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Professional Preparation Systems for Parenting Educators: Identification, Perceived Value, and Demand for a National Credential

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Abstract: The study reported here examined professional preparation systems (PPS) for parenting educators via an online survey of 324 Extension Specialists and members of the National Parenting Education Network (NPEN) and Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) listservs. Eighty-one PPS of six general types were identified. Curriculum-specific training and university degrees were perceived as contributing more to parenting educator knowledge and skills than to professional identity, but the reverse was true for state-based credentials/certificates, state-based licenses, and a national parenting education credential. Eighty-six percent of respondents were somewhat likely or highly likely to pursue a national parenting education credential if one were developed.

Introduction

Extension family and consumer sciences (FCS) educators are often described as generalists, meaning that they have knowledge and training in a wide variety of topics related to FCS. However, the availability of

general undergraduate degrees in family and consumer sciences, most often FCS education degrees, is on the decline (Bartlett & Sneed, 2004). Many persons who are hired as county-based Extension educators have specialized undergraduate or graduate degrees and may have little or no course work in subjects for which they are expected to provide programming at the local level.

As a result of this shift, there is a need for training to help new agents acquire additional subject matter knowledge in areas in which their formal education is lacking. One of the roles that Extension professionals fill in many communities is that of parenting educator. Thus, identification of professional development opportunities in parenting education can provide Extension administrators and specialists with resources to help train new employees for this aspect of their jobs. Also, by knowing which professional development opportunities are valued by those in the field, Extension agents and other parenting professionals will be better able to plan their own professional training. Furthermore, given that Extension educators often lead the planning and implementation of parenting programs in communities (cf., Malley, 2004), it is important that any effort to develop a national parenting education credential involves the Cooperative Extension System.

The purpose of the study reported here, was to (a) identify existing professional preparation systems for parenting educators, (b) better understand the perceived value of various types of professional preparation systems, and (c) assess the level of demand for a national parenting education credential.

Core Competencies of Parenting Educators

Several individuals and entities have attempted to identify the core competencies of parenting educators (i.e., the agreed-upon set of required attitudes, skills, and knowledge) as a first step toward creating professional development opportunities leading to standardized credentials. For example, the Texas Registry of Parent Educator Resources (ROPER) and Minnesota Parent Education Core Curriculum Framework and Indicators (PECCFI) are both efforts toward the development of a central base of knowledge for parenting educators (Cooke, 2006). Additionally, the National Extension Parent Educators' Framework (NEPEF) moves beyond identification of content-related competencies to identify process-related competencies that are necessary to function effectively as a parenting educator (DeBord et al., 2006).

Once core competencies are further refined, it is believed that comprehensive preparation based on those competencies, focused practice, and opportunities for continuing professional development will increase the quality (Heath & Palm, 2006) and the efficacy (Campbell & Palm, 2004) of parent education.

Professional Preparation Systems for Parenting Educators

Although core competencies of parenting educators are still being identified, clarified, and disseminated, various professional preparation systems (PPS) do exist that attempt to either train parenting educators in important areas and/or provide documentation that certain levels of proficiency have been achieved. Family professionals, including parenting educators, expressed a desire for credentials of some type as well as for the funding needed for credential attainment (DeBord & Matta, 2002).

Cooke's (2006) discussion suggests that several types of professional preparation systems exist. We propose that training systems designed to equip and empower parenting educators can be meaningfully categorized into six specific types. The remainder of this literature review introduces and discusses each type, providing general characteristics and examples.

Curriculum-Specific Training

One type of professional preparation system is curriculum-specific training, which may or may not include a certificate. These curricula focus content toward a specialized topic, targeted behaviors, and/or specific age groups. The FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community Based Child Abuse Prevention (2008) lists 16 examples of evidence-based curricula including Guiding Good Choices, The Incredible Years, Nurturing Parenting Programs, and Parent-Child Therapy. Training to deliver these curricula is of varying type and duration.

State-Based Credential or Certificate

A second type of professional preparation system is a state-based credential or certificate, typically regulated by a university or a state-based professional organization. Although we group both certificates and credentials together in this category, past research has sometimes distinguished between them. A certificate represents a seal of approval from a validating organization and typically requires completion of a course of study, while a credential involves validation of one's qualifications by a third party (Bryan, DeBord, & Schrader, 2006). Although participants can often take the same courses as part of a degree program, the certificate is more accessible than a degree because it requires fewer courses.

In 2002, North Carolina became one of the first states to offer a credential, as opposed to a certificate, as a form of professional recognition to parenting educators. Over 120 parenting educators received a ladder-based credential over a 3-year time period, and they mentioned positive experiences of increased credibility, marketability, and the ability to track their professional development (Bryan et al., 2006).

State-Based License

The third type of professional preparation system is a state-based license. Bryan et al. (2006, p. 808) define license as "official or legal permission to practice granted by an appropriate authority." Minnesota is the only known state with a Board of Teaching parenting educator license regulated by the State Department of Education. This is a stand-alone license that the state requires for hiring purposes (Cooke, 2006).

National Family Life Education Certificate

A fourth type of professional preparation system is a national family life education credential/certificate governed by a national professional organization. The only known PPS of this type is the Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) program governed by the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR). This program does not provide training, but instead serves to document the knowledge gained from other experiences and educational systems. The CFLE consists of 10 family life education content areas, one of which is Parenting Education and Guidance (Cooke, 2006; National Council on Family Relations, 2009).

There is no known national credential focused exclusively on parent education. However, there were discussions about the creation of one at both the 2008 Education and Enrichment Section Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations Annual Meeting as well as at the 2009 National Parenting Education Annual Council Meeting (M. Stranik, personal communication, April 7, 2009).

Undergraduate and Graduate Degrees

The fifth and sixth types of professional preparation systems are undergraduate degrees and graduate degrees in fields highly related to parenting and/or family life education. Program specifics vary from degree to

degree and generally include room for electives; therefore, it is difficult to ascertain the relevance of any overall degree to the core competencies of parenting educators. Clearly, if a student attempted to construct a program of study focused on parenting education, many programs would allow for this. For example, both graduate and undergraduate degrees are offered at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, St. Cloud State University, Concordia College â Moorhead, and St. Paul (Cooke, 2006). Additionally, Bank Street College in New York City, Wheelock in Boston, DePaul in Chicago, and North Carolina State all offer masters degrees emphasizing parenting education (National Parenting Education Network, 2009).

Purpose and Research Questions

Based on the literature reviewed, there is a need to identify existing professional development opportunities for parenting educators. A comprehensive list of available training opportunities of each type would be of immediate, practical assistance to Extension agents, specialists, and other parenting professionals. Additionally, data pertaining to the perceived value of various types of professional development will provide important information to both those selecting professional development opportunities and to those designing them. Last, given that various organizations have been involved in unrelated, regional efforts to develop professional preparation systems, it is important to evaluate the level of demand for a national parenting education credential among various populations of parenting educators. Building on the reviewed information regarding different types of professional preparation systems, the study reported here sought to address the following specific questions.

1. What professional preparation systems (PPS) of each type are offered?
2. Does each of the six identified types of PPS contribute more to parenting educators' knowledge and skills or to parenting educators' professional identity?
3. Is there a relationship between level of formal education and level of demand for a national credential?

Methods

Sample

The following groups of people were contacted and invited to participate in the study: (a) all individuals registered for the National Parenting Education Network (NPE) listserv ($n = 289$), (b) all individuals registered for the National Council of Family Relations (NCFR) Certified Family Life Educators (CFLE) listserv ($n = 1551$), and (c) one Extension professional (with a focus on family relations and/or parenting) from each university listed in the 2008-2009 Family Science Directory of the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES; $n = 68$). Although some individuals belonged to more than one of the identified subsamples, participants were instructed to respond only once to the survey. Data were received from 324 participants.

Procedure

Over the course of 3 weeks in early 2009, all potential participants received an emailed survey pre-notice and three emailed messages including links to an online survey housed on a university survey server. Online surveys have been shown to reduce both costs and respondent errors compared to other approaches (Archer,

2003; O'Neill, 2004). Participants were also informed in the body of the emails that they would be entered in a drawing for three small prizes. Once participants clicked on the survey link, they were informed of the nature of the survey and asked to consent to participate by checking a box (per the requirements of our university's Institutional Review Board). At the end of the 3-week period, the survey was deactivated, and the data were downloaded to STATA 10 for analysis.

Measures

Participant Demographics

To better understand the characteristics of the sample, we asked participants to report on their completion of each of the six types of professional preparation systems in a multiple-response format (i.e., check all that apply). They also reported their years of experience, level of formal education, state of residence, and the primary organizational structure of their place of employment.

Professional Preparation Systems (PPS)

PPS were identified through the following open-ended question: "What is the name of ONE professional preparation system for parenting educators?" Participants were provided a definition as follows: "A 'professional preparation system' is any opportunity that promotes the competencies needed for effective parenting education and/or once completed, serves to document knowledge or skill in the parenting education field. Examples include certificates, credentials, licenses, degrees, specialties, or concentrations specifically related to parenting education. These might be offered or issued by a variety of organizations including universities, government agencies, or specific programs/curricula." Each respondent was allowed to provide the names of up to three PPS.

PPS Type

To aid in conceptually organizing the identified professional preparation systems, respondents were asked to categorize each identified PPS as being of one of the following six types: 1 = curriculum-specific training/certificate (e.g., Strengthening Families, Incredible Years, etc.), 2 = state-based credential/certificate regulated by a university or professional organization, 3 = state-based license, 4 = national family life education credential/certificate (e.g., NCFR CFLE), 5 = undergraduate degree highly related to parenting and/or family life education, 6 = graduate degree highly related to parenting and/or family life education, or 7 = none of the above. Because participants may be more or less familiar with the features of various PPS, we used the modal response, of all participants who reported on a particular PPS, as the reported type.

Perceived Value

Two items were intended to tap participants' attitudes regarding the value of the six existing types of PPS. For each type of PPS, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement (from 1 = Strongly Agree to 5 = Strongly Disagree) with the statement, "This type of professional preparation system substantially increases the knowledge and skills of parenting educators." Next, using the same scale, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement, "This type of professional preparation system substantially enhances the professional identity of parenting educators (e.g., visibility, credibility, respect, marketability)."

In addition to reporting on the value of the six existing types of PPS, participants were asked to similarly report on the potential value (to knowledge and skills as well as to professional identity) of a national

parenting education credential, were one developed and made available. All items were reverse-scored so a higher score indicated higher perceived value.

Demand for National Parent Education Credential

Participants were asked to indicate (from 1 = highly likely to 3 = not at all likely) "how likely you would be to pursue a national parenting education credential, if one were developed and made available in your area." Responses were reverse-scored so a higher score indicated higher demand.

Data Analysis

To address the first research question, we listed the professional preparation systems that were named in response to the open-ended question and calculated a frequency representing the number of times each was listed, as an indication of visibility. Then, we calculated the modal type of each offered PPS.

Next, to investigate whether each separate type of PPS was perceived as more beneficial to parenting educator knowledge and skills or to professional identity, we conducted a series of seven t-tests.

Last, to test the association between educational level and likelihood of pursuing a national credential, we conducted a chi-square test and estimated the associated Spearman's rho correlation coefficients.

Results

Data were received from 324 participants who worked in non-profit (35%), for-profit (11%), governmental (excluding education; 12%), and educational (42%) organizational structures across 47 states. Twelve percent were relatively new to the field (i.e., less than 2 years of experience), while 42% were seasoned professionals (i.e., more than 10 years experience). Table 1 reports the percent of participants who reported having completed each of the six types of PPS.

Table 1.

Participants' Completion Rates for Six Types of Professional Preparation Systems (PPS)

Type of PPS	Completion %
Curriculum-specific Training	66%
State-based Credential / Certificate	20%
State-based License	7%
National Family Life Education Credential / Certificate	68%
Undergraduate Degree Highly Related to Parenting and/or Family Life Education	48%
Graduate Degree Highly Related to Parenting and/or Family Life Education	58%

Table 2 contains a list of all professional preparation systems mentioned by four or more participants, organized by modal type. Participants indicated a total of 38 curriculum-specific training opportunities, six

state-based credentials or certificates, one state-based license, four national family life education credential / certificates, and 18 undergraduate as well as 14 graduate degrees highly related to parenting and/or family life education, for a total of 81 PPS. As is typically the case in survey research, these results reflect participant reports and have not been externally validated in any manner.

Table 2.
Professional Preparation Systems (PPS) by Modal Type with Frequencies

Type 1: Curriculum-Specific Training	
Frequency	Name of PPS
24	Parents as Teachers
12	Active Parenting
11	Strengthening Families
8	Partnering with Parents
7	Nurturing Parenting
7	Practical Parent Education
4	Love and Logic
4	Parent Coaching Institute
4	Positive Parenting Program (Triple P)
Type 2: State-Based Credential/Certificate	
Frequency	Name of PPS
10	University of North Texas Prof. Development Recognition System
7	University of Minnesota Parent Education Certificate
5	North Carolina Parenting Educator Credential
Type 3: State-Based License	
Frequency	Name of PPS
32	Minnesota Parent and Family Education License
Type 4: National Family Life Education Credential/Certificate	
Frequency	Name of PPS
81	National Council on Family Relations Certified Family Life Educator
Type 5: Undergraduate Degrees Related to Parenting and/or Family Life Education	
Frequency	Name of PPS
4	Concordia University, Family Education Program

Type 6: Graduate Degrees Related to Parenting and/or Family Life Education	
Frequency	Name of PPS
7	University of Minnesota, Family Education
6	DePaul University, Parent Education and Support
4	Wheelock College, Family Support and Parenting Education

Table 3 indicates the means, standard deviations, and *t* values of the perceived value of each type of PPS to parenting educators' (a) knowledge and skills and (b) professional identity. Results of the *t*-tests indicated that curriculum-specific training, a highly related undergraduate degree, and a highly related graduate degree were all perceived as contributing more to parenting educator knowledge and skills than to professional identity. A state-based credential/certificate, a state-based license, and a national parenting education credential (if one were developed and made available) were perceived as contributing significantly more to professional identity than to knowledge and skills. These results are also visually depicted in Figure 1.

Table 3.

Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Value of Six Types of Professional Preparation Systems

Type of PPS	Value to Knowledge & Skills	Value to Professional Identity	<i>t</i> value
Curriculum-specific Training	4.28 (.73)	4.00 (.93)	5.77***
State-based Credential / Certificate	4.06 (.87)	4.24 (.77)	-3.17**
State-based License	3.70 (.95)	4.17 (.89)	-7.01***
National Family Life Education Credential / Certificate	4.27 (.76)	4.28 (.83)	-0.60
Undergraduate Degree Highly Related to Parenting and/or Family Life Education	4.20 (.76)	3.94 (.85)	5.57***
Graduate Degree Highly Related to Parenting and/or Family Life Education	4.39 (.72)	4.23 (.79)	3.22**
National Parent Education Credential	4.25 (.76)	4.49 (.64)	-5.95***
** <i>p</i> < .01; *** <i>p</i> < .001			

Figure 1.

Perceived Value of Six Types of Professional Preparation Systems

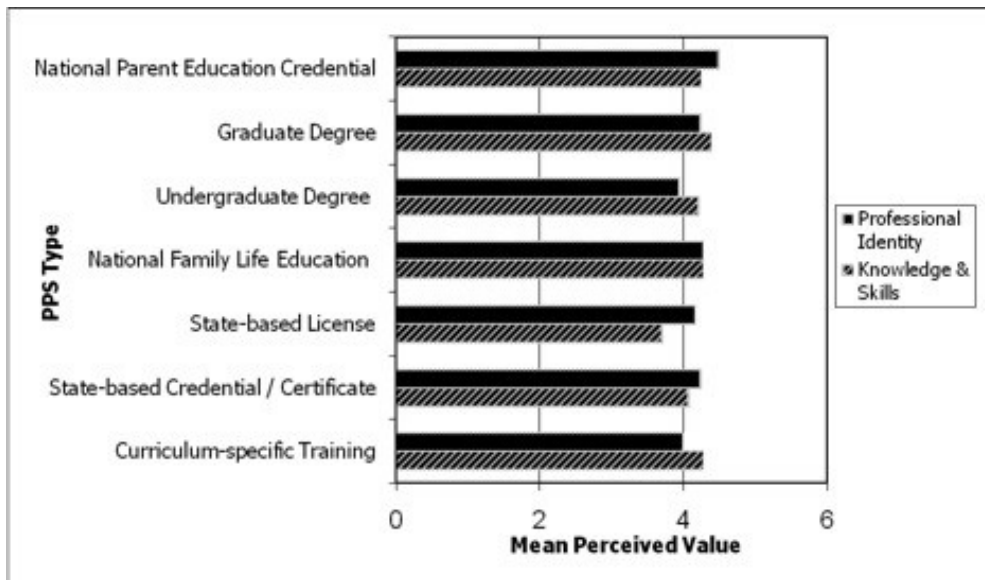


Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents "highly likely," "somewhat likely," and "not likely" to pursue a national parenting education credential, by level of formal education. The Chi-square value ($\chi^2(4) = 15.490, p < .01$) indicated a significant association between demand for a national credential and level of formal education. The associated Spearman's rho ($r = -.150, p < .01$) indicated a significant negative relationship between educational level and interest in pursuing a national credential. Thus, demand for a national credential is significantly lower at higher levels of formal education.

Table 4.
Likelihood of Pursuing a National Parenting Education Credential by Level of Formal Education

	BS/BA or less (n = 68)	MS/MA (n = 163)	PhD (n = 93)
% Highly Likely	56 %	54 %	39 %
% Somewhat Likely	41 %	29 %	44 %
% Not Likely	3 %	17 %	17 %

Implications

This article provides a first step toward a comprehensive understanding of professional preparation systems for parenting educators. This initial list provides current and future Extension personnel and other parenting professionals with a starting point for identifying professional development opportunities to enhance their knowledge, skills, and professional profile, thereby allowing them to secure employment and meet the needs of parents once employed.

Although we did not indicate any criteria for participants to use when deciding which PPS to name, it is likely that the named PPS are among the most readily known to the present sample. Given that we cannot

claim that the present sample is representative of U.S. parenting educators, caution is warranted when interpreting the professional preparation systems mentioned by participants as well as the perceived value of each type. This limitation notwithstanding, the results of the study shed some light on the variety and potential benefits of pre-service training experiences and ongoing professional development opportunities. Additionally, undergraduate and graduate degrees mentioned as PPS provide an identified recruitment location for FCS agents and other parenting professionals.

By identifying, separately, which types of PPS are perceived as advancing knowledge and skills and professional identity, we provide a tool for individual parenting educators who are shaping their professional development plans. Also, Extension administrators and supervisors may find the information about the perceived value of PPS helpful in determining which type would be most beneficial in preparing agents. If they want to increase the knowledge and skill levels of agents, they may direct them to curriculum-specific training or undergraduate or graduate courses. If they want to improve the professional identity of agents among other professionals within the community, they may encourage them to pursue state-based or national credentials that are available to them.

The absence of a significant difference between the contributions of the NCFR CFLE to parenting educators' knowledge and skills and to their professional identity suggests the generally positive perception of this certification by the participants and the usefulness and value of the CFLE to both domains of professional development. Extension agents and other parenting professionals could benefit by being encouraged to obtain this certification.

Demand for a national parenting education credential is relatively high at all levels of formal education, though the results of the chi-square test and associated Spearman's rho coefficient indicate that there is generally less demand for the credential at higher levels of education. Nevertheless, 83% of those holding a Ph.D. in a highly related field indicate that they would be highly likely or somewhat likely to additionally pursue a national parenting education credential.

The development of a national parenting education credential would perhaps be best accomplished via collaboration. State Extension programs are already encouraged to work together through multi-state initiatives, eXtension <<http://about.extension.org/>> Communities of Practice, and the Cooperative Extension Curriculum Project (CECP) <<http://srpln.msstate.edu/cecp/index.html>> to increase professional development opportunities for Extension employees. Additionally, the National Parenting Education Network (NPEN) and the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) have played strategic roles in supporting the efforts of parenting educators.

Given the stated value of and demand for a national parenting education credential, development of such a credential through collaboration among these three key organizations would meet the needs of parenting educators both within and outside the Extension system. Additionally, collaborative development of a parenting education credential would assist in professionalizing the field of parenting education and pave the way for other collaborative efforts between these organizations.

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