



**Alabama-Mississippi Child Protective Service Casework Supervision Project**

<b>Journal:</b>	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
<b>Article Title:</b>	<i>Alabama-Mississippi Child Protective Service Casework Supervision Project</i>
<b>Author(s):</b>	<i>Kimberly K. Shackelford and Nancy G. Payne</i>
<b>Volume and Issue Number:</b>	<i>Vol. 6 No. 2</i>
<b>Manuscript ID:</b>	62040
<b>Page Number:</b>	40
<b>Year:</b>	2003

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work or its Center for Social Work Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at [www.profdevjournal.org](http://www.profdevjournal.org) contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

Copyright © by The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work’s Center for Social Work Research. All rights reserved. Printed in the U.S.A.

ISSN: 1097-4911

**URL: [www.profdevjournal.org](http://www.profdevjournal.org)**

**Email: [www.profdevjournal.org/contact](mailto:www.profdevjournal.org/contact)**

# AL-MS Child Protective Service Casework Supervision

*Kimberly K. Shackelford, MSW; Nancy G. Payne, MSW*

## The Development of the Project Design

The University of Alabama School of Social Work and the University of Mississippi Department of Social Work are working collaboratively with the corresponding state child welfare agencies and community partners in the development of learning laboratories for the improvement of child protective service casework supervision in Alabama and Mississippi. Alabama and Mississippi are states with significant need for improvement in services to families and children. Each state has long held the unenviable, but justified, reputation of trailing other states in the nation in desirable statistics, while leading the nation in many negative statistics that represent indicators of child well-being. However, each state recognizes the need for improved child protective services, and each state child protection agency has a reputation of working collaboratively with universities and community stakeholders to improve services to children and families.

There are some significant differences in the service delivery systems in Alabama and Mississippi. The Alabama child welfare system has been under a federal consent decree for more than ten years. Child welfare caseloads have been decreased, and child protective service worker and supervisory positions have increased in number. During initial discussions regarding the project, the Department of Human Resources in Alabama reported that there were more than 1,200 child welfare social workers in Alabama, with more than 500 social work and 100 supervisory positions designated to child protective services. At the beginning of this project, the Department of Human Services in Mississippi reported that there were 267 child welfare social workers in Mississippi providing protective and foster care services. Information given by each agency revealed caseloads in Mississippi were at least three times higher in Mississippi than in Alabama.

According to the University of Kentucky Child Protection Supervisory Survey conducted in September 2002, social workers and supervisors indicated a great need for additional training for child protective services

supervisors. Social workers reported feeling overwhelmed and indicated that supervisory support was frequently limited to triage or emergency functions, following specific directives, and administrative functions. Mississippi was the only state participating in this survey in which the majority of social worker respondents did not select the supervisor as a source of support. It was noted that 45% of the social workers participating in the survey stated that they most often turned to a co-worker or a peer for support, advice, or guidance on work-related issues. It was also noted that 24% of the workers responding had fewer than three years experience, and only 8% of the supervisors responding had fewer than seven years experience. In the words of one Alabama respondent to the University of Kentucky survey:

"I guess what I am aiming at is abolishing the 'us and them' mentality. This exists among workers and supervisors, as it does in any supervisory-subordinate relationship. By reducing this stigma, power and authority are not relinquished or abandoned, but a partnership is formed to allow a worker to feel better connected. In turn, the line worker will engender these feelings toward that population which he/she services. The end result, idealistically I suppose, would be stronger connections to the process of casework practice."

The University of Kentucky needs assessment was instrumental in the project design. The literature review on social work supervision done by the Southern Regional Quality Improvement Center for this project included a wealth of information that was also used to determine the Alabama-Mississippi project design. The impact of supervision on child welfare staff turnover, worker satisfaction, worker skill and client outcomes was well documented. It was also revealed that casework supervision models need to incorporate the development of a learning environment that promotes evidence-based practice. The literature review discussed the supervisor as being the key to acceptance of change and in the promotion of an organizational culture that is focused on client outcomes. The Alabama-Mississippi project has been designed to promote evidence-based

---

*Kimberly K. Shackelford, MSW, is Assistant Professor at the University of Mississippi.*

*Nancy G. Payne, MSW, is Instructor and Coordinator of Part-Time and Distance Education at the University of Alabama*

*Correspondence should be addressed to:*

*Kimberly K. Shackelford, E-mail: kshackel@olemiss.edu*

practice and to help supervisors understand their roles in effecting organizational change.

### Project Design

For the purpose of this project, structured casework supervision has been defined as: A well-defined series of activities purposefully conducted in the supervision of CPS workers designed to enhance workers' abilities to think critically and make good decisions regarding the assessment of their cases and application of information gained in their intervention, and to promote empirically-based practice. Shulman (1993) proposed that the quality and structure of the interaction between the supervisor and worker parallels that of the worker to the client family. This project has been designed such that learning lab leaders will model quality interaction with child protection casework supervisors that can then be used by supervisors when interacting with social workers. The project addresses changing the organizational culture in which supervisor and worker interactions take place. The goal is to create an organizational culture in which support, learning, clinical supervision and consultation are the norm.

Intervention and control groups have been selected in each state by the state child welfare agencies. Each group was determined by the respective child welfare agency to be matched as closely as possible. In Mississippi, the control group is a region located in the northwestern part of Mississippi and consists of 10 counties with 10 supervisors. The intervention group is a region located in north central Mississippi and consists of 10 counties with 10 supervisors. The intervention group in Alabama is 10 supervisors in Tuscaloosa, and the control group is 10 supervisors in Montgomery. The project is designed to offer the same learning lab experience to each supervisor in the intervention groups through interactive video. Key state trainers will be involved in the project design and will participate in the learning labs. The regional director/manager will participate in the learning lab experience in each of the intervention groups. Data will be compared from all groups regarding client outcomes, preventable worker turnover, worker self-efficacy, and worker and supervisor responses on a cultural organization survey. Supervisors in the intervention group will also be

involved in self-measurement done through individualized personal development plans based on child welfare supervisor competencies.

Data gathered from case reviews will also be compared regarding all groups. Each state has quality improvement reports that are compiled from thorough third-party case reviews. Data will be gathered regarding satisfactory investigations, satisfactory safety plans, satisfactory assessments, satisfactory service plans, successful/purposeful face-to-face contacts with clients, stress factors identified and addressed, and support services that are consistent with identified needs of clients. Alabama has been using the quality improvement reports for improvement of services for a longer amount of time than Mississippi. Mississippi has just recently begun to use the reports in the two groups involved in the research. The Hawthorne effect may occur, as supervisors will be aware that the quality improvement reports will be used to determine improvement in work with client families. Researchers will be aware that improvement may occur due to the review of any of the outcomes. All groups will be aware that client and worker outcome data will be used to determine the effectiveness of the learning labs. Any change that occurs due to this fact should occur for each of the groups. It is thought that the groups in the learning labs will be able to improve outcomes at a higher rate.

Contamination from information being shared among members of the intervention group and the control group may occur. However, the supervisors between the groups do not have regular contact. The regional directors in Mississippi have monthly contact at staff meetings. There may be some discussion about the project, but it not likely that the supervisors in the control group will gain the skills and knowledge the supervisors in the intervention group will gain by being in the learning labs. The learning labs are not designed such that the information will be easily transmitted to a person who was not present in the lab.

The state agencies have stated that if the learning labs prove successful, and they are able to provide the learning labs to other supervisors, the control groups for this project will be the first to receive the learning labs. The control groups will be praised for their participation in the research and complimented for their ability to

“see the big picture” of improvement in child welfare supervision. The project directors will continually keep the control group apprised of the progress by attending staff meetings to discuss progress on the project.

The unique approach involved in this project allows the supervisors to determine their own knowledge and skill needs, and allows the supervisors to shape the curriculum presented in the learning labs. The literature review revealed a lack of knowledge among professionals regarding the special needs of child welfare supervisors. During the pre-proposal stage of this project, child welfare supervisors in each state expressed views regarding previous training experiences on the topic of supervision as not being what they needed. It was determined that the supervisors would be involved from the beginning and throughout the life of the project in determining the instructional material and topics. The supervisors will be asked to give input regarding strengths and weaknesses of every aspect of the project.

Dialogic learning is at the heart of the learning lab design. The labs are being created through a participatory democracy. Brookfield (2002) discussed Erich Fromm's ideas regarding conditions and dispositions for dialogic learning. Brookfield (2002) stated that adult learners help each other learn because they regard their peer's learning as crucial to their own development. Brookfield quoted Fromm (1976):

They respond spontaneously and productively; they forget about themselves, about the knowledge, the positions they have. Their egos do not stand in their own way...they carefully respond to the other person and that person's ideas. They give birth to new ideas because they are not holding on to anything. (p. 42)

Brookfield (2002) stated that what is true for the democratic experiments is true for the adult classroom. Brookfield proposed that the degree of democracy in the adult classroom is measured by the amount of influence the adults have on the situation in which they find themselves. Brookfield also stated that when hard-fought decisions emerge from true dialogue, adult learners need to know that their decisions will have some effect, or they will not bother to participate. Learning must be meaningful and useful for the adult learner. The adult learners in the child welfare supervisor learning labs will have an effect on the curriculum

and the design of the model. Each supervisor will determine how the information presented and discussed will be used in each workplace. It is the belief of the project directors that new ideas will spring from dialogic learning. They also believe that the supervisors will actively participate and try new ideas in the workplace when they have been the originators of the ideas.

The learning labs are designed to promote life-long learning and establish intrinsic motivation to learn and self-educate. Tannenbaum (1997) used several studies to conclude that individuals may attend training, but their work environment can determine whether or not the new learning results in changed behavior. Tannenbaum also stated that the culture needs to be one in which individuals who apply new ideas and skills are recognized and rewarded for their changed behavior. The learning labs are designed to promote new ideas and skills being tried in the workplace and to promote supervisory use of outcome measurement related to the supervisor's new practices. It is built into the design that learning lab leaders will reward and recognize applied knowledge and skills, and that peers in the supervisory groups will support each other and supply recognition for the application of what is learned. The determination of outcomes to be measured will promote empirically based practices. Throughout the learning lab experience, supervisors will also be exposed to studies that discuss supervisory practices that have been empirically proven to produce positive results. The original design includes the use of a web-based supportive site for child-protective-service supervisors who are involved in the intervention groups. Many of the supervisors are isolated and need connection with their peers to support their growth. The web site will offer a discussion board, practice exercises, and supportive chat functions. The overall goal of the design is to create an environment in child welfare agencies that promotes lifelong learning, self-education, and recognition for the application of ideas learned in training and other educational experiences.

The cultural consensus model (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986) will be used to determine curriculum needs. This model is a systematic ethnographic technique that cognitively maps what the organizational culture is and provides a method to measure change

in organizations. The model has three underlying propositions. Individuals will have shared values and behaviors to the extent that they share agreement regarding culture. Cultural competence is reflected in the individual's knowledge of the culture, its domains, and the degree to which an individual behaves and thinks accordingly. The final proposition is that there is a culturally correct response that is derived from the shared culture. This model allows evaluation of the degree to which there is consensus regarding the culture. It also estimates the content that is shared and each individual's cultural competence.

### **Project Accomplishments**

The project began in October 2002. The first meeting of project partners included representatives from the Alabama School of Social Work, the Alabama Department of Human Resources, the University of Mississippi Department of Social Work, the Mississippi Department of Human Services, and the University of Kentucky College of Social Work. The partners discussed project goals, objectives, project design, evaluation and collaboration needed among partners. It is important to note that it has added to the success of this project to have representatives from each organization involved in the planning from the beginning of the project. In November 2002, work was done to develop common evaluation measures for cross-site evaluation among the four different Quality Improvement Center projects. It has also been helpful and informative to share ideas with the other project coordinators, evaluators, and child welfare agency representatives. The project has allowed for information-sharing among states. This has been accomplished through conference calls and meetings throughout this project year.

In February 2002, the cultural consensus model was applied to a group of MSW students who are employed by the Alabama Department of Human Resources in the area of child protection. The agency staff members were asked to free list words that described any aspect of child protective casework supervision. There was a focus group held in which the results of the list were discussed. The list initially generated 100 different words. The focus group narrowed the list down to 40 to be used with the intervention and control groups

involved in the project.

The project coordinator in Mississippi met with both the control group and the intervention group separately to explain the project and obtain supervisor's initial reaction and views. The control group's expressed views were concerns that their lack of improvement in client outcomes would reflect badly upon their regional group. Discussion involved measurement of change and the supervisors shared the belief that they should be striving to improve in every aspect of client outcomes without involvement in a research project. The group decided that they could show improvement but if the model worked in the intervention group that the intervention group should show greater improvement. The control group is participating in the data collection and curriculum development without the reward of participation in the learning labs. There was much discussion regarding the need to be a part of something that could benefit child welfare supervisors. Each member of the group gave their support of the project. The same discussion ensued with the intervention group and their concerns mirrored the control group's concerns. The group was concerned with the consequences for them if the learning labs did not improve client outcomes. This has been a difficult hurdle to overcome, as the intervention groups are small. It has been a concern of the Institutional Review Board that the size of the groups could lead to potential harm for the participants regarding their employment. The Mississippi group discussed the issue and came to the conclusion that their jobs would not be jeopardized by lack of improvement. The data that is being collected will only be reported in aggregate form and the agency would not use the results of the study against them in any way. The project coordinator again asked each member of the intervention group if they were willing to participate in the project. The entire group was willing. It is important to note that one problem with the Institutional Review Board approval for research with human subjects concerning this project is that the groups are picked by the agency, and participants are not volunteering for the research. There were questions from the Board regarding the right of the participants to withdraw from the study or to not participate. The agency did pick the groups in Mississippi, but it was understood that if each partici-

participant was not willing to join in the study it might be necessary to use a different region. That hurdle was not faced, as all were willing to participate. However, it is an important aspect to review when designing the project and working with state agencies. The withdrawal from the study needs to be allowed, but in this type of study it is unlikely that a participant will withdraw unless for good reason if commitment to the project has been voiced. The state agency must agree that staff members must be given the right to withdraw from the study with no possible negative results for the staff member.

The supervisors have been kept aware of the project in Mississippi through contact by the program director from the University of Mississippi. This has occurred during the regular regional staff meetings. Progress on the project as well as ideas regarding curriculum have been discussed. One reward for participation in the groups that has not been discussed but has been proven to be appreciated is that the supervisors have been provided lunch at each meeting regarding the project. The supervisors have expressed thankfulness. It has been important to promote the supervisors total involvement in every aspect of the learning lab design. This has included dates for meetings and learning labs, length of time spent in learning labs, and the curriculum to be presented. It has been discussed that they are the major contributors to the development of a model that could help other child welfare supervisors and that honesty about what is working and not working is imperative to the project's success in the development of a training model.

The supervisors in the control group have also been provided lunch any time the project director has met with them. The control group is continually praised for their ability to "see the big picture" in the work toward improved child welfare supervision and in their willingness to help with the project. The control group supervisors seem to be excited about the possibilities and their contribution.

The 40 words generated by the group of MSW students were given to child protection supervisors in the intervention and control groups in Alabama. The supervisors were asked to sort the words into piles, name the piles and then rank them according to importance. Preliminary data analysis showed desired and undesired qualities and behaviors of child protective casework

supervisors. This information was used to design curriculum and measure cultural consensus. Discussion was held in focus groups in each region regarding the preliminary results. Words were defined, and discussion was held regarding which of the qualities, characteristics and behaviors are teachable. As a result of this exercise and further discussion regarding supervisory needs, topics and skill-building activities were determined for the initial learning labs. Each group in Mississippi gave input regarding what areas need to be included in the learning lab curriculum.

The supervisors have suggested the following topics and areas for skill improvement to be included in the learning labs. Leadership skills were identified as an area to be included. Topics in the area of leadership include modeling, use of constructive criticism and feedback, use of praise and expression of appreciation, celebration of successes, dealing with difficult people, setting realistic expectations in the current child welfare situation, picking battles, taking risks and allowing new ideas in the development of better practice, development of a culture of trust, accepting responsibility, motivation, and supportive supervision. Team building was another area for coverage in the learning labs. Within this topic, the supervisors noted a need to discuss being a coach, the transition from direct line social worker to supervisor, dealing with transitions, assessing strengths and weaknesses of social workers and self, building on strengths of social workers, and creating a culture of cooperation and fairness. Professionalism and modeling expectations of respect and objectivity were discussed as needs along with ethics and dealing with ethical dilemmas. The supervisors want to learn how to uphold good practice and enforce policy when workers are stressed and when there are not enough workers to do the minimum necessary. The supervisors also want to learn about vicarious liability as social work supervisors. The need to learn how to teach good decision-making and critical thinking to social workers was also expressed. Cultural competency and responsiveness was discussed and will be interwoven throughout the other topics.

The curriculum may shift as the project unfolds and new needs are identified. Both groups will have the opportunity to determine what needs to be included in the learning labs. Curriculum is being written to adhere

to the desires of the supervisors. It is understood that if new needs are identified that the curriculum may be adjusted. The desired result is a learning lab that will fulfill the needs of child welfare supervisors.

One other aspect of the participatory democracy model of learning lab design that needs mentioning is that the regional manager/director for each group has been included in the entire process and the learning labs. The inclusion of the mid-level management person in the group was discussed at length with all persons involved in planning. It was feared that the inclusion of the supervisor's supervisor would hinder honest participation in the learning labs. The participants stated that it was more important that the mid-level supervisor be included in order to understand the changes that the supervisors were attempting to make and the new skills and knowledge base of the persons being supervised. The supervisors wanted the support of the mid-level management person and desired the inclusion of this person throughout the process. This has been a positive experience for both state groups and has not hindered honest participation in the labs.

Two learning lab modules were designed during the first year of the grant. Leadership skills emerged as a topic that both groups deemed important for inclusion in the initial learning lab. In the first lab, supervisors discussed attitude, beliefs, and values regarding child welfare, child welfare agencies, child welfare supervision, and child welfare social workers. Time was spent discussing what needed to be included in the learning lab design for participants to use new knowledge and skills in the workplace. Participants developed child protective service supervisor competencies and determined how the competencies would be used in each supervisor's own personal development plan. Leadership and management skills were discussed. Supervisors designed and committed themselves to individual action plans to improve leadership skills and found partners in the group for support. Supervisors then determined the curriculum for the second learning lab.

The second learning lab focused on supervision in a culturally diverse workplace, cultural competency and responsiveness, and the development of community partnerships. Again, the child protection supervisors determined these topics. The supervisors reviewed the

personal development plans created during the first learning lab and discussed successes and barriers to progress. The third learning lab will be held during the next year of the project. The supervisors have expressed the need to continue to apply the newly learned leadership skills and to discuss the successes and barriers discovered in the process. Supervisors added a development of community partnerships component to their personal development plan. The supervisors have requested information on multigenerational supervision as another aspect of working with a diverse population in the workplace. Other topics for the next learning lab include organization skill building, giving and receiving feedback, and working with difficult people. The supervisors have also requested the use of real scenarios from the child protection units regarding supervisory dilemmas. Supervisors will be sending these to workshop leaders for inclusion in the curriculum.

University and child welfare agency persons are also working with community partners to determine the exact nature of the learning lab sessions. A meeting was held that included agency trainers, community partners, and university personnel on the project to design specific aspects of the curriculum. It has been determined by the supervisors and trainers that an advisory board of community partners working with the child protective supervisors could help in the curriculum design for the learning labs while helping the supervisors to develop community partnerships. This is on the agenda for development during the next year.

The book and workbook by Kouzes and Posner, entitled *Leadership Challenge* were purchased for each participant in the intervention groups. The book *Changing Hats from Social Work Practice to Administration* by Perlmutter, has also been purchased for participants. The plan was to complete nine days of learning labs before the end of this project year. The difficulty in obtaining IRB approval for data collection caused the learning lab start date to be later than what was planned. The learning labs began in August 2002 with three consecutive days. Another three consecutive days of learning lab were held in September 2003.

The initial evaluations and response from the child protective supervisors has been overwhelmingly positive. The regional director of the intervention group in

Mississippi stated that he was aware of a different attitude among his supervisors after the first learning lab. He told that a more positive attitude was present, along with a spirit of teamwork. The supervisors were motivated to do work he had been trying to get them to do for months. An example is that several county units in Mississippi were behind in the entering of data regarding investigations into the computer system. The work was done, but the data had not been entered. As a group, the supervisors decided to get this work up to date. The thought was that improved casework would not occur until the burden of overdue work was gone. The supervisors who could spare workers sent help to the units needing to get up to date. The supervisors used what they learned in the labs to motivate their social workers and gain their commitment to achieving this task. The work was up to date, and the supervisors used what they learned about praise and celebration to reward the social workers.

The supervisors are talking about using new skills and knowledge with their social workers. During the first learning lab the supervisors created child welfare supervisor competencies. The competencies have been used by supervisors to rate their own performance and to determine their own need for improvement. After a discussion on gaining feedback, some of the supervisors gave the competencies to their social workers and asked them to rate him/her (anonymously) so that the supervisor could improve. This involved taking a risk. Risk-taking and creativity has also been a topic of dis-

ussion. Supervisors are trying what is discussed in the learning labs and then discussing the results, barriers, and changes needed when they return to the learning labs. The supervisors are sharing and learning from each other. Supervisors are talking about listening to their supervisees and are excited about improving their work environments and services to clients.

The community partnership module has led to supervisors initiating various meetings with law enforcement, schools, hospitals, churches, and other public service agencies. The purposes have been to discuss problems, to plan for work together, to develop joint training, and to resolve past issues. Resource development has also been a topic of discussion. The supervisors have been praising each other for the initiative taken in these ventures.

Tannenbaum (1997) used several sources to determine the characteristics of a positive learning environment. Tannebaum's research indicated that "the quality and appropriateness of the training, the supportiveness of the work environment, and the use of appropriate training policies and practices" determined the contribution of training to continuous learning (Tannenbaum, 1997, 447). Tannebaum stated that organizational learning cannot exist in an environment that does not promote individual learning. It is the goal of this project to promote a positive learning environment for the individuals involved and, consequently, add to the body of knowledge that determines good child welfare supervisory practice.

### References

- Brookfield, S. (2002). Overcoming alienation as the practice of adult education: The contribution of Erich Fromm to a critical theory of adult learning and education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 52(2), 96-111.
- Collins-Carmargo, C. & Tracey, M. (2002). *University of Kentucky Child Protection Supervision Survey*. (2002). *Southern Regional Quality Improvement Center Literature Review on Social Work Supervision*.
- Romney, A. K., Weller, S. C., & Batchelder, W. H. (1986). Culture as consensus: A theory of cultural and informant accuracy. *American Anthropologist*, 88, 313-338.
- Shulman, L. (1993). *Interactional supervision*. Washington, D.C.: National Association of Social Work.
- Tannenbaum, S. I. (1997). Enhancing continuous learning: Diagnostic findings from multiple companies. *Human Resource Management*, 36(4), 437-452.