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The Evolution of Home Economics as a subject in Irish Primary and Post-Primary Education from the 1800s to the 21st Century

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Abstract

This paper is a historical review, documenting the evolution of Home Economics as a subject in Irish primary and post-primary education from the 1800s to the 21st century. The 1800s and early 20th century saw domestic subjects, including cookery, being widely taught to girls in both primary and post-primary schools. The philosophical underpinning of the subject was to enhance the quality of life for families. The subject remained a popular choice for young women up until the establishment of the Irish Free State which, thereafter, witnessed many changes in the teaching of cookery and domestic science in both primary and post-primary schools. The core ideology of the subject in providing students with knowledge, practical skills, understanding and attitudes for everyday life as individuals and as family members not only reflects the richness of the subject from the past but also the relevance of the subject in addressing issues of a 21st century society.

Key words

Home Economics; curriculum history; secondary education; female education; primary education

1. Introduction

In Ireland in the 1800s primary education was provided in schools operated by charitable institutions or the church (Catholic or Protestant) or in schools funded by the British Treasury where students experienced a gendered curriculum (Raftery, Harford and Parkes, 2010). Hedge schools were still a source of education for young children until 1870, particularly for those living in rural areas, and were often run by itinerant teachers. The early 19th century saw universal schooling gaining momentum with the

establishment of national schools which were free for all students. At the time, secondary education was preserved for the elite and the concern of a small minority of adolescents. Consequently, many students finished their education at the end of primary school.

The nomenclature used in relation to what is now called Home Economics has evolved and changed since the 1800s. The subject first evolved in primary education in the mid-1800s where cookery, laundry, domestic economy and needlework was known as the 'Domestic Subjects' in national schools (Dale, 1904). This remained the case until they were removed officially from the primary curriculum in 1971. In post-primary education, Domestic Economy was studied at intermediate certificate level and this later evolved to be known as Domestic Science at both intermediate and leaving certificate. It was not until 1968, that the term Home Economics was used in Ireland and this was brought about with the advent of a new syllabus for the leaving certificate. To this day, despite investigations about a possibility of a name change (NCCA, 2016), Home Economics is the nomenclature used across all curricula in schools and higher education in Ireland.

This article documents the evolution of Home Economics in Irish primary and post-primary education from the 1800s to the 21st century. It adopts a chronological approach with a specific focus on Cookery, Domestic Science, Domestic Economy and Home Economics in primary and post-primary education whilst highlighting significant milestones in the evolution of the subject. There is an emphasis on food/cookery although other aspects of home economics, such as needlework, are mentioned where relevant but are not the focus of this article. The article aims to give an insight to the rationale for offering these subjects on the curriculum, the aim of the subject, student uptake, and the quality of teaching and learning as the subject evolved from the 1800s to the 21st century. A summary timeline of this evolution is provided, as an overview, in Figure 1.

2. The Domestic Subjects in Primary Education in the 1800s - 20th Century

2.1 Domestic Subjects in Primary Education 1800s – 1921

In the 1800s society regarded the role of the woman as in the domestic sphere either as a housewife or working as a domestic servant (Wynn, 1983). Domestic subjects were regarded as having a place in the education of girls as it was the view that the majority of girls would marry, raise a family or work in

domestic service whereas boys would work as manual labourers, in trade or agriculture (Raftery, Harford and Parkes, 2010). Needlework was considered obligatory for girls and was regarded as “very useful to females generally, and particularly so to the humbler classes, whether applied to domestic purposes, or as a mode of remunerative employment” (Durcan, 1972, p. 34).

The Powis Commission of 1870 recommended the introduction of ‘payment by results’ and included needlework and other areas of the domestic subjects, such as cookery as subjects which could be examined (Coolahan, 2017). Cookery was taught in a small number of schools which were mostly convent schools and it was predominately taught outside school hours. In 1896, cookery was taught in 83 schools and 1,724 pupils were examined and by 1899, this had increased to 125 schools where 2,887 pupils were examined. Domestic Economy was taught in 117 schools and 1,302 pupils were examined (Commission on Manual and Practical Instruction, 1898).

The significance of the subject and the rationale for its inclusion on the curriculum at the time was to “facilitate the acquirement of such knowledge as will most readily tend to secure a condition of life as free as possible from the many ills with which life is visited” (Gallagher, 1894, p.xii). Consequently, the subject was divided into three areas: the Individual; Food; and the Home. The Individual section of the subject covered areas such as human body; digestion; removal of waste; personal cleanliness; health and sickness; home cures; infectious diseases; sick nursing; social and moral life etc. The Food section focused on nutrition; practical cookery of vegetables, fruits, meat, fish, fowl, farinaceous foods; economical foods; beverages; and special dietaries etc. While the House section included areas such as landlord and tenant; housing; ventilation; water; cleaning; areas of the home; and gardening etc. (Gallagher, 1894). Although the subject was very popular with the female students the provision of equipment, materials and fuel for the fire meant the cost was prohibitive for many schools who were underfunded. In large towns, a centre for cookery, often in Model Schools, was established whereby girls from schools in the area attended to receive instruction (Commissioners of National Education, 1900).

Towards the end of the 1800s education in Ireland was changing with many educationalists advocating a more child-centred approach and a move away from a more traditional focus solely on academic subjects (Hyland and Milne, 1987). The Report of the Belmore Commission on Manual and Practical Instruction (1898) recommended cookery and domestic science, where practical, be offered in all girls’ schools and that aid in the form of liberal grants, should be provided for the necessary buildings and equipment required (Commissioners on Manual and Practical Instruction, 1898). The Commissioners of National Education accepted the Belmore Commission Report (1898) and commenced incorporating some of the

recommendations when drafting the Revised Programme for National Schools (1900). Under the Revised Programme (1900) payment by results was abolished. A specimen timetable for girls' schools recommended that sixty minutes, once a week, would be timetabled for cookery stipulating that cookery should be offered in all girls' schools where there was a competent teacher and suitable appliances. In contrast, needlework had a recommended time allocation of forty minutes per day for three days and thirty minutes per day for two days (Commissioners of National Education, 1900). This probably reflects the issue of resources whereas needlework could be done at the desk, cooking required facilities. The training of teachers was conducted by a Ms Mary Fitzgerald, Head Organiser for Cookery and Laundry Department of the Education Office, and twelve assistants who organised classes for teachers in cookery starting in 1900 (Commissioners of National Education, 1903).

Evidentially, emphasis in society on the role of the woman in the home and a desire for better public health outcome starting in the homes shaped the philosophical orientation of the subject. Students were taught cooking skills which aimed to "preserve the health of all who dwell in it [home]" and provide "food that is wholesome, varied, nourishing, plentiful and agreeable" (Fitzgerald, 1903a, p.9). The rationale, as clearly stated in the Revised Programme (1900), was not to train cooks but to impart the requisite skills for the "average primary school girl, when she assumes the position of housewife, to perform the ordinary culinary operations" (Commissioners of National Education, 1900, p.78). This rationale was one which was heavily criticised in later years by the feminist movement and indeed one could argue has been a burden on the stereotypical image of the subject ever since.

The objective of cookery was to "show the children, how, by intelligent methods, the limited resources and simple food of even poor homes in Ireland can be turned to the best account" and to give "scope for the useful application of science for girls" (Dale, 1904, p.77). The significant contribution of cookery to the lives of those who studied it was reflected in a survey of parents in 1903 who commented "it is the most useful thing that has ever been taught, and will bring comfort to our homes" (Fitzgerald, 1904, p.206). Reflecting these sentiments, and the popularity of the subject, the number of schools offering cookery increased steadily from 48 schools (0.57% of all national schools) in 1891 to 2,707 (33% of all national schools) in 1912 (Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1

The subject, from a pedagogical perspective, was taught in an integrated manner incorporating practical skills and theoretical content with a strong focus on the former. Areas of study from 1st to 6th class included

setting and lighting fires; and learning techniques such as cooking basic vegetables; boiling, frying and poaching eggs; making tea, coffee and cocoa; uses of milk and meal including 'stirabout' or gruel, tapioca, semolina; yeast cookery; bread making; meat cookery including lamb, mutton and rabbit; utilising cheaper cuts meat such as tripe, sheep's head, corned beef, cowheel and offal pie; fish cookery; making preserves; and baking (Revised Programme for Instruction in National Schools, 1900).

From analysing inspector reports of the time, the quality of teaching cookery and the student experience varied depending on which type of school the student attended. In a report in 1903, it was noted that students attending a convent school were found to understand what was being done and knew how to make basic dishes. The teachers in convent schools were teaching in a practical manner with clear explanations, suitable dishes were taught to the students and "good method and interest" were observed (Fitzgerald, 1903b, p.205). This positive report of convent schools was repeated in 1904, where again the teaching of cookery was described as "all that can be desired", with the kitchen and students at class the "picture of neatness" (Fitzgerald, 1904, p.124). However, the report was critical of 'other schools' where the teaching of cookery was unsatisfactory due to a "want of cleanliness, order, attention to detail and the neglect of scullery work" (Fitzgerald, 1903b, p.205). This situation did not improve, and in 1904 teachers' approach to teaching cookery was criticised with too much emphasis on "cake making and fancy dishes" and not the required focus on teaching the students "cheap, useful dishes which prove that good, nutritious food may be obtained at small cost" (Fitzgerald, 1904, p.124).

The implementation of the subject largely relied on the availability of? equipment and the training of teachers. In an education system which had a large proportion of unqualified teachers; financial constraints; rural schools and social unrest, the effective implementation of the Revised Programme was hindered (Walsh, 2007). Subsequent political events took place which resulted in the setting up of two States on the island – Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State (1922). This resulted in a curriculum reform movement in the newly established Free State which had a particular focus on culture and Irish language and consequently, there was less of an emphasis placed on the domestic subjects in future curriculum reform.

2.2 Domestic Subjects in Primary Education 1922 – 1999

After the 31st January 1922, in the Irish Free State, national and secondary education came under the authority of the Minister for Education. Technical education was excluded from this where until 1924 it was under the remit of the Minister for Agriculture. The new National School Programme (1922) comprised compulsory subjects included Irish, English, arithmetic, algebra, geometry, geography, history, singing, rural science and needlework (for girls only) (National Programme Conference, 1922). The 1922 Programme heralded significant changes for the study of domestic subjects in primary education with an emphasis on needlework and a reduced emphasis on cookery and domestic economy. The curricular reform was situated within a societal context for a revived emphasis on the Irish language and a renewed sympathy towards the Gaelic League (Coolahan, 1981). Consequently, many subjects, including cookery and domestic economy, were included in a list of optional subjects and were only to be offered where special accommodation, equipment and facilities were available in schools (National Programme Conference, 1926). Notably, at a general meeting of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) in 1925 a recommendation was made to reduce the number of obligatory subjects to Irish, English, mathematics and needlework for girls. It was suggested that subjects such as domestic economy, due to their professional nature, were more suitable to secondary schools, which, at the time were fee paying (O'Connell, 1968).

These changes were influenced within a very specific cultural, social, economic and of course, political context. The education received focused on religion and the transmission of skills that may be required to earn a living with the economy being mainly agrarian based. Females were regarded as academically inferior and were required to be taught domestic skills in order to make "thrifty wives and astute mothers", skills required for future life in the home (O'Sullivan, 2014, p.69). The number of married women working outside the home remained consistently low at this time and their role, once married, was regarded as being in the home. This was reinforced by Article 41.2 in Bunreacht na hÉireann which recognises the support a woman gives by "her life within the home" and therefore, the State would endeavour to ensure that "mothers shall not be obliged by economics necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home" (1937, p.164).

The cookery programme was underpinned by a strong focus on the development of practical food skills in girls and students were taught basic dishes which could be easily made in the home (National Programme Conference, 1922). The quality of teaching in cookery and domestic economy was commended by Inspectors in their Reports in 1931 where it was noted that "creditable work is generally done in schools" in these areas (Department of Education, 1931, p.23). Despite this cookery and domestic

economy continued to be taught in a very small number of national schools (Table 2). The decline in the uptake of these two optional subjects was regarded as “regrettable” by Inspectors in 1931 but was blamed on the high cost of offering cookery and the diminished status of the subject being an optional area of study (ibid). In 1927 there were 565 primary schools teaching cookery and 11 teaching domestic economy (Department of Education, 1928) and by 1952 this had further reduced to 246 and 3 schools respectively (Department of Education, 1952). At the same time needlework was a compulsory subject in all girls’ schools and it was examined for the award of Primary School Certificate for girls.

INSERT TABLE 2

According to Walsh (2016) the curriculum changes made in 1922 were to continue to be the bedrock of curriculum provision for the next 50 years and subjects such as cookery were rarely taught in national schools. In 1971 ‘Curaclam na Bunscoile’ (Primary School Curriculum) was published and it was underpinned by a child-centred approach to teaching and learning. In this revision cookery and needlework were removed from the list of subjects available to students. This heralded the end of the teaching of domestic subjects on primary curriculum. The 1971 curriculum was later revised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 1999 and this remains the basis of the curriculum which is taught in all primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is a subject on the curriculum which broadly covers topics such as personal hygiene, healthy eating; food and nutrition but no practical food skills. Ironically, Mooney et al. (2011) called for a review of the food and nutrition content of the SPHE curriculum and to consider the benefits of (re)introducing practical culinary skills. Their study notes that the removal of the domestic subjects such as cookery from the list of subjects in the primary curriculum in 1971 is now being lamented almost 50 years later (Mooney et al., 2011).

3. Post-Primary Education 1870 - 1960s

At the start of the 20th Century post-primary education existed in two formats in Ireland – the secondary school and the state sponsored technical school. It was considered that the secondary school offered courses of an academic nature whilst the technical school offered courses of a practical orientation. There were restrictions and variations in the examinations that students from both schools could undertake. The domestic subjects were offered, to varying degrees, on both the secondary and the technical

curriculum. Secondary schooling was not considered important for the majority of children, particularly females. By 1930, 93% of the population had been educated only in primary education (Clarke, 2016).

3.1 Home Economics in Secondary Schools 1870 – 1960s

3.1.1 Home Economics in Secondary Schools 1870 – 1921

By 1870 secondary education was mainly offered in denominational private schools with access being limited to a small minority of the population (Coolahan, 1981). Finding a mechanism for financing secondary education, which was predominately denominational based, was a challenge. Consequently, the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act (1878) was passed to provide monies for improving secondary education provision in Ireland and arguably, it was one of the most important steps in the growth of girls' secondary education (Clarke, 2016; Raftery, Harford and Parkes, 2010). It began by appointing Commissioners and sought to bring in a system of written examinations. The curriculum and examinations were the same for both genders; however, the awards and prizes for achievement were separate. Subjects such as the classics and English were weighted more favourably than subjects such as music or drawing (Coolahan, 1981).

Although domestic subjects were included on the curriculum in girls' schools exclusively, they had a very tenuous hold given their perceived lack of relevance in a literary based curriculum as many of these schools were preparing girls from the emerging middle incomes and did not see domestic science as relevant for career opportunities. In 1898 it was a completely female orientated subject and only offered to girls as an alternative science aimed at those students who would spend their lives in the 'domestic sphere' (Raftery, Harford and Parkes, 2010, p.570). The pedagogical orientation of the subject remained as very practical and skills based which aimed to develop the requisite skills for managing a home. Students were topics such as physiology; basic nutrition; practical cookery; digestion; hygiene and personal cleanliness; home management; and systems of the home (Commissioners on Manual and Practical Instruction, 1898). By 1900, there were 1,997 girls taking the intermediate examination out of a total candidate number of 7,608 (Raftery, Harford and Parkes, 2010, p.570).

Following the publication of the Report of the Commission on Intermediate Education in 1899 (Palles Commission), the Government passed the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Amendment Act, 1900. The most far reaching changes were in relation to the teaching of practical subjects (McElligott, 1981). In 1900 the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI) was set up and in 1901, they issued a programme for the administration and distribution of grants for the teaching of domestic science. This was an incentive for girls' secondary schools to promote and encourage students to undertake the domestic science course (Department of Education, 1962).

3.1.2 Home Economics in Secondary Schools 1922 – 1960s

Under the Irish Free State, the Intermediate Education (Amendment) Act 1924 was enacted and in August of 1924 a new programme for secondary schools was put in place. Changes in the examination system were implemented. The Intermediate Certificate exam was taken after the first three years of study and the Leaving Certificate after the subsequent two years. However, the system was not free and consequently, this was a barrier for many children to access secondary education.

However, true to the pedagogical orientation of the subject, the domestic science syllabus at both intermediate and leaving certificate had a strong practical focus which was underpinned by the principle to “provide a scientific and cultural as well as technical training” to students this echoed the sentiments of previous syllabi by having a focus on the development of skills for the home (Department of Education, 1927, p.67). The syllabus for the three-year intermediate certificate course in domestic science was for girls only and included areas such as cooking principles; roasting; baking; use of gluten; stewing; frying; steaming; food commodities; nutrition; hygiene; digestion; physiology etc.; along with areas such as household knowledge; needlework; and clothing (Department of Education, 1924). Similarly, the two-year course for the leaving certificate encapsulated the focus on food skills and included a practical examination. Topics included nutrition; digestion; exercise; food choice, storage, preservation and marketing; feeding of infants and young children; disease; cooking of complete menus with a focus on combining foods for nutrition and digestion; invalid cookery; preserving and processing of food; food science; household knowledge and needlework etc. (Department of Education, 1924).

Inspection reports of the time commented on the teaching and stated “manual operations of cookery are well taught, but the theoretical instruction which should explain the nature of the materials and processes

employed is often unreal and bookish” (Department of Education, 1927, p.67). In response to an article ‘*Can Irish girls cook?*’ published in the Irish Independent on April 6th 1938, there was a recommendation to make domestic science compulsory for girls in place of compulsory Irish in order to encourage healthier diets in Irish homes (Clear, 2000). Although this was not to be the case the subject witnessed an increased uptake year on year (Table 3). In 1925 out of a total of 1,062 girls at intermediate level, 29% (n=305) sat the domestic science exam at intermediate level; by 1935 this had increased to 51% (n=1287) and by 1957 this had increased further to 74% (n=5368) of all girls examined for the intermediate certificate sat the domestic science exam (Department of Education, 1962, p.192).

INSERT TABLE 3

A capital grant was paid to secondary schools offering domestic science which contributed to the increase in uptake. The grant was for the purpose of ensuring; that schools had satisfactory and adequately equipped kitchens; the domestic science teacher be suitably qualified; and the number of pupils in the class did not exceed the recommended number for a practical class (Coolahan, 1981).

The presence of a gendered curriculum was very obvious. The Report of the Council of Education (1962) noted the desirability of providing instruction in domestic science to females as being “so obvious that it does not require to be stressed” (p.192). They recommended, in view of the “importance of domestic training for girls, all girl pupils should, at least during their junior course, obtain instruction either on the full prescribed syllabus in domestic science, or on a suitable and approved alternative syllabus” (Department of Education, 1962, p.192). Unfortunately, the Council Report did not even consider the notion that boys should study the subject and, whilst strongly recommending the prescribed syllabus, fell short on making it compulsory for all females.

3.2 Home Economics in Technical (Vocational) Schools 1900s – 1960s

Operating alongside the secondary school system was the technical (vocational) education system. The need to enhance Ireland’s economic wellbeing meant that practical education was becoming popular. The Recess Committee report in 1896 called for the “cause of practical education [to] be promoted” and it urged evening classes and higher technical colleges to be established (Coolahan, 1981, p.87). The

Agriculture and Technical Instruction (Ireland) Act 1899 established a Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI) in 1900 and they were tasked with establishing a system of technical education in Ireland. Domestic economy, which involved practical cookery instruction, featured as an important aspect of technical education. The DATI was supportive of domestic economy and from 1901 distributed grants to schools in order to develop specialist facilities and purchase specialist equipment. The training of female itinerant teachers of domestic economy, who were assigned to a particular region, took place over an eight-month period (Hyland and Milne, 1987). Itinerant teachers conducted classes, usually of a six-week period, in rural areas in single subjects such as domestic economy.

With the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, control for technical education was transferred to the Department of Education in 1924. At this time there were 147 such rural centres catering for 4,631 girls studying domestic economy (Department of Education, 1924). The course aimed to teach students budget cookery, basic nutrition, composition of foods, household management, textiles etc. For those who attended technical schools, domestic economy was studied by 24% of all students in 1924, which accounted for a total of 5,354 girls (ibid). In international terms these are the equivalent of the extension colleges established in the US under the New Deal in 1938.

One of the most significant pieces of legislation on technical education was the Vocational Education Act of 1930. The 1930 Act promoted the continuation of education in domestic economy and the necessity for organising a '*Day Junior Technical Course for Girls*' (Hyland and Milne, 1992, p.232). It was a popular subject and in 1931 in established technical schools, 8,212 girls took courses in domestic economy and in classes other than established technical schools, 7,092 girls studied courses in domestic economy (Department of Education, 1931, p.49). In 1947 a Group Certificate in Domestic Science examination was introduced for the first time which consisted of both a practical and theoretical component and, in this year, 275 girls sat the examination (Department of Education, 1947, p.31). The rationale for the subject was to teach lifeskills required by girls to manage their own homes and if necessary, to provide basic training for domestic servants Clear (2000). An analysis of the textbooks at the time showed a focus on course content including simple, family friendly and easy to use recipes which were based on the assumption that cooking would take place on the fire; information on nutrition, healthy diets and menu planning (DATI, 1925).

Inspector reports from 1964 commended the good work and high standard of teaching in domestic science. However, they recommended to utilise modern teaching aids and up-to-date textbooks with an increased emphasis on dietetics, food costing, hygiene and labour saving devices. From a pedagogical

perspective teachers were encouraged to integrate theory and practice (Department of Education, 1964, p.60).

The popularity of technical education was evident in the growth of the number of such schools between 1900 – 1960. However, as the 1950s came to a close there were criticisms of the sector; particularly, in relation to the transfer value and opportunities for further education for students on completion (Coolahan, 2017). Consequently, a new form of secondary education emerged in Ireland in the late 1960/70s.

The Group Certificate Home Economics programme was most commonly offered in technical schools. Students took the exam after two/three years with the average age being fourteen (Coolahan, 1981). The group certificate Home Economics maintained the same pedagogical approach as the intermediate certificate programme but had a much stronger emphasis on practical skills. Under this programme it was recommended that 150 hours being spent on food and cookery which was examined in a practical examination (Department of Education, 1984). The content areas were largely the same but with less of a focus on the scientific underpinning.

4. Home Economics in Post-Primary Education 1965 - 2018

In September 1966 the then Minister for Education, Donogh O'Malley announced that post-primary education would be free for all students from September 1967 which aimed to ensure equality of opportunity for all children (Department of Education, 1969). Curriculum provision was widened whereby students in various types of schools were now allowed to take the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations (Crooks and McKernan, 1984). In 1968 the name Home Economics was adopted throughout the post-primary curriculum.

4.1 Intermediate Certificate Home Economics 1968 - 1991

Intermediate Certificate Home Economics was three years' duration and had a strong pedagogical approach of teaching theory component underpinned by practical application. The subject aimed to teach students three key areas of learning: 1) Food and Cookery (focusing broadly on nutrition; cooking skills;

meal planning; food constituents; and shopping for food); 2) Home Management and Hygiene (focusing on personal hygiene; food hygiene; principles of home management; and kitchen appliances); and 3) Needlework (focusing on practical needlework, sewing machine skills; fabrics and clothing) (Department of Education, 1984).

The subject was very popular among females and in 1969 two males sat the examination for the first time (Table 4). Update by males continued to rise each year, however, it was not without challenge. According to Wynn (1983) parents regarded the choice of Home Economics as a “cissy” option for boys. Teachers struggled with ensuring the language registry and examples used in class were gender inclusive particularly when teaching social issues and textile skills.

INSERT TABLE 4

4.2 Junior Certificate Home Economics 1991 – 2017

In 1986 an Interim Curriculum and Examinations Board recommended a broad and balanced core curriculum and assessment (Crooks, 1990). Consequently, in 1991 a new Junior Certificate programme was introduced which allowed for a common and unified curriculum to be available for all students. The Home Economics syllabus commenced in 1991 as an optional area of study within the Junior Certificate programme.

The rationale for including Home Economics on the curriculum was inherently linked to the subjects’ philosophical and pedagogical underpinning which identifies it as having “a direct relevance to the present and future life of every young person. Its purpose is to equip young people in certain important skills for living” (Department of Education, 1990, p.1). The Home Economics syllabus was designed to facilitate the empowerment of students with lifeskills by providing them with the knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes which are necessary for daily living within the home and the community (Department of Education, 1990). The syllabus comprised five core areas and three optional areas of study with an assigned weighting (Table 5). The assessment of Home Economics was at higher and ordinary level and comprises a written exam; a practical food skills examination; and an optional study project which can be either a childcare, craft or textile project.

INSERT TABLE 5

Home Economics during this era was a popular subject particularly among girls. Since 1992 the subject has maintained this popularity (Table 6) and in 2017, there were 22,260 students which accounted for 36% of the total Junior Certificate cohort of 61,654 (SEC, 2017). Year on year there has also been an increase in the number of males being examined in Home Economics. This is a positive move to continue to dispel the traditional gender stereotyping which plagues the subject. In 2008, inspectors noted that gender imbalance in the uptake of Home Economics was often as a result of the subject being timetabled against what was traditionally perceived as male subjects (DES, 2008).

INSERT TABLE 6

The high level and excellent practice in teaching Home Economics was commended by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science. The Chief Inspector identified excellent practice in teaching practical food sessions where Home Economics teachers emphasise the development of students' practical skills, in a staged approach, whilst also integrating key theoretical knowledge (DES, 2008). Students were encouraged to develop critical thinking and decision making skills. The Home Economics Departments in schools were identified as being "well established and well organised" with the teachers being majorly "very experienced, dedicated and committed" (DES, 2008, p.8). This positive experience and high quality may have influenced the steady uptake of the subject of circa 36% of the total Junior Certificate cohort.

The Junior Certificate Home Economics syllabus witnessed no changes since its inception in 1991; however, under the new Framework for Junior Cycle (2015), a new specification (previously called a syllabus) for the subject was developed.

4.3 Junior Cycle Home Economics 2017

The Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) sets out a new vision for teaching, learning and assessment in the first three years of post-primary education in order to provide a quality, inclusive and relevant education for students in the 21st century. In designing the programme of study each school is guided by twenty-four statements of learning, eight principles and eight key skills (DES, 2015).

The development of the Home Economics specification was informed by a Background Paper in Home Economics which sets out Home Economics education in the 21st century, as well as identifying four influencing trends on Home Economics education. These four interconnected societal trends were identified as being: food and health literacy; changes to family and social systems; education for sustainable development and responsible living; and home and resource management (NCCA, 2016).

In October 2017, the new Home Economics Specification was approved by the Minister for Education and Skills. The aim of junior cycle Home Economics is to “develop students’ knowledge, attitudes, understanding, skills and values to achieve optimal, healthy and sustainable living for every person as an individual, and as a member of families and society” (DES, 2017, p.5). The specification is designed for 200 hours timetabled student engagement across three years.

It has three inter-connected contextual strands: Food, Health and Culinary Skills; Responsible Family Living and Textiles and Craft. The major strand, in terms of learning outcomes to achieve is Food, Health and Culinary Skills. This strand aims to facilitate students to apply their understanding of nutrition, diet and health and to develop a “healthy, sustainable attitude and positive relationship with food through practical experiential learning” (DES, 2017, p.15). Strand two, Responsible Family Living, uses a systems approach to develop essential lifeskills including managing resources responsibly and sustainably in the home, family and community; consumer competence and discernment; developing a caring attitude towards others. The third strand is Textiles and Craft, which is the shortest of the strands in terms of learning outcomes, focuses on developing students’ textile knowledge, creativity and skills. It is envisioned that although the learning outcomes in each strand is presented separately, the students should experience an integrated approach to teaching and learning in Home Economics. This is facilitated by four cross cutting elements which transcend each of the four strands (DES, 2017). These include Individual and Family Empowerment; Health and Wellbeing; Sustainable and Responsible Living and Consumer Competence.

The assessment of Home Economics comprises two Classroom Based Assessments (CBA) (Creative Textiles, CBA 1 and Food Literacy Skills Brief, CBA 2); a practical food skills examination; and a written examination. The practical food skills exam and the written exam will each be allocated 50% of the marks available for the final examination. For the practical food skills exam students will be required to apply their nutritional knowledge and practical culinary skills in preparing, healthy nutritious dishes or products to meet the requirements of a brief issued by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) (DES, 2017).

The roll out of the new specification in September 2018 will represent a new chapter in the evolution of Home Economics. The rationale, aim and the integrated, experiential approach to teaching, learning and assessment in the new specification will ensure that the subject has currency and relevance for students in the 21st century and beyond.

4.4 Leaving Certificate Home Economics 1965 – 2004

A significant milestone took place in 1965, when, for the first time, seventeen males undertook the domestic science leaving certificate examination (Department of Education, 1965). This was the first time in the evolution of Home Economics that males undertook and sat state examinations in the subject and commenced a step, albeit a small one, on a path towards the subject having a place on a progressive curriculum for both genders.

In 1968, the name Domestic Science was changed to Home Economics and in 1969 a new programme was offered at senior level. For the purpose of the leaving certificate programme, there were two subjects in Home Economics: Home Economics (Social and Scientific) and Home Economics (General). In 1977, the National University of Ireland (NUI) accepted Home Economics (Social and Scientific) as a subject for matriculation to enter University. Home Economics (General) had a more vocational and practical orientation; however, criticisms existed of it not being recognised by NUI (Mulcahy, 1981). The update of Home Economics increased year on year until 2000 when, thereafter, it started to decrease (Table 7). When looked at as a percentage of the total cohort of leaving certificate students update of the subject fell from 42% in 2000 to 32% in 2003. Anecdotally, this decline has been attributed to the withdrawal of the recognition of Home Economics, by third level institutions, as a science subject for the purposes of matriculation.

INSERT TABLE 7

Home Economics (Social and Scientific) was a two-year course of study involving both theoretical and practical components with a minimum allocation of three hours per week and at least 40% of the time to be devoted to practical work. The subject aimed to equip students in with knowledge, skills and

understanding in areas such as nutrition, human physiology; food constituents; microbiology; food preservation; the family in contemporary society and the principles and practices of home management.

The syllabus noted the importance of active teaching methodologies (Department of Education, 1996, p.191).

The Home Economics (General) course was similar to the previous course in domestic science but with an increased focus on group work and a broader academic practical programme. This course was also two-year duration with a minimum allocation of three hours per week. No defined practical work time allocation was indicated; however, it was intended that a strong practical element would be contained.

The course comprised three sections: Nutrition and Cookery (focusing broadly on nutrition, food constituents, consumer education, menu planning and food preservation); Dress (focusing on theoretical and practical elements of textiles); and Management of the Home (focusing on the principles and practices of home management) (Department of Education, 1984). Mulcahy (1981) notes the subject aims to equip students to “deal satisfactorily with a range of issues commonly encountered in everyday living” and whilst “the orientation is practical; a scientific or theoretical element is included” (p.103). It was offered at both higher and ordinary level.

4.5 Leaving Certificate Home Economics 2004 – present

The introduction in 1969 of Home Economics (Social and Scientific) saw a marked decline in popularity for the Home Economics (General) programme. By 1991 Home Economics (Social and Scientific) programme was studied by 32% (15,718) of the total cohort of students undertaking the Leaving Certificate and in contrast only 3% (1,303) studied the General programme (Department of Education, 1992). Because of this decline a NCCA Home Economics Course Committee (Senior Cycle) was established to review the subject. And in 1997, a revised syllabus for Leaving Certificate Home Economics Scientific and Social was presented to the Department of Education. The implementation of the revised syllabus was delayed until September 2002 and the first examination was in June 2004. This revised syllabus for Home Economics Scientific and Social replaced both Home Economics (Social and Scientific) and Home Economics (General) and is the existing programme of study for senior students.

The rationale for the subject sets out the multidisciplinary context and applied nature of the discipline with a focus on the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to enable students to “take control of their own lives at present and in the future” (DES, 2001, p.2). The systemic approach underpinning the discipline

is evident in the syllabus as it refers to the interrelationships between the individual, families, society and the environment. The syllabus aims to “allow students to acquire the knowledge, understanding, skills, competence and attitudes necessary to contribute to human development, health, leisure, security and happiness” (ibid). Skills of discernment, critical thinking, responsibility, resourcefulness, organisation, independence, creativity and adaptability are all identified in the aims of the syllabus.

The syllabus is structured around three core areas of study, each carrying a different weighting, and three elective areas where students chose one (Table 8). From a pedagogical perspective, it is recommended that the subject be taught in an integrated manner with cross referencing and linkage with areas across the syllabus.

INSERT Table 8

The assessment of leaving certificate Home Economics is at higher and ordinary level and comprises two/three components depending on which elective areas students choose. For those studying the Home Design and Management and Social Studies electives there is a written examination (80%) and Food Studies coursework (20%). However, for those studying the Textiles, Fashion and Design elective, the written examination is worth 70%; the Food Studies coursework 20% and the Textile Studies elective coursework 10%. For the Food Studies coursework students complete four assignments as set by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) each year. Topics vary in areas such as nutrition; diet through the lifecycle; diet related diseases; processing and preservation; use of time saving appliances; sensory analysis etc. According to the Chief Examiner (2017) students at higher level, in particular, were very able to engage in skills of higher order thinking by applying and analysing information and scenarios effectively. Students at both higher and ordinary level demonstrated good knowledge in the subject area. However, teachers and students were encouraged to utilise various methodologies which facilitate the development of higher order skills. (SEC, 2017).

The introduction of the new syllabus resulted in decline in the number of students taking Home Economics from 32% (2003) to 28% (2004). This was anecdotally attributed to the introduction of the written food studies coursework. McSweeney (2014) noted that the food studies coursework was causing dissatisfaction among students in terms of “the subject and learning environment” (p.244). The coursework was initially set at six assignments for 20% of the marks and students. However, students and teachers perceived this to be cumbersome for the allocated marks. Following representation made by

Association of Teachers of Home Economics (ATHE) this was reduced to four assignments in 2015 for 20% allocation of marks (ATHE, 2015). Although the numbers taking leaving certificate Home Economics continued to decline over a ten-year period it has remained relatively stable since 2014 (Table 9).

INSERT TABLE 9

It is interesting to note that while the number of students taking leaving certificate Home Economics has been declining the opposite has occurred at junior certificate level. The popularity of the junior cycle programme is often attributed to the practical nature of the subject and in particular, the high proportion attributed to food and cookery skills (NCCA, 2016). An aspect which is often not the focus at leaving certificate Home Economics.

5. Conclusion

This article has set out key developments in the evolution of Home Economics in primary and post-primary education in the Republic of Ireland from the 1800s to the 21st Century, the various changes reflect the social milieu. Home Economics started in the 1800s within a gendered curriculum under the auspices of cookery and domestic economy. These subjects were a place for young girls to learn about the practical concerns of home management and basic family cookery. Policy makers were quick to promote the subject as essential lifeskills and one which should be taught in all schools to girls. Subject inspections of the time commended the quality of teaching in cookery and domestic economy. However, the desire for more gender equity in terms of curriculum provision in secondary schools grew momentum after the Intermediate Education Act (1878). Consequently, despite the subject being offered in all girls' secondary schools, Home Economics had a low status due to its lack of relevancy in a literacy based and liberal curriculum.

During the 1920s – 1950s Home Economics a dichotomy existed. On the one hand it was regarded as having an important social need which facilitated the empowerment of young females with the knowledge and practical skills required for everyday living. However, on the other, it was criticised by feminists as a subject which endorsed the primary role of the woman as being in the home and one which promoted a middle-class society domestic ideology. The subject being regarded as an “alternative science” for girls,

along with the subject content and the social view of woman at the time contributed to the gendered nature of the subject and consequently, boys did not study the subject. Despite this, the number of females studying the subject at intermediate and leaving certificate continued to rise year on year. The teaching of the subject was repeatedly commended by inspectors as being of high quality particularly in convent schools which were well resourced.

The first seventeen male students to sit the leaving certificate examination in Home Economics in 1965 heralded a welcome, albeit small, change for the subject. This was followed in 1969 when two boys sat the intermediate examination. Through the promotion of Home Economics by the profession the number of male students taking state exams now exceed 5000.

The philosophical orientation of the subject through the eras has focused on practical lifeskills education where it concerns itself with improving the everyday life of families. Interestingly, from the 1800s the pedagogical approach to teaching and learning Home Economics has not changed and it still maintains a strong practical skills approach which is underpinned by scientific theory.

In the 21st century the new Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification 2017 aims to facilitate the empowerment of students (as individuals and as members of societies) to achieve optimal, healthy and sustainable living and uses a systemic approach to address practical, real world, perennial problems. The new specification is current, up to date and relevant for the lives of individuals and families in the 21st century whilst also promoting itself as being gender inclusive in terms of presentation and language register used. It will be interesting to observe if the upward trajectory of male students studying the subject at Junior Cycle continues.

It is evident, with each curriculum change, that the areas of learning of Home Economics have continued to evolve over the decades to maintain currency and relevancy to the lives of individuals, families and society. However, overcoming deep rooted, outdated cultural views of the subject which influence student choice will remain a challenge for the profession. The underlying rationale for Home Economics education still reflects the core philosophical underpinnings of the discipline which, through interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary inquiry, integrates knowledge and skills to improve the quality of life for families.

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