



Fiction as a Didactic Tool to Explore Challenging Issues in Home and Consumer Studies

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate student teachers' views regarding the use of fiction when teaching about gender equality in Home and Consumer Studies (HCS) in Sweden. This paper draws on questionnaire data and is part of a larger project exploring ways to renew the teaching of gender equality in HCS. Of 97 students who participated in a workshop, 94 chose to answer a follow-up questionnaire. Qualitative content analysis of responses to four questions on the questionnaire resulted in four themes: 'Using the short story requires didactic knowledge and awareness', 'The model can be used as a tool for structure', 'Using fiction in HCS has potential', and 'Support is essential'. Overall, the participants expressed a positive attitude towards using fiction when teaching about gender equality in HCS. The study implies that fiction can be used as a didactic tool to approach challenging issues in HCS teaching. The book-talk model used in the workshop can be successfully used to structure discussions about gender equality to make societal structures and phenomena visible. Furthermore, the results indicate that different kinds of support are needed when using fiction, for example textbooks containing short stories, teacher guides, and collaboration with colleagues.

KEYWORDS: HOME AND CONSUMER STUDIES, FICTION, BOOK TALK, GENDER EQUALITY

Introduction

Student teachers studying Home and Consumer Studies (HCS) at Kristianstad University in Sweden are expected to learn about gender equality and the subject's didactics to prepare them for teaching independently. HCS can be described as an interdisciplinary subject, where life in the home and the family is in focus while at the same time considering the relationship between the home and society. These relationships become apparent through the human ecology theory which forms a basis for the HCS syllabus (Hjälmeskog & Höijer, 2019b).

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HCS in compulsory schooling has a strong tradition of 'doing', relating issues of domestic life primarily to activities including food and cooking (Bohm, 2022; Höijer, 2013; Lindblom, 2016). HCS has been part of teacher education at institutions of higher education in Sweden since the late 19th century (Höijer, 2013). Within teacher education, one of the aims is to develop didactic models and methods for teaching (Håkansson & Sundberg, 2020; Wickman, 2012). One such model could be the use of fiction to approach difficult topics and provide opportunities to experience a theme from different perspectives (Alsheimer, 2004; Edvardsson, 2020; Mottart et al., 2009), both in Swedish HCS and in related subjects across the globe.

Fiction as a didactic tool in higher education

Research has shown that fiction can have a given place in different types of professional education and training (Mottart et al., 2009) eg. degree studies in law (Alsheimer, 2004; Dahlberg, 2003; Pérez et al., 2018), medicine (Ahlzén, 2010; Graham et al., 2016; Mejia-Rivera, 2019; Rolfe, 2002; Voss, 2012), and leadership education and business (Brokerhof et al., 2023; Hoggan & Cranton, 2014; Michaelson, 2016).

In a law degree, fiction can develop students' language, making it broader and richer. Fiction also made it possible for students to look at law and justice from different perspectives and the students developed a broader understanding of the ways people can think and act (Alsheimer, 2004). Dahlberg (2003) noticed that fiction helped students describe the way law and justice is viewed in different times and places. In criminology the students made an improvement in their understanding of concept through fiction reading (Pérez et al., 2018). In other words, fiction helped the reader to understand both historical times and their own society's view of law and justice.

In medicine, fiction made it possible for the students to become the characters in the novels. The students thereby developed an increased understanding of how other people think and act, and they developed empathy and an increased capacity to identify with their clients (Graham et al., 2016; Rolfe, 2002). At the same time the students learned more about themselves (Ahlzén, 2010). Fictional literature also supported a theoretical understanding and can therefore be seen as a complement to scientific literature and clinical training (Voss, 2012). Mejia-Rivera (2019) shows how fiction enables students to reflect ethically, historically and epistemologically on different perspectives of medical practice, but also on the doctor-patient relationship. Moreover, reading fiction can lead students to develop solidarity, empathy and recognition of the human suffering of the sick.

In leadership education and business fiction helped students to understand ethical issues and developed their empathy, as well as fiction encouraged them to reconsider taken-for-granted assumptions (Hoggan & Cranton, 2014; Michaelson, 2016). Fiction could also develop "moral muscles" (Brokerhof et al., 2023). Moral muscle should be seen as a dynamic moral capacity that students need to develop, and this is done through regular reflection and practice and by reading and discussing fiction in education, more specific in business ethics education.

As can be seen above, fiction can be used as a didactic tool in higher education. This didactic tool can help develop students' empathy, solidarity, moral muscles, understanding of others but also make students reflect on different problems, dilemmas, or issues. One such issue could be gender equality.

Gender equality

According to the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (SGEA) (2023) “gender equality means that women and men have the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities in all areas of life”. Currently Sweden recognizes two legal genders: woman and man. The SGEA underlines that increased gender equality does not only pertain to equal distribution of power between the sexes, but rather the understanding that no conceptions about gender should decide or limit what men and women have the opportunity to do. Gender equality is recognized as being part of sustainable development. Different aspects of sustainable development are included in the Swedish compulsory school curriculum and these can be taught in a variety of ways to serve different purposes (Alm Fjellborg & Kramming, 2022). The fifth Global Sustainability Goal is ‘Gender Equality’ (United Nations, 2023) stating that this is a fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. A target for the fifth goal is to ‘Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as is nationally appropriate’. Recent research, however, indicates a backlash against gender equality in the form of rising modern sexism (Off et al., 2022). Drawing on data from a questionnaire collected in 2020/2021 across 27 European Union countries, it was found that men show greater opposition to advances in women’s rights than women. This was seen especially among young men who expressed agreement with the statement that women’s rights have ‘gone too far’. The study found that young men were particularly likely to perceive a threat to men’s opportunities if they regarded institutions, such as public education, as unfair. The gender gap in academic performance in Sweden is well known (Boman, 2022; Holmlund et al., 2019) and official statistics for HCS confirm this. For the academic year 2022/23, 27.6 per cent of girls achieved the highest grade (A) in HCS, while only 9.2 per cent of boys were awarded the same grade (Statistics Sweden, 2023). Analyzing the performance of Swedish 15-year-olds on the national assessment in geography, Alm Fjellborg and Kramming (2022) found that girls outperformed boys on items concerning sustainable development, particularly with regard to the social domain.

In a literature review, Sabbe and Aelterman (2007) conclude that two opposing perspectives within theoretical approaches to gender can be distinguished: the essentialist and the constructionist. The essentialist perspective has been described as deterministic, meaning that innate biological differences between the sexes are claimed to shape divergent social behaviors and characteristics. Maleness and femaleness, therefore, are perceived as oppositional traits that are assumed to be inherent properties among men and women, respectively. Essentialist thoughts, according to Sabbe and Aelterman, are still firmly embedded in habits, thoughts and social institutions. A social constructionist approach recognizes that individuals ‘do’ gender and that gender socialization occurs throughout individual’s lives (Mycek, 2018). Unconsciously, both men and women can reproduce gender inequality when performing symbolic practices and interactions that construct them as ‘male’ or ‘female’. For example, Mycek (2018) found that men identifying as vegans or vegetarians did not abandon their masculine performances by engaging in a practice perceived as feminine when choosing to eat a meat-free diet. Instead, they masculinized a practice perceived as feminine and thus maintained control of their identities.

Teaching gender equality

As Mycek's (2018) study illustrated, the social construction of gender entails norms about femininity and masculinity that exist within a binary, and such binary thinking results in the objectification and domination of the subordinate part of the binary. For example, through socialization, certain performance elements become associated with one gender or the other, often resulting in binaries that restrict 'suitable' behavior for both men and women. Gender equality has been part of the Swedish school curriculum since compulsory schooling was introduced in 1969 (Hjälmeskog, 2000; Kreitz-Sandberg & Lahelma, 2021). Today, gender equality is also integrated into teacher education at institutions of higher education in Sweden, for example through degree goals concerning gender equality (see for example Högskolan Kristianstad, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). However, even though the importance of gender equality has been accepted, there are indications that it is not being transformed into meaningful practice in teacher education (Kreitz-Sandberg & Lahelma, 2021). The global demands of sustainable development regarding the fifth goal, gender equality, therefore result in local practices in teacher education programs. According to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2019), there is a lack of insight in HCS teachers' approach to gender equality in Swedish compulsory schooling. In today's HCS syllabus, the aim states that "Teaching shall contribute to student's developing knowledge about, and be given opportunities to reflect on, norms, gender equality, and work distribution in the home" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022, p. 43, our translation). However, the thematic inspection carried out by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2019) indicated that the deficiencies in this area are considerable, mentioning that important aspects of gender equality in the home, as well as in society, were not sufficiently highlighted in teaching, and that discussions held in the classrooms were often limited to how it is at home without parallels being drawn to societal structures and phenomena. Considering that gender equality is a challenging topic for teachers, and that research concerning HCS in higher education in Sweden is scarce, it would be interesting to explore if fiction could be a useful tool in teaching gender equality at universities.

Aim

The aim of this study was to investigate student teachers' views regarding the use of fiction when teaching about gender equality in HCS.

Introducing the gender equality and fiction-project

This study is part of a larger project exploring how fiction can be used when teaching gender equality in HCS. The project started when a group of teacher educators wanted to develop their own teaching approach regarding gender equality when educating the next generation of HCS teachers. Three HCS teacher educators and one teacher educator in Swedish and Core Education Subjects (the authors) began collaborating in spring 2021. Their aim was to explore the possibilities of using fiction as a tool to teach about gender equality with the overall goal being to find a lesson plan that could work in all HCS teacher training courses. The project was exploratory in that questions raised by the participants guided the next step in the process. For example, a general invitation to participate in the project was sent to all teacher educators involved in HCS courses at the university. It was decided that all short stories suggested by the Swedish teacher educator would be read by all of the group's four members. After further suggestions were presented, read and discussed, all agreed on one short story to proceed with: 'I'll kick them in the shins' (*Jag ska sparka dom på smalbenet*, Engqvist, 1980). To establish a common ground within the group, the members taught each other about central HCS issues (for

example the syllabus (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022), Human Ecology Theory (Hjälmeskog & Höijer, 2019a), and knowledge in action (Molander, 2015), as well as Aidan Chamber’s model for book-talk (Chambers, 2011).

The short story

The short story selected for the project (Engqvist, 1980) tells of a family comprising a mother, father and two children. The father becomes unemployed and starts doing work around the house, he takes his children on a cycling trip, and they go fishing together. After a couple of months, he grows tired of this and turns to the bottle. His drinking escalates until one day he hits his wife, whereupon she leaves and takes the children with her. To support herself and the children, the mother takes a job outside of the home as a cleaner. The story is told by one of the children who describes their ambivalent feelings towards the father; they want to get their father and the family back together again.

This short story was chosen because it can be related to gender equality in many ways. It deals with the distribution of work where the man works outside the home and gets paid while the woman works unpaid at home with responsibility for the home and the children. There is also a distribution of tasks in the home. The man repairs the house and spends time in the garage, while the woman cooks and sews. Questions are also raised about the misuse of alcohol, violence in close relationships, and what constitutes a family. The story can be discussed further from the perspective of human ecology theory and how different arenas are interrelated and are interdependent on each other.

The book-talk model

In the project, the book-talk was based on Chamber’s model (Chambers, 2011), modified by Edvardsson (2019). The basis for this is a reading log consisting of a matrix with five headings (Figure 1).

Likes	Dislikes	Questions	Patterns	Connections

Figure 1 Reading log used as part of the book-talk (Edvardsson 2019)

The five headings, Likes, Dislikes, Questions, Patterns and Connections, all serve to guide the reader while reading the book and allow them to systematically note personal reflections. This reading log is used as support during a structured book-talk in a group. During the book-talk,

the five headings are reviewed one at a time, and each participant gets the opportunity to share their personal reflections. Thereafter all participants are given time to reflect individually on the groups combined reading log to search for commonalities. These commonalities are then discussed in the whole group and made visible through color markings or drawn lines. Finally, a focused discussion based on the emerging themes is held.

The workshop

All 97 students taking HCS at the university during 2022-2023 were offered a workshop on gender equality as part of their regular course. These workshops followed a certain order:

- A. Introduction to the short story to read, as well as the opportunity to listen to it.
- B. Introduction through video on how to work with a reading log (Figure 1) in relation to the text.
- C. After reading and/or listening to the short story and filling out an individual reading log, all individual logs are compiled into one common log for the whole group.
- D. Identification of themes that could be found in the common reading log.
- E. Discussion based on the themes found and topics prepared by the project group.

All 97 students participated in the workshops which took 90-95 minutes each. No reward was offered to the participants.

Method

After the workshop all 97 students were invited to fill out a follow-up questionnaire. This paper draws on data from the 94 student teachers at Kristianstad University in Sweden who completed the questionnaire. The study is part of a larger project exploring ways to renew gender equality teaching in HCS.

Choice of method

For this study, a questionnaire was the method of choice to generate data in a systematic way in close connection to the workshop. This accessibility, and the relatively limited number of questions, could be reasons for the high response rate (94 of 97 participants). To obtain even more qualitative data, other methods, for example follow-up focus groups or individual interviews, could have been used to explore fiction, gender equality and HCS more deeply. The reason for using a questionnaire was originally to gain feedback regarding the short story, the book-talk model, the use of fiction, and thoughts about support. Since the participants contributed so generously with comprehensive answers, it was decided that the questionnaire would be suitable for analysis in this part of the project.

Data collection

The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and included three closed-ended questions (yes/no) including the possibility to comment on each question in free text. These were followed by one open-ended question regarding what support would be needed to facilitate the use of fiction and the book-talk model in their teaching.

The three closed-ended questions were:

- 1) Would you consider using the short story *Jag ska sparka dom på smalbenet* in HCS education?

- 2) Would you consider using the book-talk model in HCS education?
- 3) Would you consider using fiction in HCS education?

The open-ended question was:

- 1) What support would you need to facilitate the use of fiction and the book-talk model in your HCS education?

94 out of 97 students completed the questionnaire (Table 1). To ensure student anonymity, the questionnaire was completed anonymously. Through this procedure we gave students the opportunity to give honest answers and not answers that they thought the lecturers wanted.

Analysis

To ensure that the analysis adhered to a rigorous and transparent structure, it was decided to follow the eight steps of Qualitative Content Analysis described by Schreier (2014). These steps included:

- 1) Deciding on your research question
- 2) Selecting your material
- 3) Building a coding frame
- 4) Dividing your material into units of coding
- 5) Trying out your coding frame
- 6) Evaluating and modifying your coding frame
- 7) Main analysis
- 8) Interpreting and presenting your findings.

In this project, the collected answers were combined in a common Excel document. Each of the authors initially read and re-read the material individually to find units of coding relating to each question. On comparison it was discovered that similar or identical units had been identified, which then formed the basis for the authors to agree on categories and themes (Table 2).

The high response rate to the questionnaire, and the triangulation of the codes in the process of analysis, strengthens the trustworthiness and reliability of the results presented in this article.

Ethical considerations

The present study was not required to be vetted in an ethical review (Swedish Ethical Review Authority, 2023; Swedish Research Council, 2017) according to the Swedish Ethics Review Act. However, the authors strove to conduct research of high quality based on ethical norms and values. For example, this meant that students were informed about the intention of the project group to document and write about the project during the introduction to the workshop. When the link to the questionnaire was distributed after the workshop, the students were reminded about this intention by the authors and informed that their participation was voluntary and that no personal and identifying information would be collected. Even though it is possible to identify the university where the authors working with the project are employed, this does not mean that students or students taking specific courses in HCS can be identified. All questionnaires were collected without any identifying information, such as gender, name, age, or course.

Results

Overall, the participants expressed a positive attitude towards using fiction to teach about gender equality in HCS. Of the 97 students who participated in the workshops, 94 chose to answer the questionnaire (Table 1).

Table 1 An overview of the *yes*- and *no*-answers to the three first questions in the questionnaire

Question 1		Question 2		Question 3	
Would you consider using the short story <i>Jag ska sparka dom på smalbenet</i> in HCS education?		Would you consider using the book-talk model in HCS education?		Would you consider using fiction in HCS education?	
Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
75	19	87	7	87	7
94		94		94	

Of those, 87 reported that they would consider using fiction and the book-talk model as part of their own teaching practices. In the presentation of the results, the themes emerging from the units of coding (Table 2) are used as headings. To illustrate the themes, a few quotations from the questionnaire responses are used; these have been translated from Swedish into English.

Table 2 Coding frame

Question	Units of coding	Themes
1. Would you consider using the short story <i>Jag ska sparka dom på smalbenet</i> in HCS education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didactic awareness • Relevance • Norms • Collaboration • Flexibility • Distance • Time/room • Relations 	Using the short story requires didactic knowledge and awareness
2. Would you consider using the book-talk model in HCS education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure • Tool • Time 	The model can be used as a tool for structure
3. Would you consider using fiction in HCS education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential • Door opener • Frame factors 	Using fiction in HCS has potential
4. What support would you need to use fiction and the book-talk model in your HCS education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Material • Collaboration • Preparation 	Support is essential

Using the short story requires didactic knowledge and awareness

The comments by the participants regarding whether they would consider using the short story mainly concerned issues relating to didactic knowledge and the teacher's role. For example, some commented that working with this text requires a good and trusting relationship with the group of students, knowing who they are and maybe even being aware of their home situation. The circumstances, so to say, must be 'just right', because in the story the topic framing gender equality is sensitive and difficult. To this end, some participants wrote that they would like more time to prepare before approaching students and including the text in their teaching. This preparation meant, for example, establishing a collaboration with colleagues in other subjects or with the school counselor, or possibly including the text as part of a theme, using other more accessible texts initially. Another aspect conveyed in the answers to the questionnaire was concerns about the students' ages, and several commented that the text probably would work better with older rather than younger students. There were also suggestions about how a lesson using this text could be carried out. These were, for example, reading it aloud or together, being prepared with clarifying and supporting questions, or using it as part of a flipped classroom where the students read and reflect on their own before meeting in class. A few commented that the theme of the short story is too close to many students' everyday life and consequences that could result from reading it might be difficult, meaning that there may be better texts to use. However, this was also mentioned as a reason to use it, for example:

The short story sheds light on a very important and current area of society that several children at school experience in everyday life.

Other aspects of the story that were noted as positive were that it provides an opportunity for students to regard and discuss an issue from another position, or role, than their own. In particular, the narrator in the book is a child, which may make it more relatable. Several also commented that the story raises many important thoughts and feelings which could lead to good discussions. Some participants wrote that the domestic violence and alcohol addiction presented in the story are difficult topics and too central to the story, diverting focus from gender equality. On the other hand, some mentioned the presence of these difficult themes as arguments for using it:

The text has an easy language for students to understand. It highlights important issues that need to be discussed and raised, but it is easier to do that by reading a text about another person. Then it won't be so revealing for students who can draw on their own experiences. Division of labor in the home, what gender equality means, alcoholism and unemployment, financial difficulties, domestic violence, etc.

Norms about masculinity and femininity, concerning who does what in a household, and other normative structures included in the story, were reported as reasons to use this short story to discuss everyday life at home and gender equality. However, one participant wrote that the story exposed the father too much, with the risk that students may believe that it is always the man who is in the wrong. Some participants read the story as timeless, meaning that in one way it talked about a society removed from time while at the same time dealing with themes that are still relevant today.

The model can be used as a tool for structure

When commenting on whether they would consider using the model, participants mainly mentioned its structuring properties and how these can be a tool. Chamber's model for book-talk, with participants combining reading logs and using a specific structure for finding themes

and discussing them, was mostly considered a good way to structure one's own thoughts and focus on specific aspects of the text while at the same time being flexible and malleable to the individual and the topic. For example, although the matrix had a specific number of boxes, the reader was not required to complete all of them. The headings for each column (see Figure 1) served to organize thoughts while reading the story. One participant wrote:

Good model to use for fiction, fun, it makes you more active while reading. It created a purpose with reading.

Some mentioned that there were maybe too many headings and suggested that Patterns and/or Connections could be removed. Another suggestion was to have examples of what could be written in the different boxes or to combine them in some way. Although most comments about the model as a supporting structure were positive, a few mentioned that it could be difficult, especially for younger students, or that it was just dull.

Overall, the participants commented favorably on the model, as this example shows:

The model was a good tool, clear and engaging. A good support for discussions that forces you to see connections, patterns and to reflect on what has been read.

Participants saw the model as a tool to help a reader uncover what a text is about and to help understand the story. Through the structure of the log and the book-talk, they believed that patterns could become visible and therefore possible to discuss. One participant wrote that it is important that the students feel that their thoughts and emotions are relevant. The process of color-coding the group's combined reading logs and finding patterns together can uncover themes and pave the way for meaningful discussions based on the readers' experiences of the story. Some participants wrote that they had concerns about using the model in relation to the reality of working as a teacher, where time is limited, and did not want to create extra work. One way to deal with these concerns that was suggested in the questionnaire responses could be to collaborate with colleagues in other subjects.

Using fiction in HCS has potential

According to the comments, using fiction as part of teaching makes it possible to approach topics that can be difficult to work with and also invite collaboration across subjects. Some mentioned that all subjects, even HCS, should work with reading and writing, although the context must decide when. Students need to practice how to read and understand a text, and how to decipher what is being said between the lines. It was noted that including fiction could create opportunities to vary one's teaching repertoire and make the subject more interesting for the students. One participant wrote:

I think it [fiction] is a good way for students to become aware of HCS and its content from a wider perspective and not just something that you do at home or in the classroom, instead it is something that is always present and that permeates the whole of society in different ways.

The potential to use fiction as a tool to illustrate the broad scope of HCS was expressed by several participants and some described the idea as novel, fun, and modern. A few mentioned that they did not consider themselves to be readers, which could make it hard to include fiction in their own working practices. Moreover, finding relevant texts was mentioned as a possible obstacle, as well as having the time to find texts and prepare. There were suggestions that shorter texts might be easier to include, and one participant wrote that the option being able to listen to the story was important. Fiction was described by some as something of a door

opener, both in relation to collaboration with other teachers and approaching difficult or abstract topics. For example, one participant wrote:

Considering the fact that the important aspect of gender equality in the home is something that is not focused upon enough in HCS, I think that a short story like the one we read could be a good introduction to begin working with it.

Support is essential

We asked the participants what kind of support they would need in order to include fiction and book-talk as part of the HCS teaching, and almost half answered that they needed material. Several mentioned that the time to look for texts to use, and to prepare discussion questions to work with alongside the texts, was something they did not have; access to resources with texts that had been vetted and prepared would be needed. This included, for example, tips on novels or short stories to use, suggestions for discussion topics relating to the texts, and complete lesson plans. ‘You can’t get too much help’, one participant wrote, ‘not for my sake or the student’s’. Collaboration with other teachers was given as an example of support. This was either as a way for students to work with the model or a story in different ways, or as a way for the teachers to discuss the text in advance and prepare discussion topics. One participant wrote:

I would need to discuss a text like this beforehand, because I don’t think one person can pick up on all the nuances in the story that can be raised when fifteen students read it. Then at least I would be prepared for a part of the discussions.

Mentorship from teachers with more experience in working with fiction and book-talk was also suggested as a means of support, as well as from the school librarian. A concern for students’ health and emotions was also indicated in the answers, since several mentioned that collaboration with the school nurse or school counselor might be needed. In addition, participants also expressed a wish to have the possibility to prepare themselves by practicing and acquiring more skills in working with fiction and book-talk, as well as gaining more specific knowledge about gender equality and gender theory.

Discussion

Brief summary of results

Overall the participants expressed a positive attitude towards using fiction to teach about gender equality in HCS, and would consider using the short story themselves depending on their didactic knowledge and the teacher’s role. It was noted that working with a fictional text provides an opportunity for students to consider and discuss an issue from a position other than their own. Participants mainly appreciated the structuring properties of using a specific model for book-talk while reading and discussing a text and saw the model as a tool to help a reader reveal what a text is about and understand the story. Findings further suggest that using fiction as part of teaching makes it possible to approach topics that can be challenging to work with, and to invite collaboration across subjects. The potential to use fiction as a tool to illustrate the broad scope of HCS was a view expressed by several participants and the idea was described as novel, fun, and modern, although almost half said that they would need support in finding material to use.

Discussion of results

The aim of this study was to investigate student teachers' views of including fiction when teaching about gender equality in HCS. The answers to the questionnaire indicated a generally positive attitude. The specific short story chosen for the project (Engqvist, 1980) was regarded by some as being difficult because it dealt with both substance abuse and domestic violence. However, the positive results can be related to previous research, such as Alsheimer (2004), Hoggan and Cranton (2014), Mejia-Rivera (2019), Michaelson (2016) and Mottart et al. (2009), which shows that fiction can be used to discuss challenging issues in many different disciplines across the globe. By engaging in a text, a reader can try out different characters and perspectives, without risking becoming too intimate or personal (Ahlzén, 2010; Graham et al., 2016; Rolfe, 2002). One area of development that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2019) highlighted in their thematic inspection of HCS regarding gender equality was that discussions needed to relate to societal structures and phenomena rather than just the student's own experiences from their private lives. Even though the chosen text dealt with issues that can be experienced as challenging, the positive attitude voiced by the participants indicates that fiction can indeed serve as a didactic tool when teaching about domestic life and gender equality. Through fiction it is therefore possible to make visible the complex relationships between family and home and the surrounding society as described in the human ecology theory (Hjälmeskog & Höijer, 2019b). HCS has a broad scope, including such diverse matters as private economy, consumer rights, environmental issues, climate change, body issues, food and nutrition (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). Fiction could be used as a didactic tool to also work with all these matters and invite discussion, and not only with gender equality, both in Sweden and elsewhere. Previous research indicates that HCS traditionally has a focus on cooking (Bohm, 2022; Höijer, 2013), and that time for reflection and discussion is marginalized (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2019). Including fiction could be a way for a HCS teacher to explore new ways of teaching and expand their didactic toolbox. However, judging by the results in the present study, the need for support to accomplish this is substantial. Such support could, for example, include an edited textbook with short stories accompanied by a teacher's guide.

Gender equality is the fifth Global Sustainability Goal (United Nations, 2023). Both HCS teachers (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2019) and teacher educators in Sweden and Finland (Kreitz-Sandberg & Lahelma, 2021) state that they already include gender equality in their teaching. Examples show, however, that it is not part of planned activities but instead happens when the opportunity is given (Kreitz-Sandberg & Lahelma, 2021; Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2019). It is important as a teacher to be able to receive support not only in the subject syllabus, but in the whole national curriculum, as well as in global goals. Although HCS has a broad scope, it is necessary to collaborate with colleagues, have a supportive management, and be given access to different resources to break tradition and include fiction.

Implications

Our findings suggest that reading and discussing literature encourages people to adopt a variety of perspectives, broadening their horizons and allowing them to develop empathy or 'moral muscles' (Brokerhof et al., 2023). Fiction-based teaching is therefore something that can be used in higher education, school education and teacher training. The fictional texts allow the reader to discuss challenging issues without becoming personal or private. The conversation can be about the text and the textual conversation can in turn be linked to, for example, social structures. The results indicate that fiction-based teaching can be a success factor when teaching about gender equality.

Limitations and future research

This study is qualitative and small-scale, which means that we cannot comment on all prospective or active HCS teachers. In other words, the results only apply to the 94 students who participated in the study. To gain a better understanding of how fiction can be used in teaching about gender equality, further research is needed and perhaps also research with control groups where fictional texts are used in one group and other types of teaching material in another.


There is also a contextual limitation. The study is conducted in Sweden with its current laws, policy documents and curriculums. If the same study had been conducted in another context, the results could have been different. Further research on fiction as a didactic tool for exploring challenging issues in Home and Consumer Studies is needed and it would be interesting to conduct a multi-country study. Through a multi-country study, comparisons between different countries could be made to find similarities and differences.

Conclusion


Based on the results of this study and supported by international research (eg. Brokerhof et al., 2023; Mejia-Rivera, 2019), we conclude that fiction can indeed be used as a didactic tool to teach about challenging issues in HCS. The book-talk model can be a successful way to structure discussions about gender equality so that societal structures and phenomena become visible. Furthermore, the results also indicate that different kinds of support are necessary, for example textbooks with short stories, teacher guides, and collaboration with colleagues.

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