

Youth Leaders With Learning Disabilities and Their Decision to Enroll in Higher Education

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Abstract

Students with learning disabilities (LD) have not kept pace with peers without disabilities regarding enrollment in postsecondary education. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of *I'm Determined* youth leaders with LD who have enrolled in higher education. Participation led to structured experiences and opportunities to practice self-determined behaviors in an environment built to support the development of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The three major themes identified (struggle, community, and resilience) corresponded with experiences before, during, and after participation in *I'm Determined*. The major theme of *struggle* encompassed experiences at school and not understanding their disability. The theme of *community* affected participants in the context of disability awareness and opportunity. *Resilience* necessitated a change in mindset and the ability to overcome barriers. Altering classroom environments to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness is one way to reproduce the supports that led to these participants' success.

Keywords

specific learning disability, qualitative research methodology, transition area, postschool outcomes, transition postsecondary education/programs, general educators/CTE collaborations

Nationally, the postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities have experienced little movement for over 30 years (Shogren & Ward, 2018). The Office of Special Education Program's new approach, titled Results Driven Accountability (RDA), is focused on balancing compliance and results. The RDA has pushed all states to look closely at the delivery of special education services and conduct a root cause analysis when the data indicate schools fall short of performance benchmarks (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2018). The RDA necessitates that schools identify success stories from students with disabilities who have enrolled in higher education to understand better how to transfer those positive outcomes to a greater number of students with disabilities. *Nothing about us, without us*, a mantra of the disability community, illustrates the importance of listening and learning from individuals with disabilities (Scotch, 2009). Historically, self-advocates have been instrumental in ushering system change for basic civil rights through detailing the effects of "misguided ideologies" (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015, p. 103). New voices are needed to inform the field on how to best support students with disabilities in achieving postsecondary success.

College graduates earn up to 80% more than high school graduates (Rose, 2013), and that wage discrepancy can accrue to upward of US\$1 million over a career (Lobo &

Burke-Smalley, 2018). Along with higher earnings across a life span, the quality of life of a college graduate is higher, as represented by lower unemployment rates, better health, higher marriage rates, and greater community and civic involvement (Rose, 2013). A college degree often provides access to opportunities for advancement, engagement, and health. However, enrollment and degree completion have proven to be difficult for many students with LD. Students with LD chronicled numerous opportunities to act self-determined when enrolled in higher education but reported difficulty in performing the necessary behaviors (Wu & Molina, 2019). Complicating factors include students with LD not entering college with the self-determination skills necessary to succeed (Madaus et al., 2021; Showers & Kinsman, 2017). The collection of barriers, including low academic expectations of students with LD, less access to college preparatory classes, and special education services delivered at the expense of academic instruction, further

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exacerbates the opportunities for success at all levels for students with LD (Cumming & Smedley, 2016; McCall, 2015; Newman et al., 2018). As a result, students with LD remain less likely to pursue postsecondary education and are less prepared for postsecondary education than their peers without disabilities (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). However, students with LD who are most likely to enroll and complete a postsecondary education program were enrolled in college preparatory classes and received postsecondary academic support services that included interventions to promote self-determination (Yu et al., 2018).

In 2004, the Virginia Governor's office tasked the VDOE with developing a program that addressed the inequities in postschool outcomes of students with disabilities compared with their peers without disabilities. As a result, the *I'm Determined* project is a state-directed project funded by the VDOE. Core components of the program include direct instruction, models, and opportunities to practice skills associated with self-determined behavior (Shogren et al., 2015). The hallmark of the self-determination 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).

In 2008, the *I'm Determined* project developed a youth leadership component. Twenty-five transition-age students with disabilities who demonstrated both attributes of and an interest in leadership were selected through their participation in the annual *I'm Determined* Youth and Family Summit (*I'm Determined*, n.d.). To date, every *I'm Determined* youth leader diagnosed with LD has matriculated to a postsecondary institution within 1 year of high school graduation.

The *I'm Determined* Project's activities and tools are grounded in the tenets of self-determination theory (SDT). SDT is used to explain the phenomena of how an individual becomes self-determined. The 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). This study proposed that the fostering of self-determined behaviors that lead to positive postsecondary outcomes for students with LD can be better understood through the lens of SDT. This lens of SDT allowed us to examine participant experiences with a

specific focus on 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 enroll in higher education. Our goal with this approach was to identify commonalities that led to this specific group's success in enrolling in higher education. Two research questions guided our research:

Research Question 1: What specific barriers, if any, toward postsecondary education may students with LD who participated in the *I'm Determined* project as youth leaders encounter during high school?

Research Question 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 enrollment in higher education?

Method

Narrative inquiry is a methodological approach that emphasizes storytelling. Narrative researchers work under the assumption that 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). The narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) provided a succinct avenue through which we could honor individual stories as well as construct a unified compilation of self-determination through their shared experiences.

The I'm Determined Project

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

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

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym	Race/gender	Disability	Induction age/years in <i>I'm Determined</i>	Postschool outcome
Darla	White female	Dyslexia	13/8	MEd, first-year teacher
Beth	White female	Dyslexia	14/6	First semester of Community College
Sam	White male	Auditory processing, dyslexia/dysgraphia	14/6	First semester of Community College
William	White male	Dyslexia	14/7	MEd, third-year teacher
Kate	White female	Auditory processing, dyslexia	14/8	MEd, third-year teacher
Hue	White male	Dyslexia	15/6	Associate degree/Works in sales
Bryan	Black male	Dyslexia/dysgraphia	13/5	First semester at university
Gordon	Black male	Auditory processing, dysgraphia	14/6	Third semester of Community College

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 age 22 contingent upon successful yearly TRACK evaluations.

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 community-building. The training focuses on the three *I'm Determined* tools: One-pager (autonomy), the Goal plan (relatedness), and the Good Day plan (competence). The monthly calls, facilitated by Determinators, explore a specific component of self-determination and apply it to current issues youth leaders are experiencing. The training offers opportunities to practice self-determined behavior in a safe environment. It also provides participants time to build relationships and trust with other youth leaders and Determinators.

Finally, Determinators are responsible for providing professional development to K–12 educators (both general and special) throughout the state. They are encouraged to co-facilitate with youth leaders. These additional opportunities to practice self-determined behaviors serve as an invaluable experience for youth leaders and help generalize the skills learned in a real-world setting.

Participants

We used purposive sampling in the form of a homogeneous sample. We identified all members of the sample as being identified with LD under the requirements of Individuals

with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) and having graduated from the *I'm Determined* youth leadership program (see Table 1). Each of the participants was selected as a youth leader in the *I'm Determined* project based on their application packet, their performance at their first Youth and Family Summit, and the TRACK rubric. There were 13 possible participants in the sample meeting these criteria. Author 1 sent email communication to each possible participant to recruit them to participate in the study. Eight *I'm Determined* youth leader graduates, three women and five men, agreed to participate in the study. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 28 years at the time of the interviews.

Data Collection

Author 1 completed semi-structured, narrative interviews with each participant (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. One interview was conducted face-to-face and the remaining seven were virtual using FaceTime without the video function enabled. Each interview lasted an average of 45 min. In narrative interviewing, researchers draw storied descriptions of experiences from participants. Specifically, we were interested in generating participant stories that emphasized how each participant's experience helped them to enroll in higher education (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). We intended that, in these narratives, the participants would describe their experiences with the *I'm Determined* project and how that experience led to their enrollment in higher education within 1 year of high school graduation.

The interview contained four parts: the introduction of the interview process, the narrative, the questioning phase, and the conclusion (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Author 1 asked participants questions about their experiences during their educational journey, with their disability, and with

I'm Determined. We designed these open-ended questions to elicit each participant's story as they reflected on their feelings, perceptions, and experiences during their educational journey. The interview questions listed are lead questions that we asked every participant. Follow-up questions differed across participants, as they were generally based on participant responses to the lead question(s). The following interview questions were designed with this goal in mind:

1. Tell me about your attitude toward school in general prior to your participation in *I'm Determined*.
2. Reflecting on your time with *I'm Determined*, what stands out for you?
3. Now that you have graduated *I'm Determined*, what are you doing now?
4. Upon reflection, how has participation in *I'm Determined* influenced your path?
5. Would you like to tell me anything more about your educational journey or your experiences with *I'm Determined* that we have not discussed yet?

Following a preliminary analysis of the individual interviews, Author 1 held focus groups to probe emerging themes and to verify individual narratives. The focus groups followed the same semi-structured design with open-ended questions (Roulston, 2010). The focus group guide was created based on initial data analysis of the first round of interviews and included the following prompts:

1. One thing I noticed across interviews was feeling alone and not having a support network prior to your participation in *I'm Determined*. Tell me about how this affected your school experience.
2. One thing I noticed across interviews was the growing comfort level with your disability while participating in *I'm Determined*. Tell me about how, if at all, this affected your school experience.
3. Tell me about the important role that opportunities to practice self-advocacy, autonomy, and goal-setting played in your enrollment in postsecondary education.
4. Would you like to tell me anything more about your educational journey or your experiences with *I'm Determined* that we have not discussed yet?

Each focus group consisted of four participants determined by participant availability. Each participant participated in one virtual focus group interview that lasted an average of 55 min. As with the interviews, we determined which follow-up questions to ask according to participant responses during the focus groups. We organized our questions according to topics developed from our preliminary analysis of the interview data. These topics were (a) experiences in special education prior to

participation in *I'm Determined*; (b) experiences while participating in *I'm Determined*; and (c) experiences and outcomes after *I'm Determined*.

Data Analysis

Author 1 conducted an inductive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a foundational method of qualitative data analysis and provides theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In thematic analysis, researchers generate themes from a pattern of recurring thoughts, ideas, perceptions, or experiences. These themes capture the overarching commonalities within the data, allowing researchers to arrive at a meaningful encapsulation (Saldana, 2016). Using an interpretivist lens, we focused our analysis so that each storyteller's narrative contributed to the creation of themes (Cranton & Merriam, 2015). Our themes 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; emphasis in the original).

Data were stored, organized, and coded in NVivo (version 12, Mac). After transcribing the audio recordings of both the interviews and focus groups, Author 1 uploaded the transcriptions into NVivo. Computer-assisted data analysis software (CAQDAS), like NVivo, allows for a more efficient and streamlined analysis process, particularly across multiple researchers (Hoover & Koerber, 2011). Using the software early 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).

Author 1 followed approaches outlined by Saldana (2016) and began the analysis with *in vivo* coding. *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). Second, Author 1 completed a second cycle of coding using pattern coding to identify initial patterns from the *in vivo* codes and organize these patterns in NVivo through the creation of new nodes. 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. We then discussed the major themes in relation to both the research questions and current scholarship on SDT.

To ensure quality and rigor, we used peer debriefing, researcher reflective and reflexive memos, and member checks (Tracy, 2010). Author 1 met in person with a professional peer at Author 1's institution to review data and preliminary findings. The peer has a doctoral degree in education and is a board certified behavior analyst at the 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.

Author 1 kept reflective and reflexive memos to track thoughts, concerns, potential bias, insights, and questions. Author 1 discussed the content of these memos with Author 2 (a qualitative research specialist) 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 on 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 Author 1's preexisting relationship with participants as principal investigator of the *I'm Determined* project. Author 1 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. Author 1 has also presented at the local, state, and national level with every participant and is invested in their growth and success as well as the growth and continued success of the *I'm Determined* project.

Finally, Author 1 conducted member checks (respondent validation) on the emerging findings to ensure correct interpretation of the participant's 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. Finally, 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, during, and after participation in *I'm Determined*. The preservation of the balance between the individual as part of the whole and the whole as a sum of the individual parts was essential to effectively report the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We made the decision to present the findings in such a way that highlights

common themes across specific times 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 Struggle: Experiences Before I'm Determined

The participants' narratives show how they endured and persevered throughout their compulsory schooling experience. Before *I'm Determined*, the participants detailed a lack of self-determination skills needed to navigate school and the barriers to enrollment in postsecondary education rose almost immediately. The data indicated that each participant encountered barriers from the outset of their schooling. Participants shared that postsecondary education was not encouraged by school counselors or teachers and low expectations were the norm. Participants varied in age from 12 to 15 years at the time of induction into *I'm Determined* and each detailed the struggle they endured daily in school before *I'm Determined*.

Participants explained that school was a place of frustration and led to feelings of inadequacy, bullying, low expectations, and consistently being put in situations where their deficits were highlighted through ineffective pedagogical approaches. Each participant received the message, either implicitly or explicitly, that school was not for them and the prospects of ever going to college were slim. Beth remembered not being "interested in the schoolwork" and already noticing by "kindergarten and first grade that I just like wasn't on the right track as other students." Beth continued,

I would always have that voice in my head that says, you can't do what other kids can do. And that was kinda the hard part about going to elementary school was trying to catch up with the other kids. But most of my teachers just kind of would like, they have an IEP, and then tuck it in their desk. They never read over it. That made me feel overlooked. It didn't make my education feel important.

The data clearly indicated that, for participants in this study, school was a struggle, not understanding their disability was a struggle, and navigating the educational system was a struggle. The constant struggle led to low self-esteem, feelings of isolation, and general confusion surrounding their learning difficulties. Due to these struggles, participants identified education and failure as symbiotic. Bryan recalled a "lack of confidence" that led to a feeling of not "believing that I could do the same thing that my classmates were doing, at their level." This led to a "mentality that I'm stupid, I can't do this, and my other friends are smarter than me." The participants identified a lack of autonomy, feelings of incompetence, and a lack of

connection to peers because of their special education service delivery model. Throughout the common thread of struggle, we identified four areas of struggle: (a) negative experiences with school, (b) misunderstanding the disability, (c) unsupported transition between schools, and (d) combination of external and internal barriers.

Negative experiences with school. Participants expressed that both the way they perceived school and their experiences in school caused them to struggle to attain success. From an early age and prior to identification for special education, the participants struggled either academically or behaviorally and knew they were different from other classmates. Participants described frustrations due to feelings of inadequacy and the sense of being broken. School felt like a battlefield instead of a safe environment. Sam stated, "I hated going to school, I felt like it was just a place of torture. I was like everyone else is getting this, why am I not getting this?" Participants explained that their struggles in the classroom led to difficulty making friends and feeling included in general. Hue recalled the feeling of isolation everywhere except recess: "The only time the kids really wanted to relate with me or have me involved or do anything with them was when it was recess and it was time to have somebody that was athletic to play kickball."

By early elementary school, the first barrier to postsecondary education was already established. For these participants, school became a place to avoid at all costs. Participants described avoidance behaviors in their narratives that developed from feeling incompetent in the classroom. Teachers interpreted avoidance behaviors as "lazy, unwilling, or uninterested" according to Beth, Darla, and Sam. William, Bryan, and Gordon were "allowed" to operate under the radar if they each met the very low bar set for them. Teachers did not see college as a viable option and the participants internalized the message that they "were not good at school." The struggle the participants described was not isolated to their everyday school experience. The confusion around their learning struggles along with feelings of isolation added to their negative school experience. Peers began to ask questions about the participants' perceived extra help and why they kept leaving the classroom. The data indicate that an "us" and "them" paradigm formed.

Misunderstanding the disability. 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 LD or explaining the implications regarding their educational placement. Each participant described a "pull-out" approach to special education services and the feeling of being the only one with a disability. Darla explained that she thought she was removed

from the class because she "needed extra help," but she "wasn't really sure."

This analysis indicates a connection between the service delivery approach and reduced autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Beth's favorite part of school was recess; she could "spend time with her friends without the pressure of school." Her school would "take off ten minutes of our recess time, for us to go in and improve on our reading skills." To compound this struggle, participants misunderstood their disability along with the service delivery model. Hue explained, "I knew something was wrong. It was kinda miserable being alone, in a way." He recounted that being pulled out of his general education classroom "made me feel like I was kinda dumb in a way because you were never really told why we were going off to another room."

Without providing an explanation for this removal, the participants were perceived as different and not complete members of the class. Participants described a lack of competence due to misunderstanding their disability. Participant narratives revealed that this "pull out" service delivery model removed their sense of autonomy in learning and distanced them from their peers, preventing relationships from forming. The lack of disability awareness further lowered self-esteem.

Unsupported transition between schools. Compounding an already difficult situation, the transition from elementary to middle school was problematic because of increased academic rigor, peer pressure, and higher teacher expectations. These new expectations did not come with scaffolded support. Accommodations and special education services were lacking, and the data indicate that this increased participants' low self-esteem and low expectations. For example, Bryan identified the transition from elementary school to middle school as particularly rough, saying, "I feel like elementary to middle was probably the toughest transition, because we were just thrown in there." The support structure "changed but no one told us."

Participant narratives highlighted the importance of the transition from elementary to middle school. Participants described this unsupported transition when explaining their continued lack of disability awareness and inappropriate special education services leading to a deficit-based approach and widening academic achievement gap. Darla thought back to her early struggles in school and how those struggles affected her self-confidence and peer group: "I was not confident in myself academically or socially. I struggled in school, and knew that, and that's one reason that I didn't really try cuz I'd rather it look like I just wasn't trying than be dumb." Hue experienced similar self-confidence issues and struggled with both peers and teachers who did not understand his LD in a new school. 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.” Entering middle school, all the participants were academically behind their peers and felt socially isolated.

Combination of external and internal barriers. Participants described a combination of external and internal barriers exacerbating the struggle of their educational journey before their enrollment in *I’m Determined*. 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*. Participants identified external barriers related to their teachers, a lack of learning and study strategies, and specific instructional activities. These external barriers exacerbated their disability and led to a continual struggle throughout their schooling due to increased internal barriers. For instance, Sam recalled “just not being able to read as well as 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.

Overcoming the internal barrier of low self-confidence was impossible without the tools and the environment to support the self-determined behaviors needed to confront issues. A lack of environmental supports exacerbated internal barriers. A student with LD without disability awareness paired with a general education teacher without the basic knowledge of how to support a student with LD proved detrimental both academically and social-emotionally. The participants felt put into situations that worked against their strengths and focused on their weaknesses. Kate expressed that her self-confidence was low due to others’ perceptions and the constant struggle to not fall behind. She felt classmates “just thought I was weird or wasn’t smart.”

Community: Experiences During I’m Determined

The participants’ induction into *I’m Determined* was the first time they experienced relatedness without exception or consequence through a community of peers. Their collective and individual experiences aided in breaking down their preconceived notions of their future potential based on their past educational experiences and the low expectations placed on them. The participants learned about LD, gained competence through experience and practice in a safe environment, and developed tools to combat barriers. Sam reflected on the importance of community, saying, “I think it was the community of just, I think knowing that there’s people out there who are struggling just like me. I call it disability heaven, there is no judgment.” 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.” For the first time in the participants’ educational experience, they had a community of peers with LD that had been through similar struggles and were in varying degrees of moving beyond the struggle.

The participants were shocked to realize they were not alone, encouraging them to try new, self-determined skills in a safe environment. This community 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*,” crediting the program as the impetus for accepting her learning disability. The symbiotic relationship between autonomy, competence, and relatedness was evident as the community became solidified. The community of peers allowed protective walls from the participants’ previous struggles to crumble. Attempting self-determined skills in this safe environment led to increased competence, and participants began to want to act autonomously in environments outside of *I’m Determined*. The *I’m Determined* community environment is shaped to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Participants’ narratives show how this environment led them to reimagine a different future—one not defined by perceived limitations and low expectations.

The major theme of community further impacted the participants along three categories: (a) opportunity to practice self-determination, (b) disability awareness leading to self-advocacy, and (c) goal-setting. Each of these categories played a role in the reshaping of the participants’ beliefs around the feasibility of postsecondary opportunities and implications for their future.

Opportunity to practice self-determination. *I’m Determined* created a unique opportunity for participants to practice self-determined behaviors. Participants learned with others, learned about themselves, and felt comfortable trying out self-determined behaviors that they indicated were too risky to demonstrate before their experiences with *I’m Determined*. As Darla became more comfortable with her disability, her “self-esteem increased.” Because she learned about strategies, accommodations, and self-advocacy in a “safe environment,” she now had the “confidence to practice the new skills” at school. For Kate, the opportunity to learn and grow with others in the *I’m Determined* community “was huge, I wasn’t afraid to talk about it anymore” and *I’m Determined* “taught me to become more self-determined and don’t be afraid about asking too many questions.”

While participating in *I’m Determined* impacted each participant differently, the opportunity to practice self-determined behavior in a safe environment was a common thread that played a role in their enrollment in higher

education. Sam credited this opportunity within *I'm Determined* as the vehicle for his behavioral change and willingness to practice self-determined behaviors outside of *I'm Determined*, explaining, "I got there from *I'm Determined*. Without that, I don't know where I'd be right now. But it changed my life. I've learned so much." Bryan found the opportunity to become a youth leader and receive support within the youth leader community to be instrumental in increasing his self-esteem and providing a support network to celebrate successes and help problem-solve barriers. He noted the other youth leaders "have been through what you've been through so they can understand situations that you're going through and share their story or experiences." Bryan also credited his "experiences and opportunities" with *I'm Determined* as the "kick" to his self-confidence that he needed. Within the opportunity offered by *I'm Determined*, participants learned about their own disability, after which participants began advocating for themselves and their educational needs.

Disability awareness leading to self-advocacy. In the early stages of participation in *I'm Determined*, the program dedicated time to disability awareness training for the youth leaders. Participants explained that relief replaced the feeling of solitude when they realized they were not the only person in the world with LD. Kate was adamant that the biggest impact of *I'm Determined* in the beginning was "realizing that there were people out there just like me." Kate felt supported when learning about her own disability through being a member of a community of others with LD in *I'm Determined*.

An awareness of their disability equipped participants with tools, strategies, and behaviors to help level the playing field in school. The first step in doing so was understanding one's needs and matching appropriate accommodations based on those needs. The next step was advocating for those needs. Bryan credited *I'm Determined* for his new ability to self-advocate:

I'm Determined really affected me in high school because I was telling my case manager and the people in my 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.

Beth was surprised about the power of self-advocacy. She said, "I never thought that if I spoke up to an adult that they would listen to me." By becoming aware of the nature of their disabilities, participants in *I'm Determined* were able to advocate for their own needs and educational desires.

Disability awareness and an understanding of personal strengths, preferences, interests, and needs was an essential skill development area for the participants. The participants' deficit-based school experience prior to *I'm Determined*

provided them with a comprehensive understanding of everything "they couldn't do" but left them woefully unprepared to discuss their strengths. The participants described the safe environment provided by *I'm Determined* as a judgment-free zone to understand their LD, identify their strengths and needs, and practice advocating. Once competent in self-advocacy within *I'm Determined*, participants could use the skill outside of *I'm Determined*. This behavior is key to self-determination. The participants were filling their toolbox, reframing self-perceptions, and reframing teacher perceptions and expectations around postsecondary enrollment.

As Darla became more comfortable with her disability, her "self-esteem increased." She learned about strategies, accommodations, and self-advocacy in a "safe environment" that gave her the "confidence to practice the new skills" at school. She continued,

I was taking my classes seriously. And when I needed help, I wasn't afraid to ask for it. I used a lot of the tools and strategies that I have learned through *I'm Determined*. I also realized that using my accommodations and getting help wasn't cheating.

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."

Participants' narratives show how their perception of *I'm Determined* as a safe space was established through creating a community first, then skill development, and finally, the opportunity to practice the new skills without fear of failure, embarrassment, or further isolation. With this new sense of community, the opportunities to practice new skills, and the comfort of a support network of peers and adults, the participants often either reconsidered their postsecondary goals or changed their expectations for their future.

Goal-setting. All the participants' narratives mentioned the impact that participation in *I'm Determined* had on their current and future school goals. They also described a realization, or moment(s) of clarity regarding their personal expectations for the future, that allowed them to see the importance of goal-setting, specifically either adjusting current goals or creating goals for the first time. Most participants indicated that, prior to induction in *I'm Determined*, they did not have concrete goals for their futures. In their mind, *I'm Determined* taught them skills, held them accountable, and raised their expectations of themselves that led them to set specific goals for future educational pursuits and accomplishments. While there were two participants who had dreamed of college as early as elementary school because they had a specific career path in mind, the others had never really thought about college as an option. The participants identified the practice of setting concrete

and achievable goals as instrumental in their eventual enrollment in higher education.

For example, Darla's new goals were created through her exposure to positive peer role models in the *I'm Determined* community. She explained, "If you would have told me in middle school that I was gonna go to college, I would have laughed. I did not think I was ever gonna get out of my hometown. *I'm Determined* changed all that." Bryan remembered the impact participating in *I'm Determined* and being exposed to older youth leaders with LD who were in college had on his future school goals:

I didn't know what I was going to do and then, with the help of *I'm Determined*, I realized I wanted to be the first in my family to go to college and get an education past high school and *I'm Determined* gave me a boost in my confidence.

The first step in setting goals and having high expectations is the belief that the goals are achievable. This feeling of competence was fueled by actually "seeing" older youth leaders with LD succeeding in college. The simple concept that someone "like them" made it to college instilled a sense of hope in the participants and created the internal motivation to enroll in college. The importance of acting autonomously by setting a personal goal and not a goal influenced by others was crucial for the participants.

The sense of community the participants described while in *I'm Determined* provided both support and reinforcement and propelled the participants to raise their personal expectations for the future. Participants filled their toolboxes with strategies. *I'm Determined* exposed them to other young adults with LD that had already achieved postsecondary success. One lesson that permeated was the need to keep your skills sharp. Participants described a new resilience after participating in *I'm Determined* to maintain the path to educational success.

Resilience: Experiences After I'm Determined

As graduates of *I'm Determined*, they shared that the program shaped how they interacted with their environment, navigated barriers, and reached their goal of enrolling in higher education. The need for self-determined behaviors did not end with high school graduation. Each participant emphasized the importance of staying self-determined. They explained life and its challenges do not let up once a goal is reached. New challenges and new barriers continue to arise with every new opportunity. Resilience required a change in mindset and the understanding that self-determination was not an end goal. They learned quickly that their LD did not disappear with age and self-determination was a tool best kept sharp.

Each new phase of life brought different challenges, and resilience was the key to thriving in each environment.

Darla talked about the daily grind of navigating new barriers. She explained that through *I'm Determined* she learned the skills she needed to act more self-determined and stay resilient: "I was able to build on my self-determination and self-advocacy skills throughout the years with *I'm Determined*." Darla transformed from a "kid who hated school and had no confidence" to a successful adult with "a career and a master's degree." Kate too explained how she stayed resilient because of the strategies she developed through *I'm Determined*. She shared, "Being able to have the strategies and have the toolbox that I have, we always talked about the toolbox in *I'm Determined*, helped me to get through the obstacles." Before *I'm Determined*, Hue remembered often getting overwhelmed and not knowing how to ask for help or what to do when a problem arose. Hue learned "how to balance everything, set goals, and not get so overwhelmed." Within the theme of resilience, we identified two categories: (a) changed mindset and (b) advice giving.

Changed mindset. Each participant identified a significant change in their mindset with respect to self-determined behaviors, self-esteem, and self-awareness that they credit for their postsecondary success. Bryan's changed mindset surrounded disclosing his disability. He explained, "I'm proud to say I have a disability because I am able to speak up for myself. I am able to tell people what I can and cannot do." The participants' narratives showed how their changed mindset happened over time. William looked back on his experiences with *I'm Determined* and expressed:

I'm happier, I was never depressed, but I'm more confident in myself. . . I understand myself better. I know my limits, and I know where I'm strong. It's more like growing into my own skin, understanding that I am who I am and I'm good with that.

Participants described the opportunity to practice self-determined behaviors in the safe environment of *I'm Determined* as the foundation for their changed mindset. Each participant mentioned the importance of resilience because not everyone in their school was supportive of their newfound self-determination. Prior to *I'm Determined*, Beth avoided any opportunity that had the potential of public failure. Her mindset changed through her experiences with *I'm Determined*, and Beth developed resilience through taking calculated risks and learning from failures. She learned to remain resilient through life's challenges, explaining that "the first step in believing is doing, and you have to understand that not everything in life is going to be easy, because it's not." Finally, growth in self-advocacy skills was a watershed moment for William. He noted, "Just understanding that I have my own voice and need it for anything to change. It has to go through me, not other people."

There was a match between this change in the participants' mindset and SDT through the fidelity of implementation of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the *I'm Determined* strategies, activities, and opportunities. Participant narratives reveal how *I'm Determined* taught them self-determined behaviors through modeling, providing practice, and generalizing them to an environment outside the program. *I'm Determined* instilled in them confidence and competence; nurtured belief in and supported the goal of enrollment in college; and filled each participants' toolbox with strategies to overcome barriers along the way. The change in mindset was critical for the participants' success. It supported the development of resilience leading to viewing failure as a learning opportunity. Participants now had the confidence and resilience to use their new strategies to overcome new barriers to their success. They explained how they began to see new opportunities. They also shared feeling obligated to tell their story in the hope that it would prevent other students with LD from experiencing the same negativity that defined their educational experience prior to *I'm Determined*. They expressed that sharing their stories and giving advice to teachers and students may change the narrative for other students with LD.

Advice giving. Each participant attributed their postsecondary success to self-determination and resilience, but also articulated that students with LD should not have to fight for access to appropriate educational opportunities. They expressed a strong desire to share advice both with current teachers and current high school students with LD with the hope of future students walking an easier path. The common thread regarding advice for current high school students with LD was to become determined, advocate for their own educational desires, and stay resilient. Kate stressed the importance of taking the right classes: "I didn't have the right course work because I was in self-contained classes, and that put me behind."

The message to teachers was focused on relationships and high expectations. Darla emphasized the need to support students with LD and their goals. She said,

A lot of times, students are being defiant because they don't wanna look dumb, and so don't just write them off. Try to figure out why they're being defiant. Also, be supportive of their goals, and I mean, you may think that it's a super impossible goal, but still being supportive is key, and don't just shoot their dreams down.

Kate's advice to teachers was about creating a safe environment and setting students up for success. She said, "Just believing in the child is huge. Getting the students to feel comfortable and have them understand their accommodations, and their needs, and their strengths." Participants based this advice on what was most important to them from

I'm Determined, knowing that not every student will have the opportunity to participate in such a program. Table 1 captures the postsecondary school outcomes of each participant in this study. These findings have complex implications for both practice and scholarship.

Discussion

This study was not meant to represent the population of all students identified with LD. Rather, this study provides evidence about a program that helps to bridge prior research on postsecondary education outcomes, SDT, and specific practices that can be implemented in secondary schools for students with LD. A synthesis of the data from each graduate's narrative account of their experiences provides both practitioners and researchers with concrete examples of factors that participants felt led to their success. The three major themes identified (struggle, community, and resilience) corresponded with experiences before, during, and after participation in *I'm Determined*.

Before *I'm Determined*, participants' struggles reflected their experiences of limited autonomy, competency, and relatedness as understood in SDT and led to a lack of self-determined behaviors (Shogren et al., 2015). Participants' overall negative school experience offered little incentive or motivation to pursue higher education (Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001). The time during participation in *I'm Determined* was marked by behavioral and motivational changes that the participants credit to the *I'm Determined* program's environment supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Viewed through the lens of SDT, feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness fueled a shift that led to the development of self-determined behaviors (Shogren, Kennedy, Dowsett, & Little, 2014; Shogren & Ward, 2018). After *I'm Determined*, participants realized that self-determination is a skill that is essential across the life span. Participation in *I'm Determined* was said to allow each participant to acquire the skills needed (competence) to act self-determined (autonomy) while in a safe environment (relatedness). Their experience with *I'm Determined* gave the participants confidence to generalize their self-determined behavior and skills in the real world and the resilience to keep pushing through barriers.

As discussed above, researchers have established the importance of self-determined behaviors and the effect self-determination has on postsecondary educational outcomes. A gap in the research exists around model programs that promote, foster, and provide opportunities to practice self-determined behavior and leadership skills for students with disabilities. The *I'm Determined* program is unique in the opportunities it provides students with disabilities as part of their educational experience. Participants indicated that *I'm Determined* supported their autonomy, competence, and relatedness at the outset of induction. Participants felt that

fostering these foundational, essential components created an environment that supported and encouraged self-determined behavior. The participants' comfort level due to the supported environment and the realization that they were not alone led to a willingness to learn evidence-based strategies to increase self-determined behavior. Peer networks supported relatedness, and the participants pushed each other to practice new self-determination strategies with the understanding that scaffolded assistance was available.

The findings show that participants valued these opportunities to practice as they supported growing competence and increased self-esteem. Participants were able to raise their own expectations and embrace failure as a learning experience. These findings illustrate how creating environments based on the tenets of SDT fosters the confidence needed for the participants to practice self-determined behaviors. In a sense, this is where the rubber met the road. Specifically, in the case of these eight participants, the post-secondary education outcome gap was closed. Although skill development is essential, the participant narratives included in this study identify the generalization of the self-determination skills learned through participating in *I'm Determined* as necessary to achieve their goal of attending college.

Implications for Practice

The *I'm Determined* program is not a curriculum. *I'm Determined* provides the environment that fills a void 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, 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.

The participants' stories emphasized the need for systemic change. One of the many consistencies in the eight narratives was the negative impact of exclusionary special education service delivery models in elementary schools. Participant experiences revealed that self-determined behaviors were stymied before they could blossom. Participants were moved in and out of the general education classroom without explanation. The participants felt this model of special education service delivery led to peer isolation, questioning, confusion, and loss of instructional time during content classes. The participants were removed from the general education classroom during instruction in areas of their perceived strength for more instruction in their deficit area(s).

This model of special education service delivery decreases the likelihood of positive postsecondary educational outcomes for students with LD. Students with LD who spent at least 80% of their school day with peers without disabilities were twice as likely to enroll in postsecondary education as their peers spending less than 80% in an inclusive setting (Rojewski et al., 2015). Delivering specially-designed instruction and differentiating instruction has been successfully implemented in inclusive classrooms (Lindner & Schwab, 2020). Inclusion must start in elementary school. The participants experienced traumatic events and adopted defense mechanisms for protection as early as first grade because of the unintended consequences of the "pull-out" service delivery model.

Altering classroom environments to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness is one way to reproduce the supports that led to these participants' success. The three *I'm Determined* tools, namely, One-pager, Goal plan, and the Good Day plan, have been successfully used with students with LD, special education teachers, and general education teachers to increase autonomy, competence, and relatedness at the classroom and building levels (Moore & McNaught, 2014). In addition, this study's participants revealed the need to know more about their LD and how to be successful with it. Schools and programs could work to educate students about their individual LD and what it means to be "labeled" in such a way.

Limitations

The main limitation of the study was that the purposive sample contains only students who have an identified learning disability as their primary disability. As more and more students with varying disabilities aspire to attend a postsecondary education institution, further research is needed on the impact that self-determination, and the *I'm Determined* project, has on the experiences of these students. In addition, none of the participants experienced a comorbidity with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Another potential limitation was the limited diversity of the purposive sample. 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, Kennedy, Dowsett, Garnier Villarreal, and Little (2014) indicated a combination of race/ethnicity and a disability label affected levels of autonomy. Finally, Author 1'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.

Implications for Future Research

Regarding this study's sample, race is one factor that can impact the development of self-determined behaviors. Postsecondary outcomes differed significantly among students with disabilities from diverse backgrounds (Shogren & Shaw, 2017). More research is needed regarding how all forms of diversity impact the experiences of students with disabilities and their postsecondary educational outcomes.

In addition, researchers may wish to examine the level of basic special education knowledge and disability characteristic knowledge of general education teachers and school counselors. Many of the barriers faced by the eight participants were exacerbated by a lack of knowledge, low expectations due to preconceived notions, or misconceptions around implementation of IDEA.

Conclusion

The *I'm Determined* project did not invent a new approach or generate new strategies to improve postsecondary outcomes for students with LD. *I'm Determined* illustrated one way to successfully integrate theory, research, and practice and the current study provided the field with a much-needed concrete example. Opportunities for future research certainly exist, but this study adds to the growing body of literature documenting self-determination as an evidence-based predictor of positive postsecondary outcomes.

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