

**Middle School Students' Attitudes
Toward Family and Consumer Science Subject Matter:
Is Mandatory Coursework Useful in "Selling" the Curriculum?**

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Introduction

Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) curriculum objectives closely parallel those of middle school (Drucker, 1989) in that FCS subjects such as foods and nutrition, clothing and textiles, personal finance, and family relationships focus on the student's personal as well as academic development (Callahan, 1993; Davis, 1993; Larson, 1990). Nevertheless, FCS courses often are targeted for elimination from the middle school curriculum. This is due in part to the stereotypic conceptualization of the subject matter held by the general public and educational policy makers (Grundy & Henry, 1995; Haley Peggram, & Levy, 1993; Larson, 1990), which may be based on outdated notions of what the FCS discipline is about (Burge & Stewart (1991). These attitudes may affect the longevity of FCS curricula, especially when school budgets are supported by tax dollars (Erwin, Moran, & McInnis, 1996; Klien, 1993).

Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) suggest that a person's attitude is an important factor in determining subsequent behavior. During the middle school years, adolescents begin to develop their own values and attitudes in relation to learning and work (Smith, 1990; Toepfer, 1994), and many of these are enduring (Toepfer). Attitudes toward academic disciplines are formed, at least in part, as a result of an individual's firsthand experience gained through coursework. If few of these attitudes change after leaving middle school, the significance of seventh graders' attitudes toward FCS middle school programs becomes crucial to the future of the discipline (Toepfer).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to evaluate seventh graders' attitudes toward FCS subjects related to foods and clothing, respectively, and examine whether these attitudes would differ after having taken courses in these subjects. Students' attitudes toward school in general-both before and after the students completed the FCS courses-were also examined to see whether attitude change that occurred for the FCS courses occurred for school in general. If the latter occurred, this would suggest that attitude change toward the FCS subjects might have been due to influences other than firsthand experience with the courses. Relationships among the students' attitudes to the foods subject, the clothing subject, and school in general before and after completion of the FCS courses were also examined.

Method

Instrument

An instrument was developed that measured attitudes toward the foods subject matter, clothing subject matter and school in general using 5-point Likert-scaled items. Because the classes surveyed used more traditional forms of "foods" and "clothing" (i.e., course material centered on hands-on cooking and sewing activities), some of the instrument items reflected attitudes toward these activities. The attitude toward "foods" and attitude toward "clothing" measures each consisted of nine items. The attitude toward school measure consisted of five items. Information regarding age and gender also was collected. The instrument was pre-tested with eight seventh grade students to determine whether the instructions and instrument items were clear. Wording of some instrument items was modified in accordance with suggestions of the pilot group. Examples of individual instrument items include:

It is important to know how to cook.

A "foods" class is not as important as other classes in school.

What I learn in "clothing" class will be useful to me.

"Clothing" is not an important subject.

Doing well in school is very important.

Studying gets in the way of my other plans and activities.

Data Collection

Subjects consisted of 322 seventh grade students enrolled in either mandatory "foods" or "clothing" classes at three middle schools in a Midwestern metropolitan suburb. The students had no prior coursework in these subjects. Parent permission was secured prior to administration of the questionnaire; however, students were not required to participate in the survey even if their parents gave permission for them to do so. To ensure anonymity, students were not identified with their individual responses. The questionnaire was administered on the second day of class during the scheduled class period, before regular instruction began. The same questionnaire was administered on the last day of class instruction before grades were issued.

Data Analysis

Male and female responses were analyzed separately. T-tests were used to determine if there were differences in the students' attitudes toward the foods and clothing subjects, respectively, before and after having taken the corresponding courses. T-tests were also conducted to determine if there were any differences in subjects' attitudes toward school before and after they completed the FCS courses. Pearson correlation coefficients examined relationships between students' attitudes toward the foods or clothing subjects and school in general, both before and after the FCS courses were completed.

Results

Over half of the subjects (51%) were enrolled in a foods course; 49% were enrolled in a clothing course. The percentage of females in the sample was slightly larger (55%) than the percentage of males (45%). Each subject's enrollment was approximately half male and half female. The majority of the students (86%) were twelve years old, with the remainder ranging in age from eleven to fourteen years.

There were differences in attitudes for the female students who took the foods class (see Table 1). Girls had a significantly less positive attitude toward the foods subject matter after they had taken the course ($t = 1.96$, $p < .05$). There were no differences for boys who took a foods course or for girls or boys who completed a clothing course. Neither males' nor females' attitudes toward school in general differed before and after completing the foods or clothing courses (See Table 1).

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated both before and after the FCS courses to measure the strength of the relationships between attitudes toward the FCS subjects individually and attitudes toward school in general. Prior to the foods course, a positive relationship existed between attitude toward the subject matter and attitude toward school in general for girls ($r = 0.239$, $p < .05$) (see Table 2). After completion of the foods course, the positive relationship between attitudes toward the foods subject matter and toward school in general was stronger ($r = 0.343$, $p < .01$). For boys, prior to taking the foods course there was no relationship between attitudes toward the foods subject matter and toward school in general. However, after the foods courses were completed, a positive relationship existed between attitude toward the subject and toward school for the males ($r = 0.284$, $p < .05$).

Table 1
T-Test for Attitude toward Foods and Clothing Subjects and Attitude Toward School Before and After Course Completion

Variable	n	Before		After		t-value
		Taking Class		Taking Class		
		M	SD	M	SD	
Attitude toward Foods Subject						
Males	73	29.84	3.11	30.03	3.47	-.350
Females	87	30.05	2.48	29.10	3.74	1.96*
Attitude toward Clothing Subject						
Males	65	24.17	2.50	24.57	2.82	-.855
Females	80	25.26	2.09	25.46	2.63	-.537
Attitude toward School by Class in Which Enrolled						
Males - Foods	71	18.44	2.15	18.47	2.85	-.082
Females - Foods	87	18.89	2.18	18.74	3.09	.358
Males - Clothing	72	18.57	2.11	18.40	2.56	.322
Females - Clothing	80	18.40	2.14	18.35	2.72	.302

Note. Subjects responded to items on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Possible ranges for "foods," "clothing," and school attitude measures were 5 - 45, 5 - 45, and 5 - 25 respectively. n varies due to student absenteeism on the day the questionnaires were administered or students' election not to participate in the survey.

* $p < .05$.

For students taking clothing courses, there were no relationships between attitudes toward the clothing subject matter and toward school in general for either girls or boys. After completion of the

class, there was a positive relationship between clothing subject matter and school in general for girls ($r = 0.517, p < .05$).

Table 2
Pearson Correlation Coefficients (r) for Attitude Toward School and Attitude Toward Foods or Clothing Subjects, Before and After Course Completion

Variable	n	Correlation (r) with Attitude Toward School
<u>Before Taking Class</u>		
Attitude toward Foods Subject		
Males	71	0.097
Females	84	0.239*
Attitude toward Clothing Subject		
Males	66	0.066
Females	80	0.071
<u>After Taking Class</u>		
Attitude toward Foods Subject		
Males	70	0.284*
Females	78	0.343**
Attitude toward Clothing Subject		
Males	63	0.180
Females	81	0.517**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

Mean scores for the students' attitudes toward "foods" and "clothing" subjects both before (means ranged from 24.17 - 30.05) and after course completion (means ranged from 24.57 - 30.03) may be described generally as neutral. Mean scores for the students' attitudes toward school in general both before (means ranged from 18.40 - 18.89) and after (means ranged from 18.35 - 18.74) taking the FCS classes were slightly less positive than attitudes toward the FCS courses.

With the exception of the males enrolled in the clothing course, the data suggest that prior to taking the FCS courses, students perceived these subjects as being comparatively different or unique in some way from their other coursework. After the courses were completed, their attitudes toward the subjects were more consistent with their general attitude toward school.

With the exception of the girls' attitudes toward the foods subject, the fact that the students' neutral attitudes did not change suggests that the students' experiences with the FCS courses reinforced the perceptions of the subjects the students had prior to taking the courses. While it appears that, for the most part, taking the courses did not improve pre-existing attitudes, it is encouraging that the attitudes toward the FCS subjects of students as a group was not negative. It is interesting to note that mean attitude scores both before and after completion of the FCS courses indicated that students' attitudes toward the foods subject was better than their attitudes toward the clothing subject.

Conclusion and Implications

If FCS educators and professionals are concerned with ensuring the future of the curriculum, mandatory FCS courses in middle school may provide a currently unused opportunity to shape

students' attitudes toward FCS subjects in a more positive way. The findings suggest that although adolescents' attitudes toward the foods and clothing subjects may be neutral prior to taking these courses, the traditional classroom "foods" and "clothing" experience does not improve these attitudes. A re-examination of FCS course matter may be called for. Updated or innovative approaches to these subjects may help students develop in the manner intended by FCS and middle school curricula, but in a context more relevant to their everyday lives.

Klein (1993) suggests incorporating more of a family focus (as opposed to specifically a women's focus) into FCS courses, and centering curricula more around human development and family resource management issues rather than skill development. For example, clothing-related courses may focus on fiber properties, interpreting garment labels, and assessment of garment quality in order to make more informed textile product purchase and care decisions. Courses that deal with foods may focus on healthful food selections both at the grocery store and at restaurants and fast food establishments. Further qualitative research such as focus group interviews with middle school FCS students may provide more insight into adolescent perceptions of FCS subjects and the role that traditional versus innovative approaches to teaching those subjects play in shaping attitudes toward FCS education.

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