

**"Needs Assessment:
How Do We Know What To Teach?"**

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Needs assessment is a fundamental component of curriculum design. Understanding the knowledge base, as well as the perceptions and desires, of the delivery audience is critical to the success of educational programming. Needs assessment must therefore be designed as a comprehensive, integrated and unbiased process.

Because of the dynamic and expanding nature of consumer issues, decisions and information, many critical challenges face professionals within the discipline. A key element and one which continues to be fundamental to the success of consumer education programming is the question, "how do we know what to teach?" The answer hinges on comprehensive, integrated and unbiased needs assessment of the audience in question.

A "need" can be defined as the discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be" (Isaac and Michael, 1981). "Assessment" describes the status of phenomena at a particular point in time (Best, 1981). "It may deal with prevailing opinion, knowledge, practices or conditions," (Best, p. 93). Importantly, assessment merely describes a situation without value judgement or underlying rationale. Therefore, "needs assessment" is fundamentally a process which determines the concerns or needs of a reference group. Once identified, these concerns are then prioritized (often by the reference group and/or a consultant or outside agency) and ultimately they become the basis for defining program goals (Isaac and Michael) and developing curriculum.

Purpose

"The process begins inside a system with a felt need. If no need is perceived, then the rest of the change process does not occur" (Rushing as cited in Walstad and Soper, 1991, p. 295). Therefore, the purpose of this study was twofold: (1) consider the challenge of "needs assessment:" and (2) assess the needs of Idaho teachers for consumer and economic education programming.

Procedures

A survey instrument was developed by the Idaho Council on Economic Education (ICEE) network; reviewed by a panel of experts; and pilot tested to insure content validity and reliability. The project was endorsed by the Idaho State Department

of Education and data were collected from a selected sample of schools within the fourteen (14) DEEP (Developmental Economic Education Programming) districts currently serviced by the ISU Center for Economic Education.

Sample

The sample included a total of 1,230 teachers (kindergarten through grade twelve, from all curricula) in twenty-two (22) schools. Return rate from the mailed questionnaire was 50% with a usable sample of 49% (n = 598). Data were treated and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences - x. All recorded percentages were the valid percentage for the teachers who responded to that particular item.

Results

Preliminary findings indicated that the teachers who participated in this project had the following demographic characteristics:

*Educational Background

- only 19% had completed a degree beyond the bachelor's
- average year of graduation was 1976 (sd 9.44)
- only 20% had completed their degree within the last five years
- 40% had NO college course work in consumer/economics
- mean credits earned in consumer/economics was 3.44 (sd 3.67)
- 29% completed their MOST RECENT course in consumer/economics prior to 1970
- 61% had completed any related course work prior to 1980

*Current Teaching Assignment

- 47% were elementary teachers
- 53% taught at the secondary level
- only 15% taught social studies/government or business

*Economic Education Involvement/Perceptions

- 22% felt unqualified to teach consumer/economics OR that it was too difficult for students to learn
- 14% indicated lack of time and/or resources to teach the subject
- 64% believed that economics was "not formally included in required curriculum"

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Conclusions

As it related to the research sample, initial training in basic consumer/economics is needed. Additional training is necessary to update teacher training. Inservice, preservice, adult and community education must be utilized to reverse the current "involvement" with consumer/economics. Sixty-four percent indicated that they thought consumer/economics was "not formally included in required content." Idaho does in fact have a state mandate that requires a minimum of one semester in "consumer economics" for high school graduation. It is also a required component in the elementary curriculum for the state of Idaho.

The importance of needs assessment as a fundamental foundation in successful consumer/economic education programming must be reemphasized. To be valuable, it should be designed as a cooperative, integrated effort. Adequate orientation must precede the process and a variety of information should be collected--both issues to counteract the problem of confounding "needs" with preferences.

Implications

Although regional, state and local needs for consumer/economics programming may vary widely, a basic framework for needs assessment throughout the economic education network would be beneficial. Such a model could not only serve as a springboard for more unique and individualized assessment techniques, but would also allow at least minimal standardization and therefore comparison of DEEP district needs between school districts, throughout a Center service area, statewide or even nationally.

Possibilities for future research include: (1) replication of this study throughout Idaho; (2) regional or multi-state comparative studies; and (3) development of a standard data set to be assessed on an annual basis and utilized to evaluate and improve curriculum and programming in consumer/economics. University, Cooperative Extension and other applications should also be considered.

References

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