

Home Economics – Today and Tomorrow

By Irene L. McAllister

The following is a reprint of an article prepared by Miss McAllister for the North Vancouver Teachers' Association Teachers' Conference of February 18, 1966.

Although home economics schools were not established until the latter part of the nineteenth century and degree courses not offered until 1900, the importance of the subject was recognized over 2,000 years ago. Aristotle claimed that the two areas most important for the realization of a good society were economics (meaning the science of home management) and politics (the science of government). As the Greeks set no limits to thought but examined all things and called them into question, their definitions deter careful attention. To them, happiness was the exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence in a life affording them scope. Plato thought that man's happiness consisted in the full realization of his characteristic virtue and function, and that his virtue, as a rational being, was a clear insight into the true end of life, "knowledge of good." He held that such knowledge, once attained, could not fail to determine will and action. Education to him was learning to feel pleasure and pain about the right things. The Greeks also defined an idiot as an altogether private man (one not involved in society and whose concerns were only personal). Their society was to them a guarantee of all the ideals that made life worth living. In this age of over-kill and kill games on the one side and possible near ideal conditions on the other, we are forced to ponder happiness, idiocy, the good society and where we stand.

Over 50 years ago, Dr. Ellen H. Richards stated what home economics stands for:

- The ideal home life for today unhampered by the traditions of the past.
- The utilization of all the resources of modern science to improve the home life.
- The freedom of the home from the dominance of things and their due subordination to ideals.
- The simplicity in material surroundings which will most free the spirit for the more important and permanent interests of the home and of society.

This statement has the mark of the Greek-spirit and in an age of automation, well used, might even be realized. Mrs. Richards and a group interested in home economics met at Lake Placid for conferences from 1899 to 1908. Just before this time the science of home economics was considered to be in what chemists call a state of supersaturated solution, needing only the insertion of a needle point to start crystallization. On the 65th Anniversary of the first Lake Placid Conference, Dr. Ruth Hall, then president of the American Home Economics Association, said that parts of the whole had crystallized out, but we were still searching for the giant plunger sharp enough sufficiently to activate the solution and strong enough to force the solution into one clearly defined whole with each crystal in its place.

At the last International Congress of Home Economics in Paris in 1963, the theme of the congress was Home Economics Education to Meet Changing World Conditions and Needs." It was a study of the place and responsibilities of the home economist in preserving the inherent values of family life and in serving the wider society. Eighteen hundred from 40 countries attended and the week was spent in the most challenging, lectures and discussion. The following excerpt, is from the lecture of M. Pierre Laroque, Councillor of State and President of National Security of France.

What modern home economics teaching must be:

1. Teaching on the economic plane and psychological and social plane.
2. To put within the reach of all a very diversified ensemble of knowledge: whence the teaching at a more popular and persuasive level.
3. Teaching adapted to the milieu to which it is applicable (the needs vary with the type of family involved).
4. Teaching of general and permanent characteristics of equal importance for both sexes; it should be extended to adult life.
5. The teaching of home economics is not sufficient unto itself: it rests on a considerable scientific knowledge and is an element within the whole: it is and must be an integral part of a whole social policy putting to work the multiple elements closely interdependent: the policies regarding housing, regarding urbanism, regarding sanitary and social equipment, the satisfactory dividing of revenue, put at the disposal of families and social workers helping them in the solution of their problems, a network of household aids intended to assist the members of the family group temporarily disabled (failing).

The particular value of home economics teaching: it is not a system of assistance implying domination of the individual by the community; it attempts to give each member of the family group the means of solving by his own initiative, by his own effort, the problems posed by daily life; it is therefore a factor of development for the sense of responsibility and affirming the dignity of man.

The last paragraph of the final speech of the Congress indicates the state of home economics today and, judging by the ovation that followed Miss F. F. Laidler's presentation, this was an international opinion:

We are only on the threshold of knowledge concerning our subject; we are at the beginning of a new era; let us therefore evaluate, probe, exchange ideas, and above all let us recognize our own personal commitment in a world where the individual means more than the mass and where personal values must be reinforced. If we are to withstand the many malignant social growths which threaten our whole future. All the resources of the power age are at our disposal, let us learn to harness them to an ultimate good and build a dynamic profession able and willing to meet a dynamic situation.

The next International Congress will be in Bristol, England, in 1968. It will be limited to an attendance of 1,500, with a quota system for the U. S., Canada, France and England.

On this continent, key speakers at recent annual meetings of the American Home Economics Association have included such eminent educators and human beings as Dr. Harold Taylor, former head of Sarah Lawrence College, and Dr. Mary Bunting, president of Radcliffe and the only woman member of the Atomic Energy Commission. Dr. Taylor said, "I wish to suggest a philosophy of education appropriate to the aims of your organization. It stems from the great life-giving quality possessed by all women in their very natures. The philosophy I suggest is one which would hold that education must teach the preservation of human life and its enhancement in the entire range of the dimensions of life." His criticism of the American family is that it does not wish to enhance American society - it wishes to preserve it just the way it is. He found destructive tendencies paramount - kills and over-kills; "I find it immoral to talk like this. I believe that if one child or one human is being damaged by anything which is done purposely, this is an ultimately immoral and inhumane act. We must restore our sense of values which cluster around the family values having to do with the preservation of human life. We must enlarge these attitudes to a world-wide scale and not be content with accepting prophecies of disaster and talking about the anonymous 20 to 30 million people who might die." He found the family the key educational instrument as its political, moral, social, esthetic and spiritual values suffuse the life of the child, and the school and college have to build on this.

Dr. Bunting said that home economists can minimize the bad or negative human experiences of hunger, illness, fear and deprivation, and are in a unique position to maximize the good positive experiences - the experiences of learning, creating beauty, helping people, communicating. She said that quality should be emphasized - whether in research, service or family living. Her priceless statement was, "Worry about your character and your image will take care of itself."

One of the most heartening happenings for home economics has been the December '1964 issue of the Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, which had 97 pages devoted to a New Look for Home Economics. In the chapter on "A Look Into the Future," J. Lloyd Trump accepts two basic assumptions:

It is essential that all boys and girls be educated better for their present and future homemaking roles.

Home economics education must be revised to make it a more vital subject.

The possible curriculum content, staff organization, teaching methods, educational facilities and school schedules make delightful reading. His two concluding paragraphs will, I hope, become the "tomorrow" of this paper:

Home economics in the school of the future will occupy a much more prominent place than it does today. Life holds much more for each of us than earning a living. What happens at home affects all the rest of our lives. Making a home more artistic, more cultural, more friendly, and a place where all of the persons in it are more respectful of each other constitutes a foundation for the full life. Home economics education in the future will meet that challenge better as it changes its curriculum, its methods, its staff utilization, its facilities, its evaluation techniques and its fiscal policies.

The path ahead may not be completely clear but its direction is unmistakable. How rapidly the course is run depends on the zeal and professional attitudes of school principals and the teachers with whom they work. The future is in their hands.

In the clothing area, so much is taking place that keeping up to date on methods, developments in textiles and retail selection makes an annual concentrated workshop appear necessary. With present workloads, it is very difficult to keep informed, even with summer schools as often only one phase is covered in the time. ~ These workshops would have to be top quality because time in our pre-automation world is so precious that it is indeed life. I think the last week in June could advantageously be devoted to this.

In the classroom, we have to keep inspiration and the excitement of creating at a high level in the face of all the detail we are confronted with each day. This sometimes means quick-projects as enthusiasm-builders, and at other times

the "hand-made" look for hard-earned satisfaction. With the range in methods, which vary from the fashion house hand skills to mass production techniques based entirely on machine skills, the problem becomes one of to what degree both will be used in classroom work. Time available and the type of product desired have to decide the ratio.

At the International Congress, clothing was not discussed at all, which surprised me considerably as a day was given to each of Food and Nutrition, Housing and Family Living. On the afternoon of "See Paris Day," though, all the leading fashion houses sent models and an unforgettable fashion show was held in the Grand Amphitheatre of the Sorbonne - the, Congress headquarters. Nothing more needed to be said about clothing -- it was all taste and breathtaking perfection. I was later able to verify this at close range at the winter collection at the House of Yves St. Laurent.

On rethinking the Congress, I could see, the point of its programming, as human nurture and development and human environment are of paramount world importance, and once you have seen the best in clothing, the rest is up to you. When you see some secondary school girls look first at the Paris Original patterns when seriously considering a project, you realize how taste and skill-minded some of the young have become. The "treasured look" has become available to those who are willing to work for it and not just to the 5% who are able to pay for it.

Principles are relatively simple to teach, but learning depends on the practice of the principle and this demands time, of both teacher and pupil. When these principles are practiced on individual projects and to individual measurements, it is both demanding and time consuming. For this reason, class size and equipment available have to be right or frustration of pupil and teacher will result. After-school help should be necessary only in special cases, not because space or time was not available in regular periods. In clothing we have a unique chance to help girls express their individuality. They will often be prompted to improve themselves as they go about improving how other people see them. This is important enough to warrant the best teaching and learning conditions.

When and if we do realize what Dr. Ellen Richards said that home economics stands for, I think we will be teaching *home and family life, with values, family relationships, "the good life" and social responsibility as the core, and one of the crystals arranged around this center will be clothing-and textiles. Others will be childcare, human development, foods and nutrition, management, housing, the arts, national cultures and communication, all of these approached from a global point of view. These would be taught to both boys and girls, starting in Grade I and continuing through secondary school. Additional courses should be available for job preparation related to any of these fields for those wishing it.

I will close with two statements, one by Eleanore Braun Luckey in the American Journal of Home Economics:

The kind of education for family living that we have at this critical point in our history will largely determine the future course of mankind.

Closer to home Dr. Geoffrey Mason, of the University of Victoria, summed up his address to the Victoria Home Economics and Dietetics Association with these words:

I am suggesting an additional but most important role for home economics in school. I have suggested the need for a liberal approach to the formal education of our children. I use the term liberal here with a small "l" to mean liberating

I should like to see home economics, in addition to trying to develop skills appropriate to Canada-in the 1960's, also offering an education of more universal concern. Our thinking is too often tied to the accidents of time and place. We fail to see beyond the limits of our own very restricted environment

I think it is time our children began thinking of the world as a whole, about common problems of the human race and particularly of the problems of the 9 out of 10 human beings who reside outside the shores of the North American continent. I believe home economics is the best place in the school curriculum to start this thinking.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hamilton, Edith. The Greek Way to Western Civilization. New York Mentor Books 1953

Jaeger, Werner. Poideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture. England, Basil Blackwell & Mott Ltd., 1939.

Rowles, Edith C. Home Economics in Canada.

Hunt, Caroline L. The Life of Ellen H. Richards.

Laidler, F., F. "The Work to be Done." Home Economics and Domestic Subjects Review. England. September 1963.

Taylor, Harold. "The Education of Daughters," Journal of Home Economics, November ~ 1963.

Lake Placid Conferences on Home Economics (1899-1908). American Journal of Home Economics, February 1909

The Republic of Plato, translation by Francis MacDonald Cornford. New York Oxford University Press. 1945.

The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, December