Culture and Self-Determination: A Synthesis of the Literature and Directions for Future Research and Practice

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What is This?
Culture and Self-Determination: A Synthesis of the Literature and Directions for Future Research and Practice

Karrie A. Shogren

Abstract
Self-determination has received significant attention in the special education field, but scholars’ knowledge of how culturally and linguistically diverse learners and their families perceive interventions to promote self-determination remains limited. Understanding how the construct is perceived in diverse cultures is critically important given the growing diversity of society. This article reviewed existing research and scholarship examining the relation between culture and self-determination in students with disabilities. In all, 10 theoretical, review, and research articles that specifically addressed this topic were identified. Generally, the body of scholarship suggests that the self-determination construct could have universal value if a flexible framework that considers cultural and systems-level variables is utilized to develop individualized interventions. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords
self-determination, culture, transition

Supporting the development of self-determination for transition-age youth with disabilities has received widespread attention within the field of special education. Self-determination has been identified both as a means of enabling students with disabilities to achieve valued life outcomes and as a valued life outcome in and of itself (Wehmeyer, Aber, Mithaug, & Stancliffe, 2003). Researchers have suggested that youth who are more self-determined when leaving high school experience more positive adult outcomes than youth who are less self-determined (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). A growing body of literature has established the efficacy of a variety of instructional methods and curricula to promote the self-determination skills of students with a wide range of disabilities (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar, & Alwell, 2009; Test et al., 2009). One issue, however, that has yet to be explored in extensive detail within the special education literature is considerations related to the application of the self-determination construct to culturally diverse youth.

Researchers have identified potential benefits of self-determination for diverse youth but have also argued that current interventions do not adequately address cultural issues (Trainor, Lindstrom, Simon-Burroughs, Martin, & Sorrells, 2008). A contributing factor to the lack of consideration of cultural issues in the design and implementation of self-determination interventions may be the difficulty inherent to defining cultural diversity and, therefore, specific variables related to culture that must be considered when designing and implementing self-determination interventions. Although often mistakenly equated with categorical labels (e.g., Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, etc.), one’s cultural identity is shaped by multiple factors that interact across multiple contexts and institutions. Trainor et al. (2008), in a position paper on diversity for the Division on Career Development and Transition, acknowledged this complexity and proposed the adoption of an ecological framework to explore cultural issues in educational contexts. Specifically, the authors acknowledged the “inclusive and interacting nature” (p. 57) of cultural identities and cited several factors that can contribute to an individual’s cultural identity, including gender, disability, race/ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic background. Furthermore, they describe how certain cultural identities have shared experiences of oppression, exclusion, and poor postsecondary outcomes that necessitate specific attention to reduce
oppression and exclusion and increase valued life outcomes. And individuals do not live in a vacuum; one’s experiences and cultural identity are shaped through the multiple systems within which one lives, learns, works, and plays. These multiple systems include the immediate social setting (e.g., the individual and his or her family, teachers, and peers—the microsystem); the neighborhood, community, educational system, and organizations providing supports and services (the mesosystem); and the overarching patterns of culture and society (the macro system; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Trainor et al., 2008).

Understanding the multiple factors that define one’s cultural identity as well as the multiple systems that filter the influence of culture on self-determination interventions is a complex task but necessary to further our understanding and enhance our ability to design and implement culturally responsive self-determination interventions that promote positive adult outcomes for all students. The purpose of this article is to begin the process of exploring cultural variables that may affect self-determination by reviewing the existing literature on self-determination and culture to provide direction for future research and practice. Specifically, the article synthesizes key themes from the literature on the relationship between self-determination and culture and, based on this synthesis, identifies directions for future research and practice.

Synthesis of the Literature on Culture and Self-Determination

Method

A search of the PsycINFO and ERIC databases was conducted to identify studies published prior to September 2010 that explored the relationship between culture and self-determination in the field of special education. The search terms utilized included self-determination, culture, and special education. Additional articles were identified from the reference sections of the articles identified through the PsycINFO and ERIC searches. To be included in the synthesis, articles had to be published in a peer-reviewed journal and have a primary focus on the relationship between self-determination and culture. To determine the primary focus of the article, abstracts of each article identified through the database and reference search were reviewed. To be included, the abstract had to state that a primary purpose or outcome of the article was to understand the relationship between self-determination and cultural variables or to examine self-determination in a specific cultural context (e.g., Korean culture). Articles that did not state this as an explicit purpose or outcome in the abstract were not included. For example, articles that may have included race/ethnicity as a variable in an analysis of the impact of a self-determination intervention or that mentioned culture as an area for future research in the discussion section were not included if this was not an explicitly stated purpose or outcome in the abstract. Because of the small number of published articles specific to culture and self-determination, both empirical and nonempirical (e.g., theoretical or review articles) were included in the review.

After the initial screening of articles, those that met criteria for inclusion were further reviewed. Key dimensions of the article were identified, including the cultural variables analyzed, the methodology utilized, and the primary conclusions. Table 1 provides an overview of each of these dimensions for the 10 articles that met the criteria for inclusion. The following sections provide an overview of the key findings of the nonempirical articles and empirical articles and then an overview of the key themes that emerged from across the included articles.

Nonempirical Articles

Six of the articles that met criteria for inclusion were nonempirical and were either theoretical examinations of the application of the self-determination to diverse cultures (Frankland, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Blackmountain, 2004; Ohtake & Wehmeyer, 2004; Valenzuela & Martin, 2005) or literature reviews examining the applicability of self-determination research to diverse cultures (Lee & Wehmeyer, 2004; Trainor, 2002; Zhang & Benz, 2006). Three articles explored the application of the self-determination construct to specific cultures: Diné (Navajo) culture (Frankland et al., 2004), Korean culture (Lee & Wehmeyer, 2004), and Japanese culture (Ohtake & Wehmeyer, 2004). The remaining articles explored cultural variables (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, individualist vs. collectivist beliefs) relevant to self-determination in culturally diverse youth in the United States (Trainor, 2002; Valenzuela & Martin, 2005; Zhang & Benz, 2006).

The three articles that explored applications of the self-determination construct to specific cultures used the functional theory of self-determination posited by Wehmeyer (1996, 1998, 2003) to organize their discussion. The functional theory defines self-determination as “volitional actions that enable one to act as the primary causal agent in one’s life and to maintain or improve one’s quality of life” (Wehmeyer, 2005, p. 117). Specific behaviors are not what define self-determination; instead, it is whether these behaviors are used by the individual to work toward self-selected goals that improve his or her quality of life. Each of the authors discussed how the functional theory of self-determination provided a flexible framework to explore how diverse behaviors specific to a cultural identity could still be considered self-determining so long as these behaviors were self-selected to improve quality of life.
Table 1. Summary of Articles With a Primary Focus on Culture and Self-Determination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Cultural Variables Analyzed</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Primary Conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frankland et al. (2004)</td>
<td>Examined the application of the self-determination construct to Diné (Navajo) culture</td>
<td>Theoretical article that analyzed the application of the four essential characteristics of self-determination (autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, self-realization) to Diné culture</td>
<td>Self-determination is “highly relevant” (p. 203) but must consider impact of colonization, acculturation, and family structure. Need to adopt a “flexible” self-determination perspective to promote cross-cultural discussions of self-determination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leake and Boone (2007)</td>
<td>Explored the perceptions of teachers, parents, and youth with EBD who self-identified as Black, Asian, Filipino, Hawaiian, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, or White in Hawaii and Washington D.C.</td>
<td>Qualitative study conducted 20 focus groups with teachers, parents, and youth. Focus groups were conducted by trained peer facilitators. Standard set of probe questions about goals, role models, family influence, etc.</td>
<td>Key themes: family as a value, child rearing and opportunities for self-determination, education as a value, decision making within families, generational conflict over transition goals, independence vs. interdependence. Most participants, across ethnicities, expressed individualistic and collectivist values. CLD participants were more likely to describe commitment or responsibility to their families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee and Wehmeyer (2004)</td>
<td>Examined the application of self-determination construct to Korean culture</td>
<td>Reviewed Korean literature on self-determination identified key themes—relationship between self-determination and special education issues; impact of student, family, and teacher variables on self-determination; and the efficacy of interventions to promote self-determination.</td>
<td>Self-determination has been linked to inclusion and quality of life in Korean literature. Preliminary research suggests efficacy of interventions to promote specific skills associated with self-determination. More research is needed examining how self-determination can be operationalized in Korean culture and its special education system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainor (2002)</td>
<td>Examined application of self-determination practice to CLD learners in the United States</td>
<td>Reviewed literature on application of self-determination to transition. Explored gaps in literature. Explored ways to expand knowledge of cultural values and self-determination.</td>
<td>Application of self-determination emphasizes cultural values (independence, equity, and normalization) that may not be universal. Research has not evaluated the application of interventions to students who are CLD. Models of self-determination need to expand to include cultural components.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trainor (2005) Explored perceptions of self-determination held by European American, African American, and Hispanic American male adolescents with learning disabilities in the United States

Valenzuela and Martin (2005) Examined application of a modified version of the Self-Directed IEP to learners who embrace collectivist values in the United States


Zhang and Benz (2006) Summarized research on self-determination, transition, and diversity

Zhang et al. (2005) Analyzed U.S. and Taiwanese parents and teachers self-determination practices based on age and nationality

Trainor (2005) Qualitative study
Conducted focus groups, individual interviews, review of IEP or ITP, and observations of IEP or ITP meetings
Lack of connection between ITP goals and student’s self-reported plans for the future
Students did not feel teachers were supportive of their attempts to be self-determining; reported more support from parents and in home environment
Limited differences in experience of self-determination across cultural groups, but limited opportunities at school for all students

Valenzuela and Martin (2005) Review of individualist and collectivist values
Theoretical examination of how cultural sharing can be embedded in Self-Directed IEP curriculum
Self-Directed IEP can be a vehicle for cultural sharing
Need for greater focus on interdependence, community supports, and family-centered planning in self-determination instruction

Zhang (2005) Quantitative, survey study
Recruited a convenience sample of parents to complete a survey of self-determination practices at home
Used independent t tests and one-way ANOVAs to evaluate differences based on immigrations status, family income level, special education status, gender, race, and parent education level
Families from Western cultures emphasized independence more than families from non-Western cultures
Exposure to Western culture tends to increase self-determination awareness and practices
Parents with more education provide more opportunities for choice and decision-making
Parents of children without disabilities more likely to provide opportunities for self-determination

Zhang and Benz (2006) Reviewed research on self-determination, transition outcomes, and diversity
Provided suggestions for parent or teacher practices to promote self-determination
Connection between self-determination and positive adult outcomes
Some research suggests that self-determination is a universally accepted phenomenon
Need to evaluate perspectives of families from diverse cultures
Need teachers to be knowledgeable of effective strategies for working with families

Zhang et al. (2005) Quantitative, survey study
Parents and teachers completed survey rating frequency with which they engaged in behavior to foster self-determination
Conducted multiple ANOVAs to evaluate differences based on country of origin, role (parent or teacher), and age of student (elementary or secondary)
More emphasis on self-determination at secondary level in both U.S. and Taiwan
No significant differences in teacher promotion of self-determination in the United States and Taiwan
Parents in the United States promoted more self-determination at home than Taiwanese parents
Need for additional research examining multiple contexts (e.g., home and school) where self-determination can be promoted

EBD = emotional and behavioral disorder; CLD = culturally and linguistically diverse; ITP = individual transition plan; IEP = individualized education program.
For example, Frankland et al. (2004) focused on Diné (Navajo) culture and examined the degree to which the four essential characteristics of self-determined behavior (autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization) identified by Wehmeyer, Kelchner, and Richards (1996) in the functional theory of self-determination were relevant in Diné culture. Frankland et al. concluded that there were universal aspects of the self-determination construct but emphasized that some of these aspects would be operationalized in different ways in the Diné culture. For example, in Diné culture autonomy tends to be operationalized as fulfilling family and clan roles rather than individual roles. Frankland et al. assert that engaging in actions to advance the family and the tribe can still be characterized as self-determining, as the person is making the decision to apply his or her skills to familial goals, just as a person focused on advancing his or her individual goals is making a choice about the actions that will promote his or her quality of life.

Lee and Wehmeyer (2004) focused on the application of the self-determination construct in Korean special education practice. They identified a small but wide-ranging body of Korean research that has focused on self-determination. They concluded that there was support for instruction related to self-determination in the Korean context and that the functional theory has the potential to serve as a framework for developing interventions to support self-determination. They also emphasized that (a) more research was needed within the Korean context to examine how skills associated with self-determination can be operationalized in Korean special education practice, (b) students and families needed to be educated and empowered about self-determination, (c) educational and social policy to support self-determination needed to be strengthened, and (d) preparation for general and special education teachers needed to include more of a focus on self-determination.

Ohtake and Wehmeyer (2004) considered the application of self-determination to Japanese special education practices. They analyzed various “exemplary practices” that have been identified by the Japanese special education system (i.e., identify and build on students’ interests and preferences, promote goal-oriented behaviors, promote independence as well as collaboration, foster achievement) and linked self-determination instruction based on the functional theory of self-determination to advancement of each of these exemplary practices. The authors concluded that, generally, self-determination has applicability to the Japanese context. However, because of the focus on “corporate” self-determination in Japanese culture (i.e., advancing group or national interests and goals rather than personal interests and goals), the degree to which practices to support personal self-determination are actually implemented remains limited. Ohtake and Wehmeyer suggested that it is critically important to recognize the influence of both individualistic and collectivist values on Japanese special education practices. They developed a four-step process to consider when applying theories such as self-determination that are developed in cultures other than Japanese culture: (a) develop a deep understanding of the theory, (b) explore cultural values embedded in the theory, (c) focus on similarities and overlap with existing theories and practices, and (d) identify and address possible negative influences of different value systems.

Each of these articles emphasized that specific behaviors associated with self-determination can differ across cultures and that in Diné, Korean, and Japanese culture more emphasis may be placed on clan or family (e.g., collectivist) goals than on individual goals. However, the authors asserted that a person can still experience self-determination while pursuing collectivist goals so long as the individual is making decisions to pursue these goals to improve his or her quality of life. However, all articles also emphasized that this way of understanding self-determination differs from the way that self-determination is often operationalized in practice and that change will be needed across multiple systems to enable the implementation of self-determination instruction that embraces diverse cultural values and provides opportunities for the operationalization of diverse self-determination behaviors.

The remaining three articles analyzed the application of self-determination to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) youth in the United States. For example, Zhang and Benz (2006) reviewed research examining effects of self-determination on drop-out rates and postschool outcomes in students with and without disabilities and concluded that self-determination had potential for addressing the poor transition outcomes experienced by CLD students with disabilities in the United States. They then highlighted strategies for applying self-determination to students of diverse race/ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses and concluded that self-determination is important to individuals from diverse cultures and that it is “to [a] certain extent . . . a universally accepted phenomenon” (p. 10), similar to the conclusions of Frankland et al. (2004), Lee and Wehmeyer (2004), and Ohtake and Wehmeyer (2004). Zhang and Benz also emphasized that not all current instructional practices related to self-determination would be applicable to CLD students and that self-determination instruction needs to be expanded to include multicultural values. Furthermore, they argued that research is needed across the multiple systems that affect CLD youth, including the family system and educational system, to determine how families from diverse cultures promote self-determination and how teacher training models might incorporate specific training on self-determination and working with CLD families.
Trainor (2002) also explored the literature on self-determination but focused on how instruction to promote self-determination is typically operationalized in the United States (i.e., promoting independence and self-advocacy, involvement in individualized education program [IEP] meetings) and how this may conflict with values of CLD students and their families. Trainor argued that more emphasis must be placed on developing an understanding of preferences and expectations of CLD students and their families regarding self-determination. She suggested parents may provide opportunities for self-determination that differ from traditional benchmarks of self-determination instruction. Trainor’s assertions are congruent with those of Frankland et al. (2004), Lee and Wehmeyer (2004), Ohtake and Wehmeyer (2004), and Zhang and Benz (2006) that current operationalizations of self-determination instruction may not be relevant for CLD students. However, although the other authors focused on how self-determination could have universal applicability if a flexible perspective was utilized, Trainor did not reach the same conclusion based on current operationalizations of self-determination in practice. She emphasized that research that incorporates the perspectives of diverse students and families is needed to determine if and how culturally responsive self-determination interventions could be operationalized. She discussed that the majority of research represents “dominant group” perspectives and that “we do not really know the preferences, expectations, and needs of CLD families” (p. 723).

All of the previous articles criticized the lack of specific consideration of cultural values in current operationalizations of self-determination instruction. Valenzuela and Martin (2005) examined a specific self-determination curriculum, Self-Directed IEP (Martin, Marshall, Maxson, & Jerman, 1996), to determine how it could be modified to support students and their families who embrace collectivist values. Valenzuela and Martin described how the instructional units associated with the Self-Directed IEP curriculum (self-awareness, decision making, self-advocacy, independent performance, and time) are traditionally operationalized in individualist cultures as well as how these skills could be operationalized in collectivist cultures. They focused on how outcomes often embraced by diverse families, such as interdependence, group decision making, and developing a family or group identity, could be embedded in the process of supporting students and their families to use the Self-Directed IEP framework.

**Empirical Articles**

Four additional articles empirically examined issues of self-determination and culture. Two studies used survey methods and quantitative analyses (Zhang, 2005; Zhang, Wehmeyer, & Chen, 2005) and two studies used focus group methodology and qualitative analyses (Leake & Boone, 2007; Trainor, 2005).

**Quantitative studies.** Zhang and colleagues (Zhang, 2005; Zhang et al., 2005) conducted two studies examining the impact of culture on parents’ and teachers’ promotion of self-determination. In the first study, Zhang (2005) surveyed parents of students with and without disabilities in the United States on the degree to which they promoted self-determined behavior at home. Using convenience sampling, Zhang identified Caucasian, Asian, African American, and Hispanic parents and examined differences based on special education status as well as race/ethnicity, immigration status, and socioeconomic status. Although interpretation of the results was limited by a small sample size in the Hispanic parent group and an overrepresentation of parents with advanced degrees in the Asian parent group, Zhang did identify several potential areas that may be important to consider in future research. First, parents of children without disabilities tended to provide more opportunities for their children to practice the skills associated with self-determination than parents of children with disabilities. However, Caucasian and nonimmigrant parents were more likely to involve their children in activities that promoted self-determination in the home and community (e.g., participation in household chores, interaction with salespeople). Contrary to Zhang’s expectations, Asian and immigrant parents were not more likely than Caucasian parents to emphasize parental authority in the home. Zhang suggested these findings reflect a growing emphasis on self-determination across cultures. In additional analyses, Zhang found that parents’ level of education also influenced the degree to which they promoted self-determination; the more educated parents were, the more they tended to involve their children in household choices and decisions. Zhang concluded that multiple factors influence the degree to which parents support self-determined behavior in the home, and when working with students and their families, individualized planning and support will be critical.

In a second study, Zhang et al. (2005) examined the degree to which parents and teachers of students with disabilities promoted self-determined behavior in the United States and Taiwan. Parents and teachers of 203 students with disabilities in the United States and of 99 students with disabilities in Taiwan completed a survey that elicited information about the frequency with which parents and teachers engaged in specific practices to promote self-determined behavior (e.g., opportunities to make choices and decisions, to set goals) at home and at school. The sample included parents and teachers of elementary and secondary students, who completed slightly different versions of the survey based on the age of their child or student. Zhang and colleagues conducted multiple analyses to examine the impact of multiple respondent characteristics. Their primary findings were teachers tended to report higher levels of engagement in promoting of self-determined behavior than parents in both the United States and Taiwan. Parents in the United States, however,
tended to report more engagement in the promotion of self-determined behavior at both the elementary and secondary levels than parents in Taiwan. As in the previous study, the authors suggested that this finding may be related to different cultural values and the impact of these values on parenting style. Zhang et al. suggested that additional research is needed to further our understanding of how families from diverse cultural backgrounds promote self-determined behavior in the home as well as to identify ways that professionals can support parents to implement strategies to promote self-determination in the home that respect each family’s cultural values.

**Qualitative studies.** Trainor (2005) conducted a qualitative study examining the perceptions of self-determination held by European American, African American, and Hispanic American male adolescents with learning disabilities in the United States. Using focus groups, individual interviews, observations of transition planning meetings, and reviews of IEP goals, Trainor attempted to develop a greater understanding of how diverse students perceived self-determination and the transition planning process. Trainor found more similarities than differences across the diverse participants; the majority of participants were uninvolved in their formal (school-based) transition planning process, articulated goals during interviews that were incongruent with the goals specified in their IEP or individual transition plan (ITP), and felt that teachers were not responsive to, or facilitative of, their efforts to be self-determining. The majority of participants reported that their primary source of support in developing the skills associated with self-determination was their family. Because students experienced such limited opportunities to practice self-determination at school, Trainor concluded that it was difficult to identify potential differences based on culture. However, Trainor highlighted a few findings that gave “hints that participants with varying cultural identities did perceive and experience self-determination differently” (p. 243). For example, Trainor reported that the majority of Hispanic American participants, during the focus group or individual interview, stated that they wanted to live at home after high school, but they had goals in their IEP or ITP documents that focused on independent living. This may imply that teachers were focusing more on mainstream values and goals (e.g., independent living) for all students rather than goals that are congruent with the individual’s cultural or familial values.

Finally, Leake and Boone (2007) attempted to build on previous research on the perceptions of self-determination held by individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, most notably Trainor (2005), and further explore multicultural perceptions of self-determination. Using a participatory action research framework, Leake and Boone convened 20 focus groups in the United States in Hawaii and Washington, D.C. Each focus group comprised teachers, parents, or students aged 13 to 24 with emotional and/or behavioral disorders who self-identified as Black, Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese), Filipino, Hawaiian, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, or White. Focus groups were “ethnically uniform” (p. 106) to the maximum degree possible, and trained peer facilitators conducted each of the focus groups (e.g., a trained youth facilitator for the student groups, teacher facilitator for the teacher groups, etc.). Probe questions were developed for the teacher, parent, and student focus groups to guide the discussion (e.g., “Do we need control over their lives?” “What has helped you shape your own life?”).

Leake and Boone (2007) identified six primary themes. The first, *family as a value*, emerged from the tendency of CLD participants to report broader conceptions of family than the “stereotypical nuclear family of the U.S. mainstream” (p. 108) as well as a stronger identification with and commitment to their families. Leake and Boone suggested that CLD students might have or feel that they have obligations and responsibilities to a broader network of people, which could influence their opportunities to pursue self-selected goals. The second, third, and fourth themes (*child rearing and opportunities for self-determination, education as a value, and decision making within families*) emerged from participant comments related to cultural differences in decision making, the emphasis placed on education, and child-rearing practices that affected opportunities that individuals with disabilities have to develop and practice the skills associated with self-determination at home. Leake and Boone suggested that these differing emphases and opportunities at home interact with opportunities provided at school and affect the relevance of self-determination instruction. The fifth theme, *generational conflict over transition goals*, emerged from reports of conflicts between younger and older members of families based on changing societal roles and expectations. When younger generations adopted mainstream U.S. values, including some values associated with self-determination, conflict was at times introduced into the family. The sixth theme, *independence versus interdependence*, was related to the finding that all student participants, irrespective of race/ethnicity, expressed a desire to become more independent. However, CLD student participants were more likely to indicate that their dreams had to be balanced with concern and responsibility for their families.

Leake and Boone (2007) suggested that these themes may be important to consider when attempting to understand the development and expression of self-determination in CLD students. They also stated, however, that all focus group participants, irrespective of their ethnic group, made both “individualistic and collectivistic statements that often shifted, depending on the topic. In other words, most participants [were] not clearly identifiable as either an individualist or a collectivist” (p. 112). Leake and Boone suggested that most participants were actually bicultural or multicultural. They
emphasized the artificiality of the individualist–collectivist dichotomy and the need to consider the complex interplay of macro- and micro-level factors in shaping an individual’s value system and the role of self-determination in that value system.

Synthesis of Key Themes Across Articles

Self-Determined Behavior Can and Does Vary Across Cultural Identities

One theme across all of the included articles was that specific behaviors associated with self-determination varied across cultures. Researchers who analyzed the application of self-determination to Diné, Korean, and Japanese culture emphasized that self-determined behavior in these cultures was more likely to focus on clan or familial goals rather than individual goals. Trainor (2005) and Leake and Boone (2007), in their qualitative studies, also found that familial goals were more likely to be emphasized by CLD students. However, all authors also emphasized cultural identity is multifaceted and shaped by numerous factors. For example, Zhang (2005) and Zhang et al. (2005) found multiple factors related to cultural identity, including disability status, race/ethnicity, education, nationality, and immigration status, influenced the degree to which families promoted specific behaviors associated with self-determination. A clear theme across all articles was that culture matters, but congruent with contemporary understandings of culture, one’s cultural identity is multifaceted and shaped by multiple factors. Thus, to understand self-determined behaviors for an individual students and their family, the majority of authors advocated for a flexible self-determination perspective that works to understand each student and family’s unique value system.

Self-Determination as Operationalized in Practice Is Often Not Culturally Appropriate

A second theme was self-determination instruction was often not operationalized in practice in a way that allowed for a flexible self-determination perspective and diverse self-determined behaviors to be incorporated. Trainor (2002) described specific practices such as student involvement in IEP meetings and promoting self-advocacy as common ways that self-determination is taught in schools but argued this instruction may not always be well aligned with the values of people from diverse cultures. Trainor (2005) also found students often reported feeling instruction was not individualized to their dreams and goals, particularly if their dreams and goals were not aligned with mainstream values (e.g., independent living). Trainor’s (2002, 2005) conclusions are well aligned with those of other researchers, who found self-determination practice often does not embrace diverse values and instead is commonly derived from mainstream values (Frankland et al., 2004; Lee & Wehmeyer, 2004; Ohtake & Wehmeyer, 2004; Zhang & Benz, 2006). Many of the authors identified a need for developing, implementing, and evaluating strategies to modify self-determination interventions to incorporate diverse cultural values. Valenzuela and Martin (2005) began this process by modifying a specific, evidence-based self-determination intervention, the Self-Directed IEP, to be more culturally responsive.

Research Must Include Voices and Practices of Diverse Students and Their Families

A third theme was the need for more research to understand how self-determined behavior is operationalized by diverse families and students. Several authors argued that this is a necessary step in the process of developing and modifying existing self-determination practices. Each of the nonempirical articles that focused on applying of self-determination in specific cultures (Diné, Korean, and Japanese) emphasized that more work is needed to identify how self-determined behavior is operationalized in such cultures to provide guidance on how to teach and support students to develop familial goals, for example, when involved in self-determination instruction. And Trainor (2002) and Zhang and Benz (2006) emphasized that voices and perspectives of diverse families must be used to guide modifications to self-determination instructional practices in the United States; Trainor argued that without such research self-determination interventions will likely still be dominated by mainstream values rather than incorporating diverse values. The four empirical articles included in the review identified diverse cultural variables (race/ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, socioeconomic status) that interacted with contextual factors (Leake & Boone, 2007) to shape perceptions of self-determination in student and families. These articles provided preliminary insights into key cultural variables that must be considered.

Change in Multiple Systems Is Needed

A final theme was the need to consider change across the multiple systems that influence diverse students. As described earlier, multiple systems (e.g., family, neighborhood, education, and community) filter the influence of culture on self-determination practice. Several authors (Lee & Wehmeyer, 2004; Ohtake & Wehmeyer, 2004; Zhang, 2005; Zhang et al., 2005) described how change would be needed at the family system level (i.e., micro system) to educate families about self-determination as well as how change would be required in higher education systems and
public schools systems (i.e., meso system) to train teachers to embed cultural variables in self-determination instruction as well as to foster conditions that value culturally responsive self-determination instruction (Leake & Boone, 2007; Lee & Wehmeyer, 2004; Ohtake & Wehmeyer, 2004; Zhang & Benz, 2006; Zhang et al., 2005). Finally, Leake and Boone (2007), Lee and Wehmeyer (2004), and Trainor (2002, 2005) described a need for change in society’s (i.e., macro system) understanding of self-determination, disability, and culture to influence policy and practice across all of the systems that shape an individual’s experiences with self-determination instruction.

**Implications for Future Research and Practice**

This synthesis of the literature identified articles that focused primarily on the relationship between self-determination and culture. Key themes within and across articles were identified and presented. In the following sections, implications of the synthesis for research, practice, and teacher education are described.

**Implications for Research**

A key theme of the articles reviewed on self-determination and culture was cultural variables influence how self-determined behavior is operationalized for students with disabilities and their families. For example, some cultural identities may emphasize familial goals rather than individualistic goals. However, another key theme was that majority of self-determination interventions have been operationalized around mainstream U.S. values which have—in practice—emphasized individualistic goals over familial goals (Trainor, 2002). The majority of authors assert that despite the “typical” operationalization of self-determination instruction, self-determination could contribute to valued life outcomes for students with disabilities if flexible, individualized interventions that addressed cultural variables were developed and implemented in practice.

Clearly, however, multiple barriers to developing, implementing, and evaluating such flexible, individualized interventions exist that must be addressed. First, a review of self-determination literature published between 1972 and 2000 identified 450 peer-reviewed articles (Wood & Test, 2001), and surely the number of articles has grown significantly since then. However, in the present synthesis, only 10 articles were found that focused explicitly on culture and self-determination in the field of special education. And all of these articles were published within a relatively short time frame in the 2000s; the earliest article was published in 2002 and the most recent in 2007. Although additional articles may have briefly discussed issues related to culture and self-determination, it was a primary focus in a very small subset of the literature. Furthermore, a large portion of self-determination intervention studies have been found not to provide data on cultural variables, including racial and ethnic characteristics of the participants, or, if such data are provided, to consider this in the examination of the findings (Wood, Fowler, Uphold, & Test, 2005). At a minimum, more emphasis on cultural variables is needed in all self-determination intervention research. A first step is reporting and analyzing key participant characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status) in all self-determination intervention research. Not only is such reporting an accepted quality indicator for intervention research in special education (Gersten et al., 2005; Horner et al., 2005), but it also allows for the analysis of differential effects of interventions based on cultural variables.

Second, as described earlier, multiple variables interact across diverse systems to shape one’s cultural identity and self-determination beliefs and practices. The current literature base has begun to systematically explore key cultural and system-level variables that influence the operationalization of self-determination in diverse cultures. However, more work is needed to create a comprehensive framework for understanding cultural variables in self-determination research and practice and use this framework to design and evaluate the cultural responsiveness of self-determination practices. Several of the studies included in this review provided preliminary insight into operationalizing self-determination in diverse cultures and argued for a framework for understanding cultural variables and their influence on self-determination. Authors identified specific variables (e.g., disability, nationality, acculturation, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity) that influenced self-determination beliefs and perceptions as well as specific beliefs that may be present in individuals from diverse cultural identities, for example, a focus on the family versus the individual (Frankland et al., 2004; Lee & Wehmeyer, 2004; Ohtake & Wehmeyer, 2004), different goals for life after school—communal living versus independent living (Leake & Boone, 2007; Trainor, 2005)—and less emphasis on individual choices and decisions (Zhang, 2005; Zhang et al., 2005). However, to move from describing how self-determination is operationalized in diverse cultures to designing culturally responsive self-determination interventions, a systematic framework for understanding these variables needs to be developed and evaluated. Such a framework would address the recommendations of the authors of the articles included in this review to identify ways to operationalize a flexible self-determination perspective and incorporate the voices and practices of diverse students and their families. As has been emphasized, cultural identity is a complex construct, and the impact of culture is filtered through multiple systems.
This review provides an initial list of relevant cultural and systems-level variables that could guide the development of such a framework. However, the majority of the included articles were focused on a specific, narrow purpose (e.g., examining self-determination in Korean culture, comparing parent practices in the United States and Taiwan). A more systematic analysis of the broad cultural and systems-level variables that should be included in a framework for conceptualizing culture in self-determination research is needed. For example, Delphi methods could be utilized to identify key cultural and systems-level factors identified by self-determination and multicultural special education researchers and by a sample of diverse students and family members. Such a process could lay the groundwork for researchers to create a comprehensive, ecological framework for investigating effects of the most often identified factors on self-determination interventions. Frameworks, such as those developed by Trainor et al. (2008) for considering the complex nature of culture and its impact on transition practices, can serve as a guide.

After a framework for understanding the impact of culture on self-determination interventions is developed and evaluated, more systematic attention may be able to be directed to addressing key cultural and systems-level variables in self-determination interventions. Knowledge about culturally responsive teaching practices (Dyches, Wilder, Algozzine, & Obiakor, 2007; Hollins & Oliver, 1999) and best practices in multicultural special education (Obiakor, 2007) can inform the development of self-determination interventions that are relevant and meaningful for CLD students. Existing evidence-based practices to promote self-determination that have been identified in the literature (Algozzine et al., 2001; Test et al., 2009) could be modified in ways similar to those suggested by Valenzuela and Martin (2005) for the Self-Directed IEP curriculum. Researchers will need to move beyond theoretical descriptions of modifications and systematically examine the implementation and outcomes of modifications to evidence-based self-determination interventions. Research will be needed to evaluate if incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices in existing self-determination curricula is feasible and, if it is feasible, if it is then effective in promoting student and parent involvement in the identification and implementation of flexible self-determination interventions that lead to the attainment of self-selected postschool outcomes.

Research is also needed to develop strategies for assessing student and family self-determination beliefs and perspectives. The surveys conducted by Zhang and colleagues (Zhang, 2005; Zhang et al., 2005) could provide a starting point for the development of assessment or interview tools that could be used by professionals working with diverse families. In addition, work is needed to develop procedures for matching family self-determination beliefs and practices with culturally responsive training and support to foster self-determination at home. Existing research on promoting self-determination in the home (Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, & Weigel, 2008; Shogren & Turnbull, 2006) could be expanded and evaluated to determine the feasibility of incorporating culturally responsive practices.

**Implications for Practice**

Clearly advances in research are necessary to create strategies that enable developing and implementing culturally responsive self-determination interventions in schools. However, there are also steps that can be taken in practice to implement the flexible self-determination perspective described in several of the articles included in the synthesis. For example, Eisenman and Chamberlin (2001) conducted a cluster evaluation of seven schools taking part in a systems change initiative focused on implementing self-determination activities in schools. They identified several key lessons for schools attempting to operationalize self-determination within their unique school culture. For example, they discussed the importance of school staff taking “time to discuss the multidimensional construction of self-determination and how its components related to what they do in schools and classrooms” (p. 143). Although the authors did not explicitly discuss issues related to culture and the implementation of self-determination instruction, clearly cultural issues and a flexible self-determination perspective could be a part of these discussions. Teachers could brainstorm ways to work on goal-setting activities that focused on individual and/or familial goals based on the types of goals valued by diverse students.

Eisenman and Chamberlin (2001) also identified the need for schools to recognize the influence family members and friends have on self-determination and the multitude of ways family members operationalize self-determination. This is congruent with the theme common to the articles included in this synthesis that families play a key role in shaping cultural identities and operationalizing self-determined behavior. For example, Zhang (2005) and Zhang et al. (2005) found that diverse parents in the United States and Taiwan engaged in efforts to promote self-determination at home. Although there were cultural differences in the frequency of promoting specific behaviors (participation in chores, interacting with salespeople), overall all parents reported that they supported the development of skills like choice making, problem solving, and goal setting, at least occasionally if not frequently.

However, the degree to which teachers report being aware of what parents do in the home to promote self-determination is limited. For example, researchers have found that teachers report an inability to provide data on how parents promote
self-determination in the home (Shogren et al., 2007). Linking instruction at home and school is generally recognized as best practice in special education and is critical to individualizing supports and services (Snell & Brown, 2006). Teachers must use best practices in developing family professional partnerships (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2010) and adopting a posture of cultural reciprocity (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999) to facilitate their use of a flexible self-determination perspective. Only through partnerships and cultural reciprocity can teachers understand and incorporate unique preferences, beliefs, and values held by a student and his or her family. Furthermore, utilizing culturally responsive teaching strategies has potential to ensure interventions are individualized based not only on disability-related support needs but also on cultural values (Dyches et al., 2007).

In addition to family–professional partnerships that focus on self-determination, student–family–professional communication and collaboration also need to be strengthened. It was particularly troubling that Trainor (2005) found such extreme differences between goals students articulated for themselves during focus groups and goals specified in their school-based transition plans—this was particularly prevalent for goals related to transition outcomes in the domains of independent living. This suggests teachers may not be recognizing the unique dreams and aspirations of their students when developing IEP or ITP goals. Instead, they may be focused on domains that are commonly listed on IEP or ITP forms (e.g., employment, independent living) or their perceptions of “appropriate” outcomes for students (which may be influenced by the teachers’ personal values). Teachers must implement best practices in self-determination and transition (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Test et al., 2009) focused on individualizing transition goals and linking the development of these goals to student self-determination.

**Implications for Teacher Education**

Clearly, one question is, how can we support teachers and schools to understand, adopt, and apply such flexible understanding of self-determination? Enhancing research on culture and self-determination is one component, but another critical component is educating teachers about self-determination and the need for a flexible self-determination perspective. Multiple studies have reported that although teachers feel self-determination is important, they also feel poorly trained to promote self-determination. Furthermore, they report acquiring most of their knowledge through workshops or journal articles, not through formal training programs (Grigal, Neubert, Moon, & Graham, 2003; Thoma, Nathanson, Baker, & Tamura, 2002; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000). Research has also shown that personnel preparation programs rarely include instruction in self-determination either as a standalone course or as a core component of other courses (Thoma, Baker, & Saddler, 2002). It seems unrealistic to expect teachers to utilize a flexible self-determination perspective when they have such limited understanding of and experience with the self-determination construct. As recommended by many authors in this review, more focus needs to be directed toward promoting competencies related to self-determination in personnel preparation programs. The present review tells us that a key aspect will be enabling teachers to understand and apply a flexible perspective of self-determination that is individualized to each student’s unique beliefs and values.

**Conclusion**

Given the emphasis placed on self-determination in the special education field and research suggesting a link between enhanced self-determination and valued postschool outcomes, it is critical that all learners, including those who experience cultural and linguistic diversity, have access to culturally responsive self-determination interventions. This review provides initial insight into the multiple factors that define one’s cultural identity as well as the multiple systems that filter the influence of culture on self-determination and provides direction for future research and practice operationalizing a flexible self-determination perspective.

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