Fashion Industry Concepts and Skills in Secondary Education

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High school Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) courses may be a student's initial exposure to and preparation for fashion industry careers. As part of Career and Technical Education, FACS is focused on workforce, career and college preparation (Fletcher Jr., Warren & Hernández-Gantes, 2018; Palombit, 2019); emphasis is placed on career clusters and pathways—a sequence of coursework which leads to career or college readiness in an occupational area. This current orientation calls into question long-established ways of teaching coursework once affiliated with Home Economics. In the fashion curriculum, for example, emphasis traditionally was placed on students' development of sewing skills to make clothing or other textile-based products (Montgomery, 2006). Current FACS national competencies, however, provide for a much broader range of topics for “textiles, fashion, and apparel” (NASAFACS, 2018). Teachers must make decisions about which topics to incorporate into their curriculums given the limited amount of class time they have with students. Gaining insight into what shapes high school teachers' decisions about which topics to cover in the fashion classroom will help inform school administrators and FACS education professionals in their efforts toward ensuring that high school fashion curriculums meet the goals of career and college readiness as well as provide students with realistic and engaging views of career opportunities in fashion. The purpose of this pilot study was to examine whether 1) subject area coverage in high school fashion coursework varied between pathway-affiliated and unaffiliated courses and 2) whether subject area coverage was related to selected teacher characteristics.

We designed an electronic questionnaire using Qualtrics software. All respondents had taught a fashion-related course within the past two years. We also asked respondents whether the course or courses they taught were part of a pathway for all or part of the two year period. Next, we identified five subject areas in which to group items measuring the extent to which respondents covered various topics in fashion-related courses: textiles, apparel or other textile product construction, fashion design or illustration, fashion merchandising or general apparel-related topics, and career exploration and preparation. Within each subject area, we listed a series of specific topics pertaining to that subject and respondents indicated to what extent they covered each topic: did not cover - 0, slight coverage - 1, moderate to slight coverage - 2, moderate coverage - 3, moderate to extensive coverage - 4, and extensive coverage - 5. We identified these specific topics based on descriptions for fashion, textiles or apparel-related courses listed in a state CTE-CIP course details catalog (Illinois State Board of Education, 2018).

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The number of specific topics listed varied by subject area. Finally, we asked respondents a series of questions pertaining to demographic characteristics including items about how long they had been teaching fashion courses at the high school level and how much work experience they had in the fashion industry.

We obtained approximately 100 email addresses of Family and Consumer Sciences or Career and Technical Education teachers from three different Midwestern states; those who taught fashion-related courses were singled out when possible. Email addresses were found on either school district or high school websites from randomly selected education regions. Ultimately, we sent 316 teachers email invitations to participate in the survey, which included a link to the questionnaire. After sending out two reminder emails to those who had not yet completed the survey, we obtained a sample size of 34 usable responses. Respondents were all female, most were 50 years or older (58.8%) and most received their undergraduate degree in Family and Consumer Sciences (76.5%). A majority of respondents (70.6%) had some graduate-level coursework, with Family and Consumer Sciences Education being the most cited area of study (41.7%).

We chose nonparametric statistics to analyze the data due to the small sample size, the ordinal scale used to measure the dependent variables (i.e., extent of topics covered for each subject area), as well as the distribution of scores for those variables. Our first step in analyzing the data was to calculate for each respondent a median score for each of the five subject areas. This score took into account the variety of topics covered as well as the extent to which they were covered; the higher the score, the more the subject was covered by the respondent. For the sample as a whole, the median scores for each subject area indicated that apparel or other textile product construction was the most extensively covered topic ($Mdn = 5.00$), followed by textiles ($Mdn = 2.25$) and then fashion merchandising or general apparel-related topics ($Mdn = 2.00$). Career exploration was covered least ($Mdn = 0.00$), with fashion design or illustration covered to a slightly greater extent ($Mdn = 0.25$).

For further analysis of the data, we set the significance level at .05. For each subject area, we grouped median scores for respondents whose courses were pathway affiliated for part of the two year period together with those whose courses were pathway affiliated for the entire two-year period to form one group; respondents whose courses were not pathway affiliated formed the comparison group. We used the Mann-Whitney U statistic to test the difference in the extent to which individual subjects were covered between these two groups of respondents. We did not find significant differences in coverage for any of the five subject areas between the pathway affiliated and un-affiliated groups.

We then used the Spearman rank correlation coefficient to measure the relationship between the extent to which respondents covered individual subject areas and respondent 1) years of teaching fashion courses at the high school level, 2) age, and 3) fashion industry experience, respectively. We found no relationships between the extent to which respondents

covered any of the five subject areas and respondent years of teaching fashion courses at the high school level or respondent age. However, we found significant positive relationships between respondent fashion industry experience and the extent to which they taught fashion design or illustration ($r_s = .403, p < .05$) and fashion merchandising or general apparel-related topics ($r_s = .462, p < .01$). We found no relationships between the extent to which respondents covered textiles, apparel or other textile product construction or career exploration and preparation and respondent fashion industry experience.

Findings suggest that emphasis is still placed on textile product construction-related skills in the high school fashion classroom. Pathway affiliation did not seem to make a difference in the extent to which subject areas were covered. In addition, neither teacher age or years of teaching high school fashion courses was related to extent of coverage for any of the subject areas. However, as teacher experience in the fashion industry increased, so did coverage of fashion design and illustration as well as fashion merchandising or general apparel-related topics. It may be that industry experience provided teachers with greater insight into the value of these topics as part of their curriculum. In conclusion, high school fashion curriculums may help students achieve improved career and college readiness from teachers having added fashion industry exposure in some form during the course of their professional development.

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