# Building Capacity in State Education Agencies: Using Organizational Theory to Guide Technical Assistance

Caitlin Howley, PhD
ICF
United States

Keith M. Sturges, PhD
Indikus Evaluation and Planning
United States

**Abstract**

Technical assistance (TA), and more recently, capacity-building, have been fundamental components of federal calls for education reform for at least the last 40 years. Nonetheless, TA and capacity tend to be underspecified and to operate from tacit, sometimes competing, epistemologies of organizational change. In this essay, we begin with a brief history of TA to support educational change and discuss common understandings of TA and capacity. We then describe the Van der Ven and Poole (1995) framework for distinguishing types of organizational theory and apply it to the example of a federally-funded TA center designed to improve the capacity of state education agencies (SEAs), ultimately suggesting that TA providers tend to rely on teleological and life-cycle theories that neglect the generative benefits of conflict and to over-privilege rationality. We propose potential reasons for this preference and its limitations in our case example, and conclude with a discussion of implications for practice and future research.

**Keywords**: capacity building; technical assistance; state education agencies; theory to practice

## Background

Central to our article are two interrelated practice constructs, *technical assistance* (TA) and *capacity*, particularly as they are applied at the crossroads of organizational theory in education and initiatives that attempt to bring about planned change in education organizations. Since neither of these terms has a clear, unproblematic definition, we explore elaborations on each in their applied,

historical contexts.

## A Brief History of Technical Assistance in Educational Change

TA has been a fundamental component of planned educational change efforts since the 1960s, during which time post-World War II concerns about how well the US was preparing young people for global competition and national defense led to new federal involvements in education. These included the passage of National Defense Education Act in 1958 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965; the elevation of the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's Office of Education to a Cabinet-level agency in 1979; and new federal funding streams for education. Federal policy directives and funding associated with the War on Poverty during the late 1960s through the mid-1970s were aimed at large-scale, open innovations (e.g., Project Rural—see Clinton, 1986). In these projects, TA implicitly supported localized innovations with the aim of equipping local decision makers to use discretionary funds effectively (Abert, 1979). The Office of Education, the federal predecessor of the US Department of Education, was concerned with ensuring that school districts could generate reports, conduct professional development, and carry out fiscal management requirements.

By the mid-1970s, as criticism of federal funding and educational outcomes mounted, even in the same federal programs, much greater emphasis was placed on external consultancies and monitoring efforts and, within that context, TA was reimagined as a consultative process of preparing local leaders and staff to create replicable, instead of unique, structures. Throughout this period, TA work was done largely on an ad hoc basis. In Project Rural, for instance, externally-contracted evaluator-researchers strived to help school districts gather outcome data, produce reports, develop curricula, and support schools.

During the 1980s, coinciding with the so-called reinvention of federal government, funding and other supports for large-scale social and educational programs were reduced by 20% and massive reductions in regulatory mandates were effected (McGuinn, 2006), forcing many state and local agencies to build external relationships with service providers to continue planned educational change programs. These conditions facilitated the emergence of a new role for state agencies as centralized monitoring, planning, and policy conduits. Beginning in the mid-1990s—and symptomatic of a shift toward both centralization of knowledge policy and, perhaps ironically, neoliberalization of knowledge production through layers of outsourcing—TA was conceived as a mechanism that could help ensure that state agency personnel, organizational structures, and operational policies were positioned to carry out federal mandates (Harvey, 2005). At the same time, *A Nation at Risk* helped pave the way for a national acknowledgement that US schools were in trouble (Gardner, Larsen, Baker, & Campbell, 1983). Throughout this era, TA was also used with the intention of building local and state education agency technical capacity to monitor student academic standards and achievement (e.g., Clinton, 1986).

The turn of the last century was marked by a renewed interest in agency and

personnel capacity-building, spanning across public service domains. (Capacity, as we explain later, covers a lot of ground, but here we intend it to mean the enhanced ability of agencies to organize resources and energy to pursue goals.) Among these were international development, nonprofit management, and education. Aligned closely with philanthropy's interest in social investments, a precursor to what Schwandt has called *evidence mania* (1999), during the late 1990s, federal funding was directed at TA geared to capacity-building with the notion that capacity was a requisite for preparing localities to carry out externally-generated and managed initiatives successfully. In practice, these intensified efforts to assist agency staff to comply with mandates manifested themselves in the form of leadership development, strategic planning, program design and evaluation, and governance development (DeVita, Fleming, & Twombly, 2001). In the public education domain, the intensification of the accountability discourse and its accoutrements was consistent with the same policy theory that gave rise to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and related policies. This policy maneuver was accompanied not only through intense focus on achievement outcomes, but a demand for rigid and replicable processes. The proliferation of program theories and fidelity scales was swift and sweeping.

**What Is Technical Assistance?** In this section, we explore contemporary understandings of TA in educational change. We observe that notions of TA have shifted over time, moving from an emphasis on dissemination of technical information to education agencies to an emphasis on helping education agencies achieve goals. We also find that contemporary TA is generally seen as a process, rather than a simple transmission of knowledge and skill, whereby TA service providers help education agencies plan, implement, and monitor efforts intended to improve educational outcomes. Additionally, most contemporary conceptualizations of TA admit a wide variety of support services and topics.

A key component of earlier understandings of TA for educational change is the provision of expert knowledge—such as that provided in the 1970s via Project Rural, wherein program evaluators taught school district staff how to develop curricula, collect outcome data, and produce reports. The underlying assumptions of this *technology transfer* (technology here referring to specialized knowledge, skill, and tools) view of TA are that a) agency staff lack the knowledge and tools to address problems facing their organizations; b) such knowledge and tools actually exist; and c) external experts are equipped to readily provide the knowledge and tools, train organizational stakeholders to use them correctly, and help them implement solutions (Fruchter, Cahill, & Wahl, 1998). Another assumption is that agency staff will in fact *use* new knowledge and tools offered by TA providers.

More contemporary understandings of TA tend to emphasize that it is a process, taking place over time, whereby external consultants help agencies achieve goals. According to Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Horner, and Sugai (2009), for example, TA is a process "designed to build the capacity of individuals and organizations to achieve desired outcomes" (p.1). Similarly, Garcia and Donmoyer (2005) define TA as "the

contributions of 'experts' from outside of a school to help those who work daily within the school do their work better" (p. 63). Some expositions on TA for educational change highlight the means by which TA is provided. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2011) defines TA as "the provision of targeted and customized supports by a professional(s) with subject matter and adult learning knowledge and skills to develop or strengthen processes, knowledge application, or implementation of services by recipients" (p. 9). TA can include, according to an evaluation of the Comprehensive Centers program (Turnbull, et al., 2011, p. 41), a range of activities: ongoing consultation and follow-up, research collections and syntheses, engagement of participants in project planning, training events, task force meetings, conferences, and support for development of a formal plan to implement a program or policy.

As the following quote demonstrates, the contemporary notion of TA encompasses more than professional development. Instead, TA is understood as possessing greater potential to improve individual, group, and organizational performance, relying as it does on a wide array of resources and support services.

> TA is innovative, responsive, and systematic. It helps people help each other by showing them how to support others in identifying and solving problems. It relies on information resources and human expertise. It builds links between information and action. It combats institutional staleness and complacency by supporting positive outcomes in educational organizations and their personnel. Above all, TA helps organizations and their people meet the needs of those they serve. (Trohanis, 1982, p. 4)

For our purposes in the remainder of this discussion, we employ an understanding of TA as a process by which service providers help agency staff to pursue targeted organizational improvement. In our view, the form and substance of TA can and does vary widely, depending on agency needs, TA provider skills and perspectives, and contextual factors (e.g., political change).

**What Is Capacity?** Newer definitions of TA suggest that it should not simply focus on knowledge transfer but rather should emphasize *capacity building*. TA in this vein promotes critical thinking about the problems at hand, with the aim of helping agency personnel to apply new knowledge and skills to new situations, building and activating networks and coalitions to help personnel pursue goals, and assisting personnel to leverage resources and power (Fruchter, Cahill, & Wahl, 1998). Capacity building TA rests on assumptions that diverge from those informing the more traditional technology transfer conceptualizations of TA. For instance, capacity building TA a) emphasizes agency personnel assets and strengths; b) rejects the notion that external change agents possess all the substantive and contextual knowledge to assist agencies without engaging them as partners; and c) acknowledges that many problems agencies face are not simply technical, but rather are complex social and political questions that require adaptive responses (Howley, 2014).

This broader view of TA also suggests that the ultimate outcome of capacity building should be more meaningful than skill

acquisition and task completion. According to Turnbull, et al., (1994) as cited by Fruchter, Cahill, & Wahl, 1998, p. 4, if the goal of TA is to build capacity

> …then one measure of success is not the completion of specific tasks or even the mastery of the skills to complete them; instead, the measure of success is whether the recipients and their organizations are now able to use their knowledge and skills to solve new problems in new settings.

Although much of the educational change TA literature describes TA as an important means to build individual, group, or organizational capacity, Sackney, Walter & Mitchell (2005) contend, "scholars often talk about building capacity without explicating what kind of capacity or capacity for what" (p. 2). Given this, we have sought conceptualizations of capacity *for what* in the literature on public education and other not-for-profit enterprises.

Much of the literature frames capacity *for what* in one of two ways, each with its own measure of success. The first approach views capacity as a collective organizational ability to accomplish objectives, describing capacity as an organization's enhanced state of capabilities, collective knowledge, and resources to improve its chances of achieving its mission or goals (Gargan, 1980; Fixsen, et al, 2009; Eisinger, 2002; Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, n.d.). These scholars emphasize enhanced collective characteristics (e.g., Fullan, 2006; Eisinger, 2002). In practice, this framing implies, as Fullan (2006) states, a focus on "individual and collective knowledge and competencies, resources, and motivation" (p. 9), as well as a commitment "to putting the energy to get important things done collectively and continuously" (Fullan, 2010, p. 57).

Other related conceptualizations of capacity emphasize processes that support collective learning. For Senge (1990), for instance, organizations that facilitate reflection and learning have better capacity to achieve their ends than those with structures limiting such engagement. His "five disciplines" of systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning are practices he argues distinguish "learning organizations" from more traditional entities with less capacity. Likewise, Mitchell and Sackney (2000) suggest that organizations with capacity are those that support learning communities in which individuals and teams learn together about how to improve practice. Despite their emphasis on organizational capacity for learning, writers in this camp nonetheless do not view learning as an end in itself. Rather, they frame capacity for learning as a key precursor to improvement and goal achievement. In these models, then, capacity is capacity for learning that can enable organizations to attain their goals.

The second way scholars have sought to characterize capacity *for what* is by defining *types* of capacity. Century (1999), for instance, distinguishes among human, organizational, structural, and material capacities. In this conceptualization, human capacity encompasses the knowledge, skill, and will of organizational actors, while organizational capacity concerns the ability of organizational units to communicate, coordinate, and collaborate, whereas structural capacity includes policies and procedures—those organizational components that persist regardless of individuals. Material capacity includes funding, and

physical and technological resources. With somewhat more empirical bases for their categories, Mitchell & Sackney (2000) propose three capacity types based on their studies of high capacity learning communities: personal, interpersonal, and organizational. As these definitions suggest, capacity is a multi-dimensional concept, difficult to imagine operationalizing or measuring without including individual and group units of analysis, as well as apparently key phenomena such as motivation, structured learning, resources, leadership, policies, and procedures.

Regardless of specific definitions of TA or capacity, we do not see in the literature explicit connections between how providers conduct TA and their theories about how organizations work. In the following section, we propose an initial framework for understanding the organizational assumptions underlying TA and capacity-building for educational change efforts.

## Schema of Organizational Theories and Their Application in Technical Assistance for Educational Change

As Van de Ven and Poole (1995) argue, "the diversity of [organizational] theories and concepts borrowed from different disciplines often encourages compartmentalization of perspectives that do not enrich each other" (p. 510). They propose four ideal types (or pure forms) of organizational theory as a useful heuristic for understanding commonality and divergence among theories spanning time, discipline, and empirical basis. Each theory emphasizes a particular motor or mechanism impelling change, and a particular cycle of change. Briefly, these are as follows:

- *Life cycle* theories propose that organizations progress through predictable stages of development and change over time with the achievement of each successive stage dependent on the achievement of each prior stage. The motor for life cycle change is inherent institutional, program, or natural logic.
- *Teleological* theories depend on the notion that organizations change as they seek to pursue their goals. Teleological change occurs via cycles of goal development, implementation of action plans to achieve goals, evaluation, and goal reformulation. The motor for change is purposeful social construction of shared objectives.
- *Dialectical* theories describe organizational change as the unfolding result of a dynamic between opposing organizational forces wherein the changing balance among such forces ultimately eventuates in new ideas and forms. According to this group of theories, the motor for change is conflict, whereby confrontation and resolution generate a new synthesis.
- *Evolutionary* theories conceive of organizational change as adaptations to shifting environments, competition, and population changes, with organizations proceeding through ongoing cycles of variation, selection, and retention of practices, policies, or forms. The motor for change in this set of theories is competition among entities for resources.

We argue that educational change TA tends to employ two implicit sets of organizational theories—teleological and life cycle theories—in combination or at various points throughout a TA engagement, with far less attention paid to other types of theories. Although TA practitioners, in our experience,

use alternative theories to inform their analyses of organizations, they generally rely on these two when actually designing and facilitating TA. The following discussion is based on our own practical experience as TA providers and/or evaluators of TA, as observers of our TA colleagues, and readers of (the albeit scant) empirical literature on education TA.

The first tacit set of organizational theories educational change TA providers tend to embrace are those characterized as teleological, in the sense that such models are concerned with how organizations achieve their goals or purposes (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). TA providers often enter the field, in our experience, with the assumption that education entities can improve by envisioning a desired end state (such as the launch of a new policy or the improvement of student reading achievement scores), planning and implementing actions to achieve such a goal, and monitoring and refining plans and actions along the way. The teleological motor for change is the social construction of shared goals among educational change participants, who together define the end state they intend to achieve; this social construction proceeds according to a cycle of goal development, implementation, evaluation, and refinement. Such a cycle offers TA providers an accessible model of how to facilitate TA—by assisting agency staff to proceed through each stage of the goal cycle.

In educational change, TA providers draw on an array of non-education teleological theories, such as strategic planning (Beach & Lindahl, 2004, 2007) and Organizational Development (Fullan, Miles & Taylor, 1981), in which organizations are seen to be purposeful and adaptive. Change comes about as the result of the rational pursuit of goals socially constructed by organizational actors. Others translate teleological theory directly into prescriptions for how best to support education reform. Wiggins and McTighe (2007), for instance, suggest that educational change is most effectively pursued when education stakeholders pursue backward design, first defining desired end states or goals and then moving to design activities that will lead to the achievement of such goals. Trohanis (1982) makes an explicit link between the aims schools must achieve and TA, recommending a process whereby the TA provider learns about the agency's mission and goals; conducts needs assessment; develops a TA plan and agreement with the agency; delivers the TA; and evaluates services.

The second set of organizational theories education TA practitioners tend to apply are life cycle models which view organizational change as impelled by an internal logic of growth. In this perspective, organizations progress through clear, linear stages of cumulative development, and the achievement of each stage dependent on the achievement of earlier stages. As with teleological theories, life cycle perspectives offer TA providers straightforward maps for change.

In educational change, implementation stages are an example of life cycle theory on which TA providers, in our observation, often rely. Theories of implementation stages suggest that education entities mature in their use of new practices in much the same way that living creatures are thought to progress through predictable developmental sequences. The Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) (Hall & Hord, 2010; Hord et

al., 2006), for instance, proposes that stakeholders experience predictable stages of concern as they adopt a new reform. CBAM also argues that organizational actors advance through clear stages of implementation of a new innovation, with stages moving from nonuse to routine use to refinement of use to renewal and refocus on a new strategy. Providers of TA supporting educational change have also employed Lewin's (1947) three-stage process (Schein, 1996). In this cycle, organizations first unfreeze, becoming prepared to make changes as they reduce forces that preserve the status quo and amplify forces pressing for change. The second stage, moving, entails transition to new practices and behaviors, engaging employees in identifying, and addressing problems. During refreezing, the third stage, organizations achieve equilibrium as they reinforce and institutionalize new practices, often codifying them in organizational culture and policy.

In sum, we observe that TA for educational change tends toward reliance on teleological and life cycle theories. There are practical reasons for this preference, not the least of which is that both offer relatively linear pathways (from goal development to full implementation, for instance, or from nonuse of a new innovation to refocus on the use of another innovation) to which TA providers can attach their services. Moreover, teleological and life cycle theories tend to be apolitical and unlikely to disrupt the status quo; in other words, they do not challenge the legitimacy of existing political, social, and economic conditions and instead assume that such conditions will persist. Nonetheless, dependence on these theories also limits the support TA providers offer, a dynamic we discuss via the following case example.

## An Illustrative Case: A Comprehensive Center

To illustrate the relationship between TA, capacity-building, and theory use, we offer an example from the US Department of Education's Comprehensive Center (CC) program. After describing the program and providing a short history of its alignment with the nation's federal education law, we use the case to elaborate our argument that TA tends to employ two implicit organizational theories, what Van de Ven and Poole (1995) call teleological and life cycle theories.

Our interest in this topic derives from our current (and past) work with the CC program and the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center (ARCC) in particular. We believe the authors', our, positionality and relationship to the ARCC are important to note since they may prove to be both a burden and a strength. Dr. Howley is the ARCC's Director and Dr. Sturges serves as its external evaluator. While our different vantage points bring with them specific sets of biases, they also supply us with experiential, empirical, and (micro) political lenses. In addition, our working relationship helps to orchestrate those lenses and keep our biases in check.

The CC program, which emerged as part of the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and in tandem with Goals 2000: Educate America Act, President Clinton's outcomes-based national education goals, was designed to provide TA to state education agencies (SEAs), school districts, and schools in all US states territories (e.g., Puerto Rico). The CCs replaced an earlier network of 48 categorical TA centers with 15 regional centers. The new regional CCs were intended to deliver

"comprehensive" assistance to support standards-based educational reform, becoming the foundation of a national technical assistance and dissemination system that would support states, districts, tribes, and schools in administering and implementing ESEA programs and reforms (Laguarda, 2000).

In 2006, the focus of CCs was altered upon passage of the Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002 to provide TA exclusively to SEAs for implementation of NCLB, which reauthorized ESEA in 2001 (Turnbull, et al., 2011). This time, the CCs were directed to emphasize "improving academic achievement, closing achievement gaps, and encouraging and sustaining school improvement." NCLB came with an increased federal role in education, with new assessment, accountability, and teacher quality requirements for states. Given these new state responsibilities, CCs were directed to serve SEAs rather than individual districts and schools with the expectation that SEAs would then have improved capacity to support districts and schools.

In the current CC program (2012-17) award cycle, centers were again directed to focus their TA on SEAs. The foci remained essentially the same as during the prior grant period, with TA to center on building the capacity of SEAs to improve instruction, narrow achievement gaps between student subgroups, turn around low-performing schools, and, ultimately, raise student achievement. Seven content centers were established to support regional CCs in the following areas: building state capacity and productivity, college and career readiness and success, enhancing early learning outcomes, great teachers and leaders, innovations in learning, school turnaround, and standards and assessments implementation.

Now we turn our attention to the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center (ARCC). The ARCC is designed to build the capacity of SEAs in four Appalachian states (Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia) to implement provisions of federal education law, especially in the areas of

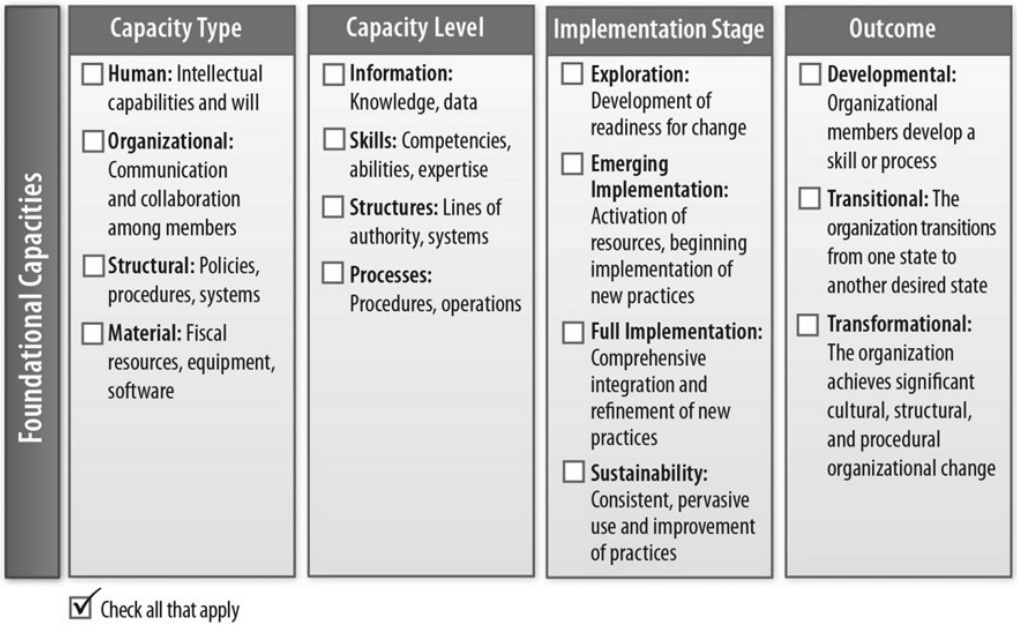


Exhibit 1: ARCC Capacity Building Framework

planning for and carrying out large-scale educational change, and providing professional learning and technical support for school districts and schools to improve instructional quality, close achievement gaps between student subgroups, and enhance student achievement overall.

As described above, all regional CCs are to provide services that require specialized technical knowledge—of content areas, state education systems, education policy, and research, for example. Given this, CC TA includes elements of traditional technology transfer approaches to assistance, such as dissemination of policy and research briefs and provision of technical training. But CCs are *also* required to provide services that build SEA capacity to develop and implement large-scale change effectively. At the center of the ARCC is the Capacity Building Framework (CBF), a schema that was designed to help staff identify which capacities a SEA needs to achieve a particular goal, and then develop and facilitate TA that assists the SEA to acquire those capacities. The CBF is articulated in a series of whitepapers developed by the ARCC's previous director (see Harsh, 2012, 2010). We suggest that the CBF is grounded in what can be characterized as teleological and life cycle theories. Core components of the CBF are depicted in Exhibit 1.

The teleological theories (that is, those that emphasize organizational pursuit of goals) that undergird the CBF include Century's (1999) typology of capacities and theories of orders of change (Ackerman, 1997; Mock & Bartunek, 1987). Both models emphasize phenomena associated with the pursuit of organizational goals, whether on prerequisite organizational capabilities or on the levels of change sought. Century suggests that capacity is "an entity's (an individual, group of individuals, system, etc.) ability to achieve the goals of a reform" (Century, 1999, p. 3). Within this broad definition, Century describes a set of interdependent capacity types. Human capacity includes the knowledge, skill, and will of organizational actors. Organizational capacity centers on the ability of organizational units to communicate, coordinate, and collaborate, while structural capacity consists of policies and procedures. Funding, and physical and technological resources constitute material capacity. Using Century's typology, the ARCC CBF asks staff to identify which capacity types would best assist the SEA in question to achieve its goal (Harsh, 2012). A descriptive framework, this typology represents a kind of folk (organizational) psychology; no empirical analyses were performed to substantiate these types and, at the same time, although they are helpful spaces for consideration, they are commonsensical categories. Nonetheless, the typology forms a core component of the ARCC CBF, enabling TA staff to consider the sorts of outcomes they aim to assist SEAs to achieve.

The CBF also directs ARCC staff to consider the extent of change sought by a SEA as they develop TA: developmental, transitional, or transformational (Ackerman, 1997; Mock & Bartunek, 1987). Developmental change tends to be incremental, with an organization focusing on the improvement of a skill or process. Transitional change involves efforts to move the organization from an existing state to a different desired state. The most intensive change is transformational, entailing significant alterations to the structures and processes within an organization and

requiring shifts in organizational culture. Whereas developmental change might be supported by a series of skill-building TA sessions, transformational change would necessitate more comprehensive, long-term TA services. As with Century's typology, this component of the CBF encourages ARCC staff to focus on the goals SEAs seek to achieve.

Two principal life cycle theories (that is, theories that propose development sequences through which change efforts proceed) inform the CBF, CBAM and the National Implementation Research Network's implementation stages. As the ARCC seeks to help SEAs plan and implement improvements effectively, its staff call upon stage theories of educational change to determine the scope and sequence of support. Influenced by CBAM (Hall & Hord, 2010; Hord et al., 2006), the CBF suggests that SEA staff need to proceed through several capacity-building levels as they pursue change. The first two levels, information and skills, address individuals' needs and concerns; failing to attend to these first can jeopardize a change effort. The next two levels, structures and processes, concern organizational and management issues associated with implementing change.

The CBF additionally prompts TA staff to contextualize the assistance they offer by considering the implementation stage (Fixsen et al., 2005) of the change effort with which they are assisting SEAs. This model includes four implementation stages: exploration, emerging implementation, full implementation, and sustainability. Each stage involves particular tasks or issues, around which TA ought to focus. For example, SEAs in the exploration stage tend to focus on identifying the need for change; learning about and selecting a change; and determining what knowledge, skills, resources, and structures are needed to implement the change. SEAs in the full implementation stage focus on different issues, such as integrating change-related knowledge and skills into standard organizational practices and evaluating and refining the change being implemented.

## Uses and Limitations of Applying Organizational Theory to ARCC Technical Assistance

The implicit teleological and life cycle theories embedded in the ARCC CBF are at once useful and limited. On one hand, these sets of theory enable us to perceive particular issues to which we might not otherwise have attended. On the other hand, when we do not consider other theory sets, we lose opportunities to combine them in ways that could be illuminating (c.f., Van de Ven & Sun, 2011). By neglecting alternative theories, we fail to see other issues, diagnoses, and TA strategies, as well as deepened explanations of how TA and capacity-building intersect.

The teleological focus of the CBF is useful in that it directs TA staff attention to important SEA goals and priorities, the achievement of which ultimately form the core of TA initiatives the ARCC facilitates. By directing TA staff to identify key SEA goals, this focusing function of the CBF helps staff avoid becoming overwhelmed by immediate SEA needs and enables them to develop TA plans that are more likely to have substantial, longer-term impact than those supporting narrower goals. In addition, the teleological impulse of the CBF helps ensure that SEA staff fully commit to the TA plan, since use of the plan is explicitly linked to achievement of their goals.

The CBF's life cycle theoretic underpinnings are useful, too, in the sense that they imply a clear sequence of agency development and accompanying TA support. TA staff employ the CBAM levels of capacity—information, skills, structures, and processes—to determine how to scaffold TA, whereas implementation stages assist TA staff to contextualize the assistance they provide to education agencies as they progress through implementation of the change in question. Thus, for example, education agencies in the exploration stage of implementation tend to identify a need for information about the change they are considering, while agencies that are further along on the implementation continuum tend to voice a need for assistance with building organizational structures to, for instance, support staff who are executing the change.

However, despite its usefulness to TA practice, the CBF limits our gaze and interpretive lens, and as a result, the TA we provide. It obscures our analytic view because it does not include specific tools or approaches informed by alternative organizational theories—such as those falling into the Van de Ven and Poole (1995) categories of evolutionary and dialectical theories. Both types of theory share a view on conflict as a motor of organizational change. According to evolutionary theories, organizational change occurs as adaptations to shifting environments, population changes, and competition for resources with other entities. Recurring cycles of variation, selection, and retention of organizational forms or directions characterize how change unfolds, in this perspective. Dialectical theories, on the other hand, view change as the result of a dynamic of conflict, confrontation, and resolution between opposing forces (internal or external). As Van de Ven and Poole (1995) put it, "change occurs when these opposing values, forces, or events gain sufficient power to confront and engage the status quo" (p. 517).

Although the CBF explicitly describes SEAs as complex adaptive systems (Harsh, 2012), alluding both to evolutionary theory and the embeddedness of SEAs in larger sociopolitical contexts, the TA schema, tools, and processes that ARCC staff employ do not direct their attention to conflict or competition. Likewise, ARCC staff are certainly aware of organizational and political conflicts SEA staff confront, but the CBF does not directly enable them to conceive TA services that center on, for instance, organizational positioning, rhetorical arguments for particular issues, coalition-building, or mediation between conflicting organizational units—all of which rely on deliberate identification of conflict as an organizational dynamic worth understanding and engaging. Nor does the CBF offer tools that allow staff to understand SEA challenges in light of longer-term historical trends. As often as we note amongst ourselves that policy and political-economic forces continue to change SEA roles and responsibilities (i.e., from compliance monitors to change agents), the CBF does not offer us a way to situate such insights into our practice.

Second, the ARCC rarely provides organization-wide TA that seeks to build overall capability to develop and implement large-scale change efforts. Instead, TA tends to be content-focused and relatively discrete, assisting SEAs to establish, implement, operate, and monitor specific programs or policies within relatively delimited domains (e.g., literacy initiatives, formative assessment

professional development, interpretation and implementation of discrete components of federal education law, etc.). Moreover, as a result of leadership and staff churn, SEA staff are often in the midst of adapting to new leaders' priorities and reorganizations—they cannot attend to larger issues of organizational health. The CBF's life cycle theoretic emphasis means that, in this context of churn, ARCC TA often resets to services focusing on early implementation stages that require support emphasizing information and skills, at the expense of services focused on organizational structures and processes.

Third, the ARCC CBF emphasizes rationality—a way of seeing the world that lionizes technical expert knowledge and presumes the perfectibility of human edifices, in contrast to views that emphasize power conflicts, the inscrutable complexity of social endeavors, cultural practices, or local and indigenous knowledge (Scott, 1998). The CBF focuses our attention on helping SEAs plan programs, policies, and systems of support in ways that are clear, administratively legible, measurable, and manageable. Given the proliferation of SEA responsibilities (Timar, 1997) and the increasing turnover of SEA staff, such support enables agencies to conceive, develop, implement, and sustain initiatives when they are overwhelmed by demands and often underprepared to design and lead large-scale initiatives. External facilitation such as that provided by CCs helps SEA staff focus, learn about effective design, and engage in continuous improvement. However, this support rarely invites ARCC and SEA staff to consider the larger purposes and meaning of SEA efforts, the interests of various education stakeholders, or the implications of decisions for wider education policy debates. Instead, our assistance tends to center on technocratic issues related to developing and implementing efforts demanded by legislative and other policy leaders.

Fourth, a more generative CBF might include the use of combinations of theories. For example, Van de Ven and Sun (2011) propose that, over the life cycle of an organizational change, different sets of theory may be more applicable at various points, such that at the exploration stage of a new effort teleological perspectives pertain, whereas during the development stage dialectical models may better explain how change unfolds. For the ARCC, combinations of theory could perhaps assist TA providers to recognize and manage the conflicts that arise among SEA staff as new initiatives are planned. Although the social construction of change highlighted by teleological theories hints that negotiations take place during development stages, dialectical theories more explicitly draw attention to the constructive capacity of conflict. Integrating dialectical theories into the CBF might help TA providers deliberately harness conflict to help agency staff reach consensus and design change efforts that are more thoughtful than they might otherwise have been.

In the end, we rarely countenance alternative organizational theories, or combinations of such theories, because our remit is to help SEAs do what they are legally required to do, and to do so well. This mission is itself teleological and provides a theoretical position that ultimately underwrites our TA, whether we acknowledge this or not. However, such a circumstance is difficult (if not impossible) to avoid in the sense that most TA providers have opted to provide specific

services and help agencies achieve specific aims.

## Discussion and Future Study

TA and capacity-building in educational change strike us as undertheorized based in tacit understandings of how organizations operate and change. On one hand, the resulting underspecification leaves the door open to generosity, permitting consultants to embrace a wide array of assistance techniques and tools. It also permits various units of analysis and practice—individual, team, unit, or organization—on which to focus TA and capacity-building. On the other hand, our review of the literature and reflective analysis of our own case example point to the limits of contemporary notions of TA. Most notably, we find that organizational theories informing TA directed at educational change tends toward functionalism, alongside reductionist (and simplified) capacity prescriptions, underwritten by "a managerial and instrumental world view" (Caldwell, 2012, p. 10). Much of the literature has us gauging the capacity of service-oriented public agencies by placing the agency on a continuum of taxonomic ideal types that define how the agency should operate and function. Our own application of the CBF reflects this orientation in many ways, as elucidated above. This system logic assumes that capacity building is, foremost, about organizing and protecting resources, preparing people to perform predetermined tasks that are aimed to a concrete (yet, constantly changing) ideal state, and situating institutional structures so that they are equipped to carry out short-term, externally determined endeavors.

Likewise, capacity-building *for what ends* also remains underspecified, and, where the ends are specified, they tend to be teleological based on functionalist organizational theories in which organizations exist to fulfill certain clear functions to support society. In our case, a functionalist view of SEAs would emphasize that they exist to oversee and administer state public education systems pursuing shared societal values and visions for education. An important critique of functionalism, however, is that it underemphasizes power dynamics, change, and conflict. Thus, as a theoretical device, it is less equipped to account for phenomena such as increasing scrutiny of SEAs from proliferating stakeholder groups, bitter political contests over content standards (e.g., the Common Core State Standards), increasing leadership and staff turnover, or policy struggles about how (or even whether) education equity might be achieved. Yet, from our perspective, these issues and dynamics render SEAs' remit—to oversee and administer state education systems—as more than simply a technocratic exercise. SEA work is deeply political and contested. TA and capacity building efforts that neglect this fact may be overoptimistic, naïve, underequipped to help SEA staff contend with pressures, and unable to pursue goals in the face of conflict.

However, we believe there is value in rendering explicit the organizational assumptions we make as TA practitioners. Below, we offer a few suggestions for advancing the state of organizational theory use in TA and capacity-building to support educational change.

**Synthesizing Theoretical Understandings of Technical Assistance and Capacity**. Any practical application of a body of theory is complicated, at best, when the literature's repertoire of definitions and relationships among concepts is ambiguous and largely

untestable. The body of TA and capacity-building work draws on multiple traditions and methods that may take the form of activities designed to simultaneously help organizational stakeholders reorient work processes so that they are more logically linked to goals (as in teleological approaches) and to proceed through organizational change in an orderly fashion (as suggested by life cycle theories).

But TA provided to those pursuing educational change also draws from other substantive areas beyond organizational theory, such as adult learning, leadership development, school reform, and data use. While this diversity of bodies of knowledge represents an improvement over unguided practice where the theoretical strands fail to intersect, we miss opportunities to advance our understanding of how organizations work. Moreover, using underdeveloped and untested theories to guide TA may have damaging implications for practice.

**Distinguishing Units of Analysis and Practice**. In addition, by anthropomorphizing organizations (as though they were individual and often "at risk" learners) and simultaneously institutionalizing groups of individuals (as if they were organizational organisms), TA practitioners are operating at (or with) mismatched units of analysis and practice (Caldwell, 2012). Because they involve interconnected facets—human learning, leadership, organizational improvement, structural improvements and resource allocation—TA and capacity-building TA must synthesize a multiplicity of understandings. They must also, therefore, be measured, both formatively and for the development of coherent theory, using multiple empirical lenses, each suited to the apposite unit of analysis. Theorization at multiple levels—individual learning and application of new knowledge, creation of new policies and operational guidelines, and organizational learning—will equip us with a better set of epistemological and theoretical lenses.

**Building the Literature Base with Solid Research**. We also lack solid research to further integrate and describe the many processes and techniques aimed at assisting educational leaders to become equipped to carry out their missions. The fragmented research body is largely prescriptive and idealized. We perceive a great need for credible, exploratory organizational research that is sensitive to political-economic, sociocultural, geographic, and localized contexts of SEAs. Given that the universe of cases is limited to several dozen state agencies, the typologies should be grounded in and developed from in-depth analyses of specific cases. To better understand the realities of SEAs, their personnel's abilities and limitations, their demands and restrictions, their needs, and what they are capable of and permitted to put into action, comparative case studies would be appropriate (Stake, 2006). Such research must also be historically-grounded. Much of the existing TA literature ignores politics and power, both of which play vital roles in what SEAs are asked to do (Jochim & Murphy, 2013; Timar, 1997), and, further, tends to ignore the historical conditions that give rise to particular organizational forms, dynamics, or dysfunctions. As Casey (2002) notes, many scholars of capacity-building TA "ultimately direct their attention to the traditional tasks of organizational problem-solving for established power elites" (p. 19)and therefore

fail to interrogate and help stakeholders address the broader conditions in which their problems emerge.

**Rethinking the Purpose of Capacity**. Capacity-building TA often suffers because explicit agency needs are often more pressing (as when the SEA is responding to a legislative mandate), particularly as SEA responsibilities proliferate and intensify (Kober & Rentner, 2012; Lusi, 1997; Madsen, 1994; Massell, Goertz & Barnes, 2012), than are needs to enhance organizational strength. The newly reauthorized federal education law places the onus on SEAs for conceptualizing, establishing, implementing, monitoring, and refining state assessment, accountability, and improvement systems, in addition to continued responsibility for the wide array of policy, leadership, curricular, instructional, program management, professional development and other functions typically performed by SEAs. In this context, sustained organizational capacity development—as potentially helpful as it might be—is often a low priority. Politically, if capacity-building truthfully involves more than socializing state agency personnel, developing more efficient processes, and restructuring work units to better carry out federal directives, the research evidence would suggest greater liberatory outcomes. Ideally, in a progressive sense, capacity-building TA in institutions designed to serve the public good would be guided by organizational theory that is sensitive to the creation of indeterminate complexity. At an extreme, this may suggest that by enhancing capacity, TA has the potential to empower stakeholders and organizations to pursue ends more generative (Rubio & Baert, 2012; Jenkins & Delbridge, 2014) than technocratic and instrumental. Then, the question becomes: How might a practice-based system of organizational theories support generative or self-sufficiency aims? We quickly find ourselves traversing political-moral terrain: Are educational agencies supposed to operate agentially? If not, ought they be entirely dependent?

## Conclusion

This paper fits within the context of state, national, and global forces that are rapidly reshaping public education and, therefore, the purpose and function of SEAs. Whereas TA and capacity building in their initial elaborations in education may have emphasized equipping state agency personnel to perform routine administrative functions, we wonder whether attention has shifted, mercurially, to equipping SEAs to manage large scale educational change and outsource other responsibilities (all with fewer staff and resources).

Capacity-building TA may be dismissed as an imperfect, technocratic enterprise. However, and at the risk of romanticizing the prospect of constructive capacity, for all its imperfections both conceptual and empirical, it has shown signs of being a meaningful step in the process of preparing state education leaders to execute high level educational policy. If such assistance could be guided by *good* organizational theory, it is more likely, we believe, to serve more than instrumental, technical purposes. The aspiration to combine organizational theory, research, and TA is likely to have important implications for strategy, leadership professional learning, and sound, particularistic, and holistic measurement in SEAs.

In this article, we strived to establish

that TA and capacity building often rely on unexamined assumptions about how organizations operate and change, over time and within particular contexts. Under-theorization has TA providers performing work that looks almost identical to TA associated with the initial passage of ESEA. However, few scholars and fewer practitioners have attempted to build solid linkages or generate a body of knowledge about TA and capacity-building. We agree with Seashore Louis (2015) that what is needed most is not a singular theory but conversation that advances a common language that will help us theorize, as a practice, challenges faced by educational organizations at all levels, while assisting organizational personnel "to acquire navigational tools to chart a course in the uncertain seas of changing expectations as they steer toward destinations that are off the map of current 'best practice'" (p. 14-15).

## References


Abert, J. (1979.) *Program evaluation at HEW: Research versus reality*. New York, NY: Dekker.

Ackerman, L. (1997). Development, transition or transformation: The question of change in organizations. In D. Van Eynde, J. Hoy, & D. Van Eynde (Eds.), *Organisation development classics*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Author. (2014). *Keeping Appalachia in mind: Building state education capacity in the region*. Paper presented at the annual Appalachian Studies Association conference. Huntington, WV. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/6578075/Keeping Appalachia in Mind Building State Education Capacity in the Region

Beach, R. H., & Lindahl, R. A. (2007). The role of planning in the school improvement process. *Educational Planning, 16*(2), 19-43.

Beach, R.H., & Lindahl, R.A. (2004). A critical review of strategic planning: A panacea for public education? *Journal of School Leadership, 14*(2), 211-234.

Caldwell, R. (2012). Systems thinking, organizational change and agency: A practice theory critique of Senge's learning organization. *Journal of Change Management,* 1-20. Retrieved from http://www.bbk.ac.uk/orgpsych/staff/academics/caldwell/docs/Systems-Thinking-Organizational-Change-and-Agency.pdf

Casey, C. (2002). *Critical analysis of organizations: Theory, practice, revitalization.* London: Sage Publications.

Century, J. R. (1999). *Determining capacity within systemic educational reform.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).

Clinton, C. (1986). The anthropologist as hired hand. *Human Organization*, *34*(2), 197-204.

DeVita, C., Fleming, C., & Twombly, E. (2001). *Building capacity in nonprofit organizations.* Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press.

Eisinger, P. (2002). Organizational capacity and organizational effectiveness among street-level food assistance programs. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 31*(1), 115-130.

Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature.* Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, National Implementation Research Network. (FMHI Publication No. 231). Retrieved from http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/NIRN-MonographFull-01-2005.pdf

Fixsen, D. L., Blase, K. A., Horner, R., & Sugai, G. (2009). *Intensive technical assistance. Scaling up brief #2.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG, SISEP.

Fruchter, N., Cahill, M., & Wahl, E. (1998). *Building to capacity: A review of technical assistance strategies.* New York, NY: The Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University.

Fullan, M. (2006). *Change theory: A force for school improvement.* Centre for Strategic Education Seminar Series Paper No. 157. Retrieved from http://michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/13396072630.pdf

Fullan, M. (2010). *All systems go: The change imperative for whole system reform.*

Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Fullan, M., Miles, M.B., & Taylor, G. (1981). Organization development in schools: The state of the art. Washington, DC: National Institute of Education. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED243223.pdf

Garcia, J., & Donmoyer, R. (2005). Providing technical assistance to improve student performance: insights from the Collaborative Inquiry Project. *Theory into Practice, 44*(1), 63–71.

Gardner, D. P., Larsen, Y. W., Baker, W., & Campbell, A. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform.* Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

Gargan, J. (1981). Consideration of local government capacity. *Public Administration Review, 41*(6), 649-658.

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. (n.d.) *What is nonprofit capacity and why does it matter?* Washington, DC. Retrieved from http://docs.geofunders.org/?filename=what_is_capacity.pdf

Hall, G., & Hord, S. (2010). *Implementing change: Patterns, principles, and potholes* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Harsh, S. (2010*). Gaining perspective on a complex task: A multidimensional approach to capacity building.* Charleston, WV: Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center.

Harsh, S. (2012). *Capacity building: The proactive dimension of organizational change.* Fairfax, VA: ICF International.

Harvey, David. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford Press.

Hord, S., Rutherford, W., Huling, L., & Hall, G. (2006). *Taking charge of change.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Howley, C.W. (March 2014). Keeping Appalachia in mind: Building state education capacity in the region. Paper presented at the annual Appalachian Studies Association conference. Huntington, WV.

Jenkins, S. & Delbridge, R. (2014). In pursuit of happiness: A sociological examination of employee identifications amongst a 'happy' call-centre workforce. *Organization, 21*(6), 867-887.

Jochim, A., & Murphy, P. (2013). *The capacity challenge: What it takes for state education agencies to support school improvement.* Seattle, WA: The Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub_capacity%20challenge_dec13_0.pdf

Kober, N., & Rentner, D.S. (2012). *State education agency funding and staffing in the education reform era.* Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy.

Laguarda, K. (2000). *Comprehensive Regional Assistance Centers Program: Final report on the evaluation.* Washington, DC: Policy Studies Associates. Retrieved from http://www.policystudies.com/studies/?id=66.

Lewin, K. (1947). Frontiers in group dynamics II. Channels of group life; social planning and action research. *Human Relations*, *1*(2), 143-153.

Lusi, S.F. (1997). *The role of state departments of education in complex school reform.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Madsen, J. (1994). *Educational reform at the state level.* Washington, DC: Falmer Press.

Massell, D., Goertz, M. E., & Barnes, C. A. (2012). State education agencies' acquisition and use of research knowledge for school improvement. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *87*(5), 609-626.

McGuinn, P. (2006). *No Child Left Behind and the transformation of federal education policy, 1965-2005*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press.

Mitchell, C., & Sackney, L. (2000). *Profound improvement: Building capacity for a learning community*. Lisse, NL: Swets & Zeitlinger.

Mock, M., & Bartunek, J. (1987). First-order, second-order, and third-order change and organizational development interventions: A cognitive approach. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 23*(4), 483–500.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2011). *Early childhood education professional development: Training and technical assistance glossary*. Retrieved from http://www.naeyc.org/GlossaryTraining_TA.pdf

Rubio, D. & Baert, P. (2012). The politics of knowledge: An introduction in F. Domínguez Rubio & P. Baert. (eds.) *The politics of knowledge*, Routledge: London, pp. 1-10.

Sackney, L., & Walker, K., & Mitchell, C. (2005). Building capacity for learning communities: schools that work. *REICE. Revista Iberoamericana sobre Calidad, Eficacia y Cambio en Educación, 3* (1), 9-16. Retrieved from http://www.redalyc.org/

pdf/551/55130104.pdf

Schein, E. (1996). Kurt Lewin's change theory in the field and in the classroom: Notes toward a model of managed learning. *Systems Practice, 9*(1), 27-47.

Schwandt, T. A. (2005). The centrality of practice to evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, *26*, 95–105.

Scott, J. (1998). *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Seashore Louis, K. (2015). Organizational theory: Around the block again? Moving forward? Or both? *Journal of Organizational Theory in Education, 1*(1). Retrieved from www.organizationaltheoryineducation.com

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization.* New York, NY: Doubleday/Currency. Stake, R. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York: Guilford.

Timar, T. B. (1997). The institutional role of state education departments: A historical perspective. *American Journal of Education*, *105*(3), 231.

Trohanis, P.L. (1982). Technical assistance and the improvement of services to exceptional children. *Theory into Practice, 21*(2), 119-128.

Turnbull, B.J., White, R.N., Sinclair, E., Riley, D.L., & Pistorino, C. (2011, August). *National evaluation of the Comprehensive Technical Assistance Centers: Final report* (NCEE 2011-4031). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

Van de Ven, A. H., & Poole, M. S. (1995). Explaining development and change in organizations. *Academy Of Management Review, 20*(3), 510-540.

Van de Ven, A. H., & Sun, K. (2011). Breakdowns in implementing models of organization change. *Academy of Management Perspectives, 25*(3).

Wiggins, G.P., & McTighe, J. (2007). *Schooling by design: Mission, action, and achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Caitlin Howley, ICF, 300 Summers St., Ste. 1240, Charleston, WV 25301.Contact: Caitlin.Howley@icf.com*