The past, the present, and the preferred future for home economics education in Hong Kong

Abstract

The future of home economics is a perennial topic on the agenda of the home economics profession. In various regions around the world the profession as a whole has been eroded systematically as a result of curriculum reform at the compulsory and post compulsory levels, with the subsequent loss of higher education programs, and, ultimately, the loss of dedicated professional home economists. This leaching degradation of home economics has implications for the concomitant loss of the unique curriculum of the subject, including the focus on consumer related issues. Hong Kong has not been exempt from this pattern, leading to concerns about the capacity of society to engage effectively in consumer and consumer related issues and the focus in home economics has been relegated to technology. This paper provides insights into the current positioning of home economics in Hong Kong, and the likely outcomes of this loss of a preferred future for the profession.

Introduction

Globally, there has been a renewed interest in the historical roots of home economics. This has been stimulated by the centennial celebrations of two leading professional associations - the International Federation for Home economics (IFHE), and the American Home economics Association (AHEA) (now known as the American Association for Family and Consumer Sciences), in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Their continued existence serves as a marker for the longevity of the home economics profession around the world. In Hong Kong, the history of the profession covers a more modest 60 years, although the roots of the profession can be traced back to well before this formal date. Featured in the history of the profession – both in Hong Kong and in its historical, Western origins - is the ongoing theme of home economics teachers seeking to legitimize their subject and literally fighting for their subject's identity and existence. Home economics in Hong Kong has been in the main marginalized, receiving little attention from school authorities as they view it as an inferior subject. The general public

knows little of the philosophical base and complexities of the discipline and are likely to characterize it as 'cooking and sewing'. At this time, home economics in Hong Kong may well be regarded as being at a crossroads, with diminishing numbers in the local professional association; smaller numbers of students enrolling in the course in schools and universities; loss of pre-service teacher education programs; and academic staff with expertise in the field being forced into redundancies in the university sector. This story is not dissimilar to that experienced in other parts of the world (McGregor *et al*, 2008; Pendergast, 2001).

Brown (1993:41) argues that it is important to understand the history of home economics, and - in this case - the history of home economics in Hong Kong in order to look to the future, stating that '[U]nderstanding the course we have come helps us to see not only where we have stayed 'on course' but also where we went astray, thereby making it possible for us both to comprehend where past actions have led us and to correct our mistakes as we consider the future'. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the history of home economics in Hong Kong in order to create an understanding of the contemporary, the present time - and to contribute this understanding to look to the future of the profession.

Thinking about the future

The future is never a given, and any one of us can affect or create the future. Futures researchers always work with three types of futures: the predictable, the possible, and the preferred (Copenhagen Institute for Futures Study, 2010). The International Federation for Home economics (IFHE) similarly argues the importance of future proofing the profession, noting in the IFHE Position Statement – Home economics in the 21st Century (IFHE 2008:2):

> [T]he focus on the decade ahead is on future proofing, which describes the elusive process of trying to anticipate future developments, so that action can be taken to minimise possible negative consequences, and to seize opportunities. Future proofing the Home economics profession and the Federation is a challenging task but one which is necessary to ensure a sustainable vision both for the profession, and for individual members.

In this paper, the authors argue the need to learn from the history of home economics in Hong Kong, to consider the features of the contemporary present, and to look ahead to the preferred future for the profession - one which does not rely on a technicist approach to the field of study.

The history of home economics in Hong Kong

There is very limited published literature documenting the development of home economics in Hong Kong. To that end, the sources of data in this paper include personal communications supplied by senior home economics teachers and professionals in educational institutions as well as the personal experience and observations of the lead author. In this way, the paper is a

form of narrative about home economics in Hong Kong.

The school curriculum

The early origins of home economics in Hong Kong date back to the mid twentieth century. During the early British colonial era (1899–1950), the government had little, if any, concern for education and 'Hong Kong education owed something to the Chinese lines' (Endacott, 1958:132). What this meant was retention of Chinese values, and so only children from affluent families attended school and girls were trained to cultivate their 'feminine grace' which was perceived as an asset for good marriage. This approach to curriculum can be understood easily in the context of Chinese culture and Hong Kong society as 'traditional Chinese values discouraged the development of independence and competence in women. Until the 20th century, lack of competence was considered a virtue for women' (Cheung, 1989:102). It is therefore not surprising that the early forms of home economics were treated in girls' schools in the 1930s to 1940s as leisure subjects. Skill and leisure based activities including sewing, knitting and housework were taught, with an emphasis on developing mothering and housewifery capabilities.

It was after the Second World War that Britain began to commit herself more to the importance of education in Hong Kong. Needlecraft and Housecraft was formerly introduced in the primary curriculum in the 1950s. However, it is noteworthy that the traditional home economics education had limited goals which were geared to meet the societal and economic needs of Hong Kong. The subject did not have a consumer focus. At that time, a large number of working-class girls had to terminate their formal education at the primary level and either get married or go into the labour market. Therefore, there was a strong need to prepare girls generally to cope with the necessary job skills to work as domestic servants. It was under this circumstance that home economics 'came into being to train young women for their "rightful place" in society' (Henry, 1989:22). This system followed closely that of the British and 'Chinese schools were to be conducted on western lines' (Endacott, 1958:281). There were changes in the curriculum in Britain in response to the changes brought about by the industrial revolution, which occurred many years prior to this. The hygienic conditions in industrial countries were worse and according to Henry (1989:19), the British government believed that one of the factors was caused by '… the ignorance of all too many women regarding the health and comfort of the home, their distaste of domestic duties, and the low standard of child care, especially in the case of working mothers'.

Home economics was thus introduced to the curriculum in Hong Kong as 'Domestic Science' with the purpose of educating women and girls in scientific management of the home for efficiency and economy. The connection to consumer studies as we may recognize it today is

undisputed at this time. This approach to home economics can be traced back to the influence of Ellen. H. Richard at the Lake Placid Conference series (1899-1909) as she remarked that 'the king bolt to hold together the previously accumulated parts of the curriculum' was Domestic Science (Richard, 1905:20).

Home economists in Hong Kong adopted the subject name Domestic Science with little understanding of its origin and background. The name itself drew suspicion and was challenged by purist scientists such as physicists, chemists and biologists who asked how Domestic Science could make claim to being a scientific course as it applied scientific principles, such as the effects of heat on different foods and the use of chemical agents on stain removal, rather than having a defined scientific body of knowledge (Yiu, 1995). Their concerns were validated when, in the late 1950's, 'Domestic Science' was retitled 'Domestic Subjects'. This change in title was an indication of the recognition of areas of knowledge related to the household. The curriculum in Domestic Subjects was made up of three areas of study, namely: Housecraft, Cookery and Needlework.

As a nation Hong Kong grew steadily in prosperity from the 1950's to the 1970's. With increased incomes, higher living standards and a rise in personal expectations, it was a common aspiration among parents for their children to continue to undertake formal education for as long as possible. In light of the social, economic and political changes, nine years of free compulsory and universal education for every child was implemented in 1978 and it was considered that it would be more appropriate to teach home economics t at secondary level and thus it was no longer part of the primary curriculum.

In 1975, Domestic Subjects was re-named 'Home Economics'. The adoption of this title mirrored its use in western countries and in 1981 the Domestic Subject syllabus was replaced by the Home Economics syllabus. Home economics is defined in the syllabus as a 'study of the interrelationships between the provision of food, clothing, shelter and related services, and man's physical, economic, social and aesthetic needs in the context of the home', in which 'Home economics draws upon methodologies and perspectives of the Science and Humanities, and uses these to consider issues encountered within the home and family' (Yiu, 1989:65). It might be expected that with this change to the title and syllabus, home economics had moved far beyond the earlier emphasis on cooking, sewing and other skills of home-making; however, a close analysis of teaching in schools and scrutiny of examination questions reveals that in practice very little actually changed. The emphasis in the subject remained on manipulative skills and rote memorising rather than on critical thinking, problem-solving and decision making, which were the imperatives of the new home economics syllabus. Furthermore, it has been revealed by Yiu (1995) that counting the 1981 home economics syllabus as an 'O' level

subject was subsequently considered to be an historic mistake by the Examination Authority, due to the lower academic level of the subject content. Perhaps, upon reflection, this was the missed opportunity to truly implement home economics in Hong Kong in a way that might have led to a more valued and sustainable profession.

From the 1980s, home economics was a core area of study at lower secondary levels (S1-S3). All new secondary schools for girls and co-educational schools were required to include provision for home economics specialist facilities. Home economics was offered in a majority of secondary schools and it became a subject to be taken at school certificate level in either English or Chinese. The curriculum was comprised of three areas of study: Housecraft was the core with Cookery and Needlecraft as optional areas of study. There was a greater emphasis on practical skills than on theory and consumer issues across the program of study.

In the mid-1980s, the syllabus was revised. At the lower secondary level there was wider scope in the content area, where some substantive theory was incorporated into the syllabus. In particular, Food and Nutrition was a compulsory area and Needlework and Dressmaking became two separate subjects. A further revision to the home economics syllabus occurred in 1993-4, mostly in response to the changing Hong Kong context. In the previous ten to fifteen years, Hong Kong had continued to grow in prosperity. Due to social, economic, technological, political and cultural changes, it was determined that the aims of education had to be realigned to provide a more suitable education for students. The 1993 Guide to the Secondary 1 to 5 Curriculum outlined the context, noting that Hong Kong was not immune to social problems such as environmental pollution and inter-personal relationships arising from affluence. So therefore education should aim at healthy living with a positive attitude towards life and a sense of responsibility for one's role in the family and community (Curriculum Development Council hereafter CDC, 1993). In these revisions to the syllabus (CDC, 1993) home economics was interpreted as a cultural, practical and technical subject. It was excluded from the core - and thus compulsory - curriculum and located in the optional or elective classification. This relegation to optional status implied that there was no unique essential learning for the preparation of an educated person acquired through the study of home economics. The implication of this positioning was that home economics was not regarded as making an essential contribution to education, so was of less value than subjects which do. The important role of home economics in family and consumer education had mostly been neglected with this major revision of the curriculum.

Another rationale for the change of syllabus in 1994 was to bring those teaching related subjects under one umbrella, that is, Home Economics (Food, Home and Family) and Home Economics (Dress and Design). Analysis of the 1994 home economics syllabus reveals that a

focus on student-centered approaches such as case study, discussion, project, and experiential learning were encouraged and more emphasis was placed on developing students' personal and communal values in determining priorities for choice and decision making. However, an analysis of the examination papers used at that time reveals a continued emphasis on testing rote memorising of facts and in class, practices remained very content and technical skills orientated.

On the economic front, Hong Kong had grown into one of the leading industrial, commercial and financial centers of the world, and thus education was expected to play a role in producing adequate personnel who had the ability to think logically and make rational decisions. The return of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997 and the development of representative government provided a platform for reform, where education was seen as the vehicle to empower students to develop social and civic awareness and responsibility, and to be rational and analytical consumers and members of the community. Hong Kong continued to be heavily influenced by Western culture, even though the majority of its population was Chinese. Thus, it was regarded as important that education should facilitate students to be open-minded about different cultures.

In response to these developments, a further review of the Hong Kong education curriculum occurred in 1999. The catalyst for this review was the need to cope with the challenges of the 21st century. It was argued that education in Hong Kong needed to keep abreast of the global trends and students must be empowered to learn beyond the confines of the classroom, that is, ideally, to set a path for lifelong learning (Education Commission, 2000). To achieve this goal, in 1999 the CDC commenced a holistic review of the school curriculum. The aim of the review was to define the general directions for curriculum in Hong Kong for the next 10 years, thereby fulfilling the vision to enable students to attain all-round development and lifelong learning (CDC, 2000). In this curriculum revision it was argued that students must attain capabilities to: learn independently; to become self-reflective on how they learn and be able to use different ways of learning so as to contribute to the future and well-being of the nation and the world at large. 'Learning to learn' thus became the theme of educational reform in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Education Commission, 2000). The essential generic skills to be mastered by learners included collaborative skills; communication skills; creativity; critical thinking skills; skills in using information technology; numeric skills; problem solving skills; self management skills; and study skills (CDC, 2001). It was argued that learners should be equipped with transferable lifelong learning skills so that they could meet the challenges of a knowledge-based, interdependent and changing society, as well as coping with globalization, fast technological development, and a competitive economy (CDC, 2001).

In response to this general curriculum direction, all subjects provided in primary and secondary schools were classified into eight learning areas (KLAs) (CDC, 2002). Home Economics was then categorized under the KLA of Technology Education (CDC, 2000). Starting from 2009-10 onwards, Senior Home Economics was renamed as Technology and Living; this was introduced into the New Senior Secondary curriculum, with an emphasis on utilizing technology effectively and flexibly to solve daily problems with a positive attitude at home, in the community, and around the world and also to create new solutions, products, and services for the well-being of humankind (CDC & HKEAA, 2007). The learning aims of the new Technology & Living syllabus were to promote the well-being of individuals, families, societies and the world as a whole through the study of contemporary issues and concerns related to food or clothing from different perspectives, as well as promoting effective resources management (CDC & HKEAA, 2007). This syllabus is currently in use in Hong Kong schools today.

Unfortunately, though the language of the curriculum material points towards a more critical course of study, implementation in schools typically remains technical in orientation. This technical approach to family well-being is proving to be unrealistic in practice and is inadequate for dealing with the complexity of family problems; knowledge deals with skills, processes and end products, often without the capacity to explore the kind of issues involved in family relationships. It fails to engage with the negative effects of external social forces that are repressive for the individual and the family. Furthermore, many critical questions about consumer and consumer related issues may not be explored if we fail to go way beyond the latitudes to uncover what sort of family and household arrangements we want and how technology can be used to genuinely improve the quality of life of family members.

McGregor, Pendergast, Seniuk, Eghan, & Enberg (2008) note that this approach to home economics education, which is often adopted, is a problem in the field. Their counter argument is that philosophers in our field developed, and continue to promote, a triad of practice, calling it three systems of action (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; Johnson & Fedje, 1999). These refer to three ways of thinking about practical, perennial problems: (a) technical (coping skills, care giving skills, getting by); (b) interpretative (talking, listening, relationships); and, (c) critical/emancipatory (political and self-power, and social action). The technological approach promoted in the Hong Kong curriculum focuses on the first way of thinking, the technical. Practice from a technical approach looks at the ‘how to’ questions. It involves helping people to gain skills necessary to meet material, day-to-day needs and delivering technical skills to enable families to cope with, or survive, the daily impact of change. As McGregor et al (2008:51) note, ‘[T]he technical approach is not bad; however, on its own, it is inadequate for the long-term sustainability of the family as a social institution and for advancement of the

human condition'. What is required is the addition of interpretative practice, which enables people to understand, adapt to and conform to change, instead of just coping or getting by. In addition, the final component of the triad, emancipatory practice, involves self-reflection and self-direction to determine what is happening, how it came about, and what we should be doing, so that communities, societies and the world are better places. Emancipatory practice is concerned with understanding power and ethics and the achievement of potential. This is the preferred focus for the home economics curriculum.

Change of subject title

As documented in this historical review, there have been a number of name changes within the curriculum in the period from the 1950's to 2010 in Hong Kong starting with Domestic Science; followed by Domestic Subject; then Home Economics; and currently Technology & Living. Attar (1990:91) would argue that this is an 'attempt to shed old prejudices along with the old name' in order to gain legitimacy and to improve the subject image. Yet there has been remarkably little change to the fundamental framework and conceptual foundations of the curriculum, with mainly cosmetic changes to reflect the larger political and education agendas of the time. The curriculum is interpreted narrowly with the technical paradigm, which has already been argued above to be inadequate.

Teacher education

There were three Colleges of Education responsible for training teachers to teach at primary level and lower secondary levels in Hong Kong from 1939 to 1994. In the 1950's, while there was a great expansion in teacher training, by the 1990's, there was an acute shortage of home economics teachers, and this shortage remains typical of the home economics teacher workforce today.

One of the contributing factors to this teacher shortage was the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984. This declaration meant that the UK government would hand over Hong Kong to the Peoples' Republic of China with effect from 1 July 1997. This created great concern over the future of the territory. Teachers who were uncertain about the future of Hong Kong sought migration to other countries, leading to a loss of expertise in the teacher workforce in home economics and all other disciplines. Apart from this political raison d'être, the poor subject image, lack of long term consistent educational goals, under-valuing of the contribution home economics can potentially make if the three systems of action are adopted (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; Johnson & Fedje, 1999), have resulted in the subject having to battle constantly to keep its place in the curriculum, contributing to the drain of home economics teachers. This has [in some ways] affected the development of Home economics in Hong Kong.

In 1994, the three former Colleges of Education were merged into The Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd, 1995). The first Bachelor of Education degree course for home economics was offered in 2001, while the first Master of Education degree course for Technology and Living was offered in 2009. It is a pity that both programs were short lived, ceasing to operate in 2011. So far, around 160 full-time and part-time participants enrolled in the Bachelor of Education program and only three participants enrolled in the Master of Educaiton program. Up to the time of going to press, there is no home economics program offered at degree level in any university in Hong Kong and no plans to introduce one. This is argued to have contributed to the low status of the subject.

Contemporary Problems

Home economics professionalism

Before the revision of the latest syllabus, there had been noticeable fragmentation in the profession, as home economics teachers did not identify with the field, defining themselves rather as needlework or cookery teachers (Yiu, 1995). The subject content thus remained mostly cooking and sewing, which was a very narrow interpretation of home economics, and one that is still assumed to be the status quo by a big percentage of the general public. Family issues such as family violence, child and sexual abuse, consumer issues, women's health, the division of labour in the family, problems related to single-parent family or external marital affairs, family relationships, impact of technology on families and so on which are relevant to the individual and family were totally neglected in the curriculum. Passive teacher-directed learning with emphasis on products and with activities mainly confined to the classroom was popular. Demonstration of steps and rules followed by pupils' practical work were the common teaching strategies used. In accordance with the three systems model (Brown & Paolucci, 1979), Henry (1988:7) describes a curriculum like this as technical in orientation, since it places emphasis on acquiring skills, making things, learning rules and recalling information.

Home economics teachers in Hong Kong, often claim to be the busiest teachers in the school - they work through lunch breaks to accommodate practical work, make costumes for school dance clubs, provide refreshments for school visitors, and prepare fashion parades and cooking displays. This is not unique to the Hong Kong experience (Pendergast, 2001). Furthermore, such time commitment is often justified as a way of displaying the artefacts of the course of study and as a way of promoting the subject to attract students. However, this is a questionable tactic, as it emphasis a technical orientation with a product-based outcome, reinforcing this as the value of home economics. As previously explained, this is a limited and undesirable view of the field of study.

To meet the changing needs of society as well as to improve the well-being of the individual and family, a revision of the out-dated syllabus and a change in the technical practice of the subject are urged. It is time for home economists in Hong Kong to think about what direction home economics should take; they should no longer dogmatically copy models from other countries which might be totally irrelevant to the local situation.

Status of home economics

Educators and students in general perceive the subject as having low status. The reasons for the apparent low status of home economics have been attributed to its limited academic challenge and lack of vocational relevance (Ma, 1996; McGregor et al, 2007). The status is always questioned at school and it seems that most students equate written work with academic standing and practical activities with less value. In Hong Kong, students largely view education as preparing them for careers and post-school life. Home economics is considered useless if students intend to pursue tertiary studies because they cannot go on to a higher level. Home economics education after secondary five was not offered at a tertiary level (secondary 6 or above) or at degree level until the 21st century (Ma, 1996:27-28). And this opportunity is about to be removed.

Home economics has often been linked with providing education for lower ability students. 'The Measures To Help Students Who Are Unmotivated or Who Have Severe Learning Problems' suggested in the Education Commission report number 4 was solid evidence of this. It (1990:35) stated:

> To help them (students who have severe learning problems) develop vocationally and socially, we propose that special skills opportunity schools be set up for junior secondary students. In these schools, skills-oriented subjects such as Office Practice, Keyboard Skills, **Home Economics** (*emphasis added*), Woodwork and Metalwork would be taught. The intention would be to enable these students to continue training at the operative level in skills center run by the Technical Education and Industrial Training Department.

Home economics had long been associated with providing education for underachieving students and problem students and was thus generally undervalued in society. Due to the limited supply of qualified applicants for home economics electives, a Certificate of Education (Three-year Full Time Course) which was offered by the Hong Kong Institute of Education in 1995 required only satisfactory performance at interview/practical test in home economics, compared with Grade C in a relevant Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, or a pass in a relevant advanced level subject for Chinese, English, Mathematics and Science. This

low level of entry qualifications further affects public perception of the academic value of home economics qualifications.

Up till now, Home Economics or Technology and Living are not offered as a compulsory subject in the secondary curriculum. As it comes under the school-based curriculum at the junior secondary level, the subject can be excluded by the decision of the school management team. On the other hand, less than 30 schools offer Technology and Living in the new senior secondary level.

Gender Imbalance in Home economics

In Hong Kong, there are different perspectives regarding gender equity. Women in Hong Kong are not disadvantaged by gender prejudice in general. However, this does not ensure that boys will be offered home economics in schools. Although home economics was made a core area of study at secondary one and secondary three levels when nine-year free and compulsory education was introduced to secondary level in 1978, limited numbers of boys studied it. Despite the fact that more male students study home economics at junior levels in response to the recommendations made by the Equal Opportunity Commission since 2000, there was only a minority of male students who were likely to study home economics to examination level as only around ten per cent of all candidates taking the 'O' level home economics papers in the past years were boys (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2008).

Research conducted in a secondary school in Hong Kong in 1996 showed that schoolboys are being discouraged from studying home economics courses for a variety of reasons (Ma, 1996). Gender stereotyping and devaluing of the discipline, which were actively perpetuated and reinforced by the education system in terms of classroom strategies, curriculum documents and school administration as well as negative attitudes expressed about home economics by teachers, peers, parents and the patriarchal community were all identified as possible contributions to the under-participation of males in Home economics.

Political Changes

Home economics in Hong Kong is unique in the world landscape because of its political history. While it was a British colony, it was heavily influenced by British education models and values, which were typically significantly removed from the students' daily life experiences. Since the return of sovereignty to China in 1997, the British influence was intentionally disfavored in preference for a closer alignment with Chinese culture. In recent years, a wider use of Chinese recipes published by the Curriculum Development Council and the Education Department, Chinese reference books and textbooks as well as Chinese as the medium of instruction have been encouraged. However, there are difficulties encountered by the teachers in bringing about

such change.

Conclusion

According to the International Federation for Home economics (2008, p.1):

> Home economics is a field of study and a profession, situated in the human sciences that draws from a range of disciplines to achieve optimal and sustainable living for individuals, families and communities. … Home Economists are concerned with the empowerment and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities, and of facilitating the development of attributes for lifelong learning for paid, unpaid and voluntary work; and living situations. Home economics professionals are advocates for individuals, families and communities.

It can be argued that the current Technology & Living curriculum in Hong Kong with its emphasis on utilizing technology effectively and flexibly to solve daily problems, does not encapsulate the wider intent of the study of home economics as defined by the leading international body for Home economics, the International Federation of Home economics. The curriculum on offer appears to be limited to a technical orientation, with little evidence of interpretative and emancipatory practice, which together are regarded to be the three basic tenets of the home economics curriculum. At the start of this paper the idea of future- proofing the profession was introduced. As explained earlier in this paper, what is required is the addition of interpretative practice, which enables people to understand, adapt to and conform to change, instead of just coping or getting by. In addition, emancipatory practice which involves self-reflection and self-direction to determine what is happening, how it came about, and what we should be doing, so that communities, societies and the world are better places, should be included as a core component of the curriculum. Emancipatory practice is concerned with understanding power and ethics and the achievement of potential. This is the preferred focus for the home economics curriculum.

The need to work towards a preferred future for the home economics profession in Hong Kong has been laid bare by this investigation into the evolution of the field. It is evident that there is work to be done to revise the conceptual foundations; the current curriculum and the availability of teacher education opportunities. There is a need to rethink the curriculum to be a comprehensive representation of home economics as accepted globally, rather than a narrow slice of what is possible. The risk of not attending to this imperative is that the 'predictable' future – one with a continued diminution of home economics - is likely to become the real future for this region.

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