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Professionalization of Family Life Education: Defining the Field

An online professional practice analysis of family life educators was conducted resulting in responses from 522 Certified Family Life Educators (CFLEs) and a comparison group of 369 noncertified family practitioners. This survey included questions about the characteristics of CFLEs, their work environments, and practice-related tasks within 10 CFLE content areas. Compared to noncertified family professionals, CFLEs more frequently perceived that entry-level family life educators needed greater expertise in Internal Dynamics of Families, Human Growth and Development, Human Sexuality, Interpersonal Relationships, Family Resource Management, and Family Life Education Methodology than the other family life content areas.

Advocates of family life education recognize the importance of applying a proactive approach

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to family well-being. One method for increasing awareness of the value of such an approach involves recognition of family life education as a profession. The emergence of the profession of family life education (FLE) over the past several decades has involved a developmental process with several essential steps. An initial step occurred in 1984 when a task force of national experts from the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) introduced the University and College Curriculum Guidelines for family life education curriculum and the Standards and Criteria for the Certification of Family Life Educators (CFLE). These Standards and Criteria formed the foundation of the Certified Family Life Educator certification program that was launched in 1985 (NCFR, 1984). These guidelines represented the knowledge base needed for effective professional practice as family life educators and are commonly known as the 10 content areas of FLE. An understanding of each of these areas was deemed essential for effective practice as a family life educator whether one was a specialist or a generalist (Czaplewski & Jorgensen, 1993). The identification of core competencies and standards of practice can be an important indicator of the advancement of a profession (East, 1980).

The application process to become a CFLE historically involved a portfolio review process, whereby applicants submitted materials documenting their academic training, professional

development, and work experience in each of the 10 content areas. A Certification Review Committee, comprised of veteran CFLEs, reviewed these materials and provided an independent assessment of the candidates' qualifications. In 1996, NCFR introduced the Academic Program Review that provided the opportunity for academic institutions to submit an application identifying coursework that met the criteria for each of the 10 family life content areas. Currently there are 110 NCFR-approved programs that can offer their graduates the opportunity to apply for Provisional Certification through an Abbreviated Application process that does not involve a portfolio review. This process has proven to be a very successful option for certification, resulting in more applications than through the portfolio process. The efficiency of the Abbreviated Application process brought to light the complexity of the original portfolio process, which was labor and resource intensive and had the potential of introducing an element of subjectivity.

In 2005, the NCFR Board of Directors approved the creation of a national examination for the purpose of certifying family life educators. An examination format is the industry-recognized measurement for professional certifications (Browning, Bugbee, & Mullins, 1996) and would increase the likelihood that the CFLE credential could be recognized by state and government agencies. NCFR, with the assistance of Schroeder Measurement Technologies, Inc. (SMT) began the process of creating the national exam for certification of family life educators in 2007. An important step in this process was to determine the actual tasks performed by an entry-level family life educator. Thus, a practice-analysis survey of CFLEs and a comparable group of noncertified family practitioners was conducted to determine expectations of what an entry-level family life educator should know in terms of knowledge and practice. In addition, the survey provided a professional profile of CFLEs and non-CFLEs that had not been previously available. Although historically there have been numerous scholarly articles on the nature and content of family life education (Arcus, 1987, 1995; Bredehoft, 2001; Bredehoft & Cassidy, 1995; Bredehoft & Walcheski, 2009; Doherty, 1995; Powell & Cassidy, 2007), the CFLE practice analysis was the first organized effort to measure the relevancy of the content of family life education to the practice of FLE.

The purpose of this paper is to articulate the process undertaken to determine the core competencies needed for entry-level family life educators, which were refined and incorporated into the creation of the new CFLE examination. In addition, we wanted to identify the practice and environmental characteristics of Certified Family Life Educators in comparison to noncertified family practitioners related to the settings and clients they serve. This study also provided a comparison of the expectations held of entry-level family life educators by both CFLEs and noncertified family practitioners as related, in general, to the 10 content areas, as well as the specific core competencies within each content area. These expectations have important implications for educational programs associated with entry-level professionals, as well as marketing the profession of family life education and the CFLE designation.

METHOD

Sample

Data utilized in this study were drawn from NCFR's CFLE professional practice-analysis project. Results for the study came from a sample of 522 CFLEs who responded to an online survey (response rate of 47%) of the CFLE membership. A comparison group of 369 noncertified family practitioners, who were practicing in the field, was also utilized to further examine the relevancy of 10 content areas for the practice of FLE. In other words, do family life professionals, who are not necessarily CFLEs but have knowledge of all content areas, consider this content relevant to the practice of FLE? This sample was obtained through related professional organizations, networks, and listservs. Because NCFR did not have direct access to the addresses, the exact number of invitations that reached the participants and the response rate are unknown. The noncertified sample resulted in 570 participants; however, due to incomplete surveys and the elimination of some respondents who were CFLEs, the final analysis included 369 noncertified practitioners in the field of family sciences.

The respondents were predominantly female (58.6% of the CFLEs and 58.9% of the noncertified family practitioners) and resided in 48 different states, Puerto Rico, and eight foreign countries. CFLEs were older than noncertified family

practitioners with CFLEs ranging in age from 22 to 85 years (mean = 48.1 years), whereas non-certified family practitioners ranged in age from 21 to 79 years (mean = 44.7 years) ($F = 15.5$, $df = 1, 883$, $p = .000$). No significant differences were found between the two groups with respect to race or ethnicity or educational levels. Both CFLEs and noncertified family practitioners were predominantly White (86.4%) and held advanced degrees (41.7% masters degrees and 38% doctorate degrees *ns*). (See Table 1.)

Measures

The content for this survey was developed with guidance from SMT through a process involving a Subject Matter Expert Committee (SMEC) selected through NCFR. These experts were from varied backgrounds including ethnicity, practice settings, areas of practice, and years of experience. Materials were submitted to SMT, such as textbooks, college course curricula, competency listings, job descriptions, the *NCFR Standards and Criteria for the Certification of Family Life Educators*, and published research in NCFR journals. Using these materials the SMT staff created a content outline for the practice of family life education. A one-day meeting was held with the SMEC to edit and expand the content outline, resulting in a comprehensive list of skills and knowledge elements needed for competent practice and for use as the basis of the survey.

Procedures

A presurvey e-mail notice was sent to CFLEs through the NCFR CFLE listserv to inform them that an invitation would be sent for completion of an online CFLE practice-analysis survey. One week later, the official survey was sent followed by three reminders. All data were collected within 30 days after the first official invitation.

The survey included a comprehensive list of important tasks that may be performed by a family life educator. On the basis of their personal experiences, respondents were asked to rate how important each task was to the appropriate and effective performance of an entry-level family life educator. The focus on entry-level professionals is consistent with standards for creation of certification exams. If the task was not performed by a FLE, they were to select "task is not performed." A

rating scale was provided to rate each task with options ranging from 1 = *no importance* through 5 = *extremely important*. In addition, several demographic questions were included to determine the backgrounds, settings, and roles of family life educators.

After analyzing the responses, there was a second meeting of the SMEC to examine the results and determine which elements of the content analysis would be included in the CFLE exam. The SMEC reviewed the results for 77 CFLE-related tasks or competencies and established statistical criteria for inclusion or exclusion of content elements. Of these 77 elements, 4 items did not meet the criteria for inclusion and were removed from the content; however, after some discussion 2 of the 4 items were rewritten. Two additional elements were clarified and another 1 was added based on respondent recommendations, resulting in 76 practice-related tasks that served as the basis of content for the CFLE exam.

Various analyses were completed to further understand the role of CFLEs and compare them to noncertified family practitioners, including descriptive statistics and an ANOVA with a significance level of $p \leq .05$. Although the revised list of items in the practice analysis can be found at the NCFR website (http://www.ncfr.org/cert/become/app_reg.asp), the analysis for this study included the items as originally written by the SMEC. In addition to examining the individual items related to CFLE competencies in the practice analysis, subscales were created based on the 10 content areas. The Cronbach alpha for these scales were as follows: *Families & Individuals in Societal Contexts* (.79), *Internal Dynamics of Families* (.88), *Human Growth & Development Across the Lifespan* (.89), *Human Sexuality* (.94), *Interpersonal Relationships* (.87), *Family Resource Management* (.92), *Parenting Education & Guidance* (.94), *Family Law & Public Policy* (.89), *Professional Ethics & Practice* (.88), and *Family Life Education Methodology* (.94).

RESULTS

Characteristics of Respondents and Their Work Settings

Because of the ongoing evolution of the profession of family life education and the increasing student and academic interest in FLE, it was

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of CFLEs and Family Practitioners

Characteristic	CFLEs (n = 522)	Family Practitioners (n = 369)	Total (n = 891)
Race/ethnicity^a			
Caucasian/White (%)	87.3	85.2	86.4
African American/Black	7.3	4.9	6.3
Asian/Pacific islander	1.8	3.0	2.3
Hispanic	2.0	2.5	2.2
Multiracial	1.0	1.6	1.3
Other	0.4	2.2	1.1
Middle Eastern	0.4	0.3	0.3
Native American/Alaska native	0.0	0.3	0.1
Degree			
H.S. degree or equivalent (%)	0.0	0.9	0.3
Associate degree	0.0	1.1	0.5
Bachelors degree	21.3	16.8	19.5
Masters degree	41.5	42.0	41.7
Doctorate degree	37.2	39.2	38.0
Field of highest degree^{a,b}			
Human development and family studies (%)	48.6	35.8	43.4
Marriage and family therapy/social work	13.1	13.9	13.4
Education	11.5	13.9	12.5
Other	9.1	11.1	9.9
Psychology	6.0	8.7	7.1
Sociology	3.7	7.8	5.4
Family and consumer sciences ed.	3.9	3.8	3.8
Religion/ministry	3.2	1.9	2.7
Medical/nursing/allied or health sciences	0.8	3.1	1.7
Organizational structure^a			
Nonprofit (%)	52.9	51.6	52.4
Government	30.2	36.4	32.7
For profit	16.9	12.0	14.9
Primary focus of organization^a			
Education (%)	65.5	67.4	66.3
Intervention	13.7	13.5	13.6
Prevention	10.6	10.7	10.6
Other	10.2	8.4	9.5
Primary practice setting^a			
Education (postsecondary) (%)	34.0	38.8	35.9
Community-based services	20.3	21.9	20.9
Education (birth through secondary)	11.4	14.9	12.8
Private practice	9.7	5.9	8.1
Faith-based organization	8.5	3.7	6.5
Other	6.6	6.5	6.5
Government/military	5.4	4.8	5.1
Health care and family wellness	4.2	3.7	4.0
Primary area of practice^a			
College/university education (%)	18.5	20.4	19.3
Parenting education	12.0	11.7	11.9
Counseling/therapy	9.1	8.4	8.8
Other	6.8	7.8	7.2
Marriage/relationship education	8.3	5.0	7.0
Cooperative extension/community ed.	4.2	5.9	4.9

Table 1. *Continued*

Characteristic	CFLEs (<i>n</i> = 522)	Family Practitioners (<i>n</i> = 369)	Total (<i>n</i> = 891)
Early childhood education	4.4	5.0	4.7
K-12 education	3.5	5.3	4.2
Child and family advocacy	3.1	5.0	3.9
Aging/gerontology	2.5	2.2	2.4
Health care and wellness	1.9	2.0	1.9
Family preservation	2.7	0.6	1.8
Ministry	1.7	1.1	1.5
Community action/service	1.7	0.8	1.4
Sexuality education	1.5	1.1	1.4
Youth development programs	1.2	1.7	1.4
Work-life balance	1.0	2.0	1.4
Adoption/foster care	0.8	2.0	1.3
Family policy	0.8	2.0	1.3
Child life specialist	1.7	0.3	1.1
Day care/preschool	1.5	0.6	1.1
Military family support	1.5	0.6	1.1
Domestic abuse/violence prevention	0.8	1.7	1.1
Drug and alcohol prevention	0.8	1.1	0.9
Family financial planning and counseling	0.8	0.8	0.8
Head Start programs	1.2	0.3	0.8
Diversity/cultural awareness education	0.4	1.4	0.8
Criminal justice	1.0	0.0	0.6
Housing	0.8	0.0	0.5
Crisis hotline	0.6	0.0	0.3
Nutrition education and counseling	0.6	0.0	0.3
Peace education	0.6	0.0	0.3
Victim/witness support services	0.6	0.0	0.3
Family law	0.4	0.3	0.3
Employment assistance	0.4	0.3	0.3
Communication and writing	0.2	0.6	0.3
Program evaluation and assessment	0.2	0.6	0.3
Pregnancy/family planning	0.0	0.8	0.3
Residential treatment	0.0	0.6	0.2
Media (TV, radio, Internet, film)	0.2	0.0	0.1
Recreation	0.2	0.0	0.1
Hospice	0.0	0.3	0.1
Age of client^c			
Newborns (less than 1 month) (%)	6.7	6.6	6.6
Infants/children (1 month – 12 years)	14.0	14.3	14.2
Adolescents (ages 13 – 18)	15.7	18.2	16.7
Young adults (ages 19 – 30)	27.5	28.5	27.9
Adults (ages 31 – 64)	24.5	21.8	23.4
Elderly (ages 65 – 85)	8.2	7.8	78.1
Elderly (over age 85)	3.3	2.8	3.1

^aRank-ordered by total group. ^bRespondents could check all that apply (CFLE *n* = 617; family practitioner *n* = 424; Total *n* = 1, 041). ^cRespondents could check all that apply (CFLE *n* = 1, 246; family practitioner *n* = 822; Total *n* = 2, 068).

important to profile family life educators, their backgrounds, and work environments, especially as they may or may not differ from noncertified family practitioners. Whereas 78.9% of the CFLE respondents had attained Full CFLE status, 21.1% were Provisional CFLEs. Full CFLEs have met both the knowledge and experience requirements for Certification; Provisional CFLEs have met only the knowledge requirement and are given 5 years in which to earn sufficient work experience in order to upgrade to Full Certification. Of the CFLE respondents 71.6% had been family life educators for 10 years or less with a range of years as a FLE from 0 to 46 years (mean = 9.2 years, median = 7 years). Of the noncertified family practitioners, 50.8% identified themselves as family life educators. When asked about the field of their highest degree, a majority of both CFLEs and noncertified family practitioners reported human development and family studies, followed by marriage and family therapy/social work, and education. Because respondents could check all options that applied for this question, only descriptive information is provided. (See Table 1.)

It is important to understand the structure, focus, and settings of those who are employed in the field of family sciences. For CFLEs and family practitioners, the primary organizational structure of their employers was nonprofit (*ns*), with education as the main focus (*ns*). CFLEs, who often work in varied settings, most frequently reported being involved in post-secondary education, followed by community-based services and educational services (*ns*). Similarly, the areas of practice were also diverse with college and university education the most frequent followed by parenting education and counseling/therapy (*ns*). Although FLE focuses on education and not therapy, some areas of practice contain both foci. This array of primary areas of practice can be useful for FLEs to see the options for future employment.

CFLE respondents reported serving an average of 66.7 individuals or families per week (noncertified family practitioners served an average of 68.1 individuals or families) with a range of 1 to more than 999 for both groups (*ns*). This range could reflect the various educational modalities (e.g., home visits to mass media) that FLEs utilize in their professional roles. CFLEs and noncertified family practitioners also provide services to a wide age range of clients, but they reported predominantly serving young

adults, ages 19–30 years, followed by adults, ages 31–64 years. Because respondents could check all options that applied for this question, only descriptive information is provided.

CFLE Practice Analysis

The essence of this survey was the participants' response to the list of 77 tasks that an entry-level family life educator would perform. Data in Table 2 indicate the mean importance of each item for both CFLEs and noncertified family practitioners. Comparisons were made between these two groups for each of the 10 content areas, as well as each item within that content area. Additionally, within each of the 10 content areas, the items are rank-ordered from most important to least important.

When examining the overall response from both CFLEs and noncertified practitioners to determine the relevance of the 10 areas to actual practice, results indicate that the 10 areas are accepted and supported by those practicing as family professionals. Some content areas were considered more important than others, (e.g., *Human Growth & Development Across the Life Span* ranked number 1; *Family Law & Public Policy* ranked number 10). None of the 10 content areas was rejected as being irrelevant to the practice of FLE. There were significant differences between the two groups of family professionals in six content areas, including *Internal Dynamics of Families*, *Human Growth & Development Across the Life span*, *Human Sexuality*, *Interpersonal Relationships*, *Family Resource Management*, and *Family Life Education Methodology*. In each of these content areas, CFLEs were more likely to expect an entry-level FLE to have a greater level of competency, as compared to noncertified family practitioners. Of the areas in which there were significant differences, *Internal Dynamics of Families*, *Human Sexuality*, and *Interpersonal Relationships* deal with relationships. In fact, several of the individual items for which there were significant differences also focused on relationship dimensions, such as "Evaluate family dynamics in response to crises"; "Recognition of reciprocal influences on family development on individuals and individual development on families"; "Recognize the psychosocial aspects of human sexuality in interpersonal dynamics of sexual intimacy"; and "Promote healthy parenting from a systems perspective."

When examining the rank order of individual items, tasks related to strategies often received higher rankings. Examples of these items include *Internal Dynamics of Families* – “Develop, recognize and reinforce strategies that help families function effectively”;

Interpersonal Relationships – “Develop and implement effective communication, problem solving, and conflict management strategies”; and *Parenting Education & Guidance* – “Apply strategies based on the child’s age/stage of development to promote effective

Table 2. Comparison of Importance of FLE Practice-Related Tasks by CFLEs and Noncertified Family Practitioners

Content Areas (Content Areas Ranked 1–10) ^a (Individual Content Ranked in Each Area)	Noncertified		Total Mean	F	p
	CFLE Mean	Practitioner Mean			
I. Families and individuals in societal contexts (rank = 8)	20.01	19.64	19.86	3.12	.078
a) Recognize the reciprocal interaction between individuals, families, and various social systems (e.g., health, legal, educational)	4.30	4.29	4.30	0.09	.759
b) Identify social and cultural influences affecting dating, courtship, partner/marital choice and relationships, family composition, and family life	4.18	4.03	4.11	7.03	.008**
c) Assess the impact of demographics (e.g., class, race, ethnicity, generation, gender on contemporary families)	4.01	4.03	4.02	0.13	.724
d) Identify the characteristics, diversity, and impact of local, national, and global social systems	3.76	3.66	3.72	2.69	.101
e) Identify historical and contemporary factors influencing individuals and families (e.g., megamarketing, technology, economics, natural disasters, war)	3.65	3.57	3.61	1.54	.215
II. Internal dynamics of families (rank = 2)	34.13	33.04	33.70	12.79	.000***
a) Develop, recognize, and reinforce strategies that help families function effectively	4.59	4.45	4.53	9.79	.002**
b) Facilitate and strengthen communication processes, conflict management, and problem-solving skills	4.59	4.39	4.51	17.52	.000***
c) Recognize and define healthy and unhealthy characteristics pertaining to					
1. Family relationships	4.55	4.40	4.49	10.51	.001***
2. Family development	4.46	4.34	4.41	6.47	.011***
d) Evaluate family dynamics in response to crises	4.18	3.96	4.09	18.74	.000***
e) Assess family dynamics from a systems perspective	4.02	3.88	3.96	5.50	.019**
f) Evaluate family dynamics in response to normative and nonnormative stressors	4.03	3.86	3.96	9.23	.002**
g) Analyze family functioning using various theoretical perspectives	3.72	3.66	3.69	0.99	.321
III. Human growth and development across the life span (rank = 1)	24.93	24.16	24.61	8.36	.004*
a) Identify developmental stages, transitions, tasks, and challenges throughout the life span	4.27	4.11	4.20	8.54	.004*
b) Assist individuals and families in effective developmental transitions	4.20	4.03	4.13	10.47	.001*
c) Recognize reciprocal influences					
1. Family development on individuals	4.16	4.01	4.10	7.54	.006**
2. Individual development on families	4.13	3.99	4.07	6.43	.011*
d) Recognize the impact of individual health and wellness on families	4.11	4.01	4.07	3.15	.076
e) Apply appropriate practices based on theories of human growth and development to individuals and families	4.06	3.97	4.02	2.39	.123

Table 2. *Continued*

Content Areas (Content Areas Ranked 1–10) ^a (Individual Content Ranked in Each Area)	Noncertified		Total Mean	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	CFLE Mean	Practitioner Mean			
IV. Human sexuality (rank = 9)	34.77	33.47	34.24	6.66	.010**
a) Recognize the psychosocial aspects of human sexuality – risk factors (e.g., substance abuse, social pressures, media)	4.10	3.94	4.04	6.52	.011*
b) Address human sexuality from a value-respectful position	4.04	3.98	4.02	0.55	.456
c) Recognize the psychosocial aspects of human sexuality – characteristics of healthy and ethical sexual relationships	4.02	3.84	3.95	7.32	.007**
d) Recognize the psychosocial aspects of human sexuality – interpersonal dynamics of sexual intimacy	3.94	3.76	3.87	7.48	.006**
e) Recognize the biological aspects of human sexuality – sexually transmitted infections	3.81	3.75	3.78	0.86	.354
f) Recognize the biological aspects of human sexuality – family planning	3.81	3.68	3.75	4.09	.044*
g) Recognize the biological aspects of human sexuality – reproductive health	3.70	3.63	3.67	1.24	.266
h) Recognize the biological aspects of human sexuality – sexual functioning	3.69	3.53	3.62	5.45	.020*
i) Recognize the biological and psychosocial aspects of sexual dysfunction	3.57	3.37	3.49	8.20	.004**
V. Interpersonal relationships (rank = 7)	25.03	23.99	24.60	15.86	.000***
a) Develop and implement effective communication, problem solving, and conflict management strategies	4.50	4.26	4.40	22.09	.000***
b) Recognize the impact of personality and communication styles	4.40	4.15	4.30	25.64	.000***
c) Recognize the developmental stages of relationships	4.16	3.98	4.09	11.29	.001***
d) Develop and implement relationship enhancement and enrichment strategies	4.20	3.94	4.09	20.18	.000***
e) Communicate aspects of relationships within the context of their developmental stages	4.02	3.97	4.00	0.67	.415
f) Analyze interpersonal relationships using various theoretical perspectives	3.70	3.60	3.66	2.87	.091
VI. Family resource management (rank = 4)	43.18	41.42	42.49	11.16	.001***
a) Identify personal, familial, professional, and community resources available to families	4.31	4.25	4.29	1.33	.250
b) Apply stress management strategies	4.14	3.94	4.06	11.64	.001***
c) Apply decision-making strategies	4.15	3.92	4.05	16.58	.000***
d) Apply goal-setting strategies and evaluate their outcomes	4.09	3.89	4.01	12.35	.000***
e) Recognize the reciprocal relationship between individual/family/community choices and resources	4.06	3.88	3.99	11.16	.001***
f) Apply basic financial management tools and principles	3.94	3.73	3.86	10.51	.001***
g) Apply organizational and time management strategies	3.95	3.68	3.85	20.08	.000***
h) Apply value-clarification strategies to decision making	3.94	3.71	3.84	13.19	.000***
i) Promote consumer rights, responsibilities, and choices of action/advocacy	3.57	3.42	3.51	4.75	.030*
j) Analyze how individuals and families manage resources using various theoretical perspectives	3.45	3.34	3.41	2.55	.111

Table 2. *Continued*

Content Areas (Content Areas Ranked 1–10) ^a (Individual Content Ranked in Each Area)	CFLE Mean	Noncertified		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
		Practitioner Mean	Total Mean		
VII. Parenting education and guidance (rank = 5)	50.69	50.09	50.45	1.18	.277
a) Apply strategies based on the child's age/stage of development to promote effective developmental outcomes	4.43	4.36	4.41	1.83	.177
b) Promote healthy parenting from a child's and parent's developmental perspective	4.39	4.40	4.39	0.05	.831
c) Recognize the influence of cultural differences and diversity	4.28	4.26	4.27	0.13	.722
d) Identify different parenting styles and their associated psychological, social, and behavioral outcomes	4.28	4.22	4.26	1.22	.270
e) Recognize parenting issues within various family structures (e.g. single, blended same-sex)	4.27	4.22	4.25	0.71	.399
f) Recognize various parenting roles (e.g., father/mother, grandparents, other caregivers) and their impact on and contribution to individuals and families	4.26	4.18	4.23	2.00	.157
g) Promote healthy parenting from a systems perspective	4.23	4.06	4.16	7.25	.007**
h) Recognize the impact of societal trends on parenting (e.g., technology, substance abuse, media)	4.24	4.05	4.16	11.70	.001***
i) Evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of various parenting strategies	4.15	4.13	4.14	0.13	.720
j) Promote various parenting models, principles, and strategies	4.11	4.09	4.10	0.11	.738
k) Identify strategies to advocate for children in various settings (e.g. schools, legal system, health care)	4.06	4.05	4.05	0.01	.905
l) Recognize the various pathways to parenting and their associated issues and challenges (e.g. assisted reproduction, adoption, childbirth, blending)	3.88	3.86	3.88	0.079	.779
VIII. Family law and public policy (rank = 10)	11.38	11.22	11.31	0.79	.374
a) Identify current laws, public policies, and initiatives that affect families	3.87	3.79	3.84	1.52	.218
b) Identify current law, public policy, and initiatives that regulate and influence professional conduct and services	3.77	3.65	3.72	3.14	.077
c) Inform families, communities, and policy makers about public policies, initiatives, and legislation that affect families at local, state, and national levels	3.71	3.68	3.70	0.14	.707
IX. Professional ethics and practice (rank = 3)	17.78	17.59	17.70	1.10	.296
a) Demonstrate professional attitudes, values, behaviors, and responsibilities to clients, colleagues, and the broader community that are reflective of ethical standards and practice	4.63	4.58	4.61	1.28	.257
b) Demonstrate respect for diverse cultural values and ethical standards	4.53	4.52	4.53	0.09	.768
c) Identify and apply appropriate strategies to deal with conflicting values	4.33	4.31	4.32	0.26	.612
d) Evaluate, differentiate, and apply diverse approaches to ethical issues and dilemmas	4.28	4.17	4.23	2.99	.084

Table 2. Continued

Content Areas (Content Areas Ranked 1–10) ^a (Individual Content Ranked in Each Area)	Noncertified		Total Mean	F	p
	CFLE Mean	Practitioner Mean			
X. Family life education methodology (rank = 6)	59.44	57.88	58.83	6.17	.013*
a) Establish and maintain appropriate personal and professional boundaries	4.55	4.51	4.54	0.94	.333
b) Create learning environments that are respectful of individual vulnerabilities, needs, and learning styles	4.48	4.39	4.44	3.26	.071
c) Demonstrate sensitivity to diversity and community needs, concerns, and interests	4.44	4.37	4.41	1.88	.171
d) Develop culturally competent educational materials and learning experiences	4.32	4.30	4.31	0.15	.699
e) Employ techniques to promote application of information in the learner’s environment	4.31	4.14	4.24	9.71	.002*
f) Develop educational experiences – implementation	4.24	4.12	4.19	4.38	.037*
g) Employ a variety of current educational strategies	4.25	4.08	4.18	9.06	.003**
h) Develop educational experiences – goals and objectives	4.22	4.12	4.18	3.58	.059
i) Identify appropriate sources for evidence-based information	4.16	4.17	4.17	0.06	.804
j) Develop educational experiences – content development	4.22	4.11	4.17	3.71	.054
k) Develop educational experiences – evaluation/outcome measures	4.16	4.14	4.15	0.15	.704
l) Develop educational experiences – needs assessment	4.13	4.04	4.10	2.16	.142
m) Implement adult education principles into work with families and parents	3.96	3.91	3.94	0.47	.494
n) Promote and market educational programs	3.85	3.54	3.73	18.63	.000***

^aContent areas were ranked 1–10 in importance based on the total mean score and number of items per content area. Individual items within each content area are ranked based on the total mean score for that item.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

developmental outcomes.’’ In contrast, the lowest-ranked tasks for the total group across the 10 content areas often dealt with applying theoretical perspectives to family functioning and development. Examples include: *Internal Dynamics of Families* – Analyze family functioning using various theoretical perspectives; *Human Growth & Development Across the Life span* – Apply appropriate practices based on theories of human growth and development to individuals and families; and *Interpersonal Relationships* – Analyze interpersonal relationships using various theoretical perspectives. In other words, in many of the content areas for both CFLEs and noncertified practitioners, knowledge of *strategies* was perceived to be of greater importance than use of *theories* to understand behaviors.

Modifications to Practice-Related Tasks

After the data were collected and analyzed, the SMEC met with SMT to examine the results.

Seven separate analyses were conducted to determine if a task would remain in the final list of tasks expected of entry-level family life educators. These analyses included the following: percent of those not performing task; mean importance rating; mean importance by years of experience; mean importance by geographic region; mean importance by CFLE status; mean importance by NCFR certification; and open-ended comments. In summary, the survey began with 77 competencies, as noted in Table 2, but resulted in 76 competencies after some items were deleted, rewritten, clarified, or added. This final list of competencies became the basis for writing exam questions by the CFLE Item-Writing Committee.

DISCUSSION

Results of the present study provide important archival information on the latest steps in the development of the CFLE program and the

field of family life education. In addition, the study offers essential information for consideration as the certification of family life educators and the profession move forward. Three areas are offered for consideration. The first focuses on the profile of CFLEs. This study offers an understanding of CFLEs and the expectations associated for entry-level CFLEs that have not previously been available. A second consideration is the implications of these findings for educational and training programs that prepare family life educators as well as their engagement in family life education. Finally, the study provides insights for the promotion and marketing of FLE and CFLEs.

CFLE Profile

No previous study has offered an in-depth examination of who CFLEs are and the settings in which they work. The findings make clear that, overall, CFLEs are a highly educated group given that the minimum educational requirement for certification is a bachelor's degree. Approximately 78% of the respondents of this survey had graduate degrees with 37% of these being a doctorate degree. An examination of the contexts in which CFLEs are found suggests that many of these advanced degreed CFLEs are employed within college and university settings. As a result, they are likely to be engaged in the development, evaluation, and/or dissemination of the latest scholarship and practice. Many CFLEs may be educating and working with the family life professionals of tomorrow, and thus have the ability to influence educational programs and training. For students of these CFLEs, there is the potential of gaining critical knowledge and analytical skills as they explore the 10 content areas associated with their FLE programs.

The degree to which students are exposed, or mentored by CFLEs who are actively engaged in community-based family life education outside the college environment remains unclear. Although students in NCFR-approved programs are required to engage in a FLE internship, there is currently no stipulation that such interns be supervised by a CFLE. Although such a requirement may be premature given the emerging nature of the CFLE program, mentorship by CFLEs in contexts in which students are likely to seek employment should be a goal for academic programs. This would

represent another step in the maturation of CFLE and be consistent with standards associated with other fields (e.g., social work).

This study revealed that CFLEs are found in a number of settings and engaging in a variety of areas of practice. Education and training in the 10 content areas provides flexibility for entry-level professionals as they pursue job opportunities and career paths. Such flexibility offers promotional opportunities for college programs in recruiting students to this field. On the other hand, the range and variety of work settings suggest that FLE is not likely to be the primary or sole focus of their work. The educational background and training that certification as a family life educator represents are likely to be one part of a portfolio of experiences and training utilized in the professional positions associated with these settings and areas of practice. The recognition of family life education as an area of expertise is still emerging. A review of the contexts in which CFLEs are employed suggests that there are many other professional identities that could be associated with their positions. It is also likely that, collectively, professionals employed in these areas comprise an interdisciplinary team. An implication for the promotion of CFLE and the field is that embracing and sustaining CFLE as a professional identity may be particularly challenging for entry-level family life educators in the midst of other professional identities and job responsibilities. This may especially be true if, as noted above, students are undertaking internships in which their field supervisors are not CFLEs.

It is likely that many entry-level CFLEs are engaging in family life education in settings or communities where there are a limited number of CFLEs. It may also be true that the nature of their work is not defined as FLE per se. However, the growing number of NCFR-approved programs and recent work by NCFR to have the U.S. Department of Labor include the term "family life educator" in the Department of Labor's CareerOneStop website (www.dol.careerOneStop.gov), suggests an increasing number of family life educators entering into the professional world and a growing recognition of their certification. Concurrent with the efforts at promoting the recognition of CFLE, bachelor-level family life educators may warrant particular mentoring, professional networking, and development from other

CFLEs and NCFR as an organization. Whether these efforts should be associated with NCFR, regional efforts, or efforts associated with NCFR-approved programs, or some combination thereof, is a conversation that should occur.

Although NCFR has increased its efforts over the past decade to offer professional development opportunities and resources through the annual NCFR national conference and through the CFLE newsletter, *Network*, continued focus on the professional development needs of entry-level practitioners is warranted. Because financial challenges limit the professional development resources for many individuals and agencies, attending the national conference may be cost prohibitive for many entry-level practitioners. More regional and local opportunities for professional networking, mentoring, and development as family life educators need to be developed or promoted. Entry-level CFLEs may be the most vulnerable in terms of job security and flexibility. In addition, professionally they are in their earliest phase of developing a commitment to a professional identity. Factors associated with the commitment to the field of family life education in general, and to the professional identity as a CFLE specifically, is an area warranting further research and examination by NCFR and scholars concerned about FLE.

The results of this study revealed that an overwhelming majority of CFLEs (87%) and family practitioners (85%) are Caucasian. The next most frequent race or ethnicity identified by the respondents was African American/Black with only 7 and 5% of CFLEs and family practitioners identifying themselves as such. This finding calls for a greater and ongoing effort to recruit and retain family life educators that represent diversity. The changing demographics of the United State clearly indicate the need for family life educators who can effectively address this diversity. Several initiatives may be needed to increase diversity within CFLE. Programs should go beyond the traditional means of recruiting students and must take into consideration how students of color are welcomed into competing programs or majors on college campuses. Furthermore, such efforts may also require a closer examination of student perceptions of FLE as a career path and the perceived barriers and limitations for diverse students. A second approach should focus on those professionals in the field who represent diversity and may be engaging in FLE activities, yet do

not identify themselves as family life educators. While ensuring that these individuals have the educational background in core content areas, recruiting CFLEs and the promotion of FLE should occur. Such an approach will necessitate a focused and strategic effort at many levels.

The *Guidelines for Ethical Thinking and Practice for Parent and Family Life Educators* (NCFR, 2009) clearly articulate that family life educators should respect cultural diversity, encourage diversity in staff, and engage in ongoing training and education to enhance skills and knowledge. Considerable discussion emerged in the process of developing the national exam for certification on whether cultural diversity should emerge as a unique content area given its importance. Although the merits of having this as a new content area were easily articulated, the final consensus was that understanding cultural diversity across the 10 content areas was critical. The danger of this approach, however, is that within each of the areas it will require continued effort and diligence by educators to ensure that diversity is represented and discussed. Clearly increasing diversity within CFLE and NCFR is an area that warrants continued attention. Although such issues are not unique to CFLE and NCFR, they nonetheless deserve ongoing focus so they remain front and center of our efforts.

Expectations of Entry-level Family Life Educators

An examination of the expectations that CFLEs and family practitioners associated with the 10 content areas offered several issues for careful consideration. Individual item analyses for the 10 content areas revealed the valuing of strategies of practice over the integration of theoretical models into practice. Across six content areas where there were statistical aggregate differences between the two groups, items associated with strategies or the application of the content area in working with families both emerged among the items with the highest mean scores. CFLEs consistently rated these items higher than noncertified practitioners. In other words, CFLEs expected that entry-level practitioners should be able to identify content area-related issues and to effectively develop strategies to address the issues. The valuing of strategies among new professionals could be associated with the fact

that many entry-level practitioners are entering the field from bachelor's degree programs where the development of skills and strategies may have been a program emphasis. The value placed on strategies may also represent the focus on the applicability of content to improving family life.

The placement of a higher value on strategies versus theoretical foundations should give pause to programs educating family life educators. Theory should guide the strategies that are utilized within family life education and should inform the interpretation of the outcomes of such strategies. Numerous scholars and noted family life educators stress the importance of a strong theoretical foundation to guide the development and implementation of prevention and educational efforts (e.g., Bredehoft & Walcheski, 2009; Duncan & Goddard, 2005; Powell & Cassidy, 2007; Small, Cooney, & O'Connor, 2009). Although it is important for entry-level family life educators to have the skills to engage in practice, an implication of these findings suggests that educational programs may need to provide a stronger theoretical foundation for the development of new skills and strategies. For some content areas and associated courses, this may require the development of new efforts, materials, and resources. NCFR's publication *Family Life Education: Integrating Theory and Practice* (Bredehoft & Walcheski) is an important contribution to this effort. In many undergraduate programs, texts utilized to cover the 10 content areas often offer only a chapter that summarizes associated theoretical frameworks, before moving on to the specific content. The integration of theory into the content areas, with associated implications for practice, may require a greater focus by NCFR, educators, and programs to further develop resource materials with this combined perspective.

An examination of the responses to content areas revealed that *Family Law & Public Policy* had the lowest individual item ratings by both groups among all items of the survey. These items addressed the importance of practitioners' abilities to identify laws, public policies, and initiatives that have an impact on families and professionals who serve families. Furthermore these items also addressed practitioners' ability to inform families and policy makers of the impact of legislative initiatives on families at local, state, and national levels. The low

rating by both CFLEs and noncertified family professionals is troubling. For one, ethical guidelines established by NCFR for CFLEs encourage practitioners to "advocate for laws and policies that reflect our changing knowledge base and the best interests of parents, families, and communities" and to "respect and uphold laws and regulations that pertain to our practice as family educators and offer expertise to legal authorities based on professional knowledge" (NCFR, 2009). If minimal emphasis is placed on this content area in terms of expectations for entry-level CFLEs, the question arises as to how effectively CFLEs will be able to follow such guidelines. Both CFLEs and family professionals highly rated the items associated with the content area of *Professional Ethics & Practice*, reflecting high expectations of entry-level CFLEs to engage in ethical and professional behavior. NCFR included questions regarding ethical conduct in the CFLE Exam, but recognized the difficulty of adequately measuring ethical issues through a multiple choice test. NCFR is currently developing a formal Code of Ethics for Certified Family Life Educators to be incorporated into the CFLE application and renewal process. These findings suggest that increased efforts may be necessary to make the connection between the family law and public policy area and ethical and professional conduct as a CFLE.

Beyond the potential ethical concerns, the finding that there are low expectations of entry-level CFLEs in the family policy and law area may raise concerns associated with how engaged CFLEs are in the development of policies and laws that may influence their constituents and their practice. Furthermore, it raises the question about the degree to which family concerns are conveyed to policy makers. Although entry-level CFLEs may not have the depth of knowledge in the various content areas as more seasoned CFLEs, or specialists in specific content-related areas, they should have core knowledge that can be used to help policy makers take a family perspective on policy making or both or create family friendly policies. In addition, family life educators can engage colleagues, service providers, policy makers, and the community to examine and be vigilant, either individually or collectively, about how policies and programs can impact family well-being (Bogenschneider, 2006b). Family professionals can work directly with policy makers to generate

and disseminate research and ideas that can influence policy making. The use of tools such as the Family Impact Checklists created by the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars (www.familyimpactseminars.org), and NCFR's *Public Policy through a Family Lens* (NCFR, 2005), may serve to increase the dialogue between family life educators and policy makers. Policy making occurs at multiple levels from broad international and national levels to policies generated at the local level. Increased efforts are needed to encourage CFLEs to engage in the process at all levels. Failure to do so leaves their concerns and those of their constituents to others to express or to go unheard by policy makers.

There may be several reasons for the low ranking of the *Family Law & Public Policy* content area. One explanation may be the self-perception of family life educators as being inadequately trained to advocate on behalf of clients or be seen as effective liaisons between families they serve, policy makers, and program administrators. As a result, policy makers and program administrators may turn to other professionals for this purpose. With the continuing changes and complexity in laws and policies at local, state, national, and international levels, frustration can arise regarding the evolving status of laws and public policies that affect families. Although there may be recognition of the importance of policies at a macrolevel, the importance of policies at the microlevel and the abilities of family life educators to have an impact at any level may be perceived as minimal.

At an academic program level, the low rating of *Family Law & Public Policy* may reflect how recently this content has become embedded in family studies programs. Moreover, there are challenges in teaching such content given that typical students are not initially seeking these programs for policy education and training. Bogenschneider (2006a) has shared that instructors of such courses are often challenged to demystify and distinguish what is meant by family policy. Many students do not have a full understanding of the policy-making process, the dynamics between "politics" and policy, nor the scope of family policies versus other policies (cf. Leite & Anquiano, 2005). Given the changing issues addressed in the policy arena and the sensitive nature and competing values on such issues, instructors are often faced with

challenges of engaging students in the family policy arena. Few students in FLE programs pursue policy-focused internships where they are engaged in activities that can enhance their skills and knowledge in this area.

Many educators in family sciences are not trained to teach or conduct research in family law and policy or make the connection between policy and professional practice. As a result, few opportunities may exist within programs for experiential or service-learning opportunities in which students may gain understanding and skills associated with policy. In addition, many educators may not be able, or are not supported, to have an active research agenda in the family policy arena, thus limiting the integration of their research and teaching. The ongoing development of resources to increase educators' comfort and teaching effectiveness in family policy, as it relates to FLE programs, is warranted (e.g., Berke & Wisensale, 2005; Bogenschneider, 2006a).

A final consideration of the low ranking of *Family Law & Public Policy* ratings may be related to the context in which many practitioners are employed. Employment in education-oriented settings or nonprofit agencies may bring certain restrictions upon practitioner activities due to the sensitive nature of policy issues. Some explicit or implicit family policies may carry certain "baggage" that entry-level practitioners are hesitant to address or encouraged not to address or both. Many CFLEs may not have sufficient time and resources to address policy-related issues. Some nonprofit agencies may have restrictions against activities in the policy arena due to their funding sources and associated restrictions. Finally, some agencies or related professional associations may have personnel whose primary responsibility or specialty focuses on understanding policies and laws and their impact on families. Thus, the low rating in this area may be related to practitioners' perceptions of the relevance of family law and policy issues to their work; perceptions of their own skills, knowledge, and abilities; or the settings in which they are employed. The need for further investigation is essential.

Although CFLEs need to increase their voice in the family policy and law arena, another important step is increasing public and the policy makers' awareness of who CFLEs are and what family life education is. Recently NCFR (2007) developed a fact sheet explaining family

life education that was distributed to U.S. senators and representatives, state governors, and selected state legislators to increase their understanding of family life education's preventative approach. Other efforts have involved including family life educators as providers in legislation. For example, there is a bill pending in the state of Texas that would recognize professionals with the CFLE credential as approved providers of parenting coordination services. Continued efforts such as these are necessary for CFLEs to be seen as a resource for policy makers.

Promotion of Family Life Education and Certification

This study has revealed that, overall, CFLEs are well educated and have high expectations for entry-level CFLEs. In addition, they work in a variety of settings and are engaged in a range of professional practices. Each of these findings is noteworthy and may be utilized in the ongoing maturation and promotion of the field of family life education. The NCFR Content and Practice Guidelines (<http://www.ncfr.org/cert/become/>) that emerged from this project can be an invaluable tool as programs develop their curriculum internally, market their program across campuses and within their respective communities, and assist their graduates to market and profile their training and work. As the recognition of the importance of prevention continues to evolve, the educational background and training in prevention and education in the 10 content areas across the life span should enable CFLEs to have key roles in the development of programs and resources.

The findings revealed particular challenges the field needs to address. The presence of only 20% of CFLEs in community-based services and a lesser percentage of respondents in other placement settings (e.g., schools, private practice) suggests that CFLEs may continue to have a low profile in the professional world for the time being. An implication of these findings is that increasing the profile of CFLEs and marketing family life educators are important areas of further work and research in order to facilitate the growth and enhancement of this field. However, the findings indicated that both CFLEs and non-certified practitioners gave the promotion and marketing of educational programs the lowest ranking of the items in the *Family Life Education Methodology* content area. Although the item

focused on programmatic marketing and promotion, it may have important implications for "marketing" CFLEs and profiling of their work. This low rating may also reflect the nonprofit context in which many CFLEs and noncertified practitioners are typically employed. For many nonprofit organizations and agencies, marketing of programs and services is a relatively new strategy or one for which few resources are available in comparison to the "for-profit" world (Wymer, Knowles, & Gomes, 2006). Over the past several years, NCFR has taken the initiative to provide workshops at its annual conference, as well as resources that focus on marketing, but for entry-level CFLEs, these workshops may be inaccessible. Continued effort to promote and profile CFLEs and their work is warranted and should be focused on emerging professionals, as well as directed to sectors of the work force in which CFLEs are engaged.

There are a number of strategies that can be employed to increase the visibility and value of applying a preventive and educational approach to family functioning as found in family life education. One includes the promotion and support of standards of practice that have been accomplished through the development and promotion of the Certified Family Life Educator credential and the NCFR Academic Program Review. Another approach involves educating employers and the public about the availability of family life education and the role it can play in strengthening families. Finally professionals in the family field need to increase funding for programs focused on prevention and identify niche markets for practice, such as health care, work-life programs, and youth ministry (Powell & Cassidy, 2007).

In summary, this study has provided important information on the profession of family life education and has served to document the process that unfolded in the creation of the new certification exam. Such documentation provides an archive to inform practitioners and professionals of both the historical process and rationale that evolved. By sharing such information it is hoped that individuals are better informed of what it means to be a CFLE and the expectations that are associated with being certified, even at the entry level. It may also help to inform curricula associated with academic programs focusing on family life education. Finally, it may serve to promote the field by providing information that may be used in the

job market to articulate the meaning of family life education. It is important to understand not only our past and present, but also our future as we move forward into a new era in the evolution of the CFLE program and the professionalization of family life educators.

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