

The Qualitative Difference: How Technical Assistance Enhances Organizations

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Summary

Iowa Aces 360 has provided technical assistance (TA) to numerous organizations; however documentation of the process and effect TA has on organizations is not often documented. This report will provide results from qualitative interviews with three non-profit organizations that received TA from Iowa ACEs 360 over the past two years and one interview with the Iowa ACEs 360 personnel who provided the TA. Each of the programs was in different stages of TA, which helps to provide a breadth of supports that can be offered with TA. TA provided was to help organizations, primarily serving at-risk populations better integrate knowledge about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) science and trauma informed strategies that would work in their practice to best serve their clients. The themes that cut across interviews and experiences were: 1) TA was a collaborative process, 2) information was gathered from key stakeholders to make decisions, 3) content provided by TA was key to successful implementation, 4) there is a process by which TA gradually and naturally comes to an end, 5) organizations once introduced to this content want more, and 6) satisfaction with the overall process and impact it has had on their organization.

Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization define technical assistance as “non-financial assistance provided by local or international specialist. It can take the form of sharing information and expertise, instruction, skills training, transmission of working knowledge, and consulting services and may also involve the transfer of technical data. The aim of technical assistance is to maximize the quality of project implementation and impact by supporting administration, management, policy development and capacity building.” A report by the Compassion Capital Fund (CCF) administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that TA is “targeted support to an organization with a development need or problem.” They also state that TA provides the most effective organizational capacity building, thus ensuring that what is implemented can be carried on past the time of TA.

Throughout this report, data from qualitative interviews conducted with people from three different non-profits who received technical assistance (TA) from Iowa ACEs 360, and one qualitative interview with an employee of Iowa ACEs 360 is presented. Particularly connections will be made between the six themes identified as a result of the interviews: 1) TA was a collaborative process, 2) information was gathered from key stakeholders to make decisions, 3) content provided by TA was key to successful implementation, 4) there is a process by which TA gradually and naturally comes to an end, 5) organizations once introduced to this want more, and 6) satisfaction with the overall process and impact it has had on their organization; and how these themes align with the definition and purpose of technical assistance and has helped build capacity within these organizations.

Method

Procedure. Hour long qualitative phone interviews were conducted with personnel from three non-profit organizations who received technical assistance (TA) from Iowa ACEs 360 over the past two years. Each of these organizations is distinct from one another and serves different populations of at-risk individuals. To give greater depth and perspective to the process, the person responsible for providing TA was also interviewed over the phone. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

Sample. Each organization was interested in learning more about adverse childhood experiences and becoming trauma informed. Each organization served at-risk individuals. One organization served students who are most at-risk for high school dropout, another organization provides education and support to refugees, and the last organization provides creative outlets and programming for adolescent and emerging adults. Lastly, Iowa ACEs 360 was represented by the person who provided TA to the organizations.

Analysis. Hand written notes were taken and themes were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). An iterative coding process occurred, and after the first two interviews, themes began to emerge.

Results

The results will be presented in two sections. First, a brief overview of the process each organization had with TA, and second, a discussion of the themes that cut across organizations.

Overview of TA Process

High School for At-Risk Students. This organization engaged in roughly a one-year process for TA. The participant first reached out for TA from Iowa ACEs 360 after viewing *Paper Tigers*, a film about a high school that became trauma informed. The participant reported that the process of TA was very collaborative. She stated that she and the Iowa ACEs 360 representative (hereafter referred to as representative) met a few times just for the representative to learn more about the organization. The participant reported feeling that the representative cared about learning about the organization and used this information to tailor the trainings for their unique needs. The participant also stated that the representative did not just come in as if she were the expert, but rather worked with the participant to create and deliver training that was applicable to her staff. The collaboration also included co-facilitation of training/professional development, thus providing legitimacy for the content, science around ACES, as well as the participant as an active role in this process—building capacity. The representative also worked with the participant to create a survey to evaluate growth in understanding as a result of the training. The participant and representative worked together to add additional trainings throughout the year. The participant stated that once she and her staff received the information provided by the representative, they wanted to go deeper, “beyond the surface.” Together the participant and representative planned ways they could go deeper and really analyze their practice. Steps that this organization took included watching the movie *Resilience* together, incorporating additional professional development on the topic, and doing a book study of *Born for Love*. Through this process, the participant gradually took the lead and conducted the book study on her own, and has added additional profession development sessions. Her goal is to ensure that there is follow

through on all this information so that what practices and ways of being with students is in place for the long term.

Organization that Supports Refugees. This organization has engaged in a two-year process to integrate and translate knowledge and practices around ACEs and trauma informed practices into the refugee population they serve. The participant reached out to the representative via email and they met several times to discuss the participant's organization prior to any discussion of what steps to take. The representative was gathering information. This fit well with the participant's organization because everything in their organization is done by refugees for refugees. If they were to get outside help that just came in as the expert and said this is what to do, it would not have fit for them. In fact one of the first steps they took in their collaboration was to modify *Connections Matter* content to be applicable for their specific refugees. For instance, considerations had to be made about what language was used and whether or not it would be perceived well by the population. In order to make necessary and culturally applicable modifications to the *Connections Matter* curriculum, they (participant and the representative) worked with key stakeholders, those that were refugees who were also working for the organization. The employees were able to provide insight into cultural differences and ways to discuss the content that would resonate with the population. One important modification was the shift from use of mental health issues, to discussing the impact that stress has on one's body. Collaboratively and in an iterative process, they were able to modify the curriculum in a way that the participant stated, "the trial run was amazing!" She also stated that now they want to have a unit 2, so that they can learn a little more. The participant also stated that what they appreciated most about the representative was that "she was someone who was willing to listen to the community and not just say this is what I do, this is how you do it." Because of that we have been able to have a better impact in the community.

Creative Programming for Adolescents and Emerging Adults. This is the organization that is in the newest phase of TA. The representative has been working with this agency for the past six months. The participants (two people participated in the interview) stated that every person that they serve in their program has trauma. They have been working on becoming trauma informed, and participated in an 8 hour long training. In the training they learned about Iowa ACEs 360 and reached out for assistance. They first held several meetings in which the representative listened and learned more about their program. Together they (participants and representative) decided on a course of action that they wanted to take. Their focus was on building resilience and relationships. To accomplish this, the representative worked with the participants to plan a family engagement night with their creative programming. At this event they debuted their new social connections survey, to assess for positive relationships in the youth they serve as well. Given that this is a newer partnership, the participants started talking about some projects they have in mind that the representative doesn't even know about yet, but that they would like TA for. They report appreciate for the representative's flexibility and demeanor. They stated that it works well for them and that they are looking forward to continued work together.

Iowa ACEs 360 Representative. The representative talked about the purpose behind the TA she provides as well as the support her organization is given to be able to build capacity in other organizations. When asked about her process, she stated that her

first step is to sit with people from the organizations and learn from them. She stated that she “has to have a baseline understanding of the community” before she could do work or even know what TA she can provide. She stated that a one size approach does not fit all organizations. She also stated that some curriculum she uses has core information that is foundational, but does need to be modified so that it can be heard and applied by the audience it is delivered to. Core curriculum has included *Connections Matter* as well as *ACEs 101*. The representative shared how each partnership was collaborative and really spent time looking at ways to develop champions and expertise to infuse this information and practices within the organization. She sees her role as building capacity once she has the baseline understanding of their organization and their needs. Successful TA for her is “once I can step back and let them run with it, it feels like they have made good progress.” When asked how she learned of this approach, she stated that it has been informed by ACEs and trauma informed practices. She said she has learned to be intentional about building relationships and getting the right type of information to make the collaboration be as impactful for the organizations as possible.

Themes Across Organizations and Processes. There were six themes that cut across all experiences: 1) TA was a collaborative process, 2) information was gathered from key stakeholders to make decisions, 3) content provided by TA was key to successful implementation, 4) there is a process by which TA gradually and naturally comes to an end, 5) organizations once introduced to this want more, and 6) satisfaction with the overall process and impact it has had on their organization.

First, collaboration was key to all organizations and something that they all stated as a reason for why they have been able to successfully implement the content and practices they developed through TA. Participants reported that through their relationship building and planning together, that they were able to get the content and programming they needed to reach their populations, thus making it more impactful and useful.

Second, information was gathered from key stakeholders. Each organization spoke about the need to have those that they worked with or serve have a voice in this process. They knew that if it was just someone coming in and saying this is how it is done, would not work from them. The representative knew this and was intentional about getting to learn more about the organization and learn from their key stakeholders prior to developing a plan or goals. Most organizations stated how this was essential for the effectiveness of their programming.

Third, the content provided by the representative, whether it was *Connections Matter*, *ACEs 101*, or the professional development provided, provided a baseline understanding to get all staff of the organization on the same page. Being on the same page helped the organization to be able to move forward with implementation and plan additional steps to integrate this information and processes into their organization.

Fourth, the first two organizations demonstrate that they are in the process of champion development and have the capacity to continue to move the work they started through the TA. The representative stated that a goal of hers is to make sure that capacity and champions are built. The building of capacity and champions enables organizations to continue to move the work forward that they started with the representative and ensure that it is sustainable. The first two organizations learned a process to help them integrate this information, whether it is ways to modify language to make it applicable or where to look to find content for professional development or book studies. Personnel in these

agencies reported taking ownership and being able to move forward with their goals in their own right-capacity building.

Fifth, organizations will want more. While this may seem contradictory to the fourth theme, it actually builds off of it. As with the school, the organization that supports refugees, and the creative programming organization, once they have started on this path of knowledge building, they want to go deeper. They feel a sense of urgency to move forward and do more. They want to apply it or create additional modules or ways to have this reach even more of the people they serve. All of the participants were committed to their work and the betterment of the populations they serve. The participant from the school stated, “We are changing lives here,” the participant whose organization supports refugees stated that “we are changing the conversation,” and the creative programming organization stated that they are “transforming youth through art.” All of these are action items. All the participants are motivated for change and are committed to going deeper, learning more, and doing what is best for those that they serve. The TA they received is supporting these efforts.

Lastly, all organizations stated that they were satisfied with the TA provided and that it has helped them to reach those they serve. Perhaps it is unsurprising that each of these organizations that serve at-risk or high-risk populations are innately attuned to the fact that those they serve have experienced trauma. The TA they received was provided by someone whose philosophy for delivering TA is informed by trauma informed practices. The trauma informed perspective is not about having a prescribed way of interacting with everyone. The TA that was delivered was intentionally collaborative, focused on building relationships, and centered around listening to the needs of that specific organization prior to any action steps. Participants from each organization stated how this process made a difference and that it positively impacted the outcomes they experienced.

Conclusions

After examining the definition of technical assistance (i.e. sharing information and expertise, instruction, skills training, transmission of working knowledge) and what the purpose is to build organizational capacity and support program implementation, the experiences of these participants and the six themes align with the definition and purpose of TA. This alignment reflects the positive outcomes each organization reported as a result of the TA that was provided. This report demonstrates that TA processes for organizations to become trauma informed mirrors best practices within trauma informed. The results of this report indicate that there is not a silver bullet for how to provide TA. TA requires time to build relationships, listening to understand, collaborating together to set goals, and work to create champions to ensure the work they have created together has positive outcomes associated and is sustained overtime.

References

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