

## Nutrition and the Pre-professional Student

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### **Article:**

The traditional nutrition education approach which requires students to identify nutrients, vitamins, and minerals is only a small segment of a comprehensive nutrition education program. A comprehensive program calls for a serious look at lifestyles, obesity, exercise, food preference, and various aspects of weight control. Recognizing the importance placed on the role of nutrition, a study was designed to explore the nutrition knowledge and attitudes of pre-professional college students. The study population included 114 students enrolled in a course designed for elementary education majors.

The questionnaire was administered in three parts. Part 1. contained ten attitudinal questions concerning the importance of sound nutrition and nutrition education. Part 2 was a knowledge test containing 30 true and false questions dealing with basic nutrition content. Part 3 required each student to rank 22 nutritional objectives in terms of appropriateness for inclusion at the elementary level.

### **Findings**

Only 28% of the total sample agreed with the statement that most elementary schools have sound nutrition programs, but 83% believed that nutrition should have a major place within the curriculum.

In reference to past experience with nutrition programs, approximately 36% felt most nutrition topics were boring. It is interesting to speculate the impact this attitude may have on their own teaching of nutrition in the future.

On a more positive note, 80% of the students surveyed disagreed with the statement "I doubt that any nutrition program would have an impact on the eating habits of young children." Again, pointing to the need for proper nutrition information, only 15% believed that children would eat nutritionally sound food rather than junk food if given a choice.

The results of the attitudinal phase of the questionnaire demonstrated a concern for the quality of nutrition education and a desire to see this subject area included in the elementary curriculum.

Although these preservice teachers demonstrated positive attitudes toward nutrition education their own nutrition knowledge was not extensive. Several glaring misconceptions were noted on the knowledge test. The mean score was 18 correct out of 30, and 17 of the subjects answered less than half of the questions correctly. Some of the most obvious misconceptions follow.

29% believed grapefruit was important in the diet because it destroyed fat cells.

The term "empty calories" was thought to refer to foods necessary, for any weight-reduction diet by 20% of the sample.

73% felt that polyunsaturated fats were lower in calories than saturated fats.

Over 30% were unaware that certain vitamins could be stored in the body.

23% believed most skin problems are directly related to sugar intake.

44% felt processed breakfast cereals contained no food value.

To illustrate the power of advertising, 57% indicated that "that tired feeling" is most likely due to a lack of iron.

Over 30% thought yogurt contained no calories.

Only one student scored higher than 90% on the knowledge inventory. In general, analysis of the results points to a lack of understanding of basic nutritional concepts.

In the final part of the questionnaire students ranked the appropriateness of 22 long-range student-oriented goals of a nutrition education program for inclusion in the elementary school curriculum. The following goals were selected as most important.

1. Distinguish between food desires and nutritional needs.
2. Evaluate food and nutritional claims on a logical and informal basis.
3. Know that there are certain foods that must be included in the diet in order to satisfy nutritional needs.
4. Make efficient and informed choices in food selection.
5. Select a day's menu based on the four food groups guide.
6. Be aware of the relationship between nutrition and health.
7. Include a variety of foods in the diet.
8. Satisfy food preferences together with nutritional needs.

The results of this phase of the questionnaire indicate that pre-professional elementary education majors tend to favor a blending of the traditional cognitive-didactic approach to nutrition education with more innovative affective and action approaches to the topic. The student survey shows a desire to provide a practical nutrition education program which meets the problems, needs, and interests of the students.

### **Implications**

Although the 114 students involved in this study seemed to have positive attitudes toward the importance of nutrition education within the elementary curriculum their overall nutrition knowledge was rather limited. It would seem, based on this preliminary survey, that students preparing for careers as elementary education majors would be an excellent target group for nutrition education within a health education methods course. Content could be blended with innovative methodology to enhance the likelihood that correct nutrition information will be presented to young people in the future through more meaningful and exciting teaching strategies.

With this in mind, the suggested nutrition content and methods presented in six elementary health methods texts were examined to see how closely the activities provided parallel the long range goals identified by the students in the survey (see table 1). Nine categories were identified which cut across several of the goals mentioned by the students plus content areas in which the prospective elementary teachers were weakest. These categories provide ample opportunity for the health teacher to expand on content and thus provide basic nutrition information in addition to illustrating creative teaching strategies.

**Table 1. Elementary health education texts**

<i>Nutrition Categories</i>	<i>Eng and Wantz, Teaching Health Education in the Elementary School, Houghton Mifflin, 1978</i>	<i>Greene, et al. Health Education in the Elementary School, Macmillan, 1978.</i>	<i>Stone, et al., Elementary School Health Education Ecological Perspectives W. C. Brown, 1976</i>	<i>Addison-Wesley, 1975</i>	<i>Sorochan and Bender, Teaching Elementary Health Science, Addison-Wesley, 1975</i>	<i>Cornacchia and Staton, Health in the Elementary Schools, 4th ed. Mosby, 1974.</i>	<i>Willgoose, Health Education in the Elementary School, Saunders, 1974.</i>
<i>Food Groups</i>							
Content	X	X			X		X
Methods	X	X	X		X	X	X
<i>Nutrition Attitude</i>							
Content		X	X		X		X
Methods	X				X	X	
<i>Nutrition Misconceptions</i>							
Content					X		
Methods							
<i>Weight Control</i>							
Content	X	X					X
Methods		X	X		X	X	X
<i>Decision-Making</i>							
Content							
Methods	X	X	X		X	X	X
<i>Snack Foods</i>							
Content							X
Methods		X	X				X
<i>Importance of Breakfast</i>							
Content							X
Methods					X	X	X
<i>Values of Specific Foods</i>							
Content	X	X					X
Methods	X		X		X	X	
<i>Nutritional Advertising</i>							
Content						X	
Methods		X					X