

Pragmatic Family Life Education: Moving Beyond the Expert-Based, Content-Driven Model of Serving Families

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Alisha Marie Hardman

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Adviser: Yvonne S. Gentzler, Ph.D.

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Abstract

The field of family life education (FLE) is shifting from an expert-based, content-driven model of education that is rooted in a positivistic epistemology of practice to a more collaborative, strength-based model that integrates scientific knowledge from family sciences with the values and experiences of families in communities. This study employs John Dewey's version of pragmatism as the guiding epistemology of practice for this emerging approach to FLE. A pragmatic approach to FLE is proposed through a summary and synthesis of concepts derived from a variety of perspectives, disciplines and fields that comprise the overall conceptual framework, which is comprised of two parts. The first is the philosophical framework, which draws from three principal perspectives: (a) family science, (b) critical science, and (c) human ecology. The second is the practical framework, which extends Bronfenbrenner's (2001/2009) bioecological model of human development to inform the development of interventions aimed at families; integrates concepts from disciplines and fields such as: the attunement perspective, helping relationships, home economics, and positive psychology in order to inform strategies and approaches for outreach and engagement; and finally reviews principles central to the philosophy of education.

The study employs a convergent, multi-level intervention mixed methods design and is based on the evaluation of an existing demonstration project entitled Co-Parent Court. The existing Co-Parent Court evaluation design utilized a quasi-experimental, randomized control group with a pre, post and follow-up survey. Co-Parent Court is used as a critical case to explore and examine the pragmatic model of FLE articulated in this

study. Findings indicate that intervention parents were more likely to be doing well on several substantively significant dimensions of family well-being than those in the control group. Lessons learned regarding what worked and what did not work in the particular case of the Co-Parent Court project are discussed in order to ground the findings in the immediate programmatic context. Additionally, eight promising principles of a pragmatic approach to FLE were developed based on a triangulation of practitioner wisdom (stakeholder interviews) and social science theory (conceptual framework) in order to contribute knowledge to the field of FLE generally.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Family education is a complex concept that has meant many various things to different people across space and time. As such, it is valuable to consider an orienting framework for interpreting the nature of family education. Thomas and Lien (2009) conceptualized an all-encompassing definition of family education that accurately captures the entire scope and landscape of the concept when they claimed that,

Family education is defined here as education of, for, and about families that is carried out by families, educational institutions, and communities. It involves the efforts of families themselves, professional educators, and community members and entities. It is both a phenomenon and a field of practice. Family education as a phenomenon occurs worldwide and has been a function of families and communities across human history and prehistory. Its professionalization has been spurred in Western societies with the growth of industrialization in the 19th and 20th centuries. (p. 36)

This description acknowledges that family education is a phenomenon that occurs within families and communities and as such, elevates families to the role of active agents in their own educational processes. However, the professionalization of family education and its development as a field of practice and concomitant social changes, has often overshadowed the educative processes, functions, and experiences inherent to families. Apple (1980) provided an analysis of ideology and control in the personal service professions explaining how the efficiency movement, which sought to identify and eliminate waste in all areas of the economy and society and to develop and implement best practices, lead to the rise of professional experts in family life. According

to Apple (1980) families become mere “managers of interaction” predicated on the knowledge, skills and behaviors professionals taught as opposed to collaborators in the co-creation of their family life.

Twenty years later Doherty (2000) identified how the concerns Apple identified in 1980 had materialized in the vision family science embraced of University-educated professional experts who would generate new knowledge and pass it on to families in the community (Doherty, 2000). Doherty referred to this as the traditional “academocratic” model, where knowledge was generated by researchers, then transmitted to practitioners who then transmitted it to families. He argued that this relegated families to the role of *consumers* of academic knowledge and professional practice aimed at promoting family well-being and excluded their role as *producers* of knowledge and action (Doherty, 2000). As a result, the traditional modes of family education research and practice inadvertently perpetuated the “provider/consumer” dichotomy identified by Doherty (2000), which may lead to the deskilling and reskilling of families as they “no longer [needed] to engage in critical discourse and deliberation” (Apple, 1980, p. 18) but rather came to rely on professionals to tell them what was “best.” The demotion of families from producers to consumers of knowledge and action, as well as the deskilling of families, were two unintentional consequences of the family education profession that were actually antithetical to the very goal and nature of the profession.

Family life education methodology. In an effort to define and professionalize the field of family education, the National Council on Family Relations developed the Framework for Life Span Family Life Education, which was intended to “embrace and

integrate (the field's) diverse knowledge and conceptual base" and "to clarify and specify the content of family life education" (Bredehoft, 2009, p. 3). The framework provided guidelines for the knowledge base needed for effective professional practice of family life educators and is commonly known as the ten content areas of family life education (Darling, Fleming, & Cassidy, 2009). The ten content areas are outlined in Table 1, which illustrates that the framework favors content knowledge over practice and application as eight of the content areas constitute content knowledge and the two practice-oriented content areas are listed last.

Table 1. *Family Life Education Content Areas*

<i>Content Areas</i>	<i>Content Knowledge</i>	<i>Educational Practice</i>
Families and individuals in societal contexts	✓	
Internal dynamics of families	✓	
Human growth and development across the life span	✓	
Human sexuality	✓	
Interpersonal relationships	✓	
Family resource management	✓	
Parenting education and guidance	✓	
Professional ethics and practice		✓
Family life education methodology		✓

Family life education's tendency to heavily emphasize content and content knowledge has resulted in an over-reliance on family education programs and family education curricula, to the exclusion of family education pedagogies. In their 1993 chapter in the *Handbook of Family Life Education, Volume 1: Foundations of Family Life Education*, Arcus, Schvaneveldt, and Moss identified this apparent disregard for the educational and methodological component of family life education:

It is interesting to note that emphasis in family life education has typically been

placed on those areas that focus on the study of individuals and families, with limited acknowledgement of important concepts and principles from the discipline of education (e.g., Fisher & Kerckhoff, 1981). Given that family life education is an educational venture, this apparent omission is noteworthy as the knowledge and use of educational concepts and principles would likely help to ensure that family life education attains its educational goals. (p. 17)

Similarly, Hughes (1994) identified that “there has been limited discussion of the methodology of family life education” (p. 74). Two decades later, the educational component of family life education has still received little attention. When family life education methodology is discussed, it is typically reduced to evidence-based program curricula. The emphasis on family life education programs and curricula over family life education pedagogy, or more appropriately andragogy since most family life education is conducted with adults, is also apparent in the preparation of family life educators as academic coursework tends to focus more on “family life” content areas rather than the educational process of family life education.

Adapting methodologies to the changing family life education landscape. In addition to the need to further draw on the philosophy of education in order to further develop and define educational approaches and strategies appropriate for family life education, methodologies need to be appropriate for the current family life education landscape. According to Duncan and Goddard (2011):

Family life education in outreach settings has a long history. It is evolving from an expert top-down approach to addressing family problems to a collaborative, strength-based, community-strengthening model that integrates scientific knowledge from family sciences with the values and experiences of families in communities. (p. 23)

This shift in the core approach of family life education as indicated by Duncan and Goddard in their 2011 work requires that methodologies that align with the new approach be developed and tested. The methodologies appropriate for the former top down approach to family life education are no longer sufficient. For example, the expert-based, deficit view model of family life education emphasized the application of technical knowledge, through implementation of evidence-based curricula and programming, in order to improve the condition of those who are considered “‘at-risk’ for failing to meet a standard set by authorities and experts as the norm” (Thomas & Lein, 2009, p. 4). Whereas a model that would seek to partner with families, building on strengths and resiliencies inherent in families and communities would require that the educational endeavor be tailored to the unique circumstances and situations of those being served. Additionally, a “community-strengthening” model of family life education might recognize that families do not exist in isolation but are embedded in an ecological context and interact with other systems, which influence the quality and nature of family life. The existing methods that currently dominate family life education practice will not be sufficient to serve families in ways that are congruent with this new model of family life education. Therefore, novel family life education methodologies need to be developed that are capable of being dynamic, flexible, and adaptable in order to be responsive to changing societal conditions as well as employ an ecological approach that connects, builds, and mobilizes resources in the community.

The Need for this Study

In recent decades there has been a call for family scholars and practitioners to challenge and change the status quo in our field, which relegates families as consumers of services. In his 1999 presidential address to the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), the major professional organization for family science and practice, Doherty (2000) called for a new model and way of thinking about the relationship between researchers, practitioners, families and communities. He critiqued the traditional model of knowledge transmission, which he referred to as the “trickle down model” of research and practice, as maintaining a hierarchy in which the knowledge of researchers is valued more highly than the knowledge of practitioners and both are valued more highly than the knowledge inherent in families. He argued that this perpetuates a view and practice in which families are relegated to being consumers of family science rather than citizens who actively apply family science for their own benefit. More recently, Bahr & Bahr (2009) recommended a collaborative, family-centered approach in which family scholars restructure the scientific monologue about families to include more dialogue with families. The practical implications of such a shift would be more accurate understandings of families as they actually are as well as better insights into how to better serve families based on their self-identified problems. According to Duncan and Goddard (2011):

a new model of taking family scholarship is emerging, critical to effective FLE in community settings. Scholars are now arguing that effective FLE will integrate the best scientific information with the knowledge, lived experience, culture, and

expertise of community clientele (Doherty, 2000; Lerner, 1995; Myers-Walls, 2000). (p. 14)

This dissertation study is an attempt to contribute to this emerging model of family life education by problematizing and challenging conventional wisdom regarding how family life education has served individuals and families, re-conceptualizing the philosophy of family life education and proposing an alternative practice model for serving families. To adequately achieve this goal, it is important to describe the epistemology of practice that currently informs family life education practice and propose an alternative epistemology of practice that will allow for the presentation of alternative philosophical and practical frameworks of family life education.

The Study Thesis, Design and Approach

The overall thesis of this study is that a new philosophical and practical framework for family life education rooted in a pragmatic epistemology of practice, will prove an effective model for serving individuals and families. This study will employ an evaluative inquiry process otherwise referred to as “evaluation research” in an attempt to “contribute to the field’s knowledge of effective programming approaches” (Treichel, 2009, p. 223). Evaluation research is a form of applied research which seeks to study the effectiveness with which existing knowledge is used to inform and guide practice, rather than the discovering of new knowledge as is the primary aim of basic research (Clarke & Dawson, 1999). Knowledge-generating evaluation research is conducted to generate knowledge about program effectiveness in general (Patton, 1996). “The evaluation research findings contribute by increasing knowledge. This knowledge can be as specific as clarifying a program’s model, testing theory, distinguishing types of interventions,

figuring out how to measure outcomes, generating lessons learned, and/or elaborating policy options” (Patton, 1996, p. 132). The purpose of such evaluation research is to inform action to improve social conditions (Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman, 2004).

According to Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman (2004) “one important form of evaluation research is that which is conducted on demonstration programs, that is, social intervention projects designed and implemented explicitly to test the value of an innovative program concept” (p. 21). The Hennepin County Co-Parent Project is a three-year demonstration project that works with unmarried parents to create a model for paternity establishment (legal fatherhood) that supports co-parenting to improve outcomes for children, families, and communities. It applies a problem solving model to address the barriers these fragile families have to becoming successful parents, including the lack of income and employment, unstable housing, criminal behavior and criminal history, intimate violence, chemical abuse and relationship distrust.

This dissertation study will utilize data from this existing, demonstration project that has employed a quasi-experimental, longitudinal design that includes both an intervention and control group and uses pre, post, and follow surveys along with a follow up qualitative interviews. This concurrent mixed methods design employs a survey questionnaire (quantitative strategy) and a case study approach based on qualitative data obtained through open-ended interviews with project stakeholders (qualitative strategy). Analysis of the data obtained for this study will be positioned within the philosophical and practical frameworks articulated in the literature review (chapter 2).

Research Questions

In alignment with the knowledge generation evaluation research approach, two overarching research questions have been identified to guide this study. This evaluation research study intends to clarify the Co-Parent Court program model, test social science theory via a proposed model of family life education, and generate promising principles to inform future family life education practice.

1. *How do evaluation findings triangulate with practitioner wisdom and social science theory?* This question seeks to triangulate multiple sources of knowledge in order to identify lessons learned from the Co-Parent Court model. The evaluation findings, will be represented by indicators of family life wellbeing, and will indicate the effectiveness of the Co-Parent Court model contributing to improvements in individual, child and family wellbeing. Practitioner wisdom will be used to determine the fit between the Co-Parent Court model and the family life education model presented in this dissertation as well as used to evaluate the value, merit or worth of the model to stakeholders. Interviews with the primary project stakeholders, including representatives from the court, project management, and direct service providers, will reveal both project related wisdom regarding the Co-Parent Court model and personal theories and approaches to working with individuals and families. The model of family life education, predicated on philosophical and practical frameworks developed to direct this research study, represent a synthesis of social science theory, which will be compared

to the evaluation findings to determine to what degree the family life education model presented fits with the Co-Parent Court model. Additionally, participant self-reports of their family life well-being will be analyzed to determine whether those who completed the intervention report higher levels of family life well-being than do those who did not participate in the intervention.

2. *What promising principles can be extracted from the Co-Parent Court model to inform practice?* This question seeks to identify lessons learned from the Co-Parent Court model that can be translated into promising principles that may be applied to inform general family education practice or design. Answering this question involves isolating the central elements of the model that seem to most significantly contribute to its effectiveness.

Answering these questions will contribute to knowledge of effective family life education methodology, which is relatively sparse. The following chapter will review the family life education methodology literature, synthesize literature from the disciplines and fields that have been identified as informing the philosophical and practical framework for this study, and provide a description of pragmatic family life education.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Given that this study seeks to examine the nature of family life education philosophy and practice, it requires a fairly broad review of the literature in order to situate the specific questions being examined. It begins with a review of the broad concept and historical significance of family education, followed by a more in-depth description of family life education, which has emerged as the professional practice of family education. Next, pragmatism is proposed as an epistemology of practice appropriate to guide the practice of family life education. Then I turn to articulating the conceptual framework that guides this study by outlining the philosophical and practical framework being examined. Finally, I synthesize concepts from the literature reviewed and propose a pragmatic model of family life education. Due to the great breadth of literature that is reviewed and synthesized here the reader should understand that the concepts reviewed is necessarily limited and is not intended to be representative of the entirety of each of the disciplines and fields reviewed herein. Rather, salient concepts were selected based on their utility to the purpose of this review, to synthesize concepts from a variety of fields that will inform a new, pragmatic approach to family life education.

Family Education

Family education is typically associated with a family enrichment or family strengthening approach. As identified in chapter one, family education has a dual nature. It is both a naturally occurring phenomenon within families and also a profession seeking

to enhance family well-being both individually and socially (Thomas & Lien, 2009). The literature reviewed in this section primarily focuses on the latter, while attending to ways that the profession of family education can honor, value and strengthen educational processes within families. The following review of literature begins by summarizing family education, what family life education is, and how it is currently practiced (family education methodology).

Family education perspectives. Thomas and Lien (2009) identified three family education perspectives, preservation, improvement, and attunement, which “connote different values and educational purposes. They are based on conceptual analysis of family education professional literature and history of families and family education, as well as ideas underlying historical eras and educational development” (p. 37). The preservation perspective can be associated with the phenomenon of family education as it typically involves family traditions passed from one generation to the next. An example would be new parents who seek wisdom and advice about childrearing from their parents. The improvement perspective aligns most closely with family education as a field of practice. It encompasses the technical application of knowledge gained through family science research. The hierarchical service delivery model described in chapter one, the “academocratic” model, in which knowledge is generated by researchers, then transmitted to practitioners who then transmit it to families, is a result of the improvement perspective of family education. The attunement perspective can be seen as the interaction between the phenomenon and field of family education. It is an approach that merges the knowledge gained through family science with the experiences of

families. A summary of the three perspectives is provided in Table 2 (Thomas & Lien, 2009).

Table 2. *Dimensions of Family Education Perspectives*

Dimension	Perspectives		
	Preservation	Improvement	Attunement
Orientation & underlying values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tradition & continuity valued • Preserve human beings & valued ways of living • Extend heritage & traditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change, progress, advancement, efficiency, standards, & standardization valued • Apply science to improve families & family life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse perspectives & realities respected & valued • Bring things into better alignment so that all people have opportunities to be acknowledged, recognized, & listened to • Understand families' views from their perspectives
Assumptions about the world & humans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World is stable & predictable • Life as it is will (& should continue) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World is ordered, governed by laws discoverable through science • World, human beings, & ways of living are predictable, modifiable, & controllable through scientific means 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural frame is a human creation & can be modified by human beings • Human beings vary widely. Their understandings grow out of their experiences & social conditions • People are able to act on their own behalf & to consider others as well
Human goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survival of people, group or family & their identity, heritage, culture, traditions & values • Maintain a group's identity, roots & interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve, better human beings & families & their environments • Achieve the greatest possible human potential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand oneself, others, & forces shaping one's own & other's circumstances • Reciprocity & mutuality among persons & between families & society • Emancipation from oppressive forces within oneself & in the external world

Educational practices emphasized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apprenticeship, storytelling, didactic, instruction, sanctions, censorship, rites, rituals, ceremonies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scientific research-based interventions intended to enrich lives & prevent & remediate problems or ameliorate their consequences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to learners • Engaging learners in reflection, dialog, & practical reasoning • Collaborating with learners, taking joint action with learners
Roles & power relations of educators & learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authority to educate children or new members of a group or family vested in elders, who may identify “younger elders” or professionals to assist in some settings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authority to identify family problems & educate family members vested in professionals specialized in an area of research-based knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power is shared by participants & educators; educators are facilitators, jointly responsible partners with learners
Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional values & culture sustained as long as external forces & conditions allow • Unexamined ideologies, customs, practices & social structures, whether functional or not, pass from one generation to another • Way of life may cease to exist if external context changes in ways that don't support sustaining it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technological developments that affect family life in various ways • Stress resulting from continual pressure to improve • Improvements often only temporary & may create other problems • Families viewed in terms of labels ascribed to them & dependent on professionals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learner's self & other awareness & understanding increased as is understanding of own & others' contexts; may lead to feeling overwhelmed • Learners' sensitivity to power dynamics increased • Learners see relevance to their lives of knowledge learned

Social evolution of family and family education. The development and evolution of family education occurred in tandem with changes, transitions and evolutions in family life. Lewis-Rowley, Brasher, Moss, Duncan, and Stiles (1993) articulated this well, “*the family as an institution in transition, an evolutionary unit resistant to, yet a captive of, the social environment*” (p. 33, *italics mine*). Social-cultural upheavals, such as industrialization and urbanization, impacted the functions of home and family, which lead to changes in traditional family patterns (Darling, 1987). In other words, preservation approaches that families had utilized for hundreds and thousands of

years were no longer sufficient to meet the needs of families in transition. Pioneers in the family field offered the vision that family relationships could be understood from a scientific perspective and that this knowledge could improve the quality of family life and thereby society at large (Burgess, 1926). “The founders of the family education movement believed that through formal family life education programs, families could learn to deal more adequately with the challenges and stresses of living in a complex and changing society” (Arcus, 1995, p. 336). It was this application of science to family problems in the beginning of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that gave birth to the improvement perspective and resulted in the emergence of family education as a field of practice. According to Arcus, Schvandeveltdt, & Moss (1993):

In more complex and changing societies, the development of new knowledge, advances in technology, and changes in social conditions all create circumstances in which the teachings of previous generations may not be appropriate or sufficient. In such circumstances, families must be supported in their educational efforts by the activities of other institutions and agencies and by the actions of individuals on their own behalf. (p. 1)

Outreach family life education emerged as a field of practice intended to meet this niche. Family life education “involves taking family science principles and practices to the general public—individuals, couples, parents, whole families—” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 3) and enabling them to make informed decisions about their economic, social, and cultural well-being. Family life education efforts are seen as one way to assist families with their educational tasks, improve family living and reduce family-related social problems (Arcus, Schvandeveltdt, & Moss, 1993).

Family life education. Family life education’s purpose is to “strengthen and enrich individual and family well-being” (Thomas & Arcus, 1992, p. 4). This is accomplished by providing information, tools and strategies to motivate and equip families to improve their lives (Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling, & Myers-Bowman, 2011) and by teaching and fostering knowledge and skills that encourage healthy coping when exposed to family problems (Arcus & Thomas, 1993). Family life education is any educational activity “designed to strengthen relationships in the home and foster positive individual, couple, and family development” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 4). Family life education programs seek to meet current needs, to help families solve problems, and to enrich and improve the quality of family life (Darling, 1987).

The Cooperative Extension System, “an educational delivery system that would transmit knowledge about families to the masses” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 7) is one of the most deeply institutionalized, comprehensive and widespread applications of family life education. The Extension System is embedded within the land grant universities in each state, thus the land grant institutions became known as universities *for* the people of the state (Lerner, 1995). The land grant idea was committed to applying the best science possible to the practical problems of families” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 7). The underlying philosophy was to “help people help themselves” by “taking the university to the people” (Rasmussen, 1989, p. vii).

Family support initiatives. Linked with the movement of family life education, especially that of early childhood intervention through parent education, is the family support movement (Weissbourd, 1994). Influenced by a human ecological perspective

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979), “family support focuses on a strengths-based approach to strengthening and empowering families and communities so that they can foster the optimal development of children, youth and adult family members (Family Support America, 2003)” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 10). The family support movement was founded on the following guiding principles (Weissbourd, 1994) that transformed the services, systems, and policies in ways that better support families:

- The most effective approach to families emanates from a perspective of health and well-being.
- The capacity of parents to raise their children effectively is influenced by their own development.
- Child-rearing techniques and values are influenced by cultural and community values and mores.
- Social support networks are essential to family well-being.
- Information about child development enhances parents’ capacity to respond appropriately to their children.
- Families that receive support become empowered to advocate on their own behalf. (pp. 32-33)

Family support services have become part of the family life education landscape.

The goal of family support services is to strengthen families and better equip them to address the challenges and problems of everyday living and family life. The family support movement was characterized by flexibility and responsiveness, constantly and deliberately evolving to meet the changing needs, challenges and circumstances of family

life (Weissbourd, 1994). Core to the family support perspective was an emphasis on using a process approach to serve families.

The process is dynamic, always changing to fit new conditions and circumstances, the principles lay the foundation, and the goal remains constant: to empower the family as its own unit, so that it can support and enable the growth and development of its children (Kagan & Shelley, 1987). (Weissbourd, 1994, p. 33)

The family support perspective in general, and the principles it promoted, specifically, provide a useful framework to strengthen and empower families.

Implementation of a family supportive approach in family life education would use a community-based approach designed to serve not only the needs but also the wishes and desires of families and seek to incorporate, rather than ignore, the variability that naturally occurs in families and communities (Weissbourd, 1994). Family support initiatives strongly rely on the use of collaborations to carry out programs and family life education programs that follow a family-support model often use home visits and peer education as primary methods for teaching principles and skills (Duncan & Goddard, 2011).

Family life education methodology. According to the National Council on Family Relations website, family life education methodology is concerned with "an understanding of the general philosophy and broad principles of family life education in conjunction with the ability to plan, implement, and evaluate such educational programs" (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 396). Family life education methodology is primarily concerned with the delivery of educational services to families; the instructional approach, often referred to as pedagogy or andragogy; the educational process. Whereas

the family life education content is the “what” the methodology is the “how.” Family life education methodology includes elements such as: ability to plan and implement a program; skill in the employment of a variety of educational techniques, strategies, methods and materials, particularly those that emphasize application of material; knowledge of adult education principles; ability to identify appropriate sources of evidence-based information; aptitude to develop and adapt educational materials so they are culturally-relevant; demonstrate sensitivity to diversity and community needs, concerns, values and interests; establish and maintain appropriate boundaries; and the capacity to evaluate programs (Duncan & Goddard, 2011). Arcus and Thomas (1993) identified that at the crux of family life education is the family life educator:

Most authors have acknowledged that in many ways the family life educator *is* the program, as it is the educator who selects, designs, and implements the program; selects and uses the resources, materials, and activities; and responds to or ignores the interests and needs of the audience. Thus in all ways it is the family life educator who bears responsibility for the shaping of a program and for the nature of the educational experience for the participants. (p. 26)

Thus, the family life educator’s competency, skills, strategies, philosophies, and approach are at the core of family life education. Reliance on family life education methodology requires that family life educators have the ability to respond to local circumstances and situations in appropriate ways. Quality control is much easier to establish using fidelity to a prescribed and pre-established curriculum or program rather than relying on the qualities and characteristics of the educator. However, families are served in more relevant and responsive ways when the educator has the freedom and ability to tailor educational endeavors to the individuals and families being served, rather

than relying on the “one-size fits all” approach of traditional programs. Core to the practice of family life education methodology are principles to guide educational efforts; educational approaches; as well as specific educational methods, techniques and strategies. These core components of methodology are reviewed here.

Family life education principles. Arcus, Schvaneveldt, and Moss (1992)

articulated operational principles of family life education intended to serve as bases for or guides to professional actions and obligations. “Some of these are descriptive principles, purporting to describe how family life education *is* carried out, while others are more prescriptive, indicating what family life educators *should do* as they educate for family living” (Arcus, Schvaneveldt & Moss, 1992, p. 14). The operational principles identified by these authors include: (a) Family life education is relevant to individuals and families throughout the life span. (b) Family life education should be based on the needs of individuals and families. (c) Family life education is a multidisciplinary area of study and multiprofessional in its practice. (d) Family life education programs are offered in many different settings. (e) Family life education takes an educational rather than a therapeutic approach. (f) Family life education should present and respect differing family values. (g) Qualified educators are crucial to the successful realization of the goals of family life education.

Educational rather than therapeutic approach. The fifth operational principle, “family life education takes an educational rather than a therapeutic approach,” is particularly salient to this discussion regarding family life education methodology and thus warrants further explanation. Although the conceptual distinctions between

education and therapy are often blurry, the purpose of action and activity in family life education is to educate or equip rather than repair (Arcus, Schvaneveldt & Moss, 1993). Doherty (1995) developed the levels of family involvement model to distinguish between family education, on one hand, and family therapy on the other. His model articulates five levels of involvement with families including: (a) minimal emphasis on family, (b) information and advice, (c) feelings and support, (d) brief focused intervention and (e) family therapy. Doherty clearly indicated that only the first three levels are appropriate for family life education, with a few advanced family life education professionals occasionally moving into the fourth level (Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling and Myers-Bowman, 2011). However, the fifth level is reserved for therapists only. This model was the first to represent the spectrum of professional services to families and an initial attempt at describing the relationship between family education and family therapy. However, family life educators have recently, raised concerns regarding Doherty's (1995) model.

Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling and Myers-Bowman (2011) identified that the levels of family involvement model conceptualizes family life education and family therapy in a hierarchical relationship. Although it is not stated directly, it is implied through the vertical and additive nature of the levels of family involvement model that all the lower levels are subsumed within the training and skills of family therapy. This presumes that therapists are qualified to provide educational experiences; however, family life education training is specific and unique from therapy training so most therapists are not equipped to intervene educationally. Therefore, these authors developed

the domains of family practice (DFP) model to more accurately represent “both the overlap and uniqueness of FLE and FT without placing them in a hierarchy” (Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling and Myers-Bowman, 2011, p. 359). In addition to family life education and family therapy, this model also incorporates family case management as an additional domain of family practice. This model recognizes that FLE, FT, and FCM are related but distinct professions that each “recognize the importance of the family context but have different viewpoints, use different tools, and take different paths as they work with families” (p. 370). The value of this model is its recognition that there are a variety of ways to serve families and while they are interrelated each has its own contribution to make in strengthening families. So then, what is the unique contribution of an educational approach to serving families?

Education for living. There exists a great deal of diversity in the conceptualization of “education” generally speaking. Is it a matter of imparting facts, of inculcating habits, of training in skills, of developing capacities, of forming the character, or some combination of these? The term “education” can be applied very narrowly, in a purely cognitive orientation intended to impart knowledge, or very broadly, construing all life experiences to be educative. The word “education” is a derivative of

the Latin verb *duco*, which means *to lead, conduct, draw, or bring*; together with the prefix *ex*, which means *out of, or from*. The concept is clearly to draw or bring out from the student what is already within him, in terms of capability or potential—to create a climate or environment in which he can develop and utilize his inherent capacity for relational growth and development. (Mace, 1981, p. 599)

Unfortunately, this is not how education is typically conceptualized. Instead, of developing and cultivating what is already present, education is often associated with the

dissemination of information in an attempt to impart knowledge upon others. However, it is important to distinguish between *learning for knowing* (knowledge) and *learning for doing*, or more accurately for family life education, *learning for living* (Mace, 1981). The distinction between the two lies in the fact that *learning for knowing* is knowledge for knowledge sake. The knowledge is the end, whereas *learning for doing/living*, knowledge is only the means toward another end, specifically that of applying the knowledge so that *learning for knowing* is transformed into *learning for living*. “The application of knowledge is the end goal of family life education” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 90). Therefore, knowledge is intended to be a vehicle on the road toward behavior change (Mace, 1981). In alignment with this goal, various analyses of the concept of education have revealed that the purpose of education is to empower the learner to use knowledge in making informed, responsible choices and in acting on the basis of reason (e.g., Peters, 1967/2010). In other words, if behavior change and positive end results are the ultimate goals of educational interventions, these interventions “are likely to require attitude changes, knowledge gain, skill development, increased perceptions of support, and self-reflection regarding feelings and motivations” (Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling, & Myers-Bowman, 2011, p. 359).

According to Thomas and Arcus (1992), this conception of education indicates that it is inappropriate to equate family life education only with information delivery, with the passive acquisition of facts or with training in skill development. Further, they suggested that, if family life education is to count as *education*, then it must be centrally concerned with the development of justified beliefs and the capacities required to arrive at these beliefs. This implies attention to particular educational goals and practices in family life education and will

influence the selection, organization, and presentation of program content. (Arcus, Schvaneveldt & Moss, 1993, p. 19)

Most explanations of family life education have referred to several different dimensions of learning (Arcus, Schvaneveldt & Moss, 1993). Family life education is intended to help individuals and families “1) gain *knowledge* about concepts and principles relevant to family living, 2) explore personal *attitudes and values* and understand and accept the attitudes and values of others, and 3) develop interpersonal *skills* which contribute to family well-being” (Arcus, 1990, p. 1). These three educational dimensions are widely accepted as goals of family life education. Indeed, family life education is most effective when families are educated in the multiple areas of information, skills, feelings, and support (Myers-Walls, Ballard, Darling, & Myers-Bowman, 2011). In his 2011 Margaret Arcus Award Address at the annual National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) conference, Wally Goddard, a professor of Family Life with the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service, suggested that it is time to move beyond skills, often viewed as the primary vehicle to behavior change for contemporary family life education interventions. His argument was that exercising interpersonal skills, such as communication skills, often require personal character strengths, such as courage, self-restraint, generosity, good judgment and justice. Goddard’s message was that family life educator’s need to move beyond just building skills toward developing character strengths such as humility and compassion, which nurture relationships. While this emphasis on building character strengths is not yet widely accepted in the field of family life education, it is reflective of the larger positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) that seeks to focus on

cultivating character strengths as opposed to solely attempting to ameliorate disorders (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

In addition to the operational principles that were identified by Arcus, Schvaneveldt, and Moss (1992), more recently, Goddard and Smith (2011) have articulated a statement of principles, or underlying assumptions that can be used to guide the development and professional practice of family life educators as well as to clarify thinking or develop programs. For brevity's sake, these principles are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. *A Statement of Principles*

The Principle	The Description
Order	Behavior has a predictable consequence
Empathy	A fundamental act of caring is taking time to look at the world through another person's eyes
Agency	People are free to make choices
Momentum	The pattern of one's life is defined by the accumulation of choices
Loss	Sometimes the best choice to sustain and affirm life requires risk or sacrifice
Integrity	Acting consistent with internal principles of right and wrong and out of compassion for all life builds healthy relationships
Movement	Life is movement
Goodness	There is an inclination in the human spirit toward life-sustaining behavior
Chaos	The world is not always tidy
Readiness for Change	Problems are best solved when family members are mentally and emotionally ready to grow and when family members are feeling safe and valued
Discovery	There are always more possibilities than our personal experiences suggest
Synergy	When we act together we discover possibilities that none of us would discover alone
Legacy	Our ultimate well-being depends on making an investment in others
Evil	There is potential for evil in people

Family life educational approaches. Duncan and Goddard (2011) identified many educational approaches, reflecting various teaching philosophies and paradigms, which may be utilized in family life education. While there are similarities to Thomas and Lein's (2009) family education perspectives, the approaches are distinct from the perspectives as the approaches describe the roles of the family life educator. The approaches identified include: (a) an expert approach, (b) a facilitator approach (c) a collaborator approach, (d), a critical inquirer approach (e) an interventionist approach, and (f) an eclectic approach. Each of these approaches will be briefly summarized below.

The role of the family life educator from an expert approach is “a subject matter authority whose function it is to transmit a fixed body of knowledge to the learner” (Price, 2000, p. 3). Accordingly, materials tend to be highly structured with predetermined curricula, leading to the acquisition of predetermined knowledge and skills (Duncan & Goddard, 2011). The recent movement toward evidence-based curricula and programs in family life education fits within this educational approach, which aligns closely to Thomas and Lein's (2009) improvement oriented family education perspective and Doherty's (2000) notion of a trickle-down research and practice discussed previously.

Family life educators operating within the facilitator approach, tend to “act more as facilitators of individualized learning than as disseminators of fixed knowledge” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 17). The facilitator seeks to help participants gain access to knowledge they already have within them. Learning is viewed as essentially a personal, self-directed endeavor and while disciplinary knowledge is important, it is not privileged

but rather a tool used to achieve the ultimate goal of self-actualizing individuals (Elias & Merriam, 1995). This approach fits the personalistic paradigm (Czaplewski & Jorgenson, 1993) and humanist educational philosophy (Price, 2000), which emphasize personal growth and self-actualization as well as the holistic development of persons toward their full potentials, respectively (Duncan & Goddard, 2011). A related philosophical orientation that fits within this approach is the progressive philosophy, which emphasizes holistic, lifelong, life-wide education and an experiential, problem-solving approach to learning (Price, 2000).

Falling somewhere between the expert and facilitator approaches (Myers-Walls, 2000) is the collaborator approach. “This approach recognizes that both family life educators and participants bring specialized knowledge to the learning experience. The educator brings research-based principles to the learning environment, and the participants bring their own lived experience regarding these principles” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 18). The educator will likely have a prepared agenda and/or curriculum, but these materials will be tailored to the expressed needs of the individuals and families being served. Often Extension services, as described previously, are an example of the collaborative approach to family life education.

An essential practice of an educator utilizing the critical inquiry approach is to use critical reflection and rational discourse (Tisdell & Taylor, 2000). “Educators using a critical inquirer approach use questions to help participants think critically about the issues that are presented” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 17). This perspective acknowledges that individuals and families have a responsibility to make a meaningful

contribution to society and thus need to critically assess life situations and social conditions in order to gain insight into issues and to solve socially relevant problems (Czaplewski & Jorgenson, 1993). This approach is tied to the critical/humanist philosophical orientation, which stresses “becoming an autonomous, critical and socially responsible thinker through an emphasis on rationality (Tisdell & Taylor, 2000, p. 8).

Interventionist-oriented family life educators are not merely knowledge transmitters or discussion facilitators (Guernsey & Guernsey, 1981), instead they “are change agents; they seek cognitive, attitudinal, and behavior change, even transformation of participants through education. They believe that education for family life goes beyond simply learning for knowing but extends to learning for living (Mace, 1981)” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 18). Interventionist approaches can be traced back to both behaviorist (Czaplewski & Jorgenson, 1993) and radical educational (Price, 2000) philosophies. According to Elias and Merriam (1995), a behaviorist-oriented educator is a “behavioral engineer who plans in detail the conditions necessary to bring about desired behavior” (p. 88). This approach is prevalent among family life education programs that build skills, such as those that facilitate communication or conflict resolution. “Radical educational philosophies form the basis of educational strategies aimed at bringing about social change and combating social, political and economic oppression of society” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 19). These kinds of practices strive to raise the consciousness of individuals and families’ about societal conditions that negatively affect them and encourage activities that may bring about changes in those conditions (Price, 2000). The radical educational philosophy has roots in critical theory and critical science.

The final approach identified by Duncan and Goddard (2011), the eclectic approach, is really just a combination of all of the aforementioned approaches. Educators coming from this approach “would use elements of all the approaches, depending on the situation” (p. 19). As is the case with most family life education work, the context will likely dictate which educational approach is most appropriate for a given circumstance or situation. Therefore, it is advantageous for family life educators to have all of the educational approaches presented here at one’s disposal to ensure that they utilize the best possible approach for each situation.

Family life education instructional methods. In addition to the approach or style the family life educator utilizes, another important component of family life education methodology involves the particular educational methods used to deliver the content. Hughes (1995) identified that “the translation of content results in instructional and implementation processes that are essential to the teaching of the content” (p. 74). Family life education pedagogy/andragogy tends to emphasize an interactive dimension and reflect concern for both cognitive (intellectual) and affective (feelings and attitudes) development (Arcus & Thomas, 1993; Arcus, Schvaneveldt & Moss, 1993). It is useful for family life educators to be familiar with general instructional principles as well as concrete methods for the delivery of family life education content.

There is a substantial and growing science of instructional design (Duncan & Goddard, 2011). David Merrill (2001) has identified five core principles of instruction that are substantiated by research and provide practical recommendations for the instruction of family life education programming. The five principles of instruction

include: (a) instruction addresses real problems, (b) activating existing knowledge, (c) the power of demonstration, (d) applying new knowledge, and (e) new knowledge integrated into the learner's world.

The first principle states that “learning is facilitated when the learner is engaged in solving real-world problems” (Merrill, 2001, p. 461). Because “family life is filled with real-world problems” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 86) it is not difficult to apply this principle in a family life education context. Many of the issues and concepts addressed in family life education programs are immediately relevant. Merrill's second principle is that learning is facilitated when existing knowledge is activated as a foundation for new knowledge. This involves asking participants to recall a past event or experience that may serve as an example of the concept being discussed. This brings “existing knowledge to a more conscious level and organizes it into a form that can guide intentional action” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 88). The third principle of instruction states that “learning is promoted when the instruction demonstrates what is to be learned rather than merely telling information about what is to be learned” (Merrill, 2002, p. 47). Because “habit regularly trumps new learning” (Duncan & Goddard, 2011, p. 89), it is useful to demonstrate the concepts that are being discussed in class. Use of an illustrative example that asks participants to respond to a situation and relies on the educator to reframe the situation using the concepts being presented is often a useful demonstration process that invites new thinking. Merrill's (2001) fourth principle states that “learning is facilitated when the learner is required to use his or her new knowledge to solve problems” (p. 463). In other words, participants need practice applying knowledge to

their lives. Practice can occur in both instructional and real-world settings (Duncan & Goddard, 2011). Family life educators can help structure and guide application of concepts and principles. Merrill (2001) identified that relevant, appropriate practice is the most neglected aspect of effective instruction. Habits developed and reinforced over the course of a lifetime are difficult to replace with application of a new principle. Therefore, new skills require extensive practice, what Gottman (1994) refers to as overlearning, to increase the likelihood that they will be employed in challenging situations rather than falling back into unproductive and over ritualized patterns and habits. Merrill's (2000) fifth and final principle is that "learning is facilitated when new knowledge is integrated into the learner's world" (p. 2). Individuals and families will benefit most when they make intentional efforts to integrate new knowledge and skills into their family's lives. Merrill's instructional principles serve as a good orientation or framework toward the instructional process generally speaking; however, it is useful to also consider specific methods that are commonly employed in family life education settings.

Duncan and Goddard (2011) reviewed commonly used methods which include:

- (a) leading group discussion, which invites active involvement in the learning process;
- (b) use of personal narratives or stories from one's own life, which grounds abstract principles in reality;
- (c) skill training, which helps individuals develop and practice skills that may enhance family functioning;
- (d) model and practice a family council/meeting, which provides opportunities for families to clarify family responsibilities and expectations;
- (e) role-playing, which is a technique that can be used to show participants how people would act or respond in a given situation and is also used to practice a

principle that has been taught; (f) use of social media such as movie and television clips, music, pictures, books, plays, short stories, comic strips and cartoons, all of which are engaging ways to illustrate important principles, philosophies and depict themes; (g) games, often used as ice breakers or as an interactive quiz game used to review concepts; (h) object lessons, which are often used to illustrate a concept or cause participants to reflect on and question assumptions in ways that may promote action; (i) homework assignments, learning contracts and idea reinforcers are all ways to encourage participants to transfer the content covered in workshops to their everyday life; and finally (j) myth versus reality, which offers the opportunity to correct mistaken perceptions of family issues that may lead to unrealistic expectations that negatively influence family life (Duncan & Goddard, 2011).

The preceding section has provided an overview of the field of family education, with particular emphasis on family life education methodology. Some of the principles, approaches, instructional processes, and methods of family life education have been reviewed to provide a sense of the current family life education methodology landscape. Next I discuss epistemology of practice as a paradigm that fundamentally orients the practice of family life education.

Epistemology of Practice

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with knowing and understanding reality (Reybold, 2002). Epistemologies are essentially theories of knowledge concerned with what constitutes legitimate knowledge and how one comes to know what they claim to know (Schön, 1995a). Rosenberg (2012) described

epistemology as “the inquiry into the nature, extent and justification of human knowledge” (p. 2). Epistemology has traditionally been reduced to a dualism between mind and matter that is essentially concerned with the objectivity of knowledge.

Some philosophers argue that true knowledge should be objective, which basically means that it should be an accurate depiction of the object – the ‘things’ – in the world. Other philosophers argue that knowledge is a human construction, that it is a product of the human mind, and that it is therefore ultimately subjective. (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 11)

This dualism presents a dichotomy between mind vs matter and subjectivity vs objectivity in such a way that it establishes an “either/or” approach that requires philosophers to pledge allegiance to either an objective approach to knowledge, which views that a single reality exists in the world or a subjective approach to knowledge, which understands knowledge as a construction of the mind and therefore no single reality exists but instead there are multiple realities.

The practical significance of epistemology is that how knowledge and reality are conceptualized influences action. “An individual’s *way of knowing* predisposes a *way of being*” (Reybold, 2002, p. 537, *italics original*). The link between knowing and being, knowledge and action, theory and practice is the core concern of an epistemology of practice. An epistemology of practice therefore identifies the relationship between knowledge and action. It describes how knowledge informs practice (and vice versa). Epistemologies are built into institutional and professional structures and practices (Schön, 1995a) and tend to be taken for granted ways of operating. Therefore, it is crucial to identify which epistemology of practice governs contemporary practice of family life education as well as consider alternative epistemologies. Donald Schön, widely known

for developing the notion of reflective practice, provides a critique of the positivistic epistemology of practice and its influence on social science practitioners. Therefore, his ideas provide the framework for the following description of the positivistic epistemology of practice.

Positivistic epistemology of practice. To date, family life education practice has been dominated by a positivistic epistemology of practice (Smart, 2009), which Donald Schön (1983) referred to as “technical rationality,” that developed during the nineteenth century alongside the rise of the scientific and technological revolution and has served as the dominant epistemology of practice among professions. The three principal doctrines of Positivism, identified by Auguste Comte, are central for understanding the positivistic epistemology of practice. The first was the conviction that empirical science was the only source of positive knowledge. The second, was the intention to eradicate mysticism, superstition, and other forms of “pseudo-knowledge” and the third, was the agenda of extending scientific knowledge and technical control to human society.

As the scientific world-view gained dominance, so did the idea that human progress would be achieved by harnessing science to create technology for the achievement of human ends...the professions had come to be seen as vehicles for the application of the new sciences to the achievement of human progress.
(Schön, 1983, p. 31)

Within this scheme, theory became the domain where knowledge is acquired (through empirical science) and practice became the domain where that knowledge is applied (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). The relationship of theory to practice is of a hierarchical or vertical nature with theory being held in higher esteem or value than its

practical counterpart. Within technical rationality, practical knowledge was reduced to the knowledge of the relationship of means to ends in such a way that the question was reduced to an instrumental question about the means best suited to achieve the desired ends (Schön, 1983). As scientific understandings of cause and effect were developed, causal relationships could be mapped onto instrumental ones so that the means appropriate to the desired ends could be selected by use of science-based technique (Schön, 1983). Therefore, in a positivist philosophy, rigorous professional practice is viewed as essentially technical, “the application of research-based knowledge to the solution of problems of instrumental choice...Its rigor depends on the use of replicable techniques derived from scientific research, based on knowledge that is objective, consensual, cumulative, and convergent” (Schön, 1995b, pp. 32-33). The hierarchy between the generation and application of knowledge within a positivistic epistemology of practice is the origin of the “trickle down model” (Doherty, 2000).

The professions of engineering and medicine achieved great success in reliably adjusting means to ends and became models of instrumental, technical practice (Schön, 1983). It was this technical rationality rooted in a positivistic epistemology of practice that is responsible for the trend towards evidence-based practices that became prevalent in the medical community. In an attempt to achieve the same prestige and apparent success that the medical field attained, the social science or “helping” professions, such as education, social work and family education, embraced similar notions elevating evidence-based curricula and evidence-based practice as the gold standard for serving individuals and families. However, those professions in the social sciences rarely deal

with technical problems that are clear, stable and certain, as is often the case in the medical field. Rather, the phenomena that social science professions, such as family education, attend to tend to be complex, uncertain, instable, unique and laden with value-conflicts, what Schön (1995b), refers to as “indeterminate zones of practice” (p. 34). The philosophical underpinnings of the positivistic epistemology of practice and methods of technical rationality are not well-suited for dealing with problems of complexity, uncertainty, instability, idiosyncrasies, and value and objective conflicts. Instead, an epistemology of practice that integrates science and experience, theory and practice, as well as knowledge and action would better allow family life educators to serve families in relevant and practical ways.

Pragmatic epistemology of practice. In contrast to the dominant positivistic epistemology of practice that dominates many professions, including family life education today, this study employs a pragmatic epistemology of practice. Pragmatists address philosophical questions “by drawing on the resources offered by our practices, and with reference to the consequences they have for our lives” (Bacon, 2012, p. 1). Therefore, its primary concern is attending to the practical. Pragmatism incorporates the practical and cognitive, along with the somatic and social in order to attend to the “coherent richness of lived experience” (Shusterman, 1997, p. 7). “Pragmatists focus on the importance of taking seriously the particularities of human practices, but there remain significant differences about what doing so means” (Bacon, 2012, pp. 9-10).

Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that originated in the United States around 1870 (Hookway, 2013 & Haack, 2006). The most influential of the ‘classical pragmatists’

were the natural scientist and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), the psychologist and philosopher William James (1842–1910) and the philosopher, psychologist, and educationalist John Dewey (1859–1952) (Bacon, 2012; Biesta & Burbles, 2003; Hookway, 2013). “Both Pierce and James conceived of pragmatism less as a body of doctrine than as a method: the pragmatic maxim of meaning” (Haack, 2006, p. 9). Adherence to the pragmatic maxim bring philosophic questions into the realm of experience (Bacon, 2012). However,

Peirce and James had rather different understandings of the pragmatic maxim: According to Peirce’s statement of the maxim, meaning consists in the *pragmatische*, i.e., experiential, consequences of a concept’s applying; according to James’s, it consists in the pragmatic, i.e., the practical, consequences of belief. (Haack, 2006, p. 10)

Peirce's canonical statement of his maxim in ‘How to Make our Ideas Clear’ “Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (Peirce, 1878/2006, p. 138). In other words, the meaning of a concept is a matter of the practical effects of acting in accordance with it or said differently the “practical consequences” of a belief (Bacon, 2012). According to Peirce, the pragmatic maxim provides a method for determining the general character of a concept through the establishment of the meaning of an idea as explained by the observable course of action, which follows from it (Bacon, 2012). It is the issue of generality that marks the significant difference between Peirce and James versions of pragmatism. Whereas practical, experiential consequences constitute the entirety of the meaning of the concept for Peirce, “James allows that the meaning of a belief can

legitimately include the psychological consequences of holding that belief” (Bacon, 2012, p. 28). James does not restrict the practical consequences of a belief to what can be observed, but instead extends Peirce’s maxim to include any kind of consequence in the life of the believer.

For both Peirce and James, the pragmatist maxim was the core of pragmatism (Hookway, 2013); however, pragmatism is more than just a maxim or principle. As a philosophical tradition, it provides a set of philosophical views and attitudes oriented toward the practical. The challenge with pragmatism is that “there is not one pragmatism but many. Not only did the pragmatists cover a wide range of different philosophical topics—from logic, methodology and metaphysics to ethics, politics and education—there are also important differences among their ideas” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 4). For clarity’s sake, this dissertation study is employing John Dewey’s version of pragmatism, which will be briefly summarized now.

Deweyan pragmatism. Dewey embraces a conception of pragmatism as a doctrine that “reality possesses practical character and that this character is most efficaciously expressed in the function of intelligence” (Dewey, 1908/1998, p. 126). Dewey’s version of pragmatism utilizes a “both/and” rather than “either/or” approach to knowledge and knowledge acquisition. As such, a caveat is useful to address the nature of pragmatism and its association as an epistemology of practice.

Calling Dewey’s ideas about knowledge an epistemology is somewhat misleading if – and the “if” is crucial here – one thinks of epistemology as the branch of philosophy that tries to give an answer to the question of how our (immaterial) mind can acquire knowledge of a (material) world outside our mind. One of

Dewey's key points is that this question only makes sense if one assumes the distinction between mind and matter, and between "inside" and "outside," is an inevitable distinction, a given for all of philosophy. (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 9)

Dewey replaced the assumptions on which modern epistemology had been based and offered a theory of knowing that was not premised on the "mind-world scheme" (Biesta, 2010). This dualistic view of reality, the notion that reality consists of two different substances, mind and matter, is based on the thoughts of Rene Descartes (1596-1650) who "argued that reality consisted of two kinds of 'stuff': *res extensa*, the 'stuff' that occupies space, and *res cogitans*, the mental 'stuff' of the human cogito (the knowing mind)," (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 9) assumes that this is the case. As a result, philosophy is fraught with traditional philosophical dualisms, such as: mind versus matter, theory versus practice, reason versus experience, and fact versus value. However, Dewey distrusted all dichotomies and dualisms (Haack, 2006).

Dewey insisted that philosophy must recognize that humans do not exist apart from their world but are rather social beings interacting with our environment (Bacon, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary that the subject-object, theory-practice, mind-matter dualisms that have marked philosophy since Descartes be entirely done away with. At the heart of the mistaken distinction between the world and our experience of it, is the 'spectator theory of knowledge,' which is the idea that "reality possesses an intrinsic nature and that knowledge is a matter of seeking to represent it accurately' (Bacon, 2012, p. 52). Dewey critiques traditional philosophy, particularly these errors of modern epistemology, and proposes a new approach, which does away with the dualistic

philosophy of consciousness (Biesta & Burbules, 2003) that manifests as the false dualism of mind (knowing) and matter (seeing). Dewey's version of pragmatism

provides a different account of knowledge and a different understanding of the way in which human beings can acquire knowledge...Dewey's approach...deals with questions of knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge within the framework of a philosophy of *action*, in fact, a philosophy that takes action as its *most basic* category. This connection between knowledge and action is particularly relevant for those who approach questions about knowledge primarily from a practical angle. (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 9, *italics original*)

Because he does not build his understanding of knowledge on the traditional dualism of mind and matter, perhaps it is more accurate to consider Dewey's approach an anti-epistemology (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). However, because he remains concerned with theories of knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge, I find that it is not incompatible to consider Deweyan pragmatism as a viable epistemology of practice for family life education. Although, I cannot help but wonder whether Dewey would find the concept of a "pragmatic epistemology of practice" as laden with redundancy. What follows is a fuller account of Dewey's philosophy of action, highlighting concepts that are particularly salient to a pragmatic epistemology of practice oriented toward family life education.

Practical reality & transactionalism. Peirce's, rather than James's, work influenced Dewey's version of pragmatism (Haack, 2006). "One of the key ideas of Dewey's pragmatism (consistent with Peirce's theory of meaning) is that reality only 'reveals' itself as a result of the activities – the 'doings' – of the organism" (Biesta &

Burbles, 2003, p. 10). In other words, reality possesses a practical character (Dewey, 1908/1998) that manifests itself in the interaction between humans and their environment.

The interactions that are of specific importance for Dewey are the interactions between the living organism and its environment. Human action, Dewey argued, is always “the *interaction* between elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social” (1922b, 9). The interaction – or as he later would call it *transaction* – of organism and environment is an active, adaptive, and adjustive process in which the organism seeks to maintain a dynamic balance with its ever-changing environment. (Biesta & Burbles, 2003, p. 10, *italics original*)

For Dewey, reality is only experienced as a function of the organism-environment transaction (Biesta & Burbules, 2003), referred to as transactional realism (Sleeper, 1986). Dewey’s transactional realism asserts that knowledge is a construction, not of the human mind but rather a construction that is located in the organism-environment transaction itself (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Dewey contends that even our seemingly private experiences and inner thoughts depend upon our relations to the external world. According to Dewey (1925/2013), “that character of everyday experience which has been most systematically ignored by philosophy is the extent to which it is saturated with the results of social intercourse and communication” (pp. xii-xiii). Bacon (2012) described Dewey’s stance this way, “although our minds contain thoughts and ideas, they are not the creation of a private consciousness but presuppose meanings which have their origin in social life” (p. 52). In other words, our knowledge is both based on our interactions with the physical, material world and constructed through our social interactions with others. This is what lead Biesta and Burbules (2003) to state that “Dewey’s transactional

realism, in other words, is also a ‘transactional constructivism’ because it can be argued that our knowledge is at the very same time a construction *and* based on reality” (p. 11).

“According to Dewey’s transactional approach, knowledge manifests itself first of all in the way in which organisms transact with and respond to changes in their environment” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 11). This transaction is what we typically refer to in everyday language as experience. “Experience itself primarily consists of the active relations subsisting between a human being and his natural and social surroundings” (Dewey, 1916/2009, p. 194). In his book *Experience and Education*, Dewey outlines experiential education, the educative role or function that experience can, though does not always, serve. For Dewey, the basis of education is, “an individual who evolves and develops in a natural and human environment, an individual who can be educated” (Dewey, 1925/1998, p. 12). So then, for Dewey, the transaction between individuals and their environment is central to his understanding of the connection between experience and knowledge (Biesta, 2010). Given that Dewey is a highly regarded philosopher of education, a lengthy excerpt from his book, *Democracy and Education*, in which he outlines his theory of education, explains his pragmatic conception of knowledge as the manifestation of the transaction between organism and environment as an educational endeavor.

The theory of the method of knowing which is advanced in these pages may be termed pragmatic. Its essential feature is to maintain the continuity of knowing with an activity which purposely modifies the environment. It holds that knowledge in its strict sense of something possessed consists of our intellectual resources – of all the habits that render our action intelligent. Only that which has been organized into our disposition so as to enable us to adapt the environment to

our needs and to adapt our aims and desires to the situation in which we live is really knowledge. Knowledge is not just something which we are now conscious of, but consists of the dispositions we consciously use in understanding what now happens. Knowledge as an act is bringing some of our dispositions to consciousness with a view to straightening out a perplexity, by conceiving the connection between ourselves and the world in which we live. (Dewey, 1916/2009, p. 243)

The essential principle of Dewey's transactional approach is not unique, but aligns with the basic premise of human ecological approach, which emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their environments (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993/2009). An ecological approach has been applied to and revolutionized our understandings of other phenomena. For example, Urie Bronfenbrenner developed an ecological account of human development that emphasized the contextual nature of human growth and development (this will be reviewed in greater detail later in the literature review). Similarly, it could be argued that Dewey's transactionalism is a contextual, ecological conception of the nature of knowledge. An understanding of knowledge as being contextually and ecologically constructed through the transaction that occurs between the person and his/her environment enables the distinction between mind and matter, theory and practice, knowledge and action to be transcended.

The theory and practice continuum. The notion that knowledge is derived from a higher source and possesses higher worth than practical activity can be traced back to the conceptions of experience and of reason formulated by Plato and Aristotle (Dewey, 1916/2009).

Dewey's epistemological writings are critical, not just of Cartesianism, but of the whole epistemological tradition from Plato through Descartes to his own contemporaries. The idea that the only knowledge worth having is certain knowledge, Dewey suggests, is the legacy of the sharp dichotomy of theory and practice embodied in the slave-owning culture of ancient Greece. Plato and Aristotle undertook a rational systemization of religious ideas, eliminating the mythical, articulating the ideals of science and reason. But the price was the glorification of the invariant, the certain, the intellectual, and a denigration of the changeable, the merely probable, the practical. This whole tradition, according to Dewey, rests on a false analogy of knowing and seeing – the Spectator Theory of knowledge.” (Haack, 2006, p. 35)

Since that time, the intellectual and the practical have come to be dichotomized, which is manifested in the “separation of knowing and doing” (Dewey, 1916/2009, p. 186). This dualism takes many forms: intellectual vs practical, reason vs experience, theory vs practice, and knowledge vs action. The dualism of theory vs practice is particularly salient and has devastating effects for those in applied fields, such as family life education. However, the reframing of the relationship between theory and practice that Deweyan pragmatism explicates offers hope for the integration of theory and practice and more democratic relationship between scholars, practitioners and families.

According to Dewey, there is no epistemological distinction between the theoretical and practical realms. “The domain of knowledge and the domain of human action are not separate domains, but are intimately connected: that knowledge emerges from action and feeds back into action, and that it does not have a separate existence or function” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 15). For Dewey, “knowledge is intimately and necessarily connected with action” (Biesta, 2010). The difference between experience

and knowledge is concerned with the occurrence of experience (Biesta, 2010). The office of knowledge signifies a search “for those relations upon which the occurrence of real qualities and values depends” (Dewey, 1929, p. 83). Therefore, knowledge is fundamentally concerned with conditions and consequences, or said another way, is concerned with the relations between actions and consequences (Biesta, 2010).

Dewey insists that knowing (theory) is not isolated from experience (practice), but is itself a kind of practice (Haack, 2006). Theory and practice are two different practices and both practices contain a combination of both knowing (knowledge) and doing (action), the only difference is a matter of emphasis (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). From this perspective, the relationship between theory and practice changes drastically, which allows Dewey to re-conceptualize theory and practice. He prioritizes the practical and conceives of theory (knowledge) as a function of action (Biesta & Burbules, 2003).

In this respect Dewey indeed seems to argue for a complete reversal of the traditional conception of the relationship between theory and practice. If, however, we follow Dewey in his claim that *theory* and *practice* are two different *practices*, then it seems more precise to say that Dewey denounced the idea that there is a *vertical* relationship between the two, in either direction, but rather that this relationship should be understood as a *horizontal* one. (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 87, *italics original*)

Conceptualizing the relationship between theory and practice as a horizontal rather than vertical one counteracts/demolishes the hierarchical relationship between academic scholars interested in empirically testing theory and generating knowledge, practitioners interested in the delivery of knowledge and families interested in the application of knowledge. Instead theory and practice become a truly integrative

enterprise. Dewey's pragmatic conceptualization of the relationship between theory and practice liberates researchers, practitioners and families from their restrictive roles as producers, deliverers, and consumers of knowledge, respectively. Instead, they become collaborators in the co-creation of practically relevant theory and theoretically substantiated practice. Dewey's approach opens up the possibility for a less authoritarian and more democratic approach to the relationship between theory and practice, science and society, and family life education research and practice.

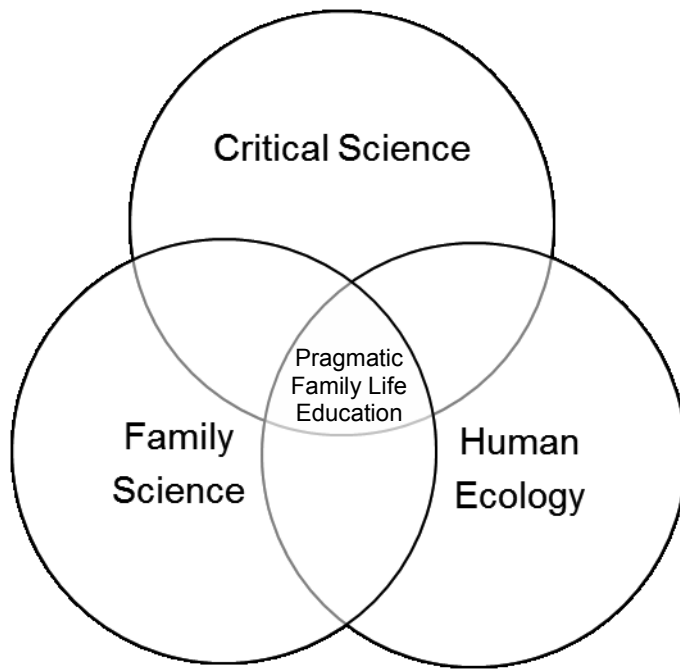
“Dewey invested so much time and energy developing a new understanding of knowledge...because he thought that the development of such a theory was crucial for addressing some of the most profound problems of modern life” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 13). This dissertation is an attempt to utilize Deweyan pragmatism as a paradigm that guides the practice of family life education in order to address some of the profound challenges that families experience in contemporary family life. This study aims to provide a forward looking conceptualization of family life education that moves toward achieving the potential in an attempt to advance the field. It seeks to provide direction for the field by integrating dominant influences from the past. The following section will identify the conceptual framework that serves as the overarching orientation for this dissertation as well as the philosophical and practical frameworks of family life education that fall within the overall conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework: Pragmatic Family Life Education

In line with a pragmatic epistemology of practice, multiple theories, ideas and perspectives will be drawn upon to examine their contributions to this pragmatically-

oriented approach to family life education. What is to follow is the conceptual framework that will identify the philosophical and practical foundations for a pragmatic model of family life education. In describing the role conceptual frameworks serve in qualitative research, Maxwell (2005) described the conceptual framework as a “system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories” (p. 33). Maxwell also suggested that the most productive conceptual frameworks are often those that integrate different approaches, disciplines, or theories that no one had previously connected. This is an attempt to do just that, to synthesize knowledge, concepts, and ideas from a variety of disciplines and sciences that provide a conceptual framework that informs a pragmatic model of family life education.

Philosophical framework. Duncan and Goddard (2011) identified that “when we fail to tie FLE practice to philosophical underpinnings, our efforts may take on a mindless, ungrounded quality” (p. 20). The philosophical framework that guides this study conceptualizes pragmatic family life education as the intersection of three paradigms or perspectives: family science, critical science, and human ecology. It is an attempt to build upon earlier attempts to develop a paradigmatic synthesis (Burr, Dollahite & Draper, 1995). This philosophical framework is graphically represented as a venn diagram in Figure 1. Each of these three paradigms will be briefly reviewed and their contribution to a philosophical framework of pragmatic family life education will be described.

Figure 1. *Philosophic Framework*

Family science. Family science is a relatively young discipline (Hamon & Smith, 2014) that emerged as a separate social science discipline in the last quarter of the 20th century, although its interdisciplinary roots reach back to the 19th century (Smart, 2009). Pioneers in the family field offered the vision that family relationships could be understood from a scientific perspective and that this knowledge could improve the quality of family life and thereby society at large (Burgess, 1926). Family science emerged as the family fields' social science discipline with its own domain of knowledge—the family realm—and its distinctive synthesis of modes of inquiry that guide scholarly pursuits (Doherty, Boss, LaRossa, Schumm & Steinmetz, 1993; Doherty, 2000).

Family science is recognized as a unique combination of both an interdisciplinary area of study and a legitimate discipline (Burr & Leigh, 1983). The family field is

intricately intertwined with a number of disciplines and professions such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, politics, home economics and education (Burr & Leigh, 1983; Hollinger, 2002). Each of these disciplines contributes valuable insights into the family institution and provides valuable background information. However, each conveys a limited and fragmented vision of the scope and complexity of family life (Schvaneveldt, 1971), whereas family science views family as its central or core organizing concept (Hollinger, 2002) and describes family in holistic terms, as a coherent, integrated body of knowledge (NCFR Task Force, 1988). Therefore, family science has established itself as a distinct discipline where “the primary goals are the discovery, verification, and application of knowledge” about families (National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) Task Force, 1987, p. 84).

Family science has the “family realm” as a distinct subject matter that is unique from nonfamily domains of experience (Beutler, Burr, Bahr, & Herrin, 1989). Seven qualities differentiate the family realm from nonfamily spheres that interact with the family realm but are distinct from it, such as the spiritual, economic, educational, and commercial realms.

These are (a) the generational nature and permanence of family relationships, (b) concern with “total” persons, (c) the simultaneous process orientation that grows out of familial caregiving, (d) a unique and intense emotionality, (e) an emphasis on qualitative purposes and processes, (f) an altruistic orientation, and (g) a nurture form of governance. (Beutler, Burr, Bahr, & Herrin, 1989, p. 806)

This emphasis on the family realm is one of the most distinctive features of family science, which is primarily concerned with a “family centered” approach that is comprised of two distinguishing characteristics: (a) attention to family functions,

structures and processes and (b) focus on education and practical services for families utilizing an interventionist or pragmatic orientation (Burr, 1993; Hamon & Smith, 2014). The family science perspective, therefore, provides an approach that seeks explanations of family processes so that knowledge can be applied in therapeutic and educational settings to help families improve the quality of their family life (Burr, 1993). “Family science scholars engage in scholarship with the intent of using their findings to enhance the lives of individuals and families” (Hamon & Smith, 2014, p. 317).

Hamon and Smith (2014) recently conducted a survey of family scientists in order to articulate an agreed upon “family science core.” Based on the responses from the survey and existing studies these authors suggest that the core of family science includes:

a focus of study that concentrates on family and relationships; emphasizes a multi-disciplinary/interdisciplinary approach; adopts a family systems, family strengths, life span and ecosystem perspective; possesses a major thrust toward prevention; coalesces around 10 family life education substance areas; values strong written, verbal, and interpersonal skills with diverse populations and families; and embraces translational scholarship and practical application of knowledge. (p. 317)

Family science is the disciplinary home for family scholars, practitioners and educators that hold a unique familial perspective (Hamon & Smith, 2014). The family science perspective guides the work of family life educators, home economists and family therapists. Family life education in its dominant conception and application is most closely aligned with family science principles. For example, in their seminal book, which outlines the principles and practices of effective family life education outreach, Duncan and Goddard (2011) described family life education (FLE) as a field of study and

application that involves qualified educators delivering *family science principles* designed to strengthen familial relationships and foster positive development of individual, couple, and family.

Critical science. Critical theory and critical science, broadly conceived, is a post-modern school of thought that applies knowledge from the social sciences to promote critical reflection of society and culture. It is useful to distinguish between critical theory and critical science as being two heads of the same coin. As Gentzler (1999) identified, the former is an outcome whereas the latter is a process.

Critical theory is usually defined as the *end result* of a process designed to expose inherent incongruities related to social situations. It is the *outcome* of the process. Critical science is the *process*, the course of action taken by individuals and groups to collaboratively examine and critique present social structures for the purpose of their own emancipation. (Gentzler, 1999, p. 23)

This study will apply the critical science perspective as described by leader of the field of Home Economics, Marjorie Brown. Critical science is widely regarded as one of three primary paradigms regarding truth and knowledge. It was developed largely as a critique of empirical science, which developed from the positivistic epistemology, and interpretive science, which is considered a metaphysical epistemology. “Critical science is best understood in the context of the synoptic theory of knowledge where its distinction from as well as its relation to the other two sciences are drawn” (Brown & Paolucci, 1979, p. 46). In other words, it is concerned with a comprehensive view of science and knowledge that incorporates empirical and interpretive science (Brown & Paolucci, 1979). It critiques both of these more dominant paradigms but also seeks to recover

reflection about practical concerns. In so doing, it seeks to unit theory and practice, fact and value, as well as science and philosophy (Brown & Paolucci, 1979).

“The purpose of critical science, therefore, is to emancipate people both from systematic misunderstandings that serve as internal constraints on their freedom and from the authoritarian social constraints that have shaped those misunderstandings” (Brown, 1993, p. 446). The critical science paradigm is concerned simultaneously with individual and family functioning as well as individual and family well-being at a societal level, thereby providing a catalyst for social change (Gentzler, 1999). “Critical science has a practical concern of improving human existence by enabling humankind to determine, consciously and actively, its own way of life” (Brown & Paolucci, 1979, p. 46). As a process, it seeks to initiate social change by using data to interpret the contemporary human situation, determine what actions are possible, and the consequences of those possible actions (Brown & Paolucci, 1979). Brown (1978) conceptualized three systems of action: technical, interpretive and emancipative “and related each to the corresponding ways of knowing within the respective paradigms of empirical, interpretive, and critical science” (Hultgren & Wilkosz, 1986, p. 139). Hultgren and Wilkosz describe these systems of actions in this way:

Technical action focuses on the application of prescriptive procedures to achieve an outcome that can be predicted and controlled...interpretive action is concerned with brining about understanding through communication, wherein there is shared meaning...emancipatory action encourages freedom to act with responsibility, without being forced or manipulated, either consciously or unconsciously. (pp. 139-141)

These three systems of action can be applied on two levels: as an approach to working with families and to understand how families go about addressing discrepancies between basic human goals and existing human conditions (Hultgren & Wilkosz, 1986). All three of these systems of action serve unique purposes and each makes an important contribution to family life. These action systems manifest themselves in terms of the ways that family members interact with their environment to improve their social and economic condition.

- Technical/instrumental action involves the knowledge of how to meet basic necessities of life
- Interpretive/communicative action is concerned with shared or inferred meanings, values, beliefs, and attitudes
- Emancipatory/proactive action is the ability and willingness to exert control over one's life

Technical action, and to a lesser degree, interpretive action, dominate systems of action directed at serving families and therefore the strategy families utilize.

Implementing the critical science paradigm would seek to promote emancipatory action.

A critical science approach can and should be oriented in two ways: toward action *with* families (professional practice serving families) and toward action *within* families (families engaging in the process themselves).

In terms of action *with* families, a critical science lens must critically analyze social conditions standing in the way of an improved quality of living for individuals and families in society (Gentzler, 1999). Brown and Paolucci (1979) recognized critical

science “as an integrated process to be carried out through professional practice” (Gentzler, 1999, p. 23). Professionals engaged in critical science must scrutinize the social forces which affect individuals and families and through discussion, understanding, interpretation and practical reasoning, determine possible solutions to society’s problems (Gentzler, 1999). It is of vital importance that professionals be capable of engaging in these processes so they may guide the families they serve through the process as well. Hultgren and Wilkosz (1986) applied the critical science framework to the development of home economics curricula; although I would substitute the word “approach” for the word curriculum their conceptualization of curriculum as informed by the critical science perspective is relevant and illustrative:

the focus of the content is on both cognitive and affective processes, on both knowledge and values, and on thought and action. The *organization of content* is around analyzing life situations, solving social problems, generating and criticizing alternative actions and the making of value judgments (Brown, 1979). (*italics original*, p. 138)

As oriented toward action *within* families, critical science emphasizes valued ends of the families being served allowing them to identify the goals, ideas or valued ends they desire. It then helps families to (a) compare existing conditions or “what is” with “what should be” or the status considered desirable or ideal; (b) determine what needs to be done to achieve the goal (c) identify reasonable alternatives and (d) generate a plan of action, act, and assess action (Hultgren & Wilkosz, 1986). Through this process families ideally develop the ability and willingness to take action and exercise control over their life. Therefore the goal of the critical science framework is to assist in the development of autonomous, responsible individuals and families who are capable of engaging in

practical activities that contribute to healthy functioning and wellbeing at both the familial and societal levels. This goal is the primary contribution of the critical science paradigm to the philosophical framework being articulated herein. The critical science framework informs a pragmatic approach to family life education by seeking to empower individuals and families to be agents of change in their own lives.

Human ecology. “Human ecology appeared in the social sciences in the early twentieth century as social scientists recognized the usefulness of ecological principles in explaining and understanding human social organization” (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993/2009, p. 421). Human ecology is primarily concerned with the interaction and reciprocal influence of humans (as individuals, groups, and societies) and their environment. Human ecology, then, can be used as a framework (Hook & Paolucci, 1970) or lens (McGregor, 2011) for a family life education approach that attends to the ecological context as a source and resource for enhancing family well-being.

A human ecology framework views phenomena from holistic and systems perspective (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993/2009).

The uniqueness of human ecology lies in its focus on viewing humans and their near environments as *integrated wholes*, [emphasis added] mutually influencing each other...Integration means that we view phenomena holistically as a complex system of interdependent parts, bounded through coordinated interaction and functional relationships. (Sontag & Bubolz, 1988, pp.3-4)

In other words, regardless of the phenomena of interest, whether individual human development or family life, all must be examined in the wholeness of interaction and interdependence with one another (Andrews, Bubolz, & Paolucci, 1980). Various human ecological models have been developed as tools to guide research and practice.

One of the most well-known and often cited is Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development, which will be addressed in detail in the practical framework. The human ecosystem and family ecosystem models will be reviewed briefly here.

Human ecosystem. The human ecosystem is comprised of three central organizing concepts: (a) the human envired unit, (b) the environment, and (c) the interaction between these two (Bubolz, Eicher, & Sontag, 1979). The human envired unit can be either a single individual (with biophysical, psychological, and social dimensions) or a group of individuals (such as a family) "who have some feelings of unity; share some common resources, goals, values, and interests; and have some sense of common identity" (p. 29). Communities, neighborhoods, villages, cities, states and nations are increasingly expansive human envired units.

"The environment consists of the totality of the physical, biological, social, economic, political, aesthetic, and structural surroundings for human beings and the context for their behavior and development" (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993/2009, p. 432). According to Bubolz, Eicher and Sontag (1979) there are three conceptually distinct but interrelated environments: (a) natural, (b) human constructed and (c) human behavioral. The natural environment is formed by nature with space-time, physical, and biological components. These components include the passage of time and the physical and biological components of the space including the atmosphere, climate, soil, water, plants and animals. "The natural environment supports human life in that it provides the energy and materials on which all life depends" (p. 29). The human constructed environment is the environment as it has been altered or created by humans. It includes components such

as: (a) the sociophysical, which includes roadways, buildings, cultivated land and water and air pollution; (b) the sociobiological, which encompasses domesticated and new animal breeds as well as cultivated crops and planted forests; and (c) the sociocultural, which includes cultural patterns such as technology, language, laws, and values. “The human constructed environment is a product of man’s intellectual and social capacities and his adaptation of the natural environment to meet physical, biological, social, and psychological needs and desires” (p. 30). The human behavior environment encompasses human element of the environment. It includes (a) the biophysical component, which is people’s presence, their bodily movements and posture; (b) the psychological component, which includes people’s thoughts, emotions, values, attitudes and sentiments; and (c) the social component, which includes relationships as well as interacting persons and groups. “The human behavioral environment is essential for meeting biological and physical needs, and the social and psychological needs for love, relationships, communication, knowledge, and self-fulfillment” (p. 30).

The third organizing concept of an ecosystem is interaction, which is the “relationship of reciprocal influence among a system’s components. Interaction in an ecosystem occurs when any part of an ecosystem influences or acts on any other part and is influenced or acted on in return” (Bubolz, Eicher & Sontag, 1979, p. 30). Interaction takes place on multiple levels. Components within each kind of environment interact with one another. Additionally interaction takes place within the envired unit (at both the intra and inter-individual levels), among the environments, and between the envired unit and environment(s). However, it is the latter that is of most importance and concern

in a human ecosystem framework. The environment is comprised of systems that vary in their proximity (near or distal) to families physically, psychologically, and socially (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993/2009). “For example, state and federal governments (distal environment) influence local communities (near environment) as well as individuals and families (human enviroined unit)” (Bubolz, Eicher, & Sontag, 1979). In turn, individuals and families shape the culture of the local communities where they reside and also influence governmental decisions.

Family as an ecosystem. An ecological perspective on family life was originally developed in home economics (Sontag & Bubolz, 1993/2009). Home economists, Hook and Paolucci’s (1970) article *The Family as an Ecosystem*, “provided the philosophical and conceptual basis for much of the subsequent programmatic and theoretical work in human ecology as it is applied to the family” (Sontag & Bubolz, 1993/2009, p. 423). Additionally, Brown (1993) identified the utility of human ecology for home economics: “the conceptual orientation of human ecology as ‘the scientific and holistic study of human beings, their environment, and the interactions between them.’ Such a framework is oriented to ‘the problems experienced by individuals and families in our society today’” (pp. 372-373). In other words, a human ecology perspective allows us to understand the problems experienced by individuals and families within the context in which they occur. It also allows us to develop solutions to those problems by utilizing resources available within families’ ecosystems and/or make adaptations and changes to the ecosystem if need be.

Families exist within complex milieu of biological, physical, social, and institutional systems that form the environment of families (Andrews, Bubolz & Sontag, 1980). The basic premise of an ecological approach to family is that the family in interaction with its environment constitutes an ecosystem (Sontag & Bubolz, 1993/2009). Insel and Moos (1974) identified three broad dimensions of family ecosystems: (a) relationship dimensions, which identify the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment, (b) personal development dimensions, which consider the potential or opportunity in the environment for individual growth and development, and (c) systems maintenance and system change dimensions, which assess the extent to which the environment is orderly and clear in its expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change. In other words, a family ecosystem approach takes into account human development, family relations, and the stability of the environment in which the family resides.

Ray (1988) identified that the adequacy of a family is the function of the social support available in the surrounding community as well as within the family, both individually and collectively, themselves. However, the availability of support is necessary but not sufficient. Families must have access to the resources that are available to them. "The ability to use and participate in community and social institutions is critical to coping with modern society" (Andrews, Bubolz, & Sontag, 1988, p. 40). Knowledge of community resources and ability to acquire social services is essential. Family life education can fill this niche by helping to connect families to support systems. In 1987, Darling suggested that attention to the environmental context in which families live is

crucial for family life education and proposed the family ecosystem model as a conceptual framework to guide the practice of family life education accordingly.

Summary and synthesis. Family life education, conceptualized as the intersection of the aforementioned paradigms: applies the content knowledge derived from family science and attends to the ecological context in which families are embedded (human ecology) in such a way that families become increasingly capable of functioning autonomously (critical science). I agree with Shusterman (1997) who asserted “philosophy should be a tool for the better practice of life” (p. 14). As described, a pragmatic philosophy of family life education, informed by family science, critical science and human ecology, can be used as a practical tool to benefit the lives of families. Whereas the philosophical framework is conceptual in nature, the practical framework is intended to provide a concrete structure for the application of the philosophical framework.

Practical framework. “Family life education is a multidisciplinary area of study and multiprofessional in its practice” (Arcus, Schvandevelde & Moss, 1993, p. 17). In accordance with this operational principle of family life education, this study develops a practical framework of family life education that integrates concepts from a variety of disciplines, fields and professions. A brief overview of the various disciplines and fields that are being pulled from to inform this practical framework of a pragmatic approach to family life education is summarized here.

The following will review concepts central to a pragmatic practice of family life education. This section will begin by extending the central idea of Bronfenbrenner’s

ecological approach to understanding human development to inform the development of interventions with families and communities. It will then review concepts from the positive psychology movement, the literature on helping relationships, ideologies of home economics, and principles of the attunement-oriented family education approach, in order to identify family life intervention approaches and strategies. Finally it will include principles of the philosophy of education proposed by John Dewey and Lawrence Cremin and identify social capital as the primary mechanism through which an ecological approach to education strengthens families, youth and communities. The literature reviewed from these seemingly disparate disciplines and fields will then be synthesized to identify the concepts central to a pragmatic approach to family life education.

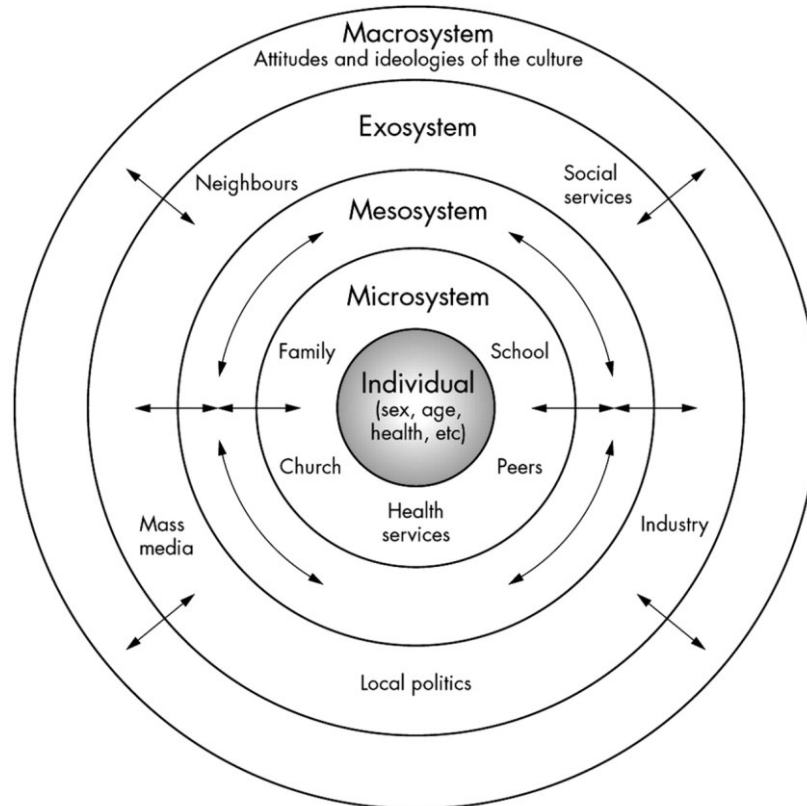
Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. Russian-born American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner formulated a developmental theory that balanced the typical emphasis on the individual with a holistic understanding of the environmental context in which the individual lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1977 & 1979). Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasized the reciprocal relationship between the growing person and changing environment and as such provided a truly interactional nature-nurture model of development. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), human development consisted of the individual's evolving conception of the ecological environment and his or her relation to it as well as the individual's growing capacity to discover, sustain, or alter its properties. In other words, the processes and outcomes of development are a joint function of the person and environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992/2005). Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the ecology of human development as

the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (p. 21)

Bronfenbrenner is best known for and by his concentric circles model of human development. Bronfenbrenner conceptualized the ecological environment as “a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3). Figure 2 illustrates the nested arrangement of concentric structures or systems, each contained within the next that comprise the ecology of the developing person. The immediate settings of the person’s everyday life as well as “the pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22) is referred to as the microsystem. The home, childcare center and school would be considered microsystems of a child. The next structure is the mesosystem, which focuses on the interrelations among the various microsystems in which the developing person participates. Interactions between home and school, for example, parent-teacher conferences or having a friend from class come over for a play date, are examples of the mesosystem. The third level, the exosystem, is a set of social structures that do not directly contain the individual but still have an impact on the person’s development. The child’s parent’s workplace, parent’s network of friends, and activities of the local school board are examples of the exosystem. The final structure in the model is the macrosystem which consists of the general underlying philosophy or cultural orientation within which the person lives. This is the “overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal and

political systems of which local micro, meso, and exosystems are the concrete manifestation” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515).

Figure 2. *Bronfenbrenner’s Concentric Circles Ecological Model*



Bronfenbrenner’s theory provides a truly holistic, ecological, contextual understanding of human development. Bronfenbrenner’s emphasis on the contexts for individual development may be extended and applied to the family unit as well (Ray, 1988). “Bronfenbrenner’s model is not a model of family process or family development per se, but provides a framework for looking at ways in which intrafamilial processes are influenced by extra familial conditions and environments” (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993/2009, p. 424). An ecological model of education would strengthen families, youth and communities by considering them within their ecological niche. Whereas most

interventions focus on one system, often the microsystem, or immediate environment and relations within that setting, this is a rather narrow, simplistic approach. Implementing a holistic approach that takes into consideration the multiple contextual systems that influence individuals, as well as individuals' experiences of those systems, is necessary to address the complexity of life. Rather than solely implementing traditional educational approaches which aim to teach knowledge, change attitudes, and build skills, an ecological approach would also strive to address structural barriers by connecting individuals to additional resources within the community or working to change oppressive policies. Educators become advocates on behalf of the well-being of families, youth and communities; empowering and working with them to meet them where they are at.

Bronfenbrenner (1974) suggested an “ecological intervention” family education approach based on his theory of human development. “The aim is to effect changes in the *context* in which the family lives which enable the family as a whole to exercise the functions necessary for...development” (p. 125). According to Mancini, Bowen & Martin (2005) community contextual factors, such as interactions with other families and institutions, are significant elements in understanding and strengthening families. Family life practitioners are finding increasing leverage in strengthening families through community-oriented or centered interventions. “The traditional focus on individual and on individual-level changes in attitudes and behavior must expand to include a broad focus on the norms and social context in which the behavior occurs” (Mancini, Bowen & Martin, 2005, p.579). Similarly Levine (1998) argues that prevention efforts designed

from an ecological perspective can change norms and can result in a more positive social climate. Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a solid theoretical grounding for developing a holistic, educational approach to strengthening families, youth and community.

[Ecological] theory is useful for research and as an organizing framework for family intervention programs (Bubolz & Whiren, 1984; Dean, 1988), family policy (Herrin & Wright, 1988), and educational curricula (Darling, 1987; Kilsonk, 1983). Rather than starting with the perspective of separate disciplines or service agencies, an ecological perspective starts with the whole; thus, it has potential to avoid fragmentation of knowledge, service, and support (Auerswald, 1968). (Sontag & Bubolz, 1993/2009, p. 424)

An ecological approach to family life education provides a framework for design and implementation of innovative intervention programs and support systems based on knowledge of the individual, family, and environment interaction (Andrews, Bubolz, & Paolucci, 1980). An ecological systems approach to serving families would provide individualized services that are responsive to the unique circumstances surrounding each family's situation; the need to coordinate services in order to provide a unified, holistic strategy for serving families; and a strengths-based approach that supports the developing capacity of families to function autonomously (Andrews, Bubolz, & Paolucci, 1980).

Sontag and Bubolz (1988) identified core competencies that professionals operating from a human ecological framework should employ: (a) Ability to seek out and synthesize information, to see relationships among phenomena. (b) Skill in practical reasoning about what is to be done, including moral reasoning and value reasoning. (c) Problem solving and decision making. (d) Resource assessment, identification, and

acquisition skills. (e) Ability to communicate effectively and determine the meaning in symbolic interaction. (f) Identification and clarification of values. These competencies could serve as a guide for family life educators employing a human ecological approach in their work serving families. Additionally, these competencies can be developed in families so they may be increasingly savvy in their ability to navigate and utilize the resources at their disposal. Indeed, Bubolz and Sontag (1993/2009) argued that

Human ecology principles must be more widely used as a basis for human action by professionals, policymakers, and citizens at large in order to achieve changes that are needed for human betterment, realization of universal values, and for improved quality of human life and quality of the environment, both locally and globally. (p. 443)

The application of human ecology principles to inform human action and ultimately contribute to individual and societal well-being is an ambitious goal that requires some cadre of professionals to incorporate an ecological approach into their philosophy and practice. It is those in the helping professions that are most appropriate to extend and apply this approach in their work with individuals and families. It is then appropriate to now consider concepts applicable to family life interventions.

Family life intervention. Family life consists of the everyday interactions and activities that occur within families. Of central concern to interventions aimed at influencing family life are issues such as: how families are viewed, the nature of the relationship between families and interveners, and the role of families in the intervention process. This next section will review literature regarding the positive psychology movement, helping relationships, home economics and the attunement perspective in

family education to discern philosophies and principles from each of these disciplines and fields that may be usefully adapted to inform a pragmatic model of family life education.

Positive psychology. The notion of positive psychology originated in Martin Seligman's 1998 presidential address to the American Psychological Association (APA) where he identified the need for "a reoriented science that emphasizes the understanding and building of the most positive qualities of an individual" (p. 559). The positive psychology movement emerged following the publication of Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi's article, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction" in 2000. The goal of positive psychology is "to utilize quality scientific research and scholarship to reorient our science and practice toward human strength" (Seligman, 1998, p. 561) and to address the imbalance in mainstream psychology from an emphasis on pathology, weakness and damage to also studying strength, virtue and building positive qualities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). According to Wong (2011), the overarching mission of positive psychology is to answer the fundamental questions of what make life worth living and how to improve life for all people. It is a science of strength and resilience that is concerned with understanding and building the factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Positive psychology is an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). These are known as the three pillars of positive psychology. Positive emotions include valued subjective experiences such as: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present)

(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). At the individual level, it is about positive personal traits or character strengths and “at the group level it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). From an interventionist perspective, the science of positive psychology is concerned with developing individual strengths and competencies that will lead to enhanced well-being on a personal level and thriving societies on a global level. At the core of the positive psychology movement is the identification of strengths, amplifying and nurturing those strengths, and then helping people to use those strengths as a buffer against weaknesses and the storms of life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). “It is about identifying and nurturing their strongest qualities, what they own and are best at, and helping them find niches in which they can best live out these strengths” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed “Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification,” which describes and classifies strengths and virtues that enable human thriving. The general scheme of the CSV relies on six overarching virtues that nearly every culture across the world endorses: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). A total of 24 character strengths were identified and subsumed under the six virtues. The CSV is intended to be used as a framework for conducting research and creating new interventions (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Table 4 summarizes the six virtues, their definition, and the character strengths associated with each.

Table 4. *Classification of 6 Virtues and 24 Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)*

Virtue	Definition	Character Strengths
Wisdom & Knowledge	Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge	Creativity Curiosity Open-mindedness Love of learning Perspective
Courage	Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal	Authenticity Bravery Persistence Zest
Humanity	Interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others	Kindness Love Social intelligence
Justice	Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life	Fairness Leadership Teamwork
Temperance	Strengths that protect against excess	Forgiveness Modesty Prudence Self-regulation
Transcendence	Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning	Appreciation of beauty & excellence Gratitude Hope Humor Religiousness

The Character Strengths and Virtues classification has provided the conceptual and empirical tools necessary to craft and evaluate interventions intended to cultivate good character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It appears that the vision articulated by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi in 2000 that “a psychology of positive human functioning will arise that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families, and communities” (p. 13) is becoming a reality. It seems plausible to believe that this classification system could facilitate Wally Goddard’s vision for family life educators to move beyond skills and begin cultivating character strengths in

the individuals and families we work with. At the very least, the positive psychology movement contributes a strength-based approach to serving individuals and families. However, the larger contribution from positive psychology to family life education is the potential interventions that could emphasize the cultivation of individual strengths, building the capacity of individuals and families, which may result in increased well-being of the individuals and families we serve but also contribute to the development of a more democratic society.

Helping relationships. Helping relationships are formed informally with friends and family but are also characteristic of the more formal relationships established between individuals and professionals, such as social workers, case managers, educators, and therapists. The literature reviewed here focuses on the nature of formal helping relationships with particular attention to the relationship between educators and individuals. In his book “Relationship: The heart of helping people” Perlman (1979) defined the professional helping relationship as a supportive, compassionate working alliance between the professional and the client that is time bound and has an agreed upon purpose. The working alliance, also referred to as the helping alliance, “is an emotional alignment that is both fostered and fed by the emotional bond, agreement on goals, and agreement on tasks” (Gelso and Carter, 1985, p. 163).

The helping relationship is unique in that it typically ranges over the full spectrum of feeling and thinking (Brammer & MacDonald, 2003). The degree of intellectual and emotional content will vary by the nature of the helping relationship (therapy will tend to have a stronger emotional component whereas education tends to emphasize the

intellectual) as well as the nature of the intervention needed. The appropriate balance of emotional and intellectual exchanges will also be dependent upon the needs, personality and circumstances of the individual or family receiving help. However, regardless of the nature of the helping relationship, whether therapeutic or educational, there is a need for the helper to build rapport with the individual or family seeking help. Rogers (1980) found that the helper's theory and method were far less important for an effective helping relationship than manifestations of the helper's attitudes. This involves the affective aspect of relationships, which are often tied to personal characteristics. In formal helping relationships, it is the professional who should set the emotional and affective tone of the relationship.

Rogers (1957) identified six essential conditions that facilitate "helpee" development. Among them are *congruence* (meaning consistency and genuineness) in the helping relationship, unconditional *positive regard* toward the individual or family being helped, *empathetic understanding* of the individual's internal frame of reference and *efforts to communicate* this understanding. Similarly, Gelso and Carter (1985) recognized the importance of genuineness, authenticity, congruence and openness, within the context of the helping relationship. Brammer and MacDonald (2003) identified additional helper characteristics that facilitate the growth and development of individuals and families, including: helper warmth and caring, helper concreteness and specificity, competent communication, and intentionality. Because at the core of the helping relationship are two, or more, people, it is essential to recognize the helper as a person and how his or her personhood is used as a helping tool in the helping relationship.

Helping another human being is basically a process, involving two simple phases, (a) building a relationship and (b) facilitating positive action, in order to enable the person receiving help to grow in the directions that he or she chooses, to solve problems, and to face crises (Brammer & MacDonald, 2003). The nature of human helping processes is essentially people helping other people to grow toward their personal goals and strengthen their capacity for coping with life (Brammer & MacDonald, 2003). There are various functions of helping, but the one typically associated with helping relationships, and particularly applicable to helping relationships within the educational endeavor, is the growth facilitator model. Within this model, helping relationships are oriented toward self-help; that is, the focus is on empowering the person to solve his or her own problems through encouraging the development of inner strengths (Brammer & MacDonald, 2003). Family life education that is reflective of this type of helping relationship would seek to empower individuals and families to be active change agents in their own lives. Therefore, goals of the educational endeavor would be identified by families, with the goal of the family life educator being to structure an environment that helps families to achieve their goals.

Home economics. Home economics attends to the interaction of human beings, in their totality, and the near environment, especially as this interaction is managed by the family (Hook & Paolucci, 1970). The field of home economics is mission-oriented, meaning knowledge is applied and practically oriented (McGregor, 2012). The original mission of home economics

is to enable families, both as individual units and generally as a social institution, to build and maintain systems of action which lead (1) to maturing in individual

self-formation and (2) to enlightened, cooperative participation in the critique and formulation of social goals and means for accomplishing them. (Brown, 1980, p. 82).

A more general statement of the mission of home economics is to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities (McGregor, 2011). This mission is realized by utilizing a problem-orientation rather than being subject matter-centered (McGregor, 2012). Subject matter-centered approaches tend to be standardized and focus on the content of the services being provided. This approach is most concerned with delivering a pre-established curriculum with predetermined ends. Problem-oriented practice, on the other hand, tends to be responsive to the families being served by addressing practical, perennial problems (Brown & Paolucci, 1979). A practical problem is concerned with reflective decision-making and thoughtful action required to address a specific situation within a specific context. Perennial problems are similar problems that each successive generation of families faces just in different contexts (McGregor, 2012). When confronted with practical problems, families often act with inadequate information resulting in actions that are not rational or justified (Knipple, 1998). Therefore, individuals and families need a process that allows them to carefully consider the practical problem and decide upon a course of action (Brown, 1978; Brown & Paolucci, 1979). Practical reasoning, which originated in home economics, is a process developed to meet this need.

Practical reasoning is a skilled intellectual and social process of inquiry used in addressing and answering practical questions (Reid, 1979). It focuses on everyday situations in which a discrepancy between reality and a desired state exists (Coombs,

1997; Fedje, 1998; Thomas, 2003). Practical reasoning combines cognitive, affective, and motivational elements and incorporates critical thinking, decision making and moral reasoning process (Thomas, 2003). Fedje (1998) described practical reasoning as (a) appropriate for complex, continuing, human concerns, (b) requiring conscious, deliberate examination of facts and values, (c) dependent upon critical and creative skills, and (d) used to establish the moral defensibility of goals and means. Family and consumer sciences professionals have identified four categories of questions that organize the practical reasoning process (Thomas, 2003). Families engage in practical reasoning when they constantly examine, judge and evaluate what is the best course of action by going back and forth among the four components of practical reasoning (Knipple, 1998).

According to Knipple, these components include:

(a) valued ends, which are consciously developed, rational goals that will lead to a desired state of affairs; (b) context, which includes factors and circumstances that affect the practical problem, such as personal values and beliefs, tradition, societal expectations, and knowledge; (c) means or methods available to accomplish valued ends; and (d) consequences that will result from means being considered and their consistency with the identified valued ends. (p. 17)

By engaging in this process, whereby families move back and forth among these four components, judgments about what to do are more likely to be rational and morally defensible than are judgments resulting from the use of a simpler, linear problem solving process (Laster, Matthews, & Manifold, 1986). However, most individuals and families are more adept at problem solving and decision-making processes than they are at practical reasoning. Even though there is similarity among these processes for solving problems, decision making and problem-solving are appropriate when a prescribed

answer is best; whereas practical reasoning is used with problems requiring reasoned judgment (Fedje, 1998). Individuals and families often need someone to model and scaffold the practical reasoning process so they may develop the dispositions and skills necessary to successfully engage in the practical reasoning process in the context of their own lives (Coombs, 1997). This is one niche that home economics, now family and consumer sciences, professionals have promoted in the school classroom. Family life educators could work in collaboration with family and consumer scientists by incorporating the practical reasoning process into our work serving individuals and families in the community.

From a home economics perspective, service to families is intended “to help families help themselves; it is not to provide prescribed ways of acting through technical expertise” (Brown, 1980, p. 82). Both components of this description of the nature of services provided by home economists warrant adoption by family life education. “To help families help themselves” means that educators seek to empower families by providing services that “support the strengths and developing capacity of families to function autonomously” (Andrews, Bubolz, & Sontag, 1980, p. 45). In our professional role, we must “enable families” by allowing them to take ownership over their own educational process and building capacity for them to recognize and solve their own problems (Vickers, 1986). Building families’ capacity to engage in practical reasoning is one way that this can be accomplished. In addition to enabling families to be autonomous and function within their own strengths, family life educators should also follow the lead of home economists who “individualize services to take into account the unique

circumstances surrounding each family's situation" (Andrews, Bubolz, & Sontag, 1980, p. 44). Doing so requires that we move beyond strict adherence to pre-established curricula and instead tailor educational endeavors to the expressed needs and situations of the individuals and families being served.

Attunement perspective. The attunement perspective is a relatively recently developed perspective for guiding family life education practice. It was fueled by the development of postmodern thought (Ellsworth, 1989), critical science (Habermas, 1971, 1973), and increasing disillusionment with the other two perspectives. The basic orientation of the attunement perspective is to establish harmony and balance in order to attune discrepancies between families and their context and bring things into alignment (Thomas & Lien, 2009).

The attunement perspective focuses on family's lives and experiences from their own point of view, on the impact of culture and societal forces on families, and on bringing about better alignment and well-being of both families and society by changing the society and culture and supporting families in changing themselves. (Thomas & Lien, 2009, p. 48)

The emphasis is on understanding families' perspectives, situations, and goals and assisting them in bringing their situations and goals into alignment (Thomas & Lien, 2009). In other words, the purpose of family education from an attunement perspective is to help families identify their "ideal" and their "real" and help them identify resources, information and strategies that will enable them to bring their "real" and "ideal" into alignment. In order to achieve this purpose, Thomas and Lien (2009) identified three primary goals of the attunement approach. The first goal is to understand individuals and how they are shaped by their social, historical, and cultural contexts is attained through

sub-goals such as: (a) being heard and understood, (b) being accepted and valued as a person, (c) seeking to understand others and their situations, and becoming more self-aware, aware of one's own situation and circumstances in society. The second goal is reciprocity and mutuality among persons, which means that people are responsive to one another, there is mutual give and take, and people consider other's situations, keep other's interests in mind, and sympathize with others, as well as reciprocity and mutuality between families and society. The third goal "is emancipation from domination and oppressive forces within oneself and in the external world" (p. 49).

The overarching purpose and goals of the attunement perspective guide educational practices that are employed during service to families. Family life educators guided by this perspective make use of educational processes that equalize power relationships among individuals, families, and educators by sharing control of the educational endeavor (Thomas & Lien, 2009). Educators encourage and welcome diverse ideas and viewpoints and may introduce alternative views into the course of discussion but are careful not to impose their views as superior or correct. They also help families to see the bigger picture and consider the implications of their actions for themselves and others.

Because this perspective holds that people have the capacity to gain insight and change themselves (including their perceptions of themselves), educators engage learners in reflecting on their own experience, their perspective on their situation and problems, and how people are influenced by their surroundings as a starting point for becoming aware of the relationship between individuals, family, and society. (Thomas & Lien, 2009, p. 49)

Educators employing an attunement-orientation often use practical reasoning, a tool used to engage families in thinking about their situation and taking action regarding it. As described previously, individuals and families are asked to consider their situation and identify their valued ends; to examine relevant contextual factors, both resources and potential barriers; and to identify actions that might bring their situation and valued ends into better alignment (Thomas & Lien, 2009). Action may involve changing oneself or one's perception of the situation or may involve making strides toward changing one's environment (Knipple, 1998; Thomas, 2003).

Attunement-oriented educators work with... families by listening to them, by engaging the families in helping the educator understand the families' perspectives, by sharing and helping families find information and resources relevant to their goals, and by working *with* the families to stimulate change that will get their needs met. (Thomas & Lien, 2009, p. 50)

The attunement perspective seems to align well with an ecological philosophy and model of education that strives to view families within their context, is responsive to the lived experience of families, and views the community and societal context as important mediators in the lives of families. An educational approach from this perspective seeks to influence not only the families being served but also the community and society that the family is embedded in. Therefore, an ecologically-based intervention approach aligns with the values, assumptions and goals of the attunement perspective as applied in family education settings. Now that concepts that inform the "family life" aspect of family life education have been reviewed, the focus will shift to identifying concepts from the philosophy of education that usefully inform the practice of a pragmatic orientation to family life education.

Philosophy of education. Defined broadly, education includes family and community as powerful educative institutions that are foundational for disseminating culture. “The process of education thus can be construed broadly as humanity’s unique methods of *acquiring, transmitting, and producing* knowledge for interpreting and acting upon the world” (Levinson, 2000, p. 2). Within the framework of a democratic society, education must be considered holistically taking into account the multitude of educative experiences that occur beyond the scope of formal education settings and methods. A philosophy of education that is rooted in a pragmatic orientation to family life education is informed by principles from informal education, Dewey’s conception of education as a democratic process, and finally Cremin’s notion of an ecology of education (as illustrated using concepts from the science of networks).

Informal education. Informal or local education differs from formal education in a variety of ways. The purpose of informal education is to liberate humans from the restraints and limitations of ignorance and dependency (Jeffs & Smith, 2005). This conceptualizes education as liberation, freedom and empowerment whereas formal education is often associated with inculcation.

Local education is to embed practice in local ways of living so as to change the character of everyday life so that it holds within it increased possibility for enhancing well-being (Smith, 1994). “By becoming part of the familiar and everyday, educators can embed relationships, values and ways of being with each other, that foster understanding, democracy and learning” (Jeffs & Smith, 2005, p. 25). Because informal education is concerned with fostering learning in life, as it is lived, it is inherently a moral craft and

heavily value laden. Education embraces a commitment to respect for persons, the promotion of well-being, truth, democracy, fairness and equality (2005).

Where formal education is based around curriculum, informal education is driven by conversation. Therefore, conversation and dialogue are the primary methods of the informal educator. Dialogue can be seen as a ‘pedagogical communicative relation’ (Burbule, 1993, p. 8), when it is directed toward discovery and new understanding (Smith, 1994). Informal educators “act as a clearinghouse, linking people to ideas, theories and knowledge which will serve them well” (Jeffs & Smith, 2005, p. 68). It is to function as a bridge between knowledge and experience. The goal is to “lead people out” towards understanding and discernment. Conversation that accomplishes this goal, that is edifying, is also genuine. Genuine conversation is characterized by reciprocity, concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection and hope (Jeffs & Smith, 2005, p. 51). Genuine conversation builds relationships and facilitates fellowship. According to Jeffs and Smith (2005), fellowship is a matter of *right relationships* which are *institutionally based*. In other words, fellowship is both a quality of individual relationships, and the institutions that people regularly interact with. Within local education there is a strong emphasis on promoting associational life, nurturing community and advancing democracy (Smith, 1994). Many of the philosophical and practical concepts articulated by Jeffs and Smith are rooted in the philosophical pragmatism of John Dewey. Dewey’s philosophy of education was concerned with concepts such as interaction, reflection and experience, as well as an interest in community and democracy.

Education as a democratic process. John Dewey is often considered the father of progressive education. Darwin's *Origin of Species* profoundly influenced Dewey's thought regarding learning and education. Dewey took one of Darwin's central concepts, the idea that species are not fixed, but are constantly undergoing change, and applied it to the fields of psychology and philosophy (Hickman, 2009). Dewey revised and improved upon the "reflex arc" mechanical model of learning originally developed by Rene Descartes in the seventeenth century and later reworked by William James. The reflex arc is essentially an arc from the external stimulation of the sense organs to a response set up by the internal working of the brain. James attempted to improve upon this model by emphasizing the associations produced in the mind and the new habit they produced. However, Dewey felt that the reflex arc model was fatally flawed as it was "unable to account for the rich coordination of situations and processes that make up even the simplest of human learning experiences" (Hickman, 2009, pp. 7-8). For Dewey, learning is not a series of truncated arcs, but a circuit of imbalance and restored equilibrium.

According to Dewey the learner is not a "blank slate" upon which ideas are to be written, neither is the mind a file cabinet, into which facts are to be filed away. Rather, true to Dewey's ability to overcome either/or dichotomies, Dewey insisted that learning always begins in the middle of things (Hickman, 2009). From this perspective, the learner is a living organism with his/her own history, needs, desires and interests, all of which profoundly influence the learning experience.

Dewey's educational ideas were, in part, a rejection of the rote, curriculum-driven approach to learning that was the standard methodology of his day. But he also rejected the opposite concept, the exaggerated "child-centered" approach that

uncritically follows the impulses as uninformed interests of the child... In Dewey's view, the challenge of education should be to integrate the educational subject matter with the talents and interests of the learner. (Hickman, 2009, p. 9)

This implies that education is most appropriately characterized by the integration of content knowledge and the lived experiences, needs and desires of the learners. This has powerful implications for family life education. It suggests that family life education should not seek strict fidelity in implementing evidence-based curricula (Dewey's "rote, curriculum-driven approach") nor should it be entirely "family-centered" without any kind of intentionality. Rather, for family life education to be most effective, it should combine these approaches by bringing family science principles to bear on the needs and desires of individuals and families in ways that value the idiosyncratic nature inherent in family life.

Central to Dewey's philosophy of education is a concern for the development of a democratically constituted society (Dewey, 1916/2009). One of the criterion for democracy that Dewey identified was that people and the systems they create must be flexible and open to readjustments as circumstance changes (Hickman, 2009). Indeed from Dewey's perspective, "education always reflects the circumstances of the times and the students involved and should evolve as these elements change" (Hickman, 2009, p. 9). Therefore, family life education practice should seek to be flexible in its application and responsive to changing societal conditions and the new strains and challenges they impose on families.

Ecology of education. Dewey "fully understood the implications of a democratic concept[ion] of education anchored in community life" (Stein, n.d.). Dewey (1937)

viewed all life as educative. He recognized that all institutions, customs, and arrangements of social life, such as community association, family life, industry, and media, are “immense educative...forces” (p. 334).

Similarly, Cremin (1976), a student of Dewey's, proposed a theory of education that conceptualizes education as a variety of inter-institutional *configurations* of educative social interactions that he termed the “ecology of education.” This conceptualization essentially situates education broadly within community by recognizing the important influence of collaboration among all institutions involved in education across the entire lifespan (Cremin, 1989). The ecology of education is essentially a model of education that recognizes the variety of educative institutions, including but not limited to family, churches and synagogues, schools, parks, museums, theaters, social service agencies, and the media, and their mutual interactions and reciprocal influences on one another. The relationships among institutions constituting a configuration of education may be complimentary or contradictory (Cremin, 1976).

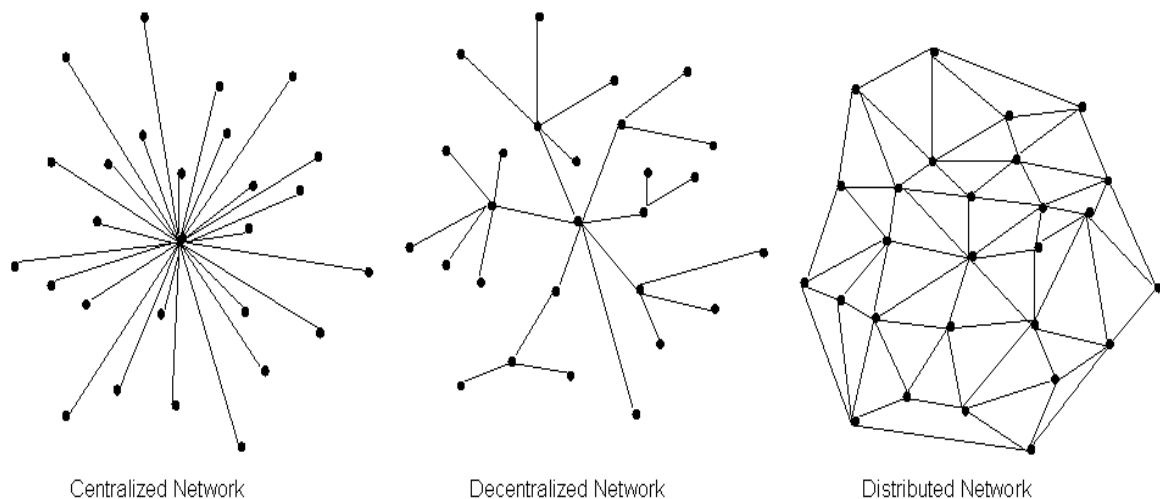
Cremin (1989) identified that “the influence of any particular educative institution is rarely direct and unalloyed; it is almost always mediated – that is reflected, refracted and interpreted – by other educative institutions” (p. 61). He identified that family is the most important of these mediating agencies. “Like any educational institution, the family originates some educative efforts, mediates others, and actually insulates its members from still others” (Cremin, 1974, p. 85). One of the primary educative functions that families engage in is educational mediation, whereby family members translate and interpret educational experiences and influences for one another (Leichter, 1974).

Educational influences include both internal (within family) and external (media, community, peer group, etc) sources. Mediation refers to the processes by which families filter educational influences in order to negotiate and create meaning in the educational experiences of its members (Leichter, 1979). It accomplishes this through processes by which it screens, interprets, criticizes, reinforces, complements, counteracts, refracts, and transforms (1979). These processes are engaged in naturally by families and are often overlooked for their educational significance.

Educational configurations. The argument has been made that education takes place in a variety of settings so it needs to be understood as it takes place in each of these settings (Leichter, 1979). When education is understood to take place in multiple settings, it is also important to understand the relative influences of each setting as well as the interaction between settings. One way of looking at the interrelationships among educative institutions is to consider the configuration of educative institutions, the idea that within a society education takes place through certain institutional clusterings (Leichter, 1979). It is possible to conceptualize educational configurations by identifying the primary educative institution or institutions responsible for education as well as by examining how various educative institutions relate to and interact with one another. These educational configurations can be illustrated by utilizing concepts from the science of networks. In 1964, Paul Baran began thinking about the optimal structure of the Internet and proposed three possible architectures for such a network (See Figure 3 below): centralized, decentralized, and distributed (Barabási, 2003). Communications systems at the time were dominated by the centralized and decentralized structures,

which he claimed were too vulnerable to attack. Instead he proposed the Internet should be designed to have a distributed, mesh-like architecture. The new science of networks graphically demonstrates the power of redundant connections between nodes and hubs to prevent failure in a system. These images can be extrapolated to inform the local “infrastructure” of human and social connections necessary to facilitate an effective approach to family and community education as well as positive youth development. The networks provide visual representations of various educational configurations by illustrating the interconnections between educative institutions.

Figure 3. *Centralized, Decentralized and Distributed Networks*



The dots or hubs in the illustrations represent various educative institutions in society such as schools, family, religious institutions, after school programs, recreation centers, libraries and the media. The lines or nodes represent the connections or communication channels between the educative institutions. The three network types presented illustrate educational orientations based on how the educative institutions relate to and collaborate with one another. As Baran identified in regard to the structure of the

internet, the centralized and decentralized structures are prone to failure. An ecological conception of education is embodied by the distributed network. From this perspective, no particular educative institution is recognized as the “hub” of education but rather all educative institutions are equally valuable and contribute to educational processes.

According to Cremin, education properly understood is the relationship of all educative institutions to each other, and to the people in them. When education is conceptualized as being situated within an ecology of educative institutions, learning occurs within an entrenched web that is mutually supported and reinforced. This educational network is least likely to fail which would imply that it is the most effective and valuable approach to education; however, it is also the least recognized and utilized approach. Sociological concepts, such as social capital and social networks are salient for understanding the interactive nature of educative institutions within an ecological view of education.

Social capital and networks. Sociologist James Coleman (1968) developed the term social capital to capture “the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value to the child’s growing up.” He demonstrated the effect of social capital in the family and community in aiding the formation of human capital (1988). Social capital, understood as the relations between individuals and institutions, aids the formation of human capital which is embodied in the skills and knowledge acquired by individuals (1988). His findings suggest that the social structure and the strength of relationships within a social group affect how people acquire skills and knowledge, which illustrates the importance of understanding community as a

source of sustenance for learning. Social capital is typically conceptualized as strong social bonds, which may represent relationships with individuals or institutions.

Putnam (2001) described social capital as networks and norms of reciprocity which come in different forms. Specifically Putnam (2001) differentiated between inclusive and exclusive social capital. Bonding social capital (exclusive) are those networks that link us to people *like* ourselves. Whereas bridging social capital (inclusive) are networks that link us to people *unlike* ourselves. “Both bridging and bonding social capital have positive effects, but for a democratic society, bridging social capital is especially valuable” (2001, p. 86). At face value this may seem to be a paradox, one might think that strong bonding social links would be the crucial ones holding a network together but when it comes to degrees of separation the crucial links are the weak links between people, especially social “bridges” (Buchanan, 2002). This is because bridging links do not merely connect people to one another; they are bridges into distant and otherwise quite alien social worlds. Without weak ties, a community would be fragmented into a number of isolated cliques (2002). “Weak links are often of greater importance than strong links because they act as the crucial ties that sew the social network together” (2002, p. 43). Weak social bonds are the most crucial in tying together a society. Somehow, these links ultimately make for a small world. According to this theory of social capital and social networks, it is often the links and connections to people outside our clique that prove the most useful. The ecological approach to education would facilitate this process of strengthening bridging or inclusive social capital, in part by promoting the development of information channels between

individuals and educative institutions. However, individuals and families need assistance in making these connections with people and institutions outside their own social cluster.

Summary and synthesis. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework of human development contributes the important idea that individuals and families must be considered within their ecological context. Families do not exist in isolation; rather, they influence and are influenced by the environment surrounding them. Therefore, intervention approaches must attend to how the external contexts of families including: community, neighborhood, societal institutions, governmental policies and social norms, disrupt or support families and how they may be altered or mobilized to better serve families.

Intervening in matters of family life is the primary concern or domain of family life education. Concepts derived from four distinct disciplines and fields inform this component of family life education. Positive psychology emphasizes using a strength-based approach to work with individuals and families. This implies that individuals and families are seen as having inherent strengths and resiliencies that can be bolstered to enhance well-being and serve as buffers against the challenges in life. The helping relationship literature, field of home economics and attunement perspective all build on the strength-based approach by recognizing that people are able to solve their own problems and manage their own lives. Therefore, any intervention into family life should empower people to help themselves. Additionally, the helping relationship literature identifies the personhood of the helper as being a crucial component of any helping relationship. Helper characteristics such as being caring and warm, authentic, genuine,

empathetic and having positive regard for the individual being helped are all important for building rapport and trust, which impact the success of the helping relationship. The field of home economics is mission-oriented, meaning knowledge is applied and practically oriented. Therefore, from this field we gain a problem-oriented practice approach, which emphasizes the importance of being responsive to families by addressing practical, perennial problems (Brown & Paolucci, 1979). Practical reasoning is an educational strategy that can be utilized to help families think through the conditions of their situations, identify valued ends, and determining appropriate action for meeting their goals. Both home economics and the attunement perspective emphasize the importance of understanding families' perspectives, situations and goals and assisting them in bringing their situations and goals into alignment.

Philosophy of education is an applied field that is concerned with educational processes and particularly implications for educational exchanges. A variety of models and concepts from the philosophy of education inform this practical model. From the informal or local education literature we derive the importance of embedding practice in local ways of living. According to Jeffs and Smith (2005), this is accomplished through conversation, reflection, and building relationships. John Dewey promoted an integrative theory of education and learning as well as a democratic conception of education anchored in community life. Cremin's (1976), philosophy of education extends Dewey's notion and identified the variety of inter-institutional *configurations* of educative social interactions that he termed the "ecology of education." These educational configurations can be illustrated by utilizing concepts from the science of networks. In particular,

Baran's description of the architecture of networks, such as the internet, (Barabási, 2003) graphically demonstrates Cremin's notion of the ecology of education. Sociologist Robert Putnam's (2001) concepts related to bridging and bonding social capital can be seen as further building upon Cremin's work to describe the different forms of relations between individuals and institutions.

This foregoing selection and synthesis of knowledge from various disciplines, fields and professions represents the practical framework that guides this study. Ideas are drawn from a variety of professions, disciplines and fields including: ecological approach, positive psychology, helping relationships, home economics, the attunement perspective, local education, philosophy of education, the science of networks, and sociology. Concepts from each of these areas, such as person-environment interaction; problem-oriented practice approach; self-directed experiential learning; conversation and relationships; ecology of education; and social capital inform this practical framework for family life education. Table 5 summarizes the practically oriented conceptual framework that this dissertation study draws upon.

Table. 5. *Practically Oriented Conceptual Framework*

Discipline/Field	Central Concepts	Primary Contributor
Human development/ Ecological perspective	Context Interacting systems (micro, meso, exo, and macro) Reciprocal nature of person-environment interaction	Bronfenbrenner (1979)
Positive Psychology	Strengths-based approach Cultivating character strengths	Seligman (1998)
Helping Relationships	Support & encourage self-growth Strengthen capacities to manage life Personhood of the helper	Brammer & MacDonald (2003)
Home economics	Problem-oriented practice approach Practical reasoning process	Brown & Paolucci (1979)
Attunement Perspective	Attune discrepancies between families and their context Focus on families' perspectives, situations & goals Bring situations & goals into alignment	Thomas & Lien (2009)
Philosophy of education	Local/informal education Democratic education Ecology of education	Jeffs & Smith (2005) Dewey (1916) Cremin (1976)
Sociology	Bridging & bonding social capital	Putnam (2001)

Pragmatic Model of Family Life Education

A pragmatic philosophy of family life education emerges at the intersection of three disciplines: family science, critical science, and human ecology. The corresponding practical model of family life education is predicated on Bronfenbrenner's ecological

model of human development and also informed by concepts from fields such as positive psychology, helping relationships, home economics, the attunement perspective, informal education, philosophy of education, the science of networks and social capital. It incorporates concepts such as holism, context, ecology, harmony, attunement, integration, and systems. Synthesizing concepts from the above-mentioned fields, a pragmatic model of family life education would have the following characteristics.

Utilizing a pragmatic approach to family life education involves applying the principles and practices derived from family science and applying them to the unique circumstances and situations of the families being served. The knowledge generated through family scholarship is seen as one of many sources of valid knowledge. The knowledge, lived experiences, values, wisdom, culture, expertise, and initiative of individuals, families and communities are honored and an important component of the educational endeavor. In other words, both family science principles and the knowledge of families are brought to bear on issues in pragmatic family life education. Additionally, a strength-based approach is utilized so that individuals and families are viewed as autonomous beings capable of instituting changes in their own lives. The educator does not resolve issues for families but rather supports families to build their capacity to make changes on their own. Pragmatic family life education seeks to form a partnership with individuals, families, and communities in order to “meet them where they are” and address their self-identified needs and interests.

A pragmatic model of family life education moves beyond the sole use of programmatic components to a more systemic, holistic, ecological approach. Educational

processes emphasize relationships, conversation, and care over curriculum, content and service. As a result, the educational endeavor becomes individualized to the idiosyncrasies of individuals and families rather than utilizing a “one-size-fits-all” approach. This allows education to be responsive to the everyday lives and experiences of families, rather than prescribing problems and solutions to them. The focus of education switches from content to context. When curricula are used they are not implemented with strict attention to fidelity but rather the content and processes are adapted in such a way that the curriculum becomes relevant and responsive rather than rigid and prescriptive. This contextual focus recognizes that individuals are embedded in families and communities. Therefore, pragmatic family life educators seek to connect individuals and families to one another, to resources and to the institutions they encounter in daily life. They act as intermediaries who blend the ability to make connections between people, institutions, and other resources that bond local communities and bridge them to other ideas and information. Doing so builds social capital in families by teaching them how to successfully navigate various institutions and obtain needed resources. It also builds the social capital in communities by establishing a strong social network among individuals, agencies, and institutions.

A pragmatic philosophy may guide the practice of individual educators or be applied to entire programs, policies, or other social interventions. Individual educators may integrate this philosophy into their ethos of practice and informally implement the strategies and approaches in their work with families. However, this philosophy may also serve as a model for practice on a larger scale. At the programmatic level, pragmatic

family life education could be applied systematically and formally to programs that serve families, young people and communities. Educational workshops would be integrated with a family case management process so that families gain the knowledge they need, develop the practical reasoning skills that will help them attain their goals, and gain access to information and resources available in the community. This would likely mean that institutional connections and referrals would be formalized so that individuals and families could be seamlessly connected to the information and resources they need. Whether applied as a personal philosophy or to larger programmatic or policy interventions, at its core, pragmatic family life education: (a) integrates knowledge generated through empirical science (family science principles) and experiential knowledge of individuals and families; (b) cultivates the capacity of individuals and families to take action in their own lives; and (c) utilizes an ecological approach to both understand the social nature of family life (social structures and values that serve both as assets and obstacles to families) and build, bridge and bolster community resources in such a way as to enable families to strengthen assets and overcome obstacles.

Chapter Three

Methods

The overall thesis of this study is that a new philosophical and practical framework for family life education rooted in a pragmatic epistemology of practice, will prove an effective model for serving individuals and families. In order to evaluate this thesis, this study will employ an evaluative inquiry process referred to as “evaluation research” (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004) or “evaluation science” (Donaldson & Lipsey, 2006). Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman (2004), authors of a widely used evaluation textbook, define evaluation research as a social science activity that systematically applies social research approaches in assessing social intervention programs—programs designed to benefit the human condition. This adaptation of social research methods to the task of studying social interventions is conducted so that “sound judgments can be drawn about the social problems addressed, and the design, implementation, impact, and efficiency of programs that address those problems” (Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman, 2004, p. 2). More recently, Donaldson and Lipsey (2006) used the term “evaluation science” to underscore the use of rigorous scientific methods (i.e., qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods) to answer key evaluation questions. Donaldson (2007) further described the purpose of implementing systematic inquiry in evaluation efforts, to “develop cumulative knowledge about interventions designed to prevent and solve a wide range of contemporary problems in our global society” (p. 240).

There are two consistent themes across these descriptions. Evaluation research (science) is (a) the systematic and rigorous use of social science methodologies to (b)

generate knowledge about the effectiveness of social innovations intended to ameliorate social problems. Whereas the term evaluation is often associated with program evaluations conducted to judge the merit or worth of particular programs with the findings being used as means for program improvement, oversight and compliance, as well as assessment; evaluation science operates within a broader aim of contributing to substantive and methodological social science knowledge (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004) regarding the development of successful programs generally (Donaldson & Lipsey, 2006). This understanding of evaluation is likely rooted in the distinction Patton (1996) made between evaluation research with the aim of knowledge generation from the dominant forms of evaluation, formative and summative, by describing the utility of the findings of each form of evaluation. Whereas summative (judgment-oriented) and formative (improvement-oriented) evaluations involve the instrumental use of results, evaluation research with the aim of generating knowledge involves the conceptual use of findings. “Knowledge-generating evaluation research is not conducted to judge the merit or worth of individual programs, but rather to generate knowledge about program (or evaluation) effectiveness in general” (Patton, 1996, p. 134). Evaluation research findings contribute by increasing knowledge in a variety of ways such as: “clarifying a program’s model, testing theory, distinguishing types of interventions, figuring out how to measure outcomes, generating lessons learned, and/or elaborating policy options” (Patton, 1996, p. 132). Patton (1996) identified that “theory-driven evaluation” (Chen, 1989, 1990; Chen & Rossi, 1987) is particularly appropriate for knowledge generating evaluation research as its

...connection to social science theory also offers the potential for increasing knowledge about how effective programs work in general. For example, Shadish (1987) has argued that the understandings gleaned from evaluations ought to contribute to the “macrotheories” about “how to produce important social change.” (Patton, 1996, p. 133)

Recently, Donaldson and Lipsey (2006) built on these ideas by asserting that the use of theory in evaluation practice is particularly salient for influencing social programming and policy making “by contributing to the knowledge and theoretical base – in large part by using, developing, testing and otherwise enhancing relevant theory” (p. 57). These authors identified three types of theory that are influential in evaluation practice. The first is evaluation theory, which tends to be largely prescriptive and “offer a set of rules, prescriptions, prohibitions, and guiding frameworks that specify what a good or proper evaluation is and how evaluation should be conducted (Alkin, 2013, p. 4). The second is social science theory, which attempt to provide generalizable and verifiable knowledge about the principles that shape social behavior. “When such theories address the social phenomena related to social programs and the social conditions they are intended to improve, however, they may be relevant to evaluation” (Donaldson & Lipsey, 2006, p. 62). The third is program theory, which “focuses on the nature of the evaluand itself (i.e., the program, treatment, intervention, policy, etc. being evaluated)” (Donaldson & Lipsey, 2006, p. 64). The confluence of evaluation theory, social science theory, and program theory constitute a distinctive approach to evaluation known as “program-driven evaluation science” (Donaldson, 2005, 2007). It is argued that this is the primary way that evaluation contributes to social betterment by way of knowledge development

(Donaldson & Lipsey, 2006). Donaldson (2007) defined program theory-driven evaluation science as:

The systematic use of substantive knowledge about the phenomena under investigation and scientific methods to improve, to produce knowledge and feedback about, and to determine the merit, worth, and significance of evaluands such as social, educational health, community, and organizational programs. (p. 9)

This dissertation study aims to generate knowledge regarding family life education program effectiveness through the evaluation of a demonstration project, which seeks to determine whether a problem-solving court approach that utilizes a community-based service delivery element, improves the social, emotional, and financial outcomes for unmarried parents and their children. The social science theory presented in chapter two will provide the context for interpreting the evaluation findings. It is hoped that by linking social science theory to the program theory of this existing social innovation and evaluating its effect, principles of effective programming can be discerned. Such knowledge can be used to provide guidance regarding the development of new family life education initiatives, policies, programs, and strategies for implementation.

Mixed Methods Research Design

A mixed methods research design was selected for this study because it allows me the ability to obtain a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon under investigation, pragmatic family life education methodology, by evaluating whether and to what degree the program was effective (through statistical analysis of quantitative survey items) as well as to determine whether and to what degree the program theory aligned with the conceptual framework of pragmatic family life education as outlined in chapter two. The

flexibility afforded by the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches and methods allows the applied researcher or evaluator to answer his or her research questions in the most effective manner (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009, p. 285). Qualitative research questions tend to be exploratory in nature (i.e., they are concerned with generating information about the unknown aspects of a phenomenon) whereas quantitative research questions tend to be confirmatory (i.e., they are aimed at testing theoretical propositions) (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Similarly, qualitative research has generally been more concerned with theory generation whereas quantitative research has been primarily interested in theory verification. Therefore, “a major advantage of mixed methods research is that it enables the researcher to simultaneously ask confirmatory and exploratory questions and therefore verify and generate theory in the same study” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 33). The choice of a mixed approach is seen as one that should be driven by the questions the research seeks to answer (Biesta, 2010). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) formulate this as the idea that one should “choose the combination or mixture of methods and procedures that works best for answering your research questions” (p. 17).

Research Paradigm: Pragmatism

The philosophical orientation most often associated with mixed methods is pragmatism (Biesta & Burbules, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morgan, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Pragmatism has typically been advocated for as the appropriate philosophical orientation for mixed methods because it is seen as providing an underlying philosophy that informs both quantitative

and qualitative data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2015; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Pragmatism is primarily concerned with actions, situations and consequences rather than antecedent conditions (Creswell, 2009) and focuses on applications, discovering “what works” and solutions to problems (Patton, 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). This is essentially a pragmatic justification of mixed methods, which relies on the argument for “the utility of research means for research ends” (p. 96), which Biesta (2010) identified as *everyday* pragmatism. However, Biesta argues that this becomes problematic “when the claim for *everyday* pragmatism is taken as an argument for *philosophical* pragmatism to the extent that the latter is seen as the philosophical “paradigm” for mixed methods research” (p. 96). For example, he identifies that Deweyan pragmatism does not provide a blanket justification for all forms of mixed methods research (see Biesta, 2010 for more detail). However, the major contribution that Deweyan pragmatism does make to the methods debate is this his understanding of knowledge does away with alleged hierarchies between qualitative and quantitative approaches and rather helps to make the case that

different approaches generate *different* outcomes, *different* connections between doing and undergoing, between actions and consequences, so that we always need to judge out knowledge claims pragmatically, that is in relation to the process and procedures through which the knowledge has been generated so as not to make any assertions that cannot be warranted on the basis of the particular methods and methodologies used. (Biesta, 2010, p. 113)

Dewey proposed the concept of “warranted assertions” as a way to pragmatically assess knowledge claims. He preferred this term because it reflects that the outcomes of inquiry “are only warranted in relation to the particular situation in which they were

produced” (Biesta, 2010, p 11). Therefore, I will use the term “warranted assertion” in this study to identify the outcomes of inquiry and research (Biesta, 2010). Although Deweyan pragmatism serves as the epistemology of practice for the study, it will not be used as the philosophy that is guiding the research design. Instead, *everyday* pragmatism is used as a practical justification for the selection of mixed methods research design for this study.

Now that pragmatism as a justification for the utility of mixed methods research has been distinguished from pragmatism as a philosophical paradigm for mixed methods designs, the utilitarian orientation that pragmatism provides a mixed method approach warrants additional discussion. Nastasi, Hitchcock and Brown (2010) describe the utilitarian function in this way:

Pragmatism places emphasis on the practical aspects of research (e.g., what works best for answering the research question), the context (e.g., what is most appropriate given the contextual conditions), and potential consequences of the research (e.g., the social or political implications). (p. 308)

Pragmatism focuses attention to the research problem, rather than the method, and then uses appropriate pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge about the problem (Patton, 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). “Being pragmatic allows one to eschew methodological orthodoxy in favor of *methodological appropriateness* as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality, recognizing that different methods are appropriate for different situations” (Patton, 2002, p. 72). Utilizing a pragmatic approach is appropriate for this study because it is problem-centered and oriented toward real-world practice, which will allow me to determine whether a pragmatic model of family

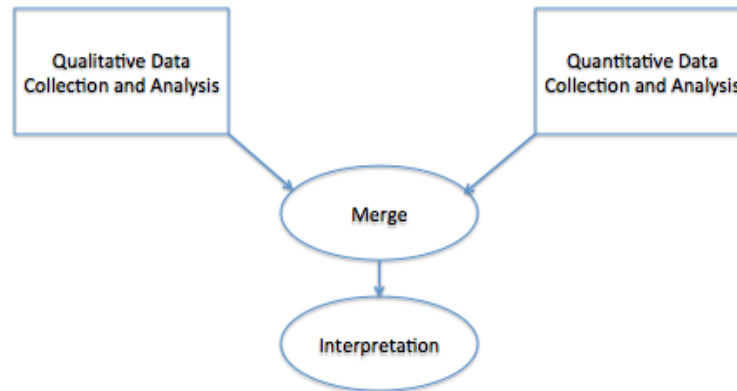
life education “works.” A pragmatic orientation will provide me the benefit of a mixed methods research design that is simultaneously flexible and structured.

Mixed Methods Design: Convergent, Intervention, Multilevel

This study will employ what has variously been referred to as “methodological triangulation” (Denzin, 1978) and as a “simultaneous” (Morse, 2003), “concurrent” (Creswell, 2009), “parallel” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009) and most recently “convergent” (Creswell, 2015) mixed methods design. I will use the term “convergent” design throughout the remainder of this paper to identify the strategy wherein qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analyzed separately with the intent to merge the results of the qualitative and quantitative data analyses (Creswell, 2015). Two parallel and relatively independent strands of research are conducted: one with qualitative questions, data collection, and analysis techniques and the other with quantitative questions, data collection, and analysis techniques (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). “Inferences based on the results from each strand are integrated to form meta-inferences at the end of the study” (p. 152). Therefore, the information is integrated in the interpretation of the overall results. Merging the results of qualitative and quantitative data analyses provides both a qualitative and quantitative picture of the phenomenon, and because both forms of data provide different insight, their combination contributes to seeing the phenomenon from multiple angles and perspectives (Creswell, 2015). The qualitative and quantitative data are merged in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009) by providing in-depth personal perspectives of individuals (qualitative) and general trends and relationships (quantitative) (Creswell,

2015). This traditional mixed methods model is advantageous because it can result in well-validated and substantiated findings (Creswell, 2009). Figure 4 shows a simple diagram for a convergent design.

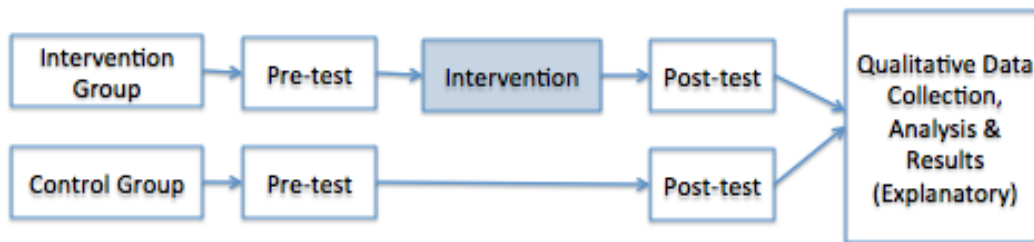
Figure 4. *Convergent Mixed Methods Design*



The convergent design is considered one of three basic mixed methods designs. These designs serve as the basis for more advanced designs capable of capturing greater complexity. The advanced mixed methods design that most accurately captures the essence of this evaluation research is the intervention design (Creswell, 2015). According to Creswell (2015) “the intent of the intervention design is to study a problem by conducting an experiment or an intervention trial and adding qualitative data into it” (p. 42). An intervention design utilizes an experimental or quasi-experimental study design in which two groups, a control and an intervention, are identified. The intervention group receives some treatment or intervention whereas the control group does not. The outcomes for these two groups are compared at pre (prior to the intervention) and post (after the intervention has been applied) to determine whether there is a difference between the groups. If there are differences in the groups at post, this difference can be

attributed to the intervention. The intervention mixed methods design places qualitative data within this experimental intervention pre- and post-test model (Creswell, 2015). The experimental intervention procedure is considered a highly rigorous design. Adding qualitative data to this design can further strengthen this already rigorous design by adding the human element into the results (Creswell, 2015). Figure 5 displays the procedural diagram for the convergent, intervention mixed methods design utilized in this study.

Figure 5. *Intervention Mixed Methods Design*

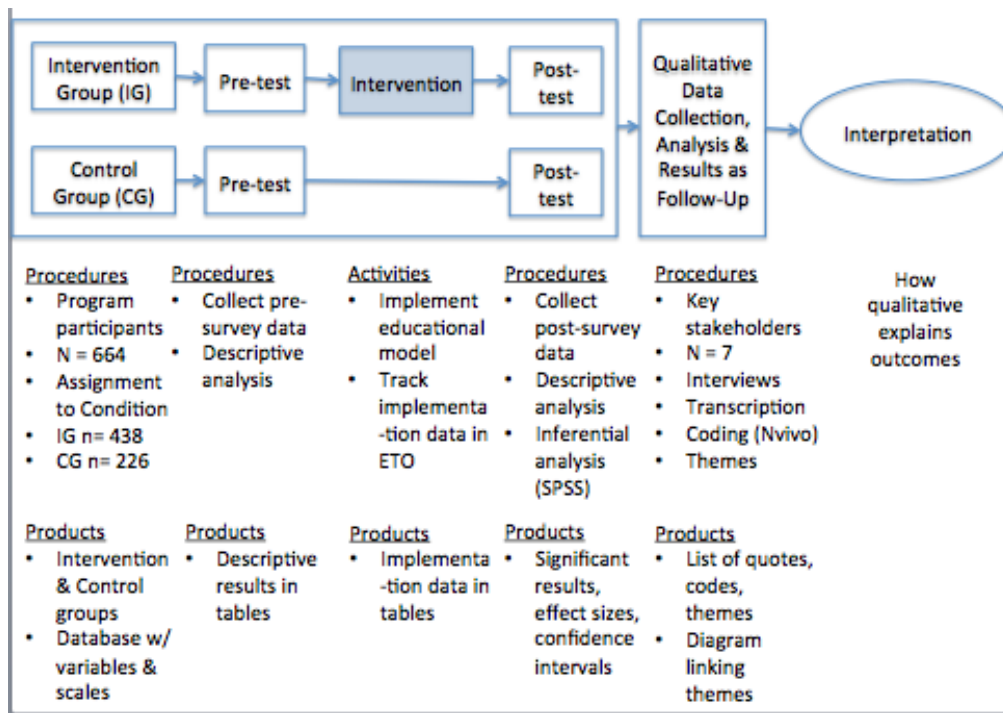


The final element of the mixed methods design being implemented in this study is known as a multilevel implementation process (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) this mixed methods approach collects qualitative and quantitative data from multiple levels within an organization or other type of social institution, thereby generating multilevel research designs. This kind of design is only possible in situations where one level of analysis is nested within another (e.g., participants within a program). “Multilevel mixing occurs when one type of data (QUAL) is collected at one level (student) and another type of data (QUAN) is collected at another level (classroom) to answer interrelated research questions” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p. 146). For the purposes of this study, quantitative data will be collected from

mothers and fathers (participant level) and qualitative data will be collected through interviews with key project stakeholders (programmatic level).

The elements described in this section outline the mixed methods research design being employed in this study. The basic design is a convergent mixed methods design within an advanced intervention design utilizing a multilevel implementation process that considered separate levels of analysis. Therefore, this study is a convergent, multilevel intervention mixed methods design. Figure 6 is a graphical representation of the portion of the study design that is relevant to this mixed methods design.

Figure 6. *A Convergent, Multilevel, Intervention Design of a Mixed Methods Study of a Pragmatic Model of Family Life Education*



The intent of this concurrent mixed methods study is to investigate whether an ecological model of education enhances family life well-being. In the study, data

ascertained from the post survey is used to measure the relationship between the pragmatic intervention approach and family well-being. At the same time, the educational model is explored using qualitative interviews with key project stakeholders. Quantitative results will yield general explanations for the relationships among variables, but the more detailed understanding of what the statistical tests or effect sizes actually mean is lacking (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Therefore, the qualitative results will help build understanding of the practical significance of the statistical results. The reason for combining both quantitative and qualitative data is to better understand this research problem by converging both quantitative (broad numeric trends) and qualitative (detailed views) data.

This dissertation study is a part of the existing, quasi-experimental, longitudinal design that includes both an intervention and control group and uses pre, post, and follow surveys along with a follow up qualitative interview with the program participants as well as stakeholder interviews conducted at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the project. This convergent, multilevel, intervention mixed methods design employs a quasi-experimental survey questionnaire (quantitative strategy) and a case study approach based on qualitative data obtained through open-ended interviews with key program stakeholders (qualitative strategy).

The remainder of this chapter will summarize the particular research methods and analysis implemented in this dissertation study. I will begin by describing the efforts taken to protect the people who participated in this research study and the research questions used to guide this mixed methods study will be identified. Next the quantitative

design elements and analysis strategies employed will be defined followed by a description of the qualitative design elements and analysis strategies. Finally, the mixed methods analytic approach used to integrate the quantitative and qualitative findings will be summarized.

Protections of Human Participants

The project was determined to have greater than minimal risk to participants and therefore a social and behavioral sciences application was submitted to the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board (IRB) for full review. Approval was initially obtained in 2010 and was renewed on an annual basis according to IRB regulations (IRB Study # 0912S74794). The following protections of human participants were in place during the study: (a) While participation in the project was court mandated, participation in the research study was voluntary, all participants were told that the study was optional and that they did not have to participate. They were also told that they could decline participation at any point in the study. (b) Data was only collected from those participants who elected to participate in the study and signed an informed consent form. (c) Court case numbers were used to track participants' survey and interview data in order to ensure confidentiality of responses. (d) All data presented in annual reports was reported aggregately (across all mothers or fathers).

It was not necessary to obtain informed consent from the project stakeholders as the interviews conducted with them fall under the category of "program evaluation," which has been designated a non-research activity by IRB. The stakeholders were not identified by name in reporting of the qualitative interviews in order to secure as much

anonymity as possible (though given the nature of the project and the limited number of individuals in certain roles, it was difficult to assure complete anonymity). In addition to the original IRB approval, a change in protocol request, which outlined a change in the questions that would be asked of the stakeholders specifically for the purpose of this study, was submitted and approved in March of 2014.

Research Questions

In line with the convergent, multilevel, intervention mixed methods approach being utilized, the generalized research questions guiding this study are: (a) To what extent do the qualitative results help to further explain the quantitative results? (b) How do the qualitative findings enhance the interpretation of the experimental outcomes? From these general mixed methods questions, two overarching research questions have been identified to guide this study. The first being “how do evaluation findings triangulate with social science theory and practitioner wisdom?” The second is “what principles can be extracted to inform practice?”

Quantitative: Quasi-Experimental Survey Design

The Co-Parent Court evaluation study employed a quasi-experimental survey design that included three data collection instances: pre (prior to the intervention), post (approximately six months following the intervention) and follow-up (at least a year following completion of the intervention). The purpose of implementing an experimental (or quasi-experimental) design is to determine whether a specific intervention influences stated outcomes (Creswell, 2009). Experimental designs are often considered the most rigorous of all research design because of their ability to address the internal validity

threat and makes causal inferences. Random assignment ensures that the control and intervention groups are probabilistically equivalent so that the control group can serve as a counterfactual. Whereas the intervention group shows the outcomes of receiving the intervention, the control group shows the outcomes in absence of the intervention. In other words, the design permits testing to two propositions:

if the program is given, then the outcome occurs and if the program is *not* given, then the outcome does *not* occur. If you are able to provide evidence for both of these propositions, you've in effect isolated the program from all of the other potential causes of the outcome. (Trochim, 2005, p. 151)

This points to the causal effectiveness of the intervention and allows the outcome to be attributed to the program or intervention. The outcomes are measured by utilizing survey questionnaire, which is an instrument that respondents complete. Utilizing a longitudinal pre, post, follow up survey design, allows the researcher to compare participant and group responses before the intervention to those after the intervention has been completed and compare what changes occurred and how the intervention and control groups differ. The pre survey serves as the baseline so it would be expected the groups that have been randomly assigned would look similar at this point whereas, if the intervention were effective, differences would be expected at the later measurement times (post and follow up).

Each case is randomly sampled by a court administrator who identifies if participants meet the eligibility criteria, which include: that the case is ready for adjudication, neither parent needs an interpreter, there are no active child protection or order for protection, both parents are at least 18 years old, and the parents must reside within identified zip

codes associated with North Minneapolis. Cases that meet eligibility criteria are randomly assigned (by use of a random numbers table generated by the University of Minnesota Evaluation team) to either the intervention or control group. It is important to note that although participants are randomly assigned, the nature of working in the real world is that the lives of participants and programs are rarely simple or straightforward. There have been situations where parents were assigned to both the intervention and control groups with different co-parents. Due to the inherent “messiness” of operating in the real world, this study is referred to as “quasi-experimental” rather than strictly experimental.

Once participants have been deemed eligible and assigned to one of the two research groups, they are then served with a notice to appear at either family court (control group) or Co-Parent Court (intervention group). The control group receives services as usual, which means they go through the typical family court adjudication proceedings in which paternity is established and custody, parenting time, and child support are set by a court referee. Those assigned to the intervention group attend court where the Co-Parent Court project is outlined and if both parents appear at court, they are enrolled in the project by the Co-Parent Court Navigators.

Demographic characteristics of participants. Control and intervention enrollment was 226 and 438 respectively. This study considered quantitative data from both the control and intervention groups; however, the intervention group data is of primary interest since they are the ones who received the intervention. The participants are predominantly African-American, with high rates of unemployment, receipt of public

assistance, criminal records, and co-parenting with more than one other parent. This population is considered “high risk” and are often referred to in the literature as “fragile families.” Table 6 summarizes several demographic characteristics of the co-parent dyads who comprised the sample. The demographic information presented here was collected at intake, which for the control group was collected by the evaluators at court directly before completion of the pre-survey and for the intervention group was conducted by the Co-Parent Court Navigator at the initial Co-Parent Court hearing.

Table 6. *Demographics of Mothers and Fathers in Control and Intervention Groups*

Individual Characteristics	Control n=226		Intervention n=438	
	Mothers (%) n=117	Fathers (%) n=109	Mothers (%) n=228	Fathers (%) n=210
Race/Ethnicity				
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2		1	2
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	3		4	4
Black or African American	60	88	64	80
Hispanic/Latino	2	1	3	4
Multi-Racial/Ethnicity	10	4	7	3
White	23	7	21	8
Age				
18-20	2		3	1
21-25	27	20	35	30
26-30	31	29	29	25
31-35	24	25	18	16
36-40	12	15	11	16
41-45	1	6	4	10
46-50	3	4		1
51-55		1		1
Marital Status				
Currently married to someone else	2	4	2	6
Never married	92	89	93	87
Previously married	6	7	5	7

**Family
Characteristics**

Number of Children Under 18

1	42	26	53	37
2	31	25	24	26
3	19	23	12	16
4	7	11	6	8
5		10	1	6
6	1		1	1
7		1		2
9				1
10				1
11				1
17				1

Number of Children with Co-Parent

1	82	82	79	78
2	15	17	17	19
3	2	1	3	2
4	1		1	1

**Socioeconomic
Characteristics**

Receiving Public Assistance

No	24	66	15	76
Yes	76	34	85	24

Education

Currently attending high school	3	4	5	5
Not attending high school, no HS Diploma	6	12	11	16
High School Diploma/GED	38	51	48	50
Some post-secondary	42	27	25	20
College degree or higher	11	6	11	9

Employment

Full-time	26	27	25	21
Part-time	18	17	22	20
Temporary/Pick-Up Jobs	2	5	3	5
Unemployed	54	51	50	54

Data collection procedures. Graduate research assistants working on the evaluation team conducted data collection with both the control and intervention group.

The control group participants were approached by the graduate assistants at the Family Justice Center as they were awaiting their case to be heard. The intervention group was approached about participation in the study at the first two co-parent education workshop. The project is explained and if participants elected to participate in the study they signed consent. Only those participants who signed consent are considered enrolled in the study.

After consent has been signed, participants completed the pre survey. All pre-survey data was completed by the individual, so each case consists of a mother and father survey, if both agreed to participate in the study, and are collected via “paper and pen.” Typically the evaluator was available if participants have questions regarding the meaning of a question. However, on occasion participants elected to take the survey home with them to complete at their convenience and either return it by mail (postage paid by the project) or in person when they returned to the workshop the following week. Upon completion of the survey participants received a \$25 Target gift card for their participation. Data was entered from the surveys into an SPSS file for later analysis. The hard copies were then filed for data quality checks and security purposes.

Participants were contacted to complete a post survey six to nine months after the pre survey was administered to them. Control cases were “matched” with intervention cases to account for the differential amount of time intervention participants spent actively involved in the program in an attempt to maintain similarity between the control and intervention groups. Participants were most often contacted via the telephone (this is the most successful method of contact) and occasionally sent letters when a working phone number was not available. Participants were either scheduled to come to the

University of Minnesota Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC) located in North Minneapolis to complete the survey in person or were given the option to complete the post-survey online. Remark, a secure web survey software, is the platform that was used to collect survey data online. Participants who chose to complete the survey online were sent an e-mail with a link to the survey and their id code. An incentive to complete the survey in-person is that the participants immediately received their incentive, a \$30 Target gift card. Those who completed the survey online were given the option to pick the gift card up in person or have the gift card mailed to them following completion of the post survey online. The follow-up survey and interview were scheduled approximately three to six months after the post survey had been completed (usually about a year after signing consent). Again the online option was also available for the follow up survey along with an interview conducted over the phone. A \$40 Target gift card was offered upon completion of the follow up survey and interview.

The control and intervention groups were compared at the second data collection point using data from the post survey. Although the number of parents enrolled in the project is rather high as reported previously, 226 and 428 for control and intervention groups respectively, numbers for the completion of post survey were considerably lower as Table 7 reveals. This limits the power of the statistical analysis, which will be further addressed as one of the limitations of the study in the discussion chapter.

Table 7. *Post Survey Completion*

	N		Total
	Control	Intervention	
Fathers	18	36	54
Mothers	51	59	110
Total	69	95	164

Survey instrumentation and design. The survey questionnaire developed by the evaluation team for the Co-Parent Court project is comprised of 172 survey questions that measure constructs such as time spent with the child, activities and involvement with the child, health and development of the child, parental and family well-being, and quality of the co-parenting relationship. In order to measure these constructs a variety of measures were selected for inclusion in the survey. Scales in their entirety or subscales were used from nine different instruments including: Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative PY2-Survey, Together We Can Questionnaire, Coping Health Inventory for Parents, General Health Questionnaire, Measures of Family Well-being, Parental Sense of Competence Scale, Co-Parenting Alliance Scale, Infant Child Checklist, and Child Behavior Checklist. In addition to these measures, some questions were developed specifically for inclusion in this study. A majority of the survey is comprised of questions with a structured interval-level response format (Trochim, 2005) such as: (1) strongly disagree (2) disagree (3) neutral (4) agree (5) strongly agree. Nearly all of the response options are single-option variables and require the participant to check or “X” the box of the appropriate response.

For the purpose of this study, the Overall Assessment of My Family’s Well-being scale was used to determine whether and to what degree participation in the Co-Parent

Court project contributed to enhanced family life well-being. This construct was measured using the Measure of Family Well-being, adapted from the Institute for Family Support and Development of MICA (1996) and developed by the University of Georgia Family and Consumer Sciences Extension in 1999. This scale assesses twelve areas of family functioning and asks individuals to identify how they feel they are doing in each of the areas by using a three point scale (see appendix A). The 12 item overall assessment assesses various areas of family life including: parenting, housing, community life, family relationships, food and nutrition, health and medical care, education and jobs, money and finances, transportation, children's education, children's behavior and child care. This scale is a self-report measure that asks respondents "when you think about each of these things below, how are you and your family doing?" with response options "Great," "OK," or "Struggle" to the statements regarding each area of family life. A fourth category, "Not Applicable" (N/A) was also an option. Each variable on the scale was analyzed on its own to determine whether the Co-Parent Court projects affects family well-being differently in different areas of family life. If participants selected "N/A" they were treated as missing data for the purpose of this analysis.

Of the twelve areas of family life that are represented on the family well-being scale, only five were selected to be reported in this study. Those that are not being reported on are either outside the scope of the Co-Parent Court project objectives (such as: the food you eat, health and medical care, your transportation and how you get where you need to go, and day care for you children when they're not with you) or large scale changes that are unlikely to be immediately impacted by an intervention such as Co-

Parent Court (residence and utilities, the neighborhood where you live, and your children and how they're getting along in the world). Therefore, the five family life well-being areas that are reported for this study include: (a) education and job, (b) money and finances, (c) children's education, (d) family relationships, and (e) parenting. The case management with mothers and fathers emphasized education and employment services making it the most relevant outcome on the scale. The implication of obtaining additional education and employment would be an increase in financial resources, so this is a proxy outcome that may be associated with gaining employment. Children's education was selected as an outcome variable that seeks to address child well-being. Finally, because the Co-Parent Court model seeks to improve the co-parenting relationship between parents, family relationships and parenting were selected as it is not unlikely that co-parenting education may influence one or both of those factors.

Quantitative analytic approach. The intervention group was compared to the control group to determine if there are differences in the outcome variable, family life well-being, between the two groups. Additionally, analysis was conducted separately for mothers and fathers in order to tease apart the different experiences of mothers and fathers who participated in the intervention. The following section describes the analytic procedure employed in this study.

Statistical analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), a statistical software program commonly used by researchers in the social sciences. In order to assess the relationship between the independent variable (scope and extent of intervention) and the dependent variable (family well-being), a form

of logistic regression analysis that is capable of extending the standard logistic regression model to accommodate an outcome variable that has more than two categories (Kleinbaum & Klein, 2010) will be conducted. This type of logistic regression analysis is known as either polytomous or multinomial (Menard, 2010). Multinomial logistic regression extends binary logistic regression to cover categorical dependent variables with two or more levels (Garson, 2014). Because the dependent variable of interest in this study, family life well-being, has three categories, multinomial logistic regression is an appropriate analysis strategy to employ. In multinomial logistic regression, “one of the categories of the outcome variable is designated as the reference category and each of the other levels is compared with this reference” (Kleinbaum & Klein, 2010, p. 435). The value of the dependent (outcome) variable that is designated as the reference category, and the probability of membership in other categories is compared with the probability of membership in the reference category (Menard, 2010). Okay was designated as the reference category for the purpose of this study. Therefore, two main comparisons will be modeled: (a) X to Y and (b) X to Z. The result of these comparisons is the computation of an odds ratio, which is the main effect size measure for logistic regression (Garson, 2014), reflecting in this case what difference the intervention makes as a predictor of family life well-being (the dependent variable). The logistic function is regarded as providing the conditional odds or relative probabilities of being in each category, relative to a particular reference category (Menard, 2010). An odds ratio of 1.0 (which is 1:1 odds) indicates that the variable has no effect, whereas the further from 1.0 in either direction, the greater the effect (Garson, 2014).

Attending to validity. Utilizing a quasi-experimental design addresses many of the threats to internal validity such as history, maturation, and selection. However, there are some threats to internal validity that are limitations or weaknesses of this study, such as the diffusion of treatment that has occurred due to multi-partner fertility causing some participants to be enrolled in both the control and intervention groups with different co-parents. Although the study sought to recruit a large sample to account for attrition, the number of participants actually enrolled in the study has been lower than anticipated. As a result, some of the groups (particularly the control fathers) is quite low. Dividing the intervention group into smaller units to compare the scope and extent of the intervention received may suffer from this issue. The same instrument is used at all three data collection points, which are divided by 6 months, on average, intervals of time accounting for instrumentation and testing threats to internal validity.

External threats to validity include the interaction of treatment and: selection, setting, and history (Creswell, 2009). This means that findings of the study cannot be generalized to individuals who do not have the characteristics of the participants and cannot be generalized to other settings. Additionally, the research needs to be replicated at a different time.

Qualitative: Case Study

The case study approach is a qualitative inquiry strategy or genre that explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals (Creswell, 2009). Case study methods allow investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life phenomena and allow analysis of contextual conditions in

relation to the “case” (Yin, 2003). This aspect of case study makes it particularly appropriate for studying a pragmatic model of family life education that seeks to provide a holistic, contextually-based approach to strengthening families, youth and communities.

For the purpose of this study, a single-case holistic design will be conducted. The single case will be selected because it represents the critical case in testing a theory (Yin, 2003). Holistic designs examine the global nature of a program and are particularly appropriate when the theory underlying the case study is of a holistic nature (Yin, 2003). Because the Co-Parent Court model is consistent with an ecological intervention approach, it serves as a critical case for testing a pragmatic model of family life education. The theory of change outlines the propositions and circumstances under which the propositions are believed to be true. Therefore, the Co-Parent Court model will be used as a critical case to either confirm, challenge, or extend a pragmatic theory of practice.

Two types of sources of qualitative data were obtained and analyzed for the purpose of this dissertation study. The primary source of qualitative data was obtained through interviews with key program stakeholders. Program documentation served as a secondary source of data that was used to supplement the interview data. In total, there were nine distinct data sources (seven interviews and two program documents) that comprised the data corpus of the qualitative strand of this study. Patton (2002) asserted the utility of using multiple sources of information because no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective of the program. Using

multiple sources of qualitative data allowed me to validate and cross-check findings (Patton, 2002).

Demographic characteristics of the key stakeholders. Stakeholders were strategically selected to complete the end of project interviews based on their roles within the project as well as the perspective they could provide. Seven individuals were interviewed. The stakeholders can be divided into three distinct groups each representing a particular element of the Co-Parent Court project. There were three individuals representing the community partners, the two CPC Navigators and the Family Facilitator, who were primarily involved in service delivery through facilitating workshops, providing case management, and otherwise working directly with the parents in the project. There were two representative of the court and government system, a judge and representative from the child support office, as well as the two consultants, representative of the overall project coordination and management efforts. The demographic characteristics of the stakeholders is displayed in Table 8.

Table 8. *Demographic Characteristics of Key Program Stakeholders*

Project Role	Sex		Race Ethnicity		Total
	Female	Male	Black	White	
Court Representatives	1	1		2	2
Project Coordinators	1	1		2	2
Services Providers	2	1	3		3
Total	4	3	3	4	7

Interview design. Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, those involved with project coordination, management and delivery, throughout the course of

the project. These interviews typically aimed to elicit reflections regarding key features of the project that contributed to success, assess whether and how the theoretical framework articulated at the beginning of the project was borne out, and ask stakeholders to provide advice for replication to achieve success and avoid pitfalls. Data for the purpose of this study was derived from the end of project stakeholder interviews that asked interviewees to reflect on the success of the project by identifying the critical factors or features of the model. My initial plan was to conduct all of the interviews myself; however, four of the interviews were conducted on the same day at the same times (prior to and following a meeting that many of the stakeholders attended). I conducted five of the seven interviews and two members of the evaluation team also each conducted one stakeholder interview. All of the interviews, with the exception of one that was conducted via telephone, were conducted in person. Interviews lasted on average 45 minutes with the shortest interview being 30 minutes long and the longest interview being 110 minutes long.

Interview data collection procedures. Interviews were conducted using a standardized, semi-structured open-ended interview, which “consists of questions carefully worded and arranged with the intention of taking each respondent through the same sequence and asking each respondent the same questions with essentially the same words” (Patton, 2002, p. 342). This requires that the interview questions be written out in advance, in the way and order they are to be asked during the interview. This interview script includes an introductory statement explaining the interview process to the participant, carefully worded questions in numeric order along with prompts or probes

that can be used to elicit the information being sought for each question (the full interview protocol can be located in appendix B). Because there were multiple data collectors conducting the interviews, using a standardized interview approach is necessary to ensure that variation in the questions posed to interviewees is minimized. This promotes consistency in the data obtained across interviewers, which facilitates the analysis process by making responses easy to find and compare (Patton, 2002). In addition to providing consistency across interviewers, it also provides structure and guidance for novice interviewers. However, the evaluation team values a conversational interview approach that does not feel rigid or rehearsed so while an interview script was used to increase consistency across interviews and interviewers, it was not expected that the interviewer necessarily read word for word from the script. Instead, there was some flexibility allowed in the delivery of the questions. Each interviewer took notes during the interview. Additionally, the interviews were audio recorded and the interview transcribed, a crucial aspect of qualitative research that emphasizes the voice and words of the participants.

Program documentation review. Program documentation such as records, documents, artifacts, and archives constitute a particularly rich source of information about programs (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) identified document review and analysis as a powerful source of qualitative data as it provides a behind-the-scenes look at the program that may not be directly observable. Additionally he identified that program goals, implementation designs and/or proposals suggest that certain things are expected to happen, therefore, it is appropriate for an evaluator to use those documents, which

represent the espoused program theory (the official version of how the program operates), to compare to the theory-in-use (what really happens in the implementation of the program) (Patton, 2002).

Two program documents were selected to review in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the program (a) the Policy and Procedure Manual, which was developed at the beginning of the program to guide implementation and (b) the Program Replication Materials, which were developed toward the end of the demonstration project in order to provide guidance for others interested in replicating the program. Both these forms of program documentation are intended to provide guidance regarding the implementation of the program and therefore should be representative of the core components of program design and implementation. Therefore, they are appropriate secondary sources of data to compare with the interview data in order to gain a fuller understanding of the program as it was espoused and as it was actually implemented.

Qualitative analytical approach. I used QSR NVivo version 10, a qualitative analysis software program, to facilitate the organization and analysis of the data. Each transcript was uploaded into NVivo. This is an efficient way to store and locate files, assign codes, and compare the codes and categories that are generated. Next each of the transcripts was read through to ascertain a general sense of the data, reflect on its overall meaning (Creswell, 2009) and to generate emergent insights and “get a feel for the cumulative data as a whole” (Patton, 2002, p. 441).

I used the first phase of Auerbach and Silverstein's (2003) thematic analysis process which they refer to as "making the text manageable." This first phase works at the level of the raw text itself and is "a filtering process, in which you choose which parts of your text you will include in your analysis, and which parts you will discard" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 42). The two steps that comprise this phase are (a) Explicitly state your research concerns and theoretical framework and (b) Select the relevant text for further analysis. In this phase you use your research concerns (step 1) to select relevant text (step 2). "Relevant text refers to passages of your transcript that express a distinct idea related to your research concerns" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 46). Therefore, I began by reading through each transcript with my research concern and theoretical framework in mind and highlighted any passages that were relevant to them. Engaging in this process made the qualitative data base manageable by allowing me to select out the passages that were relevant for the research concern and theoretical framework of this study.

After the interview data had been read through and the relevant text selected, a data condensation task referred to as coding was used to assemble segments of data that go together and further condense the bulk into readily analyzable units (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). The codes served as tags or labels for assigning symbolic meaning to the descriptive and inferential information compiled during the study (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). An eclectic approach was utilized as part of the first cycle coding (Saldaña, 2013). A combination of predetermined and emerging codes were used. I began by using provisional coding (Saldaña, 2013) also referred to as deductive coding (Miles,

Huberman & Saldaña, 2014) which establishes a predetermined “start list” of researcher-generated codes that come from the conceptual framework, list of research questions, and/or key variables. These codes were comprised of sensitizing concepts from the literature, especially from the conceptual framework articulated in chapter two, which served as a general reference and provided direction in my analysis (Patton, 2002). The emerging codes were coded using one of two strategies: (a) descriptive coding, in which labels are assigned to data to summarize in a word or phrase the basic topic of a passage and (b) in vivo coding, which refers to developing codes using a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). The general coding strategies employed as part of the first cycle coding include: (a) subcoding, where a second order tag is assigned to detail or enrich a more general entry and (b) simultaneous coding, which is the application of two or more different codes to a single qualitative datum (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). In addition, a couple affective coding methods were used to “investigate subjective qualities of human experience (e.g., emotions, values, conflicts, judgments) by directly acknowledging and naming those experiences’ (Saldaña, 2013, p. 105). In particular, three affective methods were used (a) emotion coding, which labels the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant, or inferred by the research about the participant (b) values coding, which is the application of codes onto qualitative data that reflects participant’s values, attitudes and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldviews, and (c) evaluation coding, which assign judgments about the merit, worth or significance of programs or policies and may emerge from the evaluative perspective

of the researcher or from the qualitative commentary provided by participants (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). Additionally, magnitude coding was used to indicate the intensity, frequency, direction, presence, or evaluative content of the evaluation codes (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). A codebook was developed to track the codes and categories that emerged through the analysis process (See Appendix C and D for my final codebook).

Upon completion of the first cycle coding, I began the process of pattern coding, as a second cycle method, to understand the patterns and recurrences in order to identify emergent themes (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). I engaged in the process of condensing and expanding categories in order to group the codes into a smaller set of themes and constructs. I began this process by initially analyzing the data for convergence, “looking for *recurring regularities* in the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 465). The regularities exposed patterns in the data that were then sorted into categories. The categories were verified by assessing the extent to which data that belong in a category are similar and hold together (internal homogeneity) and the extent to which differences among categories are obvious (external heterogeneity) (Patton, 2002).

Next I began generating a description of the categories or themes that emerged and began making connections between and among the themes and the theoretical model. During this stage, the data will be examined for divergence. “This is done by a process of extension (building on items of information already known [this maybe previous research or other ways of knowing]), bridging (making connections among different items), and surfacing (proposing new information that ought to fit and then verifying its existence)”

(Patton, 2002, p. 466). I used additional analysis strategies such as creating framework matrices (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) and writing analytic memos (Maxwell, 2005) to help me reflect on the meaning of the data, generate analytic insights and develop interpretations.

The qualitative analyst's effort at uncovering patterns, themes and categories relies on his or her ability to make a judgment about what is really significant and meaningful in the data. As such, qualitative findings are judged by their substantive significance. To determine substantive significance I considered questions such as "how solid, coherent, and consistent is the evidence in support of my findings?" "To what extent and in what ways do the findings increase and deepen understanding of the phenomenon studied?" "To what extent are the findings consistent with other knowledge?" "To what extent are the findings useful for addressing the problem?" (Patton, 2002). Attending to these questions provided me with one way of establishing substantive significance in my data.

Attending to validity. In addition to methodological triangulation, qualitative validity strategies will include using rich, thick description and use of direct quotations to provide evidence for themes identified to allow the reader to determine for him or herself whether there is sufficient evidence to support inferences drawn. The researcher has spent a prolonged time in the field (three years working on this project) and has therefore developed an in-depth understanding of the site and people that can lend credibility to the narrative. One benefit of working on an evaluation team is there are others who I can engage in the peer debriefing process with to enhance the accuracy of the account.

Negative or discrepant information, data that runs counter to the themes, will also be presented. By presenting contradictory evidence the account becomes more realistic and therefore valid. Finally, the bias of the researcher, myself, will be clarified through self-reflection and disclosure of background characteristics, such as gender, culture, and socioeconomic origin that have shaped my perspective and therefore interpretation of the findings.

Mixed Methods Analytical Approach

The primary “point of interface” or integration (Creswell, 2015) of qualitative and quantitative data in convergent designs occurs during the analysis phase. Mixed methods data analysis in a convergent design consists of analytic techniques applied to both the quantitative and the qualitative data as well as to the mixing of the two forms of data concurrently (Creswell, 2015; Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003). Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) refer to this as parallel mixed methods data analysis, which involves two separate processes: quantitative analysis of data, using descriptive and inferential statistics, and qualitative analysis of data, using thematic analysis related to the relevant narrative data. Although the two sets of analyses are independent, the unique understandings of the phenomenon that each yields is then linked, combined, or integrated into “meta-inferences” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In other words, inferences are made on the basis of the results from each strand separately and then are synthesized to form meta-inferences at the end of the study. When the analyses are conducted independently according to the standards of quality and excellence for each method and findings are

then integrated to reach conclusions, this is referred to as “parallel tracks analysis” (Datta, 2001; Greene, 2007).

Once analyses are complete, mixed methods interpretation involves looking across the quantitative results and the qualitative findings and making an assessment of how the information addresses the mixed methods question in the study. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) call this interpretation drawing “inferences” and “meta-inferences” (p. 300). Inferences in mixed methods research are conclusions or interpretations drawn from the separate quantitative and qualitative strands of a study as well as across the quantitative and qualitative strands, called “meta-inferences.” (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011, pp. 212-213)

In this study, analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data were conducted separately (as described previously in this chapter). Then a merged data analysis strategy was used to compare the quantitative and qualitative findings. A merged data analysis strategy involves using analytic techniques for merging the results of the two separate strands and assessing whether the results from the two separate databases are congruent or divergent (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). The strategy used to compare results from the two databases in this study is referred to as a side-by-side comparison where the research presents the quantitative results and qualitative findings together in a discussion (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). The discussion then becomes the vehicle for merging the results.

Attending to validity in mixed methods analysis. Perspectives on how to best attend to validity concerns in mixed methods research have been described as being in their infancy (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Therefore, there is no one agreed upon rubric for attending to validity in mixed methods research. Authors have discussed how it

relates to the research design, data collection, data analysis and the interpretation of findings (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). However, most authors agree that the validity of mixed methods analysis is only as strong as the validity associated with each strand (qualitative and quantitative) that comprises the mixed method design. Creswell and Plan-Clark (2011) described that validation controls in mixed methods research involve “employing strategies that address potential issues in data collection, data analysis, and the interpretations that might compromise the merging or connecting of the quantitative strands of the study and the conclusions drawn from the combination” (p. 239). Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) developed an integrative framework for inference quality and transferability in mixed methods research that

differentiates between two interactive and iterative components of meaning making. One component consists of the quality of the inputs to the interpretive process (i.e., quality of the data, design, data analysis procedures). The second component consists of the process of making meaning through systematic linking and interpreting of findings. The quality of inferences depends on the quality of the inputs to the process (i.e., **design quality**) and the integrity of the process of meaning making (i.e. **interpretive rigor**). (p. 286)

For these authors, inference quality is concerned with the standards for evaluating quality of conclusions that are made on the basis of the research findings. Therefore, the inference quality of mixed methods research is closely associated with the internal validity and statistical conclusion validity of the quantitative strand as well as the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative strand (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011) succinctly summarized Teddlie and Tashakkori’s concepts of design quality and interpretive rigor. Design quality is concerned with the

“suitability of questions, fidelity of the quality and rigor of procedures, consistency across all aspects of the study, and analytic implementation of procedures” (p. 239).

Whereas interpretive rigor involves “consistency with findings, consistency with theory, interpretations given to participants and scholars, and distinctiveness in terms of credible or plausible conclusions” (p. 239). A challenge in mixed methods research is that the quality of inferences must be judged according to three sets of standards: (a) evaluating the inferences derived from the analysis of quantitative data according to quantitative standards, (b) evaluating the inferences on the basis of qualitative data using qualitative “standards,” and (c) assessing the degree to which the meta-inferences made on the basis of these two sets of inferences are credible (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Inference transferability refers to the degree to which conclusions may be applied to other similar settings, people, time periods, contexts and theoretical representations of the constructs (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This notion corresponds to generalizability and external validity in quantitative research and transferability in qualitative research. This is the notion regarding “to whom, in what context, and under what circumstances” the findings of the study may be applied to similar circumstances and situations. According to the integrative framework, inference transferability “is relative – that is, every inference has a degree of transferability to a context, to a group of people or entities, or to the alternative ways of conceptualizing the behaviors and phenomenon under investigation” (p. 286). Mixed methods studies enjoy a dual advantage in terms of transferability. The quantitative strand may provide greater confidence in generalizing findings to other samples, settings or populations while simultaneously, the qualitative

strand provides the details necessary for a comprehensive assessment of the conditions from which the inferences were made and to which the recommendations may be transferred (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) identified four variations of transferability: ecological, population, temporal and theoretical/conceptual. Each of these refers to the degree to which inferences and recommendations: (a) may be applicable to similar settings and contexts (ecological), (b) are applicable to other people (individuals/groups) or other entities (tests, artifacts) (population), (c) may be applied in the future (temporal), and (d) can be replicated if the main theoretical constructs are defined and observed differently (theoretical/conceptual).

Chapter Four

Findings

Because this dissertation study is first and foremost an evaluation of a demonstration project, it is important to begin by situating the program context, both nationally and locally, as well as describing the program model. Following this contextual frame, the findings of the qualitative data analyses will be presented. Finally the quantitative findings will be summarized and discussed. Because the mixed methods analysis interweaves the findings from both the qualitative and quantitative analyses conducted, the mixed methods findings will be presented in the discussion chapter wherein I will compare the findings from the two strands of the study.

Contextual Frame of Reference

“A critical principle here is to maintain the contextual frame for lessons learned, that is, to keep lessons learned grounded in their context” (Patton, 2001, p. 335). Context includes the interconnection of complex, global phenomenon such as: economic, political, demographic, environmental, social, cultural, technological and health systems, all of which are interlocked, interacting and interdependent (Patton, 2011). Patton asserted that “global complexities and dynamics are not just context. They manifest themselves in local realities: changed conditions under which programs operate, new problems that participants bring to programs, and new challenges in meeting emergent needs” (p. 10).

To begin the findings section I am going to provide a brief background narrative that situates the Co-Parent Court model and project in its contextual circumstances. In

order to most accurately reflect the contextual frame of the program in the perspective of the stakeholders who envisioned, developed, designed and implemented program, the following section will summarize the research cited and program descriptions in two key program documents the (a) policy and procedures manual and the (b) replication materials.

National context. It is useful to first identify the national context within which the need for this project developed. The policy and procedure manual (2012) describes the background and context of the project in this way:

One of the most significant demographic shifts of the past few decades is the exponential increase in the numbers of children born to unmarried women. In 1940 only 4 percent of all births in the United States were to unmarried women. Currently more than one-third of all births are to unmarried women. This trend has dire consequences for children. Children born to unmarried parents are at greater risk for poverty and a wide range of adverse health, behavioral, and academic outcomes. (p. 7)

The policy and procedures manual (2012) situated this phenomenon of unmarried parents within the research conducted using the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which is perhaps the best source of information on unmarried parents. The study involved interviews with a nationally representative sample of 3,700 unmarried couples who gave birth between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large cities throughout the United States and were interviewed at the hospital shortly after giving birth, with follow-up interviews when the child was about one, three and five years old.

The study indicated that most unmarried parents who responded to the survey were involved in some type of romantic relationship and believed that they had some potential to build a life together...While the findings from the Fragile Families and

Child Wellbeing study paint a positive picture of expectations for family stability at the time of the child's birth, the first year follow-up in this study shows the difficulties that unmarried couples face on their family formation path:

- While 80% of the unmarried couples were in a romantic relationship at the time of the birth, only 58% were still romantically connected at one year;
- Only 9% of the couples married in the first year, even though roughly 75% thought their chances of marrying each other to be better than 50-50;
- While informal financial support arrangements are common, only 12% of couples have a legal child support order in the year following their child's birth.

According to researchers at the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Project, many unmarried parents face considerable barriers to stable relationships and marriage.

They include:

- Low educational attainment: 37 percent of mothers have not finished high school and 32 percent have only a high school degree. Among fathers, 34 and 40 percent, respectively, had not finished high school or only had a high school degree.
- Unemployment: 28 percent of unmarried fathers were out of work during the week of their baby's birth.
- Low income: 41 percent of mothers and 26 percent of fathers report household income below the poverty line, and 28 percent of both have incomes between 100 and 120 percent of the poverty line.
- Health problems: 35 percent of mothers and 31 percent of fathers report that their health is less than "very good or excellent." (Policy and Procedure Manual, 2012, p. 9)

Other researchers using the data from the Fragile Families study have argued that the stress of parenthood for these unmarried parents may be greater because of these social and economic conditions (Carlson, McLanahan, England, & Devaney, 2005). Although the barriers and challenges these families face is considerable, Carlson, McLanahan &

Brooks-Gunn (2008) concluded “that parent’s ability to work together in raising their children and that programs aimed at improving parents’ ability to communicate may have benefits for children irrespective of whether the parents’ romantic relationship remains intact” (p. 461). In other words, efforts aimed at helping unmarried parents successfully co-parent with one another in the absence of a romantic relationship with one another may prove beneficial to children.

Local context. The Hennepin County Family Court in the Fourth Judicial District in Minnesota is uniquely positioned to observe what the Fragile Families Study documents. The Court is witness to the trials and tribulations of these families as thousands of mothers and fathers come before the Court each year to establish paternity and to determine responsibilities for families. These family situations are complex. The parents frequently face multiple barriers to providing the emotional and financial support their children need.

According to the policy and procedure manual (2012), as part of the planning for the Co-Parent Court program, the Fourth Judicial District Research Division completed a survey of single mothers and fathers involved with Hennepin County Family Court. The primary purposes of the survey were to be able to clearly describe the single parents, to identify the problems and needs of these parents, and to recommend appropriate resources and responses. Twenty-one volunteers from Hennepin County surveyed 167 people between the end of January and the beginning of March 2007.

This survey documented the multitude of issues faced by these parents: poverty, unemployment, criminal involvement, unstable housing, and chemical and mental health issues. Specifically, the Survey found that:

- Over three-quarters are people of color.
- Over half were from Minneapolis with the majority residing in North Minneapolis.
- 28% did not complete high-school and two-thirds have a high school education or less.
- A staggering 50% of the men, and 25% of the women, had a criminal record.
- Almost 25% of the women and 60% of the men do not have stable housing.
- Two-thirds are working less than full-time and the median hourly wage is \$11.99.
- Of those working full-time, nearly half had been at their current job less than one year.
- 20% were in treatment for mental health or chemical dependency either now in the past.
- Most had more than one child with an average of 2.4 children per respondent.
- Children were most likely to live with only the mother.
- Nearly two-thirds of respondents had less than a friendly relationship with the co-parent.
- 68% of those parents not living with their child would like to have more contact with the child.

These survey results paint a sobering picture of the reality of life for many of our community's children who are born to unmarried parents. While the initial relationship between their parents may have been positive and strong, for many of them it is only a matter of time before they are living with only one parent who may or may not have the tools and opportunities to meet all of their needs. (p. 10)

The social and economic conditions of these families and multiple levels of barriers to family functioning and well-being, indicate a need for an intensive, integrated approach to serving families that is capable of addressing multiple needs simultaneously. Co-Parent Court, a three-year demonstration project which employed a problem-solving

court model, was developed and implemented with the aim of improving outcomes for these families.

Co-Parent Court Program Model

Over the last decade, the Court has begun to focus on reducing the trauma of divorce by undergoing a quiet but dramatic transformation in how divorces are handled. Today, Hennepin County families can go through Family Court quickly, economically, and with less acrimony. All divorcing parents without a parenting agreement are required to attend up to 8 hours of parent education workshops that give them more information and skills to reduce the impacts of divorce on children. Intensive case management by judicial officers fosters agreements and directs families to appropriate resolution services.

Family Court Bench leaders recognized that the Hennepin County Family Court (which serves Minneapolis) was doing many innovations for divorcing families but had not kept up with large demographic changes in families, such as the substantial number of never married parents. Although Hennepin County Child Support was doing good work at establishing paternity, no one was specifically serving the unique needs of families going through paternity establishment. Co-Parent Court intended to bring the same innovation and results to unmarried parents and their children. In collaboration with community partners, Co-Parent Court is a problem solving court that provides support, services and incentives to help unmarried parents develop the skills and knowledge to be involved parents - both financially and emotionally, and to develop a healthy co-parent relationship (Policy & Procedure Manual, 2012).

“Co-Parent Court,” is a partnership between the Family Court, the child support enforcement agency, and community service providers to serve unwed parents in the paternity system. The program uses a problem solving court model that provides support and services to help unmarried parents develop the skills and knowledge to be involved parents – both financially and emotionally – and to develop a healthy co-parent relationship. The mission of Co-Parent Court is to create a model for paternity establishment that supports co-parenting to improve the social, emotional, and financial outcomes for children, families, and communities. According to the replication materials (2014) the goals and objectives of the Co-Parent Court project are to:

- Target unwed parents needing paternity established and who can benefit from social services in order to offer appropriate services to them;
- Improve parenting skills, parental relationships, and paternal participation in the lives of their children;
- Increase child support payments from non-custodial parents by providing them information on how the child support system works and providing them services they need to better provide financial support.
- Promote agreed upon child support orders and custody and parenting time orders for unwed parents.
- Improve outcomes for children by helping unmarried parents work together to parent their children

As described in the replication materials (2014), Co-Parent Court applies a problem solving model to address the barriers these fragile families have to becoming successful parents, including the lack of income and employment, unstable housing, criminal behavior, intimate violence, chemical abuse and relationship distrust. The program services consist of several major elements:

- **Individualized Assessment and Attention.** “Co-Parent Court Navigators” meet with parents in the courthouse, administer relevant screening tools that help identify needs (housing, jobs, child care, chemical dependency treatment, domestic violence assistance, etc.), recommend appropriate referrals and programs to the judicial officer, and provide progress reports at follow-up court dates.
- **Social Services Tailored to the Needs of Parents and Children.** Partnering community agencies work closely with the Court to provide case management and services tailored to clients referred from Co-Parent Court. These include assistance in self-empowerment and responsibility, domestic violence and safety, relationship development, education, employment, housing, chemical and mental health, and basic parenting and child development. Intensive case management services are available to a more limited number of high need parents through community social service providers.
- **Co-Parent Education.** Unmarried parents are court ordered to attend a co-parent education program designed specifically for single parents and fragile families. This education program is focused on developing co-parenting skills and improving parental relationships and paternal participation in the lives of the children.
- **Development of a Parenting Agreement.** At the conclusion of the co-parenting workshops the parents develop a parenting agreement regarding parenting of their

child including custody and parenting time. The parenting agreement is then adopted by the court as a legally binding document.

- **Conflict Resolution.** Individualized mediation and Family Group Conferencing services help high conflict parents (and potentially other involved persons including grandparents and new partners of the parents) to develop their parenting agreements if necessary.
- **Supportive Services.** Additional resources, referred to as supportive services, are also provided, if necessary, to stabilize and support parents enrolled in the project. Supportive services include such miscellaneous items as assistance with rent, utilities, purchase of work clothes, transportation, and child care.

Qualitative Findings

The interview data collected from project stakeholders and program documentation will be used to reveal both project related wisdom regarding the Co-Parent Court model and personal theories and approaches to working with individuals and families. To begin with, the perspective of stakeholders will be presented to evaluate the value, merit or worth of the Co-Parent Court program from their viewpoint. This portion of the findings will outline what the stakeholders felt worked well and what did not work well. Additionally, their perspectives regarding the key factors or critical elements of the Co-Parent Court program model will be described. Secondly, in order to determine to what degree the Co-Parent Court model serves as an appropriate critical case of the pragmatic family life education model presented in this dissertation study, the conceptual framework presented in the literature review chapter will be compared to the

qualitative interview and documentation data. These two sections reflect the two major categories that emerged during the qualitative coding and analysis process.

Critical factors of project design and implementation. Stakeholders were asked the question “What are the critical factors or features of project design and practice that you believe contributed to the success of the Co-Parent Court project?” The key factors and critical elements were derived from the responses to this question as well as the stakeholders’ recommendations for other interested in replication of this program.

Table 9 presents the categories and subcategories that emerged as the dominant factors or features of the project.

Table 9. *Critical Factors and Features of Project Design and Practice*

Categories and Subcategories	Sources	References
Key Factors & Critical Elements	9	217
Model	9	87
Workshops	4	13
Social Service Supports	8	39
Supportive Services	5	8
Parenting Plan	5	14
Adaptive & Responsive	7	15
Characteristics & Qualifications	9	57
Service Providers		
People of Good Will	6	9
Philosophy of Practice	7	23
Whatever It Takes Approach	5	8
Shared Vision	8	26
Supportive Approach	4	8
Problem-Solving Team	7	31
Coordination	5	15
Curriculum	7	16
Message	3	6
Content	3	5
Unique Target Population & Issue	1	2

The critical factors are bolded in the table for emphasis. Subcategories of each of the critical factors are subsumed within (listed underneath). The factors are listed first in the order of their breadth (number of sources that mentioned the factor) and secondly in terms of the scope (number of references made to the factor). Each of the critical factors identified were mentioned in at least seven of the nine data sources and the number of references to each category ranged from 87 to 16. Each of the critical features of program design and practice will be summarized below with the extensive use of quotations to provide evidentiary support for the presence of each category in the qualitative data corpus.

Model. The model in its entirety and particular aspects of the model were most often discussed as being essential to the success of this program. The key elements of the model that were identified included: the social service supports, workshops and parenting plan. In addition to these components of the model, there was also a sense that the model and all aspects therein, needed to be adaptive and responsive to the needs and realities of the parents.

Social support services. The social service supports included both the broader social services addressed through case management, such as employment, education, and housing as well as the more immediate needs met by the supportive services, such as gift cards, transportation and child care. There is a general consensus that the “*wrap-around services are essential*” (Replication Materials). In terms of the wraparound services provided through referrals to community-based agencies, “*having the broader ability, employment services, I’d have to say [the Family Facilitator] is a significant person in*

this too. But you know, having resources because I think that's, when you're working with this population, their pretty fragile in their situation. Whether it's housing, employment, abusive situations and having all of that available so they have one place they can go, I think that makes a big difference" (Child Support Official). Having a "one-stop-shop" where families can meet a variety of needs appears to be of value. Along the same lines of the availability and accessibility of social services, one of the Navigators identified the importance of partnering with social service agencies that are within the same proximity and neighborhood to the people being served. *"the wraparound services, but in the most part that is there for the parents to make a choice on that but it is not based on sending them out into the suburbs to get the help we are trying to keep that help ever present and readily available to them under their own circumstances and keeping in mind that we need to keep these places on the bus line. Rather than moving to and fro the city, let's make it accessible"* (Navigator). According to this, the social service support partners should be located in the community of those being served by the project.

In addition to the social service supports, one of the Project Coordinators identified that *"the standard reducing barriers, so the childcare, the food, the transportation are probably important."* The Family Facilitator spoke to the value of providing those smaller supportive services to these families. *"Well, from my perspective, just having the resources here, you know anything from small things as, simple as giving them gift cards just to help them along, a bus pass to get them to their interview. You know, a card from Target to just get clothing, those simple things for someone else might think it's no big deal, but for this population it was huge. Just having the resources here*

available for our participants.” She went on to say that it is not just a matter of having the resources to support the families but also but also having them easily accessible to them, so they don’t have to “jump through hoops” to obtain the resources their family needs. It seems that a common theme is that social service supports should be easily accessible to the population they are intended to support.

Workshops. Interestingly, the Co-Parent Court workshops were the only part of the model that was mandatory for parents to participate in. “*Parents assigned to Co-Parent Court will be court-ordered to attend Co-Parent Education workshops*” (Policy and Procedure Manual). The mandatory nature of the workshops would imply that the co-parenting education is a critical element of the model. One of the Project Coordinators confirmed this: “*I think one of the biggest things would be the Co-Parent Classes.*” The Family Facilitator identified the approach in the workshops, which includes teaching parents the skills to co-parent together even though they may no longer be romantically involved, as a unique aspect of the program model. “*I don’t know of any other program that’s taken this approach to even think about dads and moms learning to co-parent without having to fight at each other*” (Family Facilitator).

In addition to the topic of the workshops, it also appears that the structure of the workshops is also an important aspect of the model. According to the Replication Materials, “*these workshops are offered on weekday afternoons. Mothers and fathers attend classes on separate days. This allows each group to be comfortable expressing their feelings and experiences... All classes are small group format that have between 2 and 10 participants. Each class is facilitated by a male and female Co-Parent Court*

Navigator that has extensive experience working with diverse participants.” In addition to the regularly schedule afternoon workshops, workshops were also occasionally held in the evenings and on weekends to accommodate parents who have work obligations during the day. By outlining how the workshops are structured, that they are “gender-specific,” relatively small in size, and that each class is facilitated by both Navigators, seems to imply that how the workshops are implemented is a central element of the model and should be attended to in any attempts to replicate the model. It seems that the topic of the workshops (co-parenting), the inclusion of both parents, and the structure of the workshops are all key elements of the project model.

Parenting plan. According to the Replication Materials, “*a major goal of the program is that parents agree to a Co-Parent Court Parenting Plan.*” In line with the unique approach in the workshops of having both parents attend so they can develop skills and strategies for how to co-parent together, the parenting plan brings the parents together and helps structure their conversations and decisions regarding issues related to childrearing. A central component of this model is “*bringing them together around the parenting agreement...which I have said is a very key and unique aspect of this project and extremely important*” (Project Coordinator). The Family Facilitator described how positively parents respond when they discover that the parenting plan they develop together will be filed with the court as a legal document. “*Just the fact that the parenting plan alone. People are like, ‘this actually becomes a legal document?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘So we can write all this down on paper and then it becomes...’ Yeah!*” (Family Facilitator). Additionally she spoke to the utility of the parenting plan. “*It’s very useful. And it’s so*

detailed. It lines out everything. It doesn't miss anything which is good. Very detailed"

(Family Facilitator). Although there is a great deal of support for the parenting plan.

There have also been some concerns and struggles articulated: *"I know we have issues with the parenting plan, but at least they were able to sit down together and work*

through that and at that point have an agreement. I had conflicts I had to resolve and I've had conflicts since where people haven't followed through on what they said they were

going to do. But it's been far less than I feared. And so, and far less than what I see in

family court" (Judge). Although the parenting plan is not a magic bullet, it seems that the

concept behind the parenting plan, that parent should be the ones' making decisions

together regarding custody, visitation, and parental decision making rather than having

that decided by the court, seems to be an important part of the overall model.

Adaptive and responsive model. There are two levels of model adaptation. More generally speaking in terms of the project model as well as the more specific aspects of the model that build in flexibility and adaptability in order to be responsive to individual needs. On the broader project level, *"we learned and adapted as we went along"* (Project Coordinator). The other Project Coordinator echoed this sentiment in regard to the need to be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances. *"In terms of recognizing that there needs to be flexibility along the way and that they will continue to try and work with the program as changes come along"* (Project Coordinator). One of the Navigators also recognized the importance of embracing flexibility at the project level: *"flexibility, meet often enough to get real time feedback and make real time adjustments and don't be*

afraid to make adjustments and you cannot be afraid that a change or a shift away from what you thought was the best practice is an indictment on your judgment.”

In addition to being adaptive and flexible in terms of project decision-making, there was also an emphasis on adapting elements of the model to be relevant and responsive to the parents being served. For example, the co-parenting education used an existing curriculum (discussed further in the curriculum section below) and modified it “to meet the goals and objectives of the Co-Parent Court Project” (Policy and Procedure Manual). In addition to the curriculum being adapted to the population, the social service model was also intended to be adaptive and responsive. “By meeting people where they are when they start and then adapting and growing with them as they change. So as their relationship with their co-parent morphs then there are interventions to meet that. So if the relationship gets worse then we have mediation or we have family group conferencing or we have services for moms and services for dads. And if their relationship gets better than we have a joint parenting plan and additional resources to support the good things they want to do” (Project Coordinator). It appears that there was a concerted effort to be flexible, adaptive, and responsive throughout the implementation of the Co-Parent Court project. The stakeholders conveyed a sense that this adaptive orientation is a necessary component of the Co-Parent Court model.

The model and its components as well as the overall flexible orientation of the model seem to be critical factors to the success of the program. “I don’t know a better model that we could have employed there. We continued to make improvements and there

are things that we could do better but the basic structure, I think is right so I guess it would just be to have it be implemented on a more stable and widespread basis” (Judge).

Qualifications and characteristics of service providers. The professional qualifications and personal characteristics of the program staff who work directly with the parents (the navigators, family facilitator and judge) are a critical factor of the program’s success. There seemed to be consensus regarding hiring or collaborating with the “right people.” There seemed to be three elements that emerged in terms of identifying who the “right people” are: the professional and personal attributes of the Navigators, a “whatever it takes” approach from the service providers working most closely with families, and a more general sense regarding “people of good will.”

Attributes of the navigators. Given that the Navigators made contact with all of the parents who came through Co-Parent Court and were considered the central point people on the project, there was wide consensus that the characteristics of the Navigator’s is especially crucial. *“We had just the right blend of the qualifications of our navigators. Relatively young, from my point of view, relatively young, black professionals, both with master’s degrees. With a lot of street experience, a lot of program experience. So the professional qualifications, that combination, plus the personal skills to build these relationships” (Judge).* This indicates that interpersonal skills are just as important as the professional qualifications. Their role is not just to deliver information but instead to build relationships with parents. Typically the professional and personal characteristics were discussed in tandem with one another. *“[The Navigators] have to have the knowledge about adult education and psychology. I mean I think our pair, with one*

specializing in adult edu, how adults learn, and the other one specializing in psychology of people, was a great combination. So they had their knowledge. They had their passion. Their belief in their people. And they were, they were self-initiators. They were self-directed. They didn't need a lot of hand holding. And then I think it's huge that they're culturally specific. You can't have a fifty year old white woman go in there and do this stuff." (Project Coordinator). This perspective adds some additional qualifications including the work ethic and style of the people serving in the Navigator role. The Replication Materials provides a nice summary of the various professional and personal attributes that persons serving in the role of Navigator should possess: *"Co-Parent Court Navigators should have an appropriate educational background including a bachelor's degree or higher in social services, human services, psychology, criminal justice, or a related field. They need to possess excellent communication skills (both oral and written), the ability to motivate clients in the program environment, the ability to work with a team, and good organizational skills. Co-Parent Navigators must be self-starters who are capable of working with minimal supervision and using independent professional judgment in working with clients. Most importantly, they must have the demonstrated commitment, patience, persistence, experience, and resourcefulness to work with disadvantaged low-income people and different cultures"* (Replication Materials). Navigators must be able to "walk in two worlds" and serve as an intermediary or bridge between the bureaucratic governmental systems and the parents they are serving.

Whatever it takes approach. The Navigators and Family Facilitator seemed to embrace a “whatever it takes” approach and were willing to go above and beyond the “call of duty” in order to best serve the families they worked with. The Family Facilitator went to great lengths to make involvement in the program as easy as possible for the parents she worked with. For example, she recognized that *“sometimes coming into the office is not the most comfortable way of getting to know someone so I usually try to meet them where they are and just have a one on one interview.”* She would commonly conduct home visits or meet parents in the community on a “neutral turf” if it seemed that they were hesitant or uncomfortable with the idea of coming into the office to meet with her initially. She also made herself available at all times. *“I’ve always given them the opportunity or just to let them know that my cell phone is on 24 hours and if they ever need to reach me they can do that”* (Family Facilitator). This willingness to be available to participants outside the typical work day office hours proved invaluable for parents as they had a stable, reliable ally to call in emergencies.

One of the Project Coordinator’s spoke of the Family Facilitators flexibility in accepting greater responsibility and taking on additional components of the project in order to best accommodate parents. *“Okay, you’re going to do genetic testing. That’s not part of her job description. And then you’re going to do home visits. You’re going to do supervised visitation. You’re going to learn mediation. You’re going to now do the presentation on domestic violence. All of those things were not in her original job description. And we’ve changed her job description and given her more money to recognize the increased responsibility that she was given. That she was asked to take on*

or did take on. There's never once been "that's not my job." I mean she goes, in the other, almost too far. It's like 'you're doing home visits? Ahh...I don't know (said with anxious/worried tone). Are you safe? Do you, are you letting your supervisor know when you're going? What time are you going? You're going on Friday night, when it's dark...' I mean that's huge." As indicated in this quote, many of the additional responsibilities taken on by the Family Facilitator were things she took initiative to do before it became a formally instituted change in the program.

The "whatever it takes" mentality was not restricted to the Family Facilitator. The Navigators also embraced this philosophy. As the Project Coordinator noted, initially they were expecting this to be a day job but they quickly discovered that to best serve families they needed to be flexible in their availability and scheduling of workshops. For example, *"offering the workshops at different times. When they realized that, you know parents aren't really, maybe there's I think they initially just wanted a day job. Who doesn't want a day job? Who wants to work nights and weekends? Nobody wants to work nights and weekends but then when they realized that parents would be better served if maybe we did nights and weekends so they just did that."* One of the Navigators consistently said that it's *"not what's best for us but what's best for them"* (Navigator). With that as a guiding premise, the service providers embraced an approach that did whatever it took to best serve the needs and interests of the parents enrolled in the project.

People of good will. This theme emerged as an emphasis on the character of the people involved in the project. *"There were very good people, of good will that came*

together to do this” (Judge). He further extrapolated what he meant by this: “You know, I think if you start with people of good will who sincerely are doing it to bring out the best of the people they’re working with and want to build their capacity and the desire to be good parents. I think if you have the right intention, the other things fall into place.” This seems to imply that the intention of the people working on the project is important. The Child Support Official identified that as important as the process and model was “having the right people in place to do it like we have... You know, having people in place that have a heart for working with the population and that matters and I think replication would require that kind of.” This conveys a sense that it is important to hire and partner with people who are legitimately concerned for the well-being of those being served. And it seems it is not only a commitment to the parents and families being served, but also the vision of Co-Parent Court. “I would find somebody, people that genuinely care about the clients and genuinely like the program, not just here for a check but really do care about the outcome and what’s going to happen” (Family Facilitator). One of the Navigators had similar sentiments, “the people are so knowledgeable and helpful and we are all passionate about the people, at different levels, but whatever our part in the program is we have taken that very seriously and done what we can do to make sure that our outcomes and our mission and our philosophies carry out.” Ultimately, “good will” seems to incorporate both a legitimate concern for the population being served as well as a commitment to the program as a means for improving the circumstances and situations of unmarried parents as well as their families and communities. The Judge would begin each stakeholder meeting with a moment of silent reflection around this quote “The

success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener.” This quote seems to succinctly and appropriately convey the essence of the role of “good will” in a project like Co-Parent Court.

Shared vision. A shared vision emerged as an additional component critical to the success of Co-Parent Court. *“Everybody, I think, has such a strong commitment to the mission and the vision”* (Project Coordinator). One of the Navigators identified that it is important for project partners to reflect on *“why we are doing it and the underpinning and that we are mindful of what we are doing this for.”* The Replication Materials explicitly state that *“consistent and visionary leadership is crucial to sustaining the Co-Parent Court vision.”* This would imply that there needs to be a leader or shared leadership that is consistently revisiting the mission and vision and ensuring that there is a consistent message and goal across program partners. Two subcategories emerged across this component, the need for a shared philosophy of outreach and engagement and the supportive approach that the Co-Parent Court model embraced.

Shared philosophy of outreach. The importance of a shared core program philosophy of outreach and engagement is crucial for the success of a coordinated effort such as Co-Parent Court. When partnering with community agencies it is important to consider how their approach to outreach and engagement aligns with the projects approach. An important consideration *“is how does their objectives and their mission statements and their granters, how does what they have to satisfy on their end stay relevantly aligned with what Co-Parent Court needed to do. How would that align?”* (Navigator). It is necessary to really understand the underlying philosophy of practice

that guides the outreach and engagement approach of each partner organization. For example: *“what do you consider a success and how does that align with what we [the project] are doing? Because you might be stopping at getting them to what you call success but that is not enough for us to replicate or get this program replicating other counties or states or whatever it might be you want to stop at what works for you and gets you your funding but that doesn’t align well with what we need from you and what we have in mind”* (Navigator). As is indicated by this passage, a misalignment in the vision and approach of partner agencies with that of the project may hinder the projects ability to fully operate according to its goal and mission. The Navigator spoke more to this when he was describing the process of referring parent to receive some social support service from a partner organization. *“I have to trust that they are giving them consistent messages and that they are not getting lost in their own mission statement but what they are saying is consistent with what Co-Parent Court is meant to be.”* On the other hand, when the partner agencies and departments have philosophies that align well with the project vision that may directly contribute to the success of the project. *“I should mention that has been one of the reasons the project succeeded, was that our child support agency is very willing and experienced in working in a supportive way with parents rather than being a punitive law enforcement agency, so they really fit into our philosophy”* (Judge). This passage nicely illustrates both components of a shared vision, an alignment of the partner’s underlying philosophy with the project, as well as the supportive approach that the Co-Parent Court project encompassed.

Supportive approach. The tagline of Co-Parent Court, “*Establishing Paternity, Supporting Families and Strengthening Communities*” seems to convey well the emphasis on providing support to parents and families who are enrolled in the project. Central to the success of the Co-Parent Court project was making changes to the court procedures and approach by creating a supportive atmosphere to make the process less punitive. The Judge spoke of some of the changes that were made to Co-Parent Court as compared to the typical paternity establishment procedure as it occurs in Family Court. “*I think we’ve tried to create a very welcoming and supportive atmosphere. From the time people first hear about Co-Parent Court we send them a brochure. I changed the wording of the, what’s called the Order to Show Cause, that brings the parties to court to make it sound less threatening, firm but not threatening. We have pictures and a sign, it says ‘Welcome Parents.’ We have pictures of parents up. So we try to dispel the typical view that parents have of the court system as being impersonal and coercive. And I try to also, the video was very helpful. Parents talking right away. Something I couldn’t do. I was trying to do it initially myself but to have actual parents talking about their experiences and I tried to use very supportive, non-coercive language in meeting the parents and that carried throughout.*” (Judge).

In addition to changing the court proceedings to be more supportive, the entire model has a supportive function built in. “*Well we’re teaching them about the whole co-parenting and how to work with the other person and they try something and it fails well then being there to support them in how to do things differently or come at it from a different perspective*” (Child Support Official). Social service supports like mediation

services are intended to help support parents as they develop a parenting plan together. Additionally, the Navigators and Family Facilitator were steady sources of support for the parents often advocating upon their behalf at the larger stakeholder and leadership team meetings. A Navigator spoke to the supportive nature of the Co-Parent Court project even from a larger programmatic perspective. *“I mean, we’re, a big extensive program but we will spend 10 minutes talking about two people’s lives on the phone, a case. How can we best serve this case? I don’t know a lot of programs that do that because usually large scope programs, they’re not, they’re not going to spend eight people on the phone time talking about people’s lives. So we actually see the people that we work with as, these are people with feelings, and problems, and our decisions are going to affect them. Versus well this is not going to advance the whole program. Maybe it won’t, but it will certainly help those people’s lives and sometimes I don’t even think the participants know the support they have behind them”* (Navigator).

Problem-solving team. Another critical factor that was believed to contribute to the success of the Co-Parent Court project was the ability of the stakeholders and project partners to work together as a cohesive unit. This theme was developed from an in vivo quote from one of the Navigators who eloquently articulated the nature of the Co-Parent Court stakeholder group: *“we’re a problem-solving team. We have a problem-solving court but this problem-solving court wouldn’t have solved too many problems if we weren’t also adaptive”* (Navigator). This speaks to the importance of consistent connection between the project partners. There were regular meetings and phone calls to ensure that the stakeholders had an opportunity to solve problems and make decisions

together. The Judge also spoke to the nature of the group process. *“We created a very strong team spirit...So the team was always extremely, in my view, very cohesive and enthusiastic”* (Judge). Having a strong team spirit and a cohesive approach likely facilitated the coordination efforts across project partners.

The coordination of efforts as well as cooperation and collaboration among project partners was a crucial component of the team approach that the Co-Parent Court project utilized. According to the Replication Materials, *“Co-Parent Court is a collaborative model which shares resources and engages in joint decision making.”* The Project Coordinator spoke to the difficulty of engaging in a joint decision making process when there are so many partners and moving parts. *“I try to build in accountability and transparency but it’s not 100% there. And so we announce things and people are like ‘okay’ and then they keep going.”* In addition to a group decision making process, the collaborative nature of the project requires a great deal of coordination to avoid the issue of *“duplicating services”* (Family Facilitator). In addition, it is important that *“everybody knows their role”* (Navigator). The Navigator expanded on what this means, *“we are all trying to stay in our lanes and do our jobs and make sure it meshes well with the next person.”* This implies that it is important to understand what other partners and agencies are doing so that parents experience the project as a unified whole, rather than as fragmented and distinct parts.

Curriculum. The curriculum encompasses three interrelated and yet distinct components, the actual content of the curriculum, the relevant delivery of the curriculum and the message. According to the Replication Materials, *“the curriculum used in Co-*

Parent Court education classes was adapted from Together We Can: Creating a Healthy Future for our Family, by Michigan State University Extension. This curriculum focused on helping unmarried parent's set healthy goals for their children, establish a positive co-parenting relationship, ensure on-going involvement from both parents, and encourage healthy decisions in their child's best interest around future relationships."

As identified previously many of the project partners believe, this content, co-parenting between unmarried parents, to be a unique and relatively new content area for family and parent education to address, particularly with the inclusion of both parents.

Although the curriculum is based in the research literature, many of the project partners saw the importance of adapting the curriculum to ensure it was relevant to the population being served. One of the Navigators indicated that for replication it is important to *"get a relevant curriculum that applies geographically, demographically"* (Navigator). *"Co-Parent Court adapted this curriculum to serve urban unmarried parents with low-incomes and unmarried parents who are people of color in a court mandated setting. Most co-parenting class adaptation decisions were driven by the complexities of participants daily lives, combined with the involuntary nature of the classes."* (Replication Materials). University-based Extension Educators worked in close collaboration with the Navigators to revise the curriculum in order to ensure that it was culturally relevant and appropriate. *"[The Extension Educator] really helped to adapt it to our clientele. I know she sat in on many workshops and honed it, to make it more relevant. So the university was a real, a strong partner in giving us a product that we could use"* (Judge). By the end of the demonstration project, it was probably more

accurate to describe that the curriculum that is used for the co-parent education component of the model was inspired by “Together We Can” rather than adapted from it.

However, one of the Project Coordinators believed it is less the content or delivery of the curriculum than it is the message being conveyed to parents through the curriculum. *“And then the content, we had the curriculum to build from. I don’t think, I really don’t think it’s so much the content as somebody paying attention to these people and saying to these dads, ‘you matter.’ I think they could have said ‘you matter’ and had a curriculum that was pages of purple grapes. I mean it really is that, it’s just changing the message”* (Project Coordinator). As outlined in the Replication Materials *“the importance of both fathers and mothers in a child’s life”* is a content topic of the first workshop, so the content and message of the curriculum may be mutually reinforcing.

Summary and synthesis. Five critical elements of the Co-Parent Court design and implementation were identified in the qualitative data corpus. First, an adaptive model that incorporates, co-parent education workshops, social service supports and completion of a parenting plan, is seen as crucial for replication. Secondly, the professional qualifications and personal character traits of the services providers, as well as the quality of the intentions and “good will” of the key stakeholders also appears to be critical to the success of the project. Thirdly, a shared vision for outreach and engagement across project partners and a supportive overall approach were highlighted as important. Fourth, successful implementation of this kind of project may benefit from a “problem-solving team” approach where project partners collaborate and coordinate their efforts. Finally, a culturally relevant curriculum that conveys an empowering message regarding the

importance of both parents in the lives of their children seems to be critical. Now that the critical elements of the project have been identified, the conceptual framework articulated in the literature review will be compared to the program model, to determine whether there appears to be evidence to support the use of this project as a critical case example of a pragmatic approach to family life education.

Conceptual framework. The conceptual framework presented in the literature review chapter was used as a guide for the analysis. The major disciplines and fields as well as the corresponding concepts of each that comprised the practical framework were used as sensitizing concepts to guide the coding process. Table 10 displays the categories and subcategories derived from the practical framework as well as the degree to which each category and related concepts were referenced in the qualitative data corpus. The bolded rows represent the primary categories, the disciplines and fields, whereas each row listed underneath the categories are subcategories and concepts that comprise the category. Indentions are used to indicate the hierarchical and embedded nature of the categories, subcategories and concepts. Additionally, the categories represent the aggregated data from each subcategory and concept subsumed within it.

Table 10. *Sensitizing Concepts Derived from the Practical Framework*

Categories and Subcategories	Sources	References
Attunement Perspective	9	61
Align Families & Contexts	3	7
Alignment of Real & Ideal	5	11
Family-Centered Practice	9	43
Ecological Perspective	9	56
Interacting Systems	3	7
Reciprocal Nature of Person-Environment Interaction	5	8
Holistic	7	16
Context	9	25
Helping Relationships	9	121
Self-Growth	8	28
Autonomy	8	38
Personhood of Helper	8	45
Authenticity	2	3
Accessibility	2	3
Ethos of Care	4	9
Positive Regard	8	28
Home Economics	8	29
Problem-Oriented Practice Approach	8	29
Philosophy of Education	9	40
Learning Experience	2	5
Ecology of Education	4	5
Local Education	9	30
Conversation	2	4
Relationships	9	26
Positive Psychology	7	19
Strengths-based	7	17

Some aspect of the conceptual framework was coded across all nine sources (seven interview transcripts and two program documents) and were referenced a total of 326 times across the data corpus. As the results in the table indicate, there was substantial support for each of the categories that comprise the practical framework articulated in this dissertation study. Each of the main categories were referenced in at least seven of the nine sources and the number of passages that referred to each category ranged from

approximately 20 to 120. While the frequency of references does not necessarily indicate the magnitude of the importance of each category on both individual (stakeholder) and collective (program) levels, it does indicate that the core tenants outlined in the practical framework were present in various ways across the Co-Parent Court program. Table 11 displays an overview of supporting quotes from each of the three stakeholder groups for each category of the practical framework. Each of the categories will be briefly discussed and additional quotes will be identified, which provide evidentiary support for the presence of each category in the interview data.

Table 11. *Quotes Illustrating the Conceptual Framework*

	Project Coordinators	Court Representatives	Service Providers
Attunement Perspective	"Well the traditional judicial model of decision-making around contested family issues is the judge makes the decisions and this is the exact opposite. This is we will do our best to provide you with information. We will support you but you're expected to make the decisions and negotiate that process with your co-parent."	"So I think if you start out with this attitude of, we're not going to tell you what to do, you're going to have to come up with the solution yourself, but we're going to give you the tools. People are more likely to get into the mentality of "we can work this out"	"Make sure the people who ultimately make decisions about parenting, visitation, about custody, all those things that they respect these parents as thinking individuals, know how much to probe in the situation, but also really embrace the idea of these families. Really thinking about I am trying to create a situation or help to, encourage a situation where they are becoming less reliant upon systems like this."
Ecological Perspective	"The issue itself. The need is huge. The research is growing. The realities are stark. So it's a perfect storm of people recognizing that the way we're doing things doesn't work. So, It's the context. It was the right time and the right place."	"I think it's just common sense that someone's actions and their amenability to an intervention are going to be influenced by their environment because there's a lot of factors. You can't just talk to one person and expect everything to change, you have to change everything. This population, I think, our perspective on this has changed some. We try to be a little more, whereas before it was just establish paternity and be done with it. We try to be a little more holistic in our approach."	"What we're concerned about is how you co-parent. So, but we recognized that no one, not one person that we enrolled were going to show up with just their co-parenting issues. They were going to show up as humans with their housing issues, with their domestic violence issues, with their mental health issues, with their substance abuse issues. So therefore we created a model that included these resources, included case management that can help you with these other areas of your life that's struggling. They all do wrap-around to being a better parents but how does housing have to do with communication? It doesn't but we realize it has to do with the person that we're trying to help so I think as far as just realizing the complexities that the people we're serving come with."

Helping Relationships		"I think the most important thing have been the personal relationships between the navigators and the parent advocates and the parents."	"I do believe it is the relationships."
Home Economics		"I think that the way that the workshops were conducted is, that the parents learned from each other and were able to present their own individual situations, their own individual problems to each other and work through it."	"So it's really about their goals and what they want to do. I try to get them to focus on at least just two of them. Sometimes there's a lot of them that have lots and lots of goals, which is fine but we need you to focus on one or two so we can get you going."
Philosophy of Education	"We just totally lucked out with the Navigators....they're just so brilliant with the families and they can make that connection, and transfer the content and build those relationships."	"The workshops were very participatory. I know [the Navigator's] philosophy, and they'll tell you this, is they would learn from the parents, the parents would learn from each other. This was not a, this was not kind of a command and control type operation. It was a support and help people do the best they can operation."	"We're facilitators, we're not teachers, we facilitate the discussion in here but the true really learning happens amongst the people that's in this room, the people that are in this room."
Positive Psychology			"I definitely work from a strength-based perspective. I see them as assets, kind of the experts of their own lives."

Attunement perspective. The major idea derived from the attunement perspective is that people are capable of solving their own problems and managing their lives. This essence is captured by one of the project coordinators, "You just need a few people in the

system to believe that these parents have the right to make decisions about themselves and that if we can help them, because nobody else ever has, help them to understand how to do it, they can start it." This conveys a basic belief in the ability of parents to govern their own lives. However, this belief in the decision making ability of parents is also moderated by an understanding that they may need some assistance. *"I think that certainly goes back to the point I made about addressing the parents' needs. It would be unrealistic to expect people to focus on parenting if their own needs aren't being met"* (Judge). This emphasis on meeting the needs of families corresponds well with the attunement perspective emphasis on a family-centered practice approach, which focuses on the family's perspectives, situations and goals. By utilizing an individualized approach the Co-Parent Court model employs this kind of family-centered approach. The project stakeholders were constantly considering the question *"how do we make sure that we created a model around the participant and their need versus trying to make the participant fit around our needs?"* (Navigator). Project partners recognize that this approach requires that *"we have to be creative in how we work with people"* (Child Support).

Another significant component of the attunement perspective is concerned with aligning families with their contexts and helping families to align their real with their ideal. A primary strategy of this project was to provide the resources and supports that will nurture families' abilities to align their situations with their goals. *"This is we will do our best to provide you with information. We will support you but you're expected to make the decisions and negotiate that process with your co-parent"* (Project

Coordinator). The nature of the problem-solving court model is that parents are expected to make the important decisions that influence their lives. One of the Navigators indicated that in their practice with parents they were *"always wrapping back around and putting the decision back in their hands. O.K. what's working and what's not working. What do you want to try, what do you want to do next?"* The whole point is to provide the tools and develop the capacities of families to make decisions for themselves. From the attunement perspective, ultimately the goal is *"to create a situation or help to, encourage a situation where they are becoming less reliant upon systems like this"* (Navigator).

Ecological perspective. An ecological perspective considers individuals and families within the context of their surrounding environment and focuses *"on the context of the family, their situation, their environment and everything"* (Family Facilitator). As Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model illustrates, there are many levels that interact and influence families. One of the project coordinators identified the macro level, which includes values, attitudes and ideologies of the surrounding culture and exosystem levels as influencing the development of the Co-Parent Court project: *"the issue itself. The need is huge. The research is growing. The realities are stark. So it's a perfect storm of people recognizing that the way we're doing things doesn't work. So, it's the context. It was the right time and the right place."* The inclusion of social service supports as an intricate component of the Co-Parent Court model were added to help provide support at the more immediate micro, and mesosystem levels. *"I think the design of including services for the parents themselves and their needs along with co-parenting services was important because it would be hard for me to tell people, 'Okay, go to these workshops and work on*

this co-parenting plan but your housing isn't safe. Or you don't have childcare or, ' the ability to say that we care about you. That we know that you can't be an effective parent unless your needs are being met" (Judge). The notion behind this is that you cannot attend to the person separate from the environmental context that they live in. Therefore, the social service supports intended to help parents obtain a degree, establish steady employment, and locate stable housing, among other things, attends to the elements in their context that may help them better meet their needs.

The Family Facilitator also addressed the importance of attending to the environmental context, which also includes other family members. *"I try to talk to them, of course find out exactly what's going on in the families, their family as well because just helping the mom or just helping the dad really isn't, to me, the most, the best way to help them because they have to go back to their environment so I try to get the big picture the whole picture so it helps not only them but their family as well."* In other words, when working with individual family members, it is important to understand the family holistically. Such a holistic approach is necessary to truly address underlying problems, which is the goal of a problem-solving court model (Replication Materials). The Judge articulated this well: *"I think it's just common sense that someone's actions and their amenability to an intervention are going to be influenced by their environment because there's a lot of factors. You can't just talk to one person and expect everything to change, you have to change everything. This population, I think, our perspective on this has changed some. We try to be a little more, whereas before it was just establish paternity and be done with it. We try to be a little more holistic in our approach."* The Child

Support Official also recognized this shift in the court system: *"So I guess, our perspective has changed from determining who the legal father is to looking at the family more holistically. And how does this affect the family and what's in the best interest of the family and the child?"* Emphasis on attending to the environmental and contextual stressors and barriers that may prevent families from thriving and using a holistic approach to serve families are elements of the ecological perspective that were apparent throughout interviews with the key project stakeholders.

Helping relationships. A common theme across interviews with the stakeholders was the significance of the relationships built between the parents and the service providers (Navigators and the Family Facilitators). The Judge noted that *"I think the most important thing have been the personal relationships between the navigators and the parent advocates and the parents."* The Child Support Official also recognized how crucial the relationships between the service providers and parents was as it is challenging to build relationships with families throughout the court process. *"I think also that the focused attention on our clients and participants because from, like from my perspective and the government's, you do more volume, you don't have the ability to make that kind of, that one-on-one, ongoing relationship and getting people, and having the Navigators as someone that's in their corner and is always working with them and keeping in touch with them, I think, is really key."* The Navigators and Family Facilitator served as important allies for these families as they navigated the paternity establishment process.

The helping relationship literature identifies the personhood of the helper as being a crucial component of any helping relationship. Helper characteristics such as being caring and warm, authentic, genuine, empathetic and having positive regard for the individual being helped are all important for building rapport and trust, which impact the success of the helping relationship. In particular, the Family Facilitator emphasized the importance of *"...being authentic. The population I work with can tell right away whether you really care about them or not. So, for me it's being just as transparent as I can be."* Additionally one of the navigators spoke to the difference between following up with a mother or father because it was part of protocol versus doing so out of genuine concern and care. *"I didn't expect the call but he contacted me and that means quite a bit to people and it has a different feel than the scheduled phone call it is like get me out of your black book and put me on your heart"* (Navigator). Both the Family Facilitator and Navigator seem to display an "ethos of care" for the parents and families they work with that extends beyond the professional responsibilities associated with their positions.

Home economics. Similar to the attunement perspective, the field of home economics emphasizes the importance of being responsive to families by addressing practical, perennial problems. Therefore, from this field we gain a problem-oriented practice approach referred to as practical reasoning, which is an educational strategy that can be utilized to help families think through the conditions of their situations, identify valued ends, and determining appropriate action for meeting their goals. Although the service providers did not employ the practical reasoning process as outlined in family and consumer sciences, they did help parents to identify problems and set goals for

overcoming those issues. During the co-parent education workshops parents “...were able to present their own individual situations, their own individual problems to each other and work through it” (Judge). In addition to encouraging parents to identify and problem-solve collectively through discussion in the workshops, the Navigators also encouraged parents to advocate for themselves. *“I would say that from start to finish we certainly advocate that if there is something that you need tell us, tell us early so that we can get on this so that we can all get on this and you can begin to address this and think about what it is that you want to accomplish”* (Navigator).

A common theme across the service providers is that they encourage parents to set their own goals rather than forcing goals upon the families. *“It’s really about their goals and what they want to do”* (Family Facilitator). The case managers help structure the goal setting process and help the families to identify concrete ways they can attain their goals. *“The case managers, in collaboration with the participant, then develops a personal development plan that spells out and clarifies short-term (3-6 months) and long term (6-12 months) goals as well the necessary steps to accomplish each goals”* (Replication Materials). The Family Facilitator implemented a “strength-based goal setting process” (Policy and Procedure Manual) with families by having them complete a Family Development Plan. *“Well first after meeting them and having the initial interview, the writing out their goals. Seeing it on paper and then we’re constantly talking about that. Where are you at in this? And just reminding them what their goals are and what they want to be. You know, and just give them that start”* (Family Facilitator). By writing down their goals and reflecting on their progress toward goal completion, the parents are

held accountable (to themselves and the goals they have identified). The Family Facilitator acts as a source of encouragement and support to help families accomplish the goals they have set for themselves.

Philosophy of education. The informal education literature recognizes that conversation, reflection, and building relationships are all central elements of the educational process. The role of informal educators is to be facilitators who facilitate conversation amongst the learners rather than teacher's who engage in didactic lecturing. This approach aligned with the strategy that the Navigator's utilized. *"We're facilitators, we're not teachers, we facilitate the discussion in here but the true really learning happens amongst the people that's in this room, the people that are in this room"* (Navigator). A central component of this approach is to actively engage the learners in the educational process. *"The workshops were very participatory. I know [the Navigator's] philosophy, and they'll tell you this, is they would learn from the parents, the parents would learn from each other. This was not a, this was not kind of a command and control type operation. It was a support and help people do the best they can operation"* (Judge). Through this group based learning style, parents are not only introduced to the concepts and perspectives being presented as a part of the curriculum but are also able to learn from the experiences and perspectives of other parents.

John Dewey's progressive theory of education centered on the integration of content with the interests of the learner. Although a pre-determined curriculum may be used to guide the educational endeavor, it is not rigidly or strictly held to but is used more as a guide that can be flexibly adapted to the needs, interests and experiences of the

learners in the room. The Navigators embraced this approach to education and used the curriculum to meet the needs of the parents attending each workshop. One of the Navigators described that they allowed “ *what we were trying to teach to take its own form and it went any different directions and being okay with that and being able to adapt and still make it relevant and teaching from a concept. We had this fine little handy dandy worksheet that focuses on support but guess what, if somebody makes a comment or says something else or the spirit moves us to do another thing with support because we think that it will be more relevant, more beneficial, more useful, then as long as we get the concept across then we don’t need to use this worksheet. We can use the jingle blocks, we can use that, we can use exercise we can use a story, just that whole adaptive, that whole adaptive approach and just really the tone, the tone of the workshops.*” The emphasis seems to be on delivering the content in ways that are relevant and appropriate to the individuals in the room with less concern for strict fidelity to an established curriculum.

Positive psychology. Positive psychology emphasizes using a strength-based approach, which views individuals and families as having inherent strengths and resiliencies that can be bolstered to enhance well-being and serve as buffers against the challenges in life. One Navigator explicitly stated that she uses a strength-based approach to serving families. *“I definitely work from a strength-based perspective. I see them as assets, kind of the experts of their own lives”* (Navigator). Both Navigators mentioned that they focus on building upon the assets the parents already have: *“my philosophy is to recognize what they know and do well already.”* A lengthy quote from the other

Navigator emphasizes the importance of using a strength-based approach, particularly with the population being served by the Co-Parent Court Project. *“As we are going through the workshops it is a lot of building off of strengths that already exist. It’s a lot of, doing a lot of questioning around figuring out some of the assets that we already have in the room and we always can work on because the population that we work with, they are so use to social services focusing on their deficits, and we are saying – ‘No, no, you’re not as broken as yourself or others may have made you out to seem - you’re not.’ Because to me if you don’t work at this challenge this challenge this challenge and this challenge and you are still up here sitting in this room making an effort for your child then that is resilient, and that’s resilience, that is the strength of self, it might not be a strength that you ask for but you sure did get it and you are using it to the best of your ability. We recognize the assets that are in the room from them.”* Not only do the Navigators operate from a strength-based approach in terms of how they view the parents in the Co-Parent Court project, they also advocate on behalf of the parents and help them recognize the strengths, assets, and resiliencies that they have.

Synthesis & summary. Based on the qualitative interviews and program documentation reviewed as part of the qualitative data corpus of this study, there appears to be ample evidence that the Co-Parent Court model may appropriately serve as a critical case to examine a pragmatic approach to family life education. The Co-Parent Court model aims to be responsive to the perspectives, needs and interests of the families it serves (attunement perspective). It also utilizes an ecological approach by providing social support services in order to address barriers and challenges in the lives of

unmarried parents (ecological perspective). Emphasis is placed on building relationships between the service providers and parents in order to develop the capacity of parents to be active agents in their own lives (helping relationships). The case managers use a goal-setting approach to help families identify their ideal and make strides toward aligning their current situations with their goals (home economics). The educational component of the program utilizes tenants of progressive education by integrating the content with the lived realities and experiences of the parents attending the workshops (philosophy of education). Finally, many of the service providers utilize a strength-based approach to working with parents by seeking to build on the assets and resiliencies that each parent possess (positive psychology).

Quantitative Findings

Participant self-reports of their family life well-being were analyzed to determine whether those who completed the intervention report higher levels of family life well-being than do those who did not participate in the intervention at all and those who did not complete the intervention. Outcomes for fathers and mothers will be presented separately. Because different social service agencies provided case management services to the mothers and fathers, it makes sense analyze the results of the fathers and mothers separately in order to be able to attribute the differential service approaches accordingly. Each section will begin by reporting the frequency or responses on the various family life outcomes across both the control and intervention group followed by the results of the multinomial regression analyses.

Father outcomes. Table 12 displays the frequency of each response category across both groups for the fathers who completed post survey. The frequency of each response may provide some explanatory power for interpreting the results of the multinomial regression analysis. Across both control and intervention groups, fathers appear to be doing well (either okay or great) on all family life outcomes except for money and finances where a majority of fathers indicated that they are either struggling or doing okay.

Table 12. *Frequencies of Father's Reports of Key Family Life Outcomes*

	N
Education & Job	
Struggle	9
Okay	21
Great	14
Money & Finances	
Struggle	25
Okay	17
Great	4
Children's Education	
Struggle	2
Okay	15
Great	13
Family Relationships	
Struggle	5
Okay	21
Great	17
Parenting	
Struggle	4
Okay	21
Great	19

Table 13 shows the results of the multinomial logistic regression models examining the relation between the condition (control or intervention) and the five areas

of family well-being for fathers. The multinomial regression analysis model was adjusted for baseline by including the pre-survey scores as a covariate in the analysis model. None of the outcome variables are statistically significant indicating that we cannot be sure that the results are not caused by chance. I will proceed with interpretation of the results but urge the reader to keep in mind that none of these results is statistically significant.

Table 13. *Odds Ratios (95% CIs) of Fathers' Reports of Family Life Outcomes by Program Group in Baseline Adjusted Multinomial Regression Model*

	Struggle	Great
Education & Job		
Control	1	1
Intervention	0.43	1.56
	p= 0.328	p =0.606
Money & Finances		
Control	1	
Intervention	0.68	
	p=0.599	
Children's Education		
Control	1	1
Intervention	0.90	2.27
	p=0.897	p=0.323
Family Relationships		
Control	1	1
Intervention	0.68	1.28
	p=0.717	p=0.735
Parenting		
Control	1	1
Intervention	0.42	0.94
	p=0.441	p=0.938
n = 54, Reference category is okay Adjusted for baseline (pre-survey scores)		

Fathers in the intervention group were 56% more likely to report that they were doing great rather than okay in terms of their education and job as compared to the

control fathers. Similarly, intervention fathers were also 57% less likely to report that they were struggling than doing okay in terms of their education and job as compared to the control group. As indicated in Table 13, most fathers, across program groups, reported that they were either struggling or doing okay in terms of their money and finances. However, the intervention fathers were 32% less likely to indicate that they were struggling as opposed to doing okay in terms of their money and finances as compared to the control fathers. Intervention fathers were 28% more likely than the control fathers to report that they were doing great as opposed to just doing okay in terms of their family relationships. Although intervention fathers did not appear to be any more likely to be doing great in terms of parenting than the control fathers, they were 58% less likely than control fathers to indicate that they felt they were struggling rather than doing okay in terms of parenting. Said differently, intervention fathers were 58% more likely to report that they were doing okay as opposed to struggling than the control fathers were on parenting.

Mother outcomes. Table 14 reports how frequently mothers reported that they were either struggling, doing okay, or doing great on the five key family life outcomes. Results indicate the as a whole, across intervention and control groups, there is a great deal of variability in terms of how mothers report they are doing in terms of their education and job. A majority of mothers identify that they are either struggling or doing okay in terms of money and finances. However, mothers report that their families are doing fairly well (either okay or great) regarding their children's education, family relationships and parenting.

Table 14. *Frequencies of Mother's Reports of Key Family Life Outcomes*

	N
Education & Job	
Struggle	21
Okay	44
Great	26
Money & Finances	
Struggle	51
Okay	37
Great	5
Children's Education	
Struggle	3
Okay	19
Great	53
Family Relationships	
Struggle	10
Okay	45
Great	36
Parenting	
Struggle	5
Okay	25
Great	62

Table 15 shows the results of the multinomial logistic regression models examining the relation between the condition (control or intervention) and the five areas of family well-being for mothers. The multinomial regression analysis model was adjusted for baseline by including the pre-survey scores as a covariate in the analysis model. None of the outcome variables are statistically significant indicating that we cannot be sure that the results are not caused by chance. I will proceed with interpretation of the results but caution the reader to keep in mind that none of these results is statistically significant.

Table 15. *Odds Ratios (95% CIs) of Fathers' Reports of Family Life Outcomes by Program Group in Baseline Adjusted Multinomial Regression Model*

	Struggle	Great
Education & Job		
Control	1	1
Intervention	0.83	1.93
	p= .723	p= .220
Money & Finances		
Control	1	1
Intervention	0.78	0.41
	p=.614	p=.355
Children's Education		
Control	1	1
Intervention	0.23	1.04
	p=.283	p=.943
Family Relationships		
Control	1	1
Intervention	0.82	0.5
	p=.789	p= .146
Parenting		
Control	1	1
Intervention	0.69	0.53
	p=.718	p=.218

n = 110, Reference category is okay.
Adjusted for baseline (pre-survey scores)

Intervention mothers were an astounding 93% more likely to report that they were doing great rather than just okay in terms of their education and job. They were also 59% less likely to report that they were doing great as compared to okay but also 22% less likely to report that they were struggling rather than doing okay in terms of their money and finances. The intervention mothers were slightly more likely (4%) to indicate that their children's education was great rather than okay than were the control mothers and 77% less likely to indicate that their children's education was a struggle as opposed to

okay as compared to the control mothers. Additionally, intervention mothers were less likely to report that they were doing great than okay and were also less likely to report that they were struggling rather than doing okay in regard to both family relationships and parenting as compared to the control group.

Chapter Five

Discussion

This discussion will begin by interpreting the quantitative and qualitative findings presented in the previous chapter and integrating them in a meaningful way in order to answer the first question of this study: *How do evaluation findings triangulate with practitioner wisdom and social science theory?* The quantitative and qualitative findings will be triangulated in order to identify lessons learned from the Co-Parent Court model. “The idea is that the greater number of supporting sources for a ‘lesson learned,’ the more rigorous the supporting evidence, and the greater the *triangulation of supporting sources*, the more confidence one has in the significance and meaningfulness of a lesson learned” (Patton, 2001, p. 335). Once the lessons learned have been identified, the second research question will be addressed: *what promising principles of effectiveness can be extracted from the Co-Parent Court model to inform practice?* Following this, limitations of the study will be examined and implications for future research and practice of family life education identified.

Evaluation Findings

Although none of the statistical analyses of the multinomial logistic regression models that were conducted were statistically significant, there remain some interesting findings. Of particular interest is the finding that parents in the intervention group were associated with an increased odds of indicating they were doing well in terms of their education and employment than were those in the control group. More specifically, both intervention fathers and intervention mothers were more likely to report that they were

doing great rather than just okay in terms of their education and job as compared with the control mothers and fathers. Although this is not a statistically significant finding, it does seem to be substantively significant given the social service supports for mothers and fathers was a central element in the Co-Parent Court model.

Mother well-being. Given that the social support services for mothers was identified as one of the elements of the Co-Parent Court model that worked, it is not surprising to see that the intervention mothers were nearly 100% more likely to indicate that they were doing great than okay in terms of education and employment as compared to the control mothers. It appears that the social support services provided to mothers was effective in producing better outcomes in terms of education and employment. Aside from children's education, in which intervention mothers reported that their children's education was marginally more likely to be great as opposed to okay as compared to the control mothers, the intervention mothers did not appear to be more likely to being doing great as compared to okay on any of the remaining family life areas than control mothers. However, they also indicated that they were less likely to be struggling as opposed to doing okay than control mothers. While to some degree this may seem confounding, it is important to consider that this multinomial regression analysis conducted two separate equations. One that compared intervention and control mothers in terms of the odds that they would be doing great or okay and another that compared the odds of whether they were doing okay or struggling. This indicates that intervention mothers are more likely to be in the group that is doing okay than in either of the extremes (struggling or great) and given the large proportion of mothers indicating they were doing okay across the

measures this seems to be plausible. What this may indicate is that there are a proportion of mothers who are going to be doing great regardless of an intervention such as Co-Parent Court. Where Co-Parent Court makes a meaningful contribution is by bringing intervention mothers who would otherwise be in the group who identified as struggling up into the group that seems to be doing okay. This would explain why intervention mothers had decreased odds of being in the group who identified they were struggling rather than the group who identified that they were doing okay across all five family life areas.

Father well-being. An unexpected finding for fathers is that those in the intervention group were also more likely (56%) to report that they were doing great as opposed to doing okay in terms of their education and employment as compared to control fathers. The increased odds for intervention fathers was less than those for mothers, however, given there was consensus across stakeholders that the father social support services were an area of failure for the project, it is surprising to see that the intervention fathers were at an increased odds for doing great in terms of their education and employment as compared to control. Although, as a whole, the fathers did not build relationships with the father advocate or appear to successfully complete services or obtain employment through the project partner selected to work with fathers, the fathers did build one significant relationship, with the male Navigator. Shade (1983) determined that any significant other can improve the expectations and performance of African American youth as long as those youth identify with the significant person. According to Shade:

The term significant others is used by various theorists to denote those persons who exercise a major influence on the attitudes of individuals by (1) communicating the norms, values, and expectations of the culture or society in which they live; (2) defining the behavior that is considered to be appropriate to the culture or society in which the individual resides; (3) modeling the appropriate attitudes and behaviors; and (4) providing the necessary information about the environment to the individuals under their influence (Woefel & Haller, 1971). (p. 137)

The male Navigator served the role of a significant other from the community who provided fathers with new information, a new perspective and modeled appropriate attitudes and behaviors in such a way that it may have altered the expectations and performance of the intervention fathers enough that they were empowered to obtain employment on their own. This is supported by the qualitative data which indicated that those fathers who did obtain employment during or following involvement in the Co-Parent Court project were likely to have done so on their own. It is likely that this could also explain why fathers in the intervention group were at an increased odds of reporting that they were doing great rather than okay in terms of their children's education and family relationships as compared to the control fathers.

Additionally, literature has confirmed the important role that relationships with significant other men can serve especially in African American communities where male role models play a crucial function in the urban community (Anderson, 1999). According to Anderson the removal of manufacturing jobs has resulted in a disproportionate number of unemployed black males in large cities and therefore a lack of positive role models for African American men who often turn to violence or crime as a means for securing

financial resources. The presence of “decent dads,” employed family men who serve as role models to their children and community as a whole, have a powerful influence on the cultural norms in a neighborhood. Anderson identified that decent dads are described as African American males with distinguishable characteristics— steady employment, community responsibility, and responsibilities as a father and husband. This “decent” dad role is not only played in his own household but in the broader African American community as well. The male Navigator is a married man and father who has steady employment and a commitment and responsibility to the community. It is not difficult to imagine that he may be serving as a role model, a “decent dad” for the fathers who participated in the Co-Parent Court project. Any gains or benefits seen in the intervention fathers can likely be attributed, at least in part, to the relationships they built with the male Navigator during the workshops.

According to the results of the multinomial logistic regression, it appears that fathers are benefitting from the Co-Parent Court model more so than mothers are. This is supported by the qualitative data analysis in which there was consensus among stakeholders that fathers were more empowered as a result of participating in Co-Parent Court than mothers were. For example, the Judge noted that *“I think our intervention probably had less to do with empowering mothers than empowering fathers. We may have solved some practical problems for mothers...but I think the sense of personal efficacy is greater among men in our system.”* Stakeholders believed this was because mothers are more likely to seek out and utilize services and resources that they need than

fathers are. Additionally, mothers may have a larger social support system available to them than do fathers.

Lessons Learned: What Worked? What Didn't Work?

The lessons learned are based on the wisdom of the key project stakeholders and are informed by the social science literature. Two evaluative categories are considered: (a) what worked? and (b) what didn't work? Table 16 and Table 17 outline "What Worked" and "What Didn't Work?" respectively with regard to the Co-Parent Court project. Each table outlines the main themes, provides evidentiary support in the form of quotations from the stakeholder interviews as well as a brief interpretive commentary regarding the theme. Each category is briefly summarized below. Concepts from the social science literature, particularly the conceptual framework that is guiding this study, are also brought to bear on each theme and comparisons are made to derive lessons learned from the design and implementation of the Co-Parent Court project.

Table 16. *What Worked: Strengths of the Co-Parent Court Model*

What Worked		
Theme	Evidentiary Support	Interpretive Commentary
Resolving practical problems through social supports	<i>We may have solved some practical problems for mothers because I know [the Family Facilitator] got housing for a lot of people and employment for a lot of people.</i>	Consensus across stakeholders was that the case management for mothers was one of the strengths of the project. The outreach and engagement approach, which was essential to success, helped families to build on strengths, set goals, and address practical problems such as lack of education, underemployment, and instable housing.
Navigators as intermediaries	<i>We just totally lucked out with the Navigators. Um, they're one hundred percent able to navigate the legal system and the world of Hennepin County, which can be a bureaucracy. But they're just so brilliant with the families and they can make that connection, and transfer the content and build those relationships. And if you had just mediocre people in those positions I don't think we'd get the results that we're getting.</i>	The Navigators acted as intermediaries. Intermediaries blend the ability to make connections between people, institutions, and other resources that bond local communities and bridge them to other ideas and information.

Individualized,
family-
centered
approach

We were trying to get away from the traditional model that was the exact opposite of that. You come in and I will tell you what is best for you and your family, how you and your family should operate because I'm the referee, I'm the Judge, and I know best. Well we flipped the script completely. No, we believe that as a parent, that as a father, mother, you know what is best for your child, you know what arrangement and what decisions you want to make on child rearing issues, you know what custody arrangements are best, so what we are going to do is provide you with a little bit more information and a little bit more of a foundation so that you can build off of that but ultimately you make your own decisions, hence the parenting plan.

But I think also that the focused attention on our clients and participants...what people need is individual.

The Co-Parent Court philosophy emphasized the idiosyncratic nature of family life by: (a) providing information so that families are better able to make informed decisions, (b) offering social support services that were tailored to the needs and interests of each family and (c) setting the expectation that families are responsible for making the decisions that govern their lives.

Relationship-
based
education
approach

So the parents develop personal relationships and trust. And...when we first started doing the, I forget what we called it. It's like a family map, who's in my, what does my family for my child consist of? [The Navigators] started showing up on parent's maps as some of their family members. So it's that level of personal relationship.

The nature of the personal relationships built between the service providers and parents have consistently been identified as one of the most crucial aspects of the model. The educators often served as mentors, role models, confidants, and sources of support for the parents. This suggests that interpersonal traits of the educators may be as crucial as content knowledge and other professional qualifications. It also implies that relationships may be the most efficient vehicle for encouraging self-transformation.

Reframing the message about fatherhood

And so for fathers to hear that I think creates a sense that they're important, they're valuable. And they're valuable even if they're not working and don't have money at the moment. And of course the workshops we talk about the unique contributions of fathers and mothers, so...the fathers in particular feel more empowered to be important and not marginalized.

I'm not saying this is the panacea and it's all going to be rainbows and roses for them but you just need people to believe that dads matter, kids and, kids connections to their parents matter.

I mean it really is that, it's just changing the message...I have been struck by how profound the simple message is of "you matter" to dads.

Despite the failure of the fatherhood social service supports, fathers became empowered by the message that they matter in the lives of their children. This suggests that the most powerful educational endeavors may be less about knowledge gained, than it is about facilitating a paradigm shift by changing attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and values.

What worked. Five themes emerged regarding what worked well in the Co-Parent Court project. To begin with, the model sought to address practical problems through connection to existing social service support systems. The community partner selected for case management services for the mothers was perceived as one of the greatest strengths of the project. The Family Facilitator operated in alignment with the approach to service delivery that the organization espoused. As identified in the qualitative findings, her approach aligned with tenants of a problem-solving orientation in which families are encouraged to set goals and given the support, structure and resources they need to attain them.

The second theme is that the Navigators acted as intermediaries between the parents and the court system. In doing so, they served as a bond between parents and the various project partners including social institutions such as the governmental bureaucracy as well as community-based social service agencies, helping parents to navigate unfamiliar territory. Additionally, the Navigators presented new information and perspectives to the

parents through the workshops acting as bridges to new knowledge and different perspectives regarding co-parenting. The role of intermediary connects with Putnam's (2001) notions of bonding and bridging social capital. The Navigators help to build the social capital of parents enrolled in the project by bonding them to existing resources in the community and bridging them to new sources of information and ideas.

The third theme that contributed to the success of the Co-Parent Court project was that it utilized an individualized, family-center approach. Rather than mechanically processing paternity cases and setting standardized orders for custody and parenting time, this model encouraged and in fact expected parents to develop their own parenting arrangements. Additionally, although the workshops were mandatory (for most parents), the remainder of the social service supports were optional and available to only those parents who expressed a need or interest in receiving additional supports. Therefore, the Co-Parent Court model was customized to the unique situations and circumstances of each family. Some parents had been co-parenting together for years and were already very successful at it. These parents were often excused from the workshops but were asked to complete a parenting plan. Other parents completed the workshops and completed a parenting plan without receiving any additional social service support. While some parents were only enrolled in one social service agency, others received services from numerous project partners. The model itself is intended to be adapted and to be flexibly implemented so as to be responsive and relevant to the parents being served. The family-centered approach is representative of the attunement perspective.

The fourth theme under “what worked” is a relationship-based educational approach that emphasized making personal connections with the parents so as to deliver the content of the workshops in a relevant, meaningful way. Navigators used conversation extensively in the workshops and encouraged parents to apply the content to their experiences and situations. By disclosing personal details, the parents in each workshop were able to learn from one another and also gain new perspectives from peers in a non-threatening, supportive environment. Parents were encouraged to use the knowledge and perspectives they gained in the workshops to make informed decisions about how they chose to co-parent given their circumstances. The emphasis on relationships and conversations are central elements in the informal education literature, whereas the adaptation of curricular content to the experiences, needs, and interests of the parents is reminiscent of Dewey’s progressive theory of education.

The fifth and final theme regarding what worked well in the Co-Parent Court project is reframing the message about fatherhood. It appears that a key outcome was enhancing father’s sense of self-efficacy and empowerment. African American fathers are constantly challenged with negative stereotypes, including the notion that they are absent or, at best, peripheral in their children’s lives (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005). These authors identified that this message eventually becomes ingrained and fathers begin to feel that unless they can fulfill traditional gender functions as provider, they do not matter to their children. The message of this program was that “fathers matter” in their children’s lives. Fatherhood is about more than simply paying child support; rather children benefit when they have an emotional relationship with both parents. This

message was central to changing both mothers' and fathers' attitudes toward father involvement. While this certainly has important implications for the implementation of programs with unmarried fathers, there is also a more general application. Educational programs should not only aim to impart knowledge and build skills but also to present new perspectives that may influence changes in attitudes, beliefs and values.

Table 17. *What Didn't Work: Challenges of the Co-Parent Court Model*

What Didn't Work		
Theme	Evidentiary Support	Interpretive Commentary
Fatherhood social service supports	<p><i>If you look at the only part of this program that has not been a success... the only part of it that is lagging behind has been the change interjectory for the fathers and it was the slowest to develop. I don't know that what we have seen that has been positive for the fathers has to do with anything more than what they have gained through workshops and I don't mean for that to be a self-righteous statements but I am trying to think of what real relationships they have built.</i></p> <p><i>You have almost have a traditional fatherhood approach. We are trying to get these fathers into the [father serving agency] which was not successful by any means; we just have a constant struggle.</i></p>	<p>The social service supports for the fathers were identified across stakeholders as the primary weakness of the project. The agency that was initially selected to provide case management services for fathers seemed to have a philosophy of outreach and engagement that was contrary to the Co-Parent Court approach. The agency placed primary onerous on the fathers to seek their support rather than taking the initiative to take on the burden of outreach in order to connect with the fathers and engage them in the services they had to offer.</p>
Complex social problems	<p><i>We are no longer dealing with co-parenting issues we are dealing with mental scars and four, six, twelve workshops talking about co-parenting will not fix it. It is not going to fix it. We can say – Well we have these wrap around services in place but the problem is that a majority of the people who need emotional and behavioral help in this world are not getting it because they refuse it or they deny that they need it and I think that is a well-documented fact...I think that at the end of the day we really have to embrace the fact that this is not an all-encompassing program this is a niche.</i></p>	<p>The issue at hand is much larger than that of co-parenting. It is a macro level societal problem that includes the intersection of a number of social forces such as: racism, classism, poverty, and neighborhood effects. Although this program attempts to alleviate the surface level problems, it does not truly address the underlying societal problems that lead to the phenomenon to begin with.</p>

The involuntary nature of the program	<p><i>I think I would change the Court order, I get why it is there but I think that even with our success I think some of our downfalls is that it is Court ordered. If we just imagine having those groups, having something like a parenting plan, having something like a case management for motivated individuals, all motivated individuals, just imagine how they would feed off of each other.</i></p> <p><i>If you take away the Court ordered workshop, I think that this overall is modeled well in that way. It is put together well enough.</i></p>	<p>Conveys the belief that adults should not be forced to participate in social programs. Inherent in this is the belief that people will only be influenced by a program if they are motivated to participate.</p>
Lack of consequences for the court order	<p><i>I don't think that we have been very responsive to those people who have done everything that we have asked of them to do, those people who we truly did place some hope with and then they have to look at them and say – I'm sorry but what are you guys going to do because you guys told me I was Court ordered so what does he or she and we have no answer for them, except for natural consequences of course but if someone doesn't see it as a natural consequence then it kind of defeats the purpose of natural consequences, you know.</i></p>	<p>Even though the workshops were court ordered, there were no substantial consequences for parents who did not comply. This raised an issue of equity and fairness when one parent in the dyad complied and attended the workshops but the other parent did not. It seems that a mandate needs to be accompanied by a way to enforce participation or else more creative means for encouraging participation, like providing incentives should be put in place.</p>

What didn't work. The greatest consensus across project partners regarding what did not work, is the failure of the fatherhood social support services. The social service supports for the fathers were qualitatively different than those provided for the mothers. Whereas the Family Facilitator who provided case management services for mothers utilized a whatever it takes approach that actively sought to engage mothers, the philosophy of the agency that provided case management for fathers set the expectation that fathers take the initiative to seek their services. As a result, fathers did not receive the same consistent and persistent effort to get them and keep them involved. As a result,

many of the fathers did not received the jobs skills training, GED completion courses, and other resources that would help them to become gainfully employed. Ultimately, the mission and approach of the agency initially selected to serve fathers was incompatible with the mission and approach of the Co-Parent Court project. An important lesson learned is that collaborative programs need to develop a shared vision by clearly articulating the vision, mission, and philosophy of practice of the program and being sure to partner with organizations that have a similar vision in place or who can alter their practices in order to align themselves with the broader program vision.

The second challenge that the project faces is that the population being served, fragile families, and the phenomenon that the project intends to address, co-parenting between unmarried parents, are rooted in complex social forces. Intersectionality, which is the exploration of how multiple, intersecting experiences, such as race, gender and class create unique opportunities for oppression, such as persistent poverty, for individuals and communities (Hancock, 2007), captures the complexity of this phenomenon well. Issues of racism, sexism, and classism intersect in powerful ways that may perpetuate the phenomenon of unmarried parents struggling with unstable housing, underemployment, and instable relationships. One stakeholder identified that this issue is *“the result of other gaps that exist. Family structure, economic gap, the education gap (historically speaking), but some of the damage that has been done to some people is irreversible.”* As this passage indicates, this phenomenon is deeply rooted in societal structures that a single intervention, even one as comprehensive and ecologically-based as Co-Parent Court, will be unable to address the underlying issues that have led to the phenomenon in

the first place. However, this model is a novel attempt to begin shifting institutional patterns to better support families and strengthen communities who are experiencing this phenomenon and may be a necessary first step to developing larger initiatives and policies that may begin to change the social forces that have led to these circumstances.

A third challenge of the Co-Parent Court project that was identified is the compulsory nature of the co-parent education workshops. Some of the stakeholders expressed a concern with court mandating adults to attend any kind of program. Additionally, many stakeholders identified that people will be more responsive to an intervention if they are motivated to participate and have chosen to do so freely. However, another stakeholder conveyed an alternative perspective that often people who would not volunteer to participate in the program initially end up appreciating what they got out of the program by the end. *“You know even if at first they feel like we’re making them do it I guarantee by the end of the workshop they don’t feel that way anymore.”* It seems that mandating one component of the program and making the rest optional may be a good way to get parents involved initially and then they can decide to what extent they want to participate in the other aspects of the program. Another option would be to provide considerable incentives for parents to participate. For example, if a father has a considerable amount of child support payments that he owes, an incentive to participate may be to reduce or forgive the child support debt upon completion of the workshops and parenting plan.

The final challenge identified is related to the issue of the court mandate. Parents who did not attend the workshops faced relatively no consequence for their noncompliance.

This was likely in an effort to avoid the traditional punitive court approach. However, if one parent complied and attend the workshops and the other parent was non-compliant, the situation appeared unfair, inequitable, and unjust. However, it seems plausible to think that instead of threatening punishment for not complying, the court could instead use positive reinforcements and incentives for people to participate, as indicated previously. It seems that if the model is going to be mandatory, there either needs to be some sort of consequences for noncompliance or incentive to encourage parents to participate.

Lessons learned. As identified in the findings, a shared vision across project partners is crucial for the successful implementation of a collaborative program such as Co-Parent Court. Clearly articulating a set of principles that guide all aspects of the program will ensure that the model is cohesive and efforts are coordinated to achieve the intended outcomes. This overarching framework orients the particular strategies and approaches utilized by all project partners. Emphasis on principles rather than particular activities, allows for the flexibility and adaptability that stakeholders identified as being a critical element of the program model. Therefore, guiding principles provide the shared vision across project partners but also allows for the model to be individualized to meet the unique needs, interests, goals, and situations of parents.

The recommendations for replication of the model varied greatly across stakeholders. While some stakeholders believed that the model should be implemented with fidelity to how it was implemented in this case, others believed that the model should be adapted to the circumstances of the local context. The Co-Parent Court model contracted with

community partners and paid them to be involved in the program; however multiple stakeholders recommended that for replication the court should partner with community-based agencies that are already doing the work. The Judge asserted that *“I think this could be done on a different, on a less complicated, less expensive basis...it doesn’t have to be done like this with employees of the program. It could coordinate with existing services and make a lot of this happen.”* One of the Navigators noted that *“meaningful partnerships are a key and they would reduce costs.”* She went on to say that those interested in replicating the model do not necessarily need to implement the whole package. Rather, *“we have created something where you can take it and make it your own.”* She suggested that there are a variety of potential combinations that could be employed using different components of the model. For instance, the parenting plan could be a standalone piece that is used apart from the workshops or could be implemented into the workshops by bringing the mother and father together to develop their parenting plan together in a group format where they can get guidance from others. Instead of holding separate workshops for mothers and fathers, the curriculum could be taught in a co-educational format where mothers and fathers attend a combined workshop. Additionally she indicated that the curriculum could be implemented in a case management rather than group format by bringing the dyad together to work through the ideas in the curriculum together. Yet other stakeholder believed that the model should not be change dramatically, *“don’t switch up too many things.”* Although some may find this diversity in recommendations about replication alarming, I believe it speaks to the intended nature of the program model, which is that it be flexible enough to be adapted in

relevant ways. The guiding principles remain constant, which allows for flexibility in the particular strategies utilized.

Comparing and contrasting the case management for mothers and fathers provides additional support to this emphasis on shared principles. The Family Facilitation for the mothers was identified as an aspect of the project that worked well. Conversely, the case management for fathers was seen as a failure among stakeholders. Success and failure seem to be associated with how well the outreach and engagement approach of the Family Facilitator and Father Advocate and their respective agencies aligned or failed to align with the vision of Co-Parent Court.

In the traditional paternity calendar process, referees (judges) may refer parents to receive social services at a local, community-based agency. However, it is the parent's responsibility to contact the agency and schedule an appointment. The Co-Parent Court process, attempted to increase the likelihood that parents would actually enroll in and receive services by taking on the onerous for connecting parents with social services. Instead of expecting the parents to seek out services, the Co-Parent Court project developed an internal referral process that would allow the Navigators to refer parents to the project partners. The idea was, that once the case manager received the referral, it was their responsibility to contact the parent and schedule an appointment. This is how the case management services for mother operated throughout the duration of the project. The Family Facilitator would make herself easily available to the mothers and would take the initiative to repeatedly contact mothers or follow up with mothers when necessary. On the other hand, the philosophy at the agency selected to serve fathers was that it was

the father's responsibility to connect with and follow up with them. However, this is no different than the referral process would be in the traditional Family Court model of paternity establishment. Therefore, it did not align well with the vision and approach the Co-Parent Court program embraced and explains why services for fathers were viewed as being unsuccessful.

Although the underlying philosophies of stakeholders were prevalent in the interview transcripts, neither of the program documents, one which was intended to guide implementation and the other to guide replication, explicitly outlined the guiding principles of the program. Although a description of the particular components of the model is important for implementation, it is equally important to describe the principles that guide the particular components of the model. It is difficult to create and sustain a shared vision, without these elements being clearly articulated in program documentation. In an effort to connect the particulars of the Co-Parent Court model to the general orienting framework, a set of "promising principles" that are derived from the evaluation findings, stakeholder wisdom, and social science theory (the conceptual framework guiding this study) will be described next.

Promising Principles

The Co-Parent Court model is designed as a holistic and comprehensive program; each component plays a vital role in meeting the interests and needs of the parents and strengthening families. All activities and components are delivered using the Family Engagement Model summarized in Table 18.

Table 18. *Promising Principles: The Family Engagement Model*

Family Engagement Model	Conceptual Framework
1.) Is relationship-based as it recognizes the need to develop relationships and partnerships with parents and families first and foremost.	Helping Relationships; Philosophy of Education
2.) Works with individuals and families within an ecological systems context – the individuals are part of a greater family and community.	Ecological Perspective
3.) Embraces a family-centered practice approach, which works with families to develop their own approach and to set goals that are both meaningful and realistic.	Attunement Perspective; Home Economics
4.) Uses a strengths and assets based approach that incorporates strategies and resources inherent to the individual, family and community.	Positive Psychology
5.) Engages and empowers families to take control and ownership of their success and future.	Attunement Perspective; Home Economics
6.) Equips families with information, skills, and resources so that they may make informed decisions.	Attunement Perspective; Home Economics
7.) Recognizes that both educators and learners bring specialized knowledge to the learning experience.	Attunement Perspective
8.) Believes that education is a collaborative endeavor in which research-based principles are integrated with lived experience.	Philosophy of Education

The promising principles are based in the social science literature and were supported by the qualitative findings of this study. Each of the six major components of the conceptual framework developed to guide this study are represented in the eight principles of the Family Engagement Model. This model promotes engagement with families that: seeks to partner with them in ways that provide relevant and responsive support in order to meet their interests and needs and allow them to build on their inherent resiliencies and assets to strengthen their capacity to make informed decisions and ultimately become self-reliant.

Limitations & Unique Contributions

This study has several limitations to consider when interpreting its findings. First, because this study was part of an existing demonstration project, the quantitative data set used was not developed specifically for the purpose of this study. Therefore, the measure used, The Overall Assessment of Family Well-Being, may not have been an ideal measure to capture outcomes relevant to the Co-Parent Court program. The survey questionnaire was comprised of many scales measuring many different variables so the abbreviated “Overall Assessment of Family Well-Being” was selected for inclusion in the questionnaire. However, had this dissertation study been conducted separately, the entire “Measure of My Family’s Well-Being” would have been used. The full measure is sub scaled so that each of the twelve family life dimensions are comprised of a number of items which are summed to provide an overall rating of that area. For example, the first of the twelve areas of interest is Parenting and Family Well-being, which contains seven sub areas (e.g., rule setting, behavior management, and parental affect/stability). The full measure is also scored on a seven point Likert scale using a retrospective pretest format. As opposed to the three-point likert scale used for this study (struggle, okay, great) the seven-point scale asks parents to rate the degree to which they agree with statements (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) and a final overall question using the same response options as the overall assessment (struggle, okay, great) but using a seven-point likert scale. Using a scale with more variability in outcome measures would have enhanced my ability to detect nuanced changes between groups.

A second limitation to this study is the small sample size for post-survey completion. Having a larger sample would have increased statistical power and increased the possibility of finding statistically significant results. Initially I had hoped to conduct within-group analyses to determine whether the extent and scope of the intervention effected family well-being outcomes. For example, comparing those who completed the program (completed workshops, developed a parenting plan, and received social service supports) to those who only partially participated in the program (did not complete some element(s) of the program). However, the small sample size prevented me from running this kind of more nuanced analyses.

A third limitation was the restrictive nature of the qualitative data that was collected and analyzed for this study. The first level at which this was a concern is the absence of qualitative data from the follow-up interviews with the parents. Given that the model proposed in this dissertation study emphasizes that the knowledge of families themselves is as valid and important a source of information as is the knowledge of researchers and practitioners, the absence of the perspective and experiences of parents is noteworthy. In addition to this, including parental qualitative data could have served to validate and substantiate the quantitative participant level data. However, this data was not included due to time restraints and a lack of audio recorded and transcribed interview transcripts. However, I plan to analyze this data at a later date and bring it to bear on the ideas presented in this dissertation study. A related limitation is that the findings are limited to the perception of the stakeholders and may not be an accurate reflection of the program in its entirety as it was implemented. Although program documentation was

reviewed as a supplemental source of data, these documents were ultimately written by the key stakeholder and therefore still reflect their perceptions of the program (the emic view). Observational data of the court processes, workshops, and case management sessions would have provided an external perspective of the program (the etic view). Additionally, observing the workshops would have likely captured more information regarding the educational approach and strategies the Co-Parent Court Navigators employed (philosophy of education).

Finally, the study is limited to a particular program and context, therefore the findings are not generalizable to other populations. However, the findings may be suggestive for educational approaches with similar groups (predominantly African American unmarried parents who struggle with unemployment and restricted resources) and programs (co-parenting interventions). Additionally, the study makes an attempt to develop promising principles that may be transferred to other family life education settings, programs and contexts.

Despite these limitations, this study also makes a variety of unique contributions. There is a great deal of concern in family and human services regarding the gap between research and practice. Practitioners argue that scientific findings and related theory are not relevant to situations of practice; whereas researchers complain that “practitioners often do not utilize scientific knowledge to guide their practice, programs or policies, thereby reducing their effectiveness” (Small, 2005, p. 320). This study bridges the chasm between research and practice by examining (research) whether this model (practice) effectively strengthens families. By studying a practical model, the research has direct

utility to both family scholars and practitioners. This study makes a unique contribution by making “scientific research more practical and practice more scientific” (Small, 2005, p. 332).

A related unique contribution of this study is that it identifies a paradigmatic orientation that corresponds well to the emerging model of family life education identified in the literature. Pragmatism serves as an appropriate epistemology of practice for a model of family life education that seeks to integrate family science principles with the wisdom, values and experiences of families. Pragmatism also emphasizes practical utility and the importance of choosing educational strategies and approaches that may be implemented in such a way as to be relevantly and meaningfully responsive to the idiosyncratic nature of family life. As articulated here, pragmatism serves as an appropriate epistemology of practice and orienting framework for the further development of this emerging model of family life education.

A third contribution of this study is the comprehensive review of literature conducted and synthesized across various disciplines and fields in order to inform the practice of family life education. It is not uncommon to remain constrained by disciplinary boundaries; however, this study draws from a variety of disciplines within the social science literature. The conceptual framework that emerged from this synthesis was then brought to bear on the qualitative data corpus, which enabled me to generate promising principles that can be further tested and if proven effective implemented in the practice of family life education. Bringing the social science literature to bear on the

practice of family life education attends to the pragmatic assumption regarding the connection between theory and practice.

Concluding Comments

In his presidential address to the National Council on Family Relations, Doherty (2000) identified the need for family life education to shift from an expert-driven to a collaborative model. A decade later, Duncan and Goddard (2011) and other family scientists have acknowledged that there has been a shift in family life education moving toward an approach that integrates scientific knowledge and principles from family sciences with the values and experiences of families in communities. This dissertation study has been an attempt to contribute to this emerging model of family life education. This study employs John Dewey's version of pragmatism as the guiding epistemology of practice for this emerging approach to family life education. Deweyan pragmatism utilizes a "both/and" approach to philosophy that seeks to embed family life education within the intersections of theory and practice; knowledge and action; as well as reason and experience. A pragmatic approach to family life education has been proposed through presenting a summary and synthesis of concepts derived from a variety of perspectives, disciplines and fields that comprise both a philosophical and practical frameworks. The philosophical framework draws from three principal perspectives: (a) family science, (b) critical science, and (c) human ecology. Family life education, conceptualized as the intersection of the aforementioned perspectives: applies the content knowledge derived from family science and attends to the ecological context in which families are embedded (human ecology) in such a way that families become increasingly

capable of functioning autonomously (critical science). The practical framework extends Bronfenbrenner's (2009/2001) bioecological model of human development to inform the development of interventions aimed at families; integrates concepts from disciplines and fields such as: the attunement perspective, helping relationships, home economics, and positive psychology in order to inform strategies and approaches for outreach and engagement; and finally reviews principles central to the philosophy of education.

The study employed a convergent, multi-level intervention mixed methods design and was based on the evaluation of an existing demonstration project entitled Co-Parent Court. Co-Parent Court is used as a critical case to explore and examine the pragmatic model of family life education articulated in this study. The existing Co-Parent Court evaluation design utilized a quasi-experimental, randomized control group with a pre, post and follow-up survey. Quantitative data collected through surveys with the parents was used to determine in what ways the Co-Parent Court model contributed to an enhanced perception of family well-being in those who participated in the intervention. Qualitative interviews conducted with key project stakeholders were used to explore whether the Co-Parent Court project served as an adequate critical case for the purpose of this study and to identify lessons learned about the Co-Parent Court process.

Findings indicate that intervention parents were more likely to be doing well on several substantively significant dimensions of family well-being than those in the control group. The interviews with stakeholders indicated that the Co-Parent Court model served as an appropriate critical case for exploring and examining the pragmatic family life education model as described in this study. This evaluation research study contributes

a better understanding about the Co-Parent Court program model by examining key stakeholder's beliefs regarding the critical factors of the model. The qualitative data corpus provided evidence for the presence of the six defining aspects of the conceptual framework (attunement perspective, ecological perspective, helping relationships, home economics, philosophy of education and positive psychology) within the Co-Parent Court program model. Lessons learned regarding what worked and what did not work in the particular case of the Co-Parent Court project grounded the findings in the immediate programmatic context.

Additionally, eight promising principles of a pragmatic approach to family life education were developed based on a triangulation of practitioner wisdom in the interview data and social science theory (conceptual framework) as an attempt to contribute knowledge to the field of family life education generally. These principles are referred to collectively as the family engagement model. Although this model needs to be further tested in other settings, with other programs, populations and contexts, the promising principles that comprise the family engagement model have the potential to inform future family life education practices, programs, and policies.

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Appendix A. Overall Assessment of My Family's Well-Being

Each of the statements below represents an important area of family life. Check the column which you think best describes how you think your family is doing. Are you "Doing great," "Doing okay," or "Having to struggle"? Some statements may not apply to you, in those cases select "N/A".

Family Life Descriptions When you think about each of these things below, how are you and your family doing?	Struggle	OK	Great	N/A
1. Residence and utilities				
2. The neighborhood where you live				
3. The food you eat				
4. Health and medical care				
5. Your education and job				
6. Your money and finances				
7. Your transportation and how you get where you need to go				
8. Your children's education				
9. Your family relationships				
10. Parenting				
11. Your children and how they're getting along in the world				
12. Day care for your children when they're not with you				

Appendix B. Stakeholder Interview Protocol

Co-Parent Court: A Problem Solving Court for Children and Families Stakeholder Interview Protocol

As part of the overall Co-Parent Court Project Process Evaluation, we have checked in with key project members periodically to see how things are going, what's working and what's not working, and explore key lessons learned. We understand that sometime because of the specific role you play in the project, it will be difficult not to identify who said what, but as much as possible, we will keep identities confidential. And all responses will be combined and reported as a group rather than what individuals said. Any questions before we get started?

SAY ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:

Just to let you know, I will be taking detailed notes (or typing on my computer) as we talk so let me know if that gets too distracting for you and we'll figure out another way to do this.

I would like to record our conversation, will that be ok with you?

Interview Questions

Question to service providers/community representatives:

1. Describe your ethos of practice. In other words, what is your approach/style when working with individuals and families?
 - a. What have you found to be most useful/effective?

Questions to all:

2. What are the critical factors or features of project design and practice that you believe contributed to the success the co-parent court project?
3. At the beginning of the project we identified two major theoretical foundations that would guide the evaluation of this project (these were based on initial meetings of the larger steering committee). How were these theories borne out, or not, in the project context?
 - a. Developmental Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner)
 - i. Bronfenbrenner's Developmental Ecological Theory emphasizes that interventions must recognize and attend to the reciprocal person-environment interactions. There are a range of contextual, situational and personal factors that interplay and influence personal and relational well-being (individual and family functioning). A successful intervention must attend to the complexities and realities of the individuals and families being served in order to provide a holistic approach that serves the needs of those being served.

- b. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura)
 - i. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is a social learning theory that emphasizes a belief in human agency and the importance of self-regulatory processes. The most central concept to agency is self-efficacy, "people's beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives." According to this theory, people have the ability to envision likely outcomes of their actions and will strive to gain anticipated beneficial outcomes.
4. Have you gained new knowledge or come to appreciate anything differently as a result of working on this project?
 - a. Probes/prompts: About participants, community services/organizations, the court, or university.
5. If you had a magic wand, what would you change and why?
6. What advice would you give to others interested in developing and replicating the success of a problem solving court for unmarried parents in their state?
7. What else would you like to share with us about the project?

Thank you for your time!

Appendix C. Critical Factors Codebook

Codes	Nickname	Description
Model	MODEL	Indicates that the model in its entirety or parts of the model are central
Workshops	WORKSHOP	Refers to the co-parenting education workshops where the curriculum is facilitated
Social Service Supports	SOC SERV SUP	Includes both those supportive services such as transportation, child care, and other resources as well as broader services such as employment, housing, domestic violence, etc.
Supportive Services	SUPRT SERV	Those additional resources and supports that supplement participants and help them meet immediate needs in order to participate in the program.
Parenting Plan	PARENT PLAN	Refers to the parenting agreement
Adaptable & Responsive	ADAPT RESPON	Adapt model to needs of the community, population, and situation. Relevance of model to individuals.
Characteristics & Qualifications Service Providers	CHAR & QUAL SERV PROV	Indicates that qualifications (professional) and characteristics (personal) of the service providers (navigators, family facilitators, judges, etc.) are a critical factor.
People of Good Will	GOOD WILL	Indicates that the "right people" to work on this kind of project are those with good intentions and good will. In vivo code.
Philosophy of Practice	PHIL PRACT	Elements that influence the philosophy of practice that guides educators, facilitators, etc. approach to working with families
Whatever It Takes Approach	WITA	Refers to service approaches that are not narrow but rather all inclusive and holistic in nature. In vivo code.
Shared Vision	SHARED VISION	Consistent message and goal across program partners. The core program philosophy of outreach and engagement
Supportive Approach	SUPRT APPR	Refers to the general tone, ambience and atmosphere of the program as identified by multiple stakeholders.
Curriculum	CUR	Refers to the co-parent education curriculum
Message	MESSAGE	Indicates that the message or content is crucial
Content	CONTENT	Refers to the content (information, research base, etc.)
Unique Target Population & Issue	UNQ TRGT POP ISSU	Identifies that this curriculum meets a unique niche by addressing the needs of fragile families, unmarried parents.
Problem-Solving Team	PROB SOLV TEAM	A group effort requiring the coordination of many different people in different roles. An in vivo code.
Coordination	COORD	Coordination, cooperation and collaboration necessary among program partners (honoring different roles, parts, etc).

Appendix D. Conceptual Framework Codebook

Codes	Nickname	Description
Attunement Perspective	ATTUNE	Concepts central to the attunement perspective.
Family-Centered Practice	FAM CENT	Focus on families' perspectives, situations, and goals.
Alignment	ALIGN	Includes both the alignment of families with their contexts as well as the alignment of families real and ideal.
Ecological Perspective	ECO PERS	Concepts & notions central to understanding and attending to phenomena from an ecological perspective
Context	CONTEXT	Any referral to the context or environment of the individual
Holistic	HOL	Considering the larger picture. The person and situation as being greater than the sum of its parts.
Interacting systems	INT SYS	Micro, meso, exo and macro systems that influence individuals and families.
Reciprocal nature of person-environment interaction	PER-ENV INT	Consideration of the influence of the environment on the person as well as the person influencing their environment.
Helping Relationships	HELP REL	Relating to the literature on the nature of professional helping relationships.
Self-Growth	SELF-GROWTH	The belief that all people have the internal resources required for personal growth.
Autonomy	AUTO	Strengthen capacities for managing one's own life. Includes concepts such as self-efficacy and empowerment.
Personhood of Helper	PERS HELP	Characteristics of the helper such as: caring, authenticity, compassion, respect, positive regard, etc.
Ethos of Care	CARE	Communicating that there is genuine care for the person and their family
Authenticity	AUTH	Service provider conveys authenticity and genuineness
Positive Regard	POS REGARD	Suspend judgment. Conveys an acceptance of and support for people. Inherent value of person.
Home Economics	HOME ECON	Concepts central to the practice of home economics.
Problem-Oriented Practice Approach	PROB ORI	Practice is oriented toward resolving practical problems and issues that families face. Responsive to families' needs and desires.
Philosophy of Education	PHIL ED	Concepts central to the formation of a philosophy of education
Local Education	LOC ED	Concepts central to local or informal educational practices
Conversation	CONV	Educational practices that emphasize conversation and dialogue rather than didactic teaching.
Relationships	RELAT	Emphasis is on building relationships
Learning Experience	LEARN EXP	John Dewey's notion that education should be the integration of content knowledge and the lived experience, needs & desires of the learners.

Ecology of Education	ECOL EDU	Cremin's notion that education occurs in many institutions (family, church, community centers, media, etc.) and the goal is to meaningfully integrate and connect these educative institutions.
Positive Psychology	POS PSYCH	Concepts and ideas related to the positive psychology movement
Strengths-based	STR BASE	Utilizing a strength-based approach that recognizes the resources and resiliencies inherent in people and situations.
Character strengths	CHAR STR	Recognizing or cultivating character strengths related to: wisdom & knowledge; courage; humanity; justice; temperance; transcendence.