

Home economics as a practical art: Preparing students for family life in a global society

By Gale Smith

Viewing Home Economics education from the global, rather than the traditional, point of view, Smith contrasts the goals of each approach and links the global approach with basic concerns raised in the Sullivan (1988) report. She stresses the expanded significance of Home Economics education in the "common curriculum" of the Sullivan report as a means of helping to improve the world in which we live.

Recently I asked my Family Management students to speculate on what makes families strong and to prepare a graphic representation of their thoughts. One group constructed a poster with the slogan, "Strong Families Take A Stand", boldly reaching diagonally from corner to corner. Surrounding the slogan were small collages of the topics they thought families should address. Included were racism, child abuse, childcare, togetherness, drug and alcohol abuse, communication, pollution and the environment, and war. What struck me as I observed the students at work, and their final product, was the parallel between their hope for families and the vision of families expressed in the mission statement of Home Economics.

The purpose of Home Economics is often defined as its mission. Frequently, it is summarized as improving the well being and the quality of family life. However, in the years since the inception of Home Economics early in this century, the improvement in quality of life increasingly tended to concentrate more on the material quality of life with an emphasis on homemaking skills and technical know how. Recognizing the need for refocusing, encompassing a broader philosophy, Brown and Paolucci (1979) articulated the following mission statement, which has been broadly accepted in the field:

The mission of Home Economics is to enable families, both as individual units and generally as a social institution, to build and maintain systems of action, which lead to 1) maturing in individual self formation and 2) to enlightened, cooperative participation in the critique and formulation of social goals and means for accomplishing them (p. 23).

A mission oriented field is one "in which knowledge or knowing is for the sake of doing something with the knowledge which is different from a discipline oriented field which views knowledge as an end" (Vaines, 1980, p. 112). Implied in the students' poster and explicit in the mission statement is the empowerment of individuals and families to take action for the welfare and fair treatment of all. The phrase "systems of action" appears in the mission statement. Brown (1980) has offered the following clarification:

These areas of action include: (1) action in rational purposive production or procurement of the physical entities required by the family for good life, (2) communicative action within the family and with social groups outside the family for understanding and for consensus in defining the good life, i.e., in the formation and

determination of values and goals, and (3) emancipative action freeing individuals, the family, and society from dogmatic beliefs and from social forces which are dominative or exploitative [sic]. Adequate engagement of the family in these systems of action contributes to the development of individuals with mature ego identity (capable of happiness and of contributing to the happiness of others) and to the evolution of society towards a free society (p. 101).

Essentially, rational purposive or instrumental action involves technical tasks directed at meeting the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter. It is communicative action and emancipative action that support empowerment; thus the need in Home Economics education is to ensure that all three systems of action are included in Home Economics curricula. The previous "stitching, stirring, sewing and cooking" emphasis, which concentrated solely on instrumental action, represents a very narrow conceptualization of Home Economics education that is not adequate for students who face a rapidly changing, increasingly interdependent world.

In 1980, Marjorie Brown wrote the book, *What is Home Economics Education?* in which she challenged the overemphasis on technical/factual knowledge and the product orientation of most Home Economics programs. She has offered a conceptualization of Home Economics education as emphasizing "process" (p. 11) or "modes of inquiry" (p. 120) concerned with the perennial practical problems of the family. Such problems are complex, contextual, continuing, ever changing, and not readily solved. They are not merely technical but problems of interpretation and significance, with implications and consequences, and thus they require careful deliberation and action.

Recently, I have extended Brown's conceptualization by recommending the systematic integration of global education (Smith, 1990). The following chart (Smith, 1990, pp. 134-136) compares what was (traditional Home Economics or preBrown Home Economics education) with what might be (global Home Economics education for the year 2000).

In summary, preBrown Home Economics is grounded in technocratic rationality. Built on a vision of control and a desire for efficiency, it is likely to produce restricted, procedurally driven thinkers who cannot tolerate uncertainty. In contrast, global Home Economics education is built on a vision of complexity, uncertainty, and value conflicts. It aims to foster the development of reflective, critical thinkers, secure in dealing with the perennial practical problems of families in a global society. Such a vision is consistent with *A Legacy for Learners: The Report of the Royal Commission on Education* (Sullivan ' 1988), which contained the following recommendation: "The focus of Home Economics study should be on the family and preparing students for family living. Students should be engaged as active learners in inquiry and reflection " (p. 99).

The Sullivan report also recommended a broad, basic, liberal education, referred to as the "common curriculum" (p. 94-96), structured around four categories of subject matter. Home Economics was included in the Practical Arts along with Physical Education, Industrial Education, and Lifespan Education. These subjects are practical not merely in the sense of utility, but also in the sense that they are "concerned with voluntary action

and ethical decisions" (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1987, p. 923). Inherent in the poster created by my students, in the mission statement that guides Home Economics education, and in the report of the Royal Commission on Education (Sullivan, 1988) is the assumption that families are important, and that they can engage in reasoned reflection and rational action to make the world a better place. Our challenge in Home Economics education is to develop programs that support this notion.

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Traditional Home Economics Education

1. Professional practice as:

- technical/instrumental
- value free

- short term information giving
- teacher as controller, lecturer

2. Metaphor of Education as:

factory, domineering, procedural

3. Aims of Education as:

- nationalistic
- transmission of knowledge
- maintaining status quo

4. The educated person as:

- passive
- capable of technical action
- vessel to be filled with knowledge
- concerned with individual well-being

5. Curriculum as:

- technology
- value free, unproblematic
- non-controversial

- gender free

6. Classrooms

authoritarian, teacher dominated

7. Underlying values as:

- control, domination, competition, power instrumental

8. Home Economics as:

- technical
- mechanistic, controlling the environment
- fragmented, one dimensional (1984)

9. Problems as:

those of material concern that can be solved by technical reason

Global Home Economics Education

- reflective (Vaines, 1988)

- critical, oppositional, committed and engaged for certain values

- long term process of value change
- teacher as facilitator of rational, purposeful dialogue (Brown, 1980)

- human conversation including the voices of those who have been marginalized and excluded (Aoki 1988; Freire, 1973~ Giroux, 1988; Goodlad, 1986), nurturing, parental

- imparting to students a constructivist global perspective (Coombs, 1988)

- active critical thinker, practical reasoner
- capable of all three systems of action (Brown & Paolucci, 1979)
- a global citizen concerned with the welfare and fair treatment of others as well as themselves

- humanism and social reconstruction

- value laden, controversial (Bridges, 1982, 1986, Carrington & Troyna, 1988, Wellington, 1986)
- gender sensitive, gender balanced (Eyre, 1989; Martin, 1981)

- democratic (Bridges, 1988), liberating (Shor, 1980; Shor & Freire, 1987)

- connection, concern, caring, cooperation justice, harmony, moral

- political / moral (Brown, 1985)
- ecological, stewardship of the environment
- integrated, multi-dimensional (Brown,

- perennial, practical, involving everyday life and mass culture

10. Knowledge as:

information and facts separated

-a commodity, an object to possess

-content

-absolute

-consisting of what is known as well from daily life as the process of knowing actively (Hultgren & Wilkosz, 1986)

-socially constructed

-concepts

-uncertain

11. Critical thinking as:

- a skill -social critique (Peterat, Slocum & Jones, 1986) critical mindedness (Werner & Nixon, 1990)

12. Society as:

-regional/national

-dominated by the social ethic of individualism and control (Friedman, 1983)

-individualism and control

-global, interdependent

-moving toward the social ethic of instrumentalism commitment (Yankelovich, 1981)

-relational and connected (Bellay, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Yipton, 1985)

13. Family as:

-passive, private, part of status quo

-a nuclear unit

-material consumers

-moral centre, active in both private and public spheres, empowered toward action

-multiple forms as per AHEA definition (1979)

-as critically conscious consumers