Using Simulation Training to Improve Culturally Responsive Child Welfare Practice

ROBIN LEAKE  
University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA

KATHLEEN HOLT  
University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA

CATHRYN POTTER and DEBORA M. ORTEGA  
University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA

Child welfare professionals need to understand the complexities of the factors that influence parenting, values, and worldviews. Being able to work across cultures is critical to assessing safety, obtaining effective services, and creating permanent healthy families for children of color. The purpose of the project was to grapple with the challenge of increasing culturally responsive practice in a context of safety and permanency that is defined by American political and cultural values. The response to this challenge was a competency-based training program designed to enhance the effectiveness of child welfare practice with Latino families. A key feature of the training was a simulation to raise awareness and learning readiness through an experiential approach to learning.

The simulation is the first component of a multi-faceted training curriculum aimed at the integration of culturally responsive practices in child welfare practice. The training series was part of a 3-year demonstration project funded by the Children’s Bureau (Washington, DC).

KEYWORDS simulation, training, culture, cultural responsiveness, child welfare

Received 9/16/09; revised: 3/16/10; accepted: 4/20/10

This project was supported by the Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children Youth and Families, United States Department of Health and Human Services HHS-2004-ACF-ACYF-CT-0014 Grant No.: 90CT0130 Effective Child Welfare Practice with Hispanic Children and Families.

Address correspondence to Robin Leake, Butler Institute for Families, University of Denver, 2148 South High Street, Denver, CO 80208. E-mail: robin.leake@du.edu
Latino families are the fastest growing and youngest population in the United States. Approximately 40% of the Latino population is younger than age 19 years (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006). Consequently, Latinos make up a growing number of families in American society and in the American child welfare systems (Child Welfare League of America, 2003). Like other minority groups, Latinos experience disproportionate socioeconomic risks and child welfare outcomes, including facing helping professionals with little knowledge of their culture and social experiences. Latinos also experience unique challenges associated with the changing landscape of opinions and policies related to immigration. At the same time, engaging child welfare workers in cultural responsiveness training can trigger resistance that interferes with skill development. This article describes a creative approach to preparing child welfare workers for cultural responsiveness training using a large-scale simulation of a community. In addition, the results of the formative evaluation, recommendations for further evaluation and implications for practice are presented.

BACKGROUND

Research indicates that minority families experience disproportionate environmental risk factors. The data collected for Latinos through the census and other sources is historically inaccurate (Ortega, 2009). Most scholars believe that information underrepresents the actual number of Latinos experiencing poverty and involved in the child welfare system (Salazar, Bornstein-Gomez, Mercado, Martinez, Ortega, Somoza, et al., 2008; Zambrana & Dorrington, 1998). While the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) collects data on Latinos as a distinct group, confusion about race and ethnicity variables lead to inaccurate reporting (Suleiman, 2003). Nonetheless, Latinos are three times more likely to be poor than their white counterparts (Perez, 2004).

These vulnerable families not only experience high levels of poverty, but also have limited resources (i.e., education, access to health care, underemployment, immigration status) (Zambrana & Dorrington, 1998). This combination of factors results in a number of obstacles that influence access to social service organizations (National Council of La Raza, 2008; Salazar et al., 2008; Suleiman, 2003; Zambrana & Dorrington, 1998). For Latinos who have limited English proficiency, the lack of bilingual service providers, limited access to interpreters, and lack of training for providers in the use of interpreters may jeopardize the safety of children and family reunification (Suleiman, 2003).

Rates of Latino children involved with the child welfare system have doubled since 1990, and Latinos are already overrepresented in the child welfare system in many states (United States Department of Health and
Human Services, 2003). The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) legislates the provision of service that guards the safety, permanency, and well-being of families, and requires accountability for these values from the states. The cultural barriers facing Latino families may threaten our ability to assure that the values of ASFA are being enacted. For example, safety is difficult to assure if the worker has limited understanding of the cultural context in which she is assessing safety. Language difficulties, cross-cultural misunderstandings, and fear of involvement with authorities make it difficult to identify kinship and other informal resources that contribute to timely permanency. Conducting a social history without both historical and current context presents challenges to professionals working from a competency-based framework (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002).

Understanding the effects of political, economic, and unique cultural aspects of family functioning is critical to assessing safety and providing effective services that ensure permanence and well-being for Latino families. Numerous training and program initiatives have provided the knowledge and exposure to practices that are family centered, yet many workers are left frustrated by system barriers and lack of experience in successfully implementing skills across cultures.

CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS TRAINING

The need for service providers to have increased cultural sensitivity, specific knowledge of the cultural/ethnic groups they serve, and culturally responsive helping skills has been firmly established (Leong & Wagner, 1994). However, the best training methods for teaching these competencies are still largely unknown (Cashwell, 1994). Most cultural responsiveness training available to child welfare professionals focuses on acquiring knowledge about particular cultural groups. This, coupled with the desire of workers to have a “recipe card” approach to understanding complex cultural features, can foster false assumptions or stereotypes related to language, religious affiliation, immigration status, and citizenship (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). In addition, while much training focuses on knowledge and understanding about cultural differences, little is available that supports ongoing self-reflection and dialogue as precursors to teaching skills for working with diverse families.

Numerous studies about human services training indicate that participants rarely apply the knowledge and skills learned in a training setting to the job environment (Baer Wells, Rosengren, Hartzler, Beadnell, et al., 2009; Curry, Caplan, & Knuppel, 1994; Wehrmann, Shin, & Poertner, 2002). Referred to as the “transfer problem,” some researchers estimate that only 10%–20% of what is taught in training actually transfers to the job (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Studies over the past 20 years have shown that factors associated
with personal attributes, training design, and work environment predict how
training participants transfer knowledge and skills to the job. Individual
attributes that predict transfer include motivation, learning readiness, and
perceived utility (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Curry et al., 1994). Conversely,
training participants who lack personal interest in the training are less likely
to transfer the knowledge and skills to the job (Miller & Rolnick, 2002).

Training programs designed to increase multicultural awareness and cul-
turally responsive practice are especially resistant to transfer (Brown, 2004). Studies of multicultural pre-service training for teachers found that training failed to change stereotyped perceptions of themselves and others (Banks, 2001). One reason might be that people are naturally resistant to confronting long-held beliefs about self and others (Allport, 1979). This resistance is operationalized in the classroom setting by lack of preparation, engagement and commitment, and participation in activities (Irvine, 1992). Thus, instructional methods that reduce natural resistance to modifying strongly held belief systems are important for transfer of learning. Educational experts believe that effective multicultural training must engage participants in examining their own self-concepts, history, and current belief systems and in developing an understanding and respect for other cultures (Brown, 1998).

Cultural training often focuses on providing knowledge about culture, ethnicity, racism, and disproportionality. While instructional strategies that teach facts and promote knowledge about minority cultures are valuable, many studies have demonstrated the importance of experiential learning in helping students connect the curriculum content and message in a meaningful way (Brown, 2004).

The desire for human service workers to have a step-by-step process
for working with diverse families has been fueled by educational and train-
ing approaches that are based on essentialist models of teaching about
 cultural groups. Essentialist approaches, in addition to reducing culture to
finite characteristics (i.e., all Latinos are late because they have a different
time orientation) reinforce the perspective that people who are influenced
by more than United States culture are so different that they are “alien.”
The exotification of cultural differences can create a barrier to empathy if
workers’ understanding of diverse people is limited to concretized boxes of
generalized cultural characteristics. This limiting approach to understanding
culture, coupled with the often-held fear by workers that they may display
racist thinking or behaviors, can create more barriers that interfere with the
helping process.

Empathy provides helping professionals with a deeper understanding of
the experiences and challenges of the people they serve. Empathy becomes
the vehicle through which the child welfare professional can relate to bar-
rriers, misperceptions, and misunderstanding about people whose cultures
may be different from their own. To the extent that practitioners attending
training about culture are more empathetic to the challenges faced by eth-
nic minority clients, motivation to learn skills to serve these families may increase. In turn, participants who are motivated, ready to learn, and see the connection between the training and their job are more likely to apply the clinical skills they learn in training to their job (Antle, Barbee, & van Zyl, 2008).

One way to teach empathy is through designed scenarios that allow participants to experience the life of another through experiential simulation. According to one researcher, “empathy is a vitally important aspect of both experiential learning and good therapy” (Browning, Collins, & Nelson, 2005, p. 4). In a role-play activity, the training participant takes the role of a hypothetical person with a specific personality, history or context (Browning et al., 2005). One study found that medical students who were taught empathy using an experiential simulation were more likely to retain skills over time compared with students who were taught empathy through a discussion group (Rae & Willis, 1973). Role-play is also a method for culture-specific training because experiential exercises improve multicultural skills, awareness, and knowledge (Brown, 2004; Helmeke & Prouty, 2001; Minor, 1983).

Role-play provides the service provider with a platform for considering and discussing cultural issues and encourages a deeper level of empathetic understanding of the experiences of others (Brathwaite & Majumdar, 2006; Cashwell, Looby, & Housley, 1997; Harter, 1981; Helmeke & Prouty, 2001; Kim & Lyons, 2003). One study found that pre-service teachers who engaged in experiential simulations were better able to put themselves “in the shoes of others” and experience the effects of minority status (Brown, 2004). Participating in role-play exercises with people from different cultural backgrounds also increases therapists’ sensitivity and comfort with working with diverse clients (Helmeke & Prouty, 2001). While role-play as an experiential learning strategy has been clearly demonstrated and widely used in the field of multicultural counseling (Kim & Lyons, 2003; Torres Jr. & Ottens, 1997), there are few experiential-based training programs that address cultural responsiveness in child welfare.

The term *experiential simulation* describes more complex role-play situations with multiple characters, scripted situations and socioemotional family histories, and often involves props. Simulations allow training participants to experience a character with more depth and nuance than traditional role-play, thus increasing empathy (Shepard, 2002). The use of multiple characters allows participants to interact and experience more dynamic and complex social situations (Browning et al., 2005). When participants have adequate time to prepare themselves for their roles, they are more likely to stay in character by relying on feelings of empathy and the social history provided for their character. Experiential simulations can lead to powerful emotions that translate into greater empathy and understanding for people who differ from themselves (Browning et al., 2005).
THE PROGRAM MODEL

The Child Welfare Resource Network, at the School of Social Welfare of the University of Kansas, developed a comprehensive, research–driven competency-based training program titled *Effective Child Welfare Practice with Latino Families*. The series incorporates several best practices in training: 1) Agency and community investment in training development; 2) focus on skill development based on experiential learning through self-reflection and dialog; and 3) extension of training events over time to facilitate practice, review and debriefing (see Figure 2). The training modules are supported by pre- and post-training elements, culturally relevant materials, and a comprehensive resource guide. A National Advisory Committee with expertise in multiculturalism, Latino immigration issues and culturally responsive child welfare practice developed the framework for the training and curriculum content.

A critical piece of the curriculum series and the focus of this article is *El Jardin* (The Garden), a half-day simulation designed to provide workers with the opportunity to understand the experience of Latino client families in the child welfare system. The simulation addresses some of the poor practice behaviors that develop out of the lack of fit between social systems and Latino client families and desirable practice responses and behaviors. *El Jardin* fosters the development of an empathetic understanding of the range of Latino experiences, motivates workers to develop their knowledge and skills to work with Latino families, and expose areas of unintended system or personal bias. The simulation closes with action planning informed by self-reflection, engagement, and dialogue to support the cultural responsiveness that serves as a “springboard” for the remainder of the skills-based training.

The *El Jardin* simulation was based on methodology developed by Wentz and Gerber (2009) who have used simulation with independent living for youth, collaborative case staffing, and courtroom performance. Figure 1 illustrates a process that begins with elaboration of the central theme or area of focus. Goals are developed to define cognitive, affective, and psychomotor outcomes for participants. Sub-themes are woven throughout the scripts, the characters, and the time frames that comprise the simulation. Characters in the simulation vary by age, gender, and life experiences. Scenarios for each character are designed to allow participants to experience a full range of emotion, including hope, frustration, motivation, and social pressures as they engage in best and less-than-best practice behavior (R. Wentz & N. Gerber, personal communication, May 2008).

Once the simulation goals have been established, developers build the environment, establish roles, family scenarios, activities, challenges, and scripted behavioral responses. The simulation scenarios were collaboratively developed by the trainers, advisory group members and practitioners in Kansas and Colorado and informed by best practice literature. Efforts were
Simulation in Cultural Training

DEVELOPING A SIMULATION

"Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me and I will understand." Confucius (450 BC)

THEME
area of focus

GOALS
- through the experience, participants will:
  LEARN / KNOW / REINFORCE (cognitive)
  FEEL / VALUE / COMMIT TO (affective)
  PRACTICE / DEVELOP / IMPROVE (psychomotor)

THEMES
- woven through the experience:
  UNDERSTANDING (ages, genders, perspectives, life experiences)
  FEEL (frustration, motivation, attitudes, hopes, pressure)
  EXPERIENCE (best practice, behaviors, consequences, change)

BUILDING THE CITY
TIME FRAME (hour, day, week)
SETTINGS AND STATIONS (homes, agencies, workplace, community, locations)
ROLES (CHARACTER LIVES) (role/story, characteristics, qualities, age, attitudes, concerns, challenges, suggested interactions with others, schedules, props)
ROLES (STATIONS) (community/support roles to interact, role/story, characteristics, qualities, age, attitudes, concerns, challenges, suggested interactions with others, schedules, props)
ACTIVITIES (Scripts and instructions that will move the action along.)
CHALLENGES / CATALYSTS (troubles, concerns, obstacles, hassles, conflicts)
BEST PRACTICE (modeling, demonstrations, magic wand service provider)

DEBRIEFING AND FOLLOW UP
BEST PRACTICES (discussion, brainstorming)
DEBRIEFING (feelings, insights, tension, "Ah-ha!")
REPORTING (sharing stories, assumptions vs. stories, experience)
PERSONAL / PROFESSIONAL ACTION PLAN (changes in action, behaviors, practice and performance)

COMPANION WORKSHOP
CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT (goals, themes, simulation experience)
HANDOUTS (reinforcing, information, discussion)
FEEDBACK AND EVALUATION (modifications, learner satisfaction, competencies)
PERSONAL / PROFESSIONAL ACTION PLAN (add to, modify, re-commit)


FIGURE 1 Developing a Simulation.
Part I—El Jardín: A Simulation Highlighting Latino Families’ Experience with Community Based Services & Foundations for Culturally Responsive Practice with Latino Families is a two segment, one-day training. The morning simulation is an experiential learning activity designed to help participants develop a insight and understanding into the lives and service needs of Latino families. The afternoon workshop session includes discussion of cultural responsiveness, the need for on-going self-reflection/assessment, the strengths of Latino culture, and the barriers to service faced by many Latino families.

Part II—Core Elements of Culturally Responsive Practice with Latino Families is a two day training series designed to explore the elements and skills to promote safety and permanency in Latino Families. Participants will explore demographics, traditions of Latino culture, citizenship and immigration, working with translators, developing the skills of cross-cultural service provision and defining best practice working with Latino families.

Part III—Developing a Culturally Responsive Team is a one-day workshop for agency supervisors to encourage an agency culture that promotes skill development in culturally responsive practice. The afternoon features presentation of three videos designed to be used with in-service or brown bag discussions.

Part IV—Advanced Topics include three video productions for in-service, classroom or “brown bag” presentations to be facilitated by local/regional “experts.” The topics include From the Field—Immigration & Child Welfare; Domestic Violence Dynamics in Immigrant Communities; and Legal Options for Immigrant & Foreign-born Victims.

Part V—Teaching Effective Practice with Hispanic Families: Curriculum modules for Social Work Departments includes awareness and skill building exercises for social work faculty. The exercises are designed to supplement existing course offerings.

FIGURE 2 Effective Child Welfare Practice with Latino Families Training Series.

made to ensure that the simulation was aligned with community demographics to ensure an authentic experience for training participants. Simulations are set up using conference style tables and chairs with community stations around the room and families in the center of the room. For El Jardín, up to 55 participants were grouped into five families, community members and providers. El Jardín includes experiences of third-generation families, immigrant families with documentation, mixed immigration status families, speakers of indigenous languages, and non-Latino neighbors and providers (Figure 3). Extensive props provide emotional relief and distance as well as encourage participants to remain in character while experiencing stressful circumstances such as teen pregnancy, detention, safety assessments, and court appearances. The challenges, troubles, concerns, obstacles, and conflicts serve as catalysts for action, understanding, and empathy (R. Wentz & N. Gerber, personal communication, May 2008).
**Violeta Family** (County of origin: Mexico)

Family members: Victor (dad); Valeria (mom); Valencia (4 years); Vanessa (18 months); Victoria (newborn).

Scenario/Issues: Parents undocumented immigrants with one-foreign- and two United States-born daughters. Father believes children born in the United States will prevent deportation. Underemployed and frustrated with low pay, he begins to carry drugs to make more money. Fight with wife ensues. A domestic violence call results in law enforcement discovering presence of controlled substances. Parents are detained at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the children are placed in foster care. Dad faces deportation. Mom may be eligible to remain under Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) if she cooperates with authorities as a witness against dad. Issues include immigration laws/practices, domestic violence, placement, and legal rights.

**Amarillo Family** (County of origin: El Salvador)

Family members: Arturo (dad); Arcadia (mom); Alberto (16 years, nephew); Azura (12 years); Alejandro (10 years).

Scenario/Issues: Recently their 16-year-old nephew moved to El Jardin to live with the family in a kinship arrangement due to gang activity. The two birth children are acculturating, but because their mother speaks little English, she is very worried about the influence of the neighborhood boys on her son in particular. Her harsh discipline involves keeping both children at home without food. Azura who admires the older girls in the neighborhood, has recently had a tattoo. Issues involve kinship, acculturation, generational differences in acculturation, language barriers, gang activity and youth behaviors, interacting with the school system, and discipline practices.

**Naranja Family** (Country of origin: Guatemala)

Family members: Nuncio (dad, in Guatemala); Norma (mom); Nicky (4 years); Navea (3 years).

Scenario/Issues: The father was recruited to come to the United States as a foreman on a work visa due to the fact that he speaks Kanjobal, a Guatemalan dialect and Spanish. He was able to bring his family over, but had to leave a newborn with his mother in Guatemala until he could obtain permission for both to join the family. He has returned to Guatemala where he is awaiting his mother’s papers so the family can be reunited in the United States. His wife is extremely isolated since no one she knows in the United States speaks Kanjobal. She tries to find a curandera, but cannot and becomes so depressed that she fails to adequately supervise her children. Issues involve language barriers, health practices, isolation, supervision/discipline practices, and definitions of family.

(continued)

**FIGURE 3** The Families of El Jardin.

After the simulation, participants debrief in character using a diary format. Additionally, each participates in a group discussion in which they are asked to identify key learning points from the simulation. The afternoon session employs a more traditional workshop format to support open dialogue.
Rojo Family (Country of origin: Mexico)

Family members: Roberto (dad); Raquel (mom); Rico (19 years); Rolanda (16 years, teen mom); Reyna (newborn baby of Rolanda); Ramon (11 years); Rosa (6 years); Reuben (2 years).

Scenario/Issues: Dad drinks heavily. Teen daughter has acculturation issues (parents want Rolanda to be responsible for all kids in home; she wants to be out with her American friends). Rolanda is a new teen mother. There have been physical altercations between Dad and Rolanda. Mom takes children out of school to translate for appointments. The family has been in the United States for years. Dad is a naturalized United States citizen; Mom is a permanent resident; children are United States citizens by derivation, except oldest son Rico (Mexican citizen) who just joined the family in the United States after living with his grandparents in Mexico. Issues involve the use of alcohol, generational acculturation, family roles, teen pregnancy, employment, citizenship and status, and father/daughter relationships.

MacGreene Family (Country of Origin: United States)

Family members: Melvin (foster dad); Maureen (foster mom); Mallory (15 years, daughter); Marta Mendoza (teen in foster care); Manuel and Marciel Martinez (godparents to Marta).

Scenario/Issues: Marta Mendoza and her boyfriend ran away from her mother’s and stepfather’s home in California. He abandoned her in El Jardin. She was placed in a newly licensed foster home where she refused to speak English. Foster mother believes Marta has an eating disorder, so takes her to the clinic where it is revealed that Marta is pregnant. Marta’s godparents live in El Jardin and are second-generation citizens who direct programs through the local community center linked to the Catholic Church. Issues involve foster family preparation, language barriers, marital stress, god-parenting, teen pregnancy, and kinship definitions.

FIGURE 3 (Continued).

about insights and understanding gathered from the morning and to set the scene for ongoing self-reflection and action planning.

Training strategies were designed to promote active engagement and preparation and mitigate reluctance on the part of workers to engage in role play simulation. Pre-training materials include a brief description of El Jardin, including goals and objectives, and guidelines for participation. Participants are given a welcome packet at registration that includes a self-reflection survey, the tools for dialogue, and material describing the simulation. To emphasize the importance of participation and openness to learning, each participant is asked to sign a certificate of readiness indicating that he/she had read all materials and agrees to enter El Jardin ready to learn.

The companion workshop that completes Foundations for Effective Practice with Latino Families incorporates the goals and themes of the sim-
ulation into more content-oriented curriculum, using handouts and exercises building on the simulation tools for dialogue and self-reflection. Action plans and goals completed throughout the training series are supported through a series of follow-up electronic newsletters featuring short informational segments. Participants are reminded to continue practicing skills to promote transfer of learning. The *El Jardin* simulation was delivered four times in Kansas and three times in Colorado throughout the 3-year demonstration project.

Development costs for simulations may be higher than traditional training modules to the extent that they rely on a community-embedded process and elaborate props that support the experience. The replication of the simulation in a new setting requires the support of a team of local child welfare and community experts who can take the existing simulation framework and customize to local issues and environments. The materials budget for *El Jardin* was $3,400 (props, scripts, culturally relevant items such as worry dolls, *dichos*, or *milagros*), with implementation costs being similar to standard training deliveries, with the exception of the need for a larger space and two to four trainers who can play central roles and manage the experience.

**EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODS**

The primary purpose of the evaluation was to provide meaningful formative feedback to the project team to guide the development of the training. Because this was a training demonstration project, most of the resources and time were directed toward developing and refining the training intervention. Because the training evolved over time, there was not a consistent product to assess until the very end of the project. Thus, the scope of the project did not include a study of training outcomes to evaluate learning and changes in attitude, knowledge, skills, and job behaviors. Nonetheless, the evaluation was able to describe how participants experienced the training and elicit some examples of how they transferred their learning to the job and improved their work with Latino families.

The evaluators worked closely with the project team to develop a communication strategy that facilitated an interactive process of immediate feedback followed by curriculum revision and refinement. The focus on formative measures such as qualitative observations and interviews and participant self-reports was an appropriate evaluation approach for the stage of development of the project. However, future evaluation will need to focus on long-term outcomes such as participant learning, transfer of learning to the job, and performance impact, in order to establish the effectiveness of the training model.
Methods

The formative training evaluation methods for this demonstration project included participant self-report through questionnaires administered at two time-points, focus groups, and structured interviews with professional observers from the project advisory board and the project staff.

Training satisfaction survey

Project staff administered a training satisfaction instrument to measure participant impressions of the effectiveness and importance of training, the expertise of the trainer, and the level of supervisory support for transfer of learning. The instrument was revised several times throughout the grant period as the training developed. The lack of consistency in instruments made it difficult to compare quantitative data across trainings. The evaluators analyzed the survey data by aggregating responses by common questions. Responses from 114 participants were included in the analysis. Participants provided qualitative responses to questions regarding satisfaction and importance.

Follow-up questionnaire

A 25-item on-line questionnaire was developed by University of Denver evaluators and administered to participants who attended any of the training modules—simulation/foundations, core, and advanced topics at the end of the 3-year grant project. The questionnaire asked participants to rate their learning on key training competencies and the extent to which they use their learning on their job, using a five-point Likert-style format with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

An email with a link to the survey using Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) was sent to 282 participants, and 78 were returned as address unidentified, indicating that the participant was no longer with the agency, or perhaps the address was incorrect on the attendance spreadsheets. From a pool of 203 participants, 51 completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 25%. The rate of response was not unexpected, considering that approximately half of the participants attended training over one year prior to the questionnaire being administered. However, the low rate of responses did not allow for the generalization of findings to the entire sample of training participants.

Focus groups

Two focus groups were conducted at the end of the grant project, one in Garden City, Kansas, with 15 participants, and one in Alamosa, Colorado, with eight participants. Both child welfare agency staff and community partners attended the focus groups. Participants were asked about their experience
with the simulation, suggestions for improvement, and transfer of learning opportunities.

PROJECT TEAM AND ADVISORY BOARD INTERVIEWS

At the end of the project, 15 individual 1-hour interviews were conducted with the project team, National Advisory Committee members, Local Advisory Board members, child welfare supervisors, training coordinators, and staff.

EVALUATION RESULTS

Satisfaction Survey Results

Aggregated responses from the training satisfaction survey administered immediately after the training suggest that participants felt that knowledge, attitudes, and skills improved as a result of the training. Specifically, at least 90% of participants reported learning in all key competency areas targeted by the training (Table 1).

Approximately 85% of participants strongly agreed that the training was important to their job, that they were motivated to use what they learned in training, and that they could see how they would transfer the learning to their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency/Learning Objectives</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Explain the importance of designing services to meet the needs of a rapidly growing number of Latino children.</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. List three or more general cultural characteristics that may impact services without stereotyping Latino individuals or families.</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. List two or more essential considerations in engaging Latino clients.</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Demonstrate use of ethnographic interviewing to conduct culturally responsive assessment.</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Understand the different types of immigration categories and conduct a basic assessment of the service eligibility of Latino individuals.</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. List two elements of a plan for assisting Limited English Proficient persons.</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Articulate basic federal requirements for meaningful access to services for eligible applicants regardless of language preference.</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Explain the requirements for providing service to Limited English Proficient individuals.</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Demonstrate self-reflection and action planning to improve cultural-responsiveness.</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Four-point Likert scale: 4 = strongly agree; 3 = agree; 2 = disagree; and 1 = strongly disagree.
Further, 82% strongly agreed that the training would make them more effective in their practice. The trainers also received high satisfaction ratings, with 95% of participants strongly agreeing that they trusted the trainers, the trainers sought their opinions and feedback, and they felt involved in the training.

When asked to identify what aspects of the training they liked the best through open-ended responses, participants identified the simulation as their top choice, followed by information about Latino culture and access to immigration resources, topics covered in the afternoon following the simulation. Many participants described in detail how the simulation raised their awareness of the language barriers and challenges faced by immigrant families. One participant wrote,

I’ve done this work for more than three decades but when I needed a translator in order to help a young, scared pregnant girl, I just threw confidentiality out the window. I ran right out onto the street and grabbed the first person I could find to translate… I cannot believe I’d do something like that, but I did!

Another said,

Even though the translator in El Jardin was pretending to translate from one language to another, even though I could understand every word that was said and every word as she pretended to translate it, it was amazing to feel scared knowing that others were talking about the future of my family!

Yet another said, “I was frustrated when they tried to offer me mental health when all I wanted was to talk to the priest or find a faith healer but they couldn’t understand my language so it was a big problem.”

Several participants noted that they found the simulation engaging and that it evoked strong emotions, even though they approached the exercise with skepticism and a dislike of role-play exercises. As one person noted,

I don’t like role playing so I chose a man who was in jail because I thought I would not do much, but when I was the character in jail I felt isolated and disappointed when my family couldn’t all visit me and my AA meeting didn’t happen.

Another noted,

When I saw all the props, I was worried. I hate role playing, and I thought I would have to look stupid. I took a child’s part so I wouldn’t have to talk, but I discovered that I really got into it. Everyone was ignoring me and just pushing me to the side, and I actually experienced what that felt like. The simulation is powerful. I’ll remember those feelings for a long time.
Even after the simulation was over and participants were completing their evaluations, they continued to write about their experiences in very personal terms, suggesting that the exercise effectively helped participants empathize with the characters they were portraying. One woman wrote, “I was so worried about my babies, I thought I would never see them again when they put me into detention.” One male participant reported, “I didn’t like not knowing what happened to my kids when I went to detention. No one told me anything and it was very frustrating.” Still another looked forward, “I commit to looking at my own biases when it comes to working with Hispanic families and other families also seeing things through their eyes and hearing about the struggles they have encountered.” From a participant playing a child’s role came the following, “These are the struggles the families I work with deal with all the time. No wonder it’s hard for them to go to school and concentrate.”

Finally, participants reported gaining new knowledge in the simulation, mostly in regard to immigration issues:

- I always thought immigrants could get federal aid. I didn’t know they needed to have documentation to be eligible.
- I am really amazed at how complicated immigration issues are but after the information shared at least I know now what to look for to help the families I work with.
- I never thought about the problems immigrants have getting services especially if they are undocumented.
- I had no idea there were medical services for immigrant families in our community.
- I didn’t realize that people in detention can ask for a lawyer, but don’t always get one and the immigration laws are so confusing. It would be easy to make a mistake that could affect a child or a parent forever. I definitely want to know more.

Participants evidenced motivation for further learning and for action, indicating that the training may have impacted readiness for learning. The final quote in the last paragraph illustrates this. Other comments included,

- I will work with my agency to look at how immigration policies impact the families we work with and create a committee to help others understand that deportation is not helpful.
- I will learn Spanish so I can further communicate with the families I work with.
- I want to learn more about immigration so I can help my undocumented families better.
- I work with Spanish-speaking people all the time and I thought there isn’t anything new I could learn from this training (before the simulation). Wow!
I learned so much about my people (Latino) and the Spanish-speaking clients I work with.

- I thought, 'Great, another cultural responsive training!' but this was great. I learned so much, I am glad I came.

Participants also noted that the simulation helped to break down community barriers:

- It was great to sit at a table with people from other agencies and from other cultures as well. I learned much about both.
- This is the first time all these people from all of these agencies have sat at the same table. There is a lot of tension in our communities. We need to continue this dialog.

One participant put these themes together in a poignant story of self-examination:

I told my supervisor that I needed to come to this training because, quite frankly I have a BIG problem working with Latino people and I didn't know why. This was probably the BEST training I've ever attended. I just realized that I have been so angry about people not speaking English. As I sat there and listened and talked, I remembered the many stories of my brothers being beat[en] at Haskell Indian School. They were beat for speaking our Potawamie language and all these years, I have grieved the loss of my native language, but I'd NEVER have spoken about it because I didn't want to get beat[en] for it like my brothers did. I learned so much about myself today.

Follow-up Survey Results

Approximately 90% of the respondents to the follow-up questionnaire administered at the completion of the project agreed or strongly agreed that they gained knowledge, understanding, and skills in most of the competency areas, with mean scores ranging from 3.53 to 4.36 on a five-point Likert-type scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree (Table 2).

Focus Group and Interview Results

Participants were overwhelmingly positive about the simulation, echoing many of the themes from individual respondents. According to one participant,

The training as a whole was motivating in so many ways. As a person who works with families of all backgrounds, I feel like I can communicate more comfortably with them. I even learned a great amount about my own personal heritage.
TABLE 2  Follow-up Questionnaire: Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills Gains after Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency/Learning Objective</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I have a better understanding of the challenges that Spanish-speaking families face living in a monolingual society.</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I have a better understanding of immigration laws and policies.</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I have a better understanding of Hispanic/Latino culture.</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I have a better understanding of how immigration laws have impacted families’ experiences with the child welfare system.</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I consider cultural traits when making decisions about families (i.e., familia, collectivism, spirituality, machismo, etc.)</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Cultural traits and characteristics shape my approach when working with families.</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I ask more questions about a family’s culture, history, and background when interviewing.</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I know where to go to find culturally responsive services in my community.</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I am able to advocate effectively for services for Latino families in my caseload.</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I do more self-reflection of how my personal experiences and values impact my practice.</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I connect more families to language services.</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. My supervisor supports my efforts to be culturally responsive to families.</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I have made the changes that I identified in my “action plan” on the self-assessment form.</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I have used the handouts and materials provided in the training for reference.</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Five-point Likert-type scale: 5 = strongly agree; 4 = agree; 3 = neutral; 2 = disagree; and 1 = strongly disagree.

Those focus group participants who attended both simulation/foundations and core training reported that both modules were valuable, but that they particularly liked the simulation because it gave people a chance to feel some portion of what it was like to be a Latino family trying to navigate the system. As one participant in Wichita said,

The best part was the role-play; lots of people came from different organizations who are not in direct services, so it was great that they got to experience a deeper understanding of the challenges Latinos face and how complicated things can get when there’s a language barrier.

One Colorado supervisor felt that training was invaluable for enabling her workers to understand the struggles that their clients experience on a daily basis. “Once they feel what it’s like, there’s an ‘ah ha’ moment, and then they are motivated to learn more about cultural issues.”
Another key finding was that the training offered child welfare workers the opportunity to network with other community providers who serve the same Latino families. Because of the intense emotional experience of the simulation and the group processing, participants felt that they forged relationships with community partners that impact the way they serve families. In one focus group in Garden City, a Head Start provider reported how she was inspired by the training to organize a “Mommy and Me” support group for Latino mothers. She called on several child welfare workers that she met in the training who now refer clients to her group. Project team staff confirmed that they have seen this powerful transformation over and over again. For example, after one simulation in Colorado, a family advocacy worker set up a planning session with a child welfare worker about conducting joint visits to families. Another participant started a bilingual unit at her agency that she continues to supervise. Many participants reported that their overall cultural sensitivity had increased as a result of the training.

Overall Findings

The results suggest that simulation training may be a promising approach for raising participants’ awareness and understanding of the experience of Latino families, and especially immigrant families, in the child welfare system. This increased awareness appeared to be the first stage of readiness to explore their own biases and motivation for learning. Findings demonstrate that participants appreciated the simulation experience for opening their eyes to the challenges faced by Latino families, and were motivated to learn more about serving Latino families and apply their skills to providing more effective case practice.

Limitations of the Evaluation and Recommendations for Future Studies

As previously discussed, it is impossible to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the training in raising awareness and improving skills in culturally based practice from these results. The evaluation was designed to gather formative feedback about the design and delivery of the training, and create a continuous feedback loop so that the project team could make ongoing improvements. These results do suggest, however, that many participants experienced this training to be profoundly different than other trainings about cultural competency, and that it was successful in raising their awareness of cultural issues with the Latino families they serve. Further, those who responded to the online questionnaire (for some, this was more than 1 year after they attended the training) said they clearly remembered this training more than others they have attended, and that the simulation changed their case practice. In light of these findings, the authors recommend that next
Simulation in Cultural Training

steps include evaluating outcomes of simulation training to determine how simulation affects awareness and readiness for skills training. Ideally, the research design would compare the simulation model (a training simulation combined with skills-based training) with traditional training (just the skills-based training component) to test whether simulation leads to increased readiness and how readiness predicts learning and transferring of skills to the job. Methods should include a pre-post self-assessment and knowledge test, and a follow-up performance measure of transfer of learning.

DISCUSSION

The nature of child welfare work can make it difficult for workers to develop skills in serving Latino families. Training on cultural responsiveness often focuses on listing the generalized cultural characteristics of a particular minority group. Instead of a focus on building skills for multi-culturally responsive practice, training too often adopts a “tell us about them” approach that focuses on short-cuts for working with clients that are culturally different (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). In the crisis-oriented environment of many child welfare agencies, few workers develop the skills that would best promote understanding, foster engagement, and lead to effective practice. Role models for effective practice are few, and inexperienced workers do not always have opportunities to learn from experienced, culturally responsive mentors.

This project was designed with the premise that training can be structured to support the development of the beliefs and attitudes that open the door to increased knowledge and skill for cultural responsiveness. Child welfare professionals need the opportunity to experience what it is like to be Latino in the communities they serve. They need to feel the dilemmas that new immigrant families, migrant families, and fifth-generation Latino families feel in American society. Child welfare professionals need to understand the importance of practicing the skills of self-reflection, engaging, assessing, planning, and intervening with Latino families. Finally, child welfare professionals need opportunities to implement their new skills on the job with support from supervisors and colleagues. The pedagogical technique of training simulation to increase awareness, readiness, and motivation as a foundation for skill building is a promising approach in the field of cultural responsiveness training in child welfare.

Building a simulation experience requires that training teams engage in a collaborative learning process with agency, family, and community partners to identify and simulate the types of clients and issues faced by Latino families in the local community. In this way, a simulation like El Jardín is “tweaked” to capture and respond to local concerns. This does take time, however the process serves other important purposes as well, as trainers build upon
community relationships and identify the important themes and sub-themes for inclusion. The task is to create a virtual reality that is separate enough to engage participants in role-play but familiar enough to be owned by participants. Engaging community partners and families in such an endeavor presents an opportunity to “build together.” This is time consuming, but ultimately a more creative process than traditional knowledge training development. It is, indeed, more “real” for training developers and for participants.

The customization and embedding of a simulation into the local environment is very likely to be critical for success. As El Jardin was developed, immigration enforcement was shifting from Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the largest investigatory arm of Homeland Security. In Colorado, ICE was actively pursuing large raids on meat packing plants, resulting in many families coming into contact with child welfare due to detention of parents. This theme was woven into El Jardin resulting in an important sense of immediacy. This immediacy of content and application may well contribute to the strong sense of reality within a simulation.

Simulation training can be resource intensive, relying on boxes of props, large training spaces, strong community partnerships, and trainer creativity and time. Findings from the formative evaluation indicate that stakeholders felt that the simulation was well worth the time and effort. More studies to compare simulation to traditional training techniques are needed to confirm whether the engagement, readiness, and learning outcomes are fully worth the investment.

NOTE

1. The terms Latino and Hispanic are not interchangeable or widely accepted. Each term reflects complex political issues about the origin of the label and the related meaning. For instance, the term Hispanic was imposed by the United States federal government for tracking of information and refers to Spanish speaking people. For a population of people whose identity is without an agreed-upon name, the larger question to consider is the consequences for empowerment and unity. Latino is predominately used here because it is the preference of one of the authors as the lesser of potentially oppressive labels.

REFERENCES


Rae, W. A., & Willis, D. J. (1973). Effectiveness of discussion, modeling and experiential simulation in training empathy skills to medical students. Retrieved from ERIC.

**CONTRIBUTORS**

**Robin Leake** is Research and Evaluation Manager, Butler Institute for Families, University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work, Denver, CO.

**Kathleen Holt** is Training and Curriculum Coordinator, University of Kansas, School of Social Welfare, Child Welfare Resource Network, Lawrence, KS.

**Cathryn Potter** is Executive Director, Butler Institute for Families, University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work, Denver, CO.

**Debora M. Ortega** is Associate Professor, University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work, Denver, CO.