"I Think I'm Reaching My Potential":

Students' Self-Determination Experiences in an Inclusive High School

Laura T. Eisenman, Megan M. Pell, Bishwa B. Poudel, & Amy M. Pleet-Odle

Abstract

Through a 5-year qualitative case study of an inclusive high school, we examined students' experiences of self-determination. We conducted analyses of multiple interviews with students, parents, teachers, guidance staff, and administrators using grounded theory methods and guided by self-determination conceptual frameworks. Explicit expectations for student agency, a network of caring autonomy-supportive adults, and integrated academic supports emerged as primary features of the students' school experiences. We describe the participants' perspectives about the school structures that supported those experiences and highlight three students who represented a range of responses to the school's model of inclusive learning supports. Implications for fostering self-determination of adolescents with disabilities within general education school settings are considered.

Keywords: self-determination, inclusion, high school, education

In the field of special education, self-determination refers to a constellation of behavioral and affective resources (autonomous action, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization) upon which an individual can draw to attain personally meaningful goals (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). Having higher levels of self-determination has been correlated with improved school and post-school outcomes (Chambers, Wehmeyer, Saito, Lida, Lee, & Singh, 2007; Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar, & Alwell, 2009). Because of concerns about the poor post-school outcomes of youth with disabilities and studies indicating youth with disabilities may have lower levels of self-determination than their typical peers (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996; Wehmeyer & Metzler, 1995) a variety of self-determination interventions have been developed. These interventions typically focus on learning specific behaviors related to self-determination (e.g., goal-setting) or educational planning processes (e.g., transition planning). Because the self-determination construct itself is complex, multi-component interventions have been found to be most effective (Cobb et al., 2009; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Shogren, Williams-Diehm, & Soukup, 2013). Although individual student capacities such as general intellectual functioning influence self-determination, they are less predictive of self-determination than are more malleable factors such as the self-determination instruction students receive and the knowledge and beliefs they develop (Lee et al., 2012).

Prior research has indicated that in order to develop youths' self-determination, autonomy-supportive adults must regularly provide youth with opportunities to acquire and then generalize particular behaviors that help them to experience self-efficacy (Eisenman, 2007; Wehmeyer, Abery, Mithaug, & Stancliffe, 2003). Walker et al. (2011) suggest that promoting self-determination requires a socio-ecological approach that acknowledges the complex interactions of multiple moderating and mediating factors among individuals and their environments. Orchestrating self-determination interventions for youth with disabilities can be challenging in inclusive high schools, where learning opportunities must be embedded in general education settings within the array of disciplinary curricula serving diverse student populations. Further, simply spending time in general education itself is not a significant predictor of self-determination (Shogren et al. 2007; Zhang, 2001). Current research indicates that few studies have identified how self-determination-promoting practices may be incorporated within existing general education classroom and school environments (Carter, Lane, Peirson, & Stang, 2008; Cobb et al., 2009; Eisenman, 2007; Karvonen, Test, Wood, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004; Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Zhang, 2002).

One approach to understanding how self-determination development may be cultivated within inclusive settings is to consider, first, how high schools can contribute to positive youth development, and second, the features of schools that support inclusion of adolescents with disabilities. At the building or organizational level, positive youth development is associated with students' experiencing an overall sense of support and belonging, which is facilitated by structures such as schools-within-schools or block scheduling that increase the likelihood that strong adult-youth relationships will develop (Eccles & Roeser, 2010; Murray & Pianta, 2007).

Schools that promote development also ensure all students regardless of ability receive high quality instruction and a challenging, meaningful curriculum in which a mastery focus predominates (Eccles & Roeser, 2010; National Research Council; 2004). These features are evident also in high schools that successfully include students who have high incidence disabilities such as learning disabilities and mild intellectual disabilities (Brigharm, Cobb, Morrocco, Clay, & Zigmond, 2006). At the building level in inclusive schools, there is an emphasis on a collaborative school-wide culture of instruction supported by high quality professional development and leadership focused on implementing inclusive instructional practices (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Special education services are blended seamlessly with general education supports (Wallace, Anderson, & Bartholomay, 2002).

At the classroom level, positive youth development for typical students is promoted when teachers communicate high expectations for all students and structure their classrooms around learning routines and opportunities to practice pro-social behaviors (Eccles & Roeser, 2010; Murray & Pianta, 2007). Teachers individualize interactions with students and convey caring by offering positive, supportive feedback on students' academic effort and performance (Murray & Pianta, 2007). Similarly, successful inclusive schools often have structures in place to monitor student attendance and academic engagement and help students identify long-term goals, access the resources they need to attain their goals, and build relationships with caring adults. Doing so increases the likelihood students will develop resilience, persist in school, and experience improved post-school employment outcomes (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Talbott & Cushing, 2011).

We observed many of these practices for supporting the development and engagement of youth with and without disabilities during a 5-year case study of a career-technical high school that embedded learning support for students with disabilities exclusively within general education settings (see, Eisenman, Pleet, Wandry, & McGinley, 2011; Eisenman & Pleet-Odle, 2013). One of the earliest themes to emerge from that study related to participants' observations of students' expressions of self-determined dispositions and behaviors. This prompted us to explore the theme of self-determination development in more depth as a way to extend the prior research on youth development, self-determination, and inclusive schools. Specifically, for this sub-study we asked: How were students' experiences of self-determination situated within their experiences of the school's model of learning supports?

Method

Design
The larger study was designed as a qualitative case for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of the complex phenomenon of establishing an inclusive school. The case encompassed a single school site that we purposively selected because of its unique nature within a district and the opportunity to examine multiple, embedded units of analysis over a prolonged (5-year) period (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). In this sub-study, we used qualitative grounded

theory methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to more closely examine one of the major units of analysis -- students' experiences -- and explore dimensions of the self-determination development theme.

Study Context: School-wide Inclusive Model

Overview. We gained entry to this new public school in the mid-Atlantic area through the district superintendent and principal, who were interested in working with the university to support professional development and research. Our study began in the first year that the school enrolled a cohort of ninth grade students and continued for 5 years. Each of the first 4 years, the school added a cohort of approximately 250 students and sufficient instructional staff to serve another grade level. The school's total enrollment reached just over 1,000 students in the final year of the study. The school served students from urban and suburban communities. Approximately 28% of the school's students identified as low income and 37% as having minority racial/ethnic backgrounds. Students with disabilities who had Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or 504 plans represented slightly more than 10% of the student population. The primary disability categories included high-incidence disabilities such as specific learning disabilities, mild intellectual disability, and attention disorders, as well as a few students with other health or physical disabilities or Asperger Syndrome. In the final year of the study, the school had an instructional staff of 83, which included 15% from minority backgrounds and 39% with master's degrees. Each year of the study, the school met or exceeded benchmarks for reading and mathematics under the state's No Child Left Behind (2002) accountability requirements. Performance for the special education group was not disaggregated because there were fewer than 40 students in the grades tested.

Learning support model. According to the superintendent, Clearview High School (pseudonym) was intended to be a "break the mold" school within the district by virtue of its inclusive model and plans to develop career academies. The other schools in the district had separate academic classes for special education students, in which most students with high incidence disabilities participated. Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities were served in only one of the district's schools where they participated in a separate life skills program. Thus, although Clearview was not serving students with significant cognitive disabilities at the time of this study, the district's decision to create a school with no separate classes was a major shift in their provision of special education services.

The school adopted a school-wide variation of a collaborative-consultative approach (Idol, Nevin, & Paolucci-Whitcomb, 2000). At Clearview, special educators moved beyond consultation to provide both direct and indirect services. No resource room or separate classes were created for students with IEPs, except for a 12-minute homeroom period. During homeroom, students with IEPs met as a group with a special educator called a Learning Support Coach (LSC) and would review individual goals, get feedback on academic progress, organize

needed materials, and receive reminders of upcoming tests or major projects. Otherwise, students were spread across classes and received in-class assistance on an as needed basis from an LSC who floated between classrooms. When in a classroom, the LSCs worked with any student who appeared to be struggling regardless of whether they had an IEP. All students could avail themselves of afterschool tutoring with an LSC or general education teacher twice each week. Occasionally, an LSC would pull one or more students from a class to complete make-up work or provide small group instruction. Similar to a college setting, individual testing accommodations could be provided in a separate office, if needed.

In the first year, the school hired one LSC to serve incoming 9th graders, and she served as the primary contact during the study. A second LSC was hired in the second year and assigned to 10th grade. Within the next three years the school added more LSCs, reaching a total of 8, plus 3 para-educators. In the fifth year, one LSC was assigned to each grade, and one managed administrative responsibilities for the team and provided back-up coverage when needed. In the fifth year of the study, a second LSC was assigned to 9th grade and two other LSCs worked across subjects in the upper grades – one for math and science, the other for English and social studies. The para-educators provided additional supports across classrooms with one working primarily in the career areas.

Support for general curriculum access. All teachers across grades and academic and career areas, participated in weekly in-house, teacher-led, cross-disciplinary professional development focused on instructional techniques that could be adapted across classrooms. As a result, students were likely to encounter similar teaching strategies in academic and career areas. The principal also regularly provided a clear message that all teachers were responsible for the learning of all students in their classes. Further, the LSCs would work with individual teachers to develop instructional adaptations that were customized for specific students with IEPs or specific courses.

All students participated as 9th graders in a "career and transition academy." While in the academy, students had a Career & Transitions course in which they worked on skills needed for success in high school and beyond such as career communications, financial literacy, team-building, and problem-solving. They also learned about different career options and rotated through several of the school's career "shops." In the spring of 9th grade, all students applied to their top three choices among the school's 14 career areas. They received a career area assignment in the last few weeks of ninth grade. Assignments were based on recommendations from a committee -- comprised of the career teacher in each area, guidance counselors, an assistant principal, and at least one of the learning support coaches -- based on a combination of factors including number of seats available and ranking of students (by grades, behavior issues, personal essay) if demand exceeded seats available. Students continued in their career shops through 12th grade along with required academic courses.

Students with IEPs were expected to become increasingly involved in their IEP meetings over their 4 years of high school, and they were supported by the LSCs to develop academic and career goals, which they would present during the IEP meeting. The LSCs devoted considerable

energy to communications with students' families, keeping them apprised regularly of student progress and encouraging them to call whenever they had concerns. The school also provided an internet-based platform all parents could access from home to check on their students' assignment completion and test grades.

Data Sources

Focus students. Student participants were recommended by the ninth-grade LSC who was responsible for reviewing files of incoming students with IEPs and meeting with students and families in the summer before ninth grade. From among the incoming students with IEPs we asked her to identify two who, based on eighth-grade records (e.g., achievement profile, discipline records), were the highest achieving with fewest behavioral problems and two who were the lowest achieving and had more behavioral problems. By selecting students on both ends of the academic and behavioral range of incoming students, we expected to gain a better understanding of the diversity of students' experiences in the school. When a choice existed among a group of academically and behaviorally similar students at either end of the range, we asked the teacher to include students of diverse gender and ethnic/racial backgrounds. Parents/guardians were asked for permission for their children to participate. If parents/guardians agreed, then students were invited to participate. Upon their assent, we reviewed the students' records to confirm their academic and behavioral histories.

We followed the four focus students from each of the first four cohorts ($n=16$) for the 5 years of the study. That is, a total of 4 students participated in Year 1 of the study; 8 in Year 2; 12 in Year 3; 16 in Year 4; and -- after the first cohort graduated -- 12 in Year 5. In addition, one member of the first cohort who graduated at the end of Year 4 agreed to a follow-up interview in Year 5. All eight focus students in the first two cohorts graduated with diplomas. None of the 16 students left the study or dropped out of school. Demographic information about the 16 focus students is presented in Table 1.

In total we had 96 semi-structured individual interviews with the 16 focus students. In the first year of the study, we were able to interview the first cohort only once in the spring. We then met with each student in the fall and spring of each academic year. Five of 24 possible interviews in Year 3 were not completed due to student illness or declining to be interviewed for personal reasons at that time. Interviews typically lasted 30 minutes. Students were invited to describe and share their perspectives on their classes, peers, teachers, the school, and their own performance and growth.

Other participants. We conducted an additional 146 semi-structured individual interviews with 73 other participants across the 5 years of the study. These participants included parents/guardians ($n=14$); learning support team members ($n=10$); the focus students' general education (academic or career) teachers ($n=36$); and school and district administrators, including a guidance counselor and a discipline staff member ($n=13$). All of these participants were asked them to describe their roles and experiences with the school, their interactions with the focus

students, and the strengths and weaknesses of the school and its approach to inclusion. Typically, interviews lasted 30-45 minutes. Table 2 shows the distribution of individual interviews by participant type and year of the study. We did not pursue interviews with parents in the final year of the study, because saturation (i.e., no new issues or themes) was reached by the end of year 4.

Other data sources. To supplement the information gained through interviews and gain a wider perspective on students' experience and the school context, we also collected the academic and discipline records of the 16 focus students each year and the school's public accountability profile published by the state. We collected other school documents such as internal weekly newsletters written by the principal and brochures for open houses. Because we were given wide access to the school, we made field notes on multiple observations of classrooms and the school environment. We also conducted six focus groups: three with general education students (*n*= 11 total) in the second year of the study; one with guidance counselors (*n*=3) and two with learning support team members (*n*= 8 total) in the fourth year of the study.

Data Analyses

The research team included multiple perspectives on special education and relationships with the school site: two doctoral students in special education with international and local experiences, and two university faculty members with expertise in transition and secondary special education, one of whom was embedded as a professional development consultant at the school for several hours each week in the school's first 3 years. All team members engaged in interviewing and transcribing some of the interviews.

Initially, we used grounded theory methods of open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Individually, we coded and made analytic notes related to the interviews we transcribed as a way to maintain accountability for researcher interpretations while also beginning the process of data reduction and theme identification. Constant comparative analyses within and across researchers proceeded as interviews were conducted and transcribed across the 5 years of the study. We met periodically to discuss emerging findings, clarify ideas, substantiate information, and search for confirming and disconfirming evidence of our interpretations. In subsequent phases of analysis, we continued this iterative process of individually and then collaboratively exploring, refining, and confirming findings.

As noted previously, an early theme that emerged from our initial analyses of interviews with students, teachers, administrators, and family members was students' self-determination development. To better understand the dimensions of this theme as expressed in the school and how well those dimensions corresponded to broader understandings in the field, we first re-examined students' experiences using Wehmeyer et al.'s (1998) four components of self-determination (autonomous action, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization) as organizing categories. Student expressions of self-determination as reported by the participants included examples of autonomous and self-regulatory behaviors such as asking for

help when needed, requesting appropriate accommodations, and establishing short- and long-term educational goals. Examples of students' self-realization and psychological empowerment included providing more accurate self-appraisals of their abilities and support needs, acknowledging their role in the learning process, and expressing greater confidence in their abilities.

Next, to move beyond description and toward a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2011; Merriam, 1998) of how students' experiences of self-determination were situated within their school experiences, we each began the process of axial and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) using major constructs from two self-determination frameworks – a theory of self-determination from educational psychology (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991) and a functional model of self-determination from special education (Wehmeyer et al., 2003; Wehmeyer et al., 1998).

From Deci et al.'s (1991) theory of self-determination, we used the constructs of autonomy, relationships, and competence to broadly characterize the perceptions of students and other participants regarding the students' experiences of self-determination in relation to their experiences of relationships and competence. As explained by Deci et al.,

> Competence involves understanding how to attain various external and internal outcomes and being efficacious in performing the requisite actions; relatedness involves developing secure and satisfying connections with others in one's social milieu; and autonomy refers to being self-initiating and self-regulating of one's own actions. (p.327)

Deci et al. view these as fundamental, interacting human needs that motivate development.

We used constructs from Wehmeyer et al. (1998) and Wehmeyer et al. (2003) as applied in the special education field to consider how participants' observations of opportunities, perceptions, capacities, and supports corresponded with experiences of students' self-determination and development. We re-examined the data to identify instances of (a) opportunities given to students to make decisions and take greater control of their learning, (b) instruction that focused on increasing students' skills or capacities, (c) the perceptions that students held in regard to learning opportunities and their own capacities, and (d) supports that were provided to enhance students' access to and participation in learning opportunities.

Through these analyses we identified common patterns of how students' experiences of self-determination interacted with their school experiences. However, we also observed several variations, most specifically in regard to the point in their high school programs (beginning, middle, end) at which the students' were seen by participants as experiencing success and expressing self-determination. To illustrate the range of experiences, we identified three students whose stories unfolded in representative ways, and we constructed a summary of each student case using interview materials from the students, their teachers, administrators and family members as well as information from their student records. Because we were able to follow the first two cohorts of students through their complete high school experience, we chose our

illustrative cases from among this group. One of the three (an African-American male from the first cohort) had been identified upon entry as one of the stronger students academically and behaviorally. Two had weak academic and behavioral records (a white female from the first cohort and a white male from the second cohort).

Trustworthiness

Factors promoting trustworthiness (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) include prolonged engagement at the site by a team of researchers with different degrees of experience as well as insider and outsider status at the school, an extensive data set of interviews with a variety of informants, and use of supplementary data sources including observational field notes, focus groups, and artifacts. To promote credibility of our analytic work, we triangulated across data types, participants, researchers, and theoretical frameworks. In addition, second-level member checking occurred through subsequent interviews with participants across years as we incorporated opportunities for them to comment on our preliminary interpretations of the data. Thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was promoted through providing information about the school context, illustrative student cases, and extensive use of participants' quotes. These attributes further support readers' consideration of the transferability or applicability of the case particulars to other settings (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Findings

Three interacting features of the school's inclusive supports model appeared to be most influential to participants' views of students' emerging self-determination. The features corresponded generally to the developmental constructs of our analytic framework: autonomy, relationships, and competence (Deci et al., 1991). First, the school incorporated specific structures that made the expectation of student agency explicit (autonomy). Second, student agency was encouraged by autonomy-supportive, caring adults across the school (relationships). Third, students received integrated supports and accommodations (competence). To illustrate these three features and the school structures through which they were enacted, we first introduce the three students who represent the diversity of students' experiences within the school's model. Then, we describe each theme in more detail, using material from the three student cases and other sources to shed light on the specific structures associated with each theme.

Different Faces of Persistence: The High Flyer, Phoenix, and Poster Child

Students arrived at the school with widely varying levels of achievement and intensity of support needs. Not surprisingly, as a result they experienced different trajectories through their high school programs. Yet, all persisted to graduation and were seen by themselves and others as

having grown in terms of their self-determination. The cases selected to represent the range of student experiences include (a) Anthony the "high flyer" who started strong and stayed strong, (b) Jay the "phoenix" who struggled and then experienced a remarkable turnaround at mid-point, and (c) Jenny the "poster child" who struggled until the very end, but ultimately persisted.

Anthony, the high flyer. His mother described him this way: "He's just a great kid…and I don't say that boastfully. He just is." Early in his high school career, Anthony noted that "I definitely want to go into wildlife biology…and [my goal?] -- it's definitely college – [not going], that's not even an option." His mother elaborated that his career goal "has never changed since he was very, very young, so he is definitely enjoying biotechnology (his career-technical area at the school)." Throughout high school he was involved in sports, which he said "builds team skills." Teachers described him as a "gentle giant" (he was 6'4" tall) with a good sense of humor who was well accepted by peers and teachers. Anthony's experience at Clearview was aligned with a typical picture of student success. Several general education teachers questioned why such a "high flyer," who was doing well in the school's most academically challenging career-technical area was receiving special education services. Others recognized his need for supports in their classes. As one of his mathematics teacher stated: "Anthony just needs additional time. He processes slower than the other kids. Other than that, he is on the money."

Anthony was first identified as eligible for special education services in second grade. He was categorized throughout his school career as having a learning disability with specific difficulties in reading skills (decoding) and mathematics (calculations and reasoning). His mother explained that his laid back personality was both a strength and weakness, sometimes requiring that "you have to put a little fire under him to get him moving." Anthony described it this way: "Some people don't realize what they can really do until they're pushed to do it." Anthony suggested that his strengths were that he paid attention as much as possible and that he had a good vocabulary. He explained his weaknesses in spelling and mathematics as related to getting "distracted by what's going on in my head. … I see that I have trouble when I have a lot of new terminology and new procedures to learn – keeping it all straight in my mind." By 12th grade he noted that "Basically, I've learned to pay attention better and I have no trouble asking questions. So I'm doing better now. I need less help." He graduated from the school with a diploma and a career-technical certificate having passed all of his courses and earning a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.04.

Jay, the phoenix. As a freshman, Jay was cautious and shy in his approach to the world and had developed a tough exterior, like a "turtle in his shell" according to his mother. Freshman year was tough: he failed three classes, had a GPA of 0.90, and had to go to summer school. He was written up for failure to dress for gym three times before staff realized that he did not know how to use a combination lock and was too embarrassed to ask for help. Neither of Jay's parents completed high school. His mother explained that she received some special education services in school, but found them unhelpful. She never learned to read, which she said made her

determined to speak up if she felt that Jay was not being served well, although she wasn't always sure what kind of assistance he needed. Jay was made eligible for special education services in first grade as a student with a learning disability. Throughout his early school career, he had difficulties with basic skills for reading, written expression, and mathematics. He was retained in fifth grade. As a ninth grader, Jay described his academic problems this way: "If I read too much, the words will get like blotched up. I'll start seeing— I won't be able to tell what it is. And then in my writing, it's spelling." Assignments such as weekly essays seemed like "piling on," and he found it hard to keep up. In regard to homework, which he rarely completed as a 9th grader, he said, "if I looked at something and I have no clue what it is, I won't do it." However, he noted that "I'm good at remembering. I get good grades on tests from remembering stuff." Jay had wanted to attend a career-technical school, but he was not accepted into his first choice, a more established school in the district that was closer to his home. When accepted at Clearview, he worried that the new school was for "brainiacs." He was not accepted into either of his top two choices for career training (web/print design; culinary arts). Instead he was placed into his third choice, plumbing, which he thought might be okay because, "they say you can make good money." He thought he might join the marines because they could help pay for college and "employers like to know you've had that experience."

Although he continued to struggle, failing one more class in the 10th grade and maintaining a GPA below 2.0 through his junior year, teachers noted that something changed along the way. According to a math teacher at the end of 10th grade,

> Now…He needs a little bit more help with getting his homework done, but somehow he is getting it….He is a little bit more focused than he was last year … it's like a 180 degree turn around from last year. It's impressive.

Jay told his mother at the end of 10th grade: "I'm graduating with my class, no doubt, even if I have to bust my behind to get there." Jay did graduate with his high school diploma, a career certificate, and a cumulative GPA of 1.85. During his senior year he attained honor roll and a 3.0 GPA for the first time in his life. At his final interview, Jay shared that he planned to get a tattoo of a phoenix:

> Because I feel like I'm maturing. I'm getting out of not doing stuff, thinking about childish things ... I'm maturing. So I want to get a tattoo to represent me growing up. So a phoenix … how it arises from the ashes and starts over, anew."

Jenny, the poster child. Reflecting on her experiences at Clearview, Jenny commented, "When I was little I always thought I'd go to college, but when I hit 9th grade and 10th grade, I was just like 'no, there's no college in my future.' Because I hated school." She barely passed her 9th grade classes, and she failed classes in both 10th and 11th grades. Jenny struggled in school from an early age. She was retained in 3rd grade and became eligible for special education services in

5th grade as a student with learning disabilities. Evaluation reports noted that she had significant difficulties with reading comprehension, number operations, working memory and executive processing. Despite these concerns, she considered herself to be a good note-taker, and she liked to read fiction. During lunch, she would "just read my book and block out all the noise. It's peaceful, I guess. … [Math], it's just boring and really hard. After we learn another formula, there's another formula. It just goes on and on." Jenny had hoped to get into the nursing technology program at the school, but was placed in her last choice area of culinary arts. Her career interests were constantly shifting, often reflecting her favorite television shows. At various times she declared interests in forensic science, criminal law, hostage negotiation, the FBI, and the national guard. She also considered the possibility of becoming a cake decorator.

At the end of Jenny's 11th grade year, her mother commented, "

> She is [more discouraged] …she said she is going to drop out and she's not going to finish and all that. I mean, we fight over it all the time. The more I push her the more it seems like the more she will shut down and put her feet in deeper.

Her relationship with her family, and her mother in particular, was problematic. Discussing her mother, Jenny said "I wanted to fail just to make her mad. And it made me miserable, and when I came [to this school] I hated it."

However, Jenny surprised everyone and did not drop out. She returned for her senior year after moving out of her family's home to live with an acquaintance from school, and she did extra work to make up lost credits. She graduated with her high school diploma and career certificate, having achieved a final cumulative GPA of 1.98. Jenny reflected,

> I think it was just a matter of me growing up and choosing my decisions. Because, before I just didn't care or whatever, but now I realize [it's up to me]. I can't mess up. I have one rule -- get over it and just study.

School staff sometimes referred to Jenny as their "poster child" signifying something that looked like a miraculous recovery and was based on major investments made by the staff over a long and difficult period. Her guidance counselor suggested "She's our success story. She's the one that says inclusion works if you stick with it."

School Structures

As indicated in their introductory stories, these three students varied in their degree of academic success and the smoothness of their path to graduation. However, as suggested by the end of their high school stories and further described below, all three were viewed as having experienced positive developments in self-determination. Participants attributed student growth to immersion in school structures that addressed the students' needs for autonomy, relationships, and competence through explicit expectations for student agency; a network of autonomy-

supportive, caring adults; and integrated academic supports.

Autonomy: Explicit expectations for student agency. The LSCs were the lynchpin of the school's efforts to deliver the message that students would become more self-determined. They were vocal with students, families, and colleagues about this expectation. Structures that were mentioned repeatedly across participants as directly influential to student development of self-determination included the LSC's purpose-driven homeroom period and requirement for student leadership in IEP meetings. Both were foundational to the LSC's frequent emphasis with students on goal setting, monitoring progress, and accountability.

Purpose-driven homeroom. "[The Learning Support Coaches] meet with them every morning and talk about what their day holds ahead of them, what teachers are having tests, here's how to organize your day" (a guidance counselor). Although the homeroom was only 12 minutes long, the LSCs found ways to communicate with students about a substantial amount of important information. They used visuals on whiteboard or powerpoint, provided oral information, engaged students in reviewing progress monitoring sheets, and met 1:1 or with small groups. Jay noted that "If I didn't have [people checking on me to keep me on track] I would probably be like one of the kids in normal public school. I would just sit back and wouldn't care." Jenny commented on the general theme: "[My LSC] is always talking about goals, how to succeed and stuff like that."

IEP leadership. "I mean, to be successful, they have to advocate for themselves. And I think that that's the theme, when I've been in every IEP meeting, that's been the theme" (social studies teacher). In the 9th grade, the LSCs would meet with students to explain the importance of the student role in the IEP and their expectations that students would take increasing responsibility for speaking up in the meeting as they got older. The 9th graders were given a "script" covering major components of an IEP meeting and providing specific prompts the students could use to introduce a component. However, they were responsible, with some pre-meeting assistance from an LSC, to fill in the blanks within the script related to their individual strengths, weaknesses, goals, and questions. The students then read the script during the meeting. Each year, elements of the script were faded such that by 12th grade only a brief outline of major IEP topics was presented and students spoke about themselves and their goals without using a script. Anthony's mother noted that

> [He is] becoming more independent as a student and asking for help when he needs it. I think it's great that … it's the kid's responsibility to run the IEP meeting and that sort of thing. He's becoming more outspoken in a different arena.

Anthony concurred, separately stating, "I basically had to lead it because it was about me. I couldn't have someone else speak about my ability and speak for myself. I had to speak about what I need for accommodations and what my goals were." Jay's mother commented on a

similar impact of the IEP meetings on Jay.

> I believe Jay's coming along with [IEP involvement]. He knows that it's important now. He knows everybody here, we're all on the same page to benefit you. ….If you want more in life, this is what you have to do. And now he gets involved in the IEP meetings. He speaks out more now, where before he'd sit there quietly and you'd have to question him a hundred times.

Relationships: Network of autonomy-supportive, caring adults. Because students were fully integrated into the school, they encountered many adults in addition to the LSCs on a daily basis. Most of these adults were clear in conveying expectations that students would learn, take charge, and mature into successful adults. The relationships established by teachers and students were reinforced by the school's efforts to engage families in cultivating similar expectations for student development.

> ***Staff roles in supporting autonomy.*** The 9th grade academy teachers worked with the LSCs and the career-technical education teachers to help the students develop vocational goals. They were the first set of teachers to introduce students to the learning strategies that were adopted school-wide through in-house professional development. By 10th grade, students started interacting with their career-technical teacher intensely on a daily basis. These teachers brought a "real world" perspective that reinforced student development as preparation for successful employment post-school. As one explained, "I mean, I'm selling work ethics. …. I'm selling adulthood." Academic teachers also reinforced activities that encouraged student autonomy through inclusive academic support and accommodations. For example, a teacher explained,

> So there's a lot that, I think, is student-driven because I give them the outline of what they have to do, but they have to make the choices as to …what they think is important. And they struggle with that.

The administration encouraged these efforts to give the students more responsibility for their learning by instituting teacher-led cross-disciplinary professional development related to instructional strategies that would benefit all students, including those with disabilities. Guidance counselors also were perceived by the students as trusted people with whom they could work closely to support their goal-setting and decision-making related to academic, personal, and familial concerns. Sometimes this was accomplished in informal ways, such as the years-long pact that Jenny had with one of the guidance counselors guaranteeing that if she graduated Jenny could claim her favorite poster from the counselor's office.

> ***Reinforcing autonomy and caring***. As described earlier, the LSCs were intentional about regularly communicating with families regarding expectations for students to actively develop

their self-determination skills through the IEP process and assuming responsibility for their own learning. They began by reaching out to families through home visits prior to the students' first day in the ninth grade and explaining the learning support model. Parents confirmed that the LSCs continued to convey these expectations through frequent email or phone communications about student progress. For some, these contacts served as reminders to parents that their children were maturing and their dependence on and methods for accessing accommodations might change. As explained by Anthony's mother, "I'm excited about this just because I was getting to the point where I would like to see how independently he works without the amount of [specialized] support he had in middle school."

Although the expectations were high, almost uniformly students reported during interviews that they had "good" teachers who cared about them. As a senior, reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages of being a student at Clearview, Jenny said, "The teachers are awesome and always willing to help." Perhaps Jay's comments in his final interview as he reflected on his progress and shared that he was considering becoming a teacher speak most strongly to the influence of the teachers at the school:

> All the teachers I've met, I like the jobs they do, the work. I like learning from them. I would like to have a kid like me that started that way, to know that I influenced someone like that. That's what I would like to do.

Competence: Integrated learning supports. "I think the beauty of it, [this model] has created its own culture in our school. I think teachers realize what's going on here and they're willing to work with all of our kids" (guidance counselor). The school's inclusive learning support model engaged students academically, vocationally, and socially. Students' inclusive experiences enhanced their perceptions of belonging and self-efficacy.

   Challenging classes with focus on learning support. "[The school] is challenging him at a new level that he hasn't been challenged before" (Anthony's mother). Before the beginning of the school year, students with IEPs were hand-scheduled into academic classes with the intent of keeping their numbers in any one class low while also clustering a few students to facilitate LSC access. The LSCs would brainstorm with academic and career teachers on how to implement instructional adaptations that would be beneficial to students with IEPs, as well as other students. One new teacher commented,

> We really do just go back and forth with suggestions. So, I'm really grateful to have [the LSC], especially because it's my first teaching experience [and I'm] not too sure about the whole inclusion thing yet -- still trying to feel it out. It's a really good partnership to have."

   Key to the success of this approach was that all teachers were involved in weekly

professional development focused on specific instructional techniques such as vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies that could be used across classes. The inclusive model also facilitated students' access to peer learning support, as explained by a career teacher:

> I watch Anthony and [another focus student] -- they're in biotech, which is our toughest career here; it is a very high academic level. And what's been a support for them, for example, what we're doing right now is they are teamed up and paired up with a group that has better academic students. And I see a lot of interaction going on from [them] as "how did you get that? How did you do that?"

Belonging and support. Students told us that knowing they were graduating with their peers and that they would earn a diploma plus a career certificate were important to them. For several, participating in sports and clubs contributed to their sense of belonging and identity with the school. In classes, teachers paid attention to creating opportunities for students to interact with each other. For example, one of Jenny's 9th grade academy teachers said,

> She's just slow to listen and process. So what I did with her is surrounded her with people that I knew were her friends, who were not special ed. And I don't know if that's right or wrong, but I want her to feel confident and to feel like she fits in.

As a result, students gained confidence to take more academic risks. One of the teachers recalled asking Jay to read aloud in class,

> And Jay said, "Well, you're all going to have to just bear with me and get through this." And the kids don't make fun of him, they don't pick on him, if he struggles with a word somebody will help him with it, which is nice to see. …They don't seem to pick on each other; they'll help each other.

A strength of the model noted by many participants was that students with IEPs did not feel singled out. They knew they could access learning support in and out of class when needed and that everyone else in the school had access to many of the same learning supports as they did. Jay explained why the school's inclusive supports model mattered to him:

> Because I don't feel like I'm separate. Like, if I was in a special ed class, I would feel different. When I'm in a normal class, I feel like I'm a part of it. I can do the same thing they can do. … When I was in special ed I was thinking, 'I'm doing slower work. I'm doing stuff for kids younger than me.' And this, I'm doing the same work as the other kids…. So, I think I'm reaching my potential. Instead of like, limiting me. Yeah.

Discussion

In this case study we explored the experiences of self-determination among a group of high school students' with high incidence disabilities and how those experiences were situated within their school's model of inclusive learning supports. Findings indicated that in this school's model the students' experiences of developing self-determination were related to the coaching they received on self-advocacy, organization, and goal monitoring practices. These practices were embedded into brief daily homeroom periods, reinforced in classrooms and after-school tutoring, and facilitated by integrated academic supports that were implemented across classes. Furthermore, students' experiences with autonomy-supportive teachers and their academic success among peers who did not have identified disabilities heightened their sense of self-efficacy.

In line with Cobb et al.'s (2009) meta-synthesis on the impact of self-determination interventions, the benefits of this school's multi-dimensional approach were most evident in students' experiences of self-determination and academic engagement, rather than measures of academic achievement. Participants indicated that the school's inclusive structures were linked to intermediate student outcomes of: (a) demonstrations of self-advocacy skills and other autonomous and self-regulatory behaviors (e.g., asking for help when needed, establishing and monitoring goals); (b) expressions of self-realization and psychological empowerment; and (c) continuing school engagement. These intermediate outcomes may have promoted persistence to graduation for students such as Jenny and Jay, a critical outcome given the academic and personal struggles they experienced throughout their high school years. For students like Anthony, the inclusive school structures may have further enhanced self-determination and supported engagement in challenging curricula, expanding options for postsecondary college and careers.

Inclusion in general education has been identified as a moderate predictor of major post-school transition outcomes, including employment, independent living, and postsecondary education (Test et al, 2009). At Clearview, inclusive learning supports may have served as a foundation for promoting the intermediate outcome of greater self-determination, which itself has been identified as a predictor of positive post-school outcomes (Test et al., 2009). As noted previously (e.g., Shogren et al., 2007), simply including students with disabilities in general education settings is insufficient to promote meaningful differences in self-determination. This study suggests the types of inclusive practices that may make a difference.

Limitations

These findings must be considered in light of the nature of the study. This was not a study of a controlled intervention to promote self-determination. Rather, it was an in-depth case study of an inclusive school, in which self-determination emerged as an intermediate student outcome. As such, the study provides insight into how particular inclusive school structures and relationships worked together to contribute to students' self-determination, but does not suggest a universal formula. Also, because it was not the original focus of the study, we did not have a

standard measure of students' self-determination growth and therefore cannot quantify the degree of growth across participating students. Changes in student self-determination were based on the judgments of participants. Student development was identified through multiple observations across participants of students' behaviors that corresponded to major attributes of self-determination. Different growth trajectories were noted and highlighted through individual case illustrations.

Implications for Practice

This analysis of Clearview's model has important implications for educators in regard to supporting students' self-determination development within inclusive, general education settings. First, it is important to note that many of the school's structures that corresponded to observations of students' self-determination were not built with that explicit purpose in mind. The school's primary purpose had been to provide inclusive learning supports that would help students' develop academic competence. The school's inclusive academic practices were viewed by participants as fundamental to promoting students' experiences of self-determination. An add-on self-determination intervention alone such as the student-led IEP process the LSCs developed, while clearly important, might not have had the same impact without the developmental opportunities and supports that students experienced across the school. As Jay observed, his feelings of finally reaching his potential were firmly rooted in experiencing academic competence alongside typical peers.

Second, it appeared that these inclusive practices were supported by consistent investment in establishing them school-wide. The network of caring, autonomy-supportive adults and their abilities to offer meaningful instructional opportunities to a wide range of students evolved over time with the support of frequent, ongoing in-service professional development on collaborative approaches to learning-focused, inclusive instructional practices. Also, because the LSCs were included in the same professional development and worked across classrooms, they had many opportunities to share and model for other teachers how expectations for students' self-determined behaviors aligned well with the school's emphasis on academic and career outcomes. The student-led IEP process helped to further reinforce those expectations.

Finally, the benefits for some participating students were not fully realized until near the end of their high school careers. They continued to struggle and the adults around them began to wonder if what they were doing was having an impact. However, the teachers continued to convey their expectations for students' emerging agency and offer multiple structured opportunities to practice self-determined behaviors within the school environment. Even with such elements in place some students like Jenny might require a safety net of more intensive and frequent mentoring to ensure their persistence in school so that they would have the time, practice and support needed to develop their individual capacities. Fostering self-determination is a developmental process that takes committed resources and time.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies could investigate more thoroughly each of the school's practices to determine transferability of the elements most closely related to self-determination into other high school settings that are more or less inclusive. In this study the inclusive qualities of the school appeared to create a powerful dynamic for students' self-determination development, but it may be that some elements such as the homeroom structure -- which itself was not inclusive -- could be adapted to other schools. Also, further examination of how the structures interact to promote self-determination of different student groups (e.g., students entering as high achievers or low achievers) would be useful for understanding how to tailor interventions in inclusive settings most effectively. Finally, studies that incorporate standard measures of self-determination, inclusive practice, and post-school outcomes would provide further evidence of the impact of inclusive self-determination interventions.

References
Benz, M.R., Lindstrom, L., & Yovanoff, P. (2000). Improving graduation and employment outcomes of students with disabilities: Predictive factors and student perspectives. *Exceptional Children, 66*, 509-529.

Brantlinger, E., Jimenez, R., Klingner, J., Pugach, M., & Richardson, V. (2005). Qualitative studies in special education. *Exceptional Children, 71*, 195-207.

Brigharm, N., Cobb Morrocco, C., Clay, K., & Zigmond, N. (2006). What makes a high school a good high school for students with disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 21*, 184–190.

Carter, E. W., Lane, K. L., Pierson, M. R., & Stang, K. K. (2008). Promoting self-determination for transition-age youth: Views of high school general and special educators. *Exceptional Children, 75*, 55-70.

Chambers, C., Wehmeyer, M., Saito, Y., Lida, K., Lee, Y., & Singh, V. (2007). Self-Determination: What do we know? Where do we go? *Exceptionality, 15*, 3-15.

Charmaz, K. (2011). Grounded theory methods in social justice research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 359-380). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cobb, B., Lehmann, J., Newman-Gonchar, R., & Alwell, M. (2009). Self-determination for

students with disabilities: A narrative metasynthesis. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, 32*, 10-114.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Deci, E., Vallerand, R., Pelletier, L., & Ryan, R. (1991). Motivation and education: The self-determination perspective. *Educational Psychologist, 26*, 325-346.

Eccles, J., & Roeser, R. (2010). An ecological view of schools and development. In J. Meece & J. Eccles (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Schools, Schooling, and Human Development* (pp. 6-21). New York, NY: Routledge.

Eisenman, L. (2007). Self-determination interventions: Building a foundation for school completion. *Remedial and Special Education, 28*, 2-8.

Eisenman, L., Pleet, A., Wandry, D., & McGinley, V. (2011). Voices of special education teachers in an inclusive high school: Redefining responsibilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 32,* 91–104.

Eisenman, L., & Pleet-Odle, A. (2013). A case study of high school special educator roles in a school-wide model of inclusive learning supports.

Idol, L., Nevin, A., & Paolucci-Whitcomb, P. (2000). *Collaborative consultation* (3rd ed.). Austin, TX: PRO-ED.

Karvonen, M., Test, D.W., Wood, W.M., Browder, D., & Algozzine, B. (2004). Putting self-determination into practice. *Exceptional Children, 71,* 23-41.

Knesting, K., & Waldron, N. (2006). Willing to play the game: How at-risk students persist in school. *Psychology in the Schools, 43*, 599-611.

Lee, Y., Wehmeyer, M., Palmer, S., Williams-Diehm, K., Davies, D., & Stock, S. (2012). Examining individual and instruction-related predictors of the self-determination of students with disabilities: Multiple regression analyses. *Remedial and Special Education, 33*, 150-161.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Murray, C., & Pianta, R. (2007). The importance of teacher-student relationships for adolescents with high incidence disabilities. *Theory into Practice, 46*, 105-112.

National Research Council. (2004). *Engaging schools: Fostering high school students' motivation to learn*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425 (2002).

Shogren, K., Wehmeyer, M., Palmer, S., Soukup, H., Little, T., Garner, N., & Lawrence, M. (2007). Examining individual and ecological predictors of the self-determination of students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 73*, 488-509.

Talbott, E., & Cushing, L. (2011). Engaging youth with disabilities in school: Building and sustaining positive relationships. In T.E. Scruggs & M.A. Mastropieri (Eds.), *Assessment and intervention (Advances in learning and behavioral disabilities, 24*) (pp. 321-339).

Bingley, UK: Emerald.

Test, D., Mazzotti, V., Mustian, A., Fowler, C., Kortering, L., & Kohler, P. (2009). Evidence-based secondary transition predictors for improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, 32,* 160-181.

Waldron, N., & McLeskey, J. (2010): Establishing a collaborative school culture through Comprehensive School Reform. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 20*, 58-74.

Walker, H., Calkins, C., Wehmeyer, M., Walker, L., Bacon, A., Palmer, S.,… Johnson, D. (2011). *Paper 1: A Social-Ecological Approach to Promote Self-Determination. A Series of Papers on Scaling-Up Efforts to Promote Self-Determination.* National Gateway to Self-Determination. Available from http://ngsd.org/sites/default/files/scaling_up_paper_1.pdf

Wallace, T., Anderson, A. R., & Bartholomay, T. (2002). Collaboration: An element associated with the success of four inclusive high schools. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 13*, 349–382.

Wehmeyer, M., Abery, B., Mithaug, D., & Stancliffe, R. (2003). *Theory in self-determination: Foundations for educational practice.* Springfield, IL: Thomas.

Wehmeyer, M., Agran, M., & Hughes, C. (1998). *Teaching self-determination to students with disabilities: Basic skills for successful transition.* Baltimore, MD: Brookes

Wehmeyer, M., & Kelchner, K. (1996). Perceptions of classroom environment, locus of control, and academic attributions of adolescents with and without disabilities. *Career Development of Exceptional Individuals*, *19*, 15–29.

Wehmeyer, M. L., & Metzler, C. A. (1995). How self-determined are people with mental retardation? The National Consumer Survey. *Mental Retardation, 33,* 111–119.

Wehmeyer, M., Palmer, S., Shogren, K., Williams-Diehm, K., & Soukup, J. (2013). Establishing a causal relationship between intervention to promote self-determination and enhanced student self-determination. *Journal of Special Education, 46*(4), 195-210.

Yin, R. (2009). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zhang, D. (2001). Self-determination and inclusion: Are students with mild mental retardation more self-determined in regular classrooms? *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, 36*(4), 357-362.

Zhang, D., Katsiyannis, A., & Zhang, J. (2002). Teacher and parent practice on fostering self-determination of high school students with mild disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, 25*(2), 157-169.

Table 1

Focus Student Demographics

Cohort	Student	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	IEP-Eligible Grade	Retained in Grade	Current Disability Labels	Remedial Academic Areas	Career Area
1	1	Male	White	5	--	ADHD	R, M	Electrical
1	[a]2	Male	Black	2	2	LD	R, M	Biotechnology
1	3	Male	White	4	3	LD	R, W	Biotechnology
1	[a]4	Female	White	5	3	LD	R, M	Culinary
2	5	Male	Hispanic	3	--	LD	M	Plumbing
2	[a]6	Male	White	1	5	LD	R, M	Plumbing
2	7	Female	White	3	--	LD	M	Medical Assisting
2	8	Female	White	3	--	LD, HI	R, M	Emergency Medical
3	9	Female	Black	7	--	HI	M	Culinary
3	10	Male	Black	pre-K	--	LD	R, M, W	Carpentry
3	11	Male	White	1	--	LD	R, M, W	Carpentry
3	12	Female	White	2	--	ADHD, SLI	M	Emergency Medical
4	13	Male	White	5	--	LD	R, W	Plumbing
4	14	Female	White	1	--	ADHD	M	Auto. Technology
4	15	Female	White	pre-K	5	ADD, SLI, LD	R, M, W	Early Child. Education
4	16	Male	Hispanic	4	--	ADHD	M	Early Child. Education

Note. Current Disability Labels: ADD=Attention Deficit Disorder; ADHD=Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; HI=Health Impairment; LD=Learning Disability; SLI=Speech-Language Impairment. Remedial Academic Areas: R=Reading; M=Mathematics; W=Written Language

[a] Case Students: 2=Anthony; 4=Jenny; 6=Jay.

Table 2

Number of Interviews by Participant Group and Study Year

Participant Group	**Year 1**	**Year 2**	**Year 3**	**Year 4**	**Year 5**	**Total**
Focus Students	4	16	19	32	25	96
Parents/Guardians	3	2	9	10	0	24
Learning Support Coaches	1	3	8	7	9	28
General Education Teachers	13	12	25	14	5	69
Administrators	8	3	5	7	2	25
Total	29	36	66	70	41	242