

Supervisors' and Employees' Perceptions of Transfer of Learning in a Child Welfare Pre-Service Training Course

By: [Elizabeth Lindsey](#) and Basil Qaqish

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Abstract:

A Transfer of Learning (TOL) program was developed to complement a Pre-Service Training program (PST) for new child welfare staff. To evaluate the impact of this TOL program, a cross sectional survey of employees and supervisors was conducted, using a stratified random sample. The overall response rate was 81% (85% for employees and 75% for supervisors), and the survey items showed good reliability. This article presents results from a comparative analysis of data from employees and their supervisors. Both groups believed that TOL activities were relevant to employees' jobs and prepared new employees for their jobs. Employees were able to link classroom learning to their job duties and apply that knowledge and skill as they began work in their new positions. While there were a few differences in perceptions between supervisors and employees, overall, both groups agreed on the value of the TOL process. Recommendations for modification to the TOL component focus primarily on the amount of time the program takes and how to enhance supervisory support for employees with respect to TOL activities. Other child welfare training programs considering use of a structured transfer of learning process as a complement to classroom instruction may find it useful to take these results into consideration as well.

Keywords: transfer of learning | child welfare | pre-service training

Article:

Introduction

In 1997, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation requiring that all new child welfare staff attend a pre-service training course prior to having direct contact with clients. In

1998, the North Carolina Division of Social Services (NCDSS) Family Support and Children's Services Section Staff Development Team began offering a mandatory training program, Child Welfare in North Carolina, also known as Pre-Service Training (PST). This article reports on results from the evaluation of a new component of PST, Transfer of Learning (TOL), implemented in fall 2002.

PST consists of a 72-hour, four-week training program that focuses on foundational knowledge required for child welfare practice in North Carolina. The first two weeks of training take place in the classroom; in the third week of training, participants return to their county DSS offices for on-the-job training experience; and for the fourth week they return to the classroom. In 1999–2000, focus groups were conducted with child welfare supervisors to assess their perceptions of PST. One of the major findings of that study was that supervisors desired a more structured approach to the third week's on-the-job training experience. As a result of this feedback, the Staff Development Team developed the TOL package, which includes activities for PST trainees during the third week of training as well as some activities that carry over into the last week of classroom training.

Implemented in the fall of 2002, the purpose of the TOL package was “to provide guidance to supervisors in orienting and training new child welfare workers” (NCDSS, 2002, p. 1). The manual is designed to be used by new employees to complete a number of activities directly related to PST classroom content. While the TOL process is largely self-directed, supervisors are encouraged to provide guidance to new employees and assign them experienced mentors to oversee their experience.

Although a majority of TOL activities are designed to be conducted during Weeks 3 and 4 of PST, two orientation activities involve: 1) a pre-training conference between supervisor and employee and 2) an employee review of computer-based training modules that are available on-line and provide an orientation to the North Carolina social service system. In general, TOL activities involve interviewing staff, shadowing experienced staff, accompanying staff to visits to other community agencies, working with actual case records, and reading and responding to case scenarios. Trainees bring their completed TOL packets with them to Week 4 of PST during which time they use some of the TOL material for in-class discussions and exercises. All participants must complete the TOL materials to fulfill the requirements of PST. At the conclusion of PST, trainees turn in their materials to the trainers who assess their work and mail feedback to their supervisors within a month of the conclusion of PST.

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the level of transfer of learning that takes place and to gather information on both employee and supervisor perceptions of the relevance and effectiveness of the TOL material. This information will be used to modify the TOL material to improve its usefulness to supervisors and training participants. A secondary purpose of the evaluation is to assess perceptions of PST training and learning, overall.

Methodology

The evaluation was conducted using a cross-sectional survey design. Data was collected from employees who had completed PST at least three months previously and their supervisors.

Instrumentation

Two surveys, one each for employees and their supervisors, were developed. Drafts were

reviewed by the state's Training Evaluation Advisory Committee, responsible for overseeing the evaluation of the entire child welfare training system, TOL curriculum developers, and trainers who teach the PST curriculum and manage the TOL process.

The employee survey contained questions about the amount of time respondents spent working on the TOL activities, the relevance of the different activities, and their knowledge and level of preparedness to take on job tasks. Most survey items used a likert-scale-type measure (1 to 6 rankings), and a few were dichotomous "Yes/No" type questions. For the most part, the supervisor survey contained items that were similar to those in the employee survey, but from a supervisor's perspective.

The overall reliability of both instruments is acceptable. Reliability of likert-type items was .77 on the employee survey and .78 on the supervisor instrument. Reliability for dichotomous items was .62 on the employee survey and .69 on the supervisor instrument. Copies of both surveys are available upon request from the authors.

Sample size and data collection

The surveys were sent to a stratified random sample of child welfare staff who took PST during July through October of 2003 and their supervisors. The sample was stratified to secure approximately equal numbers of participants from each of the four PST sessions that were held during this period. During this four-month period, a total of 167 employees completed PST. Surveys were sent to a random sample of 76 employees and their supervisors three months after the end of each employee's training. A reminder letter was sent two weeks later. If there was still no response from the employee or the supervisor, a second and, eventually, a third survey were sent.

Rates of return were very good for a mail survey. Out of a total of 76 employee surveys, 65 were returned, yielding an 85% response rate. For supervisors, 58 usable surveys out of 76 were returned, for a supervisor response rate of 75%. The overall response rate, for both employees and supervisors combined, was 81%.

There were 51 matched pairs of employees and supervisors. Power analysis of the sample of 51 matched pairs showed good power (0.87), indicating a sufficient number of matched pairs to compare the two groups statistically.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Employee and supervisor data were analyzed separately, and there was a comparative analysis of matched pairs of supervisors and employees. This paper addresses only the comparative analysis. T-tests and McNemar's tests were used to compare employee and supervisor responses.

Results

Table 1 below reflects results of t-tests that compare employee and supervisor responses to items related to overall perceptions of PST and the TOL process. With respect to item 2, supervisors estimated that the amount of time required to complete the TOL process was almost twice that of what employees reported. Similarly, on item 4, there was a statistically significant

difference in supervisors' and employees' estimates of the percentage of total time required to complete the TOL material that employees were able to do in the office during Week 3. A possible reason for the differences between employees and supervisors on items 2 and 4 may be the difficulty of questions that ask respondents to approximate time and percentages of time. However, the large differences in the means may also indicate a lack of understanding by supervisors about the amount of time TOL takes.

Table 1: Pre-Service and the Transfer of Learning Process (Employee items 2, 4, 5, 6 vs. Supervisor items 1, 2, 3, 4)

Item*	Employee Mean	Supervisor Mean	Mean Difference (Emp-Sup)	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
2. Approximately how many hours did you spend working on the Pre-Service Training Transfer of Learning Package during weeks 3 and 4?	16.78	30.15	-13.37	-2.70	0.01**
4. Approximately what percent (%) of the hours in question #2 did you complete while you were at the office during week #3?	60.57	44.02	16.55	2.36	0.02**
5. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1= "None or almost none"; 6= "All or almost all"), approximately how much knowledge have you been able to transfer from the Pre-Service Training curriculum to your current duties?	4.43	4.43	0.00	0.00	1.00
6. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1= "Completely irrelevant"; 6= "completely relevant"), how relevant was the transfer of learning process to your current duties?	4.33	4.59	-0.26	-1.33	0.19

* Item language is from the employee survey. Similar supervisor items were reworded. Item numbers above are also from the employee survey,

** Statistically significant, $p < .05$

Table 2 compares employees' and supervisors' responses to items about the relevance of each of the 10 TOL activities. The second column indicates the percentage and number of employees who completed that activity who rated the activity. For example, 29 employees

indicated that they completed the “Roles and Functions in Child Welfare” TOL activity. Of those, 93% rated that activity as “most relevant.” The same calculation is used in column 3, which reflects the percentages and numbers for supervisors. Column 4 shows the percent difference between columns 2 and 3. Because the data in Table 2 is dichotomous, we used a nonparametric test, McNemar’s, to see if there were any significant differences between the two groups. As seen on Table 2, there are no statistically significant differences between employees’ and supervisors’ responses to any of the items.

Table 3 reflects employees’ and supervisors’ opinions about whether specific TOL activities should be required of all PST participants. McNemar’s test was used for this analysis as well. There are only two activities for which there were significant differences between employees and supervisors. Comparing the significance values from Table 2 to their counterparts in Table 3, it seems apparent that employees agreed more closely with supervisors with regard to the relevance of the different activities than they did about whether the activity should be required or not. Even so, there is not really any apparent pattern of disagreement between the two groups, other than the two activities noted.

Table 4 shows that there were significant differences between employees and supervisors with regard to estimating the number of hours they met to develop TOL objectives (item 4). However, as described earlier, this type of question that asks people to estimate exact numbers often poses problems, and the validity of this item is questionable. Items 5 and 6 exhibited statistically significant differences in patterns of responses regarding employees’ level of knowledge and preparation prior to PST, with supervisors rating their employees’ knowledge of child welfare more highly than did the employees and employees rating their own level of preparation for the job more highly than did their supervisors.

Table 2. Relevance of TOL Activities (Employee items 8.1a-8.10a vs. Supervisor items 5.1a-5.10a)

Items* If you complete [TOL Activity], is that activity MOST relevant to your current duties?	Employees % (N)**	Supervisors % (N)**	Difference (Emp - Sup)	McNemar Sig. (2-tailed)
Roles & Functions in Child Welfare	93% (29)	92% (49)	1%	1
The Role of the Community in CPS	84% (32)	77% (27)	7%	1
Law, Rules Policies, & Standards	98% (44)	96% (56)	2%	1
Cultural Competence	86% (37)	77% (31)	9%	0.45
Child Development	93% (44)	89% (37)	4%	0.63
Assessing Child Sexual Abuse	90% (39)	92% (39)	-2%	1
Social Work Interview	95% (42)	94% (50)	1%	0.63

Functional Assessment	86% (35)	83% (41)	3%	1
Investigative Process	95% (41)	96% (50)	-1%	1
Ingredients of a Case Decision	98% (42)	91% (47)	7%	1

* Item language is from the employee survey.

** N in columns 2 and 3 corresponds to the number of respondents who answered that question. For instance, for “Roles and Functions”, 93% of the 29 employees who answered that question said that that activity is “most relevant” to their job duties ($0.93 \times 29 = 27$ respondents).

Table 3: Should Specific TOL Activities Be Required? (Employee item 8 vs. Supervisor item 5)

Activity	Employees % (N)**	Supervisors % (N)**	Difference (Emp - Sup) %	McNemar Sig. (2-tailed)
Roles & Functions in Child Welfare	30% (50)	55% (51)	-25%	0.02*
The Role of the Community in CPS	11% (47)	14% (51)	-3%	1
Law, Rules, Policies, & Standards	58% (50)	80% (51)	-22%	0.04*
Cultural Competence	17% (47)	16% (51)	1%	1
Child Development	31% (49)	22% (51)	9%	0.50
Assessing Child Sexual Abuse	29% (48)	20% (51)	9%	0.54
Social Work Interview	32% (50)	43% (51)	-11%	0.24
Functional Assessment	17% (48)	22% (51)	-5%	0.79
Investigative Process	50% (48)	35% (51)	15%	0.28
Ingredients of a Case Decision	52% (48)	41% (51)	11%	0.30

* Statistically significant, $p < .05$

** N in columns 2 and 3 corresponds to the number of respondents who answered that question. For instance, for “Roles and Functions”. 30% of the 50 employees who answered that question said that that activity should be required ($0.30 \times 50 = 15$ respondents).

Table 4: Questions Pertaining To “before Pre-Service Training” (Employee items 1-6 vs. Supervisor items 1-4, 6, 7)

Item*	Employee Mean	Supervisor Mean	Mean Difference	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
1. On scale of 1 to 6 (1=“Poor”; 6=“Excellent”), rate the quality of preparation for training your supervisor gave you.	3.86	3.98	-0.12	-0.22	0.83
2. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1=“Poor”; 6=“Excellent”), rate your understanding of your new job duties.	4.29	4.51	-0.22	-0.86	0.39
3. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1=“None or almost none”; 6=“Extensive”), how much information about TOL did your supervisor give you before you started Pre-Service Training?	3.32	2.88	0.56	1.45	0.15
4. The week before you started Pre-Service Training, approximately how many hours did you meet with your supervisor to develop TOL objectives?	1.86	4.78	-2.92	-2.83	0.01**
5. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1=“Low”; 6=“High”), rate your level of knowledge about child welfare in North Carolina before you started Pre-Service Training.	2.88	3.49	-0.61	-2.26	0.03**
6. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1=“Low”; 6=“high”), rate your level of preparation for your new job before you started Pre-Service Training.	3.10	0.69	2.41	9.22	0.00**

*Item language is from the employee survey.

** Statistically significant, $p < .05$

Table 5 compares items related to employee experiences during PST. There were no statistically significant differences in how employees and supervisors responded to these

questions.

Table 6 compares employees' and supervisors' perceptions of the employees' experience and abilities after PST. There are no statistically significant differences between the two groups on any of these items. It is important to note that the two groups agreed that employees were moderately well prepared for the job and had a high level of knowledge one week post-PST.

Employees were asked if they were assigned an experienced employee as a mentor before starting PST. Supervisors were also asked if they assigned an experienced employee as a mentor for the new employee. Of the 51 employee responses, 31 (61%) said they were assigned a mentor. Of the 49 supervisor responses, 34 (69%) said that they assigned a mentor to the new employee. McNemar's test indicated there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups on this item.

Employees and supervisors were also asked about the assignment of an experienced employee as a mentor to the new employee after PST. Of the 51 employee responses, 30 (59%) said that they were assigned a mentor. Of the 48 responses by supervisors, 30 (63%) said that they assigned a mentor to the new employee. McNemar's test indicated no statistically significant difference between the two groups on this item.

Table 5: Questions pertaining to “During Pre-Service Training” (Employee items 8-10 vs. Supervisor items 8-10)

Item*	Employee Mean	Supervisor Mean	Mean Difference	t	Sig (2-tailed)
8. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1="Low"; 6="High"), rate your ability to link content you learned in Pre-Service Training to your job taste.	4.57	4.25	0.31	1.27	0.21
9. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1= "Rarely"; 6= "Daily"), rate how often you were given an opportunity to apply information you learned in class.	4.59	4.08	0.51	1.78	0.08
10. While you attended Pre-service Training, approximately how many times did your supervisor talk to you about your progress?	3.87	5.14	-1.27	-1.8	0.08

*Item language is from the employee survey.

Table 6: Questions Pertaining to “After Pre-Service Training” (Employee items 14-18 vs. Supervisor items 13-16)

Item*	Employee	Supervisor	Mean	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
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	Mean	Mean	Difference		
14. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1= “Poor”; 6= “Excellent”), rate the quality of your mentoring experience.	5.34	5.03	0.31	1.31	0.26
15. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1= “Low”; 6 = “High”), rate your level of knowledge about providing child welfare services in North Carolina one week after you returned from Pre-Service Training.	4.39	4.16	0.23	1.01	0.32
16. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1= “Low”; 6 = “High”), rate your level of preparation for your new job one week after you returned from Pre-Service Training.	4.24	4.16	0.08	0.33	0.74
17. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1= “Low”; 6 = “High”), rate your current level of knowledge about pro	4.96	4.9	0.06	0.35	0.73
18. On a scale of 1 to 6 (1= “Low”; 6 = “High”), rate your level of	4.98	4.98	0.00	0.00	1

*Item language is from the employee survey.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to evaluate supervisors’ and employees’ perceptions of the Transfer of Learning (TOL) component of the child welfare Pre-Service Training (PST) program. A secondary goal was to assess respondents’ perceptions of the extent to which PST, as a whole, prepared new employees for their positions. Interpretations of data included in this section are informed by feedback from the PST trainers and curriculum developers as well as Staff Development Team management and relevant scholarly literature.

Perceptions Regarding Transfer of Learning to the Job

Overall, both PST participants and their supervisors reported that PST and the TOL process prepared new employees for their jobs. Both groups agreed that employees were able to transfer a moderate amount of PST knowledge to their jobs, which compares favorably with data on transfer of knowledge from other human service training programs reported by Curry (2001).

Supervisors and employees also agreed that employees were able to link PST content to their job tasks, which is another way of demonstrating that they are transferring knowledge from training to the work environment. Further evidence of transfer of learning are both groups' relatively high assessments of employees' knowledge and level of job preparation one week after PST.

Perceptions Regarding TOL Material

Relevance to job duties. Supervisors and employees alike assessed TOL positively. They believed that, overall, the TOL process was relevant to employees' duties and that all of the individual TOL activities were also relevant to employees' jobs. These findings are important because employee perception that training material is relevant is a predictor of the extent to which employees will be able to utilize learning on the job (Alliger et al., 1997; Curry, 2001).

Recommended requirements for TOL. Although employees and supervisors indicated all 10 TOL activities were relevant to employees' job duties, only 4 of the 10 TOL activities were recommended to be required for all participants. Discussion with PST trainers and curriculum developers suggested several possible reasons for this apparent inconsistency. First, several of the TOL activities are quite time-consuming and require that employees gain access to other staff. According to PST trainers, participants often find it extremely difficult to gain such access and may be frustrated in their attempts to complete those activities. Therefore, they may be much less likely to believe these activities should be required. Furthermore, the fact that a majority of employees reported not having enough time to complete the TOL material at the office probably contributed to their reluctance to require all activities. Second, participants may prefer having some choice about what TOL activities they complete, rather than being required to do them all. PST trainers and managers report that employees and supervisors alike are focused on the aspects of training that they perceive to be relevant to the employee's specific job and, in general, do not value as highly activities that are not directly related to the job. Third, some new child welfare employees may believe they know some or most of the material that is covered in PST and the TOL package. Staff who have worked for the agency in other capacities or who have a social work degree may believe that they already know the material that is covered in a particular module and believe they should not be required to go back over material they already know.

Preparedness for training. While employees and supervisors believed that employees are generally well prepared for training, both groups agreed that supervisors do not always provide their employees with much information about the TOL process before training. Also, employees indicated they spent less than half the number of hours indicated by supervisors on discussion of TOL objectives with their supervisors, which may indicate a lack of understanding of the question or what TOL objectives are. Despite the possibility of measurement problems with this and other items that require estimates of time, this finding is somewhat disturbing since research indicates that preparation for training and later preparation for application of learning are factors that affect transfer of learning (Curry, 2001).

Required time commitment. There was a large and statistically significant difference of opinion between employees and supervisors regarding how much time the TOL activities actually take. Supervisors tended to believe that the activities took, on average, almost twice as much time as employees actually reported they spent doing the activities (30 hours vs. 17 hours, on average). Similarly, supervisors and employees did not agree on the percent of total TOL time employees completed at the office (60% vs. 44%). There was a high degree of variability among

both employees and supervisors on both of these items, possibly indicating a measurement problem with the item itself. However, it is possible that supervisors really do not know exactly what their employees are doing and how long it takes to complete the TOL package.

The issue of time is one that has been at the heart of PST since its inception. County administrators and supervisors want new employees trained as quickly as possible so they can assume caseloads. In the focus groups that were conducted to assess supervisors' perceptions of PST, the length of training time was a major issue (Lindsey, 2000). At the same time, supervisors also want workers to return from training fully prepared to assume a caseload. This inherent tension between the amount of time needed to adequately prepare a child welfare worker and the agency's need to have a person in the field doing the job is evident in this assessment of TOL as well.

Mentors and TOL. A majority of employee respondents to the survey were assigned a mentor prior to attending PST. The survey did not inquire about their experience with this mentor, so that data is not available. However, people who were assigned a mentor after PST rated their mentoring experience extremely highly. Both employees and supervisors also believed employees received a moderately high level of follow-up assistance from their supervisors during PST. This is extremely important as research has shown that employees' likelihood of transferring knowledge and skills to the job is affected by the degree of supervisor and organizational support they receive (Curry, 2001; Warr & Allan, 1999).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The TOL process was designed to provide new child welfare staff with a bridge between the classroom and the agency work environment. This evaluation shows that the process is, in general, being implemented as intended and is having positive results. Employees are able to link classroom learning to their job duties and apply that knowledge and skill as they begin work in their new positions. The high level of agreement between employees and supervisors regarding the relevance of the TOL activities and how employees perform on the job after training provides solid support for the TOL process and material.

However, these results also suggest several recommendations for modifications to the TOL component of PST. The material should be reviewed with respect to the issue of time, with special attention given to the number and type of activities that are required of all participants, keeping in mind that the purpose of the PST and TOL is to provide training that is adequate for a new worker to begin the job. If that cannot be accomplished by reducing the amount of material or time involved for TOL, clearly the need to meet training objectives is paramount. The Staff Development Team should continue to educate PST participants and their supervisors about the amount of time employees actually need to complete the TOL material and emphasize with supervisors the importance of giving employees time at the office during Week 3 to complete TOL rather than having them begin work on caseloads or other duties.

It will also be important to continue to educate supervisors about the importance of being involved with and accessible to new employees as well as providing mentors for them, both before PST, during Week 3, and after PST. While respondents indicated a majority of employees were assigned mentors, a very large minority were not, and thus their ability to make most effective use of training and the TOL process was likely diminished.

A review of the TOL process and materials, with attention to issues raised by this study, will enhance the training system's ability to prepare North Carolina child welfare staff to begin

their careers with a solid foundation of knowledge and skill they need to work effectively with families and children. In addition, child welfare training programs considering use of a structured transfer of learning process as a complement to classroom instruction may find it useful to take these results into considerations as they develop their own transfer of learning strategies.

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