



Perspective From The Field

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Perspective from the Field

Ira M. Schwartz, MSW

When I was in the School of Social Work at the University of Washington in the mid 1960s pursuing an MSW, child welfare was considered to be one of the most prestigious areas of practice. Because Child welfare was considered such a noble and desirable field, there were no problems attracting the "best and the brightest" graduates from schools of social work.

Child welfare was also a priority at the national level. For example, scholarships were available from the U.S. Children's Bureau and from NIMH that encouraged promising undergraduates to seek graduate professional training in social work in exchange for commitments to work in the child welfare field. These resources helped insure that child welfare had a professional and well educated workforce. In addition, federal resources were invested in child welfare research and demonstration projects in order to advance knowledge in the field.

Today, all of these things are a distant memory. The federal government is out of the business of providing financial aid as an incentive to encouraging people to pursue graduate professional social work education and to practice in the child welfare field. Virtually no federal resources are being invested in child welfare research. Also, what was once considered to be an "elite" field of professional practice is now plagued by scandals, unprofessional practices, class action lawsuits, poor working conditions and inadequately trained staff. While some state and county child welfare systems may not be the target of class action litigation or media exposes, no jurisdiction in the country is recognized as being a model jurisdiction.

The crisis in child welfare is so serious that policy

makers and child welfare administrators and practitioners are willing to implement almost any policy or practice that "sounds good" or appears to be enlightened even if they are untested and could be potentially dangerous. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s family preservation programs sprung up throughout the country. In fact, they were so popular and had such broad support that such programs were adopted as federal policy and backed up with considerable federal financial support. This happened despite the fact that there was no credible scientific evidence that family preservation programs worked. Moreover, subsequent research revealed that not only did family preservation programs not work as intended but, in some instances, were dangerous and put vulnerable children in harms way.

Obviously, the challenges confronting child welfare systems in the United States will not be easily solved and will require a variety of approaches. There are many who feel that child welfare services will not be improved without additional funding. While more funds may be needed, there is no substitute for a well trained and properly supervised work force. An important component for developing and maintaining such a work force is to continuously expose child welfare administrators and practitioners to promising developments in the field. This special issue of *The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education* is one important resource that can and should be used as part of the process for improving the skills and knowledge base of child welfare officials and professional staff. Equally important, it is full of information that can be readily applied and will benefit vulnerable children and families.

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Issue Overview

Michael J. Kelly, MSSW, PhD, LCSW; Paul A. Sundet, PhD

Introduction

Many years have been poured into developing the cooperation with the state and the regional quality improvement centers (QIC) required for our professional application. We thought that a description of some of the features might interest others, which led to approaching the Journal's editor with an article idea. That idea was broadened into a multi-author review of the Children's Bureau regional funding approach, the Southern Region Quality Improvement Center's development of regional representation and state to state coordination activities, and independent articles on the four projects.

These articles provide a unique opportunity to highlight many topics which we believe will interest everyone in the social work professional continuing education community. They cover only the beginning efforts to improve first line supervision, reduce preventable worker turn over, and strengthen desirable outcomes in public child welfare. We cannot present outcome data but we feel the implementation and coordination issues alone will be of great interest. The reader will find in the project descriptions, initial evaluation plans, and required project cooperation much to think about including (1) devolution of federal-state responsibility (2) multi-state regional cooperation (3) examples of state agency-university cooperation, (4) the difficulties evaluating applied programs in the turbulent world of state services, and (5) the importance of child welfare supervision as a specialized area of continuing education.

Supervision in Public Child Welfare

Historically, front line supervisors have been the principal culture carriers in child welfare. It has been this position that has most immediately set the practice expectations for workers and dictated the organizational atmosphere. And by tracing the role emphasis of supervisors, one can chart the periodic pendulum swings that have taken place in public child welfare expectations.

At its inception, child welfare practice attempted to meld well being and protection into a therapeutic intervention based on ego psychology and humanist values. Parenting deficits were viewed as aberrations that could be rectified through a combination of insight and

relearning of normative standards. The worker was an agent of planned change, both mobilizing resources and guiding behavioral modification. Only when these efforts failed did separation take place. The supervisor was expected to guide workers through this complex change process. But as familial disruption became more pronounced caseloads grew and protection standards changed and the emphasis shifted from client change to client compliance.

Normative standards of child protection were more absolute and non-adherence to these standards had legal consequences. The emphasis moved to investigation, documentation and procedural accountability. The role of the supervisor shifted from setting clinical practice expectations to overseeing management conformity. Technical and procedural remedies were established with far less reliance on clinical judgment. Behavioral change interventions, while not abandoned, became the province of extra-organizational experts who operated in a semi-autonomous manner outside the supervisory lines.

Now, with the renewed emphasis on accreditation and driven by concerns arising from the Adoption and Safe Families Act, the pendulum has once again reversed itself. Issues of managerial compliance with regulations still remain paramount supervisory concerns but recognition that the worker's role must encompass more than investigation and surveillance is more widespread. More sophisticated standards of risk and improbability are being required by the courts and the general public. Accountability for clinical judgment is expected and the teaching/modeling role of the supervisor for social work practice is once again taking on high importance.

The professional development problem arising from this action/reaction sequence in trends is that many of the supervisory cadre once trained in clinical techniques have left the public child welfare arena by retirement, opting for the private sector or moving to public agencies more compatible with their training and interests. Most of the current public agency supervisors in this field have been hastily inducted into the compliance culture but have little formal orientation to the daily therapeutic aspects of child welfare work.

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Consequently targeting supervisory development is both logical and essential if the organizational culture is to move toward a treatment orientation that adds more value to the work.

Federal Responsibility and Multi-state Projects

The Children's Bureau funding to establish the regional quality improvement centers (QIC) is well described in their article. The Southern Regional QIC work is extensively documented in their article. Together they set the stage for the state projects. Discussing federal devolution, Green and Edwards (1998) challenged continuing education professionals to be 'creative problems solvers.' Just such an opportunity occurred in the 10 state SRQIC which represents a funding intermediary. SRQIC's board of state child welfare and academics professionals brought to the table the issues of great importance to the practicing child welfare community. They identified the first line supervisor as a key element that could unify re-professionalization efforts such as accreditation, recruitment and retention and professional development of public child welfare workers.

Regional Cooperation in Development and Research

The four projects offer four different approaches to first line supervisory development and how, in turn, this will influence worker retention and child welfare outcomes. Behind the descriptions are a few hundred hard learned lessons. In some projects, the state is the grantee and they have invited their university partner. In others, the university is the grantee and they have sought the full involvement of their state child welfare agency.

The demands for a rigorous evaluation design in each project and the requirements for cooperation in a cross-project evaluation also surfaced a number of issues. Chief among these issues has been securing the approval of agency and university institutional review boards (IRB). The protection of human subject in research projects has been rocked by some notable failures followed by Federal sanctions of a number of university based medical programs. These sanctions resulted in feverish attempts to strengthen university IRBs. For those in the social and behavioral sciences, the

strengthen campus IRBs have proven themselves contentious as funds could be spent without approval. Rarely have IRBs faced the difficulties of dealing with agency data, developmental information of individual performance, and outcomes which might be less than flattering. All four projects required months to secure IRB approval and in some cases this resulted in drastic reduction of project implementation time.

The Turbulent World of State Services

Every state's budget woes have made the university and state partnerships difficult to implement. As we move into the second program year, several projects are facing entirely new partners from either the university, the state agency, or both. In some of the states, legislation and administrative changes have reorganized child welfare activities to other agencies and reduced the selected project agency's control over child welfare outcomes. Others have faced major changes in state level leadership.

Against these types of backdrops, the SRQIC has the unenviable task of insisting on comparability in measures, collection of base line data, and sharing of information between evaluation units. In addition, they are working with those implementing the training and development to insure that fidelity to the project model is maintained and documented.

Supervision Model Summary

Each of the project applicants was asked to define a "model" of supervisory practice to implement on a limited basis and to rigorously test its impact over a three-year demonstration period. While there can be some legitimate debate as to whether the approaches chose rise to the conceptual level of true models, each of the projects, has, within the reality constraints of their respective bureaucratic and political systems, attempted to define an approach to clinical practice supervision that is consistent with the expressed needs of the staff in that state and one that gives promise of producing the cultural change desired by Children's Bureau and the QIC Board. The following articles in the journal provide an extensive discussion of the "models" defined.

All five of the states that are partaking in this project are facing somewhat similar situations with relatively young and inexperienced staff at both the worker and

supervisory levels. Arkansas, for instance, defines an "experienced supervisor" as one who has had one year of paid tenure in that position. And in each jurisdiction what previous training has taken place has focused on rudimentary child protection, risk avoidance and procedural compliance. Thus the models proposed, in each instance, represent a significant anticipated departure from existing organizational culture as well as assuming change in the individual supervisor's behavior.

Associated with these models are necessary changes in organizational performance expectations and it remains unclear the degree to which the host structures are going to be willing and/or able to accommodate these changes.

Despite drawing on a mostly common and relatively limited professional literature base, the projects do, however, have unique and distinguishing characteristics. The models reflect the diversity of organizational structured and practices among the states in which child protective services range from highly specialized approaches emphasizing principally investigation and assessment with longer-term services contracted out (TN) to more generalist forms in which worker fulfill multiple roles simultaneously (AR). In all instances the model elected requires a close collaborative working relationship between the state agency and the school of social work. In some instances this was easily accomplished because of pre-existing ties (MO) and in other s (AL/MS) the logistics of the project required forging of new alliances.

Overview of the Evaluations

The evaluation research components of each state project are of particular interest. The Children's Bureau requirements for rigorous evaluation emphasize both the impact of each project's model and the process by which results are obtained. While outcomes are the focus of each projects evaluation, much of our efforts are to documentation of the within state processes and the cooperative processes with the SRQIC. Meanwhile, the QIC itself will be evaluated by a national contractor. The process evaluation of the QIC, while an important activity in answering the questions related to effectiveness of the funding and learning process, is beyond the immediate scope of this issue. The evaluation articles are companions to the four models and attempt to

demonstrate the challenges of evaluation of unique aspects of each project while simultaneously meeting the need to test each model against the other.

Leadership and the First Line Supervisor

A significant piece in this special issue concerns the challenges of transformational leadership. Kelly and Lauderdale attempt to frame the difficulties of state agency leadership in a time of enormous change. Using a global challenge framework, we review how the Survey of Organizational Excellence has enabled state agencies to encourage, strengthen, and reinforce shared leadership. Leadership, if it ever was, is no longer a province of those in the executive suite. Kanter (1979) notes both the importance of the first line supervisor as an employee's most important work relationship and as one of the least powerful positions in an organization. Using the SOE in the Missouri project and within other work, we seek to strengthen the first line supervisor's leadership role (Kelly and Lauderdale, 1999a, 1999b).

Conclusion

We are grateful to the Journal Editor for the opportunity to present a group of related papers which we believe will address a number of issues of importance to the social work professional continuing education community. We are further grateful to the group of anonymous reviewers whose contributions strengthen each article. This issue is a departure as the papers represent work in progress but the progress itself illuminates important points about professional continuing education. Each of us will find points within which reawaken memories of projects -- those we hoped would be effective but got 'derailed' by politics and those which were successful because things 'fell into place.'

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