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Court Training for Public Child-Welfare Social Workers: An Evaluation of a Training Program

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Introduction

In Santa Clara County, California, the Juvenile Court, County Counsel, Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS), along with San José State University, School of Social Work have provided a forensic training program for the county's public child-welfare social workers since approximately 1993. This training program is called the Forensic Human Service Certificate Program (FHSCP). The FHSCP seeks to "teach child-welfare professionals how to prepare and present effective assessments in a forensic setting" (Program Mission Statement, 2005). As a result of this training, public child-welfare social workers in Santa Clara County have the opportunity to identify, to practice, and to become professionally "bilingual" (Clark, 1998), developing skills and abilities to enable them to work as effectively in the courtroom setting as they do in public child-welfare social work settings. The FHSCP has never had a comprehensive evaluation conducted to examine the overall effectiveness of the program. This article outlines the parameters, findings, and conclusions from an evaluation research project implemented to

assess workers' perception of their ability as a result of their participation in the FHSCP.

Program Description

The FHSCP is a voluntary, after-hours, certificate program. The program is primarily structured for public child-welfare social workers as they are the only participants in a juvenile dependency court case who have contact with all the other parties in each specific court proceeding. The public child-welfare social worker is the one central repository of information from all dimensions of the child-welfare case (Edwards, 2002). Consequently, it is important for public child-welfare social workers to have the knowledge, skills, and abilities that allow them to be as effective as possible in the court environment. The courses of the FHSCP seek to provide the needed knowledge, skill, and ability.

The FHSCP includes the following six courses, which provide 150 hours of classroom instruction: 1) Introduction to Judicial Process, 2) Juvenile Court Law, 3) Documenting and Collecting Information, 4) Assessment and Intervention, 5) Writing Court Reports and Other Documents, and 6) Preparing and Presenting

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Testimony. Satisfactory completion of all six courses allows participants to receive a certificate in Forensic Human Services, which can bolster the participant's qualification as an expert witness. Despite the fact that the courses were designed so that participants learn specific skills in a specific order, participants can choose which courses they want to take and when they want to take them. Consequently, participants can choose to take a few courses and not complete the entire certificate program. Also the courses are scheduled in the evening so that full-time public child-welfare social workers can participate in class sessions and complete assignments without interruption to their work day.

As intimated in the above listing of courses, the content of the FHSCP is dominated by the emphasis on the collection of information for preparation of reports and testimony to the juvenile court, as this is one of the key aspects of the public child-welfare social workers' role in the context of the court. Specifically, the public child-welfare social workers' ability to provide written communication is a primary method by which "an informed judicial determination of the appropriate status of a dependent minor in juvenile court facing ward ship proceedings" is made (Bellinger, 2000, 6). Consequently, the FHSCP teaches participants to be able to "distinguish fact statements from opinion statements" (Bennett & Hubbs, 2005, p. 2), and to understand how to create a fact-based court report. The ability to write a factually accurate picture which presents the information in an engaging way for the court is essential to producing an accurate and effective court report (c.f., *In re Malinda S.*, 1990).

An effective court report is a report that presents a factual, accurate, and descriptive summary of the specifics of a client's circumstances (Harris, 1980). Reports prepared by public child-welfare social workers for the juvenile court usually play a significant role in providing evidence to the court and all parties.

A juvenile court judge or referee (known as the "trier of fact") is usually a former attorney who reviews these reports and expects the reports to be an objective summary of facts. Consequently, the degree to which public child-welfare social workers can meet a judge's expectations correlates with the degree to which a judge has confidence in the accuracy and thoroughness of a public child-welfare social worker's report. The juvenile court judge frequently relies on the reports prepared by the public child-welfare social workers to give a sense of the current status of a family's situation.

Baca, Jendrucko, and Scott (2002) believe that "effective communication [is necessary] among the various child protection agencies to ensure the collection of information and evidence" (p. 61). Another aspect of this communication occurs in the context of explaining what the court orders mean, and the subsequent expectations of each participant in a court case. The critical skills that are required to complete court reports, summarize decisions, and explain the consequences of court orders are the same critical skills that are necessary to prepare case files for discovery, to prepare and provide oral testimony, and to conduct and document case activities. Finally, a public child-welfare social worker's effectiveness in the courtroom is related to their knowledge of the case being presented. This effectiveness is gained from experience, from training, and from the interaction between experience and training. Thus, along with writing a factual court report, a public child-welfare social worker also must have "a fundamental knowledge of the legal process and the requisite ability to communicate clinical knowledge and skill in a legal setting" (Brieland & Goldfarb as cited in Mason, 1992, p. 33).

Literature Review

History of Training in Forensic Social Work

In a historic review of the development of “forensic social work,” Roberts and Brownell (1999) reviewed the entries in the *Social Work Dictionary* (Baker, 1995), the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Burns, 1995 & 1997), and the *Social Work Almanac* (Ginsberg, 1995). According to Roberts and Brownell (1999), social workers actually first began to work in the court setting with the establishment of juvenile courts during the Progressive Era. From those initial developments, social workers’ practice in court settings has broadened to all manner of legal contexts: “. . . social work in corrections and probation, forensic mental health, substance abuse, family and criminal courts, domestic violence and child abuse and neglect, juvenile justice, crime victims, and police social work . . .” (Roberts & Brownell, 1999, p. 361). While Roberts and Brownell (1999) conclude that “forensic social work” is tantamount to “correctional social work” (p. 367), we take a broader conceptualization of the term “forensic social work,” returning it to its roots of social-work practice in the context of the juvenile court.

From a different historical perspective Whitmer (1983) describes the development of forensic social work in the context of resolving the conflicting demands of the social work advocate, working on the behalf of mentally ill clients who were unable to participate in their own representation during involuntary hospitalization reviews. Despite Whitmer’s focus on the conflict at the nexus between social work practice and the demands of the courtroom setting, he does not really explore the nature of the relationship between social workers and judicial officers, but rather attempts to inform social workers who are trying to balance the expectations from the two groups of professionals.

From a third perspective, Weil (1982) explores the interaction between social workers and attorneys given the increased

involvement of attorneys in juvenile court processes as a result of the Supreme Court decision *In re Gault* (1967), when the Supreme Court concluded that the process of denying juveniles representation in court when accused of a crime was in violation of the U. S. Constitution. Since that time, the evolution of children’s and parents’ rights has led to a recognition that children and parents who appear before a juvenile court in child abuse proceedings also are entitled to the assistance of counsel. Further, one of the results of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974) was the increased incidence of child abuse reports (Ellet & Leighninger, 2007), which led to a subsequent increase in child abuse adjudications and thus an increased role of attorneys in juvenile dependency court matters. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (1980) further solidified the interaction between attorneys and social workers in juvenile court matters of dependency adjudications (Carnochan, Taylor, Abramson-Madden, Han, Rashid, Maney, et al, 2007). While the public child-welfare social worker makes recommendations to the juvenile court, the worker must also attempt to balance all the other potentially conflicting goals and expectations of family members (Weil, 1982). Within the last 15 years this complex set of interactions has been heightened in juvenile courts by the implementation of the Adoption and Safe Family Act [AFSA] (1994), which has resulted in the most wholesale and comprehensive change in public child-welfare policy since the passage of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980.

These historical changes are critical when considering the available literature regarding the interaction between attorneys and public child-welfare social workers in juvenile court dependency proceedings. Specifically, Maidenberg and Golick (2001), in their brief review of the literature, consider 32 total

references regarding social work and the law, 24 of which pertain specifically to the nature of the professional interaction between social workers and attorneys. Of those 24 references, nearly 70% were published before 1994; and further, of those 24 references, only half of the articles focus on child welfare, which makes sense, as that was not the focus of their research. Further, the lack of recognition of AFSA by Maidenberg and Golick (2001) also appears consistent with the fact that only three of the articles they referenced were published since the passage of the ASFA in 1994.

The focus of the literature in this area varies from trying to explain the differential approaches to the professional training of social workers and attorneys by analyzing survey data (Maidenberg & Golick, 2001; Taylor, 2006), to using qualitative exploration techniques to explain the nature of the relationship between social workers and attorneys and its effect on public child-welfare outcomes (Carnochan, et al, 2007; Fogelson, 1970; Weil, 1982), to trying to explore ways to make the interaction between public child-welfare social workers and attorneys more effective (Johnson & Cahn, 1995). Specifically, much of this literature makes reference to interactions between social workers and attorneys that are frequently characterized by antagonism and misunderstanding. Practice experience supports this contention in the literature (Johnson & Cahn, 1995). Overall, the quandary that attorneys and social workers seem to experience over time and across different court room settings is the role differentiation between social workers and attorneys (Maidenberg & Golick, 2001; Weil 1982). Generally, both social workers and attorneys are working for the best interests of their respective clients; however, their approaches to that end often are very different, resulting in serious clashes over procedures, and even power struggles regarding who is in

charge (Boyer, 1995; Clark, 1998; Johnson & Cahn, 1995; Russell, 1988).

Areas of Training for Public Child-welfare Social Workers in the Juvenile Court

In the arena of public child welfare, the work of attorneys and social workers is inexorably intertwined. Attorneys have been uncomfortable working with social workers, and public child-welfare social workers have not trusted the motives of attorneys (Carnochan, et al, 2007; Taylor, 2006; Weil, 1982). Consequently, one approach to addressing the difficulty that frequently emerges in professional interactions between social workers and attorneys is to provide public child-welfare social workers with training regarding courtroom procedures and expectations so that public child-welfare social workers can present their professional expertise in the most effective manner 1) for their clients, 2) for their social service agency, 3) for each of the attorneys representing different individuals involved in a matter, and 4) for the judicial officer hearing the case (Weil, 1982). In fact, as early as 1974, Bell and Mlyniec indicated that social workers began to formally recognize the need to participate in training that would prepare them to work in the context of the legal system. Social workers needed to understand the procedures involved in the legal system (Clark, 1998).

“The American judicial system depends on the adversarial process to arrive to the truth” (Merek, 199, p. 9).

“The American legal system is often mysterious to those outside of it. It operates in a way that is quite different from other institutions with which social workers are familiar. Lawyers have a unique way of thinking and approaching their work. Both are very

different from the way social workers are taught to think and to approach their work.” (Saltzman & Proch, 1990, p. xiii).

These quotes speak to the significant difference in the philosophical approaches of the two professions in advocating for clients. Public child-welfare social workers must have a clear understanding of the adversarial court process before they begin to work in the courtroom setting. The language and procedures of legal practice are significantly different from the language and procedures of social work practice (Clark, 1998). For example, it is essential that social workers are trained in building rapport in order to elicit information to make assessments and draw conclusions when establishing case plans with clients (Hutchins, 2003). Conversely, attorneys are trained to find fallacies in arguments and to exploit the arguments of their clients’ adversaries in order to be the most effective legal advocate for their clients.

These respective professional skills are often in conflict. In the subsequent court setting public child-welfare social workers’ communication skills are more effective when they are less conclusive and as objective as possible, providing a clear exposition of the facts upon which their clinical assessment is based (Clark, 1998). A public child-welfare social worker who is effective in the courtroom is able to use the tools of investigation “to gather and interpret data meaningfully for the benefit of judge, jury and clients” (Bernstein, 1977, p.412), as well as use the tools of a clinically skilled helping professional.

Inter-Professional Interaction

The studies regarding the interaction between social workers and attorneys focus explicitly on aspects of training for these two professions (Maidenberg & Golick, 2001;

Taylor, 2006). Maidenberg and Golick (2001) explore the strengths and challenges of implementing a training program that combines student attorneys and student social workers in attempts to integrate their advocacy work on behalf of senior citizens and other dependent adults. In comparison, Taylor’s work focuses on the deconstruction of the roots of “inter-professional misunderstanding” by examining the dynamics of the professional education of social workers and attorneys, respectively (Taylor, 2006). These two research projects are informative, suggesting that training social workers about the role of attorneys and the role of social workers in court room settings helps social workers to be more effective when working with attorneys.

Another study by Conversely, Johnson, and Cahn (1995) developed training of social workers in court processes in order to facilitate progress and reduce the delays in child-welfare proceedings. And while there was an evaluation of this training, there was no subsequent follow-up assessment to determine the overall effectiveness of the training in relation to improved practice (Johnson & Cahn, 1995).

In the context of this literature, this paper fills a gap in that this study focuses on the outcome of court training for public child-welfare social workers who are not student social workers but who currently work in the field. The goal is to explore the effectiveness of their practice as a result of the training. Specifically, the research in this project seeks to determine the influence of training on public child-welfare social workers’ effectiveness in working in the court and in their effectiveness in working with attorneys. Given the critical role of the public child-welfare social workers’ potential influence in juvenile court, there is growing attention to providing training for public child-welfare social workers in order for them to be effective within the context of the juvenile court system,

yet there is little assessment of that training in terms of their perceptions of their improved professional ability.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the participation of public child-welfare social workers in training on forensic social work and their perceptions of their degree of improved ability to work effectively in court settings. By “ability to work effectively” we specifically mean that the workers know 1) what materials the court needs, and how to frame that material for the court; and 2) how to most effectively interact with the other professionals in the courtroom. This research is significant for at least two reasons. First, this research fills the gap. Heretofore, there has been little to no research regarding the comprehensive effectiveness of training public child-welfare social workers to practice in the context of the courtroom settings. Second, this research provides a measure of study participants’ assessments of FHSCP’s overall effectiveness. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. Is there an association between participation in the FHSCP and perceived improvement? Which, if any, factors related to participation in the FHSCP training, such as demographic factors, numbers of training attended and length of time since last training, contribute to public child-welfare social workers’ perceived improvement in their ability to function effectively in court?
2. What are the training participants’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the FHSCP?

Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional design to answer the proposed research questions. The

format used to obtain an assessment of workers’ perceptions was a survey questionnaire which included ten quantifiable questions, two open-ended questions, and a chance to comment.. The survey instrument took no more than 15 minutes to complete. The study participants were identified by a convenience sample of those who had taken FHSCP courses, and who continued to work for Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS). Specifically, letters were sent to those who fit the criteria for study participants. The 30 public child-welfare workers who responded were invited to participate in the study. Of the 30 individuals who initially responded only 20 returned the survey instrument. Study participants were provided the survey instrument either in a conference room or at a worker’s desk area in the DFCS offices, based on the participants’ preferences.

Variables and Measures. The dependent variable was designed as an assessment of the workers’ perceived improved professional ability as a result of their participation in the FHSCP program. Specifically, respondents were asked the following: “Since taking one or more of the FHSCP course(s), my professional ability has improved (please check only answer).” The variable was measured using a Likert scale where the scale was structured as follows: 0) strongly disagree, 1) disagree, 2) neither agree nor disagree, 3) agree, or 4) strongly agree with statements about the FHSCP. We used the following variables as the independent variables for this analysis: age, gender, degree, race/ethnicity (White, African American descent, Latino, Asian American, Native American, Mixed Race, Other), the number of FHSCP courses taken, the last time a course was taken, whether the respondent felt the FHSCP was worth their time (using the five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree

to strongly agree), indications of which courses were taken, and whether or not the program needed to make changes (yes/no). All the quantifiable variables involved in the study are specified in Tables 1 and 2.

The participants were also asked two open-ended questions:

1. What is the FHSCP doing well [sixteen responses]

2. What changes would you make to the FHSCP course(s) [eight responses]?

Table 1. List of Variables

Variables	Description	Type of Variable
Dependent Variable		
Worker Improved Ability	Workers' perceived improved professional ability	Continuous
Independent Variables		
Age	Age in years	Continuous
Sex	Male or Female	Categorical
Ethnicity	Self-identified: White/European American; African American/of African descent; Latino (including of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican descent or from other Spanish-speaking Southern or Central American country); Asian American (including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese other Southeast Asian descent or of Indian or Pakistani descent); Native American/American Indian; Mixed race; or Other.	Categorical – created dummy variables so that each ethnicity was single dichotomous variable.
Academic degree	The last academic degree received; MSW or other degree	Categorical
Length of time since last course taken	Measured in 6 month increments at three different levels	Categorical
Number of courses taken	Number of courses taken	Continuous
Worth the time	Worth the time to take courses	Continuous
Changes	Should changes be made in training program	Categorical
Specific Courses	Introduction to Judicial Process Juvenile Court Law Documenting and Collecting Information Assessment and Intervention Writing Court Reports and Other Documents Preparing and Presenting Testimony	Categorical – created dummy variables so that each ethnicity was single dichotomous variable.

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In addition, each respondent was given space to include any additional comments [eleven responses].

information about the reliability of the survey instrument.

Table 2. Variable Frequencies

Characteristics	(f) ^a	%
Sex		
[1] Male	3	15
[2] Female	17	85
Total		100
Ethnicity		
[1] White	8	40
[2] African American	1	5
[3] Latino	6	30
[4] Asian	4	20
[5] Native American	0	0
[6] Mixed Race	1	5
[7] Other	0	0
Total		100
Degree		
[1] MSW	17	85
[2] Other	3	15
Total		100
Number of courses taken		
[1] One	4	20
[2] Two	5	25
[3] Three	2	10
[4] Four	1	5
[5] Five	3	15
[6] Six	5	25
Total		100

Table 2. Variable Frequencies (cont'd)

Characteristics	(f) ^a	%
Length of time since taking a course		
[1] within the last 6 months	6	30
[2] between 6 and 12 months	1	5
[3] more than 12 months	13	65
Total		100
Those who had last taken a course 12 months ago or more	7	35
Those who had taken a course less than 12 months ago	13	65
Most Freq. Taken Courses*		
Intro to Judicial Process	18	90
Juvenile Court Law	17	85
Documenting & Collecting Information	8	40
Assessment & Intervention	9	45
Writing Court Reports and Other Documents	7	35
Preparing and Presenting Testimony	10	50
<i>*frequency/total n = percentage of sample who took course</i>		

^aTotal sample N = 20

Reliability and Validity. This study is based on the participants' assessments of their perceived improved professional abilities as a result of taking one or more FHSCP courses. While the survey questions have a face-validity, they have not been tested for reliability. Additional research using these survey questions could begin to provide

Procedures. A Master of Social Work (MSW) student researcher delivered the survey questionnaire to those who indicated an interest in participating in this project; subsequently, follow-up phone calls were made to those individuals. The goal of the telephone call was to set up a 20-minute lunch-time appointment to complete the survey. Only 20 public child-welfare social workers eventually participated in the study. The data

collection process took place between December 1, 2005, and May 1, 2006. The social workers completed the survey in the presence of the student researcher.

Plan for Analysis. The statistical procedures used to test the proposed hypotheses included the following: 1) the Pearson's Correlation Test, 2) t-Tests, 3) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), and 4) a multiple regression analysis. The analysis also included summaries of the demographical information collected from the surveys. These data were analyzed utilizing Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 11.0. A phenomenological approach was used to assess the qualitative responses (Rubin & Babbie, 2005).

Findings

Description of Sample. Of the 20 public child-welfare social workers who participated in the study, 3 (15%) were males; 8 (40%) were White/European Americans; 6 (30%) were Latino (including those who were Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican or from other Spanish speaking Southern or Central American countries); 4 (20%) were Asian American (which included Chinese American, Japanese American, Korean American, Vietnamese American, other Southeast Asian American, Asians from India or Pakistan, or Hawaiian/Pacific Islander); one individual (5%) reported that he or she was mixed race; and one individual (5%) said he or she was African American. No one in the sample identified themselves as Native American. Seventeen participants (85%) had a Master of Social Work degree. The specific other degrees of the remaining participants were as follows: Master of Public Health (1), Bachelor of Arts in Sociology (1), and Master of Personal Management and Industrial Relations (1). The age range for the participants was between 30-73 years of age,

with the average age being 43.5 years (s.d. = 11.10). The average number of courses taken by study participants was 3.5 (s.d. = 1.29). More than half of the study participants had taken their last FHSCP course more than 12 months prior to answering the survey.

Research Question 1: Perceived Improved Professional Ability

The average score for perceived improved professional ability was 2.75 (s.d. = 1.29) on a zero to four, five-point Likert scale. A score of 2 indicated that the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that they perceived that their participation in the courses improved their professional ability; the mean score seems to indicate a rather lukewarm assessment of their perceptions of their improvement in ability. Despite the mean score, in this case the respondents were not quite neutral about the statement. The modal score of 3.00 is indicative that half of the respondents reported that they agreed that their perceptions were that their professional ability improved as a result of their participation in the FHSCP courses; specifically, 16 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt that their participation in the FHSCP improved their professional ability.

The average score reported regarding whether participating in FHSCP courses was worth their time was 3.00 (s.d. = 1.41), using a zero to four, five-point Likert scale. A score of three would indicate agreement with the statement that taking an FHSCP course was worthwhile. Similar to the previous question, more than half of the respondents strongly agreed that taking FHSCP course(s) was worth their time (modal score = 4); again, specifically, 16 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the FHSCP was worth their time. Table 2 is a summary of the quantitative responses. (See Table 3.)

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Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

Mean age in years	<i>M</i> = 43.55 <i>SD</i> = 11.11
Mean score of perceived improved professional ability	<i>M</i> = 2.75 <i>SD</i> = 1.29 Mode = 3.00
Mean score for worth the time spent in the courses	<i>M</i> = 3.00 <i>SD</i> = 1.41 Mode = 4.00
Mean number of courses taken	<i>M</i> = 3.33 <i>SD</i> = 1.63
Mean score of perceived improved professional ability for those who took a course 12 months ago or more	<i>M</i> = 2.14 <i>SD</i> = 1.46
Mean score of perceived improved professional ability for those who took a course less than 12 months ago	<i>M</i> = 3.08 <i>SD</i> = 1.12

Perceived Improvement in Professional Ability Based on the FHSCP Courses. T-tests were used initially as the most statistically informative tests to assess the impact of the FHSCP courses on perceived improvement of professional ability. By examining the differences in the average score of perceived improved professional ability

between those who took four or more courses, completed more than half of the courses, and those who took three or fewer courses we found that the t-test was significant ($t = -3.008, df = 18, p = 0.008$).

We also wanted to assess whether there was a difference in perceived improved professional ability of participants who completed the entire series of six courses and those who did not complete the entire series. The thought behind conducting the second test was that significant difference between these two tests might have important implications for those who manage the FHSCP. Similar to the first analysis we found a significant difference in the average scores of improved perceived professional ability between those who completed all six courses of the FHSCP ($t = 2.965, df = 18, p = 0.008$). (See Table 4.)

The final statistical test used to assess perceived improved professional ability was a multiple regression analysis. This test was used to determine the relative contribution of independent variables in predicting a better score for perceived improved professional ability. The independent variables included in the model were *age, sex, number of courses taken, and the last time a course was taken*. (See Table 5.)

In the model, *the number of courses taken* was the only statistically significant factor that influenced perceived improvement in professional ability ($b = 0.493, p = 0.043$).

Further, this model explains more than 40% of the variability found in the dependent variable, perceived improvement in professional ability ($Adj. R^2 = 0.405$).

Table 4. T-Tests: Differences in Professional Ability based on Courses Taken

T-test results: Prof. Ability	M	t	df	p
3 courses or fewer	2.091	-3.008	18	.008**
More than 3 courses	3.556			
With Certificate (6 courses)	4.000	2.965	18	.008**
Without Certificate (< 6 courses)	2.333			

Alpha: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 5. Regression Results Assessing Variables' Relative Influence on Perceived Professional Ability

Variables	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i> - value
Age	-0.064	0.770
Sex	0.366	0.156
# of courses taken	0.493	0.043*
Last time a course was taken	0.195	0.423

Adj $R^2 = 0.405$
 Alpha: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

In addition to the t-tests and the multiple regression statistical tests that are discussed above, several other statistical tools -- that is, other t-tests and analyses of variances (ANOVAs) -- were conducted to assess if there were any other statistically significant relationships between perceived improvement in professional ability and the other variables (that is, having an MSW, or not; race; age; sex; and the length of time since last taking a course). However, these tests showed no statistically significant relationships between these variables and perceived improved professional ability; further, these tests were not as statistically informative as the multiple regression analysis which outlined the relative contribution of each variable.

Research Question #2: Effectiveness of FHSCP Training.

A phenomenological approach was used to analyze the participants' qualitative responses to the open-ended questions (Rubbin & Babbie, 2005). Specifically, we looked for themes in the responses from the participants. What we found in the analysis of these

responses were comments regarding the excellence of the trainers/instructors; the informative content; the in-depth content of the course, the resulting growth in workers' understanding of juvenile court processes, and workers' perceptions that the training had a positive impact on how they approached their social work practice skills. The most frequent response to this question was regarding the quality of the instructors. There were additional comments that were not necessarily frequent, but were informative. For example, comments were made suggesting that the training facilitated a broader understanding of the philosophical and professional differences between public child-welfare social workers and attorneys.

Participants made various suggestions in response to being asked what changes FHSCP should make. Most of these pertained to the structure of the FHSCP. The thought that the FHSCP should be offered during work hours and/or should be required training for all public child-welfare social workers was frequently mentioned. One of the criticisms of FHSCP was that the content was too specific to child welfare. Specifically, the suggestion was that Adult Protective Services, the Public Guardian, and/or other county public welfare employees could benefit from this training. Similar to the suggestion of including other county social services personnel, another interesting perspective was that study participants felt that community social service agency staff might benefit from this training. While only one comment directly suggested that the course content could be more integrated with social work practice, this response seemed to be a more tangible example that perhaps public child-welfare social workers saw a positive connection between this training and improving their overall social work practice skills. The comments from participants can be distilled into three overlapping categories: 1)

recommendations for structural change, 2) comments regarding the content of the FHSCP, and 3) comments that identify people's feelings regarding the FHSCP. (See Table 5.)

Discussion

Assessment of Quantitative Data. This research found that the FHSCP participants suggest that their professional abilities were improved as a function of their participation in the FHSCP training. There is an inherent heuristic involved in the structure of this assessment. The FHSCP training program is voluntary and participants enroll and complete the course work outside of work hours on their own initiative. Higher ratings of participants' professional ability are a reasonable outcome for workers who invest their time in this training; specifically, FHSCP participants choose to participate in the training program. The possibility exists that public child-welfare social workers who choose to participate in FHSCP could be those workers with more skills. Another explanation might be that those who choose to participate in the FHSCP are ambitious, and choose to enroll in FHSCP in order to be perceived favorably by agency management. Perhaps if public child-welfare social workers were required to participate in this training they might not have such positive perceptions about their improved abilities as a function of the training. Regardless of the rationale for public child-welfare social workers' participation in FHSCP, overall they perceive that their professional ability is improved as a result of the training program. Ultimately, the number of courses taken is the prominent independent variable in our analysis, suggesting that this variable is the primary factor influencing study participants' perception that their professional ability is positively influenced by their participation in the FHSCP. Thus we can suggest that the public child-welfare social workers in our

sample felt more professionally capable the more FHSCP courses they took.

We also found that the other variables were not significant in influencing public child-welfare social workers' perceived improved professional ability. For example, we found no statistically significant difference regarding time since last time taking a course, even though the higher average score for perceived improved professional ability was found for those who had last taken a course 12 or more months ago ($M = 2.14$ versus $M = 3.08$). Perhaps more as a result of experience in the field, public child-welfare social workers' perceptions of their professional abilities increased, whether or not those workers had participated in the FHSCP training. Ultimately, in this analysis, the last time a participant took an FHSCP course had no functional positive or negative differential influence on participants' perception of their professional ability. There were no statistically significant differences in perceived professional ability as function of any group characteristics, such as age, sex, race, or educational degree.

Assessment of Qualitative Responses. In reviewing the responses from the initial open-ended question, we were struck with how closely the responses reinforced what had been found in previous research (Weil, 1982). The public child-welfare social workers' understanding of the overarching processes seemed to enhance their perceptions of their own roles in relation to the others involved in the dependency matters in the juvenile court, most specifically the attorney's role. One specific comment was as follows:

"It help[ed] me understand the similarity and differences between social workers and lawyers. Just understand[ing] the working culture of the court process made you more

aware of how important [it is] for social workers to understand the [court] process.”

This was an interesting point in that it suggested that the participant felt that his or her understanding about the differences in the specific roles of attorneys and public child-welfare social workers enhanced his or her ability to do the job, which was similar to the findings in Weil’s research (Weil, 1982).

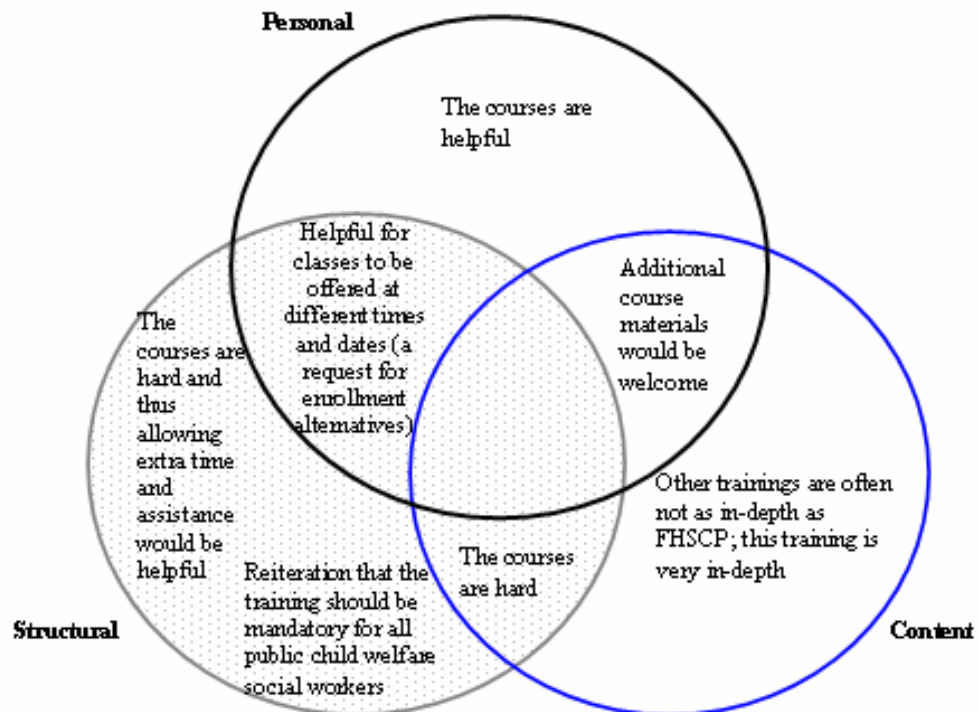
The suggestions for change seemed to focus on creating opportunities for others to benefit from this new understanding. Our sense was that the value to overall practice skills was so clear to the public child-welfare social workers that perhaps the practice skills of other types of social service workers could be enhanced. Training social services personnel from community-based agencies could result in

developing more effective partners when it comes to following case plans and documenting progress, thus providing even more accurate evidence of the outcome of services provided to Santa Clara County’s families and children.

Finally, regarding the concluding comments about the FHSCP, the responses generally fell into three areas we identified as those focused on 1) the FHSCP structure, 2) the content of the courses, and 3) the workers’ feelings about the FHSCP courses (personal feelings). Respondents seemed to view their experiences from a broad perspective, thus the categories of these comments are not mutually exclusive. (See Illustration 1)

In general the open-ended questions seemed to corroborate the findings from the quantitative analysis in that, overall, the

Illustration 1. Overlapping Categories of Qualitative Responses



perception of those who participated in the FHSCP training found that the courses improved their professional abilities. The qualitative responses seemed to elicit a nuance to that perception, specifically that the public child-welfare social workers' felt that their abilities were enhanced primarily because their overall social work practice skills were more effective as a result of participating in the training.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future

Research. One limitation of this study is the sample size, which affects the rigor of the statistical tests. The initial goal for the sample was a total of 30 public child-welfare social workers, and even that number of participants is small. Another limitation of this study was that there was a significant difference in the number of women participants compared to the number of men -- specifically 17 (85%) women compared to 3 (15%) men. This may not be grossly unusual, as historically there have been more women than men working in the field of child-welfare social work (Zell, 2006); however, the ratio in this study may be more extreme than what has been found in previous research.

There also was an interesting demographic artifact in that the racial/ethnic groups included more Latinos and Whites than any other ethnic group. Often in studies of social work practitioners the majority of study participants are white. This study was based in Santa Clara County, California, where the White adult working population (i.e., adults age 25 to 64) is less than 50% of the total population of working adults; and specifically 20% of the working adult population is Latino (California Department of Finance, 2003). Consequently, just like in the study demographics, in Santa Clara County there are more adult working-age Latinos and Whites than any other ethnic group.

The time allocated for the completion of this project also was another limitation in this study. This study required a design that allowed for implementation, analysis, and development of an initial report within a ten-month period. With more time, potentially more participants could have been included in the study. Despite these limitations, this study seems to address areas of inquiry that have not been addressed before. Further this project provides a substantial foundation for future research in this area.

Finally, although this study had the advantage of examining the impact of training after time, the impact of the training was measured through self-report, and respondents may have been inclined to report on their practice from the most favorable perspective. As a result of that natural tendency, self-report data is methodologically vulnerable to introducing bias (Rubin, & Babbie, 2005). A more rigorous research approach might mitigate the influence of self-report bias, and thus provide greater assurance about whether public child-welfare social workers' actual professional ability improves as a result of their participation in a FHSCP. A study of this type, to our knowledge, has yet to be published.

Nonetheless, the results of this study indicate that with this sample the FHSCP has provided public child-welfare social workers with practical skills that are critical to their professional development; consequently, these results provide a foundation for evidence to suggest that FHSCP is an effective training program. Specifically, the FHSCP courses have provided public child-welfare social workers with knowledge, skills, and abilities that they perceive to be helpful when they navigate the courtroom setting and deal with court procedures. Future research using a larger sample size, with more balanced representation from racial and ethnic groups, and female and male participants might

produce more interesting findings, generalizable beyond the sample responding to the survey.

Implications for Public Child-Welfare Social Work Policy, Practice, and Research

Public child welfare is a demanding area of the social work profession. The goals of public child-welfare social work include, but are not limited to, the goals of protecting children from abuse and neglect, safely reunifying families after incidents of abuse and/or neglect, and supervising and managing the situations where children and youth are not returning to their families of origin. These goals are usually implemented in the context of the jurisdiction of a juvenile court. In general, public child-welfare social workers are trained to develop their assessment and clinical skills in order to facilitate reconciliation and/or compromise between disparate individuals and/or groups (i.e., advocating for marginalized individuals and/or groups; helping individuals resolve personal and/or interpersonal conflicts; or coordinating community and/or organizational efforts).

While these are laudatory ambitions, the procedures used to implement these efforts are diametrically opposed to the efforts used by attorneys to gain similar outcomes; specifically, attorneys use adversarial debate to get at “the truth” and to ensure that constitutional rights are not violated (Clark, 1998; Carnochan, et al, 2007). Consequently, when social workers interact with attorneys in courtroom settings, the social workers are at a distinct disadvantage because often they are in foreign territory. Further a social worker’s clients, even when represented by attorneys, can be at a disadvantage if their social worker is unprepared to work effectively in the legal context. This study suggests a critical concern in terms of implications for social work practice in public child welfare: that students who have training for court perceive

themselves to be more effective than they were without the training; and that the more training these students have about court procedures the more effective they perceive themselves to be.

In terms of implications for research, this study suggests that additional research be conducted to confirm this exploratory analysis. Specifically, obtaining an objective baseline assessment of professional ability of all workers could be implemented at induction. Subsequently, periodic re-evaluation could take place over time with control and comparison groups. This model would capture the effects of time, so that when assessing those who participate in FHSCP, the effects of time can be accounted for outside of the influence of the training provided by FHSCP. Another approach to mitigate the role of self-report bias might be to explore the perceptions of those who do not work closely with public child-welfare social workers in court, but who are nonetheless affected by these workers’ abilities in court. Such individuals could include those from DFCS who work in the court as court officers; private and public attorneys who represent parents and other caretakers in Santa Clara County dependency court matters; counsel for children in Santa Clara County dependency matters; the county counsel attorneys who represent the DFCS; and the judges, referees, and administrative law judges who render decisions in dependency matters. Assessments from these individuals could be very effective at providing a different type of biased assessment of public child-welfare social workers’ actual professional ability as a result of their participation in the FHSCP.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how critical public child-welfare social workers find this type of training to be. It provides them with a larger perspective and a greater range of skills than others who practice in this field, which they

believe makes them more effective in all areas of public child welfare social work. Because of the dynamics created by successful completion of the FHSCP, the consideration to integrate this type of content into a Child Welfare Concentration for students enrolled in MSW programs might well be another significant approach to ensuring that those focused on child welfare have the knowledge and skills needed to build a successful public child-welfare social work practice.

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