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## The Benefits Of Family And Consumer Science Education: One Educators Quest To Find Meaning Through Self Discovery And Holistic Teaching

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THE BENEFITS OF FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCE EDUCATION: ONE  
EDUCATORS QUEST TO FIND MEANING THROUGH SELF DISCOVERY AND  
HOLISTIC TEACHING

A Thesis Presented

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## Abstract

(Teachers) are engaged in work that will influence not just students' immediate level of knowledge but their entire lives, and thereby they have the potential to contribute to the future of humanity itself. –

Dalai Lama (Spiritual Leader)

The world of public education is much different now than when I was a student not so long ago. In only ten years, the world has opened up and changed in a way that no one imagined, thanks to cell phones and social media. Students can now walk through the halls of school with a device in their pocket that allows them to look up information in seconds, communicate with their friends not in person but probably more often, and the answers to last night's homework thanks to a picture sent from their friend. Students may communicate less in person now, but they now can communicate with people at any time, from anywhere. We have become simultaneously more accessible and more casual in our relationships, as shown in the one sentence, no punctuation emails I am sent from students at midnight.

As the world has changed, there has been a call from some to go back to our roots. To rediscover what it means to live off the grid, disconnected, and fending for ourselves. In a sense, we have to go back to basics to rediscover our human needs and strengths. Family and Consumer Science (FCS) education is about being the best holistic person one can be. FCS education teaches students to make strong and meaningful decisions while taking care of themselves and others now and in the future. It is a foundation of learning that sets a tone for lifelong health, both in mind and body. I teach FCS, and I strongly believe it should be taught in all schools.

Throughout this paper, I hope to prove to my readers why I think FCS should remain in, or be added to, schools. I will reflect on my time as a new mother and how it has changed my perspective on the education I hope my son will receive. I also cover topics such as the influence of STEM education in schools, the climate of today's schools surrounding gun control and safety, and I end with my educational philosophy and personal stories of my time with students. Throughout, I will add quotes from my current and former students, as they are the ones that can truly attest to what they learned and value from FCS. I hope to convey my passion for the subject that I teach, while telling stories that readers can relate to their own lives. Education breeds the future leaders of America, and if we are not careful, we may not like what we see out of the next generation, and it will be no one's fault but our own.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to all the Family and Consumer Science educators who have paved the way before me, specifically my mentor teachers, Rachel McKnight and Patty Bettinger, and undergraduate advisor, Michelle Krehbiel. Also to Robert Nash for setting an example of the way I wish to run my classes: a space for everyone that is more about the conversation than what the teacher has to say. To my family who have supported me through this long journey. To my son, Theo: this is all for you. Lastly, to my classmates in the Interdisciplinary Studies of Education program, who have gone on this writing journey with me, given countless hours of advice, and shared their own stories as sources of inspiration and guidance, I thank you.

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## **Chapter 1: Why I Chose to Write a Scholarly Personal Narrative**

The aim of SPN writing is not to test, evaluate, or discover whether something is true. The main design objective of SPN research is to investigate, present, and analyze the inner life of the writer in order to draw insights that might be universalizable for readers. (1)

-Robert J. Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley (University Professor, Scholars, SPN Advocates)

A writer's job is to tell stories that connect readers to all the people on earth...

-Mary Pipher (Psychologist, Author)

Scholarly Personal Narrative. Those are three words that upon first glance do not seem to belong together. I was raised in a school system where the word "I" was not to appear in a scholarly paper. In many academic settings, the two worlds of scholarly and personal could never join because it meant the paper was an opinion and not a fact. But what constitutes scholarly? Teaching through life lessons is no less scholarly than proving a fact with an equation; it just taps into a different part of ourselves. We each live a unique life, with unique experiences, and a unique perspective. If we stopped to listen to what we each have to say once in a while, we just might learn something. Not everyone will agree with what I am writing or how I am writing it, but I think we can all agree that we each deserve the chance to tell our stories. (Author's note: in the process of writing my own story, I inevitably talk about people who have shaped my experiences. As this is my interpretation of events, I have chosen to change the names of the people you will read about in this thesis, unless they are directly quoted in the text.)

When I began taking graduate classes with the prospect of earning a degree, the thesis part of the equation seemed very far away. I knew that I wanted to attain a Master's Degree to further my education and make me a more valuable teacher for future

job possibilities. The prospect of finding a topic to write about for thousands of words, however, was daunting and, quite frankly, seemed impossible. Sitting at breakfast in Robert Nash's "office" at the local cafe, listening about what the Interdisciplinary Program was all about, Robert uttered the word thesis. I remember thinking, yeah right, that is too much work, and thank goodness a thesis is not a requirement for the program.

As I have made my way through Robert's foundations courses, I have come to see the scholarly part of myself in a different light. His classes resemble therapy sessions; weekly meetings to get out our feelings, talk about life's great mysteries, and possibly even shed tears. Each class means potentially working through personal pain, letting go of unwanted negativity, and certainly learning a lot about ourselves and how we fit into this crazy world. One of the main lessons I have learned in Robert's courses is that writing can heal. In my first class taken with Robert, Philosophy of Education, I wrote papers that evoked the past, while trying to make sense of what it meant for my future. We were not required to do research into the hows and whys of what we were feeling, but rather instructed to tell our stories and to write from our hearts.

Part of what was so daunting about the prospect of writing a thesis is the research component. The word thesis brings to the forefront of my mind images of scholars typing furiously at a lone desk, scraps of paper strewn on the floor, and hours spent in the library scouring over heavy textbooks. Research is not my forte. I enjoy writing in a way where the words just tumble out. I write to get feelings off of my chest, not to analyze data collected by others. Not that there is anything wrong with data driven

writing, but it is not my style, at least when it comes to the topic I have chosen to explore in my thesis.

The thought of writing twenty thousand words of research was not doable to me. Writing a Scholarly Personal Narrative, or SPN, made perfect sense, both for my topic and my writing technique of choice. As Robert writes, “Scholarly personal narrative is a methodology that allows for the ‘subjective I’ of the writer to share the centrality of the research along with the ‘objective they’ of more traditional forms of scholarship. The research is further stimulated by the expansion of the author’s personal connection to, or in some cases, disconnection with the content or data being studied.” With SPN I can share my stories, what I know, and what I love. I can relate what I have been through to what others have gone through, and hopefully make human connections. I can include a scholarly perspective, for I have learned a lot through Robert’s classes and others that I have taken during my graduate studies, and also find research that backs up my experiences when necessary. SPN, in my opinion, is the best writing style for the story I want to tell.

The three parts of SPN writing are Scholarly, Personal, and Narrative. Seamlessly blending these three areas so that the reader is unaware of the technical part of the writing, and therefore which part they are reading and when, is the trick to effectively writing an SPN prose. This seamless blending of the three parts will draw the reader in and keep them reading. The narrative, meaning the story and how it is written, must be something the reader cares about. It must engage and incite curiosity in the reader. For example, adding dialogue is a narrative technique that makes the writing

feel more realistic and helps the reader visualize the situation more clearly. Another narrative technique is to use metaphors to bring a story to life. The reader is able to picture the metaphor vividly, thus making them feel more at home or entertained, and the words of the story resound more profoundly because the reader is now fully engaged with the reading.

The scholarly aspect of SPN writing is how the author finds universalizable truths in their story. For instance the author can add quotes from scholarly works, showing that their life lessons are those that others have experienced as well. Ultimately, the author must relate their story to what the reader can learn from it. It is not enough to simply write about what one has been through, the author must also find meaning in what has happened, and therefore leave the reader with life lessons. The scholarly may include detailed research from scientific journals, it may be a quote from a musician, or it might be a reference to a novel. Whatever the scholarly looks like, it comes not from the author, but from an outside source to show universalizable truths, relatability, and human connections within the story they are telling.

The personal part of SPN writing is at times the easiest and at times the hardest part of SPN writing for me. By telling our story we are being personal, but digging down to our depths and recognizing our truths can be easier said than done. By writing about our own hardships, others will find solace in knowing that they are not alone. If the writer shares their vulnerability with the reader, they become human and relatable, even if the reader has not directly experienced what they are writing about. The personal can be daunting, and opens the writer up to criticism, skepticism, and plenty of other “isms,”

but by sharing, the author is hopefully helping the reader to discover something about themselves, thanks to the bravery of the author putting themselves out there.

Scholarly Personal Narrative also has the ability to heal. For the writer, sharing their experience can be cathartic. Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray even wrote a book, *Our Stories Heal*, about the power of the written word to change people's perspectives and ease people's minds. Sharing a story that has otherwise been bottled up inside is a great release, and if that story can help a reader heal a wound inside of them as well, then one story is helping two people. When we write down our story, we often learn on our own more than we thought we knew. While each of our stories is technically unique to us, very rarely would no one else be able to relate in one way or another. The purpose of SPN writing is for people to share their story in a way that others can get what they wish out of it. As the author, we have to accept that once our words are out in the world they no longer belong to us. They now belong to the reader to interpret as they wish. Therefore, we must be conscious of what we are writing, but also know that just because a writer does not see the theme you were trying to convey does not make the writing bad, it simply spoke to that person in a unique way.

Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray also wrote *Our Stories Matter*, a love letter of sorts to SPN writing. Each and every human being who is alive has a story. We have all experienced life, both its ups and downs and the mundane and dramatic incidents alike. A life does not have to be in the public eye or recognized by others as being important to mean something to someone else. Sharing our experiences is what connects humans to other humans, therefore giving us the love and nurture we need to know that

we are not alone, and if others can persevere then so can we. We are giving each other the tools to survive via the knowledge of what has worked for us. We also must remember that everyone's story is unique, and what was hard for one person might feel like a cake-walk for another. All of our pain is relative, and we must find ways to respect and learn from each other to stop making the mistakes the world has been making over and over again. By sharing stories we can hopefully spread empathy as we learn to appreciate what others have been through.

This type of writing entertains the reader while they also gain knowledge. It relates to others on a human level, even if it tells of an experience far different from their own life. It takes skill and craft to get the right balance of all three parts. Scholarly Personal Narrative writing is not a stream of consciousness similar to journal free-writing, it is not as structured as a research paper, and it is not as one-sided as a memoir, yet it can contain elements of each of these three forms of writing. The personalization is an aspect of the writing that means we can make it our own to show our true selves. The writer can add poetry or write a play; the style of writing is less important than the themes and lessons that come from it. SPN incorporates our stories, finds universalizable themes, all while being written in a realistic and vivid way.

A great SPN writer is telling their own story, yet not writing it for themselves, but for others. An SPN author is choosing to tell his or her story because it may help another human being. They are choosing to narrate their story in a prose that has flow, clarity, and purpose. To an outsider SPN may seem like the author is simply telling their story. The outsider should try writing SPN, and soon they will be introduced to a world in

which our stories are told through the lens of the reader. It is human nature to tell our stories in the way that we remember them, whether that is accurate or not is impossible to tell as our memories can be deceiving. The accuracy is not important if the writer is being true to themselves in sharing their own truths, and what is important is that those truths can be interpreted by the reader however they might help them. This is not fiction writing hoping to surprise or shock you; if the writing does either of these things it is because of how moving and human the story is, and because it is real life. Robert Nash often states, “The shortest distance between two people is a story.” Our stories are what unite us as humans, to find common ground and learn from one another.

Family and Consumer Science has meant a lot to myself and to others, and I hope that by telling my experiences in this thesis, people will come to a better understanding of the importance of FCS education. I hope to relate to teachers of various mediums and topics. I hope to inspire people to keep FCS in their local curriculums. I hope to show what FCS has meant to me throughout my life. If I can accomplish these goals, my thesis will have completed my base expectations, but hopefully it will do more. Hopefully my readers will find a way to relate FCS principles to their own lives, even if they are not teachers or students. As you will learn while reading this paper, FCS is about being the best holistic person you can be, and I do not know a single person who that does not apply to. SPN will allow me to share my side of the story, and if I succeed at writing a successful SPN thesis, I hope that you, my reader, will learn something along the way.

## **Chapter 2. Family and Consumer Science Found Me, Not the Other Way Around**

Life isn't about finding yourself, life is about creating yourself.

-George Bernard Shaw (Playwright)

### **2.1 The Discovery**

Don't be afraid to move around and try different things, no matter how old you are. The most important thing you want to find out is who you are and what capabilities you have.

-Karl Pillemer (Sociologist, Author)

When I was in college, I wanted to become an elementary school counselor. I had always loved working with kids, and I considered myself to be a good listener and problem solver. These traits seemed like a good fit to counsel young children. I babysat every summer, a few nights a week, and most weekends for a wide variety of ages. I enjoyed it, and was told by parents that I was good at it because I had fun with the kids, but was also responsible enough that adults trusted me. When a person is young, they do not have a lot of life experience to compare what they might be good at versus what they would actually enjoy doing as a full time career. At that time, I was good at babysitting, and that is what I knew. Mary Pipher elaborates in *Writing to Change the World*, "...we often find that our core interests are evolved from specific events in childhood" (2). I did not think I would be a good teacher though, as talking in front of others left me trembling, so I decided on counseling.

Counseling meant working with kids one-on-one, using the skills I was good at, but not taking me out of my comfort zone. I was specific about the age group that I wanted to work with as well, as young kids are cute and their little minds are still being formed, and I wanted to be a difference in their young lives. If someone had told me then

that I would end up as a secondary level public school teacher, at my alma mater at that, I would have laughed in their face. Life does not always take us on the path that we expect, but I have found that it often takes us on the path that fits our goals and personality the best, even when we fail to recognize them ourselves.

I stumbled upon the major of FCS purely by accident. I had entered my freshman year of college at the University of Vermont as an undecided major in the College of Education and Social Services. School counseling is a Master's program, and therefore I needed to find an undergraduate program that leant itself well to my graduate school plans. Reading the description in the course catalogue that described learning about family development over time, interactions between others, and the human lifestyle, made Human Development and Family Studies seem like a perfect fit. Until I turned to the next page of the course catalogue, that is. There lay the details of the major FCS. I was drawn to the description, and had a feeling in my gut that it was a better fit for me. Not only would I still be taking many human development courses, but also nutrition and community entrepreneurship courses, all of which I was interested in. It seemed like the best of both worlds: my major concentration could still be in human development, yet I would get experience in many other areas as well. I cannot explain my choice, but some voice deep in my head was telling me that FCS was the right major. I was not choosing the major because my friends were doing it (in fact, many were Human Development majors) or because it was a popular one (I was the only member of my class the year I graduated), but I had a true bottom-of-the-belly tingly feeling that only happens when there is a truly important decision involved.

My entire life I have been bad at decision making. I take forever at it, and I am notorious for doubting myself. I have a vivid memory of being a child standing in my garage, debating between going off to play with my friend or going to get ice cream with my mom. I weighed my pros and cons over and over again, greatly annoying my mother, who probably could have cared less which way I chose. I never wanted to have regrets. Maybe my friend had ice cream, so then I could have both? Maybe I would be picturing a chocolate chip cookie dough cone floating where my friend's face should be instead of concentrating on the game she chose to play? What if we did not go get ice cream again for weeks, then I would regret not going when I had the chance and it would keep me awake at night? These are the jumbled thoughts that go through my head for even mundane choices, and yet a major life-changing one was staring at me, clear as day. If I have learned anything in my three decades on earth, it is that my gut is rarely wrong, I just have to agree to follow it.

## **2.2 The Awakening**

To find soul-fulfilling work, one must both understand what they bring to the world and find a way or place to apply and extend those talents and interests.  
-Robert Nash and Jennifer Jang (University Professors, Authors, SPN Advocates)

I may have chosen a major, but I still had stipulations attached to my choice. I told my advisor I would not, under any circumstance, student teach. I would learn all there was to know about FCS, and I “probably would not directly use my FCS knowledge” as a counselor. First of all, that statement I made to my adviser was naive on several levels. Mainly I was crazy to think I would not use what I learned through an FCS degree in my post college life, for FCS is about being the best holistic person you

can be. It is applicable to everyone, and is centered on human beings, who counselors deal with every day. Famous last words, as I not only enjoyed my education, but dropped all other future plans of attaining a job outside of teaching FCS after completing my student teaching.

My advisor was able to convince me to student teach because it would be much easier to complete the semester long non-paying internship and attain a teaching license then, while I am still in school with fewer life responsibilities, than during my post-graduation life when there would be bills to pay. She talked about how it would be a great experience even if I never taught in a school a day in my life, for most jobs require you to present materials or talk at a meeting at some point. The hard work of lesson planning could come in handy before a big sales pitch at another job, and the organization and classroom management components would help me stay organized and benefit when working with a team at any job I might find one day. Plus, counselors work with students and often enter classrooms, so seeing the other side of how a school runs (my experience thus far was only as a student), could prove valuable to my counseling career. The worst that could happen would be that I discovered teaching is not for me, which I already believed to be true. So off I went, student teaching in both a middle and a high school. I cannot say that I loved it off the bat. I am not a natural speaker in front of people, I do not enjoy being the center of attention, plus FCS is a 5-12 license, and I was still convinced I only wanted to work with younger grades.

What I learned while student teaching, however, was that I was not half bad at it. I interacted well with the students, had a calm demeanor that they imitated, and even

worked well with students who had behavior issues because I did not treat them like students who had behavior issues. I remember sitting around the lunch table at my middle school student teaching location with other “special” teachers. I do not use the term “special” because we were all magnificent, although most were, but that we taught the non-standard subjects of the school such as physical education and Tech Ed. Those “special” classes were taught on a rotating schedule, so each teacher saw every student in the school for a few weeks during the year. There was one particular student who caused trouble for everyone. He was big for his age, did not like to be told what to do, and had a young John Bender from *The Breakfast Club* type vibe to his demeanor, right down to the heavy toed black leather boots he wore. Sitting around that lunch table, they were all mentioning the boy without outright saying his name, nudging my mentor teacher to reveal how he was treating me. “Wrapped around her finger,” were her exact words. In that moment I felt so proud, especially because I got a lot of nods of approval and possibly even some impressed colleagues.

I remember wondering what it was I had done that made John Bender work well with me. It could have been because I was young, but I chose to believe it was because of how I acted around him. I did not treat him like a problem. I talked to him as I would anyone else, even asked his interests. I called on him to help me, and I did not make any assumptions about who he was. I did not treat him as a problem, only the behaviors that at times crept up. Behaviors can be worked on, and no student should ever feel as if they are the problem. Starr Sackstein perfectly sums up my thoughts in her book *Hacking Assessment: 10 Ways to Go Gradeless in a Traditional Grades School*, “They enjoyed

the environment because they knew I cared about their learning and more important, about them as individuals. If I had not spent so much time talking to them, this would not have been possible.” (3)

One of the interesting things about the fictional John Bender character is that he chose to be at that Saturday detention. At the beginning of the movie, each student is being dropped off by their family. We get our first glimpse of each character, and we learn a lot about each one based on the car they drive, what their parents give them for lunch, and how they speak to their children about the punishment they are receiving that Saturday in detention. The “brain” of the group is driven in a beat up older car and told to work hard by his strict, working class mother. The “preppy and popular” girl of the group was driven in a BMW and given sushi for lunch in a fancy bag while she begged her father to get her out of the detention. Bender is the only character who walks towards the school alone. Later he argues with the principal and gains more Saturday detentions. It appears he is being stubborn and rebellious, but based on small hints about his father throughout the movie, I do not think he wanted to be home. School was a safe haven for him, a place to escape and be someone and somewhere different. He got himself up on a Saturday when no one was making him go, and he got himself to school. Then he found a way to have to be at that school, his safe zone, for many Saturdays to come. My student was similar in that he wanted to be in school. He could have skipped class and just embraced the troublemaker status everyone had labeled him with, but instead he chose to be there. He just needed some support, someone to listen to him, and someone to show him respect for who he is rather than attempt to change him.

## 2.3 The Pull

...success will follow you precisely because you have *forgotten* to think of it.

-Viktor E. Frankl (Psychiatrist, Author)

I was far from a great teacher in many ways, as I was still learning, something I continue to do even today, but while I was student teaching, I really started to grasp how important teaching FCS is. I was showing students how to feed themselves, be smart consumers, and work as a team. Our classes were applicable to real life scenarios right away, not some math equation that they may or may not need depending on their major in college. We were a hands-on classroom that reached many types of learners, gave students who struggle in the traditional classroom a chance to shine, and allowed the high flying students a break from the rigor of AP work.

Students would come in the next day and talk about how they made pizza for their family and experimented with toppings and knife cuts on their vegetables. Former students would come in just to see my mentor teacher and tell her how they were now going to culinary school, had hemmed their own pants, or even just to say hi and catch up. I do not remember anyone doing that with the teachers who taught the core classes I took in high school, nor did I ever feel the need to do so, but my mentor teacher had made such an impact on her students that they came back just to see her. They had her to thank for learning valuable life skills, and they were reminded of her every time they put those skills to work. “Unfortunately kids in school find themselves asking ‘when am I ever going to use this?’ in school quite frequently. This course was one of the very few that answers that question effortlessly” as stated in an interview with Melanie Theriault (Essex High School, Class of 2015).

While I was nervous about the prospect of teaching as my career, and doubtful that I was actually any good at it, I felt a pull to do something others were shying away from. I felt that FCS was important to be taught, and did not understand how others could be against it. It felt like it was up to me to continue teaching an important topic, even if that meant I was at least 30 years younger than everyone else at our annual state meetings. Once again, that gut feeling came at me, and I knew I had to fight the urge to run. I had to embrace teaching and learn more about it. Similar to babysitting when I was younger, you only get better the more you do it, and like the parents before, my professors were telling me that I was good at it. It is important to listen to those that are wiser than you, even when we do not want to admit it.

### **Chapter 3. Learning from the Past**

Mentors change lives. They sprinkle fairy mist on parched souls.

-Nancy Slonim Aronie (Author)

#### **3. 1 Marion Brown Thorpe**

We all carry, inside us, people who came before us. -Liam Callanan (Author)

The first time I met Marion Brown Thorpe was at the Sheraton Hotel in Burlington, Vermont for lunch. The hotel has a unique style, but as you first walk in it feels like any other hotel, complete with the requisite deep green patterned carpet, high ceilings, and floor to ceiling tapestry even where there are no windows. Despite the traditional lobby, as you walk through, you enter a hall that is painted a bright white and filled with natural light. You walk on a bridge walkway lined with palm trees and lit up by the sun, seemingly no matter what the weather is outside, which in Vermont is grey and dreary for what feels like half of the year. It looks as though you have entered a different world from the lobby, and as you continue down the hallway you come to an opening that leads to the seating area of the restaurant, complete with a gazebo, running water, and a serene atmosphere. Every time I walk in I feel as though I am vacationing in Florida, not eating lunch during the frigid Vermont winter.

Entering into the tropical lunch area is always a welcome experience, much needed on the day I met Marion. I will admit, I went in wondering why I had to meet this woman. Sure, she played a major part in developing the Home Economics program at UVM, but she was not currently teaching or involved in the program. She was also about to turn 90 years old, and I wondered what she could offer us early-20's aged students who were learning to teach a new breed of students very different from the past

generations Marion had dealt with. How could a woman who not only taught but also retired before I was even born share anything that would aid me in dealing with today's technology frenzied students? She was in the class of 1938, I was in the class of 2008. Wars were fought, African Americans earned the right to vote, and the start of a new millennium stood between us. But, it was also a free lunch, and I was a poor college student so I might as well make the most of it, humor the woman and let her feel like one of the girls for an afternoon. My advisor had set it up because she liked to include Marion in the happenings of the program. It turns out she also greatly admired this elder stateswoman to our profession, but my flippant young adult self had no idea what was coming.

Walking towards the table, there sat Marion, as petite as can be, a shock of curly white hair pressed in curls sitting closely to her head, smiling a small closed-mouthed smile at each of us, hands clasped before her on the table. She was delicate, and offered up a wistful wrinkled hand to shake, nodding as we introduced ourselves. She displayed a small smile that was both friendly and mischievous. As we began our conversation, she did not immediately "talk of the old days," but genuinely wanted to know what we were up to in our schooling. She knew things had not changed all that much in our discipline, even if we did not want to believe that. She listened attentively to us as we told her about ourselves, what we had been through, and where we were going. She barely uttered a peep, other than the cutest full-body chuckle that shook her back from the table a bit, head turned up, when appropriate. When it was her turn to share, I realized that this was

not a typical 90-year-old. She had not lost her mind or her physical being. She was a 70-year-old in a 90-year old's clothing, and she had the bite and wit to go with it.

Marion wove stories of a past UVM that we could not have imagined on our own. Most of her classes were held in the Bertha Terrill Building, named after UVM's first female faculty member, who also established Home Economics at the university. Since women were not allowed to wear pants back then, Marion and her classmates would sneak them under their long skirts to keep warm while walking across campus in the Vermont winter tundra. She attended school at a time when many other women did not, as they were expected to marry and then stay at home to raise their children. Marion wanted to be a physical education teacher, but her mother, like most moms even today, when met with a college major they are unsure will get their child far in life, suggested her daughter major in something to "go with it." (4) Marion chose to go with Home Economics, and not only earned her Bachelor's Degree, but also her Master's Degree in Science from Syracuse University. (5)

She relished in her stories of the troublesome students she dealt with in her early teaching years: rug rats who would play tricks on her, hide her things, and who really put her through the ringer, keeping her on her toes at all times. She always told her stories with a twinkle in her eye. She never spoke in an irritated tone, and in fact was quite soft spoken. It was hard to imagine her managing a class of students, but she had a way about her that kept people focused. We all remained silent as she spoke, both out of respect and necessity to hear what she was saying. Even as she told stories of struggle or student misbehavior, her words were always tinged with amusement and awe at what she had

been through. Marion saw life through rose colored glasses, and it was just what I needed to hear when in the midst of exams and college social drama. She had a lightness, a good spirit about her that was pleasant to be around. She reminded me of my own grandmother, who I would lie with on the couch and repeat over and over again, “tell me stories, Grandma” as a young girl. I loved hearing my own Grandmother’s tales of raising eight children who were all born within ten years from oldest to youngest, five of them boys. The tales were ones too outrageous to be made up, and better than any book I had read. Marion never had children of her own, but her students were her children. They taught her as much as she taught them, and she loved passing that knowledge along to others.

One regret I have is not interviewing Marion for this thesis before she passed away. She was 100 when she died in 2016, and it does not surprise me in the least that she lived that long. She would tell you how the secret to life was taking care of yourself and eating three good meals a day. She also never had to deal with the stresses of having a husband, which she claimed she never needed. She did marry at the age of 65, to her recently widowed neighbor who would come over to fix things for her. (6) She was not compromising or settling, as it was love, and it was happiness according to her. Marion was not one to do something she did not want to do, so when she married, she knew it was for the right reasons. The two of them were very giving, having established many charities and scholarships in their name over the years. Giving was their nature, both in monetary goods and words of wisdom. They were married for 13 years before he passed, but Marion would never speak of regret having married later in life, for she enjoyed both

her single life and her married life for what they were. She was the definition of an independent woman.

Despite the soft spoken and diminutive demeanor that I spoke to, Marion had spunk. She had gumption in that she knew what she wanted and she set out to get it. She was independent in a time when women were actually encouraged not to be that way. She broke rules and traditions while teaching a subject that on the surface feels very traditional. Teaching women how to run a home seems outdated now, but in Marion's time it was giving women something to strive for. It showed the importance of a woman's role in the family. It gave definition to a vague job of raising a family, and proved that paying bills, sewing clothes to keep children warm, and cooking nutritious meals that feed the mind and body, are equally important as bringing home the money that paid for the supplies to complete these tasks. The husband may be the breadwinner, but the mother is the heart and soul that keeps the family together. A woman's role is essential in raising future generations of children, and Marion Brown Thorpe helped generations of women do it to the best of their abilities.

### **3.2 Teaching on Our Own Terms**

The larger culture is always applying pressure, and unless we're willing to push back and fight for what we believe in, the default becomes a state of scarcity.

-Brene Brown (Researcher, Author)

I would like to think that I, like Marion, am breaking the mold of what a Family and Consumer Scientist is. Many of my FCS teacher peers are decades older than I am, and as local school programs get cut due to budget restraints, new jobs and therefore new hires are no longer an option. As teachers retire, so do their programs in many schools, rather than allowing someone youthful and exhilarated to come in and breathe new life

into an old program. UVM no longer has a FCS Education program at all. The three girls who graduated the year after I did were the last class to go through the university, and our advisor has found work in the Midwest where FCS is still booming and considered important curriculum. Some of the FCS courses are still taught at UVM by Human Development and Family Studies professors, but you cannot graduate with a degree in the major. This means no student teachers, and no one coming into teaching having been trained on the subject of FCS in Vermont. Adults can go back to school through many of our local college programs to get a teaching license, but it is rare, and the instruction of core FCS values is lacking. There is simply no way for someone to learn all of the areas that relate to FCS without going through a program specifically designed to teach it. Essentially there are not many peers close to my age in the field.

I also do not teach my students to be prim, proper, or traditional, as one might think old school FCS is all about. I try not to focus on the perception of what FCS is while teaching, and in fact try to break away from that mold. Instead I aim for all of us in the classroom to have respect for each other while the students discover how my lessons can be adapted to what applies to their lives in today's world. My neighbor who lived across the street from me growing up was in the local grocery store a few years back. The cashier and bagger were two high school aged kids having a conversation as she was checking out, and they were talking about me. They obviously had no knowledge that my neighbor knew me, and they were freely chatting as if no one was listening. One of them commented about how they liked me as a teacher, and the other replied that it was because I am the only teacher who treats them like an adult. My neighbor of course

called my father on the way home, excited to share what she had heard. I was really touched when it was relayed to me by my father, for I felt as though I was making a difference for once. I was reaching the kids, which must mean I was doing something right.

The conversation between those two boys represents exactly the teacher who I want to be: someone who the kids can come to and who they know cares. I am not some strict teacher shaking my finger at them to never do drugs or eat sugar. I am someone who speaks to them on their level about what matters, and gives them a guidepost of information to help make informed decisions when the time comes. I want to teach them by my actions and the way that I carry myself every day. Teaching through example can have a lasting impact on students, and one of the prime things I want to exude is acceptance of all: men, women, or non-conforming, gay, straight, or fluid, disabled or able-bodied. I mention men or women because I believe in equality for all sexes, which is why feminism can be quite the trigger word. I am going to try to explain why I think both Marion and I are feminists, and by feminists I really mean giving a voice to the underdog, just not in the traditional mold.

### **3.3 A New Kind of Feminist**

In our quest for happiness and the avoidance of suffering, we are all fundamentally the same, and therefore equal.

-Dalai Lama (Spiritual Leader)

Empathy shatters ideologies and destroys stereotypes. It is the only thing that works.

-Mary Pipher (Psychologist, Author)

The term feminism brings up a range of emotions and connotations in every person. For some, feminism is the bra burning, sit-in protesters of the women's movement in the middle of the twentieth century. For others, feminism is the current drive of women coming together to march and make the world know that we exist, we deserve to make choices that involve our own bodies, and we have earned the right to take home equal pay to our male peers. Both of these descriptions are positive displays of solidarity and unity of a group trying to break free of oppression. The words feminism or feminist can also evoke anger or fear in others, unfortunately.

My On Your Own class, the objective of which is to teach high school students how to successfully live as adults after graduation, once had an hour long debate on the word feminism. I start each class with an attendance question of the day. It helps me learn more about each student, gets them thinking about the day's topic, and gets each student to talk at least once each class, which hopefully will break the ice for them to then participate even more throughout the day's lesson. Most days the question is relevant to the topic of the day. I honestly do not remember the lesson topic on that particular day, but I assume we were discussing communication. The question was what your favorite word is, and one student, an impassioned advocate for women's and LGBTQ rights, answered with feminism.

Immediately a male student took issue with the word as male-hating, and started a debate that was probably equal parts his true feelings and equal parts to frustrate his fellow opinionated classmate. The discussion brought up many valid points, however, and because the class is about living on your own and making your own choices, I let

them talk. It seemed to be a more relevant discussion than the day's topic, with its own learning points, and I refereed to keep the conversation from veering too disrespectful or personal. The ultimate conclusion we made was that the word feminism has many meanings, which vary depending on who you are talking to, and that there are many misconceptions surrounding the word. It was an unexpected class, but a valuable lesson in respecting others' opinions while having a reciprocal debate.

Being a feminist does not mean anti-men. Women can have equal rights without devaluing the role of men in our society, yet somehow the word has come to represent suppressing one group so another can rise. As a woman, I do not see how a fellow woman would not be a feminist, as we should all want what is best for each other, including a salary that is based on our work output and not our gender, medicine that affects our monthly menstruation cycle sold at an affordable cost, and to see more women in positions of power, including CEOs of major corporations and high positions in our nation's capital. Labeling ourselves as feminist means we strive for the best in every woman. A woman becoming a CEO does not have to come at the expense of a man's job. There are plenty of positions to go around, and women have just as much brain power, as well as different biological traits that can be beneficial to managing employees and running large-scale operations.

The fact that high school students turned a word that is rooted in equality into a dividing talking point, even after all these years of it being around, is disheartening, but not surprising. Somewhere along the way, probably always if I am being honest with myself, women were looked at as "lesser-than" their male counterpart, and while change

has happened slowly, that still remains true today. Physically we have different body structures and some women are able to birth children, but neither should affect our work output. Marion and early Family and Consumer Scientists identified that women's roles were equal if different to a man's, and we are advocates to the feminist cause in ways we may not even recognize.

One of the roles current feminists are trying to break free of is the traditional stay-at-home mom. Taking care of one's family and raising children is one of the most difficult jobs around. Not only is it a mentally tough job due to the organization and time management needed to get meals cooked on time, while keeping everyone occupied, and arriving at playgroups on time, but it is also emotionally taxing to be teaching children who push against you with every move as they try to figure out their way in the world. It can also be physically draining as you lift flailing bodies, chase toddling legs, and scrub crusted food you never thought could end up on the ceiling. Moms are expected to remain calm in a crisis, get excited when their child does the smallest mundane thing, and be a moral compass that guides their kids in the right direction. Moms wear many hats, and it can be impossible to wear them all well. While being a stay at home mom should be viewed as super hero status, instead society views staying at home as easy, as if every mom sits all day with their feet propped up, tossing popcorn into their mouths while they watch soap operas as their children entertain themselves.

The workforce in the United States is not even equipped to aid new mothers, as there is no official law regarding maternity leave. Mothers who work hourly non-contractual jobs are expected back to work after their sick days run out. Doctors urge

mothers to breastfeed their baby for at least a year for health benefits for the baby, yet most mothers are back to work in six weeks or less. That time away from their child does not aid our ability to feed the next generation of Americans. Puppies stay with their mothers until at least eight weeks old before their human owners can take them home, yet human babies are fine to go to daycare with strangers as young as five weeks old.

When women do not feel the workplace is accepting of their tasks as a mother, it is just one more way to feel demeaned and lesser-than. If one chooses to stay at home with their children they lose their place in the workforce, but if they continue to work they are potentially not doing what is best for their children. The issue of maternity leave in this country is a large one, and not what this thesis is about, but if we want our mothers to be successful in all areas of their lives, the way we respect our mothers and newborns will need to change.

Running a household uses a different part of our brain than when we are in the workforce, but it is no less challenging. Many women have found that they need the stimulation that comes from working outside of the home, whether for social reasons or even for their own self-worth. FCS teaches us how to have both of these things: a fulfilling home life and a rewarding work life. FCS teaches how to make meals that are healthy and fast, how to make decisions that best suit one's needs, and how to manage your money so you do not spend all that hard earned paycheck in one place. FCS may be about keeping a family running, but the mother does not have to stay home to make it work. Everyone plays their part, everyone must pull their weight, and that is when the knowledge FCS provides can be the most successful.

In Marion's case, FCS even gave her a means to work outside of the home, sharing her knowledge with others. She was making a life for herself as an individual rather than with a family, all the while teaching others that we can have both and still be successful at it. Catherine Beecher emphasized the importance of female labor in her teaching. She was not relegating a woman to the kitchen, but rather proving how essential a woman's job is to running a household, managing the growth of children, and helping others. (7) She was praising women at a time when men ruled the world (at least even more than they do now). Marion Brown Thorpe was also a feminist, standing on her own when it was not acceptable in society to do so. She was a professor when it was not even common for women to work outside of the household. These trailblazing women led a revolution to teach children how to cook, clean, and understand their role in the community.

Marion probably never saw herself as a feminist. Her generation was not trying to prove themselves or fight against men, for the feminist movement had yet to begin. She was just doing what she wanted to do, what felt right in her life. Without knowing it, she was a representation as an early feminist, someone who broke molds and carved their own path. She worked, lived on her own, and represented someone who did not need to fit into society's expectations of her. I wonder if she would be offended by the word feminist, for I have found it has a much different connotation for previous generations. (6) In the years she was growing up, men were the breadwinner and the decision maker of the home, and women did not necessarily feel oppressed, but rather followed the man of the house, whether their husband or father, out of respect. It was not

until later years that women realized they could make those decisions, too, and did not need to follow a man simply because it was the way society had taught them to act. Because of the time she grew up in, she most likely felt fine with those traditional gender roles; she simply proved they could change by the way she led her own life.

When passing out candy this last Halloween, the bell rang to reveal about eight girls standing before me. In various levels of costume, I failed to recognize a set of twins who live down the road. The louder and more exuberant of the twins announced to her friends that I was one of the FCS teachers at the high school, where they would all be going the following school year. I was so focused on the candy delivering that I barely looked up at the comment, but I did just in time to see and hear one of the girls say, “oh” in a bored tone, followed by, “really?” in a very surprised tone, complete with a full head cock stare at me. I smiled and nodded, not really sure how to respond, and they all went off on their way. The middle school FCS teacher is retiring this year, so maybe the surprise came from my age in comparison to their current teacher, or maybe it was something about the way that I carry myself. There is no way to know for sure, but I do know that I do not fit the stereotypical FCS teacher, and that makes me proud. I am an example for a new generation to understand that talking about what makes us healthy both inside and out is important.

FCS represents finding what is best for each of us in terms of what we do, what we watch, and even who we choose to be around. FCS represents being the best person, be that man, woman, or other. I am a working mom who also tries to eat healthy, manage mental stress, and guide others. I try to represent FCS to the best of my abilities each and

every day in the way that I live and carry myself. We do not have to choose a career over family or vice versa. We do not have to sacrifice eating well for being happy. We do not have to give up on reaching our goals when we have children and need to help them reach their own goals. I hope to inspire other women to come to the understanding that our world has changed, and nothing is black and white. We are not cookie cutter perfect wives, but we are also not working machines. We are people, well-rounded, equal, and we can have everything we need if we are taught how to achieve that from an early age.

### **3.4. Family and Consumer Science > Home Economics**

Home Economics stands for the ideal home life for today unhampered by the traditions of the past and the utilization of all the resources of modern science to improve home life.

-Ellen Swallow Richards (Engineer, Chemist, and  
Founder of the Home Economics Movement)

It's the new way to say 'home economics,' but it's more involved. I chose it because it's versatility. It intertwines with all kinds of things.

-Brooke Rogers

From the moment that I picked my major, the most common response when I told someone what I was studying was, "huh?" My mom went around telling all of her friends that I was studying Home Ec., and it drove me crazy. I cringed because I assumed those people were picturing an old lady wearing a floral apron holding a pie when they heard the words home and economics together. I considered myself to be a modern woman, not some old-fashioned homemaker. I was going to teach students the science behind cutting in the butter for pie crust, not just cutting in the butter for the pie crust. See the difference? Certainly our world has changed, and therefore what we teach is now different, but the beauty of FCS is that it brings us back to our core. It teaches life

skills that everyone needs to know, whether they own a cell phone or not. Our topics grow and adapt over the years, but our general themes, such as child development and avoiding peer pressure, remain the same.

Home Economics became Family and Consumer Science in 1994, moving the curriculum away from domesticity. The program felt dated, and a fresh name worked as both a face lift and a way to assure students and parents that they were learning more than how to run a home. At the school I currently teach, my now named Foods I class was once titled Bachelor Cooking when the school first opened in the 1970s. It was only for boys, and it taught them how to make simple meals to feed themselves for their impending bachelorhood before marriage or if they chose to never get married. Girls took wood shop as an alternative because they were innately supposed to know how to manage a home and therefore did not need cooking class. Instead, shop class taught them to be handy if they did not have a man around to help them.

After a few years, the sexes were allowed to mix within the classes, and the name of the cooking course changed to Singles Cooking. It was still aimed at people who need to feed themselves because they did not have a mother or wife to do it. The only reason the name stuck for so long, despite being so terribly dated and sexist, was because it was catchy and well known as a popular course in the school, and name recognition is important when students sign up for classes. I changed the course name for the 2016-2017 school year because with changing times, gender fluidity, and fewer women homemakers, it just made sense to make a change that better represents that the class was for anyone to learn how to cook. Plus, the class is so much more than cooking; students

learn nutrition and consumer skills as well. Once they gain their cooking skills, they could cook for whomever, wherever, whenever they pleased.

Home Economics changing their name signaled a turn, and hoped to rejuvenate a dying breed. Unfortunately, Family and Consumer Science is less catchy than Home Ec., or maybe because it is less popular in schools now, but the new name is not a household name like its original counterpart. Over the past twenty or so years, programs, especially in the northern part of our country, are being cut from schools in favor of STEM programs. Our curriculum topics have folded into other areas such as goal setting into health, nutrition into science, and math teachers now teach financial literacy. The need for a specific teacher to cover all of these topics has seemed unnecessary in the eyes of those creating the school budget, but what are we losing along with the cut program? We lose a space for hands-on learners. We lose the practice of skills ideal for non-college bound students. We lose camaraderie and bonding around a kitchen counter, arguably the heart of most people's homes.

Think of most dinner parties. What comes to mind is the time spent around the kitchen island, with food close by, and delicious smells wafting from the oven. Memories are linked to smells, and when something is memorable we are much more likely to retain what we are learning. Therefore, a kitchen lab is the ideal teaching atmosphere, in my humble opinion. It allows for personal connections, gets our bodies moving and blood flowing, and practical skills are taught that will last a lifetime. A science teacher can teach the functions of minerals in our bodies, but that is nowhere near

as fun as experimenting and cooking with said nutrients and seeing our knowledge put into actions that create real results.

### **3.5 A Pioneer in Her Field**

What a teacher is, is more important than what he teaches.

-Karl Menninger (Family Psychiatrist)

The preconceived notion that FCS is dated is a shame, as is my original thought that all FCS teachers are probably sweet older ladies. One thing I have learned from meeting fellow FCS teachers is that we are one group of feisty ladies. Marion Brown Thorpe was a pioneer for FCS, which you would never know from her humble demeanor, but her actions spoke louder than words. When she chose to work and not marry until her 60s, she paved her own path. What I loved most about Marion was that she showed in the way that she lived her life that there was more to life than homemaking. Being a wife and producing kids is not essential to feel fulfilled, and FCS, while conjuring up an image of the past, is actually more about working on one's self than working on a home. Many of my other colleagues are expert sewers, former professional pastry chefs, and administration leaders in their schools. They are Jills of all trades, the people who others in the school go to when they need help, be it to sew the costumes for the school play or help getting a stain from lunch out of their pants. These women travel, teach CPR classes, and coach sports. They are multi-faceted humans, not just homemakers.

Through Marion I realized I need not be ashamed of teaching something that others deem unimportant. If working at a job that she loved got her to be 100 years old, she must have been doing something right. Unfortunately, I believe the negative stigma behind FCS and what we teach has led people, especially parents and school board

members, to think we need to move our schools into the future, leaving FCS behind. FCS is rooted in teaching nutrition for families back in the 1800s by the sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Catherine Beecher. (7) In the 1900s, the teaching moved to schools and centered on family management. That image seems to be what has stuck, even as pretty much everything else from pre-1970 has not. The fear that students only learn to make muffins in FCS class and are therefore wasting their time and our taxpayer dollars actually results in the loss of so much more.

A simple muffin lesson can teach a student about fat replacements, sugar substitutions, measuring, recipe conversions, recipe reading with intention, cooking with what ingredients one has on hand, comparing homemade ingredients to store bought ingredients, recipe writing, adapting a recipe to fit a dietary need, and I could go on and on. There is so much more involved in a simple cooking lab than just cooking, and if taught effectively, a student will be learning math, science, health, English, and social skills all in the same FCS lesson. We just have to find a way for schools to stop cutting their programs before it is too late.

## Chapter 4. The Importance of FCS Education from a Young Age

He who has health has hope, and he who has hope has everything.

-Arab Proverb

### 4.1 How FCS Education Could have Helped Me

Investing in early childhood nutrition is a surefire strategy. The returns are incredibly high.

-Ann M. Mulcahy (former CEO of Xerox)

When I was in the sixth grade, my mom went back to work. Up until that point in my life, she had been a stay at home mom who ran a daycare in our house. As my younger sister and I aged, she wanted the chance to get out of the house, away from biting children who knocked down the Christmas tree and then stood there drawing on their tongue with a pen while she picked up the broken pieces of glass family ornaments (true story, I cannot make that up). Her ultimate goal was to work at a college to help pay for my sister's and my educations, which she eventually succeeded at after working various secretarial jobs for a few years.

The main change that occurred when my mom returned to work was that my sister and I would be alone for a few hours after school. I was old enough to watch my little sister, and we were trustworthy kids. What we did not have, however, was any knowledge about how to take care of our changing prepubescent bodies. Every day we would return home and raid the refrigerator and food pantry for snacks to eat while watching *The Wonder Years* reruns on TV. We would fight over who got to sit in the comfy brown chair that reclined electronically with the push of a button that had been my grandfather's. We were not munching on popcorn or crackers though; we were raiding the refrigerator for the good stuff. Like bears feasting on a camp cooler, we would attack

the leftovers. My mother is an amazing cook, and she prepared a home cooked meal every night that we would eat as a family sitting around the dining room table. Tuna noodle casserole was my ultimate favorite, followed closely by chicken divan. The trend words of my favorite foods were creamy, casserole, and cheesy, nowhere in sight were the words low-fat or vegetable.

My mother's cooking was by no means unhealthy if eaten in proper proportions, but eating two meals a day negated any healthy aspects, and meant I was over-eating my daily allowance of most of the food groups. I had no concept of portion control, I just knew I was starving when I returned home from a day at school. After I had dug into the leftovers and chocolate granola bars that were in the food closet, my mom would return home and make the nightly meal. In the years prior to her going back to work, I remember sitting in front of the TV with a stomach that felt like a hollow well waiting to be filled, repeatedly yelling into the kitchen to find out when dinner would be ready. For the first time I did not need to ask, for I was full from my earlier munching.

I had no knowledge that it is actually important for our bodies to be hungry before supplying them with food again, or the new food will be stored as fat. My family is a "clear the plate" kind of deal, so in I went to the dining room and ate essentially a second full meal, even if I was not hungry to begin with. Add this new eating routine to hormones, no longer taking dance lessons, and teenage angst, and suddenly I gained weight for the first time in my life.

I had always been a fairly active kid by dancing or playing sports. I was by no means coordinated, and in fact was known to fall down while walking home from the

school bus, but I was at least moving on a regular basis. Suddenly I was not an average weight, had acne breakouts, and a work-stressed mother. I preface this next part by saying my mother and I have a great relationship now. We braved the teenage storm and came out closer than ever on the other side, but it was not always smooth sailing. Many mothers and daughters struggle through the latter's teen years, when daughters want to pull away while still making their mothers proud, and mothers want to hang on to their innocent daughters before they make the same mistakes they made in their youth.

Those years were rough for us, as communication was quick to anger for the both of us, mainly because we no longer understood who the other person was. I was a sassy teen to my mother; my mother was suddenly a real, actual person and not just my mother to me. "Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them." (8) I remember feeling disgusted about myself, and as though she felt the same way. My mother grew up with seven thin siblings, how did she get an overweight daughter? I felt inadequate, with plummeting self-esteem, but I had no idea what to do about it. Looking back, maybe my mom did not care how I looked, or maybe she wanted to help me and did not know how, but either way I felt as if my weight gain was wrong. Our relationship was being stretched and cracked as most teenage mother-daughter relationships do, and I felt as though it was because of who I was becoming.

FCS was taught in my middle school. The start of these classes coincided with my weight gain. We covered nutrition, but also how to say no to drugs, sewing bears that were donated to a local shelter, peer pressure, and other topics I cannot remember, all

within a few weeks. Every student went through the FCS classroom in a rotation with other special classes, such as Tech Ed, music, and art, and each class was stacked with valuable topics that were barely touched upon due to a lack of time.

My first three years teaching were at a middle school with a similar schedule. I saw each student for only four and a half weeks, and was expected to cover a laundry list of topics in that time. While FCS has national standards, the state of Vermont does not expect specific standards to be met by a certain grade level. Essentially it is up to the teacher to teach what they want, so long as it matches with at least one standard. I could have spent the entire four and a half weeks teaching just sewing if it is what I liked, but I wanted the students to get a little taste of everything to see what they were interested in. I created an every-other-year rotating schedule since I saw fifth and sixth graders together and seventh and eighth graders together. That way every year they learned new skills during their four years in middle school, and hopefully I covered as many topics as possible. It also meant they did not get to cook or sew every year, and we skimmed through a lot of topics.

I can honestly say that after experiencing this teaching schedule from both the teacher's and the student's perspective that it was an extremely rushed way to do things. It was enough time to introduce topics, but not delve too deep into any one. In a world where we cannot expect students to do their own research outside of class, it meant they missed out on a lot of valuable knowledge. It was a system that did not and continues to not work at reaching students in the most effective way.

I cannot put the cause of my weight gain on my FCS teacher either, for she did not design the rushed schedule she taught under. If we learned more about nutrition someone else could be writing a thesis right now about how differently their life could have been with earlier drug use education. I do not even remember learning about nutrition, but I do know that we learned some basic cooking skills, mainly of the baking sort. Being the fairly good, quiet student that I was, I was paired up for cooking with a partner who was the class scatter-brain. One day after school, my teacher told another teacher and I, “bless my heart” because I had to put up with my partner. He regularly picked his nose. Since I am not sure where he put his hands after the picking, I did not eat most of what we cooked that year. There is no sense in dwelling on what could have been, other than to make changes for the future.

Nutrition and life skills are essential for children to be taught as they enter their teen years. Growing minds and bodies have a lot going on, expectations of them coming from all directions, and, quite frankly, they do not understand their own self anymore. It does not do any good to educate about safe sex after a teenager becomes pregnant, just as it does not do any good to learn about healthy eating after the age in which we start making food choices for ourselves. Sure, corrections can be made and habits can be changed, but why should we have to do that?

My unhealthy habits began in the sixth grade, and greatly affected my self-esteem and caused a lot of self-doubt. My weight gain led to criticism from classmates, and while I never felt bullied, I certainly felt inadequate. I did not have the self-empowerment to stand up for myself, and I began a cycle of eating poorly to make

myself feel better, which then in turn made me feel worse about my appearance. Things did not change for me until college when I started working out and eating right, which coincided with starting to learn about FCS education, thus incorporating it into my lifestyle. I was also certainly not the only “latch-key” child in America, named for youth who go home each day with a key in their backpack pocket to let themselves in when no one else would be home. Thousands of other kids were also going home to an empty house, hungry, and unaware of how to make the right choices to nourish themselves properly. We must start the FCS education young, and we must be comprehensive in our topics, and not just teach bullet points. We owe it to future generations to educate them about life skills that we as adults now take for granted because we learned them as we aged.

#### **4.2 Let’s Start the Education Early**

If we do not prepare our children to become good citizens...then our republic must go down to destruction.

-John Dewey (Psychologist, Education Reformer, Philosopher)

Experts predict that this will be the first generation to live sicker and die younger than their parents (9). According to the Center for Disease Control, childhood obesity has more than tripled since the 1970s (10). While a big part of our obesity and health problems in this country stem from where the government chooses to allocate our money, as schools receive less than two dollars for free and reduced lunches for students, it is not a problem with an easy solution (9). Of course I wish Congress would step in and stop the farm subsidies that produce an excessive amount of sugar and corn for corn syrup that ends up in basically every food we eat (9), but I am not a politician. I am, however, an

educator, and I can start by teaching the youth of America. If we cannot expect our government to make changes for our children, then we as adults must advocate for them, while also teaching them how to advocate for themselves.

Families are being forced to decide between eating at all or eating junk food. The cost of processed food has gone down by forty percent since the 1980s, while at the same time the cost of fresh produce has done the exact opposite and risen by forty percent (9). We often picture emaciated children who are starved in association to poverty, when the reality is that obesity and poverty often go together. Parents who are struggling with money can afford cans of spaghetti-o and Doritos, and at least their child will be fed. The poor nutrition of a regular diet of processed foods leads to health problems such as diabetes and asthma, which then lead to high medical costs (9). There is a cyclical pattern that keeps people in poverty and does not allow them off of the moving hamster wheel. It feels hopeless, and without knowledge, it just might be so.

The health effects on overweight youth cannot be ignored. Seventeen percent of youth ages two to nineteen are overweight or obese in our country, which has grown two-to-threefold in the last two decades. In that time, fatty liver disease has become the largest contributor of non-alcoholic cirrhosis of the liver. For children, this not only means the onset of severe liver problems or failure, but the potential for heart issues and an increased rate of morbidity (11). Obesity also affects a child's chance of developing cancer, type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal diseases, and cardiovascular problems. More than 2.6 million people die each year due to health issues stemming from being overweight or obese (12).

When families have to deal with both poverty and obesity, the effects can be devastating. The cost of healthcare to treat the negative health effects of obesity causes a burden on an already tightly budgeted family, which in turn can cause rifts between family members due to the stress of balancing it all. Our country needs to look at this epidemic as just that: an epidemic. Poverty will not just go away, nor will hunger or obesity. If our government is not going to make changes that will help people get out of the cyclical situation of health and money problems, then the least we can do is to reach them with education.

FCS covers topics ranging from family growth to money management. What person can avoid the need for either of those in their life? FCS education has a foundation in family management, which essentially means real life problems. FCS teaches people how to communicate, how to make decisions, and how to set goals. FCS looks at life's problems from the inside out, starting with our inner personal struggles and ending with how one relates to the world. It covers a wide array of topics because life is a wide array of topics. We all have a lot going on in our lives every day, but with basic skills such as emotion regulation, time management, and organization, our lives can become more manageable, if not less hectic.

On the surface, FCS education appears to be common sense. In my experience, however, not many people are born with that sense in the areas that FCS teaches. Most people struggle with at least a few of the topics I mentioned above at some point in their lives. Humans need resources to turn to, and if we learn about a topic when we are young, hopefully we will implement it into our lives as we grow until it becomes second

nature. If that is not the case, at least those skills will remain in our memory, waiting to be retrieved when needed for action.

What I just spoke of is in an ideal world. I know that what a person learns as a fifth grader is not going to be at the forefront of their mind as they graduate college. Some of it will be, though, and that is what will guide us. Education builds on itself, and as we develop new skills we apply them to our previous skills and keep learning and growing.

Education has to start somewhere, and it is important that we teach our children what is important before it is too late. One educational tool is exposing children to what they have never seen. In a home where a parent cannot afford to buy fresh fruit, the children will most likely grow up eating processed food such as chicken nuggets. When those children get to school, they will eat what they know. They will grab the pizza over the fresh ingredients any day because it is familiar. In FCS classes, they have the chance to feel fresh food and taste it. They may not be able to get high quality nutritious ingredients at home, but their free breakfast and lunch at school can be nutrient packed if they know what to look for.

For the past two years I have had a student, Tim, in my class. The first year he was quite negative, and he was always getting worked up about what others were doing around him. This year, on the first day of Foods II, which cooks more exotic foods from around the world than his previous class of Foods I, he told me he would never try anything we cooked. I was understandably confused as to why he was even taking this course if he did not love food, especially since he had already fulfilled the graduation

requirement with Foods I, but he was amiable while cooking and told me he enjoys cutting onions and garlic. For the first cooking lab we made pork fried rice. He tried it, loved it, and took extra home. On day two the same thing happened. Lab three he actually yelled out, “Why do you keep picking recipes that are so good, I actually like everything!” He was trying so hard to not try the food, but in the end, he was opened to a world of new experiences throughout the semester. He learned how to sauté chicken properly, what a plantain looks like, and that he enjoys vegetables other than just onions. He went home, where I suspect food is not always available, with a container of leftovers each day, and more often than not told me about making something similar at home now that he knows how to do so. Tim is the perfect example of why trying something new is so important; you do not know you like it until you have tried it, and many students just need someone to show them what is new.

As FCS education gets eliminated from schools left and right, usually at the high school level first, but in many schools at the middle level as well, students are the ones who suffer. Some of the topics covered in FCS are taken up by health, physical education, and business teachers. Many are not, however, and the once illustrious kitchen and sewing spaces of the school become the catch-all for random school books and supplies or are converted to family learning spaces for special education departments. In a student’s day they need the opportunity to do hands-on work that relates directly to their lives. Of course English and social studies are important to learn, but it can be harder to see the payoff of their learning in those subjects until they get older and it all comes together. There is also the argument that a student will never use

calculus unless they want to be a math major. With FCS, they are learning what applies to them both currently and in the future. FCS classes also reach a wide variety of learners, specifically those that are more visual and hands-on. With classes that are so specified these days, as science is no longer just science but chemistry, physics, biology, etc., it is nice that a class exists to put a lot of these topics together, all while relating directly to one's life.

## **Chapter 5. I Want What is Best for Our Kids**

If parents are clear with their children about the need to reach out to others and the value of fairness, reciprocity, and generosity, they may save both their children and themselves a lot of heartache down the line.

-Norman E. Rosenthal (Psychiatrist, Scientist, Author)

### **5.1 How Having a Child of My Own Changed My Views of Education**

My Mother is my root, my foundation. She planted the seed that I base my life on, and that is the belief that the ability to achieve starts in your mind.

-Michael Jordan (NBA Hall of Fame Player)

When I had a baby, my whole world changed. While I was pregnant, people warned me about the changes to come, sometimes from loved ones who meant well and other times from complete strangers who should learn to keep their mouth shut in the grocery store checkout line. It did not matter what anybody said though, for I had to experience the changes firsthand to really accept my new reality. My life changed in ways I anticipated, like having to add diapers to my shopping list and learning to not mind that someone else's bodily fluids will end up on my body in some way every day. My life also changed in ways that I could never have imagined, such as the way I worry about him every day, whether something is potentially wrong or not. Having a child has been all encompassing for me.

People warned me that I would have no free time anymore, but I still pictured myself sitting on the couch reading while my child played in the background. I laugh at my naiveté now, for all of my moments when my son is awake are devoted to him, even if it is simply watching him from the couch. If I am not playing with him, I am bathing him, cooking for him, or holding him. Even after he goes to bed, I am making the next

day's lunch, picking up toys, and washing bottles to be used the following day. When we are together, he demands, and deserves, constant attention.

Recently, I was unloading the groceries and my son was playing at his toy kitchen in the living room. He was one room over, but I had a clear view of him through a cut out in the wall. He was moving his pots around, adding balls and other non-food items to his frying pans, keeping himself busy and entertained. A moment later, I was bent over putting a package of dishwasher detergent into the cabinet under the sink, when like a lightning rod on a clear day, it struck me that I had not shut the gate to the second level stairs since returning home. I shot upright, looked through the wall cutout to see pots on the ground but no one holding them, and with my heart racing, ran around the corner and up the stairs.

There he was: standing on his name-emblazoned step stool looking out his bedroom window at the world below. He was the picture of adorable innocence. As I came up, breathless but breathing a sigh of relief, he turned to me while pointing excitedly at the plow going by below, oblivious to my range of emotions that had just occurred. He gave me a sly little smile, excited that I was there, but more excited to see the plow making piles with the snow below. I felt joy that he was okay and that my momentary slip up had not resulted in injury, but just as quickly guilt crept in because I had almost failed him as a parent. No accident had occurred, but it could have, and it was because I had been careless. This two minute or less incident defines my life as a mother so far: contentedness never lasts long, and it is usually followed by anxiety or fear, then hopefully relief, none of which is known to my child, and I intend to keep it that way. It

is moments like these that really hit home how much work having a child really is, but also how important and rewarding the job can be.

Having a child has meant that my hopes and dreams for myself have become hopes and dreams for my son. I still have plans for my future, but I would rather see him succeed in life, which would also mean that I accomplished my ultimate goal for him to be happy and content. I did not lose the core of myself when I had a baby, although it certainly feels that way as I am not the same person I was before he was born. It was a rocky go at first as I tried to regain my bearings after such an earth altering event, but as with most major life changes, eventually it goes on. Life returns to a new normal, and I figured out how to do the day-to-day things that I enjoy while also being there for my son. I want to lead by example, so I still fully intend to continue to have a life and keep doing the things that I love, but my main purpose is now teaching him to be a good person who knows how to take care of himself in the world. I want him to get to where he wants to be, whether that is a dentist, a writer, or a plumber. I do not want to force my specific hopes and dreams onto him simply because I did not succeed at them myself, but rather I hope to help him develop and follow through with his own goals. I want him to have choices in life, to love himself for who he is, and to have endless life possibilities.

In order for him to have these things, he must have a good foundation. He must have a well-rounded education where he can explore and grow, all the while discovering his passions and dislikes. I envision him being able to have an education that fits his needs, whatever those may be. If it turns out he is a math scholar, then I hope he joins a math league and learns the value of competition while challenging himself. If he

struggles being in a traditional classroom setting, then I hope he has access to alternative rooms that reach all types of learners. I also hope that no matter what his specific needs are, he gets a well-rounded education that both teaches and inspires him to figure out what gives his life meaning.

## **5.2 The Influence of STEM and Common Core on Our Schools**

But even more, the changes have taught me how to best exploit that singular gift of study, to question what I see, then to question what I see after that, because the questions matter as much, perhaps more than, the answers.

-Ta-Nehisi Coates (Author)

What worries me about my son being able to achieve the hopes that I have for him mentioned above is the state of our current education system. As we move to core curriculums that emphasize everything STEM, we are losing some of the creativity in learning. Teachers are forced to teach a canned curriculum with the sole goal of being able to answer test questions. When I taught at a middle school at the beginning of my career, there was a great math teacher, Ray, who had worked for many years at the school. He was quick to chat with colleagues, and was one of the few who took the time to get to know me, despite the fact that I was a young, fresh-out-college girl with no experience from the “big city,” as those in the tiny central Vermont town called anyone not from around there. The students loved him because he was smart and kind, and taught them a dry subject with wit and understanding. He also wore pullover wool sweaters and had gray hair that stood straight up, giving him a quirky-yet-disheveled-grandpa approachability.

After working at that small middle school for three years, I switched to a high school closer to the “big city,” and one day while setting up ingredients for the day’s

lesson, my former math colleague, Ray, popped into the room. He had seen my name on the door and wanted to say hello. He was now working as a paraeducator for the technical school that is in our building. He relayed the story of how he could not handle teaching his math job anymore, for every couple of months he was forced to learn and follow new common core curriculum changes. He was attending numerous meetings, working until all hours of the night, and not able to teach to the best of his abilities because he had to follow the instruction of others. Ray was stressed and tired, his job was affecting his heart health and his family, and he did not feel it was worth it anymore.

His new job as a paraeducator allowed him to work one on one with students, giving them his all and full attention, and he was able to go home each night without work on his mind to recharge for the next day. Every day was different and he was able to enjoy being an educator, remembering why he originally got into the field. He felt whole again, he said, and it was the best thing he could have done for his own sanity.

The story of my math teacher colleague is not unique, as both teacher retention and students enrolling in programs to become teachers are at all-time lows as of 2016. (13) While there are numerous reasons that education employment numbers are down: low pay, a new breed of technology obsessed entitled students, and the list goes on, I believe a big part of it is the change in how a teacher must teach. No longer is it a teacher's choice what activities they have students participate in during class or how to demonstrate a math equation. Common core is just that, common, and if twin siblings take algebra from two different teachers, their outcome must be the same. The result is a loss of creativity for educators, and students sense that. They know when a teacher is

unmotivated, and in turn they lose any motivation to do work on the subject. It is a teacher's job to make their subject matter soar; they are teaching their subject while also selling it, convincing students to love and embrace topics that can be tough for them. When a teacher no longer believes in what they are teaching, there is little hope for the success of the student.

The working conditions of my former colleague were certainly not healthy for his mind or body, and the results might not even be the best for students either. This year I had a new student, Kylie, who had moved to Vermont over the summer from Connecticut. It was her senior year, a tough time for anyone to move away from their friends and the life they had always known. Kylie transitioned well thanks to the course options and flexibility of our school. She was amazed at how different academically our school was from her old school. There, students would walk around with laptops open in their arms, frantically typing with one hand in order to finish work while walking in the halls to and from classes. Students were not socializing with each other, just typing away to get their work in and not get in trouble.

At our school in Vermont, block scheduling means only needing to have work ready for four classes, not eight, each day. Mixed into the more rigorous courses were hands-on electives. Kylie was taking my Foods I class, which she said was not offered at her previous school, as students were expected to overload their schedules with science and math courses to get into the best college. The elective classes were all taken in middle school, including cooking, sewing, and computer applications. They were taken

in the early teen years, so students could then devote all of high school to core classes and college preparation. This type of school schedule is grueling on the mind and body.

“There is no evidence that students can absorb more than ten minutes of monologue at a stretch. Students from as far back as the mid-1970s have shown that students need interaction and connection to the material and the concepts under study to be invested in their learning.” (14) When Kylie moved here, she was able to take Foods I and Clay, and was amazed at how having those classes enriched her day. She made great friends in each class because she was able to sit and talk with new people while molding her clay and mixing recipe ingredients. The classes gave her a chance to relax and unwind, and be refreshed for the next more brain-rigorous class of the day. Kylie also was able to learn cooking techniques that were more advanced than what she had learned at the middle school level, which inspired her to keep cooking at home. She may not have been pushed into taking multiple science or math courses, but she was learning several areas of important subjects, including those that exercise different areas of the brain and her fine motor skills, all while getting a chance to develop meaningful and lasting relationships. All of these skills are taught in FCS courses, and are essential to a student having a well-rounded education that covers interpersonal skills just as much as learning facts and figures.

### **5.3 Every Moment Counts**

It is not what you do for your children, but what you have taught them to do for themselves that will make them successful human beings.

-Ann Landers (Columnist)

One thing that I have learned since becoming a mother that has stood out amongst all the other humbling lessons I have learned is the value of time. Time is precious and not something to waste, but it can also be hard to come by. I am acutely aware of how fast time goes every time I turn on my phone and see the pudgy faced baby staring back at me, who in a mere two months has transformed into a much different looking and slimmer toddler who is walking and communicating with sign language. I also have to use my time wisely every day. As I type these words, my son is napping. On a good day he naps for two hours, and that is when I write, clean, or do my best to check anything and everything off of my to-do list. I do not have the luxury to wait until inspiration strikes or the mood is perfect for writing. I write when he naps, and I had better be ready or it will not get done because I will be exhausted by the time he goes to bed at night.

In order to fit things into that two hour window, my movements are more efficient, and I have learned to be quick when he is awake, breaking up chores into smaller increments that happen when he is in the mood to entertain himself. When I clean the bathroom now, I do not have the time to do as thorough a job as I would like, but the toilets get clean and there is no visible dirt. I may not have scrubbed every last nook and cranny, but we will survive. Sometimes I wish I had the time to leisurely clean all parts of the bathroom as I did a year and a half ago, but that would mean giving up play time with my son. He will only be a toddler for so long, and I would rather look back on this time and remember dance parties and tickle fits than him crying to be held because I took too long scrubbing the shower.

I wish teaching would spend less time cleaning the showers and more time playing. What I mean is that education has become sterile, and more about the end goal than the journey. The picture of my student's former peers walking around with their faces in their laptops is bleak and harsh. Half of school is social time and learning to work with and be around others. Recess should be held for students of all ages, and not end after elementary school as it does, and activities and crafts are important outlets and not just busy work. Everyone needs a balance in their life between what needs to get done and what they want to do. Of course students need math and English, but it is not the only thing they need. They should be able to get out their energy, move their bodies, and laugh. School should not be a place where test scores determine a person's worth. We need to teach our students to be good people as well as intellectually well versed.

Students who walk around with their heads in their computers are those that know how to recite facts and hand in homework quickly, but is there value in their learning? Can they prove their knowledge? Will what they learn matter to them as they get older? Students are on a hamster wheel of school work, trying to get as much done in as little time as possible. That is a great way to burn out and fall off the wheel. Students need to slow the wheel from time to time and have a chance to drink from the water dispenser and look around at the world outside of their cage. If they do not have balance, we will end up with students who will be academically smart, but not ready to take care of themselves in the real world. It is also a recipe for mental health issues caused by stress and anxiety.

Today's students go outside less often and get their driver's licenses later in life because they have phones, and therefore do not need to interact with others in person. In turn, they are safer because they leave their houses less. There is also a huge upswing in levels of anxiety and depression, due to the pressure to be perfect that students see on social media, coupled with a lack of human interaction. The percentage of depressed teen girls jumped up fifty percent from 2012 to 2015, twenty-one percent for boys. Rates of suicide in teens are now higher than homicides (15). There is an epidemic going on amongst our teenagers, and it certainly will not be an easy fix, nor will I pretend to have the answers on how to do so. I can say that social media and cell phones do not appear to be going anywhere, so we need to embrace the change and add technology to our teaching, as well as reach them in other ways. In my On Your Own class, we do a project about social media. We analyze how it helps us, hurts us, how to be safe online, and how to behave, among other topics. We also do more on the computer now than ever before. If students are going to be on their phone all day, then they might as well use it to submit their homework.

We also must be proactive in showing our youth the beauty of the world outside of social media, IRL (in real life, as my students say). The classes that fall under the FCS umbrella vary from sewing to cooking, but each uses both one's hands and mind. Students can look up a template for sewing a skirt, but they have to physically use their skills to complete the task. If we let FCS classes get cut from our schools, students will be left with classes where their heads are in a computer all day, followed by going home where their head is staring at a screen, be it a computer, phone, or video

game. Teaching a student how to make their own cinnamon buns uses manual dexterity for kneading the dough, math skills for measuring, and creativity to get the filling ratio just right. There is only so much a computer can teach someone about those things; one must do them to really understand how to best accomplish the task.

Having a baby has taught me a lot, mostly that the world we live in is a tough place to raise kids. There is a lot that we have to compete with, and with the internet, our children do not have to trust us to teach them because they can find what they want in an instance from Siri or Alexa. I would hope that when people have children, they do so with the intent of wanting what is best for their child, but sometimes what they are influenced by is out of our control. Public schools are ruled by our Government to an extent, and decisions about the way our schools are run are not usually in the parent's control. We have to send our children off to be taught by strangers with the assumption that they are getting a good education. With the current trend towards more standard learning that teaches based on a test and not the individual, I have my doubts that parents will get the assurance they are looking for.

#### **5.4 A World with Both STEM and FCS**

Everyone has always told me that electives aren't worth the time and that colleges want to see advanced general education classes but I don't think that's always for the greater good. High school is the time to start exploring and while these may be electives, they have been proven to show worth in my college experience.

–Sarah Dramstad (Essex High School Class of 2016)

Encourage and support your kids because children are apt to live up to what you believe of them.

–Lady Bird Johnson (former First Lady of the United States)

I would never say that math and science are not important. My colleague and friend, Tracy, said it best with her response to students who complain that they will never use calculus once they graduate from high school. To paraphrase her: “Your brain is a muscle and it must be used. Training for a sport does not happen just in games; you spend time in the weight room gaining muscle mass and practicing drills to refine agility. All these things improve your body’s ability to perform well. Similarly, working through calculus problems are tough, and they expand your brain’s ability to challenge itself and awaken new skills.” It is not about choosing common core over practical classes such as FCS, it is about finding the balance of exercising our brains and our bodies, learning knowledge and also life skills to help mold impressionable youth into capable adults. All of the worry and concern I have for my son, all of the hours spent taking care of him, and all of the happy moments should mean something. I want what is best for my son, as I assume all parents want the best for their children, and that includes time to play and explore. Tracy is right that our brain is a muscle, which is why we also must exercise the creative side of the brain.

We stretch ourselves and grow when we put ourselves into uncomfortable positions. Many FCS topics are not easy for children, for various reasons, including that working hands-on is a physical challenge or because talking about emotions is trickier and less concrete than discussing linear numbers. FCS taps into a different portion of the brain we need to exercise, one that forces students to think outside of the box and be flexible when things do not go as planned. I have many high-flier academically gifted students who come to my class never having received a grade lower than an A in their

school careers, and yet they receive a B in my class. It is because they cannot control everything in the kitchen. They have to employ time management and multitasking skills, and their grade is based more on showing the skills they have learned and participation than being able to solve an equation.

I have to smile at the high-flier students who get frustrated that their dough will just not roll out to the thickness that they want, despite the fact that they meticulously measured out all of the ingredients. When they leave my class at the end of the semester, I hope they have learned to be flexible, to trust their instincts that they can make changes on their own when needed, and that learning is not just about receiving a grade. If a student can succeed in both a traditional and a non-traditional classroom, they will be better equipped to face all that life has to throw at them once they are living on their own.

It is great that girls in particular are being asked to join STEM fields. Careers are opening up for women that were once unheard of for us to work in. One of my good friends while growing up recently quit her job at a large male-dominated corporation to raise her three children. She left because, as one of the few women engineer employees, she suffered sexism that she could not endure any longer. We must change the working landscape for women and men, making all jobs equal to everyone. There is no reason a woman cannot be a truck driver, accountant, or physicist, just as all men can be nurses, administrative assistants, and teachers. It takes trailblazers to start change, and women currently in STEM fields are carving a path for future generations of women to follow, just as Marion Brown Thorpe did as a professor in the last century.

It is great to see women equaling men, but there is no reason why STEM classes should be put above others. Currently students at my school are being encouraged to double up on science and math courses whether they plan to enter a STEM related field or not after graduation. While these classes expand their brains and may inspire new areas of creativity, the overloading of their schedules means there is no time for elective classes such as FCS. I argue that as important as STEM classes are, classes that teach students how to care for their basic lifelong needs are equally important. In fact, they should be requirements and not just elective courses. We are graduating students who can complete calculus problems but cannot balance a checkbook. As my former student Sarah Dramstad states, “I studied abroad last summer for five weeks and there was a senior that I lived with who was also a nutrition student who didn’t know how to make eggs or even pasta from a box. I don’t want to be quick to judge because sometimes I feel lucky that I get the chance to cook a lot at home, but it just seemed a little strange that if someone is working (on) a profession that helps people to eat healthier or adjusting diets, then they should know the basics so they know where to start. Unfortunately, one of my other college friends today said they had to look up how to make an omelet online and gave up as it was too hard. It just seems like a basic skill that I wonder if I take it for granted a lot or if society just doesn’t teach us ‘the basics’ of independence, similarly with financing and taxes.” (Sarah Dramstad, Essex High School Class of 2016).

I would never put STEM education down, for it is important both for the movement of women’s rights and the future of our technology based world, but we have to be careful that we do not lose sight of other important areas of education. Plus, brain

development is aided when multiple areas are activated. “The sciences are thought of as objective, logical, analytical, reproducible and useful; the arts are supposed to be subjective, intuitive, sensual, unique, and frivolous... But scientists and mathematicians know that the arts are vital to their success and use skills borrowed from the arts as scientific tools. These include the ability to observe accurately, to think spatially..., and perceive kinesthetically...” (16)

Parents often assume students learn everything in school, and schools often assume certain things are taught at home. This is a faulty assumption on both parts, and as both parents and educators it is important to make sure we are raising well rounded, socially responsible children. As Ann Landers said in the quote that started this section, giving our youth the skills to do things for themselves will help them be productive members of society. I plan to make sure my child learns the value of hard work, independence, and self-advocacy, and I hope others will be right there with me. We have the future generations to think of, if we can lift our heads away from our phone screens long enough to realize it.

## Chapter 6. Schools Today

Each type of adversity carries its own challenges and has the potential to yield its own form of wisdom.

-Norman E. Rosenthal (Psychiatrist, Scientist, Author)

### 6.1 Are Schools a Safe Place to Be?

...reach out to people who are isolated or lonely- whatever the reason- and help them feel part of the group. Try to be sensitive to those who are outside the mainstream.

-Norman E. Rosenthal (Psychiatrist, Scientist, Author)

This year marks my tenth year as a teacher, but before that I was a student for approximately seventeen years, not including preschool. I have spent the majority of my life going to a school each and every weekday. I cannot speak to what it was like for teachers in the past, but as a student I never felt unsafe in school on an average day. School shootings have been around since the 18th century, but there was a difference between a shooting that occurred at a school and a school shooting, where a mass amount of people were killed or injured in a random fashion. (17) When I was growing up, school shootings were tragic, but felt rare and distant. They occurred when a student was bullied and had had enough, but most students did not have access to guns or enough anger to hurt others, so I thought.

After the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, when I was in middle school, I remember there being talk of putting metal detectors in the entranceway of schools. Those talks blew up whenever a shooting would occur, and then promptly deflate once a few weeks had passed and people had moved on to the next newsworthy event. I for one thought it would be crazy to put them in every school. This was a suburb of America, not an inner-city where crime was more prevalent. We did not have gang

violence or even regular fist fights. To me, adding metal detectors would mean the school was unsafe. It would be a formal reminder of how we are unsafe, and as if something bad was expected to happen, rather than it be a distant possibility. I felt that students needed to be trusted and not feel as if a school were a prison.

I now believe the opposite. Whether it is because I am older and understand consequences in a more realistic and personal way than I did as a teen, or because we live in a post-Parkland shooting America, but I no longer feel as safe as I once did. I want any possibility of what has happened in far too many schools to be eliminated from happening here. School shootings have grown in numbers of occurrences and casualties to the point where they can no longer be ignored, with the five largest school shootings happening within roughly the last ten years. (13) There was even a threat at a school in Southern Vermont in February of 2018. Thankfully it was reported, thwarted, and the accused was taken into custody. The dangers of school shootings are becoming more common, and no longer are they a problem that happen only to the rest of the country. They can happen to anyone, anywhere. While I am not physically scared when I enter the school building each day, I am hyper-aware of any dangers lurking around me thanks especially to one-day last year that hit a little too close to home.

## **6.2 A Lockdown Situation**

Understand that bad things come at everyone and it is their responsibility to make their lives what they want them to be by successfully dealing with whatever challenges they face.

-Gary Player (Professional Golfer)

April 12, 2017 started out like any other Wednesday. My Foods I class was making pizza using the homemade red sauce they had simmered the class before. They

were kneading and flipping dough while thoughtfully picking out the toppings that would make the best tasting and looking pizza. A playful competition was going between the kitchen groups on who would make the fluffiest crust. There was palpable excitement in the air; pizza day is a great day for the cooks who get to enjoy it later, plus they get a self-esteem boost and the ultimate compliment every time someone walking through the halls pops their head in to report how good it smells and to ask if there are any leftovers.

Out of nowhere, the pizza baking bliss was cut like a knife by the chime of the bell that signals a lockdown. Everyone looked around confused. We are not usually alerted before a drill will happen, and it was the three-quarter block of the day, which is the typical time to have a drill because the most people, including students with late arrivals and everyone from the technical center that has a later start, are in the building. Still, drills usually happen during the last week of each month, and we were far from then. Like robots, students began turning off their ovens and locking the classroom doors as they have been trained to do time and time again. But then the voice of our assistant principal came over the loudspeaker and said something I will never forget: this is not a drill.

Suddenly, students went from slowly getting into lockdown position to frantically running to the food pantry where they knew to hide. Adrenaline and fear suddenly coursed through me; this was the first time we were going into lock down not because of a drill. I was simultaneously glad for the training the drills had provided, and panicked that I had never taken them all that seriously in the past. In the rush to get in the room, students did not pull out all the carts we keep back there, and I did not think to grab my

phone from my office. Nineteen students and two adults got into the pantry with only enough room to stand, a few students forced to sit on the counters, and one was in a shopping cart. We all looked at each other with worry in our eyes, not knowing what came next. I made the choice to leave the lights in the closet on, for the door to the outside hall was blocked by a large freezer, and the doors to the hall were locked and the rooms had the lights off. I weighed that the panic that would spread from being in the pitch black and extremely hot room would overcome too many students. We needed the assurance of seeing each other, and somehow it made the air a little easier to breathe.

I made silent eye contact with the instructional assistant in the room, she and I giving each other questioning looks that also revealed relief that we were not alone. Some students had their phones with them and immediately got on the school website, which said the entire district was under lock down. That gave me some relief that the problem could be in town. A convict could be on the loose, or a situation where they need to know our whereabouts, but we were not in imminent danger. For a while, that was our only knowledge of the situation we were in. We just stood and waited. The website was not being updated, no one spoke over the loudspeaker, I did not have my phone to check emails, and we get such poor cell reception in my classroom that students could not text. The school was eerily quiet. Then the rumors started.

I can only assume the stories began as the authorities arrived, and students in other parts of the school who could see more than we could in our windowless closet started sharing what they saw. Local and state police, SWAT teams, the bomb squad, even the FBI had arrived, all wearing bullet proof vests and carrying assault weapons.

Like a game of telephone, students started communicating via the app Snapchat, and scared minds took snippets of what others were saying and transformed it into something much worse. The first student getting information informed me there was a shooter on the loose. He was standing in front of me, his back to my front, as I was standing with my back to the door to be the first in the way of any danger. Side note: blocking the door was something I knew I should do, but I cannot deny it was a heartbreaking place to stand. I would do anything for those students, but you never think in a million years you will have to position yourself in a way that you would take a bullet before them if need be. I cannot deny the thought flashed through my mind that I should be standing in the way of danger before my kids, but it did not mean I wanted to.

My student's hands were shaking as he held the phone up above his shoulder for only me to see the messages he was receiving. I silently nodded at what he was showing me, trying my best to not reveal any emotion on my face, knowing I was being watched by other students. I chose not to reveal what I was reading to the rest of the group, for fear of upsetting them with information they did not need at that moment. For a while there was a weird juxtaposition between the shaking student and a few of his friends who were reading the same messages and the rest of the group, who were mostly freshmen and starting to get bored and antsy. They were fidgeting, starting to make noise, and complaining they were hungry. The older students and I were quick to shush them, and they were mostly quick to listen. I was torn between telling them what was possibly going on, which would most certainly spread fear quickly through the little closet, or

allowing them to remain blissfully unaware, but in turn their nonchalance could reveal our hiding spot.

My stomach dropped as I read the message on my student's phone. My fear was coming true, it was not just an outside community problem, but the school was in real danger. I never thought I would be in a real school shooting; those are things we only see on the news. Images of videos the news show after a school shooting started flying through my brain: students running from the building with their hands up and parents hugging each other and crying. I had to push the thoughts from my mind and be present for the students in front of me. If I broke down, they would break down. I had to remain stoic so they would follow suit. I had to stay strong so they could express their emotions if needed. Plus, we still did not know what was actually happening. I wanted to believe the messages my students were receiving could never be true, but I was in the dark as much as they were. We only had the messages from others and the noises outside of the room to go on.

For two and a half hours we fidgeted in that room, switching feet and fanning ourselves. After the first hour, all sorts of messages were coming in. A coach had been shot. One gunman had been arrested but another was still on the loose. Someone had been taken away on a stretcher in an ambulance. Even parents were sending false messages to their students. Most of the time, despite the troubling things we were being told, we remained semi-calm. A lull would form where we were comfortable and feeling hidden, then we would hear heavy boots running, loud banging on doors, and hollering. Out of nowhere a loud thumping would shake the door, our stomachs coming up into our

throats. The person causing the intrusive sound would bellow, but it was unintelligible, and we never knew if we should tell them we were there in hopes it was a policeman or remain silent in case it was someone looking to hurt us.

We were left in the dark, but in some ways I am grateful for that. We were not in one of the exposed classrooms, where there are two doors on either side to different hallways, where students had to crouch in the corner under desks. They saw SWAT members running by with rifles and each student was searched. We also were lucky we were not the student in the bathroom who got held at gunpoint by a police officer making sure they were not an intruder hiding out, rather than just a poor student who happened to be going to the bathroom when the lockdown alarm sounded. We were not in a room with huge windows where we could see the FBI, SWAT, bomb squad, and local police gathering outside, we were not in a room alone, or in a room that saw the lights going on and off in the hallway, only activated by motion sensors meaning a person was near.

On a lighter note, no one complained of having to go to the bathroom, so unlike other teachers I did not have to turn a trash can into a toilet. There was food in the pantry so we passed around dried cranberries and marshmallows as if we were friends sitting around a campfire. Looking back, I think I handled the situation well. Students were well behaved, but not in a panic. I took the threats seriously, but did not overreact.

Students were scared, but remained positive and had a much less traumatic experience than some in other rooms. Our sheltered space was a big part of our safe feeling, for it really felt as though we were in a hidden cave, but I also think my demeanor made a difference. I heard later that other teachers were rocking themselves

back and forth and one had a panic attack. I put no judgement on others' reactions, for it was a very scary and unique situation, but I am proud of the way I handled the day.

There was so much unknown that day, so much fear, and in the end it was all about a threat. An anonymous person or people had reported to authorities that they were going to the high school with bombs and guns to do damage. It turned out to be a swatting incident; just a rouse to get law enforcement distracted. What they were distracting from, we may never know, as nothing else happened nearby that day. We remained in lockdown for over two hours, sweating and scared, our emotions running wild, all for nothing. It was the first and only official lockdown I have been in, and I hope it is the last. I am glad no one got hurt, but I was angry that it was for nothing at the same time. For days and weeks after that Wednesday, I would jump every time a door slammed. Students wandering the halls warranted a second look. There is something about being escorted out of the building by a swat member holding an assault rifle that you do not forget easily. For days, law enforcement was in our building for added protection, but it just leant to the realization that school was no longer a safe haven. This is little old Essex, Vermont, and even we can experience the terrors of school threats. Physically we were all okay, but emotionally we will never be the same.

When they first came over the loudspeaker announcing that the lockdown was over, but that we must remain in our rooms with the doors locked and only go to the bathroom in groups, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. There was elation that the pizzas that had been sitting in the warm ovens had managed to cook and suddenly students could eat. I remember feeling dizzy and that the room was so bright. All the adrenaline

was wearing off and I was crashing. I also desperately needed to breast pump, as I had not been able to since that morning, and was engorged with pain. I had been aware of my need to express while in the pantry, but managed to not focus on it for fear that I would leak. Suddenly, out in the open room again, everyone desperately needed to tend to bodily needs that had shut off thanks to the panic in our minds.

When we first entered the kitchen again, we were delighted to be able to stretch, but still unaware of how to feel or really what was going on. A girl was knocking on our classroom door, and the students started screaming. The girl looked as though she was about to cry, and it turned out she had been left in the room next to ours alone for the entire lockdown. She was making up an assignment with a teacher, who had left to get coffee when the lockdown chime went off. She did all the right things, locked the doors and shut the shades, but it did nothing to aid the panic of sitting alone for two and a half hours. Our school learned a lot that day, about our resiliency and behavior, but also about how to deal with a lockdown situation in the future. There are a lot of little variables, such as a student being in the bathroom or in a room alone that had always been overlooked because we did not need to look closer. Suddenly every lock on each door had a job, each entranceway was assessed, and we had real life situations to share with students when doing drills in the future.

### **6.3 The Aftershock**

Sometimes the best lessons in life come from disasters that almost happen, but don't.

-Marty, quoted by Norman E. Rosenthal (Psychiatrist, Scientist, Author)

If there is a positive to come out of the lockdown experience, it is the safety measures we are now aware of. We had a real life non-dangerous threat that let us see

firsthand what improvements needed to be made to keep people safe. We are still meeting about changes to this day, and hopefully in the future we will have an app that sends teachers updates in an emergency situation. I know most teachers now keep their phones on them every day since last April, something that previously was frowned upon as it was a poor example to students who are expected to keep them out of sight. We have also put flashing lights in rooms where the alarms and loudspeaker are hard to hear, such as when the band is practicing. Now the front door to the building stays locked after the first bell of the day, and students are buzzed in via a video camera system after showing their student ID card. The key when a threat is present is to delay them from getting inside the building, and if they do get in, we now have a better idea of how to handle that as well.

While the physical changes we have or are going to make are positive, the biggest takeaway for me was the importance of community. Students need to feel safe in school, which may not happen until we put metal detectors in place, but until then we can at least be there for them. As teachers, we are the guideposts for students, and they have to trust us. They need people in school who they can go to and who they know will do whatever they can to protect them. I can one hundred percent say that I never plan on carrying a gun, as President Trump would like, and being responsible for firing on a possible intruder. That is a responsibility I never want to have. I do hope to be someone in the school that students can go to. Those who spent two and half hours in the little pantry with me said after that they were glad I did not overreact, for it would have raised their fear level. I did not want them to make light of the situation, but there was no point in

sitting in the corner crying either. We all had to be ready to move on a moment's notice. The mind can go to some faraway places in two and half hours, and I am grateful I was able to keep mine focused and ready to be there for my students, even when I wished someone was there for me.

Another thing I keep thinking about since last April is that we cannot live in fear. I find myself wary of a lot these days, specifically students trying to use locked back entrances rather than going through the front door of the school building, abandoned backpacks, and students running down the hall and yelling in the middle of class, but usually those things mean nothing. I still go to school each day and do my job and treat students as I always have. Installing metal detectors would certainly give me some piece of mind that we would catch a possible weapon before it entered the school. It would ease one area that would let me be a better, less worrisome teacher. The reality is that the threats are not going away anytime soon, and taking the proper precautions against them are our best course of action for everyone's mind and body.

Not every student would be lucky enough to be in a FCS class if another lockdown occurred, and therefore close to food and nice smells, but that is not really the point. The advantage to FCS classes is the bond that students build in a very short amount of time and the feeling of a community. Even on days when all is well, students have a bright spot in their day, a place to come that is welcoming, warm, and feels like home. I have even been called 'mom' more than once throughout my teaching career. I have students that come down to my room regularly throughout the day to stop in, see if there are any leftovers to take home, and tell me about their day. They feel comfortable

in the space and like being there, something important in a school that is becoming ever more regulated and impersonal because it is necessary to protect our students from danger. Students who are made fun of or feel as though they do not belong can find a home in FCS classes. Everyone belongs, and all types of learners, grades, and social groups end up in my classroom together. Students who have trouble learning in other places can find a home in FCS, and giving those students something to strive for can make all the difference needed to keep their life on track. In the next chapter I will show how FCS classes provide a meaning making center for schools.

## **Chapter 7. Family and Consumer Science Classes: A Meaning Making**

### **Center for Schools**

Honestly I enjoyed class with you so much and I didn't feel like I was going to class and forced to try and learn. I learned while having fun.

-Melanie Theriault (Essex High School Class of 2015)

### **7.1 My Philosophy of Teaching**

Your bliss is what you're supposed to be doing- the thing you're meant to do, the thing that nourishes you the most, the thing that harmonizes your inside truth with your outside life, the bringing together of who you are with what you love doing.

-Nancy Slonim Aronie (Author)

At the beginning of each semester, teachers are mailed paper after paper that describe student plans. There are IEP, 504, EST, and ELL plans, ranging from depression to ADHD diagnoses. On average I get about twenty plans for my approximately one hundred students per semester. My first few years teaching, I ignored the plans when they first arrived on my desk. I wanted to meet each student without prior judgment. I found it made my interactions with each student equal, and often I was surprised a few weeks later when I read through the plans and what I was reading did not translate to the student I had come to know.

I now read through each plan right away because I have had students with severe medical needs that I need to prepare for and students with plans that allow them more time or working in different spaces, which I need to know before I tell them differently. However, after reading through the bland summary of a students' challenges, I remember those early days when I waited to form judgments. I treat each student as an individual, and one who is capable of completing anything we do in class, even if it has to be adapted slightly. No student is alike, and the state of Vermont is moving towards

Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) so that each student will have an individualized plan, regardless of whether they have a special need or not. We can all use specialized plans to help guide our learning and keep us on track. Some students just have diagnosed challenges that affect their learning. It is my job to not make those students feel singled out or different, and feel equal to their peers whenever they are in my room.

## **7.2 Food Brings People Together**

I realized very early the power of food to evoke memory, to bring people together, to transport you to other places, and I wanted to be a part of that.

-Jose Andres Puerta (Chef)

The hands-on nature of the classes I teach leads to personal relationships forming more easily than in some other rooms. As students cook, they talk, and I often hear more than I should. Topics get asked ranging from the legalization of marijuana to what it is like to take a college class. Students feel comfortable asking me questions they might not ask of others, either because they do not have the same type of relationship or because they do not have the chance to do so while learning about poetry or algorithms. I love that my classroom feels like home in a way. We are working with food, which is the center point for many people's memories and favorite pastimes. No party happens without snacks, family gatherings often happen around the kitchen island despite a room full of comfy chairs set up for guests, and even important meetings often include carb-loaded treats or at least beverages. For celebrations and holidays we break bread together, when going through tough times we eat comfort food such as mashed potatoes or chocolate, and we gather to catch up with friends over brunch or drinks.

Many of life's moments involving others also involve food. Food smells evoke memories of grandma's famous Italian pasta sauce simmering on the stove as you arrive at her home and going to a favorite greasy burger joint with friends after school.

"Motivation can come from within the individual, called intrinsic motivation, when an activity is related to a person's needs, values, interests, and attitudes." (17). Once students are engaged in their learning, in my room around food, the table is set for them to absorb other areas of learning they are expected to accomplish, such as math, science, and interpersonal skills.

The happy memories that food awakens from our brain puts a positive spin on being in my classes. Even non-food FCS classes are still hands-on and conversation inducing while students sew or design, and I make it my goal for students to know they can speak openly about what they like. While I do not want to know of any illegal behavior, I am an open book who they can ask whatever curiosities come to mind. I want students to know they are not just kids in my book, but young adults trying to discover their way, and I remember what that was like. I was in their shoes not that long ago, and I can relate to them rather than judge them for their adolescent mistakes. "Students understood this environment was a safe place to ask questions, take risks, and create meaningful goals. Achievement levels soared- we celebrated success and built upon it."

(3) As Starr Sackstein said in the quote above, allowing students to feel comfortable and create their own meaningful educational goals will allow them to flourish and develop the skills to learn on their own.

I have taught students who come from abusive homes, where they did not have enough food or emotional support. Students sometimes have food sensitivities due to their relationship with it at home. A student recently said that she was going through a really rough time at home, as an incident had occurred between herself and her mother's boyfriend, who she has a restraining order against because of an act he committed against her in the past. Her mother continues to date the man, as they share a child together, even if it means her older daughter cannot be in the home with them and she struggles to find money to ride a city bus elsewhere after school. I was not privy to the meetings between this student, her case manager, and counselors, but she told me about it anyway. She said she wanted to talk, and also she knew that if she needed a break in class I would grant it to her. She said she knew I would understand, so she was not worried, and she was glad when she got to come to my room for it was a relief to feel supported. All of these students deserve a shot at success despite everything going against them. If I can be a small hopeful spot in their day, the hope is that they can find motivation to get past their hardships and keep persevering.

Whether we eat during a celebration or during sad times, we have to keep eating. My classroom allows for easy conversation and open dialogue. Students get to be themselves and know it is a safe place. I hope to always have that atmosphere, and it is rare in many other areas of our school.

### **7.3 Timing is Everything**

Taking FACS classes meant gaining real life skills while having fun in a refreshing environment in contrast to a typical class.

-Hannah Danis (Essex High School Class of 2017)

There should be two educations. One should teach us how to make a living and the other how to live.

-John Adams (U.S. President)

Eighty minutes. One can do a lot in eighty minutes. Multiple Netflix shows can be streamed, banana bread can be mixed, baked, and be ready to slice, or a workout can be completed. Eighty minutes is not a ton of time out of one's day, but eighty minutes feels never ending when asked to sit still for its entirety. In education courses in college, we are taught to vary our lesson approaches, and get students up and moving every thirty minutes at the most. I know from experience that most high school courses stray from this recommendation, due to the mass amount of information needed to be taught in a short amount of time. Teachers see their students for eighty minutes every other day, and they make the most of it. Take a quick walk through the halls during a given period, and one will see the majority of class rooms contain all students sitting in desks facing a teacher in front of the room. No movement or activity can be heard.

Say a student makes it through eighty minutes, plus the five minute passing time to get to their next class. Now they realize they have to do it again, and also thirty minutes of flex time to see teachers about work they need help with, followed by two more eighty minute periods. If all classes are lecture style, with students sitting and taking notes, they will sit for three hundred twenty minutes total throughout the day, not including lunch. As a teacher who stands and walks around much of the day, my legs are cramping just thinking about that. Our children have to get up and move for both their mental and physical health. They need breaks from writing down information to experience it first hand through experiments and labs. They need to run around and break

a sweat if possible. Along with physical education classes, FCS classes offer variety in the monotony of college preparation courses, as students are standing and using their bodies and minds at the same time.

“It is time for faculty to acknowledge that nothing is more appealing to readers (especially our students) than to experience an author’s personal stories with meaning-making implications that can touch all their lives.” (18) There is so much we can learn simply by talking and interacting with one another, and it is in those times that we learn life lessons that cannot come from a book. A teacher telling their story is one-sided; instead classes should be a dialogue. Similar to the feminism discussion I talked about earlier, an open conversation with people of different viewpoints can lead to new understandings and empathy. It is time to start not only getting students up and moving, but talking as well.

While most classes at the high school I teach are preparing students with knowledge to get accepted into the college of their choice, and then have the base to succeed at said school, FCS teaches students how to take care of themselves once they are there. Wrote a former student, “As a student soon to be graduating from college, taking courses in Family and Consumer Science had a huge impact on my ability to successfully function as an adult. Providing me the skills to succeed transitioning to living on my own. I learned a great deal about meal prep, portion sizes, and different cultural cuisines that have expanded my health and cultural awareness. I’m thankful I attended a school that offered Family and Consumer Science courses!” (Mackenzie

Burnett, Essex High School Class of 2014). While the classes may be presented in a non-traditional fashion, they still very much relate to real life situations.

Another former student who is currently in school studying dietetics reports, “Family and Consumer Science has shaped my career, but it was another way to look at learning. It was a hands-on experience where trial and errors would turn into learning opportunities. It was learning practical skills to use in life to become independent, to work as a team, and open to trying something new. It’s where critical thinking and creativity come together. And, of course, it was an opportunity to explore a different field from your typical general education courses and goes beyond the classroom limits.”

(Sarah Dramstad, Essex High School Class of 2016). My adviser, Robert Nash, while reviewing this section of my thesis wrote, “It seems to me that your classes are exercises in making and understanding meaning. The actual family and consumer skills that your students are learning are the tools for getting them to do important self-examinations.”

He could not be more right.

FCS, in my opinion and as supported by the words of my former students above, puts the fun in function. Students are learning information and skills that will support their lives no matter what career or path they choose, and they learn them through experimentation. In a school where students will argue over one point on a test grade because it could affect their GPA, FCS is more focused on the practice than the end result. If you can show me a great apple crisp, but your apples are cut slightly different than the demonstration I did for my students, but said apples are cut cleanly and the knife was handled correctly, I am okay with that. If a student prefers to season their meat

differently from the recipe we use in class, but it means they are experimenting with various spices and finding their taste and love for food, I am a happy teacher. My goal is to instill skills that will open their world to new tastes, ideas, and motivations, which will hopefully bleed into other areas of their schooling and life as well. “Taking Food Science made me more confident in the kitchen and instilled in me an immense interest in cooking and baking and preparing different kinds of food. Since taking food science I have felt super comfortable trying to make new dishes for myself and it has definitely made life better for me as a college student who lives in an apartment off campus.” (Charlotte Ouellette, Essex High School class of 2015).

The unique way that FCS classes are taught allows for an eighty minute break in students’ days, but it also reaches a variety of learning styles. Many of the students in my class are those that plan on going to college, but wish to better themselves in ways other than just knowing math equations and history dates. There are equally as many students who are not planning on attending higher education. Those students know from an early age they will work blue collar manual labor jobs. I have had students who are training to be maple sugar tappers, lumberjacks, and botanists from our technical school. Those students have trouble succeeding in a traditional classroom, as they need to move around and learn with their hands.

I have also taught several students whose goal in life is to work for a fast food chain. My immediate thought is to encourage them to do more, to make them realize they can do anything they set their mind to. In each of those cases, it was not about the student being too hard on themselves, but about them being realistic. One student had

been severely sexually assaulted as a child, and by high school he had trouble focusing enough to absorb new information. One student came from a family where his mother was in jail, he was being raised by his grandmother and drug dealer father, and any job would be a dream come true. For these students, FCS is something they can succeed at. They can use their hands and learn skills applicable to their future, knowing their best effort and relating the topics to their own life are more important than a test grade.

#### **7.4 A Space for All Students**

Food brings people together on many different levels. It's nourishment of the soul and body; it's truly love.

-Giada de Laurentiis (Chef)

John was a student of mine as a junior. He did not take much in life seriously, least of which was school. He was loud, obnoxious, and most teachers wanted to give him a passing grade so he could leave their class and move on to the next teacher. He was on the verge of not graduating on time, if at all, if he did not find a way to start handing in work and bringing his grades up. When he entered my class, I thought he was a fun kid, although he pushed the boundaries too far at times. He added too much spice to foods just to see what would happen (he threw up), was on the verge of being unsafe when he decided to break-dance in the middle of the room on the hard tile floor, and I often wondered what he was learning aside from how to be social. He was a prankster who would hide in the supply closet to scare the next unsuspecting student needing a broom. He was a lot of work, but he was also charming with a hundred-watt smile. He meant well, and he wanted to succeed, he just kept getting in his own way. To quote John directly, "Before I took singles cooking and international foods I wasn't a big fan of cooking or anything. I took the class for what I thought was going to be an easy credit.

Then I walked in and it was not what I expected. I fell in love with the classes and the atmosphere. I graduated in 2015. And I still cook some of the meals and dishes we made throughout the class. I ended up liking the class so much I became a TA for International Foods my senior year. Best decision of my life.” (John McLemore, Essex High School Class of 2015).

John needed a place that accepted him for who he was, kookiness and all, and allowed him to have a little fun, as long as no one got hurt and he got the day’s task done. Rather than punish him for his ever moving body and hyperactivity, I put him to work, helping me as a TA to move equipment, clean cabinets, and set up the next class. John was not a student who was able to sit for eighty minutes at a time, which was required in most of the classes he was not passing, and he needed to have a win at school. I helped him to own his education in class, and to realize how helpful he could be if he put his energy in the right direction. John was able to graduate because of the Teacher Assistant credit he earned as a senior, and is now in college working towards a Bachelor’s degree.

FCS classes end up being a safe place for students who feel school is not a place for them. Students may feel inadequate due to their academic skills, while others want to be done with the confines of high school. They want to get away from being told what to do and having to follow rules. Little do they know, when they have a job one day they will have to follow rules in order to get paid, but hopefully their juvenile delinquency will be over by then. My classroom turns into a safe space for those students even when they are not in class. They come down and eat lunch with me when they are not comfortable

being in the cafeteria alone. They come to me crying when they have had a fight with their mom. They come sit in the comfy chair in my office to talk about normal teenage trivialities and interpersonal strife. Above all, they know that I am willing to talk to them about what they need, with me acting as much as a counselor than as a teacher.

Elliot was in my Foods I class as a sophomore. He did not fit into a particular clique at school. He was a one-season varsity athlete, but also friends with students who experimented with drugs and skipped class. He had an older brother who was popular, athletic, and smart, and Elliot tended to follow his path, even though he did not fit the same mold or have the same skills as his brother. He was a wayward soul, trying to be like his brother, trying to stay clean for baseball, all the while struggling academically and to find his place. That semester in my class, he rarely arrived on time, handed work in weeks late if at all, and chose group mates who thought the class was pointless because one “worked at Dominoes and knew how to cook” and a girl who missed class almost weekly because her mother let her sleep in or go get manicures when she felt like it. He was the type of student I wanted to connect with and to help him realize his potential, but he was not open to any of it. To him, I was just another teacher, and teachers were the enemy keeping him away from having fun with his friends by making him do boring work. When the semester ended, Elliot just barely passed and I honestly thought I would not see him again.

The following year, I saw Elliot’s name on my attendance list, this time for Food Science. I was surprised, and admittedly dreaded teaching someone who did not want to be taught. Right away things were different though, as he was showing up to class on

time, seemed excited about what we were going to cook that semester, and was kind to his kitchen mates. His troubled friends from the semester before were not in this class, or school in general as one had dropped out, and with no bad influences in this class, Elliot was able to focus. While he still handed work in late at times, he always checked in to see what needed to be done and genuinely seemed to care about his grade. He was polite and talkative with me, one of the few students who always said hello and goodbye when entering and leaving. He was the same Elliot as the year before, but without the negative peer influences, I got to see the true Elliot.

He and I would talk a lot about baseball and what he wanted to do after high school. He admitted he was planning on following his brother to the school he went to. I felt sorry for him that he was following his brother's path and did not seem to have the skills to forge his own. Towards the end of the semester he asked about how I got into teaching, specifically how I got into teaching FCS. I will never forget what he said next. "You have a pretty fun job. I think maybe I'd like to do it one day." I was floored. Here was this kid who seemed to think of nothing but where the next party was, and he was genuinely interested in what I taught as a profession. Even if it was just a fleeting thought, the fact that he was envisioning his future was a huge step forward.

At the end of the school year we sat in circles with other teachers and were asked to share an "ah ha" moment that had happened with a student. I shared the story of Elliot, and how this student who could have cared less about my class the year before was now considering it as a career. "It is essential that we develop a learning space where failure is positive, as it is a catalyst for growth and change." (3) Sometimes it just takes a little

nourishing and mutual respect, even after a rough start, for a student to grow leaps and bounds.

At our school there are no true community areas. There is a courtyard for seniors that is only open for about a month at the beginning and end of each year because of how long our winters last. Students gather in the lobbies and cafeteria, but they are not the most welcoming or comfortable spaces. The library has padded chairs and plenty to do, but you must be quiet and working and you cannot bring in food. Without a true student center, our kids need somewhere to go that feels warm and inviting. When you enter my classroom you are greeted by bright colors on the cabinets and warm smells. There are refrigerators for storing food and ovens for warming up lunches. It is probably the closest space to home, and a needed reprieve from the sterility of standard classrooms and brick walls. A little comfort can go a long way, and students will feel welcome and as if they belong. Some just need the encouragement that despite their history, socioeconomic status, or academic ability, all students belong in school.

### **7.5 There is Room for FCS in Today's Schools**

Family and Consumer Science education is important because it teaches you some very important life skills. Whatever our next step after high school is, the skills we learn in Family and Consumer Science courses will be useful.

-Molly Kenny (Essex High School Class of 2018)

Those who believe FCS is a dying breed think that what I teach can be engulfed into other departments. Nutrition can be taught in a human biology course, for instance, although with everything else they must go over, it would never be taught in the same detail as in FCS. It is not just about where the information would be taught, it is about the fact that the camaraderie would disappear. Students learn about teamwork, respect,

and time management in FCS. They learn while surrounded by positive memories. They get real life experience. They can learn facts and figures anywhere, but the environment of FCS classes cannot be replicated. Students are more likely to remember what they are learning if they are invested. They want to be in my room because they enjoy food, and because they are learning about things that will affect them now and in the future. Along the way they also have fun, something hard to come by in today's teach-to-the-test world.

While driving to work recently, my husband was aimlessly listening to the radio. The DJs were talking about subjects in school that they wish had been taught when they were there, subjects they did not know they needed until after graduation and entering the real world. The male host reported that no one had taught him the basics of budgeting while the female host said she wished someone showed her how to pay bills. My husband, for the first time in his life, wanted to call in and yell "someone is teaching those things!" He did not call, but they were right: someone should teach those topics. What is sad is that no one is aware they are being taught, if they are at all depending on the school.

FCS can benefit everyone, but it is being pushed aside with the assumption that students will learn these basics at home or "figure them out" when they need to. The current generation of young adults who are reporting that they do not in fact know how to adult should be enough to keep our FCS courses around for years to come. The classes teach people how to manage their lives, and also how to live. FCS classes are foundations for the future, where students learn valuable skills while finding meaning in their lives, something that can benefit everyone who steps foot in my classroom.

“This sort of class is one of those that teaches you more than cooking, but the values of being responsible and independent. It’s not something high school students tend to be thinking about, but you realize how important this class is once you’re off to college.” (Tyler Bean, Essex High School Class of 2014) Family and Consumer Science education taps into student’s needs in a way that is important for today’s youth. Teenagers need social interaction, inter-personal time, and to learn how to be independent thinkers. FCS is rooted in old-fashioned society, yet it feels fresh based on how our current generation behaves. FCS can help get students’ heads out of their phones and try firsthand how to accomplish tasks that will allow them to flourish as adults. There is a comfort and safety in FCS, and if it leaves schools, there will most certainly be a void. It is time to bring FCS back to the forefront of our educational philosophies to help students become respectful, independent, open-thinking members of our society: those who will be in charge of our future.

## 7.6 Key Takeaways

1. It is important to *recognize our interests and skills*, but to also be *open* to where life might *unexpectedly lead us*.
2. Always look to *past generations* for wise words. They may have lived in a very different time, but their *drive and courage are inspirational*.
3. *Words* have many *different meanings* depending on the listener; two-way dialogue leads to *empathy and respect*, if not *agreement and understanding*.
4. Family and Consumer Science education needs to start at a *young age*, or the *obesity epidemic* will have *health consequences* for decades to come.
5. I hope all *teachers* strive to be *open, honest*, and to remember that students are people, too.

6. The *topics* taught in school need to encompass more than what will get a student into college; students also need to learn how to *take care of themselves* while being *productive members of society*.
7. Schools are not as *safe* as they used to be; *lawmakers* should *listen* to those of us who have *experienced fear* firsthand or we will *continue to lose more lives*.
8. Some of the *best memories* happen over *food*; embrace good food and use it as a means for *learning and experimenting with other skills*.
9. Without FCS, there would be a *comfort void* in schools. Students feel at *home* in the FCS rooms, and it is a *needed break* in a rigorous day, helping them to *refresh and work harder* with a *clear head* in other classes.
10. While *schools are changing*, our students *need FCS* more than ever before to help them *remain present and centered* in a world where most of their lives occur online.

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