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Evaluative Thinking: Using Results-Oriented Reasoning to Strengthen Collaboration

By Courtney L. Malloy, Janet S. Lee, and Stephanie W. Cawthon

In today's world, much of what used to be individual work has become collaborative. Moreover, complex change initiatives often require individuals within and across organizations to team up to set and achieve meaningful goals. Our role as researchers and evaluators is to offer support that can be used to strengthen the work of organizations and interdisciplinary teams. We focus on four broad categories:

1. identifying existing evidence in the field that can be used to inform the quality of a project,
2. gathering information from stakeholders to identify key needs in the field,
3. conducting formative and summative evaluation for programs and initiatives, and
4. offering technical assistance support regarding how to use data.

Our work with pepnet 2, in particular, has afforded us several lessons regarding the significance of evaluative thinking to collaborative endeavors. Evaluative

Photos courtesy of pepnet 2



thinking—a process that involves systematic results-oriented reasoning—is essential for collaborations to be successful. Evaluative thinking focuses individuals and their discussion on the outcomes that are expected from an endeavor, how those outcomes might be achieved, the research and/or evidence that informs results, and ongoing examination and reflection on data regarding the progress of the collaboration. (Patton, 2014).

When infused into the culture and activities of a collaboration, evaluative thinking propels individuals forward in the same direction and increases the likelihood of success down the road.

Lesson 1—Collaboration Alone is Insufficient

With terms like *cross-sectoral*, *public-private partnership*, *professional learning community*, *social network*, *interdisciplinary*, *multi-disciplinary*, *alliance*, *consortium*, and

collaborative increasingly widespread, it may be tempting to view endeavors undertaken through group cooperation as a panacea, the single way to effect complex change. Certainly, many of the persistent and intractable social problems are more likely to be solved by the collective action of key individuals with diverse perspectives.

Collaboration, however, is a means to an end, not the end itself. Simply bringing together people with common interests to work on a challenging initiative is not a failsafe approach. In fact, it is insufficient. Collaboration is more likely to be fruitful when team members are able to exercise evaluative thinking systematically about the change they want to achieve and properly ground efforts in evidence.

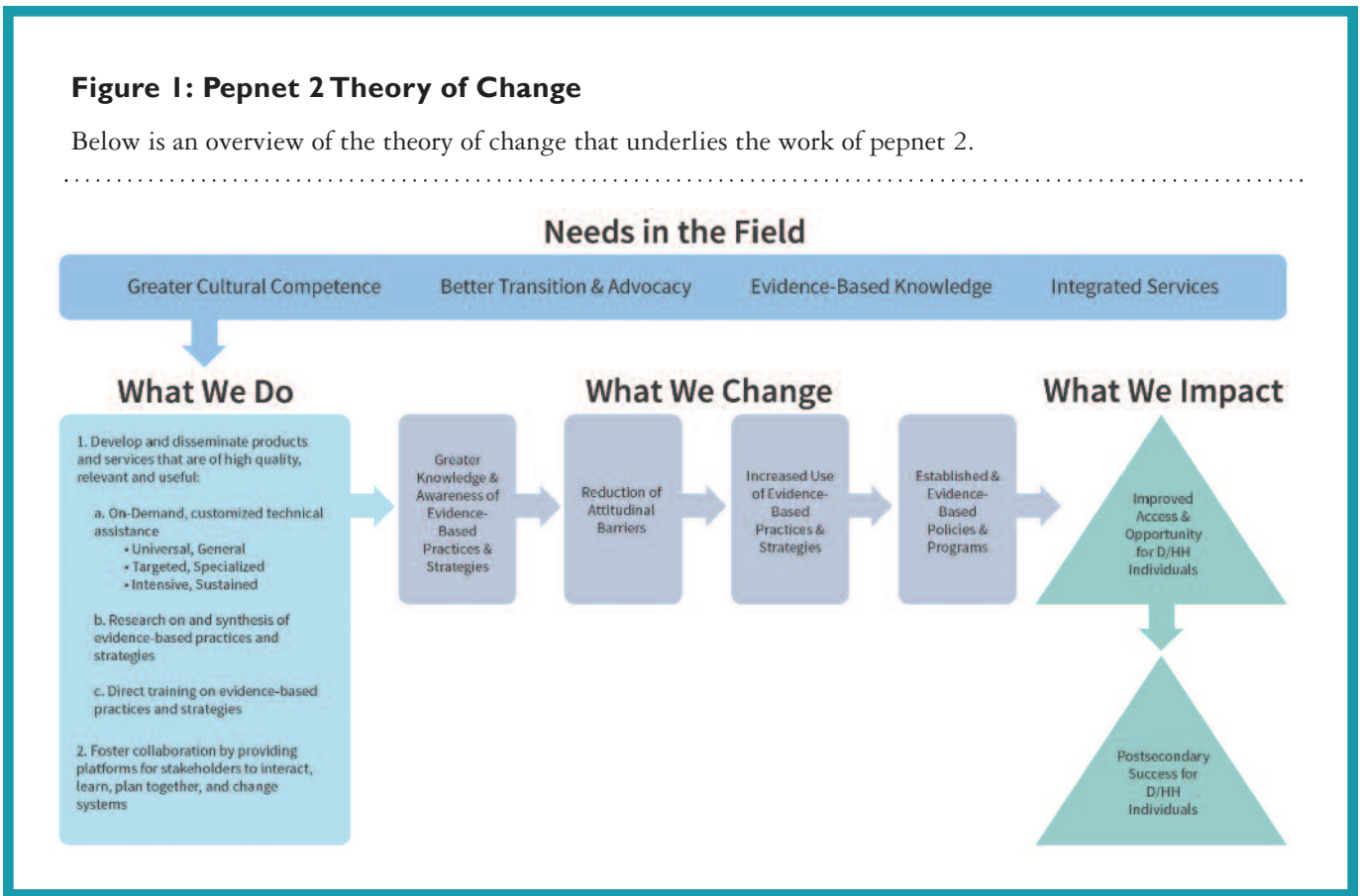
In our work, we have seen the benefits of evaluative thinking as a catalyst for progress towards complex problem solving. As teams begin to think analytically

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Figure 1: Pepnet 2 Theory of Change

Below is an overview of the theory of change that underlies the work of pepnet 2.



through their purpose and arrive at common goals, they generate momentum, enthusiasm, and greater commitment to work. Moreover, when teams have a plan that is rooted in evidence and includes indicators to monitor progress, they can begin the meaningful work that is required for change. By contrast, when teams fail to craft a coherent plan for moving forward that is grounded in systematic, results-oriented evaluative thinking, they often struggle to move beyond convening and toward collective action.

Lesson 2—Begin with a Theory of Change

A theory of change provides a useful starting point for effective collaboration. It explains the principles underlying an initiative and outlines how desired outcomes will be produced. This theory can come in various shapes and sizes, but it generally has three main components

(Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004):

- 1. Long-term and short-term outcomes**—The long-term goal for pepnet 2 is to improve access, opportunity, and postsecondary success for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. In order for these long-term changes to occur, short-term changes requiring new evidence-based practices, policies, and programs are required. (See Figure 1.)
- 2. Strategies**—In order to accomplish these short-term outcomes, pepnet 2 engages in several strategies and activities, including technical assistance, training, research, and convening.
- 3. Explicit assumptions**—Assumptions about why strategies will work should be explicit. The assumption underlying the work of

pepnet 2 is that numerous needs in the field should be addressed in order to achieve greater postsecondary success for deaf and hard of hearing individuals, including stronger evidence-based knowledge and tools, greater cultural competence, better transition and advocacy, and integrated services.

By focusing on select strategies that are driven by needs in the field, our assumption is that short-term outcomes (i.e., greater knowledge regarding effective transition) will lead to long-term outcomes (i.e., deaf students' success in the postsecondary environment).

Stakeholders who are engaged in collaborative change efforts often can identify the various strategies and activities that they hope to implement. However, without a theory of change,

the desired outcomes and assumptions underlying those strategies are not made explicit, and the connection between strategies and outcomes remains unclear. Taking the time to generate a theory of change ensures a chain of reasoning grounding the new initiative and promotes a shared understanding of how to move forward. Moreover, the theory can be used to explain to others what the collaboration is about and provide the foundation to determine how to measure its progress.

When crafting a theory of change, it is often useful to begin with all stakeholders at the table and address the following questions: *What is the group's desired long-term change? What will look different after the group's strategies have been implemented?* After addressing these questions, teams should work to identify the short-term changes required to accomplish the long-term goal. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2004), an organization dedicated to helping disadvantaged children in the United States, provides a practical guide for structuring theories of change and suggests three main types of outcomes:

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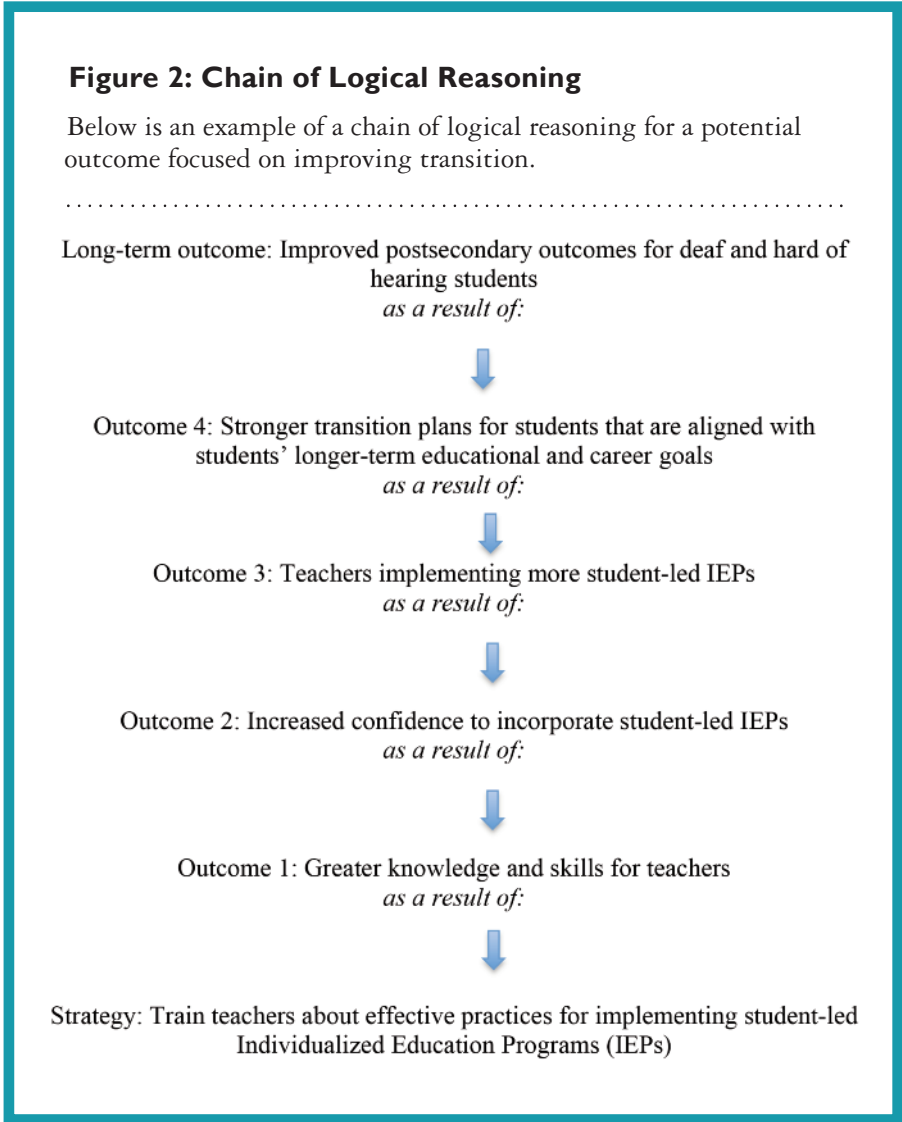
1. **Impact**—Changes in people’s lives, including knowledge, skills, behaviors, health, or conditions for communities.
2. **Influence**—Changes in institutions, service systems, community norms, partnerships, policies, or regulations.
3. **Leverage**—Changes in public or private funding and resource allocation.

Once the short- and long-term outcomes are mapped out, strategies and activities can be generated that are likely to lead to the change envisioned. As

strategies are clarified and connected to outcomes, a chain of logical reasoning should begin to emerge. (See Figure 2.)

Lesson 3—Ground Discussion in Research and Evidence

Ideally, a theory of change includes a clear articulation of assumptions about why the proposed activities will lead to the desired short- and long-term outcomes. Without a critical look at the available research and evidence base, decisions about planned strategies and activities may be based on intuition and individual experiences or even on political demands. Furthermore,



collaborative teams may be drawing individual knowledge from different perspectives, with resulting divergent assumptions about why particular strategies may or may not be effective. Looking to the available research and evidence is thus an important component in developing a shared understanding of the rationale for choosing activities.

The first step to reviewing the existing literature is to identify the evidence that supports the needs of the project. There are many different kinds of evidence that may be integrated into a rationale that explains why proposed strategies and activities will lead to anticipated short- and long-term outcomes. When developing pepnet 2's theory of change, our goal was to provide both theoretical perspectives and data. We drew from theoretical perspectives in the fields of human development, cultural psychology, and deaf education. We asked what factors were important in understanding potential barriers or supports for deaf and hard of hearing individuals in achieving their educational, work, and personal goals. Data and empirical evidence were important. In our pepnet 2 work, we synthesized existing literature on key topics, such as the effectiveness of accommodations, and we gathered information from the field to answer questions that the extant research literature could not provide.

From a theoretical perspective, the pepnet 2 Research and Evidence Synthesis team felt it was important to include cultural competency frameworks in considering access and options for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. This perspective focuses attention on building the skills and attitudes of professionals that serve individuals who are deaf or hard of



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hearing, and cultural competency is a part of creating an open and positive learning or work environment. Synthesis of current data was important in laying the foundation for decisions about future activities or programs. More specifically, we drew upon the current demographic data available about current high school completion, college enrollment, postsecondary persistence, and employment for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Significant demographic shifts over the last 10 years have occurred, and updating was essential.

A second example of where evidence played a role in the development of the theory of change was in the articulation of the potential short-term outcomes that would result from the proposed activities. For example, research shows that self-determination is predictive of stronger postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities (Konrad & Test, 2004). Although this research was not conducted with deaf or hard of hearing students, pepnet 2 made the

assumption that fostering students to lead IEPs might have similar results for our students. When requested, pepnet 2's Research and Evidence Synthesis team provided this kind of information to collaborative teams throughout the organization.

Lesson 4—Monitor the Progress

Ongoing reflection is critical. This allows collaborators to refine strategies and to measure outcomes to determine effectiveness. A well-defined theory of change should suggest key indicators that can be used for monitoring and evaluating the collaboration.

For example, if teachers are trained to effectively implement student-led IEPs, then it follows that the two primary indicators of progress might be the number of trainings conducted and the number of teachers trained. If there is an insufficient number of trainings or if attendance at trainings is low, it is unlikely that the changes articulated in the theory would occur. However, if those indicators were measured frequently and reviewed, stakeholders could examine the data and intervene appropriately before the end of the initiative.

It is not sufficient to only examine data related to the strategies and activities in an initiative; an

examination of the outcomes is also warranted to determine whether the collaborative endeavor has produced the intended changes. Potential indicators in the example above might include pre- and post-measures of the following outcomes: knowledge about and confidence in the IEP process of students and teachers, the number of student-led IEPs that are taking place, and the number of IEPs with transition plans that are aligned to students' longer-term educational and career goals.

Putting It Together

Taken together, these lessons illustrate how transparency in planning activities, naming assumptions behind their effectiveness, and monitoring outcomes can assist collaborative teams in the development and implementation of activities. Preparing individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing for future education and work opportunities often involves the collaboration of people or

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agencies with multiple perspectives, diverse training, and a broad range of experiences. A collaborative model in effective program and service development therefore requires an anchor that represents the shared beliefs and assumptions about what is being done, why, and to what end. This is the

purpose of devising or adopting an underlying theory of change and combining it with evaluative thinking for the collaboration. Our work with pepnet 2 represents an evolving model that can provide a platform for those seeking to engage in meaningful discussion and collaborative activities.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants, Toddlers and Their Families: Collaboration and Leadership Interdisciplinary Graduate Certificate



The Infants, Toddlers and Their Families certificate program is an 18-credit program with courses offered primarily online. This program provides professionals from a wide range of disciplines with current evidence-based knowledge and skills for working with families and their very young children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

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