

Chapter 1

Introduction and Overview

The Arc's Self-Determination Scale is a student self-report measure of self-determination designed for use by adolescents with disabilities, particularly students with mild mental retardation and learning disabilities. The Scale was constructed based on a definitional framework of self-determination as an educational outcome proposed by Wehmeyer and colleagues (Wehmeyer, 1992a, in press a, in press b; Wehmeyer, Kelchner & Richards, in press), described in the **Theoretical Issues** chapter of this guide. This framework defines self-determination as "*acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of life free from undue external influence or interference*" (Wehmeyer, 1992a; in press b). An act or event is self-determined if the individual's actions reflect four *essential characteristics*: (1) the individual acts autonomously; (2) the behaviors are self-regulated; (3) the person initiates and responds to event(s) in a "psychologically empowered" manner; and (4) the person acts in a self-realizing manner (Wehmeyer, in press a; Wehmeyer, Kelchner & Richards, 1994). These *essential characteristics* emerge as students develop and acquire a set of component elements of self-determined behavior (e.g., choice-making, decision-making, problem-solving, goal-setting and task performance, self-observation, evaluation and reinforcement, internal locus of control, positive attributions of efficacy and outcome expectancy, self-awareness, self-knowledge). *The Arc's Self-Determination Scale* operationalizes this framework to provide a tool for students with disabilities, educators and researchers. The remainder of this chapter discusses the potential use and misuse of the Scale, ways to improve the reliability and validity of self-report measures, and identifies user qualifications. The framework upon which the Scale is based is presented in the **Theoretical Issues** chapter.

Use of The Arc's Self-Determination Scale

Assessment has multiple uses in education, including providing data for diagnostic and placement decisions, evaluating individual strengths and weaknesses, planning educational and treatment strategies, and evaluating intervention effectiveness. As with any such process, assessment can be used inappropriately, for example to exclude individuals from given services or to maintain outdated

or overly intrusive interventions or placements. When considering the assessment of self-determination, there is a need to be cognizant not only of the possible contributions of such an effort, but the potential limitations of the exercise as well. These issues are compounded when the assessment in question is a self-report measure. *The Arc's Self-Determination Scale* was designed to be a tool to enable and empower students to become more self-determined by providing a vehicle by which they can, with appropriate supports and accommodations: (1) evaluate their own beliefs about themselves and their self-determination; (2) work collaboratively with educators and others to identify individual areas of strength and limitations related to self-determination goals and objectives; and, (3) self-assess progress in self-determination over time. In addition, *The Arc's Self-Determination Scale* can benefit students by providing researchers a tool to evaluate which environments, instructional strategies and curricular materials enhance or impede self-determination.

The voices of students with disabilities are often the least frequently heard or solicited voice in the educational planning, decision-making, and program implementation process. This is adequately illustrated by the current state of affairs regarding student involvement in educational planning meetings. The reality for too many students with disabilities is that they are, essentially, left out of this process (Gillespie & Turnbull, 1983; Van Reusen & Bos, 1990). The implementation of P.L. 94-142 opened the door for student involvement in educational planning and decision-making by requiring the participation of students in planning meetings, whenever appropriate. Unfortunately, as Gillespie and Turnbull (1983) pointed out, little effort was expended to determine just when *whenever appropriate* was and most students were either uninvolved in the process, or involved only peripherally. Van Reusen and Bos (1990) stated that "student involvement [in educational planning], even at the secondary level, is for the most part either nonexistent or passive" (p. 30). If this is true for student-involvement in the IEP meeting, it is equally the case for the educational program planning and implementation process, despite evidence that such involvement would benefit students and result in more positive educational outcomes.

The Arc's Self-Determination Scale was conceptualized as a vehicle to reverse this trend by providing a self-report indicator of self-determination. The intent of the process is first and foremost to provide a voice for students with disabilities in this important area. However, there is considerable debate regarding the use of self-report measures, particularly with students with mental retardation. The **Scale Construction and Development** chapter provides a detailed discussion of the procedures used to determine

the most reliable and valid formats to measure self-determination. However, an overview of the use of self-report measures, and methods to improve their validity, may be useful for individuals wanting to utilize the Scale.

Improving the Validity of Self-Report Measures

There is a growing recognition in educational research that the student is an active participant in the learning process and student-variables must be accounted for; students formulate goals, attend to selected events, employ strategies (effective or not), process information and apply their beliefs about themselves and their environments to the learning process (Schunk, 1992). While attention to student perceptions related to learning and success has increased steadily in the educational literature, this has often not been the case for students with cognitive disabilities. However, this too is changing and there is an emerging body of research addressing student perceptions of academic and other outcomes. One of the reasons this effort has lagged is the pervasive skepticism regarding the validity of perceptions from students with cognitive disabilities. It is widely recognized, for example, that students with mental retardation tend to be outdirected, heavily influenced by adults, and overly acquiescent. The prevailing sentiment, based upon an assumption of deficits, has been that people with cognitive disabilities are not reliable or valid reporters of their own perceptions.

When researchers and educators question the validity of the perceptions of students with cognitive disabilities, what they often mean is that these students hold unrealistic perceptions. While this may be true, this does not negate the validity of the student's perception. A perception is invalid when it does not match the student's true beliefs or feelings, not when it is unrealistic.

The Arc's Self-Determination Scale has been constructed in such a manner to limit problems with reliability and validity. However, it should be recognized that it provides an indication of students' perceptions of their self-determination. As the definitional framework upon which this assessment is based proposes, individual perceptions are critical aspects of becoming self-determined. Students can possess all the skills necessary to be self-determined, but if they are never allowed to employ these skills, may grow to believe that they are not capable. Thus, student perceptions become a particularly important aspect to understand when trying to promote self-determination. It is our belief that a presumption that students with disabilities are inaccurate in reporting the degree to which they are autonomous, self-regulating, psychologically empowered and self-realizing is inaccurate and

unfair. Unfortunately, there is little evidence to prove or refute this.

Assor and Connell (1992) provided a number of suggestions for improving the validity of students' self-reports:

- Remember and communicate that what you want is for students to report what they truly believe about themselves. Accurate reports do not necessarily reflect real or actual performance.
- Ask students in a way that helps them understand what you are after in the assessment process. There is nothing hidden or secret about the process. We are not seeking some psychologically defined variable but simply what the student feels or believes.
- Emphasize that, no matter what students answer, as long as it is truly what they believe or feel it is the right answer. Ensure confidentiality and put students at ease.
- Communicate to students what the information will be used for and why they are being asked these questions. Get the student involved in the interpretation process as well as the assessment process.
- Groups with too many students are a problem because students feel that others might see their answers. Keep groups as small as possible.

The key to ensuring valid self-reports is to convince students that what they believe is very important. In order to convince students, one must genuinely believe this. This means acting on students' perceptions in a manner that is respectful, nonjudgemental, and promotes student involvement.

Inappropriate Uses of The Arc's Self-Determination Scale

The Arc's Self-Determination Scale was designed for two principal purposes; (1) to assess individual student strengths and weaknesses in self-determination and facilitate student involvement in planning educational and treatment strategies; and, (2) as a tool to conduct research on self-determination. *The Arc's Self-Determination Scale* has been constructed and normed with these uses in mind and other uses of the Scale are inappropriate. It is important to stress that the Scale is not a diagnostic or prescriptive tool. At the very least, the difficulties with reliability and validity from self-report measures make diagnostic, prescriptive, or placement decisions based on this data inappropriate and unprofessional. Although scoring provides opportunities for comparisons between the individual student and

the sample used to provide normative data for the Scale, we make no assumption about a “normal” or “expected” amount of self-determination. Instead, when used to identify student strengths and limitations, users should look at repeated measures across time and examine individual improvements.

One reason it is unfair or inappropriate to make decisions about students based on Scale scores is that the Scale makes no attempt to identify the reasons for the student’s lack of self-determination. As Mithaug and colleagues (Wolman, Campeau, DuBois, Mithaug & Stolarski, 1994) have described, becoming self-determined requires both the capacity and the opportunity to do so. Thus, a lack of self-determination may be a result of inadequate capacities to perform skills related to self-determination, inadequate opportunities to develop, acquire or employ these skills, or both. The end result is the same, but intervention to address the problem is different. *The Arc’s Self-Determination Scale* is a vehicle for eliciting discussion about the cause of a low level of self-determination and potential interventions to remedy this situation, but not to identify such causal relationships. It is therefore inappropriate to assume that low scores on *The Arc’s Self-Determination Scale* reflect problems that are only student-based.

A final consideration when using *The Arc’s Self-Determination Scale* is the difference between group scores and individual performance. Scores that fall in the extremes are generally minimized when one has a large group to consider. The sheer number of students’ scores will minimize the effect of a few outliers on the mean score. This serves to minimize the impact of error inherent in most attempts to assess students’ abilities, such as circumstances when the student is angry, sleepy or sick, answers just to “get through” the process, does not understand a question and marks any answer, or responds in an acquiescent manner. Although the Scale’s administration procedures attempt to control for these circumstances, it is not possible to keep these factors completely out of the assessment process. It is critical that the person working with the student be alert to factors that might impact the student’s ability or willingness to answer in a valid manner. In addition, however, it is the responsibility of this person to explore the validity of scores that are considerably higher or lower than the norm to ensure that an outside agent was not in action. This can only be accomplished working with the student as an equal partner.

Appropriate Uses of The Arc's Self-Determination Scale

The Arc’s Self-Determination Scale has potential to assist students and educators in their efforts to promote self-

determination as an educational outcome. The Scale has utility as one component in an overall effort to promote self-determination by involving the student in his or her educational planning and decision-making process. In addition, the Scale can provide the information needed to develop goals and objectives related to self-determined behavior. Items on the Scale were written at a fourth-grade reading level (lower when possible). The Scale has been field-tested and validated with students with cognitive disabilities receiving special education services around the country. The administration process includes the latitude for educators to provide a series of accommodations, from reading the test items and explaining various words and concepts for the student to transcribing student responses if necessary (see **Administration** chapter).

The first potential use of *The Arc's Self-Determination Scale* is to generate discussion about items the student finds interesting, problematic, or wants to discuss more broadly. Ideally, a student could use the Scale with minimal instruction from a teacher or another person. However, students will vary considerably in the level of support they need to complete the assessment. Many students with mild levels of cognitive disabilities should be able to work through the Scale independently or semi-independently. This process, in and of itself, has merit. The authors' experiences with the Scale indicated that students were motivated to engage in the activity because it focused on their interests, abilities and feelings. On numerous occasions students indicated that no one had ever asked them about their feelings about control over and choices in their lives. If students are particularly sensitive about or focused on "scores" and "comparisons" between themselves and others, the Scale could be completed, not scored, and each topic area could form the basis for discussion about students' beliefs, desires, abilities, limitations, and future plans.

The second use of the Scale involves scoring it and comparing Total, domain and subdomain scores with Scale norms and, more importantly, examining individual strengths and weaknesses across the domains. The normed data is provided only as a point of comparison, not so that students who perform below the mean should feel a sense of failure or otherwise use the information in a pejorative manner. Normed data can provide students and teachers with honest feedback upon which to base future interventions.

One reason that students lack self-determination is that they experience overprotection from family members and school personnel. If students invest in the assessment process as something they want to do to benefit themselves, they will use information comparing their performance with that of others as a call to action. It is critical that the teacher or person working with

the student provide feedback that directs the student toward this conclusion. Otherwise, they may use the information to reinforce feelings of insecurity and failure. The educational literature shows quite clearly that students learn from “failure” experiences when such experiences are mitigated and students are enabled to repeat the experience with success. Less than optimal performances in any area of *The Arc’s Self-Determination Scale* should be followed by learning opportunities and experiences that enable the student to make progress in that particular area.

In this light, students could work collaboratively with the teacher to score the assessment (because of the need to make the assessment usable as a research tool, its scoring is most likely too complex for self-scoring) and discuss the outcomes, both in comparison with data from the Scale norms and looking at individual student strengths and areas of need. During this process, teachers should refer back to the questions used in each domain and subdomain to find examples for students to understand what they do well and where they might need work. Such discussions should be supportive, positive, and empowering, not negative and disempowering. While seemingly paradoxical, poor performances on *The Arc’s Self-Determination Scale* could be empowering. Individuals who are placed in control or charge of solving their own problems feel empowered. It is not students’ performance, *per se*, that is important, but the opportunity to set them in control of their learning experience.

Any use of *The Arc’s Self-Determination Scale* with individual students should focus on potential educational goals and objectives. This discussion, in turn, can consider possible educational programs and activities to address and meet these goals and objectives. The **Scoring and Interpretation** chapter of this guide provides a detailed description of each domain and subdomain and how scores should be interpreted. It is not realistic to turn directly to Scale questions to generate goals and objectives because the items were selected to be representative of a broader area. For example, the first six questions form a subdomain under the *Autonomy* domain called *Independence: Personal Care and Family-Oriented Functioning*. As is described in the **Scoring and Interpretation** chapter, the six questions reflect performance in self-care and general family focused activities, like shopping, cleaning and cooking. If a student scores low based on these six questions, it is likely that he or she is not performing other similar activities. Thus, instructional emphasis would focus broadly on the student learning and the opportunity to engage in the types of activities that the Scale items represent.

Beyond individual student evaluation and planning, *The Arc’s Self-Determination Scale* has potential utility as a research

instrument. Instruction and intervention in self-determination have not progressed further because few means exist to evaluate the efficacy of interventions and the impact of environments and experiences on student self-determination. *The Arc's Self-Determination Scale* has been standardized to allow such use by educational and psychological researchers. It is important that researchers recognize that the Scale is a measure of student perceptions of self-determination. The **Reliability and Validity** chapter of this guide provides information on internal stability, construct and content validity and other information useful to researchers.

User Qualifications

The end-users of this Scale are intended to be students with disabilities or educational and psychological researchers. However, we recognize that if *The Arc's Self-Determination Scale* is to be used to enable and empower students with disabilities to become more self-determined, there will need to be an intermediary agent, in most cases a teacher. For all practical purposes, it will be the teacher who identifies the Scale as educationally useful, obtains copies of this guide and Scale protocols, provides the support and accommodations necessary for the student to complete the Scale in a reliable and valid manner, and facilitates the discussion with the student regarding how to use the information the Scale provides. The teacher's role in this process is as critically important as it is in more traditional models of teaching and instruction.

As such, we have identified teachers and researchers as the primary "users" of *The Arc's Self-Determination Scale* and direct comments regarding user qualifications to these parties. Use of the Scale does not require specific credentials or training in psychometric evaluation. Because the Scale is a student self-report measure and the process has been designed to elicit student involvement and discussion, it is inadvisable to be too prescriptive about its implementation. The Scale has been field-tested with both group and individual administration and can be equally suited for either circumstance. The most important "qualifications" for users are difficult, if not impossible, to teach or train: (1) acceptance of the importance of student involvement in educational planning and decision-making; (2) commitment to involving the student as an equal partner in the educational process; and, (3) respect for people with disabilities as equal and contributing members of our society. In addition to these characteristics, it is essential that the user be familiar with the Scale and its implementation. Scale users are encouraged to read

this procedural guide to gain an understanding of the construct the assessment attempts to operationalize and to gain a full understanding of Scale administration, scoring and interpretation.