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Publisher Routledge

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Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792306944>

Promoting Strengths, Prevention, Empowerment, and Community Change Through Organizational Development: Lessons for Research, Theory, and Practice

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Online publication date: 25 January 2011

To cite this Article Evans, Scotney D. , Prilleltensky, Ora , McKenzie, Adrine , Prilleltensky, Isaac , Noguera, Debbie , Huggins, Corinne and Mescia, Nick(2011) 'Promoting Strengths, Prevention, Empowerment, and Community Change Through Organizational Development: Lessons for Research, Theory, and Practice', *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 39: 1, 50 – 64

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10852352.2011.530166

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2011.530166>

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Promoting Strengths, Prevention, Empowerment, and Community Change Through Organizational Development: Lessons for Research, Theory, and Practice

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SPEC Learning and Changing by Doing is a three-year, action research, and organizational change project designed to ultimately promote social justice and well-being in the community. SPEC is an acronym that stands for Strengths, Prevention, Empowerment, and Community Change. The project consists of five organizations tackling internal organizational change in order to better promote justice and well-being in their respective constituencies. In this article we present a formative evaluation of this multi-case study of organizational change in human services. This article contributes to the empirical and theoretical literature on organizational change in the nonprofit human service milieu.

KEYWORDS *community change, empowerment, organization development, prevention, promoting strengths*

Thousands of human service workers are deployed in our communities through organizations funded by well-meaning philanthropic agencies and donors. They dedicate themselves tirelessly to helping others every day, and care deeply about the well-being of the people and communities they serve. However, human service organizations (HSOs) cannot promote

This research is made possible through funding from The Children's Trust.

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well-being in the community through services alone; advocacy, prevention, community empowerment and social action are also warranted. HSOs and the agencies that fund them can better connect the service-oriented work of their organizations to the structural and systemic factors that create problems for their constituents. They must build on existing individual and community assets, promote community voice and power, and play a larger role in prevention and social change (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006; Brady & Tchume, 2009).

This article describes the formative stage of a three-year action research project designed to help HSOs and funding agencies rethink their role in communities. The *Miami SPEC: Learning and Changing by Doing* project seeks to promote social justice and well-being in the community of Miami, Florida. Our guiding framework, SPEC, is an acronym that stands for Strengths, Prevention, Empowerment, and Community Change (Prilleltensky, 2005). The project consists of five organizations learning together with university-based researchers and tackling internal change in their respective organizations in order to better promote justice and well-being in their constituencies. Below we outline the SPEC conceptual framework as an alternative guiding paradigm for human services and present formative findings from the initial stage of this project. We focus on how the organizations in this study are attempting to change internal organizational conditions and finish with lessons to be drawn from the first phase of the project.

WHY IS CHANGE NEEDED?

Millions of dollars are spent in our communities each year with little impact on the social conditions that continue to create problems for individuals and families. Needs assessments are conducted, programs and services are envisioned, proposals are funded, and interventions are delivered. Yet, the problems endure. In our view, the trouble is that most human service practice is designed to be ameliorative rather than transformative (Evans, Hanlin, & Prilleltensky, 2007). The term *ameliorative* refers to an approach to health, human, and community services that cares for individuals who have already been afflicted by some psychological, physical, or social ailment. This paradigm is a composite of several values, beliefs and practices that predominate in helping professions and attendant institutions (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). Ameliorative, individual-level interventions can do little to address the larger social and economic forces that influence the well-being of individuals (Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999; Smedley & Syme, 2000; Syme, 2000).

A *transformative* approach to human services, on the other hand, suggests a role for human service organizations in promoting community, equality, and solidarity (Mullaly, 1997). Under this paradigm, human service organizations are agents or mediators of community and social change

through prevention, empowerment approaches, community building, policy advocacy, and social action. A shift from amelioration to transformation in the human service approach is sorely needed as a “focus on services will never be sufficient to address fundamental societal issues” (Himmelman, 1996, p. 25). This shift can also make economic sense. A recent report suggests that every dollar invested in advocacy and organizing work (\$20.4 million total), returned \$89 in benefits for North Carolina communities (Ranghelli & Craig, 2009).

As we have described in previous papers (Prilleltensky, 2005; Evans et al., 2007), traditional human service practice is limited due to problems with the timing and targets of interventions and the level of affirmation and engagement of clients and community members. Too often, human service funding and the practice it supports is too little (focused on individuals while ignoring social context), too late (reactive), deficit-oriented, and disempowering. We seek fundamental change in HSOs so that practice is strength-based, preventative, and empowering with strategies focused on social change.

THE SPEC FRAMEWORK

The SPEC project is based on the premise that a comprehensive approach to the promotion of well-being must attend to four complementary intervention domains: capabilities, time, participation, and ecology (Prilleltensky, 2005; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006). These domains can be used to analyze community organizations’ efforts to promote well-being. The SPEC framework can help tear down the “conceptual wall” described by Delpeche and colleagues (2003) by offering a conceptual model of integrative practice that has real utility for human service practice.

A myriad of factors operating at the individual, organizational, and extra-organizational levels affect the SPEC profile of an organization. Employee skills, organizational climate, and level of funding are examples that can act as either barriers or facilitators to SPEC. This study highlights the fact that the ability of organizations to practice SPEC in the community is predicated on certain organizational conditions. For example, it is difficult to imagine how an organization can empower community members when its own employees lack voice and choice in their daily work. Constructing an organizational SPEC profile and identifying the specific barriers and facilitators that impede or promote SPEC practices can help organizations move toward the promotion of social justice and well-being.

THE PROJECT

The SPEC Learning and Changing by Doing project is a three-year action research partnership between university researchers and five community

organizations. The five participating nonprofit organizations either fund or deliver services to children and families in a large metropolitan area. They vary in several ways including size, budget, scope, and the services they offer. We work closely with these organizations to evaluate the extent to which their practice and policies align with SPEC principles and then plan and implement organizational change. We engage the men and women working in these settings in a process whereby they learn SPEC principles and lead a process of change aimed at making their agencies and the field in general more aligned with SPEC principles and practices.

The Intervention and Theory of Change

Figure 1 portrays our intervention components and theory of change. We believe that there is a set of organizational preconditions for transformative practice. These preconditions include generic organizational conditions such as a healthy organizational climate and sufficient resources. Additionally, there are specific preconditions in organizations that promote critical practice, such as an orientation towards social justice and empowerment and the necessary enabling structures and resources to support critical practice. To help build on or create these preconditions in our participating organizations, our research team utilizes training, consultation, organizational development, action research, and professional development strategies.

SPEC TRAINING

Each organization has 2–4 staff participating in a training cohort for graduate credit from a major university. Classes are held twice a month for 3 hours each over 13 weeks (semester). Each class session includes lectures, group discussions, and activities that allow participants the opportunity to reflect on SPEC principles and practices in their daily work and in the larger community. Their learning is supplemented with regularly assigned reading,

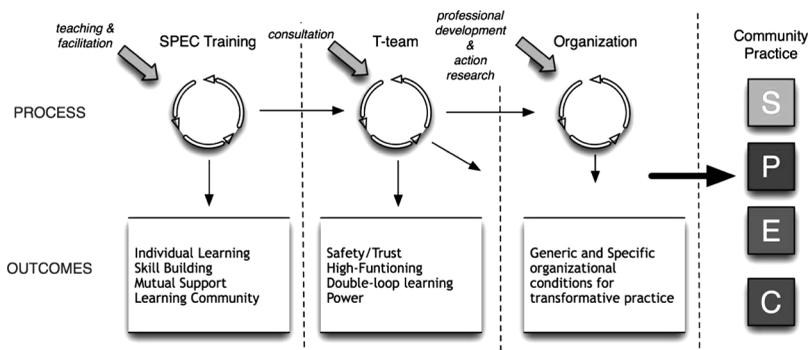


FIGURE 1 Miami SPEC Project theory of change.

presentations, and written assignments. Members of this cohort also play key roles as part of the transformation teams (T-team).

TRANSFORMATION TEAMS (T-TEAMS)

Training cohort members have formed T-teams in each organization that are diverse and representative of the organization as a whole. The role of the T-team is to assess the SPEC profile of the organization, identify targets for change, and guide efforts to create and sustain change. On average, these groups meet every other week for one to two hours.

CONSULTATION

A research team member meets regularly with each organization's T-team to provide support related to implementing SPEC principles and practice. We also consult with leadership and others individually or in small groups. As consultants, we help the organizations reflect on their processes and practices and offer useful resources to help in the change effort.

ACTION RESEARCH AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

One of the core features of this project is the belief that organizational practice can be improved through ongoing learning and problem solving. By engaging collaboratively with organizations we help them to develop practical and timely solutions and diffuse knowledge, principles, and practices.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This project uses an action research framework to contribute to and learn from this local effort and to reveal the process of organizational transformation. By focusing on organizations attempting change, we can maximize the chances for understanding how this type of change happens. In this formative evaluation we focus on two specific research questions: (1) What is changing in each organization? (2) What are the "lessons learned" to date in helping us to advance the project and our understanding of organizational change and organizational theory?

METHODOLOGY

The central methodology driving this project is action research: inquiry that transactionally arises from the very practice of intervention (Schon, 1983). The investigators have joined with the five participating organizations to

facilitate and understand organizational change so as to better promote community development and well-being.

METHOD

The overall research project employs a mixed method approach that allows for the close examination of complex organizational processes and facilitates validation of the data through triangulation (Denscombe, 1998). For the formative evaluation described in this article, however, we are focusing on the participant-researcher gathered qualitative aspects of the project to paint a rich picture of the early stages of this project. Researchers gathered organizational notes, meeting minutes, and documented organizational efforts in the SPEC class, T-teams, and other organizational contexts through field notes.

APPROACH TO DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was ongoing during data collection, using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data were analyzed and reduced to identify central themes, ideas, beliefs, values, concerns, and other issues. Initial categories were developed using the SPEC conceptual framework and other categories were developed as they emerged.

FORMATIVE FINDINGS

Promoting SPEC Principles in Organizations: What is Changing?

The five organizations participating in the SPEC project are in the formative stages of changing their organizations. As reflected in our theory of change (Figure 1), this project targets change at multiple levels of analysis in the hopes of ultimately affecting the way they practice in and with the community. While we acknowledge that this type of organizational transformation takes time, these organizations are making some headway in the first year of the project. In this section, we report on changes taking place on three levels: (1) the SPEC training class, (2) the organizational T-teams, and (3) the organizations. We also present some of the challenges that our participating organizations have experienced as they attempt to create change. Findings presented in this section derive from data from our training sessions and ongoing consultation with each organization.

THE SPEC TRAINING CLASS: DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Participants in the training class report gaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between individual and societal well-being and have begun to

think about what that means for their organizations. Additionally, participants have gained knowledge of organizations, organizational change, and have developed practical skills for facilitating discussion and collaborative process.

While these specific learning outcomes for individual participants in the training class are important, we are also witnessing the emergence of what Lave and Wenger (1990) call a community of practice. Participants come to class each session armed with new knowledge generated by their attempts to put course learning to use in their organizations. Participants exchange experiences and ideas about their practice of creating change in their organizations. This process is important to the development and sharing of techniques and strategies, but more importantly, it is shaping their thinking about healthy organizational process and the importance of transformative practice. While each training session offers content with related readings and discussion, it is clear that the participants most value the collegiality, discussions, and learning shared with the other participants. In year two of the class, we intend to build on and nurture this community of practice model.

T-TEAMS: DEVELOPING STRUCTURES FOR DIALOGUE, REFLECTION, LEARNING AND ACTION

At this stage of the project, all five organizations have established T-teams in their organizations and developed norms for participation and group process. Participants describe these new organizational structures as the place where learning, reflection, and honest and open dialogue can happen. The meetings provide support, protected space for dialogue, and opportunities for members to increase their understanding of organizational issues and strategies for improvement. T-teams are promoting group processes that are interactive and participatory. One executive director referred to her organizational T-team as “the group she has always wanted” in her organization. Another director remarked that it was great to see “staff members who had been previously disengaged actively participating in bringing about change in the organization.” Participants report that T-team members are developing facilitation, discussion, and collaboration skills in the process getting to “experience and be part of a collaborative environment.” The fact that these teams have been established and legitimized by leadership in the organizations is a sizeable “small win” for these participating organizations.

CLARIFYING ORGANIZATIONAL TARGETS FOR CHANGE

All but one of the organizations has established a clear initial focus for their change efforts. All of these targets are “transactional” in nature in that they are focused more on foreground organizational factors (climate) rather than background (culture) (Burke, 2002). Organizations are targeting change in

staff relations, communication, cross-team collaboration, and trust. While these organizational factors surface as important issues to tackle, change in these conditions may not make much a difference unless the underlying culture that supports them is addressed. The challenge for these organizations now is to get beyond thinking of organizational improvement as their change destination and instead, deeply consider as change targets the elements of organizational culture, capacity, and support that get in the way of transformative practice.

RIPPLE EFFECTS ON ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

T-teams are enabling structures for participation, reflection, and learning (Evans, 2005). They offer safe space and protected time to engage in democratic dialogue about the direction and strategy of the organization. Some members who normally would not have the chance to step outside of their job description are able to contribute to and learn from the T-team process. Broad participation brings invaluable perspectives and helps diffuse the change message through all departments in a given organization. Our participating organizations are currently moving their processes and learning out into their larger organizations. They are trying to change the climate of their organizations with regard to participation and communication.

Some T-teams in our participating organizations are taking on the responsibility to develop and implement all-staff discussions and trainings on organizational and SPEC-related topics using participatory discussion methods. In one example, a T-team at one organization led an all-staff discussion where one of the managers tried to shut down a comment by exclaiming “you can’t say that here.” This statement was at odds with the environment that the T-team was trying to create, and the context allowed for honest exploration into what that type of sentiment says about their organizational culture and the type of organization they want to be. If sustained, these new practices have the potential to change the culture of participation and communication in these organizations, ultimately changing the norms or standards of their organizational system (Burke, 1994; Dimock, 1992).

BARRIERS TO CHANGE

Our participating organizations face significant challenges in trying to transform their organizations. Indisputably, the biggest barrier to their change efforts is the current economic context. All of these organizations are currently facing tremendous challenges in securing the resources they need to operate at full capacity. They have had to endure funding cuts that have led to staff cuts or reduction in hours. For leadership in these organizations, this challenge can consume their entire focus and leave little energy for guiding or inspiring a change process. Additionally, each of our organizations

is at different levels of readiness for change. The T-teams face the challenge of creating readiness across the organization to be able to fully act on identified targets of change. We will use the next semester of the training class to openly identify barriers and drivers of change in each organization and develop strategies for reducing restraining forces and increasing driving forces (Lewin, 1951).

DISCUSSION OF LESSONS LEARNED

In line with our formative evaluation goal for this article, we organize the discussion in terms of three main lessons: (a) lessons for promoting SPEC principles in organizations, (b) lessons for living and practicing SPEC principles in organizations and communities, and (c) lessons for studying, measuring, and theorizing SPEC principles and practices.

Lessons for Promoting SPEC Principles in Organizations

As evidenced by the participants in the training and by consultations with the key executives in the various organizations, there is a sense of progress toward aligning the organizations with SPEC principles and practices. Whereas each organization is advancing at its own pace, they are all satisfied with the changes the SPEC project is bringing about in their agencies.

In our view, the modest progress we have achieved in the first 20 months may be accounted for by the synergy of multiple interventions. The main intervention method is our biweekly, three hour training sessions in which participants learn SPEC principles and practices and in which they build a cross-organization community of practice (Wenger, 1998). We often hear participants comment on “how nice it is to have a place where we can think and reflect on our practice.” The training meets several needs: intellectual curiosity, sense of belonging, common cause, sharing, professional development, and commitment. Participants nurture each other and learn from each other, as manifested in the transfer of knowledge from one organization to another. Participants develop knowledge and practices related to SPEC practices and they share them freely with others. Recently, participants began planning for “life after the project.” The grant for the SPEC project, which lasts three years, will come to an end in about 12 months. The inter-organizational group already contemplates ways of staying connected and disseminating the project.

This community of practice is designed to bring about changes in each of the five participating organizations. This is the role of the T-teams. These three interventions: training, T-team, and consultation, work synergistically to make sure the project is focused and sustained. In addition, our team also provides the occasional professional development to the various

organizations and shares data emerging from the project. In combination, these five interventions help us enhance the reflective capacities of our partners.

Our second lesson in this category is about “balancing acts.” Each T-team strives to achieve a balance among competing values: (a) attention to process versus attention to outcomes, (b) attention to dynamics within the T-team versus attention to organizational dynamics, (c) attention to internal organizational issues versus external practice in the community, (d) focus on a few specific issues to tackle versus focus on multiple yet unfocused issues, and finally (e) legitimacy of T-team to assert leadership over initiatives versus needing to obtain legitimacy from the entire organization for each decision. What we learned by observing these five balancing acts is that there is not a formula for achieving the right balance, but that there is a need to surface these issues in the T-team so that the group may choose wisely and reflectively on its course of action. These five tensions are reflective of two main roles for groups and leaders in the literature: attention to tasks and attention to relationships. Effective teams pay attention to both (Chidambaram & Bostrom, 1997).

The third and final lesson in this group refers to leader involvement. Without leader endorsement, participation, and affirmation, projects of this kind do not go very far. Comparing this venture to previous ones in which we did not make it a requirement that leaders get involved in meaningful ways, this is much smoother sailing. Of the five participating organizations, two CEOs attend the training, along with senior staff from the remaining three organizations. For those in which the CEOs do not participate, we make it a point to keep them informed and involve them in quarterly meetings.

Lessons for Living and Practicing SPEC Principles in Organizations and Communities

A lesson we learned and relearned in this process is that the experience of workers *within* an organization is closely tied to their practice in the community. Our strong hypothesis is that the practice of SPEC in the community depends greatly on the lived experience of SPEC practices within each organization. Internal dynamics have a direct effect on external practices.

This realization prompted us to develop an initial theory of organizational conditions leading to SPEC practice in the community. Our data and existing literature reveal that there are two kinds of necessary organizational conditions: generic and specific. *Generic* conditions refer to factors and dynamics that must exist in all types of healthy organizations. *Specific* conditions, in turn, refer to the unique constellation of factors that would lead an organization to not just any healthy practices, but to SPEC practices in the community.

GENERIC CONDITIONS

The literature on organizations is awash with theories on what makes organizations effective and successful. Human service organizations, like any organization, require some basic qualities in order to function well and be productive. Without these basic conditions, organizations are inefficient, ineffective, and unpleasant places to work. Based on our findings, these generic conditions can be lumped into two general categories: climate and resources.

The health of an organization depends on the extent to which it fares in creating an organizational climate that is effective, reflective, and affective (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006). An *effective* environment refers to a workplace that meets its goals in serving both its own workers and the larger community. Keys to effective environments include organizational adherence to practices of accountability, responsibility, efficiency, and communication. A *reflective* environment is one in which organizations take time to think meaningfully about larger issues that affect the organization and the community. In reflective organizations there is value placed on learning. Such organizations often provide opportunities for employees to develop their skills and talents (i.e., first order reflection) and critical thinking about organizational values, vision, and mission (i.e., second order reflection) (Perkins et al., 2007). An *affective* environment is one that attends to workers' feelings of acceptance, appreciation, and affirmation (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006). When employees feel safe and respected, it has positive implications for their well-being, level of social support, and decision-making power (Marmot, 2004; Warr, 1999). Failing to address the affective needs of workers has negative implications for worker satisfaction and ultimately on quality of services delivered.

On a more basic level, organizations also need sufficient human, organizational, and financial resources to maintain their operations and programming. They need an adequate number of workers with the necessary skills, dedication, motivation, and initiative. Sufficient organizational resources such as clear goals, adequate physical space, and effective staffing patterns are also needed. Most importantly, human service organizations need sufficient financial resources to support positions, operations, and programs to get the job done.

SPECIFIC CONDITIONS

While generic conditions are necessary for SPEC practice in the community, they are not sufficient. Organizations also require specific conditions in order to promote social change. Specific conditions can also be described in two broad categories: consciousness and critical capacity. *Consciousness* refers to the shared beliefs, assumptions, and overall orientation of the organization. In contrast to issues of organizational climate, consciousness

is about a shared organizational worldview. In our view, the ability of an organization to play a role in social change depends on the presence of (a) a justice orientation, (b) an ecological orientation, (c) a collaborative orientation, and (d) a shared awareness of power.

An organization that espouses a justice orientation considers issues of fairness and justice in understanding community problems and devising solutions. This can be contrasted with a service or charity orientation. An organization that has an ecological orientation considers personal, organization, and systemic factors in understanding problems and devising solutions. This is contrasted with an orientation that is too focused on individuals or families to the neglect of context. A collaborative-oriented organization believes in building relationships with other agencies, groups, and coalitions to create a movement, and supports other groups without trying to own every issue or campaign. This orientation is preferred to one that is competitive or self-preserving. Lastly, organizations that have a shared understanding of the role of power in promoting or inhibiting well-being are more apt to implement interventions that attempt to alter power relations in communities. These four elements of consciousness are reflected in organizational values, mission, vision, organizational discourse, and theory of change.

An organization with critical capacity has the requisite organizational structures and human and financial resources in place to support transformative practice. It has the ability to act on the shared social justice values of the organization. Critical capacity starts with a sense of collective efficacy: shared beliefs in the organization's collective power to produce transformative results in the community alone or in partnership with other groups and organizations. "People's shared beliefs in their collective efficacy influence the types of futures they seek to achieve through collective action" (Bandura, 2000, p. 76). Additionally, organizations require program staff and leadership that have knowledge, skills, consciousness, and commitment necessary to engage transformative practice coupled with active participation of funders supporting their social change mission. Lastly, organizations that exemplify SPEC practices need enabling structures that support inter-organizational collaboration, meaningful constituent involvement, and second order reflection and learning.

Lessons for Studying and Measuring SPEC Principles and Practice

We have used quantitative and qualitative measures to gauge the extent to which organizations engage in SPEC practices within their organizations and outside in the community. So far, we have been disappointed with our quantitative efforts. In a previous similar project (Evans et al., 2007; Bess, Prilleltensky, Perkins, & Collins, 2009), we developed a questionnaire that was very comprehensive but too long to obtain a large enough sample. In this project, we tried two versions, a long and a short one, but in both cases the data were hard to decipher. After several collective *mea culpa*, we came to the conclusion that

it would be nearly impossible to capture in a short questionnaire uniform understandings of strengths, prevention, empowerment, and community change approaches to elicit valid and reliable responses from participants. Our team began piloting a structured focus group we call the SPEC check. This tool assesses the extent to which programs in organizations are aligned with the SPEC principles. We have not reported these findings in this article, but the initial reports indicate that the process of determining how SPEC-like projects are, is illuminating and invigorating to the people from the organization involved in it. We are fast coming to the conclusion that the reality of SPEC we are trying to measure should be a collective one, arrived at through dialogue, and not a private one arrived at through solitary reflection.

CONCLUSION

To be sure, this type of transformation in human service organizations is difficult and slow to unfold. Creating lasting change in organizations requires creating the necessary conditions for change, clearly defining the problem and targets for change, and developing appropriate actions for change (Evans & Loomis, 2009). These are challenging tasks in the context of dwindling resources on one hand and increased need for services in the other. The five organizations participating in the SPEC project are taking on this challenge and experiencing some organizational and collective benefits resulting from their targeted action. Most of the organizational changes we are witnessing are “small wins” (Weick, 1984) that can potentially create the organizational conditions necessary for real transformation in the way they practice in the community. But this will take persistent and focused efforts by the T-teams in the coming months and beyond.

Through this work, we have become increasingly focused on the necessary organizational conditions for SPEC practice. We believe that creating the generic and specific organizational preconditions outlined in this article can lay the groundwork for more critical practice in the community (Butcher, Banks, Henderson, & Robertson, 2007). This research and action partnership can increase our understanding of these preconditions and the best strategies for organizational development and change toward these ends. We will apply the lessons learned from the first phase of the project to help foster continued learning and change in this thriving community of practice. We invite others to follow along and join in the theory and practice developments related to SPEC at our project Web site: www.specway.org.

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