

An Education Note:

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOUSING EDUCATION IN THE SECONDARY HOME ECONOMICS CURRICULUM

Jean A. Memken, Julie Johnson, and Kendra Vance

Abstract

Young adults need the ability to analyze and select housing to meet current and future needs. The importance of housing and specific housing topics in secondary home economics curriculum are investigated. Forty-five secondary home economics teachers in a Midwestern state responded to a questionnaire concerning 136 different concepts within eight home economics subject matter areas in their curriculum. Similar data were collected from 395 parents and 75 social service agency representatives in selected counties within the state. Analysis indicated that there are some significant differences among teachers, parents, and agency representatives regarding subject matter and concepts within Housing and Home Furnishings. Responses of new and experienced teachers were not significantly different. The study concludes that housing professionals and educators should work together to help young adults obtain the housing information which is not currently available in secondary home economics curricula.

Introduction

The purchase of a home is one of the important investments made in an individual's lifetime. Housing provides physical comfort and security. The home acts as a setting for the socialization of children. By obtaining appropriate housing, individuals and families may achieve a sense of self-esteem. Within our culture, owning a home is considered evidence that a person has realized the "Great American Dream" and is a successful, contributing member of society.

In spite of the tremendous influence of housing on people's lives, there has been very little effort to educate people in this country about housing alternatives or how to obtain housing that meets human needs. Little attention is given to housing in public school curricula.

One place, however, that housing concepts are often introduced is in home economics. It is important that post-secondary housing educators are aware of housing curricula offered at the secondary level so that they can better assist and enrich that curricula. Housing educators could then help the secondary teacher build a stronger knowledge base in housing.

Jean Memken, Associate Professor, Home Economics, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois. Julie Johnson, Associate Professor and Kendra Vance, Research Associate, Consumer Science and Education, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska.

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The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, it will report the current findings of the importance housing plays in the secondary home economics curriculum and what particular housing concepts (topics) are stressed. Second, this research will compare the perceptions of parents and social service agency representatives as to the importance of housing education in high school home economics curriculum with the housing concepts that are actually being taught at the high school level.

Review of Literature

The Need for Housing Education

During the past few years, housing has received a great deal of public attention because of fluctuating interest rates, the energy crisis, and the increasing numbers of homeless in our society. Since 1949, the United States government has had as its goal "a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family." However, as our population grows and changes, this goal is becoming increasingly more difficult to achieve. Those least likely to obtain decent housing are young people.

A recent study by Hohm (1985) revealed that young adults expect to purchase housing, particularly single-family homes, that resemble the housing of their parents' generation. These young people also report they plan to deposit large sums of money for down payments and spend a large proportion of their monthly income on housing expenditures. Results of this research show a tremendous difference between expectations of young people and the actual housing alternatives available to them. Because of the substantial rise in property values and the increasing costs of land in recent years, the opportunities for becoming a first-time home owner are declining.

Two phenomena are occurring more frequently today because of the problems young people have in acquiring housing: 1) young adults are living longer in their parents' home and, 2) they are moving back into their parents' home at a higher rate than ever before. In 1983, 59% of the young adults in this country (aged 18-24) lived with their parents. The trend of later marriages accounts for many young people not moving out of the parental home. However, evidence shows there is an increasing number of 18-34 year olds with their own families living with their parents (Heer, Hodge, & Felson, 1985). One explanation for the formation of a three-generation household is the lack of suitable and affordable housing alternatives for young families.

In a study of housing preferences, Hwang and Albrecht (1987) find that the fulfillment of residential preference is strongly related to age. Young households have a smaller chance of fulfilling their residential preferences than older households. Having young children within the household further decreases the chance to fulfill housing expectations (Hwang & Albrecht, 1987).

Today the housing market is going through a period of rapid change (Eilbott, 1985). This is in response to a number of societal and economic forces including inflation, revisions in the tax laws, changes in income, demographic changes, and changes in the cost structure of the housing industry. To ensure that future generations have a broader knowledge of the housing market and the alternatives that are available to them as housing consumers, it seems imperative that housing education be integrated into the home economics curriculum at the secondary level.

Housing and the Home Economics Curriculum

To date, housing appears to receive very little attention in high school curricula, including home economics curricula. In a study by Lodi and Newkirk (1988), home economics teachers were asked to rate 194 concepts that could be included in a curriculum. Although all 194 concepts were ranked to be very or somewhat important, housing was ranked at the bottom of a list of subject-matter areas.

Cargin and Williams (1984) surveyed home economics teachers in the Midwest to discover what subjects were most frequently taught. The sample was subdivided into beginning teachers and experienced teachers. The results show that housing is ranked fifth by beginning teachers and sixth by experienced teachers out of seven subject-matter areas. Only consumer education and family finance receive less attention in the home economics classroom than housing.

In a related study by Spitze (1985), 190 home economics classes in 40 high schools were observed to determine what percentage of time was being allocated to the various subject-matter areas in home economics. In the observed classes, housing was being taught in 4%, cooking-food in 27%, and sewing-clothing in 29%.

How Curricula are Developed

Laster (1986) identified many questions that need to be addressed when designing a curricula. Those questions are: "What subject matter should be taught? What learning processes shall be included? What shall be the goals or valued ends? What mode(s) of thinking shall be inherent in the design? Laster regarded the judgments made about curricula to be moral value-judgments, because curricula affect people, their relationships, and their long-term well-being. Curricula decisions, then, have public significance and ramifications.

Since curricula impact the public, it is possible that both the recipients and supporters of schools should be involved in their development. Martin, Saif, and Thiel (1987) reported that at least two-thirds of curriculum developers surveyed in a national study indicate that parents and community representatives should be involved in decisions relating to curriculum development. English and Kaufman (1975) feel the opinions of each major constituency, i.e. students, community, and professionals, should have equal recommendations in determining the goals of the curriculum. Kirst and Walker (1971) identified four value bases which influence curriculum decisions: 1) tradition, 2) science, 3) community, and 4) individual judgment. Tradition may be viewed as preserving the subject matter which has survived the test of time or perpetuating the status quo and inhibiting change. Science refers to subject matter that can be scientifically identified as essential to students. This scientific knowledge of housing could be identified by housing educators. Community members can help determine which elements in the curriculum deserve priority. Finally, students' desires or individual judgment and values should influence the direction of the curriculum as well.

Wulf and Schave (1984) identified four methods for selecting subject matter: 1) research into the literature of the field, 2) advice from experts, 3) intensive study of the field by curriculum writers, and 4) needs assessment. Any one or combination of these methods could be used to select the appropriate subject matter for a curriculum.

A needs assessment has often been used by curriculum developers as a method to select subject matter. It revolves around a simple model. A need is identified as a discrepancy between a future desired condition and the existing condition. This concept of need was first used by Tyler (1949) when he said a need was the difference between the "present condition of learners and the acceptable norm" (p. 7). A needs assessment is rooted in empiricism; and when it is used, that which is unknown becomes known and defined.

Hypotheses

It is assumed that in order to develop an adequate housing curricula, input is needed from many sources, including housing educators, parents, and other community representatives. In this research analysis, perceptions of high school home economics teachers were investigated regarding housing concepts included in their

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curricula. Perceptions of parents and social service agency representatives were analyzed regarding the importance of housing education for young people enrolled in home economics classes.

Three specific hypotheses were tested to better understand the importance of housing education in the home-economics classroom and to analyze the perceptions of parents and housing professionals:

1. The importance of housing education in the home economics classroom is ranked significantly different by some of the following groups: teachers, economically disadvantaged parents, other parents, and representatives of social service agencies.

2. There is a significant difference in the emphasis placed on housing concepts in high school home economics programs between new teachers and more experienced teachers.

3. Specific concepts in the area of housing are rated significantly different in importance by some of the following groups: teachers, parents, and representatives of social service agencies.

Methodology

Instrumentation and Data Collection

There were two similar questionnaires mailed to respondents. One was directed to parents and social service agency representatives and the second to secondary, home-economics teachers. The first consisted of a question and list of 136 concepts in home economics. The question was: "How important is this concept for students?" Respondents were asked to rate each concept on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=not important, 2=little importance, 3=important, 4=very important, 5=essential). These concepts were divided into eight subject-matter areas: Consumer Education, Management and Other Processes, Basic Employability Skills, Food and Nutrition, Housing and Home Furnishings, Child Development and Parenting, Family Relationships, and Clothing and Textiles.

The concepts were validated by subject-matter specialists, including a housing educator and an advisory council. The council consisted of teacher educators, home-economics teachers, a secondary-school administrator, social-service administrators, and a consulting statistician. The questionnaire was field tested for validity and revised.

The second survey was directed to home economics teachers. The eliciting question and responses were revised, but the same 136 concepts and 5 point scale were used. Home economics teachers were asked: "To what extent is this concept taught in your classroom (included in your curriculum plan)?" Possible responses were: 1 = not included in any course/program, 2 = included but not emphasized (has little importance in my course/program), 3 = included but only somewhat emphasized (has some importance in my course/program), 4 = moderately emphasized (is very important in my course/program), and 5 = emphasized a great deal (is an essential concept in my course/program). Both survey instruments also requested demographic information from the respondents.

Sample Selection

Twenty-four counties in a Midwestern state were randomly selected as a sample for this study. Parents were then randomly selected from these counties to comprise the parent sample. In addition, the entire population of agency representatives from the Department of Social Services in these selected counties were surveyed for the agency-representative sample. Home economics teachers in these counties, as well as another 24 randomly selected counties, were surveyed to comprise the teacher sample.

The procedure for data collection consisted of three mailings to the sample populations: initial questionnaire, post-card reminder, and follow-up questionnaire to those who had not responded. Returns from 45 of the 50 teachers surveyed resulted in a 90% response rate. A 96.2% response rate was achieved for the social service agency representatives (75 of 78). Of the 395 parents who received the questionnaire, 187 of economically disadvantaged parents completed the survey for a 77.9% response, and 208 other parents returned the completed the questionnaire for an 87.7% response rate.

Analysis

The 136 home economics concepts or topics listed in the questionnaire were categorized into eight content areas. Table 1 shows a rating of the subject-matter areas by home economics teachers, parents, and social service agency representatives based upon the mean score of each sample.

Table 1. Mean scores and contrasts for subject-matter importance by groups.

Subject Matter Areas in rank order of overall mean score	Teachers	Econ. Disadv. Parents	Other Parents	Agency Reps.
	N= 45	187	208	75
Basic Employability Skills	3.43a	4.06b	3.93b	4.13b
Child Development and Parenting	4.03a	3.94a	3.73a	4.10a*
Management and Other Processes	3.97a	3.92a	3.82a	3.83a
Family Relationships	3.75ab	3.83a	3.65b	3.83ab
Consumer Education	3.52a	3.83b	3.65a	3.57a
Food and Nutrition	3.75a	3.67a	3.44b	3.31b
Clothing and Textiles	3.71a	3.44b	3.19c	3.05c
Housing and Home Furnishings	3.42ac	3.42a	3.14b	3.18c

*Means with identical letters failed to test significantly different at $p = 0.05$.

Note. Scores were assigned as follows: 1=not included or not important; 2=not emphasized or little importance; 3=somewhat emphasized or important; 4=moderately emphasized or very important; and 5=greatly emphasized or essential.

The mean score for "child development and parenting" seems to indicate that teachers greatly emphasize this area. "Management and other processes" also had a high mean score. In contrast, housing and home furnishings had the lowest mean score, and therefore, appear to be last in terms of the emphasis received in the home economics classroom.

The mean scores for both economically disadvantaged and other parents indicate that employability skills are the most important subject matter in their children's home-economics classes. Housing is considered the least important. Economically disadvantaged parents gave housing a score similar to the teachers, but other parents appeared to perceive housing as being even less important and rated it low.

Social service agency representatives gave responses similar to both groups of parents; employability skills had the highest mean and housing the lowest. Agency representatives gave housing and home furnishings a low mean score. This shows that although it was considered important, it was among the least important subject-matter areas included in the home economics curriculum.

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Hypothesis one was tested using analysis of variance and Tukey-HSD statistics. Results of this analysis are shown in Table 1. The analysis shows there are several significant differences among the mean scores of the teachers, the two parent groups, and the social service agency representatives at the .05 level. Tukey-HSD statistics confirm these results and reveal the significant difference in scores between several groups. Teachers and economically disadvantaged parents rated the importance of housing similarly; both groups ranked it significantly higher than the other parents. Agency representatives perceived the importance of housing significantly lower than economically disadvantaged parents. Hypothesis one was accepted.

Teachers were divided into subgroups to test hypothesis two. One group included respondents who had 10 years or less experience in the profession. The other group included respondents who had been employed as teachers more than 10 years. The rating of the importance of housing concepts of these two groups were compared using analysis of variance. Results of this analysis are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Means and contrasts for housing concept importance by teachers.

Concepts	New Professionals (Less than 10 Years Experience)		More Experienced Teachers (10 Years or more Experience)	
	(Rank)	(Mean)	(Rank)	(Mean)
Housing alternatives	1	4.45	1	4.48
Goals/standards/values/resources				
influencing housing	2	4.25	1	4.48
Financial/legal aspects	2	4.25	5	4.04
Selecting furnishings and				
equipment	4	4.15	6	4.00
Evaluating home comfort/privacy				
security	6	3.80	3	4.16
Using decision making in housing	5	3.90	7	3.80
Determining quality in furniture*	9	3.50	4	4.08
Selecting housing	7	3.75	7	3.80
Making home safe	12	3.40	7	3.80
Storage principles	13	3.30	7	3.80
Decorating/limited budget	9	3.50	12	3.52
Influence of housing individuals/ family	11	3.45	11	3.54
Conserving energy	7	3.75	7	3.80
Identifying and evaluating housing information	14	2.85	14	3.28
Adapting housing for special needs	15	2.75	15	3.16
Caring for home	16	2.65	16	3.12
Legal rights/influencing change	17	2.63	17	2.84
Culture/housing future	18	2.35	18	2.56
Government and housing	19	2.05	19	2.13
Neighborhood	20	1.90	20	1.92

*Significantly different at the .10 level.

Note. Scores were assigned as follows: 1=not included; 2=not emphasized; 3=somewhat emphasized; 4=moderately emphasized; 5=greatly emphasized.

There were no significant differences in the importance of housing concepts at the 0.05 level. The importance of determining quality when purchasing furniture and home furnishings was the only concept rated significantly different by the two groups of teachers at the 0.10 level. Newer professionals rated this concept considerably lower than the more experienced home economics teachers. Therefore, hypothesis two was rejected. Both groups saw housing alternatives and goals, standards, values, and resources influencing housing as the most emphasized housing concepts taught in their classes. Newer professionals also strongly emphasized financial and legal aspects of renting or owning in their classes.

Table 3. Means and contrasts for housing concept importance by groups.

Concepts	Teachers	Econ. Disadv.	Other Parents	Agency Reps.
N=	45	187	208	75
Financial/legal aspects	4.13a	4.06a	3.84a	3.80a
Making home safe	3.62a	4.04b	3.76a	3.84ab
Conserving energy	3.49a	4.03b	3.65a	3.55a
Selecting housing	3.78a	3.65a	3.43a	3.60a
Evaluating home comfort/privacy security	4.00a	3.58b	3.34c	3.21c
Determining quality in furniture	3.82a	3.58ab	3.36bc	3.25c
Selecting furnishings and equipment	4.07a	3.49b	3.20c	3.23c
Using decision making in housing	3.84a	3.45b	3.21c	3.29c
Legal rights/influencing change	2.75a	3.58b	3.22c	3.17ac
Decorating/limited budget	3.51a	3.44a	3.06b	2.95b
Housing alternatives	4.47a	3.17b	2.88c	3.16c
Identifying and evaluating housing information	3.09a	3.28a	3.07a	3.17a
Goals/standards/values/resources influencing housing	4.38a	3.09b	2.91b	3.11b
Storage principles	3.58a	3.22ac	3.01bc	2.87b
Adapting housing for special needs	2.98ab	3.23a	2.84b	3.01ab
Influence of housing individuals/family	3.50a	3.09b	2.83c	3.11abc
Government and housing	2.09a	3.09b	2.74c	2.64c
Neighborhood	1.91c	2.89b	2.58c	2.65bc
Culture/housing future	2.47ab	2.69a	2.43b	2.52ab

*Means with identical letters failed to test significantly different at $p = 0.05$.

Note. Scores were assigned as follows: 1=not included or not important; 2=not emphasized or little importance; 3=somewhat emphasized or important; 4=moderately emphasized or very important; 5=greatly emphasized or essential.

To test the final hypothesis, group means of each of the 20 housing concepts were compared among teachers, parents, and agency representatives (See Table 3). Five (25%) concepts were perceived by teachers to receive moderate to great emphasis in the classroom. They include: housing alternatives; goals, standards, values, and resources influencing housing; financial and legal aspects of owning or renting; selecting home furnishings and equipment; and evaluating housing. Understanding how to shape or control the neighborhood was rated as being not included or included but not emphasized by most of the teachers in the sample.

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Teachers' perceptions of importance rated significantly greater at the 0.05 level than perceptions of importance from all other groups for the following concepts: housing alternatives; goals, standards, values, and resources influencing housing; selecting home furnishings and equipment; evaluating a home; and using decision making in housing. Teachers' ratings of importance were significantly lower than economically disadvantaged parents' ratings for making the home safe; the influence of housing on individuals or family; and conserving energy. Both groups of parents' perceptions were significantly higher than teachers' perceptions for caring for the home; legal rights and influencing change; government and housing; and controlling neighborhood environment. Therefore, hypothesis three was accepted.

Conclusions

The results of this study show some divergence between the importance of housing in people's lives and the emphasis it receives in the secondary, home economics curriculum. In this analysis home economics teachers rate housing as the least emphasized topic in their classes. Parents and social service agency representatives perceived housing as being the least important home economics subject for high school students. An interesting finding shows that agency representatives who work with economically disadvantaged families see housing education as being significantly less important than their clientele (who rate it the same as home economics teachers).

It may be assumed that new home economics professionals would place greater emphasis on housing in their classrooms than more experienced teachers because of their more current training and, their own frustrations of being a housing consumer in a market that has few desirable alternatives to offer young people. In actuality, the opposite result was found in this analysis. Of the twenty housing concepts, only four had a higher mean rating by the newer professionals than the more experienced home economics teachers. Because there was only one significant difference in ratings between these two groups even at the 0.10 level, it would appear that the level of teaching experience has little relationship with teachers' decisions to include housing education as part of the home economics curriculum.

"Housing alternatives" and "goals, standards, values, and resources influencing housing" appear to be the two concepts most strongly emphasized by teachers. Those parents who are economically disadvantaged perceive the housing topics of "safety" and "conserving energy" as being most important. Among the four groups of respondents, parents who are not economically disadvantaged give lowest priority to "housing and furnishings" of all subject-matter areas. Within this category they rated the concept of "financial and legal aspects" as most important. Social service agency representatives feel "home safety" is most important, followed closely by "financial and legal aspects". This group rates some housing concepts significantly different than their clientele, the economically disadvantaged parents. There were no significant differences between the other parent group and agency representatives.

Implications

Housing professionals have much to learn from this study. Housing educators at the college level should work harder to stress the importance of housing education to future secondary teachers and social service workers. Housing is of major concern to young families today. Perhaps more emphasis should be placed on housing curricula at the undergraduate level to prepare future teachers and other professionals that work with families. Without a solid base of housing information, more young people will find themselves in a dilemma many already face: limited knowledge regarding available housing alternatives, inability to acquire suitable shelter, living longer with parents, having to move back into the parental home, or even homelessness.

To help secondary home-economics teachers place a greater emphasis on housing in their curriculum, housing educators may want to provide additional graduate coursework for teachers or offer in-service programs. It may be beneficial to contact the director of home-economics education in state departments of education in order to advertise courses and in-service programs. Coordination with the director to provide workshops through vocational education meetings could be another avenue to provide in-service education. Educational materials could be developed that would help teachers in their efforts with the young, high-school student. Finally, there should be an effort to publish articles in journals and newsletters that are popular with teachers, such as Illinois Teacher, What's New in Home Economics?, and Forecast. These publications could help teachers understand the importance of housing as a part of the curriculum as well as give them ideas on how to use or find housing information and resources.

This emphasis on housing education must be stressed not only in the classroom, but also in the community. Professionals such as realtors, builders, mortgage loan officers, architects, and designers can also benefit from the results of this study. This research shows that young people do not receive a great deal of housing information in their home economics classes. Until housing education becomes more of a priority at the secondary level, these housing professionals will need to share in the education of young, inexperienced housing consumers. It is critical that they recognize this challenge and are willing to accept a role in housing education in addition to their normally prescribed duties as professionals in the housing industry.

The role of the adult educator assumes significant importance because of the results of this study. Since young people receive little housing education in high school, the task of educating those students about housing may need to be delegated to cooperative extension housing specialists, adult-education programs, community colleges, or as part of the continuing education programs within colleges and universities.

The future of our society may depend upon how well we prepare future generations to cope with this ever-changing world. Young people will face many challenges as they enter the 21st century. One of the most critical will be the acquisition of suitable housing. Housing education should be emphasized at the secondary level so that future generations may have a better opportunity to enjoy a quality of life consistent with what they have come to expect. Without a foundation of housing knowledge, young people may struggle to attain the "decent home and suitable living environment" they have been promised. Housing educators can be key "players" in working collaboratively with teachers and other professionals to improve the quality of housing education.

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