

An Examination of Home Economics as a Subject on the Curriculum in Special Schools.

This study examines the current provision of Home Economics (HE) in special schools for students with mild and moderate general learning difficulties. It indicates that access to HE depends on a number of factors including the availability of hours and student age. HE teachers highlighted many limitations including the lack of a formal recognised programme and limited resources. The results show that teachers consider the main purpose of the HE programme is to teach students with special educational needs practical life skills. It is also considered important to provide students with an accreditation. The question arises as to why a suitable HE curriculum framework has not yet been devised to meet the needs of students with mild and moderate general learning difficulties.

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INTRODUCTION

Home Economics (HE) is offered as part of both the junior and senior curriculum in Irish post-primary schools. The aim of HE is to promote sustainable family living in an ever-changing society (Mullaney, 1997). The acquisition of practical skills is a key element of any HE programme. Special schools are designated as primary schools and follow the primary schools curriculum. HE is not therefore on the curriculum, though some special schools offer HE as part of the school programme. One of the many recommendations made by the Special Education Review Committee Report (SERC) (Ireland, 1993) was that

...resources for the teaching of practical subjects at an appropriate level should be made available for pupils of post-primary age in special schools, taking into account their age, ability and aptitudes (p. 23).

This recommendation was never fully implemented and limited curricular access to post-primary subjects for senior students in special schools is a continuing issue. Associated with this concern is the lack of accreditation available to these students (Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE), 2006; National Disability Authority (NDA), 2006).

Home Economics and the Student with Special Educational Needs

HE has much to offer students with special educational needs (SEN). Its practical nature can provide opportunities to learn life skills defined by Macnamara (1995) as "...those skills that enable a person to function as happily and independently as possible in his or her own environment" (p. 1). Macnamara also describes how life skills can empower individuals, help develop a positive sense of self, increase confidence and give the opportunity to be valued as members of society.

Blake (1988) suggests that HE can provide opportunities to develop other skills including language, maths, social skills and motor skills. It also presents opportunities to explore cross-curricular links, a key principle of the revised primary schools curriculum (Department of Education and Science (DES), 1999). Studying HE also gives students in special schools the possibility of acquiring a formal accreditation.

Provision of Home Economics in Special Schools

Comprehensive data on the provision of HE in special schools is not available. Anecdotally, it appears to be very piecemeal. For example while some schools have DES sanctioned teaching posts, others provide the subject through posts or hours provided by their local Vocational Education Committee (VEC) and some special schools do not offer HE at all. Teaching hours vary widely and there is no specific curriculum available. In most circumstances teachers devise their own curriculum using other available programmes including aspects of the Junior Certificate HE course and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) modules.

The author carried out research to investigate the provision of HE in special schools, and to examine the types of programmes currently being delivered and how HE teachers view them. The study focused on special schools providing education for students with mild and moderate general learning difficulties (GLD).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed to carry out the research. A 20-item questionnaire was devised. It involved collating information on (a) teachers (b) programmes delivered and (c) purpose of the programmes. Further insights were gathered through interviews.

Sample

Of the sixty-three schools contacted, thirty-four responded, of which twenty-seven (43% of the target group) offered HE and completed the survey. These schools are attended by students with mild GLD (n=15) and moderate GLD (n=12). All HE teachers who responded were female with a mean of 18.48 years teaching experience (R=4-40) and 11.83 years (R=2-31) experience of teaching students with SEN. Service in the current post ranged from six months to thirty-one years (M=10.47). The mean number of hours allocated was 15.31 (R=5-22). Six teachers were in full-time posts. Seven teachers were interviewed; five from schools for students with moderate GLD and two from students with mild GLD.

Procedure

The sixty-three schools were contacted by letter inviting those offering HE to participate in the study. The HE teacher was requested to return the completed questionnaire. Questionnaire data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to represent quantitative data and content analysis was applied to analyse the open-ended items. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

General Background

Ninety-two per cent of the teachers hold a teaching qualification ($n=25$) with seventy-four per cent holding a specific HE teaching qualification. Only seven teachers had previous experience of teaching students with SEN ($R=0.75$ -12.5 years, $M=5.6$ years) and most did not have an opportunity to liaise with the teacher who previously held the post.

Home Economics Provision

All students to whom HE is offered in the twenty-seven schools participate. In most cases (73%) it is only offered to senior students ranging in age from 13–18 years. The number of classes attended per week range from one to four ($M=1.5$) lasting from thirty minutes to 180 minutes ($M=78$ minutes). Senior students and those preparing for the Junior Certificate or a FETAC module tend to be allocated more time. The number of students in a typical class group varies, ranging from two to ten students ($M=5.78$, $SD=1.86$).

Curriculum

While the HE programmes offered varied in schools, each includes the common elements, cookery, kitchen safety, food safety and nutrition/healthy eating. Eighteen (66%) of the schools follow an accredited programme with some students. This includes all fifteen schools that cater for students with mild GLD. The most commonly offered accredited programme is the FETAC food and cookery module. The main reason stated for choosing such programmes (23.4%) was that gaining accreditation is important for the students. However interviews clearly showed that some teachers had reservations about the accredited programmes available, suggesting that achievement in examinations may not reflect students' ability to use their skills:

...there are the basic skills that I feel are being neglected. In the Junior Cert task you are never asked to open a tin of beans... We're making jam tarts... I don't really think it's practical... I feel what we should be doing in this school is teaching the students to live independently.

Teachers' responses to statements concerning the aims of the HE programme are summarised in Table 1. The majority strongly agreed that the main aim of their programme was "to teach practical life skills" (88.9%).

Table 1: Aims of HE programme: Teachers' opinions

Aims	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)
Teach practical life skills	88.9	7.4
Teach students how to prepare simple meals	85.2	7.4
Give students the opportunity to learn life	77.8	7.4

skills within the context of Home Economics		
Teach students about healthy eating	73.1	23.1
Give students an opportunity to study a post-primary subject	40.7	18.5
Help students attain formal accreditation	26.9	23.1
Provide students with skills which may help prepare them for work	55.6	14.8

Teachers who were interviewed further emphasised this practical aspect to the HE programme, one remarking:

...the main aim would actually be to prepare them for life after school...equip them with as many skills as possible, to help them survive at home and in the outside world.

Developing confidence, self-esteem and independence were key goals the interview participants hoped HE would help their students achieve.

The most frequently reported strengths of the HE programmes as reported by teachers (17%) were that they helped students gain independence and life skills, were flexible, and met the needs of the students. Weaknesses cited included lack of time, poor resources, literacy difficulties encountered by the students and poor correlation between programmes and student ability.

Programme Planning

Forty-two per cent of participants indicated that they themselves input most into programme planning, others received input from the principal and the class teacher. The main source of subject-specific advice and support was from other HE teachers in special schools (31.3%). The issue of support was also revealed as a concern during interviews. It emerged that the teachers relied on advice from colleagues, class teachers and occasionally special needs assistants (SNAs) when initially planning their programmes. Some teachers also expressed a sense of isolation, “I really feel like I’m on my own...I do feel I’m in a special school with primary school teachers. I am quite separate”.

The majority of respondents (84%) indicated that they would welcome a specific HE programme for students attending special schools. 23.7% of respondents felt that specific programmes might include resources to meet the literacy levels of the students, 28.9% felt that currently available curricula do not meet the student needs.

While welcoming the idea of a new programme, interviewees would like such a programme to be flexible in structure:

I'd be wary of the kind of programme that would be offered... I would hate to have to be forcing, you have to do this, because this is on the list ...I'd like something really flexible.

In line with responses to programme priorities (Table 1) teachers indicated that a programme should focus on the acquisition of practical skills (27.3%). Interview participants corroborated this. They also expressed the hope that a specific curriculum would be accompanied with appropriate resources. Similarly they all indicated the need for the opportunity to meet with and share ideas with HE teachers in other special schools. One respondent commented, "I would love if we had a forum for HE for special schools, just to talk with others and share experiences".

DISCUSSION

While this research study may appear small in scale the target audience is small anyway and therefore the survey sample is a good representation of HE teachers in special schools. This research affirms that the provision of HE in special schools varies considerably in terms of subject availability, hours offered and accessibility to students. Students attending special schools have a diverse range of needs. However, they do need key skills, such as preparing and eating food, in preparation for life after school. It is ironic that a subject that can equip students with practical life skills is provided so unsystematically.

In 1993 the SERC report recommended exploring the availability of practical post-primary subjects in special schools. This recommendation was never fully implemented. The solution is not necessarily found in appointing specialist teachers to each special school. Provision could be made on a dual-enrolment basis whereby students could attend another school for suitable HE classes.

The availability of a suitable curriculum for teaching HE to students with SEN needs to be investigated. It is not acceptable that teachers in some circumstances have no recommended programme, little available support or resources and little experience of teaching students with SEN. This study indicates that HE teachers in special schools want to provide a programme with structure and believe their students deserve a properly planned curriculum designed to meet their needs. Provision of guidelines and curricula is required, perhaps in the form of a curricular framework that teachers could adapt to meet the needs of their students.

An appropriate HE curriculum devised for special schools would also provide an opportunity for debate regarding the purpose of teaching HE in these schools. The results from this study suggest that teachers consider that the main purpose of the HE programme is to teach the students practical life skills and possibly provide them with an opportunity for accreditation. Can a suitable curriculum be devised that could fulfil both of these goals? The achievement of accreditation can be demanding in terms of time and can constrain the opportunity for students to acquire skills. The possibility of students achieving these awards in centres to which they transfer after leaving school should be investigated.

A specific curriculum for HE should meet the diverse needs of the students, provide structure, be very flexible in nature and most importantly be accompanied with appropriate resources. While teachers are experienced in devising and adapting materials, it is clear that there is a lack of resources for this group of students. It is also clear that although HE teachers in special schools have some support they would very much value contact with, and the support of, other HE teachers in similar situations.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of HE provides many valuable learning opportunities to students in special schools. However, the subject is provided in an inconsistent manner. HE teaching provision is not formally provided or planned for in special schools, perhaps because it is viewed as an extra subject. Some type of curricular framework must be explored for this group of students. It is imperative that any programme/curriculum draws on the experience of HE teachers knowledgeable in this area. Evidence from this study suggests that this curriculum should be based on a core module, focusing on cookery, kitchen safety, food safety and nutrition/healthy eating. Modules representing other elements of HE could be included. This programme/curriculum must be as flexible as possible to allow it meet the needs of a diverse range of students. The possibility of gaining accreditation should also be explored, as should the concept of students starting a programme at school and completing it elsewhere.

Finally, it would be very beneficial to HE teachers in special schools if they were facilitated to create suitable contacts, share ideas, explore programmes and devise resources. The possibility of the Special Education Support Service (SESS) or the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) setting up some type of forum should be explored given that these organisations already have expertise in the development of and in providing support for such programmes.

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