

Chapter 12

ENHANCING SELF-DETERMINATION THROUGH GROUP ACTION PLANNING

A Holistic Emphasis

Ann P. Turnbull, Martha J. Blue-Banning,
Emma Longan Anderson, H. Rutherford Turnbull,
Kimberly A. Seaton, and Patricia A. Dinas

THE FIELD OF special education has been characterized as taking a "fix-it" approach to disability (Gliedman & Roth, 1980; Heshusius, 1982; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1985; Zola, 1982). The "fix-it" approach emphasizes that the goal of special education is remediation of deficits that exist within the individual. It assumes that once those deficits are remediated, individuals with a disability will be able to participate in society in an independent (i.e., unassisted) manner. The "fix-it" approach is reflected in the area of self-determination by approaches that exclusively enumerate a list of important skills that individuals with disabilities must master in order to be considered self-determining. Typically, once the list is developed, efforts are directed at systematically teaching these skills to achieve self-determination. This conceptualization of self-determination assumes that individual skills alone are enough for an individual to achieve autonomy in meeting environmental challenges and expectations.

As an alternative to this unidimensional emphasis on individual skills, we, have suggested that self-determination has three key components: 1) motivation, 2) individual skills, and 3) a responsive context. Consistent with the identification of these three components, we have defined self-determination as follows: self-determination means choosing how to live one's life consistent with personal values and preferences. A self-

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determining individual can choose to make decisions singularly and/or choose whose support to invite in his or her decision making process" (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1985).

Becoming self-determined involves an interplay of motivation, skills, and a responsive context. This interaction develops dynamically and fluidly over time. Motivation and skills relate to aspects of the individual, whereas the component of a responsive context relates to environmental support and opportunity. Motivation refers to intrinsic desire, energy, and positive anticipation of the future that result in an openness to learn, undertake challenges, and solve problems. Skills involve a broad range of domains including knowledge and acceptance of self, problem solving, communicating, learning from successes and failures, accessing individual and agency support, and being reciprocal in relationships. A responsive context consists of environments in which opportunities are available for enjoyable and reciprocal relationships, nonjudgmental and informative feedback, a reasonable degree of successive challenges, negotiation of reasonable and constructive limits, open and honest communication, facilitating but not controlling support, and celebratory affirmations of progress.

The focus in this chapter is primarily on the creation of a responsive context. Although this particular component is highlighted, we emphasize that the three components are highly interdependent. Thus, when a context is appropriately responsive, one should expect that it will influence the individual in terms of enhancing both motivation and skill development.

This chapter describes a particular model, one that we have developed and call Group Action Planning, which has a wide range of applications, including the enhancement of self-determination. Group Action Planning is a form of person-centered planning that shares many features of other person-centered approaches such as Making Action Plans (Forest & Pearpoint, 1992) (formerly the McGill Action Planning System), Personal Futures Planning (Mount & Zwernik, 1988), and Essential Lifestyles Planning (Smull & Harrison, 1992). Table 1 compares and contrasts traditional planning methods (e.g., individualized education program [IEP] conferences) and a person-centered approach (e.g., Group Action Planning). Group Action Planning is a flexible process that can be used at any point in a person's life. Although this chapter focuses primarily on Group Action Planning as a strategy for supporting students with disabilities who are moving from high school to adulthood, the process is just as applicable for infants as it is for adolescents or people who are elderly.

GROUP ACTION PLANNING

Group Action Planning is a process of creating a reliable alliance among an individual with a disability, family members, professionals, and friends. The purpose of the process is to support the individual with a disability to create a vision of how he or she wants to live life and then to make a long-term commitment to the individual to transform that vision into reality.

Table 1. Comparison of traditional and person-centered planning approaches

IEP conferences— traditional planning	Group action planning person-centered planning
Professionally directed, unequal ratio of professionals to family members and friends	Approximately equal proportion of participants from the groups of friends, community citizens, family members, and professionals
Structured, formal process	Reflective, creative process that focuses on divergent problem solving
Regulated by mandated paperwork for monitoring compliance	Not mandated or regulated; facilitated by an, individual skilled in collaborative communication
Held in professional setting (e.g., conference room)	Held in an informal setting, most often the home of family or friends
Serious atmosphere in which the focus of attention is on the student's developmental needs	Relational, fun, affirming atmosphere in which the strengths, capabilities, contributions, and dreams are the focus of attention
Meets once or twice a year	Meets regularly (usually monthly) to accomplish next steps
Developmental assessment and outcomes guide the process	Visions and relationships guide the process
Professionals and agencies are primarily responsible for implementing programs to accomplish developmental outcomes	Group members form a reliable alliance with every member assuming responsibility for transforming visions to reality

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IEP, Individualized education program.

The fundamental characteristics of Action Groups are that they

1. Actively invite people who can be helpful to participate in a reciprocal and interdependent manner
2. Create a context of social connectedness and caring among all participants
3. Foster dynamic and creative problem solving fueled by great expectations
4. Continuously affirm and celebrate. the progress that is being made

When these characteristics of Action Groups occur at an optimal level, the outcome is synergy. Synergy has been defined as "the capacity of an individual or group to increase the satisfaction of all participants by intentionally generating increased energy and creativity, all of which is used to co-create a more rewarding present and future" (Craig & Craig, 1974, p. 62). This synergy, in turn, empowers both an adolescent individually and his or her network of key supporters, with the result being that "the whole is truly greater than the sum of the parts." This is a radically different concept than the "fix-it" approach that primarily emphasizes the development of an individual repertoire of skills.

The information presented here is based in part on a 3-year model demonstration project funded by, the Office of Special Education Programs within the U.S. Department of Education. This project, entitled "Self-Determination Through Group Action

Planning," is currently in its final year of implementation. It consists of 1) a high school course on self-determination and 2) the development and implementation of Action Groups for each student in the course.

The self-determination course, facilitated by project staff and high school personnel, used process-oriented teaching strategies. The students were involved in the development of the course, outlining the curriculum in the first week of class and generating ground rules for their individual and collective work. The course facilitators concentrated on enhancing individual motivation and skills. The course was supplemented by participation in Group Action Planning, which, in a sense, served as a practicum component for the course.

The Action Groups provided an environment in which the students could express, practice, and benefit from their newly developing skills. It became clear that the "fix-it" approach of teaching skills associated with self-determination is necessary but is not sufficient for the full utilization of these skills in making crucial transitional decisions. Instead, those skills have to be activated (through motivation), developed, and used by the student in a supportive context. Thus, Group Action Planning is a way to approach self-determination holistically because it focuses on the motivation and skills of the individual and the responsiveness of the context. The essence of this approach is to create a network of people who nurture, support, and encourage the student to make choices about his or her present and future life.

The following sections explain the "who," "where," and "when" of Group Action Planning by emphasizing general guidelines and following the implementation of Ryan and Katie's Action Groups (see the following case studies). The emphasis is on general guidelines and suggestions, as the key to successful Group Action Planning is flexibility and absolute focus on each individual student's needs in his or her community, culture, and family contexts.

Ryan is a 17-year-old high school student with cognitive disabilities who likes Nintendo, sports, music, and pizza. Ryan has been in a segregated special education setting for most of his life. His mother and father have been very involved in initiating change in his life. When his Action Group started, he was identified as having "behavior problems." He acted out in class, was not motivated to go to school, was lonely, and generally appeared to be unhappy. He was unaccustomed to expressing his preferences, and his attention span was short. His ability to comprehend the complexity of decision making or to contribute his own input was thought to be "severely limited."

Katie is a bright, competent 19-year-old high school student with cerebral palsy who is preparing to graduate. Although Katie was placed in a special education classroom for students with cognitive disabilities at an early age, she has no cognitive disabilities.

Katie was raised by her maternal grandmother. After her grandmother died when Katie was 15 years old, Katie moved to a group home for adults with severe and profound mental retardation. Katie. Very patient person who enjoys people and wants to work with children after graduation. She is interested in looking into postsecondary education. When Katie entered the self-determination class, she was interested in leaving the group home to live independently, thinking about graduation, and experiencing difficulties being as with friends and service providers.

Who Participates in Group Action Planning?

The focus member of the group is, first and foremost, the individual with a disability. The evolving self-determination of adolescents can most comprehensively be supported through a family systems orientation (Turnbull & Turnbull, therefore, groups also typically include family members (not limited to mothers only, as too often happens in home-school partnerships). Other people are invited to join the group, and the invitation depends primarily on 1) the transition issues facing the person and group, 2) the lifestyle preferences of the person and group, and 3) the ability and preferences of those invitees to participate in the group and to be part of the reliable transition alliance. Table 2 specifies in six domains of transition planning and suggests people who might be invited to participate in Action Groups based on their ability to systematically address these issues.

Action Group participation can be arranged on both a permanent and temporary basis. The permanent members are the core people most committed to the student who will likely be available over a long period of time. These are the people who not only support the student to express his or her visions for the future, but also provide support for the daily challenges of implementing those visions. Other participants, however, can be temporary in the sense that they can be invited to participate in one or more meetings that address specific issues. For example, in Table 2 a number of different people are specified related to living situations—Section 8/HUD housing personnel, social services personnel, and landlords. It may be that these individuals would not be appropriate to include as members of a student's Action Group but would be appropriate as invitees to specific meetings where the issues to be addressed have to do with finding desirable housing.

A key group member is the facilitator, whose role is vital to the Action Group's success. We will discuss the facilitator's role later in the chapter.

Ryan's core Action Group members have included Ryan, a facilitator, his parents, his sister, his teacher, two classmates from school, 4 peers from his church, a couple of university faculty members, and several family friends. Some of the temporary members have been music students from the local university, several members of a fraternity at the local university, a speech and language therapist, and teachers and transition specialists from his school.

Table 2. Identifying key issues and people to invite

EMPLOYMENT

Issues

Is the student currently working? Is it a paid position or an unpaid position? What kind of work experience does the student have? What are his or her vocational interests? Has there been an employment evaluation? If the student is not currently working, is he or she interested in finding a job? What are future employment goals?

People to invite to Group Action Planning meeting

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Co-workers, supervisor | Vocational rehabilitation personnel |
| Family | Independent living center personnel |
| Student connections | Generic employment agency personnel |
| School personnel | |
| Vocational coordinator | |
| Teachers | |
| Job coach | |

LIVING

Issues

Where is the student currently living? Where does he or she want to live 5 years from now? With whom does he or she want to live? What can we do now to make the vision a reality? How is it going with his or her current living situation? Any problems, issues to deal with now?

People to invite to the Group Action Planning meeting

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Friends | Section 8/HUD housing personnel |
| Roommates, landlord | Independent living center personnel |
| Attendants, paid staff | |

TRANSPORTATION

Issues

How does the student usually get around? Is transportation an issue? Does he or she know how to access public transportation? Is he or she interested in obtaining a driver's license? Taking driver's education classes?

People to invite to the Group Action Planning meeting

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Friends | Paratransit systems |
| Cab company personnel | People who may be open to carpooling |
| Bus company personnel | Driver's license examiner |

FINANCIAL

Issues

Does the student currently have a bank account? Does she or he know about banking procedures? Does he or she have a budget? Is there something for which the student needs to be saving-something he or she wants to do or buy? Does the student know how to purchase something from a store? Are there issues in regard to guardianship or conservatorship?

People to invite to the Group Action Planning meeting

- | | |
|--|--|
| Service providers, service coordinators | Supplemental Security Income (SSI) personnel |
| Conservator, guardian | Social services personnel (food stamps, financial aid) |
| Advocacy and protective services personnel | |

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

SOCIAL*Issues*

What does he or she do now for fun? What are preferred hobbies or sports? What about friendships and dating? What are possible community resources related to social interests?

People to invite to the Group Action Planning meeting

Friends, classmates

Athletic club participants

Church members

Recreational services staff

Neighbors

Community members with similar hobbies

SCHOOL*Issues*

How are things going at school? Is the educational program appropriate? What is the status of the transitional planning process? Are sufficient related services being provided? How is the communication between the school and family? Is school appropriately preparing the student for adult life?

People to invite to the Group Action Planning meeting

Friends, classmates

Related services providers

Inclusion specialist

Job coaches

Transition specialist

Counselors

Teachers

School administrators

Paraprofessionals

Advocacy organization representatives

Katie's core Action Group members have included Katie, a facilitator, her special education teacher, her vocational rehabilitation counselor, her job coach, a speech and occupational therapist, a services coordinator from the state Medicaid waiver program, her friends, and a transition specialist from the high school. Temporary members have included a representative from a literacy project, an independent living specialist, a representative from Advocacy and Protective Services, and her home care attendants.

Where Do Action Groups Convene?

Action Groups meet in a comfortable, nonthreatening environment. The environment can significantly impede the outcome of the meeting for the student and his or her family if it is intimidating. Thus, groups should meet anywhere that is comfortable and where professional control is not the norm. Meeting places can include group members' homes, a library or community building, restaurant, or church. Whereas traditional team meetings, such as IEP conferences, typically meet around tables with everyone having a set of papers in front of them, Action Groups are best convened more informally.

Ryan's group usually meets at his home. Group members sit around the living room and munch on snacks. Over the last couple of years, the group has also met at a friend's house, Ryan's church fellowship hall, and a park.

Katie's group meets in a local bakery close to her apartment, restaurants, her apartment, the high school, and a neutral office setting. Katie's meetings are always very large, but people always manage to pull together into a circle.

When Do Action Groups Meet?

Groups may meet when convenient and as often as necessary. Monthly meetings are the general rule, with more frequent meetings during times of crises or upcoming deadlines. It is essential to remember that the bottom line of Action Groups is *action*-the perception and reality of which are critical to enhancing the student's motivation and skill related to self-determination. Thus, groups need to meet regularly and fairly often, with group members working on tasks between meetings.

Ryan's group meets approximately once a month. The group has met more frequently during times when Ryan has experienced more intense behavior challenges or when greater changes are needed in his school schedule, such as when he became the first student with a cognitive disability at the local high school to be fully included in the general education program.

Katie's group also meets on a monthly basis. The group met more frequently when Katie was preparing to move into her own apartment. When other critical issues arise, members gather in smaller groups to have more intensive brainstorming sessions with Katie.

Group Members' Roles

Although all Action Group members contribute by offering support, providing resources, and developing action plans, there are some specific roles that members typically assume. The roles of the student, family, facilitator, and other group members are described on the following pages.

Student Roles Student involvement may range from being present to setting the agenda, leading the discussion, and creating the action plan. It is critical that the student be involved and remain the center or focus of the group, as the purpose of the Action Group is to be a responsive context in which the student chooses how to live his or her life and to provide the necessary support to actualize those preferences. Even if the student's current motivation and skills are such that his or her involvement in the Action Group is limited, supportive participation with coaching can be the catalyst for developing

self-determination skills. Group members run the risk of making students dependent on the group if they assume control of decision making, rather than supporting them to make the choices they prefer.

Family Roles The roles of the family or primary caregiver should complement the student's ability to be involved. Families of students with more advanced skills can assume more of a support role in the group, encouraging their family member with a disability to express preferences and participate actively in decision making. Family members of students with more significant disabilities are often most attuned to their family member's specific preferences and can communicate his or her visions and preferred options for taking action.

Parents, siblings, and extended family can all make valuable contributions. In a recent study of student perspectives of family involvement in transition planning, students frequently cited brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, and grandparents as people on whom they would prefer to rely for long-term support in securing employment and housing (Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1995). Some students, such as Katie, do not have family to call upon, and it is especially important in those instances to call on long-term support from friends.

In Ryan's Action Group, his family was very involved from the beginning as the primary catalyst for visions and priorities. In addition to his parents and sister, his friends from school and church helped all group members "stand in Ryan's shoes" and see things from the perspective of a 17-year-old. In fact, Ryan's motivation to participate greatly increased because of participation in his Action Group meeting by his friends. He especially looks forward to the times when these friends come to his house for meetings, and he always wants to sit by them. Since the first meeting, Ryan has greatly extended his skills in expressing his opinions and preferences in an assertive manner. All group members have responded by asking for his opinions and making sure that any options discussed meet with his approval from the outset. His family has been able to encourage the same level of active participation in decision making throughout his daily and weekly routine.

Katie has led her Action Group from the start. She has worked with the facilitator to prepare for the meetings-setting agendas, inviting people to attend, establishing meeting times and places, and developing action plans. In many ways, the members of Katie's Action Group have created a network of support much like an extended family.

Facilitator Roles As stated previously, Group Action Planning can be characterized primarily as a process that promotes self-determination through 1) inviting support, 2) creating connections, 3) solving problems with fuel created by great expectations, and 4) affirming and celebrating progress. Action Groups work best when a facilitator is specifically designated to promote these four vital functions. Table 3 lists tips for effective facilitation.

The facilitator's role in inviting support is to enable the student to identify the people on whom he or she would most like to rely for support when creating and actualizing a vision for adult life. This task involves identifying key issues and people who can help with those issues, brainstorming about the best way to issue an invitation to join the Action Group, supporting the student (and family) in issuing invitations, and explaining their potential roles to the people being invited to the Action Group.

The facilitator's role related to social connectedness is to make sure that people feel comfortable with one another, ensure that each person experiences a sense of

Table 3. Tips for effective facilitation

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- Listen to the student with a disability and ensure that his or her message is heard by all group members.
 - If the student is not able to communicate assertively, watch for body language that indicates a desire to communicate or participate in decision making. Create a safe and supportive context for participation to be manifested.
 - Anticipate what the priority issues will be and identify key resources that can be helpful in addressing them.
 - Create a positive, upbeat, and socially alive atmosphere within the meetings.
 - Make sure that every participant is welcomed and perceives a sense of connection to the student, family, and to other group members.
 - Inject humor, laughter, and warmth into discussions. Remember that the goal of the meeting is action, and keep the discussion focused on moving through the steps of the problem-solving process. Do this in a way that is comfortable and refrain from putting pressure on or creating stress for other group members.
 - Encourage creative visions filled with great expectations of the future.
 - When inviting people to join the group, issue the invitation in a way that promotes the dignity of the student and family.
 - Make sure that the action plan is specific in terms of tasks to be accomplished, who is to assume responsibility, and the preferred timeline. Reach closure on issues and summarize to make sure that people understand.
 - In brainstorming, create an environment where creativity and divergent thinking can be expressed. Refrain from evaluating options as they are suggested.
 - Always emphasize the human side of communication and refrain from distancing one
 - self or taking a clinical orientation.
 - Create a comfortable pace for the meetings that is consistent with the family's cultural
 - style and tempo.
 - Affirm the progress that the student is making in demonstrating self-determination skills. Reinforce those skills and encourage others in the group to do the same.
 - Enjoy yourself. The more there is a genuine "joy quotient," the more the Action Group will be creating an atmosphere in which to best foster self-determination.

belonging and contribution, maintain an upbeat and energized atmosphere during the meetings, and see that participants experience a sense of connection with the student. Essentially, the facilitator's role is to ensure a vital and reciprocal social support atmosphere within the Action Group.

The third major role is to encourage the group to follow a creative and systematic problem-solving process. The steps we recommend for problem solving are outlined in Table 4. Although most traditional team meetings are constituted to make vital decisions affecting the lives of individuals with disabilities, too often these meetings are devoid of a creative and systematic problem-solving process (Turbiville, Turnbull, Garland, & Lee, in press). Given this history of typical team meetings, it becomes obvious that creative and systematic problem solving cannot be expected to happen automatically. Many professionals and families do not have a mastery of the problem-solving skills necessary for self-determination, and many students with disabilities do not know how to be problem solvers. Thus, in Action Groups students benefit from having a facilitator who generally guides the problem-solving process, empowering students to demonstrate the problem-solving skills that they are learning in their self-determination coursework. As students develop these skills, they naturally move into the role of leader. As students are increasingly able to lead their group, which involves identifying key issues, goals, and action plans, the facilitator's role becomes more of a support person to the leader, coordinating communication and action. In the initial and middle stages of development, the facilitator should model the skills necessary for problem solving and decision making.

Finally, facilitators have a key role in ensuring that Action Groups are characterized by the celebration of success. Both students and families have characterized a process of planning for the future as being highly stressful (Morningstar et al., 1995; Turnbull, Turnbull, Bronicki, Summers, & Roeder-Gordon, 1989). Thus, a key aspect of Action Groups becoming a responsive context for self-determination is the creation of opportunities for students to practice and refine self-determination skills while simultaneously minimizing the discomfort and maximizing the enjoyment associated

Table 4. Steps of the problem-solving process

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1. Identify a problem/issue and specify a desirable outcome. Assess the level of risk.
 2. Brainstorm options. Set a specific amount of time, and list as many ideas as possible. Do not explain or judge the ideas. Be silly, be outrageous-you never know what ideas will work or what they will inspire in others. Write down all of the ideas for later discussion.
 3. Evaluate options and weigh alternatives. Look at the advantages and disadvantages of each option. Identify potential obstacles and consequences. Remember that every decision has both positive and negative consequences.
 4. Assert preferences.
 5. Make and implement an action plan. Outline tasks, person(s) who will assume responsibility, and a timeline.
 6. Evaluate the outcome (and revise plan as necessary).
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with the process. Indeed, the more fun, the more group members will stay involved as part of the reliable alliance. Thus, the facilitator can take the lead to initiate celebratory activities. The role of celebration is discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

The facilitator of Ryan's Action Group, from the outset, enabled Ryan and his family to identify people to invite as group members. As the group progressed through its first two years, Ryan's participation became stronger. He became the host for the evening, enhancing the social connectedness among participants and sharing his dreams, preferences, and concerns about his school program and job possibilities. One of the particular roles of the facilitator was to highlight the success that Ryan was experiencing and to help all group members recognize the important contributions they were making to his evolving self-determination.

In Katie's group, the facilitator primarily supported Katie in her role as group leader :sharing her concerns and brainstorming alternatives for those concerns. Sometimes the facilitator served as a mediator between group members who had differing opinions, and at other times the facilitator primarily encouraged the participation of all members. As Katie was increasingly able to do these tasks herself, the facilitator was primarily present in a supportive role.

Group Members' Roles Every group member has the role of being a creative problem solver, namely, 1) supporting the student's self-determination by enhancing his or her motivation and skills and 2) participating in the hard work of creating desirable transition supports and services. This is accomplished on a month-by-month basis by implementing the "next steps" that are generated at each meeting. Whereas traditional team meetings set annual goals and objectives that typically are not expected to be implemented on an immediate basis, Action Groups determine "next steps" that are to be accomplished prior to the next meeting. The more specific, concrete, and doable each person's action and the sooner it must be taken and accounted for to the group, the better.

A specific responsibility related to problem solving is to record the major decisions that the Action Group makes and the specific "next steps" that each member agrees to carry out. The facilitator or a designee should take notes and prepare a simple "to-do list" to be sent to group members after each meeting, with a reminder of the time and place of the following meeting. The tasks on the "to-do list" are critical because the essence of Action Groups is *accomplishing tasks* that translate the student's visions into preferred and responsive supports and services.

Another specific responsibility that often needs to be designated to a particular group member is to serve as an advocate for the student's self-determination. One of the dangers

of group meetings is that there are a number of adults who may be accustomed to a fast-paced agenda, rapidly moving through the steps of problem solving. As a result, the student may be left out of the critical decision making process. The advocate's role is to ensure that the student has every possible opportunity to participate and clearly understands the contributions that others are making. This can involve providing explanations to the student or cautions to group members to slow down. Advocates can monitor the extent to which group members are keeping the student's interest as the focus of the discussion. This responsibility needs to be assumed by a person who is especially familiar with the student and has both the capacity and desire to communicate the student's preferences and interests.

Other creative roles that group members can assume include a "yaysayer" and a "naysayer." Especially when conflicts or controversial issues are being discussed, it may be important to have people who can specifically advocate a "why not" approach, as well as people who can bring up the "yes, but" issues. If these roles are implemented, it is helpful to rotate them so that certain individuals do not always fall into the routine of taking an extreme pro or con position.

Ryan's friends in the group were wonderful "yaysayers." When discussing school inclusion and options available, such as Ryan participating in the high school marching band or on the wrestling team, his friends consistently offered rationales for why Ryan should get to do what everyone else in the school had opportunities to do. They had a special knack for cutting through bureaucratic barriers and seeing possibilities, whereas some of the adults might just see the barriers. One friend commented that the Action Group could accomplish almost anything because Ryan had adult support coupled with his peers' creativity, inventiveness, and grassroots knowledge about how students make things happen for each other.

Due to Katie's difficulty in verbal communication, she was at risk of being left out or "spoken for" when the group began excitedly brainstorming and discussing ideas. In response to this risk, a special relationship developed between Katie and an independent living specialist named Diane. Diane worked with Katie on how to best present her ideas and opinions. In this way, Diane acted as Katie's advocate, always ensuring that other group members heard what Katie had to say.

CONDUCTING GROUP ACTION PLANNING

Because Group Action Planning is a process, implementation varies according to whether the Action Group is in a preliminary stage or if it has been ongoing for a significant period

of time. This variance is addressed by focusing on implementation issues associated with 1) initial planning, 2) the first meeting, 3) the life of the Action Group, and 4) celebrating success at each step of the way. These issues are discussed below.

Initial Planning

The catalyst for Group Action Planning, in Katie's situation, came from the demonstration project's paid staff who were interested in implementing this approach. Ryan's group was initiated by the two senior authors, who served in the role of facilitator and parent, respectively. They were not part of the demonstration project. Action groups can also be initiated by individuals with disabilities, family members, friends of the individual or family, or professionals who support them (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1996; Turnbull, Turnbull, & Blue-Banning, 1994). Regardless of who the catalyst is, one of the most critical first steps in getting started is to identify a facilitator.

The facilitator can meet with the student and others who are committed to starting an Action Group. Initial conversations need to focus generally on the student's visions for the future and the specific priorities that he or she would most like to address. Facilitators can be helpful in asking specific questions about employment, housing, postsecondary education, or other domains of future consideration (see Table 2). They can also brainstorm a broad array of options for students and family members who may not be aware of the full range of future possibilities.

As visions and preferences begin to be identified, the facilitator, student, and family can select people who would be most appropriate to invite to the first Action Group meeting (again, see Table 2). After these individuals are designated, another important decision would be to determine who will issue the invitation and how this will be done. The student may have both the motivation and skills necessary to invite support, or he or she may need various levels of assistance to carry out this initial task. Regardless of how inviting participants is done, students should have the opportunity to enhance their motivation and skill in reaching out to others, explaining the rationale for this process, and inviting participation in it.

Obviously, logistics for the first meeting need to be arranged, including location, time, and refreshments. Major consideration needs to be given to comfort and connection so that the Action Group can, from the outset, develop the social ambience that differs from traditional team meetings.

First Meeting

The first meeting is critical for setting the tone for the entire Group Action Planning process. Again, major emphasis needs to be given to social connectedness, an upbeat atmosphere, and energy for envisioning a preferred lifestyle and learning how to implement it. Rather

than the meeting being a serious and somber process, the students, family, and facilitator can work together to create a welcoming, energized, and active atmosphere. During this first meeting, envisioning the future is the priority focus. The student, if possible, can share his or her dreams in terms of preferred lifestyle options.

At the first meeting, Katie and her group members generated many ideas and action plans to help Katie realize her goals. Katie and her group also began to deal with critical issues at hand. One topic of immediate concern was guardianship, because one of Katie's service providers was vying to become Katie's guardian.

Some people have never had the opportunity to articulate a vision and may not be able to do so from the outset. Also, many cultural traditions focus on a strong present rather than future orientation. But most group members generally have an idea of the student's present preferences. Our experience suggests that visions grow in ever-increasing circles as the student's motivation and skills for self-determination are enhanced. Thus, it is possible for Action Groups to get started on one specific task (e.g., getting a part-time job, arranging for Supplemental Security Income [SSI] benefits, learning to use public transportation) while other, larger visions are incubating.

Whether Action Groups start with a student's specific preference or with a fully developed future vision, the first meeting needs to delineate one or two priority issues for the group's focus. Action Groups focus on manageable tasks one after another in successive approximation. Rather than trying to work on all preferences and needs simultaneously, a key for Group Action Planning is to explicate the specific next step that would act on the student's preferences and then to develop and implement an action plan to accomplish that next step. Once that task is completed, the Action Group proceeds to the next priority. The focus at the first meeting should be on the development of a blueprint for the Action Group with particular focus on gaining an understanding of how the student wants to live his or her life. From this vision, the first task of importance is identified. If there is time at the meeting (most meetings last 1-2 hours), the group can begin to formulate an action plan using creative problem solving to address the first task.

By the end of the meeting, the Action Group should have the issue of first consideration identified. As members consider that issue, they may want to recommend other people who might be invited to join the group. For example, if the first goal relates to participating more actively in community recreation and the student particularly enjoys sports, other people in the community who particularly enjoy sports might be asked to join the Action Group as well as someone from the City Parks and Recreation program. Membership should be flexible so that people with particular interest in and expertise on issues under consideration are invited to share their suggestions and resources.

Ryan's visions at the first meeting included participating more in the extracurricular activities at his school and having friends with whom he could hang out. That was one of the reasons why it was especially important to have friends as members of the Action Group. At the first meeting, members generated school activities that might be of particular interest to Ryan. It became obvious that the school's pep club was a natural as Ryan so much enjoys sports and also likes to be in an energized, rowdy atmosphere. Ryan and his family were clearly excited about these new possibilities.

From the outset, Katie was very clear about her future goals. She wanted to graduate from high school, live in her own apartment, have a job after high school, and be her own guardian. At the first meeting, Katie and her group members generated many ideas and action plans to help Katie realize her goals. Katie and her group also began to deal with critical issues at hand. One topic of immediate concern was guardianship because one of Katie's service providers was vying to become Katie's guardian.

Life of Group Action Planning

After the first meeting, the Action Group participants proceed through future meetings with successive action plan development and implementation. It is critical to realize that the actual Action Group meeting is the designated time for planning, but the designated time for implementation is the period *between* meetings. Thus, the goal of each meeting is to create an action plan with a "to-do list" of tasks that various group members will implement prior to the following meeting. If each member takes on one or two tasks, then a whole host of tasks can be accomplished within a relatively short period of time. Each meeting needs to begin with a review of the "to-do list" from the previous meeting, with each participant reporting on what he or she has accomplished. This kind of immediate accountability at each meeting supports the motivation of group members to accomplish their tasks and helps provide an individual and collective sense of group momentum. As the student perceives significant progress toward realizing visions, his or her motivation and skills related to self-determination are affirmed.

Generally, Action Groups move from one significant task to another. Translating visions into reality, particularly at the time of transition from high school to adult life, is a complex and time-consuming process. Some Action Groups that have created radical lifestyle change have taken 5 or 6 years for all necessary changes to occur (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1996).

One of the goals of Action Groups is to develop social connectedness and personal commitment so that members choose to stay together over long periods of time. In some sense, the Action Group can become almost an extended family, not only for the student but for all group members.

Celebrating Success Along the Way

In almost every family, work and celebration go hand in hand. Indeed, one of the key ingredients of Action Groups that is missing in many of the other efforts to support people with disabilities is even a modicum of celebration. Typically, students, families, and professionals address issues of future planning and self-determination in a somber and serious way always focusing on the tasks still not successfully achieved. In asking families and teachers to reflect on IEP conferences, a frequent reaction is a big sense of relief once the meeting is over (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Drudgery is probably not too harsh of a term to apply to the general demeanor of approaching transitional planning.

As an alternative, Group Action Planning is designed to generate significant action in accomplishing visions and then celebrating progress that is associated with that action. Emphasis is placed on enlivening the hard work of planning and implementation by adding as much celebration and spirit as possible. Thus, achieving and celebrating successes are the lifeblood of the Group Action Planning process.

At the end of 1 year, Ryan and his Action Planning Group had accomplished many things. After working on extracurricular involvement in the pep club at his junior high, the Action Group went on to address Ryan's greatest vision, which was to be a member of the school's wrestling team. That vision was accomplished and one of the highlights of Ryan's school career has been participating in a wrestling match. As time progressed and visions grew, Ryan then decided that he wanted to be fully included in the local high school. Although students in his community with his degree of disability had not experienced this extent of inclusion previously, the Action Group went to work over many months to help put these supports in place. Currently, Ryan is finishing his first semester in full inclusion. Biology is his favorite academic class, but the real highlight of the semester has been participating in the percussion section of the high school marching band. Ryan's family and teachers marvel at the improvement in his behavior as he has increasingly learned to express and act on his own preferences.

At the end of 1 year, Katie's life has changed tremendously. She graduated from high school with a standard diploma. She currently lives on her own with support from home care providers that she has hired. She is working to become her own guardian—a struggle in the courts for over 1 year now. She is also exploring employment options and working independently to build her communication and literacy skills through programs offered at the university. Katie is surrounded by many friends, including a boyfriend. She has become more assertive and is therefore able to communicate her needs and wishes to the various service providers in her life.

Considering Cultural Diversity in Group Action Planning

MacGugen (1991) emphasized the importance of reexamining how culture frames both the definition of self-determination and the process by which one strives to become self-determined. The typical definition of self-determination in the literature that primarily emphasizes personal autonomy is in many ways a "white, western, linear, and product oriented" (MacGugen, 1991, p. 6) concept that consequently needs to be culturally reframed to better fit minority students with disabilities and their families.

The following guidelines have been helpful to us in reframing the concept of self-determination and relating it to the Group Action Planning. First, it is important to consider the individual and family's cultural context, including level of acculturation, family composition, and community supports. Are the self-determination skills the student is learning congruent with his or her cultural values? Will these skills be appreciated as self-determination when expressed in a culturally relevant manner?

Second, the problem-solving focus of Group Action Planning may appear more linear than intended. Honoring how the family has successfully initiated positive change in the past is the best predictor of future success. What has worked? Who have been the key players? This process of discovering the unique problem-solving process of a given family may not be easy. It is important to reflect on the family's context and respond in a manner congruent with the family's values.

Finally, the self-determination skills acquired via this culturally relevant process must be considered in light of utility within the dominant culture. We concur with MacGugen that "minority students with disabilities like their parents and families, stand with one foot in their family-culture and another foot in the dominant culture" (MacGugen, 1991, p. 3). How can the individual and family successfully utilize these newly acquired skills in the larger social context while still acknowledging the validity of their familial-cultural context? While keeping one foot in two different contexts is necessary, we contend that negating the family-culture is not only detrimental for the student and family, but also significantly diminishes the learning that can occur for people from both dominant and minority contexts.

SUMMARY

We have found Group Action Planning to be an effective means of fostering self-determination and creating a responsive context, a network of ongoing support for the individual, family, and service providers. A summary of Group Action Planning is encapsulated by an Action Group member of another student, Steve, who participated in the demonstration project.

If I understand it right, . . . the whole intention behind the Action Group process ... is that people aren't doing this out of an obligation, or that this is their community service for the month, or anything. They go there [to the Action Group meetings] because it's fun, it's fun to sit down and talk about how to make things better For this person. You know, you're having something to eat, it's a casual situation, it's not a meeting where everybody's uptight. . . . It's more a discussion about the great things that Steve has achieved, and how they can work together to help each other in the following weeks. And they may not always have common interests with each other-that's, one way to have a group come together but they can disagree adamantly about philosophy or religion or really any of those heavy issues. But as long as they have a strong interest in Steve, and he cares about them, that seems to be what allows the group to continual) reinvent itself. And the family and Steve are always consistent, and usually a few other long-term, key people, but other people come in and out as . . . friendships change over time. And, so then, the group never fades.

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