"I really believe we can change people's lives": Family Life Educators' beliefs

Jessica Troilo, Ph.D.
West Virginia University

ABSTRACT. This qualitative project sought to understand how 53 Family Life Educators (FLEs) in a state in the Appalachian United States identified behaviors, outcomes, and challenges. FLEs identified four behaviors they believed were essential to their roles. They also identified challenges that were perceived to negatively impact their abilities to meet their reported expectations of being a family life educator. Their behaviors, outcomes, and challenges corresponded to the National Extension Parenting Educators' Framework. The author used grounded theory methods to analyze the interview data. The FLEs who were interviewed identified their primary identity as the Effective FLE. Challenges interrupted FLEs abilities to be effective, but when FLEs were enacting the effective FLE identity they saw positive outcomes. A primary implication is that when FLEs engage in behaviors deemed essential, positive outcomes for parents and themselves are possible. Challenges, however, interrupt that process in a negative way.

Keywords: Family Life Education; professional development; extension

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Direct Correspondence to Jessica Troilo, Learning Sciences and Human Development, 802E Allen Hall, PO Box 6122 West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506-6122; JETroilo@mail.wvu.edu

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"I really believe we can change people's lives": Family Life Educators' Beliefs

Family Life Educators (FLEs) working within extension services and other settings see evaluation as an integral part of their work. Arnold (2002) notes that, increasingly, there is a "culture" within Extension that values evaluation. Others continue calling on educators to establish evidence for their programs (Duncan & Goddard, 2016; Dunifon, Duttweiler, Pillemer, Tobias, & Trochim, 2004; Goddard, Marshall, Olson, & Dennis, 2012). Therefore, it is somewhat surprising that despite significant focus on measuring program and participant learning outcomes (such as perceived gains in knowledge and changes in behavior) there is little in the literature about (a) the process of how Extension and FLEs perceive behaviors they believe are essential to providing programs, (b) the impact of those behaviors, and (c) the ease of being able to enact behaviors they deem essential. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to understand the processes involved with parent education rather than the outcomes.

The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), which certifies FLEs, defined the role of family life education as "any organized effort to provide family members with information, skills, experiences, or resources intended to strengthen, improve, or enrich their family experience" ("What is Family Life Education?" n.d.). FLEs who are certified must be educated in several areas related to family well-being (e.g., social contexts and internal dynamics of families, human development and sexuality, interpersonal relationships, family resources, parent education, family law and policy, and ethics and practice in the field), which are referred to as competencies. Successful, effective FLE programs achieve behavior change in their attendees (Gibson & Hillison, 1994). Although we know what is expected of FLEs, less is known about how Family Life Educators (FLEs) evaluate their own roles. Therefore, this project aimed to understand how FLEs in a rural Appalachian US state identified behaviors they deemed essential to their roles as FLEs, what they expected as outcomes of those essential behaviors, and what challenges they experienced when enacting those behaviors.

National Extension Parent Educators Framework

A guiding perspective for this study was the National Extension Parenting Educators' Framework (NEPEF), which proposed priority content and process skills that should guide parent educators who offer family life education courses (DeBord, Bower, Goddard, et al., 2002; Smith, Cudaback, Goddard, & Myers-Walls, 1994). In 2000, a team of Extension FLEs developed a complementary set of *priority processes* to guide FLEs offering parent education programs. These six skills (i.e., Grow, Frame, Develop, Embrace, Educate, and Build) were determined to be necessary for FLEs to provide the best environment for parent learning. The teams suggested that if these "priority practices" were used for creating the content and "priority processes" were used in complementary fashion, then it would allow FLEs to work most effectively with parents to improve their family lives. This combination of parent and FLE priority practices became known as the National Extension Parenting Education Framework (NEPEF). Since FLEs who use NEPEF standards have been found to provide family life education effectively, it seems necessary to understand how FLEs working in the field rely on these standards.

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Theoretical Underpinnings

Identity theory has been used to understand and explain the meanings and importance individuals assign to various roles (Stryker, 1968). This theory focuses on role development, role expectations, and enactment of behaviors consistent with particular identities (Stryker, 1968). Enactment of a certain identity is dependent on its salience and centrality. Salience of an identity refers to the "readiness to act out an identity" (Stryker & Serpe, 1994, p. 17). When added to the concepts of NEPEF, a broader picture of FLEs can emerge. For example, how do FLEs use NEPEF domains to help inform their identities as FLEs?

Stressful events, whether positive (e.g., a promotion to a position with greater responsibilities) or negative (e.g., job loss), can also initiate changes to identities. Events involving individuals' identities, particularly high salience ones, can influence individuals to change their role expectations for those identities or, in some cases, can add or eliminate identities (Kiecolt, 1994). For example, motivation to reach goals central to an identity will begin to wane if individuals believe increased effort will not increase their chances at success or if they receive no support in their efforts (Schunk, 1989). Identities may become less salient for people who experience both negative stressful events and negative self-appraisals, even if the individual is highly committed to that role (Kiecolt, 1994). In other words, if FLEs face stress in their positions, and if they or others attribute their stress to FLEs' actions or behaviors, then those FLEs are more likely either to vacate their positions or to reduce their efforts in their careers.

Both identity theory and the NEPEF standards can allow for deeper understanding of how FLEs think about their roles and the quality of education they provide. Each FLE is likely to face similar stressful events in their positions and at work. However, it is likely that reactions to stress vary, ranging from completely disengaging or quitting to increasing their determination to engage parents and/or collaborators. How does this occur? Where FLEs fall on the continuum and how they think about themselves as they provide family life education is based partly on job descriptions and requirements, but individuals are active agents in creating and negotiating their own identities (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Therefore, we need better understanding of how FLEs think about their professional identities because when educators engage in self-evaluation, it tends to lead to improvements in the quality of education provided and student outcomes (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2015). The following questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do FLEs perceive their roles?
RQ1a: What challenges do FLEs perceive?
RQ2: How do FLEs use NEPEF standards in their conception of their FLE identities?

Method

Data were analyzed using the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). LaRossa (2006) noted that "family studies has become a field where methodologically based theorizing matters" (p. 837). This method allows the researcher to identify a process within a phenomenon. This study's purpose was to identify the process of how

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FLEs think about their roles. As such, methods that assist in the development of new ideas, such as grounded theory, are in demand in this discipline. It is important to develop substantive theory because doing so improves our understanding of families, which allows researchers to develop better, more appropriate recommendations for practitioners, policy makers, and educators (Lavee & Dollahite, 1991).

Participants

Participants were county FLEs from a rural mid-Atlantic state attending an Extension train-the-trainer event as part of a large externally funded project, which sought to decrease economic, psychological, and physical costs of unhealthy couple and parent-child relationships by promoting and providing outreach education. Like many "Marriage Initiative" programs, this Extension-based project in a rural mid-Atlantic state organized and trained local coalitions co-led by Extension agents and non-profit agencies. Each year, the project plan of work included offering two state conferences to train coalition members in current research-based, skill-focused curricula in relationship, parenting, and financial education. To respond effectively to their locale, educators had autonomy over which programs their local coalitions chose to implement. This somewhat decentralized nature of the project led to interest in learning how educators in diverse areas went about choosing what they deemed essential behaviors, their identification of challenges in achieving those behaviors, and outcomes from participating in family life education courses they deemed important.

Following institutional (IRB) approval, the author and research assistant conducted 53 open-ended interviews. These FLEs reported teaching a wide range of courses on romantic relationships, parenting, financial planning, healthy eating and cooking, poverty, child and adolescent development, drug prevention, bullying prevention, body image, and emotional well-being. The vast majority of interviewees were currently teaching family life education courses (81%); 75% offered family life education courses within the past three years and 99% planned to offer family life education courses in the next three years. The mean age of participants was 41.7 years (SD = 2.12); 45 (84%) participants were female and 98% were Caucasian. All had college degrees, and all were trained as parenting educators. Although the sample was predominantly female and Caucasian, this is representative of this state's FLEs (i.e., based on this university's Extension records, 6% of the state's FLEs are male, and 97% are Caucasian).

Procedure

An open-ended interview schedule was created in order to understand FLEs' essential behaviors, challenges to completing those behaviors, and outcomes they perceived as characteristic of family life education courses they taught. First, participants were asked to "Please describe 3-4 essential behaviors, or goals, you have for yourself when teaching family life education courses. For example, what do you believe you need to accomplish in order to believe you are teaching effectively? Please feel free to include behaviors you are currently doing." Participants were also asked to "Please describe any challenges or barriers you have to deal with in trying to meet your goals. In other words, think about each of the essential behaviors

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or goals you listed. Then, think of what stops or hurts your abilities to do those behaviors or goals." Next, participants were asked to "Please explain what you believe are likely results, or outcomes, from the family education courses you teach" and to "Please describe how you know you are providing excellent family life education." Finally, participants answered a series of demographic questions. The interviewers were faculty members. One was an Extension faculty member who delivered family life education programs as well as training Extension agents in various family life education programs. The other interviewer was a faculty member who contracted with Extension to also provide parenting education training and parenting education as needed. Each interviewer had more than 10 years of experience working with family life education within Extension.

Constant Comparative Approach to Data Analysis

Creswell (1998) compared the use of the constant comparative method to conduct data collection and analysis to a "zigzag" pattern. The interviewers also analyzed the data. Transcriptions were read and interviews were listened to multiple times as categories were developed and refined. Data were analyzed and compared until incoming data no longer advanced theory development (i.e., saturation; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Coding began after transcription of the first interview. We coded each line of each transcript (i.e., open coding; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As more interviews were conducted and as more codes were developed, we began combining similar codes to form sub-categories (i.e., axial coding; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, we identified the core category represented in each of the sub-categories (i.e., selective coding; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This category also explained how the sub-categories were related to one another. For example, many participants described several challenges they believed they faced. In the early stages of coding, this resulted in numerous codes (e.g., confidence, negative teaching evaluations). As coding proceeded, these codes formed the Challenges to FLE's Self-Efficacy code, which described challenges that hurt participants' beliefs in themselves. In the final stages of coding, this sub-category was incorporated into the Perceptions of Challenges category. This category was identified as one of three influences acting on participants' ability to engage in their essential behaviors, which in turn influenced the core category: The Effective FLE.

Results

An identity is an "internalized set of role expectations" (Stryker, 1987, p. 90). Role expectations described by participants in this study focused on the Effective FLE Identity ("I think if you reach just one person, then you are an effective teacher" 003; see Figure 1). This project also identified a series of behaviors of, challenges to, and outcomes of the Effective FLE Identity as perceived by FLEs in an Appalachian US state.

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Essential Role Behaviors of the Effective FLE Identity

All participants believed their identity could be described as the Effective FLE identity. Participants deemed four behaviors necessary in creation and maintenance of Effective FLE Identity: Teaching Effectively, Using and Extending the Reach of Quality Programs, Collaborating with Others, and Connecting with People, which correspond to NEPEF standards. For example, the priority processes of *Grow*, *Embrace*, and *Educate* are present in the Teaching Effectively and Connecting with Parents behaviors, *Frame* and *Develop* are present in Quality Programming behaviors, and *Build* is present when FLEs discuss Collaboration behaviors. The priority practices of *Understand, Guide*, *Nurture* and *Care for Self* are present in the Learned/Retained Information and Behavior Change outcomes, and *Advocate* is included in Requests for Programming outcome. Receiving Positive Feedback did not address any priority content but seemed to relate to the *Growth* process.

Teaching effectively. Teaching effectively was defined as showcasing high quality education in courses. Every participant considered this behavior essential to the Effective FLE role. Participants believed that effective teaching "would maintain parents" attention and increase their knowledge and inspire change" (012). This participant remarked feeling "sheepish because that sounds so cliché, but I really believe we can change people's lives for the better." Another FLE equated effective teaching to "providing the best education to the audience" (047) which corresponded to others' beliefs that FLEs need "to provide relevant information to the class…it needs to be relevant to them or else they won't care" (001). It was accomplished by setting high standards for their course delivery (N = 32), using feedback to improve (N = 27), and being prepared to teach (N = 11). This concept seemed most similar to NEPEF's grow domain, which includes professional growth, and the educate domain, which involves being effective teachers and the educational process.

Participants believed they needed to set high standards for their teaching. Many discussed goals for their teaching that involved being empathetic, relevant, relaxed, and encouraging to parents. They not only set high standards for themselves, but also planned how to achieve those standards. In other words, they sought to gain experience, as many believed that teaching often and gaining experience with many different types of courses helped grow their teaching skills. They also sought out opportunities to better their teaching through training opportunities. This continuous focus on refining and improving their teaching allowed them "to be confident with the program…and flexible. That's motivating to people" (037). They reported taking teaching feedback seriously and using that to improve their classroom performance. Finally, they discussed being ready to teach. This included being prepared, showing up on time, planning ahead for what was needed, and planning for unique needs common to the geographic region.

Using and extending the reach of quality programs. This behavior included expectations that FLEs should use evidenced-based courses and the accompanying course materials along with expanding programming where relevant. Each participant also believed this was essential to his or her role. This is somewhat related to the NEPEF educate domain because the educate frame encourages educators to identify appropriate educational programs. In fact,

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one FLE stated that "when you don't use these types of programs (evidenced based), effective teaching is just not possible" (004). Furthermore, using evidenced-based materials allowed participants to feel more confident. Using evidenced based programs reinforced the idea that they were effective teachers: "these are well developed programs and we as facilitators have to be trained…these are high quality curriculum" (024). Finally, participants believed that evidence-based programs helped "enrich peoples' lives" (049), whereas others believed it "empowers and encourages parents because they get up-to-date information created by experts" (019). Finally, since they discussed using high quality programs, they believed they had a duty to offer relevant courses in areas and to people that had not previously experienced those courses: "I need to make more connections because I know more people in my county can benefit from some of the courses I teach…it's just getting it to them" (032).

Collaborating with others. Most participants (N = 48) also believed Collaborating with Others in the profession was essential to their FLE roles. This involves the build NEPEF domain most clearly, in its discussion of building networks. Participants who discussed collaborations believed it was necessary to be an essential FLE and that it was "helpful and beneficial to work together" (002). There were various sources of collaboration. Many created relationships with colleagues across the state, community programs, and Extension faculty. They believed their "knowledgeable co-workers were so helpful in my day-to-day needs" (004). Others found collaboration within the national council or via seminars offered online, which allowed participants to talk and see one another. These collaborations helped participants build their own knowledge. Many "relied on other teachers for help with [their] own teaching because it helps to talk with others" (009). When participants felt they lacked in some topics, they sought help from their collaborators. As one participant stated, "Their support helps build my confidence and self-esteem" (024). Participants were likely to equate their colleagues to "teammates" who helped create "a great and relaxed atmosphere." Without collaboration or a "team approach," participants could not meet the demands of being an effective FLE. For example, participants did not believe they could effectively prepare for their duties without "discussion with other professionals…like a sounding board" (050).

Connecting with parents. Finally, 36 participants identified Connecting with Parents as essential to their roles, since most family life education courses offered in this state involved some kind of parent education or parents as the participants. The embrace domain of NEPEF was echoed in this category because it involves connections with individuals attending parenting education. This connection was believed to occur via empathizing with parents and was considered essential to having parents trust the FLE. Many participants spoke of the importance of "just being able to listen…to relate to the group on a personal level" (052). FLEs realized that "not all families have the same problems" (013) or reasons for attending family life education courses, so listening and empathizing were considered important steps in being effective FLEs. Empathizing with parents was also expected to help participation. Many FLEs spoke of classes with little to no participation, and about how they "learned that empathizing and connecting with them will get them excited about the program" (018). This was especially important in multi-session trainings, where participation may wane over time. One participant believed connecting with parents "would keep them interested during the training and keep them coming back!"

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(042). Finally, connecting to parents allowed FLEs to better prepare and "identify future programming that meets the needs of the clientele served" (044), which was especially important to FLEs serving economically devastated areas.

Challenges to the Effective FLE Identity

FLEs believed they met with four challenges to their essential behaviors. These challenges were also were believed to impact abilities to meet the expected outcomes of FLE. Each will be detailed below.

Challenges to programs. Programmatic related challenges were discussed most often (N = 43). These included roadblocks experienced when trying to use evidenced-based programs (e.g., lack of resources for training, absence of evidence-based programming, or lack of materials relevant to a rural population). This seemed to get at issues with the frame and to develop domains from NEPEF. Many participants wanted more training or updated videos, handouts, and materials, but realized that funding was not adequate to cover those costs. Other participants reported wanting "new curriculum relevant to the population, but there aren't the funds" (043) and some spoke about how "the lack of money interferes with my ability to do some programs, but I try to do with what I have" (012). Some FLE participants were concerned that "the curricula are above their (attendees) skill level" (033). In general, participants believed they were able to manage these challenges, but they also believed additional funding for better, more relevant programming would help their attempts of being effective FLEs.

Challenges to attendance. Attendance issues were experienced by 32 participants and included various issues FLEs perceived as negatively affecting parent attendance. Several NEPEF domains potentially connect to this. It could be issues with the develop domain (planning and marketing of programs) or the build domain (community involvement). These were directly influenced by a lack of attendance, since they had difficulty affecting change (i.e., being an effective FLE) when parents were attending inconsistently. One participant put it succinctly: "I can't offer programming to an empty room" (011). Many FLEs realized that transportation, childcare, and time were probable reasons for parents being unable to attend. Participants were also likely to report additional issues they believed kept parents from participating: "some just don't care because they feel they don't have a problem with parenting" (019), "it's hard getting the audience who needs the information the most to attend" (042), and "some people don't have a desire to learn something new" (053). Finally, some FLEs noticed that challenges to programming and challenges to attendance went hand in hand. For these participants, they believed they could expand the reach and overcome challenges to attendance if they had more funding or better programs. These challenges frustrated FLEs, who believed they were trying to identify relevant and useful curricula, in their efforts to expand their programming more broadly throughout their counties.

Challenges to FLE self-efficacy. Twenty-one participants experienced challenges to FLEs' sense of self-efficacy as teachers, which was defined as a lack of belief in oneself and one's teaching abilities. Participants' responses seemed to connect to the grow domain (growth

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as a professional). Perhaps since FLEs were used to evaluating their programs and their teaching, they were often self-reflective about their own skills in terms of teaching and classroom management. For example, one FLE reported "know[ing] evaluations are necessary and help me improve, but negative feedback is rough" (017). Others discussed feeling "embarrassed by losing control of the class" (010) or frustration about "not knowing how to control a rambling person in class" (023). Another FLE spoke of the "discomfort with taboo and other sensitive topics" (022) saying that: "I'd like to know how, to learn how to better cover this information, but I also feel like I should be able to discuss any topic, and so part of me feels I shouldn't ask." She later disclosed she has not asked and continues to struggle. Negative feedback made some FLEs "question [their] skills as a teacher because I feel like I do everything I can and it's hard not to take negative comments personally" (048) and increased their "feelings of insecurity regarding knowledge about the topics taught" (048). Finally, some participants felt they were responsible for students who do not seem to change their behaviors by the end of a course.

Challenges to collaborations. Eight participants noted difficulty in making connections with other FLEs, county agencies, or state partners. This challenge is most directly related to NEPEF's build domain. This challenge was present in a small part of the overall group of participants, but for these eight participants, it was difficult to negotiate. For example, one participant reported feeling like "the agencies I partner with have a lack of enthusiasm about the programs I teach and what I do" (001), which left her feeling frustrated and isolated. The more she discussed her collaborations, the more frustrated she got: "I feel as if I told them I was no longer working in the county, they wouldn't care! They wouldn't even notice I was gone." Another spoke about how she had collaborations with other agencies, "but they're all negative…it's a negative relationship, so there's really no teamwork, so what's the point?" (017). Ineffective or non-existent collaborations negatively influenced FLEs attempts to connect relevant agencies so that parents could rely on a variety of community resources. One participant believed that "it reduced the trust parents have for me and sometimes people don't even know they can ask me about certain topics because other people (agencies in the area) are telling them I can't or don't do that" (028). Thus, when agencies could not work together effectively, it had a direct impact on this FLE's ability to provide effective teaching.

Outcomes of Being an Effective FLE

Finally, FLEs identified four outcomes they believed resulted from enacting the Effective FLE identity: Parents Learned and Retained Information, Positive Feedback, Requests for Future Programming, and Behavior Change.

Parents learned and retained information. Most FLEs (N = 50) reported instances where they knew the people in their classes learned new information from their courses, which was reflected in the way participants discussed what they learned. Some FLEs "ask[ed] students to demonstrate what they have learned by applying what they learned before the end of class" (051), which is a way for FLEs to ensure that new information was learned and retained. Another stated she has parents "relate their children's development to course material during the class, and I can see if they know the information or if they don't" (037) whereas another noted that

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"parents who asked questions about the material and who participated…I could tell they listened and really 'got it'" (053). In essence, when FLEs encountered parents who could take the material and restate it in their own words or apply it to their lives, this showed that parents learned and retained the information. Thus, FLE participants were discussing NEPEF's educate domain.

Positive feedback. Most FLEs (N = 50) also received feedback from parents and other professionals for their courses, which relates to the grow domain from NEPEF. FLEs discussed that "feedback demonstrated parents' enthusiasm for the topics they were learning" (049) whereas feedback from professionals let FLEs know they were demonstrating teaching effectiveness. For example, most FLEs believed positive feedback from parents meant "they like what we do…they believe it's useful" (012). Another FLE believed positive feedback would help with "greater retention of participants for future classes, which would help them come back" (043). When discussing receiving positive feedback from another county agency, an FLE stated that "it really meant something special when they came to us and said 'Thanks for the info. It really helped and made sense' because it showed the importance of what we do" (036). In general, FLEs believed that receiving positive feedback regarding their offering of courses made them feel like they were offering high-quality, useful programming that benefited their counties.

Requests for future programming. Many FLEs (N = 38) reported receiving requests for future programming, which was interpreted as effectively engaging county populations in family life education courses. This seems to relate to the build NEPEF domain. One participant believed that "it [spoke] volumes when people are choosing to spend time in our classes because I know we're competing with busy lives and family life" (025). When parents requested additional programming, it allowed FLEs to know they were effectively teaching curricula relevant to the county's needs.

Behavior change. Finally, some FLEs (N = 28) observed behavior change in parents as their courses progressed. Although each FLE spoke of the importance of behavior change, not all participants were able to witness those changes, which made those times when behavior change was noticeable all the more significant. For example, one participant saw how a parent benefited from a parenting class by improving how they dealt with her child's temper tantrums, saying "it really is big when parents can go away saying they feel successful at parenting" (014). One participant offered a story of how a couple took a relationship course:

> *After the course finished, a couple told me about how they had decided to take the course as a final attempt, a last ditch effort to save their marriage…they said they applied the concepts of the course – they changed how they communicated with each other, or at least tried to – and ended up not divorcing!* (036)

This may be an uncommon example, but the FLE who shared this story believed that behavior change is possible "if couples desire to change." Another FLE explained how working with young pregnant women provided many opportunities to change behavior. For example, she "had a prenatal client pregnant in the 9th grade who wanted to quit school. Through our programs, she

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decided to graduate. She's now a LPN and making others" lives better" (043). Seeing individuals change provided additional motivation to FLEs to continue working on bettering themselves so they could continue to help inspire change.

Discussion

FLEs place a high priority on teaching, quality curriculum, professional collaborations, and connections with parents. A primary implication is that when FLEs engage in behaviors deemed essential, positive outcomes for parents and themselves are possible. However, challenges interrupt that process in a negative way. Furthermore, when FLEs enact their Effective FLE identity, it suggests they are also relying on NEPEF standards, which are assumed to lead to high quality parenting education. It is important for FLEs to manage challenges and self-doubt because continued unsuccessful attempts to engage in behaviors considered essential to a role can lead to individuals exiting those roles, even if they are roles deemed necessary (Kielcot, 1994). Therefore, when FLEs can minimize their challenges, whether through additional training and other self-management strategies, they can contribute strongly to family well-being. A series of statements can be made regarding results of this study that may have implications for practice with FLEs. Each is described in detail below.

Implications for Practice

Cumulative challenges decrease likelihood of being effective FLEs. Several barriers were identified by the FLEs; the most common were programmatic in nature. This is somewhat surprising, since challenges stemming from attendance and attendees' personal issues have been well documented (Spoth, Redmond, Hockaday, & Shin, 1996). Participation was the source of the second most popular challenge, whereas less is known about the programmatic issues. Programmatic issues include financial resources, and as budget cuts continue to affect Extension programs, this topic may be more pressing. Previous researchers have found that barriers to expectations can act as indirect, rather than direct, influences (Lent et al., 2001). Therefore, programmatic challenges may indirectly affect FLEs' abilities to offer relevant curricula, to receive additional trainings, or to evaluate programs to ensure they are effective for their audiences.

Researchers note that motivation to meet role behaviors will begin to wane if individuals believe increased effort will not increase their chances at success or if they do not receive support in their efforts (Schunk, 1989). For example, FLEs whose continuous attempts to increase attendance and create lively discussions are not successful may be at risk for no longer setting or working toward achieving the effective FLE identity based on their belief they will be unsuccessful. In general, individuals who state role expectations that are difficult to attain generally make the changes necessary to meet them compared to individuals who set easily attained expectations (Locke, Frederick, Lee, & Bobko, 1984). Some who experience setbacks, however, will continue working towards their role behavior expectations for an identity so long as others believe in their abilities (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981; Schunk, 1989). Based

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on this, a primary recommendation would be for FLEs to share their most difficult or most important role behavior with others (e.g., colleagues, supervisors) in order to find support in achieving that goal.

FLEs seek out and rely on high-quality feedback to support their Effective FLE identities. FLEs had detailed discussions of the variety of sources where they seek and receive feedback. Although receiving negative feedback influenced some to question their abilities, no FLE stated that he or she wished to avoid feedback. Feedback has been found to be a key component in meeting one's expectations (Locke & Latham, 2006). It has been theorized that without feedback, those who set goals or expectations cannot make effective progress toward achieving their intended behaviors. Therefore, the recommendation from this finding is that evaluations (those done at the end of a course along with assessments that measure behavioral change over time) should be constructed carefully. Ensuring that annual review procedures of FLEs are measuring family life education effectiveness also seems essential to the success of FLEs. Finally, it may behoove supervisors to meet regularly with FLEs to discuss, follow-up, and provide the variety of types of feedback to further help FLEs refine their approaches to attaining Effective FLE identity.

Limitations and Conclusions

The primary limitation in this study is that the goals, supports, and barriers are probably not broadly generalizable to FLEs across the United States since data were collected in a rural state. Experiences of the FLE participants in this study likely have unique experiences because of the state's geography, which may influence attendance of participants and the time of FLEs who often have to drive long distances to offer their programs, and the population of the state. Future researchers could expand this study to a more representative sample and could compare different geographic regions to distinguish among goals, supports, and barriers of various regions.

In conclusion, it is necessary to understand how FLEs themselves set goals and perceive supports and barriers. Furthermore, when FLEs rely on NEPEF standards in setting their goals and expectations, this may benefit their abilities to provide high-quality education. The findings of this exploratory study represent the first step in identifying how FLEs establish goals they have in their positions, as well as what helps or hurts their abilities to achieve their goals. This will allow those involved with Extension the ability to better address the needs of new FLEs by helping manage barriers and capitalize on strengths. It can also help Extension agents understand what FLEs consider important (i.e., their own experiences, program qualities, attendee characteristics, and research-based programs) and work to support FLEs in their attempts at balancing and achieving their notable goals. Finally, setting and reaching goals is associated with several positive outcomes. FLEs who believe they can successfully achieve their goals will likely continue to set new goals in provision of quality family life education. This can benefit FLEs and Extension agents as well as individuals who attend family life education courses.

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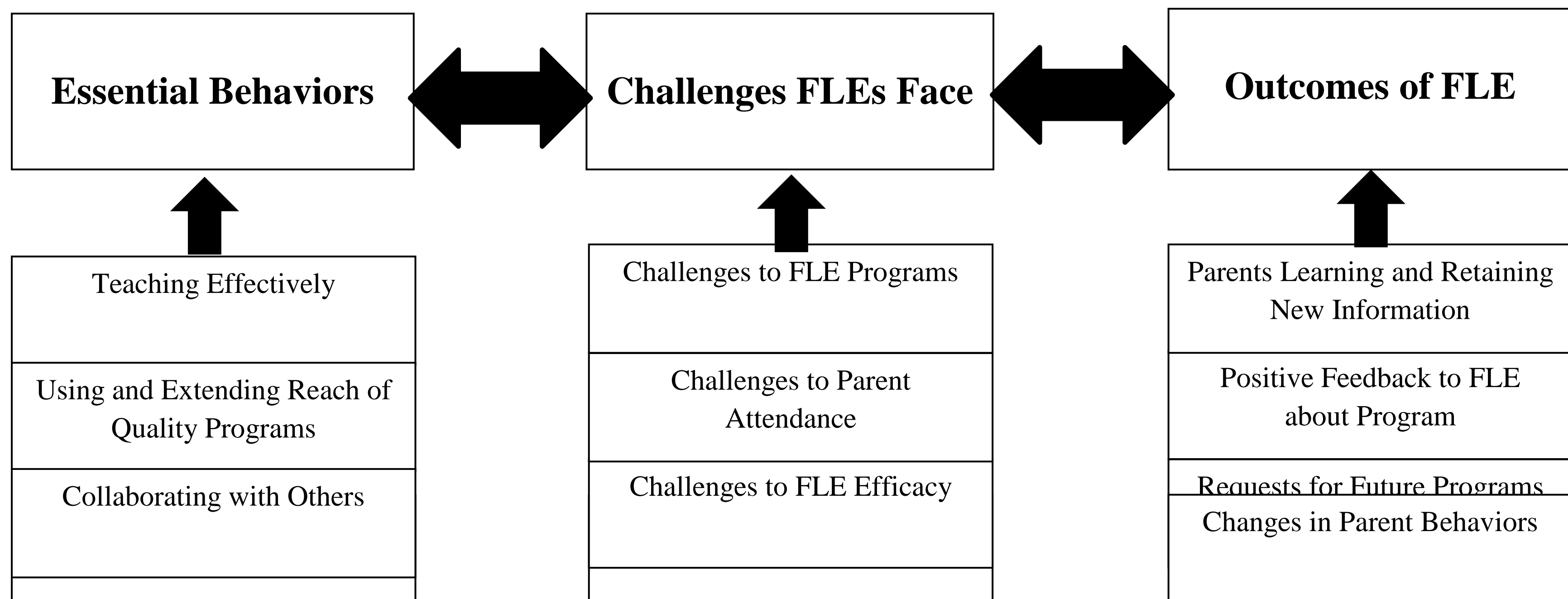
Figure 1. The Effective FLE Identity



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