Clinical Focus

Student-Led Individualized Education Programs: A Gateway to Self-Determination

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of *I'm Determined* youth leaders with learning disability who have enrolled in higher education within 1 year of graduating high school to better understand if and how their experience participating in the *I'm Determined* project led to their participation in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.
Method: The intent of the narrative inquiry methodology applied to this study was to create a unified story of collective experiences that described or explained the factors leading to participation in their IEP meeting. Although each of the eight narratives is unique to the individual, common themes emerged that were reflected in the literature and consistent across the time continuum of life before and life during participation in *I'm Determined*.
Results: One experience that was consistent was the importance of participating in and leading their IEP meeting. A narrative timeline led to our findings presented here within a continuum of experiences before and during participation in *I'm Determined.* We made the decision to present the findings in such a way that highlights common themes specific to IEP participation across moments in time while honoring individual narratives through supportive text from the data. This is a study of people's perceptions of their experiences best told by direct quotes from the participants. The IEP experience is just one component of the self-determination experience.
Conclusions: This study provided insight into the educational experiences of the eight *I'm Determined* youth leader participants and examined the importance of both their participation in *I'm Determined* and the development of self-determination skills deemed essential to participate and lead their IEP meeting. Their unique perspective documented in this study served to both inform and push the field forward.

The negative correlation in postschool outcomes for students with disabilities compared to their nondisabled peers has been a topic of conversation since the 1980s (Halpern, 1985). The disparity was significant enough that

transition services were mandated by federal law with the revision of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 (Kohler & Field, 2003; Landmark & Zhang, 2013). This revision defined transition services as a coordinated set of activities designed to be a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the student and facilitate movement from school to postschool activities (i.e., education, employment, and independent living) and mandated that students' preferences, interests, and needs informed the development of the transition plan (Kohler & Field, 2003; Wei et al., 2016). The 1997 amendments to IDEA were significant with respect to postsecondary outcomes. The age of mandated transition services was

reduced from 16 to 14 years and included an additional parameter that the student's educational plan, including their course of study, must align with their postsecondary goals. The intent was to coordinate the transition activities in a meaningful sequence. Additionally, students were invited to actively participate in their transition planning and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, thus paving the way for the justification of teaching self-determination skills to students with disabilities (Kohler & Field, 2003; Landmark & Zhang, 2013; Wei et al., 2016).

The 2004 amendments, dubbed the IDEA, moved the mandated age for a transition plan back to 16 years but, for the first time, added the requirement to invite the student to any IEP meeting where postsecondary goals were on the agenda (Wei et al., 2016). The heavy focus on compliance regarding transition planning was cemented with this latest, and most recent, revision of IDEA as was the importance of including student voice; student participation; and a clear, coordinated link from transition services to postschool outcomes via the IEP. The law clearly mandated compliance through the new amendments.

However, history has demonstrated that compliance does not always equal results. Meeting the legal requirements of transition services as dictated by federal law does not ensure positive postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities (DeFur, 2003). Most of the disconnect emanates from either students not receiving services detailed in the transition plan of the IEP or poorly written transition plans that contain vague goals, no coordinating activities, and no connection to the students' postsecondary aspirations (DeFur, 2003; Landmark & Zhang, 2013). The collection of barriers, including low expectations, lack of instructional rigor, lack of IEP participation, and disability awareness, further exacerbates the opportunities for success at all levels for students with disabilities (Cumming & Smedley, 2016; McCall, 2015; Newman et al., 2016). Despite the identification of these evidence-based practices, teachers still use secondary transition practices that have little to no evidence base (Rowe et al., 2015). The move from compliance to results-driven accountability, while not mutually exclusive, necessitates a true individualized approach to transition planning with an eye on the student's postschool goals. States have struggled making the transition from a compliance focus to an outcome focus (Morningstar et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2016; Williamson et al., 2010). This study examined the steps the Virginia Department of Education has taken to make this transition and ultimately provide students with disabilities the support they need to meaningfully participate in their IEP meetings and achieve successful postsecondary outcomes.

Student-Led IEPs

An IEP is a document that is developed for students who qualify for special education services. The Virginia Department of Education defines an IEP as a "written statement designed to meet a student's unique needs" that is important for "students with disabilities and for those who are involved in educating them" (Virginia Department of Education, 2023). Stakeholders, including the student, educators, administrators, related service personnel, and family members, meet annually to review student progress and discuss future instruction. During the meeting, the IEP team members collaborate to create the IEP document that describes the student's present level of performance, identifies needed accommodations, and specifies goals that address student needs.

The IDEA (2006) requires that students be invited to their annual IEP meetings beginning at the age of 14 years. While IDEA suggests that students with disabilities begin participating in their IEP meetings at an even younger age, research indicates that active student involvement prior to the age of 14 years is not the norm (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Chandroo et al., 2018). Many students who attend their IEP meetings assume a passive role. The Office of State Superintendents of Education (2014) measured the amount of time that IEP team members spent talking during meetings. It was noted that students, on average, talked for a mere 3% of the meeting time; special educators (55%), general educators (19%), and family members (16%) did most of the talking.

Student Participation

Students with disabilities may be relegated to passive roles during their IEP meetings because they are not prepared to assume leadership. Some students lack the necessary self-determination and communication skills to take on leadership roles (Davis & Cumming, 2019). In some cases, special educators reported deficits in their own abilities to teach these skills, due to either a lack of preservice training (Benitez et al., 2009; Cho et al., 2011) or a lack of time and resources to provide adequate instruction (Lubbers et al., 2008).

While inviting a student with a disability to their IEP meeting may satisfy matters of compliance, mere physical presence is not enough. Students participating in (and leading) their IEP meeting has significant benefits for the student, their families, and their educators. Inviting the student to participate in the meeting allows them to have a voice in their own education and empowers them to take ownership of their learning (Biegun et al., 2020; Sanderson & Goldman, 2022). Students who are involved in the IEP process have IEPs that are more specific, measurable, and relevant to their individual needs (Lloyd, 2009).

Students who are actively involved with planning their IEP have increased self-determination skills (Arndt et al., 2006; Howard et al., 2021; Papay & Bambara, 2014) and a better understanding of their disability (Branding et al., 2009). Mason et al. (2004) found that students who led their IEP meetings were more likely to understand their disability rights and were more confident in advocating for themselves. The annual meeting offers a forum for students to practice decision making, self-advocacy, and authentic communication (Biegun et al., 2020; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Furthermore, a student who is encouraged to exert influence during the meeting may learn that their voice matters and that the IEP process is something that is done with them, rather than for them.

Meeting Description

What student-led IEPs look like is influenced by the student's individual strengths, preferences, interests, and needs. In some instances, students begin by introducing themselves and other members of the team. In other instances, students lead the whole meeting and provide prepared resources that educate the IEP team on accommodations and goals. The Student-Led IEP Rubric (see Appendix B) exists as a resource to gauge the degree of IEP awareness, participation, and social skills that could be practiced enhancing student voice and engagement. There are six categories in this rubric that are essential to creating conditions for a well-designed student-led IEP process: (a) IEP awareness, (b) IEP participation, (c) knowledge of IEP, (d) abilities and disabilities, (e) knowledge of rights and responsibilities, and (f) social and communication skills. Depending on how students self-evaluate themselves, there are many practice implications that might be considered. For example, a student might score a Level 3 in the category of knowledge of IEP and reference that they "don't have a voice in developing accommodations and goals." If this type of situation coexists with a Level 1 score in the category of social and communication, where a student says, "I don't know how to interact with others in my IEP meeting," there are natural opportunities to utilize IMD (I'm Determined) resources. Students could prepare a One-Pager to share their strengths, preferences, interests, and needs. If the student is resistant to in-person interactions, a valuable alternative is for students to prepare video recordings to be shared at the IEP meeting. This example is one of many that demonstrate that the design of student-led IEPs should always account for existing competencies and capabilities. The student-led IEP rubric is a starting point to consider individual strengths and strategies that develop any one of the rubric categories. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and educators can use this rubric as an informal assessment to gauge what students know and what contributions they are prepared to share in the IEP process. The rubric can also function as a goal setting tool, by which students can set goals to improve one or more of the categories.

SLP's Role

The role of the SLP in increasing participation in IEP meetings is critical. The SLP is a key player and IEP team member of students with language-based learning disabilities (LDs). The SLP can start working with the student on self-determination skills during the elementary years through disability awareness and informal assessments to help the student develop and articulate their strengths, preferences, interests, and needs (Collins & Wolter, 2018). This skill development not only lays the foundation for effective communication skills but also develops the repertoire necessary to participate in the IEP meeting. The SLP is often an underused asset when creating postsecondary transition plans, developing self-determination skills, and fostering IEP involvement due to limited preservice preparation on how to implement these essential elements (Perryman et al., 2020). Considering speech-language impairment is one of the most common disability categories, leveraging their skill set to increase both self-determined behavior and IEP involvement is important.

I'm Determined Project

In 2004, the Governor's Office tasked the Virginia Department of Education with developing a program that addressed the inequities in postschool outcomes of students with disabilities compared to their nondisabled peers, resulting in the creation of the I'm Determined project. Core components of the program include explicit instruction, peer modeling, and opportunities to practice skills associated with self-determined behavior in a controlled environment to build competence (Shogren et al., 2015). Explicit instruction is focused on applying the Elements of I'm Determined (see Figure 1) to real-world situations. A family component of the project focuses on the same components to ensure consistency across environments and maximize opportunities to practice self-determined behaviors.

The pinnacle of the I'm Determined project is the point when the student, educator, and guardian(s) see how the development of these skills leads to improved academic and personal outcomes. This project facilitates youth with disabilities to undertake a measure of control in their lives, helping to set and steer the course of their educational journey (Moore & McNaught, 2014).

The I'm Determined team is composed of university faculty working for the Training and Technical Assistance Centers (TTACs) and transition-aged youth with disabilities from across Virginia. The team is structured into geographic regions encompassing six public universities. TTAC faculty (called Determinators) are paired with

THE ELEMENTS OF
I'm Determined

Choice Making

The skill of selecting a path forward between two known options.

Cm

Decision Making

The skill of selecting a path forward based on various solutions that have each been thoughtfully considered.

Dm

Problem Solving

The skill of finding solutions to difficult or complex issues.

Ps

Goal Setting & Attainment

The ability to develop a goal, plan for implementation, and measure success.

Gs

Self-Regulation

The ability to monitor and control one's own behaviors, actions, and skills in various situations.

Re

Self-Advocacy

The skills necessary to speak up and/or defend a cause or a person.

Ad

Internal Locus of Control

The belief that one has control over outcomes that are important to his or her own life.

Lc

Self-Efficacy

Belief in one's own ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish specific tasks.

Ef

Self-Awareness

Basic understanding of one's own strengths, needs, and abilities.

Aw

I'M DETERMINED

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transition-aged youth leaders (five per university) and are tasked with providing professional development to youth with disabilities, educators, and families. The youth leaders, in consultation with the Determinators, also plan and facilitate the annual 3-day *I'm Determined* Youth and Family Summit at James Madison University as well as the smaller regional *Echo* Events (McNaught & Pope 2022).

Youth leaders are selected through an application process and must have demonstrated leadership potential as measured by their participation in at least one Youth and Family Summit. The project uses the acronym TRACK (team-oriented, responsive, attentive, career/ college and community-oriented, kindness) to both assess potential leaders and evaluate current leaders at the end of every year. Youth remain in their leadership role through the age of 22 years contingent upon successful yearly TRACK evaluations (McNaught & Pope, 2022).

As leaders, youth are required to participate in two multiday face-to-face training sessions per year and monthly web-based calls focusing on the core components of self-determination, including decision making, goal setting, self-advocacy, and problem solving (Moore & McNaught, 2014). The multiday training is delivered by Determinators and veteran youth leaders. Topics include

disability awareness, dealing with barriers (internal and external), high expectations, and IEP participation. The training focuses on the three *I'm Determined* tools: One-Pager (autonomy), the Goal Plan (relatedness), and the Good Day Plan (competence) and how each tool helps with creating and communicating about your IEP (see Appendix A). The monthly calls, facilitated by Determinators explore a specific component of self-determination and apply it to current issues youth leaders are experiencing.

The *I'm Determined* project's activities and tools are grounded in the tenets of self-determination theory (SDT). SDT is widely accepted as the foundational blueprint for supporting self-determined behaviors through autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Shogren et al., 2015). Numerous studies link autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the causal factors leading to increased self-determined behaviors (Sun et al., 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2018; Wisniewski et al., 2018). Higher levels of self-determination have been linked to positive postschool outcomes for students with disabilities, including enrollment in higher education (Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001; Madaus et al., 2021; Showers & Kinsman, 2017). Using the theoretical framework of SDT allowed us to examine participant experiences through the lens of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, allowing for a conceptualization of individual experiences within a framework for both the individual participant and the related experiences of all the participants.

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that led the *I'm Determined* graduates with LD to participate and lead their IEP meetings. We synthesized the data from each graduate's account of their experiences into a unified story of self-determination. This unified narrative provides both practitioners and researchers with concrete examples of factors that led to these students' success. These success stories offer practitioners in the field of special education additional data to help address barriers to IEP participation. Two questions guided our research:

1. What specific barriers, if any, toward IEP participation did students with LD, who participated in the *I'm Determined* project as youth leaders, encounter during their K–12 school experience?

2. How, if at all, do students with LD, who participated in the *I'm Determined* project as youth leaders, perceive their experiences in the program as contributing to their involvement in their IEP meetings?

Method

Narrative inquiry is a methodological approach that emphasizes storytelling. Individuals express the meaning of their experiences through story, and it is those stories that should be analyzed to understand a particular phenomenon (Lichtman, 2013; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002). After gathering narratives of participant experiences, researchers look across the individual stories to identify characteristics of the collective experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). This approach allowed us to honor individual stories as well as construct a unified compilation of self-determination through participants' shared experiences.

Participants

This study used purposive sampling in the form of a homogeneous sample. All members of the sample possessed two specific traits: (a) identified as having an LD under the requirements of IDEA and (b) graduated the *I'm Determined* youth leadership program. There were 13 possible participants in the sample meeting these criteria. The first author sent e-mail communication to recruit them to participate in the study, and eight *I'm Determined* youth leader graduates, three women and five men, agreed to participate (see Table 1). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 28 years at the time of the interviews.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Race/gender	Disability	Induction age/years in *I'm Determined*	Postschool outcome
Darla	White female	Dyslexia	13/8	M.Ed., 1st year teacher
Beth	White female	Dyslexia	14/6	1st semester of community college
Sam	White male	Auditory processing, dyslexia/dysgraphia	14/6	1st semester of community college
William	White male	Dyslexia	14/7	M.Ed., 3rd year teacher
Kate	White female	Auditory processing, dyslexia	14/8	M.Ed., 3rd year teacher
Hue	White male	Dyslexia	15/6	Associate degree/works in sales
Bryan	Black male	Dyslexia/dysgraphia	13/5	1st semester at university
Gordon	Black male	Auditory processing, dysgraphia	14/6	3rd semester of community college

Data Collection

The first author completed semistructured, narrative interviews with each participant (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview using the university's institutional review board approved form. Each interview lasted 45 min on average. Narrative interviewing places the focus on the story and purports that narrative story telling is how people make sense of their lived experiences and how they communicate in everyday communication (Mishler, 1986). The purpose of this approach to interviewing is to generate rich, detailed descriptions of the experiences from the storyteller's perspective, including but not limited to their experiences with the *I'm Determined* project, that led to the participants' positive postschool outcome (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

The first author conducted follow-up focus group interviews of 50–60 min after initial data analysis to probe emerging themes and followed the same semistructured design with open-ended questions (Roulston, 2010). The group size consisted of four participants in each focus group and was determined based on participant availability. Each participant was expected to participate in one focus group interview. Questions were constructed according to topics developed from the preliminary analysis of the interview data. These topics were: (a) experiences in special education prior to participation in *I'm Determined* and (b) experiences while participating in *I'm Determined*.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data that allows for theoretical flexibility and enables researchers to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes capture the overarching commonalities within the data, allowing researchers to arrive at a meaningful synopsis (Saldana, 2016). We focused our analysis using an interpretivist lens so that each narrative contributed to the creation of themes (Cranton & Merriam, 2015). Within the interpretivist paradigm, "reality is constructed by individuals in interactions with their social worlds" (Cranton & Merriam, 2015, p. 50). The analysis process was filtered through this lens by allowing each storyteller's narrative to dictate emergent themes. The approach to thematic analysis was inductive, not theoretical, in that the themes were created from the data and not forced to fit into an already existing coding structure (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2016). Lastly, the findings from the study were organized into latent themes that go beyond the surface and "identify or examine the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, conceptualizations—and ideologies—that are theorized as

shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

Data were stored, organized, and coded in NVivo (Version 12; Mac). After transcribing the audio recordings of both the interviews and focus groups, the first author uploaded the transcriptions into NVivo. Computer-assisted data analysis software (CAQDAS), such as NVivo, allows for a more efficient and streamlined analysis process, particularly across multiple researchers (Hoover & Koerber, 2011). Using the software early and often allows for all the generated data (memos, interview transcripts, focus group transcripts, and member check transcripts) to be stored in NVivo, further enhancing both the efficiency and thoroughness of the data analysis (Hoover & Koerber, 2011).

The authors began the analysis by reviewing all the transcribed interviews individually and then again as a group. The authors identified patterns in two episodic time frames, before participation in *I'm Determined* and after participation in *I'm Determined*. Initial patterns included *disability awareness*, *special education*, *general education*, *self-contained/resource*, *service delivery*, *IEP/IEP meeting*, *barriers*, *attitude*, *expectations*, *self-determination*, *motivation*, *elementary school*, *middle school*, *high school*, and *tools*. The authors then used in vivo coding to sort direct quotes into each identified pattern. In vivo codes use the participants' words as code names to "prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (Saldana, 2016, p. 106). Students with LD are often a marginalized population and "coding with their actual words enhances and deepens an adults' understanding of their cultures and worldviews" (Saldana, 2016, p. 106). Direct quotes from each participant were copied and pasted from the transcribed interviews and sorted based on the patterns identified after the review of the interview transcripts. Thus, we used pattern coding to organize the in vivo codes into categories. These categories grouped the in vivo codes into more useful units of analysis. To do this, we collected similar in vivo codes, assessed their compatibility, and then assigned a pattern code to the new grouping of codes. These pattern codes were the impetus to the development of the major themes from the data.

For example, the authors reviewed all transcripts for any discussion related to IEP/IEP meetings. In vivo codes relating to this pattern code were copy and pasted using NVivo into the corresponding node (IEP/IEP meeting). Each pattern code was then further organized and coded by the narrative time frame of before or during participation in *I'm Determined*.

The two major themes developed were specific to participants' experiences before participation in *I'm Determined* and during participation in *I'm Determined*. The

major theme of *confusion* was identified prior to participation in *I'm Determined*. The authors coded specific details of the participants' confusion across three categories including school, disability, and barriers faced. The major theme of *community* was identified during participation in *I'm Determined*. The authors coded specific details of *community* across three categories including disability, opportunity, and goals. We then discussed the major themes in relation to both the research questions and current scholarship on SDT.

Quality and rigor were established through peer debriefing, researcher reflective and reflexive memos, and member checks (Tracy, 2010). The first author met in person with a professional peer at the first author's institution to review data and preliminary findings. She is a doctor of education and a board-certified behavior analyst–doctoral level. Her scholarship includes self-determination, transition, cultural diversity, autism, and applied behavioral analysis. She is familiar with both narrative inquiry and thematic analysis. Debriefing sessions did not reveal any concerns regarding bias but did help differentiate major themes from subcategories.

We kept reflective and reflexive memos to track thoughts, concerns, potential bias, insights, and questions. The authors discussed the content of these memos with each other during data analysis and presentation of findings. We used reflexive memos as an exercise in self-awareness, which allowed us to study ourselves in the sense of how personal attributes and beliefs interact with the phenomena being researched (Kuntz, 2010; Watt, 2007). The discussions centered around awareness of pitch, tone, and rate of speaking when asking follow-up questions and the importance of remaining grounded during the interviews to allow for processing time for the participants as their narrative unfolded. Such reflexive practice was necessary due to the first author's preexisting relationship with participants as principal investigator of the *I'm Determined* project. The first author has known each of the participants for at least 5 years and has worked closely with each participant regarding the development of both their self-determination skills and their leadership skills.

Finally, the first author conducted member checks (respondent validation) on the emerging findings to ensure correct interpretation of the participants' views (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We offered each participant the opportunity to review transcriptions of their initial individual interview and their follow-up focus group interview. Lastly, we provided participants with the initial draft of the findings (Roulston, 2010). Participants did not request changes to transcripts or preliminary findings based on member checking sessions.

Findings

A narrative timeline led to our findings presented here within a continuum of experiences before and during participation in *I'm Determined*. We made the decision to present the findings in such a way that highlights common themes specific to IEP participation across moments in time while honoring individual narratives through supportive text from the data. This is a study of people's perceptions of their experiences best told by direct quotes from the participants. Findings discussed are specific to IEP participation. The IEP experience is just one component of the self-determination experience. McNaught and Pope (2022) detailed each participant's experience with both special and general education, as well as life after high school.

Confused: Experiences Before *I'm Determined*

Participants clearly remembered being tested for an LD but did not remember a time where a teacher, counselor, or school psychologist explained to them what the results meant in language they could understand. Feelings of academic inadequacy and low self-esteem permeated the group. The change in placement, while varied, was not communicated to any of the participants leading to a sense of confusion. A key time in all the participants' narratives was when they were identified for special education services under the category of LD. None of the participants remembered anyone telling them specifically that they had an LD or explaining the implications regarding their educational placement. All the participants clearly remembered a "pull-out" approach to special education services and the feeling of being the only one with a disability. This service delivery approach led to reduced autonomy, competence, and relatedness and consistently put the participants in environments that did not support or nurture self-determined behaviors. The transition from elementary to middle school was difficult because of increased academic rigor, peer pressure, and higher teacher expectations with no scaffolded support. The confusion was now manifested in their own lack of disability awareness along with a service delivery model they did not understand.

Disability

Beth remembered a feeling of wanting to hide her disability: "I didn't really talk about it, I honestly didn't want to talk about it with my friends because I had so many friends at school and I didn't want them to think of me as like the weird kid or like a freak or anything." Beth

remembered the fear of being "found out": "Because I thought that I would lose all my friends because I was in special ed. And I thought sometimes they would judge me."

Sam recollected not understanding his disability in elementary school: "I just thought I struggled more than other people. I struggled with spelling, I really struggled with making friends. I struggled with just being okay with myself, always wanting to change." Sam talked about missing English class because of his disability in elementary school: "I went into a reading something, I can't remember what it is. And I remember hating going to it because all it did was make me read. It was not explained to me at all, I didn't understand why I was going to it."

Bryan still did not understand his disability as he transitioned to middle school. He remembered:

> It wasn't until my seventh-grade year in middle school, that my special education teacher finally broke everything down to me and told me what my disability really was. I thought I was getting pulled out because I was just having a conference with another teacher. They really didn't tell me right away that I learned differently, because they didn't want to upset me. I never even knew I had and IEP or a meeting about me.

Gordon struggled with acceptance of his disability. He talked about "hiding" and "staying quiet" during elementary school as means of avoidance. Upon further reflection, he remembered "seeing" other students with disabilities but "we never talked about it" and even in elementary school "we never expressed what disabilities we had, cuz we never knew. I never even heard IEP until *I'm Determined*."

School

School was difficult for all the participants. From an early age and prior to identification for special education, all the participants struggled academically and knew they were different from other classmates. Early memories of inadequacy and feeling broken led to frustration. The feeling of school as a battlefield instead of a safe environment permeated the narratives.

Sam remembered, "I hated going to school, I felt like it was just a place of torture. They are forcing me to do something that I don't wanna do and I'm not very good at it." He continued, "When we started with learning how to spell your name, learning your address and different things like that. I was not very good at it and could tell then. I was like everyone else is getting this, why am I not getting this?"

William thought back to his initial IEP meeting: "And then I can remember having this huge long meeting for my initial IEP, but I just sat there." The meeting did not shed any light on his LD from his perspective: "They were using huge words; they were talking about things that I didn't think really pertained to me. I didn't really understand my disability and how it affected me, not till later on."

Kate did not remember attending IEP meetings or having her LD explained to her until high school: "So, I was aware of it. I didn't fully understand it, but I knew even before because I struggled and I saw other people not struggling. I knew that there was something. And I didn't fully understand it but my parents tried to teach me." She thought the path of least resistance was to "struggle in silence" because she "didn't know who to ask for help."

Barriers

All participants identified barriers as a constant along their educational journey. Barriers did not disappear when the participants became self-determined, but each participant developed strategies to deal with barriers as part of their experience with *I'm Determined*. Barriers identified by participants included themselves, teachers, lack of strategies, and specific instructional activities that exacerbated their disability and led to continually struggling throughout their schooling.

Sam identified a variety of barriers. He recalled "just not being able to read as well others" as a key factor in his lack of self-confidence. He dreaded "having to be able to read aloud in front of people, and stuttering and people saying like, can you just not read at all or what?" He felt ostracized by his peer group: "Them not supporting me and making fun of me instead of being able to support me and say, hey, hey, I have this answer, let me show you how to do that." Sam was always bothered that teachers thought he was lazy: "I hated when people thought I was lazy because I'm doing the best I could do and giving it everything I have. And mentally and physically stressing about it and getting sick over it." He would work late into the night on assignments and often not finish. The teacher's attitude was, "You didn't get the assignment done? It's all or nothing."

Hue experienced similar self-confidence issues and struggled with both peers and teachers who did not understand his LD. He felt like no one knew enough about his LD to explain it to him in common language: "Having nobody else to relate to or having nobody else to really tell me more about my disability really made it hard to connect especially when everybody else was reading and reading fluently."

Gordon remembered struggling the most in high school because "that's when everything was a fast pace."

The "pull-out" model was difficult for Gordon because he had hard time "catching up" when he was removed from the general education classroom. He was often given the answers and wished teachers "would just let me try to everything on my own first, and then come back and help if I need it."

Overcoming barriers was impossible without the tools and the environment to support the self-determined behaviors needed to confront issues. The barriers were exacerbated by the lack of environmental supports. Confusion only increased as the academic rigor increased through elementary school into middle school and the lack of support remained a consistent issue. The absence of autonomy, competence, and relatedness cemented the notion that school was about survival, not learning, and any idea of continuing their education in a postsecondary environment was not appropriate or feasible.

The lack of disability awareness paired with an environment not supportive of autonomy, competence, or relatedness led to few opportunities to practice self-determined behavior. Most participants did not know they had an IEP, let alone an annual meeting to discuss their needs. Feelings of loneliness and confusion about their disability slowly changed as they began their journey with *I'm Determined* and met other youth with disabilities.

Community: Experiences During *I'm Determined*

The participants' induction into *I'm Determined* was the first time they experienced a community (relatedness) of peers with similar challenges. The participants learned about LD, gained competence through experience and practice in a safe environment, learned about tools to support self-determined behavior, and heard from experienced *I'm Determined* youth leaders about leading their IEP meeting. Peer networks were formed using social media for youth leaders to support each other outside of formal *I'm Determined* events and trainings.

Darla remembered self-advocacy not always being easy, but she relied on her community through *I'm Determined* for support: "Teachers were, especially in middle school, my teachers were really dismissive and weren't supportive at all of me participating or trying to lead my IEP." Darla found it easier to talk to a peer from *I'm Determined* who could relate to what she was going through.

William remembered the sense of community he felt within *I'm Determined* as particularly helpful. He met other "kids with the same struggles that I was facing and after hearing their stories and talking with them, figuring out they're just like me was a relief." William's experiences pushed him to be self-determined in a "safe environment first" and gave him the confidence to self-advocate at school, including during his annual IEP meeting.

Disability

The sense of community and feelings of relatedness strengthened Beth's confidence and started breaking down the walls she built to protect herself based on her previous struggles. Beth recalled not wanting to accept her disability "until I got in *I'm Determined*." Upon further examination, Beth credited her experiences with *I'm Determined* as the impetus for accepting her LD: "*I'm Determined* mostly was like the core reason of why I accepted my disability because I saw how people were so much happier when they knew they had a disability, and they accepted it. It made me want to lead my meeting."

Sam was amazed that the older youth leaders did not try to hide their disability. He remembered the positive impact of "having older leaders say that they're comfortable with their disability, but it doesn't define who they are." He quickly realized he was now part of a community that he did not know existed, and his relief was palpable. He was "in awe of how they took charge of their life and used their IEP."

In the early stages of participation in *I'm Determined*, time was dedicated to disability awareness training for the youth leaders. The feeling of solitude was replaced by one of relief when the participants realized they were not the only person in the world with LD. The feeling of community was slowly established through relatedness.

Darla clearly remembered the moment when she realized she was not alone. She was attending her first *I'm Determined* Youth Summit and had not yet been selected as a leader. She said:

> In the beginning, realizing that there's a lot of people in the state of Virginia who are just like me and struggle. And then, who have become successful. Meeting people who are older and they're in college, and they're able to go to college and be successful, was really powerful. I think that having friends who were going through the same thing or went through the same thing was helpful. I was able to rely on them for, if I needed a little help or asked for suggestions or things like that. My support team grew drastically.

As Darla became more comfortable with her disability, her "self-esteem increased." She learned about strategies, accommodations, and self-advocacy in a "safe environment," which gave her the "confidence to practice the new skills" at school and in her IEP meeting. The increase in self-esteem led to the intrinsic motivation to try new opportunities.

Opportunity

These initial experiences with *I'm Determined* led to feelings of relatedness through community building and development of self-determined behaviors. The symbiotic relationship between autonomy, competence, and relatedness was evident as the community became solidified. Participants experienced feelings of relatedness for the first time and began forming friendships that endured outside of structured *I'm Determined* events. The community feeling and realizing they were not alone led to a willingness to try new self-determined skills in a safe environment. The new skill development led to increased competence. The increased competence led to the participants' willingness to act autonomously in a controlled environment first and then the willingness to generalize the new skills to environments outside of *I'm Determined*. A nuanced understanding of their disability along with peer models led to increased IEP involvement in high school.

Darla continued:

And so, I was taking my classes seriously. And when I needed help I wasn't like afraid to ask for it. I used a lot of the tools and strategies that I have learned through *I'm Determined* not only like the program but also other youth leaders and the adults to help me be successful in school. I also realized that using my accommodations and getting help wasn't cheating. And I never really thought it was cheating but I was always like, I don't need that. But I realized that I need those to be successful, and I shouldn't be ashamed of that.

Beth's self-esteem increased with each new opportunity: "I am more confident. I finally accepted that I couldn't get rid of my disability no matter how hard I tried to hide it." Beth continued:

So, I didn't start thinking about wanting to accept my disability until *I'm Determined*, because I would see there were people that did have disabilities, and I thought I was the only one in the world that had this disability, and nobody would understand me, and nobody would get the way that I learn. I finally accepted my disability, and I finally was like okay this is how it's gonna be, so I better start talking about what I need at my IEP. And when I finally did that, my grades improved.

Beth learned how to self-advocate, and it was not always easy but she learned how to "deal with it through *I'm Determined*." Beth remembered:

And there would be some teachers in high school, that are like no, we can't use that, no, we can't do that, it's not fair to the other students. Why do you get to use it, but they can't? And I would always say it levels the playing field, it's just how it is and it's in my IEP.

William changed from a shy student always trying to "fly under the radar" to someone not being afraid to disclose his disability. He said:

But it was just truly getting out of my comfort zone, understanding that I had a voice, understanding that there are people who are going through the exact same times as I'm going through, so I can always rely on someone my age, to just kind of help me, give me some pointers. For me at that point in time, I mean, into high school, I didn't really worry about what people thought about that I had a disability or not. I mean, people knew I had a disability, and I wasn't shy about it. But I wouldn't go out of my way and say, hey, I have a disability but now after *I'm Determined*, being more involved with my IEP, I went out of my own way to go tell my teacher and said, this is who I am. This is what I need. I mean, I use the tools like the one pager, and the goal sheet, and the good day plan to help me.

Disability awareness was a "game changer" for Hue. He said:

Then the next step was learning about my disability. So that once I understood it, then we were able to go towards leading my IEP and figuring what accommodations would work better for me. Those little steppingstones all built confidence. And then after I knew what was going on with me and we were able to get it down to like a science with what was working I started doing better.

Bryan credited *I'm Determined* for the change in his behavior: "*I'm Determined* really affected me in high school because I was telling my case manager and the people in my IEP team meetings that this was my goal, and this is what I wanted to do to achieve it, and I was making plans to go to college."

In a similar vein, Gordon thought, "Right now, I'm not ashamed to tell people I have a disability. Like, that's maybe the fourth thing that I mention when talking to somebody." This was not an easy road for Gordon especially "because back home I never see any Black people with disabilities." Gordon credited disability awareness as

the first step in "being able to find out who I am as an individual with a disability." Gordon took it one step further and credited participation in *I'm Determined* as the impetus for his behavioral change: "I guess it's just becoming a youth leader for *I'm Determined* just changed everything cuz at first I didn't wanna disclose much about my disability to anyone and now I talk about it and run my IEP." Gordon concluded that "*I'm Determined* helped me develop my voice and that changed everything with school."

Participation in *I'm Determined* did not protect participants from the struggles of their public-school experience: rather, it equipped them with tools, strategies, and behaviors to help level the playing field. The first step in leveling the playing field is understanding one's needs and matching appropriate accommodations based on those needs. The next step is advocating for those needs.

Sam learned to self-advocate and had mixed results: "I was told by a teacher that the best thing I would do was work at McDonald's." The setbacks did not deter Sam: "A lot of my teachers were like, no, I'm not giving you this. And then I'm went up to them and said, yes, you're gonna give me this because it is in my IEP and that's a legal document saying that I need to get this." Sam continued to reflect on his high school experience: "Well, going into high school, I just felt more confident after working with *I'm Determined*. I understood more about myself and sort of what I am capable of rather than just feeling scarred from middle school." Sam was willing to act boldly because of his new community of supportive peers through *I'm Determined*.

Disability awareness and an understanding of personal strengths, preferences, interests, and needs were essential skill development areas for the participants. The participants' deficit-based school experience prior to *I'm Determined* led to a comprehensive understanding of everything "they couldn't do" but left all of them woefully unprepared to discuss their strengths. Self-awareness will only get you so far if you cannot advocate for yourself. The safe environment provided by *I'm Determined* created a judgment-free zone for the participants to understand their LD, identify their strengths and needs, and practice advocating until competent with the goal of generalizing the skill outside of *I'm Determined*. The participants were filling their toolbox, reframing self-perceptions, and reframing teacher perceptions and expectations around IEP participation.

Goals

All the participants' narratives mentioned the impact participation in *I'm Determined* had on their current and future goals and described a realization or moment(s) of clarity regarding their personal expectations for the future.

This realization led to an understanding of the importance of goal setting and either adjusting current goals or creating goals for the first time.

William reflected on how inclusion in a community and access to opportunities impacted him during the years he participated in *I'm Determined*. The autonomy he experienced influenced his path: "I mean, it's really from *I'm Determined*. It pushed me outside my comfort zone." He continued:

> I've always been a student so I've always been told what to do, where to go, how to do it. So, for me, the big thing that changed was that I actually ran my IEPs. I mean, my special education teacher would write it out for me, but I mean, I told her everything I needed. Everything that ever came my way was, what my strengths were, what my weaknesses were. And now going into other environments and having that confidence, having that understanding that I can tell my story, be proud of who I am, and how I came about is powerful.

Hue talked about how experiencing autonomy pushed him to lead his own IEP meeting because prior to *I'm Determined,* he "didn't have any say in it." As a result, "your teachers didn't really get a chance to know you throughout the meeting." He remembered running his first IEP meeting: "So, now once I took over running it, and I'm in control over it and I'm leading it, the teachers look at you a little bit different." Hue continued:

> It was about what I wanted. And that was probably the last big thing that allowed me to really develop into being an actual good student I felt like. Being able to have the confidence to go and talk to everybody was because, hey I can actually tell everybody that I'm coming up with my accommodations and tell my teachers, my principals, my resource teacher, everybody there I'm able to say hey, this is what I need. I got help and got some pointers and stuff and recommendations along the way from *I'm Determined* but I was able to put pen on paper and this is what I wanted as a student, not what everybody else wants. They actually went from not paying attention to you at all throughout the meetings to okay, everything, all eyes and everything is focused on you, and you could get the point across exactly how you wanted.

I'm Determined provided the safe space through establishing a community first, then the skill development, and, lastly, the opportunity to practice the new skills without fear of failure, embarrassment, or further isolation.

The establishment of relatedness created a safe environment to build competence through practice, which led to autonomous behaviors through setting new goals for the future based on changed expectations. Barriers did not disappear because of *I'm Determined* participation. The participants were better prepared to deal with barriers through opportunities to practice self-determined behavior that led to increased confidence and willingness to advocate.

Discussion

This study has explored the work of the Virginia Department of Education's *I'm Determined* project and the promotion of self-determination in transition activities. The *I'm Determined* program is not a curriculum. *I'm Determined* provides the environment that supports self-determined behavior for each participant. Some are seeking competence, some are seeking autonomy, and some are seeking relatedness. *I'm Determined* provides for all of those needs and teaches strategies for staying determined when not in supportive environments. Self-determination does not happen overnight; it is a process full of hard work, risks, vulnerabilities, and rewards, and most importantly, it teaches you how to get up when life knocks you down. Environments can be altered, and strategies can be used by practitioners that mirror what *I'm Determined* provided these participants.

IEP participation is one activity that is associated with self-determination skills and linked to positive educational outcomes and greater independence and well-being (Martin et al., 2006; Royer, 2017). For each participant, the lasting impact was not the "how" of participation but the fact that they had a seat at the table and were prepared to share their voice. The narratives of participants from the *I'm Determined* project highlight that pedagogies focused on self-determination and student leadership reinforce participation and influence outcomes of transition planning activities such as student-led IEPs while also influencing the psychological needs of individual students. Contrasting participant narrative experiences before and during their involvement with *I'm Determined* gives ground for three critical points of discussion. These include: the attainment of basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness), opportunities to practice or act, and explicit teaching of the *I'm Determined* project tools (i.e., One Pager, Good Day Plan, and Goal Plan; see Appendix A).

Need attainment, in psychological areas of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, is associated with feeling confidence, a sense of freedom, and a sense of connection to others (Brenner, 2022; Sun et al., 2017; Vansteenkiste et al., 2018; Wisniewski et al., 2018). These feelings operate

as motivators for individuals and reinforce a positive sense of self as one takes action and makes choices (Brenner, 2022; Ryan et al., 2021). The psychological attainment of competence, autonomy, and relatedness is evident in the narratives of *I'm Determined* youth leaders. Hue expressed the attainment of competence as he shared a greater understanding of his disability and its impact on his ability to communicate with his teachers and other supports. William demonstrated the motivations associated with autonomy noting the difference that occurred in moving from being "told" what to do and how to be, to now being able to speak up and tell others "my story and my needs." Finally, Darla experienced relatedness among her peers and teachers, and through creating a safe space to talk about herself and her needs, she was able to take risks and take on new opportunities because she knew others were there for support. Practice with and reinforcement of these basic psychological needs strengthens one's ability to act and galvanizes the beliefs that one can influence what happens in everyday interactions and situations. These findings reinforce the importance of self-determination and basic psychological need theory; however, there are also unique contributions in the data that emphasize the communicative abilities associated with self-determination skills. Communication and collaboration are significant features of IEP development and pivotal to creating representative teams and a functional IEP (Biegun et al., 2020; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). In the narrative data, there is original evidence of youth practicing adaptive leadership and social intelligence alongside self-determination. Youth leaders demonstrate that competencies, such as self-advocacy, incorporate features of adaptive leadership (Kuluski et al., 2021) and the adaptive capacity to shift away from technical solutions and embrace creative problem-solving strategies in instances of complexity, change, and uncertainty (McKimm et al., 2023). Equally important is social intelligence and the ability to contextualize different perspectives and address social situations with self-awareness, social awareness, and relational management (Boyatzis, 2009; McKimm et al., 2023). *I'm Determined* continues to consider how classroom instruction, simulations, and natural opportunities stimulate the confluent practice of self-determination, adaptive leadership, and social intelligence.

SLPs can address skills, abilities, and beliefs associated with self-determination and tangentially establish skills associated with adaptive leadership and social intelligence. To start, take time to sit down and construct *affective communication* that is consistent with the temperament, personality, and identity of the student. Doing so equips the student with a repertoire of phrases, metaphors, and imaginaries that evoke emotions and influences listeners within the IEP process to empathize with the lived

realities of the student. The influence of affective communication flows into adaptive leadership capabilities; however, a second step that is often overlooked is the refinement of communication to account for contexts and audience. Therefore, SLPs should take time to reflect with students on the contextual factors and the different types of *tact* that are effective in different social environments. One example of this type of adaptive communication can be referenced in how students communicate their accommodations to educational staff versus how students lead in advocating for accommodations within a formal eligibility or IEP meeting. The choice of tone, word choice, and nonverbal communication are all sensitive pieces that communicate a social intelligence that is intentional, visionary, and yet understanding of other's perceptions. The last step is to reflect with students on what it means to communicate and live out one's social intelligence. Social intelligence incorporates both affective communication and adaptive leadership but adds on a student's abilities to receive and process social feedback from others. In accepting feedback, there is a reflective process of self-appraisal, which constantly informs and sharpens communication and the way in which those communicative interactions occur. In practice of social intelligence, one naturally circles back to affective communication and refines the language to reflect the personal growth that came from critical reflection. The development of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are a continuous and ongoing process of development, refinement, practice, and reflection and occur through practices of affective communication, adaptation to context sensitivities, and reflecting on social feedback.

A second point of emphasis highlights the role that transition activities, such as participation in student-led IEPs, play in shaping youth identity and a sense of self. Enriched environments observed in narrative data show that individuals are given space to take risks and can construct a sense of dignity. This makeup of enriched opportunities emboldens youth to use self-determined behaviors and gives them more opportunities to practice (Loman et al., 2010). Studies on dignity of risk highlight the "geography of risk," noting that there is an important balance between affording individuals to take risk and creating safe spaces for individuals to practice new skills (Heller & Skymba, 2022; Marsh & Kelly, 2018; Mukherjee, 2022). Examples of this balance between risk and protection are evident in how *I'm Determined* positions itself to engage youth to take social risks, while simultaneously offering tools and mentoring that supports active problem solving and self-advocacy. Darla used her accommodations to access learning opportunities and subsequently dismissed the self-perpetuating idea that her accommodations were a type of cheating. Sam developed a boldness

to speak up when others doubt or misunderstand him or his needs. Finally, Gordon mentioned the confidence he found to express himself as a Black man with a disability. Participants mentioned situations where social risks were present, yet they navigated those risks with self-determination, leading to feelings of dignity and self-worth. Geographies that enrich one's belief in self do so by affording individuals to take incremental steps to act self-determined on their own terms, providing room for new inclusive practices to be formed (Hall, 2004; Heller & Skymba, 2022; Imrie & Edwards, 2007). The unique contribution in this study shows how intentional programming from *I'm Determined* creates situations where youth can learn to take risks. However, that data also show that learning to take risks begins in environments that have a growth mindset, offer peer support, and model adaptive emotional regulation strategies (Clark & Soutter, 2022; Heller & Skymba, 2022; Schweizer et al., 2020). By giving youth safe spaces to act on their own accord, individuals can understand what life outcomes are within their locus of control and what personal capabilities will support their access to new opportunities (Heller & Skymba, 2022). While dignity is equated to self-esteem, this study reinforces that dignity is not something youth can conjure up on their own, but it is rather something that exists in social interactions where individuals sense they are seen, received, and valued (Barclay, 2019; Nussbaum, 2006). Youth leaders who participate in *I'm Determined* come into learning environments knowing that know they are inherently valued. That feeling of being valued is empowering and leads individuals to try out and act out new behaviors. Taking risks, such as participation in the IEP, is contingent on feeling a sense of worth. That worthiness is grown when individuals feel honored, respected, and supported in their chosen actions (Mukherjee, 2022). This study supports the cultivation of dignity, a strategy that honors the individualized process of learning self-determined behaviors (Heller & Skymba, 2022). This strategy provides room for youth to learn to take risks but does so in ways that recognizes that each youth needs individualized protection and support to develop confidences in themselves and their abilities.

Providing different types of transition activities gives students a wide range of opportunities to develop a communication style that is their own. The development of one's own voice is not a one-step process but should be thought about as a scaffolded approach that moves from modeling, to support, and finally to independence. A first step of scaffolded support exists in modeling. These models might exist in natural transition activities, but often students lack prerequisite skills to even know where to look for guidance. SLPs or peer models are great

resources for developing social communication in transition activities. At *I'm Determined*, modeling occurs by having older, more experienced peers, interacting and modeling behavior alongside younger and less experienced peers. The use of peer models is an excellent scaffolded support that establishes baseline communication skills for transitioning youth. A second step in providing an enriched environment to act is in providing a communication support. While many students know when something is going right, or something is going wrong, they often do not have a full range of words to express what they are feeling or what they need. The supportive scaffold provides a partner who operates as a resource in formulating communication. This support can be tapped into for a spectrum of opportunities, from relational interactions all the way to advocating in areas of conflict or injustice. The final step is to establish opportunities where students can communicate independently in transition activities. While independence is experienced by many young adults, it is essential to account for the ways in which agentic actors continually need advice, mentoring, and time to self-appraise. Therefore, even when students act independently, make sure there is still space for the individual student to choose to engage in dialogue and reflection with others. It is in the provision of that space that students can experience the agentic feeling of choice, alongside a level of support that is essential to human flourishing.

The third and final point of emphasis builds upon the pedagogical supports in the *I'm Determined* tools that are used to explicitly teach youth to communicate and advocate in places like IEP meetings. While explicit instruction is not often linked to leadership development, *I'm Determined* has found that the empowering youth to speak up is facilitated by the use of the *I'm Determined* tools. Several research studies have indicated that teaching students with LD to self-advocate requires explicit instruction, where students are taught to understand themselves and their disability so that they can then effectively advocate their learning needs to others (Koca et al., 2023; Prater et al., 2014). The *I'm Determined* tools (i.e., One-Pager, Good Day Plan, and Goal Plan) are structured ways to discover more about oneself and are intrinsically teaching youth to communicate their strength and needs. The use of the *I'm Determined* tools boosts self-awareness and simultaneously provides a platform for developing a vocabulary. One example of this would be with the One-Pager, where students identify strengths, preferences, interest, and needs. The One-Pager begins with growing self-knowledge and then gives youth a resource to communicate that knowing to others. Youth participating in *I'm Determined* have opportunities for this type of self-discovery across all the *I'm Determined* tools, and in doing so, students begin to craft language and socio-relational

techniques that support effective communication of goals, aspirations, and needs. The *I'm Determined* tools are templates that explicitly address self-determination skills such as goal setting, self-regulation, problem solving, and self-awareness. As Hue comments, "The *I'm Determined* tools were game changers." By game changer, Hue is saying that the presence of the tools as a learner was important for him to develop self-knowledge and that, through self-knowledge, he was able to articulate to others in ways he couldn't before he had that knowledge of himself. The three tools reinforce elements of the IEP such as goals, support needs, and accommodations and because youth use these tools frequently, youth build competencies about themselves that are refined to effectively advocate at IEP meetings. This study reaffirms previous findings regarding the teaching of self-advocacy (Koca et al., 2023; Prater et al., 2014) but contributes to established practices that support the facilitation of self-knowledge and subsequently improves the levels of communication that occur as youth learn to advocate in IEP meetings (Bross & Craig, 2022). The use of the *I'm Determined* tools changes as youth become more self-determined but is always a resource when new situations, new problems, or new relationships emerge. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the value of the *I'm Determined* tools as an inherent resource to develop self-determination and to support youth to effectively advocate to others.

In practice, the three tools can be used succinctly across all phases of transition planning. Use of the IMD tools generally follows a tool-by-tool progression, beginning with the development of the One-Pager, followed by the Good Day Plan, and finally with the Goal Plan. This progression is followed, in part, because each tool builds on the other. The first tool offers explicit instruction in developing self-awareness, whereby individuals begin to identify and discover their strengths, preference, interest, and needs. These words and descriptors identified in the One-Pager become part of a lexicon that students use to express who they are as individuals. Development of this lexicon naturally supports the development of the Good Day Plan where students are asked to reflect on what makes up a good day and what actions are associated with making those days a tangible reality. The Good Day Plan allows for the transfer of the One-Pager and gives students a visual representation of how utilization of strengths and/or needs attainment is connected to the experience of good days. When students make connections between actions and outcomes, they are equipped to articulate to others what is needed and what actions are necessary to take. The final tool is the Goal Plan, when students correlate that planning one's actions leads to an increased probability of experiencing good days. Because the experience of having a good day feels good, students

have intrinsic motivation to establish goals associated with a Good Day Plan. In goal planning, students lean on what they have learned about themselves and their social environments. This referential process between the self and the social is articulated in the One-Pager (self) and the Good Day Plan (social), and with goal planning, there is an opportunity to scope out what actions the self needs to take and how social environments might respond, support, and or challenge one in the processes of attainment. In the Goal Plan, features of communication are built into the design of the goal template, the steps to get there, the outcomes of the goal, and the people needed to achieve that goal. Articulating each of those operates as a template for communicating "what I am doing, how I am going to do it, what I will achieve, and who I need." In communicating goals in this way, students are practicing communication skills that are expressive of the self but also show an aptitude to navigate the social terrain of transition.

The *I'm Determined* project is a not a set curriculum but, rather, a supportive environment that observes the unique needs of individuals and grants them opportunities to achieve greater degrees of competence, autonomy, or relatedness (McNaught & Pope, 2022). While changes in self-determined behavior are observable because of participation in the *I'm Determined* project, it is essential to see the emergence of skills as a result of needs attainment, which with increased practice translates into other spaces such as IEP participation. Several studies centered on speech-language pathology have highlighted the emergence self-determination skills through practicing for IEP meetings. These practices applied self-advocacy and public speaking skills in preparation of IEP meetings and were observed as practice opportunities that moved students from being passive participants to being contributing members who are confident in their identities and capabilities (Collins & Wolter, 2018; Perryman et al., 2020). Participants clearly indicated that increased IEP participation operates because of prior self-determination practice but also explained involvement in the IEP as a practice that strengthens one's needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Therefore, and in concordance with participant narratives, it is essential to construct student-led IEPs as both a product of previously developed self-determination and a learning space from which one can cultivate skills, abilities, and beliefs associated with self-determination.

There are many examples of a student-led IEP that result in meaningful outcomes for students. However, as practitioners, we need to avoid the temptation to copy ready-made examples and recognize that the same individualization that is practiced in IEP development should be reflected in the planning and design of student-led IEPs.

Implications for Practice

What does a student-led IEP meeting look like? Does it require the student to preside over the meeting? While the ultimate goal may be for every learner to take control of as many facets of the IEP process as possible, it is important to acknowledge a broad spectrum of ways that youth can offer leadership (see Appendix B). Younger or students new to self-determination can practice leadership by introducing themselves or introducing the other members of the IEP team. Since the student should be the center of the team, it stands to reason that they would have a relationship with everyone who attends the IEP meeting.

Another way for students to exert leadership in the IEP process is to create visual media that offers relevant information. Such contributions may take several forms including a graphic organizer, slide deck, or video. Students with strengths and interests in creating visual media may prefer to share information in this way as opposed to writing or speaking during the IEP meeting. Preprepared visual media also offers the advantage of allowing students to plan and edit their contributions in advance, which may offer more comfort than feeling put on the spot and asked to speak in front of the IEP team. Student-created visual media facilitates a student-led IEP by communicating authentic ideas and preferences. In this way, a student can directly contribute to the writing of the present level, accommodations, and goal sections of the IEP document.

A more robust level of student leadership requires looking beyond the annual IEP meeting. While the term *IEP* is often used, interchangeably, to refer to either the annual meeting or the document created during the meeting, there is merit in viewing the IEP as a yearlong process. A student can regularly meet with their case manager to review progress toward goals and reconsider needed accommodations. In doing so, the student's voice remains front and center in the process, thus facilitating a student-led IEP.

It was previously noted that teachers report a lack of time and resources to offer instruction related to self-determination. With a focus placed on academic content instruction, there may be little time for lessons that are specific to self-determination. It is easier to consider ways to embed self-determination skills into existing instruction. For example, a teacher who incorporates choice boards into a math or science class is offering practice with choice making and autonomy. SLPs who encourage students to ask for help (self-advocacy), prioritize tasks (problem solving), set learning goals (goal setting and attainment), or model for peers (self-efficacy) are helping their learners

sharpen important self-determination skills. These self-determination skills can serve a student well in an IEP meeting and beyond.

This study revealed that many of the subjects were initially unclear regarding the purpose of their IEP meetings. Furthermore, some subjects were not able to follow what was being discussed by the team. The field of special education is full of jargon and acronyms. We would not expect non-educators to understand what is meant by Free Appropriate Public Education, Local Educational Agency, or IEP. Nor should we assume that our students understand these terms without instruction. It is impossible for our youth with disabilities to assume a leadership role in the IEP meeting if we are, in effect, speaking a foreign language during the meeting. It is important to use language that all IEP team members can understand.

Perhaps the most important step in fostering student leadership in the IEP process is to think beyond compliance. A school can satisfy compliance by inviting a 16-year-old to their meeting and providing a seat at the table, but this alone does not contribute to better outcomes. Students who have strong self-determination skills are prepared to assume levels of leadership in their IEP meetings. This is not to say that students who have not honed their self-determination skills should not actively participate. On the contrary, the IEP meeting offers an authentic environment for students to practice choice making, self-advocacy, self-regulation, problem solving, and other important skills. It is important to remember that leadership can take many forms and, with practice, can grow and mature along with the student.

Limitations

The study has some limitations, including that it only looked at students who have an identified LD as their primary disability and did not include students with other disabilities or comorbidities. It is important to note that the *I'm Determined* project works with students from all disability categories. The first author's relationship to both the study participants and the *I'm Determined* program is a limitation. Potential bias was addressed through reflexive and reflective memos, member checks, and peer debriefing. One way to limit potential bias in the future is to use an unaffiliated colleague as the lead interviewer. Another potential limitation was the limited diversity of the purposive sample. Out of the eight participants, six identify as White and two identify as Black. Trainor (2005) documented that self-determination interventions aligned with a student's specific cultural beliefs were extremely limited, and Shogren (2013) indicated a combination of race/ethnicity and a disability label affected levels of autonomy.

Implications for Future Research

This study demonstrated that youth and young adults with LDs who were part of the *I'm Determined* project experienced opportunities to practice self-determination and, through psychological needs attainment, contributed to greater participation into IEP processes. This study reinforces existing research that demonstrates that there is a link between enriched environments and the practice of self-determination skills (Loman et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2022). Because these basic psychological needs are reinforced through practice opportunities, there are research implications in this study that present self-determination practices as the confluence of leadership, resiliency, and social intelligence. When these practices are taught well in one context, individuals seek to transfer those same skills into new environments, where they can sense and attain their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. As such, the transfer of *I'm Determined* activities into IEP participation is one scenario that indicates that use of self-determination skills is contingent on the student's ability to connect their self-determination with alternative skills, such as leadership, when approaching novel situations and environments. This study's unique contribution suggests that the confluence of skills that coexist with volitional behavior, such as adaptive leadership and social intelligence, is an important factor that buttresses self-determination skill development and IEP participation.

The original findings in this data set iterate that the development of self-determination skills alone is inadequate to support the complex communication and collaboration that occur on IEP teams and other social collaborations. Therefore, as *I'm Determined* refines its conceptual framework, it continues to reflect on how practitioners oscillate in teaching leadership and social intelligence alongside self-determination. This approach accounts for how self-determined behaviors are perceived by others and reflects on practitioners' role in supporting students to socially adapt their communication to effectively communicate their wants and needs to others. For SLPs looking to increase student participation in the IEP, the *I'm Determined* project recommends further research in the following areas. First, there are gaps in understanding how students develop advocacy voice in their natural environments. Students with disabilities are too often illiterate in forms of advocacy because they are acquiescent to others (i.e., families, teachers, service providers, case managers; Shogren, 2013; Wehmeyer, 2014). This means that prerequisite speech and language skills associated with self-determination and self-advocacy are generally not known or understood by students with disabilities. When self-advocacy is being taught, there remains little analysis of how socio-contextual environments impact the growth of

self-determination (Shogren, 2013). Further studies exploring naturally occurring activities and the influence those activities have on self-advocacy are an important area of interest that will influence student voice and participation in advocacy activities, such as IEP meetings, and inform practitioners of naturally occurring opportunities.

Addressing the development of self-determination requires practitioners to consider both the natural and/or engineered practice opportunities. While much is being done to increase student participation in their IEPs, there is vision beyond school-based advocacy. The lives of transitioning youth do not end when they exit school, and preparing youth for adulthood is a reminder that developing self-determination is not only about improving the quality of school-based services or academic outcomes. It is also about equipping youth to become adults who will experience a life that is motivated by confidence that one has something too valuable to add to the conversation and that speaking up as an alternative voice in complex situations is influential to creating outcomes that are inclusive of people with disabilities.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that led *I'm Determined* graduates with LD to participate and lead their IEP meetings. While IDEA strongly suggests and guides policy toward youth participation in IEPs, it is evident that research-based transition theories easily become entrenched in systems of compliance. When transition practices become strictly an issue of compliance, the process of individualization that guides student volition gets lost, stifling student voice in academic and transition services. SDT, in contrast to compliance-based approaches, highlights the creation of autonomy-supportive environments where students are afforded space to influence outcomes and make choices, all of which connect to experiencing feelings of empowerment, well-being, and engagement (Brenner, 2022; Ryan et al., 2021). The Virginia Department of Education's *I'm Determined* project designs educational opportunities around student volition and builds opportunities for corresponding skills, abilities, and beliefs to be learned. Through meaningful relationships, enriched environments, and pedagogies that honor individual choice, students with LDs are taught to make meaning of their experiences in ways that embolden advocacy and action. Narratives presented by youth leaders of the *I'm Determined* project demonstrate that students with LD perceived their school experiences to be a place of confusion, frustration, and personal embarrassment. However, through program development, participants in *I'm Determined* develop relationships and experience inclusive spaces where they exercise their voice and volition, which results in attainment of basic psychological needs.

It is in the occurrence and reoccurrence of these opportunities that youth ultimately transfer skills to other environments, such as participating in their IEPs. Autonomy-supportive environments have been shown to facilitate the development of self-determination skills (Brenner, 2022). However, and perhaps most specific to the youth narratives in this study, there is increasing evidence that cultivating confidence, self-will, and social support in autonomy-supportive environments ultimately leads young people to transfer skills into other spaces. This transfer is evident as *I'm Determined* Youth leader's psychological needs are met and then represented in other environments such as IEP processes. The process of growth and development continues as youth and young adults practice self-determination and ultimately influence transitions into employment, independent living, and social relationships.

Data Availability Statement

Due to privacy and ethical concerns, neither the data nor the source of the data can be made available.

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IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

One-Pager

Use this as a facilitation guide to complete the One-Pager tool, or to help someone else complete it. The questions below can be used as prompts to help you arrive at answers. Focusing on one column at a time may also help. We encourage you to share your finished One-Pager with others!

My Strengths	My Preferences	My Interests	My Needs
• What am I good at in school? • What am I good at in my community or home? • What do other people say are my strengths?	• What makes my day or school work more enjoyable? • What would be nice to have or happen but I would be okay without it? • Where do I see myself in the future: ◦ Living? ◦ Working? ◦ Doing for Having fun?	• What do I like to do? • What activities or groups do I enjoy being in? • What are my hobbies and after school activities?	• What things or changes to my day help me? • What do I need to succeed? • What assistive technology helps me at school, home, and in the community? • What can others do to help me? • What are some things that are hard for me? How do I get through the hard things?

I'M DETERMINED

Scan code for more guidance, videos, and examples.
For additional resources visit www.imdetermined.org/resources.

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Good Day Plan

Use this as a facilitation guide to complete the Good Day Plan tool, or to help someone else complete it. The questions below can be used as prompts to help you arrive at answers. Focusing on one column at a time may also help. We encourage you to share your finished Good Day Plan with others!

Good Day What happens on a good day?	**Now** Does it happen now?	**Action** What needs to happen to make it a good day?	**Support** Who can help me?
• What things are always present on good days? • What do I do on a good day? • What makes me happy?	• Am I getting what I need during the day? • If yes, GREAT! Keep it up. • If not, move to next column to think of options and other choices.	• What do I need to make this happen? • What things or plans can I use to help me? • What goals should I set for myself? • What do others do to make this happen that I could try? • Is there a reasonable other choice?	• What people can help me have a good day? • What people do I need in order to increase the chance of good things happening? • Who supports me? • Can I be the support person for this?

I'M DETERMINED

Scan code for more guidance, videos, and examples.
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IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

Goal Plan

Use this as a facilitation guide to complete the Goal Plan tool, or to help someone else complete it. The questions below can be used as prompts to help you arrive at answers. Focusing on one column at a time may also help. We encourage you to share your finished Goal Plan with others!

My Goal	Outcomes	Next Steps	People Who Can Support
• What is one of my goals? • What is something that I want to do? • Where is a place I want to go? • You can write a goal to reach soon or several months or years away. • Pick one goal to start with.	• How do you know you have reached your goal? • What are some results of getting this goal done? • How will I benefit from finishing this goal? • What are some new things I can do after attaining this goal?	• What do I need to do to reach my goal? • If I were to break my goal into pieces, what would those pieces be? • What is one thing I can do today that gets me closer to my goal?	• Who are the people in my life who can help me reach my goal? • Which step of my goal can each person help me with? • Who will encourage me to reach this goal and check to be sure I made it?

I'M DETERMINED

Scan code for more guidance, videos, and examples.
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Student Rubric for IEP Participation   I'M DETERMINED

Name: _____   Date: _____

Area	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
IEP Awareness	I don't know what IEP stands for.	I know what IEP stands for.	I know what IEP stands for and the purpose of an IEP meeting.	I know what IEP stands for, the purpose of an IEP meeting, and I can tell others about these meetings.
IEP Participation	I don't participate or attend my IEP meeting.	I attend a pre-conference IEP meeting and/or my IEP meeting, but I don't participate.	I attend and contribute information about myself for my IEP in a pre-conference or at the actual IEP meeting.	I lead parts or my entire IEP meeting.
Knowledge of IEP Content	I don't know what is in my IEP.	I know that I have accommodations and goals in my IEP, but I don't know what they are nor do I have a voice in developing them.	I can name the accommodations and goals in my IEP, and I have a voice in developing them.	I can name the accommodations and goals in my IEP, have a voice in developing them, and advocate for them.

For additional resources, scan code or visit
www.imdetermined.org/resources.

Student Rubric for IEP Participation   I'M 🚀 DETERMINED

Area	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Abilities and Disabilities Awareness	I am not sure of what my disability is and how it affects me.	I have knowledge of my abilities and disabilities, but I do not share it with others.	I can describe my abilities and disabilities to others in my IEP meeting.	I describe my abilities and disabilities, as well as how my disability impacts me to others outside of my IEP meeting.
Knowledge of Rights and Responsibilities	I don't know my rights under IDEA.	I have knowledge of my rights.	I know my rights and can negotiate with others who I know to ensure that I receive those rights.	I know my rights and can negotiate with others who I don't know to ensure that I receive those rights.
Social and Communication Skills	I don't know how to interact with others in my IEP meeting.	I know the social and communication skills I need to use in an IEP meeting, but I do not used them at this time.	I know and practice social and communication skills in my IEP meeting.	I use social and communication skills to get my needs met in meetings and interactions other than IEP meetings.

For additional resources, scan code or visit www.imdetermined.org/resources.

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IEP Awareness Score:

Abilities and Disabilities Awareness Score:

Added Score Results:

6-11 Points:
- What is one area you will focus on?
- Who can help you improve in this area?
- Set one goal for yourself.
- How can we help you achieve your goal?

IEP Participation Score:

Knowledge of Rights and Responsibilities Score:

12-18 points:
- What is one area you need to improve on?
- Who can help you improve in that area?
- Set one goal for yourself.
- How can we help you achieve your goal?

Knowledge of IEP Content Score:

Social and Communication Skills Score:

19-24 points:
- Set two goals for yourself based on your progress.
- How can you achieve your goals?
- How can we help you achieve your goals?

Score Total: _____

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BELOW FOR EDUCATOR RECOMMENDATIONS

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