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The Star Protocol Process: Facilitating Collaboration between Families and School District Personnel
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Abstract

This paper describes a process that was developed to facilitate communication and collaboration between school district personnel and families of children with significant disabilities. The Star Protocol was designed to engage families and educators in a structured conversation in order to first collectively define the presenting issue(s) and then co-create an action plan. The Star Protocol draws from elements contained in both person-centered planning processes from the disability field and reflective protocols that have been developed to assist educators to improve their teaching. Each step of the protocol is detailed and an example of the use of the protocol is provided.

The Star Protocol Process: Facilitating Collaboration between Families and School District Personnel

“A problem well stated is a problem half solved.”-- Charles F. Kettering

A variety of person-centered planning processes have evolved over the past two decades to increase the quality of the lives of adults and children with disabilities. In Personal Futures Planning (Mount, 1987, Mount & Zwernick, 1988) teams develop a personal profile for an individual with a disability comprised of five areas: home, school, community, choices and preferences, and

relationships. Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) is another person-centered planning process that addresses both long and short term planning (Pearpoint, O'Brien, & Forest, 1993). The McGill Action Planning System (MAPS) was developed specifically for school age children with disabilities with the intent to develop an action plan to integrate students with disabilities into general education settings (Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989). Common elements of person-centered planning include following a set structure for the meeting, positive and creative thinking on behalf of the participants, collaboration and the use of a trained facilitator to guide the overall process (Callicott, 2003).

Similarly structured processes have evolved over the past ten years as a form of professional development for teachers. These processes are rooted in reflective practice, peer engagement, and driven by positive student outcomes. Influenced by a number of factors including the National Staff Development Council's standards for staff development (National Staff Development Council, 2001) and the collective work of the Coalition of Essential Schools, processes have been developed to assist educators to work collaboratively with one another to improve their teaching. Commonly referred to as reflective protocols, these processes provide educators with the necessary structure to work together to collectively reflect on and improve their teaching.

A number of reflective protocols have evolved that focus on the evaluation of student work in a collaborative manner. The Tuning Protocol, for example, provides a structured opportunity for teachers to share student work before a group of educators in a structured, reflective discourse aimed at "tuning" the work to higher standards (Allen, 1995, p.2). Similarly, the Collaborative Assessment Conference focuses on examining the work of a particular student to gain insight into that student's strengths and needs and to reflect on and gather ideas for revising classroom instruction (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 1999). Protocols have also been designed to assist educators in collaboratively addressing instructional issues or challenges. One such protocol is the Consultancy Protocol developed by Gene

Thompson-Grove as part of the Coalition of Essential Schools' National Learning Faculty Program (Thompson-Grove, Evans, & Dunne, 2005).

Common components of reflective protocols include the adherence to a predetermined structure, the use of a facilitator to maintain adherence to the protocol, reflection, peer engagement and an overall focus on improving student learning.

Missing from both person-centered planning processes and reflective protocols, however, is a process to deal with differing or conflicting opinions or ideas, especially between educators and families of students with disabilities. The Star Protocol was designed to engage families and educators in a structured conversation in order to first collectively define an issue needing to be addressed and then co-create an action plan based on this agreed upon issue. It was designed as part The Student Technical Assistance Response (STAR) Team, a project funded by the Connecticut State Department of Education to increase access to the general education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities.

The Star Protocol draws from many elements contained in both person-centered planning processes, such as MAPS and reflective protocols; specifically the Consultancy Protocol. The Star Protocol has been used to assist educators and families in the planning and implementation of inclusive educational programming for students with significant disabilities in Connecticut for the past two years.

The Star Protocol Process

Participants in this process typically include the student, family members, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, peers, and related service providers. A facilitator ensures that the meeting proceeds according to the steps outlined in the protocol. There is an opportunity for all members to speak uninterrupted, to ask questions, to analyze and discuss the situation, to brainstorm possible solutions, and to design a measurable action plan to address the presenting situation. The meeting lasts approximately one hour, or may be split into two forty-five minute meetings at the discretion of the facilitator. An underlying assumption of the Star Protocol is that the people who know

the student best have the capabilities to solve complex situations. The Star Protocol was developed to uncover these capabilities, first by clearly defining the presenting situation from multiple perspectives.

Step One: Present Perspectives

Each member presents his or her perspective on the current situation (members may pass if desired). Each person has two uninterrupted minutes to speak. Listeners may want to write down questions or comments they have about each presenters' perspective. The Facilitator or Recorder keeps a public record of each presenter's key points. All participants present, without discussion, before moving on to the next step. Fifteen minutes are allotted for this step of the protocol.

Step Two: Clarify

After all participants have presented, five minutes are set aside for the group to ask clarifying questions of individual members regarding their experiences with the focus student. Clarifying questions have brief, factual answers. The purpose here is to better understand one another's perspectives – participants are asked to save comments and discussion for later.

Step Three: Probe

The group is then given an additional five minutes to ask probing questions – questions that help participants expand their thinking about the issues that have been presented. The goal here is for the group to learn more about the situation and to do some analysis of perspectives and experiences. Individual participants respond to questions, but there is no discussion by the larger group of these responses.

Step Four: Defining the Issue(s)

The group enters into a discussion to analyze, explore, and clarify the situation. The purpose of this discussion is not to devise solutions but to reach group consensus in defining the issues. Some groups like to start with positive questions such as "What is the good news in this situation?" and then move on to questions such as "What needs to be improved?" Once the team has arrived at a unified

definition of the situation, it is recorded and the Facilitator repeats it aloud. At this point, if the process has taken more than 45 minutes, the team will agree upon a date and time to reconvene the meeting. This is especially important if there has been significantly different perspectives of the situation have been shared. Ten minutes are allotted for this step.

Step Five: Brainstorm

The participants review actions that have worked (from Step One), actions that have not worked goals, and the student's strengths and interests. Using these as a guide, the team brainstorms for up to 15 minutes on ways to resolve the situation. Ideas are recorded by the Facilitator without evaluation or judgment.

Step Six: Create an Action Plan

Here the team chooses solutions that were identified in Step Five. The team must identify who is to implement each solution, what resources are needed, an agreed upon time frame, and to determine if each item agreed upon was successfully implemented. The group also decides upon at least one action that will be taken within 24 hours. The team must also decide how the plan will be monitored and by whom. Fifteen minutes are allotted for the development of the action plan.

Step Seven: Reflection

At the end of the meeting the Facilitator takes five minutes to review the team's action plan to ensure that all members understand and are in agreement with one another. The Facilitator ends the meeting with a brief conversation about the group's observation of the process.

An Example of the Star Protocol Process

Nancy is a 10-year-old student in a suburban school district in central Connecticut. At the time of her referral, Nancy spent half of her day in a fourth grade general education classroom and the other half of her day in a self-contained special education classroom. The request for assistance from the STAR Team was made to obtain assistance in embedding and addressing Nancy's functional academic

skills within the context of her general education classroom. After interviewing Nancy's family and teachers, observing Nancy in both her general education and special education classrooms and conducting a record review, a Star Protocol meeting was scheduled. Participating in the meeting were Nancy's mother and a friend of the family, her general and special education teachers, a paraprofessional that supports Nancy in her general education classroom, the principal, the speech pathologist and the school psychologist. A facilitator instructed the group on the protocol prior to the start of the meeting, enforced the rules of the protocol throughout the meeting and recorded participant responses on flip chart paper.

After brief introductions participants engaged in the first step of the protocol: Present Perspectives. Each participant provided an overview of Nancy's education. Her special education teacher was concerned about Nancy's need to learn functional skills such as telling time and functional reading, while her general education teacher was concerned about Nancy's lack of independence and distractibility in the general education classroom. Nancy's mother was concerned about the gap between Nancy's academic abilities and those of her nondisabled peers and the feasibility of her academic needs being met in a general education classroom.

Participants were then given an opportunity to ask clarifying questions of each other. Clarifying questions have brief, factual answers. For example, the special education teacher asked Nancy's mother about her ability to generalize functional skills being taught at school to the home setting. The general education teacher also asked the special education teacher how she is going about teaching time telling skills to Nancy in the special education classroom.

Next participants were provided the opportunity to ask probing questions of one another. Probing questions do not have easy answers but help participants to expand their thinking about a particular situation. At this time the special education teacher was asked about Nancy's level of distractibility in the special education classroom and how it is addressed. The paraprofessional was

asked about what strategies she might use to increase Nancy's independence in her fourth grade classroom.

Next the group collaboratively defined the issue by collectively looking at their recorded notes. The group developed two questions that they wished to address: (1) how do we bring functional academic and adaptive living skills into the regular education classroom? and (2) how do we address Nancy's needs yet increase her independence in the classroom?

The group engaged in a brainstorming session and collaboratively identified an Action Plan (see Figure 1). The action plan entailed completing an analysis of Nancy's fourth grade classroom to determine opportunities for teaching functional skills within the context of her general education classroom. Secondly the team agreed to develop a self-management schedule for Nancy, which would embed functional time telling and reading into her fourth grade classroom. The team also decided to color code Nancy's schedule to increase Nancy's independence in the classroom and reduce her reliance of paraprofessional assistance.

During the final stage, participants reflected on the process and how they feel about moving forward with their action plan. Participants commented that they felt that the process helped simplify what needed to be done. One teacher commented that she would have never been able to develop this plan on her own.

As a result of their efforts, Nancy's time in her general education classroom was increased to 84%. She was able to reduce her dependency on paraprofessional assistance and work on generalizing functional academic skills to her general education classroom.

Discussion

Certainly these ideas and strategies are not new to the field of inclusive education. What is new, however, is the collaborative and reflective process in which they were conceived and implemented. Kettering's quote at the beginning of this article speaks volumes: a problem well stated is

a problem half solved. The collaborative and reflective nature of the Star Protocol process appears to provide school district personnel and families with the structure needed to hear one another and work together to develop and implement action plans to address mutually agreed upon issues.

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Action Steps	By Whom	By When	Resources and Support (Available/Needed)	How Will We Know if it Was Successful?
Conduct ecological inventory in current general education environment and review current IEP to complete an IEP Matrix	Special and general education teachers	2/07	IEP Matrix Form	Completed ecological inventory and IEP matrix
Implement a self-management system (embed functional academics: reading, writing, math)	Special education teacher, general education teacher, school psychologist	3/07	Article and examples to be sent to district	Implementation of self-management schedule which addresses embedded functional academic skills
Develop and implement color-coded organizational notebook	Special education teacher, paraprofessional, parent	4/07	Office supplies	System in place, reduced dependency on paraprofessional, increased attention and participation in general education classroom

Figure 1. Sample action plan.

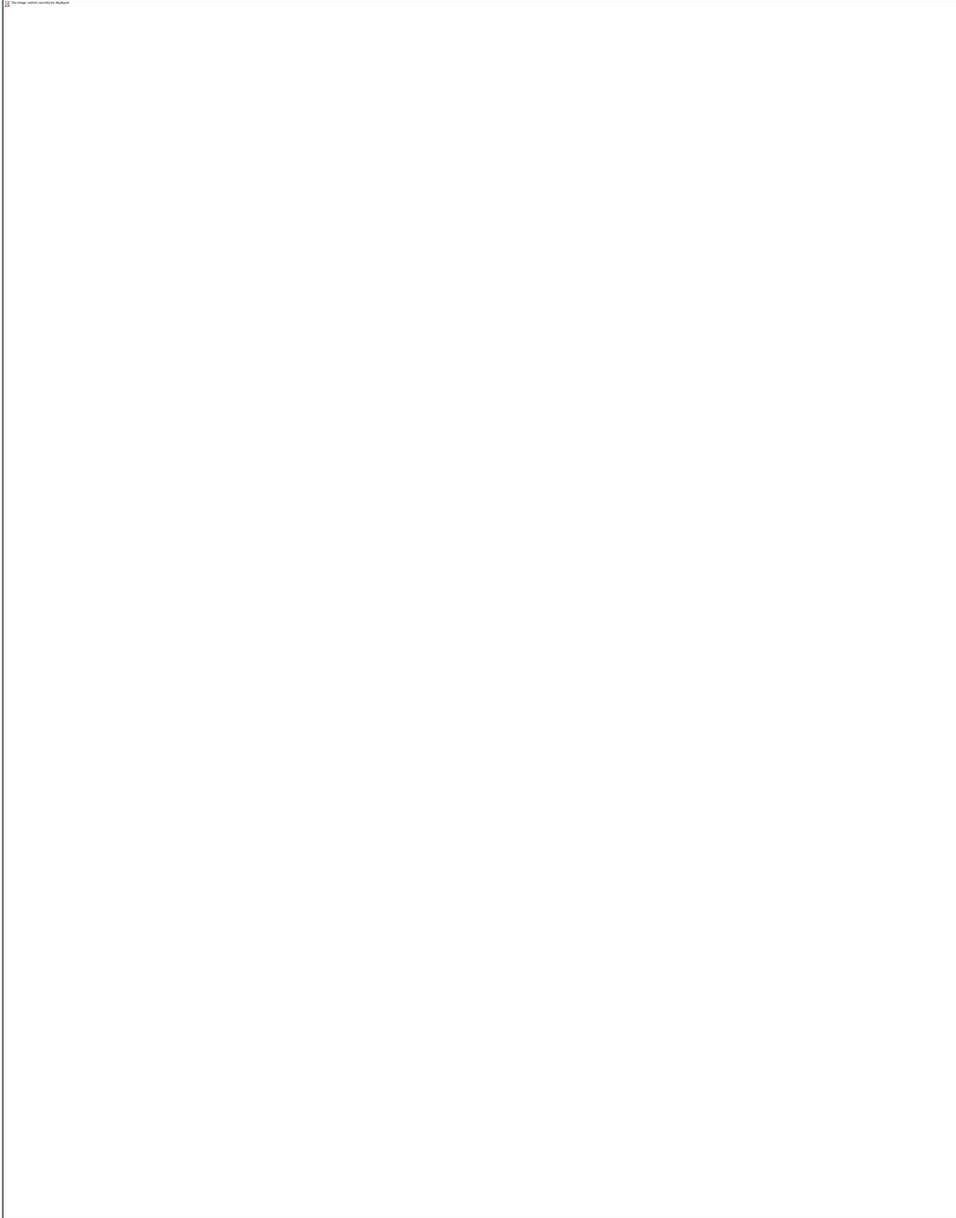


Figure 2. Self-management plan developed by Nancy's team to embed functional academics into fourth grade classroom