Employability Standards: Inclusion in Family and Consumer Science Middle School Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent that the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) employability standards were included in the family and consumer sciences (FCS) curriculum. The 149 middle school teachers in this study were asked to indicate on a 4-point Likert type scale whether they considered each of the 25 employability standards to be a major objective, an important objective, an incidental objective, or not an objective in their teaching. Results showed that 16% of the 25 employability standards were identified as a major objective in their teaching by a majority of the participants whereas, 64% of the 25 employability standards were identified as important objectives in their teaching by a majority of the respondents. When teacher groups were compared based on years of teaching experiences and the seven topics of the employability standards, there were no significant differences found between teacher groups on any of the seven topics.

Since the inception of the middle school movement, educators have been interested in the dynamics of early adolescents (Lounsbury, 1996) which is evidenced by the literature (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2002, 2005, 2006; North Carolina State Board of Education, 2004; Southern Regional Education Board, 1999). Middle-level education is characterized as a time when children are transitioning into adolescence and are filled with vibrant energy and intellectual curiosity; they undergo more rapid and personal changes than any other time in their lives (National Middle School Association, 1995). The middle school years span the chronological age of 10 to 15 years. During this time, the early adolescent tend to focus on developing a sense of self, form cultural identities, enlarge their social sphere beyond the family, establish close friendships with others, form opinions about others, and develop a sense of fairness and justness (Clauss, 2006). Therefore, the curriculum in middle school is important; it cannot be a simplified version of secondary level education but should be specifically designed to meet the needs of the early adolescent (Jackman, 1996). A curriculum that focuses on human growth and development and the characteristics of individuals who are changing from childhood to adolescence is favored. According to Lounsbury (1994), the success of the middle school curriculum is determined by its effectiveness in helping these students know who they are, helping them with their aspirations and standards, and viewing their responsibilities and relationships appropriately.

Family and consumer sciences programs are an important part of the middle school movement. Family and consumer sciences in the middle school focuses on helping students develop self-responsibility and competence dealing with the practical problems of early adolescence (Ohio State Department of Education, 2003). Family and consumer sciences classes in middle school provide the broad foundation to prepare students for their multiple roles within work, family, and community along with experiences to help them navigate their way to adulthood (Jackman, 1996; Southers, 1988).

During the last decade, attention has been given to the early adolescent and the world of work (Kerka, 1994). The career and technical education program at the middle school level should give students a view of many different careers. Additionally, middle school career and technical education programs can afford students the opportunity to increase self-understanding as they prepare for an occupation. Career awareness and career choice options are addressed in the family and consumer sciences middle school curriculum. The implementation of a comprehensive career exploration program is an avenue of connecting schools to the world of work (Ohio State Department of Education, 2003); career options are explored in the context of personal interests, personal skills and family life goals.

According to some researchers (Bragg, 1995; Richens & McClain, 2000; Taylor, 2005), successful functioning on the job requires more than technical skills; portable skills are needed and can be transferred from job to job (Techniques, 1997). Portable skills include communication skills, basic skills, ability and willingness to learn, teamwork, thinking skills, personal quality skills, and interpersonal competencies (Kretovics & McCambridge; Richens & McClain, 2000; Techniques, 1997). The portable skills are integral to the family and consumer sciences curriculum at middle school level (Jackman, 1996). Development of portable skills creates options for future live roles and will help students make a successful transition from school to work (Dykman, 1995). Family and consumer sciences education has become part of the career-oriented curriculum that allows for career exploration outside of the home (Georgia Department of Education, 2005a). Therefore, the content of employability is becoming increasingly important and relevant in family and consumer sciences curriculum. Addressing the issues of employability skills can be accomplished through the inclusion of employability standards in the curriculum.

In Georgia, the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC), mandated by the Quality Basic Education Act of 1986 was established (Georgia Learning Connections, 2005a). The QCC is currently being revised as Georgia Performance Standards (GPS). However, in family and consumer sciences those revisions have not been completed and are still referred to as QCC. The QCC is a statewide basic curriculum that created standards detailing what students should know and be able to do upon completion of courses within every content area. Standards were developed by a committee of public school educators, both secondary and postsecondary and have undergone revisions every four years (Georgia Learning Connections, 2005b). Employability standards were developed for all Technology and Career Education courses and intended to be integrated through the

instructional course sequence of Technology and Career Education programs. At the time of the latest revisions of the QCC standards in 2004, employability standards were labeled as seven different topics. Those topics are Basic Skills, Thinking Skills, Personal Qualities, Interpersonal Skills, Technology, Business Aspects, and Career Development. These employability standards are intended to help prepare students for the transition from high school to employment. The QCC in Technology and Career Education contains two parts, the employability standards (also referred to as core skills) and the content area standards. The term, employability standards, was used on the learning connections official website (Georgia Learning Connections, 2005c) and therefore, used for this study.

The implementation of employability standards in family and consumer sciences is entrusted to the teachers serving the profession. Schlossberg (as cited in Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004) synthesized the work of adult theorists and advanced several propositions. One proposition which has relevance to this study concluded that adults continually experience transitions requiring adaptations and reassessment of the self. The inclusion of career exploration and career options into the family and consumer sciences programs whereby they were originally family-oriented merits a change in the curriculum for family and consumer sciences teachers and therefore, attention should be given to how teachers adapt to these changes at different periods in their career. Hall and Smith (1999) proposed that how teachers respond to educational reform initiatives could depend on factors such as years of teaching experience. Georgia teachers of family and consumer sciences have a broad range of years of teaching experience (Smith, Hall, & Jones, 2001; Smith, Jones, & Hall, 2003). Therefore, it is conceivable that teachers have adapted the employability standards in their teaching at varying degrees based on years of teaching experience. Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine the extent that middle school family and consumer sciences teachers are including the employability standards in their teaching, and if teachers differ in their inclusion of the seven topics of the employability standards in their teaching based on years of teaching experience.

Conceptual Framework

To ensure implementation of employability standards, attention must be given to including them in the curriculum. The notion of including essential content in the curriculum is grounded in curriculum design. Thereby, the concept of curriculum design guided this study.

Overtime, several curriculum designs have been proposed. Separate subject, multidiscipline, interdisciplinary, and integrated curriculum designs as identified by Beane (1993) were explored for use in this study. After careful deliberation, the integrated curriculum design was chosen as a framework. The integrated curriculum has been used and defined by several researchers. According to Beane, the integrated curriculum design promotes personal and social integration through the organization of curriculum around significant problems and issues that have been identified without regard for subject area lines. Shoemaker (1989) defines an integrated curriculum as one that cuts across subject-matter lines, bringing together various aspects of the curriculum

into meaningful association to focus on broad areas of study. Additionally, an integrative curriculum can start with an organizing theme followed by questions, projects, and activities that involve integration and application of knowledge in the context of the theme. Dohner (1994) maintains that as themes are studied in and outside of the school, students will become generally educated about real-life problems, and teachers will be able to use their specializations in this general education context.

Employability standards are broad and cover several different kinds of essential skills that are applicable to all career and technical education program areas. Based on the description of the integrated curriculum, it was chosen as the lens for this study to view the implementation of these general skills that are desirable by employers.

Methodology

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent that middle school teachers in family and consumer sciences were including the employability standards in their teaching and if teachers differ based on years of teaching experience and inclusion of employability standards. Specifically, the following research questions guided this study. To what extent are middle school teachers in family and consumer sciences including the employability standards in their teaching? Are there differences in teacher groups based on years of teaching experience and the inclusion of the seven topic areas of the employability standards in their teaching?

Procedure

Middle school family and consumer sciences teachers in Georgia were surveyed. Names and addresses of 255 middle school teachers were obtained from the Department of Education. A questionnaire packet including a cover letter and a pre-addressed, stamped return envelope was mailed to teachers. Using Dillman's (2000) survey implementation strategies, a thank you postcard was sent a week after the initial mailing as a reminder; a second questionnaire was mailed 3 weeks later to teachers who had not responded to the first questionnaire or the postcard. Of the 255 middle school teachers identified, 149 (58%) responded to the questionnaire. The teachers ranged in age from 23 to 63 years ($M = 43.1$, $SD = 8.6$) whereas, years of teaching experience ranged from 1 to 34 years ($M = 14.5$, $SD = 7.9$).

Instrumentation. The scale for the questionnaire consisted of twenty-five employability standards found in the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum. Face and content validity of the instrument were evaluated by an expert panel of family and consumer sciences educators. Changes suggested by the validation panel such as formatting of items and instructions for completing the instrument were made. After the development of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha was run to establish reliability. According to Litwin (1995), levels of .70 or higher on Cronbach's alpha suggest acceptable or good reliability. For this study, the scale showed a Cronbach's alpha score of .96 which is well above the .70 recommended.

Part one of the questionnaire was developed by using the employability standard statements on a Likert-type scale. The scale used to develop this instrument was adapted from the *Curriculum Orientation Survey (COS)* developed by Hall (1981). The *COS* was developed to measure the extent to which selected objectives were included by teachers in their family and consumer sciences programs (Hall, 1981); it measures what you teach in your program (Anderson, Ley, & Mears, 1982). It is the teacher's perception that selected objectives are included in their teaching. Specifically, in this study, participants were asked to read each employability standard statement and indicate on a 4-point Likert type scale if the standard was *a major objective*, *an important objective*, *an incidental objective*, or *not an objective* in their teaching. The value for each anchor was: not an objective = 1, an incidental objective = 2, an important objective = 3, and a major objective = 4. Part two of the questionnaire requested demographic and program related information. Participants' age, number of years of teaching experience, and program type were sought.

Descriptive statistics which included frequencies, percents, means, and standard deviations were used to analyze the data. Mean ratings of 1.0 to 1.75 represents Not an Objective, 1.76 to 2.50 is an Incidental Objective, 2.51 to 3.25 is an Important Objective, and 3.26 to 4.00 represents a Major Objective.

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) and Tukey's post hoc tests were also used to analyze data. The a priori alpha level for analytical test of differences was established at the .05 level. The effect sizes for the analyses of variance were interpreted using Eta Squared.

Findings

Table 1 reported frequencies and percentages for the employability standards for family and consumer sciences middle school teachers. Of the 25 employability standards, almost two-thirds (64%) were perceived as *important objectives* for the majority of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire. On the other hand, less than a tenth (8%) of the 25 employability standards were considered a *major objective* and 4% of the 25 employability standards had equal numbers of teachers who felt they were both an *important objective* and a *major objective* in their teaching. For the remaining employability standards, 16% and 8% of the standards were considered as *not an objective* and an *incidental objective* for the majority of the teachers in this study, respectively.

According to the Georgia Learning Connections (2005c), the employability standards are labeled as the following topic areas: Basic Skills, Thinking Skills, Personal Qualities, Interpersonal Skills, Technology Skills, Business Aspects, and Career Development. Of the 3 employability standards that middle school family and consumer sciences teachers rated as a *major objective* in their teaching, two of them were under the Interpersonal Skills topic and one was a Personal Qualities topic. One of the Interpersonal Skills standards was both *a major objective* and an *important objective*.

The five Basic Skills and the three Thinking Skills employability standards were rated as *important objectives* in the teaching of middle school family and consumer sciences teachers. Three of the four employability standards under the topic of both Personal Qualities and Interpersonal Skills were considered as *important objectives* by teachers in this study. The one Technology Skill on the list of employability standards was rated as an *important objective* in their teaching by the family and consumer sciences middle school teachers. In total, 16 of the 25 employability standards were rated as *important objectives* in their teaching by a majority of the teachers in this study.

Of the four employability standards under the topic of Career Development, two were rated as *incidental objectives* and two were rated as *not an objective*. The two employability standards under Business Aspects topic were also rated as *not an objective* by a majority of the family and consumer sciences middle school teachers.

With the exception of one area, there were at least two standard statements for each topic of the employability standards. Participants responded to each statement; however, responses within each topic area were averaged to provide a holistic understanding of a given topic. Table 2 shows teachers' overall mean ratings and standard deviations for each topic of the employability standards. For the seven topics of the employability standards, the mean rating was slightly above 2.0 and slightly below 3.0 on a 4.0 scale. Personal Qualities and Interpersonal Skills received the highest overall mean of 2.96 and 2.75, respectively. On the other hand, Career Development and Business Aspects received the lowest overall mean of 2.30 and 2.27, respectively. Therefore, it is the perception of middle school family and consumer sciences teachers that they included the Personal Qualities and Interpersonal Skills standards in their teaching more than they did the Career Development and Business Aspects standards.

Teachers varied in their years of teaching experience as shown in Table 3. Two teachers reported 1 year of experience while one reported 34 years of teaching experience. In order to better understand the effect of teachers in various stages of their careers, teachers were sub-grouped according to number of years of teaching experience. This grouping yielded the following categories of years of teaching for the participants: 1-10, 11-20, 21-30, and 31 - 40. On the Certified Personnel Data section of the Georgia Public Education Report Card, teachers are grouped in ten-year increments for years of experience (Georgia Department of Education, 2005b). Teachers in this study were categorized accordingly.

Frequencies for years of teaching experience were disproportionately distributed among the three groups (see Table 3). The category representing 11-20 years of teaching experience was the largest group, (n = 56). The second largest group (48) represented participants who had taught 1-10 years, while the lowest count (n = 33) was reported for the 21 to 30 years of teaching. There was only 1 teacher in the 31 to 40 year of teaching category and therefore, to small to compare.

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to determine if teacher groups were different on years of teaching experience and the seven topics included in

the employability standards (Table 3). Analyses indicated no significant differences on the seven topics of the employability standards and any teacher group. Eta-square is routinely used to calculate effect size for ANOVA. Effect size is an estimate of the degree of association for the sample. Effect size quantifies the size of the difference between two groups, and provides a way to interpret statistically significant results in practical terms. In this study, the effect sizes ranged from .001 to .050 (see Table 3). Basic Skills received an effect size of .035 while Interpersonal Skills received .050. According to Cohen (1988), these effect sizes are medium and large. For this data, 3.5% of the outcome for Basic Skills was explained by years of teaching experience whereas 5.0% of the outcome for Interpersonal Skills was explained by years of teaching experience. Thereby, years of teaching experience did influence whether teachers included the employability standards in their teaching.

An overall mean rating for teachers on the seven topic areas were calculated. Table 3 shows that teachers with 1-10 years of teaching experience had the highest overall mean score on the combined ratings of the seven areas. However, the teachers with 1-10 years of teaching experience had a wider range of variation than the teachers with 11-20 and 21-30 years of teaching experience.

Conclusion and Discussion

Two major findings emerged from this study. First, 64% of the employability standards were rated as *important objectives* by middle school family and consumer sciences teachers. Those *important objectives* were in the topic areas of Basic Skills, Thinking Skills, Personal Qualities, Interpersonal Skills, and Technology Skills. This finding corroborates findings from previous studies (Cotton, 1993; Lankard, 1994; Davies, 2000), which showed that employers want employees with basic skills, personal skills, who are creative problem solvers, and work well with those around them. Traditionally, family and consumer sciences programs were geared toward preparation for the work of the home rather than preparation for a career whereby employability standards were not as pertinent to the program and its content. The inclusion of the standards on topics such as Personal Qualities and Interpersonal Skills are appropriate for the middle school curriculum as middle school is a time that moral, cultural, and social skills are being explored and broaden (Clauss, 2006). Additionally, by including the employability skills in their teaching, family and consumer sciences teachers are also contributing to the preparation of students for the workplace. Family and consumer sciences teachers are therefore, positioning themselves in the mainstream educational reform movement.

Second, when the overall mean score for each topic of the employability standards was determined, Personal Qualities and Interpersonal Skills received the highest mean scores. The two areas of employability standards, Personal Qualities and Interpersonal Skills, are often referred to as portable skills. Portable skills are those that can be taken from workplace to workplace (Techniques, 1997). Personal quality, thinking and interpersonal skills are some of the most important skills for job applicants to possess, according to a group of employers (Richens & McClain, 2000). This finding

supports those from previous research whereby, employers prefer employees have attitudinal traits (Taylor, 2005) rather than technical skills. Family and consumer sciences teachers are uniquely positioned to stress the characteristics of the aforementioned areas of employability standards based on their knowledge of content areas dealing with child, family, and interpersonal relationships. Beane (1994) and Shoemaker (1989) felt that an integrated curriculum cuts across subject lines. These employability standards can be integrated into the curriculum in family and consumer sciences in any of the content areas.

Although their were no significant differences found between teacher groups based on years of teaching experience, teachers with 1 to 10 years of teaching experience received the highest overall mean score for the combined seven areas of the employability standards. According to Schlossberg (as cited in Herr et al., 2004), who summarized the work of major theorists in adult career development, the concept of transitions suggests that adults are constantly experiencing change either deliberately or due to external forces. She further asserts that changes can engender growth or new concepts. An adaptation of preparation for a career programs did not affect beginning teachers as teachers with 10 or less years of experience embraced the inclusion of the employability standards in their teaching more than teachers who had beyond 10 years of teaching experience as evidence by the mean ratings.

The teaching of employability skills to future employees is an effort that should be undertaken by a total school. Miller (1989) maintains that family and consumer sciences teachers have a vital role in teaching essential skills. Historically, family and consumer sciences within public schools has taught basic living skills which are important to individuals, families, and society. The image of the traditional family and consumer sciences program is still held by some people. However, the results of this study confirm that middle school family and consumer sciences teachers in Georgia have gone beyond the traditional anticipated curriculum and are including employability skills in their teaching. Subsequently, family and consumer sciences teachers are helping to prepare students for the workforce as early as middle school by contributing to the desires and needs of employers through the employability standards.

Table 1

Frequencies of Teachers' Views of Employability Standards Taught in Family and Consumer Sciences Programs

EMPLOYABILITY	Not an Objective		Incidental Objective		Important Objective		Major Objective	
Content Standards	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%

EMPLOYABILITY	Not an Objective		Incidental Objective		Important Objective		Major Objective	
Content Standards	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Basic Skills								
Demonstrates the ability to locate, understand, and interpret written information (manuals, graphs, schedules, publications, etc.).	28	19	40	27	47	32	30	20
Demonstrates the ability to communicate thoughts, ideas, information, and messages in writing by creating documents (letters, memos, directions, manuals, reports, graphs, flowcharts, etc.)	25	17	49	33	51	34	20	13
Demonstrates the ability to perform basic computations by using numerical concepts and calculations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, whole numbers, decimals and percentages).	18	12	46	31	59	40	24	16
Demonstrates the ability to receive, interpret, and respond to verbal and nonverbal messages appropriate to a given situation.	13	9	28	19	66	44	38	26
Demonstrates the ability to orally (or with sign language) present ideas, thoughts, and messages to listeners in a clear, concise, and courteous manner.	13	9	32	22	68	46	33	22
Thinking Skills								
Demonstrates the ability to create new ideas, combine ideas or information, make connections, and reshape goals that reveal new possibilities.	17	11	42	28	53	36	32	22
Demonstrates the ability to specify goals, generate alternatives, consider risks, and evaluate and choose workable alternatives.	21	14	38	26	57	38	30	20

EMPLOYABILITY	Not an Objective		Incidental Objective		Important Objective		Major Objective	
Content Standards	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Demonstrates the ability to recognize a problem exists, to identify reasons for the problem, to develop plans for a solution, to evaluate the plans, and to plan revisions when warranted.	19	13	42	28	55	37	30	20
Personal Qualities								
Demonstrates the ability to accomplish tasks in a forthright and timely manner.	11	7	19	13	62	42	54	36
Demonstrates an awareness of one's impact on others, knowledge of one's own emotional needs, and how to address those needs.	18	12	29	20	61	41	38	26
Demonstrates the ability to assert self appropriately in social situations, and take interest in what others say and do.	14	9	28	19	58	39	46	31
Demonstrates the ability to be trusted.	13	9	31	21	46	31	57	38
Interpersonal Skills								
Demonstrates the ability to participate as a team member.	8	5	13	9	49	33	75	50
Demonstrates the ability to teach others new skills.	13	9	35	24	55	37	41	28
Demonstrates the ability to interact appropriately with a customer/client in a business situation.	42	28	30	20	50	34	23	15
Demonstrates the ability to provide leadership in an organization.	35	24	39	26	48	32	23	15
Demonstrates the ability to resolve conflicts.	14	9	38	26	51	34	42	28
Demonstrates the ability to perform in a work environment with individuals of different ages, gender, cultures, attitudes, and abilities.	26	17	32	22	43	29	43	29

EMPLOYABILITY	Not an Objective		Incidental Objective		Important Objective		Major Objective	
Content Standards	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Technology Skills								
Demonstrates knowledge and application of computers and/or technology.	23	15	38	26	58	39	26	17
Business Aspects								
Demonstrates the ability to maintain safety, health, and environmental standards when using and disposing of hazardous materials.	64	43	33	22	22	15	23	15
Demonstrates the ability to maintain safety, health, and environmental standards at a worksite.	40	27	29	20	37	25	39	26
Career Development								
Demonstrates the proper skills for seeking and securing employment.	47	32	38	26	34	23	25	17
Demonstrates the proper skills necessary for successful transition to a work environment.	45	30	47	32	31	21	21	14
Demonstrates the ability to identify key elements that comprise professional standards and appropriate behavior.	35	24	43	29	36	24	28	19
Demonstrates the ability to understand that most people will change careers and employers several times in their lives and be prepared for this change.	45	30	37	25	29	20	30	20

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Topics in the Employability Standards for Family and Consumer Sciences Middle School Teachers[a]

Employability Standard Areas	*M*	*SD*
Basic Skills	2.66	0.79
Thinking Skills	2.68	0.88
Personal Qualities	2.96	0.86
Interpersonal Skills	2.75	0.80
Technology Skills	2.60	0.96
Business Aspects	2.27	1.04
Career Development	2.30	0.99

Note. Mean scores are based on a 4-point Likert scale: 1 = Not an Objective, 2 = Incidental Objective, 3 = Important Objective, and 4 = Major Objective.

Mean ratings of 1.0 to 1.75 represents Not an Objective, 1.76 to 2.50 an Incidental Objective, 2.51 to 3.25 an Important Objective, and 3.26 to 4.00 a Major Objective.

[a] = 149.

Table 3

Effects of Years of Teaching Experience on Areas in the Employability Standards

Years (n)	1-10 (48)		11-20 (56)		21-30 (33)		Total (137)	Missing (12)	
Area	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*P*	*ES*
Basic Skills	2.63	.86	2.71	.73	2.62	.74	1.63	.19	.035
Thinking Skills	2.70	.91	2.66	.85	2.65	.86	.47	.71	.010
Personal Qualities	2.93	.91	2.96	.91	2.98	.70	.02	.99	.001
Interpersonal Skills	2.87	.86	2.76	.77	2.61	.68	2.37	.07	.050
Technology Skills	2.67	.93	2.59	1.01	2.58	.94	1.01	.39	.021
Business Aspects	2.16	1.07	2.04	1.04	2.25	.98	.9	.41	.021
Career Development	2.26	1.18	2.32	.91	2.37	.95	.61	.61	.013
Overall	2.60	.96	2.57	.88	2.58	.84			

Note. Mean scores are based on a 4-point Likert scale: 1 = Not an Objective, 2 = Incidental Objective, 3 = Important Objective, and 4 = Major Objective.

Mean ratings of 1.0 to 1.75 represents Not an Objective, 1.76 to 2.50 an Incidental Objective, 2.51 to 3.25 an Important Objective, and 3.26 to 4.00 a Major Objective.

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