

Using Technology to Revolutionize Child Welfare Training

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Abstract: While the impact of trauma on children is well-documented, teachers and others who work with children report feeling unprepared to support them. Those who do receive training are forced to sit through the same didactic presentation, not meeting the needs of the individual learner. This paper focuses on a program that is leveraging technology to individualize professional development to prepare those who work with students to fully support them via interactive, research-based resources available at no cost. This work helps to standardize the level of care children receive, makes these trainings scalable and meets the user of the resource where they are in their professional development journey.

Keywords: child welfare training, mobile learning, professional development

Introduction

The impact of trauma on children is both well researched and significant. It is clear effects of trauma on children are cumulative in nature, meaning the more types of trauma a child experiences, the greater the risk to his/her development (AOC Center for Families, Children, and the Courts, 2014; Dwyer et al., 2012; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2007). More specifically, research finds that trauma can have a significant impact on a child's brain, behavior, and cognitive ability due to stress hormones released in response to trauma, activating the "fight, flight, or freeze" response (AOC Center for Families, Children, and the Courts, 2014; Saxe, Ellis, & Kaplow, 2007). While the fight, flight or freeze response is a natural response for humans in the face of danger, children experiencing this stressed state for extended periods of time may result in toxic stress. An unfortunate result for some children is that this state of constant stress becomes their normal mode of functioning (Cole et al., 2005), prompting inappropriate reactions and/or behaviors to everyday events. Examples include: anxiety about interacting with others, leading to increased sensitivity to tone of voice and/or normal social cues (Cole et al., 2005; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015); aggressive behavior to "strike first" in order to protect themselves from a world they see as dangerous (Cole et al., 2005; Osofsky, 1999); defiance in an attempt to assert control over an environment they see as unpredictable or unsafe; withdrawal from activities due to intense feelings of shame surrounding the trauma (Cohen et al., 2005; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2007); and difficulty forming positive relationships with peers due to the learned coping mechanisms they adopt from experiencing repeated trauma (Saxe, Ellis, & Kaplow, 2007). Suffering from toxic stress can impact a child's cognitive ability, as well. Literally *all* of the cognitive and behavioral resources necessary for learning can be affected by trauma. These include things like attention, organization, memory, engagement, and the ability to self-regulate (Cohen et al., 2005).

However, there is hope. Research also shows that strong, safe, caring relationships can help undo the brain changes which occur during trauma and help children recover to normal levels of functioning. In fact, teachers and others who work with trauma-exposed students can help facilitate children's recovery from trauma (Alisic, 2012), making trained individuals who work with children all the more important. The troubling issue is that few of these individuals get adequate training around how to identify, report, and respond to signs of trauma. For example, even though all fifty states in the US currently have some type of mandated reporting law (Kesner & Robinson, 2002), one survey of almost three thousand schools found that only fifty-one percent of participants had received any training on how to report suspected child abuse (Crosson-Tower, 2003). Additionally, Kenny (2001) found about one-third of teachers in their study were aware of the legal requirements and/or standards for reporting suspected child abuse, and only three percent were aware of their school's reporting procedures. And even when teachers do know the procedures, it is not uncommon for them to underreport due to "a deep fear of the legal ramifications that might result in the case of a false allegation" (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992; Compaan, Doueck, & Levine, 1997;

Kenny, 2001). Unfortunately, it is not just practicing teachers who are uninformed and unprepared to support children exposed to trauma. A number of studies have found that future teachers currently enrolled in teacher preparation programs also did not receive enough training on child abuse (Hazzard, 1984; McIntyre, 1987). This is increasingly important as stated by Sinanan (2011) a “failure to report suspected child maltreatment not only undermines the child abuse reporting system, but also greatly impairs society’s ability to help children in need of protection. Underreporting by professionals denies children who have been maltreated an opportunity to receive protection, reduces professional support for mandated reporting laws, exposes professionals to anxiety and liability, and distorts the statistics of child abuse which can impact both funding and policy” (Sinanan, 2011, p. 68).

When educators and others who work with children regularly receive training on child welfare topics, it often varies in quality and real-world applicability. Per Collins, Amodeo, & Clay (2007), “many adult learners experience frustration in training due to the gap between the theoretical ideas in courses and the relevance and applicability of the material to their work.” Therefore, rather than hiring subject matter experts who may have little experience in effective training methods, schools and child welfare agencies are moving towards utilizing trainings that employ knowledgeable individuals experienced in training methods’ best practices (Williams, 2001). To do so, child welfare agencies are slowly moving toward a competency based training model to bridge the gap between professional information learned and real-world application of that information (Bernotavicz, 1994). This increased accountability through demonstration of skill will increasingly help assure that the trainings teachers and others who work with children receive is most useful. With the addition of technology, we can assure that these expert trainings utilize the best practices in training methods and are scalable in a truly cost-effective way.

Literature Review

Incidence of Trauma

The quality and availability of training on child welfare topics is crucial, if not only because of the number of children who experience trauma. In fact, one-quarter of U.S. children will witness a traumatic event before they turn four (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2012) and sixty percent of children age seventeen and younger were exposed to violence, either directly as victims or indirectly as witnesses (Finkelhor et al., 2013). Twelve percent of children have had three or more adverse experiences, or a traumatic experience in their life occurring before the age of 18 that they remember as an adult, which are associated with levels of stress that can harm their health and development (Child Trends, 2013), thirteen percent experienced maltreatment from a caregiver (Finkelhor et al., 2013) and more than two-thirds of children report experiencing a traumatic event by age sixteen (American Psychological Association, 2008). As unsettling as those figures are, they add weight to the need for readily available, high quality trainings that help educators and those who work with children feel prepared to support them.

Components of Effective Child Welfare Training

While we know that schools and agencies are moving towards child welfare trainings delivered by credentialed individuals utilizing best practices in training methods (Williams, 2001), what more should these sessions include to be considered effective? Crosson-Tower (2003) states that training programs on child welfare should stress “identifying, reporting, treating, and preventing child maltreatment; furnish information on professional roles and responsibilities; and offer opportunities for free and frank discussion of mutual interests and problems among professionals in various disciplines,” (Crosson-Tower, 2003, p. 51). In addition, other research suggests trainings should be personalized, self-directed, and trauma-centered in order for users to gain the most from them.

Personalization is an important component because participants can identify their individual needs and focus in on those, increasing the amount of learning taking place (Collins, Amodeo, & Clay, 2007). This is crucial for the complex topics covered in child welfare education. The ability for educators completing the training to have some autonomy over the experience is also important. As adult learners, educators expect some level of control over their learning, which is of particular importance to child welfare training since educators and child welfare workers will have “varying levels of education, life experiences, work experience in child welfare roles, and work experience in other settings” (Collins, Amodeo, & Clay, 2007, p.16). Finally, a trauma-centered approach to the training is important because many users of the trainings may become impatient if the content of the training they are spending time in only applies to ‘ideal’ child development and ignores the full impact of trauma on the development of several of their students (Collins, Amodeo, & Clay, 2007).

Difference between in-person and online trainings

While traditionally, many trainings that educators and others who work with children receive are in-person, there are several benefits to moving these trainings online and out of the classroom. Some of these advantages include “1) reduced need for geographical access to trainees, 2) reduction in loss of time at the job due to training, 3) capacity to rapidly update instructional materials, 4) capacity for immediate feedback on learning through quizzes and exercises, 5) capacity for repetition and drill, 6) branching functions that allow trainees to select only content with which they are unfamiliar, and 7) worker ability to practice without harming the client” (Bookhagen & Wegenast, 2004; Lauderdale & Kelly, 1999; Leung, Cheung, & Stevenson, 1994; Collins, Amodeo & Clay, 2007). Additionally, online professional development that builds on adult learning theory allows the learner’s experience to be self-motivated, self-directed, interactive, and collaborative. According to Bellefeuille (2006, p. 88), benefits of the technology include: “students have unlimited access to information in different formats; communication is facilitated; learners can present their ideas and work to a broader audience; and they can receive feedback from people outside the classroom, school, and local community.” Additionally, Visser (1996) notes that the use of games in professional education not only stimulate right-brain learners – who tend to be creative, intuitive and visual – but also left-brain learners – who tend to be logical, systematic, and linear. Finally, the use of technology in these trainings has the “capacity to provide training to those whose participation might otherwise be prevented due to time, travel, or other obstacles,” (Collins, Amodeo, & Clay, 2007, p.55).

With the benefits of online trainings clear, there is a drawback that many highlight: the lack of interpersonal interaction. Collins, Amodeo, & Clay (2007) note that professions like social work and education have been reluctant to incorporate trainings using online delivery methods because the opportunity for critical reflection on learning and practice through interaction with another individual seems to be lacking. However, the main benefit to in-person training on child welfare – its potential to incorporate small group work and/or professional learning communities for reflection – are often underutilized or not utilized at all. Imel (1999) notes that “although small group work seems to be ever-present in training, many trainers hesitate to use them for fear of negative results, e.g., a lowering of teaching standards, a loss of control of the teaching and learning process, or a sacrificing of content in favor of the time needed for group interaction.” With advances in the capabilities of online hosts, the opportunity for reflection and interaction is now available in ways that rival in-person trainings. When comparing the two, “you can’t compete with the anytime/anywhere [capabilities] that online professional development can provide,” (Countryman & Dede, 2007, p. 11).

Innovation

The innovation this paper focuses on is taking content commonly covered via in-person trainings for mandated reporters in a southwest state and turning them into online trainings called On-Demand Modules. On-Demand Modules are actively engaging, research-based, and personalized interventions available to educators and others who work with children at no cost. More specifically, On-Demand Modules are online, 60 minutes micro-courses created by synthesizing current scholarly literature in close collaboration with subject matter experts – including faculty from various institutions. The components of each module include a consistent set of six core sections: Lesson Home; Foundation; Resource; Assessment; Application; and Conclusion. Upon successful completion of a module, teachers earn a certificate that can be used as evidence of their learning and credited towards teacher recertification hours. Because of the quality and specificity of each module, users are enabled to fully exercise autonomy over their professional growth, enabling them to more effectively support children who may have been exposed to trauma. Additionally, each part of designing an On-Demand Module is done with an Adult Learning Theory orientation. From this perspective, all On-Demand Modules are designed to target learners where they are in their learning journey. Unlike traditional trainings on child welfare, our modules provide those who work with children scalable resources that are 1) rigorously evaluated for effectiveness, 2) built to respond to the type of training users want, and 3) capable of bringing about a consensus on best-practices in the profession along with a common language to build upon.

Currently there are four On-Demand Modules readily available on the topic of child welfare. These include: Identifying Signs of Child Abuse and Neglect, Reporting Signs of Child Abuse and Neglect, Understanding How Trauma Impacts Students, and Supporting Students Experiencing Trauma. Each of these modules is self-paced, research-based and includes a tool teachers and others who work with students can immediately use to support the

children they work with. These modules also include a completion certificate for each user upon passing the quiz at the end to assure mastery of the content. To date, over 600 users have completed one of these modules, with over 76 percent of users of these modules completing it once they register for it. A benchmark for completion rates in other online resources can be found in a recent Harvard study which found that only 22 percent of those intending to earn a certificate did (Reich, 2014).

Best Practice

Child welfare trainings are being revolutionized by the strategic addition of technology to provide learners not only with the most current research on the topic, but also the best practices in online training methods. On-Demand Modules provide users with a training resource that standardizes the language used on the topic, is scalable because it's not reliant upon an individual, increases accountability for learning, and provides users with adequate, built-in time to reflect and apply content. One of the greatest benefits of online training, according to Countryman & Dede (2007) is that "it can provide teachers with a common language to communicate about teaching and learning." These modules also allow all users to be trained using the same exact method or tool, which can promote a standardization of protocols, policies, and procedures in the face of suspected child abuse (Sinanan, 2011). Because online trainings are not dependent on individual experts traveling to each location for the training, they are truly scalable. This assures that "once a flexible and versatile online system has been developed, the number of people who can make use of it is essentially unlimited," (Countryman & Dede, 2007, p. 11). Additionally, because software is constantly running in the background of computers, all action can be tracked and analyzed, leading to "more opportunity and scope for assessment and accountability of participants than does face-to-face professional development," (Countryman & Dede, 2007, p.13). Finally, even though many social work and educational settings have been reluctant to move child welfare trainings online because of the perceived lack of personal reflection, David Zarowin of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, notes that "in sharp contrast to the typical workshop, where you sit for three hours and you get a whole bunch of really good ideas, but you are left to your own devices as to how to integrate this into your practice, [online trainings] are courses where you learn something, you get a little bit, you try it out in the classroom, you reflect on it, and then you develop your practice," (Countryman & Dede, 2007, p. 13).

Conclusion

Those who work with children know the significantly negative impact trauma has on them. While educators are the most frequent reporters of child abuse (Crosson-Tower, 2003), they are also dissatisfied with the "quality and amount of child abuse education they receive," (Sinanan 60). When they do receive training, it is often in-person, one-size-fits-all, and largely reliant upon didactic methods (Williams, 2001). However, by moving this content online, these trainings provide users with increased autonomy over their learning and development, greater interactivity and engagement in the experience, more accountability for the results of their learning, and increased space to reflect and try out the new content in safe space. Thus far, four On-Demand Modules have been created to train educators and those who work with children on issues relating to identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect and understanding and supporting trauma-exposed students. All of these resources are currently available at no cost and are changing the way mandated reporters in our state are trained. On-Demand Modules have taken expert content, added best practices for online training, and created resources that are standardizing professional language around child welfare in a scalable, cost-effective way.

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