Chapter Two
What is Home Economics?

"It is no secret that home economics educators currently hold conflicting and unclear conceptions of the aim of home economics, of the questions with which it should be concerned, of knowledge relevant to the field, of appropriate procedures and norms of inquiry." (Brown, 1980, p.14)

From its beginning, home economics has struggled with its mission. Was it intended to prepare homemakers and by association, educate women to assume their rightful place in the home? Was it the first inroad into higher education for women? Was it the first step to the more-or-less status of equality that men and women have today in much (but not all) of the world? Was the intent to improve quality of life? What is quality of life?

To ask "what is?" in the context of a field of study and providing the foundation of professional practice, is more than just a definitional question. It requires deeper contemplation that clarifies, illuminates, and deepens our understanding.

Consider the comment made by Elizabeth Berry in 1905:

_The majority of the people I meet think "Domestic Science" means "Cooking" - no more & no less. As I have a lot of board space, I intend to outline pretty fully my course as given up to date for the benefit of visitors. Whenever I can work in ideas outside of cookery, I think I shall try to do so._

--Elizabeth Berry to Mary Urie Watson, (n.d., ca. 1905). University of Guelph Archival Collections.

What is she trying to say about Domestic Science (Home Economics at the time)? Is she saying that it is not just cooking? Is she challenging the definition that has been given to it by administrators and the general public? Imagine what ideas she might be working in and why. Elaborating these ideas would give us further insight into Berry’s philosophy, as it is clear from her statement that the technical skills of cookery were insufficient to meet her values and beliefs about the subject. Considering why she holds these beliefs would become her rationale.

Mission Statements

A mission statement indicates the shared values of a profession. It is a normative statement of what “ought” to be. The central purpose or intent of home economics often termed its mission because home economics is a profession which seeks to perform some mission or service to society or some segment of society. A mission is more than a goal because it usually involves a continuing set of projects or efforts. A mission-oriented field is one in which “knowledge or knowing is for the sake of doing something with the knowledge which is different from a discipline oriented field which views knowledge as an end” (Vaines, 1980, p. 112). Mission statements then embody the philosophical orientation of the field.

It is useful then to explore mission statements over time to see what values have shaped the profession. Consider the following:
Do not depend so much upon books, do not spend so much time telling the children about things. Give them the things and let them work on them with their bodies and their hands. They will find out more in five minutes than you can tell them in as many hours. They will learn more, learn it quicker, and learn it better.


Home economics in its most comprehensive sense is the study of laws, conditions, principles and ideals which are concerned on the one hand with man's immediate physical environment and on the other hand with his nature as a social being, and is the study specifically of the relation between those two factors. In a narrow sense the term is given to the study of the empirical sciences with special reference to the practical problems of housework, cooking, etc.


Home economics for girls is not on the school programme merely or mainly to train them to be housemaids or cooks or seamstresses or laundresses; but because while doing these things, in some degree, it also gives the girl a sane attitude toward life by requiring her to solve life problems and deal with real projects. (p. 337)


We are no longer so much concerned with cramming knowledge into our students as we are with equipping them to take their places in the world. When we regard education in this light, there can be no question of the contribution made by the practical arts.


The mission of home economics is to enable families, both as individual units and generally as a social institution, to build and maintain systems of action which lead 1) to maturing in individual self-formation and 2) to enlightened, cooperative participation in the critique and formulation of social goals and the means to accomplishing them (p. 23).

The mission or general goal(s) of the profession must take into account the systems of action which the family has historically had within it and which contributed to personal and family well-being as well as to the ideas and ideals of society:

1. Purposive, rational action (means-ends action) or work to secure the animal necessities of life, physical and social, and to secure the goal of civilized living.
2. Symbolic interaction, i.e., language and social norms and values with the underlying meaning involved.

In light of loss of freedom for the family to act, families need to institute a third system of action:
3. Emancipative action which provides critical consciousness of social forces and which then formulates social goals and values and judges critically the means by which to accomplish those goals and values.


Because home economics education is part of home economics, its service is directed toward solving problems of the family as a family. Problems of the family as a family are concerned with suffering brought about by the family's inability to engage adequately in areas of action which define its role as primary social institution. These areas of action include: 1) action in rational-purposive production or procurement of the physical entities required by the family for the good life, 2) communicative action within the family and with social groups outside the family for understanding and for consensus in defining the good life, i.e., in the formation and determination of values and goals, and 3) emancipative action in freeing individual, the family, and society from dogmatic beliefs and from social forces which are domineering or exploitative.


Home Economics / Family Studies is the only school subject whose primary focus is on preparing students for everyday life in an increasingly complex global society. It is unique in its systematic, integrative approach where problems of daily life are addressed in a holistic manner.


Home economics is concerned with all aspects of daily living including human relationships and development, resource management, consumerism, foods and nutrition, clothing and textiles, housing, and aesthetics. Home Economics brings together knowledge from its own research, the sciences and the arts and uses this knowledge to assist people in enhancing their daily lives.


The twenty-first century is full of rich possibilities. Our new stories should be about choosing ways of living together that re-enchant, interrelate, and honour webs of life. This means we must use our imaginations, see ourselves as co-creator and living in ways that consistently nurture the underlying metaphor, the world is our home.


During their high school career, students study a variety of subjects important to their choice of postsecondary study or to their choice of occupational training. Only the study of Home Economics, however, can be said to be concerned with meeting the challenges of everyday living in a modern society. Home Economics education provides the necessary balance in bringing
together theoretical understandings and addressing practical everyday problems. It contributes to empowering people to become active and informed members of society with respect to both living independently and living in caring situations with other people. Students develop an understanding of the interdependence of their everyday living with that of other human beings and broader issues related to ecological sustainability (Home Economics Institute of Australia, 2002).

-- Home Economics IRP, British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills, and Training, 2007, p. 4

The mission of the American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences is to provide leadership and support for professionals whose work assists individuals, families, and communities in making informed decisions about their well being, relationships and resources to achieve optimal quality of life.


Home economics is a field of study and a profession, situated in the human sciences that draws from a range of disciplines to achieve optimal and sustainable living for individuals, families and communities. As a curriculum area, home economics facilitates students to discover and further develop their own resources and capabilities to be used in their personal life.


These are but a few view points that explore the “what” of home economics education over time. They serve as jumping off points for developing a personal philosophical statement related to home economics education. What ones resonate with you? Which ones did you find inspiring? Which ones did you question?

**Home Economics Educational Philosophy and General Educational Philosophy**

Over the years home economics education has responded to larger shifts in the philosophy of education, especially those that related to the process of education.

**1900 – 1925 – Hands-on life skills.**
This was the beginning of the progressive era in education. Underlying this philosophy of education was learning by doing. John Dewey was a strong proponent for this reform of education away from a transmission of pre-ordained knowledge approach. He argued for the need for education practice to be grounded in sound philosophical principles.

Home Economics at the time was attempting to legitimate the importance of household matters as a field of study. The “learning by doing” philosophy served them well as students were able to practice household management in laboratory like settings.

**1926 – 1960 – Social efficiency.**

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Education in this period was influenced by the philosophy of social efficiency that held that schooling should serve to optimize the “social utility” of each individual in a society. Thus students would be scientifically evaluated (e.g., using IQ tests) and educated towards their predicted role in society. Franklin Bobbitt is often mentioned as a leader in this movement. The language and thought of industrialism permeated educational social thought and school curriculum. Schools adopted the assembly line factory model of operation with streams (e.g., academic, vocational).

The social utility of women – a means to create a positive family life – was valued thus home economics became a required subject for girls in British Columbia from 1936 to 1961. The factory model was also applied to home economics where emphasizing scientific management of the home became a priority (e.g. see Christine Frederick, 1913).

1961 – 1978 – The rise of science
When the west lost the race for space, science began to trump all other subjects and home economics in B.C. is pushed to the outer core of subjects, seen as less important than math, physics or chemistry. A scientific way of thinking which holds that the scientific method is the best approach and that all things are ultimately measurable became the prevailing philosophy in education in western societies. It is linked to positivism and instrumental rationality.

Home economics continued to focus on scientific models and methods and scientific management of the home. The second feminist wave created a backlash to home economics as it was criticized by more radical feminists as an attempt to keep women at home and out of the workforce.

1978 – 1990 – Interpretive and Critical Modes
During this period critical pedagogy, an educational movement that aims at helping students to develop a consciousness of freedom, to recognize authoritarian tendencies, and to connect knowledge to power and to develop the ability to take constructive action, begins to take hold in education. The advocates of this philosophical position critiqued technical rationality as being incomplete. It only addressed problem solving, not problem posing. Issues of class, gender, race and other forms of disadvantage and exclusion became explicit topics of investigation. The underlying value was social justice.

It was at this time that Brown and Paolucci (1979) wrote the a new mission statement for the American Home Economics association explicitly stating that home economics professional practice and then home economics education (1980) must address three systems of action. Based on the work of Jurgen Habermas, the three systems of actions were: instrumental, communicative and emancipatory.

The philosophical work in education from critical theory (neo-Marxist, feminist, and postmodern perspectives), that began in the 70’s and 80’s continues to expand to the present day. It has brought not only a shift in philosophical perspectives and methods, but a more explicitly political commitment.

Home economics theorists continue to advocate for reform based in critical theory (see Johnson & Fedje,1999). Evidence of this is adopting reflective practice mode and ecology as a unifying theme (e.g., Vaines, 1994), in developing global perspectives in home economics (e.g., Smith & Peterat, 1992), informing home economics through post colonial studies (e.g., de Zwart). Practical reasoning and critical thinking are used to explore the incompatibility of the scientific paradigm with post-modern plurality and with inequities in the global marketplace.
What is Home Economics Education today?

As a school subject in different contexts and in different grades, home economics may be oriented as an applied academic subject, as a product or technology producing course, as career education, as independent living skills, as health education, as parenting or as family life education. Home economics has at times suffered characterization as “sewing” and “cooking” but as reported recently in the Globe and Mail, “Forget baking cookies and sewing skirts. Today’s home economists have turned their attention from caring for the family to tackling community issues such as poverty, obesity and food safety” (Dube, 2009). The emphasis has changed from a technical approach to one that includes critical thinking and social responsibility.

Home economics makes a unique contribution to the education of young people. It focuses on the nature and challenges of our daily lives in relationship to other peoples, social systems, and material resources. The curriculum centers on questions such as “what should be done about...”: maintaining health; securing housing; acquiring appropriate clothing; caring for children; ensuring food security; making ethical consumer decisions, and so on. It is unique in teaching about foods and nutrition, parenting, human relationships and development, resource management, consumerism, clothing and textiles, housing and aesthetics, and integrating these topics and decisions about daily life.

Home economics has an educative and preventative mission. It helps young people to optimize living in their current familial and personal relationships and to plan well for their future relationships and families. It aspires to increase the resourcefulness of people and help them to live satisfying, sustainable and quality lives. Home economics provides young people with the opportunity to consider daily living problems beforehand contributing to development of self-reliant attitudes and abilities and sense of social responsibility. The skills and knowledge developed in home economics are useful to students not only in their personal and family lives, but also in securing and holding employment in business, industry, and the professions.

Summary

The responsiveness of home economics to social and economic conditions (as evidenced in the current economic downturn) and its roots of health, hygiene, thrift and voluntary simplicity have renewed interest in hands-on practical skills that improve the lives of individuals and families.

Home economics pioneers such as Ellen Richards in the United States and Adelaide Hoodless in Canada believed that home economics education would cure all of society’s ills. Two catchphrases were “worthy home membership” and “right living” to be taught to young women through the application of scientific principles to the home. Powers (1992) comments that home economics “never came close to fulfilling the grandiose claims of its more flamboyant proponents. Hopes of social salvation became transformed into making white sauce, stitching seams, and doing the laundry” (Powers, 1992, p. x).

Joanne Kister (1999) asks what uniqueness home economics has to offer in a crowded school curriculum and suggests three questions for home economics curriculum developers:
- What questions do students have about their world? (everyday and life problems).
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• What questions does the world pose for students? (e.g. environment, care of the elderly, committed relationships).
• In what kind of future world might students live?

References:
dc Zwart, M. (??). White Sauce and Chinese Chews: Recipes as Postcolonial Metaphors

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