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The value of home economics to address the obesity challenge: An evaluation of comments in an online forum

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Abstract

Negative public perceptions of home economics have plagued the profession and created negative stereotypes for decades. Strategies such as a name change and shifting of curriculum components to other subjects in attempts to gain legitimacy have led to a general demise of the field as a unified profession. This paper reports on the text analysis of a self-selected group of members of the public who posted 130 comments to a website forum in response to the published article "Bring back home ec! Parents don't have time to teach kids basic cooking and housekeeping, so schools must do it instead" (Bosch, 2012). The study provides a unique glimpse of the opinion of members of the public, of the value and contribution of home economics as a school subject, particularly with respect to its potential to address the obesity challenge through a greater awareness of food knowledge, theory and skill - collectively food literacy. Three themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the posts: The role of parents; the role of schools; and life skills. Findings from this investigation are important as they provide something of a litmus test about public perceptions of utilising home economics education as a mechanism to address a major public health challenge confronting humankind in the twenty-first century.

Introduction and literature

In 2010 an article titled *Bring back home economics education* was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. The authors argued that the best solution to fighting the war against obesity is to "bring back home economics" in order to empower individuals with food knowledge and skills and that "providing a mandatory food preparation curriculum to students throughout the country may be among the best investments society could make" (Lichtenstein & Ludwig, 2010 p.1858). There is no doubt that child and adult obesity is a growing concern in affluent nations around the world with negative physical, psychological and social impacts (UNICEF, 2000; Zaninotto et al., 2006) as well as economic and cultural consequences (Wanless, 2002). The challenge of managing obesity is one that is at the core of public health concerns for humans in developed countries at this time. In the United States for example, obesity presently costs society almost \$150 billion annually in increased health care expenditure (Finkelstein, Trogdon, Cohen, & Dietz, 2009). Lichtenstein and Ludwig's message has served to stimulate renewed interest in the potential of home economics education to lead the way in a crusade of potentially massive significance to the health and wellbeing of the public.

It is interesting to note current calls for a reintroduction of home economics were not instigated by professionals from within the field, providing an opportunity for the profession

to sharpen its focus on providing for the needs of a new generation. The field emerged more than one hundred years ago at a time when public health related to sanitation and hygiene was of profound interest, with the importance of cleanliness and hygiene in domains such as food storage and preparation having significant public health benefits through the reduction of food contamination and subsequent illness and even death (Pendergast & McGregor, 2007). Out of this need, the profession of home economics emerged, and over more than one hundred years and in different contexts - dependent upon need - the field has adjusted to fulfil roles associated with optimizing the wellbeing of individuals and families in their near environment (International Federation for Home Economics [IFHE], 2008). In more recent decades, and closely linked to the increased affluence of modern society, the field has struggled to retain a positive identity, particularly as a curriculum area in schools, where it was fundamentally built to contribute to the education of individual's wellbeing, as it has been challenged in terms of relevance in today's world, and has been criticized for creating and reinforcing negative stereotypes of women, especially because of the perception that it accepts, without challenge, the confines of patriarchal ideology (Attar, 1990; Reiger, 1990).

In their comprehensive exploration of home economics and patriarchy, Pendergast and McGregor (2007, p.7) note "history confirms that (a) home economics was established within a society that was dominated by a patriarchal ideology and (b) the founders, predominantly women, were required to conform to its power distribution before they could establish a profession". The acceptance of patriarchal ideology as the dominant philosophy underpinning society at the time of its development as a field has had, and will continue to have, profound effects although the field has struggled to shake off negative perceptions associated with its emergence at a time of patriarchal dominance. This effect is particularly powerful within the home economics profession because it is a field of study that brings together, in almost every sense, the least powerful of the binary pair, considered from the ideology of a patriarchal paradigm. Historically the field has been dominated by females (not males), has had a focus on the home, that is, the private sphere (not public), and is often unpaid (not paid) work (Pendergast, 2001). Hence, negative stereotypes of a disempowered curriculum area, catering for females have dominated public perceptions of the field of study, inevitably limiting its capacity to impact the wider community.

Home economics curriculum differs around the world, whether in a school, university or other educational location (Pendergast, 2012). Students undertake context specific content in a range of domains, yet, there is a shared theoretical and philosophical base and set of core practices that bind home economics curriculum globally. Recently, the *IFHE Position Statement - Home Economics in the 21st Century* (IFHE, 2008, p.1) captured this shared meaning by formulating the statement that as a curriculum area, home economics...

...facilitates students to discover and further develop their own resources and capabilities to be used in their personal life, by directing their professional decisions and actions or preparing them for life.

Hence, through the engagement in home economics curriculum, the individual is provided the learning opportunity to develop capabilities to enhance personal empowerment to act in daily contexts. Contexts may include, but are not limited to: Food, nutrition and health; textiles

and clothing; shelter and housing; consumerism and consumer science; household management; design and technology; food science and hospitality; human development and family studies; and, education and community services. In the Position Statement, it is argued that the capacity to draw from such disciplinary diversity is “a strength of the profession, allowing for the development of specific interpretations of the field, as relevant to the context” (IFHE, 2008, p.1).

In the context of the advocacy by Lichtenstein & Ludwig (2010) to mandate home economics education, the value of home economics education in fighting obesity is firmly constructed around the various elements of food literacy which are typically delivered in home economics curriculum. But is home economics the appropriate vehicle for delivery of this message given it has at best mixed status as a curriculum area in schools? A recent study by Pendergast, Garvis & Kanasa (2011) provided a unique insight into the responses of 97 contributors to an online forum responding to a newspaper article speculating about the inclusion of cooking in the Queensland, Australia, school curriculum. The analysis revealed that the wider community did not collectively understand the potential contribution of home economics to develop food literacy and it was recommended that further research be conducted to find positive ways to change perceptions of home economics in schools.

Another recent global investigation about the role of home economics in developing food literacy provides additional insights into the potential of home economics to play a significant role in addressing the food obesity challenge. In that study, Pendergast and Dewhurst (2012) collected data using an online survey with 1188 respondents from 36 different countries in the world sharing their views. Among key findings are the recognition of differences in understandings of food literacy and affirmation that “home economists globally are like-minded in their beliefs about the need for food literacy curriculum” (Pendergast & Dewhurst, 2012, p.13).

The publication in the Journal of the American Medical Association highlights another aspect of the “bring back home economics” plea as the title suggests the implied demise of the field and hence the need for it to be regenerated. Data from around the world confirms that home economics has suffered a demise in terms of the availability of curriculum for formal education in schools and in tertiary institutions, with a trend towards a dispersal of the content across related fields, such as food science, family studies, textiles design, technology and public health (IFHE, 2008). Linked to this demise is the global trend to change the name of the subject and the field to what have been considered to be more contemporary titles that can address negative stereotypes associated with the name ‘home economics’ (Pendergast & McGregor, 2007). Examples of name changes to family and consumer science; and human ecology, are both now widely utilized in the United States in preference to home economics. The use of a range of names for the field has led to fragmentation of curriculum and an apparent demise; hence the need to “bring back” home economics.

The public plea by Lichtenstein and Ludwig to “bring home economics back” heralds another element in what has been identified by Pendergast (2006) as a ‘convergent moment’ where a number of key factors have aligned to provide an opportunity to focus on the future of the field. Unexpected as it was, the 2010 publication points again to the need to privilege

education which focuses on wellbeing and which develops not only knowledge, but the ability to apply this knowledge in theoretical and practical ways.

Since the publication of the original article in the Journal of the American Medical Association, there has been considerable interest in the ideas shared in the paper, especially in the form of viral spin-offs utilising social media technologies. A Google search reveals dozens of articles, online debates, website blog posts, along with a Facebook campaign to bring home economics back to schools, and other opinion and commentary sites, all referring to the Lichtenstein and Ludwig (2010) article as the basis for these conversations and posts. One article appeared in the Slate magazine, which is published by The Washington Post. Slate magazine is a daily online paper described as offering “fresh angles on stories in the news and innovative entertainment coverage, all with its signature wit and irreverence. Pushing the boundaries of convention, Slate publishes provocative commentary on topics such as politics, culture, business and technology. Slate reaches 6.7 million online adults a month according to Nielsen” (The Washington Post, 2013). The Slate Magazine article is titled Bring back home ec! Parents don’t have time to teach kids basic cooking and housekeeping, so schools must do it instead, was written by Torie Bosch and posted on 5 June 2012. This article canvasses the potential of home economics in today’s society and posits the view that it is more valuable than ever, using as a basis the original publication by Lichtenstein and Ludwig (2010). Bosch presents a case that home economics never really disappeared from schools - it still exists but is often named differently and that home economics knowledge often seems to be “like common sense” because the core messages have effectively permeated society (Bosch, 2012).

It is this article that inspired the authors to investigate the accompanying discussion forum that was generated in response to the article. The self-selected, anonymous respondents provide a snapshot of comments in response to the article. Our analysis reveals that their comments could be grouped into three main themes: the role of parents; the role of schools; and life skills.

The Study

This study provided a unique opportunity to gauge the opinion of self selected members of the public regarding their ideas about the value and contribution of home economics as a school subject, particularly with respect to its potential to address the obesity challenge through a greater awareness of food knowledge, theory and skills. Soliciting the opinion of the public is valuable because the field has been impacted by negative perceptions over recent decades. The call to “bring back home economics” by authors in the prestigious medical journal points to a legitimising of the field by those beyond the usual advocates within the profession and may serve as a turning point through the contesting of negative public perceptions. This study will provide some insight into the responses to the ideas posed by the follow up article in Slate magazine.

Method

Data and data analysis

Comments were collected from the online article entitled Bring Back Home Ec: Parents don't have time to teach kids basic cooking and housekeeping, so schools must do it instead in the online Slate Magazine (5 June, 2012). Many articles on the Slate website allow readers to post their comments in response to articles, and to comments from others. This particular forum recorded 264 posts from anonymous readers. Respondents were a self-selecting, convenience sample. As the posts were anonymous within the discussion forum beyond a selected username, identity of individuals within posts is unknown. Since the group were self-selecting (they had enough interest in the topic to respond), it is difficult to generalize beyond the sample presented and this is a limitation of the study.

On average, most participants wrote three to four sentences. All posts were downloaded and screened for use in this study. Comments were scrubbed to remove any extraneous text. Exploratory analysis of the comments revealed unacceptable concept map instability meaning a stable concept map could not be formed after repeated iterations of Leximancer recoding the concepts into themes. To resolve this issue the comments were coded by hand and subsequently 51% (n=134) of the comments were coded as irrelevant. Examples of removed comments included those that simply agreed or disagreed with previous comments, those inviting forum participants to events etc. These comments were removed and the analysis was completed with the 130 comments of relevance to the forum topic. The resultant stable map was achieved after two rounds of reclustering.

An adapted version of Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran's (2003) 15 stages of content analysis (based within the constant comparative method) was used as a guide to identify key themes and meanings in the data. This process allowed newly identified themes to be compared with previously identified themes to ensure that the new theme added more understanding about the phenomenon under investigation. Themes were located with frequency counts, with some themes entering two categories. Coding for manifest content (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001) was used, which means that what was directly written in the online blog, as opposed to latent content which is implied, was used for the content analysis. The computer program Leximancer was used to assist the researchers build strength of association and visual maps after the themes were generated. The number of themes was set to five with Table 1 showing the resultant themes, their related concepts at the connectivity of the concepts within the themes.

Connectivity is a measure of how related the concepts within a theme are to other concepts in the map relative to the highest ranked theme. The themes of 'learn' and 'day' and their related concepts were disregarding as significant themes as their connectivities were 11% and 5% respectively. Figure 1, the resultant concept map also reflects this decision to remove those themes from further discussion. Leximancer automatically assigns the theme name as the most numerous concept. A closer examination of the individual concepts as they appear within the context of the quotes revealed the initial themes of 'kids', 'home' and 'cook' were better labelled as 'role of the parents', 'role of the school' and 'life skills' respectively.

Table 1: Leximancer identified themes, their related concepts and connectivities

Theme	Connectivity (%)	Related concepts
Role of the parents	100	kids, skills, teach, time, parents, basic, people, life, things, taught, etc., doing, skill, schools, household
Role of the school	71	home, cooking, learned, class, school, take, sewing, work, shop, stuff, family, classes, students, grade
life skills	22	cook, food, laundry, course, meal, money, clothes
learn	11	learn, teaching, children, sense
day	5	day, making

Figure 1 shows the resultant concept map. Circles group related concepts into themes with the three themes with the highest connectivity being shown. Bayesian analysis is used to determine the relatedness of themes, therefore more related concepts are closer spatially in the concept map. For example, within the theme of 'responsibility of parents', the concepts of 'life' and 'skills' have been calculated to be highly related terms as shown by their closeness. The third layer of information within the concept map are connecting lines between concepts which indicate a statistically significant relationship between two or more concepts. For example, the concepts of 'kids', 'parents', 'skills' and 'life' are highly likely to be related in a significant manner as indicated by their grouping within the theme of 'role of the parents' and their connection with a line.

Findings

Each of the most significant themes (role of parents, role of the school and life skills) will now be discussed in the order of the prominence assigned by Leximancer and is shown heat mapped (i.e., red for the most prominent theme to yellow and green) in the concept map. Prominence is partly determined by how often the concepts in a theme are mentioned in the text and indicates the importance of those concepts and therefore the theme to the participants.

The role of the parents

As the most prominent identified theme (connectivity of 100%), the majority of comments focussed on the importance of the role parents and the home play in imparting important knowledge and skills, including those related to food and cooking skills, to their children. This is signified in the concept map by the close relationship of parents, taught, teach, kids, basic, life and skills. Many comments described how forum members had learnt important skills in their childhood or described how they are teaching their own children these skills, for example:

[B]y the time they were 10 years old, both of my kids (one of each) could scrub a bathroom, change their sheets, load and unload the dishwasher, and

do a load of laundry without breaking the washer or lighting the dryer on fire.
(Comment 116)

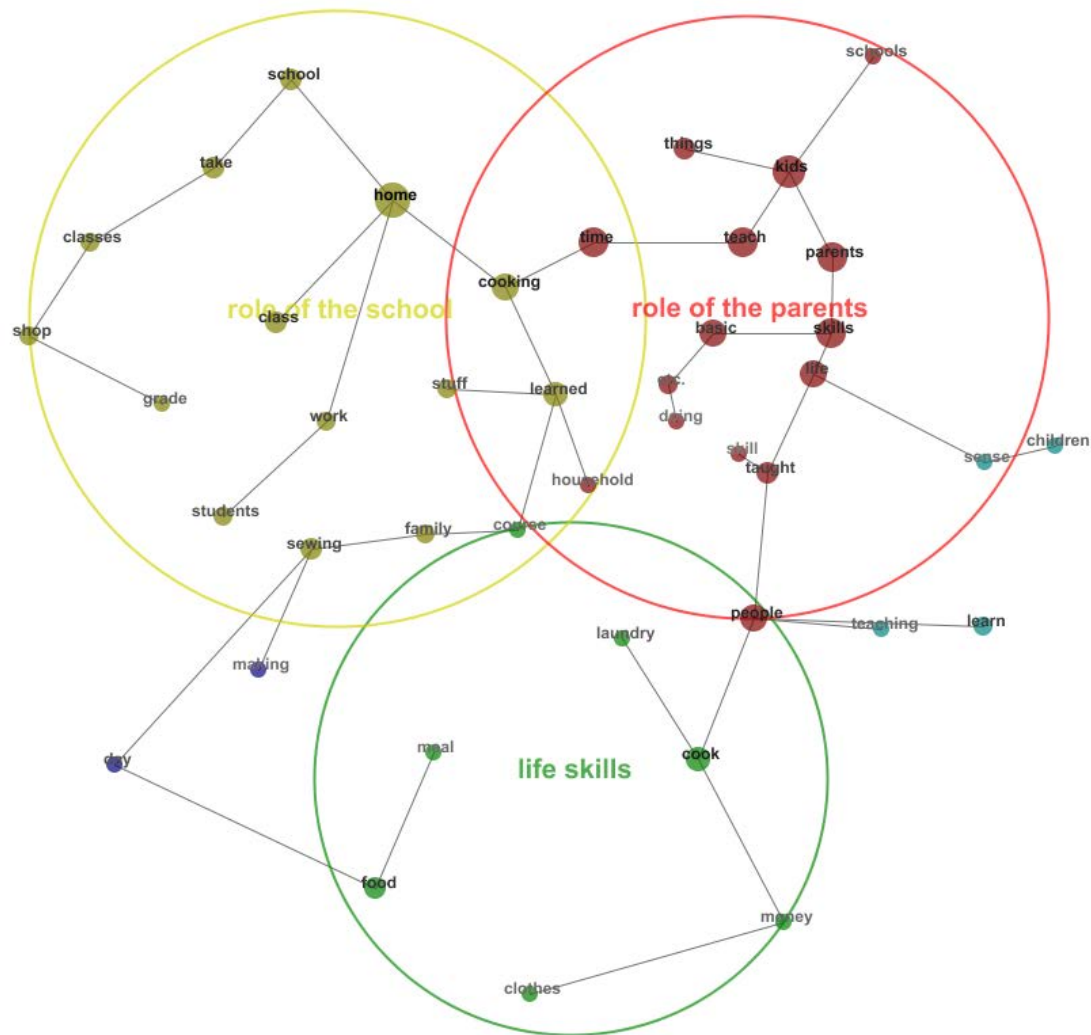


Figure 12: The concept map

Other comments were related to how respondents had learnt important skills once they left home. The key theme in these comments was the importance of learning the necessary skills in the home context which would not necessarily be achieved in a classroom. In the main, the comments in this category advocated for 'family' to be the place where knowledge and skills that might be regarded as components of a home economics curriculum, would best be delivered.

Other comments in this theme generally tended to be critical of parents and their abrogation of responsibility to schools on this matter, hence still advocating for the family to provide the knowledge and skill development, for example:

[E]xcuse me, but exactly where are the parent's responsibilities to teach their children. A significant part of the difficulties in public education today is that parents drop their kids off at the school house door and think that is the end of their involvement in the process (not all parents, but a surprisingly large number). (Comment 111)

and

[S]chools exist to create informed citizens, not to teach your kids how to care for themselves and not be pigs. (Comment 72)

and

... I disagree with this idea that parents don't have time to teach their kids these simple life skills. We are all busy, but anyone who says they are too busy to give their kids these valuable lessons needs to just admit that it's not that they can't it's that they don't want to. (Comment 10)

But not all contributors to the forum within this theme advocated for family as being the sole source for developing knowledge and capabilities associated with food literacy and other related aspects of individuals wellbeing. For some, this was based on the lack of capacity in the family, for example:

[Y]eah, but not everybody has parents they can call to help them. (Comment 70)

and

I guess your answer is that in cases where the parents are low-skill, their kids can just follow in their footsteps? That's compassion. (Comment 80)

One forum participant presented alternate arguments to the view by other forum members that cooking (and nutrition) is common sense, noting that some parents lack the necessary expert skills; and further highlighting the potential benefits to society of appropriate education, such as that delivered in home economics classrooms. Their lengthy forum post follows:

[I]t's not common sense. People do not just understand calories, nutrition, and personal/household finances, *especially* when they are young. And learning about nutrition *before* you screw up and get fat is the best way to avoid a lifetime of struggling with your weight. Earlier is so much better. There are entire industries built up around balancing check books and people who make their living telling other people to save 20%. Why is that? It's because these things are not just absorbed. And unfortunately, the people with the means, resources, and awareness to educate themselves in these areas are the same people whose parents were able to equip them at a

younger age. You can't forget about all the kids who never made it past high school or the 9th grade- ...

Even if you imagine that all parents have the time to teach their kids, you can't ignore the fact that many parents don't have these skills themselves. If they never learned how to work a stove, how will they teach their children? And if their own finances are a mess, how do they teach their kids about household budgeting? ... It's kids whose parents are frankly not equipped to help them.

So why should we do this? Because we all pay the costs. When people don't know how to budget and spend within their means, we end up with bubbles and credit crises and toxic mortgages and a lot of good people who lose a lot of money because other people made bad decisions. Maybe if we can teach them to balance a check book and assess true affordability, we can reduce the chances of ever being in this mess again. 5% reduction you say? 3%? I'll take it! And when they don't know how to feed themselves, they get fat and cost the healthcare system money. They buy bad foods and prop up a food economy based on waste products and processed goods. They ensure that your grocery store is flooded with sugar and salt and pre-made things that provide no nutritional value, and they spend 30 cents on a 2-liter of soda every week instead of drinking tap water for free, then complain that a healthy diet is more expensive. Maybe if we educate people, we'll have a sounder economy, a more versatile workforce, lower healthcare costs, fewer unplanned pregnancies, fewer predatory companies, and more qualified elected officials. We should at least try. (Comment 7)

The content in this posting was repeated by many other forum contributors, though generally not as comprehensively as in this posting, and reflects a greater understanding of the potential value and contribution of home economics education. The large scale consequences of a deficit of what home economics education can provide in terms of individual and collective empowerment is captured in the examples provided, such as healthcare costs, consumer knowledge and so on.

The second theme with 71% connectivity to the most prominent theme (the role of parents) focussed on the role of schools to provide an education for all students in matters related to households and families. This high degree of connectivity reflects the similarity in the nature of comments in that those forum participants who made comments about the role of parents were also likely to make comments about the role of schools. A focus on the role of schools now follows.

The role of schools

While most forum contributors placed the onus on parents to educate their children on matters of household management, like in the previous theme, others argued that not all parents were equipped to pass on those skills - the notion of capital being used to describe

the capabilities - and that was a role that could and should be fulfilled by schools as a social good, for instance:

The decline of the "domestic sciences" also impacts the very real problem of entrenched poverty. After a few generations of children having children (be that in an urban or rural setting) the family domestic skill capital has diminished considerably. This impacts what food is consumed and how efficiently the money is spent. (Comment 83)

Some forum contributors pointed to the inability of parents to pass on important skills with the consequence being the responsibility fell to schools instead. The reasons for this failure were varied, and included: Lack of skills, lack of time, and lack of interest, as noted in the comment followings:

Parents don't have time to teach kids basic cooking and housekeeping, so schools must do it instead. (Comment 94)

and

I am 54 and most certainly did not learn the operation of a home from my mother, who was raised with a full-time cook and housekeeper. While we had a full-time housekeeper when I was a child, we did not have a cook. My mother's cooking was simply awful.

In 7th grade, I was to take metal shop, while the girls took home economics. I rebelled - the trait started young - and I took home economics. I was going to be the only boy in the class until I explained to Mike Young, the captain of the our baseball team one ate the food one cooked in class, so he and several other players also signed up. To this day, that was one of the best classes I ever took. (Comment 41)

Anywhere there is a system of public education, it's in place to train citizens. It's not there out of some 'higher calling' to impart centuries of priceless knowledge. (Comment 76)

Comment 41 introduces the commonly experienced gendered divide of the curriculum with girls typically being required to study home economics while boys undertook study in one of the manual arts disciplines. Comments within this theme also retold both negative and positive experiences (as signified by the relationship between the concepts of school, take, shop and classes) with home economics and these tended to sway their views on whether home economics should be returned, as in the following comment.

I remember my home-economics class in junior high. I remember the tuna noodle casserole (yuck!!), fried chicken (something I don't eat as an adult), and worst of all that monstrosity that involved adding browned hamburger, onions, cooked carrots and green beans, and slices of hotdogs to Western

family mac and cheese (cooked with margarine of course!!!) adding government cheese and breadcrumbs and cooking it as a casserole. Also I knew more about sewing than the teacher. (Comment 130)

Life skills

The third main theme generated from the data is encapsulated by the notion of life skills. With a 22% connectivity to the main theme (the role of parents), forum contributors commented on the breadth of the home economics curriculum in developing a range of skills and capabilities, including financial management, consumer rights and responsibilities, food purchasing, storage and preparation (food literacy) and much more. The concept of money is strongly related to cook and clothes for slightly different reasons. In relation to cook, this word was often used by forum contributors around the idea of being able to manage a food budget and budgeting in general, for example:

...most people starting out need to know how to control their food budget. Budgeting was one of the primary aims of early home economics. Then it became about making a fancy meal and sewing an apron. Imagine a course that talks about proper shopping for a budget, preparing meals within a budget, and controlling food waste. (Comment 108)

Other life skills to be included would be a comprehensive review of personal finance, including costs of debt and credit, banking fees, etc. (Comment 82)

Home economics as I took it in the late 80's wasn't particularly useful, but things like household budgeting, healthy cooking, etc. would be very helpful to just about everyone (even if you learned it at home, it couldn't hurt to brush up). I actually learned far more useful things from a culinary standpoint in Boy Scouts...how to cook, sure, but also how to make a menu, then a food list, then shop, prep, package, and prepare the food. To this day I make a mean beef stew...and it's a lot easier to do on a stove than it was kneeling in the rain over a campfire! (Comment 125)

In relation to clothes it tended to be around the idea that learning basic sewing skills saved money, while others argued that sewing in today's society was irrelevant given how cheap (another money concept) clothing is to purchase, as exemplified in the following comment:

[F]ocusing on cooking, basic household budgeting, and basic home repairs ("how to fix a toilet," "how to unclog a drain," "how to set up a secure wireless network," "how to change the oil in a lawn mower," etc., etc.), and you've got a very useful class. Get rid of the sewing, though - waste of time. (Comment 44)

Discussion and Conclusion

This evaluation of an online discussion forum has provided a snapshot of views from members of the public regarding their ideas about the value and contribution of home economics

education as a school subject, particularly with respect to its potential to address the obesity challenge through a greater awareness of food knowledge, theory and skills. The evaluation of forum comments - which were stimulated by an opinion piece exploring the idea of reintroducing home economics into the curriculum as a key strategy to address child and adult obesity in affluent countries - revealed three main themes with a relatively high degree of connectivity between the two leading themes: the role of family and the role of schools. The third theme, life skills, recorded a lower degree of connectivity at 22%. It was typical for forum contributors to include comments about both the role of family and the role of school, with a high degree of connectivity (71%) observed in the data.

The evaluation further revealed a lack of consistency in respondents experiences of, and knowledge about, home economics education. This aligns with the previous study conducted by Pendergast, Garvis and Kanasa (2011) that revealed the community did not understand the potential contribution of home economics to the development of food literacy capabilities. It also revealed entrenched views of home economics as a traditional subject, often connected to gendered roles for girls and women and reinforcing the patriarchal views of the subject that have hampered its acceptance as a field for decades. Also debated in the forum with divergent views evident, was the taken-for-granted nature of home economics knowledge on the one hand, and on the other hand, arguments challenging this view.

In sum, there was not a decisive picture emerging from the data reflecting views from the wider public regarding the advocacy of the author to 'bring back home ec' (sic) (Bosch, 2012). Nevertheless, soliciting the opinion of the public is valuable because the field has been impacted by negative perceptions over recent decades. The call to "bring back home economics" by Lichtenstein & Ludwig (2010) in the prestigious medical journal may serve as a turning point by placing the question back on the agenda and by providing an opportunity to contest negative public perceptions. However, what is revealed is that there remains a large degree of uncertainty about the value and potential contribution of home economics to this public health agenda. This provides an opportunity for home economics professionals to shape the field and to position the profession appropriately for today's context. Aligned with findings from Pendergast, Garvis and Kanasa (2011), this study also recommends that further research be conducted to find positive ways to change perceptions of home economics in schools. By way of conclusion, it is evident that some forum contributors held very high regard for the profession of home economics, as expressed in the following comment:

[T]raditional home economics subjects could be part of a whole curriculum of life classes. Basically, how to function in society. number one being how to manage not to get fat. (Comment 60)

Biography

Professor Donna Pendergast currently holds the position of Dean, School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University.

Dr Susanne Garvis is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Monash University.

Harry Kanasa is a lecturer in Science and Mathematics Education at Griffith University. He is currently completing his PhD on scientific literacy. His current research interests are thinking skills and students' understanding of the nature of science.

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