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## The Implementation of a Regional Education Network Through the Application of the Developmental Evaluation Process: A Case Study

Amy Jane Griffiths  
*Chapman University*, agriffit@chapman.edu

John Brady  
*Chapman University*, jbrady@chapman.edu

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## **The Implementation of a Regional Education Network Through the Application of the Developmental Evaluation Process: A Case Study**

Employment rates for individuals with cognitive impairments range from approximately 23% to 34%, which is extremely low when compared to their counterparts without disabilities, who have employment rates of 75% to 80% (Houtenville, Brucker, & Lauer, 2014). It has been estimated that about one in four young adults with intellectual disabilities and one in three young adults with autism or multiple disabilities have never been employed within eight years of their leaving high school (Newman et al., 2011). These students graduate from schools/school districts that have been the responsible agency for their vocational readiness to a services environment that comprises many local and regional/state agencies, each with a different responsibility to the employment of these individuals. Collaboration between these agencies is critical if they are to provide employment services to this population.

In this paper, we describe the successful efforts of a group of educational leaders, parents, individuals with disabilities, and service providers who came together to work on improving the transition outcomes of young adults with disabilities. We formed this group after facilitating a research presentation (Griffiths, 2016) at a regional conference that highlighted the challenges related to the transition period from high school to young adulthood for individuals with disabilities. A number of the conference participants answered the call to participate in a cross-agency committee to collaborate on the improvement of services and opportunities for meaningful transition opportunities for these individuals, particularly as they relate to employment.

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The group was intended to be more than an advisory committee; we wanted it to be a collaborative network (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015) of significant influencers in the region. The group's goal was to improve the transition process and outcomes, from school to adult life, for students who were leaving special education programs in the schools. To facilitate the creation of such an organization, we used the developmental evaluation (DE) process developed by Patton (2011). Developmental evaluation is a method of ongoing evaluation and feedback to a groups participants to improve its effectiveness in achieving its goals. In this manner DE serves as a continuous improvement process for complex changes in real-time.

### **The Project Conceptual Background and Literature**

We present a case study of the history of the first two years of the development and implementation of a regional educational network collaborative that used DE theory and methods to guide its implementation. In the spring of 2016, after attending a presentation on employment opportunities for young adults with disabilities at a policy conference in Southern California, a number of the attendees decided to form a regional collaborative to link the employment efforts of their organizations. After some discussion, we changed the original advisory committee idea to one of the developments of a network of these organizations that would collaborate on improving regional access to employment. Interagency and interdisciplinary leadership and planning are critical to the success of career development efforts for students with special needs (Kohler & Field, 2003). The creation of a functional network is a way to develop more effective working relationships between the key stakeholders, including major employment-oriented organizations in the region, school districts, nonprofits, county and state organizations, family members, post-secondary institutions, and individuals with disabilities.

### **Network Improvement Communities**

Network improvement communities are a recent development in the school improvement movement. They are a collection of organizations with the same overall goals that come together to collaborate on program improvement that applies to each of their missions (McCormick, Fox, Carmichael, & Procter, 2010). Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and LeMahieu (2011) described these networks as organizations with a diverse membership and the expertise that is needed to solve complex educational problems; they are groups of interested parties who address issues relevant to all of them. This intentionality is fostered by creating group goals and structured social arrangements that organize the interactions of the parties to further the attainment of these goals.

Peurach, Glazer, and Lenhoff (2016) described a similar organization, which they refer to as a school improvement network. They view such networks as an effective way of supporting improvement across groups of schools or agencies. They define school improvement networks as "systems that produce, use, and manage [the] intellectual capital needed to improve education for many poor and at-risk students" (p. 608). In their discussion of network creation, Peurach et al. recommend the use of developmental evaluation to guide the formation, development, and adjustments needed over-time to make these networks effective.

Noonan, Morningstar, and Erickson (2008), in their paper on improving interagency collaboration for the employment of exceptional individuals, described collaborative networks as a necessary ingredient in the success of transition efforts for individuals with disabilities from school to work. They stated, "Interagency collaboration appears to be a key variable in what happens to youths with disabilities after they leave high school, and it is a critical element leading to higher employment and post-secondary education outcomes" (p. 133). Noonan et al.

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note, however, that these collaborative networks are often not found in our educational communities.

### **Systems Change and Leadership**

Two other concepts, complexity and emergence from the systems change literature and practice (Patton 2011; Williams & Hummelbrunner 2011) informed our work. Taking into consideration the complexity of the context in which a program operates is critical in any effort for social change. For the implementation of change to be successful, social change work must be sensitive and adjust to the needs of the context in which it exists. Social change must be customized to fit local conditions; it cannot be imposed on the local professionals and families.

In this case of young adults with disabilities, there are many contextual, organizational, local, and regional factors involved, which create very complex environments in which to work. The second critical process in complex systems which drives change efforts is that of emergence. Emergence is the way solutions to problems become evident through the interaction of the members of a network as they focus their attention on the achievement of their mutual goals. Because of this emergent process, it is necessary to carefully identify and encourage solutions that arise through the interactions of network members who work with the problem at the local level. Leadership should then facilitate the implementation of these solutions as they emerge organically from this process of collaborative interaction. The DE process, discussed below, is designed to facilitate these two critical organizational processes that underpin successful network collaboration.

## **Developmental Evaluation**

Developmental evaluation (DE) is an evaluative process that focuses on helping organizations to develop effective practices in complex and dynamic environments (Dozios, Langlois, & Blanchet-Cohen, 2010; Patton, 2011). Developmental evaluation provides a means to address emergent issues, solutions, and problems that arise when groups get together to initiate change efforts; it is often used in innovative processes to affect system change. Developmental evaluation practitioners work closely with the project leadership and members at each step of the change process to collect data on the efforts of the network and to adjust the program as issues arise. In their research on the DE approach, Szijarto and Cousins (2018) cited its merits "We can't predict and control our way to social betterment. Instead, emergent influences, inevitable surprise, and sensitivity to context (among other things) make ongoing adaptation a more viable option" (p. 1).

This type of collaboration fit the DE model in that the improvement of employment outcomes by a collaborative effort by twenty-four organizations was very complex. Each of the organizations had their individual goals and missions, separate funding sources with staff with various professional experiences, and clientele who had their own complex needs. It was clear that we could not readily superimpose a readymade solution for their cross-agency goals. The evaluators had to work with the many agency staff to create opportunities for collaboration and then identify and focus network resources on new solutions that may not have been evident at first.

There are several approaches to DE. As first described by Patton (2011), it is a process that "supports innovation development to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments [and involves] asking evaluative questions, applying evaluation logic, and

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gathering real-time data to inform ongoing decision making and adaptations" (p. 1). In DE, the evaluator joins the innovation team to help them to improve a project by focusing on ongoing data collection and systematic reflection on that data and the process. Patton terms this *collaboration for innovation*, in which "the basic theory of action is: bring good people together, and good things will happen" (p. 243).

In this project, we followed the seven-step process of DE, as described by Dozois, Langlois, and Blanchet-Cohen (2010), which involves:

asking questions of the process, context and direction of the network; facilitating the flow of information to all participants; providing timely information on system and context issues within the developing network; mapping and modeling the developmental processes at work; pausing and reflecting on progress to date; reminding participants of the networks goals and progress toward them; and matchmaking to connect members of the network with each other in areas of mutual concern. (p. 51)

This model of DE was selected because it is a method that is designed for use when the evaluator is a part of the design and implementation team and participates in leadership, the whole network, and subgroup meetings.

### **Case Study Method**

In this paper, we described the application of the process of DE to the implementation of a regional collaborative network for improving employment opportunities for young adults with disabilities. A case study methodology was used to explore the development and outcomes of the project. This method was selected because we wanted to document a unique event and process with clearly defined boundaries (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). Yin and Creswell (2013) describe this as a single or intrinsic case study. Both Patton (2011) and Peurach et al. (2016)

recommended using the case study method when investigating the development of complex networks in education. This approach allows for a detailed investigation of the process as it unfolds in a real-world context. As suggested by Dozier (2010), the data sources for this case study description and analysis included observations, interviews, document analysis, end-of-meeting surveys, focus groups, and field notes, which were reviewed monthly by the leadership team for ideas to improve the focus and performance of the group.

### **History and Context**

The network idea started two years ago at a conference presentation of the Thompson Policy Institute in which researchers shared data on the employment challenges and opportunities that students with disabilities face (Griffiths, Giannantonio, Hurley-Hanson, & Cardinal, 2016). These researchers found that there are minimal employment opportunities for this population and that many of those young adults are not employed. After the presentation and call to action, several representatives from local, regional, and state organizations came together as a group to collaborate on improving employment outcomes. This collaboration, the Orange County (California) Transition Initiative (OCTI), resulted in representatives from 24 organizations' meeting every other month for a half-day of planning and collaboration. They also engaged in monthly conference calls, to improve transition services for individuals in transition from school to adult life and services.

### **Project Focus**

OCTI participants developed the focus of this project, as well as the vision and mission statements, over the first few months of meetings. The overall mission was to improve transition outcomes (e.g., employment, housing, social-emotional) for people with disabilities and to support these individuals in leading happy, healthy, and meaningful lives. The project

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participants then worked to accomplish these goals by creating a goal-oriented action plan for the network of transition organizations that would effectively communicate, collaborate, and share data to enhance services and, ultimately, outcomes for people with disabilities in the region.

The initial focus of OCTI was to enhance partnerships that promote preparation for as well as achievement and retention of competitive integrated employment (CIE) for youth and young adults with disabilities. Based on a discussion of OCTI's focus and mission, the following work teams were created: (a) Research and Evaluation, (b) Information Dissemination/Website Development, (c) Job Development & Business Partnerships, (d) Education & Training, (e) Administration of Justice, and (f) Orange County Local Partnership Agreement to support CIE. These work teams included individuals who represented a variety of agencies who were committed to the group's focus and had the willingness to participate in face-to-face meetings, conference calls, and work tasks in keeping with the OCTI action plan.

Programming efforts included the identification of resources, tools, services, and career development educational options for youth and adults. Multi-agency planning was used to identify referral, intake, and enrollment processes to ensure access of these youth and young adults to programs. The programs of focus were those that will prepare them for career pathway employment and post-secondary education, leading to long-term careers. Communication procedures, information sharing, and documentation processes were shared and updated, as needed, to ensure effective cross-agency programming efforts.

### **Results: Developmental Evaluation Process.**

Developmental evaluation interventions can take many forms. The seven-process model of developmental evaluation we used for two years in this project was in *DE 201: A Practitioners Guide to Developmental Evaluation* (Dozier, 2010). The data sources for this case

study description and analysis included observations, interviews, document analysis, end-of-meeting surveys, focus groups, and field notes, which were reviewed monthly by the leadership team for ideas to improve the focus and performance of the group. The results of this DE are outlined below, organized by Dozier's (2010, p.49-50) seven-processes of developmental evaluation.

### **Asking Questions of the Process, Context, and Direction of the Network**

This was a network of 24 regional organizations, which were responsible for the area's transition services. Representatives of the organizations met in person for a half-day six times a year and monthly via a conference call. The monthly call participants discussed the progress of projects from the last meeting as well as the needs and topics of the meeting the following month. The leadership team, which included the DE evaluator, then met to finalize the plan for the upcoming session. Development of the plan involved taking into consideration the results of the phone conference, comments from the previous meeting survey, and progress on the goals of the network and the subcommittees.

In each of the formal network meetings, leaders held regular discussions of overall progress and emphasized collaboration among members. The leadership team also observed and participated in subcommittee meetings to help facilitate their work and to identify any emergent needs or issues. Over time, these observations indicated a lack of subgroup progress on their goals. Leaders addressed this by providing each subgroup with subcommittee chairs from the network leadership team and moving the subgroup meetings to the end of the formal network meetings. The subcommittees then reported their work to the larger group to get their feedback and provided meeting notes to the leadership team for the planning of the next steps.

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### **Facilitating the Flow of Information to All Participants.**

All subcommittees provided updates on their work to the full network at each meeting and provided feedback on their progress. All meeting notes, network materials, resources, and so forth were placed on a Google drive site to facilitate communication between all network members for the sharing of information and collaboration. Later in the process, the network developed a website . This site served to focus the members and leadership on relevant topics as the network developed over the first two years, specifically on the process of collaboration and the specific areas of focus. The development and funding of this website helped to educate critical stakeholders, including caregivers/parents, individuals with disabilities, educators, employers, and service providers, on services and information related to transition issues in the region.

### **Providing Timely Information on System and Context Issues Within the Developing Network**

Early in the process, the leadership team, which included the developmental evaluator, conducted a regional assessment of the services needed by and available to young adults with disabilities. The assessment results were used to determine the initial goals and action plans of the network. In June 2018, a two-year follow-up survey was distributed to team members, providing them with the opportunity to reflect on the processes and outcomes of the network thus far. Team members rated questions related to collaboration and meeting impacts on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = not at all; 5 = very much so). At this two-year follow-up, 94 % of team members indicated that their participation in the network had been worthwhile personally, that the meeting dynamics had facilitated the achievement of network goals ,and that there were opportunities at each meeting to communicate their ideas and point of view. Additionally, 88% of the team

members felt that the network vision statement remained relevant to their work. Finally, all of the team members indicated, with a rating of 5 (77 %) or 4 (22%), that the network provided the opportunity to get to know more professionals in the field.

### **Mapping and Modeling the Developmental Processes at Work**

The network's initial needs assessment was used to prioritize the early work of the collaborative and the formation of five subcommittees of professionals to work on the five highest priorities. The collaborative developed an action plan that included goals, strategies, critical partners and sources, questions/required information, milestones, expected outcomes, and the responsible person/agency. This plan helped to guide the short and long-term efforts of the various work teams.

The developmental evaluator attended all meetings to observe and note the process and progress of the network. The evaluator discussed these observations of the group's efforts toward meeting their goals at each of the leadership meetings, the monthly planning meetings, the total network meetings, and the year-end review. The focus of these DE discussions was on the dynamic nature of the process, which included the identification of emergent problems and discussion of solutions to them.

### **Pausing and Reflecting on Progress to Date: Reminding Participants of the Network's Goals and Progress Toward Them**

The first meetings of the network were used to develop a mission statement. The members decided that the overall goal of the group was to foster collaboration among agencies in order to create a unified regional approach to employment. At the end of each subsequent meeting, all meeting participants completed a one-page survey that asked their opinion on what worked well, the next steps, future interests, and general comments on the efforts of that day's

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session. Throughout the years, at each meeting and telephone planning call, each of the subcommittees reviewed progress on their work, asked for feedback from the group, and identified the next steps. At the end of the program's second year, members completed a survey regarding their experience in the group as to how collaborative it was and how helpful it was to them and their organizations. Several times during the first two years, the members of the network, acting as a focus group, discussed the progress of the group in terms of its goals, projects, and subcommittee work. These discussions were used to collect formative information and to provide participants with the opportunity to comment on the various efforts of the network.

### **Matchmaking to Connect Members of the Network in Areas of Mutual Concern**

The DE concept of matchmaking was evident in several outcomes. First, the creation of a regional job development and business partnership group, the Orange County Local Partnership Agreement (OCLPA), was a critical outcome of this network. The Orange County Local Partnership Agreement is a partnership agreement among the network and other agencies, all of whom participate in preparation for and achievement of employment for individuals with disabilities. The OCLPA included community colleges, K–12 educational agencies, workforce development programs, the Department of Rehabilitation, adult service providers, resource groups, and local businesses. This agreement later became a model for other regional plans. Second, the network facilitated the development of a regional universal referral process (URP). After much work in the subcommittees, the URP was agreed on. It provides for a coordinated, well-sequenced service delivery process to individuals; it optimizes the use of local partner resources; it promotes community-based integrated work training and competitive integrated employment. The pilot phase of the URP began in October 2018 and included six school

districts, three adult agencies, and two community colleges. Third, was the implementation of a multi-part research project that involved matching the labor market needs to student characteristics. This research project was the result of a collaboration between the network and a labor market consultant that created a method to define the labor market needs of the region as they relate to people with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities. Fourth, the OCTI was able to connect and collaborate with university student interns, with expertise in website development, to build a network website. The information dissemination committee collected informational resources from various stakeholder organizations, including local, state, and federal resources. It worked with the students to build a website for parents and professionals interested in the transition to employment issues.

### **Implications for Practice**

The use of DE in the development, implementation, and leadership of this regional educational improvement network helped facilitated its success. The DE process focused on best practices identified in the implementation literature by providing a framework of interventions that kept the focus on ongoing program improvement and the achievement of the network's goals. This process helped to bring these organizations together to improve regional transition employment opportunities. The DE process was a way of "nudging" those involved in the developing network into keeping a focus on the mission and vision of the group while being open to emergent opportunities and barriers in complex circumstances (Langlois, Blanchet-Cohen, & Beer, 2013). This motivated the stakeholders to provide input, representation, and resources from their organizations. It also facilitated the continued involvement in the improvement of employment opportunities for students with special needs. The results of this project, as shown in this case study, argue for the inclusion of DE principles and processes in any

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large-scale regional efforts at interagency collaboration. Without adherence to this framework, likely, the complex change initiative described in this paper would not have been as successful.

At the process level, we used the DE process described by Dozois (2010) in *DE 201: A practitioner's guide to developmental evaluation*. The use of this manual was quite helpful in translating the concepts in the DE literature to the real-world work of network development and practice. The handbook was developed by the J.W. McConnell Foundation (Dozios,2011) for local users to implement the DE process and was designed to be simple enough for program professionals without much evaluation experience to use.

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