An Integrated Approach to Supporting Professional Development through In-Service Education and Supervision

Trudi Norman-Murch, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, Southwest Human Development, Phoenix, Arizona

Karen Wollenburg, M.S., The Portage Project, Portage, Wisconsin

The authors both have experience as direct service providers of early intervention services (Karen Wollenburg is an early childhood special educator and Trudi Norman-Murch is a speech/language pathologist). They both have responsibilities within their own agencies for staff support and program development; in addition, they provide in-service workshops and consultation to other professional groups at the national level.

Karen: My years spent working as a home visitor in a Birth to Three program have prepared me in many ways to do in-service education for professionals in the field of early intervention. They have given me a perspective to use when trying to understand how to achieve a good fit with the variety of programs and people who participate in learning opportunities. As with families, I am a guest in the program's home. I listen carefully and observe interactions in order to understand what the participants' view of their situation is. Sometimes I am credited with "power" that I do not possess and am expected to be able to "fix" whatever is perceived as wrong. I find a way to partner with the participants, clarify roles and expectations, and spotlight the existing strengths of the individuals and organization. I point out and encourage our mutual and reciprocal learning effort. I must try to earn trust and interact in a way that honors the integrity and responsibility of the organizational system. My role is to support the care givers (organizational leaders) as they strive to provide for the needs of the child (program) in the context of their community and environment.

Trudi: I started my professional career as a speech/language pathologist working in a hospital, and then moved to an educational setting. This involved changing from a direct-service, clinical model to an inclusive, classroom-based model. I began to take on more supervisory and program management responsibilities when I went to work in a community-based early intervention program which provided services according to a family-centered, relationship-based model. This program is located within an agency (Southwest Human Development) which has made a commitment to reflective supervision, as providing a primary vehicle for continuous program improvement and individual professional development. I have, therefore, personally experienced many of the changes which have taken place in our field. I believe that this helps me when I work with individuals who are in the midst of these transitions, because I am still struggling with them myself. I can acknowledge and identify with the feelings of loss which may take place at many levels: loss of importance as the main agent of change, loss of (apparent) control of the learning situation, loss of clarity as to the scope of our practice, and loss of primary connection with the children whom we serve. However, I am also aware of the many important commonalties of purpose, skills, and knowledge which underlie diverse approaches, as well as the opportunities we have for being more effective in our work.

The field of early intervention is in a state of redefinition and reorientation: many professionals working in this field have gone through at least one, and often several, major shifts in accepted models of "best practice." Many of us define ourselves, to a greater or lesser degree, in terms of the work we do. A belief that our work is of value and that we are able to do our work well is central to our sense of well-being. When we are challenged to change the definition of our work and the skills needed to do it, we may experience stress and discomfort. Alternatively, we may be excited at the prospect of learning new skills or applying new knowledge, but feel uncertain when it comes to actual implementation or application.

Although early childhood professionals bring a wealth of knowledge and skills to the intervention process, for many of us, our discipline-specific training may not have emphasized skills that help us form collaborative partnerships with families, support positive parent-child relationships, or recognize the need for self-awareness and reflection. Additionally, some practitioners may not be familiar with concepts in neuroscience and developmental psychology which stress the important relationships between infant brain development and attachment theory (Champion, 2000). These ideas have major implications for practice that are different from the educational or medical-model approaches that are well-established in many of the professions serving families and children in early intervention.

We, as professionals in the field, are personally experiencing the evolution of our practice and know first-hand how exciting and overwhelming it can be. In this article we will share our insights and experiences as in-service providers and program leaders who support others in their professional development. We will stress the important correlations between in-service opportunities and the on-going support and supervision of staff. This article will also highlight the important parallels between the work of in-service presenters and supervisors/program leaders and the work of direct service providers with families.

Four principles have helped us in our efforts to integrate in-service education and supervision:

1. Think of staff development as a process, not an event.

2. Attend to the emotional components of learning.

3. Use scaffolding to support new ways of being and doing.

4. Think ecologically.

In the discussion of these principles that follows, text in italics represents the voices of various participants in in-service education and supervision in various forms, including comments made by supervisees, excerpts from workshop evaluations, and language we have used as trainers.

Think of staff development as a process, not an event.

We have all had experience with presenting or attending "one-shot" workshops which are enlightening and inspiring at the moment, but may not lead to real individual or organizational growth. Formal training events are likely to have the greatest impact if they are part of an on-going development process and a long-term plan.

Seek coherence among learning opportunities offered to staff.

It helps to have agreed-upon core values and a shared mission. At Southwest Human Development we have developed a set of "principles of practice" and at Portage we have articulated "core perspectives"—viewing situations from an ecological perspective, taking a strengths based approach, being family centered, acknowledging relationships as the focus for learning, and reflecting regularly on our daily practices at all levels of the organization (Copa, Lucinski, Olsen, Wollenburg, 1999). Program leaders should keep values and mission in mind when seeking outside training, to be sure that the training reflects those values and enhances those practices. Discuss core values with presenters, to be sure they are comfortable with them, and ask presenters to try to make explicit the connections between these foundational principles and the specific training content. This helps staff see the connections between new concepts and established practices.

The workshop on the use of videotaping was so timely, because it really reinforced all the work we have been doing on taking a strengths-based approach in our conversations with families. The presenter gave us so many concrete ways of communicating to families the importance of all those wonderful moments when they are just enjoying their baby!

When deciding whether to invest resources in any particular in-service, we ask ourselves how it might further our overall staff development plan.

Involve leaders.

In order for staff to redefine their work and expand their skills, program leaders must be committed to helping implement new practices and exploring new concepts in the context of daily program routines and interactions. When managers, supervisors, and direct service staff attend workshops together, they have a shared experience on which to build. The visiting presenter should identify key individuals within an organization or group with whom they can develop a partnership to support the on-going integration of theory into practice. A major task of those who offer in-service opportunities is to build relationships with program leaders, in order to help them find the support they need to nurture the growth of the professionals in their care.

Use supervision and other opportunities for reflection to complement in-service training.

A supervisory or mentoring system which reflects the precepts "Supervision is a relationship for learning" and "Supervision should feel like help" (Fenichel, 1992) is one of the most effective possible supports for professional development. Ongoing reflection can help assure that staff explore and practice the barriers and benefits of presented ideas and knowledge, with assistance, so that they become comfortable and integrated into daily routines and interactions. Supervision can be a safe place for individuals to explore their reservations and concerns, which might otherwise prevent them from acquiring new skills.

At first I was really worried that I was being asked to be a mental health counselor, but the more we talked about it, I realized that sometimes it is really helpful to just listen to a parent when she talks about her concerns. When I start to feel like I'm getting in over my head, I sit down with my team and they help me figure out if I should be making an outside referral.

Program leaders can think ahead of time about activities that might follow an in-service training. For example, staff may be identified to take responsibility for presenting key concepts at the next team meeting. Staff who have attended a workshop may meet shortly afterwards to discuss the relevance of material presented and to make an implementation plan. Time can be taken during team meetings to practice specific skills, and to seek opportunities for integrating new approaches into existing program routines.

We have found that the most effective strategy is for individual supervisors and group leaders to be alert to "teachable moments" during supervision or team meetings when they can draw attention to connections between in-service content and on-going child or family situations. In light of the important role of supervision in this whole process, program leaders should consider devoting agency time and resources to building the skills of the supervisors as a group. Support for staff development should be clearly identified as one of supervisors' primary responsibilities.

Attend to the emotional components of learning.

Build and maintain trust and security.

People who feel safe and valued for their contribution are able to give voice to the issues and feelings that describe their complex interactions with families and other professions. For the in-service presenter, the program administrator, and supervisors, a major task is the development of a secure base and holding environment which supports people as they discuss critical issues and personal responses to their work.

Sometimes I come away from the home visit and I don't know what I'm doing there. I have learned so many ways to help that baby, yet I can't see that the mom cares at all about her development, it just isn't important. So who am I supposed to be in this family?

Listening and observing to gain a better understanding of the situation is often the first step in assuring psychological safety within the group.

Confirm purpose and role.

A clear understanding of expectations, the purpose for the time spent together, and the role of the individuals involved is key to building and sustaining trust and security for both the individual and the group. This appears to be true whether in the context of a workshop, a team meeting, or a supervisor/supervisee meeting. Taking the time to discuss why you are together and what you hope to accomplish clarifies expectations and helps set boundaries. An orienting conversation can help both presenter and participants clarify the parameters of their contact. It can open the door to a discussion that acknowledges that the expertise, knowledge, and power to act lie within the existing program structure and participating peers.

In an orienting conversation, presenters might say:

We have been invited to share specific strategies and ways of thinking and doing the work of early intervention. We will share those that we and other professionals have found effective, but we do not expect that you will necessarily agree or do things the same way that we do when you leave the workshop . We ask that you share your thoughts and experiences with one another while we are together, consider the information, and take away from this experience those strategies and ways of thinking that you find most important. With the support of your team and supervisor, you can try and explore the ideas over time, discuss how they are working for you, apply them to your work, and get support in thinking about the benefits and costs of your choices and actions.

Introductory remarks and activities that preview the kinds of interactions that might occur help participants to feel prepared and more comfortable. For example, an ice breaker that encourages the sharing of experiences from one's own family of origin helps set the tone for later discussions that highlight the importance of our own history as it influences how we are in our work, as well as what we do.

Talking first, and openly, about the difficulties of change, the variability of expectations for "good work" required by different disciplines, and possible feelings of loss, anger, and ambivalence that occur related to shifts in expectations, gives permission for providers to express their differing emotional and practical experiences.

Set clear boundaries and expectations for mutual respect.

Determine the concerns and interests of participants/staff at the beginning of the time together and clarify which of those will most likely be addressed.

Cindy, since you have said you are a new graduate in speech and language therapy, I understand that knowing more about the specifics of feeding disorders is a very important issue for you. It is not a topic that we are able to address during this workshop; however, there are experienced therapists here with us that would be, or may know of, great resources for you. . .

People need to feel heard even though their issues may not be addressed directly.

Some of you will raise very important issues that we will not be able to address during our time together. We will try to document those issues either by writing them on the "Parking Lot" (a large sheet of blank paper posted on the wall) to share later with your supervisor for future team and individual training, or by talking with you individually and assisting you to find resources.

Having mutually negotiated team and supervisory agendas for regularly scheduled meetings, and clear documentation of group rules that define the group's expectations for respectful interactions, sets the stage for the development of trust and security in the ongoing relationships.

There are people in the group (or on this team) who have different work or life experiences, who operate under different program guidelines, and who have different discipline-specific training. Our joint task over the next few days (or in our team meetings) will be to listen to one another, share multiple perspectives and experiences, and find the important contributions that we each have to offer.

It is important that we honor our differences and strive to understand the varied individual and programmatic ways of defining the work, in the same way that we strive to understand the beliefs and routines of the children and families with whom we work.

Clear statements indicating that each person has control over what and how much they choose to share, and a discussion of how shared information will be kept confidential, will help clarify boundaries and support a personal sense of control and mutual respect. Protect

the vulnerable by offering alternatives or "thinking pauses" when unusually sensitive information or personal conflicts begin to unfold. These strategies help create a holding environment in which the group's struggles and concerns can be heard, and conflicts addressed directly and safely.

Link content with life experiences.

Linking content to the "experiences of the heart" gives untried ideas a place to settle in and be held for consideration. Activities and discussions that attend to "moments of meaning"(Champion, 2000) and link new learning to emotional engagement breathe life into theory and philosophy.

Invite the telling of stories. The sharing of personal experiences gives meaning and authenticity to the content. Stories are one way in which the culture and history of an organization can be passed on to new members over time. Stories can evoke memories and emotions that are universal and spotlight important learning.

I can attest to how important what we say to parents is, and the importance of finding what's going right. My daughter is now 12, but I still remember vividly the day in the grocery store when she was about 15 months old. I was pushing her in the cart talking to her about the fruits and vegetables in the produce aisle when a little old lady hobbled up to me, smiled at my daughter and patted me on the arm saying "You talk so nicely to your little girl." Well, I was overwhelmed; hardly anyone ever commented on how I interacted with my daughter. I felt like a "good mom." I felt noticed for something I was doing well. All that day, and actually for the next week , every time I "talked nice" to my daughter I felt proud. I remember those feelings to this day.

Explore from the personal. Activities that help people gently explore the origins of their own attitudes and beliefs open a door for greater understanding of the ways of others. Care must be taken to protect confidences by structuring such activities so that the *process* is discussed, not the specific details of the exchange. Exploring personal beliefs and cultural patterns around such basic aspects of family life as eating, sleeping or discipline will reveal many different perspectives needed by participants or team members. Discussions of different perspectives can serve to normalize the diversity often discovered within the families served by programs.

Identifying "moments of meaning" or emotional engagement can clarify potential opportunities to present new information, encourage exploration of ideas introduced during workshops, and give direction for ongoing supervision and professional growth and learning.

Somehow, when I look at what I'm doing when I go on a home visit and I match it up with what I now know about the importance of the parent-child relationship, I just can't

continue to spend the therapy sessions playing with the baby and working with the therapy ball. Yet I'm not sure how else to be, or how to explain a new way of doing things to the parents. Will they think I'm trying to get out of doing my job?

Use a reflective approach to encourage self-awareness.

The reflective approach to staff development means that a presenter or supervisor interacts with others in ways that encourage the ongoing exploration of self in relation to the work. This approach acknowledges the affective component of the complex relationships involved in early intervention.

I go there and I can hardly talk to mom about the baby without feeling like I'm going to cry. I hope that my own baby will be healthy, but I feel guilty thinking that way. . . maybe it's just pregnancy hormones; I don't know.

Within a reflective approach, the supervisor or presenter uses inquiry and observation to deepen self understanding.

Can you tell me a little more about what that's like for you, visiting this family and thinking about your own baby?

A reflective approach views situations through an ecological lens, considering professional developmental levels, individual and organizational history, culture, biology, and current context in order to try to determine how best to support growth and learning.

Use scaffolding to support new ways of being and doing.

Build on existing strengths.

Any workshop or staff development effort should start with an examination of what is currently in place, and what is already working that supports the concepts being presented.

Over the last few years we have gotten so much better at including parents in therapy sessions and making recommendations which reflect family routines. We've already done a lot of the hard work of moving towards delivering our services in a natural environment.

By shining the light on individual and program strengths, we can help staff understand that they have a strong foundation upon which to build new skills and practices. We also draw attention to the resources available for moving the process forward. By asking, "What strengths does the family, do you, does your team bring to this situation?" we help shift the focus of the discussion away from all the difficult and negative aspects of a problem and toward the tools at hand for addressing it.

Just as we do with children and families, we can often reframe a current practice, which has been taken for granted, so as to highlight its importance and usefulness in a new context.

Joe's mom seems to really trust you, and to be willing to try the techniques you have suggested to her. What do you think you did to help her feel this way towards you?

When a new concept or practice is presented in the context of what is already happening, we communicate an appreciation and respect for staff competence and skills. This, in turn, helps to build the trust needed for staff to consider making a change.

Reference the work.

Conversations about new ideas should be continually tied back to the daily work. Just as we believe that functional goals and outcomes related to everyday routines are most helpful for families, so too will new skills generalize best for staff if they are presented in the context of their actual work setting. Recognize and acknowledge the value of taking small steps in adopting new attitudes or practices; anyone can be easily overwhelmed at the prospect of making a major change. If we encourage staff to think about one or two ways they could begin to implement a new practice within their current schedule or routine, they may be more likely to give it a try. Individual supervision, team meetings, and workshop settings all provide opportunities for these kinds of discussions.

Training content should be congruent with the expressed or perceived needs of participants, and should be built upon them. This approach parallels our work with families: We start where they are, and respond to their concerns and priorities in designing an assessment or intervention plan. This does not mean ignoring our own thoughts about what might be important, but rather finding ways to connect these priorities to those of the family. So too in training: For example, if staff are expressing distress around behavior management issues, a workshop on the social/emotional consequences of sensory-integration difficulties might be an effective way to both introduce basic concepts related to sensory integration and to offer intervention strategies which could be quite useful in addressing staff concerns.

Use a partnering approach. In-service presenters and group leaders need to give choices and present themselves as collaborative partners with staff. The visiting trainer suggests ideas for consideration; program leaders and staff have to decide together what they find useful and want to try. The presenter takes a neutral stance, offering the help needed to reach the outcomes desired by participants. For example, if the program wants to move its early intervention practices towards provision of services in the family's natural environment, the outside consultant could suggest a number of ways to refine the IFSP process so as to be more supportive of natural environments. The group leader can then partner with staff to figure out which of the ideas presented are most feasible and desirable. The solutions arrived at

internally will be most appropriate to the specific situation, and choice will have been preserved at every level.

Encourage practice in "finding the words."

As we help practitioners learn how to provide relationship-based interventions, we need to give them ample opportunities to practice these skills. If, for example, we are suggesting that in some circumstances modeling may not be an effective way of helping a parent learn to feed her child successfully, then we need to offer alternative strategies and the chance to use them. Case study discussions, role plays, and fish bowl activities (both during workshop presentations and team meetings) can be safe ways of trying out new ways of being and doing. As we practice, we start to "wear the learning"—to make it fit.

Not infrequently, visiting presenters talk about aspects of the work which staff have not thought about, or included in their understanding of the scope of the job. Concepts such as professional use of self (boundary issues, transference, dealing with conflict) and the need for self-reflection may be quite foreign and quite challenging (Bertacchi & Norman-Murch, 1999). It is valuable to offer the chance to explore alternatives and to think about possible responses to the difficult situations encountered by all practitioners at one time or another.

How do you think you might handle it if a mom said to you, "Our family is so grateful for the help you have given us. We feel as if you are almost part of our family, and we would like to ask you to be the godmother of our new baby." What do you think you could say? What would be the costs? The benefits?

Think ecologically.

Just as we encourage practitioners to take an ecological perspective in their work with children and families (taking into consideration, for example, the family's history, culture, and composition; the child's biological status and experience; community attitudes; and agency systems), it is also helpful to consider the broader context when planning for professional growth and development.

What is the context?

Taking an ecological perspective means attending to agency/group culture and history. If the agency values program improvement, and if there is a clearly articulated expectation that staff will continue to build their skills and refine their practice, then staff are less likely to see change and innovation as covert criticism of them or their work. If, on the other hand, the agency offers minimal ongoing support for reflection and learning, new information may be more cautiously received. These considerations affect the way outside trainers present material and interpret responses.

Consider pacing and timing. Plan formal in-service

events for a time when participants will be reasonably unstressed and mentally available. Planning several workshops one after another will result in burnout, and they are not likely to have maximal impact. Likewise, group leaders should attend to what else staff have been asked to consider recently, or other changes that have been proposed. Trainers and program leaders should ask: What is the agency's track record and credibility related to providing follow-up and support for new ideas? What are the "ghosts in the workplace" which may undermine professional development efforts? It is best to take on fewer projects so as to have some closure and sense of accomplishment. This is a leadership responsibility, and one that is sometimes difficult to uphold in the face of multiple opportunities and program requirements. Staff need to trust that management has a realistic understanding of the demands of the work, and will provide adequate resources (including time and assistance with implementation of new approaches).

Who are the participants or team members?

We have long understood the value of an individualized and developmental approach to our work with children and families. These principles apply to professional development efforts as well. A young speech/language pathologist who is new to the field, struggling to learn how to do what she was taught in school, and not yet ready to think about how to "give away" her expertise to the families on her caseload, needs one kind of assistance. An experienced team, whose members have worked together for a long time and have seldom been challenged from within to think about their actual practices in the light of new standards, needs a very different kind of support. The cultural background of individual participants and the community will also affect the way ideas are understood and received. In order to achieve a goodness of fit with recipients for both content and style of teaching, we have learned that active listening and observation skills are just as important in this work as they are with children and families.

How credible are we, as teachers or supervisors?

This is a critical issue, and one which can expose our own vulnerability. It is highly likely that we will be supervising or teaching individuals who come from professional disciplines which are different from our own. Additionally, if we are not currently engaged in providing direct service, there may be questions about our ability to really understand what it is like to be doing the work. It helps to acknowledge these as potential concerns, and to leave room for any questions that individuals may have. If we believe that learning occurs through collaborative partnerships, then we can be open to the expertise that each person brings to the relationship.

I am not a physical therapist, so I am not sure what special equipment might be needed for providing therapy, but I know that families can often be much more creative than we would expect in finding ways of practicing activities at home once they understand what the goal is. Can you think of a time when a family surprised you that way?

Think about the composition of your audience when selecting readings, case study examples, and videotape observation materials. If possible, participants and their experiences should be reflected in these materials. For example, in our work with speech/language pathologists on relationship-based interventions we have used materials from that field which exemplify those practices (Manolson, 1994 and MacDonald & Gillette, 1989). When working with Early Head Start staff, we use case studies of families who face the kinds of challenges often encountered by families in that program.

Summary

Professional growth and development are supported most effectively when new concepts and ways of thinking and doing are:

• congruent with the mission and beliefs of the parent organization;

• integrated into the natural context of the learner;

• mindful of the feelings associated with the work and with change; and

• supported through consistent supervisory and team opportunities for ongoing reflection.

In-service opportunities offer ideas, inspiration, and motivation. These can then be explored, practiced, refined, and implemented in the workplace.

References

Champion, P., (2000). Infant/Maternal Interactive Social/Emotional Learning Where the Infant Has a Disability or Is at Risk for a Disability. *Infants and Young Children, 12*(3):10-16.

Copa, A., Lucinski, L., Olsen, E., & Wollenburg, K. (1999). Promoting professional and organizational development: A reflective practice model. *Zero to Three, 20* (1): 3-9.

Fenichel, E. (Ed.) (1992). *Learning through supervision and mentorship to support the development of infants, toddlers, and their families.* Arlington, VA.: ZERO TO THREE/National Center for Clinical Infant Programs.

Bertacchi, J.& Norman-Murch, T. (1999). Implementing reflective supervision in non-clinical settings: Challenges to practice. *Zero to Three, 20* (1): 18-23.

Manolson, A. (1984). *It takes two to talk: A Hanen early language parent guide book.* Toronto, Ontario: The Hanen Centre.

MacDonald, J.D.& Gillette, Y. (1989). *ECO—A partnership program for communication development.* San Antonio, TX.: Special Press.