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Importance of home economics compared to other secondary school subjects: Australian parents' and young adults' views

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Abstract

The secondary school home economics subject provides life skills for students. Exploration of different stakeholders' opinions of this subject is important for identifying its status in schools. Accordingly, the present study examined young adults' and parents' opinions of secondary school home economics education. An online survey was administered to 1,086 Australian respondents drawn from a commercial research panel. The key questions included: 'How important is home economics compared to other secondary school subjects in the following years: Years 7-12?', and 'In general, how would you rate the importance of the following subjects in the middle years of secondary school?' The respondents were asked to rate 14 secondary school subjects including home economics. More than 50% of the respondents (53-60%) rated home economics as 'one of the most important subjects' or 'the most important subject' in years 7-10 and this was 45% in the case of years 11-12. Visual examination of respondents' ratings of the different subjects revealed that home economics was believed to be of similar importance to health, physical education, and digital technologies. These findings suggest that there is widespread support for home economics education among young adults and parents in Australia.

KEYWORDS: HOME ECONOMICS, SECONDARY SCHOOL, PARENTS, YOUNG ADULTS, AUSTRALIA

Introduction

Secondary school home economics was originally introduced with the aim of providing life skills for students (Pendergast, Garvis, & Kanasa, 2011; Pendergast, 2001b; Smith, Hall, & Jones, 2001). This subject was mainly targeted at girls, to prepare them for future roles in society as wives, mothers, and domestic workers (Benn, 2012; Caraher & McCloat, 2016; Pendergast, 2001b; Stage, 1997). However, since then the societal role of women has changed with more women taking up paid employment outside the home. Cooking practices have also changed, partly due to the introduction of processed foods by the manufacturing food industry (Jaffe & Gertler, 2006). Because of these changes in the domestic and paid employment roles of women, and in cooking practices, the use and relevance of home economics was questioned (Benn, 2012; Pendergast, Garvis, & Kanasa, 2013;

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Slater, 2013). Subsequently, home economics was pushed aside by subjects like computing and math, which were viewed by authorities and parents as more important for students' future career opportunities (Dewhurst & Pendergast, 2008; Pendergast, 2001a; Pendergast et al., 2011; Slater, 2013).

During the past decade, however, the widespread increase of food-related problems has initiated debates about the importance of home economics. In school settings home economics can play multiple roles to tackle the food-related problems in society. Firstly, in secondary schools home economics can enable students to gain knowledge and learn new skills that will help them in their future lives (Pendergast, 2008). Secondly, both theoretical and practical home economics lessons can be used as a platform to deal with everyday practicalities and basic human needs, for example through the acquisition of food preparation and budgeting skills. Finally, home economics can be a societal platform that facilitates discussions about community and environmental wellbeing as well as sustainability-related issues (Caraher & McCloat, 2016; Pendergast, 2008; Smith, 2009). Accordingly, many leading researchers in health and education have suggested that home economics should be reinstated in school curricula (Lichtenstein & Ludwig, 2010; Pendergast & Dewhurst, 2012; Slater, 2013).

This renaissance of home economics, particularly in the form of food education, has been observed in several educational settings across the world. For example, in 2015 the 'General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in Food Preparation and Nutrition' was introduced to secondary school students in England (Department for Education, 2015). In 2017 the 'Victorian Certificate of Education Food Studies' was provided for senior secondary school students (years 11 and 12) in Victoria, Australia (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2016), and in 2013 the revised Ontario Family Studies learning area was introduced in secondary schools in Canada (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). These, as well as other initiatives, have focused on the provision of a much broader understanding of food in addition to the domestic and health-related aspects of food taught in traditional home economics.

Parents and young adults can be considered as the direct beneficiaries of school home economics education. This subject has the potential to provide food knowledge and skills to young people. These include an understanding of healthy food options, development of meal preparation skills and food budgeting skills, and an understanding of social values related to food (Caraher & McCloat, 2016; Pendergast, 2008; Smith, 2009). These types of knowledge and skills are invaluable for the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of young people (Grundy & Henry, 1995; Smith, 2009) and assists parents to make their children informed food citizens (Turkki, 2005). Moreover, food knowledge and skills enables young people to create better home food environments and support their parents' food decisions (Moore, Asay, & Curry, 2006; Turkki, 2005).

Research related to young adults' and parents' opinions of school home economics education is sparse and the available literature suggests that these groups have mixed attitudes towards school home economics education (Lai-Yeung, 2015; Pendergast et al., 2011; Slater, 2013; Slater & Hinds, 2014). Moreover, no large-scale studies have been conducted in Australia to explore these two stakeholder groups' opinions of school home economics education. Therefore, this paper focused on exploring parents' and young adults' opinions of the importance of home economics compared to other subjects offered in Australian secondary schools.

Methodology

Design, sampling, and procedure

The study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive study design. A large-scale online survey was conducted to obtain young adults' and parents' practices and confidence related to food, and their views of secondary school food education. Recruitment was done via quota sampling across Australia by gender, age, and State or Territory of residence. The sample was drawn from a research panel managed by GMI Lightspeed. Three hundred and thirty-one respondents were young adults (between 18–30 years) and 755 were parents of young people aged 12–25 years. Potential respondents were sent an email with a link to the survey as well as a plain language statement which explained the purpose and conditions of the survey. Ethics approval for this study was granted by Deakin (name) University health ethics advisory group (HEAG H191, 2016).

Instrument

The questionnaire included mainly close-ended questions and a small number of open-ended questions. Additional details of the survey questions are reported in a previous paper by the authors (Nanayakkara et al., 2018). The present paper focuses on the following two questions.

Importance of home economics subject

Respondents were asked *How important is Home Economics compared to other school subjects in the following school years?* They were asked to give their response for each year of secondary school from Year 7 to Year 12. Four category Likert-type response scales were used (where 1 = the least important subject, 2 = one of the least important subjects, 3 = one of the most important subjects, and 4 = the most important subject). Respondents were then asked *In general, how would you rate the importance of the following subjects in the middle years of secondary school?* They were asked to rate 14 secondary school subjects (English, mathematics, science, history, geography, visual art, music, drama, health, physical education, home economics, textiles, digital technologies, languages other than English). Five-point scales anchored at either end by opposite terms were used (*not at all important* (coded as 1) to *very important* (coded as 5)).

Demographic and educational background

Respondents were asked *How old are you?* Responses were recorded as a continuous variable (age in years). Those who were over 30 years were asked *Are you a parent of a young person aged 12-25 years?* Those who answered *yes* were allowed to proceed to the next stage of the survey, resulting in a final sample comprised of young adults and parents of young people (referred to as 'parents' hereafter). Respondents were asked *Are you male or female?* (male coded as 1 and female coded as 2). The respondents were asked *Did you study home economics or a similar food-related subject (e.g., Food Technology) in secondary school?* A *yes/no* (coded as 1 and 2 respectively) response format was used. The *yes* group is referred to as FS and the *no* group referred to as NFS hereafter.

Administration

The questionnaire was pilot tested among nine young adults and parents. After minor adjustments, the final pilot-tested questionnaire was administered via GMI Lightspeed during late 2016 and early 2017. This work was supported by a small grant from the the Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition, Deakin University.

Data analysis

The responses to the questions were analysed using IBM SPSS Version 24. Cross-tabulation (Chi-square) analyses were performed to examine bivariate associations between categorical variables (gender, age, and experience of learning food-related subjects in school) and the responses to the question about perceived importance of home economics. A *p* value of less than 0.01 was selected as the level of significance.

Multidimensional scaling (MDS) was performed to examine the perceived similarities of the 14 subjects (Pinkley, Gelfand, & Duan, 2005). MDS is a data reduction technique that helps to identify the ways variables are related to each other (Giguère, 2006). The respondents' ratings of the 14 subjects were analysed using the ALSCAL program for nonmetric MDS. Stress and R Square indices were used to determine the dimensionality of the MDS solution. When the number of dimensions was set as 2, a smaller stress value (Kruskal's stress = 0.059) and larger R Square value (RSQ = 0.985) were observed, which indicated a good fit of the MDS model to the ratings data (Pinkley et al., 2005). Each dimension of the map produced by the MDS analysis was visually examined for the clustering of school subjects (Masnick, Valenti, Cox, & Osman, 2010; Pinkley et al., 2005).

Results

Demographic characteristics of the participants

In total, 1086 respondents completed the survey. Seventy percent were parents of young people and 30% were young adults. The mean (SD) ages of the parents and young adults were 51 ± 10 years, and 25 ± 3 years respectively. Forty-five percent were male, and 55% were female. Forty-seven percent of respondents had studied home economics or a similar food-related subject in secondary school, and 53% had not studied these subjects in secondary school.

Importance of home economics compared to other secondary school subjects

More than 50% (53-60%) of participants rated home economics as ‘one of the most important subjects’ or ‘the most important subject’ in years 7, 8, 9 and 10. The perceived importance of home economics in years 11 and 12 was lower but still substantial (45-46%). Significantly more young adults than parents rated home economics as one of the most important subjects or the most important subject in years 11 and 12 (Table 1). There was no difference in responses between males and females or between those who had and hadn’t studied home economics or a similar food-related subject in secondary school.

Table 1 Proportion of respondents who believe home economics is important compared to other secondary school subjects

Proportion of young adults and parents					
	Total (%)	Young adults (%)	Parents (%)	Chi sq	p
n		331	755		
Year 7	53	51	54	0.539	0.463
Year 8	60	59	60	0.087	0.768
Year 9	60	63	59	1.913	0.167
Year 10	59	62	58	1.338	0.247
Year 11	46	53	44	7.262	0.007
Year 12	45	52	42	9.819	0.002
Proportion of females and males					
		Female (%)	Male (%)	Chi sq	p
n		506	580		
Year 7		49	56	5.969	0.015
Year 8		57	62	3.172	0.075
Year 9		56	63	5.944	0.015
Year 10		56	61	2.457	0.117
Year 11		44	48	2.256	0.133
Year 12		42	47	2.766	0.096
Proportion of those who have (FS) and haven't (NFS) studied a food-related subject at school					
		FS (%)	NFS (%)	Chi sq	p
n		510	576		
Year 7		55	51	1.677	0.195
Year 8		63	57	3.712	0.054
Year 9		61	59	0.803	0.37
Year 10		58	60	0.898	0.343
Year 11		46	47	0.347	0.556
Year 12		44	46	0.163	0.686

Respondents' perceptions of the importance of different secondary school subjects (MDS)

The MDS map (Figure 1) summarises the respondents' perceptions of the different subjects. Inspection of Figure 1 shows that the subjects clustered into three groups which we have provisionally named: Job skills (science, mathematics, and English), life skills (health, digital technologies, physical education, and home economics) and self-expression (visual art, music, and drama) subjects. Furthermore, this map suggests that the respondents viewed home economics as of similar importance to physical education, digital technologies, and health. Similar patterns were observed when ALSCAL was conducted on the data sets from young adults and parents, males and females, and, FS and NFS (data not shown).

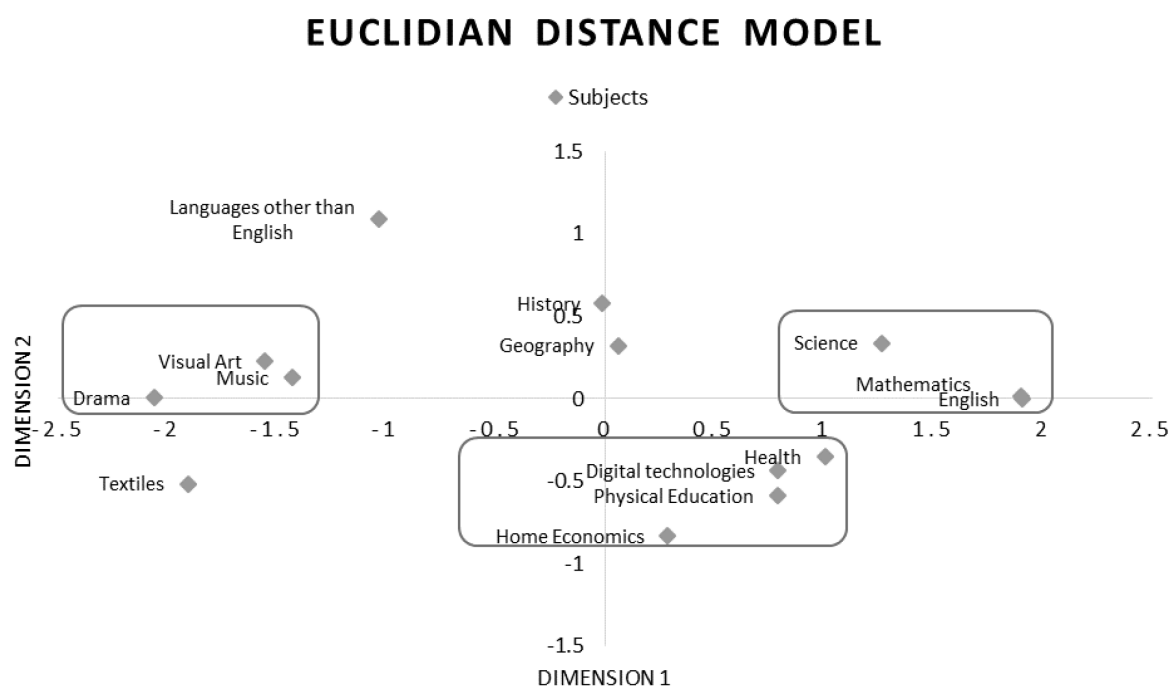


Figure 1 MDS map of respondents' ratings of 14 secondary school subjects

Discussion

The results showed that most respondents valued secondary school home economics highly. Moreover, they considered home economics to be as important as physical education, digital technologies, and health. The present study is unique in that it examined a large group of contemporary Australian parents' and young adults' views of home economics compared to other secondary school subjects.

The respondents' positive views of secondary school home economics may in part be related to the general decline of food-related skills in society (Bava, Jaeger, & Park, 2008; Caraher, Dixon, Lang, & Carr-Hill, 1999; Soliah, Walter, & Jones, 2012). This could have triggered the respondents to realise the importance of secondary school home economics. Previous studies showed that middle school students (Booth, 2011), and university students (Slater & Hinds, 2014) viewed home economics as a subject that teaches important life skills. Furthermore, previous studies that have explored lay people's and parents' opinions of food skills and school education suggest that home economics is seen as a conduit for the provision of life skills (Lai-Yeung, 2015; Pendergast et al., 2011).

The MDS findings suggest that lay people distinguish between secondary subjects along at least two dimensions, not one. That is, there are different kinds of subject importance perceived by parents and young adults, including job skills, life skills, and self-expression. All three types are important to parents and young adults, and, therefore, deserve thoughtful consideration in secondary school curricula. Our respondents rated home economics as similar in importance to digital technologies, health, and physical education. This is a novel and interesting finding that contrasts with the marginal status of home economics in many secondary schools (Colley, Comber, & Hargreaves, 1994; Pendergast, 2002; Slater, 2013). The teaching of home economics faces many challenges including

lack of trained staff, lack of time provision in school timetables, and inadequate financial and technical resources. Some of these challenges have been observed in Australia (Grundy & Henry, 1995; Pendergast et al., 2011; Ronto, Ball, Pendergast, & Harris, 2017a, 2017b; Ronto, Ball, Pendergast, & Harris, 2016). Our findings suggest that parents' and young people's expectations of home economics may be higher than those of education authorities, at least in Australia.

There was a noticeable difference in perceptions of younger compared to older respondents. More young adults saw home economics as one of the most important or the most important subject in years 11 and 12 compared to parents. In contrast, gender and previous home economics learning at school were not associated with the subject's perceived importance. Early studies of students' secondary school subject preferences found that home economics was preferred by female students compared to male students (Harvey, 1984; Lightbody, Siann, Stocks, & Walsh, 1996). Traditionally, home economics was stereotyped as a 'female subject' and more females took this subject in secondary school (Benn, 2012; Harvey, 1984; Lightbody et al., 1996). In the present study, there were no differences between the gendered perceived importance of home economics. This suggests that contemporary males and females value home economics equally. This is a novel finding that is consistent with the notion of importance of gender balance in the improvement of school home economics education (Azubuike, 2012; Lichtenstein & Ludwig, 2010; Pendergast, 2001b; Slater, 2013).

Implications for research and practice

Future studies should explore other stakeholders' opinions of the realities of enhancing secondary school home economics education status, and their understanding of public expectations from school home economics education (e.g., Education system administrators and curriculum leaders).

At present, all States and Territories across Australia offer home economics-related subjects such as food technology, food studies, home economics, health and human development, and food for life in secondary schools. However, there are variations in content and pedagogical approaches among them (Home Economics Institute of Australia, 2010). Therefore, future studies should explore aspects of home economics education in different states and school settings of Australia to identify their shared characteristics, differences, and opportunities for improvement of home economics education.

Education authorities and curriculum leaders should seek opportunities for strengthening secondary school home economics education. Allocation of more time in the timetable, provision of more resources, and provision of more opportunities for teachers' professional development are a few ways that this could be done. Moreover, opportunities for the integration of home economics into other curricula or disciplines needs to be investigated. Education authorities and curriculum leaders should act together with teachers, students, parents, and other professionals such as food industry, or health professionals to design realistic and constructive plans to improve secondary school home economics education.

Strengths and Limitations

This study had a large sample size and the respondents represented the main demographic categories in the general Australian population. One limitation is that the study did not examine why the respondents considered home economics to be important. This opens up scope for future studies to explore young adults' and parents' opinions of different aspects of secondary school home economics. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, causal inferences could not be made. However, this study design enabled us to capture contemporary Australian parents' and young adults' views of secondary home economics education.

Conclusion

The results suggest that most contemporary Australian young adults and parents of young people value secondary school home economics education. They rated the importance of home economics as similar to that of health, physical education, and digital technologies subjects. These findings suggest that there is a large disparity between the public's expectations of home economics education within Australian secondary schools and the low status in which it currently holds.

Biographies

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