

FACILITATING MEANINGFUL FAMILY THERAPY EDUCATION

Teaching Family Therapy: A Substantive and Methodological Review and Critique

How Award-Winning Family Therapy Educators Engage Their Students in Meaningful Family  
Therapy Education

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# FACILITATING MEANINGFUL FAMILY THERAPY EDUCATION

## **Abstract**

Manuscript #1

Teaching Family Therapy: A Substantive and Methodological Review and Critique

Therapy Education

Ryan M. Earl

## ABSTRACT

The first manuscript of this dissertation examines developments in empirical research related to teaching family therapy since Avis and Sprenkle's (1990) review. The purpose of this substantive and methodological review is to explore topics that have been empirically examined, including the various methods used to generate the respective findings. Trends in family therapy education, including the shift to core competencies, are discussed, and thirteen articles were reviewed across the following areas: justification for research design, sampling and data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and generalizability. Implications for authors, researchers, and educators who teach family therapy are discussed.

# FACILITATING MEANINGFUL FAMILY THERAPY EDUCATION

## **Abstract**

Manuscript #2

How Award-Winning Family Therapy Educators Engage Their Students in Meaningful Family  
Therapy Education

Ryan M. Earl

## ABSTRACT

Family therapy educators are currently challenged to teach their students in ways that facilitate competencies, but that are also meaningful to students. In this qualitative study, which serves as the second article of this dissertation, twelve award-winning family therapy educators were interviewed about how they facilitate educational practices that family therapy students have defined as meaningful to them. A thematic analysis of the interviews revealed seven primary themes: 1) relationship building, 2) attending to student development, 3) relevance, 4) actively engaging students in the process, 5) enthusiasm and curiosity, 6) providing and receiving honest feedback, and 7) transparency. The implications of these findings are discussed to support meaningful family therapy teaching practices as well as to offer specific suggestions for how family therapy educators can more deeply engage with their students.

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## **General Audience Abstract**

Teaching Family Therapy: A Substantive and Methodological Review and Critique

How Award-Winning Family Therapy Educators Facilitate Meaningful Family Therapy  
Education

Ryan M. Earl

### GENERAL ABSTRACT

This dissertation consists of two manuscripts. The first manuscript outlines the current state of research in the topic area of family therapy education. After reviewing thirteen studies from the past twenty-seven years, I provide a summary of trends and findings within this area of research. In addition, I review and critique the various methods that have elicited such findings. Finally, I hypothesize about why this area of research is suffering in quality and quantity and provide recommendations for how future research on this topic could be conducted.

For the second manuscript, I interviewed award-winning family therapy educators about their teaching methods. I asked them how to facilitate meaningful learning experiences for students so that current and future instructors could strengthen their own teaching. I use the findings from these interviews to provide the following recommendations: 1) get to know students personally, 2) recognize education as a developmental process, 3) make topics and examples relevant to students, 4) learn with, but also from students, 5) use student-led presentations sparingly or not at all, 6) be open to giving and receiving honest feedback, and 7) share enthusiasm. I also list implications and directions for future research related to how to teach family therapy in meaningful ways.

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### **Dedication**

To Mom, Big Man, and Shorty: I don't know how I could ever quantify the unbelievable support you've given me throughout my life and through the last nine years of school. I can say with 100% certainty that I'd never have made it this far without your love and encouragement. I know that you're all proud of me, but I'm just as proud of all of you. Thank you for everything – I love you, and I owe this to the three of you.

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To Sarah: Thanks for...well, the millions of things you help me with.

This dissertation is a culmination not just of my work, but of all the support and encouragement each and every person in my life has offered me along the way. It is dedicated to all of you. This was a joint effort in more ways than I realized it would be. I will do everything I can to show you that your support was well-placed.

I love all of you.

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## Teaching Family Therapy: A Substantive and Methodological Literature Review and Critique

Way back in 1991, Liddle made the following assertion:

“Our field can progress no further than do those who define it and teach it to others” (p. 688).

### **Introduction**

In both classroom and supervision settings, family therapy educators use a variety of methods to teach beginning therapists how to practice therapy with their developing caseloads. Though one might easily articulate what teaching is, it is difficult to find the topic clearly defined or studied within empirical training literature, where the term “teaching” is often couched within articles related to “training”, “education”, “supervision”, “curriculum development”, “outcomes”, and “competencies”. A closer look yields a staunch reality: there is little specific, empirical focus on the teaching process within family therapy training. Given that traditional coursework and classroom environments still exist and play a large role in the training process, it seems strange that there is so little empirical emphasis on the topic.

More than ever before, stakeholders in the field are pushing scholars to empirically validate family therapists’ varied theories, processes, and models. Therapists are held accountable to treat client systems in ways that are supported by science (Breunlin et al., 2014), yet the same standard does not seem to exist for the instructors who teach family therapy. Twenty-six years after Liddle’s (1991) comprehensive “state of family therapy training” and Avis and Sprenkle’s (1990) substantive and methodological review of outcome research in family therapy training, Breunlin (2016) points out that there is little difference in the current state of family therapy education, including teaching, than in years past. Nelson and Smock (2005) explain that “we have no research on outcome-based education in family therapy and very

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little collectively in education” (p. 361). What this suggests is that the variety of content and methods of teaching implemented by graduate family therapy programs, such as teaching about models, integrative frameworks (Breunlin et al., 2011; Fraenkel & Pinsof, 2001; Josephson, 2008), gender (Filkowski et al., 2001), scientist- practitioner models (Breunlin et al., 2014; Crane et al., 2002), or even common factors (D’Aniello & Perkins, 2016; Karam et al., 2015) are largely implemented without any empirical evidence to justify them.

To date, the most recent substantive and methodological review focused on family therapy education was published in 1990 by Avis and Sprenkle. Based on their substantive findings related to outcome research in family therapy training, they suggested that “beginning assessment skills may be as effectively taught using traditional classroom methods as by using more expensive experiential methods” (p.260). However, they acknowledged that their suggestion was tentative, and that more comparative studies needed to be conducted in the future to confirm or disconfirm their findings. Additionally, Avis and Sprenkle (1990) recommended the following:

1. A need for controlled research on both training and supervision.
2. Development of more valid and reliable instruments with which to measure change in trainee skills.
3. More attention paid to evaluating training in terms of impact on therapeutic outcome;
4. Improved research design and more adequate methodology.
5. Comparative studies that address differential effectiveness of various teaching and supervisor methods, sequencing of learning experiences, and impact of different models of training on practice.

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Have family therapy scholars managed to address the recommendations by Avis and Sprenkle (1990) within the past 27 years? If so, how? What do we now know about teaching family therapy that we did not know nearly three decades ago? Is evaluating the process and outcomes of family therapy training still the “fledgling research endeavor of tremendous importance to the field” (p. 263) that Avis and Sprenkle (1990) suggested it was? If so, are the chosen methodologies adequate and/or improved? Recently, Breunlin (2016) suggested that “the history of training and supervision of family therapists can be categorized as a struggle to move forward” (p. 517). Is this the case for teaching, and, if so, what can be done about it?

Due to the evolving nature of the training process, as well as its prominent importance in ensuring quality of care among beginning therapists, I was interested in reviewing empirical literature that specifically addressed the teaching process in family therapy training. The purpose of this article is to present a summary of empirical literature focused on teaching and/or learning family therapy in addition to evaluating the quality of research design. To accomplish this, I conducted a substantive and methodological review. I explore developments in research within the past twenty-six years related to teaching family therapy, critique the methodologies used to ascertain the substantive findings, and offer recommendations for future research.

### **Justification for the Method**

According to Littell, Corcoran, and Pallai (2008), a substantive review “aims to comprehensively locate and synthesize research that bears on a particular question, using organized, transparent, and replicable procedures at each step in the process” (p. 1). Substantive reviews are becoming more common as the result of movement within various fields, including family therapy, toward evidence-based practices. Implementing evidence-based processes,

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including teaching practices, requires consumers (educators) to be able to locate relevant studies, assess their credibility, and integrate credible results with existing knowledge and prior literature.

Littell et al. (2008) suggested that substantive reviews go beyond traditional, narrative summaries of research by imposing a level of rigor, depth, and discipline to the review process. Rather than simply regurgitating findings from several studies, a substantive reviewer can uncover associations not previously identified, transparency, and meta-syntheses of findings and ideas. The researcher actively disseminates not just what research studies find, but also *how* they are found. Specifically related to family therapy and/or family therapy education, substantive and methodological reviews can help disseminate and highlight the efficacy and relevance of various topics, processes, and methods related to teaching family therapy, but also the methodologies used to produce the findings that shape the way we understand it.

Many substantive reviews, particularly in fields like social work and family therapy, are meant to be useful for practice and policy because readers inevitably interpret and apply the results to their own work (Littell et al., 2008). A substantive review such as this is a way to compile, analyze, and synthesize the major findings and ideas from existing literature related to teaching family therapy. It provides current family therapy educators with an updated, accessible means through which they can disseminate current teaching practices that are both backed by empirical research and specific to the field of family therapy.

Consistent with Littell et al.'s (2008) suggestion, I conducted this substantive and methodological review as both a researcher and as somebody who represents the “end users” of the review, in this case a family therapy teacher/educator. As a result, I provide conclusions and recommendations based on my analysis that can directly influence current and future educators and researchers of family therapy training. In addition, I provide context for the state of how

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family therapy is taught so that readers can see what empirical research has been conducted since Avis and Sprenkle's (1990) review, as well as where gaps exist and need to be filled by future research.

### **Eligibility Criteria**

In topic areas that are rich with literature, one of the most important considerations a reviewer must attend to is which studies are included or excluded from the review. This can be an arduous process unless the researcher knows what specific topics and/or populations they want to consider (Littell et al., 2008). Family therapy education literature encompasses several specific areas of inquiry, including the supervision process, outcomes and achievement, gatekeeping, core competencies, common factors, recruitment, and more. As a result, the primary eligibility criterion for this substantive and methodological review was whether a study was empirical in nature in addition to having a specific focus on some aspect of teaching.

The major criteria for exclusion was to exclude any literature published prior to Avis and Sprenkle's (1990) and Liddle's (1991) review. These earlier articles were excluded so as to not be redundant to prior reviews. In addition, I chose to only include literature that related specifically to teaching within a family therapy training context as a way to not over-extend or discredit my review. Unfortunately, I did not have the luxury of focusing on one specific methodology, simply because the quantity of empirical literature related to the topic is so limited. As a result, the methodologies that *have been* used are described, as well as how they could be improved.

### **Search Methods**

Cooper and Hedges (1994) suggested that identifying the terms a researcher will use in conducting a literature review is the first step in synthesizing research. The primary goal in

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determining which studies were included in the review was to make sure they were relevant to the phenomenon I wished to study, which in this case was “teaching” family therapy. Littell et al. (2008) explained that a convenience sample of studies is likely to not be representative of an overall body of literature, so reviewers should take great care in ensuring they locate literature from a variety of sources. With this in mind, I searched using the terms “teaching”, “training”, and “education” on the websites of various family therapy journals, including *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, *Contemporary Family Therapy*, and *Family Process*. I also used Google Scholar, EBSCO Host, PsycINFO, and the reference lists of articles related to family therapy education. According to Reed and Baxter (1994), free-text searches can often yield false positives, so I further refined my search by excluding articles that did not include the word “teach”, “teacher”, or “teaching” within the abstract or body of the manuscript.

### **Review in Context: The Core Competencies Movement**

While my search initially included many articles describing characteristics of the training process, such as supervision, limiting my review to articles that included some form of the word “teach” narrowed the pool of literature down to 40 articles spanning from 1995 to 2016. Of these 40 articles, only 13 were empirical studies. The remaining 27 were theoretical manuscripts with no methodology to review or critique. Though these 27 articles were ultimately screened out of the review for this reason, I would be remiss not to spend some time discussing the field’s paradigm shift to outcome-based education, which was a major focus of many of the theoretical manuscripts I found.

The shift from input- to outcome-based education was perhaps the most significant change within the past 30 years within family therapy education. A driving factor of this shift was and continues to be the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy’s

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(AAMFT) emphasis on the core competencies, which are “a collection of the basic minimum skills that each practitioner should possess in order to provide safe and effective care” (Graves, 2005). Nelson and Smock (2005) suggested that the growth of family therapy approaches, models, and theories created a “dilemma” in family therapy training, where teachers and programs were tasked with determining whether family therapy should be a distinct discipline or remain more broadly-defined and multidisciplinary. The core competencies and the shift toward outcome-based education attempted to resolve this dilemma by clarifying foundational elements of the field while maintaining flexibility for individual programs to train students collaboratively. Teachers, in turn, are expected to teach to and facilitate students’ learning of these competencies.

### **The Shift to Core Competencies in the Context of Higher Education**

Shifting to competencies- and outcome-based education is not unique to family therapy training. In fact, it is old news in the context of higher education, where institutions are constantly charged with demonstrating that graduating students actually learned something while enrolled. Hodge (2007) explained that the push for outcome-based education began in the late 1950s after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I into Earth’s orbit, effectively “beating” the United States. Systems of higher education in the United States were held accountable for this “failure”, and as a result large amounts of money and resources were poured into higher education reform (Morke, Dornan, & Eika, 2013). The push for reform sparked the development of outcome-based education under emerging ideas and theories that suggested learned knowledge could be observed through behaviors. In essence, higher education began to shift from focusing on teacher performance toward focusing on learner performance.

The widespread movement toward outcome-based education has, for the most part, been welcomed and embraced, especially within the medical field (Cooke et al., 2010). Programs



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began to adopt clear and progressive expectations of learners and their respective abilities to demonstrate competency in their subject areas of choice. Clear expectations for learners also opened educators up to more integration of both progress and cumulative assessment as students developed. Feedback, guidance, and mentoring, as a result, have become more integral aspects of the teaching process within higher education.

However, Hodges (2010) identified some issues with outcome-based education that still remain unresolved, even after 40 years of discussion. He argued that competencies and outcomes overly target “good enough” performance rather than excellence. This is especially true when competencies and outcomes are standardized, according to Hodges (2010), because it creates a false sense of reduced cost and training time. Once outcomes are defined, it is all-too-common for educators and programs to crystallize around them, which is counterintuitive to the growth and development of not just programs, but to the respective fields within which these programs are embedded. The entire development of outcome-based education, especially since the 1980’s, according to Morke et al. (2013) is mostly focused on education as a “product”, one that must be observed through curriculum design, assessment, program evaluation, and accountability.

Perhaps the prominent critique of the teaching process within an outcome-based framework, however, is “that individual teachers and learners are more or less unrepresented in it [the discourse of outcome-based education], except as objects of regulation” (Morke et al., 2013, pp. 855). Outcome and competency-based education largely focuses on assessment and accountability of the whole system, but fails to link such assessment and accountability to teaching and learning processes. Cooke et al. (2010), Hodges (2010), and Morke et al. (2013) all suggested that this is a glaring oversight because teaching and learning is, in effect, the driving

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force of outcomes. Without teaching, there is no learning, and without learning, how can we know what was taught?

### **Teaching to the Core Competencies: Course and Curriculum Development**

After Nelson et al. (2007) outlined the process through which a task force developed the core competencies<sup>1</sup>, they acknowledged that a shift to outcome-based education “is not easily accomplished” (p. 428) and that there would need to be further discussion about how to actually emphasize and teach core competencies within training programs. As a result, several authors provided frameworks through which the core competencies could be integrated into family therapy curricula. Chronologically, Chenail (2009) was the first to do so. He suggested that family therapy program faculty will better be able to make the shift toward outcome-based education “by embracing a learning and learner-focused approach” (p. 76) where faculty members and students collectively work together to create an environment where learning objectives are “introduced, measured, and enforced” (p. 76). Chenail (2009) suggested that faculty can align their course student learning outcomes (SLOs) with specific core competencies. He described designing assignments in which students must engage in the process of being an evidence-based practitioner as a means to grow competency in the *research in marriage and family therapy* core competency domain. He also suggested using rubrics with revise and resubmit systems as a way to make the assessment process “part of the learning endeavor” (p. 83). Though he acknowledged the shift toward learning-centered education as a work in progress, Chenail (2009) challenged family therapy educators to know what competencies they are teaching, and to communicate with students to determine whether they are being learned.

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<sup>1</sup> For the detailed process through which the core competencies were developed, readers should review Nelson et al. (2007).

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Like Chenail (2009), Miller (2010) identified how difficult the paradigm shift toward core competencies was, including its relationship to assessment. As a result, he offered a framework through which the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) could be adapted as a formative exercise rather than as a summative evaluation of student competencies. He suggested that the OSCE can become a teaching method, where students complete the evaluation throughout their development. Miller (2010) explained that doing so facilitates student awareness of competency, so they may be mindful of what to demonstrate in classroom activities such as role plays or written assignments. Teachers are encouraged to create OSCEs using real cases and scenarios that highlight the various domains of competency, and offers examples. Though Miller (2010) acknowledged that using OSCEs as formative measures is potentially exhausting to students and instructors, it lays a novel foundation for a way instructors can continually implement student feedback. Miller (2010) hoped that other family therapy educators would use his article as a template when building additional OSCEs.

Gehart (2011) further expanded the ideas of Chenail (2009) and Miller (2010) by offering specific steps teachers could take in developing and carrying out a core-competency-based curriculum. She offered the following steps:

- 1) Identify Your Purpose, where programs and teachers should determine their motivations, such as maintaining accreditation, for teaching to the core competencies.
- 2) Develop a Competency Assessment Plan, where teachers create assignments and rubrics specifically tailored to the domains and subdomains of competencies.
- 3) Customize Your Assessment System, where program faculty collaborate with one-another to ensure that the competency-based assignments and assessments fit with programmatic values and goals.

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- 4) Integrate Assessment Into Curriculum and Course Assignments.
- 5) Establish Interrater Reliability.
- 6) Collect Data, where programs maintain a constant feedback loop between what faculty teach and students learn.
- 7) Refine the Process, where program faculty continually collaborate to ensure course improvement and teaching practices are constant.

Ultimately, Gehart (2011) encouraged family therapy faculty, administrators, and students to communicate openly and constantly about the core competencies so that they might become communal knowledge within programs.

Literature focused on curriculum development post-core competency movement then seemed to go through a period of dormancy until a recent push toward the integration of common factors in family therapy training (D'Aniello & Perkins, 2016; Karam, Blow, Sprenkle, & Davis, 2015). Karam et al. (2015) suggested that, because the AAMFT core competencies are not model-specific, an integrated common-factors approach is likely to serve as a catch-all. In other words, integrating common factors into family therapy curricula is likely to facilitate heightened student competency, as common factors are closely tied to many of the core competencies. To do this, Karam et al. (2015) suggested teaching common factors in addition to whichever models a program might cover. To teach common factors, Karam et al. (2015) argue, is to prime students for higher levels of competency both upon graduation and into their careers. D'Aniello and Perkins (2016) offered specific strategies for teaching common factors in family therapy programs. They suggested that programs should create a common factors course, or simply have teachers create experiential activities that focus on practicing common factors processes such as expanding the client system. They also suggested creating a common factors-based skills lab

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where an instructor runs students through role-play scenarios. Using process research, these faculty can continually assess for measured competency in a variety of domains.

Finally, Piercy et al. (2016) explored current and recent graduate students' most and least meaningful learning experiences as a way to understand what students find meaningful during their training in the time of competency-based education. This study modeled the feedback process suggested by the likes of Chenail (2009), Miller (2010), and Gehart (2011) through research. They acknowledged that just because students find certain teaching processes meaningful does not mean they are becoming competent. At the same time, they argued that meaningful learning environments are presumably more likely to better facilitate learning, which inevitably leads to competency.

### **Substantive Review**

Due to the low quantity of studies evaluating family therapy teaching, I, like Avis and Sprenkle (1990), I had to broaden the definition of what constituted a "teaching study" to include empirical investigation of attempts to teaching family therapy to a group of trainees regardless of the length of a training program or level of trainee experience. Ultimately, thirteen empirical articles related to teaching family therapy emerged from my search; two were quantitative and 11 were qualitative (see Table 1). The article reviews are presented chronologically, followed by a list of overarching substantive findings. It is a worthy note of concern that there have still been no studies completed that directly assess how teaching methods in family therapy courses and programs ultimately affect therapist-in-trainings' client outcomes, despite pleas from Avis and Sprenkle (1990) and earlier from Kniskern and Gurman (1979) for future researchers to do so. However, it is apparent that the core competencies movement directly influenced empirical studies focused on teaching family therapy. Scholars seemed to focus mostly upon teaching

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multicultural competence in a variety of forms, as well as person-of-the-therapist competency. Though work still must be done, it is encouraging to see that, at the very least, therapists-in-training are finding emerging methods of teaching within these competency domains useful in their work.

The first qualitative research study was published by Keiley et al. (2002). They documented a convenience sample of one teacher and 8 students' experiences using cultural genograms in a Gender and Multicultural Issues in MFT course. Experiences were shared through a voluntary, six-question survey after the course was finished and through an additional follow-up question one year later. After conducting a thematic analysis, the researchers found that the cultural genogram assignment led to realizations among students that "gender and culture permeate our emotional memories whether we [students] are aware of it or not." (p. 172). They also found that students agreed that exploring their cultural and ethnic identities "served them well" (p. 175) in their development as MFTs. The cultural genogram assignment, according to the authors, impacted students' clinical work almost immediately, where they were better able to ask culture-related questions and become more empathic toward clients struggles with having cultural norms "pathologized" if seen as different from the societal norm. The cultural genogram assignment also highlighted self-of-the-therapist issues that each student still needed to attend to. Based on their findings, Keiley et al. (2002) recommended the use of cultural genograms in diversity-based courses as a way for students to gain first-hand experience with exploring their varied experiences of gender, culture, and ethnicity in a way that could immediately be applicable to clinical work.

The next article I reviewed was published by Piercy, McWey, Tice, James, Morris, And Arthur (2005). The purpose of the article was to explore doctoral family therapy students'

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perceptions of research and their beliefs about what would strengthen the research culture in their training programs. The researchers gathered “unconventional data” (p. 363) such as metaphors, poetry, free associations, and critical experiences from telephone interviews with 14 doctoral students, aged 24-38, from ten COAMFTE-accredited programs. After conducting a thematic analysis, Piercy et al. (2005) found that relationship building and collaboration were integral components of the teaching/learning process, and that students enjoyed when professors were enthusiastic as they guided students through learning how to conduct research. Students also indicated positive learning experiences when the instructor was patient with their development and facilitated a supportive learning environment. From these findings, Piercy et al. (2005) suggested that family therapy educators should “take a more central role in the family therapy research training of their students” (p. 375), “connect research and statistical knowledge with hands-on experience” (p. 775), and “help students find connections between research topics and their personal values” (p. 376) when teaching family therapy research courses.

Another study was conducted by Mittal and Wieling (2006). The purpose of their publication was to offer preliminary research data to help family therapy educators understand and respond to the needs of a growing body of international family therapy students. Following the research question, “what are international students’ experiences in MFT doctoral programs in the US?” (p. 371), Mittal and Wieling (2006) conducted in-depth telephone (9), face-to-face (3), and email (1) interviews with a nonrandom, purposive sample of 13 doctoral students from a non-disclosed array of accredited doctoral programs. All methods of interview used the same interview protocol, though the face-to-face and telephone interviews allowed for a semi-structured format. After coding the interviews and conducting a thematic analysis, the researchers found that international students described good relationships with faculty, familial

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and school support, financial help, office space, and positive relationships with colleagues and international community as important in mitigating symptoms of academic stress. Mittal and Wieling (2006) recommended that when working with international students, family therapy instructors should be mindful of the individuality of each international student, have conversations with each international student regularly to plan course of study, and to connect international students with other people who can support them in their training, including classroom experiences. They also encouraged instructors to facilitate collaborative discussions with international students about their expectations and long-term goals “instead of training them to act in ways that fit the dominant North American culture.” (p. 382), to check in with international students regularly about how classes are going, and to adopt a flexible and multicultural stance when teaching course content.

In 2006, Paris, Linville, and Rosen explored the reciprocal process of growth during clinical training as it related to personal life experiences and professional/clinical experiences during training. Specifically, the researchers were interested in the way clinical and academic experiences, including inside the classroom, affect students’ personal growth and vice versa. Paris, et al. (2006) created a website where a total of 19 MFT students representing ten COAMFTE-accredited programs provided demographic information and engaged in a discussion forum or chat room with researchers, who asked open ended questions about the intersection of personal and professional growth. The discussions/responses were analyzed and placed into several categories and subcategories. Specifically related to teaching and learning, the researchers recommended that instructors should facilitate classroom and supervision activities and discussions that focus on therapists’ experiences of growth. Doing so, according to their findings, is likely to enhance student therapists’ capacities to relate more deeply to course



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content, provide for continual self-awareness exercises during training, and assist with self-evaluation. Including these discussions in the classroom, according to Paris et al. (2006), can also heighten students' sense of how personal experiences may become liabilities in their clinical work, as well as how their personal experiences can positively contribute to their clinical work.

McGeorge, Carlson, Erickson, & Guttormson (2006) conducted a two-way evaluation of a feminist-informed couple and family therapy training model to explore the way in which such a model fits within COAMFTE's accreditation standards. It was the first empirical article to mention accreditation standards and core competencies. The feminist-informed couple and family therapy training model presented by the researchers meant that issues of social justice were central to the content, discussions, and assignments of every course, where the voices of marginalized students were given an elevated platform in comparison to students from dominant groups. Students were introduced to major historical, theoretical, and contemporary issues of social justice in the field and to critical perspectives related to issues of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc. The first evaluation was a computerized discussion with a cohort of seven students who completed the training over an eighteen-month period. For the second evaluation, two cohorts of four students each (eight total) completed an electronic survey that included several open-ended and Likert scale questions. The researchers coded and conducted a thematic analysis for both evaluations. Based on their data, McGeorge et al. (2006) found that implementing a feminist-informed training model to couple and family therapy training presents many challenges, namely that members of dominant groups tend to become resistant to discussions of oppression. Additionally, they concluded that a feminist-informed model provided students with a template through which they could more effectively address client cultural contexts and help clients change.

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The first of two quantitative studies was published by Murphy, Park, and Linsdale in 2006. The researchers explored differences in multicultural counseling competencies such as awareness, knowledge, and skills, after students completed a diversity course. Twelve participants consisting of eight second-year master's students, three first-year master's students, and one doctoral student completed the Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge-and Skills Survey (MAKSS) at the beginning and end of the 16-week course. Discussion was a major point of emphasis within the classroom; students were given opportunities to relate their personal experiences to the assigned readings. In addition, students completed cultural genograms and journal reflections, facilitated classroom discussions, wrote a clinical diversity paper, and completed a final examination. The researchers performed a paired t-test to compare means between pre- and post-test scores on the MAKSS. Murphy et al. (2006) found that there were statistically significant differences between pre- and post-test means of each subscale (awareness, knowledge, skills). Based on their results, the researchers concluded that "a single course can be effective in increasing students' competencies immediately after the course was completed." (p. 309).

In 2011, Nelson and Graves wanted to understand what postgraduate MFT supervisors believed to be the most important skills for trainees to develop prior to entering postgraduate training, as well as the degree to which the same supervisors believed trainees could demonstrate the core competencies. They wanted to know if, in fact, students were effectively learning from the way core competencies were taught. To answer their research questions, Nelson and Graves (2011) conducted a self-designed, one-time, 128-item survey that was administered online and/or through traditional mail. The survey, which consisted of 5-point Likert scale questions, was sent to 2,166 AAMFT-approved supervisors and the Canadian equivalent, and the original response

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rate was 8.9%. After paring down surveys that had errors or were not completed, the final sample size consisted of 136 supervisors. Results showed that, overall, graduates of COAMFTE-accredited programs were rated higher than students from non-accredited programs on their respective abilities to demonstrate core competencies. However, the approved supervisors polled in the study rated both groups of students as grossly underperforming compared to their (supervisors') standards of competence, especially as it related to certain assessment skills, understanding of research, and ability to contribute to the development of new knowledge. Results also showed that, according to supervisors, fewer than ten percent of the core competencies are "mastered" by trainees upon graduating from their respective programs. Nelson and Graves (2011) argued, however, that it could also be that supervisors are not up to date with competencies or the training needs of graduating therapists. Either way, the researchers recommended that training programs need to set higher standards of learning related to the core competencies, especially given how heavily emphasized they are by the accrediting body.

Another empirical article focused on teaching family therapy emerged in 2015. Hernandez-Wolfe and colleagues (2015) explored how the development and implementation of a transnational immersion training influenced student competency in cultural equity, reflexivity, and collaborative responsiveness. The immersion training had specific objectives for the instructors and students, which included facilitating a collaborative learning environment and introducing methods for practicing collaborative dialogue. This was accomplished through experiential mindfulness exercises, ritual performances, video clip viewings and discussions, storytelling, musical performances, and discussions of political issues in Latin America. Three Colombian faculty, six Afro-South American women, and 11 master's level family therapy students from the United States completed the immersion experience. During and following the

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immersion experience, the researchers conducted a total of eight debriefing meetings. Several themes emerged from those meetings, most notably that the immersion experience seemed to facilitate heightened conceptual, perceptual, and executive competencies as it related to reflexivity, an AAMFT core competency domain. Specifically, students demonstrated increased self-awareness through reflexively writing about their own social location, as well as increased perceptual skills related to exploring internalized dialogues that “challenged dominant cultural explanations in their own discourse.” (p. 150). As it related to executive competencies, students displayed an ability to repair instances of microaggressions or misunderstandings by reading and using feedback from each other. According to the students, their ability to do this was the direct result of participating in the immersion experience. As a result, the authors recommended implementing some of the activities/workshop ideas from their immersion experience into family therapy training to boost students’ multicultural competence.

Niño, Kissil, and Apolinar Claudio (2015) explored the experiences and perceived professional gains of students following a person-of-the-therapist training (POTT) course. POTT is a structured program focused on training person-of-the-therapist processes and competencies. The goal of POTT, as explained by Niño et al. (2015) is:

“Rather than emphasizing the *resolution* of the clinician’s personal struggles *as a condition* for conducting effective therapy, POTT encourages therapists to make use of who they are in the moment of the therapeutic encounter, while they continue working on resolving their personal issues, or grappling with the issues that may have no resolution.” (p. 3).

POTT was implemented as a two-hour, weekly experiential class over a span of nine months in a master’s program. The authors outlined several stages to the POTT model, including: 1) reading articles about person-of-the-therapist; 2) identifying and understanding students’ “signature themes”; 3) exploring how signature themes can be used to facilitate better

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therapy; 4) live supervising a simulated case performed by actors; 5) writing a paper about the live supervision experience; 6) keeping a weekly journal to reflect on personal and professional process throughout the course. Students then completed a final reflection paper that summarized their perceived gains over the course of the semester. The final papers served as data for the study, and were qualitatively analyzed by the researchers. Niño et al. (2015) conducted a content analysis to derive themes from the final reflection papers of 54 first-year students in a COAMFTE-accredited family therapy program over a span of 2 years. They found that after completing the POTT training, students overwhelmingly reported increased awareness of person-of-the-therapist issues such as strengths, growth areas, limitations, and reactivity when working with clients. Students also reported that they were better able to experience, acknowledge, and track their own emotions after the POTT training. In addition, students felt as if their clinical work significantly improved due to an increased willingness to “try new things” in session, a heightened sense of being able to take control of sessions, and the ability to differentiate professional boundaries. Finally, students reported that they felt a greater sense of empathy toward themselves. This opened them up to empathizing more deeply with client struggles in addition to having an increased ability to observe the whole therapeutic process. Based on their findings, Niño et al. (2015) suggested that other family therapy programs should implement POTT as a structured, operational way to help students achieve core competencies related to person-of-the-therapist issues.

Shortly after Niño et al.’s (2015) exploration of students’ personal and professional gains following POTT training, Niño, Kissil, and Cooke (2016) explored the way in which POTT influenced students’ abilities to form effective, beneficial therapeutic relationships with their clients. The researchers analyzed simulated lab papers and final reflection papers from 66

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students who enrolled in the POTT class over a span of three years. The researchers developed a code book and conducted a directed content analysis. Niño et al. (2016) found that students reported increased empathy toward their clients and heightened abilities to manage their own countertransference in session, to balance multiple alliances simultaneously, and to bond with their clients. Students also reported that POTT helped them more consciously develop positive regard for their clients, and that they were more in-tune and able to facilitate what they perceived as “genuine connection” (p. 610) over the course of therapy. Like Niño et al. (2015), Niño et al. (2016) suggested that including a POTT-type course in graduate family therapy programs could be a beneficial way to teach core competencies related to building beneficial therapeutic relationships.

When teaching multicultural competency and diversity, family therapy training programs rarely, if ever, teach about working with obese/overweight clients, body shaming, or weight bias. With this in mind, Cravens, Pratt, Palmer, and Amar (2016) conducted weight bias training with students from four accredited MFT programs. The training was followed by an exploration of MFT students’ reactions to the training, their previous experience with the topic, and potential ideas for inclusion as part of their own programs. The training included five experiential activities related to body privilege, weight bias, and clinical implications. Thirty-five students, five doctoral and 30 master’s students across four COAMFTE-accredited programs attended the training. The researchers conducted one- to two-hour focus groups after the training to gather information about the need for, strengths, of, and areas for improvement for the training program. After coding the focus group data, Cravens et al. (2016) conducted a thematic analysis. The researchers found that students overwhelmingly thought that weight bias training should be integrated into the courses they take prior to seeing clients. Students appreciated the experiential

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activities as “eye-opening” (p. 215). They especially seemed to appreciate activities four and two, which were a discussion focused on the ways language and culture influence therapist weight bias and an examination of the way overweight body size is depicted in the media, respectively. Overall, students seemed to highly appreciate the training, even amidst self-of-the-therapist challenges, due in large part to a lack of prior experience with the topic. They cited an increased sense of competency when working with overweight clients thanks to heightened sensitivity to the topic after completing the training. Cravens et al.’s (2016) findings supported their recommendation that all family therapy programs should include some form of weight bias training early on in training to expand student competencies related to working with diverse populations.

Yet another exploratory study was conducted in 2016 by Quek, Eppler, and Morgan. The purpose of their study was to explore cis-female-identified students’ experiences in a ten-week course focused on working with gender in family therapy. The course included lectures, discussions, and case studies that “addressed the intersectionality and interplay of gendered development, performance, and power in families.” (p. 446-447). Throughout the course, students were encouraged to think critically, use their own voices, and develop their own “gender consciousness” (p. 447). The researchers analyzed four-years-worth of end-of-class journal reflections from 88 cis-women who represented a relatively diverse range of ethnic backgrounds. Quek et al. (2016) coded the journals and conducted a thematic analysis. They found that the gender course created an opportunity for students to express their emotions related to being female, which overwhelmingly presented as guilt, anxiety, and taking offense to society’s dominant gender discourse. Students also appreciated the chance to re-examine gender stereotypes, role-conflicts, and uncovered hurts, as well as the chance to find strategies for

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empowerment in the context of holding a marginalized gender identity. In addition, students reported that they directly applied the course materials clinically and personally. They cited being able to cultivate advanced empathy skills as well as the ability to speak with clients about gender issues with new degrees of intentionality, which the participants felt benefited their work significantly. Based on their findings, in the context of defined core competencies that include standards for multicultural clinical competency, Quek et al. (2016) suggested that other MFT programs should operationalize gender perspectives within MFT curricula in the way that they did to increase these competencies.

The final study I reviewed was conducted by Piercy and colleagues in 2016. Their study explored current and recent graduate (within 5 years) students' most and least meaningful learning experiences in their master's and/or doctoral programs. The researchers used critical incident technique to conduct a thematic analysis of qualitative survey data. A purposive sample of 43 current students, 25 masters and 18 doctoral, and 25 recent graduates, 20 masters and five doctoral, representing 21 COAMFTE-accredited training programs completed the four-question, online survey. The data were coded in dyads and then refined as a group, and the research team generated themes. Though they acknowledged that just because students find certain teaching processes meaningful does not mean they are becoming competent, they argued that meaningful learning environments are presumably more likely to better facilitate learning, which inevitably leads to competency. Based on their findings, Piercy et al. (2016) suggested that faculty who teach family therapy should do, among others, the following in their classrooms: connect theory to practice, develop activities that allow students to personally connect to course content, limit student presentations, help students become less reactive to difficult or nonresponsive clients, and regularly assess for student feedback.



### **Conclusions Based on Substantive Findings**

Based on this substantive review of empirical research related to teaching family therapy, I offer the following conclusions:

- It seems that whether current teaching methods are deemed effective is contingent upon student report rather than on quantitative, measurable data.
- Several teaching methods that facilitate heightened multicultural competence among students have emerged. It seems that family therapy educators would do well include a variety of assignments, such as cultural genograms, that directly relate to class discussions and activities that focus on gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and more. Students demonstrate increased multicultural competency through immersion, both in the classroom and in outside activities.
- Students seem to benefit from structured training and/or activities that push them to personally relate to materials. Teachers can facilitate this type of training by assigning personal reflection journals, clinical case studies, and/or final reflection papers that synthesize course content with personal experiences.
- Students also seem to benefit from class discussions where students and instructors are encouraged to share their experiences with one another.
- Empirical emphasis has been placed on how to teach multicultural and person-of-the-therapist competencies. Based on student reports, it seems that the practices outlined above are perceived as beneficial and should be used by teachers.
- Very few of these or other core competencies are mastered upon graduation according to supervisors.

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- To date, there is no empirical literature that demonstrates ways to facilitate student competencies in areas other than multicultural or person-of-the-therapist competencies. Though these two areas are certainly important, future researchers should look to expand outside of these two areas.

### **Methodological Review**

Avis and Sprenkle (1990) suggested that methodology in family therapy training research required “urgent attention”, so they offered six core recommendations based on their methodological review. They called for more controlled research, replication of existing studies to confirm or disconfirm findings, developing more valid and reliable instruments to measure change in skill, paying attention to training's impact on client outcomes, using adequate sample sizes, and answering more specific research questions. It was evident at the time, albeit over two decades ago, that research related to family therapy education needed serious methodological attention if it was to evolve in a meaningful way.

Unfortunately, controlled research and/or replication of existing studies to confirm or disconfirm findings continues to be virtually non-existent. None of the 13 articles I reviewed were designed as replications of existing research, nor did they develop any sort of reliable instrumentation to measure change in skill/competency. In fact, only the use of adequate sample sizes and more specific research questions seem to be evident in the empirical literature written since Avis and Sprenkle (1990), which are described below. To evaluate and critique the respective methodologies of the articles, I used the following criteria/guiding questions:

- Justification for research design: is the methodological approach justified by the author? Is the purpose of conducting the research adequately described and justified? Are the methods appropriate for answering the research question/s?

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- Sampling and data collection: what kind of sampling strategy is used, and is it appropriate and justified? Are the collection procedures clearly described? Are the researchers' roles clearly described?
- Data Analysis: are the procedures explicitly stated and appropriate?
- Trustworthiness: were necessary steps taken to ensure trustworthiness and rigor? Are findings drawn from data rather than researchers' preconceptions?
- Transferability: are the findings applicable to other contexts? Is the study replicable? Do results extend beyond the bounds of the project? Can readers make connections between study results and their own experiences?

### **Justification for Research Design**

The authors of every article provided some degree of rationale for why they chose to conduct their research. Unsurprisingly, the shift to core competencies was a prevailing factor; eight of the 13 studies (72%) explicitly mentioned the AAMFT core competencies to justify researching their particular aspect of the teaching process. It seems that awareness of the core competencies encouraged researchers to design and evaluate means of facilitating them, especially since they are so heavily emphasized as part of the COAMFTE's accreditation standards. Though two of the remaining five studies mentioned student multicultural competency as a frame for their research questions (Cravens et al., 2016; Hernandez-Wolfe et al., 2015), they did not explicitly mention the AAMFT core competencies. Because their respective studies were conducted prior to the shift toward competencies, Keiley et al. (2002) and Piercy et al. (2005) did not mention them as justification for their research; however, both articles cited COAMFTE accreditation standards for culture and research training, respectively.

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Where all of the reviewed studies provided adequate justification for their research, five (28%) did not provide any form of justification for their chosen methodology. Rather, the researchers of these studies jumped straight into discussing design, sampling, procedures, and results. However, articles like Piercy et al. (2005), Mittal and Wieling (2006), Piercy et al. (2016), and Quek et al., (2016) provided elaborate, explicit justifications for their chosen methods and how those methods would produce answers to their respective research questions. These studies represented 31% of the articles I reviewed. The remaining 59% provided reasonable justifications for their methods that fit the purpose of their study, though these justification sections were not as elaborate as the four aforementioned studies.

### **Sampling and Data Collection**

The most popular sampling strategy used was convenience sampling, which was evident in seven of the 13 articles. The remaining six articles relied upon purposive sampling methods. There were no random samples, which demonstrates a reliance upon samples that were easily accessible or theoretically determined. All of the articles clearly described their respective sampling strategies, including descriptions of researcher roles, if applicable. Sample sizes within the articles varied considerably. The qualitative studies ranged from nine participants (Keiley et al. 2002) to 86 participants (Quek et al, 2016), with an average of 36 participants per study. The quantitative studies had 12 participants (Murphy et al. 2006) and 135 participants (Nelson & Graves, 2011), respectively. In several studies, the participants only represented one training program (Keiley et al., 2002; McGeorge et al. 2006; Murphy et al., 2006; Niño et al., 2015; Niño et al., 2016; Quek et al., 2016), whereas others ranged from representing four programs (Cravens et al., 2016) to 21 programs (Piercy et al., 2016). Four studies included participants from masters and doctoral programs (Cravens et al., 2016; Keiley et al., 2002; Murphy et al., 2006;

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Piercy et al., 2016) while the rest either focused on teaching only master's students (Hernandez-Wolfe et al., 2015; McGeorge et al., 2006; Niño et al., 2015; Niño et al., 2016; Paris et al., 2006; Quek et al., 2016) or only doctoral students (Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Piercy et al., 2005).

One issue that was prevalent in nearly every study was a lack of diversity within samples. In most cases, there were significantly more women than men who participated, and only two studies (Piercy et al., 2016; Quek et al., 2016) mentioned non-binary gender participation or lack thereof. In terms of racial diversity, the majority of studies consisted of a predominantly white sample, unless the study focused specifically on the experiences of international students (Mittal & Wieling, 2006) or people of color (Hernandez-Wolfe et al., 2015). In fact, seven of the 13 studies explicitly cited a lack of racial/ethnic or gender diversity as a limitation to their findings. Age, however, was one area in which samples were considerably diverse, with most studies citing an age range of nearly 30 years. In addition, the researchers in all of the studies I reviewed mention their role/s in the research process. The small sample sizes and lack of diversity among samples is likely a consequence of the convenience and purposive sampling evident in all of the articles reviewed here. Studies with higher levels of diversity and larger samples, such as in Piercy et al., 2016, seem to make an effort to illicit participation from multiple programs, in addition to consciously seeking out diverse samples.

### **Data Analysis**

The predominant research method used in studying how to teach family therapy was thematic analysis. Ten of the 11 reviewed qualitative studies used thematic analysis as the means of disseminating data. All ten of the studies that used thematic analysis mentioned transcription in some form, followed by various coding processes and eventual theme generation. These thematic analyses were conducted on transcripts of telephone questionnaires (Piercy et al.,

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2005; Mittal & Wieling, 2006), computerized discussions (McGeorge et al., 2006), survey questionnaires (Keiley et al., 2002; McGeorge et al., 2006; Piercy et al., 2016), focus groups (Cravens et al., 2016; Hernandez-Wolfe et al., 2015), archived course assignments (Niño et al., 2015; Niño et al., 2016; Quek et al., 2016), or in-person interviews (Mittal and Wieling, 2006). Paris et al. (2006) was the only study that did not use thematic analysis; instead, the researchers opted for a grounded theory approach to category generation. Of the 11 qualitative studies, five used data from more than just one semester or point in time, which ranged from one year (Hernandez-Wolfe et al., 2015) to four years (Quek et al., 2016).

The two quantitative studies used very simple methods of quantitative analysis. Murphy et al. (2006) used paired t-tests to determine significant mean differences before and after a diversity course, and Nelson and Graves (2011) used descriptive statistics, including frequencies to disseminate data. It appears that a lack of reliable and valid instrumentation might be one reason for the lack of more rigorous methods of quantitative research. Murphy et al. (2006) used the Multicultural Awareness, Knowledge, and Skills Scale (MAKSS), but acknowledged that, at the time, the MAKSS was still a new instrument that had not been fully tested for reliability or validity. Nelson and Graves (2011) had to create their own Likert-scale questionnaire, which they adapted from the core competencies. Even though they piloted the instrument with colleagues, the researchers acknowledged that it “may still have been confusing” (p. 449) when sent out to their participants.

### **Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability**

Effort to maintain trustworthiness and rigor was clearly articulated in all eleven qualitative articles. Several articles explicitly cited methods of maintaining trustworthiness such as consensus (5), triangulation (4), member checking (4), audit trails (4), and/or some form of

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researcher reflexivity (4). Five of the 11 qualitative articles used a combination of at least four methods (Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Paris et al., 2006; Niño et al., 2015; Cravens et al., 2016; Piercy et al., 2016), three articles used a combination of at least two methods (Niño et al., 2016; Piercy et al., 2005; Quek et al., 2016), Keiley et al., 2002 used one method, and two studies did not explicitly discuss trustworthiness (Hernandez-Wolfe et al., 2015; McGeorge et al., 2006). Studies like Piercy et al. (2005) and Quek et al. (2016) made a conscious effort to use direct quotations to present and contextualize their data, and Paris et al. (2006) used thick description to understand participant responses in context.

Reliability and validity issues were discussed within both of the quantitative articles I reviewed. Murphy et al. (2006) used Cronbach's alpha to determine internal consistency of the three dimensions of the MAKSS prior to performing their t-test. Nelson and Graves (2011) ran a preliminary analysis on the instrument they created for their study. They stated, "Using statistical analysis, no bias was detected between supervisors associated with academic training and those who were not" (p. 433), but the researchers did not state the specific analysis they used. In addition, they piloted their instrument before distributing it to their sample. The instrument demonstrated high internal reliability, but the researchers acknowledged that it would be difficult to determine its external validity.

### **Transferability**

The current body of empirical research related to teaching family therapy primarily includes studies that are not longitudinal, nor do they have comparison or control groups. This means that what's deemed to be "effective" based on student report is reliant on sometimes as little as one semester's-worth of data. Several qualitative and quantitative studies suffered from transferability problems, mostly due to small and/or homogenous convenience samples that only

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represented one training program (Keiley et al., 2002; McGeorge et al., 2006; Murphy et al., 2006; Niño et al., 2015; Niño et al., 2016; Quek et al., 2016) or point in time (e.g. one semester, one training, etc.) (Cravens et al., 2016; Hernandez-Wolfe et al., 2015). Keiley et al.'s (2002) study was the most problematic as it related to transferability, as it only represented one program, one semester, and the sample was entirely made up of women. Murphy et al.'s (2006) study struggled with similar issues, where it represented one class over one semester at one program with a convenience sample comprised of only white women. Many of these studies are replicable, and such replications would benefit from being conducted over multiple semesters with students that represent several training programs. Control groups would also add to the generalizability of future studies that seek to replicate these findings.

There were some articles that demonstrated higher affinities for transferability, however. For example, Piercy et al., 2016 had a highly diverse, purposive sample that represented 21 masters- and doctoral-level programs. Paris et al.'s (2006) sample was racially/ethnically diverse and represented ten training programs, and Piercy et al.'s (2005) sample represented high racial and gender diversity as well as ten doctoral training programs. The two articles by Niño and colleagues (2015; 2016), though only representative of one program, used data from large samples of multiple, diverse cohorts of students that spanned three years. Though Cravens et al. (2016) only held one training on weight bias, students from four different programs attended, though it is unclear the extent to which their participants were diverse. Though a large sample participated in Nelson and Graves' (2011) study, it is difficult to transfer the findings given unclear, non-operationalized instrumentation.



## **Implications and Recommendations**

### **Implications for Teachers and Researchers of Family Therapy Education**

Examining the empirical body of family therapy teaching research through this type of review helps family therapy researchers identify what factors should be included when conducting research focused on the teaching process. It is also important for family therapy educators who want to determine how to teach content and/or facilitate student learning competencies during training in ways that have tentative empirical backing. One implication is the core competencies movement, which serves as a common, underlying process that contextualizes teaching practice and provides reasonable justification for conducting research on the teaching process. After all, training programs are constantly tasked with having to demonstrate that competency is being attained by graduating students. However, some caution should be exercised if a teacher is going to use the current body of research focused on teaching family therapy to inform their practice. This is because the vast majority of data have been pulled from small samples that represent one program or course, and as such may not translate well to different contexts, environments, or teaching styles.

To this point, teaching multicultural and person-of-the-therapist competencies has been focused on the most. To facilitate students' learning of multicultural core competencies, current research suggests that teachers may do well to include assignments and activities such as cultural genograms, immersion workshops, personal reflection journals, challenging discussions, critical thinking questions, clinical diversity papers, and clinical case studies. Though these types of activities are generally located only within diversity courses (Murphy et al., 2006), they do not have to be; rather, these types of activities, if integrated within the curriculum, may facilitate multicultural competency throughout a student's development in addition to other skills such as

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empathy, self-disclosure, etc. Research seems to support this same idea for teaching person-of-the-therapist competencies. Teachers may want to consider implementing some form of person-of-the-therapist training like the POTT model described by Niño et al. (2015; 2016), as students report that doing so heightens their sense of personal and professional gains as well as a stronger ability to facilitate meaningful therapeutic relationships. This may be especially true if students are given the chance to reflect on the mutual influence of their personal and professional lives during training.

Ultimately, a common theme seems to be that students thrive when provided with the opportunity to personally connect to course content and the respective competencies attached to it. This was abundantly clear as it related to learning how to do research at the doctoral level, as evidenced by Piercy et al. (2005), but was also the case within the other articles I reviewed. Piercy and colleagues' (2016) research seemed to further confirm this notion; students most meaningful learning experiences in the time of competencies-based MFT education stemmed from positive relationships with their supervisors and teachers, their clients, and themselves. When students lack personal connection with the teacher, are unable to connect theory to practice, are not exposed to diverse perspectives, or perceive a lack of value, it seems that our teaching methods fall short.

### **Research Recommendations**

*Replication is still necessary.* Avis and Sprenkle (1990) explicitly called for replication of the studies they reviewed. Unfortunately, based on my review, I must make the same plea. Research on various methods of teaching is currently a “one and done” process, which makes it difficult to know whether such methods are effective over time in various contexts. The articles reviewed here could easily be replicated in other training programs or across programs over time,

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and I highly recommend that researchers consider this to increase the transferability of such teaching methods. Higher transferability will likely result in more widespread adoption of teaching methods that are proven to facilitate student competencies effectively.

***Seek more representative samples.*** Researchers from the past two decades have relied far too heavily on convenience sampling, which severely limits findings. Future researchers would do well to follow in the footsteps of researchers like Piercy et al. (2005; 2016), and Cravens et al., (2016), whose samples, though purposeful, were representative of multiple training programs. The majority of the studies also severely lacked diversity of gender, racial/ethnic, and sexual orientation. More representative samples will allow future researchers to discover teaching methods that can be tailored to a diverse range of students across multiple training programs.

***Include controls.*** Current research relies on data from samples that were all in the experimental group with no control group present. When possible, within ethical guidelines, future researchers should look for differences in competencies between groups who receive one type of teaching method versus a control group that receives some different form of instruction. Doing so would better illuminate the context in which competencies are better facilitated/taught. Control groups might also demonstrate how certain competencies are learned versus others, and could also control for extraneous variables like instructor style, experience, and course designs.

***Do more quantitative research.*** Student reports and perceptions are important, for sure, but relying on such data does not necessarily mean that heightened competency is actually achieved. As Nelson and Graves' (2011) data suggests, students do not demonstrate competency mastery as well as their reports might suggest. It seems that we are still in need of reliable and valid measures of family therapy competencies, and that developing such instrumentation could

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be used to provide educators with hard data that demonstrates whether certain teaching methods are more statistically, or even clinically, significant. Gathering quantitative data may also be a more effective way for a program to demonstrate heightened student competences to the COAMFTE.

*Develop research questions related specifically to teaching.* It is currently very difficult to find empirical literature that specifically addresses teaching methods. Because teaching within the classroom setting is still such a prevailing form of training, researchers ought to explore this context specifically. In addition, my hope would be that more researchers attend to the subject and value the importance of providing meaningful teaching that actually reaches students.

### **Why Isn't More Family Therapy Education Research Being Done?**

Similar to the reviews before it, there is an overarching negativity in this review about the state of empirical investigation of teaching family therapy. While it is easy to look at the existing body of literature related to teaching family therapy or to read this review and feel discouraged or even alarmed at the paucity of research, there are a few reasons why this might be the case that extend beyond simply stating “we don't care enough” or “nobody wants to do it”. If so many have stressed the importance of researching family therapy training, why has it not happened? Perhaps the most salient reason is that the topic area is difficult to receive funding for. Illes (2013) explained that research funding is increasingly dependent upon sponsors' needs than in previous decades. Funding has also become more competitive; as a result, researchers are forced to shape studies, including topics, that are more desirable to sponsors.

Specifically related to family therapy research, Stith (2014) explained:

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“As higher education budgets become tighter, the only researchers that are going to thrive are those who have fundable lines of research and those who have the skills and contacts to be able to achieve funding for their work.”

Perhaps the reason family therapy scholars have stepped away from attending to family therapy education is not because they do not care, but because they are unable to secure funding for such research. But why is it so difficult to secure funding for this type of research? After all, every family therapist had to be *taught* how to practice in graduate school before being let loose into society. Perhaps more research should be conducted to show that teaching is fundable. This may be why every scholar who has evaluated family therapy training research has called for studies focused on the impact of training on client outcomes. We spend considerable time focusing on empirically-validated treatment (Dattilio, Piercy, & Davis, 2013), in part because treatments have implications for the clients we serve. What if the studied methods that are reviewed in this manuscript influence client outcomes? What if they do not? Either way, the assumption is that teaching and training affect client outcomes, or else we would not require prospective therapists to attend graduate school. Stith (2014) suggested that research in family therapy should “keep family therapy on the map of modern health care”. With that said, I will end with a question: How can family therapy stay on the map of modern health care without teaching it in ways that allow it to be?

### **Conclusion**

In this substantive and methodological review and critique, I a) highlighted the importance of the teaching process as an integral part of training, b) discussed family therapy training’s paradigm shift to outcome-based education through the AAMFT core competencies, c) provided substantive conclusions and recommendations, d) critiqued the various methodologies researchers have used to explore various teaching methods and outcomes, and e) provided

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implications and recommendations for future research. Family therapists begin their development by sitting in classrooms with multiple instructors over multiple courses spanning an entire curriculum. Central to this process is the way instructors teach the varied content and processes of family therapy simultaneous to the way students learn them. It seems that this area of research is still far behind how researchers are examining other topics in the field. I hope this substantive and methodological review and critique may be useful in encouraging more researchers to further explore the teaching process in family therapy training.

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Table 1.1

Table 1.1 Substance & Methodology		Methodology								
References	Substance		Justification for Study	Justification for Method	Design	Sampling	Analysis	Trustworthiness	Generalizability	
	Teaching Process	Findings								Recommendations
Qualitative Studies										
Keiley et al. (2002)	Cultural Genograms (CG)	CGs explore cultural and ethnic identities, help students ask culture-related questions in Tx, greater empathy for cultural factors, highlighted person-of-the-therapist cultural growth areas	Use CGs in diversity courses to facilitate first-hand experience of gender, culture, and ethnicity that influences clinical work.	Accreditation standards demand multicultural competency	N/A	Qualitative: self-developed questionnaire	Convenience sample of 7 masters and 1 doctoral student, and 1 instructor representing 1 program, all female, high age diversity, low racial/ethnic diversity	Thematic analysis	Member checking	1 program represented (-), small sample (-), one semester (-), lack of diversity
Piercy et al. (2005)	Research	Students appreciate patience, enthusiasm, and support from instructors. Relationship building and collaboration are highly important.	Instructors should take a central role in research training, connect statistical knowledge with hands-on experience, and connect research to student values.	Accreditation standards demand courses focused on research.	Explicitly stated: to bring findings to life and capture participant experiences through creative language.	Qualitative: telephone interviews using a self-developed, 7-item interview protocol	Purposive sample of 14 doctoral students representing 10 COAMFTE-accredited programs, high racial and gender diversity	Thematic analysis	Member checking, consensus	10 programs represented (+), moderate sample (-)
Mittal & Wiegling (2006)	Teaching to International Students	Positive relationships with faculty, colleagues, and the international community reduce stress among international students.	Be mindful of students' individuality, converse regularly, connect students to support systems, facilitate collaborative discussions about expectations and goals, check-in regularly, and embody multiculturalism in the classroom	Increasing international doctoral MFT student population calls for an assessment of needs.	Explicitly stated: postmodern- and feminist-guided, transcendental phenomenology to gain rich understanding of participant experiences.	Qualitative: telephone, face-to-face, and email survey	Nonrandom, purposive sample of 13 doctoral students, high racial/ethnic diversity	Thematic analysis	Member checking, audit trails, triangulation, reflexive journaling	7 countries represented (+), small sample (-)

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Table 1 Continued										
McGeorge et al. (2006)	Feminist-informed training: integration of social justice	Challenging to implement, because students of dominant groups become resistant.	Feminist-informed training provides students with a framework for addressing intersecting client cultural contexts	Critics of CFT argue that it does not adequately address issues of diversity, power, or social justice. AAMFT Core Competencies	N/A	Anonymous computerized discussion forum and online open- and closed-ended survey	Convenience sample of 15 master's students representing 3 cohorts, 1 program, low age and racial diversity, adequate gender diversity	Thematic analysis	N/A	1 program represented (-), moderate sample (-), lack of diversity (-)
Paris et al. (2006)	Mutual influence of academic and personal experiences	Student capacity for self-awareness, self-evaluation, ability to relate to course content, and reflexivity are enhanced by activities and discussions focused on student experiences of growth	Instructors should facilitate classroom and supervision activities focused on student experiences of growth.	Few studies examine the intersection of students' personal and professional lives	Explicitly stated: constructivist perspective/dialogue approach to discover participant meaning through language. Discovery-oriented.	Electronic discussion groups	Purposeful sample of 19 master's students representing 10 programs, low gender diversity, high age diversity, high range of clinical experience, low racial diversity	Grounded theory category generation	Consensus, audit trails, triangulation, cross-coding, thick description	10 programs represented (+), moderately-large sample size (+), high diversity (+)
Hernandez-Wolfe et al. (2015)	Transnational immersion training	Immersion heightened conceptual, perceptual, and executive competencies related to reflexivity. Students demonstrated increased self-awareness related to multicultural competence	Programs or instructors should promote or develop immersion experiences or implement activities/workshop ideas from their immersion experience to heighten multicultural competence	Immersive experiences have been shown to decenter privilege while challenging the perpetuation of dominant social narratives. AAMFT Core Competencies	N/A	2 debriefing meetings during immersion, 1 immediately after, and 5 more over the course of 1 year (8 total)	Convenience sample of 3 faculty and 11 students from 1 master's program, 6 non-students, high ethnic, age, race, and gender diversity	Thematic analysis	N/A	1 training program represented (-), small sample (-), high diversity (+)

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Author	Person-of-the-Therapist Training (POTT)	Heightened awareness of strengths, growth areas, limitations, and reactivity. Better able to experience, acknowledge, and track emotions, take more risks in session, empathize with selves and clients, and observe therapeutic process	Programs or instructors should implement POTT to help students achieve person-of-the-therapist competencies	AAMFT Core Competencies and accreditation standards focus on person-of-the-therapist dynamics	N/A	Collection of two-part, de-identified final reflection papers completed by students after POTT course	Convenience sample of 54 master's students representing 2 years and 1 program, low gender diversity, high age and racial/ethnic diversity	Conventional content analysis	Member checking, audit trails, triangulation, consensus, outside researcher	1 program represented (-), large sample (+), multiple years (+), high diversity (+)
Niño et al. (2015)	Person-of-the-Therapist Training (POTT)	Increased ability to empathize with clients, manage countertransference, balance multiple alliances, and bond with clients. More consciously developed positive regard for and facilitate genuine connection with clients	Programs or instructors should implement POTT to teach Core Competencies related to therapeutic relationship building.	AAMFT Core Competencies and accreditation standards focus on building therapeutic relationships	Explicitly stated: directed content analysis are analyzed using existing theories or extant research	Collection of de-identified archival data consisting of simulated lab papers and final reflection papers	Convenience sample of 66 master's students representing 3 years and 1 program, low gender diversity, high age and racial/ethnic diversity	Directed content analysis	Consensus, audit trails, outside researcher	1 program represented (-), large sample (+), multiple years (+), high diversity (+)
Cravens et al. (2016)	Experiential weight-bias training	Increased competency and sensitivity when working with overweight clients. Training was meaningful to students.	Programs should implement some form of weight bias training, prior to starting clinical work, to expand student competency related to working with overweight clients.	Lack of focused training on working with overweight clients, AAMFT Core Competencies focus on multicultural competence	N/A	1-2 hour, post-training focus groups	Purposive sample of 30 masters and 5 PhD students representing 4 programs, high gender diversity	Thematic analysis	Consensus, role/bias acknowledgement, memos	4 programs represented (+), MS and PhD students represented (+), low diversity (-), 1 training (-)
Quek et al. (2016)	Teaching gender to cis-female MFT students	Able to openly express guilt, anxiety, and taking offence to societal gender discourse. Cultivated advanced, intentional empathy skills when working with gender issues in therapy	Operationalize gender perspectives within MFT curricula	How cis-female-identified students experience gender-focused classes, AAMFT Core Competencies focus on multicultural competence	Transcendental phenomenology honors participant voices	Collection of end-of-class journals	Convenience sample of 86 cis-female-identified master's students representing 1 program over 4 years, high age diversity, low ethnic diversity	Thematic analysis	Triangulation, direct quotes, bias acknowledgement	1 program represented (-), large sample (+), multiple years (+), moderate diversity

Table 1  
Continued

# FACILITATING MEANINGFUL FAMILY THERAPY EDUCATION

Table 1 Continued										
Quantitative Studies										
References	Teaching Process	Results	Recommendations	Justification for Study	Justification for Method	Design	Sampling	Analysis	Trustworthiness	Generalizability
Piercy et al. (2016)	Most and least meaningful learning experiences	Meaningful learning environments are more likely to facilitate competency	Connect theory to practice, develop activities that allow students to personally connect to content, limit student presentations, help students become less reactive to clients, and regularly assess for student feedback	Little research on what students consider to be meaningful learning, how to teach AAMFT Core Competencies is not well-defined	Critical incident technique reflects concrete rather than abstract events, thematic analysis is theoretically flexible and allows researchers to cut across participant experiences	Open-ended, 4-question online survey	Purposive sample of 25 current masters and PhD students, 20 recent master's graduates and 5 recent PhD graduates (68) representing 21 programs, high racial/ethnic, age, gender, & religious diversity	Thematic analysis	Transparency, audit trail, peer debriefing, researcher reflexivity, role acknowledgement	21 programs represented (+), large sample (+), masters and PhD students (+), high diversity (+)
Murphy et al. (2006)	Diversity course's impact on multicultural competencies	Significant difference between pre- and post-course means on awareness, knowledge, and skills subscales of the Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge Skills Survey	A diversity-focused course can be effective in increasing student multicultural competencies	AAMFT Core Competencies and accreditation standards focused on multicultural competence	Paired t tests allow for a comparison of means to determine statistically significant differences between pre- and post-test scores	Students completed the Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge, and Skills Survey (MAKSS) before and after a diversity course	Convenience sample of 11 masters and 1 PhD student (12) representing 1 program, only female, only white	Paired t test	Reliability coefficient alphas low for awareness, but high for knowledge and skills. Moderate reliability and validity of instrument	1 program represented (-), 1 course over 1 semester (-), new instrumentation (-), small sample (-), homogenous sample (-)
Nelson & Graves (2011)	Supervisors' assessment of students' mastery of Core Competencies after graduation	Graduates of COAMFTE-accredited programs are rated higher than students from non-accredited programs on ability to demonstrate Core Competencies. Fewer than 10% of Core Competencies are mastered by trainees upon graduation	Training programs and instructors should set higher standards of learning related to the Core Competencies	AAMFT Core Competencies and accreditation standards are heavily emphasized as measurements of student and program success	N/A	Online 128-item, Likert-scale questionnaire developed by research team	Purposive sample of 135 supervisors, high age diversity, high diversity of institutional affiliation	Frequencies	Ran statistical analysis to determine bias, piloted before full distribution, high internal consistency of the instrument within groups	Large sample (+), high diversity (+), low response rate (-), no operationalization of survey variables (-), non-reliable or valid measure (-)



## FACILITATING MEANINGFUL FAMILY THERAPY EDUCATION

### How Award-Winning Family Therapy Educators Engage Their Students in Meaningful Family Therapy Education

“The mediocre teacher tells, the good teacher explains, the superior teacher demonstrates, the great teacher inspires.”

– William Arthur Ward

What separates a great family therapy teacher from a mediocre, good, or even superior teacher? How, in the words of William Arthur Ward, does a great teacher inspire students? What constitutes the “something more” of exemplary teaching that catalyzes the teaching encounter in ways that are meaningful to students, but also promotes competencies and training standards? To address these questions, I interviewed award-winning family therapy educators about the methods they use to bring meaningful educational practices to life for their students. I also sought to shed light on the intangibles of award-worthy teaching that is unique to family therapy education. The specific aims of this study were to explore, highlight, and provide language for the characteristics of quality family therapy education as well as to offer recommendations as a template for how to teach family therapy in meaningful ways. This was accomplished through the perspective of an exemplary, award-winning sample that educators in the field can aspire to.

### **Background**

*What* is taught in family therapy training programs is quite well define. Thus, topic-centered education has accounted for a considerable majority of literature focused on family therapy education within the past three decades (Earl, 2017). As part of membership and accreditation standards, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) requires graduate family therapy programs to teach courses in human development, marital and

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family studies, marital and family therapy, professional studies (ethics), and research methodology (Barker & Chang, 2013). Teachers of these courses are encouraged to be mindful of the AAMFT's list of core competencies, which are "a collection of the basic or minimum skills that each practitioner should possess to provide safe and effective care" (Graves, 2005, p.15 as cited in Nelson, Chenail, Alexander, Crane, Johnson, & Schwallie, 2007).

*How* to teach this required content, however, is far more ambiguous. Family therapy education scholars tend to focus on educational issues such as curriculum development (Liddle & Saba, 1982; Josephson, 2008), course design (Maggio, Chenail, & Todd, 2001), and skill development – not the art of effective, meaningful teaching. Maynard (1996) suggested that good teaching in family therapy training programs can offer burnout protection for both instructors and students, particularly if teachers use diverse methods of instruction. Fife et al.'s (2014) meta-model for effective therapy suggested that effective therapy involves not only what therapists do, but also who they are and how they regard their clients. This may also be the case for family therapy education, where a teacher's effective use of skills and techniques (the "how") is derived from and driven through their way of being with students. This "way of being" reflects the teacher's in-the-moment attitude toward their students. I sought to identify what these effective skills and techniques might be, how some of them are unique to teaching family therapy, and how they contribute to meaningful learning experiences identified by students.

A recent study by Piercy et al. (2016) provided educators with a glimpse into what makes family therapy education meaningful or not meaningful to current students and recent graduates. The researchers conducted a thematic analysis of the most and least meaningful learning experiences of current family therapy students and recent graduates, where they identified themes such as the importance of the theory-to-practice link, personal connection to subject

matter, the benefits and drawbacks of student-led presentations, therapist responsibility for client outcome as a supervision issue, and the program feedback loop. The present study extends these results by exploring how people who have been recognized as exceptional teachers apply these meaningful teaching practices in their family therapy courses and classrooms.

### **Theoretical Foundation for Meaningful Teaching**

How might family therapy educators conceptualize the “something more” in their teaching? Should they simply follow recommendations and findings from articles such as Piercy et al. (2016) that discuss what makes education meaningful for family therapy students? It seems that it would behoove educators to pay attention to what the consumers of the teaching process are saying. It also seems beneficial to articulate a theoretical foundation for why the present study could be useful to family therapy educators who seek to improve their pedagogy. To accomplish this, I discuss teaching family therapy through a systemic perspective, where teaching is a relational encounter/dialogue between teachers and learners. Specifically, this study was framed and developed through a combined theoretical foundation in principles of the I-It/I-Thou philosophy of Martin Buber and of collaborative language systems.

### **I-It and I-Thou – Education as Relationship**

*I and Thou* (Buber, 1958) is perhaps Buber’s most famous work (Fife, 2015). Knapp (2009) suggested that Buber’s ideas provide an alternative theoretical perspective through which scholars can engage in dialogical (relational) theorizing. The central thesis of *I and Thou* is that being human is a fundamentally relational process. To be, Buber (1958) proposed, is to be in relation with others. He suggested two ways of being: 1) I-It, where a person stands in relation to others as objects; and 2) I-Thou, where a person stands in relation to others as people, categorized by mutuality, directness, “present-ness”, and openness. Fife (2015) suggested that

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students are “experientially familiar with them [I-It versus I-Thou relationships]” (p. 214), and that they can readily recognize when they are treated as objects rather than as people. An I-It educational relationship is one where the teacher and learner each see each other as “objects” or “containers” of education. Warner (2001) suggested that there are three ways in which people can be objectified: as means, as obstacles, or as irrelevant. Buber suggested that I-It is important in that it can contribute to technical accomplishment and science; however, a pure I-It stance can detract from genuine relationship building, thereby hindering the teaching encounter.

In contrast, Fife (2015) explained that I-Thou is categorized by “a rich and intimate of engagement [between people]...rather than seeing others in light of generalities, one relates to the uniqueness of others.” (p. 213). When people can facilitate an environment where I-Thou relationships thrive rather than I-It, Buber (1958) explained that genuine dialogue emerges. Genuine dialogue, whether verbalized or not, creates a mutual sense of understanding, intimacy, and respect for humanity. In the context of I-Thou relationships, people become more intimately aware of their potential, which occurs through the process of confirmation. I hypothesized that principles of I-Thou rather than I-It would contribute to how meaningful family therapy education is facilitated.

### **Collaborative Language Systems - Education as Co-Constructed Dialogue**

Coined by Anderson and Goolishian (1988), collaborative language systems produce understanding while considering both context and cognition of the various people within them. Anderson and Goolishian (1988) suggested that people work in tandem to expand knowledge and understanding through dialogical conversations. Conversation is a partnership, characterized by shared mutual inquiry, defined as “an in-there-together, doing with, back-and-forth process in which two or more people put their heads together to puzzle over and address a situation”

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(Anderson & Goolishian, 1988 as cited in Anderson, 2016, p. 187). The relationship, in effect, is an empowering experience that gives new meaning to learning. Using this framework, I hypothesized that meaningful family therapy education is a co-constructed dialogue between instructors and students rather than a linear flow of information from instructors to students.

### **Family Therapy Teaching Awards**

Since 1997, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) has presented selected and/or nominated family therapy educators with the annual Training Award, which “honors AAMFT members or training programs for significant contributions to the advancement of the field of marriage and family therapy by encouraging and training the next generation of marriage and family therapy researchers and/or practitioners” (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 2015). Similarly, since 2011, the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) has presented the Kathleen Briggs Outstanding Mentor Award, which “recognizes an outstanding mentor of students and new professionals in the area of marriage and family therapy” (National Council on Family Relations, 2015) (See Figure 1). Recipients of these awards are recognized for their respective abilities to teach family therapy, and the awards are granted by nationally-recognized accrediting bodies upon nomination by fellow instructors and/or students.

### **Methods**

The method of inquiry in this study was driven by the research question: “How do award-winning family therapy educators apply meaningful teaching principles?” I was interested in operationalizing their respective methods and processes across theory and practice. Specifically, I wanted to know what award-winning family therapy educators *do* to bring meaningful teaching and learning to life. According to Crotty (1998), all studies should have four basic elements,

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including: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. The aforementioned I-It/I-Thou work of Buber and a collaborative language systems framework guided the epistemology and theoretical elements of this study. Related to methodology, I chose a qualitative, phenomenological approach to inquiry to capture participants' experiences with facilitating meaningful teaching.

To learn more about the way award-winning family therapy educators facilitate meaningful family therapy education for their students, I conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013) of interviews with recipients of the AAMFT Training Award and/or Kathleen Briggs Outstanding Mentorship Award. Clark and Braun (2013) defined thematic analysis as an analytic approach to qualitative research that is theoretically flexible. This approach allowed me to identify important patterns of content and process within the dataset and to capture meaning within participants' experiences by including data reported by the participants themselves. Thematic analysis is a useful method for comparing information across participant experiences; in the case of this study, this involved synthesizing award-winners' self-reported methods of teaching family therapy.

### **Sampling and Selection**

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at my university, I recruited participants using a purposive sampling method. Invitations to participate were made via email correspondence. The email included standard information related to confidentiality, informed consent, and other human subject protections. In case the interviewee wanted to read the questions before agreeing to participate, the email included the interview protocol (see Figure 2). Participation was voluntary and written consent was obtained prior to scheduling each interview.

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To qualify, participants needed to meet one of or both of two criteria: A) be a past individual recipient of either or both the AAMFT Training Award or the NCFR Kathleen Briggs Outstanding Mentorship Award or B) were part of the program faculty at the time a whole training program won the AAMFT Training Award. To avoid oversaturating the sample with program representatives, I limited criterion B to a max of two participants per program. I searched the AAMFT Training Award and NCFR Kathleen Briggs Outstanding Mentorship Award websites to gather the list of award-winners that I could potentially interview for this study. I was interested in focusing on winners for the reasons mentioned above and because they would be well-suited to discuss the dynamics of the teaching process that might be unique to family therapy. I also believed that these outstanding educators would be in a unique position to help current family therapy educators by operationalizing the way they bring meaningful family therapy education principles to life for their students.

To date, 16 individuals and three training programs have received the AAMFT Training Award, and four individuals have won the NCFR Kathleen Briggs Outstanding Mentorship Award. Three individuals have received both awards. This amounted to a grand total of 23 potential participants. However, this potential sample was reduced to 18 when I had to consider that four recipients are deceased and after one person I contacted explained that they had not received the award and was wrongly listed as a recipient.

In total, 12 people participated in the study. Six were individual recipients of the AAMFT Training Award: Joseph Wetchler, Volker Thomas, Thorana Nelson, Douglas Sprenkle, Eric McCollum, and Sue Johnson. Three participants represented two programs that received the AAMFT Training Award; Toni Zimmerman represented Colorado State University, and East Carolina University was represented by Jennifer Hodgson and Damon Rappleyea. One

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participant, Fred Piercy, was a recipient of both the AAMFT Training Award and the Kathleen Briggs Outstanding Mentor Award. Christi McGeorge also participated as both an individual recipient of the Kathleen Briggs Outstanding Mentor Award and as a representative of North Dakota State University's AAMFT Training Award. One participant requested to not be identified.

### **Data Collection**

I collected data through in-depth, individual telephone interviews with each participant. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 45-90 minutes each. The interviews were audiotaped and electronically transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview followed the same protocol for every participant (see Figure 2), which included questions that were adapted from the themes and recommendations of Piercy et al. (2016). In addition, I asked “big picture” questions and questions focused on what potentially differentiates teaching family therapy from teaching in other disciplines<sup>2</sup>. The semi-structured format allowed for follow-up and clarification questions. Data were collected until theoretical saturation was achieved across most essential units of meaning.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, I conducted a thematic analysis, which allowed me to investigate not only general themes in the data, but also the nuance between participants' responses and even within answers to the different questions within the interview protocol. This method was also useful for organizing the findings in a way that other family therapy educators could clearly understand and hopefully take into their own teaching. I followed a mix of Braun and Clarke's

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<sup>2</sup> The answers to this section of questions yielded information worthy enough of a standalone manuscript, which is in preparation at the time of this manuscript's completion.



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(2006) phases of thematic analysis and the modified van Kaam method described by Moustakas (1994) to analyze the data.

First, I read through all 12 interviews to familiarize myself with the data and immerse myself in the experiences of the participants. Second, I read through each transcript and brainstormed themes that I saw (open coding) that were reflective of the relevant expressions and ideas that emerged from the data. The coding process was inductive, where I sought to generate codes that captured the meaning of each response. I used a constant iterative process to analyze the strength of individual descriptions, and I grouped them within embedded units of meaning (axial coding). I then collapsed and reanalyzed the codes several times to present what seemed to be most salient or essential to the participants in terms of their relative methods of facilitating meaningful family therapy education for their students (selective coding).

Third, I developed a system for considering the nuance that was present within individual participant experiences that also related to the general themes. These were ideas that might only have been reported by a small number of participants, but still seemed to have an essential quality that fit within the context of both their experiences and the theoretical foundation of the study. In addition, I developed a code book for the general themes as well as themes within questions to differentiate specific methods from general qualities of award-winning education. I then further refined the codes to determine what by-question themes fit within the general themes, and what themes were unique to each question.

### **Maintaining Trustworthiness and Rigor**

I supported credibility, trustworthiness, and rigor in several ways (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). As I conducted my analysis, I established an audit trail (Davies & Dodd, 2002), where I, as the interviewer, kept careful field notes during interviews. An audit trail also allowed me to

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document the coding process, including any difficulties I had, and ways of making coding decisions. I was transparent by remaining reflexive during the coding process and by documenting the steps of my analysis. I documented decisions, modifications, and collaborations as I coded and derived the themes. Finally, in coding, constructing, and labeling themes, and discussing their meaning in relation to this study, I tried to provide enough depth through the actual words of the participants to reflect verisimilitude (Shulman, 1992).

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

As the researcher, I had to keep in mind my own biases related to what I personally consider to be meaningful family therapy education throughout the interview process and analysis. As a former student and current educator who is invested in finding ways to make learning meaningful to students, it was important to stay open-minded and honest throughout the study. Like the participants in the study, I was constantly reminded of my own meaningful and not meaningful experiences, and I paid careful attention to when these biases emerged through memoing my personal thoughts and connections during and after each interview and throughout the coding process. In times where it was difficult to tell if I was interpreting a participants' ideas through my own biased frame or not, I would send a section of the transcript to a research assistant to see what their thoughts were, and we discussed parallels or differences as necessary.

### **Results**

I coded seven general themes that transcended all of the answers from the participants' experiences of facilitating meaningful family therapy education (see Table 1). These general themes were too difficult to attach to one specific process/question; instead, they provide context for the by-process codes presented later in this section. Though the themes are presented in no particular order, I provide a model for how the themes can be conceptualized as interrelated (see

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Figure 3). Though the list of award-winners is publically available, I honored requests for anonymity. All but one participant agreed to let me identify them as a participant, but a few participants asked that their specific quotes remain anonymous. Therefore, no quotes are attributed to a specific participant. However, each of the twelve participants is quoted at least twice (without being identified) to ensure that all of them are given voice. For the sake of clarity, filler language such as “uh” and “you know” were removed from the representative quotations.

### **Theme 1: Relationship Building**

All 12 participants cited some form of relationship building as the most important process of facilitating “good”, meaningful education. They often discussed providing emotional support for, making an effort to connect with, and forming a “human” connection to their students. Many claimed that building relationships with students both as a group and individually is “fundamental” to facilitating meaningful education. For example, one participant said, “the personal relationship is a key feature, particularly in MFT training...people just don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” When asked how to do this, a participant noted the need for sensitivity to and patience for individual students’ ways of connecting:

“It is sort of having to be patient with how people want to be joined or connected with and then you can kind of show that you’re willing to be patient and you’re invested in their learning and you’ll do what they need in order to be able to sort of build that teacher-student connection.”

Others discussed doing this through everyday interactions outside of the classroom. One participant offered an example of simply stopping to chat with students outside of the classroom context:

“I try to get to know a little bit about the students – nothing intrusive – but about more than just their lives as students...I enjoy stopping to chat with them in the hall when I see them, so I think there’s just, first of all, building a fundamental relationship.”

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“I just try to be present. Not metaphorically – physically. I leave my office door open. I initiate conversations with students about things that aren’t necessarily education related. I’m certainly available when they have clinical questions or issues they need immediate help with, but honestly what I think students appreciate the most is that my door is actually *open*.”

Some participants specifically discussed the importance of remembering names and being able to identify students by their interests. One of them offered a specific example:

“Well I know all their names. I end up taking a picture of each of them [students] and then ask them to answer five questions on the back of a card...what do you enjoy doing, what is your major...this and that and then have their picture on the front...it was kind of a flashcard for me to remember who the student is and know something about them.”

Many of the participants suggested that they are mindful of building toward more collaborative relationships with their students over time because it helps facilitate students’ professional autonomy. One participant captured this idea by saying:

“You’re pushing for more collaborative relationships, so part of that is to talk about personal things or to have students be more involved in the conceptualization of papers so they are not just a minion that does what I want”.

Several participants explained that they work diligently to show students that, as one participant articulated, “I’m ultimately on their side and want them to know and feel that.” It was important to many of the award-winners that they establish an alliance with their students through outward investment in student success in addition to forming a personal connection or relationship. Though some suggested that this can be “explicitly stated”, this was often followed up with the caveat that it is more realistically likely to happen through action. One participant explained:

“I help students know that they are coming to [program], true, but they’re also becoming one of our colleagues and so I am interested in having a colleague and am interested in collaborating with them. I’m interested in leveling that hierarchy...I think that creates some openness that has some cascading effect. We have socials, team-building exercises, and different types of things to create a sense of unity. We establish feeling safe so we can joke with and challenge each other...so they know I have their best interest in mind.”

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### **Theme 2: Attending to Student Development**

Several participants discussed the importance of being able to identify and in turn teach to students' respective levels of development. This theme often emerged when participants were asked how to facilitate collaborative relationships with their students. To do this, one participant suggested "gathering feedback in a pretty consistent and continuous way" as a means to "attend to their developmental level and provide an array of [teaching] styles and methods that I know my students will respond to". Other participants noted that adapting to students' developmental levels, particularly over time, is just as important as identifying them:

"I think building a collaborative relationship really starts by being sensitive to where a student is at the particular point of development and let them lead with that, but then I make sure to shift gears as they mature."

Others discussed the importance of understanding students' development so that they could monitor both their expectations for students as well as the way in which they challenge students in the classroom. In addition, not attending to development might, as some stated, lead to student frustration and could cause them to "shut down":

"I challenge them enough that they can grow but I don't over challenge them so that they become discouraged, give up, get frustrated, or get angry at me, or whatever it may be. For me, it's monitoring the expectations that I have of students at various levels, like first year students, second year students, or third year students."

"Yet if we are working with students and saying 'well, these are the skills you gotta do', well that may not be the skill they are developmentally ready for. And they may need to have other skills come into place before either they or another student can make that jump. It doesn't mean that one student is more advanced – it's just the way that student's nervous system was set up. So, you gotta be able to connect at those levels and see that we are all going to develop differently."

### **Theme 3: Relevance**

Many of the participants emphasized the importance of making sure content is connected to ideas, experiences, and examples that are relevant to students. Several also noted that relevant

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content and examples are useful, even “necessary” when helping students connect theory to practice. To accomplish this, participants cited the need to understand students’ contexts, interests, and learning styles so that teaching “connects the material to the student’s life perhaps or to something that makes sense to them.” Two participants discussed the importance of this process:

“Because they’re a learning community you can refer to materials they learned two years ago or two days ago, but you don’t want to have rigid boundaries between classrooms, supervision, things like that. I think you want to have lots of interplay between [those contexts] so relevancy becomes obvious.”

“I mean a lot of it is relevance. You could say the most wonderful things and if you don’t say them in a safe, engaging way, people can’t hear them.”

Participants discussed the importance of expanding the relevance of course content to the societal level. One participant stated:

“I’m teaching content, but I’m trying to do that by making it highly relevant not only to the student that’s sitting there...but also making it highly relevant in terms of what’s happening in our society, culturally. All of my teaching is really connected to social justice and diversity.”

In addition, participants suggested that making course content and process relevant to students requires their own reflexivity and willingness to “self-study”, and that it often requires “listening to students so that you can try to mix in some of their unique language” which “helps the student begin to connect those theoretical ideas into their own ways of thinking”. As one participant stated:

“We can actually have a conversation because they are not starting from zero. I give them the opportunity to locate some of the pre-existing knowledge they have...I want them to think about it, and for us to have a discussion.”

One participant discussed a specific way to ensure relevance and shared thoughts related to keeping the teaching process “fresh”:

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“Nothing is perfect in my mind. I’m always going to be changing it [syllabus], so for me a ‘shadow syllabus’ has become so helpful because I keep pretty detailed notes on it. I just sit down after each lecture and I type to myself exactly how the class went and what happened and what needs to be different. I think the day I realize I gave exactly the same lecture as I gave the semester before is the day I need to retire.”

### **Theme 4: Actively Engaging Students in the Process**

It was clear that award-winning family therapy instructors take an active role in facilitating student involvement and participation in the classroom and that they work to, as one participant explained, “pull rather than push students into the learning process.” It seems that doing this takes many forms:

“I think that as they progress, students gain confidence. I begin to ask them more and more about what ways they would like to go in class and in therapy - what things they feel like they should be doing with their clients, and I adapt to that.”

“I try to at least create an open environment where there are rules and boundaries but where there are also opportunities to enhance and improve the program, which is something we should always want. I think students are constantly being exposed to new technology and ideas and are applying things outside the classroom – so part of that is being flexible with that and asking questions and letting them teach us how they’re learning best.”

“I get them collaborating with one-another. For example, in my writing for publication class, I get students into writing teams in which they give each other feedback rather than just getting it from me. They become the reviewers. So they’re engaged not just as writers, but in the process of actually getting a paper together and having it reviewed.”

Participants often discussed how critical it is to hold students accountable for what is required of them, such as doing the readings before class, so that students are set up to be able to engage in the materials more deeply when they get to the classroom:

“I think a lot about student engagement and how I’m going to get students involved... I think you have to keep them active in their learning process and get them to take accountability for it. Challenging them to take responsibility for doing the readings... I think that’s why I do a lot of [small group] conversations because it’s rather easy to hide when I’m just lecturing on the articles to the whole class. It’s harder to hide when you’re in a group of three people and you haven’t done the reading and have nothing to contribute to the conversation. There’s a social desirability factor I’m playing on because students don’t want to look bad in front of their peers.”

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“You give them information but that’s only part of it. You create a coherent framework that gives them an experience, takes them into a new way of seeing, a new way of understanding what they’re doing and puts things together in a coherent way that they can use as a platform to ask more questions and keep learning.”

One participant explained that they engage students in the classroom by first prompting and facilitating discussions prior to class:

“I would frequently send out questions for discussion in advance so that the students could engage in and be thinking about the subject matter before I would talk about it. I could also use their questions to drive in-class discussion. I think it created a collaborative mindset from the beginning. I’m a facilitator rather than an expert who wants you to report things back to them.”

Furthermore, many participants were averse to a traditional lecture format or to using materials such as PowerPoint presentations when teaching. A couple participants said:

“In preparation for my particular class I give them a hand out, kind of like a map of the things that we are going to talk about that day. So I’m almost giving them the notes – I know that sounds like it might be spoon-feeding them but I also don’t do PowerPoints. So I’m really trying to create a didactic conversation and I want them to be able to have the information. This is what we will cover – now let’s go apply it and discuss it.”

“We [myself and the students] actually *do* stuff that therapists have to do. I teach them how to do the nuts and bolts of being a therapist like paperwork and treatment plans by actually making them do it in class. Sometimes as an assignment, other times as an in-class activity. Don’t just talk about it. Have them do it. And that can extend to anything! What better way to know students know how to do something than to actually see them do it?”

### **Theme 5: Enthusiasm and Curiosity**

Participants often discussed the importance of outwardly showing interest and investment in course content and in students’ processes of learning it. It was clear that award-winning family therapy educators bring energy and passion to the teaching process, and that they are not afraid to show it to their students. In addition, participants constantly discussed the importance of being curious about students, their respective contexts, their interests, and their learning styles. Several also mentioned being open to learning from their students and their colleagues. This was



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clear not just in the content of participants' answers, but through the enthusiasm and interest each participant demonstrated as they answered my interview questions. As one participant remarked, "I'm just innately interested in the experience of people...I get a lot of interesting answers if I just ask questions." A few participants stated that their enthusiasm and curiosity stems from the co-creation of knowledge:

"And I share my knowledge and they share their knowledge and we are co-creating new knowledge. But I ask questions. And they are curious questions – I want to know what they know. And then we go from there."

"I really want to hear what the student has to say about it. What the student's ideas are. It's really quite a bit about continuing to push the student to come forward with his or her ideas. It's never really been about what are mine."

"I think enthusiasm really works well for people... if I have enthusiasm for what I'm talking about it kind of gets on to whoever the students are. So I think that if you enter something with energy and enthusiasm it really helps."

"You have to be passionate about the material. The world is full of people teaching things that they [teachers] don't care about and that they aren't interested in and then they wonder why their students don't care and are not interested either."

Participants explained that curiosity can go a long way in terms of eliciting feedback about their teaching and whether it is reaching their students. As one participant stated:

"I often say things like 'does that make sense?' and 'was that helpful?'. And I try to ask those questions in a way that invites an honest response. And I pay attention to their [students'] nonverbals."

### **Theme 6: Providing and Receiving Honest Feedback**

Participants often stated the importance of continually providing feedback to students as part of the teaching process, and that that feedback should be honest rather than placating. It appears that award-winning teachers are willing to not just encourage students, but also challenge them when appropriate. One participant explained how to handle this with students up front:

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“I try to be really clear to students at the beginning that I won’t bull[expletive] you. If I say you did a good session, you did a good session. And if I say you didn’t do a good session, you didn’t do a good session. It’s not that I’m trying to make you feel bad or prove that I’m smarter than you, but I feel like they have to trust that what I say is really what I think.”

“I’m honest and direct. In my experience, instructors can get so [expletive] anxious about whether students like them or not. Students like honesty. They respect it. At least in my experience both as a student and now as a long-time instructor. I tell students ahead that I will call it like I see it, and then I do that. Of course I might throw in some empathy about where I think they’re coming from – I think that’s important too – but they are there to learn, not to find more people in their lives they like.”

Another participant stated that providing feedback on poor performance is important, but that it is even more important to “find out what that’s [the performance] really about”. Another participant explained that providing honest feedback is a two-way street and is nested within mutual student-teacher accountability:

“I hold myself accountable, and I ask students to hold me accountable to ‘walk my talk’. And that enables me, or gives me the right, actually, to hold them accountable to walk their talk.”

In line with the accountability piece, one participant noted that providing honest feedback is an “act of respect” and is also a way to teach students how to give and receive feedback themselves:

“I think it’s a matter of creating learning environments where students are given space to learn how to give feedback how to receive feedback. I think it’s important for them to learn that, and I think it’s respectful of the relationship I have with them to do that.”

### **Theme 7: Transparency**

Nearly all of the participants mentioned the need for openness and willingness to discuss and share their own personal experiences and stories while teaching. One participant suggested that they and other teachers should be “willing to at least try to match the level of their [students’] disclosure.” Transparency was often used as an example of how to build relationships with students, facilitate collaboration, and establish personal connections with

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them. One participant demonstrated humility while explaining that curiosity and willingness to learn from students is essential to the longevity of teaching:

“I think the day that I know everything is the day when I shouldn’t be allowed to teach anymore...I never go into the classroom and don’t come away with something.”

Several participants noted a willingness to share random stories or to even be self-deprecating in the spirit of encouraging students to open up themselves. As one participant explained:

“I think relative to many professors I was willing to be fairly self-regulatory and share a lot of personal experiences, including some that were not necessarily self-flattering. For example, if I was talking about the therapeutic alliance I might share a story of a time I failed at it. I think that enables students to feel like they could share some of their own struggles as well.”

“I’m sure there are some teachers who would never talk about locking themselves out of their house, for example...I think that sort of humanizes me for them a bit.”

Transparency was also discussed as being synonymous with authenticity and establishing credibility, which seemed to be deeply important to most of the participants. A few award-winners articulated this concept:

“You show up as a person, you’re real and authentic and you’re a safe person. You have to be willing to engage – I really like it when people ask me questions...disagree with me...or when they challenge me... You model openness. That’s a big part of it. You model it.”

“I think a certain amount of transparency and willingness to share your own experiences, and by that I mean your clinical experiences but also your personal experiences, really goes a long way with connecting with students and establishing credibility with them.”

### **Discussion**

The goal of this qualitative study was to discover how award-winning family therapy educators facilitate meaningful family therapy education practices. While most of the award-winning participants of this study gave much of the credit for receiving their respective awards to the students and colleagues who nominated them, they all acknowledged that, to some degree, as

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one participant stated, “we must be doing something right.” Indeed, it seems that the “something right” is, first-and-foremost, a strong willingness to build relationships with students and connect with them personally. The participants painted powerful pictures of the ways they take initiative in facilitating a connected, human experience with students that extends beyond simply seeing them as consumers of course or program content.

It is abundantly clear that the teachers who participated in this study are deeply invested in their students both personally and professionally, and that they are willing to outwardly show it. Where many instructors might demonstrate interest in student perspectives and ideas within the classroom settings, these instructors extend the desire to learn more about their students to outside of the classroom context. Some do this deliberately through outside team-building exercises or social events. Some even explained that they will invite advisees to their homes for dinner or small get-togethers, as appropriate. Others prefer to build personal connections through smaller, day-to-day interactions that happen in the halls of academic buildings or on-site therapy clinics, perhaps through following-up on a personal event that a student shared, or checking in with a students’ goals or recent successes. In turn, the classroom becomes an enriched environment where teachers and students can engage in co-created dialogue, take risks, and feel connected not just to course content, but to each other.

Such findings are consistent with the I-Thou principles of the I-It/I-Thou philosophy of Buber (1958) and with Collaborative Language Systems (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988). The principles of I-It and I-Thou have been applied to the therapeutic context (Fife et al., 2015; Fishbane, 1998) and quantitative research (Fife, 2015), but not yet to the classroom setting. Though Fife et al. (2015) offered ways the concepts of I-It and I-Thou might be taught to beginning therapists, they did not explore how these dynamics might affect the way course

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content is ultimately delivered and received. Based on the findings of this study, however, it seems that the I-Thou perspective embodied by the participants contributes to award-worthy educational practice.

To elaborate, in an I-Thou-oriented educational context, teachers engage with students as humans rather than as objects of learning. The participants in this study seek to engage in and connect with students' humanity, including their complex, varied ways of synthesizing information and ultimately applying it to their personal and professional development. They articulated their respective efforts to engage in genuine dialogue with students, where information freely flows back and forth rather than in one direction. They spend time exploring the unique ways their students learn family therapy, including how their personal contexts might affect their learning processes. They honor what is important to students, and they seem to admire the way what they teach contributes to students' understanding not just of how to do therapy, but of the human experience. When students are validated and confirmed not just for what they know, but for who they are, they become more open to exploring their potential as therapists while also modeling how to facilitate healthy, impactful relationships. Such is a key aspect of relational maintenance (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2012); in this case, it is within a classroom setting. As one participant explained:

“That’s why we put so much effort into training. We are talking about human hearts, and it’s not a joke, you know? It’s about making sure we are responsible for really doing something special.”

These findings are also consistent with a collaborative language systems framework. Not only did the participating educators conceptualize the teaching process as a relational encounter, many either alluded to or explicitly stated that meaningful family therapy education is co-constructed through a running dialogue with and feedback from their students. Anderson (2016)

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noted that, to engage in collaborative language, a person with expertise levels their relationship with others by integrating others' experiences and dialogues into their own without denying their expertise. Expertise, according to Anderson (2016) is "know-how" that invites collaborative relationships and dialogic conversations rather than forcing others to completely reconstruct their existing narratives. Several of the award-winning participants discussed how they facilitate collaborative language or co-constructed dialogues with their students rather than force-feeding them content from an expert position. However, they honor that students do not necessarily have a working knowledge of what is being taught, so they work with them to develop their respective abilities to better articulate and apply concepts in a way that personally suits them. One participant noted:

"Right. So, if you take the knowledge that teachers have and the knowledge that students have, what comes out is something more whole. It's an interactional effect...I assume students have knowledge. I share my knowledge and they share their knowledge and we are co-creating new knowledge. Advanced knowledge."

It seems that the participants assess and measure their respective abilities to reach students by listening to student voices and feedback rather than by whether they adhere to the entirety of a course syllabus or manage to get through all points of a lecture. Consistent with a collaborative language systems framework, they give students space to indicate whether what they are learning is useful, how it is useful, and how the new concepts and transferred expertise fit with their own experiences and pre-existing knowledge. Many participants explained that sending information is only useful and worthwhile if students can receive it, so they pay particular attention to students' language and try to use it when appropriate. Content delivery is certainly a prominent aspect of facilitating meaningful education, but award-winning teachers also emphasize that the discussions that arise as a result are just as, if not more important to the

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process. Therefore, they spend considerable time elevating student voices and conducting an orchestra of varied perspectives.

The findings highlight that a willingness to be transparent with students is one of the most obvious, concrete ways for instructors to facilitate meaningful education, relationships, and dialogue. Many scholars have researched and discussed the delicate balance and importance of therapist transparency (Roberts, 2005), but not instructor transparency. Hanson (2004) found that clients often find therapist self-disclosure to be helpful and that disclosure can strengthen therapeutic alliance. In contrast, nondisclosure is often perceived as unhelpful. Hill et al. (1998) found that therapists who are willing to self-disclose tend to receive the highest client helpfulness ratings. Nearly all of the award-winning teachers I interviewed explicitly stated that they are willing to be transparent with students. Some share personal stories, others share clinical successes and failures, and most share a combination of the two. While it is certainly important to take the role of instructor seriously, these findings highlight the need to supplement the role with one's own personality and humanity. Students are clearly drawn to this. It may be that meaningful education experiences happen for students when instructors are willing to model openness to new ideas and to sharing their own experiences.

When asked how they help students connect course concepts and theories to their emerging clinical practice, nearly all of the participants expressed that doing so was "obviously necessary". One participant asked, "wait, there are instructors out there who *don't* do that?" It seems that heavy emphasis on making sure students can connect materials to their clinical practice is a core component of award-winning teaching. The most commonly-cited methods of facilitating the connection of theory to practice were: 1) engaging students in role plays, 2)

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demonstrating the application of a concept themselves [teachers], 3) encouraging students to observe their peers apply theory real-time, and 4) soliciting a variety of student perspectives.

The most common and effective ways to help students connect theory to practice seems to come in the form of holding demonstrations, facilitating role-plays, or designing scenarios where students can practice various interventions. Many explained that they often receive positive feedback from students when they make a point of including these activities as major components of their classes. Facilitating these activities requires preparation and leadership from the teacher, but students are given space to engage with and make them their own. One participant offered a specific example of how to engage students in observations:

“...we have them go over to our on-site therapy clinic and we have them observe almost six sessions, and they have an observation sheet and on that observation sheet one of the things that they’re supposed to be able to do is identify a prominent MFT theory or post-modern theory that they observe of the student their watching. It doesn’t necessarily have to be the model that [the therapist] is practicing from but what model do they see – and they have to provide evidence. So they get to observe and partake in the theory-practice link simultaneously. Then they debrief with the therapist to see if their original hypotheses were correct.”

Encouraging students to share their own varied perspectives on different theories and concepts also appears to be a key component of helping students not only connect theory to practice, but to do so in a way that feels personalized and relatable. Several participants suggested presenting a case example and then allowing students to conceptualize that case using a variety of their own emerging ideas. Though the instructor obviously brings expertise and perspective on various concepts and how to apply them, there is no “one-size-fits-all” way to do so. Great teachers demonstrate an awareness of this, which is likely why several participants mentioned that they highly value the way student perspectives can contribute to a more whole understanding of theoretical application. One participant offered an example of how to do this:



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“One of the things that’s really fun and we all enjoy doing is looking at a particular case from, say, three different theoretical perspectives and how each of these perspectives might lead us in a different direction. Then we compare them and see what fits for each student rather than for me or for the group as a whole.”

Valuing and encouraging a variety of student perspectives was also cited as an effective way to help students appreciate issues of diversity within both course content and the classroom itself. Courses specifically focused on multiculturalism have been found to heighten student multicultural competencies (Murphy, Park, & Linsdale, 2006), but few have discussed how to attend to the diverse perspectives present in the classroom. Mittal and Wieling (2006) suggested that instructors should adopt a flexible and multicultural stance when teaching course content, regardless of the course’s main topic. A few of the award-winning family therapy educators explained that they consciously weave social justice into every aspect of their teaching, and that they make sure to elevate the voices of students who hold identities that are traditionally marginalized within society (women, people of color, sexual minorities, etc.). In addition, several participants explained that they are not afraid to bring controversial subjects into classroom discussions. They provide students with the opportunity to share where their perspective, and then work to weave the perspectives together with course concepts. Topics related to diversity and social justice can be emotionally loaded, which several participants acknowledged. These same participants noted that one of the key ways to encourage and understand the diversity of perspectives in a classroom is to challenge not what a student says, but where their idea might come from or why their perspective is the way that it is.

Regarding how to keep student-led presentations meaningful to students, there was some variation in perspectives on the matter among participants. Piercy et al. (2016) found that students tend to find student-led presentations to be least meaningful to them. Many participants plainly stated some form of “I don’t use them”. One participant stated, “I’ve not found student

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presentations to be useful.” It seems that, though they appreciate collaborating with students and hearing their varied perspectives, award-winning family therapy educators are averse to granting students the ability to fully drive the teaching process. In fact, many reported that they consider it to be poor teaching practice to place heavy emphasis on student-led presentations, especially if those presentations drive content. One participant explained that they think “there are some professors that kind of abuse student-led presentations”, and that some will “often do it out of laziness”. Another participant echoed these sentiments:

“I hate when students are presenting something that I know I could present better than them. So I never assign student presentations because I hated them when I was in graduate school. There have been too many times where there were student-led presentations and I thought ‘the instructor would have done a better job explaining that.’”

However, there were several participants who indicated that they do use student-led presentations to supplement their teaching process. However, these participants consistently emphasized that they should be brief rather than a focal point of the lecture or course:

“I think part of it is brevity, so when I get the students doing something they’re going to be doing it briefly. I want them to decipher it [assigned discussion content] into bullet points quickly because I want them to briefly talk about that and then I can embellish what they just said with my own example. I think if you turn too much of the class over to students, you don’t have as much opportunity to share your own experiences and wisdom. I want to keep class moving.”

One participant explained that student-led presentations should be designed or framed as a tool to help them develop their own skills related to disseminating and presenting information to their peers:

“I think you emphasize to them that this is more than just you taking my job and doing it for me. This is you developing a way to take information and put it into a format where people can learn and you can practice the role of educator. Because you’ll have to use those skills no matter what you go into – not just academia. We teach clients all the time. You have to learn how to do that somehow.”

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Other participants echoed the idea that students should be facilitating discussions or contributing ideas or examples to content rather than presenting the content itself. One participant explained that they found success in changing the language and purpose of student-led presentations from “presentation” to “facilitation”:

“I don’t even call it a presentation, because that has too much of a connotation of ‘hold a monologue’. And some students will do that, so instead I call it ‘facilitate a session’. Facilitating is a two way interactional process, presenting is a one-way process... When I put in the syllabus and we discuss at the beginning of the semester what it means to facilitate a session, it becomes much more of a matter of figuring it out with each other because facilitation depends not only on the person who’s responsible for the facilitation but also there is a responsibility on the people who will receive it. They have to take responsibility too and can’t just sit back. And, of course, I model that for them whenever I’m teaching.”

The impact of training person-of-the-therapist on family therapy students has received considerable discussion in recent years (Aponte & Kissil, 2014; Niño, Kissil, & Claudio, 2015; Niño, Kissil, & Cooke, 2016). Niño et al. (2015; 2016) found that directed person-of-the-therapist-training can help students achieve competency in person-of-the-therapist issues and with building beneficial therapeutic relationships. Paris, Linville, and Rosen (2006) found that teachers who help students define and articulate the intersection of their personal and professional growth can positively influence students’ clinical work. Many participants agreed that attending to person-of-the-therapist issues, even as it relates to course materials, is an essential piece of facilitating meaningful education for students. One participant went so far as to say that the line between personal and clinical growth is “almost indistinguishable”. It was no surprise that supporting person-of-the-therapist issues and personal growth was most often cited as a way to attend to the impact of client progress or lack thereof on their students.

When asked how to attend to students’ person-of-the-therapist issues in the classroom, many participants explained that they ask about and express interest in students’ internal

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dialogues (Rober 1999; 2005). This includes asking students directly about how they are learning content and in what ways concepts affecting them personally. Though working through person-of-the-therapist issues has been cited as useful (Niño et al., 2015) and meaningful to students (Piercy et al., 2016), the participants emphasized the need for clear boundaries with students, especially since they work hard to form personal connections with them. While this is certainly a difficult task, it seems that knowing how to set boundaries up front is key, especially if it means referring students to their own personal therapy if need-be. It appears that it can be beneficial to both normalize and encourage students to attend therapy when appropriate. One participant explained that they are “really clear with them [students] that I think therapists having therapy is a really useful experience both in terms of personal growth for us but also for understanding the client experience.”

Finally, participants seemed to be highly interested in learning not just from their students, but from their fellow peers. Interestingly, nearly every participant asked me to send the manuscript of this study to them when it was finished. They were eager to hear what their peers had to say, and to learn about what fellow award-winners do to facilitate meaningful education. Perhaps in addition to receiving awards for teaching, they should also be recognized as award-winning learners. Many expressed that, though they were honored to have been recognized for their teaching, they still actively seek opportunities to grow. They seek out and attend teaching workshops, they read about teaching, and they discuss their practice with others. Even though they developed successful teaching methods and pedagogy, they still look to evolve. One participant mentioned several times in their interview that they “should retire” the day they felt like they had nothing left to learn; many others echoed this sentiment. It seems that humility can go a long way toward reaching students and facilitating meaningful education.

### **Specific Recommendations**

**Get to know students personally, and let them know you too.** Family therapy educators should consider how they can connect with students in a way that extends beyond the classroom setting. Connecting with students seems to be less about how it is done and more about the effort an instructor puts into doing so. Ask about students' goals, interests, life events, and desires. Take time to engage in lighthearted conversations, and follow-up with them on more than just course work. Consider modeling this process. Recognize that building personal connections is a reciprocal process, and that it is okay for an instructor to share personal stories, including clinical successes and failures.

**Meet student at their respective levels of development.** There is a delicate balance between unconditionally validating students' current developmental levels and challenging them to grow. Family therapy educators should regularly ask for feedback to assess where students are developmentally. Be willing to challenge students in ways that facilitate growth, but not so much so as to lose sight of where they are.

**Make what you do relevant.** Educators should avoid re-using the same examples semester after semester. Instead, instructors should make an effort to connect course concepts, theories, and principles to content and clinical examples that are current and relatable to students. It is equally important to identify and highlight the way course concepts fit within wider systemic contexts. Facilitate role plays, demonstrate application, and offer relevant case examples.

**Learn with, but also from your students.** Encourage students to share their perspectives, and actively create a space where students feel safe to do so. Be curious about where they are coming from, and recognize that students come into our programs and classrooms

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with varying levels of pre-existing knowledge and/or experiences. Teachers should bring in their content expertise, certainly, but they should also be mindful that the personal, human nature of family therapy provides a rich context for the co-construction of ideas.

**Use student-led presentations either sparingly or not at all.** Family therapy educators should refrain from relying upon students to fill class time. If student presentations are used in the classroom, they should not be the main source of content delivery. Instructors should consider framing student-led presentations as facilitated discussions, where students lead a classroom dialogue about specific aspects of the topic at hand. In addition, instructors should provide specific instructions for student facilitators to follow.

**Be as open to giving and receiving honest feedback.** Family therapy educators should be willing to share honest feedback with students. Offering unconditional validation or, conversely, only constructive criticism can hurt a teacher's credibility in the long run. Students are more likely to be drawn to and benefit from both positive and negative feedback if they know it is honest. Conversely, educators should encourage open, honest feedback from students. Take this feedback seriously, and even be willing to use it to shape future class processes, activities, or examples.

**Share your enthusiasm.** Finally, instructors should be willing to share their passion and enthusiasm for the concepts they are teaching. They should find new, fresh ways to deliver content, and inject energy into lectures and activities. Program faculty should encourage each other to teach the classes they have an innate interest in, rather than assigning courses according to who is or is not available or according to seniority. While this might be a "big ask", the chance to demonstrate how much an instructor cares about the content they are teaching seems to reach students and enrich the classroom experience.

### **Promoting Meaningful Teaching**

Implied within these findings and recommendations is the idea that family therapy programs should be promoting meaningful teaching. The question that most assuredly follows this sentiment, however, is “how can and why should we do that?”. I cover some reasons why we should in the next section, but I would first like to attend to the question of how. Currently, promotion and tenure standards within most major universities and family therapy programs are written in such a way that research agenda is of upmost importance. If a faculty members want to achieve assistant, associate, or full professorship, they must demonstrate that they are capable of publishing research, presenting, and contributing to scholarly dialogue.

Participants cited a lack of incentives as a primary reason why meaningful teaching practices often fall by the wayside. They discussed that engaging students in their learning and constantly looking for ways to facilitate meaningful education takes a considerable amount of time, effort, and resources. Like in any profession, there is limited time to attend to every responsibility with as much depth and quality as a person would like. As a result, when it comes to moving up the academic ranks, educators are often forced to divert their resources toward research. Unless an educator is willing to, as one participant explained “go the extra mile”, teaching is likely to suffer or rely upon already-established syllabi, methods, and/or processes, whether meaningful or not. Perhaps it would behoove family therapy programs to increase their emphasis on teaching evaluations as part of promotion and tenure. Program directors could evaluate faculty on student evaluation response rates, and whether teaching scores are comparable or even higher than departmental or college averages. Participants even suggested holding “teaching workshops” where faculty come together to learn what does or does not work for their peers. If faculty are incentivized to engage in meaningful teaching practices, it may

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become the norm for a program, which could contribute to some of the factors that are listed in the subsequent section.

### **Implications, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research**

Aside from relationship building, the methods outlined above, though common among the participants, were not wholly universal. Teaching methods that work for one teacher may not necessarily work for others, so my goal was not to corroborate the participants' pedagogies, but rather to explore the similarities across them. Though the interview protocol I used attempted to capture the how-to of as many meaningful education practices as possible, these findings are only a start. For example, even though participants discussed the need to attend to students' levels of development, it is unclear whether these methods are better suited to masters-level students versus doctoral-level students, or to both. Future research could explore this difference in more depth.

The experiences of twelve award-winning teachers cannot possibly capture the entirety of how to facilitate meaningful education for students. Undoubtedly, there are family therapy educators that are deserving of one of these teaching awards, but, for whatever reason, have not yet been selected or nominated for them. In addition, both the AAMFT Training Award and the Kathleen Briggs Outstanding Mentor Awards are North American awards, which narrows the findings down to what is likely considered to be meaningful to North American family therapy students rather than family therapy students across the globe. Similarly, it is difficult to know whether the students and colleagues who nominated these award-winners are representative of a diverse range of identities. As a result, it is important to consider that these meaningful teaching practices may or may not necessarily be representative of practices that reach minority students or marginalized students whose voices are often overlooked.



### **Student Performance and Competency**

Research consistently shows that teacher quality is strongly related to student achievement, especially as it relates to K-12 education (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Schalock, 1998; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Though it is far more difficult to find literature that discusses the impact of quality teaching on undergraduate or graduate student achievement, Sanders and Horn (1998) suggested that trends within K-12 as it relates to the intersection of quality teaching and student achievement likely extend into higher education. Though quality teaching is certainly an art, research demonstrates that there may also be some science to it. For example, Marzano et al. (2001) found that quality teachers are more likely to implement instructional strategies that reinforce student effort and lead to higher percentile gains. Based on longitudinal research on the intersection of teacher performance and student learning, Sanders and Horn (1998) explained that their results showed that the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher. It does not seem far-fetched to wonder if this might also be the case for family therapy education.

Could it be that effective, meaningful family therapy teaching practices also contribute to heightened student competencies? Though the findings of this study do not necessarily answer this question, they certainly do raise it. While arguably any student would be interested in learning from professors who make use of meaningful teaching strategies, it is not a stretch to assume that these same students would also be interested in graduating as competent therapists. In fact, the student-centered ideas present within the results of this study are juxtaposed to a body of family therapy education literature that is decidedly subject-centered. The core competency movement gave rise to empirical studies that focus on what students are learning, rather than how they are learning it (Earl, 2017). As Piercy et al. (2016) highlighted, just because

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experiences are considered to be meaningful does not mean that they contribute to student competencies.

The interview protocol for this study was developed from what students consider to be meaningful to them, not from what has been empirically shown to influence student competencies. The core competencies are heavily emphasized for accreditation and assessment, so whether the specific teaching methods outlined in this study directly contribute to student competency is a question worthy of empirical investigation.

### **Student Satisfaction and Retention**

Quality teaching has also been shown to directly influence student satisfaction with their programs, and by extension enrollment retention. Wong, Tong, & Wong (2016) recently found that teaching quality contributes to institutional branding, which may lead to students perceiving certain programs to be more desirable than others. They also found that both teaching quality and institutional branding have direct influence on both student satisfaction and achievement. Cassidy (2016) found similar results, where quality teaching was a strong factor in predicting student satisfaction. Carey (2016) found that when students are more satisfied with their programs, they are more likely to stay.

Though quality teaching is but one factor in student satisfaction with a program, research seems to indicate that meaningful practices such as those described in this study could contribute to student satisfaction and, in turn, higher program retention rates. Perhaps if the teaching faculty of a family therapy training program are willing to adopt some of the recommendations of this study, students may report higher satisfaction with the classroom component of their training, which in turn could lead to their investment and retention. Future researchers should

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explore how meaningful teaching impacts administrative aspects of a program, such as outcomes, retention, and gatekeeping to see if this is indeed the case.

### **Extension to Other Roles and Contexts**

Like the participants in this study, family therapy educators often fill more roles than just “teacher”. They can also be supervisors, mentors, administrators, committee members, advisors, and practicing therapists to boot. Could it be that the findings of this study also apply to these other contexts? That is to say, do the aforementioned themes also apply to facilitating meaningful advising, supervisory, or even therapeutic relationships? After all, therapists teach their clients all the time. Though this study focused on teaching, specifically, it could be that the participants in this study simply practice in meaningful ways that transcend all of these contexts, and therefore could be applied in more than just the classroom setting. This potentially broad extension seems worthy of empirical investigation, especially since supervision and training are often intertwined within the literature.

While the findings of this study provide concrete examples of what award-winning family therapy educators *do*, it does not capture who they *are*. One might wonder if what the participants in this study do to facilitate meaningful education is catalyzed by their personalities or specific character traits. For example, do they embody a similar way of being as defined by Fife et al. (2014)? Future researchers should consider studying the characteristics of instructors who students identify as having the most positive influence on them. Such research might provide context for why the practices outlined in this study are effective.

### **Conclusion**

This study directly benefits family therapy educators who aspire to improve their teaching by facilitating meaningful learning experiences for their students. This study also

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indirectly benefits future students, all of whom must complete graduate training prior to becoming family therapists. I hope the themes and recommendations derived from interviewing award-winning family educators will be useful in paving the way for future research focused on elevating the importance of meaningful teaching in family therapy training programs.

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Table 2.1

<i>Table 1 Themes Related to How Award-Winning Family Therapy Educators Facilitate Meaningful Family Therapy Education</i>
Relationship Building Attending to Student Development Relevance Actively Engaging Students in the Process Enthusiasm and Curiosity Providing and Receiving Honest Feedback Transparency

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Figure 2.1

Award	Description	Award Recipients	
		Individuals	Programs
<b>AAMFT Training Award</b>	This award honors AAMFT members and/or training programs for significant contributions to the advancement of the field of marriage and family therapy. by encouraging and training the next generation of marriage and family therapy researchers and/or practitioners.	Fred Piercy (1997) Betty Carter (1998) Peggy Papp (1998) Olga Silverstein (1998) Marianne Walters (1998) Richard S. Wampler (2000) James Keller (2001) Howard Protinsky (2001) Douglas H. Sprenkle (2002) Mary Ward Hicks (2003) Volker Thomas (2005) Joseph L. Wetchler (2007) Eric E. McCollum (2008) Thorana S. Nelson (2009) Wallace Denton (2010) Sue Johnson (2013)	Colorado State University Marriage & Family Therapy Program (1999) North Dakota State University Marriage & Family Therapy Program (2012) East Carolina, University Medical Family Therapy Doctoral Program (2015)
<b>NCFR Kathleen Briggs Outstanding Mentor Award</b>	The purpose of the Kathleen Briggs Award is to recognize an outstanding mentor of students and new professionals in the area of marriage and family therapy. It is given in honor of Kathleen Briggs, a long-time Family Therapy (FT) Section member and leader. She was committed to mentoring marriage and family therapy graduate students and new professionals.	Richard & Karen Wampler (2011) Fred Piercy (2013) Christi McGeorge (2015)	

Figure 1: Award descriptions and past recipients

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Figure 2.2

<b>Findings Related to Meaningful and Non-Meaningful Family Therapy Education Practices from Piercy et al. (2016)</b>	<b>Present Research Questions</b>
Good Teaching/General	What do you consider to be “good teaching”? Why do you think you received your teaching award?
Personal Connection with Teacher or Supervisor	How do you nurture a personal connection with your students in the classes you teach? Could you give an example?
Collaborative Environment	How do you nurture a collaborative environment in your classes and/or supervision? Could you give an example?
Connecting Theory to Practice	How do you connect theory to practice in your classes? Could you give an example?
Student-Led Groups or Activities	We found that many students did not appreciate it when students who knew little more than they did taught or gave presentations. How do you keep student led groups, presentations, or activities meaningful to the other students? Could you give an example?
Client Progress or Lack of Progress	We found that students were quite affected, both positively and negatively, by the progress or lack of progress of their clients. How do you, at the same time, support a student’s investment in their clients without taking too much responsibility for clients who do not make expected progress? Could you give an example?
Poor Teaching	In our previous study, we received a lot of examples of poor teaching from our graduate student participants. What is poor teaching to you, and how do you suggest that our graduate programs avoid such teaching?
Self-of-the-Therapist Issues	Students in our previous study seemed to appreciate learning about their own personal issues and how to be sensitive to these issues in the therapy they provide. How do you suggest this be done? Could you give an example?
Diversity of Perspectives	Students in our previous study appreciated a learning environment that supported a diversity of perspectives. Do you agree? How do you nurture such an environment? Could you give an example?
<b>Additional Questions</b>	
Additional Thoughts	What other thoughts do you have regarding what makes your teaching engaging and meaningful to students?
Big Picture	What should family therapy programs be doing to ensure good teaching? What could AAMFT be doing to

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	promote meaningful teaching? How can other teachers benefit from your experience?
Differentiation from Other Fields	How is good teaching in MFT different from good teaching in other disciplines? What, specifically, makes it unique?

*Figure 2: Interview Protocol*

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Figure 2.3

