




# A Transdisciplinary Approach to Promoting Self-Determination

*Collaboration Between Special Education Teachers and Music Therapists*

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Prior to the 1970s, the concept of individuals with disabilities having control of their own life choices (i.e., personal activities, education, independence, decision making) was absent from mainstream education and society (Spooner & Brown, 2011). Through civil rights movements and special education legislation, such as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004), we have entered an era for students with disabilities that prioritizes high-quality instruction with an emphasis on student's choice making, goal setting, and self-directed learning (Browder et al., 2020).

## Self-Determination

At its core, self-determination can be defined as the intentional process of conveying one's own wants and needs (Shogran & Broussard, 2011). According to Wehmeyer (2005), *self-determination*, or self-determinism, refers to the idea that individuals have control over how they act and what they do. Goal making, problem solving, decision making, choice making, and self-awareness are all aspects of self-determination (Friedman, 2017; Ryan & Griffiths, 2015; Rowe et al., 2015; Wehmeyer, 2005; Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003). Wehmeyer (2005) further explains that self-determination is more than just a behavior or skill; it is a characteristic or way of choosing to act. Because of this explanation, Wehmeyer emphasizes that self-determination is not a goal to be met but a process and characteristic to be enhanced.

Although self-determination emphasizes the control individuals have over their own lives, their environment plays an important role in how often and effectively they practice self-determination (Ryan & Griffiths, 2015; Wehmeyer, 2005; Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003). In educational environments, it is important to consider how often students with disabilities have the opportunity to practice making choices, making decisions, or setting goals (Spooner & Brown, 2011; Wehmeyer, 2011). Self-determination is listed among the eight criteria of high-quality instruction, which also include collaborative teaming,

inclusive practices, positive home-school relationships, systematic instruction, positive behavior support, teaching academic skills, and teaching functional skills (Browder et al., 2020). Because students with disabilities require deliberate and explicit instruction, including promoting self-determination (Browder et al., 2020; Spooner & Brown, 2011), curriculum and grade-level standards should focus on instructional experiences related to self-determination, such as choice making, goal setting, problem solving, self-regulation, and decision making (Browder et al., 2020; Wehmeyer & Schalock, 2001). By providing skill instruction and opportunities to practice choice making and decision making in school settings, students may find empowerment so "they themselves can obtain the outcomes they desire" (Ward, 2005, p. 110). Collaboration among professionals (e.g., special educators and musical therapists) is an environmental factor that may promote self-determination.

## Collaboration, Collaborative Teaming, and Models of Collaboration

Collaboration is "an interactive process involving individuals with varying levels of expertise who work together to solve a mutually-defined problem" (Paulsen, 2008, p. 213). In collaborative relationships, team members describe their expectations, contribute their expertise, and learn from

one another (Paulsen, 2008). Three models of collaboration that team members may embrace include multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary (Johnson, 2002; Ritter-Cantesanu, 2014). In a multidisciplinary team approach, professionals of different disciplines work with the student to reach their individualized education program (IEP) goals through their individual areas. In this approach, there is little interaction among the professionals. Similar to a multidisciplinary team approach, interdisciplinary teams share their IEP goals and implementation plans among each other. In this approach, it is also common to write the IEP as a group while keeping each discipline area in mind. Finally, in a transdisciplinary team approach, the roles are more blurred, and every team member involved is truly working together to support the student and their goals. With the transdisciplinary approach, all members of the team must "embrace communication, cooperation, and flexibility" (Ritter-Cantesanu, 2014, p. 145) to be successful in reaching their goal.

## Collaboration Between Special Education Teachers and Music Therapists to Promote Self-Determination

Collaboration is an essential component within professional relationships, especially in special education (Browder et al., 2020). An important aspect of collaboration is collaborative teaming, which is an aspect of high-quality education (Browder et al., 2020). Collaborative teaming is often described as a transdisciplinary team approach because it allows professionals with various backgrounds and expertise to work toward the student's best interests and needs (Browder et al., 2020). The transdisciplinary team can include a variety of professionals, such as speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, or music therapists. However, in this article, we focus on music therapy because music therapists provide a unique approach to promoting self-determination in school systems by focusing on creativity, decision making, problem solving, and flexibility within the structure of music (Adamek & Darrow, 2018; Gadberry & Harrison, 2016).



According to Wehmeyer (2005), self-determination, or self-determinism, refers to the idea that individuals have control over how they act and what they do.

**Music Therapy.** Music therapy is an evidence-based practice in which a certified music therapist assists individuals by working on nonmusical skills (i.e., social, cognitive, emotional, physical) in a structured, safe, and creative environment (Bruscia, 2014). Under IDEA, music therapy is a related service, and students can receive this as a part of their IEP (Adamek & Darrow, 2018; Ritter-Cantesanu, 2014). Music is a unique format for individuals to express and interact in a nonverbal way, and it can allow people to share their preferences, choices, decisions, emotions, and goals (Adamek & Darrow, 2018; Gadberry & Harrison, 2016). Music therapists use music as a way to implement a variety of interventions and approaches in school settings to promote goals or skills among students, such as improvisation (or spontaneous music making), active or directed music making, singing, listening to songs, songwriting, or song discussions (Adamek & Darrow, 2018; McFerran & Elefant, 2012). Music therapists also enter sessions with training and experience working with people with disabilities and are also trained in therapeutic interactions and interventions (Adamek & Darrow, 2018).

**Music therapy and self-determination.** There is a lack of literature that explicitly focuses on self-determination in music therapy; however, it is a common area of focus that arises in the therapeutic process when working on either communication, social, or autonomy skills (Gadberry & Harrison, 2016). Communication, emotion, social, and autonomy skills are important aspects of self-determination, as they can foster self-awareness, choice making, and goal setting (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2004). Music therapy can promote these skills in a variety of formats and ways, such as through structured or flexible client-directed sessions (McFerran & Elefant, 2012). For example, improvisation may provide opportunities for the student to musically express their emotions, have autonomy over how and what to play, and encourage social interaction between the therapist and student (Gadberry & Harrison, 2016; Graham, 2004; McFerran & Elefant, 2012; Stephenson, 2006).

Additionally, students may have opportunities to choose songs, interventions, instruments, and goals to allow them to practice effective verbal or nonverbal communication skills, to exercise autonomy and control over their therapy experience, and to allow them a chance to express how they are feeling that day (Gadberry, 2012; LaGasse, 2014; Lee & McFerran, 2012; McFerran & Elefant, 2012; Stephenson, 2006; Thompson & McFerran, 2015).

**Special Education.** Special education is a unique field in which special education teachers provide specially designed instruction to students with disabilities according to federal and state guidelines (Friend & Bursuck, 2018). Students who qualify for special education include those diagnosed with a specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, emotional or behavioral disorder, autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, deaf or hard of hearing, deaf-blindness, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, other health impairment, multiple disability, or developmental delay (Friend & Bursuck, 2018). Using specially designed instruction, related services (e.g., music therapy), and supplementary aids and services, students with disabilities work toward grade-level academic and functional content standards and IEP goals, such as self-determination.

### **Transdisciplinary Relationship of Special Education Teachers and Music Therapists**

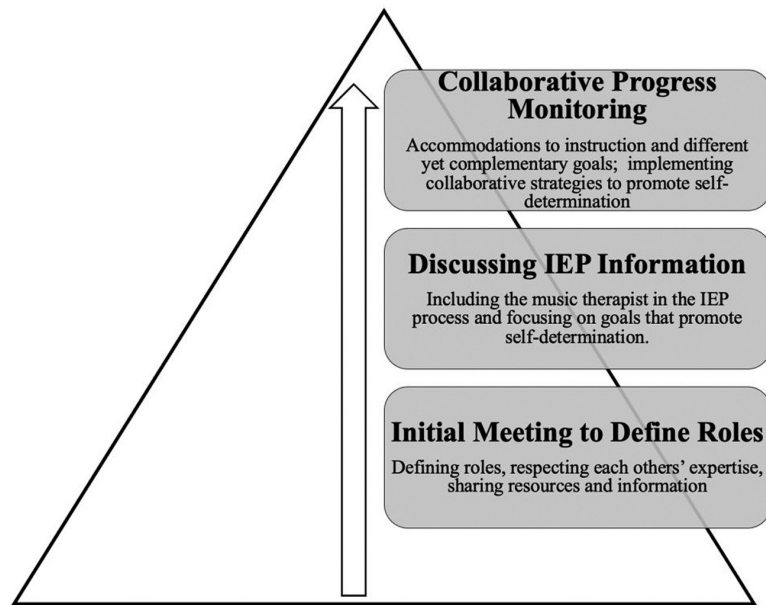
As part of the IEP team, music therapists and special education teachers may collaborate using a transdisciplinary team approach to help students become more self-determined. As mentioned previously, in a transdisciplinary team approach, the professional lines are blurred, which allows the music therapists and special education teachers to work on their goals individually (e.g., in the classroom or in a therapy session) while also sharing their expertise across settings. When these lines are blurred, for example, the special education teacher may share that the student makes choices by using pictures in a field of two. With this knowledge, the music therapist can incorporate choice, an element of self-determination, during the

music therapy session and allow the student to choose the next song with pictures. Additionally, music therapists can collaborate with other professionals in schools (e.g., special education teacher) by serving as consultants to offer suggestions about modifications and adaptations of music use in the classroom (Janzen, 2018). Collectively, the music therapists and special education teachers can share information about students' academic needs, behavioral performance, progress, strengths, and needs.

Although the research on collaboration between professionals such as special educators and music therapists is limited, there are implications for music therapists and special education teachers to work together to promote self-determination among students with disabilities. In this article, we highlight this transdisciplinary approach through a vignette in which a music therapist and special education teacher work together to best meet the needs of a student. By using this collaborative method, self-determination can be promoted by generalizing the strategies, interventions, and tasks across settings with all team members communicating effectively. Through the use of a vignette and a framework, the focus of this article is to provide special educators and music therapists with suggestions on how to promote self-determination and how to achieve this through successful collaboration.

*Samantha is a special educator who has recently been informed that one of her students, Ben, and his guardians have requested that music therapy be provided as a related service. Ben is a 14-year-old adolescent with autism spectrum disorder and uses an iPad to communicate with others. Ben has been using his augmentative and alternative communication device for the past couple of years but is still not completely comfortable with it quite yet. He has a hard time expressing his concerns and needs with those around him, and when he is frustrated, he tends to cry and yell. Samantha and Ben's parents have been working to address this in the classroom and at home, but they are looking for a new and more creative approach. Ben loves all kinds of music, especially rock music, and is constantly asking to play instruments or listen to music on his own. His parents have recently learned about the addition of a music therapist in the school district and are interested in including this as a*

Figure 1 Framework for Collaboration



Note. A pyramid of the Framework for Collaboration is shown, beginning with an initial meeting to define roles, then moving through discussing individualized education program information, and ending with collaborative progress monitoring.

related service, especially to encourage expressing needs and promoting skills for self-determination. Ben enjoys music, and as an active member of his own IEP team, he requests that music therapy be added to his IEP goals. After being assessed for music therapy, his IEP team determines that music therapy should be added to his IEP.

Although Samantha has never had an experience with music therapy in her classroom, she has met the new music therapist in the district, Laura. Samantha loves including music in the classroom and knows that her students respond well when music is implemented during their instruction, but she isn't sure what a music therapist will do and how to collaborate with the music therapist. As a new service provider in the district, Laura provides a districtwide workshop sharing the benefits of music therapy in schools, how music therapy differs from music education, and what music therapy sessions may look like. After the workshop, Samantha has a better idea of what is involved in music therapy sessions. Although she is excited about the new opportunity to collaborate, she is still unsure of the roles, expectations, and possibilities that could come out of this new service. She would like to make sure that she and the music therapist are on the same page so Ben can receive the best support and services possible.

Samantha follows the steps of the "Framework for Collaboration" (see **Figure 1**) to ensure that there are roles defined, that she and Laura have time to discuss the IEP information, and that progress toward IEP goals and self-determination are discussed.

### Framework for Collaboration

The Framework for Collaboration (see **Figure 1**) is a series of steps that can help special education teachers like Samantha effectively collaborate with music therapists like Laura. Although the framework is presented as a linear approach, both professionals recognize that each point or step in the framework can be revisited at any time to best meet the needs of the student. The process begins by outlining roles, then focuses on collaboration, and ends by discussing the IEP goals. Effective communication is an important component to maintain throughout each step of this process. By

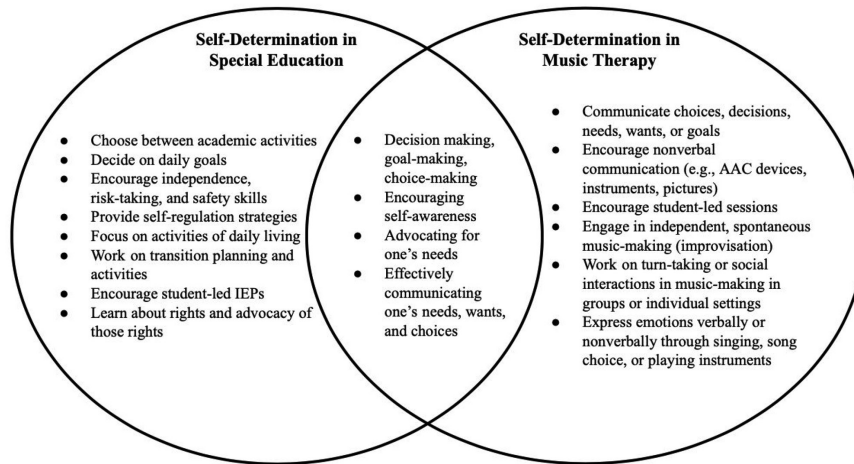
using a transdisciplinary team approach, the special education teacher, music therapists, and other members of the IEP team can communicate openly within and outside of their area of expertise. The goal of these collaborative interactions is to help the student become more self-determined, and the framework provides guidance for the team members to help the student meet this goal.

#### Step 1: Initial Meeting to Define Roles

Before collaboration begins, it is important to define and to establish the possible roles and expectations of special educators and music therapists. The roles of each professional are unique and complementary, as they both have specific expertise and a part to play within the education and self-determination process. The special educator provides a background of knowledge and acts as the

Effective communication is an important component to maintain throughout each step of this process.

Figure 2 Self-determination in music therapy and special education



Note. Figure 2 displays the different ways of promoting self-determination in music therapy and special education, with the overall similarities displayed in the middle.

leader of the IEP process (Ritter-Cantesanu, 2014). During collaboration, special educators may utilize their expertise by applying instructional strategies and interventions (e.g., systematic instruction; Browder et al., 2020) and sharing their background of knowledge of the student. In doing this, the special educator helps the music therapist understand educational terminology as well as shares resources and literature.

A music therapist enters this collaborative relationship with a different perspective because of their knowledge of creative arts and evidence-based therapeutic interventions, such as singing to promote communication skills (LaGasse, 2014). Therefore, the music therapist brings a unique and creative approach by focusing on music and relationships with students when developing accommodations or modifications (Adamek & Darrow, 2018; Ritter-Cantesanu, 2014). Students in music therapy can create songs, play instruments, and express their current feelings through improvisational music making.

As music therapy becomes more prevalent in schools, educators may need more information to help them understand the role of a music therapist in the school setting. Special educators and music therapists can work together to help others understand the importance of

music therapy. For example, the special educator can discuss the role and purpose of music therapy directly with other professionals and educators in the school, or the music therapist can provide handouts or schoolwide or team-based workshops to share information about their knowledge and contribution to IEPs and education of students (Janzen, 2018). Additionally, music therapists can demonstrate interventions in these workshops and what is expected during a music therapy session.

*The new district music therapist, Laura, facilitates a workshop where she demonstrates possible interventions that may occur in music therapy sessions, such as active music making, songwriting, and improvisation, so teachers have an idea of what to expect.*

During this initial meeting where roles are defined, the music therapist and special educator can take the time to share their thoughts and approaches to promoting self-determination. The educator may have created an environment in the classroom that allows for students to practice autonomy and to express choices related to their education, daily goals, or IEPs. Specific to the elements of self-determination, the music therapist can share with the special education teacher how they would include opportunities for choice making, independence, and goal setting in their sessions by having the students choose

instruments or songs, take turns selecting session activities, or initiating music making. Sharing ideas about self-determination strategies at this initial meeting can allow both professionals to learn about each other's style, educational expertise, and approach, which helps them determine consistent strategies across settings. See Figure 2 for more information about the roles of the special education teacher and the music therapist and how they both can focus on self-determination.

### Step 2: Discussing the IEP Information

*As an active member of the IEP team, Laura is excited to discuss the IEP goals with Samantha. After the workshop, Samantha has a better understanding of how Laura and music therapy can help Ben meet his self-determination goals. Samantha knows now that music therapy can work toward and complement other goals in the IEP, especially as Ben learns to make decisions and communicate his wants and needs without anxiety or frustration. With their roles clearly defined and knowing they can share their expertise, Samantha and Laura begin discussing Ben's strengths and needs. As the special educator, Samantha shares information about how Ben makes choices in the classroom, such as during independent reading time, and she mentions that Ben struggles when he's given too many books. With this information, Laura knows*

*that when Ben is in music therapy, she should offer no more than two or three song choices to Ben at a time. Samantha and Laura can work collaboratively on choice making in different settings while collectively helping Ben become a more self-determined young man.*

Self-determination is an important part of high-quality instruction in special education and is an important component of the IEP (Browder et al., 2020). This may include having a student-led IEP process, whereby the student is actively involved in choosing the music therapy goals they want to work toward (Davis & Cumming, 2019). Self-determination can also be included by ensuring the student has goals that focus on autonomy and choice making. As mentioned in the vignette, a student who has difficulty and anxiety with making decisions can have an IEP goal that includes making one decision per day. This goal can be addressed by both the special education teacher and the music therapist. Whereas the special education teacher may focus on creating choice opportunities for the student in the classroom (e.g., lunch or book choices), depending on the needs of the student, the music therapist could focus on creating choice opportunities in music therapy (e.g., songs or instruments) (see *Figure 2*).

Background knowledge and sharing of expertise is imperative for the collaborative process as it helps to create classroom routines for both the special educator and music therapist. Frequent communication is crucial when discussing IEP progress, changes, or meetings. Because students with disabilities need dedicated time and specific, special instruction to close skill gaps (Browder et al., 2020), the music therapy setting may provide a different space for the student where they can be free to be creative and to express themselves in a different manner than when they are in the general or special education classroom. It is important for the special education teacher and music therapist to agree about the student's goals and strategies, which requires consistent and regular communication, whether formal or informal (e.g., email, meeting, quick chat; Janzen, 2018). Although the focus here is the relationship between the special education teacher and music therapist, it is important to note that all professionals in the transdisciplinary team are included.

### **Step 3: Collaborative Progress Monitoring**

The final step of the framework is collaborative progress monitoring of the IEP goals. Progress monitoring, which is mandated by IDEA, involves collecting continuous data to determine if a student is meeting their IEP goals, if the interventions are effective, and if changes need to be made (IDEA, 2004). When collaborating, it is important for the transdisciplinary team to collect data on the individual goals for the student but to also share their data with the rest of the team.

To collect data on self-determination goals being taught in the classroom setting and in music therapy sessions, the special education teacher and music therapist must determine the best data collection procedure. There are many types of data that these professionals may decide to collect that can help them make important instructional and educational decisions, such as observational data or frequency data (Browder et al., 2020). By collecting data often on the IEP goal (e.g., choice making), sharing the data within the transdisciplinary team, and monitoring the data frequently, the special education teacher and music therapist can make important decisions for the student.

Perhaps the most important result from data collection and progress monitoring is the ability to make educational changes and to be able to support the student as they work to attain their self-determination goals. Together, the music therapist and special education teacher can ensure they provide the student opportunities for decision making (e.g., allowing the student to decide on which songs to use during the session, through song discussion, and by determining lyrics of a song) within their respective settings. Effective and frequent communication remains important at this point in the process. Music therapists and special educators should touch base on a regular basis (a) to discuss systematic or anecdotal documentation, (b) to provide another perspective on the student's progress, and (c) to monitor the student's progress so they can determine if any educational or instructional changes should be made.

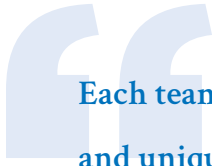
### **Concluding Vignette of Collaboration Between a Special Educator and Music Therapist**

*At their meeting, Samantha and Laura determine that one goal in Ben's IEP for*

*self-determination should be choice making, and they determine that giving him two or three choices at a time during a class time or music therapy session would be appropriate for him because that would decrease his frustration and anxiety. Samantha also shares a "calm down" or emotion regulation sheet, which provides a list of strategies and activities Ben can utilize to regulate and manage his emotions. During the meeting, Samantha and Laura also discuss progress-monitoring strategies and determine that frequency counts for the number of choices provided during each class along with anecdotal data on his responses would enable them to make important instructional decisions. Samantha and Laura decide to check in every week before or after Ben's music therapy session and to also have a formal meeting at the end of the month where they will discuss their progress-monitoring data. Laura also agrees to send her session notes for Samantha to review just in case they don't get a chance to talk after every session.*

*At the end of the month, Samantha and Laura formally meet to discuss Ben's progress in music therapy. Ben has been enjoying the chance to play instruments with Laura and has been doing well making choices in music therapy and learning about emotions and coping strategies. Samantha shares that although Ben has been managing his frustrations by using the calm-down sheet, and that his anxiety is reduced when he has some control and choice in his daily routine, he still struggles with regulation and expressing his needs. Both agree that it may be helpful to collaborate and determine additional strategies they can use in each of Ben's environments to generalize and promote these skills of self-determination. Following Step 3 of the framework, both professionals use their unique expertise to suggest strategies that could be implemented in a variety of settings. Laura shares that she has created a song using the steps on Ben's calm-down sheet that Samantha gave her during the last meeting. The song is simple and incorporates visuals on the sheet. Samantha asks Laura to teach her the song and provide her with a recording so they can use it in the classroom. Samantha also mentions that incorporating an emotion check-in with Ben might be helpful to encourage his emotion awareness and regulation skills. Together they create a check-in routine with a list of possible coping or regulation techniques.*

*Implementation of the new check-in and regulation song continues for the next several weeks. Samantha and Laura continue to collect data on Ben's goals and check in weekly and*



## Each team member contributes their expertise and unique perspective in the promotion of self-determination in students' academic process.

monthly to discuss progress. During these meetings, they also communicate with each other about any potential issues or ideas that may help of hinder Ben's progress toward his self-determination goals. Because of the collaboration between Samantha and Laura and use of the strategies in both the classroom and music therapy settings, Ben receives multiple opportunities to make choices in his environment, which ultimately helps him regulate his emotions by decreasing his frustration and anxiety. Samantha and Laura know that because of their collaborative relationship, Ben is well on his way to improving his self-determination skills and meeting his overall goals.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to promote self-determination and collaboration among special education teachers and music therapists. By following the steps provided in this article (i.e., initial meeting to define roles, discussing the IEP information, and collaborative progress monitoring), special educators can work alongside music therapists to promote self-determination among students with disabilities. This transdisciplinary approach emphasizes communication, cooperation, and flexibility as the team members work together to support the student (Ritter-Cantesanu, 2014). Each team member contributes their expertise and unique perspective in the promotion of self-determination in students' academic process. Through intentional and successful transdisciplinary collaboration, special education teachers and music therapists can implement high-quality instruction and help their students reach their self-determination goals.

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