



Context Matters: Structural Constraints and Assessment Equity in Home and Consumer Studies

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Abstract

This study examines how contextual factors affect the quality, validity, and equity of assessment in Swedish Home and Consumer Studies, applying Messick's (1996) theory of assessment validity. Multi-year survey data (2020-2024) were collected from a voluntary, geographically diverse sample of home and consumer studies teachers across Sweden, with repeated iterations and triangulation with prior studies providing longitudinal insight. Findings show that material resources, class size, time allocation, workload, and access to professional development significantly shape assessment practices. Inadequate kitchen equipment, insufficient preparation time, and overcrowded classrooms hinder teachers' ability to observe, support, and evaluate students effectively, constraining both formative and summative processes. While broad participation was achieved, voluntary sampling may have introduced self-selection bias, and self-reported data involve risks of subjectivity and recall error. Although results are not statistically generalisable, they are strengthened by sample size and design. The study calls for systemic reforms in resource allocation, clearer structural guidelines, and expanded professional training to ensure assessments reflect actual competence, thereby promoting fairness and equal educational opportunity.

KEYWORDS: HOME AND CONSUMER STUDIES; HOME ECONOMICS STUDIES; ASSESSMENT VALIDITY; ASSESSMENT EQUITY; CONTEXTUAL FACTORS; RESOURCE LIMITATIONS

Introduction

Purpose

Assessment is a central component of teaching and learning, yet in practical, process-oriented subjects such as Home and Consumer Studies (HCS), it presents unique challenges. Unlike traditional academic subjects, HCS combines cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains of learning, requiring students to apply theoretical knowledge through hands-on, often collaborative activities. This makes assessment in HCS inherently complex, as it must account for both final products (e.g., a completed meal, a budget plan) and the learning process itself—such as planning, cooperation, problem-solving, and reflection (Höijer et.al, 2013). In Sweden, Home and Consumer Studies is governed by the national curriculum Lgr22, which emphasises competence development through active participation, critical thinking, and sustainable decision-making. The curriculum promotes a constructivist, inquiry-based pedagogy, where

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students gradually shift from teacher-guided activities to more autonomous exploration and learning (Skolverket, 2022; Banchi & Bell, 2008).

This article explores how contextual and structural factors influence assessment quality in HCS, with particular attention to issues of equity and validity. Drawing on teacher perspectives and current research, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do contextual conditions, such as time, resources, and group size, affect teachers' capacity to conduct valid and fair assessments in HCS?
2. What systemic or organisational changes are needed to support equitable assessment practices in process-oriented subjects?

By highlighting the impact of external conditions on internal classroom practice, the article seeks to inform both pedagogical approaches and policy development in Home Economics education. The findings have broader relevance for any educational system aiming to implement competency-based, practical learning in equitable ways.

Assessment in practical and process-oriented subjects has long been recognised as particularly challenging. Unlike many theoretical subjects, assessment must capture not only subject knowledge, but also practical skills, decision-making, collaboration, and reflection demonstrated during learning activities (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Andrade, 2010). Researchers have also highlighted the importance of validity and fairness in assessment, particularly when external conditions such as resources, time allocation, class size, and access to appropriate learning environments may influence students' opportunities to demonstrate their competence (Messick, 1996; De Ron & Feldt, 2022). These challenges are not unique to Sweden but are relevant across educational systems that seek to assess practical competencies in authentic learning situations. Against this background, the Swedish subject HCS provides an interesting context for examining how structural conditions influence assessment quality and equity.

This study draws on Messick's (1996) unified theory of validity, which underlines that assessment outcomes cannot be separated from the conditions under which they are produced. From this perspective, validity includes considerations of fairness and equity, making contextual factors such as resources, time allocation, and learning environments central to understanding assessment quality.

Literature and Background: Home and Consumer Studies in the Swedish Curriculum Lgr22

The nature of Home and Consumer Studies as a process-oriented and practical subject, as defined in Lgr22 and supported by constructivist pedagogy, directly influences how assessment should be designed and implemented. Since the subject emphasises active participation, reflection, and the development of transferable skills through real-life tasks, traditional assessment methods focused solely on final products or written exams are insufficient. Assessment in HCS must therefore capture not only the end results, such as a completed meal or a household budget, but also the learning process, including students' problem-solving abilities, collaboration, creativity, and reflective thinking throughout the lesson phases (Bohm, 2021; Banchi & Bell, 2008). This aligns with the curriculum's focus on developing competencies such as responsible decision-making, sustainability awareness, and practical skills in everyday life. Moreover, the gradual progression from teacher-guided to student-led inquiry requires formative and authentic assessments that provide ongoing feedback and allow students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and attitudes in varied and meaningful contexts (Andrade, 2010). Such assessments support the development of lifelong learning skills and help ensure that students meet the holistic aims of HCS as described in Lgr22.

Elements of the findings presented in this article have previously informed a broader synthesis of structural and material conditions in Swedish HCS published in a professional reference volume (Larsson, 2024). The present article differs from that work by focusing specifically on assessment validity and equity through the analytical lens of Messick's (1996) validity framework and by synthesising findings across four survey periods conducted between 2020 and 2024.

Purpose and Core Content of HCS

Lgr22 articulates HCS's purpose as preparing students for everyday life through the integration of practical skills, theoretical knowledge, and value-based learning (Skolverket, 2022). Core content areas include:

- Cooking and household management, including meal planning and preparation.
- Nutrition and healthy eating, with attention to food quality and origins.
- Physical, mental, and social wellbeing, encompassing work-life balance.
- Sustainable consumption and environmental responsibility.
- Personal finance, such as budgeting and economic decision-making.
- Social and cultural dimensions, including family roles, cooperation, and gender equality.
- Societal impacts of individual choices in sustainability and cultural traditions.

Structural Conditions and Teaching Methods

Optimal HCS instruction requires a safe and well-equipped environment. Functional kitchens with adequate appliances, ventilation, hygiene facilities, and ergonomic workspaces are essential. Sufficient kitchen stations and space for practical work and shared meals support collaborative learning and safety (Skolverket, 2022). The teaching approach follows a five-phase lesson structure: establishment, introduction, student work, meal, and conclusion, emphasising experiential learning and reflection (Bohm, 2021). Pedagogy is rooted in inquiry-based learning, progressing from guided to open inquiry, fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and autonomy (Banchi & Bell, 2008).

Assessment in Home and Consumer Studies

Assessment in Home and Consumer Studies must reflect the subject's practical and process-oriented nature by capturing not only final products but also students' learning processes, including collaboration, problem-solving, creativity, and reflection. Formative assessment plays a central role, providing ongoing feedback that supports student development and aligns with curriculum goals (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Bohm, 2021; Andrade, 2010). Positioning students as active evaluators of their own learning fosters self-regulation and reflective practice, while making learning visible helps both students and teachers adjust strategies throughout the learning process (Havnes et al., 2012).

Summative assessments, meanwhile, evaluate the extent to which students have acquired the knowledge, skills, and attitudes outlined in Lgr22. However, the complexity of assessing practical skills and processes poses challenges for ensuring validity, reliability, and fairness. These challenges are often compounded by contextual factors such as material resources, class size, time allocation, and teacher workload (De Ron & Feldt, 2022; Ingvarsson & Wallin, 2015; Messick, 1996). Addressing these challenges often requires sustained professional development to enhance teachers' assessment literacy and support effective implementation of formative practices (Avalos, 2011; Guskey, 2002). Understanding how these factors influence assessment practices is crucial for developing equitable and high-quality evaluation methods in Home Economics education.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach that foregrounds the lived experiences and professional perspectives of teachers in Home and Consumer Studies. Integrating theoretical frameworks related to curriculum implementation and workplace safety, the study offers a multifaceted understanding of how institutional, regional, and legal contexts shape instructional practices and influence student learning outcomes within the HCS discipline.

Methodological Rationale

A longitudinal qualitative survey design was selected to balance depth, scope, and practical feasibility. While classroom observations and individual interviews can provide rich contextual insights, they are often limited by resource constraints and restricted to a small number of sites, thus limiting generalisability. In contrast, the survey method enabled participation from a geographically diverse cohort of HCS teachers across multiple regions and municipalities over a four-year period. Repeated data collection allowed for tracking changes in resource availability, professional experiences, and perceptions of institutional constraints over time. Open-ended questions captured rich qualitative data comparable to interview narratives, while the substantial sample size enhanced the robustness and transferability of the findings.

Research Design

The investigation utilised a longitudinal qualitative survey methodology with four waves of data collection conducted between 2020 and 2024. The survey instruments combined closed-ended multiple-choice questions with open-ended items, facilitating a mixed-methods approach. This design supported quantitative descriptive analyses alongside in-depth thematic exploration of qualitative responses, thereby enabling examination of key factors such as resource allocation, working conditions, and teachers' subjective experiences longitudinally.

Instrument Development

Survey instruments were developed collaboratively with experts from the Swedish Teachers' Union for Home and Consumer Studies to ensure content validity, clarity, and relevance. The questionnaires addressed both quantifiable aspects of framework conditions and elicited nuanced reflections on daily pedagogical practices. Inclusion of open-ended questions provided respondents with opportunities to elaborate on their experiences beyond fixed-response options.

Population and Demographics

Participants were active home and consumer studies teachers across Sweden, recruited via the Teachers' Union registry. The material encompasses four studies. The first study, conducted in 2020, was completed by 368 practicing teachers from across the country ($n = 368$). The second study, carried out in 2021, involved 176 teachers ($n = 176$), while the third, in 2023, was completed by 328 teachers ($n = 328$). Finally, the fourth study, conducted in 2024, focused on 372 home and consumer studies teachers ($n = 372$). Approximately 85% of respondents reported more than 3 years of teaching experience, with the majority holding formal qualifications in home and consumer studies or related fields. The sample was geographically diverse, representing a broad spectrum of educational contexts and resource distributions nationwide.

The present article does not report the results of a single survey. Instead, it provides a synthesis of findings from four related national surveys conducted between 2020 and 2024. The surveys were designed around a common set of themes concerning framework conditions, teaching practices, and assessment in Home and Consumer Studies. Although some survey items were adapted between data collection rounds to address emerging issues, the overall design enabled comparison of recurring patterns across the four survey periods.

Sampling Procedure

An open, non-probability sampling strategy was employed to maximise inclusivity and representativeness. Invitations were disseminated through Sveriges Lärare (formerly the Swedish Teachers' Union), leveraging its extensive network to engage a wide cross-section of experienced and committed HCS educators.

Data Collection

Quantitative data from closed questions were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentages. Qualitative data from open-ended responses underwent systematic thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Data processing and interpretation were conducted with reflexivity and critical self-assessment, ensuring credibility. Findings were triangulated with prior research and aligned with a Finnish Home and Consumer Studies educational framework for enhanced validity.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical methods summarised quantitative data from multiple-choice items, while qualitative data were analysed through rigorous thematic coding. The analysis was iterative and reflexive, enabling critical engagement with the data. Triangulation against existing literature and the Finnish model strengthened the interpretive trustworthiness of the results.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered strictly to ethical guidelines established by the Swedish Research Council, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant confidentiality and anonymity, and maintaining voluntary participation. All data were anonymised at the point of collection and securely stored, with access restricted exclusively to the researcher.

Limitations

Although the study design facilitated broad participation and longitudinal insight, several limitations must be acknowledged. The open, voluntary sampling approach may have introduced self-selection bias, potentially overrepresenting teachers actively engaged in professional networks or with strong views on framework conditions. Self-reported data carry inherent risks of subjective bias and recall inaccuracies. Despite geographic diversity, findings are not statistically generalisable to the entire population of Swedish HCS teachers. These limitations are common in qualitative educational research and were mitigated through a large sample size, repeated survey iterations, and triangulation with prior studies.

Findings

Contextual Factors

Material Resources

Across all survey years (2020-2024), teachers consistently reported that worn or outdated kitchen tools compromised instruction and assessment. In 2020, 51% of teachers noted inadequate kitchens, slightly improving to 46% in 2024, indicating a persistent issue. Insufficient or substandard equipment meant that students sometimes worked under lacking conditions, creating risks of unfair evaluation. Teachers highlighted that practical skills risked being assessed inaccurately if tools were missing or malfunctioning, potentially skewing the representation of student competence. Several teachers stressed that the validity of assessments was impacted when the conditions under which skills were tested did not reflect realistic or intended learning situations. This concern was consistent across multiple years, indicating a persistent problem with material resources in Home and Consumer Studies.

Time Constraints and Workload

Time limitations emerged as a prominent and persistent challenge in the assessment of Home and Consumer Studies. Scheduling and lesson duration have impacted teaching and assessment. The length of lessons can vary significantly across Sweden due to the absence of standardised regulations. Teachers perceive this as a major issue; for example, 42% of teachers in 2022 and 36% in 2024 reported that scheduling is a problem. Across all survey years, teachers consistently reported that the allocated instructional time, typically 75 to 80 minutes per lesson, was insufficient for comprehensive teaching, formative assessment, and meaningful student feedback. Limited transition periods between classes, sometimes less than 10 minutes, which 40-44% of teachers reported as too short, further exacerbated the pressure on both planning and execution.

Several teachers described substantial reductions in subject hours at their schools, in some cases exceeding the 20% reduction permitted by the National Agency for Education. This resulted in a compressed instructional schedule and limited opportunities to support student learning or collect evidence for assessment. One participant reported:

The school has reduced the subject by more than the 20% allowed by the National Agency for Education... Lesson time is insufficient, and students receive no compensation during other times. (Teacher, Survey 2024).

Other participants similarly noted that reduced lesson time affected their ability to provide feedback and monitor student progress consistently.

Several teachers reported that limited time for feedback and documentation affected their ability to provide individualised guidance and to collect sufficient evidence for assessment. Several participants described the cumulative effect of these time constraints as physically and cognitively exhausting. One teacher stated:

I have three days a week that are so intense with a lot of teaching that I'm really exhausted, both during the day and especially when I get home. (Teacher, Survey 2020).

Other participants noted that the lack of follow-up time made it challenging to monitor student progress consistently and support learning effectively.

Group Size and Learning Environment

Class size and the overall learning environment were reported by teachers as important factors affecting instruction and assessment in Home and Consumer Studies. Across the surveyed years, teachers consistently described challenges associated with large student groups, often ranging from 14 to 20 students per session. With only four to five fully equipped kitchen stations available, students frequently had to share workspaces. According to survey data from 2020–2024, between 12% and 17% of teachers reported that three or more students regularly shared the same station, which limited task variety, reduced exposure to different cooking methods, and prevented full participation in intended activities. In some cases, as many as five students shared a station. One teacher noted:

It becomes harder for me to praise each student's effort when there are so many in the same group. (Teacher, Survey 2024).

Several participants reported that large group sizes and limited resources also reduced opportunities for formative feedback and individual observation. Teachers described increased noise levels and greater challenges in classroom management, which diverted attention from instruction. One respondent explained:

The classroom is like a hall filled with a large group of bustling students: I can hardly hear them or myself during the practical work. Extremely exhausting. (Teacher, Survey 2020).

Physical Layout of Facilities

The physical design of classrooms was reported by teachers as an important factor affecting instruction and assessment in HCS. Participants described how spatial arrangements, such as split kitchen areas, obstructed sightlines, and overcrowded workstations, created challenges for monitoring and supporting students. Several teachers noted concerns regarding safety and supervision, indicating that they could not maintain visual contact with all students at the same time. One teacher stated:

The HCS classroom consists of different spaces where students are present at the same time. However, I cannot be in all spaces simultaneously and do not have oversight of the students. (Teacher, Survey 2022).

Participants also reported that limited visibility and constrained layouts reduced opportunities to observe student practices and provide immediate feedback. Tight spaces and insufficient access to equipment, such as sinks or ovens, disrupted the flow of tasks and instructional activities.

Assessment Practices

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment was consistently reported by teachers as a key strategy in Home and Consumer Studies. Teachers described using continuous observation, verbal feedback, reflective questioning, and guided discussion to support student learning throughout the term. Despite widespread use of these practices, several factors were reported to limit their implementation:

- **Limited instructional time:** Reductions in subject hours and tight timetables left little room for individualised feedback or reflective dialogue. Teachers reported that formative moments were frequently rushed or omitted due to the pressure to cover content and manage classroom logistics. As one of the teachers explained:

I have several lessons with very short transition times and two with zero transition time, students have to leave at the exact moment new ones are coming in! I am extremely stressed because I don't have time to prepare the new lesson and never know if the others will finish on time. How am I supposed to have time to reflect on what was done and how it went for each student? (Teacher, Survey 2020).

- **High student-to-teacher ratios:** Large groups made it difficult to monitor each student closely. One participant noted:

It's challenging to see what every student is doing when I have such a large group and only a short time with them. (Teacher, Survey 2023).

- **Variation in student readiness:** Teachers reported that some students arrived tired, unprepared, or with limited kitchen skills, which disrupted the flow of lessons and reduced opportunities for formative feedback. These conditions also made it harder to sustain student engagement during instructional activities.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment in Home and Consumer Studies was typically conducted at the end of instructional periods to evaluate students' knowledge and practical competencies. Teachers reported that assessments included both theoretical understanding and hands-on performance, with grading based on cumulative evidence collected throughout the term. A recurring challenge reported across all survey years was the limited number of assessable lessons within the academic calendar. Several teachers noted having as few as eight lessons per year for formal assessment, which restricted their ability to collect sufficient and representative evidence of student learning. One teacher explained:

Having to cover all goals in about eight assessable lessons during the school year and then grade afterwards... Even grades for Christmas must be set after only 3-4 lessons. (Teacher, Survey 2024).

Teachers also highlighted the extensive documentation requirements involved in summative assessment. Recording both practical and theoretical performance was described as administratively demanding, especially for those teaching multiple groups. One participant stated:

I have far too many students in different types of group configurations. Some have only theory for one semester, others both theory and practical. 11 groups and many adaptations that must be documented, and everyone has to be assessed! (Teacher, Survey 2021).

Several teachers reported that heavy workloads limited time for reflection, moderation, and cross-checking of grades.

Validation of Assessment and Equity in Assessment Conditions

Teachers reported using a broad range of strategies to support assessment in Home and Consumer Studies. These included written tests, practical exercises, long-term projects, and ongoing classroom observation. Classroom observation was the most frequently used method for each lesson session. Practical tests and theoretical exams were also used regularly, with approximately 90% of teachers in the 2024 survey reporting using these methods at least once per term. Teachers described clear criteria, transparent communication, peer dialogue, and student feedback as important components for supporting valid and fair assessment. Involving students in reflective discussions around performance was reported to contribute to a shared understanding of assessment criteria.

Despite these strategies, teachers identified contextual limitations that sometimes restricted the application of nuanced assessment methods. Limited resources, time, and large class sizes were reported as factors that occasionally led to the use of more simplified approaches. Several teachers raised concerns about unequal assessment conditions between schools, noting that differences in group size, equipment quality, lesson frequency, and classroom layout created varying opportunities for observation, feedback, and demonstration of skills. One teacher explained:

It's not fair that students in better-equipped schools or smaller groups have an advantage in showing what they know and can accomplish. (Teacher, Survey 2024).

Professional Development and Assessment Quality

A significant proportion of surveyed teachers, ranging from 65% to 85% across 2020-2024, reported a strong need for subject-specific professional development, particularly regarding assessment. Teachers described limited access to training that addressed both formative and summative assessment strategies in HCS. In the 2024 survey, 58% of respondents indicated that school leadership did not provide sufficient support or time to engage with new developments in assessment methodology. Teachers highlighted that ongoing professional learning was necessary to maintain effective assessment practices. They identified three main areas where professional development was needed:

- Curriculum Alignment: Ensuring assessment practices reflect current knowledge requirements and subject goals.
- Formative and Summative Strategies: Improving understanding of diverse and integrated assessment methods suitable for practical and theoretical learning.
- Confidence and Consistency: Strengthening the ability to apply grading criteria fairly across different student groups and learning contexts.

Discussion

Contextual Factors

Contextual conditions in Home and Consumer Studies significantly influence teaching and assessment quality. Insufficient equipment, reductions in subject hours, and compressed schedules limited opportunities for individualised guidance, formative feedback, and the collection of reliable evidence for summative assessment (Klenowski, 2009; Looney, 2011). Large class sizes and shared workspaces further constrained observation and participation, creating potential safety risks and inequities. High student-teacher ratios reduce feedback frequency and depth, compromising both formative and summative assessment (OECD, 2020;

Harlen, 2007). The physical environment, therefore, actively shapes assessment validity, as suboptimal layouts increase cognitive and physical load, restricting engagement and fair evaluation (Woolner et al., 2007; Black & McCormick, 2010; Brookhart, 2011). Structural factors, such as group size, resources, and scheduling, are integral to equitable and pedagogically meaningful assessment. These findings align with practical implications that highlight the critical role of material resources, time allocation, and classroom design in enabling teachers to implement curriculum goals effectively (De Ron & Feldt, 2022; Ingvarsson & Wallin, 2015).

Formative Assessment

Teachers emphasised formative assessment as crucial for clarifying goals, supporting skill development, and scaffolding learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009). However, limited time, large groups, and variable student readiness mirrored previously reported barriers in practice-based subjects (Carless, 2007; Havnes et al., 2012). Effective formative assessment depends on supportive conditions, highlighting the interplay between structural resources and pedagogical success. Overloaded schedules, frequent lesson interruptions, and reduced instructional hours further constrained opportunities for student-centred inquiry, differentiation, and individual feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Banchi & Bell, 2008), limiting development of competencies emphasised in Lgr22, such as sustainability awareness and responsible decision-making.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment was similarly affected by structural and administrative constraints. Limited makeup opportunities, compressed timetables, and extensive documentation demands risked undermining reliability and completeness, particularly in subjects combining practical and theoretical evaluation (Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski, 2013). Despite teachers' efforts to align assessments with curriculum standards, systemic limitations often impeded valid and equitable evaluation. Physical and spatial barriers, such as obstructed sightlines and limited kitchen stations, restricted teachers' ability to observe critical skills like hygiene, collaboration, and safe equipment handling, further undermining fairness (Gelinder, 2020; Lindblom, 2016).

Validation and Equity

Transparent criteria, student involvement, and peer dialogue were reported to enhance assessment validity and fairness (Sadler, 1989; Andrade, 2010). Nevertheless, contextual limitations occasionally necessitated simplified approaches, compromising depth and consistency. Variation in group size, equipment quality, lesson frequency, and classroom layout created inequities, supporting Messick's (1996) assertion that assessment must measure competencies under equitable conditions. Research also indicates that variability in learning environments can distort outcomes, meaning grades may reflect context as much as competence (Popham, 2003; Tierney, 2013). Teachers emphasised the need for standardised baseline conditions, adequate time, resources, and training, to ensure fair assessment. Structural inequities in resources, class size, instructional time, and professional development can exacerbate disparities among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Lundahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2010; OECD, 2020). Policy interventions addressing these systemic barriers are necessary to align assessment practices with curriculum goals and social equity objectives.

Professional Development

Ongoing professional development was critical for maintaining assessment quality. Teachers reported limited access to training in formative and summative strategies, risking outdated practices and misalignment with curricular expectations (Guskey, 2002; Avalos, 2011). Key areas included curriculum alignment, diverse assessment methods, and consistent grading, echoing research showing that targeted professional development enhances assessment literacy, instructional quality, and student outcomes (DeLuca et al., 2016; Heritage, 2010). Uneven access to training, often dependent on local leadership and resources, remains a systemic barrier. System-level investment in professional learning is crucial to ensure teachers can implement equitable and valid assessment practices.

Research Limitations/Implications

While this study offers valuable insights into the contextual conditions shaping assessment in Home and Consumer Studies, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. The data was collected within a specific Swedish national context, which may limit the generalisability of findings to other countries or education systems. Moreover, although multiple teacher perspectives were included, student voices and quantitative performance data were not part of the study. Incorporating these additional perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how contextual inequities influence learning outcomes (Carless, 2007; Havnes et al., 2012; Black & Wiliam, 2009). These limitations suggest that further research is needed to examine the interplay between structural conditions and assessment practices across diverse educational contexts. Comparative studies could also explore how different policy frameworks, resource allocations, and pedagogical cultures affect equity and validity in practical, process-oriented subjects such as HCS (Stiggins, 2005; 2007; Harlen, 2007).

Practical Implications

The findings have important implications for educational practice and school organisation. While curriculum frameworks such as Lgr22 highlight competency-based and process-oriented assessment, teachers' ability to implement these intentions depends on the structural conditions in which teaching takes place. Consistent with Messick's (1996) view of validity, assessment quality is influenced not only by assessment design but also by students' opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills under equitable conditions.

Physical and spatial barriers also impede equitable assessment. Obstructed sightlines, split layouts, and limited kitchen stations restrict teachers' ability to observe critical skills like hygiene, collaboration, and safe equipment handling. Overcrowded classrooms reduce teacher attention per student and heighten noise levels, further diminishing the reliability and fairness of assessment outcomes (Gelinder, 2020; Lindblom, 2016). Access to professional development emerged as another key factor influencing assessment quality. Limited opportunities for ongoing, subject-specific training impede teachers' ability to maintain consistency and align practices with current curriculum and pedagogical research (Guskey, 2002; Avalos, 2011; DeLuca et al., 2016; Heritage, 2010). System-level investment in professional learning is therefore crucial to enhance teacher competence and promote equity across schools. Continued investment in subject-specific professional learning is therefore important for maintaining equitable assessment practices across schools.

Social Implications

Beyond classroom practice, the findings raise broader questions about educational equity and access to learning opportunities. Differences in resources, instructional conditions, and professional support may influence students' opportunities to demonstrate competence, potentially affecting the fairness of assessment outcomes across schools (Lundahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2010; OECD, 2020).

Policy interventions are necessary to address these systemic barriers. Without equitable distribution of resources, limits on group size, sufficient teaching hours, and structured professional development, curriculum goals remain aspirational. These findings support frameworks of educational equity that emphasise the need to tackle structural disadvantages to ensure fair and valid outcomes for all learners (Messick, 1996; Popham, 2003; Tierney, 2013). By linking micro-level classroom practices to macro-level policy, the study underscores that fostering social equity in HCS requires coordinated attention to both pedagogical and structural conditions (Sadler, 1989; Andrade, 2010).

Overall, the study demonstrates that teachers' ability to conduct valid and equitable assessments in HCS is heavily shaped by contextual factors such as time, resources, and class size. Addressing these challenges requires systemic support, including professional development, resource allocation, and policy-level interventions, to ensure that assessment practices reflect students' true competencies rather than contextual advantages or disadvantages.

Conclusion

This study highlights that valid and equitable assessment in Home and Consumer Studies cannot be understood, or improved, without accounting for the broader structural and contextual conditions in which teachers operate. While curriculum reforms like Lgr22 promote competence-based, inquiry-driven learning and assessment, their implementation is undermined by practical constraints such as insufficient time, inadequate material resources, overcrowded classrooms, and limited opportunities for professional development. Such barriers shape both the content and methods of assessment, as well as whose learning is most faithfully captured, prompting urgent concerns about equity and fairness in educational outcomes. The findings support a growing consensus that structural equity is a prerequisite for pedagogical equity. Policymakers, school leaders, and curriculum developers must recognise that assessment design alone is not enough. Ensuring the validity and fairness of assessment in practical subjects like HCS requires sustained investment in teacher support, classroom infrastructure, and time for reflective, student-centred practice.

Future research should explore the perspectives of students and examine how structural disparities affect their experiences and outcomes. Comparative studies across countries could also offer insights into how different educational systems navigate the intersection of structure, pedagogy, and assessment in life-oriented subjects such as HCS.

Biography

Elina Larsson is a Swedish lecturer and researcher in home economics education and sustainable living. She promotes critical thinking, active citizenship, and inclusive learning environments. Her work develops teaching methods that support practical skills, sustainability, social responsibility, and lifelong learning, equipping students to tackle global challenges and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future.
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