Training as a factor in policy implementation: Lessons from a National Evaluation of Child Welfare Training ☆

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Received 25 May 2007; received in revised form 9 June 2007; accepted 11 June 2007
Available online 19 August 2007

Abstract

Federal, state, and local governments spend substantial resources on training child welfare staff. Moreover, enhanced training is often proposed as a core solution to many problems facing public child welfare and other human service agencies. In this paper we conceptualize training as an element of the policy implementation process. We use data from a multiple case study evaluation of nine federally-funded training projects to examine training activity within a policy implementation framework. Findings indicate federal, state, county and organizational contexts were important in successful implementation; the projects were, for the most part, successfully implemented; training projects lacked explicit causal theory to link training activities to training outcomes; and elements of both top-down and bottom-up implementation frameworks were identified. Conclusions focus on the utility of training for enhancing policy implementation, as well as the need for greater theory development in this area.

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Keywords: Child welfare; Policy implementation; Training

1. Introduction

Training in the human services, particularly in child welfare systems, is a frequent theme to improve intervention. Training utilizes resources of time, talent, and money, it is often touted as the solution to a wide variety of social problems, and it occurs in multiple jurisdictions (federal, state, local) and settings (public and private). Despite what may be excessive attention to training

☆ This study was conducted as part of the National Evaluation of Child Welfare Training Grants (9OCT0124) funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau.

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0190-7409/$ - see front matter © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2007.06.001
as a solution to myriad social problems, the scholarly attention to the role of training in child welfare systems is minimal (Collins, Amodeo, & Clay, 2007a). Much of the literature focuses on training practice, that is, the identification of approaches to training (e.g., curriculum development, training delivery, training systems). Alternatively, at a more conceptual level, there is some attention to adult learning theory to guide the development of a wide array of educational and training interventions (Knowles, 1984). There has also been attention to the transfer of training to improve workplace performance (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005). In all of these areas (training practice, adult learning theory, transfer of training) the boundaries of knowledge include child welfare training but range far to include learning that occurs in a variety of settings and for differing purposes (e.g., human services, business, military).

In this article we take a different approach, focusing not on training practice but on the role played by training to introduce innovation or to solve problems within a larger policy context. The concept of training as an important factor in policy implementation emerged from the findings of a study we conducted that examined the context, implementation, and outcomes of a cluster of nine training projects funded by the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The purpose of the study was to “evaluate the Child Welfare Training (CWT) Program by evaluating a set of nine projects from the cluster of twelve projects that was funded for a three-year period under the Children’s Bureau priority area, Training of Child Welfare Practitioners to Work Effectively with Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care through the Federal Independent Living Program (ILP)”. Although the Children’s Bureau has long funded training projects, and typically each of these projects has conducted evaluation of its own activities, this was the first multi-site evaluation of child welfare training. From this study we derive conclusions for the field of training to enhance its potential impact as a factor in policy implementation.

2. Background

Child welfare training comprises a wide variety of activities including professional social work education, pre-service or core training for new employees, and advanced or continuing training. This third type is for current workers in public child welfare, and often, the private agency workers with whom public agencies contract. Typically this type of training aims to develop more advanced skills or to support the implementation of new policy or practice initiatives. It is this third type – advanced or continuing training – that was the primary focus of this set of training projects.

2.1. Training as a variable in policy implementation

Although commonly conceptualized as a human resource and workforce development issue, training in public agencies is also a key factor in policy implementation; agencies are expected to translate general policy guidelines into specific procedures, and line staff is expected to translate specific procedures into interventions with clients. Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) provide the following definition of policy implementation; it “embraces those actions by public and private individuals (or groups) that are directed at the achievement of objectives set forth in prior policy decisions” (p.447). This includes “one-time” efforts as well as continuing efforts to achieve the large and small changes mandated by policy decisions. We characterize training programs supportive of policy decisions as an effort to facilitate large and small change within state agencies.

Social workers are heavily involved in the implementation of policy, especially when policy is delivered through human services programming. Doueck and Austin (1986) noted that training
serves as a link in the social policy formulation and implementation chain, and that a role of staff development personnel is that of policy analyst in regard to agency functioning. The frameworks that policy experts use to examine implementation can be readily applied to training if one thinks of human services arenas in which national or state policy filters through a human service bureaucracy. Several policy frameworks imply that staff training is a factor in implementation (Copeland & Wexler, n.d.; Ingram, 1990; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979, 1980; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). For example, the implementation analysis framework provided by Copeland and Wexler identifies both professional orientation and educational training as characteristics of implementation officials within the larger category of organizational structure.

The work of Lipsky (1980) has been particularly useful for understanding the implementation of policy through the work of bureaucracies delivering social services. The street-level bureaucrat (e.g., child welfare case worker) is in a position to interpret policy for the client, since the client may be unaware of the rules and parameters of any particular policy. Street-level bureaucrats operate with extensive discretion and may interpret policy favorably or unfavorably for a particular client given a variety of factors including his or her own views of the policy, the explicit or implicit rewards existing in the workplace (e.g., pressure to close cases, focus on reducing risk to the agency), and personal biases, among other factors. Training may play a role by clarifying policy for the workers, which may limit their discretionary tendencies, or by attempting to correct workers’ personal biases.

The field of implementation research is known to be “overwhelmingly complex” (p.451), with challenges related to methodology and boundaries of analysis. While many scholars (e.g., Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979, 1980) have moved toward the development of models of implementation, focusing on comprehensiveness of a wide-ranging set of variables, a complementary approach is to examine in greater depth one set of variables. Thus, we have begun to address the question: what is the potential for training approaches to facilitate policy implementation?

2.2. Independent living policy and training projects

The policy of interest in this research is the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (FCIA) (Public Law 106–169). This legislation addressed concerns regarding challenges faced by adolescents preparing to transition from foster care at age 18. It doubled funding for independent living services (a $140 million capped entitlement requiring a 20% state match) and initiated substantive changes in services to these youth including: allowing states to use program funds for room and board, extending the age of eligibility for services to 21, and allowing states to extend Medicaid coverage to this population in the young adult years. States may use funding in a variety of ways to achieve the purposes of the program (Collins, 2001, 2004).

Successful implementation of FCIA would require child welfare workers to be adequately prepared for their expanded role in assisting youth with transition to independence. Training is the primary mechanism to prepare workers for their expanded role. The nine training projects examined in this study were funded in September 2000 for a three-year period and were focused on the training of workers to assist youth transitioning from foster care to independent living. These training projects were federally-funded from the Child Welfare Training Program (Section 426 of Title IV-B, Subpart1 of the Social Security Act). The purpose of this funding priority was “to develop and evaluate a competency-based training curriculum to strengthen public child welfare agency staff intervention skills for working with older youth in foster care and/or Independent Living Programs. The youth, ages 16 to 21, need assistance in making a successful
transition to adulthood, as well as help in avoiding long-term dependency on the social welfare system” (U.S. DHHS, 2000, p.80).

The training projects were explicitly focused on improving worker approaches to youth aging out of foster care and were designed to emphasize a youth development philosophy. These philosophical principles include: active participation of the youth in their case planning, a strengths-oriented focus, empowerment strategies, and attainment of normative outcomes (e.g., education, employment, healthy relationships) rather than the avoidance of problems (e.g., drug use, pregnancy). Both FCIA and the Request for Proposals for the training projects describe the challenging issue of adolescents transitioning from care, emphasize the importance of outcomes both concrete and in terms of relationships, promote the idea of adolescents becoming self-sufficient as adults, and describe youth development as a guiding principle to work with transitioning youth.


The National Evaluation of Child Welfare Training Grants was funded in 2003 by the Children’s Bureau. The National Evaluation consists of four components. One major component was the evaluation of the cluster of Independent Living (IL) training projects. Using several key tenets of the implementation literature, in this paper we use data from the multiple case studies to examine the role of training. Thus, our data, gathered from sites across the country, are being used in the service of theory development related to the role of training in policy implementation.

Below, we describe the methodology and study results. Results that have particular relevance to understanding the process of policy implementation included the following: 1) context was important in successful implementation, 2) the projects were, for the most part, successfully implemented; 3) training projects lacked explicit causal theory to link training activities to training outcomes, a common difficulty in tracing policy from conceptualization to implementation; and 4) elements of both top-down and bottom-up implementation frameworks could be seen. Each of these will be discussed in detail, followed by observations about further theoretical development of training within policy implementation.

3. Method

The evaluation utilized a multiple case study design. According to Yin (2003) a multiple case study is defined as “empirical inquiry that uses more than a single case in investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.” Training projects such as these are complex in their multiple sets of activities, key actors, foci of interventions, and contextual uncertainty.

Of the 12 funded IL training projects, nine were selected for the case study evaluation. We eliminated our own training project from inclusion. We then selected the smallest project to use as a pilot site. Another site was eliminated from inclusion because it could not be scheduled for a site visit during the field period. The remaining nine projects formed the project sample and are denoted by the letters: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I.

1 In addition to the multiple case study reported here, the other three components of the National Evaluation project include: comprehensive literature review of child welfare training, survey of state training directors, and survey of faculty of schools of social work.
After conducting a pilot study at one site in Summer 2004, the field period for data collection was from August 2004 to December 2004. Most site visits were two days; occasionally they were one day or three days. Prior to the site visit, relevant documents were reviewed including the proposal, interim and final reports, the complete curriculum, videos, and any other products. Site visit activities included a series of interviews with key project personnel including the project director, youth participants, trainers, curriculum developers, evaluators, and collaborators from the public child welfare agency or key private agencies. In sites where training was still being offered, we attempted to schedule the site visit so that we could observe training.

For each site, data analysis involved writing detailed case study reports that integrated the various types of data and used a conceptual model (Fig. 1) as a guide to organize the data analysis. When case study reports were completed, the second phase of data analysis involved the multi-site analysis. At this stage, data were integrated across the multiple sites through an iterative process. Throughout the analytic process a series of matrices were developed to organize key concepts across sites. Additionally, the raw data (interview notes, final reports, supplemental post-test site evaluation data, curricula) were frequently double-checked for accuracy. As segments were written, the content was reviewed by the analytic team to ascertain whether there were different recollections of the data gathered in interviews as well as to begin to generate implications from the data. Two other checks were included to insure accuracy and objectivity. Research assistants reviewed sections of the written multi-site analysis and compared it to the individually written case study reports to look for discrepancies. Finally, a draft report was made available to the grantees to correct any errors of fact and to generate discussion regarding the validity of the conclusions and implications drawn by the project team.

4. Results

4.1. Context is important to project implementation and to project impact

The policy implementation literature recognizes the importance of federal, state and county context to successful implementation, typically identified as economic, social, and political conditions (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1979, 1980; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). In our study we identified four common contextual challenges to both the implementation of these training projects and their potential effects on facilitating successful youth transition: state budget crises, insufficient public agency priority given to training, insufficient public agency attention to adolescent issues, and geography.

4.1.1. Budget crises

All but one site (Project A) spoke about the challenging budget environments in the states which manifested themselves in several ways. For example in one state the budget crisis meant that workers did not have time to participate in training or could not get reimbursed for travel to attend training. In another state, budget problems led to extensive retirements. This resulted in a lot of new people in staff positions and staff stretched thin because of early retirements. In one of the county agencies in a different state, budget difficulties led to a hiring freeze. Therefore, the training academy began to offer more advanced training rather than core training. In turn, however, this led to too much diversity in the training topics offered, too much dispersion of training focus, and the need to develop a strategy with the counties to consolidate these efforts. Similar examples were given by other projects as well.
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Fig. 1.
4.1.2. Insufficient priority given to training

All sites reported that state and county agencies assigned insufficient priority to staff training. This was the case regarding staff training in general as well as the IL training specifically. Respondents at Project D reported that workers had large caseloads and it was challenging to get full participation in training. There was also an interaction between the lack of training priority and the geography in primarily rural states. When there was no funding to pay for travel costs and overnight stays this became another barrier to participation in training.

Like most projects, the training offered by Project C was not mandated and the project had a hard time recruiting participants from the public agency. To adapt to this challenge the project made the training shorter (a common strategy among the grantees) and expanded the target audience to private agency group home workers. Project G respondents reported that training is not considered a priority at the state or the county level. In fact, the state gives a double message to workers: training is valuable but workers need to stay on the job.

4.1.3. Lack of priority given to adolescent/IL issues in the state/county

Several respondents identified that adolescent issues in general, and IL in particular, have not received enough attention in their states and counties. Project G was among the projects that stated this to be an issue. In particular, when the state has fiscal problems adolescent services are more likely than other services to be cut. There is also a bias against adolescents; there are limited community resources in adolescent services and the more challenging adolescents are quickly referred to the juvenile justice system. Project H reported that in their local county there has been a “cookie cutter” approach to providing IL services (which are primarily life skills training).

Independent Living services appeared limited in the state where Project F was located. At the time of the project there was also wide variation by county; some counties did not know about the IL legislation, some did not have IL coordinators, and there was no state monitoring of the counties regarding IL services. One respondent working for the state agency was part of the federal Children and Family Services Review process and reported that only one youth could talk about receiving IL services.

At Project B, project staff believed that the state agency and many child welfare agencies across the country do not want to deal with high-risk youth, specifically those youth in congregate care. The project’s curriculum focus on high-risk youth was chosen to respond to repeated requests for help with this population from worker and supervisor needs assessments. According to one respondent, the state child welfare agency did not want to address the high-risk youth population in its regular training because the child welfare agency believed that high-risk youth should be served by other state agencies (mental health, substance abuse). When the IL grants became available, this was seen as an ideal opportunity to address such a topic.

Project C reported a somewhat mixed experience. Prior to this grant there was very little training on IL. But a strong person in the state child welfare agency was committed to IL and he was very important in several initiatives. The availability of the federal IL funds has been central to the development of new youth services. One key challenge, however, was that the new infusion of IL funds led to many fragmented policies and programs around the state; they “popped up” but were never fully implemented.

Although sites were in agreement that adolescent services received low priority, there were strengths exhibited in many localities. For example, in one state, the person in the IL coordinator’s position had been in this role for a long time and has served as an important advocate for youth in the state. Another positive note that sounded across most projects was the belief that, because of the combination of the funds provided through the FCIA legislation and the delivery of these IL training
projects, attention to adolescent issues was increasing. Comments suggested momentum from various efforts that included: available federal funds for services, development of new program models, formation of local partnerships based on this issue, and implementation of these training projects.

4.1.4. State geography

Three geographic issues appeared to play a role in influencing the context of the project: the size of the coverage area, the rural character of some regions, and the organization of services in a county-based system. Some projects had a regional or multi-state focus (A, D, F, I). Uniquely, Project A also worked with the many tribal communities in two states. Geographically large projects are challenged by the attention needed to coordinate efforts and adapt training to different environments. County-based systems present these same challenges. Projects operating in rural areas expressed challenges related to travel and communication.

Even projects operating in a single state express these types of concerns. Covering an entire state may involve many hours of travel and different organizational cultures. Project G described the challenge of interfacing authority and responsibility between the state and counties. Smaller counties may have only two IL cases so they may not want the IL training. Moreover, workers in the one part of the state have to travel six hours to central training.

These are common challenges to the implementation of many training projects as well as other services delivered by state agencies. They are not likely to be unique to this cluster of training projects. How likely are these challenges to be overcome in the near term? Obviously budget problems will be a continuing challenge in many jurisdictions and little can be done about geographic challenges beyond the enhancement of technology. The relative importance of training within agencies and the attention to the needs of adolescents, however, are challenges that may be more mutable with strategic efforts. Although training efforts within states are wide-ranging, there are increasing efforts within states to attend to training in a more systematic fashion (Collins, 2007). Additionally, as noted above, these training projects may have been one of many factors that helped raise the visibility of the needs of adolescents on the agenda within states.

4.2. Projects were, for the most part, successfully implemented

Project activities were primarily focused on developing curricula, delivering training, and involving youth in meaningful roles on the project. Other project activities included developing and sustaining collaborative relationships, evaluating the training project, and disseminating project materials to a wider audience. The evaluation found evidence of project success in developing curricula and delivering training to a wide variety of audiences. It also found that this success was partially attributable to the knowledge, experience, and competence of the grantees, as well as the state of the training field as a whole which has predominantly focused on training practice (Collins, Amodeo, & Clay, 2007b). Mixed success was observed in the areas of youth involvement, collaboration, evaluation and dissemination.

Evidence of successful implementation included the following: 1) content analysis of curricula and curricula-related products identified comprehensive coverage of several topics relevant to the project focus; 2) interviews, observations, and document review confirmed the purposes, audiences, and scope of training delivery.

The content analysis of curricula identified relatively common themes across the projects. Topics taught by virtually all sites included: positive youth development (e.g., principles, philosophy) and independent living assessment and case planning (including a strengths focus,
building relationships, locating and using resources, and building support networks). Several sites also addressed the topics of state and federal policies related to youth, and the relationship between the youth and their workers. Other topics of note were diversity among foster care youth and worker skills of support, empathy, and engagement. A few sites addressed more specific issues such as HIV/AIDS (one curriculum), violence related to transitioning youth (two curricula), supervisor–worker relationships (two curricula), and high-risk youth (three curricula).

Eleven different training audiences were identified in the evaluation of the training projects. The most frequent audience, addressed by all nine projects, was child welfare workers. The second most common audience was “youth service personnel” including a wide variety of individuals in public and private settings (school, juvenile justice, mental health, and substance abuse). Other audiences included child welfare supervisors \( (n=6) \), residential staff \( (n=5) \), IL workers \( (n=5) \), child welfare administrators \( (n=4) \), foster parents \( (n=3) \), MSW students \( (n=3) \), foster youth \( (n=1) \), tribal agency staff \( (n=1) \), and adoption staff \( (n=1) \).

Some sites had multidisciplinary audiences by design (e.g., B, D, H) and others ended up with them by default, either because various groups heard about the training and came even though the training was not specifically addressed to them, or because the training audiences were broadened to include a variety of agencies when public child welfare workers could not attend. Multidisciplinary audiences were seen as beneficial by some sites because the sites were able to reach and raise the awareness of additional constituencies. However, the drawback was that most sites had no content on how various disciplines could work together on behalf of youth. This is an example of how projects adapt to context but in ways that may not serve implementation well.

The evaluation found larger deviation (from proposed plans) related to youth involvement, evaluation and dissemination. For example, several projects shifted from involving youth during training to the use of youth-produced videos, evaluation designs were heavily scaled back from original proposals, and dissemination was more idiosyncratic than planned. These changes were partially related to contextual factors (e.g., child welfare systems would not cooperate with evaluation plans) but also were related to the skill set of project teams. While project teams had ample expertise in curriculum development and training delivery, some lacked expertise in youth involvement, evaluation, or dissemination. Furthermore, adequate project infrastructure for these activities was typically lacking. The exceptions were notable. Project E had significant youth development infrastructure through its partnership with a large, experienced, youth development organization and had far more success than any other project in integrating youth into the project. Project C had an internal evaluation and dissemination unit and hence had more sophisticated project evaluation and dissemination mechanisms. Other sites did not have these external partnerships or internal resources, and these activities therefore tended to be more marginal. All of the projects came to realize over time that each of these functions was a substantial undertaking and that organizational or project-specific infrastructure was necessary for implementation.

4.3. Lack of causal theory limits potential impact

Policies have implicit causal theories regarding how people and systems will respond to new or changed policies, and thus, policymakers can influence the implementation process by basing programs on strong causal theory (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Likewise, causal theory related to training is also important but is often lacking; in particular regarding the linkage between context, activities, and outcomes of specific training projects.

Theoretical conceptualization of training would link training activities with training outcomes taking into consideration the federal, state and local context of the training. Use of logic models
has become common to training projects, as it has to other interventions, but there is a wide range
in the level of sophistication of logic models and most of them are used for purposes of
operational planning rather than causal understanding of the linkage between activities and
outcomes (Collins, Amodeo, & Clay, in press). In these and similar training projects, the lack of
causal theory to guide projects limits the ability to plan appropriate training activities and leads to
a lack of clarity regarding intended project impact.

Data from this cluster of training projects suggested that projects: 1) addressed contextual
challenges through collaborations; 2) engaged in standard rather than unique training practices
(with the exception of youth involvement); and 3) lacked clarity regarding outcomes intended.

4.3.1. Addressing contextual challenges

“Collaboration” has become a mantra in the effective delivery of a variety of services and
training activities are not an exception. Yet, the explicit conceptual purposes for engaging in
collaborations are not always well specified or targeted to meet the unique needs of a specific
project. In these projects there was not consistent evidence that the projects’ selection,
engagement, and maintenance of collaborative partners was done for well-defined purposes. All
projects collaborated with the public child welfare agency; this is a requirement of securing these
training grants. Other collaborators might have been engaged, but in most cases it was not clear
whether the relationships were substantial or perfunctory.

The utility of collaborative relationships lies in collaborators’ ability to facilitate project
implementation and address contextual challenges. If projects paid more explicit attention to the
use of their collaborative relationships, it could forestall some of the problems witnessed in these
projects, and lead to more positive outcomes such as 1) raising adolescent issues higher on the
public agency agenda; 2) securing release time for workers to attend training; and 3) facilitating
evaluation of the training.

4.3.2. Utilizing standard and innovative training practices

To what extent do projects engage in activities that are specific and purposefully directed to the
goals of this project versus the employment of standard training procedures? The answer to this
question will depend on how adequately the projects conceptualize their activities and outcomes
and attend to causal theory.

The components of training projects as reflected in the training design and delivery literature
are standard: conducting training needs assessments, curriculum development, pilot training, and
training delivery. These components were consistent across this cluster of training projects as well
as across numerous other child welfare training projects we identified in the literature (Collins
et al., 2007a). While there may be some variation depending on project resources and members’
skill level, experience, and interests, procedures remain fairly standard. For example, although
each project developed its own curricula there were commonalities in the processes of curriculum
development. Conducting needs and/or competency assessments was universal (n = 9), with focus
groups as a common method (n = 8), as well as the use of advisory groups for feedback (n = 7).

The unique feature of this cluster, which each project attempted, was the inclusion of young
people as advisors, curriculum developers, or trainers. Project E was most innovative in their
efforts; their resulting project fully infused youth in all aspects of the training, and their project
was characterized as “youth-led” rather than youth-involved. Project D also had a substantial
youth presence as curriculum developers and trainers. The remaining projects utilized youth in
less ambitious ways and were, therefore, closer to the “standard” end of the continuum rather than
the “innovative” end. Having youth in focus groups, on advisory panels, or reviewing drafts,
while better than no youth involvement, was not as innovative as projects might have hoped or originally planned.

4.3.3. Clarifying outcomes

The outcome domains of knowledge, attitude, and skill are common targets of training projects and this cluster aimed to influence child welfare workers’ knowledge, attitude and skill in work with adolescent foster youth. Our interpretation of the data suggested that attitude change toward adolescents in care was the most common goal of this group of training projects. The underlying assumption was that if workers have more positive attitudes toward youth, this will lead to better practice with youth. This was operationalized in several ways. Projects using youth as trainers or youth in videos were designed to give workers an empowered healthy view of youth. Core concepts of projects included “youth as a resource” (rather than client) or project titles such as Y.O.U.T.H. — Youth Offering Unique Tangible Help or Project STAR: Successful Transitions for Adult Readiness to convey an assets-based approach to youth work. Training content that avoided negative stereotypes of youth, provided a youth voice in examples, and reminded workers of their own challenges as young people, were common, and were utilized to influence worker attitudes regarding adolescents in foster care.

Knowledge as an outcome was also typical and this included content such as training workers on the FCIA, use of an assessment tool, and awareness of local resources. Project attention to skill development, although not absent, was less apparent and mostly ignored in the projects’ evaluations. Consistent with the training literature, attention to skill development is more difficult and time consuming, and requires greater involvement of the agency to allow practice of skills within the agency setting following training. Moreover, conceptualization of a skilled IL worker is less straightforward and less developed. Abilities to connect with youth, respect them, engage them in problem-solving processes, help them identify self-defeating behaviors and avoid them, help them increase their sense of self-efficacy and empowerment, and link them with resources, are not as easy to operationalize or evaluate as knowledge about the FCIA or attitudes supportive of youth.

Some projects had latent goals as well. In addition to typical outcomes of increased knowledge, attitude, and skill, we identified additional goals of some of these training projects: the empowerment of youth participating in the projects; the development of long-term collaborations with agencies; and systems change to be more youth-focused. In short, rather than simply influencing the attitudes of individual workers, these projects may be used as vehicles for influencing larger efforts. For example, training projects might be used to facilitate consensus about goals within the agency. Given the finding that adolescent services are not a high priority in many state agencies, training projects, such as these, can be used to spotlight the overlooked needs of these youth.

Projects’ own evaluations focused primarily on documenting participants’ positive feedback toward the training. Outcome measurement did not appear to be a high priority of the projects although all of them did conduct at least a minimal level of evaluation (nearly always focused on knowledge gain or attitude change). Numerous factors limited the quality of evaluations: a) the commitment of the projects to evaluation efforts was uncertain; b) limited resources impacted the projects’ ability to do observations of participant learning and the three-year time period impacted the projects’ ability to follow-up with trainees; c) technological difficulties were often experienced by sites using technology-assisted evaluation methods; and, d) the projects faced public agency resistance in conducting evaluation (e.g., providing contact information to follow-up with trainees). The final reports of the projects were highly variable in the amount of outcome
data provided. With the exception of Project C, very few outcome data were provided by projects and consequently, conclusions about the effectiveness of these projects are limited.

Training evaluations rarely measure impact beyond training outcomes (increase in knowledge, change in attitude, enhanced skill). The linkage of training activities with long-term outcomes requires greater conceptualization by the training field as a whole, rather than by an individual training project. Projects are unlikely to have impact without other contextual conditions in place. Some project sites recognized that the delivery of training during the time period that states were accessing and utilizing federal funding to implement independent living related services facilitated the perceived effectiveness of the training. Comments suggested a “synergy” of efforts that included: available federal funds for services, development of new program models, development of local partnerships surrounding this issue, and delivery of these training projects. This connoted some excitement about independent living services that had previously been absent.

4.4. Top-down and bottom-up approaches to implementation

Implementation scholarship often categorizes theories of implementation into top-down or bottom-up types of strategies, with increasing attention to hybrid theories of implementation. Although these categorizations are recognized to be a simplistic rendering of complex phenomena, they can provide a tool for analysis. According to Pülzl and Treib (2006), top-down perspectives include the work of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), Bardach (1977), and Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979, 1980). These theories start with the assumption that policy implementation begins with a decision made by central government. They have assumed a direct causal link between policies and observed outcomes and tended to minimize the impact of implementers on policy delivery. In a top-down interpretation of the role of training, training activities are designed to provide the needed information to workers to do their jobs in accordance with the policy intent. In this conception, the role of the worker is to receive the information, to learn it, and to act appropriately. Such a model of training may be realistic when legislation is non-controversial as well as clear, so that the information communicated to the worker can be easily understood and carried out, the worker would have no ambivalent feelings about the work to be done, resources would be available for the worker to act in congruence with the policy’s intent, and implementation would not challenge the worker’s professional or personal ethics. This model is also appropriate when policy change occurs in the work setting so that the worker would be supported, or at least not thwarted, in doing the work. Here, trainers are conduits only and fidelity to the curriculum is pure.

Bottom-up implementation theorists include Lipsky (1980) and Elmore (1980). Theories of this nature focus on what is actually happening at the recipient level and understanding the causes that influence action “on the ground”. The interaction between the worker in the bureaucracy and the client is central in defining the nature of policy implementation. Training within a bottom-up conceptualization would demonstrate a realistic understanding of the nature of the work and the systems within which workers interact with clients. Training programs would be developed with extensive input of workers and clients to determine training needs as well as needed competencies for conducting the work. The legitimacy of the trainer would be particularly important in order for the workers to “buy-in” to the training content. Consultative models in which workers seek guidance with real cases and training based on principles of adult learning (e.g., involving participants in decisions about what to learn and how to learn it; utilizing the wisdom and experience of those who come to training; and providing the opportunity to apply learning
immediately after training) would fit within a bottom-up framework. Additionally, training activities might be used to allow mechanisms of feedback upwards regarding the successes and challenges of implementing new policy directives.

Data from these projects suggest elements of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to training, although no training projects used this language to describe the role of their projects in implementing youth-focused policy and practice. Some project elements which suggest an implicit top-down model include the following: the genesis of the project was a federal priority identifying the need for training workers regarding adolescent transition from care; public agencies demonstrated more support for standard rather than innovative approaches; and training content and method was adapted to agency structure rather than used to influence agency culture. Despite the challenges to implementation identified, the evaluation found positive feelings toward the training. The grantees, state agencies, and trainees overall recognized the need for this type of training. This may have facilitated a top-down approach. Other federal priorities may not be as closely aligned with the needs of the field and may therefore generate more resistance, often characteristic of top-down implementation.

Other elements of projects which suggested an implicit bottom-up model included: needs and competency assessments, advisory committees, development of collaborations, and effort to involve youth. Through these mechanisms, projects attempted to understand the nature of the work in order to develop appropriate training content and activities. Projects may engage in these types of activities (e.g., needs assessments, advisory committees, collaborations, involvement of youth) because they are required to (i.e., collaboration with the public child welfare agency and involvement of youth were requirements of these projects) or because these activities are standard practice (e.g., needs assessments, advisory committees). Each project used each of these mechanisms to some extent, but evidence from the evaluation study suggested wide variation; some were judged to be real (i.e., serious and sustained efforts, such as Project E regarding youth involvement and Project H regarding advisory committees) and others more superficial. To increase the likelihood of successful implementation greater articulation of the purposes of these activities and the explicit linkage of these activities with outcomes, are needed.

More advanced training might also consist of trainee-to-organization feedback loops regarding the utility and challenges of training to respond to policy and program decisions. Training of supervisors and higher level staff, in particular, might utilize a more consultative rather than didactic classroom model in which shared knowledge is encouraged between participants and later with administration, along with development of action plans in which supervisors and higher level staff make personal commitments to specific tasks to further the work. There were hints of these types of activities (i.e., inclusion of administrators in training audiences \( n=4 \) and use of action plans as a training activity at Project H), but they were not commonplace.

5. Discussion

Public child welfare practice is highly challenging. The policy context within which child welfare workers serve clients is complex, evolving, and at times ambiguous. Training initiatives are a key mechanism by which workers come to understand the policy environment and the expectations for their work. The training projects examined in this evaluation were designed to train workers to expertly assist young people in preparing for the transition. We have examined these projects as an element of the policy implementation process and have concluded that the projects were basically successfully implemented but that a greater number of successful outcomes might be achieved if training were conceptualized as part of the policy implementation
process, and greater explicit attention were given to: contextual factors, causal theory, and frameworks of bottom-up policy development.

The experiences of these projects provide several lessons. Training projects, alone, are unlikely to have a lasting impact. Potential facilitating factors for greater impact would include: accompanying legislation, resources, institutionalization of training within agencies, and agency/governmental context supportive of good child welfare practice (e.g., foster care, workforce, etc.). There was some indication that because this training was developed and delivered while agencies were implementing programs funded by the Foster Care Independence Act, there was some synergy across efforts and a climate conducive to more youth-focused child welfare work. Moreover, projects indicated that the planning phases involving collaborations with agencies may have been as important, if not more important, than the actual training delivery itself. Yet, although these projects were successfully implemented and well received, there is little evidence that single projects had a sustained effect. None was demonstrated in the projects’ own evaluations. In our cross-site evaluation we found glimmers of institutional change but longer follow-up would be needed to determine if the impact was lasting. Our assessment of the quality of these projects, as a whole, was that they were conducted by experienced and competent organizations and personnel, that they accomplished planned tasks in the areas of curriculum development and delivery of training, and that both curriculum and training were quite good and sometime excellent. Yet, the conceptual link between training and improvements of well-being of children, youth, and families is tenuous. Training serves numerous purposes and, in special projects such as these, may potentially have a long-term benefit rather than simply a short-term impact on worker knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The long-term benefits may include: enhanced collaborations that yield later payoffs in terms of influencing programs and practice; institutionalization of training in the agency setting either as an element of core training or as an occasionally offered advanced course; or through the impact on knowledge development for the field regarding better approaches to training development and delivery. These types of benefits are generally not included in the evaluation of individual training projects but should receive greater evaluation attention.

Large scale training projects such as these may facilitate a policy implementation process by creating attention, enthusiasm, and collaborative effort to address an issue at the state or local level. This impact may be of greater utilization than a top-down information-driven conception of training designed to get workers on-board with a policy. Greater attention to activities of collaboration, training evaluation, and dissemination may facilitate the role of training in policy implementation. These activities may serve to facilitate greater institutionalization and thereby more impact on worker and agency change. Without these efforts good training programs may be offered in a haphazard way and with little sustained impact.

Causal theory regarding the use of an approach to effective policy implementation through human service delivery is limited. Regarding the role of training as an approach to aid effective policy implementation, across a wide variety of human service arenas, and other policy arenas as well, there is a lack of consensus regarding the appropriate use of training. Greater conceptualization, and therefore, realistic expectations of outcomes are needed for training projects. By themselves, training efforts have no control over other major forces that will affect both the training outcomes and later client outcomes. Among these forces are the financial resources available that support the policy intent, the workforce conditions that support a high level of professionalism (e.g., degree requirements, salaries, supervision, and professional ladders), and the social conditions that bring families to the attention of child welfare systems. Thus, outcomes should be designed to reflect areas where training is highly likely to have an impact.
The federal Child Welfare Training Program should aim to fund the type of training projects that are of critical need to public child welfare agencies. If federal funding priorities are not aligned with the needs of the field, public child welfare agencies have no reason to engage in long-term institutionalization of training programs. Although top-down information-driven models of training can be useful for certain tasks (e.g., appropriate documentation and paperwork) they may be highly limited when applied to the complex nature of intervening with families with great challenges. For the most part, the training field has recognized this; yet, training practice has not developed sufficiently for this reality. Training based on adult learning models, for example, recognizing workers as experts, provides the framework for this more advanced learning but these lessons are not generally utilized in practice, at least in part because top-down conceptions of the policy implementation process conflict with bottom-up conceptions of effective training.

6. Conclusion

Training is a non-controversial solution to highly complicated problems; hence its popularity. It is a “high consensus” approach (Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975) which generally bodes well for effective implementation. There is rare opposition to enhanced training. It is also, erroneously, interpreted to be a low cost approach. Training also rarely addresses systemic issues in child welfare systems and almost by definition, assumes the problem lies within the individual worker rather than the system within which the worker operates.

But a more sustained conversation needs to exist about the role of training in our public child welfare agencies. Training systems are receiving increasing attention in child welfare systems due to the federal Children and Family Services Reviews (Authors, 2007). Consistent with other forces within the policy environment, training efforts will increasingly be required to demonstrate effectiveness. To do this, theoretical frameworks are needed that link context, activities, and outcomes. In particular, greater focus is needed on developing the supportive conditions required to facilitate effective training. Training is neither a panacea, nor, despite a lack of sufficient outcome data, without merit. Sabatier (1986) noted that the relative importance of the many specific variables affecting policy implementation varies across cases. We have suggested that within the human services training is a key variable in policy implementation and there is a need for more scholarly attention to model development of implementation in child welfare agencies with training being a key element.

The strength of the case study method is its in-depth analysis and is enhanced with multiple case studies that help to determine if the story told is unique to one site or consistent across multiple settings. The well-known limitation of the case study method is the inability to generalize. Thus, we offer our analysis of the role of training in these nine sites and suggest that our observations and conclusions be further tested across a larger number of cases. In particular, we suggest testing additional federally-funded clusters to identify which elements may be common or unique to specific types of training initiatives. For instance, in what ways might a training initiative around increasing adoption for special needs children be similar to the patterns observed in this project: Which contextual factors are similar and which are unique? Are the processes of curriculum design and training delivery similar or specific to the goals of the training project? Are the challenges of training outcome measurement and linkage to client outcomes the same or different, and in what ways? Furthermore, since much of child welfare policy is specific to states, further analysis of the implementation of state policy through state child welfare training initiatives may provide a closer look at the linkage between policy implementation and training.
References


