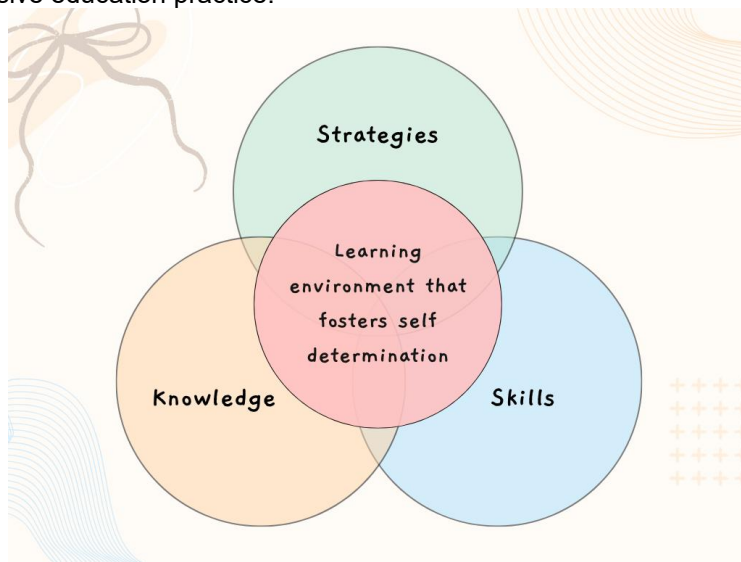


Self-Determination

Why Self-Determination Matters

Self-determination refers to an individual's ability to make choices and manage their own life. For students with disabilities, particularly in a special school context, fostering self-determination is essential for developing independence, agency, and quality of life. Research consistently shows that students who are supported to be self-determined are more likely to succeed in education, employment, and community life.

In a special school, where students may experience a range of cognitive, physical, sensory, or communication challenges, teaching self-determination is not just empowering—it is a human right and a core part of inclusive education practice.



Teacher Knowledge: Foundations of Self-Determination

Effective promotion of self-determination begins with deep teacher understanding. Staff must be equipped with knowledge about:

- What self-determination is: including its components such as choice-making, goal-setting, problem-solving, self-advocacy, and self-regulation.
- The rights of students with disabilities to express preferences, make decisions, and participate in planning their own learning and life paths.
- Developmental appropriateness: understanding how self-determination skills look across various ages and disability presentations.
- Barriers to self-determination: including over-reliance on adult decision-making, restrictive environments, and communication barriers.

Teacher Skills: Embedding Self-Determination into Practice

Teachers in a special school setting need to intentionally build environments and interactions that support student autonomy. Key skills include:

- Facilitation: creating structured opportunities for students to make real choices in daily routines, learning tasks, and leisure.
- Active listening: recognising and interpreting verbal and non-verbal expressions of preference and choice.
- Collaborative planning: engaging students in goal setting and Individual Learning Plan (ILP) development.
- Advocacy support: teaching and modelling how to express wants and needs, while also encouraging students to do so themselves.
- Positive risk-taking: supporting students to try new things, experience success and failure safely, and learn from it.

Strategies for Implementation

To embed self-determination throughout the school culture, teachers should:

- Incorporate student choice in classroom routines, task sequences, and project directions.
- Use visual supports, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), or technology to enable students to express preferences.
- Celebrate student-led learning: highlight examples of students initiating actions, solving problems, or reflecting on outcomes.
- Build routines of reflection: use language and prompts that help students think about their own learning, feelings, and goals.
- Collaborate with families and therapists: to ensure that self-determination is supported across home, school, and community environments.

Summary: Embedding Self-Determination as a Core Practice

In a special school, promoting self-determination is not an extra—it is fundamental. Every student, regardless of their support needs, can be supported to be more autonomous, involved, and empowered. Staff must commit to:

- Recognising the dignity and capacity of every learner
- Creating environments where choices are real and respected
- Teaching decision-making, reflection, and self-advocacy as explicit skills
- Advocating for systemic practices that uphold student voice
- Empowering students to direct their own lives is both a moral and professional imperative. In doing so, we prepare them not only for academic success, but for fuller participation in society on their own terms.

Section 1: Planning for Self-Determination

Understand and Identify Key Skills

- Familiarise with the core components of self-determination (e.g. autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, self-realisation).
- Identify age-appropriate self-determination skills based on student needs.
- Collaborate with the student support team (e.g. guidance officer, SEP teacher) to individualise goals.

Set Clear, Measurable Goals

- Embed self-determination goals into Individual Curriculum Plans (ICPs) or Individual Support Plans (ISPs).
- Align self-determination goals with Australian Curriculum achievement standards and General Capabilities (esp. Personal and Social Capability).
- Ensure student voice is captured in goal-setting processes.

Curriculum Design and Adaptation

- Integrate opportunities for choice-making, goal-setting, and self-assessment in everyday learning activities.
- Include scaffolded tasks that promote decision-making, problem-solving and self-advocacy.
- Provide functional, real-world tasks that increase student agency (e.g. project-based learning, enterprise education).

Section 2: Embedding Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) with a self-determination focus

Data-Informed Behaviour Planning

- Conduct a functional behaviour assessment (FBA) where needed.
- Use collected data to inform the development of Individual Behaviour Support Plans (IBSPs).
- Involve families and multidisciplinary teams in PBS planning.

Curriculum and Environmental Adjustments

- Plan proactive, positive classroom routines aligned with behavioural expectations.
- Embed explicitly taught social-emotional learning (SEL) into weekly timetables.
- Design lessons that build skills in emotional regulation, resilience, and respectful relationships.

Consistency and Reinforcement

- Integrate reinforcement strategies (e.g. token economies, praise, natural reinforcers) consistently.
- Use visuals, prompts, and predictable routines to support behavioural success.
- Regularly review and adjust strategies in collaboration with stakeholders.

Section 3: Integration and Reflection

Link Self-Determination and PBS

- Provide structured choices within behaviour strategies (e.g. break options, activity sequencing).
- Use goal setting and reflection tools that encourage students to evaluate their own behaviour.
- Celebrate student achievements in both academic and behavioural domains.

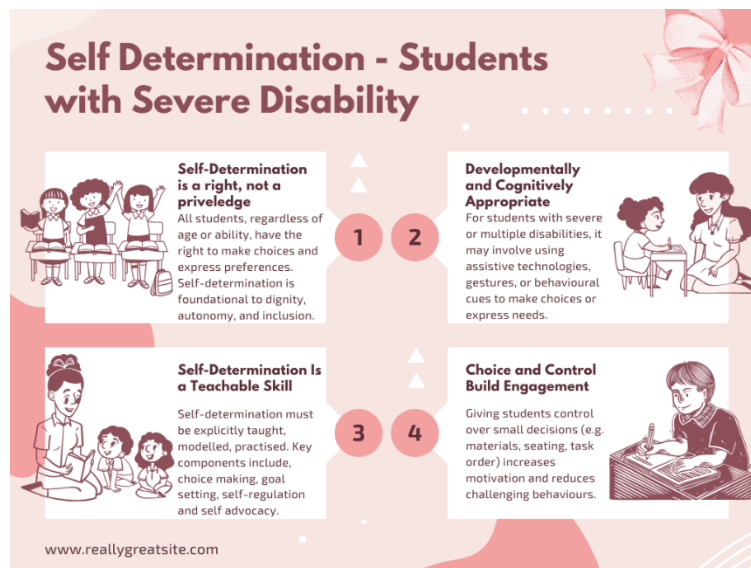
Ongoing Monitoring and Adjustment

- Schedule regular check-ins to monitor progress towards both learning and behaviour goals.
- Document and evaluate effectiveness of strategies.
- Involve students in reflecting on what works for them and co-designing next steps.

Professional Collaboration and Development

- Participate in regular case reviews with colleagues and support staff.
- Engage in professional learning on PBS and student agency.
- Share successful practices and resources with team members.

When working with **young children** and **students with severe intellectual or other disabilities**, promoting **self-determination** requires thoughtful adaptation and responsiveness to individual needs. Below is a detailed overview of **key points, perspectives, and practical advice for teachers**. Key Points on Self-Determination for These Learners are summarised below.



1. Self-Determination Is a Right, not a Privilege

- All students, regardless of age or ability, have the right to make choices and express preferences.
- Self-determination is foundational to dignity, autonomy, and inclusion.

2. Developmentally and Cognitively Appropriate

- For **young children**, self-determination begins with guided decision-making, expressing preferences, and developing basic self-awareness.
- For students with **severe or multiple disabilities**, it may involve using assistive technologies, gestures, or behavioural cues to make choices or express needs.

3. Self-Determination Is a Teachable Skill

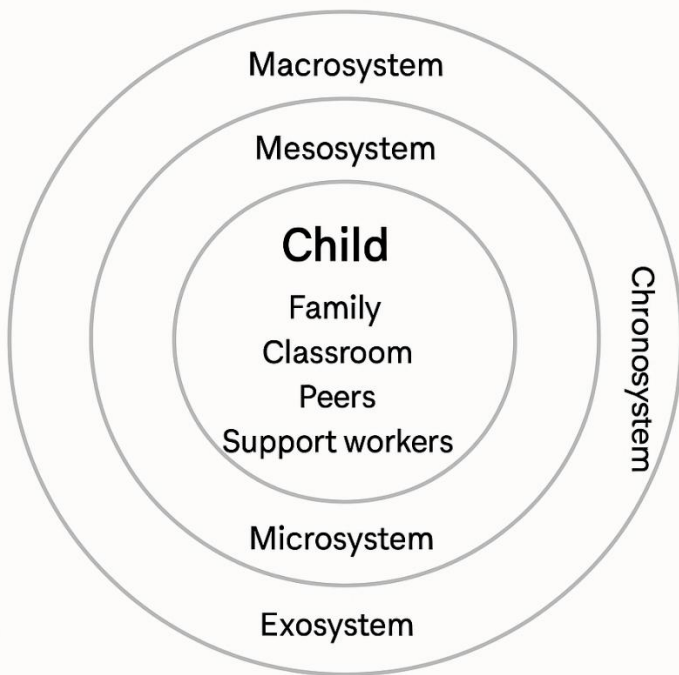
Like literacy and numeracy, it must be **explicitly taught, modelled, practised**, and supported across contexts. Key components include:

- *Choice-making*
- *Goal-setting*
- *Self-regulation*
- *Problem-solving*
- *Self-advocacy*

4. Choice and Control Build Engagement

- Giving students control over small decisions (e.g. materials, seating, task order) increases motivation and reduces challenging behaviours.
- Opportunities for autonomy must be **safe, structured, and meaningful**.

Causal Action & Self-Determination



Collaborate with Support Teams

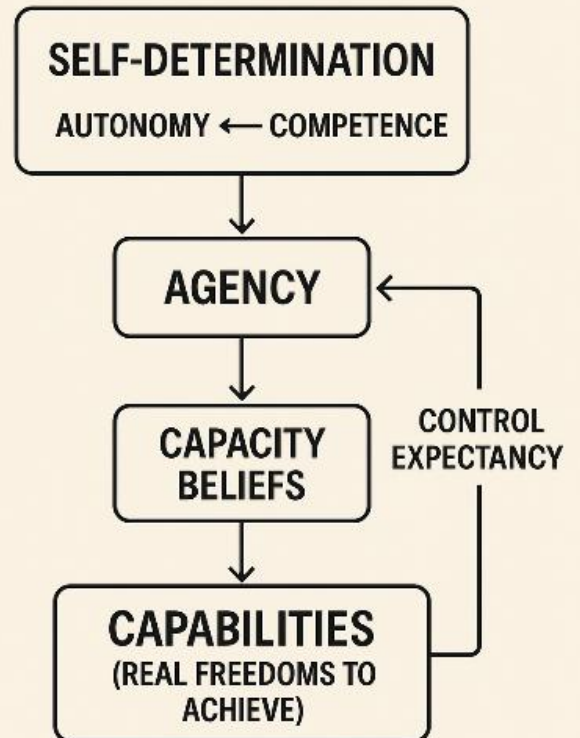
- “Our speech therapist helped us create a communication board tailored to a student’s interests — it changed everything.”
- Work with therapists and families to develop tools and goals that reflect student needs and preferences.

Model and Reflect

“We talk about our own decisions so students see it’s okay to change your mind or ask for help.”
Use think-aloud, reflective questions, and social stories to model self-determined behaviour.

There is substantial research connecting self-determination, agency, capacity beliefs, control expectancy, and capabilities, especially in educational psychology and capability theory. These constructs intersect through themes of motivation, autonomy, empowerment, and human development. Below is a detailed explanation and a visual model to represent these interconnections.

SELF-DETERMINATION, AGENCY, CAPACITY BELIEFS, CONTROL EXPECTANCY, AND CAPABILITIES



Conceptual Overview of Key Constructs

1. Self-Determination

- Rooted in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci & Ryan.
- Emphasizes three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
- Fulfillment of these needs enhances intrinsic motivation and well-being.

2. Agency

- Refers to the individual's ability to act intentionally and make choices.
- Closely tied to autonomy and self-efficacy.
- Central to Amartya Sen's capability approach, where agency reflects the ability to pursue goals one values.

3. Capacity Beliefs

- Also referred to as self-efficacy in Bandura's framework.
- Reflects a learner's belief in their capability to succeed in specific tasks or domains.
- Strongly linked to motivation and perseverance.

4. Control Expectancy

- Includes concepts like locus of control (Rotter) and attribution theory (Weiner).
- Internal control expectancy aligns with greater personal initiative and persistence.

5. Capabilities

- From Sen and Nussbaum's Capability Approach.
- Defined as the real freedoms or opportunities to achieve well-being.
- Not just what people do, but what they can do—connected to functioning and choices.

Interconnections Between Constructs

Construct	Connects To	Explanation
Self-Determination	Agency, Capacity Beliefs	Autonomy and competence foster a sense of agency and belief in one's abilities.
Agency	Control Expectancy, Capabilities	Being agentic requires belief that one's actions matter (control) and that one has real opportunities (capabilities).
Capacity Beliefs	Self-Determination, Control Expectancy	A sense of competence (capacity) supports internal control beliefs and self-determined behaviour.
Control Expectancy	Capacity Beliefs, Agency	If individuals perceive control over outcomes, they are more likely to act with agency.
Capabilities	Agency, Self-Determination	The broader context in which agency and autonomy can flourish—if the environment allows it.

Supporting Evidence and Research

- Bandura (1997): Self-efficacy as a major driver of motivated behaviour and agency.
- Deci & Ryan (2000): Motivation is most sustainable when individuals feel self-determined.
- Amartya Sen (1999): People's capabilities are key to assessing their real freedoms and agency.
- Nussbaum (2011): Emphasized individual capacities within social justice and education.
- Weiner (1986): Control beliefs affect emotional and motivational reactions in learning.
- OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030: Emphasizes learner agency, student voice, and well-being.

Explanation:

- Self-determination (via autonomy and competence) fuels agency.
- Agency is strengthened when learners believe they have control and capacity.
- All of these contribute to the development and use of capabilities—what learners are actually able to do and become.

Application in Practice

This model is particularly useful in:

- Education: Designing inclusive, empowering curricula that foster student voice.
- Disability support: Emphasizing real opportunities and personal control.
 - Well-being and mental health: Enhancing personal autonomy and efficacy.
 - Policy design: Shifting from outcomes to enabling environments and freedoms.

Fostering self-determination in young children and students with significant disabilities isn't about independence alone — it's about valuing agency, recognising capacity, and providing access. Teachers play a crucial role in not only teaching these skills, but also creating environments where every student is empowered to have a voice and a choice.

Theoretical principles of Self-determination

If you are interested in various theories about self-determination, here is one to consider.

Bronfenbrenner's theory identifies nested environmental systems that influence a child's development. These systems affect the child's ability to initiate actions (causal agency) and develop self-determination (i.e., autonomy, self-regulation, and goal setting).

1. Microsystem

Definition: Immediate environments the child interacts with daily.

Examples: Family, classroom, peers, support workers.

Influence: Direct support for independence, communication of expectations, modelling self-regulated behaviour.

2. Mesosystem

Definition: Interconnections between microsystems.

Examples: Parent-teacher communication, school-healthcare coordination.

Influence: Consistency of support and expectations across contexts builds confidence and encourages initiative.

3. Exo-system

Definition: Settings that influence the child indirectly.

Examples: School board policies, parent workplaces, local health services.

Influence: Determines access to resources (e.g., assistive tech), flexible support environments, parental availability.

4. Macrosystem

Definition: Broader cultural and societal values.

Examples: Cultural attitudes towards disability, inclusion policies, social justice values.

Influence: Shapes norms and opportunities for autonomy and inclusion.

5. Chronosystem

Definition: The dimension of time—life transitions and historical changes.

Examples: Transition to high school, curriculum reforms, family upheavals.

Influence: Timing of support interventions and policy changes can help or hinder self-determination.