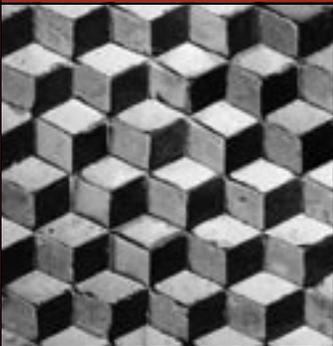




THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

ROUNDTABLE ON COMMUNITY CHANGE



THEORY OF CHANGE

AS A TOOL FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

A Report on Early Experiences

OCTOBER 2004

Andrea A. Anderson, PhD



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Introduction and Case Study Background

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a new methodology for planning community-based initiatives—the Theory of Change (TOC) approach. Through lessons learned from a case study of how TOC was applied during the planning phase of The Wallace Foundation (Foundation)¹ Parents and Communities for Kids (PACK) initiative, the utility of this technique and the challenges involved in employing it are illustrated. The case study was designed to highlight lessons that will be of most interest to program planners, evaluators, and funders who are interested in applying this method to their work.

SECTION ONE of the paper begins with a review of the role of the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change (Roundtable)² in developing training and research around the TOC approach to planning and evaluation. It reviews the initial work done to apply TOC to evaluation, and presents the latest Roundtable thinking on how TOC can be used to provoke clear thinking about strategic planning for new initiatives.

SECTION TWO introduces the PACK initiative and explains how the Foundation envisioned using the TOC approach to enhance the plans of planning grantees.

SECTION THREE explains the components of a TOC through a review of the theory created by one of the PACK sites. This section of the paper is designed to familiarize the reader with the TOC process and jargon so that the observations and lessons learned presented in subsequent sections are more readily understood.

In **SECTION FOUR**, highlights from each site’s planning process are presented, with an eye toward the challenges faced by the sites as they used TOC to develop their PACK grant proposals, and the insights that the TOC process afforded. Elements of each site’s TOC are highlighted in this section to set the stage for a discussion of lessons learned about how useful TOC is as a planning tool.

SECTION FIVE addresses the lessons learned from this demonstration of how TOC was used as a planning tool and poses questions that will be addressed as the field continues to refine its approach to training and technical assistance around the TOC approach.

¹ This project was made possible by a grant from The Wallace Foundation.

² The Roundtable worked in partnership with consultants from ActKnowledge to develop training and technical assistance materials for the Foundation and their PACK grantees. For further information about ActKnowledge, contact Helene Clark at www.actknowledge.org.

SECTION ONE:

The Theory of Change Approach

Community-based change initiatives (CCIs)—be they programs aimed at a special population or large-scale interventions designed to bring about community-wide changes—are increasingly being used by foundations as vehicles to promote their missions. These initiatives often have ambitious goals, and so planning specific on-the-ground strategies to meet those goals is difficult. Likewise, the task of planning and carrying out evaluation research that can inform practice and surface broader lessons for the field in general is a challenge. The Roundtable has been particularly intrigued by the difficult task of evaluating complex community initiatives and has taken steps to move the field forward in creating new ways to think about this problem.

The Roundtable’s early work in evaluation culminated in a 1995 publication, *New Approaches to Evaluating Comprehensive Community Initiatives*. In that book, Carol Weiss, a member of the Roundtable’s steering committee on evaluation, hypothesized that a key reason complex programs are so difficult to evaluate is that the assumptions that inspire them are poorly articulated. She argued that stakeholders of complex community initiatives typically are unclear about how the change process will unfold and therefore place little attention on the early and midterm changes that need to happen in order for a longer-term goal to be reached. The lack of clarity about the “ministeps” that must be taken to reach a long-term outcome not only makes the task of evaluating a complex initiative challenging, but reduces the likelihood that all of the important factors related to the long term goal will be addressed.

Weiss popularized the term *theory of change* as a way to describe the set of assumptions that explain both the ministeps that lead to the long-term goal of interest and the connections between program activities and outcomes that occur at each step of the way. She challenged designers of complex community-based initiatives to be specific about the theories of change guiding their work and suggested that doing so would improve their overall evaluation plans and would strengthen their ability to claim credit for outcomes that were predicted in their theory. She called for the use of an approach that at first blush seems like common sense: lay out the sequence of outcomes that are expected to occur as the result of an intervention, and plan an evaluation strategy around tracking whether these expected outcomes are actually produced. Her stature in the field and the apparent promise of this idea motivated a number of foundations to support the use of this technique—later termed the *theory of change approach*—in

the evaluations of early CCI efforts.³ As a result of the popularity of the approach, many in the field have turned to the Roundtable to better understand how to apply TOC techniques to their own work.

As defined by the Roundtable,⁴ the TOC process hinges on defining all of the necessary and sufficient preconditions required to bring about a given long-term outcome. In a departure from Weiss, the Roundtable recommends using a technique called “backward mapping” that requires planners to think in backward steps from the long-term goal to the intermediate and then early-term changes that would be required to cause the desired change. At each step, the outcomes produced are considered to be preconditions for the stage that follows. In other words, the preconditions for the long-term outcome occur in the intermediate stage of change, and the preconditions for the intermediate outcomes occur in the early stages.⁵ This set of connected outcomes is depicted in a map known as an *outcomes framework*, which is a graphic representation of the change process as it is understood by the planners and the skeleton around which the other elements of the theory are developed.

During the process of creating the outcomes framework, participants are required to articulate as many of their assumptions about the change process as they can so that these can be examined and even tested to determine if any key assumptions are hard to support (or even false). There are typically three important types of assumptions to consider: (a) assertions about the connections among long-term, intermediate, and early outcomes on the map; (b) substantiation for the claim that all of the important preconditions for success have been identified; and (c) justifications supporting the links between program activities and the outcomes they are expected to produce. A fourth type of assumption that outlines the contextual or environmental factors that will support or hinder progress toward the realization of outcomes in the outcomes framework is often an additional important factor in illustrating the complete TOC.

³ The Annie E. Casey Foundation was an early supporter of Weiss’s approach, applying her insights about theories of change in its evaluations of the Jobs Initiative and the Rebuilding Communities Initiative. A number of national foundations have also supported the application of this approach in their work, including the Rockefeller Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

⁴ A number of researchers, planners, and practitioners and technical assistance providers use the terms *logic model* or *outcomes framework* to denote their understanding of the relationship between social interventions and the changes in early, intermediate, and longer-term outcomes. Likewise, *backward mapping* and *outcomes-based planning* are terms that have been used to describe the process of doing this work. TOC borrows from and builds on those approaches to planning.

⁵ While it is instructive to think of this as a three-step process leading to links among long-term, intermediate, and early points in the change process, typically the backward mapping approach elicits more than three levels of change that are then grouped into the early, intermediate, and long-term categories.

	<p>The TOC approach to planning is designed to encourage very clearly defined outcomes at every step of the change process. Users are required to specify a number of details about the nature of the desired change—including specifics about the target population, the amount of change required to signal success, and the time frame over which such change is expected to occur. This attention to detail often helps both funders and grantees reassess the feasibility of reaching goals that may have initially been vaguely defined and, in the end, promotes the development of reasonable long-term outcome targets that are acceptable to all parties.</p>
<p>THE ROUNDTABLE AND ACTKNOWLEDGE DEVELOP TOC TRAINING TOOLS</p>	<p>The task of creating a TOC for a community-based initiative requires a significant amount of work—particularly in the cases where there is little empirical research to draw on to craft plausible change pathways related to the stated goal. While Carol Weiss and others have extolled the virtues of articulating theories of change, little exists in the way of a methodology for applying the approach to real-world situations. In response to this gap, the Roundtable took on the task of developing tools that could be used with program stakeholders to develop theories of change, spending a year working on training materials designed to teach people ways to elicit theories of change for the purposes of program planning. In partnership with consultants from ActKnowledge,⁶ a series of workshops were given during 2000–2001 to introduce the TOC approach to planning to audiences made up of community-based program staff, funders, and technical assistance providers. These workshops allowed the Roundtable to try a variety of approaches to teaching the TOC method, and to refine a set of tools that could be used by program stakeholders to develop theories of change on their own.</p>
<p>EXPLORING THE TOC METHOD WITH PACK PLANNING GRANTEES</p>	<p>By the spring of 2001 the Roundtable was ready to test the effectiveness of its TOC training tools with stakeholders of an actual initiative. The Roundtable hoped that using the tools with planners who were developing a new intervention would show how well the materials communicated the key steps in the theory development process. It was also expected that the participants in the pilot test of the approach would produce strengthened program plans.</p> <p>The Roundtable welcomed the opportunity to work with the Foundation to learn about how TOC would work as a planning tool at the early stages of their first large community-change initiative—Parents and Communities for Kids (PACK). This seemed like an ideal opportunity for learning on both sides, as the Foundation was eager to apply the rigor of the TOC planning process to the development of PACK plans and to contribute to the field’s awareness and understanding of the approach. As a result of this mutual interest in learning from the PACK grantees’ experiences, the Foundation and the Roundtable developed a research plan designed to critically observe the TOC process throughout</p>
	<p>⁶ With the generous support of several foundations: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Hewlett Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Coalition for Community Foundations for Youth, and the Hawaii Community Foundation.</p>

the planning period. The project was designed to generate lessons about three key issues: (a) the advantages of using TOC as a planning tool; (b) the challenges encountered while using the TOC approach to planning; and (c) ways to make the Roundtable's training materials more useful.

While all of the planning grantees were exposed to the TOC training sessions and had access to the technical assistance made available by ActKnowledge, just three of the Foundation's twelve planning grantees were chosen as a sample for the study of the planning process. The three sites represent the range of organizations that had planning grants for the PACK initiative:⁷

- > **The Elm Harbor team** serves the region surrounding a midsize East Coast city. This team is made up of two local foundations that typically support local education and youth development programs.
- > **The Blackstone team**, located in a large East Coast city, was made up of representatives from a number of major cultural institutions—including a library, children's museum, botanical garden, art museum, zoo, and park. It formed to think collectively about how to reach out to members of the ethnically diverse neighborhoods in their backyards to promote an increase in the utilization of the resources they had to offer. The group had little experience planning interventions for families and youth, and no prior experience working together as a team before working on the PACK grant proposal.
- > **The Palmdale team** was composed of staff from a very highly regarded United Way based in a mid-sized West Coast city. This team has been nationally recognized for the quality of its programming for youth through collaborations with the local parks and recreation department as well as the libraries and public school system. It came to the planning process with a wealth of experience planning community-wide interventions.

In the next section of the paper, the PACK initiative is briefly described and the Foundation's expectations about the added value of the TOC approach are explored.

⁷ For reporting purposes, the identities of the three study sites have been disguised. Throughout the report, pseudonyms are used to protect their anonymity.

SECTION TWO:

The Wallace Foundation

PACK Initiative Summary of the Framework

In the spring of 2001, The Wallace Foundation launched an initiative designed to improve learning outcomes for children through activities outside of the traditional school day and to promote learning as a core community value.⁸ This initiative, known as Parents and Communities for Kids (PACK), grew out of the Foundation's experiences as a major funder of libraries, youth development, after-school programs, and family literacy programs. According to the program description, the underlying assumption guiding PACK is that:

Schools cannot educate children by themselves. The supports that community assets provide, and the role that parents and families play are critical to children's learning and success.⁹

Twelve organizations from across the country received six-month planning grants of \$75,000 to develop strategies designed to improve informal learning opportunities and supports for children between the ages of six and ten. These communities were instructed to develop plans that met the following criteria:

- > **The strategies employed should improve the supply of quality out-of-school learning opportunities for children and families.**
- > **They should increase the demand for and participation in such opportunities.**
- > **This increase in participation should be used to help children learn and prepare for successful adulthood.¹⁰**

In addition to these general guidelines, the Foundation had a number of other important expectations of the programs they would ultimately fund:¹¹

- > **The programs were expected to emphasize strategy and focus to use existing resources effectively.** "It is not the goal of this initiative to fund massive new programs; rather, it will support local efforts to deploy existing resources effectively to reach target audiences and build sustainable supports for learning."
- > **The programs were required to place an emphasis on parents as both supporters and suppliers of their children's learning.** "Research shows major payoffs for

⁸ Wallace Foundation, 2001, PACK program description, 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid 1–2.

**USING TOC AS A
PLANNING TOOL
FOR PACK: THE
QUEST FOR
ACCOUNTABILITY**

children’s learning when parents are highly engaged. Parents, in the midst of overwhelmingly busy lives, are looking for assistance in educating their children successfully. Community institutions must find new ways of partnering with parents and of supporting their interest in helping their children to learn.”

- > **The Foundation anticipated that the programs would place an emphasis on making community resources family friendly and learning friendly.** “Many after-school programs, cultural institutions, and youth-serving organizations do far less than they could to support families as active participants or to incorporate learning opportunities into their mission, programs, and services. The time is right to enrich the learning environment and strengthen the family appeal of cultural and community institutions.”

As experienced funders and program designers, the Foundation staff knew that designing a new community-based initiative would require rigorous planning and clear thinking. The Foundation also knew that it was critically important for sites to have a tool that would help them weigh strategic options against the ability to generate the stated goals for families, communities, and children. They turned to the theory of change approach as a mechanism to promote their grantees’ ability to define outcomes that they would be able to hold themselves responsible to produce, given their available resources.

The Foundation’s understanding of the value of TOC was a clear motivation for encouraging their grantees to use this approach to articulate the types of outcomes that would be produced at the child, family, and community levels of analysis. Accountability is highly valued by the Foundation, and it was hoped that clear thinking and communication about the specific types of changes that could be expected at each level of analysis would help manage expectations and promote clearer lines of accountability for both the Foundation and each grantee. Furthermore, given the Foundation’s responsibility to the field to draw broad lessons from the experiences of its grantees, it became critically important to be able to document the mechanisms through which the funded strategies successfully produced improvements in informal learning for children, changes in community capacity, and changes in capacities among parents. Each of these aspects of accountability reinforced the Foundation’s interest in applying the TOC approach to planning the PACK local initiatives.

The Foundation hoped that their own nascent set of assumptions related to what it called “informal learning” could be used as a point of departure for developing local theories of change. Under different circumstances, the guidelines outlined in the previous section would have been most helpful to the local planning teams. Given the requirements of the TOC approach at the site level, however, a much richer foundation-level TOC should have been developed before site-level planning was begun. Therefore, on at least one important measure, the

Foundation failed its own test of accountability by not mirroring the level of specificity about the change process that they required the sites to develop.

While staff at the Foundation did not use the TOC approach to develop a foundation-level TOC for the PACK initiative, some preliminary thought was given to what the likely preconditions for informal learning would be in any given community. These preliminary ideas are summarized in Figure 1. This graphic representation of the Foundation's early thinking was presented as a reflection of the Foundation's "action framework" during a TOC training session attended by the planning grantees. At that time, neither the Foundation nor the Roundtable anticipated how much the lack of clarity in the Foundation's thinking would impact the sites' ability to develop theories that meshed with the Foundation's goals.

Had the Foundation worked through a TOC process before commissioning proposals from the planning grantees, they would have been forced to develop a clearer, more informed definition of their long-term goal. The Foundation would also have come up against the dearth of empirical or descriptive research in the field related to informal learning, and may have anticipated the conceptual difficulties their grantees would have in developing change pathways related to attaining this goal. Thus, by not insisting that the Foundation take on the TOC process before sites began their work, the Roundtable missed the mark on being fully accountable as purveyors of the TOC process.

The Roundtable and the Foundation had much to learn from using the TOC approach as a planning tool for the PACK initiative. The next sections of the paper explain the elements of a TOC in detail by highlighting excerpts of the Elm Harbor proposal. Following this, a review of all three case study sites' experiences with the TOC approach is presented. Lessons learned are discussed in the final section of the report.

INITIAL ACTION FRAMEWORK: COMMUNITY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES PROJECT*

This figure was developed by staff at The Wallace Foundation, April 2001.

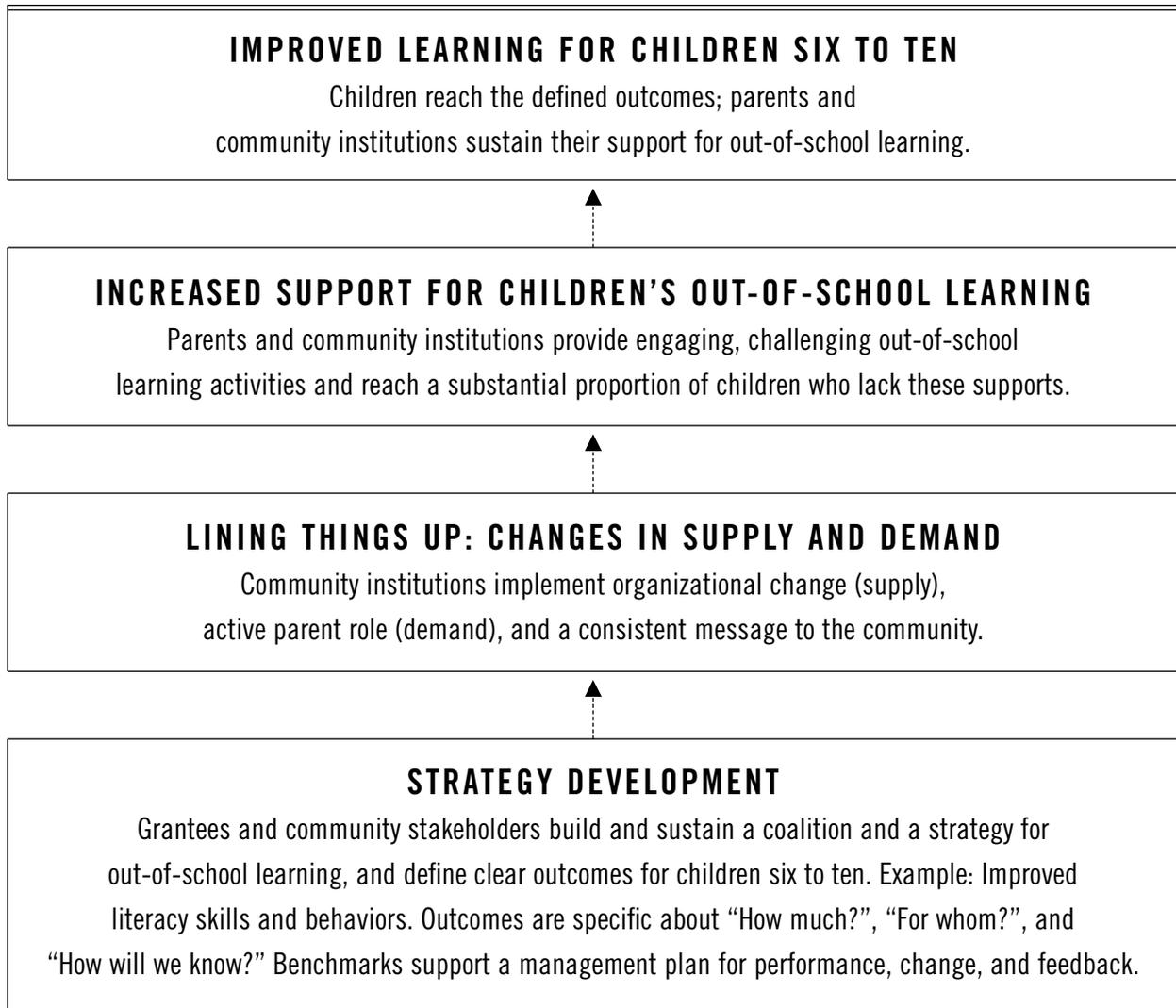


Figure 1

* "Community Learning Opportunities Project" was the original, internal name for the PACK initiative.

SECTION THREE:

Illustrating the Components of a Theory of Change with an Example from PACK: Taking a Look at Elm Harbor’s TOC

ELM HARBOR’S LONG-TERM OUTCOME AND OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

Each of the PACK grantees was encouraged to use the TOC approach to help them think through the development of strategies to improve informal learning. This section of the paper examines one of the theories submitted as part of a PACK proposal in order to highlight the elements of a TOC and provide an example that can serve as a reference point throughout the rest of the paper. The theory that is presented below was chosen because it is a clear example of how the TOC concept can be applied to a new initiative.

The Elm Harbor team defined their desired long-term goal simply as *improved learning for children and families*. This definition of the long-term outcome suggests that changes were anticipated for both children and families, yet the statements that were used to operationalize the long-term outcome are related only to changes in the children in their target area. Elm Harbor identified six important dimensions of *improved learning for children*:

- > **Children in target area learn critical thinking skills.**
- > **Children learn about and appreciate diverse cultures.**
- > **Children develop a joy of learning and curiosity about the world.**
- > **Children and parents see a wide range of activities as learning opportunities.**
- > **Children become good citizens and engage in pro-social behavior.**
- > **Children develop strong communication and social development skills.**

This view of the long-term outcome would appear to conflict with the range of outcomes specified in the PACK planning guidelines—the Foundation clearly expected each site to propose long-term changes at the child, family, and community levels of analysis. A review of the Elm Harbor TOC shows, however, that the changes to families’ capacities to promote learning and to the community’s capacity to promote informal learning required by the Foundation in the guidelines occur in the TOC as preconditions to these long-term goals. The Elm Harbor team articulated four preconditions that would be necessary to bring about the long-range changes in *informal learning for children*:

- > **Families increase participation in learning activities at home and outside the home.**
- > **Parents and caregivers remain engaged and involved in their children’s learning during the elementary school years.**

- > **Children enjoy learning activities outside of school and stay engaged in family learning.**
- > **The community values, encourages, and supports family learning.**

Figure 2 depicts the outcomes framework for the Elm Harbor initiative. This outcomes framework is a good model because it succinctly represents the relationship between changes at the family and community levels and changes for children in the targeted area. Unlike many of the maps generated by users of the TOC process, this one is relatively concise—each box summarizes a set of related outcomes that jointly represent attainment of a particular precondition for success. Most often, theories of change depict far more complex pathways of change, so in this regard the Elm Harbor example is not typical. For the purposes of illustrating the components of theories of change, however, this map illustrates quite clearly the relationship between the long-term goal and the intermediate and early changes that are required to bring it about.

ELM HARBOR'S ASSUMPTIONS

The second component of a TOC is the set of assumptions that explain the underlying logic of what has been depicted in the outcomes framework map. These assumptions explain the connections between outcomes in the pathway, and why the outcomes that are depicted are the complete set of necessary and sufficient preconditions required to bring about the targeted outcome. Later, assumptions are added that explain the connection between planned interventions and the expected outcomes.

Taken together, the assumptions in a TOC should tell the story about how and why planners expect change to occur as depicted in the outcomes framework. As an example of the explanatory power assumptions, the following excerpt was taken from Elm Harbor's TOC. This assumption explains the connection the Elm Harbor team makes between the "community values and supports family learning" box and the "improved learning for children and families" box in their outcomes framework:

Initial and continued community support for family learning will, over time, translate into community-wide values that consistently reinforce family learning—creating a community-wide "culture of learning" in our region. We assume, based on the enthusiastic response and level of investment by both parents and organizations to the collaborative effort of the planning process, that continued collaboration and support for family learning as PACK expands will lead to an increase in the investment of current participants and attract new participants. In addition, we assume that realization of the collectively designed institutional changes in welcoming practices and program improvements will contribute to greater community support for family learning.

In many cases assumptions draw on theory from academic research. Since there was not much in the way of academic theory for the Elm Harbor team to use to

ELM HARBOR OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

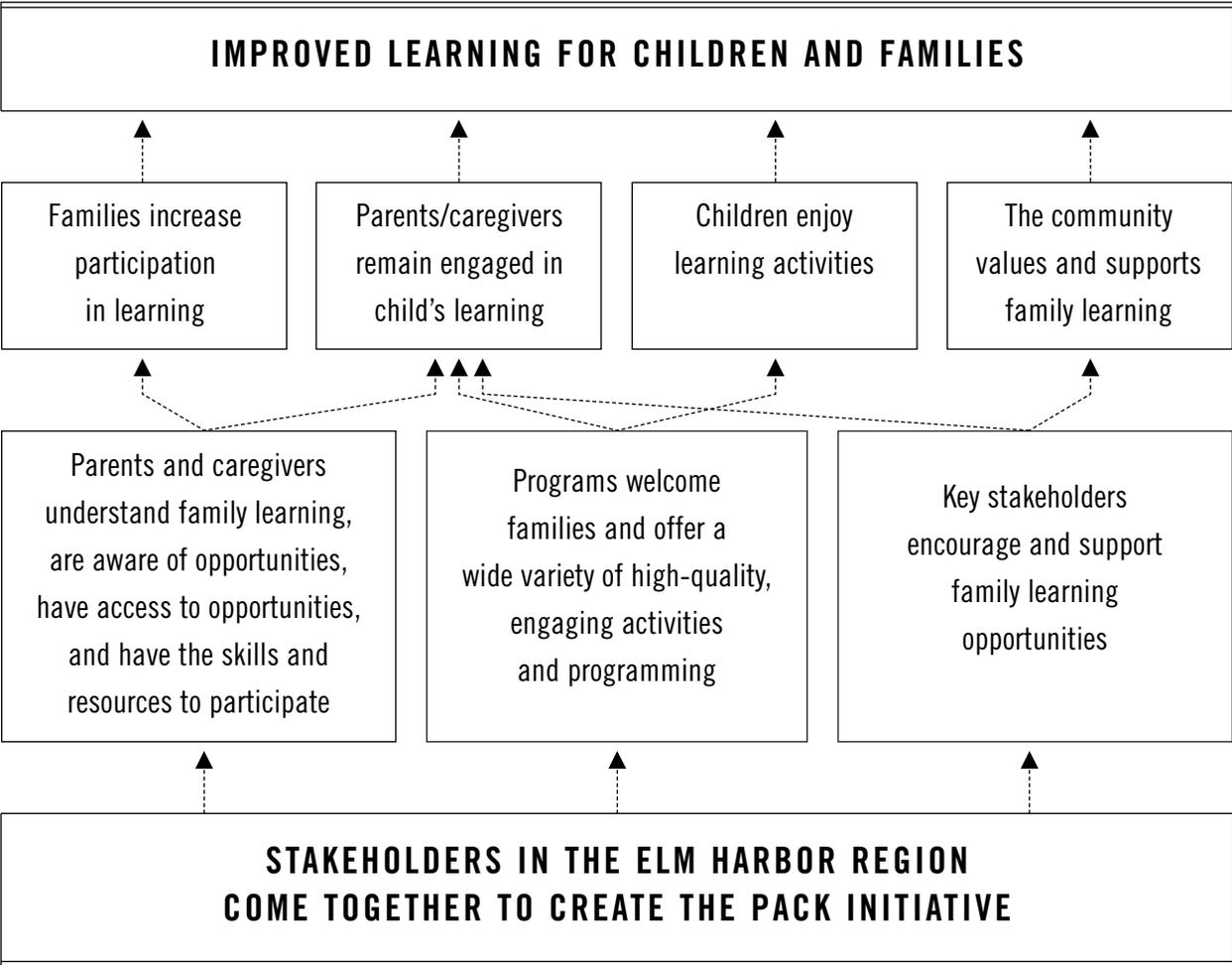


Figure 2

**ELM HARBOR'S
PROGRAMMATIC
STRATEGIES**

substantiate the predicted connections in their change pathway, the team members grounded their assumptions in locally generated empirical evidence as much as possible. Throughout the discussion of assumptions, the Elm Harbor team blended their own insights with data collected during the planning stage from parents and other stakeholders. This allowed them to test some assumptions while there was still time to change their plans if they had been proven to be off-base.

The third element of a TOC has to do with the strategies that will be put in place to bring about each outcome in the outcomes framework. As previously explained, the TOC approach focuses first on identifying all of the necessary and sufficient preconditions for reaching a long-term goal. Only after these conditions have been identified and laid out in a change pathway can the appropriate actions be developed to bring them about.

The Elm Harbor TOC provides a good example of how more than one strategy can be proposed to bring about a single outcome in the outcomes framework. For example, Elm Harbor planned a number of activities designed to bring about the outcome “Families increase participation in learning.” The planned strategies include the following:¹²

- > **PACK develops and disseminates a family tool kit** that provides information on programs, discount coupons, free mailers for receiving more information, and ideas for home-based family learning activities.
- > **PACK delivers family workshops** that introduce the tool kit and teach families fun learning activities they can do at home.
- > **PACK initiates a social marketing campaign** designed to deliver the right message using the right messengers and the right vehicles at the right time, combining community organizing techniques and traditional marketing methods.

As a general rule, the TOC approach requires that actions are designed after the outcomes framework and guiding assumptions have been clearly established. In most cases, the discipline imposed by this approach to selecting strategies makes planners aware of a wider variety of places to intervene than would have otherwise been apparent. Unlike other approaches to planning, the outcomes depicted in the outcomes framework drive the choice of strategy as opposed to the other way around. Each activity in a TOC must be directly linked to a required outcome and must not conflict with the assumptions that have been articulated.

¹² This is an illustrative subset of what the Elm Harbor team planned to implement to bring about this outcome.

**ELM HARBOR'S
INDICATORS OF
SUCCESS**

The final element in the TOC is the list of indicators that will be used to track progress toward outcomes in the pathway. For each outcome, one or more measurable indicators are defined, with a focus on specifying the signals of how the initiative will be declared a success. These details help the user communicate in very specific ways how much change, how many people, and what time frame will be used as measures of a successful outcome. Thus, the TOC-defined indicators go beyond predicting an increase in something good or a decrease in something undesirable, and drill down to a level of detail that will be meaningful to the program stakeholders as benchmarks of progress.

In the example from Elm Harbor, the indicator for one of the early outcomes related to changes that parents must make is presented to illustrate how these details work together to create a meaningful way to know whether the expected change occurs:

OUTCOME: Parents/caregivers understand the importance of family learning.¹³

INDICATOR: As of January 2004, 75 percent of parents/caregivers in the target area report in a telephone survey that learning in the home is *extremely important*. We assume baseline in this population is 68 percent and will collect target area-specific data to confirm.

This example illustrates each of the elements of a TOC-defined indicator. The target *timeline* for these changes to take place, January 2004, means that the planners do not expect to see this change in parent attitudes until the initiative has been on the ground for two years. The defined *population* for this indicator is broad because PACK expects the initiative to have an impact on all of the parents and caregivers in their targeted region. Had PACK planned to implement targeted programs rather than community-wide interventions, it would have been more appropriate to define a smaller population which focused on only the participants in the sponsored programs.

The *threshold* of change in this example is a rating of “extremely important” out of five possible responses on a Likert-scaled telephone survey of parents in the area. The percentage of parents/caregivers who respond this way is expected to change slightly, from 68 percent to 75 percent in the two-year period. The team assumes a relatively high level of awareness at the outset of the initiative and will use a telephone survey to verify this assumption.

¹³ This is just one of the early parent-level outcomes mentioned in the outcomes framework.

**SUMMARY OF THE
ELEMENTS OF A
THEORY OF CHANGE**

We have reviewed each of the elements of a TOC by looking at an example taken from Elm Harbor’s work. This allowed us to present the definitions in a context that sets the stage for the remainder of this paper. The Roundtable’s approach to theories of change requires planners to think about quite a bit of detail. As has been shown through the Elm Harbor example, at minimum a TOC should include:

- > **An outcomes framework** that summarizes the set of necessary and sufficient preconditions—known as early and intermediate outcomes—that precede attainment of the long-term outcome.
- > **A set of assumptions** that explain the connection between the outcomes in the change pathway; delineates the set of outcomes as the necessary and sufficient preconditions for goal attainment; justifies the choice of interventions planned to bring about the outcomes in the path; and articulates constraints in the environment that may hinder or promote the achievement of the long-term goal.
- > **A set of interventions** designed to bring about outcomes in the pathway.
- > **A set of indicators** designed to reflect the amount of change that must occur over a specified time period and for a specified target population in order for a successful outcome to be declared.

The requirements set forth by the TOC approach can be daunting, particularly the first time that planners attempt to use it to design an initiative. In the sections that follow, the experiences of the three case study sites will be explored.

SECTION FOUR:

The Case Study of Three PACK Planning Grantees

ELM HARBOR: EXPERIENCE WITH THE TOC PROCESS

The case study of PACK planning grantees was conducted largely through observing planning meetings, interviewing planning team members, and reviewing interim products, when available. The other major sources of data are the theories of change themselves, which reflect the struggles and triumphs that each site had with the TOC process.

A detailed presentation of each of the three theories of change is beyond the scope of this paper. Each TOC presented an enormous amount of detail, and as a result it would be difficult if not impossible to summarize them briefly and fairly. As a consequence, the site summaries presented in this section focus more on the experiences with the TOC process as reported by members of each team, and less on the theories of change themselves. Where necessary for illustrative purposes, examples are drawn from the theories to highlight a particular challenge or insight, but these examples are kept to a minimum.

In a previous section of this paper, the Elm Harbor TOC was used as an example of how to operationalize each element of a TOC. This was the exemplary TOC in the sub-group of sites selected for careful review and was one of the four sites selected by the Foundation to receive the \$1.5 million grant to implement PACK in their community.

As discussed earlier, the Elm Harbor theory was good for a number of reasons:

- > **The long-term outcome was clearly and specifically defined.**
- > **A succinct outcomes framework was created** to summarize how reaching a concisely defined set of early and intermediate outcomes would lead to the realization of the long-term goal.
- > **The change pathway seamlessly integrated** the outcomes that would be produced at the child, family, and community levels, demonstrating how the changes at the community and family levels logically precede changes for children.
- > **Each outcome in the change pathway was clearly operationalized**, and details were presented about how much change, over what population, and during what time frame. Where possible, the planners used baseline research as a benchmark to determine how much progress would be achieved by the stated deadline.
- > **The assumptions presented a coherent explanation** of how and why the Elm

“The TOC process got us smoothly into the discussion about partners’ contributions of money to make our plan doable. Once we saw where we were headed, we were able to ask: how can we leverage what we have? What can our partners bring to the table?”
—Planning Team Member, Elm Harbor

Harbor PACK initiative would produce the expected outcomes. Assumptions were tested with field research when possible, a practice that strengthened the believability of the theory Elm Harbor produced.

In large part, Elm Harbor’s successful implementation of the TOC process can be attributed to the contributions of a very skilled planning consultant who had prior experience with the TOC process. Elm Harbor’s team benefited tremendously from that consultant’s ability to guide the group through a series of structured sessions that generated the information that would make up the theory. His approach to working with the group, while less participatory than the idealized TOC process, allowed the team members to contribute to the theory without having to first learn the nuts and bolts of the process.

Individual members of the planning team explained that they would have preferred to be more familiar with the TOC process but chose to follow the lead of the consultant in order to efficiently complete the PACK proposal. They suggested that the pressure associated with using a new technique as part of the planning process for a \$1.5 million grant motivated their decision to allow the consultant to take the lead in crafting the TOC. With stakes that high, the group faced an enormous amount of pressure to “get it right” and felt that the time that they had as a group to learn TOC *and* produce a good PACK proposal based on it was insufficient. They thought that the TOC methodology and terminology should have been introduced much earlier in the PACK process so that their whole team could have had more time to absorb the approach and begin to think about pathways and assumptions according to TOC guidelines.¹⁴

Elm Harbor’s plan for dealing with a tight time frame is instructive to other groups who may face the same challenge. They introduced the TOC approach to the planning team, and after recognizing that they did not have time to really teach the method to everyone in the group, they formed a small committee to create the outcomes framework that formed the backbone of the TOC. This group was made up of stakeholders who found the TOC concept familiar because they had done similar planning tasks before. By July they were able to present a change pathway to the full planning team and lead a discussion on outcomes to get feedback and make changes. While the TOC team focused on the outcomes framework, others did research to articulate assumptions that would begin to flesh out the framework developed by the TOC team.

It is interesting to note that the consultant for the group facilitated meetings that produced assumptions but did not use this language or attempt to explain the idea of what assumptions mean in the TOC context. According to the consultant, “We never really framed assumptions as such, but rather as learnings that

¹⁴ Applications for planning grants were submitted in February 2001 and awarded in April 2001. By the time the Foundation convened the planning grantees for TOC training, many of them had already begun to work on early versions of their proposals.

“There isn’t a lot of evidence about how things work. The major tension in this process from my point of view is that we are aspiring to have more evidence at work than is available.”

—Planning Consultant,
Elm Harbor

were distilled into statements that drove the planning. Most of these came out of phone interviews and early research.” His familiarity with the TOC process allowed him to elicit statements about important underlying beliefs and potential hypotheses without having to first train the participants in the whole TOC approach and vocabulary.

The early testing of assumptions proved useful for Elm Harbor because team members realized that they held beliefs that were not supported by their subsequent research. For example, before conducting interviews with local service providers, they thought that “organizations need more resources to do good work,” and “limited organizational knowledge about cultural differences in parenting styles would require additional resources to resolve”: these were assumptions that they believed they should bear in mind as they planned strategies. Their research showed, however, that there are a lot of resources in the area already, and that organizations are more culturally competent than they expected. They found out that peer-to-peer learning was a way to unlock untapped potential, and that this was not necessarily going to require a great infusion of new funding to bring about.

In addition to having a consultant to manage the process and do all of the behind-the-scenes work required to create such a detailed TOC, this group recognized that their ability to fund research that tested assumptions before they became part of the theory strengthened their final product and influenced the direction they chose to move in.

Even in Elm Harbor there was some reticence about “thinking outside of the box,” and this troubled a number of stakeholders who thought that the members of the planning team were overly focused on what “the Foundation wants” and not willing to think broadly or creatively about the problem at hand. As one stakeholder put it, “the need to keep the Foundation happy has gotten in the way of being able to focus on the interesting long-term outcomes and how to get there. . . there is a tension around how to do what the community wants versus doing what the Foundation will fund.”

Another issue that troubled the Elm Harbor team members was the level of discomfort people associated with defining thresholds and targets in the theory. As previously described, the TOC approach calls for each outcome to be operationalized in specific terms, with multiple indicators defined for each outcome, and then target populations, thresholds of success, and performance targets established for each indicator. According to Elm Harbor’s planning consultant, this process made participants “moderately uneasy because we were not comfortable with the arbitrary nature of this task.” The group felt that they had little to go on as they set thresholds and targets to answer the question, “How much change is good enough?”, and group members were concerned about setting the mark either too high to achieve or too low to be impressive to the Foundation.

BLACKSTONE

On the surface, the Blackstone TOC is very good. This group clearly followed the Roundtable’s TOC procedure to the letter and prepared a TOC that was complete and rich with details about the connections between long-term, intermediate, and early outcomes; the assumptions that underlie the outcomes framework; and the connections between proposed action steps and expected outcomes. With one critical exception, this group did a thorough job of thinking about how to operationalize every outcome in their outcomes framework, and in so doing really clarified the thinking about how change will occur and what change will “look like” along the way. Unfortunately, the exception to this rule undermined the quality of an otherwise impressive product.

The weakness of this TOC is that it is not focused on a well-defined long-term outcome. Their definition of the long-term outcome “*increased quality, utilization, and impact of out-of-school learning activities*” does not reflect conceptual clarity about informal learning. The indicators selected for the long-term outcome illustrate the ambiguity of their definition:

- > **Parents report satisfaction with informal learning.**
- > **Usage of informal learning opportunities increases over time and across the partners’ institutions.**
- > **Community stakeholders report benefits of enhanced informal learning.**

This lack of clarity about what is meant by “informal learning” prevented the group from developing a theory that would promote changes in the ultimate outcome. It is likely that this group could have produced a winning TOC related to informal learning if they had been given more guidance from the Foundation about how to operationalize informal learning and understand the preconditions for improving it.

Given the opportunity to review the Blackstone TOC, one may come away with the impression that it is very good, and that would not be wholly wrong. The key observation about this TOC is that it is conceptualized at the “wrong” level of analysis. Rather than focusing on desired changes at the level of families and kids, and thinking of the preconditions to bringing those changes about, this group focused on the *initiative level of change*. They created an almost flawless model of getting an initiative (arguably, any initiative) off the ground. In reality this level of analysis is also important to all of the PACK grantees, but the need to focus on the challenge of changing children’s and families’ abilities to learn outside of the classroom was missing, and for that this theory suffered.

“I thought that the whole point of this was to be flexible in our thinking as we learned, but in the end what happened was that the theory of change became ‘The Plan.’”

—Blackstone Planning Team Member

“The big picture is what is important, but that got lost in the effort to lay out the level of detail that we were required to do. We could have done a better job of thinking about the big steps if there was not so much attention paid to the details right now.”

—Blackstone Planning Team Member

PALMDALE

Blackstone’s Planning Process

There may not be many connections between the process used in Blackstone to produce the PACK TOC and the disappointing final result, but there are lessons to be taken from their approach to tackling the task of applying TOC to the proposal development process.

In Blackstone, the planning tasks were divided among three subcommittees: a programming committee designed interventions and a marketing strategy; a research committee conducted interviews and focus groups as part of a needs assessment; and a theory committee created the overarching framework for the initiative.

It is important to note that Blackstone’s planning team was working together for the first time, and they were so eager to win the PACK grant, and so unclear about what the staff of the Foundation wanted, that they focused too much on getting the steps of the process perfect. In the end, they created a fantastic TOC, but one that had little to do with what the Foundation was looking for, and one that did not really take full advantage of what they knew about the community-level changes necessary to promote informal learning. In hindsight, this group could have benefited from making a few mistakes in the TOC process and spending more of their limited time trying to understand the keys to promoting informal learning among children.

In many ways the Palmdale TOC mirrors Blackstone’s, except for the lack of detail about how outcomes are defined and the intentional lack of specificity about strategies to bring about the outcomes in the framework. Like Blackstone, informal learning opportunities are not defined in this theory, and therefore the theory itself is less about changing learning for kids and more about building a collaborative designed to market cultural activities to families and kids who are currently underutilizing what is available in the area.

One of the key observations about this theory is the overabundance of detail in the outcomes framework, without an overarching story line. This is partially due to the fact that each outcome is overdetermined, and also due to the fact that the logic in the map does not work backward to answer questions about necessary preconditions, but rather forward in a way that anticipates the consequences of each step in the process. This difference may seem subtle but in fact may explain why so many long-term outcomes hinge on the outcome “Families increase participation in quality out-of-school activities.” Using the backward mapping strategy that the Roundtable recommended should have surfaced many more preconditions for the long-term outcomes, particularly since those outcomes reflect complicated processes that surely require more than increased participation to bring about. (Examples of these outcomes include “families and adults display increased literacy”; “adults act confidently as change agents to promote children’s learning”; and “families demonstrate high expectations of their kids.”)

It is difficult to judge the quality of the Palmdale TOC because it was submitted to the Foundation before it was complete. The group finished the outcomes framework but completed only illustrative examples of the remaining elements of the theory. This group had a number of good ideas about how to improve learning for families and children, and how to develop the community's capacity for out-of-school learning, but they simply did not have the time they needed to incorporate these ideas into their TOC. A sample taken from an explanation of the outcomes framework for changes in learning suggests that the group was on the path toward the right idea:

IF a social marketing plan is developed and implemented that produces targeted messages for identified communities,

THEN more kids will participate in after-school activities. It is assumed that through increased marketing of out-of-school activities in combination with removing cost, transportation, and cultural barriers, kids may attend with or without their families.

IF the above is true,

THEN kids demonstrate excitement about out-of-school learning opportunities. The model assumes that if the activities are welcoming and appealing and not "doing school out of school," then kids will be excited about learning.

IF the above is true,

THEN kids will demonstrate increased knowledge, values, and abilities as learners. Kids who are engaged in (versus simply attending) quality out-of-school activities will learn.

The final product reflects an attempt to blend participant experience, research findings, and important local values around cultural sensitivity and widespread participation of community partners. It also reflects the belief that the planning group could not (and should not) prepare a complete plan without the participation of the local sites (which were not part of this initial planning process). The proposal reflects a work-in-progress with an understanding of the TOC process. Yet it also reflects an inability on the part of the group to go beyond the initiative-level theory that explained how to get PACK off the ground to one that would have unpacked informal learning and demonstrated how the available programs in Palmdale could have been brought into a collaborative designed to target specific learning goals for children and families.

The summary of the Palmdale experience that follows highlights three specific challenges faced by the team, chosen because they could each be understood as

advantages under different circumstances. These challenges are indeed paradoxes: (a) the planning team was composed of program directors and staff of several successful initiatives with an average of twenty years of experience in the field; (b) the members of the team were familiar with planning processes similar to TOC and had been rewarded many times for their ability to produce high-quality strategic plans; and (c) the members of the team recognized the need to allow the neighborhood-based organizations that would be supported with PACK monies to determine the most appropriate strategies for producing the long-term goals outlined by the TOC. Each of these apparent strengths undermined Palmdale's ability to produce an acceptable TOC for the PACK initiative.

Blinded by Prior Success

In Palmdale, the planning group had an impressive set of past programmatic successes to build on in the area of after-school programs, several of which served as important precursors to the PACK planning process. This prior success actually may have made the backward mapping aspect of the TOC process a bit more difficult for this group because the planners were not thinking out of the box in the way the TOC process requires. This planning team felt that it had identified many of the pieces of the puzzle already and struggled to figure out how to get as many of those pieces as possible in the PACK initiative instead of starting off with a blank slate and working backward to identify the important preconditions necessary to reach their long-term goal. This bias made the group less open to questioning their assumptions about how to bring about change. As a result, Palmdale's depiction of the outcomes framework was steeped in experience and evidence from research yet came across as a jumble of great ideas instead of a logically organized and compelling set of connected outcomes.

“We feel a lot of pressure to create a theory of change for PACK when it may be more interesting to show the bigger picture of what the United Way is doing over all.”

—Planning Consultant,
Palmdale

Nothing New under the Sun

In addition to the biases associated with prior programmatic successes, the group may have approached the task with too much experience with similar planning methods. The TOC approach to planning did not seem new for this group, because they were familiar with the outcomes framework provided by their state's Outcomes Project (which provides county-level data on kids and youth), and because the United Way is a leader in the logic model approach to planning. As a result of their perceived familiarity with the TOC approach, members of the team did not fully embrace an understanding of implementing backward mapping, identifying preconditions, and articulating assumptions until they were several weeks away from the Foundation's deadline for submitting proposals.

Democratic to a Fault

The Palmdale team saw their TOC as a general blueprint for action that would be taken by other actors. They planned to award grants to neighborhood groups to implement any of a wide range of suggested strategies designed to produce outcomes on the pathway map. Thus, one of the biggest challenges for Palmdale was balancing the need to create a TOC that demonstrated an understanding of

the types of interventions necessary to bring about targeted outcomes, while being flexible enough to allow the local sites they funded to make choices about which strategies to pursue. As a result of this tension, the TOC that Palmdale submitted may suggest that the planners were not clear about what they expected to do to produce the early and intermediate outcomes related to longer-term changes in informal learning. The truth is that they designed their theory to accommodate a number of approaches to action that they knew had been successful in Palmdale before. They intentionally created a TOC that lays out the outcomes in a change pathway but left specific actions undefined because they wanted the communities themselves to decide how to act.

More than those at any of the other sites, the Palmdale planners attempted to follow the TOC instructions to the letter. They created an outcomes framework that focused exclusively on what they saw as outcomes, leaving the particulars about the action steps for the funded sites to decide. Focusing on the outcomes framework first and the programs later is exactly what they were instructed to do, yet following these instructions did not lead them to produce a compelling TOC, because so much of it was left blank for funded communities to fill in. The challenge for Palmdale became trying to figure out how to depict the actions or interventions that would move the pathway along before those decisions had actually been made. This is where their TOC fell short of what was expected by the Foundation.

SECTION FIVE:

Lessons Learned

“Please tell [the] Wallace [Foundation] that the TOC is valuable, but the Foundation should have had a clearer theory of change themselves. They should have gone through this exercise at the Foundation so that they understand what is involved in thinking like this, and so they could have figured out if the premises of PACK were sound. . . . Do they understand that \$1.5 million is not enough to do what the sites need to do to have an appreciable outcome at the end?”

—Anonymous Planning Team Member

The experiences of the three sites were quite similar in many ways, despite the fact that the quality and completeness of their final theories of change and PACK proposals varied widely. Working with the sites to finalize their theories, and observing their struggles and triumphs with the process, Roundtable administrators saw firsthand the ways in which this approach adds value to planning. They also recognized the challenges that remain as they continue to work on materials that explain this approach to program planners and practitioners in community-based initiatives.

Seven lessons emerged from this case study that have implications for future use of the TOC process for planning:

- LESSON 1:** The TOC process is a helpful way to ensure that a group exercises the type of hard thinking that improves the quality of program planning.
- LESSON 2:** The quality of the entire TOC hinges on defining the long-term outcome well.
- LESSON 3:** Focusing on the necessary and sufficient preconditions required to bring about a desired long-term change is more difficult than articulating all of the good ideas a group may have.
- LESSON 4:** Lack of evidence hampers even the best planners as they attempt to create a high-quality TOC.
- LESSON 5:** Using consultants to facilitate the process may be a requirement for doing this work efficiently and effectively.
- LESSON 6:** In addition to hiring skilled TOC consultants, planning groups should allot sufficient time to go through the steps in the TOC process.
- LESSON 7:** Using TOC to create a high-stakes plan placed tremendous pressure on the teams to do what it takes in order to win the grant.

LESSON 1

The TOC process is a helpful way to ensure that a group exercises the type of hard thinking that improves the quality of program planning.

Although there certainly were challenges involved in using the TOC approach, each site reported that the process was insightful, and participants reported that they would use TOC to help them think through planning in the future. In all three places, backward mapping forced people to get outside of the box and think about what had to change, as opposed to thinking about strategies and activities at the outset. It is clear that all of the sites now have a real sense of how much would be involved in moving from where they started to where they want to go. Doing the work to create the outcomes framework uncovered intermediate requirements for reaching the long-term goal that may have otherwise gone unstated, even if they had used logic models as a guide.

In addition to thinking hard to come up with the outcomes map, the planning team members at all three sites relished the opportunity to challenge assumptions among themselves, which led to each assumption in the final theory being thoroughly vetted. All three groups felt that while they may have started off with theoretical differences, their teams emerged with a greater degree of consensus about their collective vision. According to one planner in Elm Harbor, this was the most challenging part of the process:

There was a sort of pushing on each other, which was almost antagonistic at times, so that we could get behind each of the arrows and debate the connections. I thought this would be simple at first, but realized that you are asking your colleagues hard questions throughout this process. I am much less skeptical now of the value of this approach than I was at the beginning.

LESSON 2

The quality of the entire TOC hinges on defining the long-term outcome well.

The experiences of Palmdale and Blackstone highlight the importance of investing time in clearly understanding the long-term outcome before moving on to the other steps in the process. These groups never quite came up with a definition that was workable for them, and their theories reflect that. Neither the Blackstone nor the Palmdale theories attempted to explain how they were going to address children’s needs as they relate to learning, which meant that the theories had no sound starting point. Blackstone’s final product was a theory that seemed to be based on the idea that “our programs are great, and any kid who takes part will learn something and be better off,” and less focused on the specific skills or competencies that their programs would promote.

One of the challenges of the planning process for all of the grantees was the lack of a clear conceptual framework in the request for proposal (RFP) about informal learning to use as a basis for developing a local TOC. Many of the planners were frustrated by what they saw as a vaguely defined long-term outcome that they were to develop plans around, and expressed concern that their understanding of

the long-term goal would not match that of the funders. One participant was particularly clear in this regard:

Please tell [the] Wallace [Foundation] that the TOC is valuable, but the Foundation should have had a clearer TOC themselves. They should have gone through this exercise at the Foundation so that they understand what is involved in thinking like this, and so they could have figured out if the premises of PACK were sound.

LESSON 3

Focusing on the necessary and sufficient preconditions required to bring about a desired long-term change is more difficult than articulating all of the good ideas a group may have.

It is very difficult to manage all of the good ideas that come up during group planning sessions. In most cases, the group has done some pre-TOC thinking, and they have some projects or ideas that they have already bought into (and in this case, written up in their proposal for the planning grant). Once these planners were asked to create a TOC, they often felt frustrated by having to start from scratch to think about the preconditions that would lead to long-term outcomes because they already had ideas that they wanted to include in the proposal. Creating a blank slate for the TOC process is hard to do and may lead to force-fitting early ideas into the TOC that is being developed. This becomes a problem that jeopardizes the quality of the theory, especially if the group is reluctant to go beyond the good ideas they developed before a TOC came into play.

In Palmdale, the planning group had an impressive set of past programmatic successes to build on in the area of after-school programs. KidsTyme collaborative headed by the City Department of Parks and Recreation, and Schools & Neighborhoods Together, which involved the local school system and a wide range of other service providers, served as important precursors to the PACK planning process.¹⁵ This prior success actually may have made the backward mapping aspect of the TOC process a bit more difficult, because the planners were not thinking out of the box as much as was hoped. They had identified many of the pieces of the puzzle before beginning the TOC process and struggled to figure out how to get as many of those pieces in the initiative as possible instead of starting off with a blank slate and working to create a theory that was based on the best new thinking. Interviews and observations in Palmdale strongly suggest that their TOC was steeped in local experience and research: multiple members of the planning team could substantiate each step of the pathway that they had come up with, and there was evidence that the programs they hoped to fund were quite successful locally. Despite these strengths, this group, more than the others, was bound by their past success and less open to questioning assumptions about how to make PACK work well to promote the goals stated in the RFP.

¹⁵ Names of these programs have been changed to ensure the anonymity of the sites.

LESSON 4

Lack of evidence hampers even the best planners as they attempt to create a high-quality TOC.

One of the features of the PACK planning process that has not typically been part of the TOC approach in other initiatives was the intense level of research going on in the community while the theories were being developed. This research was called for in the RFP and provided valuable information to each planning group. All three groups felt that they were able to plug lessons from their focus groups, asset inventories, and key informant interviews into the outcomes framework and assumptions. The Palmdale and Elm Harbor teams were also able to draw on experience and research literature to create a document that they felt reflected the best of what they knew about parental involvement in children's learning. These sites felt strongly that their theories were not drawn out of thin air but were, rather, based on solid thinking and evidence.

The expertise of the local planning consultants greatly enhanced the use of local research in the TOCs and proposals. Elm Harbor is probably the best example of how consultants were used to generate important information for their TOC as it developed. At this site, many members of the planning group recognized that their ability to fund extensive research that pretested assumptions before they became part of the theory strengthened their final product and influenced the direction they chose to move in. This early testing of assumptions proved useful for Elm Harbor because they realized that they held beliefs that were not supported by their subsequent research. Their research also uncovered unknown conditions that influenced their plans. For example, they found out that peer-to-peer learning was a way to unlock untapped potential for organizations in their target area, and that this was not necessarily going to require a great infusion of new funding to bring about.

In addition to using research to pretest assumptions, consultants in Elm Harbor hoped to use research to help them identify meaningful performance targets and thresholds for each indicator in their outcomes framework. The TOC approach calls for each outcome to be operationalized in specific terms, with multiple indicators defined for each outcome, and target populations, thresholds of success, and performance targets established for each indicator. Planners and consultants in Elm Harbor reported a high level of discomfort with this task. According to Elm Harbor's planning consultant this process made participants "moderately uneasy because we were not comfortable with the arbitrary nature of this task." The group felt that they had little research evidence or experience to go on as they set thresholds and targets, and were concerned about setting the mark too high to achieve, or to low to be impressive to the Foundation.

LESSON 5

“I didn’t really learn this [TOC] until we started doing it ourselves. . . there was no way we could have taught the group all it needed to know in one day, so we have all learned as we have gone along.”

—Palmdale consultant

Using consultants to facilitate the process may be a requirement for doing this work efficiently and effectively.

One of the biggest lessons to come out of comparing the experiences of these three sites is that consultants are really useful for getting a group through the TOC process. Although each of the planning team leaders attended the TOC training and all of the sites had access to the technical assistance provided by ActKnowledge, neither proved to be enough to prepare someone unfamiliar with the TOC approach to actually conduct the meetings, draw relevant information from discussions, keep the group focused on important tasks, and prepare drafts of a theory that progressively got more detailed and focused.

At all three sites, it was clear that consultants took responsibility for learning TOC so the group could focus on providing the content and contextual information. Both the Blackstone and Elm Harbor teams were facilitated by a technical assistance provider who had expertise in the TOC method, which led to those groups’ ability to produce a complete TOC. While the Palmdale consultant facilitated meetings and did follow-up work to polish the products, her relative lack of experience with the method may have jeopardized the quality of the final product.

Another important lesson about consultants relates to way that users of the TOC approach may need to think about staffing the planning group. Prior to this case study, the difficulty of one person conducting TOC meetings, keeping everyone focused on the task at hand, and creating the desired products was not entirely clear. After observing the meetings in Palmdale and Blackstone, Roundtable staff concluded that three people may be required to successfully run the TOC sessions—a facilitator, a public note taker, and a documenter who can keep track of all the assumptions, indicators, and other things that need to be in the final report. It may help to audiotape or videotape the meetings if it is really important to understand how the group understands the details. It was clear the consultants who ran the meetings with one partner were not able to keep track of a lot of what was said, and in some cases this meant that important ideas were not included in the final product.

LESSON 6

In addition to hiring skilled TOC consultants, planning groups should allot sufficient time to go through the steps in the TOC process.

Almost everyone reported that time was a major factor in getting the TOC done well. Each group felt that the TOC process required more time than they had to spare to do the hard thinking and gather the information necessary to make the theory strong. Many said that the task required more work than they could reasonably be expected to do well in six months, particularly since they were committed to wide buy-in and wide participation of top-level players in their communities.

Three particular observations emerge in relation to how time was a factor in completing good theories of change.

A. *The sites attempted to deal with the time crunch by dividing the tasks required to complete the PACK proposal among subcommittees.* At each of the sites a small group of stakeholders took responsibility for crafting the TOC. These small groups held on average five planning meetings of three to four hours each to complete their work. These committees then shared their draft theories with the larger group to get feedback. In addition to these subcommittees, there were one or two staff and consultants who worked almost full time on the proposal during the last two months of the summer, which included a lot of undocumented overtime, particularly in Blackstone and Palmdale.

Elm Harbor's plan for dealing with a tight time frame is instructive to other groups who may face the same challenge. They introduced the TOC approach to the planning team, and after recognizing that they did not have time to really teach the method to everyone in the group, they formed a small committee to create the outcomes framework that formed the backbone of the TOC. This group was made up of stakeholders who found the TOC concept familiar because they had done similar planning tasks before. By July they were able to present a framework to the full planning team and lead a discussion on outcomes to get feedback and make changes. While the TOC team focused on the outcomes framework, others did research that allowed them to articulate assumptions that would begin to flesh out the framework that the TOC team came up with.

It is interesting to note that the consultant for the group facilitated meetings that produced assumptions but did not use this language or attempt to explain the idea of what assumptions mean in the TOC context. According to the consultant, "We never really framed assumptions as such, but rather as learnings that were distilled into statements that drove the planning. Most of these came out of phone interviews and early research." His familiarity with the TOC process allowed him to elicit statements about important underlying beliefs and potential hypotheses without having to first train the participants in the whole TOC approach.

B. *The challenges involved in using the TOC process largely stem from the time it took planning team members to agree on the early products and move on to add details to their frameworks.* These latter tasks—operationalizing outcomes and defining thresholds and targets—were rushed in all three sites, with different consequences. Members of the planning teams who are not researchers had a hard time thinking about indicators, and an even harder time coming up with ways to measure them. This was one area that consultants really had to take the lead on, and in all three sites this task was left largely to them. For example, the planning team members in Palmdale and Blackstone spent so much time on

developing their outcomes framework and articulating their assumptions that their consultants did most of the work around defining thresholds and targets. In the end all three groups felt that their thresholds and targets were far too arbitrary to be useful, largely because they were rushed to define them, and also because they had little research evidence to use as a basis for making these predictions.

C. *Participants may need extra time to digest the theory and offer solid critique to the TOC framework as it is being developed.* Although consultants in each site worked hard to prepare for each meeting, the sessions were frustratingly slow going because the TOC drafts take a long time to review and understand. It is difficult to get planners to look at the framework in the meeting and get them to critique it meaningfully right away. Most people need the help of a facilitator who can walk the group slowly through each step, making it clear that it is acceptable to stop and question what is there. The process worked best in Elm Harbor, where the TOC drafts were posted on an intranet site that allowed people plenty of time to carefully review them before each meeting. Despite the fact that things went smoothly with the TOC process in Elm Harbor, the planning team members offered suggestions about the kinds of things that they think would have helped them do an even better job. Most of what they had to say in this regard had to do with the time that they had as a group to learn TOC. They thought that the TOC methodology and terminology should have been introduced at the very beginning of the preplanning grant process so that their whole team would have had more time to absorb the approach and begin to think about pathways and assumptions according to TOC guidelines.

LESSON 7

Using TOC to create a high-stakes plan placed tremendous pressure on the teams to do what it takes in order to win the grant.

It is important to note that one of the challenges involved in using the TOC approach in a high-stakes situation like this was getting clear about how TOC related to the overall PACK proposal. Each site clearly had a vested interest in winning the PACK grant, and that was in many ways far more important than getting the theory right. Planners in all three sites were very constrained by their fear of not producing what the Foundation wanted, and few of the planners felt comfortable with their grasp of how the Foundation defined long-term outcomes and of what the Foundation was expecting in terms of the level of detail at each step.

The planners were also not clear about how to blend their research, the TOC, and their action plans into a coherent proposal and implementation plan. Several were confused about whether the theory should be the proposal, or an appendix, or a section in the middle that the proposal was built around. In the end, the Elm Harbor approach of using the theory as a referred-to appendix appeared to be the most effective way of using the TOC approach to guide thinking, while

preparing a proposal that would be accessible to readers at the Foundation who had not been exposed to the TOC language or method. The proposal drew on lessons from the TOC process but was a stand-alone document that fit the typical format of a grant proposal.

An additional problem arose regarding the degree to which planners felt they had to adhere to the proposal guidelines in preparing their theories of change. In Palmdale and Blackstone many of the participants got bogged down in definitions and terms (e.g., the difference between an *outcome* and a *precondition*) and got sidetracked by thinking that they had to get it right or they would be penalized. This took away from thinking about the big picture at the beginning. In Elm Harbor, this problem was largely avoided because of the working style of the consultant and the TOC subcommittee which decided to translate the group's work into TOC language.

It is important to note that there are specific lessons that come out of watching Blackstone's experience. Blackstone's planning team was working together for the first time. Like the other teams, they were eager to win the PACK grant and, at the same time, unclear about what the staff of the Foundation wanted. As a result, they understandably focused too much on getting the steps of the process perfect. In the end, they created a fantastic TOC—but one that did not really take full advantage of what they knew about the community-level changes necessary to promote informal learning for kids.

In Elm Harbor there was also some reticence about “thinking outside of the box,” and this troubled a number of stakeholders who thought that the members of the planning team were overly focused on what “the Foundation wants” and not willing to think broadly or creatively about the problem at hand. As one stakeholder put it, “the need to keep the Foundation happy has gotten in the way of being able to focus on the interesting long term outcomes and how to get there. . . there is a tension around how to do what the community wants versus doing what the Foundation will fund.”

CONCLUSION

The PACK TOC experience has brought to life a process that had largely been abstract before the case study. The Roundtable, and colleagues at ActKnowledge, greatly benefited from the many discussions with PACK planners during their six-month planning grant. Much was also learned from reading each proposal and noticing where groups had difficulty communicating their ideas about assumptions and change pathways. Each of the groups worked hard to consider what had to change in the early and intermediate terms for them to reach the long-term outcomes they had defined. Regardless of whether their proposal was ultimately successful, they reported learning a great deal about their communities and planning partners in the process.

The Roundtable will continue to work on developing materials that prepare planners to take on this process. This case study has provided valuable insight that will surely help future users of the TOC approach avoid some of the common pitfalls faced by the PACK groups, while gaining important insights about how to think systematically about change.



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