PEER-REVIEWED PAPER

Teachers' Perspectives on Advancing the Teaching of Home Economics on the Island of Ireland

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Abstract

Home Economics education aims to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, and the dispositions and values for healthy and sustainable living. This research undertakes a comparative analysis of the enablers and barriers to teaching Home Economics on the island of Ireland from the perspective of Home Economics teachers. A survey was completed by 358 Home Economics teachers, comprising 198 teachers from Ireland and 160 teachers from Northern Ireland (NI). The analysis identified similar aims for Home Economics education, although how the subject was configured on the broader curricula and what elements of the field of Home Economics were included in curriculum specifications varied. Whilst the majority of Home Economics teachers felt the subject was supported in schools, they reported significant challenges in relation to the resourcing of the subject; the workload and expectation involved in teaching a practical subject; how practical classes are timetabled; and the curriculum content, particularly at senior cycle which may have an adverse impact on the teaching and learning of the subject in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: **HOME ECONOMICS, SECONDARY SCHOOL, PRACTICAL EDUCATION, TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES**

Introduction

The island of Ireland has two distinct jurisdictions with separate Governments—Ireland, and Northern Ireland (NI), with each country having its own education departments. The Department for Education, Northern Ireland (DENI) approves all curricula developed by the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) which is then implemented in schools across NI. Similarly, in Ireland, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) develops curricula for approval by the Minster for Education and Skills.

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Home Economics, as a curriculum area, "facilitates students to discover and further develop their own resources and capabilities to be used in their personal life" and to prepare them for "optimal and sustainable living" (International Federation of Home Economics [IFHE], 2008, p. 1). The subject Home Economics has a long tradition on the secondary school curriculum in Ireland (McCloat & Caraher, 2019); however, recent curricula changes in both jurisdictions have had a significant impact on the teaching of Home Economics for both teachers and students. This paper presents the results of a comparative study of the enablers and barriers of the teaching of Home Economics on the island of Ireland from the perspective of Home Economics teachers. The comparative analysis is explored across four themes: teaching Home Economics; resourcing Home Economics; teachers' perspectives of the curriculum; and policy implications for Home Economics education on the island.

Home Economics on the Northern Ireland Curriculum

Key Stage 3 (KS3) (ages 11–13) aims to empower young people to develop their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives (CCEA, 2007a). Following a period of reform, Home Economics has been repositioned to form a compulsory subject strand of Learning for Life and Work (LLW). This is a significant change from its previous position as an optional contributory subject within the area of study of Science and Technology (DENI, 1992). The placement of Home Economics as part of LLW reflects the subject's contribution to developing the skills and competencies necessary for life and work (CCEA, 2007b).

Home Economics at KS3 is underpinned by three key concepts: Healthy Diet; Home and Family Life; and Independent Living (CCEA, 2007c). Through studying 'Healthy Diet', students explore how to achieve a healthy diet through theoretical and practical cookery skills (CCEA, 2007d). The concept of 'Home and Family Life' offers students the opportunity to study the roles and responsibilities of individuals within a range of home and family structures and to investigate the changing needs of the family through the lifecycle (CCEA, 2007d). The study of 'Independent Living' encourages students to understand the importance of becoming discerning consumers by developing a range of skills to promote independence through planning, managing, and using resources. Aspects such as managing money, factors influencing consumer choice, consumer rights and responsibilities and the role of consumer organisations in providing support are also studied (CCEA, 2007d).

As part of the revision process undertaken by CCEA, General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) (ages 14–16) Home Economics was rebranded as GCSE Food and Nutrition, being first taught in September 2017. Whilst elements of the Home Economics Specification remain, an emphasis has been placed on food and nutrition, with a refined focus on consumer related topics (CCEA, 2016).

GCSE Food and Nutrition is an optional two-year linear programme delivered through 120 guided learning hours and consists of two components of equal assessment weighting. Component 1, Food and Nutrition comprises nutrition; recipe modification; meal planning; nutritional and dietary requirements; food provenance; food processing and production; food safety; effective consumerism and managing resources. Assessment of this component is a two-hour external written examination, taken at the end of year 2. Component 2, Practical Food and Nutrition, is a controlled assessment task, undertaken in year two of the course, comprising a 3500-word report and a practical exam. The task requires students to undertake research and justify their selection of a range of dishes. Students prepare, cook, and serve the selected dishes under exam conditions within three hours (CCEA, 2016).

In 2022, a total of 2,746 students sat the exam which comprised 2,102 females and 644 males. Although it is still very gendered biased, figures in 2022 demonstrated a slight decline in the number of males which was in contrast to the previous year's trend of a small year on year increase in males studying the subject (559 in 2019; 605 in 2020; 688 in 2021) (CCEA, 2022).

The rebranding of Home Economics was not limited to GCSE level, with a name change and refreshed subject content also occurring at General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced level (A Level) (ages 16+). Under its new guise, GCE A Level Nutrition and Food Science had a firm focus on the food industry and the connections between diet, lifestyle, and health (CCEA, 2018). This will facilitate progression to further study at university in a related area or direct employment into the food industry, which employs 100,000 people in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Association, 2020). GCE Food and Nutrition is available at two levels: Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and A Level. In year 1, AS comprises AS1: Principles of Nutrition and AS2: Diet, Lifestyle and Health. As part of AS1, students study nutrition and nutritional requirements through the lifecycle. In AS2, students explore eating patterns, energy and energy balance, diet related disorders, alcohol, and physical activity. In Year 2, there is a choice of modules to study. Option A, Food Security and Sustainability, requires the study of consumer behaviour, food security, food poverty, food sustainability and food waste. Option B, Food Safety and Quality, includes food safety, microbiological and chemical contamination, additives, allergens, food legislation. The Research Project module requires the completion of a 4000-word research-based project on an area from one of the modules outlined above (CCEA, 2018). At A Level, uptake of the subject is also predominately female. Similar to GCSE, there has been a marked increase in the number of males studying the subject over the two latest exam series which aligns with the launch of GCE Nutrition and Food Science. In 2022, a total of 611 students took the exam which comprised 544 females and 67 males (CCEA, 2022).

Home Economics in Ireland

Junior Cycle Home Economics (ages 12–15) is an optional area of study which aims to "develop students' knowledge, attitudes, understanding, skills and values to achieve optimal, healthy and sustainable living for every person as an individual and as a member of families and society" (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2017, p. 5). The specification comprises a three-year course of study which is designed for a minimum of 200 hours of timetabled student engagement. Despite being an optional area of study, Home Economics remains a consistently popular subject choice at junior cycle where, in 2022, 39% (*n* = 26, 322) of the total number of junior cycle students studied Home Economics, comprising 79% (*n* = 20,809) females and 21% (*n* = 5,513) males (State Examinations Commission [SEC], 2022).

The learning outcomes in the Home Economics Specification are arranged as three interconnecting strands of study: Food, Health and Culinary Skills; Responsible Family Living; and Textiles and Craft. Each of the strands are underpinned by four cross-cutting elements which have a focus on Health and Wellbeing; Individual and Family Empowerment; Sustainable and Responsible Living; and Consumer Competence.

Food Health and Culinary Skills focuses on encouraging students to develop a positive and healthy relationship with food. Students are asked to apply their understanding of scientific and theoretical principles in making informed decisions which will have a positive impact on their health and wellbeing. A broad range of areas are studied within this strand and include, inter alia, menu planning; healthy eating; nutrition; shopping; portion control; food waste;

reading food labels; practical food preparation and cooking skills; ecological and ethical principles of food; diet related diseases; and commercial food production. The strand 'Responsible Family Living' facilitates students to develop essential life skills which will empower them to "manage resources responsibly and sustainably in the home, family and community" (DES, 2017, p. 16). As part of this strand, students study areas such as family relationships; sustainable everyday practices; consumer decision making; financial literacy; consumers' rights and responsibilities; interior design. The third strand, Textiles and Craft, aims to develop students' practical textile skills and creativity. A key focus of the strand is on sustainability and how consumers make sustainable choices for purchasing and maintaining clothing and textiles.

A practical pedagogical approach is encouraged in Junior Cycle Home Economics, and this is reflected in assessment where there are 50% of the externally assessed marks weighted towards a practical food skills examination at the end of the three years of study. This is externally assessed by examiners working on behalf of the State Examinations Commission (SEC). During the practical food skills examination students are required to demonstrate their food literacy skills, using a problem-based learning approach, to meet the specific requirements of a brief distributed in advance by SEC.

Leaving Certificate Home Economics—Scientific and Social (ages 15–18) is an optional area of study which aims to equip students with knowledge, understanding, and skills for managing their own lives, as well as for further and higher education, and work. Home Economics—Scientific and Social focuses on how individuals and families manage their resources to meet physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and economic needs. It underscores the importance of the interdependent relationship that exists between individuals or families and the environment and helps encourage a sense of responsibility towards sustaining resources (Department of Education and Science, 2008). The structure includes: a core (80%), and an elective, from a choice of three (20%). The core comprises three areas: Food Studies (45%), Resource Management and Consumer Studies (25%) and Social Studies (10%). The three electives are: Home Design and Management; Textiles, Fashion and Design; and Social Studies. The use of a core and elective structure enables the study of specific aspects of the syllabus, without the need to make them compulsory (SEC, 2011). In 2022, 21% of the total cohort (n = 12,132) of students at senior cycle, sat the leaving certificate examination, comprising 86% (n = 10,393) females and 14% (n = 1739) males. The selection of the subject at senior cycle has remained consistently around 20% of the total cohort of students since 2014 (SEC, 2022).

Practical work is an essential component of the Home Economics syllabus at Senior Cycle, with learners having to complete practical coursework journals worth 20% of their overall grade. Learners undertake four practical assignments, based on five areas of practice: Area A—Application of Nutritional Principles; Area B—Food Preparation and Cooking Processes; Area C—Food Technology; Area D—Properties of a Food and Area E—Comparative Analysis to include Sensory Analysis. For each of the assignments, students must complete one cookery practical.

Methods

The aim of this research was to undertake a comparative study of the enablers and barriers to teaching Home Economics on the island of Ireland from the perspective of Home Economics teachers. Home Economics teachers from NI and Ireland were recruited to complete an online survey. Cognisant of cross-border variations in curriculum, two surveys were issued, one for NI and one for Ireland. The study was conducted with ethical approval from the School of Education, Research and Ethics Committee, Ulster University.

Home Economics teachers, across the island, were contacted through a variety of snowballing strategies such as sharing a survey link via social media; internet; direct email; and Home Economics subject associations. In order to access and participate in the survey, the respondent must have answered a screening inclusion question which confirmed they were a Home Economics teacher currently teaching in either NI or Ireland and give their consent to participate in the study. The target sample size of 196 Ireland and 115 NI participants was ascertained using power calculations based on 700 post primary schools in Ireland and 199 post primary schools in NI, allowing a 5% margin of error and a 90% confidence base. This sample was achieved and 198 teachers (Ireland) and 160 (NI) participated. All data was analysed using SPSS (V24). Framework analysis was used to organise qualitative data according to priority themes (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). This paper, one of the first of its kind, presents the results, from a teachers' perspective, of the enablers and barriers of teaching Home Economics on the island of Ireland.

Findings

Demographics

The survey was undertaken by 358 Home Economics teachers on the island of Ireland, comprising 198 teachers from Ireland and 160 teachers from NI. Ninety eight percent (98%, n = 352) of all respondents were female. The participants had a range of teaching experience, with over a quarter of respondents in each jurisdiction having over 25 years teaching experience. The survey highlighted how the educational pathway to becoming a Home Economics teacher differs between Northern Ireland and Ireland. In Ireland, the vast majority of respondents had studied a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) Home Economics honours degree programme. In NI, teachers followed a range of pathways to become a teacher, but the majority had studied a Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) in Home Economics, with an undergraduate degree in associated areas, namely food, nutrition and consumer studies.

The Home Economics teachers work in a department that has, on average, 2.8 (NI) and 2.5 (Ireland) Home Economics specialist teachers. Remarkably, 49% (n = 75) of teachers in NI indicated they have an out-of-field teacher(s) working in their department teaching Home Economics, whereas only 12% (n = 22) in Ireland reported this context situation. Teachers who worked with an out-of-field teacher identified no consistent method of support being offered to nonspecialist teachers. Approaches included team teaching with a specialist; sharing of resources; out-of-field teacher teaching theory lessons only; and additional support provided by the subject leader. Teachers in NI raised a need for educating more subject specific teachers for the NI system, with one participant stating:

> teaching should be by specialist teachers and if this is not possible then some additional training should be offered for nonspecialists. (NI150).

Teaching Home Economics

Timetabling Home Economics classes emerged as an important influence on the teaching of the subject. A higher percentage of respondents in NI (53%, *n* = 85) than in Ireland (32%, *n* = 63) indicated that their current timetabling had a negative influence on their teaching of Home Economics. In particular, the time allocation to the subject per week was highlighted as negatively impacting their quality of teaching. In order to adapt, teachers identified having to choose recipes with reduced complexity and skill level and in some cases, having elements of the recipe prepared in advance for students e.g. pastry. In Ireland, the emergence of one-hour classes was raised by the majority of teachers as concerning and were regarded as 'detrimental' to the quality of teaching Home Economics. As one teacher noted, due to time limitations:

> practical classes are dumbed down due to the inability to carry out teaching of key skills. (Ireland29)

Similarly, in NI, a teacher commented:

> lessons are 1 hour long which essentially means 55 mins. This is not enough time to teach 20 children how to cook. Skills are being lost. (NI57).

The expectation and pressure on a practical class teacher was also noted by Home Economics teachers. Teachers reported practical classes being scheduled over a break or at the end of the day which necessitated teachers sacrificing their break periods and lunches to prepare the practical room to ensure students could complete their practical work. It was regarded that this time pressure and the constant 'rush', given the allocation of class time, had a negative impact on both student and teacher's wellbeing. As one respondent noted:

> timetabling next to break/lunch time implies an expectation that the teacher will work through breaks which contravenes wellbeing. (Ireland13).

At Junior Cycle, teachers in Ireland had more time allocated each week, with an average of 111 minutes. This time was greatly reduced in NI, with an average of 72 minutes allocated per week for the teaching of KS3 Home Economics. Differences also arose in reported class sizes, with teachers in NI having larger classes, with an average of 23, compared to 20 students in Ireland. When considering examination years in NI, GCSE (KS4) and A Level (post 16), a similar pattern emerged; class time increased and class sizes decreased when compared to KS3. GCSE classes were allocated an average of 120 minutes per week, with an average class size of 20 students. However, A Level classes were allocated an average of 125 minutes per week, with an average class size of 15 pupils. For Leaving Certificate, a similar situation emerged, with an average of 125 minutes allocated and an average class size of 18 students. However, this may be as a result of fewer students choosing to study leaving certificate Home Economics than a strategic attempt in planning.

The majority of teachers (85% in NI and 53% in Ireland) taught practical food fortnightly at KS3 and Junior Cycle. However, more teachers in Ireland taught practical food to junior level on a weekly basis (37%, *n* = 73) when compared to NI (5%, *n* = 7). Interestingly, there is a marked shift in the frequency of practical food classes at senior cycle, with only 3% (*n* = 6) of teachers in Ireland undertaking practical cookery classes either weekly or fortnightly with Leaving Certificate students. In NI, at KS4, 39% (*n* = 56) of NI teachers report having practical classes every week. The frequency in which textiles was undertaken in Ireland was lower when compared to practical cookery. Only 15% (*n* = 28) of teachers at junior and 1% (*n* = 2) at senior

cycle indicated they undertook textile work on a fortnightly basis, with the vast majority 80% (*n* = 147) and 98% (*n* = 162) indicating it was less often.

Large class sizes were of more concern in NI than Ireland with a higher proportion of respondents in NI (52%, *n* = 82) reporting that large class sizes had a negative impact on their teaching versus 28% (*n* = 55) in Ireland. The majority mentioned that their class numbers had been increasing and are at, or past, capacity. As a teacher noted:

> 24 in a class is a massive number of students to care for in a practical setting. I believe this number should be reduced to a maximum of 20 to instil an atmosphere conducive to learning. (Ireland76).

Respondents noted that these larger classes were not conducive to effective classroom management or teaching for students with behavioural issues or those with differing abilities. The larger class size reduced the teachers' abilities to undertake one-on-one teaching which impacted the students' skills progression. Conversely, 49% (*n* = 96) of Ireland and 27% (*n* = 43) of NI respondents reported class size as having a positive impact on their teaching of Home Economics. The majority of respondents from Ireland and NI who viewed class sizes positively mentioned having number restrictions placed on their classes of normally 20–24 students, imposed with the support of management:

> We have a max 20 policy in our school. The timetabling staff are very supportive on this matter and respect the need for a controlled number of pupils in the practical environment. (NI143).

It was felt smaller numbers allowed for a greater depth of learning and facilitated the teacher to give attention to students whilst maintaining proper health and safety conditions:

> I recently fought for smaller class numbers in Junior Cycle classes as per directive from TUI [teachers union]. This has made a huge difference to the quality of teaching and learning as well as improved the health and safety of all students taking part in practical classes. (Ireland52).

Home Economics teachers in both jurisdictions were involved in a range of initiatives in school to promote the subject. The most frequently cited activities among the teachers were: cooking or food related clubs (27%, *n* = 96); competitions (20%, *n* = 71); healthy eating week or activities (16%, *n* = 59); participating in wellbeing committees (9%, *n* = 34); external engagement with stakeholders to give talks or demonstrations (7%, *n* = 27); subject fairs and open days; and in Ireland, transition year initiatives (3%, *n* = 12); craft clubs and courses (7%, *n* = 27). Whilst engagement in promotional initiatives in schools was frequently cited, involvement in Home Economics related activities outside school was limited. In NI, this was reserved for providing cooking courses or camps (2%, *n* = 8) and working for CCEA (2%, *n* = 8). Similarly, in Ireland the main activity mentioned related to providing cooking courses or camps (3%, *n* = 12). Ireland respondents mentioned involvement with the Association of Teachers of Home Economics (ATHE) (2.7%, *n* = 10) as a key activity outside school.

Resourcing Home Economics

Facilities available to prepare and teach practical food skills in schools on the island of Ireland were largely comparable, with slightly more teachers in NI having a dedicated practical cookery room, 99% (*n* = 158) compared to 87% (*n* = 172) in Ireland. There was consensus amongst the significant majority of participants (81%, *n* = 160) that facilities available were mostly adequate to teach the curriculum. In considering the facilities available for teaching the textile component of the curricula, this applied only to Ireland as textiles no longer forms part of the NI curricula. Slightly under half (48%, *n* = 89) indicated the presence of a dedicated sewing

room, however, half rated the facilities as inadequate to teach the curriculum. A joint food-textiles room was used by 43% (*n* = 76) with slightly over half rating the room as inadequate for teaching textiles.

To assist in the preparation of practical classes, a Home Economics Technician was employed by the vast majority (87%, *n* = 135) of departments in NI, with contracts varying from a few hours per week to full-time basis with 84% (*n* = 129) indicating that they had access to a dedicated food preparation room. Conversely, only 3% (*n* = 5) of departments in Ireland had a Home Economics Technician to support the teacher.

Slightly more than half of NI respondents (52%, *n* = 82) and Ireland respondents (56%, *n* = 109) agreed that the availability of resources in their school had a positive influence on their teaching. They cited examples including, modern facilities for teaching, and a management team who were supportive of the subject. In Ireland, respondents felt that the resources available were helpful and there was support for collaborating and sharing resources:

> Home Economics is well resourced in our school—we are also getting a new extension to the school which includes a second new kitchen. (Ireland166).

For respondents who felt the lack of resources had a negative influence (21% in NI and 16% in Ireland) a lack of funding; inadequate facilities and safety hazards were cited as being the reason.

A significant disparity between jurisdictions arose in the financial support by the school provided for practical food classes. In Ireland, 77% (*n* = 148) required students to bring their own ingredients, compared to 26% in NI where schools tend to supply the ingredients, with students required to make an annual contribution to reimburse the expense. At KS3, students are mostly commonly asked to contribute between £10–£15 per annum. However, at KS4 it is estimated that students will incur a cost of up to £40 per annum. In Ireland, at junior cycle level, 41% (*n* = 70), teachers estimated the financial cost to their students towards practical food more than €60 per year. At Leaving Certificate level, due to less practical classes, teachers estimated costs for students between €20–€40 per year.

Home Economics teachers in both Ireland and NI cited having access to kitchen facilities and/or equipment as being an important mechanism by which they can feel supported. A NI teacher commented:

> facilities are excellent, and the department is equipped with a hard working HE Technician who orders ingredients and prepares for practical classes. (NI21).

Interestingly, a lack of support was mentioned explicitly by teachers in both jurisdictions as frequently occurring:

> school has not shown support to the subject in last few years—quite the opposite. Teacher retired and her position not even advertised, showing lack of respect for the subject... (Ireland13).

Teachers in Ireland noted a budget for equipment and timetabling as important factors to be considered by school management, whilst those in NI stated timetabling and supporting educational activities for teachers including continuing professional development (CPD) would support their teaching.

Teachers' Perspectives of the Curriculum

Teaching practical food was mentioned by most respondents in both Ireland and NI as the most enjoyable and rewarding component of Home Economics curricula to teach. They reported that students appeared most engaged with these topics, elaborating that it builds confidence and pride, where:

> students can see the value of the learning and are happier to be busy with hands on tasks. (Ireland2).

They outlined a sense of achievement being able to facilitate students to develop practical life skills:

> the practical element of the subject is fantastic. It is such a privilege to equip young people with practical skills that will carry them through life. (NI67).

Teachers in Ireland rated, in order, the topics of social studies; food studies; and consumer studies most positively as they relate to students lives:

> students are engaged as the topic is something that is relevant to them, and I feel that it is useful information and knowledge and skill that will prepare them to live a healthy, happy life. (Ireland52).

Similarly, teachers in NI reported that the nutrition; food choice; and diet and health were most enjoyable to teach, with some additional mentions of food science and child development.

Relatability of the curriculum emerged as a key challenge of teaching the family resource management aspects of the curriculum. Students cannot always relate content to their own current stage of life and therefore, this can be challenging to teach to ensure students maintain interest. Additionally, the sensitivity of teaching family studies, given the diverse societal family contexts, was also an aspect that teachers tried to navigate.

Teachers in both Ireland and NI remarked on the content heavy nature of the subject at senior cycle. Teachers lamented the reduced number of practical classes at leaving certificate which were not feasible outside the prescribed coursework because of the depth and breadth required of the theoretical aspects of the curriculum to cover. They referred to the written coursework as requiring strong literacy skills as opposed to a focus on the practical application. They attributed this combination to an explanation for the decline in student numbers. Similarly, teachers in NI noted a concern over the breadth of content on the senior curriculum and the burden of excessive assessment and its impact on the quality of the student experience. In addition, they referred to time implications on practical teaching and the overcrowding of classes impacting on the quality of education provision:

> at KS4 I have found it difficult to cover all the course content and do controlled assessment. It is difficult to meet all the deadlines of assessment that are expected. (NI122).

A number of NI teachers reported the nutrition and food science component for the A level was set too high and was challenging for students to engage with:

> the A2 Specification is a little removed from Home Economics in that the content is more relevant to third level education food technology courses. A2 pupils often cannot grasp some of the concepts due to having no practical experience in the food industry. (NI104).

Supporting Home Economics Teachers CPD

CPD played an important role in supporting Home Economics teachers in their practice. This was particularly the case for teachers in Ireland, where the majority (65%, *n* = 126) regarded engaging with CPD as having a positive influence on their practice. In contrast, only 38% (*n* = 59) of NI teachers found it beneficial with 66% noting they had not engaged in any CPD activities in the last two years. Teachers who viewed it as a positive influence, noted CPD also provided an opportunity to network, collaborate, share ideas, and learn from other Home Economics teachers. It was also regarded as an opportunity to keep up to date with curriculum developments and learn new skills and methodologies. Teachers suggested more opportunities and funding to participate in CPD were required. Both NI and Ireland teachers suggested more subject specific CPD is needed:

> any enhancement of subject knowledge is important. It is lacking today with funding issues and sub cover. (NI66).

Interestingly, the membership of a subject association was more common amongst teachers in Ireland, with 76% (*n* = 150) indicating membership of the ATHE compared to 18% (*n* = 28) in NI who were members of the separate NI ATHE. This was viewed as an important opportunity to engage with CPD and other teachers.

Policy Implications for Home Economics on the Island

From the perspective of Irish teachers, the most mentioned curriculum policy recommendation (*n* = 128) was the introduction of compulsory Home Economics at junior cycle. One respondent stated:

> Home Economics should be mandatory and a core subject for Junior Cycle as it is a key life skill. (Ireland25).

Respondents in NI emphasised the importance of Home Economics retaining its compulsory status on the curriculum with no class rotations.

Funding and/or specific grants to support Home Economics was called for by teachers in both jurisdictions. Particularly, funding for the purchasing of equipment, ingredients for class, and the updating of facilities was suggested as being extremely beneficial. Additionally, it was also highlighted that there should be a standardised policy in place that specifies quality standards for Home Economics specialist facilities; for technical support; and the time allocated on a timetable to teach a practical subject. Respondents noted:

> policy on timetable at government level, no point in talking about obesity and the need for food skills if the resource of time per session is not available to facilitate adequate learning experiences. (Ireland48).

Across both jurisdictions, teachers called for a review of the curriculum, albeit at different levels. In NI teachers referred to a review of the relevance of the curriculum and a preferred practical pedagogical focus with an associated need to reduce GCSE content. Furthermore, they requested clearer guidance on the specifications to enhance their teaching and referred to the need for a subject specific textbook. Teachers in Ireland called for a complete reform of the Leaving Certificate syllabus. It was felt that the current syllabus too theoretical and would be enhanced with a more balanced focus on developing associated practical skills, they noted:

> more incorporation of basic life skills classes for students who have never taken home economics so that they can cook basic meals for themselves. (Ireland38).

It was also suggested that the syllabus requires 'modernising' to ensure it is relevant and current to students. They reiterated the breadth of the curriculum, and the associated workload has a negative connotation by students:

> the leaving cert course is too long. (Ireland41).

> less content in senior cycle is required so quality teaching and learning can be spent on all areas of the course. (Ireland63).

This was viewed as a deterrent for choosing the subject:

> there are two assessment components to Home Economics, no other subject requires this of students, they do not want to study a subject with a greater workload than other subjects. (Ireland34).

The focus of assessment in senior cycle Home Economics on written assessments was noted by many teachers as contributing to a negative perception of the subject at this level:

> the journal is very detailed and repetitive. It is very time consuming. The other subjects that have coursework are much shorter. The marking scheme seriously needs to be looked at when only 3% achieve a H1. Students vote with their feet and choose subjects where they can attain H1s in other subjects more easily. (Ireland130).

A suggestion to counteract this was to:

> have [a] practical exam in line with junior cert, concentrate on skills rather than write up. (Ireland36).

In general, teachers were content with the balance of practical and theoretical assessment at junior cycle Home Economics.

Discussion

Many years may have elapsed since the introduction of Home Economics as a subject on the island of Ireland (McCloat & Caraher, 2019; Moran, 2007), and whilst teaching, as a profession, continues to remain a predominately female profession, it is evident that Home Economics is taught almost exclusively by females. The situation is not unique to this island, with anecdotal evidence suggesting similar patterns in many other countries. Although literature may outline the causes and solutions to reverse the trend, few, if any depict a changing pattern. Perceptions of a subject only studied by females (Dewhurst & Pendergast, 2008), coupled with optional status on school curricula across many countries (McCloat & Caraher, 2020a, 2020b) and the perceived lack of relevance and prospects of future study for males (Azubuike, 2012; Nanayakkara et al., 2018) could go some way in explaining why Home Economics continues to have an almost exclusive female teaching network. Teachers can be seen as role models (Lumpkin, 2008) by their pupils and the lack of male Home Economics teachers may also contribute to the gender gap in those studying Home Economics (McCloat & Caraher, 2016). In trying to reverse this trend and entice more males to become Home Economics teachers across Ireland, removing the optional status of the subject at Junior level in Ireland may contribute to alleviating this issue.

As a subject, many obstacles challenge the delivery of Home Economics, including resources; a shortage of subject specialists in NI; limited time on the timetable; and budget constraints (Nanayakkara et al., 2018; Rutland & Owen-Jackson, 2013). Specialist, adequate and well-maintained facilities are essential requirements for the effective teaching of Home Economics (DES, 2008; Education and Training Inspectorate [ETI], 2000; Ofsted, 2005). Although teachers

in this research indicated the availability of resources had a positive impact on their teaching, challenges exist around a lack of modern equipment and facilities, as well as support by school management to facilitate this. Ofsted (2005) identified that the teaching of food is compromised by shortages in resources, for example accommodation, specialist equipment and curriculum time. The lack of a Home Economics technician can result in an increased workload for teachers (Owen-Jackson & Rutland, 2012), this is of particular concern to the teachers in this study, as only 3% of teachers in Ireland reported having access to a Home Economics technician in their school. Consideration of introducing Home Economics technicians to schools in Ireland would go some way to alleviate the workload experienced by teachers in preparation for practical classes, particularly in light of one-hour classes.

The study highlighted that whilst the majority of Home Economics teachers in Ireland taught with Home Economics specialists, many, particularly in NI, have several out-of-field teachers working alongside them. An out-of-field teacher refers to a teacher teaching a subject that they are not educated in or professionally registered to teach. A subject specialist has the ability to provide a deep learning experience, provide more detailed and complex explanations and relate content to real life examples (Eaton et al., 2006; Shreeve, 2018) and have studied the theory, methodology and practice of teaching Home Economics (McCloat & Caraher, 2016). Out-of-field teachers in Home Economics, according to Pendergast et al. (2022), may lack a sense of identity and have not had formal training in the subject specific content or pedagogy which may "negatively impact student learning, teacher effectiveness and student access to role models" (p. 1). Whilst many out-of-field teachers provide a meaningful learning experience for students; observations have reported that it can have an adverse effect on the pupils' learning; limiting students' progress in both theory and practical skills through the avoidance of aspects of the curriculum and ineffective management of practical lessons (ETI, 2000; Goos et al., 2021). The situation of out-of-field teachers was most prevalent in NI. As identified in this study, support to out-of-field teachers is varied and what is offered is perhaps unsustainable in the long term. Thorough planning, establishing close working relationship, sharing of subject knowledge and resources (Shreeve, 2018) may go some way in supporting out-of-field teachers but in the longer-term consideration needs to be given to a more sustainable and joined up approach.

Whilst reported class sizes in Ireland and NI were in line with maximum recommendations (DENI, 2016), many teachers reported larger class sizes as having a negative impact on their teaching. Larger classes coupled with reduced practical time can limit the development and progression of practical skills, creating a learning environment where it is challenging to monitor individual progress. Best practice in teaching Home Economics is observed when sufficient time is allocated to both the practical and theoretical aspects of the subject (ETI, 2000; DES, 2008). From the study it was noted that students are most likely to undertake practical cookery on a fortnightly basis. Research however suggests that engagement in practical cookery on a weekly basis successfully demonstrated the development and progression of practical skills (DES, 2008; Ofsted, 2006). Teachers reported that a wide variation exists between schools in relation to the frequency of practical lessons as well as the provision of ingredients for practical lessons. This was particularly prevalent for lessons in Key Stage 3 / Junior Cycle.

The short duration of time allocated in a class period to the teaching of Home Economics was identified as being problematic for teachers. The duration of a practical lesson can also impact on development of skills and knowledge. Owen-Jackson and Rutland (2012) reported shorter

lesson times can limit the integration of practical work with theoretical understanding. Teachers in this study reported a reduction in class time allocation for the subject had an adverse impact on the skill level being taught and increased the requirement for advance teacher preparation. Research (Höijer et al., 2011; Owen-Jackson & Rutland, 2012) demonstrates reduced class times increases teacher's workload and results in students not experiencing varied skills which can make the integration of practical work with theoretical understanding more challenging. Food literacy skills developed as part of Home Economics enables students to develop a range of transferable and higher order thinking skills (Pendergast, 2012). With curricula across the island seeking to prepare students for life and work (CCEA, 2022; DES, 2017), Home Economics, like many other practical subjects, competes for time on a crowded and finite timetable.

Promoting Home Economics remains to be an important facet of the professional life of the Home Economics teacher. The IFHE, in 2008, called on Home Economists internationally to work towards branding the subject and promoting the contemporary relevance of the subject and the contribution it makes to society. McGregor (2018) calls to develop this further by engaging ambassadors for Home Economics and refers to "an artful and strategic blend of branding, rebranding and ambassadorship is proposed as an important strategy for future proofing the profession and discipline" (p. 12). It was evident from this research that teachers are actively involved and perceive a benefit from their respective subject associations. Some teachers further suggested establishing a network for sharing experiences and resources among teachers. This has referred to this as a "subject discipline collaborative" which helps to reduce the isolation of teachers and assist with their acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and judgement (Nanayakkara et al., 2018). The majority of respondents in both NI and Ireland indicated current provision of CPD had a positive influence on their teaching. However, it Is interesting to note that most of the NI Home Economics teachers in this study had not engaged in any CPD activities within the last two years. Nanayakkara et al. (2018) emphasises the need for frequent and ongoing professional development opportunities and these should be carefully crafted considering the needs of teachers and their students.

From a policy perspective, one of the main disparities between NI and Ireland is the status of the subject Home Economics on the curriculum at junior cycle. In Northern Ireland, Home Economics is compulsory and in Ireland, it is an optional, albeit popular, subject for students. This research demonstrated how NI Home Economics teachers want it to remain as a compulsory subject and those in Ireland are calling for it to be compulsory. Over the years, Home Economics teachers, national organisations and the media have been vocal in calling for compulsory Home Economics for all junior cycle students in Ireland (Boland, 2017; Maguire, 2017; McCloat, 2013; Safefood, 2018; St. Angela's College, Sligo, 2018). This was based on the rationale that all young people should be afforded the opportunity to develop essential food, health, and cooking skills in school so as to empower them for future daily living. Indeed, this took a significant step forward in November 2018 when the Irish Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs' Report on Tackling Childhood Obesity recommended that the 'Government should consider the introduction of Home Economics as a compulsory subject on the Junior Cycle Curriculum for postprimary schools' (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2018, p. 6). A call for mandatory Home Economics is reiterated internationally, most notably, when Lichenstein and Ludwig (2010), stated it may be "among the best investments society could make" (p. 1858). Similarly, research in Australia (Nanayakkara et al., 2018; Pendergast et al., 2011) identified the important role Home Economics can play in developing food skills among young people and consequently, the need for it to be made available for all students.

Conclusion

This paper explored the enablers and barriers to teaching Home Economics on the island of Ireland from the perspective of Home Economics teachers. Home Economics, as a mandatory subject at Key Stage 3 in NI, was envied by Home Economics teachers in Ireland who called for the subject to be made compulsory at junior cycle. Home Economics teaching remains a predominantly female profession, and it was suggested that mandatory Home Economics in NI and Ireland may go some way in alleviating this issue. Teachers of any practical subject have an increased workload in preparing for these classes; however, this is exacerbated in Ireland where teachers have no access to technical support, unlike NI. The introduction of Home Economics technicians to schools in Ireland, similar to the scheme in NI, would assist teachers and reduce the associated workload in preparing practical classes. Across the jurisdiction, most teachers reported having access to adequate classroom facilities for teaching Home Economics. Challenges persist with the timetabling and the class time allocated to the subject, particularly, the move towards one-hour classes which was of significant concern to teachers for conducting practical food classes. Teachers identified opportunities for subject specific continuing professional development to enhance their teaching of Home Economics. Arising from this, there are numerous opportunities for cross-border collaboration to advance the teaching of Home Economics on the island of Ireland. This paper presented the results, from a teachers' perspective, of the enablers and barriers of teaching Home Economics on the island of Ireland; and it provides important data to support future policy decisions pertaining to Home Economics on the island of Ireland.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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