

Chapter 8

Home Economics Education in Secondary School Settings: Lessons from Education Policy on the Island of Ireland



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Abstract Home Economics education aims to provide a comprehensive, applied and practical experiential learning environment for studying food education. This chapter will discuss Home Economics secondary school education in two jurisdictions on the Island of Ireland—the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The educational rationale, aims and underlying pedagogical approaches to teaching Home Economics in educational policy in both jurisdictions will be explored and comparative case study similarities and differences highlighted. The Home Economics curricula at secondary schools vary between jurisdictions and this provides the basis of the analysis. The chapter concludes by detailing how Home Economics education can contribute to the systematic development and practical application of food skills, knowledge and competencies.

Keywords Home economics · Curriculum · Food education · Cooking · Island of Ireland

Introduction

The International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE) states that 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” (IFHE 2008, p. 1). Although the preferred name for the discipline and the profession is Home Economics, there are many variations used on the name

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internationally, including Family and Consumer Science (USA); Human Ecology (Canada) and Home and Consumer Studies (Sweden). 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” (IFHE, 2008, p. 2). Internationally, it is widely accepted that Home Economics teachers are responsible for teaching food education to young people in schools. Home Economics, for many, is the subject on the curriculum responsible for teaching students food knowledge, skills and attitudes required for life. Through the subject, students have an opportunity to develop transferable skills to be adaptive and respond to everyday food and health issues. Pendergast (2012) notes that the value of Home Economics is that it “does not teach a skill for the sake of that skill, it teaches for application, it teaches informed decision making in endless scenarios, it teaches evaluative and critical thinking skills, it empowers individuals—no matter what their context” (2012, p. 8).

This chapter explores Home Economics secondary school education in two jurisdictions on the Island of Ireland—the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland (NI). In both the ROI and NI, the name Home Economics is used on the curriculum and in teacher education. The chapter examines how Home Economics education in the secondary school setting contributes to the systematic development and practical application of food skills, knowledge and competencies. The use of the two jurisdictions allows some cross case study analysis to be carried out (Thomas, 2011).

The Island of Ireland comprises two jurisdictions—the ROI and NI—with each having separate governments. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) in the ROI has overall responsibility for the curriculum and educational policy in all schools. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) develops new curricula for approval by the Minister for Education and Skills. The Department for Education, Northern Ireland (DENI), has responsibility for educational policy in schools although similar to the Republic; this is developed by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and is based on the National Curriculum used in England and Wales. The curriculum in Northern Ireland schools aims to “empower pupils to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives. It is about helping pupils prepare for life and work as individuals” (CCEA, 2007, p. 2).

In the ROI, a recognised teacher education qualification, along with education to Degree level in the discipline Home Economics, is required in order to register as a Home Economics teacher with the Teaching Council. Currently, in order to gain registration, students study a 5-year programme which comprises Bachelor of Arts Home Economics and Professional Masters in Education (with Home Economics). This includes students studying the discipline Home Economics and the pedagogy associated with teaching the subject. The Teaching Council in Ireland recognises this Degree for registration as a Home Economics teacher. Whereas, in NI, no university offers students an opportunity to study the discipline Home Economics for their undergraduate degree. Where a student aspires to become a Home Economics teacher, they must undertake a 1-year Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) in Home Economics that focuses on studying education as opposed to Home Economics disciplinary content. However, the University of Ulster entry

requirement for the PGCE (Home Economics) refers to the applicant normally having an honours degree in Home Economics or in the event of a combined degree, at least 50% shall be in the subject Home Economics. This requirement is in place despite there being no such University course available in NI. Consequently, the qualifying degree for entry to this programme can be from a number of allied areas to Home Economics such as Food and Nutrition, Consumer Studies, Consumer Management and Food Innovation.

Home Economics Education in the Republic of Ireland

In the ROI, the name ‘Home Economics’ is used to describe the subject across the education system at all levels, including post-primary (secondary) and teacher education. Home Economics has a long history in the Irish education system dating back to the early 1800s in Irish primary schools (McCloat and Caraher, 2018). In secondary schools, Home Economics is an optional subject on the curriculum. It is available at both Junior (aged 12–15) and Senior (aged 15–18) cycles. Although the subject is optional, it remains consistently a popular choice among students.

At junior cycle, the uptake of Home Economics has remained consistent over the last 3 years where 36% of the total number of junior certificate students study Home Economics (Table 8.1).

Although at senior cycle there are significantly less students studying the subject, mainly because students do not choose as many subjects as in the junior cycle, the total cohort for the last 3 years has remained consistent at 21% (Table 8.2). Consequently, the subject remains one of the most popular optional subjects chosen by students.

Table 8.1 Junior certificate home economics (Author, adapted from State Examinations Commission, 2016, 2017 and 2018)

Year	Total number of junior certificate students	Number of students studying home economics	As a % of total student cohort
2018	62,562	22,644	36
2017	61,654	22,257	36
2016	60,248	21,464	36

Table 8.2 Leaving certificate home economics (Author, adapted from State Examinations Commission, 2016, 2017, 2018)

Year	Total number of leaving certificate students	Number of students studying home economics	As a % of total student cohort
2018	54,396	11,558	21
2017	55,731	11,814	21
2016	55,684	11,642	21

Junior Cycle Home Economics

In September 2018, a new Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification was implemented in all schools for first-year students. This curriculum development took place in the context of an overall reform of the Junior Cycle programme offered in secondary schools (DES, 2015). The Junior Cycle Home Economics subject consists of a three-year course of study with a minimum of 200 hours timetabled student engagement. The new Specification for Home Economics identifies the subject as a field of study, which aims to achieve “optimal, healthy and sustainable living for individuals, families and society” (DES, 2017, p. 4). Through engagement with Home Economics at junior cycle, students develop their knowledge, attitudes, skills, understanding and values to achieve this approach to living. From a food education perspective, Home Economics aims to “develop students’ practical food and health literacy skills so that they are enabled to adopt a healthy lifestyle and make informed decisions that positively impact their health and wellbeing as individuals as well as within their families and society” (DES, 2017, p. 5).

The learning outcomes for Junior Cycle Home Economics are arranged in three inter-connecting strands which include: Food, Health and Culinary Skills; Responsible Family Living; and Textiles and Craft. Although the learning outcomes are set out under each of these strands, teachers are advised to encourage a fully integrated experience in order to maximise student engagement and learning. This integrated nature of Home Economics is achieved by studying four cross-cutting elements, including: Individual and family empowerment; Health and wellbeing; Sustainable and responsible living; and Consumer competence (Fig. 8.1, DES, 2017, p. 12).

Junior Cycle Home Economics is the only subject on the national curriculum that provides food education in a systematic and experiential way to students. The strand food, health and culinary skills aims to enable students to “develop a healthy, sustainable attitude and positive relationship with food through practical experiential learning” (DES, 2017, p. 10). A key strength is the practical, hands-on experience for students, underpinned by scientific and theoretical knowledge. The learning outcomes in this strand demonstrate the broad range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that are developed in the subject, including budgeting; shopping; food choice; menu planning; portion control; planning menus for diet related diseases and for families at various stages of the life cycle; healthy eating; nutritional analysis; food science; homemade vs. commercial food production; ethical and ecological food choices; food labels; food waste; and the practical skills of food preparation and cooking using a variety of techniques.

The experiential and practical pedagogical approach encouraged in teaching and learning Home Economics at junior cycle is reinforced by the assessment approach. At the end of the 3 years of study, students will be expected to apply their knowledge, understanding and practical food literacy skills, utilising a problem-based learning approach, to a number of scenarios. These scenarios will range from preparing a meal with due consideration to a special diet or diet-related disorder;

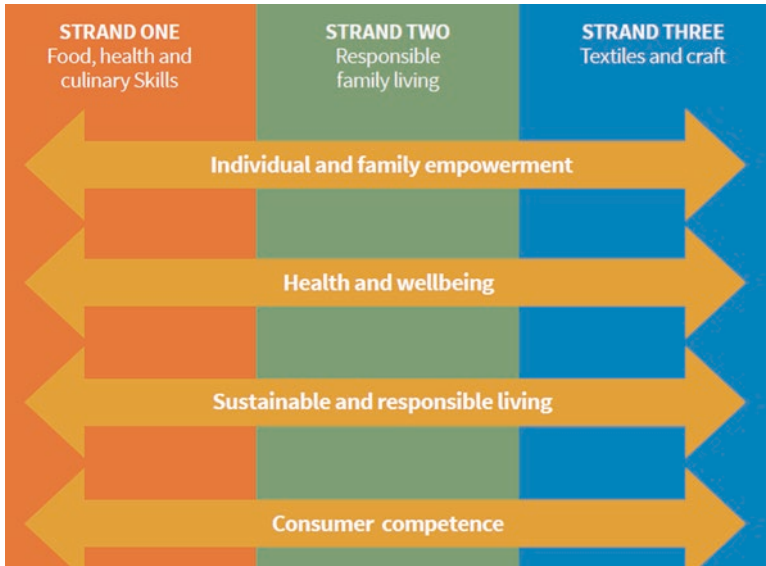


Fig. 8.1 The elements of the contextual strands (DES, 2017, p. 12)

cook a healthy family meal; prepare a school lunch; to resourceful cooking (DES, 2017). This practical assessment is worth 50% of the externally assessed marks with the other 50% assigned for a written examination.

Senior Cycle Home Economics

A revised senior cycle *Home Economics—Scientific and Social* for the Leaving Certificate was introduced in schools in 2002 with the first examination in 2004. The aim of the syllabus is to “develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, competence and attitudes necessary to contribute to a personal and family environment conducive to human development, health, leisure, security and happiness” (DES, 2001, p. 2). Home Economics at senior cycle is designed for 180 hours of class contact time over a period of 2 years, which is approximately five classes of 40 minutes per week, where a minimum of one double period (80 minutes) per week is required to facilitate practical work.

The syllabus is structured around three core areas and a choice of three electives (Table 8.3) with the majority of time being weighted towards food studies.

Building on Home Economics at junior cycle, students have the opportunity to study food literacy topics including: food choice; food science; nutrition; diet and health; preparation and processing of food; cooking of food using a variety of

Table 8.3 Structure of the leaving certificate home economics syllabus (DES 2001)

Core areas of study	% Weighting
Food studies	45
Resource management and consumer studies	25
Social studies	10
Electives (choose one area)	
1. Home design and management	20
2. Social studies	20
3. Textiles, fashion and design	20

techniques; food microbiology; sensory analysis; food safety and hygiene; nutritional analysis; preservation of food and food legislation. Teaching and learning in Home Economics at the leaving certificate level focuses on ensuring students will have the requisite skills and knowledge to “take control of their own lives at present and in the future” (DES, 2001, p. 2).

The assessment of leaving certificate Home Economics depends on which elective is chosen. For those who choose the first two electives (see Table 8.3), the written examination is worth 80% and the Food Studies coursework is worth 20%. However, for those studying the Textiles, Fashion and Design Elective, 70% of the marks are for the written examination, 20% for the Food Studies coursework and the Textile Studies Elective coursework is 10%. The Food Studies coursework requires students to complete four assignments from a prescribed list of five topics distributed each year. The topics can include specific diet-related disorders; nutritional topic; diet through the life cycle; sensory analysis and use of an appliance.

Home Economics Education in Northern Ireland

Home Economics is a mandatory requirement for all students (male and females) up to Key Stage 3 level (age 11–14 years) in NI. Students are required to study the subject within the learning area Learning for Life and Work as it is concerned with preparing young people for independent living (CCEA, 2017, p. 1). Students must study three key concepts in Home Economics: Healthy Eating; Home and Family Life and Independent Living. The key concept Health Eating affords students the opportunity to explore the concept of health eating and to develop knowledge, skills and understanding in the choice, planning, storage, preparation and cooking of food. Similar to the Junior Cycle Home Economics programme in the ROI, there is a strong focus on practical food skills which is underpinned by theory. According to CCEA (2017), students acquire “knowledge, understanding and practical skills in areas such as diet and food choice, family relationships and parenting and financial and consumer awareness” (p. 1).

GCSE (General Certificate Secondary Education) Home Economics: Food and Nutrition

Home Economics, as a GCSE subject area, develops pupils as an individual member of society by “helping them explore their health in a practical context, enhancing their potential to live a healthy lifestyle and make responsible choices about their diet and food” (CCEA, 2007, p. 2). If a student chooses to continue to study Home Economics after Key Stage 3, they can opt for the revised GCSE (General Certificate Secondary Education) Home Economics: Food and Nutrition Specification, which commenced in September 2017. The specification has a class allocation of 120 hours and comprises two areas: Food and Nutrition and Practical Food and Nutrition. According to CCEA (2017) the topics include: nutritional guidelines; food science; nutritional and dietary needs of different groups of people; food provenance; food production and processing; food safety and utilising a variety of food preparation and cooking techniques. Similar to the ROI, the assessment of GCSE Home Economics: Food and Nutrition has a 50% weighting for the practical skills examination that “develops unique transferable skills” (CCEA, 2016, p. 15). Students are assigned a practical task which can involve them preparing three dishes plus accompaniments to meet the requirements of the task assigned.

GCE (General Certificate Education) A Level Nutrition and Food Science

The name Home Economics is not used to identify any subject at senior cycle in NI. However, if a student wishes to continue their food education to GCE A Level, they study a subject called Nutrition and Food Science, which was revised in September 2018. The student has the option of taking the course as Advanced Subsidiary (AS) as a final qualification, which has a guided learning allocation of 180 hours. However, if they are taking the course for full GCE A Level qualification, they will be required to have 360 hours of learning and will also complete additional units of learning. The course of study is theoretical with no practical work included as a mandatory component. The core areas of learning are in Principles of Nutrition, and Diet, Lifestyle and Health with two additional units if students are taking the course to GCE A Level (Table 8.4).

Discussion

What emerges from looking at the provision of Home Economics in secondary school education in the ROI and NI is that there are similarities in terms of underpinning pedagogies and curriculum at junior level, but also differences in terms of

Table 8.4 Nutrition and food science specification (Author, adapted from CCEA, 2018)

Content	Assessment	Weighting	
		Advanced subsidiary (AS)	GCE A level
AS 1: Principles of nutrition	External written examination	50% of AS	20% of A level
AS 2: Diet, lifestyle and health	External written examination	50% of AS	20% of A level
<i>Additional units for GCE A level</i>			
A2 1: Option A: Food security and sustainability OR Option B: Food safety and quality	External written examination	N/A	30% of A level
A2 2: Research project	Students complete a 4000-word research-based project	N/A	30% of A level

support, specialist training and the practical implementation of policy solutions. Some of the differences in support issues can be found in the training provision for Home Economics teachers. Up until 1922 the island of Ireland shared a common educational policy; with the advent of the Irish Free State in 1922 the administrations separated; there were many similarities and overlaps in the early years of this separation but we are now seeing the emergence of major differences (McCloat and Caraher, 2018).

Home Economics in schools in the ROI and NI is a platform for teaching a sustainable and healthy approach to food and living. It promotes developing a positive relationship with food whilst maximising practical experiential learning and availing of opportunities to make the learning real and applicable to everyday life. As is evident from both curricula in NI and the ROI, Home Economics is a comprehensive subject sequentially integrating aspects of nutritional knowledge, scientific theory and practical food skills. Internationally, there are frequent calls to teach people how to cook (McCloat et al. 2017; McGowan et al. 2017; Caraher and Seeley, 2010; Vileisis, 2008). Alongside this, the media lament a perceived demise of cooking (Murcott 2012, 2019). These calls for more cooking often translate into calls for cooking in Home Economics (Owen-Jackson, Rutland, 2017), reducing Home Economics to a single issue focus, ignoring the wider role of Home Economics and the expertise required to deliver it (see these as examples of this tendency to reductionism: Jamie Oliver Foundation 2017; British Nutrition Foundation 2017a). Nonetheless, teaching people technical cooking skills in isolation will not provide them with the required knowledge, understanding and skills to navigate the myriad of food environments. Such piecemeal interventions are often not sustainable and not effective over a period of time (McCloat and Caraher, 2016; Caraher et al., 2010; Caraher and Reynolds, 2005). Instead, having an established and comprehensive

curriculum such as Home Economics, with specialist trained teachers, can approach the teaching of food education in a systematic and integrated way. This is further reiterated by Wolfson et al. (2017) who identifies cooking as a complex process and calls for an intervention framework developing ‘food agency’ which gives due cognisance to the multifaceted nature of food management, skills and knowledge.

Home Economics, as a subject on the curriculum, provides this multifaceted, multidisciplinary approach to food education. McGowan et al. (2017) concluded a necessity for programmes to be multifactorial, which integrate a range of knowledge and psychology-related factors in their design. Consequently, Home Economics in schools is the most favoured and coherent place to teach comprehensive food literacy skills to students as it incorporates a practical and theoretical component (Ronto et al., 2016; Burton and Worsley, 2014). In order to develop a confidence in choosing, preparing and cooking food for themselves and their families, students need to be taught the scientific and practical aspects of food as part of a comprehensive curriculum; this is about equipping them with the critical skills for adulthood and the various roles we play in our health and life careers (Lichtenstein and Ludwig 2010; Robertson and Schneider-Benns, 2015). In a longitudinal study, food preparation behaviours were tracked over a 10-year period and they resulted in greater engagement with food in early adulthood (mid to late twenties) but not during adolescence (Laska et al. 2012). This suggests that skills acquired early on may well be used later at key ‘life-career’ points. The success of this is evident: Worsley et al. (2015) found associations between Home Economics education in schools with higher levels of food knowledge across several age groups in a study in Australia. Whilst Lavelle et al. (2016) identified that learning cooking skills as a young person is positively related to cooking and food practices, cooking confidence, health and diet quality in later life; and consequently, recommending “high quality practical food education” is provided in schools (p. 9).

The benefits of Home Economics education in developing essential food skills and contributing to public health was brought to the fore internationally by Lichtenstein and Ludwig (2010), who argued that food education has an important part to play, as a component of a long-term solution, to addressing dietary habits of young people. Consequently, they identified mandatory food education and ‘bringing back’ Home Economics as one of the best investments that society can make (Lichtenstein and Ludwig, 2010). In both jurisdictions outlined in this chapter, Home Economics is the subject on the curriculum that facilitates students to develop knowledge, practical skills and understanding in relation to food. Students have an opportunity to apply this knowledge and understanding in a practical, hands-on cookery class whilst developing their cooking self-efficacy in a holistic way. Where Home Economics as a subject or profession does not exist, people look to other ways of including key food skills in the curriculum or in an out-of-class situation as in Condrazy’s (2010) culinary nutrition or ‘chefs adopt a school’-type programmes (Ballam, 2018; British Nutrition Foundation, 2017a, 2017b; Jamie Oliver Food Foundation, 2017; Caraher et al., 2013; Caraher et al., 2010). While programmes such as the those run by the British Nutrition Foundation, Food for Life and the Food Teachers Centre offer some additional short-term training on food education

for teachers in the UK, they are optional and often exist outside the requirements of the formal curriculum. While promoting a whole school approach, this has to be negotiated on a school-by-school basis and is not embedded in curricula or pedagogical approaches.

In reviewing the curriculum content for Home Economics across both jurisdictions, a broad range of common underpinning knowledge, scientific principles and practical skills are evident. The main differences between the two curricula are the topics which are covered. In the ROI, Home Economics comprises areas including food studies; textiles, fashion and design; and family resource management. However, in NI the curriculum focuses solely on food education but over a shorter number of contact hours (120 hours (NI) vs 200 hours (ROI) at junior cycle). Common food themes in curricula include nutrition; food science; menu planning; food provenance; shopping; budgeting; food safety; nutritional and dietary needs of different groups of people; ethical and ecological food choices; practical skills of food preparation and cooking using a variety of techniques. This broad base for the curriculum is a strength for the subject. Indeed, Condrasky and Hegler (2010) state that programmes focusing on producing “sustainable healthy eating behaviour through culinary confidence and nutrition alertness are a successful approach to begin the restoration of our nation’s health” (p. 1).

Despite the comprehensive food education provided through Home Economics on the curriculum, a difference exists between NI and the ROI on whether or not all students are required to study the subject. In 2007, the Department for Education, Northern Ireland (DENI) prioritised the studying of Home Economics on the curriculum and made the subject compulsory for all students up to Key Stage 3. Baird (2010) identifies this area of the curriculum as one of the most important for students to learn in the current era because of the knowledge, skills and understanding it teaches in relation to food. Nonetheless, for NI the challenges are located in the facilities available in schools to teach the subject and the shortage of specialist teachers. In the ROI, it remains an optional subject despite numerous calls to make it compulsory (Hickey, 2018; Boland, 2017; Maguire, 2017; Sweeney, 2015; Gray, 2015; McCloat, 2012, 2013). However, the publication of the Report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Childhood Obesity in November 2018 has heralded a significant shift in attitude towards Home Economics by policy makers. The Report recommends making Home Economics compulsory, on a phased basis, for the Junior Cycle curriculum in secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2018). The publication of this recommendation follows evidence presented to the Houses of the Oireachtas in May 2018, which called for compulsory Home Economics, by numerous witnesses giving evidence at the hearing of the Committee (St. Angela’s College, 2018; ATHE, 2018; Safefood, 2018). Primarily, the recommendation was made in light of the necessity, from a public health perspective, to teach young people practical food education and in particular, practical food and cooking skills. It remains to be seen whether or not the recommendation will be implemented in the coming years.

A constructivist approach to teaching and learning is the pedagogical approach Home Economics curricula in both jurisdictions. Home Economics education

adds the active dimension to learning that requires students to think critically and reflectively about the content and the process. Consequently, students' level and complexity of thinking about food and health issues can increase (McCloat and Caraher, 2016). Similarly, Ronto et al. (2016) notes that the comprehensive, hands-on approach in Home Economics education ensures the subject is well positioned to develop students' food literacy skills. The pedagogical approach utilised in Home Economics education in both the ROI and NI facilitates the subject to play a key role in developing practical and theoretical food competencies in young people. The application of scientific and theoretical knowledge, understanding and skills in practical real-life food situations is an inherent pedagogical approach to teaching and learning in Home Economics and aims to facilitate students to have a positive relationship with food.

What remains clear in broader health promotion literature on healthy eating is that there needs to be congruence between what is practiced and what is taught in schools (Townsend et al. 2011). Therefore, the promotion of healthy food habits in Home Economics needs to be matched by the provision of food in the school setting. This can be achieved in NI, as like the rest of the UK, there is school meal provision, which is not the situation in the ROI. There is in England, Scotland and Wales nutrition standards for school meals. As we noted above, single-issue approaches such as the equation of home economics with cooking solely, or as Owen-Jackson and Rutland (2017) termed it 'from cookery to cookery', are inadequate; likewise Home Economics needs to be located within a broader framework of healthy schools work. This framework is more evident in NI with its support for school meals and food-based initiatives whereas the ROI has strong support for Home Economics.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided insight into the Home Economics curricula, focusing specifically on food education, in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. By exploring the rationale, aims and pedagogical approaches to teaching Home Economics on the island, it is evident that Home Economics education contributes to the systematic development of students' practical food skills, knowledge and competencies. The Home Economics curricula, in both jurisdictions, is a comprehensive and wide-ranging programme incorporating scientific theory, nutritional knowledge and practical food and cooking skills taught in an experiential, sequential and integrated approach. It is an established subject on the island of Ireland which is evidentially well regarded as a compulsory subject on the Northern curriculum and a policy recommendation now in place to make it compulsory in the Republic of Ireland. The pedagogical approaches and philosophical underpinning in the Home Economics curricula on the island ensures the subject is ideally placed to deliver a holistic, multi-faceted and comprehensive food education to students aiming to prepare them to navigate everyday food circumstances and develop a sustainable healthy approach to, and relationship with, food.

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