispanic American, 1 Asian American) who did discuss goals with their children specifically addressed postsecondary goals. For example, one of the Asian American parents spoke about the postsecondary educational goals of his son. He said that his son will soon enroll in courses at a community college. Employment goals were discussed by African American (n = 3) and Hispanic American (n = 1) parents. Indeed, when Hispanic American parents spoke to their children about postsecondary goals, they primarily stressed finishing school and having a good career so that their children could have a better life. Independent living goals were most frequently mentioned by the European American parents.

One European American parent said that she and her daughter have been discussing postsecondary goals and plans for the last three years; nevertheless, the parent did not believe that her daughter fully understood these conversations. Other parents (15%; 2 European American, 1 African American) noted that discussions regarding postsecondary goals occurred regularly in their households. However, some of the parents (35%; 3 African American, 3 Hispanic American, 1 Asian American) did not discuss postsecondary goals because they felt that it was inappropriate due to their child’s ability to understand long term goals or due to their cultural beliefs: “We are Hispanic and I don’t think he has to leave the house when he turns 18. He is going to stay at home with his family.”

**Decision Making**

How and whether parents teach their children to make decisions was also probed. African American parents taught decision making by talking with the child, utilizing teachable moments when someone made a poor decision, having family meetings, modeling the decision making process and specifically asking for the input of the child when making a decision. The Asian American parents taught decision making by applying consequences and modeling decision making. Modeling and discussing the consequences were the strategies used by the European American and Hispanic American parents. Some of the parents expressed concerns about the delicate balance between allowing their children to make decisions and guiding their children in making those decisions. One of the Asian American parents summarized this dilemma when he said, “They are not equal members of the family. The parents also cannot dictate their activities, either.” Additionally, a few of the parents felt that as children grew and matured, more decisions could gradually be made by the children. One European American parent said, “Well, I believe up to a certain age the parent has the absolute authority. At about 12 they are old enough to make some of their own decisions.” An African American parent concurred when she stated, “I think that there is a certain age when they should follow the directives of the parents, and after they get . . . 15 or 16, they start making some choices.” Parents also considered whom the decisions would most impact when deciding the level of participation that the children had in making the decisions.

**Decisions that impact the family.** When asked specifically about the role of the child in making decisions that impact the family, three parents (15%; 2 African American, 1 Hispanic American) stated that their children were not considered equal decision makers. Conversely, five parents (25%; 2 European American, 2 Hispanic American, 1 Asian American) stated that their children were considered equally when making decisions that affect the entire family. Most of the parents (n = 12, 60%; 5 European American, 4 African American, 2 Hispanic American, 1 Asian American) felt that children’s opinions should be consid-
ered when making family decisions, but that the parents should make the final decision. However, it should be noted that some of the parents made all of the family decisions because they felt that their children were not cognitively capable to participate.

Decisions that impact the child. Parents were more likely to allow their children to make decisions that directly impacted the children. For example, African American parents allowed their children to make decisions about recreational activities, clothing, high school coursework and friends. Asian American parents allowed their children to make decisions regarding recreational activities and personal care product choices (e.g., hair products). The Asian American parents did not forbid their children to make decisions about friends; however, the children did not make those types of decisions because of their poor social skills. Both of the Asian American children had an autism spectrum disorder. European American parents let their children make choices about purchases (e.g., bedroom furniture, groceries, clothing) and friends, although one of the parents said that his daughter did not have any friends due to the severity of her intellectual disability. Hispanic American parents allowed their children to make decisions regarding recreational activities, how to care for siblings, family purchases and friends. Similar to the European American parent, one of the Hispanic American parents noted that his son did not have any friends because of the severity of his disability.

Problem-Solving

Problem-solving, another facet of self-determination, was a category that emerged from the interviews. The majority of the parents (60%, n = 12; 6 African American, 5 European American, 1 Asian American) said that they talked to their children to facilitate problem-solving when a poor decision was made by the child. In fact, discussing the issue was the first thing that the parents stated they would do, followed by brainstorming ways to address the problem. Four of the parents (20%; 2 Asian American, 2 European American) said that they would apply consequences such as grounding the child, making the child pay to fix something that was damaged and taking privileges away. Additionally, six of the parents (30%; 3 European American, 2 Hispanic American, 1 Asian American) said they would use the experience as a teachable moment for the child in hopes that the child would make better decisions in the future.

Other parents (30%, n = 6; 3 Hispanic American, 2 European American, 1 African American), when faced with a poor decision being made by their children, said they would support and encourage their child and suffer the consequences along with the child. One Hispanic American mother stated, “I can’t do things for her, but I can support her and encourage her as much as possible.” Also, three of the European American parents said that they would solicit outside sources to help their child, as expressed by one father, “When something like that happens with him, because of his learning disability and everything, we generally, if it’s severe enough, we will get other people involved [be]cause he has a tendency to listen to others more than he may listen to the wife and I.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gather rich, qualitative information from parents of diverse cultures about their perspectives and practices regarding self-determination. For this purpose, we designed the study to include a couple of strengths. First, participants of the study represented more cultural groups and a wider range of disabilities (including low-incidence and multiple disabilities) than most existing studies that investigated self-determination within cultural contexts. Second, we interviewed 20 parents, which was a relatively large number for an interview study. However, there were also some limitations. One of the limitations was the small number of Asian American parents included in the sample due to the limited availability of parents in this group. Further, both of the children of the Asian American parents had an autism spectrum disorder; therefore, the answers and perspectives of these parents might have had more to do with their child’s disability than with their Asian American culture. Another limitation was that all of the parents were interviewed only one time without a follow-up interview. It would have been ideal to have the
parents engage in member-checking to determine if their beliefs and practices were accurately represented. In addition, problems inherent in telephone interviews prevented the researchers from reading facial expressions and body language. As a result, some important information could have been lost. Despite these limitations, the findings of the study revealed certain patterns associated with cultures that could facilitate further understanding of self-determination in various cultural contexts and could be used to guide training and material development.

The study found that 30% of the parents, all from culturally diverse groups, did not know the meaning of self-determination; all of the European American parents explained self-determination in a practical way; and 35% of the parents, including some from diverse cultures, believed that a self-determined individual is the causal agent in one’s life. These findings are consistent with other studies (e.g., Bui & Turnbull, 2003; Leake & Boone, 2007; Zhang, 2006; Zhang, et al., 2005) in terms of parents from Western cultures knowing and doing more in the promotion of their children’s self-determination skills than parents from diverse cultures. It was obvious that the effort of promoting self-determination in the past two decades has not reached all parents from diverse cultures, although the majority (70%) of them acquired a basic understanding of the concept. Of course, this may mean that certain parents from diverse cultures may not value self-determination; however, we still have the obligation to equip them with the basic knowledge so that they can make an informed choice as to whether to adopt this concept and its related practices. Schools and teachers may need to disseminate more information to parents about the meaning of self-determination and its value in facilitating student transition.

Twenty percent of the parents, all from diverse cultures, did not talk to their children about their strengths and weaknesses. This finding indicates a need for parental education in this area because research has repeatedly shown that it is critical for parents to model how to examine one’s strengths and weaknesses beginning during early childhood (Field et al., 1998; Sands & Doll, 1996; Zhang, 2006). Parents of students with disabilities must be informed and trained about their important roles in assisting their children to develop a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Parent training centers, especially those funded by federal grants, should engage in disseminating effective daily activities that parents can use to model the behavior of analyzing one’s individual strengths and weaknesses and how to utilize one’s strengths in positive ways. The strengths and weaknesses reported by parents in the study seem to match stereotypical understandings of strengths and weaknesses of the general population from each culture. This is not necessarily negative because this reveals that individuals with disabilities carry their cultural strengths, which can then be utilized in transition planning. Compared to the parents from diverse cultures, European American parents seemed to be the most proactive in preparing their children for independent living, albeit only two of the European American parents had taken actions to prepare their children for independent living by ensuring that their children were on the waiting lists for subsidized housing or group home settings. Because most of the parents had not taken these types of actions, it can be assumed that there was a lack of knowledge about independent living resources and how to access these resources. However, this problem is not unique to the parents of this study. On the other hand, a positive finding from the study was that all of the parents involved their children in learning and practicing domestic skills that will facilitate their children’s future independent living.

The majority of the parents believed that their children had self-efficacy, with the exception of the two Asian American parents. Although it is not clear whether this was a reflection of cultural differences or a reflection of the child’s disability (i.e., an autism spectrum disorder), there is still a need to encourage Asian American parents to help their children enhance their self-efficacy given the collective nature of Asian cultures and the parents’ intent to act as the authority and in control (Chao, 1994; Chen, Wang, Chen, & Liu, 2002). Five of the seven European American parents, four of the six African American parents and two of the five Hispanic American parents taught their children self-efficacy by
using praise and encouragement. However, the remainder (25%) of the parents did not teach self-efficacy to their children at all. Given the need to develop self-advocacy skills early and because self-determination skills are essential to the successful transition from school to work for individuals with disabilities (Field, 1996; Field, et al, 1998; Sands & Doll, 1996), there is a need to promote this behavior among all parents of children with disabilities.

It was disappointing to find that 20% of the parents, all from diverse cultures, did not talk to their children about having and setting goals. One of reasons cited was because the child had limited communication skills (an Asian American student with an autism spectrum disorder). Conversely, it was quite encouraging to find that parents who spoke to their children about goals talked about goals related to many aspects of the future, including short-term as well as long-term goals (e.g., postsecondary goals). It seems like the past decades of effort to include parents in the transition planning process might have increased parents’ awareness and willingness to help their children with disabilities set goals and prepare for the transition to adulthood.

Along the same line, parents from all cultures taught their children decision-making skills in various ways. In terms of including children in family decision making, three parents (all from diverse cultures) stated that their children were not considered equal decision makers; on the other hand, five parents from three different cultures treated their children as equal decision makers. Regarding decisions that impact the child, parents from all cultures were more willing to let the child make them. Such involvement of children with disabilities in making decisions that impact their own lives will eventually promote their decision-making skills, which is an essential component of self-determination skills as conceptualized by Wehmeyer (1997).

Problem-solving techniques were mainly understood by the parents as a way to deal with a poor decision by the child, rather than a way to overcome obstacles when working toward a goal as conceptualized by Wehmeyer (1997). Although problem-solving can be used as a way to deal with poor decisions, associating this skill set mainly with treating inappropriate behavior limits the power of these skills in pursuing transition goals or any other goals. It seems that the field of special education, particularly parent training centers, needs to identify ways to inform parents about what problem-solving is and how to help students with disabilities develop and use these powerful skills in achieving goals. When dealing with poor decisions made by a child, all of the African American and the majority of the European American parents talked to the child to solve the problem. Hispanic American parents tended to support and encourage the child and even suffer the consequences along with the child. It is clear that there are some cultural patterns in dealing with inappropriate behaviors or poor decisions. However, it is not clear which of the ways benefits students more in their development and exercise of problem-solving skills. More research is needed to determine if these patterns correlate with the student’s development and use of problem-solving skills; and if they do, which way is more likely to promote these skills.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

American society has become increasingly multiethnic and multilingual (Rodriguez, 1990). Any attempt to understand how self-determination is understood and practiced in a certain culture has to link to the group’s original culture. For example, to understand self-determination in the context of Hispanic culture, research is needed to compare South American cultures where the U.S. Hispanic cultures originated with the mainstream U.S. culture. Therefore, one type of future research can focus on international comparisons between a U.S. cultural group and its original culture and examine self-determination among these broader cultural backgrounds with the general populations. A second type of future research can limit participants to parents and guardians of students with one type of disability, e.g., autism, so that the characteristics associated with the disability do not interfere with cultural factors for easier inferences of causal relationships. A third area of research that is very much needed is to design interventions and examine their effects in promoting self-determina-
tion practices and skills among culturally diverse parents (Karvonen, Test, Wood, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004). Federal, state and private funds need to be available for the development, field-testing and dissemination of such interventions.

Conclusion

Self-determination has been empirically linked to better student outcomes (e.g., Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Research on examining self-determination within culturally and linguistically diverse contexts has yielded mixed results regarding valuing and practicing skills related to self-determination. However, there is evidence to suggest differences exist in various patterns among parents from diverse cultures. Knowing these differences helps education and service professionals understand how to approach parents of various cultures. Such understanding will further enable the empowerment of parents for working together to promote self-determination of students from diverse cultures. Toward this end, more research is needed, especially research focusing on intervention development.

References


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