

High School Students' Perceptions of Family and Consumer Sciences Education as a Career in the Jackson Purchase District of Kentucky

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This study investigated possible reasons high school junior and senior students in the Jackson Purchase District of Kentucky choose to pursue a career in teaching Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) and examined future demand for FCS teachers in the district. Results of the study indicate the number of students enrolled in FCS courses has remained steady, the majority of students who take FCS classes (90.7%) have not considered FCS education as a career and that most students feel FCS should continue to be offered in high school. In addition, 28.5% of teachers in the study will retire within 2 years, adding to the teacher shortage problem in a state where demand for FCS teachers already exceeds supply.

For years researchers and educators have expressed concern for the dwindling supply and increased demand for Family and Consumer Science (FCS) teachers (Jackman & Rehm, 1994; Miller & Meszaros, 1996; Mimbs, Stewart & Heath-Camp, 1998). According to Bull, Uerz and Yoakum (2000, p. 30) "FCS programs provide the education necessary in reducing welfare dependency and increasing self-sufficiency by empowering individuals with the knowledge and skills to manage their personal and family lives as well as their work responsibilities." Despite the fact that enrollments in FCS courses remain steady, many high schools are faced with potentially closing FCS programs because there are no replacement teachers available to keep programs up and running (Lee, 1999).

Although attempts have been made to recruit FCS teachers over the past 12 years FCS programs have still fallen short of balancing teacher supply and demand. A recent national survey conducted by Werhan and Way (2006) revealed that FCS education continues to experience a serious shortage of qualified teachers. In order to successfully recruit FCS teachers there must be an understanding of why decline in this field has occurred. According to Lee (1999), it is important to collect data on student characteristics to show specific reasons why students pursue or do not pursue FCS education careers.

Miller and Meszaros (1996) predicted the current severe shortage of FCS teachers in the state of Kentucky. For example, they predicted that Kentucky would need 220 FCS teachers by 1998, however at that time only 99 FCS education students were enrolled in Kentucky FCS teacher education programs. Therefore, profiling Kentucky high school students and determining their perceptions of FCS education as a career may reveal reasons for the decline in FCS teacher education and provide insights into FCS teacher recruitment strategies. The dual purposes of this study were first, to investigate why high school junior and senior students in the Jackson Purchase district of Kentucky (JPDK) choose to pursue or not pursue a career in teaching FCS and second, and to determine future demand for FCS teachers in the district. In order to accomplish these purposes, the following research questions were examined.

1. What factors influence junior and senior high school students' decisions to pursue FCS

- education as a possible career in the JPDK?
2. What is the future demand for FCS educators in the JPDK?
 3. Has there been a decline in enrollment in FCS high school classes in the JPDK over the past 10 years?
 4. To what extent do demographic characteristics play a role in students' decisions to pursue a degree in FCS education in the JPDK?

Literature Review

Student Perceptions of Family and Consumer Sciences

Over the years, FCS has experienced a decline in teachers so researchers and educators have begun to look into the reasons for this decline (Malroux & Tripp, 2008). One important factor when determining causes of decline is students' perceptions of FCS. Since it takes student enrollment to run a secondary education program, students' perceptions of the field must be considered (Erwin, Moran, & McInnis, 1996).

Several studies have examined student perceptions in other states. For example, in a study conducted by Smith, Hall, Jones, Cory and Ethridge (1998) a survey was sent out to a total of 1,508 Georgia students. Of the 1,508 students, 68% thought FCS was very interesting and 82% thought FCS was beneficial for their family life; however 34% thought FCS courses should not be required along with 28% who were unsure whether FCS should be required. In addition, over half (52%) of the students did not feel FCS was as important as major subjects. However, this study did not examine whether students wanted to pursue FCS teaching careers.

In a similar study conducted by Lee (1999), 1,036 high school students in North Carolina were surveyed. Again, of the 1,036 students most held positive attitudes regarding the FCS classes and the FCS profession. However, when asked if they would consider becoming FCS teachers themselves a majority (71.2%) said no. Lee did not mention which FCS classes were offered at the participating schools in her study. Some students could have been enrolled in money management, food science, clothing construction, and child development courses which are not state or nationally mandated courses (Lee, 1999). Therefore, students enrolled willingly, which is an indication that they had positive attitudes toward FCS classes at their schools. Students who are mandated to take a course such as life skills might not have a positive view about FCS classes.

In an earlier study that produced similar outcomes, Lee (1996) interviewed middle school students in North Carolina. The students were all enrolled in a state-approved course entitled *Exploring Life Skills*. Middle school students were asked several questions pertaining to the class. Specifically, they were asked "what they thought of the career Family and Consumer Sciences teacher" and "as an adult, would they like to be a Family and Consumer Sciences teacher" (Lee, 1996, p. 96). Although 80.5% of respondents demonstrated positive attitudes toward their FCS class, 70% indicated no desire to become an FCS teacher.

Students' lack of interest in an FCS education career has resulted in the termination of several FCS programs at universities across the United States (Weis, 1995). Fewer FCS teacher education programs lead to fewer college students enrolling in university programs to supply the FCS high school teachers needed. When the supply is less than the demand of teachers, programs will close down, merge with other disciplines, or encourage irregular certification for non-traditional pre-service teachers (Travers, 1999).

Supply and Demand of Family and Consumer Sciences Teachers

The shortage of FCS education enrollment throughout the years and the aging FCS teaching workforce create a negative supply and a positive demand (Stout, Couch & Fowler, 1998). Perhaps one of the most widely cited studies conducted on the future demand for FCS teachers was a national study by Werhan and Way (2006). In the 2002-2003 academic year, over five million students enrolled in FCS classes taught by 37,500 teachers in the United States. The majority of responding states reported a shortage of FCS teachers. Some of the data were incomplete because many school boards/states/regions did not report their programs as FCS. Some referred to them as 'other', 'technical', or 'life skills' making it difficult to gather specific data for FCS on a national level. FCS enrollment makes up 25% of the total student population, which indicates FCS is an important part of secondary education (Werhan & Way, 2006). Data were not available for Kentucky.

Ten years earlier, Miller and Meszaros (1996) conducted a national study of the incoming supply and demand for FCS teachers and extension educators. Miller and Meszaros based their study on a suggestion made from Jackman and Rehm (1994) that the decline was due to the number of undergraduates majoring in the field. Findings from research based on 171 surveys mailed to U.S. colleges revealed that 27 undergraduate FCS education programs had been deactivated or phased out. Alaska, Maine, New Hampshire, Oregon, Rhode Island, and the District of Columbia no longer have FCS teacher education programs (Miller & Meszaros, 1996). At the time the study was conducted, data showed Iowa State University as the only higher education institution with a stand-alone FCS teacher education department in the United States. However, the program was later combined with apparel and hospitality management (Iowa State University, 2000). It is likely that in the fourteen years since the Miller and Meszaros 1996 study, additional FCS undergraduate programs have been deactivated despite being combined with other programs.

Only 315 FCS education degrees were awarded in 1995-1996 (Zehr, 1998). From the data collected in the Miller and Meszaros (1996) study, the states with the largest disparity between supply and demand are Arkansas, California, Florida, Iowa, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Specific information for Kentucky showed a need for 270 teachers with only 99 undergraduates available to meet the demand. In response to the crisis, the University of Kentucky used federal and state vocational education money to recruit teachers and promote the field of FCS (Zehr, 1998). Several retired FCS teachers filled vacancies but retirement benefits only allow them to work 100 days a year (Zehr, 1998). Thus, this is a temporary fix rather than a permanent solution. However, in the nationwide list of teacher shortage areas conducted between 1990 through 2011, FCS was not recognized by the United States Department of Education (USDE) as an area of teacher shortage (USDE, 2010). Further, Bull and Cummings (2002) forecasted that 77% of the FCS workforce will retire by the year 2012. The number of universities offering FCS education degrees and the number of students graduating from these programs are seriously declining (Bull & Cummings, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Super's Theory of Vocational Choice was developed in 1954. It was based on Ginzberg and associates' earlier theory of career development (Super, 1957). Super believed that career development involved an individual's whole life. The theory includes five main stages with sub-stages individuals progress through: growth, which lasts from birth to 14; exploration, lasting

from age 15 to 24 (with the sub-stages of crystallization, specification, and implementation); establishment, from 25 to 44 (with sub-stages of stabilization, consolidation and advancing); maintenance, from 45 to 64 (with sub-stages of holding, updating, and innovating); and the final stage of decline from age 65 and onwards (with sub-stages decelerating, retirement planning, and retirement living).

Super (1957) believed that people are constantly changing and that the environment we live in could be a precursor for what we choose to become. Socioeconomic factors and personal characteristics would therefore impact career development.

Super's Theory and the Study Population

Because the population for the current study consisted of junior and senior high school students who typically have an age range of 16 to 18, Super's (1957) career development theory was deemed an applicable framework, as the theory includes stages based on age ranges. According to Super's career development theory (1957), participants of the current study would fall into the exploration stage, somewhere in between the sub-stages of crystallization and specification. During exploration the person starts to decipher between 'fairy tale' careers and careers that could be attainable. They begin to explore different careers through classes, after school jobs, and family members (Super, 1957).

The Jackson Purchase District is surrounded by rivers and lakes which puts this geographical area at a socioeconomic disadvantage. Studies have been conducted about river towns and high levels of poverty especially along the Mississippi River (Boston, 2008). Fewer jobs are available due to the stigma of the area which is unattractive to teachers, businesses, and health care providers. According to Super's theory, this environment probably has some influence on the career choices of the student population studied.

Super's Theory and Reviewed Literature

All research reviewed for this study included middle school through high school students, with the age range approximately 12 to 19-year-olds. According to Super's (1957) career development theory, there are two career stages represented in the literature reviewed. During the growth stage, which lasts until 14 years old, people are fantasizing about careers, collecting perceptions of careers, and developing a sense of self-identity (Super, 1957). During the exploration stage and its sub-stages, people are beginning to test the waters with their career development. They are more interested in the possibilities and usually form career goals towards the end of this stage. Since the current study focused on junior and senior high school students, the participants should be in Super's exploration stage.

Method

Population and Sample

The target population of this study was all FCS teachers and current junior and senior FCS students at all high schools in the JPDK. As noted above, this area is at an economic disadvantage which makes the population of the area among those that the AAFCS suggests can be helped to "reduce welfare dependency through FCS education" (Bull & Cummings, 2002, p. 30).

The sample consisted of volunteer teachers and junior and senior students from high schools where permission to conduct the study was obtained. Not all schools agreed to participate.

The JPDK consists of eight counties with fourteen public high schools. Of these schools, the principals of all but two schools agreed to participate. However, not all of the teachers at the 12 schools where permission was obtained agreed to participate in the study, resulting in only seven participating schools. Among the classrooms where teachers agreed to participate, rosters identified 346 students and 8 teachers. All 346 students were provided with consent and assent forms, and were informed that participation was voluntary. The 8 teachers were provided with consent forms, and informed that participation was voluntary. Seven teachers and 107 students agreed to volunteer and made up the sample of the study.

Instrumentation

Two questionnaires were developed to collect quantitative data for this study guided by review of the literature.

Lee's (1999) Family and Consumer Sciences Survey for High School Students was modified based on additional literature and feedback from the pilot test of the current research project. The resulting student questionnaire consisted of two sections (a) education (11-items) and (b) demographics (5-items). Students chose from a list of potential answers for all items on the instrument. For example, in the education section of the student questionnaire, item 1 asks "Do you plan to attend college after high school?" Students chose from "yes", "no" and "undecided."

In addition, after review of the literature, a questionnaire consisting of 7-items was constructed to measure perceptions of teachers about their FCS classes and personal background. All 7-items were open-ended questions.

The instruments were pilot tested with a group of 5 Career and Technical Education master's degree students at a local university to establish validity and to obtain feedback on the readability of the instruments. Feedback on the questions such as whether the instruments were understandable, whether the questions were written at the appropriate level, and the appropriateness of the questions for the study was provided. Minor adjustments were made to questions on both instruments. It was not possible to run reliability statistics on the instruments as the samples in both the pilot and the actual study were too small to obtain results.

Data Collection Procedures

Human Subjects approval was obtained and an office visit was made to each high school's principal/assistant principal to explain the research study and obtain written permission to conduct research in their high school. All but two principals gave permission. Thereafter, emails and phone calls were sent to discuss the nature of the research study with the participating schools' FCS teacher(s). Phone calls and emails to FCS teachers at the high schools where permission had been obtained from the principals failed to obtain participation at all but 7 of the schools. Follow-up emails were sent out to teachers who did not respond to the first set of emails. Two other attempts were made to contact the teachers via email, however no additional teachers responded and the study proceeded with participation of seven schools.

Student subjects were then obtained through class rosters at the seven participating schools. Consent forms for parents and assent forms for the students were distributed two weeks before data collection was scheduled. Reminders were sent to all students in an effort to increase participation. Participation was voluntary, and instruments were handed out in class to all students who turned in signed consent and assent forms. However, not all eligible students

completed the survey instrument. The resulting response rates were 30.9% (N=107) students and 87.5% (N=7) teachers.

Results

Results and findings are presented in the order in which the research questions were posed. Data from the student questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS v. 16 and descriptive statistics. Data from the teacher questionnaire were grouped according to the responses and categorized for reporting.

Research Question 1: What are the factors that influence junior and senior high school students' decisions to pursue FCS education as a possible career in the Jackson Purchase District of Kentucky?

Most students (90.7%; N=97) have not considered FCS as a career; only ten students would consider FCS as a career (9.3%; N=10). Respondents were asked to select all factors that influenced their decision to pursue or not pursue a career in FCS education (see Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1
Factors Influencing Decision to Pursue FCS Education as a Career

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Teaching is rewarding	3	2.8
Desire to teach content area	1	.9
Want to help youth	2	2.8
Family member teaches	2	1.9
Parents want them to teach	2	1.9
Other factors	1	.9

Table 2
Factors Influencing Decision Not to Pursue FCS as a Career

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
College attending does not offer FCS	2	1.9
Not enough available information about FCS	2	1.9
Have never thought about it as a possible career	68	63.6
Teachers do not make enough money	8	7.5
Not enough available jobs	19	17.8
Other factors	10	9.3

It should be noted that of the ten students who showed interest in FCS as a career, only four planned to pursue education as a degree in college. Further, of those four students, one indicated she would only attend a community college, which will not result in certification to teach FCS. Another of the four plans to major in elementary education. As FCS teachers are certified for either grades 6-12 or grades 7-12, it is unlikely that this student will receive an FCS teaching certification. From the data collected, there appear to be only two strong candidates for future FCS teaching certification.

Research Question 2: What is the future demand for FCS educators in the Jackson Purchase District of Kentucky?

Teacher participants were asked if they would retire within the next five to ten years. Two teachers indicated they would retire within the next five years (28.5%). One teacher indicated she had continued working although capable of retiring because her school does not have a possible candidate for her replacement which would lead to closing the FCS department at that high school. Other teachers merely responded “no” to indicate that they are not planning to retire in the next five to ten years.

Research Question 3: Has there been a decline in enrollment in FCS high school classes offered over the past ten years in the Jackson Purchase District of Kentucky?

Of the seven teachers, three could not answer the question, “Has there been a decline in your classes since 2000?” because they have not been teaching long enough to make an accurate report. Three indicated there was not a decline and one teacher indicated there was a decline in her enrollment in two areas: child development and parenting. Two teachers commented that they fear FCS will be phased out if the state drops the mandated course of life skills. They expressed their concerns with the state’s ability to mandate other core classes which will give high school students an even smaller opportunity to take and explore electives. One teacher’s response sums up these fears, “I worry about the decline across the state because it's a state effort to keep FCS up and running. It would not matter if I have a strong increase of students throughout the years if the rest of the departments throughout the state were showing a severe decline in enrollment because we rely on each other for program continuation.”

School records verify that overall there has been only a small decline in limited areas of FCS student enrollments in JPDK.

Research Question 4: To what extent do demographic characteristics play a role in the student’s decision to pursue a degree in FCS education in the Jackson Purchase District of Kentucky?

In examining the demographic characteristics of the 10 student participants who indicated they have considered FCS as a career; nine were seniors, all (10) were female, and nine were Caucasian. This is representative of the demographic characteristics of the sample population.

Among the students interested in FCS as a career, for the highest level of education that their mother completed, participants reported that two had some high school education, six had a high school diploma, one had an Associate’s degree, and one had a Bachelor’s degree. For the highest level of education their fathers have completed, participants reported: five had some high school education, four had a high school diploma, and one had a Bachelor’s degree. Again, this was representative of the entire sample, indicating that parents’ level of education is probably not a factor in determining whether or not students will pursue FCS as a career, although parents’ level of education may be a factor in the overall low rates of students indicating they will attend college.

Discussion

Although only ten students reported they would consider FCS as a career, most students (77.6%; N=83) felt that FCS classes were important while only 3.7% (N=4) felt they were not. The remainder, (18.7%; N=20) declared they did not know/maybe. Along with the importance of FCS classes, slightly less than half (43.9%) felt FCS classes should be mandated, about one fifth

(21.5%) felt they should not be mandated, and about a third (34.6%) could not decide if they should be mandated. Nearly two thirds (60%; n= 97) have never considered FCS as a possible career. Furthermore, 17 of these 97 students indicated there were not enough jobs available, which contradicts the findings of the literature reviewed for the current study. It is evident that some students in the current study are unaware there is a severe shortage of FCS educators. Clearly more recruiting and awareness information needs to be provided to FCS students at the upper levels of high school.

A total of 29% (N=31) students responding to this study were males. This is consistent with many major studies in FCS. In fact some scholars have discussed recruiting men and consider them to be our largest minority group in this field (Werhan, 2002). Within the JPDK no attempts have been made to recruit male FCS teachers.

Of the ten female students who would consider a career teaching FCS, all but one were seniors. Seniors are generally 18 years old by graduation, which places them in the specification sub-stage of Super's career development theory. Specification is the time when people are narrowing their choices (Super, 1957). This means it is likely that the seniors have a better understanding of what they will pursue as a career. However, as noted above, only two of the ten actually plan to attend college programs that could actually lead to an FCS teaching certification.

Nine of the 10 were Caucasian; however, one Hispanic female indicated a desire to teach FCS. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2004), minority educators make up only 13% of the teacher workforce. Yet, Hispanics are the most rapidly growing ethnic group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002) so this is a group the field might want to focus on in future recruiting efforts.

In this study, 18.7% of participants' mothers did not have a high school diploma and 19.6% of participants' fathers did not have a high school diploma. In addition, 41% of participants' mothers had a high school diploma as their highest level of education and fewer than 15% of participants' mothers had a bachelor's degree or higher. Fewer than 10% of participants' fathers had a bachelor's degree or higher. Finally, 35.5% or 38 students in the study did not know their father's highest level of education and 22.4% or 24 students in the study did not know their mother's highest level of education. Again, using Super's theory to examine these findings, students are limited to exploring occupation opportunities commensurate with their parent's socioeconomic status and the environment in which they live (Super, 1957). Based on the information provided by the students in the current study, socioeconomic and environmental factors of the parents and perhaps the JPDK may have played a role in students' future career plans.

Conclusion and Limitations

Although 86.9% of the participants in this study plan to attend college, only 33.28% of all high school graduates in the United States go on to college (NCES, 2004). Kentucky, overall, has higher than the national average rates of students attending college (63%) with a 62.7% rate for JPDK (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (2008). Therefore, it is likely that at least some of the participating students who responded that they plan to attend college will not.

Regarding FCS education, 10 of the 107 students stated they have an interest in FCS education as a career; however, only two indicated that they plan to attend a college/university program that could lead to an FCS teaching certificate. While we cannot generalize beyond this sample, if these two students in the sample actually obtain FCS teaching certificates, and they choose to teach in the JPDK, there would be no decline in FCS teachers as only two of the

teachers in this study indicated that they are planning to retire soon. However, it is unlikely that these two students would actually remain in the district, as many citizens obtaining college degrees leave the area for economic reasons (Boston, 2008). Further, not all of the teachers in the district participated, so it is likely that there will be more than two retirements in the next 10 years. Therefore, even in a best case scenario, it remains likely that the JPDK will experience a decline in the number of FCS teachers.

Since a large majority of students in this study indicated that they had never considered a career in FCS or that they did not feel there were jobs available in FCS, current FCS teachers need to take a role in informing and recruiting students for FCS careers. According to Super's (1957) theory, during the specification stage students are narrowing their career paths and are more likely to accept influence from authority figures. As such, FCS teachers can play a role in influencing students to pursue FCS teacher education as a career. This study was delimited to FCS high school programs in the JPDK. It should be noted that the study does not serve as a complete indication of the supply and demand for the entire state of Kentucky. Furthermore, seven high schools in the district chose not to participate in the research study, which resulted in incomplete data for the district as a whole. Findings of this study cannot be generalized beyond this sample.

Recommendations

Based on results of this study, the following recommendations are offered.

1. Since a significant number of students, (33.6%) plan to attend the local community college, a bridge degree could be offered between West Kentucky Technical College (WKTC) and Murray State University (MSU), which offers FCS teacher education as a degree. This bridge degree could be marketed towards all students enrolled in Early Childhood Education and Culinary Arts. Since the FCS education degree mandates college students complete courses in both domains, this could be a possible way to recruit students to enroll in MSU's FCS education program once they complete the classes required to achieve an Associate's degree at WKTC. Articulation from two-year to four-year institutions within FCS has been suggested since 1999 (FCS Summit, 1999).
2. Six of the seven teachers in the current study received their degrees from the local university, MSU, but all commented on MSU's failure to publicize the FCS degree program and failure to aggressively recruit students for the program. Both the universities and the current teachers need to share information regarding FCS teacher degrees available in Kentucky.
3. Over 20% of the current study's participants plan to attend MSU once they graduate. Making MSU's FCS presence known in these high schools, offering information, discussing possible scholarships, and creating a mentoring program could increase enrollments. Jensen, Rowley, Skidmore and Parker (2003) carried out a FCS recruitment project which involved a recruiting reception at Brigham Young University. This was shown to be a success as one-eighth of the students participating declared FCS as a major.
4. Minority students should be targeted during recruiting. In response to the lack of diversity in education, priority should be given to students of color and to males. Several supporting studies such as Devall, Vail and Resendez (2005) and Eastman, Cummings, Petersen, & VanLeeuwen, (2006) have shown an increase in minority enrollment as a

- result of effective recruiting and retaining strategies.
5. While a majority of students indicated they do not desire to become FCS teachers, these students also indicated that they have simply never thought of it as a possible career. This finding suggests it is not necessarily that students are opposed to becoming an FCS teacher, but rather that they have not been given an opportunity to consider FCS careers. So, although students may not currently consider FCS education as a possible career it does not mean they could not be persuaded by the idea. Taking a faculty-student mentoring approach could help retain FCS majors (Stevens & Crase, 2003). This could mean starting the recruitment in high school by FCS teachers or guidance counselors. A larger study needs to be conducted on the whole state of Kentucky to explore why students have not considered FCS education as a career.
 6. Since there were a large number of students (17.8%) that indicated there were not enough available jobs in FCS education, FCS teachers should discuss the severe shortage of FCS teachers nationwide with their students. Exposing students to the truth and evidence of the high demand for FCS teachers could result in a larger number of students' pursuing FCS teacher education as a career.

Future Research

There could be misconceptions about what FCS means to students. Some students may perceive FCS as simply cooking and sewing while the FCS field involves many more disciplines. Therefore, investigating students' definitions of FCS could serve as a future study. If there were a common definition and students viewed FCS as a field encompassing many disciplines, then desire to teach in FCS may increase. This could be included in a larger study of the entire state of Kentucky in order to determine why students have not considered FCS education as a career.

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