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Self-Determination and Struggle in the Lives of Adolescents

by Mairead Moloney, Jean Whitney-Thomas, & Danielle Dreilinger

Introduction

As students approach high school graduation, they face new expectations for their behavior and achievements. Adolescents are often expected to move from a position of dependency on others to taking responsibility for themselves. Many students who have developed skills of self-determination are better able to successfully cope with the stresses of this transition.

The *self-determined* individual practices decision-making, knows what he/she wants out of life, and understands how to access the necessary supports to achieve these goals (Mithaug, 1996). An important part of developing self-determination is one's capacity for *self-definition*, a concept explored later in this brief. These skills may be more difficult for students with disabilities to master, as they often face additional obstacles in achieving independence (Hanley-Maxwell, Whitney-Thomas & Pogoloff, 1995, Schulzinger, 1998). Obstacles include: poor match between student interests and potential jobs or careers, social isolation, and the frustration of arranging for accommodations with the Social Security and school systems (Timmons, Schuster, & Moloney, 2000).

This study examined the development of self-determination in a sample of teenagers, both with and without disabilities, who were poised to leave high school. The researchers set out to better understand the process by which youth develop a sense of themselves.

Methodology & Participants

This report describes the experiences of eleven students in their junior and senior years of high school, living in a working-class suburb of Boston. A small sample size was chosen in order to gain a richer level of detail in a topic of emerging importance. The researchers obtained data through four voluntary, in-depth, open-ended interviews with each student, conducted over the course of the 1998-1999 school year, supplemented by interviews with school staff and participant observations. Two participants did not receive a final interview; one left school for psychiatric treatment and the other had a change in foster placement. Of the eleven participants, six had a disability–defined as being on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)–and five did not. Surprisingly, only four of the six students were aware that they had an IEP, and only two out of the eleven (one with an IEP, one without) defined themselves as having a disability. See Table 1 for more information on the participants.

Findings & Implications

The concept of *supported independence*, which emerges from these findings, can seem almost contradictory. In order to gain an adult sense of self-definition, adolescents need opportunities to make decisions and explore their interests independently. However, they also need continued, reliable support from adults and peers. This support enables them to make sense of their experiences, gives them a sense of security, and reduces the severity of stressful situations.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Variables	N of individuals (total N = 11)
Age	
17	8
18	1
19	2
Sex	
male	5
female	6
Race	
white	9
black	2
Year in School	
junior	2
senior	9
Living With	
both parents	6
mother only / other living arrangement	5
IEP	
yes	6
no	5
Considers self to have a disability	
yes	2
no	9

The researchers classified students with regard to two concepts closely linked to the development of self-determination: struggle and self-definition.

Struggle

The extent to which students reported difficulties in their lives with, for example, family, friends, drugs, and health.

Students with **high struggle** often:

- handled adult-level responsibilities, such as caring for a younger sibling;
- were involved with one or more government or social services agencies, such as foster care, mental health, the Social Security Administration, or the police;
- were frustrated by their unhealthy lifestyle or friendship choices, but felt powerless to change them.

Students with **low struggle**:

- felt physically and emotionally safe and supported in their endeavors;
- had secure connections to adults, both in school and at home;
- had social, school, and family lives that inter-linked and supported each other.

Self-definition

A reported sense of purpose, knowledge of one's own strengths and weaknesses, and the ability to communicate this information to others.

Students with **high self-definition**

- could describe themselves in detail
- identified experiences which had taught them about themselves;
- knew their resources and how to use them;
- had both specific goals for the near future and dreams for adulthood; and
- had confidence in their ability to achieve their goals.

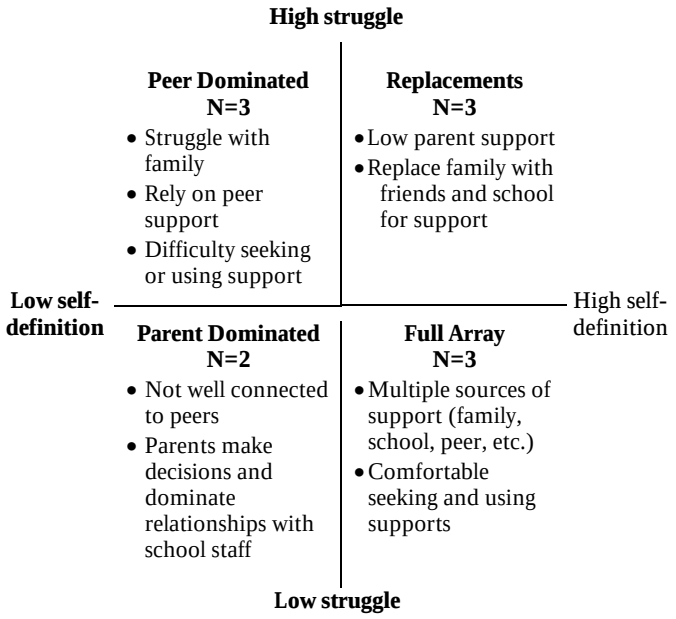
Students with **low self-definition**

- lacked confidence, consistency, and accuracy in describing themselves;
- had difficulty identifying learning experiences;
- lacked awareness of helpful resources and how to use them;
- had vague or no plans and visions for the future;
- struggled with issues of independence, and felt uncertain about their ability to achieve goals.

Categories of Students

This study identifies four categories of students, three of which are at risk: ***Full Array, Peer Dominated, Parent Dominated, and Replacements*** (see Figure 1). Each group faces different obstacles and thus requires different support strategies.

Figure 1: Struggle – Self-Definition Matrix



1. Full Array

Students classified as Full Array are not at risk; these students had multiple sources of support they felt comfortable using. They consistently made daily and long-term decisions that were well thought-out and had positive consequences. One student, when asked who has helped him, replied, "*My boss…has helped me along the way. My parents. I talk to my art teacher. [She's] pushing me the right way.*" When asked about events that helped shape the person he is now, he said, "*I… learned from a lot of people. A lot of my friends…started getting into drugs and drinking and stuff like that, but I saw my way through to the right direction…I wanted to do something with my life.*"

2. Peer Dominated

Peer Dominated students had independence but insufficient support, struggled with their families, had difficulty reaching out or using support, and consistently relied on their peers for most of their needs. These factors often led to emotional distress and poor decision-making. One young man said, *"I cannot stop smoking...because of my friends."*

These students are at the most immediate risk and may appear to be the most troubled, as their struggles are often acted out in a more public fashion. The two students who failed to complete the study were classified in this category.

Suggestions for Support

The lack of both self-esteem and awareness of existing resources prevents these students from accessing support. Until the student develops trust, adults may need to initiate support in a way that respects the student and his/her concerns. Adults can also be very helpful as positive role models.

- Increase self-esteem by initiating activities in which students can succeed;
- Discuss available resources and how to use them;
- Build social connections with a broader range of peers by encouraging students to join clubs, teams, etc.

3. Parent Dominated

Conversely, Parent Dominated students had insufficient independence. They tended not to be well connected with their peers, and their parents often made decisions for them and dominated their relationships with school personnel. While these students face fewer overt struggles, they may have difficulty building self-directed adult lives. One young woman stated that she *"[hadn't] really had to make any"* major decisions. When asked, "*Do you think there are other people in your life who make decisions for you*?" she replied, "*My mother*." Thus, these students may have fewer experiences on which to base plans and dreams for adult life, and feel less control over their futures. It is interesting to note that the two students who belonged in this category were both on Individualized Education Plans (IEP's), enrolled in classes that were not integrated into the school as a whole, and had more significant cognitive disabilities than the other participants.

Suggestions for Support

Students whose needs may hinder their ability to be "independent" in the traditional, culturally defined sense may require more creative ways of achieving independence. Try to create opportunities for supported independence, and be available to talk to students about their experiences. To build confidence and skills, encourage students to:

- take on leadership roles in school or outside organizations;
- set goals, starting with the short-term;
- make smart financial decisions, like saving money for college or paying their own auto insurance;
- advocate for themselves, and become comfortable talking to adults and authority figures about their needs.

4. Replacements

Replacements lacked strong parental or family support. They "replaced" these missing support figures with friends, teachers, or other school personnel. In that sense, these students seemed fairly self-sufficient in attracting and building their own resources for support. One young woman told the researchers, *"I make every decision with my close friends and my fiancée. They are part of my life…we kind of all come together and compromise…we make the decision [like a] family."* Unfortunately, this system is not necessarily stable, and may deteriorate as the student's status or environment changes over time.

Suggestions for Support

These students may encounter struggles that their social support systems can not accommodate.

- Respond when a student expresses the need for support, matching the intensity of support to the student's needs. For instance, adolescents may need extra encouragement as they make the transition from home to a more independent lifestyle.
- Encourage these students to build security by forming relationships with more stable individuals or groups, such as religious institutions, supportive family members, adults who can serve as mentors, and peers who are less at risk. Commitment to a particular career or interest may also provide stability.

For All Students

The study participants expressed that the interviews helped them define their needs, challenges, strengths, and goals. This type of experience could be a useful tool to increase students' self-definition.

- Learn to recognize the self-definition and support needs of students with, and without, significant disabilities. If possible, arrange for intervention (i.e. counseling, career-planning opportunities, mentoring programs).
- Talk to students about supports that are available, and how to use them.
- Consider activities to encourage self-exploration and self-awareness in young adults.

Resources

- National Program on Self-Determination: www.self-determination.org
- Wehmeyer, M.L., Agran, M., & Hughes, C. (1998) *Teaching Self-Determination to Students with Disabilities.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Center on Self-Determination at Oregon Health Sciences University: www.ohsu.edu/selfdetermination.
- www.self-determination.com: Comprehensive site available end of July, 2000
- Massachusetts Partnership for Transition: Message board and resources at www.childrenshospital.org/ici/icinet/forum/

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