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Grounded Training: Preparing Child Welfare Supervisors for Domestic Violence Work

Ann Fleck-Henderson, PhD, and Stefan Krug, PhD

Introduction

As child welfare agencies face increasingly complex demands for service in a climate of steadily decreasing resources and increased pressure for accountability (Fabricant & Burghardt, 1992), the professional development needs of child welfare supervisors take on new urgency. Although the administrative, educational, and leadership functions of supervisors have long been recognized (Kadushin, 1992), agency investment in their training has not, historically, been a priority (Herman, 1990). The approach to "grounded training" described in this article represents an effort to address the training needs of supervisors in the area of domestic violence.

Broad based efforts are underway to identify and codify the competencies required of supervisors and to link these competencies to pre-service and/or in-service training programs (e.g., Bernotavicz & Bartley, 1996). Competency-based approaches to training usually refer to competencies, or discrete sets of skills, identified by people other than those being trained, usually people higher up in the organization and/or experts in the field. These approaches are based on the (credible) assumption that training must be accountable to some centralized and standardized notion of what is needed for the job.

The term "grounded training" is derived from Glaser and Strauss' (1975) "grounded theory," which refers to theory that is inductively developed during a study and in constant interaction with the data from that study. This contrasts with theory that is developed conceptually and tested against empirical data. In the realm of training, it means developing curricula with those being trained and keeping the training accountable to local (in terms of the particular people and the particular place) needs and conditions.

These two sets of needs, one articulated by practitioners, the other by administrators and policy makers, may or may not converge. Both must inform training. Approaches that rely too heavily on agendas developed at only one level or by one constituency are likely to be problematic. Training agendas that are developed at the highest levels of management risk reflecting political pressures and/or being disconnected from the immediate needs of field staff. Management may have an investment in documenting that staff have received training in the current "hot" issue. Training agendas that originate at the line level risk being reactive to clinical pressures and/or blind to systemic issues and may lack a coherent unifying framework. The staff may not be able to conceptualize needs beyond those which are immediately pressing. Ideally, therefore, training is developed from the "top down" to ensure coherence and a good fit with the mission and mandates of the agency, and from the "bottom up" to ensure relevance to day-to-day work experience. To a great extent the trainer functions as interpreter, translator, and mediator between and across these levels of the organization.

Rationale for a Grounded Approach

Grounded training honors what we know about adult learners. Adult learning, perhaps all learning, depends on active involvement of the learner. People learn best what they themselves want to know and what has direct relevance to their lives and work (Knowles, 1970; Reynolds, 1942, 1985). Particularly in institutional settings, adult learners may even resist and resent training if the relevance is not clear to them. Readers who have conducted trainings in public child welfare systems will not need a reference for this comment, but the phenomenon has been documented (Perry, 1950).

Learning is a function not only of motivation and interest, but also of the prior knowledge and understanding the learner brings. New information

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is assimilated to the learners' cognitive schemes (Norman, 1980) and developmental position (Belenky, et al., 1986; Kegan, 1994; Perry, 1981). Thus, without some knowledge of the learners' current understanding of an area, a teacher or trainer can not know what is being learned, no matter how expert she may be on what is being taught. Just as social workers must "start where the client is," so must trainers.

Learning, if it is to have important effects on behavior and attitudes, involves risk and change, perhaps the risk of change, for the learner. Attention must be given not only to the content of training, but also to processes of change and growth in the participants, and to the support of a learning environment which is sustaining.

Grounded training is also indebted to what we know about public service bureaucracies. Almost two decades ago, Michael Lipsky, in his classic work on street-level bureaucracy (1980), developed the idea that public service providers have information often not available to their "superiors," as well as levels of discretion which, in effect, shape policy. In the present environment of change in our social service system, academics and administrators have even more to learn from practitioners. (Rosenthal, 1998). We need to consult our trainees not only because we need information about them as learners, and because we need them to "buy in" to the training, but also—importantly—because they usually know more than we do about the realities of their work. By their nature, bureaucracies direct work from the top down. It is important to support the flow of knowledge from the bottom up as well.

Among the values implicit in bureaucracy in its ideal form are uniformity, fairness, and consistency of practice. In large bureaucracies, this can involve disregarding particular local situations and characteristics. Again, the values of the top down approach must be maintained, while the particularities of local situations also deserve attention. Our model of training is "grounded" not only in its continual inclusion of workers in developing the train-

ing, but also geographically. Rather than including workers from throughout the state or region in trainings, we focused on one area office of 100 workers, which allowed us to attend to local organizational and community features and to build on the natural relationships among colleagues and collaterals which occur in a child welfare office.

The Training Project

Among the goals of our project were to train supervisors in domestic violence work in one Department of Social Services area office and to develop a training manual for the Department which could then be used system wide. Phases of our work, between September, 1995 and December, 1997, included: getting acquainted, assessing needs, developing curriculum, fostering an educational process as we delivered 14 seminars, evaluating the learning, and producing a manual flexible enough to be consistent with the grounded training approach.

Getting Acquainted

We were outsiders to the system in which we hoped to train. At this time in Massachusetts there is no formal institutionalized relationship between universities and the child protective system, as exists in states which access Title IV-E funds. Therefore, we were not only outsiders, but unknown outsiders. For the sake of our own learning and to establish a relationship in which supervisors felt safe to speak frankly with us, we devoted a considerable amount of time to becoming acquainted.

We began by meeting with a small group of supervisors and workers who identified themselves as having a particular interest in domestic violence. In addition to these focussed meetings, we spent considerable time getting to know the office and the staff. We shadowed workers on home visits, court appearances, and in supervision sessions, and we attended staff meetings.

A key person was the domestic violence specialist assigned to the Boston Region. Massachusetts

is unique in having a Domestic Violence Unit within the Department and a specialist assigned to each region. These women all have experience working in shelters and programs for battered women and now work full-time for DSS, consulting with workers, visiting families at times, and coordinating with community agencies. The domestic violence specialist worked closely with us and filled the function of insider or liaison, sensitizing us to the nuances of office culture and alerting us to potential trouble spots.

The importance of outside trainers getting, at least to some degree, inside the agency system is illustrated in supervisors' comments that outside trainers, no matter how expert, often do not understand the nature of child protective work and make erroneous assumptions, for instance about power relationships (Supervisors meeting, January 12, 1998). Without this experience, experts almost invariably generalize from contexts which are not comparable.

This point is illustrated, from the positive side, by the experience of the domestic violence specialists.

The domestic violence specialists came into the child welfare system as experts in working with battered women. Their perspectives on child protection and on work with battered women in the context of child protection have been informed and altered by their ongoing involvement with DSS workers and clients. One domestic violence specialist told us that she would never have imagined, prior to working at DSS, that she would encourage shelter workers in some situations to file child abuse reports. The domestic violence specialists came from settings where the clients were voluntarily seeking shelter and/or other assistance because of domestic violence. Work with non-voluntary clients, who may not request help with violence or even identify it as an issue, presents new moral and clinical challenges. The specialists have developed new skills and knowledge. They have been trained by their trainees, and vice versa.

Needs Assessment

It is important, in our view, to begin with affirmation of the work already being done and with the expressed questions and needs of those doing it. This approach helps to ensure that training has practical relevance to the needs of the participants while it communicates respect for the knowledge and experience of the supervisors. Proceeding with the assumption that supervisors are "local experts" with specialized knowledge of their own job situations, we assessed their learning needs in the area of domestic violence.

Table 1

1. Assessing dangerousness in situations involving domestic violence.
2. Assessing risk to kids if adults are violent and kids look O.K.
 - 2a. Judging when to keep such cases open or not.
3. Assessing risk if people "deny" or minimize.
 - 3a. Understanding this minimizing.
4. Knowing our responsibilities in dealing with men.
5. Ability to collaborate with other agencies (e.g., shelters) and maintain confidentiality.
6. Knowing when pushing for safety increase risk of violence.
 - 6a. Knowing what to do if that is the case.
7. Knowing where to find more resources for women, children, and men in addition to therapy, batterers' treatment, and shelters.
8. Ability to consider cultural differences in domestic violence cases.
9. Ability to take care of our own and workers' safety and liability.
10. Ability to manage our own and our workers' frustration and powerlessness.

We interviewed all 15 supervisors about their experience working with domestic violence situations, asking them to identify their learning needs in the area of domestic violence by telling us what situations they found difficult in their work experience. We then compiled what we heard, identified core questions, and shared this list of issues with them for verification. We also asked them to prioritize the list of topics and to add any we had omitted (Table 1).

Curriculum Development

This list was our primary guide to developing curriculum. Our secondary guide was the competencies the Department and/or our grant specified. For instance, our grant emphasized interagency collaboration, which was not high on the list of the supervisors. Further topics and needs arose as we went through the two years. The "grounded" approach increased our ability to respond to new concerns as they arose and to address increasingly sophisticated questions as learning occurred.

At our request, supervisors referred us to workers with challenging cases. We interviewed these workers, tape-recording when permitted, to obtain material which could be used in disguised form for case vignettes. The use of local cases had a number of benefits: our understanding of real dilemmas was increased, we were able to construct composite vignettes that did justice to the complexity of the cases supervisors regularly encountered, and the method ensured cultural and clinical relevance to the population being served.

While our activities were dictated by our training approach, they had an indirect benefit for the morale of the office. Social workers appreciated the opportunity to have their stories heard. Our field notes from July, 1996 include the observation, "one major service we are providing to the workers is to bear witness to their work. A dominant theme is that they are glad that we can see how it really is."

Including trainees in the development of curriculum is an important aspect of "grounded training." Kentucky's university-state partnership does

this in a more extensive and elaborate form than ours (Fox, Burnham, & Miller, 1997). There, curriculum development teams include frontline workers, supervisors, trainers, evaluators, and university representatives. In our case, in addition to including our trainees, we worked with our medical center partners, and the domestic violence specialist. If her role had not existed, we should have had a supervisor in the curriculum development group. As the curriculum and trusting relationships evolved, the supervisors were increasingly contributors to the planning process.

We "delivered" the curriculum in a series of sessions at approximately monthly intervals. Initially, supervisors suggested that they invite a worker or more to join with them. Most sessions thus involved workers and supervisors, but some, focussing on supervision skills, were limited to supervisors only. The full program is outlined in Table 2.

Fostering an Educational Process

One of our primary goals was to create a climate of excitement in and for learning. This requires considerable attention to the contexts of training, including the ambiance, atmosphere, and implicit values. The most glorious curricula can fail to move or change students. Learning, really learning, in a way that informs practice can never be guaranteed, but it can be nurtured.

We abandoned the word "training," which had such a connotation of required and passive learning that it was an impediment. We referred to our sessions as "seminars," which also conveyed the expectation of mutual learning among participants and between participants and seminar leaders.

All the seminars involved active participation of the supervisor/trainees. Participants responded to vignettes, participated in role-plays, or in other ways actively engaged and expressed their beliefs and knowledge. This reflects our belief that most people learn better by doing than by listening. It has multiple other benefits: (1) supervisors vary in

Table 2

April, 1996: Child assessment and intervention
May, 1996: Responding to women victims of violence
June, 1996: Working with men who are abusive
July, 1996: Role-playing interviews with men
September, 1996: Repeat of July
October, 1996: Supporting families as nurturing environments
November, 1996: Supporting agencies as nurturing environments
January, 1997: Supervising domestic violence work
March, 1997: Role-playing interviews with women
April, 1997: Legal and criminal justice resources
May, 1997: Role playing supervision of domestic violence work
June, 1997: Advocacy and community resources
June, 1997: Consultation on supervisor competencies
July, 1997: Consultation on worker training

Supervisors attended from 0 (1 supervisor) to 11 seminars, with an average of a little over 5.

their levels of experience and skill and are tremendously credible sources of learning for one another; (2) supervisors often know more than outside trainers about the way new learning translates into on-the-job practice; and (3) practicing the skills being learned and articulating their own knowledge increases supervisors' ability to support their workers' learning.

The lack of incentives for supervisors to avail themselves of training opportunities is a larger organizational issue. Usually, training is an "add-on" for which there is no release time or other compensation. This becomes a powerful disincentive to regular participation. We found it helpful to

offer a variety of incentives and inducements (just short of bribes): food, continuing education units, and certificates of completion, for example.

Carryover between seminar sessions and application to the job were facilitated by supervisors' relationships in their daily work. Those who missed a seminar they wished to attend could learn from their colleagues. Conversations begun in a seminar could continue in the office. Important ideas from one seminar could be reiterated and reinforced later in the series. In addition, at least one of us attended each seminar, even if outside experts were involved as presenters. This constituted another ongoing relationship and increased the potential for coherence and connection across topics and times.

Evaluation

A systematic evaluation of supervisor learning was conducted during the summer and fall of 1997, after the series of seminars was completed. Supervisors filled out a questionnaire and responded to structured interviews, which were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The Child Welfare League of America (1997) has identified levels of competence as:

- Awareness
- Knowledge and understanding
- Application to job
- Skill acquisition

All supervisors reported increased awareness of domestic violence as an issue. Even one new supervisor, who had attended no seminars, said his awareness of the issue was heightened from hearing his colleagues discuss domestic violence and from observing the comings and goings surrounding our Project's meetings. Our evaluation was directed to the remaining three levels of competence: Knowledge and understanding, application to job, and skill acquisition. Although separable for purposes of discussion, these levels of competence co-evolve. Trainees convert new knowledge into skills that can be applied to daily practice. At the same time, practice experience, in training role-plays and

actual casework, informs and deepens their understanding and knowledge.

For each of 21 identified content areas, respondents indicated whether they already knew it, had no change in knowledge and skills, had increased knowledge and skills, or found that area not applicable to their work. The first 13 items were those originally identified by supervisors as areas of difficulty. As self-reports err in the direction of socially desired answers, for each area in which new learning was reported we asked the respondent to describe what was learned and what s/he did differently as a result. This required actually producing evidence of knowledge. Descriptions of learning and/or changes in practice were counted only if two independent coders identified them in the transcript.

The most frequently cited learning, with specific references to skills and changes in practice, was knowledge of domestic violence resources in the community. Almost all respondents specifically mentioned the "purple sheet," a short list of relevant agencies, people and phone numbers, and many mentioned specific agencies and individuals. An increase in specific knowledge and learning was evident also in supervisors' understanding of "denial." Some referred to their greater appreciation of the real dangers women face and of the difficulties of leaving abusive relationships. Others referred to cultural and psychological factors. An increased respect for the risks of "pushing" was evident in references to what might happen if DSS pressed too hard for the woman to take specific actions, and in mention of alternative strategies for improving safety. About half the respondents showed specific evidence of greater tolerance for ambiguity, greater acceptance of their own limits and of the inevitability of uncertainty. Half referred to specific new abilities to assess risk differentially. Five people mentioned new supervision skills. Four referred to interviewing skills, and the same number to an increase in strengths perspective and/or an ecological perspective.

This evaluation reflects some gains in skills and applied knowledge for almost all the respondents, dramatic gains for a few, and gains in varied content areas among the supervisors. Given our initial assumption that learning is a function of the learner as much as of the curriculum, it is no surprise that participants gained different knowledge and skills from the same curriculum.

An unanticipated benefit was supervisors' enthusiasm for seeing and hearing how their colleagues actually approach challenging clinical situations. They reported that such opportunities are rare. This may be a function of local office culture, but we suspect it reflects more general features of the child welfare system, in which supervisor training, and particularly the development of supervisor's clinical and teaching skills, has not been the highest priority. Discussions with each other also spurred discussion with colleagues and collateral workers outside the seminars. In addition to gains in knowledge and skills, it was notable that the participants reported, in evaluations of each session and in reflecting on the project as a whole, that they enjoyed the seminars.

A Manual

If grounded training is inevitably as labor intensive as this project, few people will try it. The manual we created for the Massachusetts Department of Social Services represents an attempt to retain the principles of grounded training without requiring the degree of on-site immersion described here. An edited excerpt from the introduction to the manual follows.

"This manual, or any curriculum, is only a starting place for a trainer. The art of training involves negotiating the relationship between your teaching objectives and your students' learning objectives. In the easiest situation, they may be identical, but often they are not. People can learn only what makes sense to them and fits, or comes close to fitting, their own questions, interests, and assumptions. Knowledge of a subject matter or curriculum is insufficient without knowledge of your students.

“Needs can be assessed prior to the training period, by interviewing a sample of the intended trainees and/or by conducting focus groups with them. It is useful to let the trainees know the results of this effort. Alternatively, if the training arrangements are such that you do not know who will be included or you cannot meet with them, the training can begin with a quick assessment of those in the room. It is important to keep track of the areas which participants identify, list them publicly if possible, be clear about what you can and cannot cover, and appropriately refer questions and concerns which you cannot address. Obviously, there is no point in conducting a needs assessment unless you are willing and able to adapt your curriculum to what you learn.

“The manual provides exercises, case vignettes, and overheads to assist the trainer in presenting material. It cannot substitute for or replace clinical and community experience. Trainers must have done the work about which they are teaching and have familiarity with the Child Welfare Agency’s policies and culture.”

Conclusions

It is our conviction that grounded training, which is built on the questions and the knowledge of those being trained, is an important concept in child welfare agencies, particularly for the training of supervisors. Supervisors occupy an important niche in the structure and culture of child welfare agencies. They are responsible for the implementation of agency objectives, through the efforts of line workers, and also function as teachers and mentors. Grounded training benefits from their experience and constitutes a form of teaching consistent with principles of adult learning.

Grounded training is difficult to implement for reasons that are both pragmatic and cultural. Child protective services are large public bureaucracies, and “bottom up” methods are not the norm. Political pressures often dictate training programs. Centralized and uniform training is easier to control and monitor. Grounded training demands a

philosophical and political commitment and an infrastructure. In our case, a grant and a partnership with a university provided the infrastructure. However, without a political commitment from the State, this is a fragile partnership dependent on soft money. It is certainly not the only model. Another model might use a committee of supervisors and/or managers to develop training agendas with a facilitator and/or experts to assist them. Grounded training demands resources, but so do all forms of training. This approach simply moves more of the resources to a “lower” level in the institution, closer to the ground.

We are conscious of the parallel processes: trainers to supervisors, supervisors to workers, and workers to clients. It is our hope that the respect for supervisors’ knowledge and the collaborative approach to learning implicit in grounded training serve as a model for these other relationships. If the literature on teaching and learning has any merit, this will improve learning. It should also improve morale. Public Child Protective Services are often perceived by clients, workers, and supervisors as hierarchical, bureaucratic, and authoritarian institutions, which in some respects they inevitably are. The concept of “empowerment,” most often used in reference to clients seen as disenfranchised, alienated, and subordinate, and recently extended to students (Finch, Lurie, & Wrase, 1997), is equally relevant to child welfare workers, who often experience themselves as disenfranchised, alienated, and subordinate (Krug, 1994; Richards, 1992).

Grounded training is a small effort to change the culture in the direction of empowering and collaborative relationships. Finally, this should improve the quality of service and the safety of families.

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