

An Exploration of the Self-Determination Construct and Disability as it Relates to the Diné (Navajo) Culture

H. Corine Frankland
Western New Mexico University

Ann P. Turnbull and
Michael L. Wehmeyer
University of Kansas

Lavine Blackmountain
Navajo Nation Department of Vocational Rehabilitation

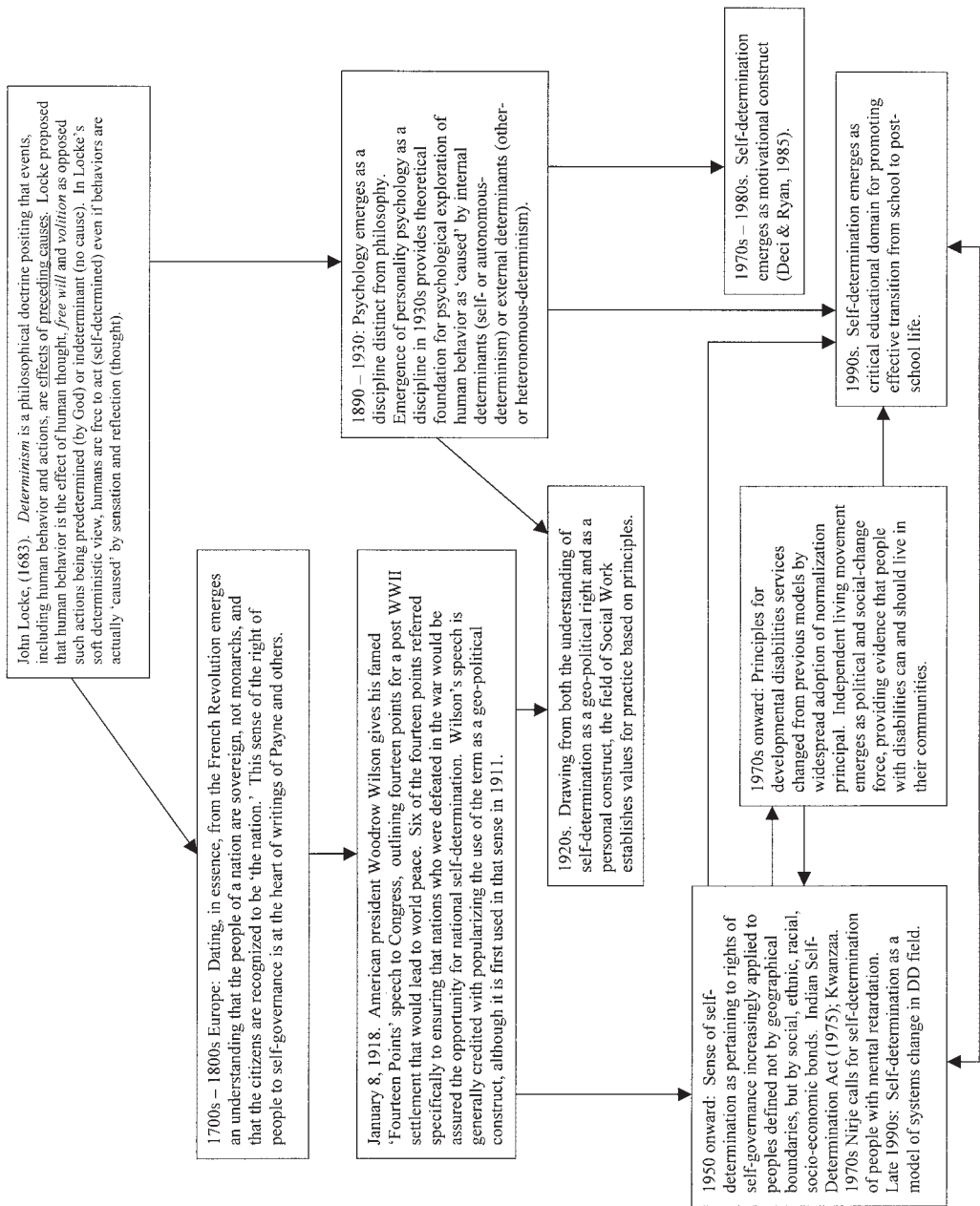
Abstract: Recent literature in the field of transition studies emphasizes importance of creating self-determination supports to promote independence, autonomy, and quality of life in students with disabilities. Much of that literature, however, has not taken cultural and familial factors into consideration. A review of the Navajo family and disability literature indicates that most traditional and semi-traditional Diné (the preferred term for referring to the Navajo people, a term that translates in the Native language to “The People”) indicates that the component elements of self-determined behavior are relevant to and important to Diné people, but that the ways in which these are expressed differs from an Anglo perspective. While the Diné people value self-regulation and autonomy, they are operationalized more in an emphasis on the importance of interdependence and group cohesion above independence and autonomy. This examination of application of self-determination within context of the Diné culture and traditions illustrates the universality of certain aspects of self-determination while at the same time indicating critical need for educational services that reflect cultural, racial, and familial values of the student.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that students with disabilities receive broad-based, outcome-oriented transition services to enable them to pursue a range of post-school options, including: (a) community living, (b) competitive and supportive employment, and (c) vocational training. To ensure decisions made in the transition planning process represent the student's desires and choices, recent emphasis has been placed on providing environmental supports and instruction to foster self-determination. According to Wehmeyer, Kelchner, and Richards (1996), self-determined people must possess four essential characteristics. First, they must be self-realizing. To be self-realizing, persons must have reasonably accurate knowledge of their strengths and limitations within their given environment and act in such a

manner as to capitalize on this knowledge. Second, they must be self-regulating. To be self-regulating, persons must be able to set goals, problem solve, and make decisions regarding their preferences. Third, they must be psychologically empowered. People who are psychologically empowered believe that they possess skills and opportunities to perform certain tasks and behaviors and that their actions will bring positive outcomes. Fourth, they must be empowered to act autonomously. To be autonomous, persons must act according to their own preferences free from undue external influence or interference. Further, it is assumed that as self-determination skills are developed, quality of life and adult outcomes will improve (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997, 1998).

As depicted in Figure 1, the self-determination construct emerged in the late 17th Century as part of the philosophical debate (in England and Europe) concerning determinism (the philosophical doctrine that all behavior is the effect of a cause) and the ‘free-will

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to H. Corine Frankland, Western New Mexico University, Gallup Graduate Studies Center, 2055 State Road 602, Gallup, NM 87301.



problem.’ That is, in its earliest usage, the construct was applied as part of the debate concerning whether humans were free to act (volitional behavior) or whether all human behavior was predetermined by God (theological determinism). As the construct was applied to explain human behavior in other disciplines and domains, particularly psychology (and subsequently social work and education), the construct’s meaning changed slightly to refer to whether behavior was caused by factors internal to the individual (self-determination) or factors external to the individual (other-determination).

In the early 20th Century the constructs usage as pertaining to self-control and self-governance was used to refer to geo-political entities, typically with regard to the rights of the peoples of nations to self-governance. As that century progressed, use of the term to refer to rights of peoples for self-governance and self-control was applied to groups of people who were not citizens of a common country, but instead shared some common background, cause or issue. Among these uses of the geo-political sense of the term was the ongoing struggle by Native Americans for sovereignty and self-governance, codified in the Native American Self-Determination Act, the rights of African-Americans for self-governance (exemplified by the inclusion of one day for self-determination during the African-American holiday Kwanzaa), and proclamations for rights of citizens with disabilities for self-governance and greater autonomy to control resources (Nerney & Schumway, 1996; Nirje, 1972; Vaughn, 1993).

In the early 1990s the U.S. Department of Education initiated a focus on promoting and enhancing the self-determination of children and youth with disabilities (Ward & Kohler, 1996). While geo-political sense of the construct has proved to be quite portable and readily applicable to persons who are denied basic rights to self-governance, personal sense of the term is more complex when considered across cultures and applied to members of non-Anglo-European groups. As the construct has been applied in the fields of disability

services and special education, it is important to note that values inherent in most efforts to promote self-determination are those values associated with Anglo-European cultures and societies (Lynch & Hanson, 1999). These values generally include: (a) personal control over the environment, (b) importance of time, (c) individualism, (d) self-help, (e) competition, (f) future orientation, and (g) goal orientation [U.S. Department of Agriculture & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1986) cited in Lynch & Hanson, 1998].

The self-determination movement in education, as it now can reasonably be called, is growing in both theory and practice and has potential to significantly impact how transition services will be designed and implemented for students with disabilities. Thus, it is critical that attempts to promote self-determination be consistent with cultural orientation and values of each student and family. Recently, the self-determination movement has recognized this need and has determined that any conceptualization of self-determination must recognize and be able to accommodate for wide variations in how self-determination is understood (and, therefore, promoted and enhanced) as a function of a greater variety of cultural and societal factors (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997; Wehmeyer, 1997b).

This paper explores how the theory and practice of self-determination relates to values and beliefs of the Diné people. Topics addressed include: (a) Diné families: Structural and cultural factors, and (b) essential characteristics of self-determined behavior (Wehmeyer, Kelchner, & Richards, 1996) as they relate to the Diné culture and various sub-groups within the Diné tribe. Significance of the paper is in promoting the design and implementation of transition services that are responsive and tailored to specific preferences and needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and in promoting a wider dialogue about such issues.

Figure 1. Emergence of Self-Determination.

Diné Families: Structural and Cultural Factors

Despite 200 years of contact with Anglo-European values and assimilation initiatives, the Diné tribe has, to a remarkable degree, maintained its cultural value system, even though there are differing opinions regarding the importance of formal education, employment, and bi-cultural skills within members of the Diné tribe. Despite current differences that exist among tribal members, however, the Diné language, clan system, and cultural belief system provide a cultural umbrella under which Diné tribal members share important beliefs and cultural connections. As a foundation for exploring the cultural perspective of transition and self-determination initiatives, the following structural factors are explored: (a) resident patterns, (b) socioeconomic status, (c) levels of acculturation, and (d) colonialization factors. Further, cultural factors influencing transition and self-determination are explored, including: (a) Diné family structure and expectations, (b) child development expectations, and (c) expectations as they relate to persons with disabilities.

Structural Factors Influencing Transition and Self-Determination

Resident Patterns

The Diné people live on the largest Indian reservation within the United States. The Diné tribe consists of approximately 270,000 members, of which 165,614 live within the Diné Nation borders (Utah Division of Indian Affairs, 2000). The Diné Nation encompasses 25,000 square miles, approximately the size of the state of West Virginia, and spans across the four states of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah. Despite 200 years of contact with surrounding Anglo society and government influence to assimilate the Diné peoples into mainstream society, the Diné culture is remarkably stable and enduring (Connors & Donnellan, 1998). Today, over 50% of Diné people live in reservation towns of 2000-3000 people, while the other 50% are scattered throughout remote areas of the reservation. Of those tribal members living in rural, remote areas, the majority live in small camps on

land that has been passed down matrilineally. Because losing land is equated with loss of life and security, Diné people living in rural areas make strong efforts to retain their land base, despite the poverty and unemployment that is rampant in such remote areas (O'Connell, Minkler, Dereshiwsy, Guy, & Roanhorse, 1992).

Socioeconomic Status

As is the case with most Indian reservations, poverty rates are high in the Diné Nation and comparable to those found in some underdeveloped third world countries. According to the Utah Division of Indian Affairs (2000), 56% of Diné people live below the poverty line compared to 13% for the total United States population. Additionally, the average annual per capita income for a Diné person in 1990 was \$4,106, compared to the national average of \$19,082.

Today, many Diné families who reside in rural areas within the Diné Nation rely upon sheep, cattle, small gardens, and federal assistance for survival. Due to the remote nature of the rural communities, many communities lack paved roads and other amenities, while homes often lack electricity, running water, and telephones. Although many Diné people endure sparse economic and living conditions, Diné perspectives regarding financial stability are often different from those values held by Anglo-Europeans. For example, many Diné gauge their financial success upon (a) having reliable shelter, (b) a vehicle for transportation, (c) sufficient livestock for personal consumption and sale, and (d) a dependable, united family.

Poor economic conditions on the Diné Nation are exacerbated by a lack of jobs for its tribal members. Annual unemployment rate for the Diné Nation ranges from 36% to over 50% seasonally, compared to the national unemployment rate ranging from roughly 4.0% to 6.0% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003). Primary employment agencies on the reservation are government-funded institutions that include Indian Health Services, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and public schools (Utah Division of Indian Affairs, 2000).

Because work is difficult to find on the reservation, many residents move away from the

reservation to secure employment. From 1980 to 1990, the on-reservation population grew by 22% while the numbers of enrolled Diné tribal members living off the reservation in the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah increased by 124.5%. This significant demographic shift is also evident in nationwide statistics that indicate that Diné people are leaving the comforts of their ancestral lands for employment in cities across the United States (Utah Division of Indian Affairs, 2000).

Acculturation Factors

As a result of Anglo-European attempts to assimilate Diné people into mainstream society over the past 200 years, various levels of acculturation exist within the Diné tribe. Given the complexity of these acculturation factors, it is impossible to assign a specific cultural continuum for Diné tribal members. Despite this difficulty, there is general consensus that variations in Native American beliefs and behaviors can be attributed to the degree of exposure or contact with Anglo-European beliefs and values (Duran & Duran, 1995).

Recognizing the impact of acculturation on Navajo beliefs and behaviors, Connors and Donnellan (1993) provided three levels of acculturation for the Diné people: (a) traditional, (b) semi-traditional, and (c) modern Diné. According to Connors and Donnellan, traditional refers to those Diné whose first language is Diné and who may have limited fluency in the English language. Traditional Diné people most often live in the remote areas of the Diné Nation and rely on livestock and farming. Traditional Diné people often have little to no formal education, adhere to traditional tribal practices, and are often non-Christian. Semi-traditional Diné people are fluent in both Diné and English languages, derive some income from wage work, have at least an eighth grade education, and often combine Christianity with native ceremonies. Semi-traditional Diné people may live in rural areas, but most often live in small towns within the reservation or in towns bordering the reservation. Modern Diné people usually only speak English, profess Christianity or not religion at all, declare ignorance of Diné ways, derive all income from wage work, and have high school and/or some college technical

training. This population often lives in cities off the reservation, apart from their immediate relatives, but maintain close obligatory ties with parents, sisters, and brothers (Connors & Donnellan, 1993, p. 269).

Colonialization Factors Influencing Self-Determination

On August 12, 1868, the United States government entered into the Treaty of 1868 with the Diné tribe. This treaty formally recognized the Diné tribe as a self-governing body and granted homeland to the tribe (Treaty Between the United States of America and the Navajo Indians, article 6, 15 Stat. 667). Although the Diné tribe was recognized as a self-governing body, the United State's Bureau of Indian Affairs served as the manager of tribal finances, schools, and medical facilities.

In 1975, Congress recognized the need for increased self-governance for all Native American tribes. As a result, *The Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975* (25 U.S.C.A § 450 et seq., 1975) was implemented. This Act of Congress authorized the Secretaries of Interior and Health, Education, and Welfare to enter contracts under which the tribes themselves would assume responsibility for the administration of federal Indian programs (Canby, 1991). Under this Act, the United States government provides federal funding directly to the Diné Nation to encourage them to manage their own affairs under a trust relationship with the government (Henson, 2000). As a result, both the United States government and the Diné people refer to the Diné reservation as a sovereign nation. As such, the Diné Nation has its own police force, its own courts and legal system, and a three-branch government that includes a legislature that enacts the laws for the general benefit of the Diné people.

Yet, while the Diné Nation is considered a sovereign nation, it like all tribes, is also simultaneously considered as a "ward" of the United States (25 U.S.C.A. § 450 et seq., 1975). Under such terms, the United States is in the position to unilaterally assert power over the Diné Nation, eliminating the "sovereign status" of the Diné Nation if it so wishes (D'Errico, 1997). As such, the United States

government has ultimate power over tribal funding, tribal programs, and benefits to the Diné people. As a result, a dependent relationship continues between the United States government and the Diné Nation, and it is the United States government that ultimately determines to what degree the Diné Nation is allowed to self-govern.

Many Diné regard historical and current relationships with the United States government as detrimental to their people. According to Judge Robert Yazzie, the Chief Justice of the Diné Nation, all Diné people currently suffer from some form of post-traumatic stress syndrome as a result of the United States government's attempts to control the Diné people and their culture (Yazzie, 1995). Duran and Duran (1995) described this illness as intergenerational posttraumatic stress disorder. This disorder is suggested to be a result of many decades of physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse at the hands of oppressive government and religious entities and internalization of pathological patterns that stem from such abuse. Both internalized historical mistreatment and "ward" status have played a large part in the high rate of alcohol-related crimes, violence, apathy, and abuse that have become part of daily life for many residents of the Diné Nation.

Cultural Factors Influencing Transition and Self-Determination

Family Structure

Diné culture is organized in two ways: (a) immediate family and (b) extended family or clans. For the Navajo, immediate family members are usually blood related and most often include parents and siblings, but can also include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Within the immediate Diné family, members have specific roles to perpetuate the family's survival and support. For example, within each family, certain members may be relegated responsibility to care for livestock, tend area farms, care for the home, and provide assistance for the elderly. Further, members of Indian Nations are expected to formally or informally guide, counsel, or teach children that belong to the clan (Subia Sipes Bigfoot, 1993). With an emphasis on commu-

nal spirit, Diné children are raised to believe in the importance of a "one for all and all for one" philosophy (McWhirter & Ryan, 1991).

Extended family to the Diné includes both distant blood-related relatives and distant non-related blood relatives. Extended family for the Diné is not traced specifically blood relations, as in Euro-American culture, but is traced by a clan structure that was originally formed to protect against marriage between tribal members who were related by blood (Frazier, 2000). Diné clan structure originated with four clans and the number of clans grew as non-Diné women with their own tribal clans were adopted into the Diné tribe. Today, over 130 clans are recognized within Diné society (Frazier). The mother's clan determines clan membership for both boys and girls. In addition to protecting against intermarriages between relatives, Diné clan structure provides a foundation for ethics that guide social interactions, status, and responsibilities within one's tribe and in the community (Witherspoon, 1975). For example, a young woman, although not related by blood, may be a mother to some, sister to others, daughter or grandmother, all at the same time, according to the Diné clan system. As such, the young woman is expected to fulfill role responsibilities governed by the Diné clan system. Ultimately, the Diné clan system provides a mechanism for role prescription and a structure for uniting the Diné people regardless of blood lineage. This serves to strengthen the identity of the Diné people as a family and as a tribe.

For modern Diné people who are aware of their clans, the organizational system provides a mechanism for providing a Diné identity and connection to their family, as well as serving to prevent incestuous relationships and marriages. However, because many modern Diné homes are organized similar to Anglo-European nuclear families (e.g., mother, father, siblings) and may not know or value the Diné clan relationships, they may unconsciously or consciously choose to marry within their clans. Often, modern Diné people do not prescribe to traditional communal values nor do they actively participate in the continual protection and functioning of persons outside the nuclear family.

Variations in Child Development

Beliefs of modern Diné people are generally rooted in Anglo-European conceptualizations of proper child development. Thus, significant differences do not exist between modern Diné perception of child development and Anglo-European perceptions on child development. However, traditional and semi-traditional Diné people may hold very different beliefs and expectations regarding their children's development (Connors & Donnellan, 1998; Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994; Joe & Malach, 1998). In the following section, roles and expectations are given of the following age brackets: (a) birth to 3, (b) 6 to 9, and (c) 10 to 15. These age brackets represent the natural progression of Diné child development.

Birth to five. From the time a child is born, until the age of 6, Diné children are encouraged to become a person in their own right and are encouraged to develop their own unique identities (Connors & Donnellan, 1998; Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994). Diné people believe that children enter the world with pre-determined identities given by the Creator and that it is the responsibility of the parent to encourage the child to develop their identities virtually free of constraints. During these early years, Diné children are provided protection and guidance from harm. The primary focus of parenting, however, is to encourage children to explore their surroundings and develop an understanding of their fit in both their immediate family and the larger world (Connors & Donnellan). It is at this young age that Diné children are taught the importance of *tááweejit'éégó* – “self-determination” in the Diné language. *Tááweejit'éégó* refers to the process of children learning all they can about themselves and their environment, so that one day they will be a person who is equipped with both mental strength and an understanding of where they fit in the universe. When Diné children develop these qualities, they then possess the ability to overcome mental and physical hardships, including hunger, jealousy, and laziness.

Six to nine. Between the ages of 6 and 9, Diné children are perceived as capable of learning and assuming adult responsibilities. During this phase of development it is typical

for Diné students to be left alone in the house without parental supervision. Further, children at this phase of development assume greater gender-appropriate responsibilities associated with semi-traditional and traditional Diné culture. Appropriate responsibilities for girls within this culture include caring for younger siblings, caring for elderly family members, and assisting with cooking and housework. Appropriate responsibilities for boys within this culture may include assisting with livestock, farming, or upkeep on family dwellings (Connors & Donnellan, 1998; Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994).

Ten to fifteen. Between the ages of 10 and 15, Diné children assume increased responsibilities in the home and are allowed to make decisions regarding their life, including schooling, with little deference to parental authority. At the onset of puberty, or by the age of 15 if puberty has yet to occur, Diné children are regarded as socially and physically mature adults who are capable of exercising socially mature behavior and assume life's consequences (Deyhle, 1991; Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994). Having reached adulthood, it is expected that they should be able to contribute to the family's well-being, whether by providing financial support or physical labor. Ultimately, they should be self-sufficient, able to care for themselves, and serve as contributing members for the well-being of the family and community.

Perceptions of Disability

Historically, the Diné people have not recognized disabilities as “handicapping conditions,” and there is not specific term used to refer to persons with disabilities (Connors & Donnellan, 1998). Only recently has there been an attempt to translate terms such as learning disabilities, mental retardation, autism, and other disabilities into Navajo, yet to many traditional and semi-traditional Diné parents, these labels provide insufficient information. Although a western diagnosis may fit the needs of modern Diné people who rely heavily on western science and medicine, traditional and semi-traditional parents are more concerned with why the disability manifested in their child (Joe & Malach, 1999).

Diné culture maintains a distinct and

unique explanation for health and illness, based on identifying and treating the causal agent rather than the illness (Connors & Donnellan, 1998; Joe & Malach, 1999). Whereas modern Navajos are more likely to attribute disabilities to environmental factors (e.g., alcoholism, uranium exposure) and accept western diagnoses, traditional and semi-traditional Navajos are more inclined to attribute disabilities to disharmony with the Universe and seek out ceremonies to “correct” this imbalance. Hózhóǫ́jí (“The Blessingway Ceremony”) is conducted by a Diné medicine man to first determine the cause of the disability. The ceremony is often attributed to something detrimental that the mother did while pregnant (e.g., weaving rugs, visiting yeí béí ché dances, butchering sheep, tying knots), but may also be attributed to negative actions taken by the father (e.g., roping horses or cows). After cause of the disability is determined, the family will then seek out additional traditional ceremonies to help assist the person with a disability, and their family, to accept his or her condition. The purpose of these ceremonies is to integrate the mind, body, and spirit in such a way that it enables persons with disabilities to live in harmony with their condition (Connors & Donnellan). Once the healing ceremonies have been performed, the individual is a “whole” person again, not only in his or her own eyes, but in the perspective of family and community members as well.

In traditional and semi-traditional families, there is a general acceptance of persons with disabilities (Connors & Donnellan, 1998). Persons with disabilities are accepted as socially competent according to their own unique personal abilities and limitations. Most Diné people tolerate and accept behaviors of individuals with disabilities, however disruptive the behavior might be (Connors & Donnellan, 1993). Further, traditional and semi-traditional Diné people are more willing to allow their children to develop into the type of person they want to be and are less motivated to “fix” or “correct” behaviors, typical of modern Diné people and Anglo-Europeans (Connors & Donnellan, 1998). It is the perception of traditional and semi-traditional Diné that children born with disabilities can attain a level of self-governance when they are provided guid-

ance and support of immediate and extended family members. As a result of this belief, many traditional and semi-traditional families will not seek out special services for their children. Rather, these families will focus on finding ways in which they can support the child to be self-governing and ways in which the child with a disability can contribute to the family’s overall well-being.

Traditional and semi-traditional families hold similar expectations for children both with and without disabilities, with the prevailing expectation that all children will be contributing members of the family (Connors & Donnellan, 1998). Although children with disabilities may not be able to function fully in the family, they are expected to help out with tasks that are appropriate with their functioning level. For example, youth with less severe disabilities may assist with carrying groceries, gathering firewood, or being able to dress themselves. This example illustrates the importance of inclusion into the functioning of the family, irrespective of type and severity of the disability.

Essential Characteristics of Self-Determined Behavior, Causal Agency, and the Diné Culture

In this section, the four essential characteristics of self-determined behavior identified by Wehmeyer et al. (1996) – (a) autonomy, (b) self-regulation, (c) psychological empowerment, and (d) self-realization – are defined and compared with those values held by traditional and semi-traditional Diné people.

Self-Regulation

People who are self-regulating have learned self-management strategies that enable them to set goals, problem solve, and make decisions regarding their preferences. In order to attain these outcomes, a variety of self-management strategies are implemented, including: (a) self-monitoring, (b) self-instruction, (c) self-evaluation, (d) self-reinforcement, and (e) observational learning strategies (Wehmeyer, 1999).

Traditional and semi-traditional Diné beliefs regarding self-regulation. In the Diné culture, development of self-regulating behaviors be-

comes important at age 6, when children begin to assume family and adult responsibilities. In both traditional and semi-traditional Diné families, Diné families consider training of all children the responsibility of all adults and believe that teaching of Diné children within the family circle should be by example and explanation rather than direct interference (Deyhle & LeCompte, 1994). Praise and encouragement are particularly important at this age. For example, a Diné family member may frequently use the expression *nizhóní shiyázhí* meaning: “that is good work my child.” The purpose of this continual praise is to help young children understand that they are valued, thereby instilling a healthy sense of self-worth. Through having a healthy sense of self-worth instilled at an early age, the Diné child is prepared to master challenges that will present themselves in the future. In addition to instilling a sense of self-worth into their young children, Native American parents traditionally teach by example and provide lengthy explanations of the reasons for family and tribal guidelines and preferred behaviors (Subia Sipes Bigfoot, 1993). Further, Diné parents use traditional stories to help children understand behaviors that are profitable or non-profitable, enhancing the children’s problem-solving and decision-making skills.

After young children have received a period of thorough instruction, Diné families assume that their children should be able to determine right from wrong, and will act accordingly, in the best interest of their family and the larger community. Although Diné children are given much leeway to make decisions during their childhood and youth, these opportunities for important decision-making are critical to the well-being and perpetuation of the larger Diné tribe. It is the belief that children must learn to make good decisions early in life, if they are to make sound decisions for the well-being of the tribe upon reaching adulthood. Because of such high expectations held by the family and community, it is imperative that children learn early self-regulation skills to please and contribute to their families and larger community.

Cultural comparisons. Self-determination literature connects self-regulated behavior with self-management strategies that promote decision-making consistent with individual prefer-

ences. On one hand, the concept of self-regulation supports Diné expectations that children should possess the skills to make decisions between positive and negative behaviors. Further, they should have the skills to regulate their behaviors without adult prompting and interference. On the other hand, unilateral decision-making may conflict with the Diné values of interdependence and group consensus. When evaluating these two opposing functions, it is important to consider that, when making decisions, Diné students may place the family’s needs above their own.

Psychological Empowerment

People who are psychologically empowered believe that they possess the skills and opportunities to perform certain behaviors and that these behaviors will bring positive outcomes (Wehmeyer, 1999). Psychological empowerment is rooted in perceived control over one’s environment and abilities and leads to learned hopefulness. According to Zimmerman (1990), learned hopefulness is created when persons are provided opportunities to assume control over their lives; as a result, they perceive more control over their environment. As a result of opportunities to control environmental factors in one’s life, persons are empowered and are therefore less likely to feel alienated, powerless, or experience social isolation.

Traditional and semi-traditional Diné beliefs regarding psychological empowerment. Psychological disempowerment or hopelessness is evident in many Diné communities and manifests in several harmful behaviors, including alcoholism, child abuse, suicide, and domestic violence (Duran & Duran, 1995). Traditional and semi-traditional Diné people attribute negative social behaviors to a variety of sources, including: (a) witchcraft, (b) negative experiences with the animal and spirit world, (Connors & Donnellan, 1998) (c) a history of government policies and paternalism (Duran & Duran), and (d) serving in various wars. Despite prevalence of negative social behaviors in many Diné communities, most Diné strive to “walk in beauty.” To walk in beauty means to walk, exist, or function within the concept or confine of wellness, peace, harmony, and completeness (Carrese

& Rhodes, 1995). Further, to walk in beauty means to honor and embrace spirituality, group identity, and group cohesiveness.

Importance of spirituality is a central theme in lives of most traditional and semi-traditional Diné people. Persons with strong spiritual beliefs consider the harmony of the mind, body, and spirit integral to personal and family well-being. Psychological empowerment stems from holistic well-being and the understanding that one is living in harmony with the natural environment and spirit world. Disempowerment, which often leads to learned helplessness, occurs when a person is regarded as "out of balance" with the spirit world or his environment. Despite the source of illness, various healing ceremonies are conducted to rebalance the well-being of persons who become spiritually ill, with the overriding purpose of integrating the mind, body, and spirit in a manner that empowers the person to live a more harmonious existence within the family and community. Because of the variety of psychological stressors present in Diné society, both prevention and intervention ceremonies are conducted on a routine basis in Diné communities.

Further, the importance of group identity and cohesiveness is also central to psychological empowerment among Diné people. Understanding and honoring one's place in Diné clan structure serves as a source of psychological empowerment for many traditional and semi-traditional Diné people. Knowledge of one's clans provides an understanding of how each individual fits into the universe, the tribe, and the community. Ultimately, clan relationships serve as a source of psychological empowerment because the structure provides a sense of identity, group cohesiveness, and group support.

Cultural comparisons. Self-determination literature consistently emphasizes the importance of personal beliefs about one's capacity and one's ability to influence outcomes in one's life as critical to positive adult outcomes. Wehmeyer (1999) regards psychological empowerment as the positive result of using effective problem-solving skills to achieve a sense of control over the activities and influences of one's life. When interpreted within an Anglo-European context, this results in the circumstance that individuals feel empowered

to act as causal agents in their own lives, with the concomitant result that persons will feel less alienated and isolated in society. For traditional and semi-traditional Diné people, however, ultimate psychological empowerment is the outcome of "walking in beauty," living harmoniously in the universe and honoring and actively participating in one's clan system. Additionally, by knowing one's clan relations, it is said that one will never feel alone or isolated in Diné society (H. Baldwin, personal communication, September 15, 2000).

Self-Realization

People who are self-determined are self-realizing in that they use a comprehensive and reasonably accurate knowledge of themselves and their strengths and limitation to act in such a manner as to capitalize on this knowledge (Wehmeyer, 1999). This self-knowledge and self-understanding is influenced by evaluation of significant others, reinforcement, and attributions of one's own behavior. As a result of self-realization, persons know what they do well and act accordingly.

Traditional and semi-traditional Diné beliefs regarding self-realization. In traditional and semi-traditional Diné families, self-knowledge is very important and ties directly into the importance of being a member of the Diné tribe and a member of specific clans. From the time Diné children are born, they are provided affirmation for significant accomplishments. A baby's first laugh, naming ceremonies, the achievement of puberty, and school graduations are all causes to celebrate accomplishments of the child (Office of Diné Culture, Language, and Community Services, 1996). In traditional and semi-traditional families, a child's efforts and accomplishments are noted by ceremonies where all activities, including songs, music, and prayers focus of the child's continued success. Through the sharing of gifts, songs, prayers, and statements of appreciation, children receive positive affirmations regarding their significant accomplishments and as a result children gain a greater understanding of their strengths, identity, and fit into their family and community (Subia Sipes Bigfoot, 1993).

An important facet of self-realization occurs

when Diné children reach puberty. At the onset of a girl's first menarche, a four-day kinááldá ceremony is conducted. All family members, as well as the larger community, are invited to honor the child's progression into womanhood. During the ceremony, the young woman is taught traditional values to instill both a sound mind and physical endurance. The purpose of these teachings is to instill values necessary to ensure that the young woman will act in a respectful and honorable manner, which leads to status as a well-respected family member. Less common, yet still practiced by some traditional and semi-traditional families, is the puberty ceremony for Diné boys. The teachings are similar to those reflected in the girls' ceremony, but often take place in a sweatlodge or in a Native American church prayer meeting.

Further, in traditional and semi-traditional Diné families, expectations are held regarding the future roles to be assumed by Diné children. In many Diné families, parents pay attention to their children's special qualities. For example, a daughter who is especially patient and nurturing with younger children may be persuaded to stay near the family's home and assume full-time childcare activities after reaching adulthood. A second example is of a son who is especially good at handling livestock. In this case, the son may be expected to remain near the family's house to take charge of the livestock on a full-time basis after reaching adulthood. Other examples include: (a) becoming a medicine person for the family as indicated by visions or natural ability or (b) becoming a teacher or other type of professional as denoted by strong school performance.

Cultural comparisons. The current conceptualization of self-determination implies that "self-realization forms through experience with an interpretation of one's environment and is influenced by evaluations of significant others and by reinforcements and attributions of one's own behavior" (Wehmeyer, 1997a, p. 118). Self-realization is equally important in both the Anglo-European and Diné culture. However, in the Diné culture, emphasis is placed on both individual self-realization and on realization of the self within the immediate family and within the Diné clan structure. For traditional and semi-traditional Diné people,

emphasis is placed on creating environments and supports in which children can discover their own personal identity, strengths, and roles within the parameters of their immediate family and within the parameters of their designated clans. As a result of comprehensive family and community supports that teach and celebrate success of Diné children, the value of the Diné culture and the future role of Diné children in the family is well-defined. Ultimately, attainment of self-realization in the Diné culture is consistent with understanding one's culture, one's responsibilities to the immediate family, and one's place and roles within the Diné clan structure.

Autonomy

Most applications of the self-determination construct in special education and transition place a great deal of emphasis on behavioral autonomy. Often, and mistakenly (Wehmeyer, 1998), that emphasis has been interpreted as referring to either the independent performance of, primarily, self-care and independent living skills and behavior or acting exclusively from a point of personal preference and interest. However, examining Figure 1 again, it is evident that the basis for understanding the personal self-determination construct is much more complex than the relatively simplistic notion of doing things for oneself or acting strictly out of personal preferences.

Wehmeyer et al. (1996) noted that the focus on autonomy in promoting and enhancing self-determination is more in line with the use of the term within developmental psychology, in which the movement to autonomy is synonymous with the individuation process in which the child moves from being largely dependent upon others for care and support to being largely dependant upon herself or himself. There is, however, a sense of acting as a basis of personal preferences inherent in this understanding of autonomy. Wehmeyer (1997a), for example, noted that:

Autonomous individuals have the capacity to indicate preferences, make choices based on those preferences, and initiate action based on these selections. Persons who are self-determined are able to act based on the basis of personal beliefs and values,

thoughts and emotions, and likes and dislikes instead of exclusively on social norms or individual group pressure (p. 117).

Traditional and semi-traditional Diné beliefs regarding autonomy. In Diné culture, formation of one's personal identity is valued from the time a child is born until the age of six. Traditional and semi-traditional Diné people regard each child as being born with a pre-determined identity and pre-determined skills. Further, traditional and semi-traditional Diné people view childhood as a time of experiential learning to discover one's personal identity and their fit in the larger world (Connors & Donnellan, 1998). To honor this spiritual belief, childhood is a time of permissiveness where Diné parents enable their children to develop their personality consistent with their own desires and provide the opportunities to explore and learn from their surroundings without significant adult interference.

When traditional and semi-traditional Diné children reach the age of 6, they are expected to begin assuming adult responsibilities. At this age, parents begin to insist on appropriate behavior and begin to mold the child into the expected model of the Diné adult (Connors & Donnellan, 1993). At this phase of development, children are expected to learn the values and skills that are pleasing and supportive of the family. These skills include: (a) assuming duties and responsibilities of adulthood, (b) contributing to the family's welfare, and (c) recognizing and applying proper kinship terms to family and clan members. Interestingly, as Diné children are in the process of learning the proper behaviors of what constitutes a successful Diné adult and family member, they are afforded a great deal of autonomy in their actions and preferences. Deyhle (1991) describes these differences as two opposing functions within the Diné culture – the autonomy of the individual regarding personal actions is strongly maintained, while at the same time the consensus and cooperation with the group is actively desired. This dichotomy is rooted in the Diné belief of respecting and honoring the choices of each individual, while simultaneously expecting the Diné child to be loyal and a contributor to one's family and community.

Cultural comparisons. Because of the significant emphasis placed on loyalty and contribution to family, autonomy if defined exclusively as 'acting independently,' as is too often the case in the self-determination literature, is inconsistent with the values held by traditional and semi-traditional Diné people. Certainly autonomous actions are respected in Diné children and youth, and when the understanding of autonomy is broadened to reflect the process of individuation, or the formation of one's identity, it becomes more consistent with the Diné tribal values and beliefs. Thus, although there is a cultural value for autonomous behavior, it is expected that these behaviors will reflect the importance of fulfilling expected immediate family and clan roles. Although such a heavy emphasis on interdependence and group membership may be perceived by Anglo-Europeans as undue external influence or interference, these collective norms have served to perpetuate the Diné immediate family and clan system and, ultimately, the longevity of the Diné culture and tribal system.

This does not negate the understanding of self-determined behavior as including action based on personal preferences, but instead emphasizes that it may be a personal preference, a choice, to abide by rules, processes, and structures established as the norm in one culture that may require the individual to cede 'control' over to others in some fashion. There are many ways to come to decisions. Because the largely Anglo-European community in America chooses to do so in an individually-directed manner does not, in fact, make that the only (or even the best) way to come to decisions. Ewalt and Mokau (1995) noted this when writing about self-determination (as a value inherent in social work practices) in the context of several Pacific island nations:

A more complex understanding of self-determination, extending beyond identity solely with individualism, is provided by cultures other than those descended from Northern Europe. Inherent in many cultures are values that emphasize the collective over the individual as a perspective on self-determination. In addition, populations of color have experienced histories of op-

pression that have further affected their ideas of autonomy and maturity (p. 169).

Expanding on this notion of separating autonomy and individuation from the Anglo-European sense of independence and individualism, Ewalt and Mokau conclude (again, from a social work perspective):

Self-determination has two definitions. One is concerned with self-direction. In this connotation, the client's self-direction for what to do and be is held preeminent over decisions that the professional authority might prefer. The burden of proof for a departure from this rule rests with the professional person. The second definition is that one should be free to do or be what one wants without group restraints. However, reference to one's own wishes separate from one's social ties is not necessarily appropriate. Decision making is more complex than separating into exclusive categories what is in other people's interest and what is in one's own interest. It is necessary to appreciate how contributions to group interest may ultimately strengthen the person as well (p. 169).

What is evident from examining the self-determination construct within the context of societies that place greater value on communal processes and societal structures than do many Anglo-European Americans is that autonomy is an important value and one which is part of becoming self-determined, but it is autonomy as better understood as the process of moving from less dependence upon others for care and support, though not necessarily less involvement in communal processes, including more group-oriented decision-making processes.

Summary

Best practice in the field of transition services includes providing environmental supports and instruction to foster self-determination in students with disabilities. The literature indicates that students with disabilities will secure a greater quality of life when they possess the four essential characteristics of self-determined behavior: (a) self-regulation, (b) self-realization, (c) psychological empowerment,

and (d) autonomy. A review of the literature indicates that the four essential characteristics of self-determination are highly relevant in Diné culture, yet the process by which the four essential characteristics are realized depends on the degree of acculturation of the Diné student and family.

Because quality transition services are critical to the well-being of all persons with disabilities, it is imperative that educators strive to create transition services that reflect the beliefs, values, and expectations reflected in the student's culture. When planning services for traditional or semi-traditional Diné students, professionals should foster a flexible self-determination perspective to support the best interest of the student and family. Professionals should seek to understand how specific cultural beliefs, values, and expectations shape the present and future for each Diné student and family. Through striving to understand cultural similarities, differences, and nuances related to self-determination, culturally-responsive transition services can be created to support a quality of life that best reflects and supports the cultural values and preferences of each student and family.

As importantly, however, it is only by examining issues of self-determination within the context of different cultures and cultural values that we can come to a fuller and richer understanding of the construct itself. This, in turn, will enable us to design more effective supports that enable people to become more self-determined, not simply 'self-determined' as a segment of society understands it.

References

- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2003). Employment situation summary. Retrieved August 10, 2003 from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>
- Canby, W. C. (1996). *American Indian law in a nutshell* (3rd ed.). St. Paul, MN: West Wadsworth.
- Carrese, J. A., & Rhodes, L. A. (1995). Western bioethics on the Navajo reservation: Benefit or harm? *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 274, 826–829.
- Connors, J. L., & Donnellan, A. M. (1993). Citizenship and culture: The role of disabled people in Navajo society. *Disability, Handicap, and Society*, 8, 265–280.
- Connors, J. L., & Donnellan, A. M. (1998). Walk in

- beauty: Western perspectives on disability and Navajo family/cultural resilience. In H. I. McCubbin, E. A. Thompson, A. I. Thompson, & J. E. Fromer (Eds.), *Resiliency in Native American and immigrant families* (pp. 159–182). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- D'Errico, P. (1997, October). *American Indian sovereignty: Now you see it, now you don't*. Paper presented at the inaugural lecture in the American Indian Civics Project at Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA.
- Deyhle, D. (1991). Empowerment and cultural conflict: Navajo parents and the schooling of their children. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 4, 277–297.
- Deyhle, D., & LeCompte, M. (1994). Cultural differences in child development: Navajo adolescents in middle schools. *Theory Into Practice*, 33, 156–166.
- Duran, E., & Duran, B. (1995). *Native American post-colonial psychology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Ewalt, P. L., & Mokuau, N. (1995). Self-determination from a Pacific perspective. *Social Work*, 40, 177–182.
- Frazier, A. (2000). *A Navajo woman speaks: Women leaders in indigenous culture*. Retrieved September 18, 2001 from www.fountainoflight.net
- Henson, C. L. (2000). From war to self-determination: A history of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. *American Studies Today On-Line*. Retrieved August 10, 2003 from <http://www.americansc.org.uk/indians.html>
- The Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975* (25 U.S.C.A. § 450 et seq., 1975).
- Joe, J. R., & Malach, R. S. (1999). Families with Native American roots. In E. W. Lynch & M. J. Hanson (Eds.), *Developing cross-cultural competence* (2nd ed., pp. 127–164). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Lynch, E. W., & Hanson, M. J. (1999). *Developing cross-cultural competence* (2nd ed.). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- McWhirter, J. J., & Ryan, C. C. (1991). Counseling the Navajo: Cultural understanding. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 19, 74–82.
- Nerney, T., & Schumway, D. (1996). *Beyond managed care: Self-determination for people with disabilities*. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire.
- Nirje, B. (1972). The right to self-determination. In W. Wolfensberger (Ed.), *Normalization: The principle of normalization* (pp. 176–193). Toronto: National Institute on Mental Retardation.
- O'Connell, J. C., Minkler, S., Dereshiwsky, E., Guy, E., & Roanhorse, T. (1992). Identifying unique challenges to the provision of rehabilitation services on the Navajo reservation. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 11, 13–19.
- Office of Diné Culture, Language and Community Services. (1996). *Diné culture and language curriculum framework* (Available from the Diné Office of Education, P.O. Box 670, Window Rock, AZ 86515).
- Subia Sipes Bigfoot, D. (1993). Cultural values and American-Indian families. In N. Feyl Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and schools in a pluralistic society* (pp. 157–173). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Treaty Between the United States of America and the Navajo Indians*, article 6, 15 Stat. 667.
- Turnbull, A. P., & Turnbull, H. R. (1996). Self-determination within a culturally responsive family systems perspective: Balancing the family mobile. In L. E. Powers, G. H. S. Singer, & J. Sowers (Eds.), *On the road to autonomy: Promoting self-competence in children and youth with disabilities* (pp. 195–220). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1986). *Cross-cultural counseling: A guide for nutrition and health counselors*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Utah Division of Indian Affairs. (2000). The Navajo Nation: An overview. Retrieved August 10, 2003 from <http://dced.utah.gov/indian/Today/dine.html>
- Vaughn, C. E. (1993). *The struggle of blind people for self-determination: The dependency-rehabilitation conflict; empowerment in the blindness community*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Ward, M. J., & Kohler, P. D. (1996). Teaching self-determination: Content and process. In L. E. Powers, G. H. S. Singer, & J. Sowers (Eds.), *On the road to autonomy: Promoting self-competence in children and youth with disabilities* (pp. 275–290). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Wehmeyer, M. (1997a). Self-determination as an educational outcome: A definitional framework and implications for intervention. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 9, 175–209.
- Wehmeyer, M. (1997b). Self-determination for youth with significant cognitive disabilities: From theory to practice. In L. E. Powers, G. H. S. Singer, & J. Sowers (Eds.), *On the road to autonomy: Promoting self-competence in children and youth with disabilities* (pp. 115–133). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Wehmeyer, M. (1998). Self-determination and individuals with significant disabilities: Examining meanings and misinterpretations. *The Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 23, 5–16.
- Wehmeyer, M. (1999). A functional model of self-

- determination: Describing development and implementing instruction. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 14, 53–61.
- Wehmeyer, M. L., Kelchner, K., & Richards, S. (1996). Essential characteristics of self-determined behavior of individuals with mental retardation. *American Journal on Mental Retardation*, 100, 632–642.
- Wehmeyer, M., & Schwartz, M. (1997). Self-determination and positive adult outcomes: A follow-up of students and youth with mental retardation or learning disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 63, 245–255.
- Wehmeyer, M. L., & Schwartz, M. (1998). The relationship between self-determination, quality of life, and life satisfaction for adults with mental retardation. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 33, 3–12.
- Witherspoon, G. (1975). *Navajo kinship and marriage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Yazzie, R. (1995). Healing as justice: The American experience. Retrieved August 10, 2003, from www.usask.ca/nativelaw/publications/jah/yazzie.html
- Zimmerman, M. A. (1990). Toward a theory of learned hopefulness: A structural model analysis of participation and empowerment. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 24, 71–86.
-

Received: 19 February 2003

Initial Acceptance: 15 April 2003

Final Acceptance: 30 August 2003