



**SOUTH WEST IMPROVEMENT
& EFFICIENCY PARTNERSHIP**

MindfulPractice 
Promoting Inclusion Transforming Services

**Promoting and Improving High Quality Assessment,
Planning, Intervention and Review (APIR) Practice**

**Report of an Action Learning Project for South West
Improvement and Efficiency Partnership**

April 2011

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Dr Jocelyn Jones
Ledbury, Herefordshire
April 2011

Executive Summary

Context of the APIR project

The impetus for this improvement project came from a regional Safeguarding Leadership workshop held in June 2009. Participants at the workshop identified a need to promote high quality assessment/ planning/ intervention and review (APIR) practice amongst staff across the front-line safeguarding agencies in the region.

Action learning was chosen as preferred method to deliver the project, with two sub-regional action learning sets (one ALS in the west and one in the east). In addition to participating in an ALS, each team manager was to receive mentoring provided locally. The project was commissioned by Government Office for the South West in early 2010 with the launch of the project in April, followed by six ALSs in each sub region from May 2010 to January 2011. The following local authorities were represented at the start of the project: B&NES (2), Bournemouth (1), Bristol (2), Cornwall (3), Devon (2), Gloucestershire (4), North Somerset (2), Poole (2), South Gloucestershire (1), Swindon (2) & Wiltshire (2).

Overview of the approach taken

The evidence base

Brandon et al (2008, 2009, 2010) in their biennial analyses of serious case reviews advocate a responsive and interpretive stance in making sense of family circumstances, especially where there might be safeguarding concerns. They argue the case for practitioners and managers to be curious, sceptical, think systematically and critically, and act compassionately. In this conception of good practice, the competent social worker dialogues with the child's environment, back and forth, to make sense of the information they have collected, and form a cognitive, sensory and intuitive analysis of that information.

The project design was founded on a broad conception of knowledge (Jones 2003a; Humphreys et al 2003; Heron and Reason, 2001); the work of Hawkins and Shohet (2006) and Morrison (2005) on supervision, Ferguson (2009) on mobilities, emotions, atmospheres in the context of home visits and Munro (1999, 2008) on intuitive and analytic reasoning and hypothesis formulation. Together these different approaches, and the findings from the biennial analyses of serious case reviews, provided an 'evidence based' foundation to address uncertainty, risk and complexity within the action learning sets.

Another focus of the project was on leadership (Fisher et al 2003; Torbert 2004) and helping managers encourage their staff to go that extra mile to improve outcomes for children and families. This motivational approach to project delivery was based on a methodologically robust and frequently cited large scale US study (Glisson and Hemmelgarn 1998), which found an unequivocal link between the caseworker's rating of their work environment and positive outcomes for the children with whom they were working.

High quality supervision and building reflective capacity are central to generating non-routinised, relationship-based responses to children and families and working with uncertainty, risk and complexity (Taylor et al 2008; Gibbs 2009); and to developing service quality standards which seek to introduce intellectual rigour, manage uncertainty (and on occasion unfounded certainty), reduce dysfunctional anxiety and promote child-centred functional anxiety and attunement.

This project's key objective was to motivate front line managers and practitioners to do this challenging work well, and share both pre-existing or developing pockets of excellent practice within the ALSs.

Learning method

Action learning (Revens, 1998; Kember 2000; Jones and Gallop 2003; McGill & Brockbank 2004) enables participants to acquire fresh insights into a real-time issue they have raised in the ALS. The emphasis is on reflecting, deciding to experiment with new action, taking action and, having moved on to a different place, starting the cycle again with reflection on the action taken, where to and so on. At its best action learning offers an enjoyable and non-stigmatising way of improving performance, and can lead to significant cultural change in organisations.

The Munro Review (Munro 2010; Munro 2011) highlights the need for a practice and policy framework which gives due acknowledgement to the complexity of the social work task, the intellectual and emotional demands on individuals and the central role of critical reflection. It also raises the question of how children's services in England can become more reflective and adaptive learning organisations, for example, by applying more double loop rather than single loop learning which asks 'Whether we are doing the right thing?' rather than focussing on compliance, by only asking 'Did we do it?' Action learning is an excellent way of encouraging more double-loop learning within organisations.

Evaluation

The outcomes, and emerging benefits and challenges were tracked throughout the life of the project using a formative approach to evaluation (Clarke with Dawson, 1999). This promoted ownership and enabled any feedback to be rapidly responded to.

The evaluation findings draw on a range of ongoing and post project feedback: evaluation of the April launch event; group feedback at the September and December ALSs and with mentors at their two sessions in September and November; two 45 minute focus group discussions at the final ALSs in January 2011, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim; and two online evaluative questionnaires available for completion after the project had ended in February/March 2011– one for ALS members and the other for mentors.

Overall the following local authorities contributed to one or more forms of evaluative feedback in the period May 2010 to January 2011: B&NES, Bristol, Cornwall, Devon, Gloucestershire, Poole, Swindon, Wiltshire, and one of the two councils where a candidate had withdrawn. A total of 16 ALS participants (out of a maximum of 23 who started the programme in April) and seven mentors (out of a maximum of 11 who started in 2010) provided feedback in one form or another to the evaluation, giving an overall contribution rate of 70% for ALS members and 64% for mentors.

Outcomes and impact

Front line managers will be more analytical, reflective and enquiring.

Evaluation responses indicated that team managers had systematically enhanced their reflective capacities; increased awareness of their own intuitive and analytic skills became evident in the way they now approached the supervision task (Munro 1999, 2008).

Front line managers will have more creative and improved supervision skills.

Towards the end of the project there was emerging evidence that some Team Managers were trying out new approaches involving both individual and group supervision with their team members to improve the quality of practice. Mentors also reported that their mentees had demonstrated this outcome, and one mentor went on to use some of course materials to develop multi-agency reflective practice workshops, which quickly became very popular and were over-subscribed.

Front line managers will develop, through application & ongoing evaluation, a robust model of practice standards.

The innovative evidence-based participatory model encouraged exploration and promoted ownership such that over time team managers began identifying more subtle quality standards in their own practice. Children and young people started to come into focus more in assessments with a renewed sense of the importance of finding out what the reality of the child's day to day life was like and looking for evidence of that in assessments.

Front line managers will report increased knowledge, understanding, skill and consistency of practice in relation to recording, sound analysis, and consistency of thresholds.

Front line managers and Heads of Social Care will report improved decision -making and practice standards.

This evaluation collected feedback from ALS participants and mentors; feedback on the second outcome is being gathered independently by the Project Manager from Heads of Social Care. Throughout the duration of the project there was growing evidence, from a number of sources, that these two outcomes had been met, particularly by those who had an attendance score of five or more and had received at least three mentoring sessions.

Front line managers will report benefits in sharing learning with colleagues across the South West region.

This outcome was clearly demonstrated with positive feedback gathered across all the sources of data.

Challenges and recommendations

Challenges

The biggest challenge to councils relates to the sheer day to day pressures and how, with best intentions, these can thwart nominees' plans to take part in a development initiative like this. Seniors managers are influenced just as much by cultural busy-ness as everyone else so that the clear advantages of signing up to a project like this are either not appreciated in the first place, not supported or not followed through.

Local models need to sit alongside higher level regional initiatives for employees, identified as 'the next generation' or 'bosses' of the future. For those fortunate enough to be selected for regional projects especially, there needs to be a clear remit to maximise their learning from other participating councils and return to their own departments with examples of best practice from elsewhere. This is the essence of 'double loop learning', which seeks to ask whether we are doing the right thing, and is a key step on the way to becoming 'an adaptive learning organisation'(Munro 2011), characterised by a culture which values its employees, is responsive and in a continuous drive for improved performance.

A project like this has the potential to support leadership development at all levels and would certainly equip senior managers to 'walk the talk' (Lord Laming 2003), taking a genuine interest in the quality of practice on the front line.

Recommendations

1. More consideration needs to be given to the lead in time for projects of this nature so that the context and expectations are clear at the outset. Cover arrangements need to be agreed and regularly reviewed throughout the duration of a project like this or where local group supervision arrangements are set up by team managers: duty work is the social care equivalent of an accident and emergency unit. Any time out for professional development by individuals or teams needs to be planned well in advance.
2. The selection process should be transparent and service development focused. This would maximise the impact and help steer the legacy of the project in each local authority.
3. Ideally nominees need to feel valued by being asked to participate, rather than being directed to attend, with back up to call on in the event of an emergency. Ideally two or more people should participate to help share and embed the learning in the authority; they could also travel together. Further consideration needs to be given to venues with good transport links and to car sharing. This would help reduce costs and carbon emissions, and support peer mentoring on the journey.
4. Initiatives like this need to take place at both regional and local level, and should be properly evaluated against outcomes and disseminated, building an evidence-based bank of what works in the region.
5. Where a content element is requested in the design of an action learning project, it is recommended that ALSs run on for slightly longer to allow more time in each session for experiential learning. If not already in place, there would also be some merit in offering ALS membership to NQSWs, perhaps facilitated by a trained internal facilitator.
6. Given the success of this project, it is recommended that further work on identifying practice standards be taken forward within a small voluntary sub group from the ALSs. This would identify standards in relation to:
 - How often team managers accompany social workers on visits, and if they do how well they use it as a learning opportunity afterwards.
 - The frequency and quality of group supervision sessions, assessed through a team resource file and discussions with team members;
 - The quality of the analytical framework used to record the reflective component of supervision and how that links to improved outcomes for children and families and a social worker's professional development.The standards could supplement the organisations and workloads 'health check' proposed by the Social Work Task Force (Social Work Task Force 2009) to help measure the all-important organisational or workplace climate in teams - one which creates the optimal environment for staff to generate positive outcomes with and for children and young people (Glisson and Hemmelgarn 1998; Gibbs 2009).
7. This project has identified two areas for further leadership development: one at front line manager level; and the other at a more senior level to help Service Directors and others understand and appreciate the evidence-based importance of reflective practice in improving outcomes for children and families. This needs to take place within organisational cultures and climates that actively go about noticing, commenting upon, and celebrating good practice as well as identifying and responding to underperformance.

It is recommended that Senior Managers be offered the opportunity to participate in regional or sub regional 'Master classes', based on the content element of the ALSs, to keep abreast of new applied research findings to support front line staff and to assist with local service developments. With the publication of the final Munro Review report due later this month, it is vital that the tomorrow's leaders are able to inspire their staff and generate opportunities for double-loop learning, as they strive to become adaptive learning organisations.