



Community Café Collaborative Theory of Change Outcome Map: Companion Notes

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In February 2009, Council for Children and Families contracted with Organizational Research Services (ORS) to facilitate the development of a Theory of Change for the Community Café Collaborative in Washington State. The project involved a participatory process that included Collaborative leadership team members, café hosts and participants, as well as other partners. The process resulted in a visual depiction of what the practice is and how it supports change among participants, communities and systems.

The primary intent of this effort was to develop a foundation for ongoing development and future evaluation efforts of the model and it is hoped to have additional benefits as well, such as supporting the development of tools to help the Collaborative share their work and secure resources.

What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change is the clear expression (typically a graphic depiction) of the relationship between actions and intended results. The Community Cafe Theory of Change identifies the main strategies that comprise the practice and their relationship with key outcomes, i.e. changes among individuals, families, communities or systems. The Community Cafe Theory of Change map is built on several assumptions and considerations that are described below, and reflects how the Collaborative believes it will make change. This brief summary provides some orientation to the outcome map and its development, and identifies next steps.

Why Develop a Theory of Change?

For a volunteer-driven and expanding practice model, the benefits of articulating a Theory of Change can be multiple. Right now, Community Cafes are of considerable interest to family strengthening organizations in Washington and around the country. A Theory of Change can help to show how Community Cafes connect and add value to the spectrum of efforts going on in this area. A Theory of Change can also clearly show potential funders what kind of service or experience they would be supporting for families and the benefits that should theoretically result. Depending on how a Theory of Change is used, it can also help to ensure that an organization or practice consistently maintains key elements of an approach, leading to increased achievement of consistent outcomes. Perhaps most importantly, a Theory of Change can help the organization (or Collaborative, in this instance), critically consider the process in which they are deeply steeped. Precisely because of the simplicity of a practice, it can be valuable to consider what and how change is taking place. A Theory of Change and its development encourages reflection, which is key to learning. Thinking through these questions can be a first step in then considering how the work can be captured, celebrated and sustained into the future.

The main audience for the Theory of Change is the Community Café Collaborative Leadership Team and other community café stakeholders for the purposes of informing their evaluation(s), strategic planning,

communications with funders, and development and communication with replication sites. Theories of Change rarely stand alone for external audiences. The Community Café Collaborative, in particular, can and should continue to use stories of individual, community and organizational changes to illustrate the story of change depicted in the Theory of Change.

Theory of Change Development Process

The process for developing a Theory of Change for the Community Café Collaborative began with a **review of materials**, including the Toolkit and Host Orientation Guide, evaluation tools, and prior reports. ORS then facilitated calls and two **work sessions with members of the Leadership Team** to brainstorm and then refine an early draft outcome map. The Community Café Collaborative hosted a **meeting for café hosts, participants and other stakeholders** where participants shared their personal experiences related to involvement in Community Cafes. Participants and facilitators from ORS used these stories to further refine the identified strategies and outcomes for the Theory of Change. Notably, the feedback from the larger stakeholder group was very much in line with earlier drafts based on discussion with the Leadership Team, demonstrating that stakeholders share a common understanding of the Community Café practice even across unique Café communities and perspectives. ORS is working with the leadership team to finalize the draft and **consider its implications and next steps**, particularly related to evaluation.

Theory of Change Narrative

The Community Café outcome map highlights the practice's Resources & Approaches, Strategies, Outcomes, and Goals.

Resources & Approaches. In a Theory of Change outcome map, this section notes what must be in place for a program or practice to take place. Key frameworks that guide the Community Café practice include the research-based **Strengthening Families Protective Factor Framework** emphasizing a strength-based approach to supporting families in key areas such as providing social connections and family resiliency. The **Word Café model** guides the methods and approach of bringing people together using a particular conversational process and set of principles. In addition to instrumental resources such as the Host Orientation Guide and all of the volunteers, participants and partners; the Community Café Collaborative places a high regard for particular guiding principles, values and approaches.

Strategies. This section of a Theory of Change map describes what a program or practice does in order to achieve change – broad sets of activity in which it engages and uses its resources. In developing the Theory of Change, it was clear that the Collaborative sees Community Cafés as a **practice rather than a specified model or program**. No two Community Cafés are (or are expected to be) the same. Participating communities, café settings, discussion topics and duration or “dosage” of the cafes vary. The Collaborative is expanding its work quickly, so the ways in which volunteers are working are understandably shifting. Still, it is clear that there are several core areas of work.

- 1) The Community Cafés themselves are **sets of conversations** with community members offered by trained facilitators in partnership with community sponsors that include several common approaches highlighted in the outcome map.
- 2) The Collaborative **builds community and social networks** among participants in individual cafés as well as between cafes, institutions and systems.

- 3) The Collaborative places a premium on **mentoring volunteers to take leadership roles** in varying capacities related to individual cafes, the Collaborative, and state or national outreach and partnerships.
- 4) Lastly, the Collaborative works with people in positions of power at various levels (e.g., institutions, state systems) to **advocate** for new ways of dialoguing, incorporating parent voice, and on behalf of specific policies or programs.

Outcomes. Outcomes on the Theory of Change map refer to changes among participants, communities and systems that the Collaborative sees as related to the work they do. The list of who may experience positive outcomes based on the Community Café Theory of Change includes: individual Café participants and hosts; Café communities; larger communities based on geography, identity or association (e.g., a neighborhood, school or ethnic community); institutions and systems.

Community Cafes are unique from more traditional family strengthening programs and approaches in the way that many of the outcomes occur at the community level. Also distinct is the way in which Community Café Theory of Change outcomes reinforce one another: Individual participants and communities influence positive change among systems, while changes in institutions and changes also support positive outcomes among individuals and families.

In line with considerable research on social network theory, the Community Café Theory of Change depicts how its **social networking approach** provides social support to families and increases communities' social capital. Social capital refers to "features of social organizations...which act as resources for individual and facilitate collective action." Social networks and social capital have been linked to improved health and other aspects of well-being such as family assets and early childhood success (Jordan, 2006; Lochner, Kawachi & Kennedy, 1999).

Community Cafés, as with other methods of building social networks, help to strengthen existing connections within communities by increasing a sense of belonging, acceptance, connectedness, and thus ownership of a community. The literature refers to this as "**bonding**" social capital (Jordon, 2006). In a vivid example, one participant shared during the stakeholder meeting how coming to a community café as a recent arrival to the country made her feel as if she finally belonged, and provided her the opportunity to receive support as well as to share her own gifts.

Social networks generally, and Community Cafes specifically, also help communities and their members to make new connections within their community or outside of it. These new connections bring additional social support and access to new resources. The literature refers to this as "**bridging**" social capital (Jordon, 2006). At the stakeholder meeting, participants demonstrated how Community Cafés strengthen social capital in this way through stories about getting help with their children's homework and interpretation of school communications from other Café participants.

Social capital clearly benefits participants directly. The Theory of Change also illustrates how Community Cafes build **value for meaningful dialogue** among participants SO THAT they begin to model the practice with their families and extended communities. Social capital and the value for meaningful dialogue are increased SO THAT leadership, partnerships and community capacity are strengthened. These changes then lead to changes in systems and institutions, such as increased value for parent wisdom, increased parent voice, and increased transparency in decision-making.

Goals. The Theory of Change states the ultimate goals to which these changes contribute for families, communities and policies. The ultimate goal is “Beloved community¹ based on the collective wisdom with and in human systems that foster equality, respect and inclusion.”

Observations & Insights:

- The Collaborative often reflects on and frames its work through the lens of systems theory. This map, however, places the focus on the Community Café practice rather than the system overall. The lines linking one outcome to another refer to the primary way in which change is anticipated. This does not imply that these changes happen in a simple or hierarchical manner. Positive outcomes at the bottom of the map also influence those that are placed higher.
- This map is intended, primarily, to help the Collaborative in thinking about its work. It is likely not appropriate for a general audience. The Theory of Change map, however, help the Collaborative design more targeted communication tools. A simplified version may be designed for a particular audience or specific outcomes from the map may be referenced.
- The opportunity to hear and reflect on the stories shared in the Stakeholder meeting was key to the development of the Theory of Change. They were powerful individual accounts of the meaning of Community Café for particular people. At the same time, it was clear that individual stories shared many common elements – changes referred to on this Theory of Change as outcomes. Moving forward, a strong evaluation plan would similarly be able to capture the common changes while using individual accounts to amplify and frame the larger picture.

Next Steps in Evaluation

As the purpose of this project was primarily to support and further the Collaborative’s evaluation efforts, we encourage the Collaborative to consider using this tool in the following ways:

- Identify several of the outcomes which seem most interesting, valuable or relevant to focus on and attempt to align your current evaluation efforts with these outcomes. For example, it would likely be valuable to connect the Theory of Change to the evaluation work being conducted by Washington State University.
- Measuring the impacts of social networking – looking at changes in social capital and social support – are some of the changes that are most immediately connected with the Community Café strategy. There is also a fair amount of interest in these areas among funders, so it would likely be valuable way to capture and frame the changes that are occurring in these areas.
- We can continue to talk about some suggested tools or methods for capturing the impact of Community Cafes in some of these areas. A few general comments to consider as you continue your evaluation planning:
 - Consider evaluation tools that allow you see the “forest through the trees.” Tools that allow you to capture data in a comprehensive and systematic way will supplement and build on individuals stories to explain the big picture.

¹ “Beloved community” is a term used by Community Café as referred to by Martin Luther King, Jr.

- Rituals seem to play an important role in Community Cafes by using Café “customs” or familiar techniques to provide safe space and encourage sharing (e.g., using an object to identify who is speaking, closing Cafés in a particular manner). Similarly, it may be possible to use evaluation methods that participants come to identify as part of the Café culture and process. For example, documenting the changes heard anecdotally may be accomplished by closing each café with participants noting a positive change they or their community have experienced from participating in Community Cafés and dropping it into a bowl during a closing circle for Community Café volunteers to later compile. Similarly, there are interactive and visual ways for people to rate their response
- Evaluation capacity is a real concern for the Collaborative as it is fueled by volunteers. Evaluation designs must take capacity into account with tools that are simple to implement and analyze. (This is another advantage to seeking out some tools that focus less on capturing whole stories and more on simple indicators of what can be seen, heard or recorded to demonstrate positive changes are occurring.)
- Evaluation will help to communicate what Cafes do to outside parties, particularly partners and funders interested in supporting the practice. As you know based on your experience with Appreciative Inquiry, evaluation can also provide an opportunity to capture, share and celebrate successes. Evaluation can also be designed to align with the Community Café model in other ways, e.g., be incorporated into rituals or activities.

References:

Jordon, A. (2006). *Tapping the Power of Social Networks: Understanding the role of social networks in strengthening families and transforming communities*. In a Series of Reports on Social Networks from the Annie E. Casey Foundation: Number One.

Lochner, K; Kawachi, I; and Kennedy, B. (1999). Social capital: A guide to its measurement. *Health and Place*, 5 (259-270).

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