Using Stories From the Field for Professional Development

“How-To” Guidelines From Reading to Reflection and Practice Integration

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Case studies provide numerous opportunities for professional development and can be particularly helpful in transdisciplinary training. Below are suggestions for how to use the Zero to Three Journal's Stories From the Field series of articles across a variety of settings and roles such as clinical practice, program development, team building, training and supervision, and capacity-building in the early childhood workforce.

Stories From the Field (Powers, 2011, 2012, and this issue) journals present a collection of articles focused on how professionals who work with infants, toddlers, and their families are making a difference. The stories highlight both the successes and the challenges of working with young children and their families, and they offer a powerful opportunity for professional growth and development. For clinicians, team members, and program administrators, each issue of Stories From the Field can be used for reflection on clinical work, team functioning, and systems building. The stories might also fuel practice change and offer pathways to deeper understanding of the work. For educators, trainers, mentors, and supervisors, Stories From the Field present real-world clinical cases and programs that can be used when training transdisciplinary professionals.

Below are some general guidelines for using Stories From the Field, followed by “how-to” suggestions for clinical practice, team building and program development, teaching and supervision, and workforce capacity building efforts. The suggestions can be readily adapted for use with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

General Guidelines

Recognize the potential of the stories. The articles in the Stories From the Field Journal issues were written by and for professionals who work with babies, young children, and their families. These collective stories reveal the experiences of professionals working with young children and, beyond this, the experiences of the young children and families they serve. Stories provide opportunities to share trials and tribulations, challenges and barriers, learnings, and ultimately, to build collective wisdom.

Identify the gems within the stories. As you consider each article or story, look for the gems—moments of connection, opportunities, challenges, and barriers. Consider the lessons learned and what you might have done differently or the same under similar circumstances and why.

Read reflectively. Before you begin a story, create a space for reflective reading. Set aside the time both to read a whole story and to think about its significance. Read the story with intentionality. Pause as often as you like to consider a particular section, statement, or case. Reread the story—either immediately or at another time—and consider how your thoughts, reactions, and take-home messages have changed. Capture your reactions to what you read with notes or highlights.

Reflect on what the stories mean to you, your colleagues, and the young children and families you serve. Consider the perspectives offered in a story and how they relate to your everyday work. How do the cases, teams, and processes differ from what you are doing? On the basis of these reflections, consider the changes you would make to your practice, your programs, and systems.

Clinical Practice

Clinicians rely on their clients’ stories and the narratives they co-create during treatment to inform and guide their work. Depending on the setting in which you practice and type of work you do, you may find that you are the only infant and early childhood mental health clinician within a program, an agency, or a particular
geographic locality. In community-based private practice, you may, indeed, be the sole infant mental health provider. *Stories From the Field* demonstrate that, as a clinician, you are not alone.

- Use the stories to identify other clinicians, professionals, and providers who are doing similar work in similar settings with similar populations.
- Use *Stories From the Field* as a reflective tool to create self-awareness about your own practice. You may want to ask yourself: (a) who you serve, (b) what you do, (c) what the opportunities and challenges are, and (d) where you get support and sustenance to continue to engage in your work?
- Create a peer consultation group or journal club where you use articles from *Stories From the Field* for discussion. Talk about different stories at each meeting, setting the frequency of meetings at a manageable interval for your group.
- Write your own *Stories From the Field*. Whether you enjoy writing or find it challenging, capturing your story by writing it down can enhance your conceptualization of a particular case and offer another avenue for self-reflection on the work you do. If you are a member of a peer consultation group or journal club, consider having members share their own story at your meetings.

**Team Building and Program Development**

*Stories From the Field* provide ideal material for discussion at team meetings, group supervisions, retreats, and other gatherings. Careful examination by a team of its own functioning is often challenging and fraught with feelings, investment, and ego that interfere with transformation and progress. Using the stories, team members can examine how other programs work, gaining insight into how to improve their own services.

When using *Stories From the Field* with teams, establishing expectations and guidelines is essential. First, agree as a team that everyone will read the selected story for a specific meeting. Second, select a facilitator who will be responsible for guiding the story discussion. Last, create a space and allot enough time to discuss the story at the designated meeting. The story discussion should not be an afterthought or left for discussion only if there’s time at the end of the meeting. The facilitator is responsible for ensuring that the agenda includes adequate time for discussion.

At the start of your meeting, have the facilitator set the agenda and begin the discussion with a reflective question that invites team engagement. The facilitator will maintain conversation flow, being mindful that everyone has an opportunity to comment or engage as they wish. The facilitator is also responsible for closing the discussion and following up on action steps or team decisions. Consider designating another team member to take notes or minutes that briefly document the discussion, capture the thoughts and feelings of the team members, and record any action items.

- Create team “table talk” by selecting a story that describes work related to your team’s work. Consider the similarities and differences, reflecting on what your team can learn from the story and how your team can enhance its functioning.
- Read stories that illustrate a particular struggle for your team, whether it’s a specific type of client, a programmatic barrier, or another dynamic that interferes with your work. Create a space to discuss challenges and what they might mean in your own work.
- Refresh and change group dynamics by bringing in new voices in using the stories. The perspectives of others may reinvigorate or help clarify your mission and vision.

**Teaching and Supervision**

*Stories, whether one’s own or others’, are powerful teaching tools. In teaching and supervising professionals in your own and other disciplines, you can use these stories to illustrate the work in which you engage.*

- Select *Stories From the Field* related to the content of your workshop, seminar, or training. Participants in your training can read the stories in advance or you can use excerpts from the stories throughout your presentation.
- Use stories for training about a particular approach, program model, or population (e.g., integrating mental health services into pediatric primary care, working with caregivers who are substance abusers).

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Practical Tips and Tools

Capturing your story by writing it down can enhance your conceptualization of a particular case and offer another avenue for self-reflection on the work you do.

- Select a story to read and discuss in supervision. Other people’s stories provide new material and alternative perspectives in the context of supervisory relationships and can often help when clinician’s feel “stuck.”
- Develop case-based learning opportunities using Stories From the Field. Consider regularly incorporating case-based learning into existing seminars and courses for early childhood professionals and creating new opportunities for such learning.
- Use stories to share the work of infant and early childhood professionals with professionals in other fields and settings. Many of the stories describe innovative, transdisciplinary, and cross-systems approaches to early childhood services. They can be used to demonstrate the potential of building collaborative relationships and working together to improve the lives of young children and their families.

Building Workforce Capacity and Creating Systems Change

While professionals rely on data, evidence, and science to drive decision-making, it is often the stories that drive them to create solutions and compel them toward action and, ultimately, change. In a diverse and dynamic field like infant and early childhood mental health, stories can serve as bridges across disciplines, systems, and purposes.

- Use Stories From the Field when training transdisciplinary professionals to create connection to and identification with your content area. Ask professionals to identify where they would fit into the story, what their roles might be, and what actions they would take. Ask them to reflect on the perspectives of other professionals and of the families in the story.
- Consider the services and programs described in the stories. How did the setting or type of service impact the providers, families, and children described in the story? What systems, procedures, or institutional supports were necessary to make the program work? What was missing and how could you improve upon the work described?
- Advocate for change using Stories From the Field and your own stories. The real-life experiences documented in the stories provide compelling material that can be used to advocate for improvements in early childhood services and systems. Share successes and identify opportunities to transform care on the basis of lessons learned in Stories From the Field.

The “how-to’s” described above are by no means exhaustive. The articles in the Zero to Three Journal’s Stories From the Field series can be used in countless ways to support, promote, and enhance your work on behalf of young children and their families. Be creative and go beyond reading the stories to using them as an opportunity to explore how theory, research, and training are put into practice to create meaningful change in the lives of infants, toddlers, and families.

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References