

Interventions to support self-determination in deaf young people

A literature review by the National Deaf Children's Society

This literature review aims to consider the different definitions and measures used by researchers to evaluate self-determination, taking into account the following points.

- If we have enough knowledge from existing research to identify what an effective programme for deaf young people around self-determination might look like.
- What insight research provides us on the activities that could be used to develop features associated with self-determination.

The review also aims to identify evidence-based practices which have demonstrably improved self-determination, particularly in young adults who are about to undergo transitions (eg moving from school to a post-secondary institution).

1. Summary

- We identified six systematic reviews, summarising the findings of 81 papers in total. These reviews focused specifically on interventions and their impact on self-determination in disabled young people.
- Few papers included deaf young people in their research. Most reported findings on self-determination in young people with learning and intellectual disabilities. Papers also tended to be focused on young people in secondary education.
- Five interventions are described in this review. Four interventions are listed on the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) as either evidence-based or research-based practices. This indicates that there is research evidence for their effective use in promoting self-determination.
- A separate literature search for interventions aimed at improving self-determination in deaf young people identified one study looking at the application of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) in deaf middle and high school students in the United States. Although its findings are limited, the study recommends further research involving this intervention. This intervention is also recommended for use by the National Deaf Center for Postsecondary Outcomes in the US.
- In order for interventions to be adapted for use with deaf young people in the United Kingdom, the five interventions we identified need to be assessed by professionals involved in the education of deaf children and young people. Further research also needs to be conducted to determine their effectiveness.

2. Methodology

Our literature search identified six systematic reviews, focusing on interventions aimed at improving self-determination in disabled young people. Collectively, these six reviews summarise the findings of 81 papers and are presented here in a narrative metasyntesis. We have presented an overview of these reviews in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of six papers included in this review

Author	Years searched	Focus	No. of papers reviewed	Age range	Most common disabilities	Sample size	No. of interventions
Burke et al. (2020)	2000–2017	Interventions targeted at students with disabilities in schools.	34	5–21 years; most studies were conducted with students in high schools.	Learning disabilities (39%), intellectual disabilities (23.5%), autism spectrum disorder (3.4%)	Aggregate sample size = 3,091; range = 4–493	12
Gelber et al. (2020)	1951–2012	Interventions targeted at college students with disabilities.	9	College-aged students.	Learning disabilities (64%), students with ADHD (28.2%), orthopaedic impairments (26.9%)	Data provided is based on 100 papers and not the nine focusing on interventions.	9
Cmar (2019)	After 2000	Assesses interventions for possible use with students with visual impairments.	14	13–26 years	Results not always disaggregated by disability.	Aggregate sample size = 1,761; average sample size = 126; range = 3–493.	6
Raley et al. (2018)	After 2000	Assesses standalone curricula associated with improving self-determination.	7	11–21 years	Learning disabilities (six papers), intellectual disabilities (five papers), autism spectrum disorder (three studies)	Aggregate sample size = 1,042; average sample size = 149; range = 15–372	5
Sanderson and Goldman (2020)	1989–2017	Interventions to increase participation in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.	6	12–21 years old, majority in high school.	Learning disabilities (63%)	Average sample size = 39; range = 16–130	6
Cmar and Markoski (2019)	2003–2016	Self-determination and young people with visual impairments.	11	6–24 years	Visual impairment or deafblind (100%)	Aggregate sample size = 275; average sample size = 25; range = 1–54	Unclear as interventions are not named

We selected these reviews because they limited their attention to papers that evaluate interventions and their outcomes. The authors assessed the quality of each study by looking at the research design (eg if an experimental approach was used) and the data analysis itself (eg whether the findings showed a strong effect from the intervention). They also paid close attention to how faithfully interventions were delivered. Variability in design and implementation means it can be difficult to associate specific outcomes with the intervention itself (and to compare an intervention across studies).

Although the time periods covered by each review overlap, their focus can differ. Gelbar et al. (2020) looks at a specific age group (college students), Cmar and Markoski (2019) describe interventions targeted at a specific disability (visual impairments), and Sanderson and Goldman (2020) examine interventions that are designed to improve participation in educational review meetings. Occasionally, there is some overlap in the papers covered (eg five out of six papers in Raley et al. are also included in Burke et al.).

3. Definitions of self-determination

Before searching for papers, each review provided a working definition of self-determination. They generally refer to a similar body of papers covering theories of self-determination within the fields of education and disability. Gelber et al. (2020) explicitly state that definitions of self-determination across research papers may differ in the language used or the specific components of self-determination referred to. But they are similar in that they refer to a set of skills that “allow individuals to act as causal agents in their respective lives” (p.165).

Three reviews (Cmar, 2019; Cmar and Markoski, 2019; Gelber et al., 2020) refer to a definition from Field et al. (1998) below.

“Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behaviour. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective, are essential. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults.” (quoted in Gelber et al., 2020).

Gelbar et al. (2020) observe that this description is frequently used within self-determination literature and indicates how self-determination can be broadly defined, covering several component skills which are necessary for success throughout an individual’s lifetime.

Definitions of self-determination can differ in whether it is seen as a psychological trait (eg the capacity of an individual to make their own choices) or as a set of behaviours (eg the ability to act freely and independently to pursue goals). These behaviours (also known as self-determined actions) include choice-making, decision-making, goal setting and attainment, problem solving, planning, self-management, self-advocacy, self-awareness and self-knowledge.

When searching for papers to include in their reviews some papers use the keywords ‘self-determination’ or ‘self-determined’ (eg Cmar and Markoski, 2019), while others search for papers covering specific components of self-determination. In the latter case, Burke et al. (2020) include search terms such as ‘choice-making’, ‘goal-setting and attainment’ and ‘self-advocacy’. This means there is sometimes variation across papers in what aspect of self-determination is being examined. For example, Gelber et al. (2020) reports that five of the nine studies focusing on college-aged students investigated self-advocacy as the primary dependent variable.

4. General summary of the interventions

What types of interventions have been identified?

Interventions can vary according to whether they target one skill associated with self-determination or several. For example, Burke et al. (2020) identify seven single-component interventions and 27 multi-component interventions. The single component intervention often targeted different aspects (eg problem-solving, self-advocacy, goal setting, self-awareness).

Interventions can be described as curricula, of which there appear to be two types. Raley et al. (2018) focus on standalone curricula which provides a framework for the teaching of multiple skills associated with self-determination (eg *Whose Future is it Anyway (WFA)*, *Self-Directed Individualized Education Program (SD-IEP)* and *NEXT STEP Curriculum (NSC)*). This type differs from teaching models which offer a general framework through which different types of content can be taught (eg *Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI)*).

Some interventions are considered to be widely established. These include, for example, the SD-IEP and the SDLMI. Many interventions were not as common. For example, 14 interventions were only identified in one paper. These interventions may focus on a specific aspect of disability (eg a glaucoma education programme) or investigate the impact of an activity on one aspect of self-determination (eg a week-long sports camp). Others involve individual coaching/tutoring or training sessions with role-playing scenarios designed to improve students' knowledge of their rights and their ability to request accommodations.

What types of students do these interventions target?

Five reviews focused on interventions targeting students with disabilities in general. Cmar and Markoski (2019), however, focus on interventions that aim to improve self-determination in students with visual impairments. The most frequent type of disability reported were learning and intellectual disabilities (see Table 1).

Few studies included deaf participants. Cmar (2019:123) provides a breakdown of self-determination practices used with different groups of students with disabilities and notes that there are no studies focusing on deaf young people.

The majority of papers covered by this review focus on young people in secondary settings. Information regarding other social groups (eg gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) were not always provided. Based on the available information, the majority of participants involved in self-determination research are white (eg 53% in Burke et al., 2020). More research on interventions targeted at students from diverse backgrounds is needed.

Gelbar et al. (2020) note that limited attention has been given to students in post-secondary settings (this is one motivation for their review). Based on their search, they note that studies in this area were frequently US-based, focused on universities, consisted of small sample sizes and were limited in the demographic information they provided.

Most papers in this review focus on improving self-determination within segregated special education settings. For example, Raley et al. (2018) observe that all the curricula covered in their studies were implemented in self-contained special education classrooms. These reviews argue that there needs to be more research looking at improving self-determination within inclusive general education settings.

Who gives the intervention?

Most interventions were given in school settings and were delivered by trained teachers, researchers or project staff. In Raley et al. (2018), facilitators were primarily special education teachers. Sanderson and Goldman (2020) observe that studies using teachers to deliver curricula made a bigger impact than those that used researchers.

Self-determination is unlikely to have been taught by teachers prior to an intervention. Therefore, they are likely to need training in this area. Cmar (2019), writing for students with visual impairments, suggests this training along with further accommodation by teachers, will be necessary before students can benefit from these interventions.

Intervention duration

Interventions can vary substantially in duration. Burke et al. (2020) notes that, among studies which reported this information, the duration of the entire intervention ranged from two to 104 weeks, with the most frequent duration being eight weeks. The duration of individual sessions also ranged between 30 and 190 minutes. Gelber et al. (2020) observe that interventions can last between eight and 24 weeks, or as short as a few days. Raley et al. (2018) list standalone curricula lasting from 10 weeks to three years.

How are outcomes assessed?

Post-intervention outcomes are often assessed using a validated measure. As with interventions themselves, assessments may assess improvement in one component of self-determination, or in overall self-determination. Burke et al. (2020) identified 12 studies which measured overall change in self-determination using a validated measure. They identified 18 studies measuring change in one or more components, either using a validated measure or a researcher-created measure. Four studies measured both overall self-determination and improvement in one or more components.

The most common assessments used are the Self-Determination Student Scale (17 papers), AIR Self Determination Scale (16 papers), Goal Attainment Scaling (12 papers), and the ARC Self-Determination Scale (nine papers).

In addition to using validated measures, studies may also link the success of an intervention to transition or post-school outcomes (eg achievements in employment, education and independent living). For example, Burke et al. (2020) identify 24 studies using these outcomes, in addition to a validated measure. However, not all studies have explored links between interventions aiming to improve self-determination and post-school outcomes, so the association between them is not clear.

In a few cases, some studies used social validity (eg using student and teacher feedback forms) to determine whether an intervention resulted in a positive outcome. Although they are occasionally reported, these assessments are not considered as informative or reliable as validated measures.

Caution is required even when using a validated measure. Gelbar et al. (2020) discuss whether it is appropriate to use validated assessment tools with college students, since most assessment tools do not have norming data from this population. For example, the Self Determination Student Scale was normed on secondary school students, and the ARC Self Determination Scale was normed on secondary students with cognitive disabilities. Similar points are likely to be relevant when selecting an assessment to use with deaf young people.

However, there are two recently published instruments measuring self-determination that do include college students with disabilities in their norming sample. These are the Self Determination Assessment-internet (SDAi) and the Self Determination Inventory Self-Report (SDI:SR).

Are these interventions effective?

To determine effectiveness, Cmar (2019) refers to guidelines listed at the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition ([NTACT](#)), which was developed by the Council for Exceptional Children's Division for Research. These guidelines serve as an indication of the level of research evidence obtained for each intervention. Here, interventions are grouped into four levels based on research evidence available (from highest to lowest).

1. **Evidence-based practices:** considered to have been evaluated thoroughly and associated with improved outcomes.
2. **Research-based practice:** sufficiently successful in improving student outcomes.
3. **Promising practices:** may have been researched rigorously but appear to demonstrate some improvement in outcomes.
4. **Unestablished practices:** rooted in anecdotal evidence rather than research.

Some interventions described in Section 5 are listed on NTACT's website. The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) is described as an evidence-based practice for teaching goal-attainment, and Whose Future Is It Anyway? (WFA) is described as a research-based practice for teaching self-determination skills.

Generally speaking, intervention outcomes tend to be positive. For example, Burke et al. (2020) conclude that self-determination training can be useful for transition planning. In their review, 77% of studies focus on transition-age students and all studies showed an improvement in overall self-determination, or a skill associated with self-determination. Sanderson and Goldman (2020) demonstrated that interventions led to improved participation in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings (measured as speaking more often) although this was not always significant.

Similarly, Raley et al. (2018) attribute positive outcomes to the use of the five curricula. Although one study showed no significant changes in self-determination scores, students' perception of their autonomy did improve. Skills not associated with self-determination can also show improvement (eg students' knowledge of the transition planning process and self-efficacy for educational planning).

Burke et al. (2020) refer to another narrative synthesis by Cobb et al (2009) which suggested that multicomponent interventions yielded a greater positive effect than single component interventions on self-determination and academic productivity.

Interventions that are repeated over a longer period of time (eg two years) appear to be more effective than shorter, time-limited interventions. Wehmeyer et al. (2012), as reported in Shogren et al. (2016), found improvement in self-determination among high school students after using the SDLMI over a two-year period. When self-determination scores at the beginning of the intervention are compared to scores at the end of the first year, there was only a minor improvement. They suggest that growth in self-determination emerges after repeatedly using the SDLMI to set and attain goals.

Despite positive outcomes, the research evidence for interventions can sometimes be described as limited because there are only a small number of papers assessing these interventions according to specific outcomes. Although Gelbar et al. (2020) identified 100 papers describing the use of interventions for improving self-determination in college-aged students, only nine papers tested the impact of interventions on outcomes. Similarly, Raley et al. (2018) find that the use of the five curricula examined in their review is only supported by seven studies published in the last 16 years. Lastly, 14 out of the 19 interventions identified in this review were only tested in one paper.

5. Specific description of selected interventions

In this section, we provide a brief description of five interventions listed in these systematic reviews. As these reviews were more frequently reported and widely used, more evidence and insights are available.

Table 2: Frequency of five interventions across four papers

Assessment	Number of papers reporting findings from a specific intervention			
	Burke et al. (2020)	Raley et al. (2018)	Cmar (2019)	Sanderson and Goldman (2020)
Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI)	12	-	4	-
Whose Future Is It Anyway? (WFA)	2	4	2	-
Self-Directed Individualized Education Program (SD-IEP)	1	1	3	1
Self-Advocacy Strategy (SAS)	2	-	3	-
NEXT STEP Curriculum (NSC)	1	1	-	1

Gelbar et al. (2020) and Cmar and Markoski (2019) are absent from Table 2 because they did not name specific interventions.

Although most papers assessed the outcome of a single intervention, two papers looked at the impact of several interventions. For example, Wehmeyer et al. (2013), as reported in Raley et al. (2018) and Burke et al. (2020), used five curricula associated with self-determination within a single study (including WFA, SAS and SDLMI). Teachers were able to choose which curriculum to use based on need. Although this appears to be an option, these two papers have been excluded because it is difficult to attribute outcomes to a single intervention. However, these studies also report improvement in self-determination overall.

Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI)

The SDLMI is widely used and appears in 16 papers overall. It is a teaching model which teaches self-direction and self-regulation. It is a multicomponent intervention designed to improve self-determination globally. Teachers are provided a framework for organising lessons into three phases: setting goals,

taking action, and adjusting goals and planning accordingly. As it is a framework, it can be broadly applied (eg within or outside of the classroom). Raley et al. (2018) suggest that models of teaching like the SDLMI may be more appropriate for promoting aspects of self-determination when compared to standalone curricula, because of the lack of research supporting the latter.

SDLMI has been assessed widely and is associated with positive outcomes:

- It is described in Burke et al. (2020:185) as “an effective intervention for teachers working to integrate skills associated with self-determination, particularly self-regulated problem solving in service to goals with a high level of flexibility”.
- It is linked to positive outcomes for high school students with disabilities (eg greater access to general education curriculum, increased classroom participation, greater goal attainment and higher self-determination) (Cmar, 2019).
- It is listed by the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) as an evidence-based practice for [teaching goal attainment](#).

The materials associated with SDLMI are [widely available](#).

Whose Future Is It Anyway? (WFA)

This intervention is listed in eight papers. This is a standalone curriculum which aims to improve student involvement in the transition planning process (eg in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings). IEP meetings are mandatory in the United States, held once a year for all students with disabilities, eligible for special education/related services. These meetings aim to devise an educational plan that reflects the needs and interests of the student. Parents, teachers and service providers are in attendance and students aged 16 or over are also invited to attend.

The curriculum consists of 36 sessions where students are taught skills associated with self-determination (eg self-awareness, disability awareness, setting goals and finding resources). Raley et al. (2018) note that the WFA is the most frequently used curriculum in their review of standalone curricula.

Positive outcomes can be associated with the use of the WFA curriculum:

- Two studies in Burke et al. (2020) reported positive improvements in self-determination.
- All four studies in Raley et al. (2018) using the WFA also reported improvement. In one study, those who used technology to access WFA demonstrated significant improvement in comparison to those who did not.
- WFA has been evaluated in group experimental studies involving middle and high school students with intellectual and learning disabilities with positive results (Cmar, 2019).
- [WFA](#) is listed as a research-based practice for teaching self-determination skills, and as a promising practice for teaching student knowledge of transition planning by the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT).

It is available to download for free from [here](#).

Self Advocacy Strategy (SAS)

The SAS is an intervention aimed at improving self-determination and to help students prepare for education or transition planning meetings (eg Individualized Education Program meetings (IEP) meetings). It consists of seven instructional stages intended to increase a student's sense of control and empowerment. Through these stages, students identify their strengths, where they can improve, and engage in planning for their education and transition goals. Students are also encouraged to share these details during meetings and communicate their goals.

Outcomes associated with SAS were described in five papers across two reviews and tend to be positive.

- Improvements were generally reported in Burke et al. (2020), although one study reported that these improvements did not reach significance.
- Cmar (2019) lists studies which indicate that SAS has been effective in increasing involvement of high school students with various disabilities in their IEP meetings.
- SAS is listed as a research-based practice for teaching student involvement in IEP meetings by the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT).

More information regarding the SAS and how it can be implemented is available from [NTACT's website](#).

Self-Directed Individualized Education Program (SD-IEP)

The SD-IEP is a standalone curriculum designed to assist students in managing their IEP meeting. Students are guided through 11 steps leading up to an IEP meeting (eg begin meeting by stating its purpose, do introduction, review previous goals). These steps teach students the leadership skills required to manage their meetings by communicating their interests and goals effectively. Students are taught to break their goals into a series of achievable actions that result in attainment of the final goal.

Outcomes associated with the SD-IEP are described in six papers.

- Two papers in Burke et al. (2020) report significant improvement in self-determination following the use of SD-IEP.
- One paper in Raley et al. (2018) reported no significant changes in self-determination scores. However, students showed an increase in their perception of their autonomy following the intervention.
- Based on three papers, Cmar (2019) described this intervention as effective in increasing leadership skills for high school students with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities and visual impairments.
- In one study listed in Sanderson and Goldman (2020), the SD-IEP was effective in encouraging greater participation in IEP meetings.
- [The SD-IEP](#) is considered a research-based practice for teaching student involvement in IEP meetings by the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT).

The SD-IEP is available as a multimedia intervention package consisting of a teacher's manual, student workbook and two videos. It is available to [download](#).

NEXT STEP Curriculum (NSC)

The NSC is a standalone (self-directed) curriculum that teaches students skills in transition planning. Over 19 lessons, students self-evaluate their skills and choose goals across four domains (personal life, education, employment, living on your own). The lessons aim to prepare students for personal transition planning meetings and then take action while monitoring progress.

Outcomes associated with this review were generally positive.

- In one study reported in Burke et al. (2020), participants in the treatment group showed more improvement in overall self-determination following the intervention than the control group.
- Results in Raley et al. (2018) appear mixed. Students who received the intervention showed more positive patterns in self-determination, but results varied depending on the assessment used.
- Results were described as favourable in Sanderson and Goldman (2020). Despite limited information on study design, results were favourable towards those who received the intervention (measured as improved participation by students with mild intellectual disabilities in Individualized Education Program meetings).
- NSC is not listed on the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) website.

The NSC is available for purchase [here](#).

6. Interventions for deaf students

We conducted an additional search for studies focusing specifically on deaf students. This search identified a PhD thesis which looks at the application of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) for deaf middle and high school students in the United States (Spolsky, 2014). A copy of this thesis is available [here](#) and there is a brief description below.

The intervention lasted five to six weeks and consisted of five interviews between the student and teacher using the SDLMI model. The study involved three Teachers of the Deaf at two public high schools and one middle school. There were 22 students involved (six middle school students and 16 high school students). Teachers of the Deaf were provided with training prior to implementing the SDLMI intervention. Student outcomes were assessed using the American Institutes of Research Self-Determination Scale (AIR-SDS) and the Adolescent Self-Determination Assessment Short Form (ASDA).

Spolsky (2014) did not find a strong association between the use of SDLMI and improvement in self-determination and goal attainment. Students, however, already had high levels of self-determination prior to the intervention. The intervention was also delivered over a short period of time. Longer and repeated interventions may have a more marked effect on self-determination levels. Students and teachers gave positive feedback on the use of SDLMI. The students felt that the SDLMI improved their ability to set goals and helped them with their learning at school.

Spolsky (2014) suggests that future research using the SDLMI with deaf students with lower levels of self-determination should be conducted. These interventions need to be of appropriate length and intensity to allow students to properly internalise self-determined behaviours and show improvement.

The SDLMI is recommended for use by the National Deaf Center for Postsecondary Outcomes (NDC) (see www.nationaldeafcenter.org/self-determination-inventory).

NDC also recommend the use of a [Choose Your Future! Activity Kit](#) which aims to encourage students to prepare for transitions by discussing their strengths, needs and interests. The kit assists them in identifying goals that align with their preferences. The Choose Your Future! Activity Kit appears to be supplemented with [Deafverse](#), a free online game that provides “a safe space to practise applying self-determination skills at home, in school, and in the community”.

Information on the effectiveness of these measures does not appear to be available and it is unclear if they have been researched. However, these interventions appear to be a good model to consider going forward since they are designed for use with deaf students.

As well as interventions, it is also necessary to consider available assessment tools. As mentioned above, Gelbar et al. (2020) warn that some assessment tools may not be appropriate for specific populations (eg some tools have been normed using data from secondary school students and may not be suitable for college-aged students).

There are few tools available for use with deaf students. The Self Determination Inventory Self-Report (SDI:SR) is used by the University of Manchester for the [READY Study](#) to look at changes in self-determination (a research study following young deaf people over a period of five years to understand the varied pathways they take and associated factors). An American Sign Language (ASL) version is available at the [National Deaf Center's website](#). This measure is in addition to AIR-SDS and ASDA used in Spolsky (2014).

7. Conclusion

Based on the six review papers, there is limited evidence as to how effective these interventions may be for deaf young people. Cmar (2019), in considering whether specific interventions may be appropriate for students with visual impairments, concludes that as papers provide limited information on disability, it is difficult to say which intervention would be beneficial to students with visual impairments. In addition, Cmar (2019) states that all interventions need to be evaluated to see what pre-teaching, supplementary instruction and accommodations might be required. A similar conclusion could be made here when considering possible interventions for use with deaf students.

There are few papers assessing the impact on interventions aimed at improving self-determination in deaf young people. One study investigates the use of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) and provides limited evidence of its effectiveness. However, this is attributed to the intervention being given to participants who already displayed a high level of self-determination and over a short period of time. Therefore, further research with deaf

young people is needed. Other interventions listed on the National Deaf Center for Postsecondary Outcomes (eg Choose Your Future! Activity Kit) were also identified through research, though assessments of their effectiveness do not appear to be available.

8. References

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