

Empower Students with Your Words



“SAY you’re SORRY...!”
 “WHY are you so forgetful...?”
 “WHY can’t you be more like him...?”
 “HOW many times must I tell you...?”
 “WHY can’t you ever...?”
 “WHY are you always so slow...?”
 “SIT down. Be quiet. Do your work...!”

- Does the tone of voice teachers use sometimes leave students feeling distressed, discouraged, degraded, or even ashamed?
- Do teachers frequently use directives to manipulate students to behave or respond in an expected manner?
- Do teachers strive to create learning conditions that empower students to become self-determined?

Teachers may not always be aware that their words can leave students questioning who they are, what they are capable of doing, and why they act in certain ways. This article presents common dialogues on how teachers’ manner of communication can affect students’ sense of empowerment, personal autonomy, self-awareness, as well as the ability to self-regulate [see Table 1: “Components of Self-Determination”].

Creating Condition for Self-Determination

Helping students with disabilities become self-determined has been a national priority for more than a decade [see box, “Conceptualization of Self-Determination”]. However, promoting self-determination requires a close examination of not only the curriculum and instructional strategies, but also the surrounding conditions where learning takes place (Abery & Stancliffe, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Mithaug, 1996). Some of these conditions identified by researchers as

critical to self-determination include teacher support, validation, encouragement, and student perception of self and others (Field, 1996; Fredericks, 1988; Powers, Singer, & Todis, 1996).

<Insert Table 1>

The kind of environment teachers create in and out of the classroom can influence students' ability and willingness to engage in self-determined behaviors. Needless to say, learning conditions which encourage students to express themselves, take appropriate risks, and solve problems are more likely to enhance skills of self-determination (Field, Hoffman & Posch, 1997; Field & Hoffman, 2002). In particular, teachers' manner of communication can be a powerful tool in establishing favorable learning conditions towards developing these critical skills. The choice of words and the tone of voice teachers use when explaining, instructing, reprimanding, or counseling students can affect students' abilities and attitudes towards modify their behavior. The following questions and scenarios help teachers evaluate the extent to which their words affect the learning conditions for students with disabilities to exercise self-determined behaviors.

1) *Do you allow students to honestly express themselves?* Lets take a look at scenario #1:

Student: I HATE Math! I don't know how to do any of the problems!

Teacher: No, you don't. You've always like math!

Student: I do? How come I can't do all these problems?

Teacher: Oh, sure you do, you just need to try harder.

Student: I feel so stupid... everyone seems to be so much smarter than me.

Teacher: No, you are not stupid.



Who said I like Math? I still don't know how to do these problems. I must be stupid.

Developing A Sense of Self

One of the most critical components of self-determination is to know who you are, what are your strengths and limitations, and what you like or dislike. In order to acquire a sense of self-knowledge, students need to be encouraged to explore their inner thoughts and feelings, whether these are expressions of boredom, frustration, anger, anxiety, uncertainty or sometimes, stupidity.

On the one hand, students who are unable to express themselves are often less likely to discover who they really are and what they want. Consequently, they are less likely to make decisions towards satisfying their needs (self-regulation), like likely to stand up for what they want (self-advocacy), and less likely to give themselves credit for their own effort (self-efficacy).

On the other hand, students who express themselves only to seek the approval of others are also less likely to acquire skills of self-determination. These students have a propensity to rely on the approval of others and so tend to express what others expect rather than how they truly feel. For that reason, they are not only less likely to develop a sense of self-awareness, but also subsequent skills of self-determination.

2) When students express themselves, do you accept or acknowledge their expressions?

Every so often, teachers confront students' expression as false, unjustifiable, or as inaccurate assessment of themselves. When this happens, students begin to adopt a mindset that what they are feeling is not necessarily a true reflection of themselves or that other people seem to know them better than they know themselves. Gradually, students begin to doubt who they are and what they are capable of doing and start to rely more and more on others to tell them what they should do and how they should feel. In order to prevent this cycle of over-reliance, teachers

can make a deliberate effort to acknowledge students' expressions and help them trust themselves in taking appropriate risks. Lets take a look at scenario #2:

- Student: I hate MATH!
- Teacher: You sound frustrated.
- Student: I can't do any of these questions.
- Teacher: What seem to be the problem?
- Students: I don't know...
- Teacher: It sounds to me maybe you forgot the formula. Am I correct?
- Student: No, I remember the formula, I just forgot how to use them here.
- Teacher: What are you going to do about it?
- Student: [thinking] ...I don't know... maybe I need to review my notes again or work with someone.



Sound like you have a couple of options to try. I'll let you decide what you want to do.



Feeling empowered to handle the situation...

3) *Do you tend to tell students what to do when a problem arise?* See Scenario #3:

- Teacher: Jim, where is your journal?
- Student: I forgot. I think I left it at home?
- Teacher: Well, you better copy the work from Sarah then.



Well, somehow the teacher will solve the problem for me.

Time and again, teachers are too quick to tell students what to do rather than suggest alternatives or let students come up with plausible solutions on how to resolve the problem. Experienced teachers will find that the use of punishment as a form of deterring behavior often *do not* help students learn to solve their own problems. In order to create an environment whereby students are encouraged to solve their own problems, teachers can:

- 1) Acknowledge how students are feeling; [*self-awareness*]
- 2) Help students identify where the problem lies; [*self-regulation*]
- 3) Empower students to resolve the problem. [*autonomy & psychological empowerment*]



This 3-step procedure permits students to turn their attention towards resolving the problem at hand rather than shoving the responsibility to the teachers or letting adults be in charge of the situation. Especially when working with students with disabilities, teachers need to be mindful to provide sufficient time for them to identify what exactly is the problem, come up with alternatives, and decide how to handle the situation. Teachers may assist in generating possible solutions, but ultimately, teachers must empower students to choose, decide, and resolve their own problems.

The Types of Questions Teachers Ask

4) *Do you expect students to come up with rationale explanations when you question them?*

Let's examine scenario #4:

Student: I forgot my book today.

Teacher: WHY do you always forget your book? WHY didn't you put it in your backpack the night before? WHAT do I need to do to get you to remember to bring your book everyday?



I don't know...

Scenario #5:

Student: I don't want to go out to play today.

Teacher: Why not?

Student: I don't know...

Teacher: What do you mean by you don't know? There must be a reason for it and you are not telling me why.



Perplexed and ashamed for feeling the way he did and for choosing not to go outside today...

Typically, when a situation arise, the first few words that comes out of a teacher's mouth is, "Why did you do that" or "Why didn't you do that?" It seems as though by asking those questions, students would automatically formulate a rationale to their actions, learn from their mistakes, assume responsibilities, and make amends.

Confronting students with such rhetorical questions compels them to come up with some sorts of legitimate, logical explanations, otherwise, they are not "entitled" or have the "right" to behave or feel the way they do. Yet often, when students' spontaneously responded, "I DON'T KNOW," teachers cannot seem to accept that either. Has it ever occur to teachers that these three words may perhaps be the students' most earnest expression? This style of questioning only shuts students down rather than open them up to self-discovery. Hence, instead of questioning students, teachers can say:

- "Talk to me..." and then listen;
- "Tell me what happened..." and then listen;
- "Keep talking..." and then listen.



At times, the most effective way of empowering students is to simply acknowledge their self-expression with a nod of the head, a sound, “Umm,” or just a couple of words, “I see.”

5) *Do you use labels to get students to do what you want?*

With all good intents, teachers want to help shape students’ behavior in order to teach them what are acceptable or unacceptable conducts in a given context. Unfortunately, in doing so, teachers may lock students in roles that do not enhance their development of self-empowerment. Take a look at scenario #6:

- Teacher: Please share your calculator with John, he forgot to bring his today.
- Student: But I need to use it. I’ve got work to do also.
- Teacher: Don’t be SELFISH. He needs it to do his work too.
- Student: Why didn’t he remember to bring his own?
- Teacher: You have always been very GENEROUS with your things, what’s going on today?

[Feeling betrayed and vindictive] Next time I better stop being so good, otherwise, I have to be good all the time!”



Instead of using labels such as “selfish” or “generous” to manipulate the student to act in the expected manner, the teacher can:

- 1) Acknowledge the student’s feelings; [*self-awareness*]
- 2) Help the student identify the problem; [*self-regulation*]
- 3) If the student is unable to come up with options to solve the problem, suggest alternatives and talk through the steps of resolving the problem; [*self-monitoring*]
- 4) Empower the student to handle the situation; [*autonomy & psychological empowerment*]



- 5) Give credit back to the student for his/her ability to handle the situation. [*self-efficacy*]

This 5-step approach validates students' self-expression without sympathizing, correcting, or judging them. Take a look at scenario #7:



Teacher: Please share your calculator with John, he forgot to bring his today.

Student: But I need to use it! I've got work to do also.

Teacher: I know, sometimes it's hard to share when you need to use the thing yourself. What do you suggest John could do so he too can complete his work too?

Student: I don't know. All I know is that I need it now and I can't share with him till later.

Teacher: [sensing that student may not be able to come up with any solution] You may either take turn or switch seat with Mary so John can share with her instead [offer alternatives but still empower student to handle the situation]. Since this is your calculator, I'll let you decide how you want to work this out so both of you can get your work done [states expectation that ultimately both students need to complete their work].

Student: [feeling empowered to resolve the situation] All right, when I'm done with this one question, I'll let him use mine calculator.



You sure worked out this situation by yourself [giving credit back to the student for resolving the problem]

Final Words

Words can be powerful tools to engage students with disabilities in self-determined behaviors. When teachers are cognizant of their manner of communication, students not only feel good about themselves, but are also empowered to think on their own, take charge of problem situations, and are proactive in acting on what they want. Keep in mind these two powerful words: “Acknowledge” and “Empower.” That means *acknowledge* students’ self-expression and *empower* them to take charge.







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Table 1: Components of Self-Determination

According to Wehmeyer, Kelchner & Richards (1994), self-determination can be broken down into four mutually exclusive, yet overlapping components. Note that these indicators are not intended to be an exhaustive list of characteristics and skills framing self-determination. However, together, they characterize what is known as self-determined behaviors		
Self-Realization	 <p>A comprehensive and reasonably accurate knowledge of one's strengths and limitations in an environment as a result of evaluations, reinforcements, and attributions of one's behavior by others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Self-awareness ▶ Self-knowledge ▶ Self-belief
Autonomy	 <p>A sense of personal control over one's preferences and the ability to execute tasks free from external interference in areas of self-care, family, recreation, social, and vocational activities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Choice indicating preferences ▶ Choice as a decision-making process ▶ Choice as an expression of autonomy & dignity ▶ Self- & Family Care ▶ Self-Management ▶ Recreational and social management
Self-Regulation	 <p>A combination of behavioral and cognitive strategies that enables one to examine his/her environment and make decisions about how to act, to evaluate outcomes, and to make necessary adjustment. Behaviors include self-management, goal setting and attainment, problem-solving, and observational learning strategies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Goal setting & attainment ▶ Problem-solving ▶ Problem-identification ▶ Problem-expectation ▶ Problem- resolution ▶ Self-observation, evaluation, & reinforcement ▶ Self-management ▶ Self-monitoring ▶ Self-instruction ▶ Self-evaluation ▶ Self-reinforcement
Psychological Empowerment	 <p>A dimension of control in areas of cognitive (personal efficacy), personality (locus of control), and motivational domains. Essentially, the person acts on a belief that he/she has control over circumstances and the prerequisite skills to achieve the desired outcomes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Internal locus of control ▶ Engagement in appropriate risks ▶ Positive attributions of efficacy ▶ Outcome expectancy ▶ Self-efficacy ▶ Efficacy-expectation ▶ Self-instruction ▶ Self-reinforcement

Box 1: Conceptualization of Self-Determination

Historically, the term self-determination refers to the right of nations to self-governance. Later, the disability rights advocates and people with disabilities appropriated the term to refer to their “right” to have control in their lives (Nirje, 1972). For this reason, self-determination is sometimes used interchangeably with the term empowerment.

The empowerment movement over the last few decades has contributed significantly to the shift in emphasis for people with disabilities. The terms empowerment or self-determination have recently been reconceptualized as an educational or adult outcome for people with disabilities rather than a political or social agenda. Wehmeyer (1992) emphasized that for the purpose of education and rehabilitation, self-determination is best understood in relationship to a person’s behavior and viewed as an adult outcome that is achieved through lifelong learning, opportunities, and experiences.

Even though the literature does not yield a universally accepted definition for self-determination, this term has often been defined as people having choices and control over their lives without unnecessary interference from outside influences (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). According to Wehmeyer (1992), an act or event is considered self-determined if:

- a) the person acted autonomously;
- b) the person’s behavior was self-regulated;
- c) the person initiated and responded to event in a psychologically empowered manner; and
- d) the person acted in a self-realizing manner.

In 1990, the U.S. Department of Education through the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) funded a series of projects to enhance self-determination of students with disabilities (Ward & Kohler, 1996). In each of these projects, self-determination was approached from many different angles. Some of the efforts included: person-centered planning, curriculum development, self-advocacy activities, and teaching students to become active in goal setting and decision making within the context of the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

In an attempt to establish a common ground, the directors of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) projects operationally defined self-determination as “choosing and enacting choices to control one’s life - to the maximum extent possible – based on knowing and valuing oneself, and in pursuit of one’s own needs, interests and values” (Campeau & Wolman, 1993, p. 2).

One of the earliest definitions of self-determination coined by Ward (1988) is “the attitudes which lead people to define goals for themselves and the ability to take the initiative to achieve those goals” (p. 2). Powers, Singer, and Sowers (1996) identified personal attitude is the indicator of one’s self-determination, and that it is people’s attitudes that either facilitate or thwart them in their demonstration of empowerment, active participation in decision-making, and self-direction.

Self-determined individuals have also been characterized as those who know how to set goals for themselves and then initiate to achieve those goals by making their needs known, evaluate their progress, adjust their performance, and solve their problems (Martin & Marshall, 1995; Martin, Marshall & Maxson, 1993). In other words, self-determined

people have developed a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, and autonomous behavior (Field and Hoffman, 1994).

From the psychological perspective, self-determination is characterized as having “the capacity to choose and to have those choices be the determinants of one’s actions” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 38). Likewise, Schloss, Alper, and Jayne (1993) regarded self-determination as “the ability of a person to consider options and to make appropriate choices regarding residential life, work, and leisure time” (p. 215).

Wehmeyer (1992) summed up the common themes of self-determination as the “attitudes and abilities required to act as the primary causal agent in one’s life and to make choices regarding one’s actions free from undue influence or interference” (p. 305). He emphasized that when individuals are able to act on the basis of these skills and attitudes, they would have greater ability to take control of their lives and to assume the role of successful adults in society. These abilities (Mithaug, Campueau & Wolman, 1994) and attitudes (Field, Martin, Miller, Wehmeyer & Ward, 1999) can be broken down into the following list:

- Ability to make decisions based on personal wants and needs.
- Ability to consider options and solve problems.
- Ability to initiate and take necessary actions.
- Ability to adjust decisions according to previous outcomes.
- Ability to set and attain goals.
- Ability to self-advocate for personal wants and needs.
- Ability to perform tasks independently.
- Awareness of personal interests, preferences, strengths, and limitations.

- Awareness of personal independence and interdependences with others.
- Attitude of persistence.
- Attitude of self-confidence.
- Attitude of positive attributions of efficacy and outcome expectancy.

In short, self-determined individuals:

Know how to choose – they know what they want and how to get it. From an awareness of personal needs, self-determined individuals choose goals, then doggedly pursue them. This involves asserting an individual's presence, making his or her needs known, evaluating progress toward meeting goals, adjusting performance, and creating unique approaches to solve problems. (Martin & Marshall, 1995, p. 147)

Although each of these definitions operationalizes from a different perspective, there is general consensus about the conceptualization of self-determination. The three most consistent themes are the concepts of choice, control, and freedom, with emphasis on actions and outcomes. All in all, self-determination framed as an educational outcome is vital for all students and more so for students with disabilities.