

Implementing Parent and Family Life Education Delivery in
Rural and Urban Minnesota through Webinars:
An Exploratory Study

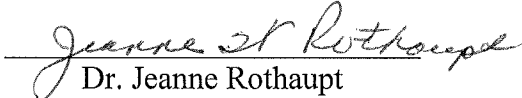
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ABSTRACT

This study documents the planning and implementation of parent and family life education delivery through webinars (online seminars) in rural areas where parents have limited opportunities to attend traditional classes. Qualitative data are presented from the funding agency, service provider, instructors, and participants through narrative and thematic discussions. Quantitative data from participant evaluation surveys are also included. Findings support the viability of webinars for the participants included in this study. Five themes are identified, including 1) the importance of trusting relationships between collaborating agencies; 2) the need for flexibility and convenience; 3) increased role of the internet in parent and family life education; 4) pros and cons of webinars; and lately 5) webinars as a catalyst of change. Enhancements suggested by the agencies, instructors, and participants are provided. Questions for further research, especially regarding parent and family life education in rural areas and for working parents, are suggested.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Parent education has the potential to provide parents with appropriate knowledge and skills to make a difference in their child's development (Hudson, Campbell-Grossman, Fleck, Elek, and Shipman, 2003). Ironically, since so many parents are in the workforce today, the significant demands of work life and family life make it difficult for them to access programs available in their community that could provide parent education. There are even more barriers for parents of low-income, parents from communities of color, and immigrant parents. These barriers may include money for tuition or fees, cultural differences, understanding of the school system, lack of transportation, lack of child care, or limited English skills.

A majority of parents are working outside the home, but all parents are working parents—even though some don't receive a paycheck. Family life education (FLE) that allows for the greatest flexibility is advantageous for all working parents. Parents employed outside the home are already at the work site, which eliminates transportation and additional child care barriers. In addition, these parents are often reluctant to take more time away from their families to attend evening FLE in the community. Stay-at-home parents also want flexibility because many deal with child care and transportation barriers, and one could say that their worksite is their home.

Despite all of these significant barriers, there is the potential to reach these populations by making parent education available flexibly when and where it works best for parents. That could be in a community setting, at their worksite, or in their own home. This study will examine and follow one organization's attempt to reach parents of young children—especially from underserved populations—and to describe the process of implementing parent and family life webinars and the potential benefits they can provide to children and families.

Theoretical Framework

Parents and other early care providers are the most critical influences on a young child's future educational success. The theoretical framework informing this is the ecological systems theory, in which a child is sequentially influenced by family and early caregivers, followed by school, then by their community, and finally by the larger society (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Many parents do not understand the importance of early education or of the critical nature of their influence in their child's life. They may also lack the knowledge and skills in parenting that are needed to effectively support their children's emotional, social, and academic development. Quantitative, descriptive, and longitudinal studies document educational disparities among specific socioeconomic groups of children (Hart, 1995; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Olson, 2007).

Context of the Study: Collaboration to Provide Parent and Family Education in a New Way

The service provider in this study has been offering parent and family education at the worksite for over 24 years, primarily at its headquarters and at companies in the metropolitan area of a Midwestern state. This organization is nationally recognized for innovation in work-family education at the worksite. Its mission is to educate, support, and affirm working parents and individuals at the worksite in order to increase the health, wellness and resiliency of individuals and families. The executive director of the participating agency said it is very important to the integrity of this organization that every aspect of the program is linked to research-based best practices.

Parent and family life education seminars offered through the service provider have typically been coordinated and paid for by individual companies that have a large number of employees. Some seminars are scheduled during the work day, with the endorsement of the

employer that encourages employees to attend. However, the majority of seminars are scheduled during employees' lunch time as Brown Bag seminars or Lunch and Learn seminars. This seminar format is difficult to implement in small companies, in remote areas, and at manufacturing, retail, and food service worksites. There may not be a critical mass of people able to meet at one time and place, or specific employee groups may have time constraints and a lack of flexibility in their work day that prohibits attendance.

Stay-at-home parents, including those who provide child care for others' children as well as their own, also qualify as working parents whether they receive a paycheck or not. Some of them are also looking for flexibility of time and place if they are going to participate in parent education programs.

This service provider has also attempted to bring parent education to low income employees and immigrant populations who are employed at manufacturing, retail, and food service worksites in metropolitan and rural areas, but results have been limited thus far. Besides the logistical issues previously mentioned, these underserved parents may be suspicious of what will be discussed, or believe that only parents with problems attend parent education classes.

One recent focus of the organization is educating parents about young children's needs, and helping them facilitate providing good information to their child's caregivers.

In an attempt to more effectively reach all of these underserved populations, the service provider in this study has begun to offer internet-based seminars to parents. This delivery method, commonly known as web conferencing or webinars, provides parents access to education through the internet and/or the telephone. In a webinar, each participant sits at his or her own computer—in any convenient location--and is connected to the instructor and to other

participants via the internet. In some cases a group of people gather in a conference room at their place of work or in a community setting to participate together.

Webinars have been used in business settings during the last ten years for meetings, training, and professional development, primarily to save time, to reduce travel costs and to facilitate communication and training in remote areas (Workman and Koch, 2005; Krause, 2005). The service provider in this study started using webinars in 2007 to extend the geographic reach of its parent and family life education seminars, and to provide a time-efficient alternative seminar format for employees in industries such as law, accounting, and banking. Interest, participation, and satisfaction of employees taking part in parent and family life education webinars has been positively documented when it is measured through attendance and evaluation surveys. For example, webinars facilitated during the months of March through May, 2009 served over 1800 people through more than 100 webinars. (Appendix A)

Webinars are utilized to overcome time and distance constraints and to broaden the educational reach to additional family members and/or care providers. The webinar delivery methods have been continually refined and updated within the limits of the service provider's technology capacity and knowledge base and on experiences and feedback from participants. Efforts are made to be as collaborative as possible with participants by using polling and question and answer features to allow more interaction between the audience and the presenter. In some cases, the staff has incorporated the use of VoIP audio technology to allow for a truly web-based communication between the instructor and those participating at a distance. Eventually, the service provider hopes to have the technical capacity to use webcams so that the instructor and participants can view each other in a virtual meeting platform if they wish.

Webinars may provide the opposite opportunity as well, with hidden or anonymous participant functionality, enabling participants to be unaware of the other participants who are attending a class “meeting.” There is a possibility that anonymity may increase participation of certain individuals or populations.

At the time the researcher decided to study the use of webinars for parent education, the service provider was in the early stages of planning to provide webinars in the southwestern part of this state through a collaborative grant with an area foundation which would be the funding agency. According to the project leader from the funding agency, six state Initiative Foundations (MIFs) were seeded by the McKnight Foundation 23 years ago to impact human and economic suffering that was prevalent in rural areas of the state. According to S. Carlson, (personal communication, May 7, 2009), “the mission of the MIFs is to be a catalyst to facilitate economic and social change by developing and challenging the region’s leaders to build on its assets.”

Statement of the Problem

Multiple needs assessments in this Midwestern state have shown that distances between small towns and the lack of public transportation pose significant barriers for rural residents who wish to access community resources. This would include parents who might otherwise participate in parent and family life education. There are likely other complex societal, economic and personal reasons for this disparity, as well. The implementation of one possible solution, interactive computer-based webinars to deliver parent and family life education, may help to address this problem.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to observe and document the implementation of parent and family education webinars in the southwest area of a Midwestern state facilitated

through a service provider working in collaboration with a funding agency. Secondary goals were: 1) to record and analyze evaluation data and comments from project managers of the funding agency, project managers of the service provider, webinar instructors and webinar participants, and 2) to provide agencies that fund and/or provide parent and family education with suggestions for future implementation of webinars.

Research Questions

1. What is the process that the service provider and the funding agency went through as they discussed options, made decisions, and planned the delivery of parent and family education?
2. How were the webinars decided on and implemented, and what changes were made during the course of the pilot project?
3. Did the funding agency, service provider, instructors, and participants consider the project successful and worth implementing in other communities?
4. What barriers, ideas, and suggestions for improvement emerged during the process for each group of stakeholders—funding agency, service provider, instructors, and participants?
5. Was there evidence that webinars are a viable method to use for providing parent and family education in rural and urban areas?

Assumptions of the Study

This study assumes that children need specific cognitive, social and emotional skills to succeed. Another assumption is that parents and other early caregivers are key to helping children develop these skills, and that most want what is best for their children. It also assumes that parents and caregivers can learn how to teach these skills to children, and that parent education is an effective way to accomplish this learning. A final assumption, only peripherally related to this study, is that providing parents with information and skills will result in more children who start school ready to learn.

Definition of Terms

Web conference. This can be either a downloaded application on each attendee's computer or a web-based application where the attendees enter a URL (website address) to join the conference. Some web conferencing technologies incorporate VoIP audio technology to allow for a truly web-based and interactive communication.

VoIP. Voice over Internet Protocol is a general term for transmission technologies for delivery of voice communications over networks such as the internet. VoIP systems usually interface with the traditional public telephone network through computers.

Webinar. A webinar is a specific type of web conference. It is typically one-way, from the speaker to the audience, with limited audience interaction. Although usually provided as a PowerPoint presentation with audio for the instructor facilitated on the internet, a webinar can also be collaborative when it includes polling and question and answer sessions that allow participation between the audience and the presenter. Webinars may include MPEG video embedded in the PowerPoint or accessed through a link on the internet. In some cases, the presenter may speak over a standard telephone line, pointing out and elaborating on information

being presented on the screen. The audience can respond to the instructor and/or the group over their own telephones or through the internet in a chat format. Webinars may (depending upon the provider) provide hidden or anonymous participant functionality, enabling participants to be unaware of other participants attending the same meeting or class.

Archived Webinar. An archived webinar is a presentation that is recorded and made available through a website after the “live” delivery.

Webcast. A webcast is a media file distributed over the Internet. A webcast uses streaming media technology to take a single content source and distribute it to many simultaneous listeners/viewers. It may either be distributed live or on demand. Essentially, webcasting is “broadcasting” over the Internet.

SurveyMonkey. SurveyMonkey is an internet service that enables users to easily create and administer their own Web-based surveys. The basic service is free, although more advanced options are available for a fee. Organizations use SurveyMonkey for many purposes, such as customer surveys, employee surveys, performance reviews, feedback and group scheduling.

Message Board. In this study, the message board refers to a page on an internet site where webinar participants could ask follow-up questions or request further information from the instructor for a period of 30 days following the “live” delivery.

Parent Education. Specific, research-based education that provides parents with information and support to raise their children to be successful, well-adjusted, and ready for school.

Family Life Education. Broader than parent education, family life education provides information and support for all aspects of family functioning over the life course.

Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE). ECFE is a universal access parent education program started in Minnesota in the mid-1980s that is available in every school district in the state. Parents attend with their birth-five children to participate in developmentally-focused parent-child activities, and then they separate for parent education. Parent Educators and Early Childhood teachers are licensed by the state.

Early Learning Counts! (ELC). ELC is a customized parent education program developed by Working Family Resource Center to bring information and resources about school readiness to working parents of birth-five children at the worksite. The unique feature of this program is that parents share resources with family, friend, and neighbor caregivers of their children, and encourage them to work with the children on important developmental skills.

Project Manager or Project Leader. For this research, a project manager or leader is someone from the funding agency or the service provider who has responsibility for the planning and implementation of all or part of the pilot project.

Limitations of the Study

The question of whether the webinar is an effective delivery method for teaching parent and family life education is limited to the qualitative self-reporting of four groups of subjects in this study. The participant evaluation survey was developed specifically for the purpose of this pilot project, so generalizations must be limited. It is difficult to quantify how much, if any, the webinar format increased the participation of underserved populations in parent education, particularly as this was the first attempt to do so. The results of this exploratory study are also limited to one specific area of a Midwestern state, and it is not possible to generalize the findings to all parents. As in any exploratory study, the primary purpose is to begin the research

conversation and to identify more questions and hypotheses that could be proposed in further research studies.

Methodology

This study explored the use of webinars as a delivery method of parent and family education for working parents and other caregivers. The specific participants that were studied reside in the southwest area of a Midwestern state, and are parents or caregivers of birth-five year old children, or are professionals who work with parents. Professionals from the funding agency have been trying for some time to find alternative ways to reach more parents in their 18-county service area with 156 communities, and have encountered many of the barriers previously mentioned in the introduction to this study. The funding agency in collaboration with the service provider agreed to fund and pilot several webinars and to evaluate the success of this particular delivery method. This mixed-methods research study has contributed to the collaborative work. The researcher investigated and described the decision-making process that led to the choice of webinars for parent education, and observed and documented the parameters, coordination, delivery and evaluation of three webinars. Qualitative data was collected from SWIF professionals, WFRC coordinators, and webinar instructors. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected from webinar participants.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Societal changes, especially related to technology and the economy, exert a huge impact on families. Using ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), it is generally agreed that parents and other early caregivers are the most influential in a young child's development and future life, including school success. Other circles of influence such as schools, businesses, communities, and the larger society also have an impact, especially due to the exponential growth of technology, information that is universally available, and global connections in the 21st century. This ecological systems theory supports a holistic view, with an individual child's needs and successes intertwined in a complex system that involves the family within its total global context (Darling & Turkki, 2009).

Importance of Parent and Family Life Education

Decades of research studies demonstrate that the years between birth and age five are critical for children's development, and that experiences during these early years determine whether or not a child will succeed throughout life. Before they even start school, children who are exposed to a language-rich environment have developed more circuits in their brains that are the foundation for future learning. "When inadequate stimulation is provided or barriers to opportunities for productive learning exist, these can lead to early disparities in capability that generally persist in the absence of effective intervention" (Center on the Developing Child, 2007, p.7). Parents are the first and most influential teachers of children, yet few of them know much about child development or appropriate methods of discipline. Most parents are motivated to raise their children to be successful, but may not have the information, skills, or support that they need to do the job. One study looked at research related to children with a higher success rate in school, and found that middle-class parents used more childrearing practices that prepared

children for school success. Although day-to-day parenting practices appeared to make the difference, the author states, “Even further analysis reveals that it is not so much what middle class parents do with their children, as HOW they do it” (Martini, 1995, p.51). Besides “pre-academic” skills, another research summary stresses the importance of relationships and social and emotional skills as a vital part of preparing children for school. It is important that a child’s environment includes reciprocal learning interactions with teachers, including their parents. (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Another study that looked at the effectiveness of parent training in the Early Childhood Special Education curriculum for parents of children identified for services related to the autism spectrum points to the leverage that is possible to achieve when parents are trained to be involved in their child’s learning (Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2006). These and other studies point to the holistic approach that posits it is not enough to focus only on the children in seeking to improve school success. It is also important to focus on giving parents the education and support they need to raise successful children.

Parent and Family Life Education at the Worksite

According to the U. S. census in 2000, almost three-fourths of women in Minnesota who were actively parenting children were also in the work force. (Legislative Commission on the Economic Status of Women, 2000). Many of these are low-income, immigrant, and single parents, and a number are in the workforce as a result of welfare to work programs. The stress these parents experience has been studied, and there is some documentation of how it impacts mental health and family functioning (Grywacz, Quandt, Arcury & Marin, 2005). Other studies document the effectiveness of interventions to teach parenting practices, and how this may directly or indirectly affect young children and improve their early learning opportunities (Cowen, 2001; Martini, 1995). Today, many middle-class families are also operating in survival

mode due to layoffs, hiring freezes, wage cuts and financial uncertainty. This has increased family stress in many additional families as a result, and has most likely reduced the number of families who are able to take advantage of parent and family education. The service provider in this study believes that one way to solve this problem may be to reach working parents while they are at the worksite, and to provide them with research-based parent and family life education during their work day.

Previous research about the effectiveness of parent and family life education offered at the worksite is limited. Many studies have been done on work-life business practices and policies such as schedule flexibility, telecommuting, taking work home, and family leave, but very few studies have looked at the impact of parent and family life education held in the workplace. This gap has a lot to do with the relative newness of research on work and family interactions, and also the difficulty of designing a study that would satisfy the strict criteria of the research community as well as the privacy and legal concerns of the business world.

Only three articles were found that actually support the argument that the worksite is a good setting for reaching parents, and several of the same researchers were involved in all three studies (Schuster et al., 2001; Eastman, Corona, Ryan, Warsofsky, & Schuster 2005; Schuster et al., 2008).

The first was an exploratory study that was part of a public health effort to reduce adolescent risk behaviors by recognizing and supporting the critical role of parents in promoting their teens' healthful behavior. Although primarily a review of published studies and commentaries, the authors also discuss qualitative data they collected from interviews conducted with human resources directors and staff from worksites in Los Angeles County as well as from three focus groups held at worksites with parents of children in grades 6-10. The researchers

state “Many of the common challenges to implementing effective intervention programs for parents of adolescents can be overcome by offering the programs at the worksite” (Schuster et al., 2001, p. 43).

The second study used focus groups with three populations—employed parents of adolescents, high school students, and worksite executives. In the article’s summary it states, “A worksite-based program designed to help parents of adolescents develop communication and parenting skills could provide a way to reach busy parents” (Eastman, Corona, Ryan, Warsofsky, & Schuster, 2005, p. 62.)

The third study, also by Schuster et al., (2008) was a randomized, controlled trial of a parenting intervention at 13 worksites in southern California. Since the authors cite evidence that when parents talk to teens there is a reduction in risky behavior, and parents are unsure how to do that, they hypothesize that parent education for parents of adolescents is worth trying. The authors propose a possible solution to getting parents to attend educational seminars to learn and practice ways to communicate with their teens about sexual topics and risky behaviors. The solution is to bring the intervention to parents where they work, since 87% of 11-16 year olds in the US lived with one or more employed parents at the time the study was designed. This research included an evaluation of “Talking Parents, Healthy Teens,” a parent education program that promoted parent-adolescent communication about sexual health. The program followed the principles of worksite health promotion, but the targeted behavior change for the adolescents was achieved through teaching parents how to communicate with their teens, resulting in a more positive and “askable” relationship (Schuster et al., 2008).

Promising research is currently occurring that indirectly provides support for the importance of parent education at the worksite. In one of the first studies to be done on work and family

crossover and spillover with parents who are non-professional employees, the researchers state, “Overall, activities aimed at working parents, whether through work/life programs at places of employment or through community-level family life education programming, need to address the needs of both mothers and fathers and focus on a family strengths perspective” (Bass, Butler, Grzywacz & Linney, 2009, p.212). An earlier study by two of these researchers examined effects of work-family conflict and work-family facilitation on mental health among working adults, and found that when there is little conflict between work and family, and if issues from home don’t interfere with work, some adults experience better mental health (Grzywacz & Bass, 2003).

All working parents of young children use some kind of child care, and due to cost or convenience many use informal care from neighbors or family members. In rural areas, there is often no other choice. Parents and untrained early childhood caregivers may know very little about how to promote the healthy development of children. For example, some parents and caregivers are not aware of the significant benefit of daily reading to children as young as infants (Diamond, Reagan, & Bandyk, 2000).

Using Webinars for Parent and Family Life Education

Very little research has been done on internet-based parent and family life education, and there were no studies found that specifically examined webinar delivery of parent education. One study on virtual family life education focused on how fathers find and use parent education resources from different kinds of websites (Morris, Dollahite & Hawkins, 1999). The learning described in this study was primarily one-directional, with little opportunity for participants to process ideas or ask questions in order to apply and expand their learning. Another study by Na and Chia (2008) looked at quantitative differences in parents who used a parenting portal vs. parents in a control group. Although they found that parents increased their knowledge about

children and their confidence in themselves as parents, there was not a significant impact on the time or quality of time that parents spent with their children. In another study it was stated that “While the availability of huge quantities of online information has many positive aspects, there is a serious risk of exposure to erroneous and potentially harmful information.” (Martland & Rothbaum, 2006). This is mainly due to the lack of monitoring or screening of what is posted on some sites.

Two research studies were found which refer to online parent education directed by a trained educator, and both targeted very specific groups of parents (Pacifici, Delaney, White, Nelson & Cummings, 2006; Hudson, Campbell-Grossman, Fleck, Elek & Shipman, 2003). The study conducted by Pacifici, Delaney, White, Nelson and Cummings (2006) was a quantitative study which focused on teaching foster, adoptive, and kinship parents through a program called Foster Parent College, whose overall goal was to educate foster, kinship, and adoptive parents about clinical aspects of their child’s behavior problems. They also gave the parents practical ideas to cope with the behavior they were seeing. In this case, the parent education, which included a web-based discussion board, was found to meet the needs of the parents by increasing their understanding of problem behaviors and improving their competence in dealing with them.

The second study, by Hudson, Campbell-Grossman, Fleck, Elek and Shipman (2003), was also quantitative and examined an internet-based intervention with first-time fathers during the eight weeks immediately after their infant’s birth. The results showed that the intervention helped new fathers to feel more satisfied with their parenting than did the fathers in the comparison group.

It must be stated that internet searches have revealed that some webinar delivery of parent education is currently being offered by a few other organizations, but no apparent quantitative or

qualitative research was available about the implementation or the value. This researcher could find no other programs that specifically offer parent and family life education webinars at worksites, although there are a number of organizations that offer webinars for employers and human resource professionals related to flexibility, telecommuting, general wellness, and specific health issues (World at Work, 2009). Most of these webinars appear to be geared toward increasing the knowledge of business leaders and trainers so that they can implement policies or train employees. There are also a great many studies, articles, and even webinars that are related to online learning in higher education settings and distance education for secondary students in remote geographic locations (The Sloan Consortium, 2009).

A knowledge gap exists in the Family Life Education (FLE) field about factors relating to the delivery of, and participation in, parent and family life education in a webinar format. Although it can be theorized that transportation and distance have kept many parents from attending community-based educational seminars, and that reducing these barriers through the flexibility of providing seminars over the internet would increase participation. However, this theory does not take into account another factor: whether parents and other early childhood caregivers consider this type of education important and worth taking the time to attend. This will be an important aspect to observe and explore in this and further studies.

This study is an attempt to fill a part of this research gap by examining how two organizations collaborated to implement three webinars, and presenting narrative and thematic findings from the four groups that were studied.

Chapter III: Methodology

This study documented the planning, implementation, and evaluation of one possible solution to the issue of lack of access to parent and family life education for parents and caregivers of young children--the interactive webinar made available through the parent's home or worksite, and available when it is convenient for the parents.

IRB Approval

The Institutional Review Board approval application for this study was submitted to the University of Wisconsin Stout for approval on March 9, 2009. The study was found Exempt from review by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, under Category 2/3 of the Federal Exempt Guidelines.

Participant Selection and Description

Four subsets of participants are described in the study: 1) those from the foundation providing funding and direction, 2) those from the agency providing parent and family education webinars, 3) webinar instructors, and 4) webinar participants. Each of these groups was presented with a brief statement about the study along with a consent form. All participation was voluntary. Following is a summary of the four units included in the study:

- 1) There was one funding agency project manager, a Program Officer of the Foundation. She was assisted by several staff members who contributed to the project, but they were not interviewed.
- 2) The project managers from the agency providing webinars consisted of the Executive Director, the Director of Education and Development (who served as the primary project leader), and the Director of Operations.

- 3) The three instructors were chosen by the service provider project managers after several discussions with the funding agency project manager and her staff to choose the topic areas. The general areas chosen were family finances, nutrition for children, and parenting in stressful times.
- 4) The sample and population of webinar participants came from the southwest area of a Midwestern state. All individuals who participated in the webinars were asked to complete an evaluation survey on SurveyMonkey. Three webinars were held with a total of 150 participants. Slightly less than half of the participants completed the survey.

Data Collection Procedures

The study's purpose was to observe and document the implementation of parent and family life education webinars in the southwest area of a Midwestern state. The webinars were facilitated by an agency providing parent and family life education in collaboration with a foundation that identified a need and provided funding.

The data was collected in a different manner from each of the four stakeholder groups in this project as described below. Semi-structured interview questions were asked and answers expanded through probes. The recorded interviews were transcribed. Copies of the survey and interview questions are attached (Appendix B). Data collection was completed as follows:

- 1) The foundation project leader was interviewed twice through recorded telephone interviews, and once by answering interview questions through email.

- 2) The primary project leader from the service provider, the Director of Education and Development, preferred to complete the three interviews through email. She deferred to the Director of Operations to answer questions about technology, and specifically about the webinar platform. He was interviewed once in person and the recording was transcribed. The Executive

Director of the service provider was also a project leader; she was interviewed once in person and the recording was transcribed.

3) Two of the three instructors participated in initial phone interviews with follow-up feedback via email. The third instructor provided interview information only via email. The instructor of the first webinar was asked all of the questions via email after a short phone conversation that was not recorded. Instructors of the second and third webinars were interviewed by the researcher on the phone shortly after completion of each webinar and the recordings were transcribed. The instructors were also asked some follow-up questions by email after the participant survey results had been tabulated and shared with them.

4) Participant feedback was provided through self-report evaluations of the webinars. The evaluation survey for webinar participants was set up to be automatically administered online through SurveyMonkey to those who took part in each webinar shortly after the webinar ended, and was voluntary and anonymous. The survey used was created specifically for the purpose of this study, and was designed in collaboration with the service provider and the funding agency project managers.

Data Analysis

Each of the four data subsets was analyzed according to methods deemed appropriate to the particular type of data gathered. Qualitative data was analyzed into thematic units from transcribed interviews. In addition, participant open-ended questions and comments that came from the evaluation survey were also included in this analysis. The experiences of the four stakeholder groups were presented through a narrative description. Quantitative participant scores were tabulated and summarized based on a Likert scale.

Limitations

Several limitations are inherent in this study. Access to employee contact information from businesses was limited due to proprietary and privacy rules that limited access to potential webinar participants. In addition, only 46% of those who attended the webinars completed the evaluation survey. A question to consider is whether those not completing the survey were dissatisfied. And finally, as an exploratory study of one agency, it is inappropriate to attempt to generalize the findings to other agencies.

Chapter IV: Results

Research results of this study are initially presented through narrative descriptions of experiences of the four stakeholder groups. Following the narrative, five major themes that emerged from the study will be discussed.

Experiences of the Four Stakeholder Groups

Descriptions of the process of implementation and participation in webinars are summarized for each of the following groups: the funding agency, the agency providing webinars, the webinar instructors, and the participants.

Funding agency.

The project leader who was interviewed from the funding agency is a Program Officer who provides leadership, program management and supervision to the early childhood initiative of a foundation that covers eighteen counties in the southwest area of a Midwestern state. She also serves at the statewide level with five other individuals representing the state's Initiative Foundations (MIFS) to oversee and manage the early childhood programs across rural areas of this state. The webinars in this study were implemented with some of the foundation's dollars earmarked for "regional value-added services." Since the funding agency's area includes 156 communities spread over a large geographical area, it is impossible to impact all of them in any of their targeted initiatives. This project was an attempt to pilot a method that would use limited resources to flexibly serve an almost unlimited number of people and communities throughout the entire region. Some of the project leader's goals were to reach people they haven't reached before, to serve large numbers, and to test the use of technology for educating parents. The available funding influenced the number of seminars that were scheduled, and also the topics that were chosen, which needed to align with the areas of focus set by McKnight for that region.

After connecting with the Executive Director of the service provider and suggesting they collaborate on a pilot project, planning was done primarily through phone calls, phone conferencing, and email correspondence. One in-person meeting was held with the service provider's Executive Director and local leaders from the funding agency. When asked how they determined that webinars would be the best format for this project, the funding agency representative shared that , they were "willing to be very creative and proactive," but also, "it was just gut instinct." In retrospect, she felt that a face-to-face meeting with all involved might have "resulted in more clarity and less retro-fitting." She would like to see more time built into the planning process and thought it would reduce the number of changes and adaptations during the implementation.

The funding agency did expect some barriers, especially related to promotion of webinars and to technology limitations. They wanted to reach parents who were not being served and wondered how they could find them and encourage them to participate. In addition, there was the issue of a large number of second shift workers. This was a concern to the funding agency because most programming is available only during the day or early evening when second shift workers would not be available. Eight different methods were used to publicize the webinars, including the use of print media, radio, internet, targeted mailings, and enlisting all of their partners to spread the word. It was clear that considerable energy was put into promotion. The funding agency stakeholder also knew that some portions of the region did not have broadband internet access, and there would be problems with access of the live webinar through dial-up internet. There would also be apprehension from some people about how to participate in a webinar and some trepidation about the computer technology. These barriers led to the requests

for two additional features from the service provider--archiving of the live webinars, and an interactive Message Board so that follow-up questions could be directed to the instructors.

When asked about the barriers again after the three webinars were completed, the funding agency project leader discussed them as internal and external issues. She felt that the biggest internal barrier was that “the foundation had never really hosted and been a centralized convener for webinars before, and so we didn’t know what we didn’t know.” Externally, the biggest barrier was that most people had no experience with a webinar and did not understand what to expect, so there were probably many who did not even try to connect. Another external barrier to participation was that May was not a good month for them to do this programming.

The implementation process was not without challenges. In fact, the funding agency project leader said, “We were not terribly happy with the first webinar.” She explained, “...we realized actually after the first live broadcast that we should have asked to have seen the content of the webinar before it was offered to ensure that it aligned with the specific parameters of our funding.” After seeing the content of the second webinar they suggested some edits, and before the third webinar, the funding agency leader actually talked with the instructor about the content, and she felt that helped the most to clarify what they wanted.

The leader from the funding agency also mentioned some challenges with the registration process and that some participants had difficulties connecting to the webinar or the audio, “...so we did a lot of troubleshooting for the first webinar.” Overall, she was very pleased with the pilot project and the collaboration. She said, “The service provider has responded to every single thing that’s come up in the process...” and, “...we learned together how to make this the best it could be.”

There were some surprises for the funding agency as the project unfolded. The biggest was the large number of child care providers and other professionals who participated in the webinars. She commented, “We were not anticipating the very strong response and almost begging we’ve gotten from our early education constituency to use webinars for professional education in the coming year.” Since these professionals wanted to use the webinars for their required continuing education, the service provider needed to come up with a clock hour certificate and a process to verify an individual’s attendance. Another surprise was that a number of programs viewed the webinars as a group in settings related to parent education or staff development. Finally, it was surprising that there were not more users of the Message Board. The reason for this is unclear.

As far as the future use of webinars, the funding agency project leader was very enthusiastic about the possibilities. She had already spoken with some colleagues at other MIFS about the possibility of convening statewide webinars using shared funding resources. She expressed a desire to engage in a discussion with other leaders about “an opportunity to do some good quality professional education across the state so that everyone in the state could see the same folks without incurring enormous travel or registration fees and those kinds of things.” She also had some thoughts about how the Message Board was cost-effective to set up in the future. Finally, she suggested that both the funding agency and the service provider come up with ways to make the webinars less daunting for all involved. The service provider could design a simple planning guide with questions for their staff and potential partners to answer when considering the implementation of webinars. She also thought her agency could upload a short video clip on their website explaining the concept of a webinar and how to access it. This would reduce the amount of staff time taken up with explanations over the phone by both organizations.

Overall, the funding agency project leader was very enthusiastic and positive about the project. She stated, “It’s an expensive use of resources, but we have felt it was effective.” When asked whether she thought webinars are an effective format for parent and family life education in rural areas, she said, “Absolutely.” She also talked about the fact that she thinks there are “a lot of great educators scattered throughout the state whose expertise is limited to the school district where they work.” She suggested that this expertise could be shared through webinars.

Agency providing webinars.

The service provider partnered with the funding agency in the planning and took care of the majority of the details during the implementation. Three people from the service provider agency were interviewed as leaders of different aspects of the project, including the Executive Director, the Director of Education and Development, and the Director of Operations.

The Executive Director was the first to become connected with the funding agency, and stayed involved throughout the process, making sure that the project was a good fit and proceeded smoothly. She shared that her only concerns were related to technology issues and access and that the benefits would clearly be “reaching the people” and that it “would be a tremendous benefit and very exciting.” In discussing the planning and implementation processes, she knew her staff had those covered, but she definitely kept tabs on the pulse of the project. In her words, “...from up above, looking down, I think there was a lot of good dialogue that went back and forth that makes for something richer than just, ‘oh we can do that—it’s out there.’ We really wanted to learn a lot; we knew we didn’t have the answers and we wanted to make it the best that it could be.”

The service provider project leader stated that she clearly had confidence in her staff to take care of the numerous details and adaptations, but she also knew when to get more involved.

She said that after the first webinar, when there was no communication from anyone at the funding agency, she had “an intuitive feeling,” so she called the project leader. She stated, “I got excellent information, and then right away we could work on it. So I think the open communication was so critical.”

When asked whether she thought webinars are an effective format for parent and family education in rural areas, she said,

From where I sit here, I do. From my experience of meeting some of the people...there, and the coordinators on a state-wide level, and listening to them, it's amazing how many hats they wear and how much information they are sharing with families and the community and the businesses, and this... is a phenomenal way to reach people and to get deeper into their families (through) education. The people who are delivering it are credentialed and licensed; they've been tested and proven; they're experts in their field and they're trained to be able to give information that is practical and can be delivered or make it into their family right away--that day, that night, when they go to deal with sleep issues, eating issues, behavioral issues, social issues. I think it's a wonderful way for right now, for what I know about technology. It's a great way to reach people.

As far as suggestions for the future, the Executive Director felt that there were improvements that could be made in the webinar delivery. She wanted to be sure that there was a welcoming introduction to each webinar and that it would be clear that “it's being brought to you by the funding agency.” She also wanted to assure that there would be good closure at the end of each webinar with where to get more information, etc. There were improvements made in these areas after the first webinar, and this will be addressed further during the debriefing session

between the two organizations. Overall, she feels the project was successful and could be replicated in other communities.

The second leader from the service provider, who actually managed the entire project, was the Director of Education and Development. She talked about some of the underlying factors that influenced the overall direction of the project. She shared that when staffs from the two organizations participated in a conference call on December 17, 2008, she learned that "the funding agency had lost over \$10 million in 19 days and was concerned about how to reach the largest group of parents possible in the most economical way. Their region had been devastated in the fall (2008) by layoffs ...the stress level was high, and the funding agency was extremely concerned about keeping families intact." In determining the scope and direction of the project, "further dynamics were discussed such as work environments (shift work vs. traditional), survivor guilt for those still employed, and the funding agency's focus areas of health and wellness, kindergarten transition, social-emotional development, early literacy, and improving quality care." After considerable discussion, three areas were identified as being potential educational focus areas for parents of young children, birth to age five, who were facing immense stress and uncertainty in today's economy. The general topics chosen were finances, nutrition, and parenting.

Initially the plan was to provide seminars in-person, since in the beginning the service provider did not think that webinars would be a possibility. However, they learned that people in this particular rural area are highly connected via internet...in many ways that is how they are getting their information.

The service provider team created a proposal of seminars and met to determine how to provide the Message Board and to archive the webinars. They established a budget, applied for a

grant from the Foundation, and created the first draft of an evaluation survey. One key factor everyone kept in mind when devising the evaluation survey was determining what information would be most valuable for future projects of a similar nature.

Meetings also occurred between the Director of Education and Development and each instructor to customize their presentations to better focus and meet the needs of parents of birth to five year olds. This project leader shared, “The biggest barrier we anticipated was dial-up internet vs. high speed...” This was verified later by the funding agency staff, who said they had talked with people who experienced connection issues related to access speed.

The service provider staff was not sure what would be the best time of day to host the ‘live’ presentation, so with agreement from the funding agency they scheduled each at different time of day – 8:30 pm, 4:00 pm and 12:00 noon. The Director of Education and Development was surprised by the results shown in the participant data, and she shared that the delivery time that had the most participants was “8:30-9:30 pm...very, very surprised!!! The 4-5 pm was not, as that is commuting and dinner time, but I honestly thought the 12-1 pm would have the highest ‘live’ participation. Participants indicated it was easy and nice to have it late at night after the ‘hurricane hour’ and after children were in bed.” Another surprise for her was the lack of participation on the Message Board. She theorized, “Either our instructors did a really great job of presenting their information or people just did not get to the message board. It does take an additional step to access and go back to check responses...this may have been ‘too much, too late’ after the presentation.”

As far as the future, the Director of Education and Development would definitely recommend replication in other locations, with a few changes. She already has several suggestions such as, “I would eliminate the Message Board option and try doing the webinars as

‘unmuted’ so participants can ask questions and dialogue with the instructor (during the live webinar).” Another change she suggests is “to work with instructors on making their PowerPoints and presentations more engaging. We are all on a steep learning curve.” Finally, she would like to see a “post—then pre” type of evaluation developed that would be completed at the end of the webinars “so participants can rate their knowledge of the subject matter prior to participating and after.”

When asked whether she thought webinars are an effective format for parent and family life education in rural areas, she also said “Yes.” Although she still thinks in-person seminars are the optimal delivery method, she admitted, “The webinar option allows more people to participate than would otherwise.” She also brought up the theme of anonymity, which she thinks encourages more people to participate that otherwise might not. She added, “We find this extremely true when topics are of a more sensitive nature.”

The final staff member interviewed from the service provider was the Director of Operations, who was the project leader for the webinar process related to technology. His role in the planning process was primarily to understand what the funding agency project leader wanted, to identify current service provider capabilities and what they could learn to do, and to set up all systems for implementing the webinars. When asked about the technology requirements for providing webinars he said, “You need a webinar platform or something that would host the number of people logging in so they would be all connected to the same Power Point, such as WebEx, or what we use is GoToWebinar.” He shared that as a service provider they have been providing webinars for about two years. He also explained that the Message Board was not part of the webinar platform, but was set up as a customized page on the service provider’s website.

When asked about barriers inherent in the webinar format, he commented, “The barriers would be the interactions between the participants and the instructor because basically you’re narrating through your PowerPoint.” During the implementation phase, the Director of Operations managed the registration process, the “live” webinar broadcasts, the recorded webinar access, the Message Board, the participant survey evaluation process, and emails related to the three webinars. As always, he needed to be online during each webinar to assist the instructors and the participants with technology issues. It was the researcher’s observation that in addition to knowledge of the technology, managing the “live” webinars requires calmness, quick thinking, and tenacity in order to be able to solve whatever varied issues and problems come up. Some of those issues were related to the speed of dial-up internet connections previously mentioned. Others were difficulties people had getting the audio portion to work, or misunderstanding something about the link to the webinar. When asked about the people who registered but did not attend, he shared that there are always a number who do that with webinars. In fact, he said, “With some of our larger webinars, other than (the funding agency), you can get 500 people signed up and maybe 300 people actually attending.” In this case, because it was new to so many people, there could also have been some who gave up when they had trouble signing on to the webinar. This project leader also compiled numerous statistics and reports requested by all of the other leaders (and the researcher!)

As far as future replication in other locations, the Director of Operations also had suggestions to improve the webinars. He explained some features in GoToWebinar that the service provider is just beginning to use, such as doing polling during the “live” webinar. He said, “With a large group they (the instructors) can poll and get the results back on their people so they keep them involved where they can ask questions.” Other changes he suggested were to

replace the Message Board with a discussion board so that participants could see everyone else's questions and comments and could engage in a discussion with each other as well as with the instructor. He also suggested keeping all of the archived webinars available during the entire time of the project, and having all webinars held "live" at the same time of day for consistency.

When asked if he thinks webinars are an effective format for family education in rural areas, he responded,

Yes it is, if it's done right. I think webinars can be very effective in getting out the message rather than saying 'I'm only going to do it in person because that's the way I like to do it and that's the way it should be done'; you're missing a group of people that would just do a webinar. So that's my theory; you have to be open to everything in order to – not that people are being lazy; they just don't have the time or maybe they don't have the transportation from their house to a town that offers that education, or they have the transportation but it's a long way away and they don't want to drive. Not every town has the availability to have it; if we can offer it to them in their house or at their job, it's an effective way.

Webinar instructors.

The instructors who taught the three webinars have had considerable experience with parent and family life education—both face-to-face and through webinars. All three admitted that they prefer face-to-face teaching, but also clearly felt that the webinar format has many advantages in rural areas and for busy working parents. Convenience of location for participants, flexibility of viewing the presentation at any time, reduction of travel time and costs, and reaching more parents with good information were mentioned in their interviews. Instructor #2 stated "...it's just a tremendous way to reach lots of people that otherwise presenters could not

reach. I mean we're not going to all drive to (the southwest area of the state) to present to ten people..."

The downside of webinars each of them mentioned is that instructors don't have the ability to make sure that they are focused on the needs of the participants. They usually don't know very much about who is actually attending, and that makes it difficult to know their needs. As Instructor #3 said, "...it's hard to get a sense of how well received they (the webinars) are because you don't have the face time and it's hard to know what people need when you're presenting these." Instructor #2 commented, "The perfect situation is when you can have both, really." She talked about some webinars she has done through the service provider where there are 50 people in a room plus 300 more on the phone and computer. In that case, her experience is that people attending in person give nonverbal feedback, make comments, and ask questions. Those participating through the webinar benefit from that, and stay more engaged, too. She shared that "some people really want to come and see you, but then you can reach hundreds more people that aren't willing to leave their (workplace) to go to class."

All three of these seasoned educators answered that webinars are an effective format for parent and family life education in rural areas. They also shared that they would like to make the webinars more interactive. Instructor #1 stated, "It's hard to connect with the participants in this format, but (next time) I would try to find a way to get more involvement if possible."

Webinar participants.

Data from the reports generated by GoToWebinar during the registration process was analyzed (Appendix C). Numbers show that many more people clicked on the web link and looked at the information publicizing the webinars than actually registered. Of participants who registered, gender was almost entirely female. During the first webinar, all of the people who

registered were located in 28 towns in the southwest area of this Midwestern state, except for four people who registered from one large metropolitan area. By the third webinar, there were three people who registered from towns in the northern part of the Midwestern state, and one from a neighboring state. There also appeared to be some people who registered but did not attend either the live or the archived webinar. However, in a few cases, there may have also been additional people watching with a group in a conference room or sharing a computer with someone who registered. Participants were asked to complete an evaluation survey after they attended the webinar in person or watched the recording. Slightly less than half of the registered participants actually completed the survey. Table 2 (Appendix D) numbers show the results of four Participant Survey questions answered based on a Likert scale for each of the three webinars. The responses show that almost 87% agreed or strongly agreed that the webinars identified skills and ideas they could use in their job or personal life, and 94% agreed or strongly agreed that the speaker was knowledgeable. As far as the webinar format, 92% thought it was an effective method, and almost 90% said the amount of information was appropriate for the timeframe.

The webinar participants' open-ended responses reflected several topics. When answering the question about how they will use the information, almost half indicated they would be using the webinar information professionally through their work in child care, Head Start, or parent education. About half indicated they would use what they learned in their personal life. When asked to respond to the question about benefits of having access to this type of program both personally or professionally, flexibility and convenience of location were mentioned, with 24 references to the ease of learning at home or at work. Time was mentioned 18 times, particularly in the context of accessibility. Although there were many positive

comments about the webinar format and hope expressed that there will be more of them in the future, there were also a number of negative comments. Most were suggestions to make the webinars more in depth, “not just the basics,” and that they need to be more engaging. As one participant commented, “This type of method is the way of the future; this needs to be continually improved and enhanced. There should be more visuals than just straight text.”

The perspectives of each of the four groups provided insight into how each frame of reference had a slightly different experience, yet all made comments in some of the same areas. Based on the interviews from these four stakeholders, several common themes emerged.

Identified Themes

A number of themes emerged from the first and second subsets of the stakeholder data, and a few were evident in all four subsets. The five identified themes that will be discussed here are: the importance of trusting relationships, flexibility and convenience, parents get information differently, pros and cons of webinars, and success and being a catalyst for change.

Importance of trusting relationships.

The first theme that emerged from data sets of both the funder and the service provider was the emphasis on the importance of relationships and trust in the development of the project. The funding agency leader talked about the ongoing positive relationship she had with the Executive Director of the service provider over many years, and how the project evolved and developed through their interactions. She said, “there were relational interactions going on over the last three years that really built the partnership, and pushed her thinking and pushed my thinking to really look at where the alignment was.” She also stated that she was “very intrigued by the approach that the service provider had taken to try and impact people creatively.”

The Executive Director of the service provider also spoke about the strong connection between the agencies and. She stated that the funding agency project leader's "...enthusiasm, her detail, and her vision were ideas I thought would fit with what we're doing here (in our program)." She added that the relationships were built over time, especially as she connected with leaders of the MIFS through meetings, discussions and some contacts made through parallel work with the McKnight Foundation. Several rural areas were considered as possible partners before this MIF funding agency was identified for this pilot project.

By the time the funding agency was ready to move forward, the project leader was confident that this particular service provider had the most expertise with webinars to carry out the project. The actual planning meetings occurred mostly through phone calls and emails back and forth, and she said it was "comfortable to do that because we had such a trusting relationship already built."

The funding agency project leader also observed another way that relationships are important in this type of collaborative effort. She noted that the service provider's previous delivery of webinars has been primarily in businesses, where the sponsor of the webinar has not needed to provide input into the content of the presentation. Her thought was that the businesses have developed a trusting relationship and consider that the service provider will provide a credentialed, knowledgeable instructor to present classes or webinars. She clarified that philanthropic organizations need to have more input into the content to be sure it aligns with their mission and goals, and stated that "none of the MIFS are going to come at this as just a sponsor." She suggested that this kind of project "needs to be treated more like a partnership," rather than like a traditional grant.

Flexibility and convenience.

A second identified theme was flexibility and convenience. This theme was evident in comments from all four groups. The Executive Director of the service provider said:

I think we're touching on a really important way to reach our busy families that takes away from having to worry about child care and transportation and all kinds of things. I see it has a lot of possibilities in the rural parts of the state and, truthfully, that's what the McKnight Foundation came to us about five years ago. It was to say, how can you do what you do in cities in the metro area for rural areas? It's not a 'cookie cutter' approach. We need to listen and to really get the bugs out of things.

The funding agency project leader echoed the theme of flexibility and convenience when she said she believes totally in the value of this state's Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), but stated that "today's moms and dads often do not have the latitude to engage in a traditional ECFE-style class." She liked the service provider's approach of taking parent education to the worksite--wherever that might be--and also having parents share information with their children's caregivers.

The Director of Education and Development from the service provider said that the webinar format might be easier for those in rural areas to access than driving great distances to attend an in-person presentation. She commented, "The ease and convenience of an online presentation was appreciated by the participants. It removed barriers such as transportation, managing schedules, child care, etc." She pointed out that recording the presentations definitely added value in terms of flexibility. She shared "We had 67 individuals access the recorded seminars. With 83 individuals participating in the "live" webinar, we almost doubled our participation rate by offering the recordings."

One of the webinar instructors stated, “Many parents at certain worksites don’t have the luxury of attending something face-to-face,” and “ “certainly anything after work is really prohibitive for parents.” Another instructor commented, “I think this type of delivery is useful and needed in the rural areas.”

Many survey comments from participants were related to this theme. Examples were, “Online training is INVALUABLE for people who live in remote country areas. It also alleviates the need for babysitters and travel time.” “It (the webinar) can be accessed at any time of day or night to fit various schedules.” “I can visit this webinar when my child is in school or in the evening after he’s in bed.” “With it on the web it fits into my schedule better and thus (I’m) more likely to participate.” Another benefit that was mentioned by five participants was being able to “review it again if I need to.” Busy adults may want to hear an idea or concept again after they have had time to process their thoughts. Flexibility and convenience were clearly the most important advantage of webinars that was expressed by many voices in all four groups.

Increased role of the internet in parent and family life education.

The third theme to emerge was related to changes in the way today’s parents want to get information. This theme was expressed by the funding agency, service provider, etc. The funding agency leader talked about the frustration of many licensed parent educators who find that the recent generation of parents seems to be “parenting by Google” rather than seeking credible resources in the community. This, and the desire to provide good, solid information for parents, led the funding agency to look at using web-based technology to reach more parents. She went on to say, “I just cringe when I think of the parents who are Googling stuff...” She thinks there is a great opportunity in this type of delivery of parent and family life education for state professionals to share their expertise with “...a very tech-savvy generation of parents.”

The Director of Education and Development from the service provider shared her thoughts that “The popularity of this delivery method is growing exponentially because of limited funds, the ability to reach remote geographical areas, and the ease of participating.” Interestingly enough, she shared that their agency also sees more male participation using this format (than in-person seminars). She commented, “We believe this is due to the “anonymity.” A participant echoed this thought, “Nobody else knows who’s attending this meeting and it is more personal.”

Pros and cons of webinars.

Pros and cons of webinars were expressed in all four groups, although the interviews of the instructors contained the most comments about this theme of pros and cons of webinars. Three of the advantages of this delivery method have already been described in the theme of *Flexibility and Convenience*. They are the availability to access webinars at flexible times, the convenience of viewing at work or at home, and the ability to review all or part of the webinar again. Other pros mentioned in the interviews related to the actual content of each specific webinar, the ability to access professional development and continuing education hours, and the chance to pass on resources to other parents and professionals. In some cases, recording the webinars allowed participants to recommend that spouses or other significant adults view them later, at their convenience. By far the biggest benefit was mentioned by the Director of Operations from the service provider when he said, “the benefits of using a webinar would be the fact that it can reach many people all over a large area, such as the (the funding agency) area or the United States, or across the sea, whereas in person your travel is a big consideration.”

Some drawbacks to webinars were also mentioned during the interviews and in the survey comments. The Director of Education and Development from the service provider stated, “There wasn’t any face-to-face interaction, peer learning, or Q&A during the presentation.” The

Director of Operations from the same agency has facilitated the delivery of many webinars. He commented, “Unless you have a very dynamic speaker or somebody who is very used to using the platform, it can get kind of dry.” Each of the instructors mentioned the difficulty of knowing who is in the audience of a webinar, what their level of knowledge is, and whether it is going well during the transmission. As one of them said, “You don’t get any feedback from the audience, so I can’t adjust as I go.” There was an anticipated concern about parents having questions or wanting more information, so the service provider agreed to provide a feature the staff had never tried before, a question and answer forum using an online message board that the instructor would check and respond to weekly. As mentioned in the narrative, the Message Board was used very little. However, 21 participants indicated on the evaluation survey that they planned to access the Message Board. Although some may have changed their minds, the question arises whether the Message Board might have been too difficult to access.

Webinars as a catalyst of change.

All four groups of subjects in this study responded positively to using webinars for the delivery of parent and family life education in this area of the state, and leaders from the funder and service provider commented that they thought the project was a success. When specifically asked, “Do you think webinars are an effective format for Family Education in rural areas,” 100% of the project leaders and instructors said yes. Participants were asked to rank whether “The webinar format was an effective method for delivering information,” and 91% strongly agreed or agreed.

The development of this project was influenced by the funding agency’s perspective relative to the foundation’s mission “to be a catalyst to facilitate economic and social change.” This also influenced the amount of funding that could be used for the project. Throughout the

interviews, the funding agency project leader referred to the foundation's funding role related to this pilot project. One of the important outcomes of the project for her foundation was learning about the strongly expressed need for parent and family life professional education in their geographic area, and finding that webinars could be a viable option to provide it. She felt that this project had been successful and that it was worth the risks of time and money. She also projected the experience further, suggesting webinars as a possible solution to another issue in their area when she said, "...and I think it's going to be an essential component to a long-term viability of Early Childhood Family Education in (the rural areas of this state), where we do not have enough licensed teachers."

Although the service provider of the webinars has been facilitating parent and family life education webinars for several years, this study provided the staff with some new evaluative information from the perspectives of four stakeholders involved in the planning and delivery. Since some experienced educators have expressed skepticism about the efficacy of webinar delivery for parent and family life education, the results of this research provide new information to add to the discussion.

Chapter V: Discussion

This study followed and examined two organizations as they collaborated in an attempt to make parent education available flexibly--when and where it works best for parents of young children. By exploring and studying the process of implementing parent and family life education webinars and listening to and documenting the experiences of four groups of stakeholders—the funding agency, the service provider, three instructors, and participants in the three webinars—more information is available about what it takes to deliver webinars on parent and family life topics, and about how three of them were received. It is hoped that more discussion and research will follow.

Five research questions provided the framework of this study, and all five were answered descriptively in the qualitative findings. Each is briefly discussed here.

1. What is the process that the service provider and the funding agency went through as they discussed options, made decisions, and planned the delivery of parent and family life education?

There was evidence in the interview data that this project evolved and was customized through a collaborative effort between two strong organizations with a trusting relationship. The project leader of the funding agency said it in a nutshell when she stated, “We didn’t know what we didn’t know.” It appears that was the case for the service provider in some areas, as well. The importance of the relationship between the leaders was the first theme to emerge, and is a key finding.

2. Why were webinars chosen, how were they implemented, and what changes were made during the course of the pilot project?

Webinars were chosen as the delivery method almost as a “Plan B” decision, when these two organizations realized that the preferred option of in-person seminars was cost-prohibitive, and when it was determined that webinars could be a viable option to reach a large audience (and a rural one!). The implementation process was described in detail throughout this study, and the changes made during the course of the project were critical to the successful outcomes. For example, each webinar appeared to be more successful than the previous one in terms of serving the funding agency’s mission, goals and target audience.

3. Did the funding agency, service provider, instructors, and participants consider the project successful and worth implementing in other communities?

Data from all four of these stakeholder groups reflected their beliefs that this project was successful. There was a strong response from the participants who answered the survey that they wanted more webinars in their area. The other three groups clearly thought the project would be worth implementing in other communities, but had definite suggestions for improvement.

4. What barriers, ideas, and suggestions for improvement emerged during the process for each group of stakeholders— funding agency, service provider, instructors, and participants?

Barriers to the use of webinars as a delivery method that emerged through the study were primarily related to technology and to inexperience in participating in an online educational seminar. Access to high-speed internet seems to be the most critical issue, and may be the most difficult to resolve in some geographic areas at the present time. More “user-friendly” explanations of each part of the process would also be helpful. An exciting idea that emerged is the possibility of using webinars as a cost-effective delivery method for professional development. One of the key findings for the funding agency is how much need exists in their

geographic area for high-quality, low-cost, convenient training for child care workers and parent educators, especially as budgets are being drastically cut.

5. Was there evidence that webinars are a viable method to use for providing parent and family education in rural and urban areas?

The evidence from each of the four stakeholder groups in this study supports the use of webinars for providing parent and family life education, particularly in rural areas and for working parents. In a pilot project, there are initial start-up costs, extensive employee training, and adaptations along the way that affect the results. Any new initiative takes time to catch on.

This study helps to make the case for the potential benefits webinars can provide to families, and supports future replication in other McKnight Initiative Foundations (MIFS) throughout this Midwestern state. This and future studies will give funders and agencies that provide parent and family life education more information to guide them in decisions, planning, and implementation of webinars.

Conclusions

To conclude this research study, a quote from the service provider's Director of Education and Development seems appropriate to summarize a number of the findings. When asked whether webinars are an effective format for parent and family life education she responded,

With technology changing at an exponential rate, the possibilities are endless as we look at better online methods, procedures, and techniques for making online family education effective. I did find it surprising that in rural areas, even those that are more low-income, technology is still prevalent and a common ground among individuals. In many cases, it is THE way people in rural areas stay connected and on top of information. It is in

everyone's best interest that solid, research-based information is provided and delivered, so parents are not accessing their information from unreliable sources on the internet.

It is the researcher's observation that parent and family life educators have a critical opportunity to influence the quality and direction of the FLE field. Many in the current younger generations choose internet delivery methods in place of face-to-face delivery. Family professionals have a choice of whether to embrace technology and figure out how to use it to educate families effectively, or to insist on what they may believe are proven methods of delivery. It is possible that even more families may access information through webinars than with older methods, and that could allow them to discover valuable research and best-practices in the field of family life education.

Recommendations for Future Research

The subject of this study was about an emerging area of parent and family life education. Besides recommending further research related to webinar delivery of parent and family life education, particularly for those in rural areas and for working parents, this researcher wholeheartedly recommends that both of the organizations studied in this project continue their collaboration. They are "on to something" that could leverage scarce resources to make a difference in the lives of children, families, and professionals. Since the service provider in the study appears to be one of only a few organizations facilitating webinars for parent and family education, it would be valuable to the FLE field if more evaluation and research into the use of webinar delivery through this service provider could be implemented. One of the major findings is the potential value of webinars for FLE professional development in rural areas.

Questions have emerged throughout the course of this project that could lead to future study. The researcher believes it would be valuable to know whether more people are inclined to

participate in parent and family life education when it is available as a webinar rather than through face-to-face classes, how the delivery method compares with face-to-face classes in affecting the levels of learning and behavior change, what are the most effective ways to evaluate learning in this delivery format, whether anonymity increases participation in parent and family life education, and what type of participatory interaction between instructors, participants, and the content in webinars promotes optimum learning.

Although it would be difficult to design a study that answers most of these questions and measures the efficacy of this area of education delivered in a webinar format, if accomplished there will be many potential benefits to practitioners in parent and family life education, to families and communities, and to interested funders.

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Appendix A

Example of Service Provider Webinar Participation
 March 2, 2009 –May 26, 2009

Webinar Date:	Number Attended:
March 2, 2009	34
March 3, 2009	108
March 11, 2009	63
March 17, 2009	43
March 19, 2009	2
March 20, 2009	4
March 24, 2009	5
April 7, 2009	83
April 7, 2009	25
April 16, 2009	145
April 23, 2009	3
April 29, 2009	6
April 30, 2009	40
May 5, 2009	436
May 6, 2009	24
May 12, 2009	3
May 14, 2009	513
May 19, 2009	214
May 21, 2009	40
May 26, 2009	60
TOTAL	1851

Appendix B

Interview Questions for the Funding Agency Project Managers

The researcher will ask the funding agency project managers the following questions in person, by phone, or through email during three interviews throughout the course of the project. Responses will be recorded.

Interview #1: The Planning Process

3. What were your reasons for connecting and collaborating with the service provider on this project?
4. How did you determine the scope and direction of the project? How many meetings and other types of communication were involved in this part of the implementation?
5. Has the funding agency used webinars before? How did you determine that the webinar format would be best for this project? What barriers and/or benefits did you anticipate?
6. Why did you want to have a recording available for 30 days? Why did you want to have a Message Board available for 30 days?
7. How were the three topics and instructors chosen?
8. How was the Participant Survey developed?

Interview #2: The Implementation Process

1. Describe the implementation process, including problems and successes.
2. What did you do to ensure that the webinars were customized to fit your clients?
3. Describe all of the steps the funding agency took to publicize the webinars.
4. What were the pros and cons of presenting this content in the webinar format versus a face-to-face presentation? Did recording the seminars and/or adding the Message Board make a difference in the effectiveness for participants? Explain.
5. How effective do you think the delivery method was for each topic and for this specific audience? Do you think participants' needs were met? Explain.

Interview #3: The Follow-up Process

1. What were the barriers to participation in the webinars? What would be needed to address removing these barriers?
2. From the Participant Survey Report, how well do you think participants' needs were met? Explain.
3. Would you change anything in the Participant Survey if the project were replicated?
4. What were the pros and cons of the Message Board. Did you hear any feedback about the Message Board? Do you think it was cost/effective and essential in this project?
5. Did you receive any follow-up inquiries or referrals as a result of this project?
6. Which delivery time had the most participants? How important was it to record the webinars?
7. Were there any technology issues that limited access? What would it take to overcome them in the future?
8. Would you change or add any steps in the planning process if the project were replicated?
9. Would you recommend replication of this project in other communities?
10. What changes would you suggest the service provider make in the webinar delivery process if this project were replicated in other areas?
11. Do you think webinars are an effective format for Family Education in rural areas? Explain.

Interview Questions for The Service Provider Project Managers

The researcher will ask the service provider project managers the following questions in person, by phone, or through email during three interviews throughout the course of the project.

Responses will be recorded.

Interview #1: The Planning Process

1. What were your reasons for connecting and collaborating with the funding agency on this project?
2. How did you determine the scope and direction of the project? How many meetings and other types of communication were involved in this part of the implementation?
3. How did you determine that the webinar format would be best for this project? What barriers and/or benefits did you anticipate?
4. What are the technology requirements for providing webinars? What experience does the service provider have with providing webinars? Why did you decide to make a recording available for 30 days?
5. What are the technology requirements for implementing a Message Board? Why did you decide to set up a Message Board for 30 days?
6. How were the three topics and instructors chosen?
7. How was the Participant Survey developed?

Interview #2: The Implementation Process

1. Describe the implementation process, including problems and successes.
2. What did you do to ensure that the webinars were customized to fit this project?
3. What were the pros and cons of presenting this content in the webinar format versus a face-to-face presentation? Did recording the seminars and/or adding the Message Board make a difference in the effectiveness for participants? Explain.
4. How effective do you think the delivery method was for each topic and for this specific audience? Do you think participants' needs were met? Explain.

Interview #3: The Follow-up Process

1. What were the barriers to participation in the webinars? What would be needed to address removing these barriers?
2. What changes do you think the service provider would need to make in the webinar delivery process if this project were replicated in other locations?
3. From the Participant Survey Report, how well do you think participants' needs were met? Explain.
4. Would you change anything in the Participant Survey if the project were replicated?
5. What were the pros and cons of the Message Board. How many people used the Message Board? Do you think it was cost/effective and essential in this project?
6. Which delivery time of day had the most participants? Was that a surprise?
7. How many people accessed the recorded seminars? How important was it to record the webinars?
8. Were there any technology issues that limited access? What would it take to overcome them in the future?
9. Would you change or add any steps in the planning process if the project were replicated?
10. Do you think webinars are an effective format for Family Education in rural areas? Explain.

Interview Questions for Webinar Instructors

Within two days following each webinar, the researcher will conduct and record a phone call interview with each instructor. The interview questions are:

1. What is your professional background and how does it relate to Family Education?
2. What is your previous experience in presenting face-to-face presentations and webinars?
3. What changes did you need to make in your typical seminar content in order to focus on the needs of the parents of children 0-5?
4. What are the pros and cons of presenting your content in the webinar format versus a face-to-face presentation? Which method do you prefer?
5. How effective do you think this delivery method was for this specific audience? Do you think participants' needs were met? Explain.
6. Would you change anything about your presentation if delivered again as a webinar?

After the webinar participants complete the Participant Survey evaluation of their webinar experience on Survey Monkey, each instructor will read the summary of the participants' responses. This could be up to one month after completion of the webinar. Instructors will answer the following questions through email:

1. What are your thoughts about the Participant Survey Report?
2. Did feedback from the Participant Survey Report change the way you felt about participants' needs being met? Explain.
3. Describe your experiences of monitoring the Message Board, including how much of your time it took to monitor. How many people do you think used the Message Board, and did any of them use it more than once?
4. What were the topics discussed or the questions people asked on the Message Board?
5. How would you rate your experience of working on this project on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the most favorable?
6. Do you think webinars are an effective format for Family Education in rural areas? Explain.

Participant Survey to be administered on Survey Monkey to those who take part in a webinar sponsored through a service provider and a funding agency

Seminar Title _____

Live Date/Time _____

Instructor: _____

I participated in:

- the “live” webinar presentation
 the recorded webinar presentation

Rate the following 1-5 (5 being “strongly agree”, 1 being “strongly disagree”)

- The webinar identified skills and ideas that I can use in my job or personal life.
- The speaker was knowledgeable on the topic.
- The webinar format was an effective method for delivering information.

Please answer yes or no

- Did you access or do you plan to access the Message Board for questions or additional information?
- Have you ever attended a parenting seminar before? If yes, please describe. If no, what are the reasons you did not?
- (Live webinar participants only) Was the time of the webinar a good fit for your schedule?
 If no, what time would be better?
- Have you ever attended a webinar before? If yes, please describe.

What are some ways you will use this information?

What are some benefits of having access to this type of program for you personally or professionally?

Other comments or ideas for future webinars:

Appendix C

Webinar Participation Data

	Webinar 1	Webinar 2	Webinar 3	Totals
	3-02-09	4-07-09	5-06-09	
Clicked on the Registration Link	134	94	94	322
Registered	52	59	52	163
Gender	F= 49 M=3	F= 55 M= 4	F= 49 M= 3	F = 153 M = 10
Location of registrant	SW = 49	SW = 54	SW = 45	SW = 148
Southwest area,	SP = 3	SP = 4	SP = 4	SP = 15
St. Paul area,				
or Other area	Other = 0	Other = 1	Other = 3	Other = 4
Attended live webinar	34	25	24	83
Attended recorded webinar	24	33	10	67
Total attended	58	58	34	150
Completed the survey	22	25	22	69

Appendix D

Participant Evaluation Survey Data from Three Webinars

Survey Question	Webinar 1 # scoring					Webinar 2 # scoring					Webinar 3 # scoring					Totals # scoring					Total responses from 3 webinars	% scoring 4 and 5
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1		
1	7	12	1	2	0	8	14	2	1	0	10	9	2	0	1	25	35	5	3	1	69	86.9%
2	12	10	0	0	0	12	12	0	1	0	10	9	2	0	1	34	31	2	1	1	69	94.2%
3	12	9	0	1	0	12	11	0	2	0	12	7	1	0	1	36	27	1	3	1	69	92.6%
4	9	10	2	1	0	9	14	1	1	0	11	9	1	0	1	29	33	4	2	1	69	89.8%

5 = Strongly Agree 4= Agree 3 = Neither Agree or Disagree 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree