

Home Economics: - Past, Present, and Future

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In this centennial year, when we are looking back over the history of our nation, it is rather interesting for those of us in home economics, at least, to look back to the beginning of our field. Simpson (16, p. 3) quotes from an article entitled "The Beginning of Education in Agriculture and Home Economics in North America" in The Journal of Home Economics, published February 1910, as follows:

Apparently agricultural education in North America had its beginning in the farm school which was established by Francois de Laval ... in 1668 or about that date. . . While Laval was founding educational institutions for boys, the problem of educating girls was being taken up by the Ursulines and the Nuns of the Congregation at Quebec. As most of the secular teaching was along the lines of manual training and what is now grouped under the head of Home Economics, it may be truthfully said that formal education in this subject had its beginning in North America at the Convents in Quebec about the middle of the seventeenth century. In a letter dated August 9, 1668, it is stated that the Ursulines besides careful instruction in religious duties, taught all that a girl ought to know ... The training which the girls received must have been very largely in the household tasks

On a secular basis the development of, the field of home economics education began in the United States soon after the middle of the nineteenth century. There were undoubtedly many factors, which motivated development of our field, but Krug (9, p. 473-74) in reviewing the history mentions four which seemed particularly influential: humanitarianism, industrialism, the women's rights movement, and an interest in correct diets.

Humanitarianism,. . at first, involved helping the poor, and later, in 1880, developing a program to teach them to sew. The advent of industrialization tended to attract women to work outside the home. The women's rights movement sought, on one hand,. to free women from the routine of the home and, on the other, to dignify the role of women in the home by regarding homemaking as a vocation equal to other careers. The fourth factor, that of a definite interest in diets and foods, brought cooking schools into existence in the late 1870's.

According to Simpson (16, p. 3) the earliest formal classes that we have on record in Canada took place in-Montreal in 1887 when lessons in cooking were given by Miss Corson, an American. It is rather interesting to note in this connection that the series of classes included:

Twelve public lectures to ladies, average attendance at each lesson 200; twelve evening lessons to artisans' wives average attendance at each lesson 100, twelve evening lessons to high school pupils, average attendance at each lesson 20.

A more permanent cooking school was established in Montreal the following year as a result of this historic venture.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Rowles (15, p. 93) tells us, the Young Women's Christian Association in Kingston, Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto attempted to help the working girl on a low standard of living, a result of the industrialism which changed the pattern of living in Canada in the latter part of the nineteenth century. These attempts to help were twofold: to raise the girl's standard of living, as well as that of the Canadian family on a low income. Classes in cooking and sewing which were conducted at Victor Mission in Toronto had as their aim the same purpose.

In 1894 the National Council of Women, realizing that many young married women were unprepared for homemaking, asked that home economics be taught in the public schools. "The main purpose of these

approaches was to teach skill in sewing and cooking so that girls and women would be better homemakers.” (Rowles, 15, p. 93). At its inception, therefore, to meet the needs of the times, the field of home economics was concerned mainly with the most tangible areas of sewing, cooking and, in connection with cooking particularly, the concept of sanitation, which was also coming to the fore at that time.

In the 1890's the term “manual training” meant a type of education which developed the ability to think while at the same time the hands were learning skills. James Robertson, Commissioner of Agriculture and Dairying for Canada, said in 1901 when addressing the Ontario Educational Association in Toronto:

Manual training is that part of general education which seeks its results in the boy himself or in the girl herself, seeks the result there and nowhere else, without regard to the particular occupation to be followed afterwards ... Manual training is a means for developing the faculties and giving ... that all around training which he is entitled to in a country like ours ... (15, p. 38-39).

As far back as 1901 some educators realized the need of teaching all students how to live apart from teaching them a vocation! The term “manual training” means something different to us today, but the ideas inherent in it and interpreted into today's terminology are still good and doubly essential for young people living in such a complicated society as ours.

It is important to remember that home economics became an instructional field at a time when the family was a production unit responsible for providing food, shelter and clothing for its members. And though parents had much more opportunity then to teach their children homemaking skills, Cooley (quoted by Krug (9, p. 474)) in 1911 said:

... any curriculum which does not include training for the home sphere ignores the very centre about which her (women's) life revolves. Many of the home talents are innate and develop naturally, but many lie dormant because untrained. When woman begins to preside over her own home, she soon discovers her limitation if she has not had the advantages of training along the lines of household arts and economics.

The wisdom of Cooley's statement still stands today, especially in the area of household economics or, if you wish, consumer education.

Writing in 1940, Spafford (17, p. 1) said, “People who have not kept informed often think of the home economics laboratory as a place where girls cook and sew. . .” Home economics classes where cooking and sewing are taught by competent teachers actually offer more to students than just the perfecting of skills of cooking and sewing. In spite of the values which may be inherent in well -taught classes of this nature, there has been in the last few decades, a marked trend away from emphasis on physical skills and toward the more intangible areas of home economics, namely, education for personal, family and community living. This trend of course is a legitimate one. Home economics education of the 1880's met the needs of the families which were production units, by teaching them the skills of cooking and sewing. As Budewig (3, p. 22) phrases it,

Home Economics is an idea in the history of thought that emerged on the educational scene in response to the needs of society for a more comfortable, convenient, pleasant and productive life for all people.

Home economics is still on the scene, but to meet the needs of today's society education must be adapted to the specific need, for a

... homemaker must not only be able to feed and cloth her family, she must be able to manage the family resources of time, money, and personnel. Changing social conditions and modern technology have made it impossible for a girl while growing up, to learn all this from her mother and from other members of her family. Toward the end of the nineteenth century it became apparent that the homemaker was in need of more specialized help than that offered in cooking and sewing; she needed the kind of help which the modern home economist can provide (15, p. 93).

As it was a generally accepted fact that women needed help through training during the nineteenth century, which was very simple and uncomplicated in comparison with present-day living, how much more do people need education today to prepare them for effective living! It might be well for us right here to review the philosophy of home economics. Home economics is not a clear-cut, well-defined discipline with specific boundaries. Home economics draws from many areas - such as the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities - those things which relate to the home and family living. It might be well to emphasize that although home economics borrows from many disciplines, it cannot be considered a parasite field, for it is capable of contributing to those

fields from which it draws "...far more than has been realized" (21, p. 11). Home economics interprets, relates and makes applicable for human use the knowledge, concepts, and appreciations of the many disciplines from which it draws, and in so doing, becomes a new field of educational experience. Paul (13, p. 751) says that home economics is, in its most comprehensive sense,

... 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 especially of the relation between these two factors ... It is a philosophical subject... something to connect and bind together into a consistent whole the pieces of knowledge at present unrelated.

During the process of "connecting" and "binding" knowledge into something meaningful, home economics education has a chance, as McCain (10, p. 32) quoting Bevier suggests,

... to teach something of the beauty of life and the unity of life, to teach that there is an art in a well-ordered home and a well-ordered life; and that perhaps is the greatest thing home economics has to do.

The primary concern of home economics is the strengthening of family life. It is generally agreed that the family is the most important social institution in existence. Having agreement on this point, it must further be conceded that what happens to the family and within the family determines to large extent the development and behavior of the individuals in the family. Communities are made up of families, so it is also a fact that what happens to and within the family affects the community and society at large. The primary concern of home economics then becomes threefold: education for better personal, for better family, and for better community living. Home economics education attempts to accomplish its major goal through educating individuals for family living, improving the services and goods used by families, conducting research to discover the changing needs of individuals and families and the means of satisfying these needs, and furthering community, national and world conditions favorable to family living (I, p. 4).

The purpose of education, as defined by the Educational Policies Commission of the National Education Association of the United States (1938), was divided into four categories stated in terms of individual behavior and centering on the person himself, his relationship to others in the home and community, the creation and use of material wealth, and socio-civic activities. The result of the process of education should therefore be an educated person, an educated member of family and community, an educated producer and consumer, and an educated citizen. Academic subjects emphasize and provide training in citizenship and provide the prerequisites for career-training. Administrators, teachers and lay people alike agree and recognize that in addition to education for a career and citizenship, students need to be prepared for their everyday personal and family living, as well as for living in a world of science and social problems. Home economics specializes in training for better personal, family and community living. Home economics therefore is an important part of the total process of educating people for living. Whitehead (21, p. 11) says,

The specialist teacher has been accused of being the greatest single drag upon human knowledge! One tends to believe that one's own subject has unique opportunities and I think that in the case of our subject this claim can really be substantiated.

Sperry (18) challenged the field of home economics when he said "The most vital education is education for family life. The most effective vehicle is home economics if we but realize our full potential."

The fact that there is a need for educating people how to live is undeniable. The high divorce rate, illegitimate birth rate, and the upsurge in the last few years of juvenile delinquency should be convincing enough. Molloy (11, p. 45) said,

if educators from kindergarten to senior high school will keep in mind that the family structure has been weakened, and needs help desperately, and if they will try to compensate in every way possible, erosive effect upon the family unit may be lessened,

One of the biggest problems facing society today, and probably the one from which all others stem is the fantastic rate of change in every field of endeavor and at every level of interpersonal relationships. This prevailing atmosphere has been responsible to a large extent for a breakdown of desirable relationship and stability within the family circle. The importance of a closely-knit, compatible family unit in

maintaining a strong society cannot be denied. Educating for effective family living becomes more imperative as society becomes more complex. Amidon (2, p. 31 -35) suggests that the home can be no wiser or better than the family that lives there, and the family can be no wiser or better than its individual members. Teenagers (the parents of tomorrow) will only be as good parents as they have learned to be.

Where should education for family living be taught? Molloy (11 , p. 46) suggests that many people oppose this type of teaching in the schools. because it involves teaching morals, which they believe should be left to the churches. " The Church can help, and it does in many cases. But how can one or two hours on Sunday provide adequate preparation for living effectively during the week in today's complex society with its many pressures? And how can the Church help those who rarely or never enter its doors? Moll'by (11 , p. 46) goes on to say that

...there are deep moral principles behind good family living, and public schools should not teach religion. But , knowledge can never destroy religion or do it permanent harm; usually it supplements religious beliefs and makes them more enduring.

There are those who suggest that family living should be taught in the home. Those who insist that this is possible imply that home economics is composed of nothing but skills - the skills of cooking and sewing (10, p. 15). Anyone will agree that parents should spend much time teaching their children the things they ought to know. It is not proposed that the school monopolize this duty, but parents vary in their ability to teach homemaking, and school instruction helps to equalize experiences for all children.

Where the boy used to husk corn with his father, he now has no place with his father in the office or on motor assembly lines. Direct learning has been converted to the indirect learning and guidance situations of the classroom (19, p. 467).

Parents often find themselves at a decided disadvantage because an increasing complexity of knowledge is constantly invading the various curricula of elementary and secondary schools. "Children at early ages can deal with content and concepts foreign to their parents" (5 , p.499). The family still is a place of shelter and security, but it is not necessarily the center of intellectual activity. The family is still important as an agency to transmit values, but parents cannot teach concepts which they themselves do not understand or know about.

What direction must home economists take to meet the present and future needs of Society? Otto (12, p. 625) says,

The current emphasis in home economics is on management and understanding human relationships - management as a tool for achieving personal and family values; relationships as, a means of sensitizing individuals to the human potential.

One of the important responsibilities of education is to improve and develop personal and family life. Home economics through the teaching of management and relationships, is abundantly qualified to meet this responsibility of education. Home economists need to be dedicated to their work, and convinced that this field of study has a positive contribution to make to society.

Families today are no longer producing units, but rather are consuming units, so home economics education does not need to emphasize production as it once did. Effective home economics classes must meet the needs of individuals and families as consumers, and this cannot be done by emphasizing the skills of cooking and sewing. Otto (12, p. 625), says in this connection,

A person. can live a very rich life and never bake a biscuit or construct a garment. Technology and mass production make available goods and services which are purchased by the greater percentage of the population.

Baking biscuits and sewing garments are no longer compulsory achievements in order to prepare for living in an increasingly complex technological society. Budewig (3, p. 22) says further,

We obviously cannot keep home economics exactly as it is by rationalizing everything that we presently do. We must search out those aspects which have lost their purpose for present-day living and which are being perpetuated merely because they served. the purposes of society in an earlier period.

Society once was production-oriented. Today it is consumer-oriented. In order to be up-to-date in approach, home economists must teach toward a consumer, rather than toward a producer, point of view.

In the teaching of skills, there is a tendency to emphasize the "how" at the expense of the "why". As the society of the future will be entirely different from that of today, it is imperative to train students in perfecting mental rather than physical skills. Otto (12, p. 626) suggests that unless the learning experiences planned are based on cognitive and technical objectives. . . " teachers are educating for obsolescence. . ." Paul (13, p. 752),

by asking a question, seems to reiterate the need for a new look. at what is, being done in home economics classes!

Because our lives and surroundings are changing, do we need to make some changes in home economics; do we need to change some of the things we are teaching, and the way we are doing it?

In a similar vein, Coon (4, p. 842) says:

Home-economists must be among the first to anticipate and recognize change, to weigh the capacities of the individual to meet now demands, and to set new directions for professional programs of benefit to families.

There is a real need for home economics teachers to re-assess their philosophy about their chosen field and to re-define. accordingly their values and goals. In view of modern trends teachers must be able to justify what they are teaching to students.

Home economics came into being in response to the needs of society. What direction should home economics be taking today to meet the needs of our present and future society? The trend toward earlier marriages should provide some pressure for more adequate education for adolescents. Hall and Paulucci (7, p. 163) give some startling, if not frightening, statistics about high-school -age girls in the United States.

Today one-fourth of all 18-year-old girls are married and one-sixth of the 17-year-old girls, One out of each 16 girls in the 16th year is married. These are high. school ages. These are young persons who are entering marriage, parenthood, and homemaking in teen years. They face the very real task of maturing in marriage.

These are American statistics, and though the percentages in Canada may not be quite so high, our statistics show similar trends.

Rogers (14, p. 85-86) deploras any gradual decline in the importance of home economics both in education and in many business organizations. She emphasizes the importance of home economics for secondary school girls because so many of them marry without a college education.. She says;

We believe home economics at the secondary level. is of primary importance because, professionally, home economics could live or die depending on its strength at that level, and because with so many girls marrying without college education, this is their only chance of getting any homemaking education.

This trend toward earlier marriage presents society with two alternatives:

- 1 . providing education which will help girls prepare more adequately for early marriage, or
2. providing education which will help girls see the advisability of deferring marriage.

Whichever alternative is pursued, a new approach, aimed directly at the heart of the problem, must be given consideration. Training of such significance cannot be left to chance correlation in one or another of the subjects on a student's timetable, even. though many teachers, regardless of their subject field, feel a responsibility toward educating the "whole" person. If each teacher is to teach for family living secondary school courses will need to be revised with this objective in mind. If one department is to be responsible for teaching the body of this information, secondary school organization will need to be revised to allow all girls to take a course of this nature.

I believe that secondary schools should be providing education which will help girls see the advisability of deferring marriage. Time is used to poor advantage, therefore, if such topics as trousseau planning are taught. Careers, and hobbies, and services to one's family and community need to be presented as immediate goals which, if participated in wholeheartedly, automatically mature, prepare, and equip the individual for a better chance in marriage and parenthood a few years hence. In support of this philosophy, Vars and Lowe (20, p. 258) state that "... one of the most effective deterrents to student marriages is a challenging secondary School program." Teachers can and do exert much good influence on their students. Hanson (8, p. 316) says that

... consistent expectation on the part of a teacher may be helpful to girls in resolving the dichotomy of their social roles. This does not mean choosing between marriage and a career but rather a realistic acceptance that both will have their proper times and places.

An understanding, discerning teacher can give moral support and guidance to individual girls which will help them to counteract the pressures which have a tendency to lead to early marriages.

Education for family living concerns boys as well as girls. Goodykoontz and Coon (6, p. 55) are quite positive in their statement that "education for family living... concerns one sex just as much as the other and must meet the needs of both sexes from the beginning of life until the end." They (6, p. 1) say, in addition, - that the basic philosophy for home and family life is making

... men and women conscious of the treasures that are offered in daily life homemaking, bearing and rearing children, living together - which now they do not fully sense or may even destroy because they are blind and unaware, or preoccupied with other activities and interests.

It is essential that young people grasp a basic philosophy of home and family living before they set up their own homes. Teenagers have a tendency to be idealistic. They think in romantic terms of the home which they hope one day to establish. Education is necessary, first of all, to help them realize that their home of the future will be very similar to the one in which they now live. This is a difficult concept for most young people to grasp. There will be continually the same routines of getting up in the morning, cooking meals, washing soiled dishes and clothes, cleaning the house, tending children, and going through a multiplicity of other such procedures. The one main difference will be that, then, they themselves will be at the helm of things; they will be the ones responsible for the performance of these duties. Education is necessary, in the second place to help young people realize the "treasure" which can be theirs through these routines of daily life. (Note: See article pages 28 - 33, Thesa Journal, Volume 3 Number 1, June 1965, for further discussion on the need for teaching home economics to boys as well as to girls.)

In 1894, in a relatively simple society, the National Council of Women realized that many young married women were unprepared for homemaking. What should we as educated home economists be doing today to see that all secondary school students receive the education necessary to prepare them for the much more complicated task of homemaking in this twentieth century! Are we, while teaching the students we do have, developing in them the ability to think while their hands are learning skills? Can we justify the subject matter we are teaching? Are we prepared to change our ideas, methods, emphases to keep pace with the changes going on around us? Are we encouraging creativity in our students, and helping them to think critically so that they will be able to solve the unknown problems of the future?

Whether we call the subject home economics or change the name (and no one has come up with a better name), it seems absolutely essential to give all of our students some basic instruction in the art of living. Taking a course in bookkeeping or business fundamentals will not suffice. There is a great deal to be learned about the spending and saving of money which must come before we enter the figures in a column of a book. The handling of money is only one of the aspects of the art of living. All students need instruction in the care and selection of clothing, grooming, aesthetically - pleasing home surroundings, management of time, energy, talents, interests. Will we meet the challenge as we enter into the second century of our existence as a nation?

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