

Preparing Future Child Welfare Professionals to Strengthen Couple Relations

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ABSTRACT. This study evaluates the potential value of integrating a family science-focused course on strengthening couple and coparenting relationships into the training of social work students and future child welfare professionals. The 15-week graduate course offered 30 MSW students an opportunity to learn and practice relationship and marriage education (RME) skills in order to teach relevant concepts to clients and to support future integration of these skills in their careers. Evaluation data showed that students demonstrated improvements in multiple domains of knowledge and self-efficacy and applied the concepts learned with clients within six months of completing the course. Implications for future trainings, research, and the scholarship of teaching and learning are shared.

Keywords: relationship education, couples, child welfare

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Preparing Future Child Welfare Professionals to Strengthen Couple Relations

Child welfare professionals (CWPs) today are tasked with increased responsibility of working with families experiencing difficult circumstances to ensure that vulnerable children grow up safe and thrive. Most CWPs receive formal graduate school training in a myriad of topics to equip them with tools and skills to provide services these families need. In recent years, their scope of training has expanded to address topics outside the traditional social work field and more in line with family science, including financial (Despard & Chowa, 2013) and relationship (Antle, Frey, Sar, Barbee, & Van Zyl, 2010) education. The changes are designed to provide CWPs with knowledge and resources to help families manage and reduce stress, develop and maintain healthy relationships, and create safe and stable homes for children.

During the past decade, relationship and marriage education (RME) efforts have expanded in focus to engage diverse and at-risk audiences more effectively, including those disproportionately represented in the child welfare system (Bembry, 2011; Charles, Jones, & Guo, 2014; Hawkins & Ooms, 2012). With emerging research documenting benefits of RME on at-risk audiences (Charles et al., 2014), CWPs are recognizing the potential value of RME (Schramm, Futris, Galovan, & Allen, 2013). Although brief professional development trainings have demonstrated promise in helping CWPs learn how to implement RME (Futris, Schramm, Lee, Thurston, & Barton, 2014), integration of RME into a formalized graduate course may better equip future CWPs with foundational background knowledge and skills to strengthen families and prevent unhealthy and unsafe family situations that place children at risk. To date, no research exists on potential interest and benefits of social work education designed to prepare future CWPs to strengthen couple and co-parenting relationships. The purpose of this study was to explore MSW students' experience in such a course in order, with the goal of advancing scholarship of teaching and learning in family sciences and social work.

Relevance of RME to Child Welfare

Unhealthy and abusive relations between parents (e.g., birthparents, adoptive parents) or temporary caregivers (i.e., kinship caregivers, foster parents) are detrimental to children's development and safety (Bembry, 2011). Because they work regularly with clients who experience family stress and relationship difficulties, CWPs are well situated to help them develop skills to avoid or exit unhealthy relationships and build healthy ones that foster safe environments for them and their children. In fact, CWPs are beginning to recognize that reinforcing elements of healthy parenting dyad relationships is relevant to children's safety, permanency, and well-being (Antle et al., 2010; Sar, Antle, Bledso, Barbee, & Van Zyl, 2010; Schramm et al., 2013).

Distinct from therapy or counseling and similar to parenting education, RME teaches principles and skills to support healthy relationship choices and strengthen couple and co-parenting relationships (see Futris & Adler-Baeder, 2013). Although commonly delivered within group settings, integrating RME into existing, individual-oriented social services may impact

more individuals who need such support but would not typically attend group programs (Rhoades & Stanley, 2011; Sar et al., 2010). In fact, individuals within the child welfare system, including foster youth (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009) and adopting parents (Mooradian, Hock, Jackson, & Timm, 2011), are open to receiving RME. Importantly, research indicates that RME is effective at improving couple and co-parenting relationship quality for distressed couples (e.g., Charles et al., 2014), including situationally violent couples (Bradley, Friend, & Gottman, 2011).

In addition to the child welfare system's primary objective of keeping children safe and protected from harm, its secondary purpose is to provide necessary services to families of children at risk, to improve conditions in their homes, and bring stability to their family units. Since families served within the child welfare system disproportionately include single mothers, greater emphasis is being placed on changing the culture of child welfare "to recognize that *unmarried* does not necessarily mean *unpartnered*" and that typical mother-child oriented services need broadening to focus on "family-centered care that includes fathers, regardless of marital or co-habitation status" (emphasis in original; Jones, Charles, & Benson, 2013, p. 172). Despite the established influence that couple (married and unmarried) relationship quality has on parenting behaviors and children's welfare, child welfare services often focus on addressing antecedents of unhealthy couple relationships (e.g., unemployment and underemployment, poor mental and physical health, substance abuse). Recent federal initiatives (Brown, 2010) and discourse in the social work profession (Bembry, 2011) have called greater attention to *added* benefits of RME in meeting needs of economically disadvantaged and distressed families.

To move this effort forward, CWPs and those in graduate school preparing to work with families need training to better understand principles and skills that foster healthy couple relationships along with strategies to teach these skills to clients (Christensen, Antle, & Johnson, 2008). Recent initiatives to develop RME-focused trainings for CWPs in the field have demonstrated promising impact on the transfer of learning RME principles and skills into practice (Futris et al., 2014). However, earlier exposure to RME through graduate courses that provide more time to review and practice these skills may prove more beneficial in facilitating self-efficacy and application (Gockel & Burton, 2014). To date, social work education has addressed domestic violence in terms of intervention-focused services (Danis & Lockhart, 2003; McMahon, Postmus, Warrenner, Plummer, & Schwartz, 2013), with a noticeable gap in attention to developing competencies and skills to *prevent* future instances of domestic violence. With a focus on teaching positive conflict management strategies and empowering individuals to identify signs of unsafe relationships (Rhoades & Stanley, 2011), RME has been found to decrease levels of interpersonal violence among child welfare clients, thus *promoting* healthier relationships (Antle, Karam, Christensen, Barbee, & Sar, 2011).

Integration of RME into social work education aligns with the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS; CSWE, 2008). These assert that "the purpose of the social work profession is to promote human and community well-being." This purpose aligns with research that shows that quality of close relationships is a strong predictor of individual health is (Umberson & Montez, 2011). Educating social work students about ways to promote healthy relationships reinforces EPAS Educational Policy (EP)

1.1-Values, which states “Service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, *the importance of human relationships*, integrity, competence, human rights, and scientific inquiry are among the core values of social work” (emphasis added, CSWE, 2008). Furthermore, RME training aligns with several core competencies outlined in EP 2.1, including:

- a. distinguishing RME from therapy and learning how to apply RME skills to effectively engage clients enhances social worker conduct (EP 2.1.1, e.g., clarifying professional roles and boundaries, demonstrate professional communication);
- b. demonstrating the research-base of RME can facilitate ethical practice (EP 2.1.2, e.g., recognize and manage personal values; EP 2.1.3, e.g., distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, and practice wisdom; EP 2.1.6, e.g., use research evidence to inform practice);
- c. reinforcing the unique and vast experiences that influence relationship quality across diverse populations and the life course (EP 2.1.4, e.g., recognize and communicate their understanding of the importance of difference in shaping life experiences; EP 2.1.7, e.g., critique and apply knowledge to understand person and environment); and
- d. preparing students to identify and meet future clients’ relationship needs (e.g., EP 2.1.10 a-d, e.g., use empathy and other interpersonal skills, assess client strengths and limitations, implement prevention interventions that enhance client capacities, help clients resolve problems).

Thus, educating social work students in fundamental healthy relationship skills and principles aligns with many established foundational policies in social work aimed at improving professional and client-based relationships.

The Current Study

According to Hutchings (2000), the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) involves examining pragmatic questions that may require a “radical shift from usual practice” (p. 3). To the best of our knowledge, the SoTL with graduate student populations in general, and with graduate student populations in family science and in social work specifically, is rare. The present study addresses this gap in the literature by exploring questions that characterize the SoTL, including “what is” and “what works” (Hutchings, 2000). A “what works” inquiry focuses on effectiveness of an approach and its impact on student learning. A “what is” inquiry emphasizes elements and features of an approach, focusing on what the approach “looks like.” The current study specifically examines effectiveness of a 15-week MSW course designed to train social work students in understanding and implementing RME. Although previous research evaluated courses designed to enhance social worker-client interactions (Gockel & Burton, 2014), there is no published research on a more comprehensive, couples-focused relationship skills training. This study describes not only teaching approaches used in the course, but also students’ experiences with integrating the material in their work. The study also examines effectiveness in increasing the competency of future CWP’s for using knowledge, skills, and resources gained when engaging with clients.

Moreover, the current study has a grounding in five principles of good practice in assessing SoTL. These are, according to Felton (2013), (a) inquiry into student learning – examination of how attitudes and habits connected to learning are developed, (b) grounded in context – considering scholarly and local contexts, (c) methodologically sound – intentionally employing research tools that connect to inquiry into student learning, (d) conducted in partnership with students – involving students in the inquiry process, and (e) appropriately public – communicating SoTL for public consumption and critique. In addition to these principles, the present study is guided by a model for assessing effectiveness of training in child welfare (see Antle, Barbee, & van Zyl, 2008). This model attends to short-term outcomes related to attitude changes (i.e., affective reactions, learner attitudes, and utility reactions) and learning impact (i.e., understanding of strategies and skills, awareness of resources available, and confidence and abilities in applying the information learned), along with the transfer or application of new skills and information into practice.

The study addressed these research questions:

1. What are students' general attitudes about couple relationships, marriage, and parenting in general?
2. How satisfied are they with the course experience?
3. Do students perceive RME as relevant to their future work and in meeting client needs?
4. Do students' knowledge, awareness of resources, perceived ability and comfort, and confidence in teaching RME significantly improve after students finish the course?
5. Are intermediate outcomes maintained at six-month follow-up?
6. In what ways do students apply RME principles and skills after completing the course?

Consistent with our evaluation of trainings conducted with field-professionals (Futris et al., 2014), we hypothesize that students will (a) report favorable attitudes about the course, (b) demonstrate significant improvements in their capacity to teach RME, (c) demonstrate sustainability in training impact, and (d) report that they apply what they learned in practice.

Methods

Sample

Thirty MSW students, in their second or third years of the program, registered for and completed the 15-week course *Couple & Marital Relationships in Child Welfare* offered at the University of Missouri in the fall semesters of 2010 ($n = 9$), 2011 ($n = 12$), and 2012 ($n = 9$). These students ranged in age from 22 to 46 years ($M=29.29$; $SD=8.29$), 96.4% were female, and 89.3% were Caucasian. Also, 71.4% of the students reported being single/not married (50.0% were in a relationship) and 28.6% were married. Five students reported they were currently working in the child welfare field and 19 students completed a practicum the semester following the course.

Graduate Course

Table 1 summarizes course content and weekly objectives. During weeks 1-8, students reviewed theoretical, historical, and empirical literature that provided context for understanding couple and marital relationship patterns and behaviors in general, and specifically within the child welfare system. The second half of the course (weeks 9-15) focused on research-based principles and skills that facilitate development of healthy couple and co-parenting relationships (see Futris & Adler-Baeder, 2013), evaluating and developing resources and tools to teach these skills and concepts to clients, and identifying local resources to support future integration of RME in their careers. A copy of the course syllabus is available from the second author.

Taught by the second author, the course was a combination of lecture, class discussion, role playing, experiential learning (e.g., practicing tools with others outside of class), and reflection assignments aimed at actively engaging students in acquiring and practicing RME skills. To further reinforce application of course content, students received unique case study families and were provided each week with unique experiences or events impacting their family. Students were required to submit weekly one-page reflection papers related to how the topic, readings, and class discussion during the previous week related to their case study family's situation. To allow students to learn from each other's perspectives, they were paired with classmates who had the same case study families. During the first 10-15 minutes of each class, students shared their answers to their weekly questions. Some students were then called on to provide brief backgrounds of their case study families, discuss their recent challenges, describe how they responded or suggested ways to provide assistance, and share insights into how the topic discussed the previous week may have influenced their case study family.

During the second half of the semester, students were required to develop tools or guide sheets based on research related to best practices in RME. The idea behind creating tools and ultimately having an accessible "toolbox" was to have readily accessible resources when working with individuals, couples, or families in the future. Students could create tools themselves, adapt tools they found, or borrow tools that other programs/professionals used. Then students were required to try out their tools with their case study families, based on scenarios provided to students. Additionally, students had to try out the tools they created or learned about with individuals or families they knew or worked with, and then write reflection papers on what went well, what they learned, and what they would do differently. In this way, students not only learned from readings, the instructor, and fellow students; they also learned to develop and apply practical tools to case study and real families. As a final assignment, students were required to write reflection papers that synthesized theoretical portions of class (e.g., case study, theories, readings) and applied portions of class (e.g., lessons learned from developing and using the tools). The paper also included students' views on how they expect to apply what they learned in class with real individuals and couples they may work with.

Procedures

Both Institutional Review Boards (IRB) approved the research design and protocols. Data were collected through on-line surveys that the first author administered, so as to maintain objectivity between evaluation efforts and the instructor's (co-author) relationship with students. The instructor forwarded emails from the evaluator; these messages provided a secure URL to access each survey. To increase response rate, reminder notices were sent out 3-4 days and again 7-8 days after the sending of first notices. Participants created personal IDs they used to complete each survey in order to maintain anonymity and allow the independent evaluator to match surveys over time. Students were advised that their decisions to participate in the study would have no effect on their grades. The researchers offered no incentives for participation.

Students who agreed to participate in the research study were asked to complete a survey at the beginning (Week 1; pre-test) and end (Week 15; post-test) of the semester as well as one-week (1wk), two-months (2mth), and six-months (6mth) after completing the course. The authors developed survey items, basing them on scales previously used with CWPs (Sar & Antle, 2003; Futris et al., 2014). Of the 30 students, 28 (93.3%) responded to the first three surveys and 28 (93.3%) responded to at least one ($n = 7$) or both ($n = 21$) follow-up surveys (2mth: $n = 26$, 86.7%; 6mth: $n = 23$, 76.7%). Data from these 28 students were the focus of analyses in the current study.

Measures

Learner Attitudes. At the pre-test and one-week follow-ups, general attitudes toward training content were assessed using five items reflective of *couple and parenting* relationships in general (e.g., *Strong marital/couple relationships lead to successful parenting*) and RME specifically (e.g., *All couples should receive marriage education before getting married*). Responses were coded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), and a mean score was computed ($\alpha = .63$, pre; $\alpha = .71$, 1wk) with higher scores reflecting more favorable attitudes.

Affective Reaction. At post-test, feedback about participants' course experience was assessed via three scales that captured students' overall *satisfaction* with the course (1-item; 1 = very dissatisfied; 5 = very satisfied) and their perceptions of the *course* (5-items; e.g., *The course/training met my expectations*) and of the *instructor* (3-items; e.g., *The instructor was engaging*). Responses ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Mean scores were computed such that higher *course* ($\alpha = .86$) and *instructor* ($\alpha = .80$) ratings reflected favorable affective reactions.

Utility Reaction. At the pre-test and the one-week follow-up, three items assessed how participants viewed potential helpfulness and relevance of RME to their work in child welfare (e.g., *Understanding characteristics of healthy marital/couple relationships will strengthen my assessment and case planning skills to reduce abuse/neglect*). Responses ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. A mean score was computed ($\alpha = .60$, pre; $\alpha = .67$, 1wk) to reflect more positive utility reactions.

Perceived Competency. The current study examines learning in terms of self-reported competency as opposed to an objective assessment of change in knowledge, at the start and the end of the course. At pre-test as well as at one-week and six-month follow-ups, three indicators captured participants' perceived competency with incorporating healthy RME skills into their work: (a) *knowledge* of skills and strategies to promote healthy relationships (3-items; e.g., *I understand specific skills that support healthy couple relationship development*); (b) *ability and comfort* in discussing couple issues and providing information to improve their clients' relationships (3-items; e.g., *I am comfortable discussing with the individuals/families I work with how their marital/couple issues and problems impact their child's safety, permanency and well-being*); and (c) *awareness of RME resources* available to support healthy relationships (2-items; e.g., *I am aware of resources available that I can use with individuals/families in supporting couple relationships*). Responses ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Mean scores were computed so higher scores represented greater perceived knowledge ($\alpha = .70$, pre; .79, 1wk; .85, 6mth), comfort/ability ($\alpha = .61$, pre, .75, 1wk; .85, 6mth), and resource awareness ($\alpha = .79$, pre, .56, 1wk; .64, 6mth). At the end of the course (post-test) and at the six-month follow-up, participants responded to 7-items assessing how confident (1 = not at all confident; 5 = very confident) they felt applying seven specific core concepts taught during the second half of the course (see Table 1). Mean scores were computed ($\alpha = .96$, post; .93, 6mth), with higher scores reflecting greater *confidence* in applying concepts learned.

Transfer. At the two- and six-month follow-ups, participants were asked to describe, in general, how they have used course information when working with individuals and families. Students received seven open-ended questions and were asked to describe, in specific terms, if and how they applied information related to each of the seven core principles/skills reviewed (see Table 1). Two independent raters coded the responses (1 = applied with clients) with inter-rater reliability across the 14 items ($n = 343$ individual responses) ranging from 91.3% to 100% ($M = 95.0\%$). In cases where raters differed in their coding, the first author reviewed responses and made final decisions on whether the responses described appropriate *professional application* of the principles/skills. A sum score was then computed (0 = no examples documented; 7 = examples documented for each principle/skill). Since the focus of this study was on whether students had applied the materials after the course (not on *when* they had done so), scores at two- and six-month follow-ups were averaged together.

Data Analysis

Repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) were conducted to explore participants' average levels of change on each outcome. The authors conducted preliminary assumption testing to check for normality, linearity, univariate and multivariate outliers, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, and multicollinearity, with no serious violations noted. For statistically significant MANOVA main effects, post-hoc comparisons using univariate ANOVAs were examined. Students' qualitative comments about their experience and their survey responses are shared below in the results section to reinforce the quantitative findings.

Results

Attitudes on Marriage and RME in Child Welfare

Learner attitudes. On average, 75.0% and 78.6% of students agreed about the importance of marital preparation, intentionality, and strong couple/marital relationships on successful parenting at the pre-test ($M = 3.89$; $SD = .49$) and at the one-week post-test ($M = 4.07$; $SD = .57$), respectively. When asked what they may do differently as a result of the course, one student (2011) wrote: *“I will look at more than just the child’s welfare in a situation because the parent’s relationship impacts the child so much.”* A repeated measures ANOVA revealed no significant within-subjects effect (pre-post difference), $F = 2.91$ ($p = .10$). This result suggested that on average, students reported similarly positive attitudes after the course. Students reinforced this in their comments, e.g., *“[the course] validated my intuition with regard to couples relationships and how they affect children”* (2010) and *“I always knew that there was a connection but I never really realized how much a relationship can affect a household and relationships within the family”* (2012).

Affective reaction. The majority (96.4%) of students were either satisfied or very satisfied with the course ($M = 4.64$, $SD = .83$). As one student (2010) wrote, *“Well-organized and systematic presentation of material! Excellent use of class members’ various backgrounds and experience in discussion.”* On average, students gave the course ($M = 4.58$, $SD = .50$) and the instructor ($M = 4.81$, $SD = .36$) favorable ratings. According to one student (2011), *“I wasn’t sure what to expect upon enrollment. I liked the organization of the class. It focused on implications of unhealthy partnerships on children, and then addressed how to create healthy relationships.”* Another student (2012), who plans to become an LCSW couples therapist, commented that *“this training was the most helpful course I have taken within my college career. I feel more confident and possess an extensive amount of knowledge that I will carry into my future practice.”*

Utility reaction. On average, students agreed or strongly agreed at the pre-test ($M = 4.36$, $SD = .41$) and the one-week post-test ($M = 4.46$, $SD = .52$) that RME was relevant to their future work in child welfare. A repeated measures ANOVA revealed no significant difference over time, $F = 1.48$ ($p = .24$). Thus, students’ perceptions of RME’s relevance to their jobs remained positive. According to a one student (2010), *“So many of the tools we became familiar with are useful... For many of [my clients], the time they are with me is the first time they have been on their own in their lives. They lack basic functioning skills. I will utilize these tools as I continue to develop my practice.”*

Perceived Competency

A repeated measures MANOVA revealed a significant within-subjects effect (difference over time) across all three indicators of perceived competency from pre- to one-week post-test, $F(3, 25) = 27.60$ ($p = .000$). Table 2 summarizes mean scores and post-hoc repeated measures ANOVA results for each indicator. After the course there was, on average, noticeable improvement in students’ knowledge of and ability/comfort with incorporating RME information

into aspects of their current or future jobs in child welfare, and in their awareness of resources that can strengthen couple relationships. One student (2010) shared, “I can now provide clients relevant information and offer resources for those that want to have stronger relationships that I did not have access to prior to this class.” Another student (2012) commented:

I learned so many new things, such as tools and trainings to help a couple connect and share in a healthy relationship. I also learned about different cultures and ethnicities and how they have different views on marriage and cohabitation. I think this training helped me become more culturally competent when talking to a variety of couples!

A repeated measures MANOVA also showed stability in change across all three indicators six-months later among the 23 students who provided complete data at all three time points, $F(6, 17) = 14.51$ ($p = .000$). Considering each indicator individually, results from repeated measures ANOVAs involving three time points revealed a significant within-subject effect (see Table 2). Follow-up tests revealed a significant mean difference between pre-test and one-week post-test scores, as well as between pre-test and six-month post-test scores for each indicator. No significant mean differences were found between one-week and six-month post-test scores. In other words, six months after the course, students reported sustainable levels of perceived competency. As one student (2010) commented, “*still have room to grow, but overall this course has given the many tools that will help me when working with families.*”

Regarding student ($n = 22$) confidence applying information learned in helping individuals and couples develop skills across the seven content areas, a majority (87.0% - 100%) felt confident or very confident after the course ($M = 3.47$, $SD = .55$). One student (2010) shared, “*I can use the 7 principles now with clients. I can recognize these more with clients. I am more equipped with tools I can use to help struggling couples.*” At the six-month follow-up, the proportion of students who felt confident or very confident, although high (72.7% - 86.4%), decreased slightly across the seven content areas ($M = 2.99$, $SD = .51$). A repeated measures ANOVA confirmed that on average, students reported a statistically significant decline in confidence six-months after the course ended, $F(1, 21) = 9.06$ ($p = .007$).

Application of material and key concepts

Of the 28 students who completed either the two-month and/or six-month follow up, 19 (67.9%) shared general examples of how they used course information in professional contexts at either the two-month (16 of the 26 respondents; 61.5%) or six-month (7 of the 23 respondents; 30.4%) follow-up. One student (2012) described her experience helping a client who was had been in an abusive relationship for several years and was dating a new partner:

... she has only known him a very short time... has been spending ALL of her time with him and disregarding her own life. She said she is scared because she thinks he's perfect and asked how to know if someone really is - because she's afraid he will be violent as well. I used the 'KNOW' material: how do you really know someone and what the red and yellow flags are, what questions to ask him.... It seemed to really click in her mind that she didn't REALLY know this person at all after a couple of weeks.

Another student (2011) described helping a couple that had difficulty spending time together:

One couple has opposite schedules. He works nights and she works days and it can't be avoided due to their need for income. I talked about flex times they can share instead i.e. when he comes home and when he wakes up to go to work. They also are working with their bosses to align at least one day off that is the same for both of them. I encouraged them to use that time together...going to the zoo, walking their dogs.

In addition, 25 (89.3%) students reported they shared information related to one or more of the specific principles/skills they learned with clients either at the two-month (19 of the 26 respondents; 73.1%) or six-month (15 of the 23 respondents; 65.2%) follow-up. On average, students described applying at least three concepts at the two-month ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 2.59$) and six-month ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 2.57$) follow-ups. Table 3 lists the seven concepts, the numbers of students who reported applying each concept, and examples of ways they did so.

Students also shared examples of how they applied the skills to engage their clients more effectively. For example, commenting on her use of the *Care* skills, one student (2011) wrote, *"I've done my best to demonstrate empathy when working with families who are continually kicked down. I try to verbally tell families or individuals that I understand the support they are able to offer their kids even in light of everything they are dealing with."* Although some students did not have opportunities to apply skills to practice, they still commented, referring back to the course content:

Currently I am not in a position where I regularly apply these principles in practice. I know that I have absorbed a lot of the information and believe it is likely that I apply some of the principles without consciously realizing it. I do think this information will be useful in the future, and can foresee myself utilizing it regularly in different settings. I often review the binder of information to keep it fresh in my mind. (2011)

Discussion

During the past decade, CWPs have expanded their scope of training while scholars and professionals have developed and delivered RME training for a variety of at-risk audiences. Guided by a comprehensive model for child welfare training evaluation (Antle et al., 2008), the current study explored MSW students' perceptions of a graduate course created to build capacity within child welfare services to promote healthy relationships. Our findings demonstrate the promise of such a course and initiative.

First, most students agreed it is important for couples to prepare for marriage. Most understood the link between healthy couple relationships and healthy parenting practices. An understanding of this "spill-over" effect is critical for students to grasp so they can make the connection between couple relationships and their mission of promoting child safety, stability,

and well-being. Similarly, most students reported high levels of satisfaction with the instructor and the course (i.e., affective reaction) and recognized RME's relevance to their future work in child welfare (i.e., utility reaction). When asked what they found most useful about the course, most responses were consistent with this student's (2011) comment: "*Applying the tools, creating your tools, also applying everything to your case study family*" (2011). The combination of class lecture, readings, case studies, and development of tools that students practiced with individuals and couples made the course applicable to their current or future work with families. Students' comments also reinforced the importance of understanding RME's empirical foundation in order to make it relevant to their work (e.g., 2011: "*It has also given me evidence based research that I can use at my agency and with my clients*"). Thus, students demonstrated core competencies (CSWE, 2008) related to ethical practices and critical thinking to inform their professional decisions and engage diversity and differences in practice.

This study also found that most students improved in their knowledge, ability, comfort and awareness of resources to help clients they work with develop healthy couple relationships. Importantly, these changes were sustained six months after the course's completion. Students also reported feeling confident in helping individuals and couples develop seven core principles and skills essential to building and maintaining healthy couple relationships (Futris & Adler-Baeder, 2013). However, six-month follow-up confidence scores, albeit high, were significantly lower compared to reports immediately following the course. This may depend on whether students had opportunities to apply concepts regularly with individuals or couples. Perhaps students who regularly "use" the information are more confident than are students who "lose" the information by not having occasions to apply it in practice, either at work or through service learning or practicum opportunities. Although 80% of students were in a work or practicum setting the semester after the course, and while follow-up surveys revealed most students were using the information, some students did not have similar opportunities:

...being a grad student and working in a practicum which entailed a different setting than child welfare/marital or family therapy, I rarely used the information. I functioned as a case manager/advocate in my last position. I expect to use the information from HRMET [Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education Training] more frequently in my next position, working in mental health services (2011).

Thus, student senses of self-efficacy in using skills they learn may be enhanced not only by providing opportunities during the course to immediately apply principles and skills learned, but also by assuring they have opportunities to apply those skills immediately after the course. One student (2010) suggested sharing tools with workers at her practicum as a way to facilitate her application of what she learned:

I have just been mainly observing so far, but am hoping to incorporate some of the course/training with the individuals I work with soon. I think it would be a good idea to introduce some of the tools that were discussed in class to the workers here to see if they think it would be helpful for our clients.

Future research should examine this “use it or lose it” effect on sustainability of perceived competency following skills-based training.

Previous research shows that positive learning impact and utility reactions are associated with transfer of RME into practice (Futris et al., 2014). Despite sample size limitations to directly examining this association, our findings demonstrated that most students did, in fact, transfer what they learned into practice. Although the extent to and regularity with which they applied newly acquired skills is not clear, students’ comments suggest they shared RME information relevant to meeting clients’ needs – this is a critical core competency (i.e., EP 2.1.10; CSWE, 2008). For example, one student (2010) described using tools from the course to help a male client experiencing conflict with his wife, “*despite his reports of caring deeply for her and wanting to maintain the relationship*”:

We discussed his perception of these tools and how they might be used to enhance his own relationship and decrease conflict between he and his wife. He reports utilization of the tools he chose, and also reports decreased conflict, even reacting in surprise when he recounted how long it had been since they had been in an argument.

Although not the primary focus of analyses, students also shared examples of how they applied what they learned in their personal lives, illustrating retention and application of the course concepts and improving the likelihood of their later use with clients. For instance, one student (2011) wrote, “*Personally, I’m applying many of the principles in my own relationship so that I can have more experience with them when working with clients.*” Another student (2012) shared, “*I have only done this personally. I have put more investment in my marriage by setting up date nights and making changes within the household. I have worked on making my marriage a priority rather than on the back burner.*” A few students also reported sharing it with friends: “*I referred to one of the handouts with a friend of mine in an informal setting. I have also applied these principles to my own relationship and my own life. It has not come up in a professional setting, but I do anticipate it being useful with a different population*” (2011). Thus, it is likely that students who relate to the course content personally may be more likely to apply these skills appropriately in a professional setting. Future research could examine this association.

Although our findings offer preliminary support for incorporating RME into graduate social work courses, there are limitations. First, the graduate course was offered as an elective class for students at this university, so they self-selected into the course. This suggests that students who were already interested in RME may have enrolled. Moreover, the current study was conducted at only one institution, so experiences of these students reflect only the approach provided by one instructor and a single curriculum. Different instructors and schools may have different approaches to teaching RME principles and skills, as well as unique practicum opportunities that engage clients with whom these skills could be applied. The current study also assessed learning in terms of changes in self-reported competency; future research using objective assessment of change in knowledge would advance the SoTL in this area. While our findings demonstrate potential benefits of a course focused on RME, we recommend caution in generalizing the ability to replicate these results. Future replication studies are warranted.

Felten's (2013) principles of good practice serve as a heuristic for better understanding and evaluating the present study. With regard to the first principle of inquiry focused on student learning, we emphasized not just improving knowledge and skill development, but also cultivated attitudes that connected to student learning by providing case study family scenarios that changed each week. The second principle of good practices emphasizes the need to understand scholarly and local contexts where learning takes place. Hutchings and Huber (2005) pointed out that the scholarship of teaching and learning must be understood in context of location and discipline, along with institutional and cultural contexts. This was a graduate course for social work students, but a professor in human development and family science at a large research-intensive university in the Midwest taught it. The class size was relatively small (twelve or fewer students each of the three semesters); it was the only class this professor taught during each of the three semesters. Felten's third principle of good practice in scholarship of teaching and learning is ensuring methodological soundness. Our measures were intentional, discipline-specific, and rigorous enough to study learning and development. The fourth principle of ensuring good practice is conducted in partnership with students was followed, by obtaining human subjects review approval and by following protocols. Beyond this, however, students were engaged in the inquiry process from the start, as students provided understanding of social work principles and practices unfamiliar to the instructor from a related discipline. In turn, case studies were updated and a more collaborative forum for learning was implemented. The fifth principle of good practice involves "going public," evidenced not only by publication of this study in a professional journal and presentation of this research at a national conference, but also, the broader curriculum is available open-access online, without fees (www.nermen.org).

Conclusion

As social work education evolves and broadens to include other life skills training that is preventative and family-systems oriented, our findings suggest there may be value in family science educators working with social work educators to integrate RME-training into MSW programs. Unlike continuing education training designed for professionals (Futris et al., 2014), offering a graduate course as described in this study can provide MSW students with broader and more in-depth (e.g., theoretical, empirical, and contextual) understanding of RME. The course also will give them opportunities to practice skills in conjunction with practicum or similar service-learning experience before entering the workforce. While many goals and competencies of MSW and RME align, some programs will find it challenging to offer such a course as an elective with tight course schedules and limited faculty.

Finding ways to equip MSW students with additional skills and tools to strengthen "fragile" families and children has been a high priority within the profession (Bembry, 2011; Christensen et al., 2008; Gockel & Burton, 2014). However, the ideas of incorporating RME into the work of CWPs are still fairly new. As such, CWPs, including social work educators, lack complete understanding of the goals of RME and can be hesitant to include RME in their training curriculum and/or services provided to couples and families (Schramm et al., 2013). Similarly, while it may be the case that CWPs who work directly with families desire and have skills to

help strengthen couple relationships, they may not feel able to do so if supervisors are not supportive. Recent findings reinforce that CWPs are more likely to use RME material with couples when they have administrative support for including RME in their work (Futris, Schramm, Richardson, & Lee, 2015). Thus, family science educators can play influential roles in facilitating greater understanding, among CWPs and social work educators, of what RME is and how it can benefit families served in the child welfare system. Findings from this study are encouraging; the authors anticipate future studies related to integrating RME into social work and child welfare services will result in more healthy and stable families.

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Table 1. Course topics and objectives.

Week	Topic: Overall objective
1	Theory, History, and Trends in Attitudes and Behaviors Related to Marriage: Examine marriage using an ecological perspective and explore historical and current trends and attitudes related to marriage.
2	Benefits and Impact of Healthy Marriage and Couple Relationships: Examine research findings related to the benefits of healthy couple relationships and consequences of unhealthy relationships for adults and children.
3	Cultural Diversity and Competency: Examine how couple and marital formation patterns and processes can be affected by race, ethnicity, social class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and physical and mental health. Recognize personal values and biases and how they influence ethical practices.
4	Family Policy and Social Perspectives: Examine how current local, state, and federal initiatives and policies affect marriage and families.
5	Macro-Level Risk and Protective Factors: Examine the patterns of institutional support/discrimination in relation to family formation patterns and well-being for couples and families of various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.
6	Micro-Level Risk and Protective Factors: Identify the individual, couple, and familial strengths and challenges that influence couples and families in the child welfare system.
7	Family Forms, Functions, and Transitions: Using multiple sources of knowledge, explore how couple processes vary as a function of family forms and transitions.
8	Domestic Violence: Examine personal and societal factors that are associated with domestic violence in a variety of cultural and socio-economic contexts.
9	Choose: Support clients in making deliberate and conscientious decisions to be committed, intentional, proactive, and strengths-focused in their relationships.
10	Know: Help clients develop intimate knowledge of their partner's personal and relational needs, interests, feelings and expectations.
11	Care for Self: Engage clients in cultivating individual wellness and health in order to support the health of their couple relationship
12	Care: Guide clients in expressing kindness, respect, and understanding to facilitate positivity and stability in their relationships.
13	Share: Demonstrate to clients the value of developing and maintaining couple time, a shared sense of couple identity, and a close friendship in healthy relationships.
14	Manage: Clarify to clients that conflict is normal in couple relationships, and share strategies to manage stress, listen to understand, accept differences, and ensure emotional and physical safety when conflict arises.
15	Connect: Help clients become better connected with their family, peers, and community as a source of support to them and their couple relationship.

Table 2. Student's reported perceived competency.

	Short-term impact ($n = 28$)			Sustainability in competency ($n = 23$)			
	Pre-test	1wk-post	F -value	Pre-test	1wk-post	6mth-post	F -value
Knowledge	2.94 (0.69)	4.29 (0.52)	84.94*	3.01 (0.64)	4.39 (0.48)	4.29 (0.48)	63.64*
Ability and comfort	2.99 (0.75)	4.31 (0.54)	62.38*	3.06 (0.74)	4.39 (0.56)	4.20 (0.47)	43.87*
Resource awareness	3.16 (0.84)	4.11 (0.67)	24.47*	3.11 (0.89)	4.22 (0.65)	4.29 (0.47)	28.16*

Note: Mean (Standard Deviations) presented. * $p < .001$.

Table 3. Number of student who applied course concepts and examples.

Concept	Total (N=28)	2-mth (n=26)	6-mth (n=23)	Example
Choose - The central importance of intentionality and commitment	16 (57.1%)	14 (53.8%)	8 (34.8%)	<i>I use choose the most when working with clients who have left an abusive relationship and are entering a new one. I talk with these women about being intentional of who they choose to date and how they would like the relationship to progress. (2011)</i>
Care for Self - Maintaining physical, psychological, and sexual health and wellness	20 (71.4%)	14 (53.8%)	11 (47.8%)	<i>I have discussed the importance of maintaining good, positive self-care strategies and how it will in turn benefit loved ones. You cannot be there for others if you are not first in first tune with your own needs. (2012)</i>
Know - Developing intimate knowledge of one's partner	17 (60.7%)	12 (46.2%)	9 (39.1%)	<i>Suggested a couple complete a questionnaire on the other person to deepen their knowledge of each other. (2010)</i>
Care - Demonstrating kindness, affection, understanding, respect, and support	19 (67.8%)	13 (50.0%)	12 (52.2%)	<i>A family I worked with had trouble demonstrating this not only to each other but to their child so I had to address ways to show respect and care within the family dynamic.(2012)</i>
Share - Maintaining friendship and a sense of 'we'; spending meaningful time together	13 (46.4%)	9 (34.6%)	7 (30.4%)	<i>I brainstorm with clients ways to spend time together as a couple that are low-cost and quick connections. (2010)</i>
Manage - Strategies of engagement and interaction around differences, stresses and issues of safety	14 (50.0%)	9 (34.6%)	6 (26.1%)	<i>I worked with an individual who was experiencing conflict with his wife... I referenced the Manage lesson to help the individual learn healthy ways of addressing this conflict, such as setting relationship ground rules, using I-statements, and active listening techniques. (2011)</i>
Connect - Engaging social support,	18 (64.3%)	16 (61.5%)	8 (34.8%)	<i>I have discussed the importance of social support in the community and</i>

community ties, and
sources of meaning

have connected my clients to resources that would benefit them, particularly community resources that they had not accessed or heard of. I mention the importance of using these resources to better their social situation and gain access to more support. (2012)
