

Home Economics – A Basic Discipline

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We are often reminded that the school has full responsibility for the primary aims of education -- the use of language, the handing on of accumulated knowledge, the development of the enquiring mind, and preparation for a vocation. The secondary aims of education -- health, aesthetic appreciation, character development and so on --are not entirely the school's responsibility. The home, the church, the community, as well as the school are responsible for these secondary phases of education.

In teaching home economics in high school we contribute on both the primary and secondary levels. Perhaps we have emphasized too much our contributions on the secondary level: health, aesthetic appreciation, character development. There will always be those who suggest that homemaking can be taught at home; and on this secondary level it can be, though often the home has not done a particularly good educational job. I should like to emphasize that home economics in high school, makes its most important contributions to the primary aims of education: to the handing on of accumulated knowledge, the development of the enquiring mind, and the preparation for a vocation (a vocation that most of the students who study home economics, will work at for a substantial part of their lives).

If home economics is not contributing to these primary aims of education it is our fault. We must do better teaching in order that there will be better learning on the primary level and inevitably we will also contribute at the secondary level of education.

It was in 1894 that Mrs. Hoodless presented her famous resolution to the National Council of Women; the resolution suggesting that formal education in homemaking be introduced into Canadian schools. Within twenty years departments of education all across Canada had introduced this new subject; programs of study had been drawn up; teachers were being trained; the University of Toronto was offering a degree program in home economics; home economics extension workers were in demand to serve the Women's Institutes; and as a result home economics teachers, at all levels, were in short supply -- just as they are today.

Why did the educational system respond so readily to the suggestion that formal education in homemaking was needed? Home economics was introduced into formal education because women felt that homes were in danger. Girls, as they grew up, were spending years in school, instead of learning housekeeping from their own mother all day long, every day of the week. Young women were becoming factory workers, stenographers, teachers, or doing all sorts of other jobs outside the home until they were married. And then they did not know how to keep house. Poor housekeeping was the threat 70 years ago when formal education in home economics was first introduced in Canada. Household science, domestic science, household economics whatever the name, the purpose was to teach sewing, cooking, laundering and housekeeping. The teachers themselves were skilled in these arts, having been taught by their mothers. These teachers had to develop programs of study, textbooks and plans for teacher training. They did a remarkable job and we respect their memory. But the purpose for teaching home economics has changed.

Homemakers now need a differing view of help from that which they needed fifty years ago! Our purpose has changed, and, consequently we must change our teaching.

In 1965 homes are again being threatened and many homes are breaking under the strain. The threat today is perhaps even more serious than the one that caused concern in 1894. Society today is putting pressure on married women to earn a salary. What does that do to homes?

Homes are established for the rearing of children and the woman who marries undertakes to bear and rear children. The woman's role is that of homemaker; the man's role in our society, is still that of breadwinner, even though women are rapidly taking on the job of sharing this responsibility. The question which each married couple must raise, and must settle for their own family, is whether the wife can help earn the living and also do her job as homemaker. Families are established for the development of new citizens, citizens healthy in mind and body and with the ability to think. This kind of person does not develop as a matter of course. The school, the church and the community may help, but the home has the greatest influence and responsibility.

Can a woman earn a salary and also make her family her major interest? 'Some women can, but a great many cannot do so. The danger seems to lie in matters difficult to define; the money that comes, in as salary is easy to count; the job of homemaking is impossible to evaluate. Men, and women too, in this modern age, seem to suggest that the work a woman does as a homemaker does not justify her existence, that homemaking is a job anyone can do as a leisure time activity.

What are home economists saying and doing in the face of this social trend ? There are four ideas that I offer as a challenge to home economists, for thought and for action.

Idea #1

Most families need a mother in the home while the children are growing up. If the mother takes a job outside the home, either for financial reasons or to fulfill her own personal needs, it should be a job that is part-time or has short definite hours, so that the mother's major concern can still be with her family. Working mothers should choose their jobs carefully. This is a basic rule that should be taught to employers as well as employees; to girls choosing careers as well as to working mothers. My premise, on which this rule is based, is that most families need a mother in the home while the children are growing up. In our Canadian society we have not handed over the bringing up of our children either to a nurse maid (a nanny) followed by a boarding school, nor to state operated nurseries. Perhaps we will adopt some such system in the future, but today in Canada, parents bring up their own children. The mother takes the major share for this responsibility and therefore, if she also is employed outside the home, she should choose her job carefully, a job that has short hours, no home work, no overtime! Either that, or she should take only part of a bigger job. I suggest that there should be more part-time home economics teachers who take half a load and do it well, carrying along with their teaching, their professional responsibilities outside the classroom.

Idea #2

My second " idea " refers to all homemakers who have a job outside the home. Some of these homemakers are married, some of them are not, but all are trying to do two jobs. These women (some of them might be men, some are women, and some of them are home economics teachers) should have help with the homemaking responsibilities. Our classes in family relations and in home management teach how to do this. We can lay out work schedules for every member of the family. We are quite glib on the topic of shared responsibilities for earning the money and shared responsibilities in the home. Do we live up to our teaching?

Idea #3

We home economists have a special responsibility toward the next generation of homemakers. What are we doing to help prevent unwise early marriages, and marriages forced on young people in order to avoid illegitimate children? Are we helping to teach young people about what marriage costs, not in money but in a lifetime of devotion? Are we helping to prepare young people for marriage? Homes and parents should be doing this job but they cannot do it alone. 4-H Clubs help. Schools and churches must help too. In schools every boy and girl should be taught home -economics. Programs for study in high school are being revised. Streaming of students may be introduced. I predict that unless action is taken soon, high school home economics will be offered only to one stream of girls, the ones with the lower intelligence quotients and not at all to boys. We cannot be satisfied with this when we realize what home economics has to offer.

I should like to see home economics made compulsory for girls in the early grades of high school and for boys and girls together in Grade 11 or 12. If we are to make young people aware of the importance of homemaking, how can we do it if we leave it out of their formal education? Family members are constantly making decisions which affect the welfare of the family, decisions regarding management of time, money and other family resources. There is a fund of information which, if made available, could help toward wiser decisionmaking in these areas. Through the teaching of home economics this fund of information should be made available.

In a technological age every individual requires knowledge about selection and use of consumer goods; such goods as home furnishings, clothing, food, shelter and equipment. Knowledge about these subjects should be taught under the title "home economics".

Even though many tasks have been taken out of the home the skills sewing, cooking, cleaning and housekeeping are still required by the homemaker if the family is to continue to be the basic unit of our society. These skills are taught in home economics.

Home economics teachers have a special responsibility to the next generation of homemakers. There is an urgency about what we should be teaching that leaves no time in our classrooms for busy work I No useless poster work, no meaningless cutting out of pictures, no washing of dishes which should never have been dirtied.

Idea #4

The years devoted by a woman to bringing up a family are difficult years, filled with hard physical work, monotonous work, and the demands of adult life. A girl's education should, in some measure, prepare her for this job by helping her to understand not only how she can apply the physical and social sciences to her homemaking tasks, but also how to enrich her family's life through her knowledge of the humanities and the arts.

We should recognize that young married women who have been working, and then suddenly find themselves being full-time homemakers, may feel isolated; may develop an inferiority complex; may give way to a lack of discipline as far as hours are concerned and lose their - sense of the value of time - These young married women need help with their housekeeping problems. They also need a basic philosophy and inner resources which will help them through these difficult years. During their high school years their home economics teacher has a unique opportunity to help them to develop an appreciation of good books, music, art and beautiful surroundings. She can help them develop housekeeping skills which should lead to good homemaking, and an appreciation of what it takes in the way of skill and labor to make a good home. She can help them to develop value judgments such that their choice of surroundings and activities may lead to happiness. She can help these girls, to think to apply their intellect to homemaking tasks.

In summary, I have challenged you to teach so that:

- (1) Working mothers will choose their jobs carefully. (This means taking a positive stand on the question of married women in the labor force.)
- (2) The homemaker (married or not) who works outside the home, will secure help for her homemaking tasks. (This means recognizing that homemaking is more than a leisure time activity.)
- (3) The next generation of homemakers will be prepared for marriage (knowledge, skills, values).
- (4) The students who have been in your classes will have learned to think, to reason, to use their minds!

It is not easy to adopt these four purposes as a basis for your teaching: it may mean revising lesson plans, introducing whole new lessons, buying new books, taking more refresher courses, carefully analyzing what you are doing now and leaving out the parts which are no longer significant!

Today homes are not in danger from poor cooks and dressmakers, they are in danger from people who do not understand the social significance of the home and the cost in time, energy and skill required to maintain a good home.

If you make these four concepts the basis of your teaching, then I am confident that home economics, in your classroom, will be a basic discipline.