

## **4 Home Economics Education and Issues in Contemporary Living: From the Perspectives of Gender and Citizenship**

This paper will discuss various issues affecting individuals and families living in modern Japan: eating habits, consumerism, residential environments, and social/welfare issues related to the declining birthrate and the resultant ageing of society. An overview of the gender issue, identified by the Japanese government as one of the most serious problems facing the country in the 21st century will also be presented. Ways in which home economics can help rectify this problem will also be discussed. Finally, the description of the characteristics and the potential of the home economics curriculum as well as the different ways it can be used to empower children will be discussed.

### **4-1 Problems in Contemporary Living that Affect the Individual and the Family and How Home Economics Can Help**

#### **4-1-1 Eating Habits and Food-related Problems**

The modern Japanese diet is a mixture of traditional foods such as rice, vegetables, fish, and soybean products with a Western diet centered on meat and dairy products. All in all, it is a diet rich in its variety of ingredients, styles of cooking, and tastes. Such a healthy diet has enabled the Japanese to become the longest lived people in the world, living to the average age of 81.9 years, according to a 2003 survey. In addition to a healthy diet, other factors that have contributed to this long life span are the existence of modern medical services, a system of social supports, and a relatively high standard of living.

Also, Japan is a country with four distinct seasons, which has led to the development of a food culture that uses seasonal ingredients in its cooking, with each region of the country having its own traditional and holiday dishes.

In recent years, however, several eating or food-related problems have developed with negative health consequences, for instance, excessive calorie intake from over-eating and a lack of nutritional balance caused by the eating of irregular meals. This tendency is not limited to adults. Eating, or overeating, between meals is also a

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problem for elementary school age children, who fail to get the nutrition they need because they are eating too many fatty foods or sweets. Such eating habits have been shown to increase obesity as well the chance of developing lifestyle diseases such as adult-onset diabetes. Furthermore, according to various studies, teenage, and even prepubescent, girls are heavily influenced by cultural ideals of feminine beauty, especially the desire to be thin, which often makes girls do excessive dieting that can damage their health. There is also the problem of families whose members live separate lives and thus end up eating separately. They often eat in a hurried manner - relying on restaurants, pre-prepared meals in convenience or grocery stores, or quick-and-easy-to-make foods at home.

There are many problems associated with these mass-produced foods, whose quality suffers as a result of preservation, cost reduction, and product beautification. Food additives, such as preservatives and coloring, affect not only human health but also pollute the environment and, as a result, the food chain on which we depend. Environmental pollution and unsafe practices in the food industry continue to threaten the quality of food: seafood populations contaminated by PCBs and dioxins, mad cow disease (BCE), just to name a few.

By studying food and nutrition in home economics, students can acquire correct facts about what to eat and what not to eat in order to build a healthy body. The course aims to have students learn by doing: they choose safe ingredients, cook their own food, and gain confidence in preparing all aspects of a meal.

##### **4-1-2 Consumer-related Problems**

In Japan, the period of economic revival in the 1950s saw the beginning of product-related injuries to consumers, either through false advertising or contaminated food products. This was caused mainly by companies having dishonest business practices or neglecting safety standards in order to cut costs and compete in the price wars that were current at that time. This resulted in many low quality products being available on the market. Whenever there was trouble, consumers found themselves in a very weak position, confronting rich and powerful companies. To prevent this, the Japanese government passed the Consumer Protection Fundamental Act in 1968. Under this law, two organizations were founded: the National Consumer Affairs Center of Japan and the Consumer Center. These organizations have been active in supporting and protecting the consumer by conducting product tests, passing on information and advising individual consumers.

Despite these advancements, consumer-related problems continued to occur. After

1980 the situation became even more complicated with the explosion in the number of service and information-related crimes. Consumers were constantly troubled by pyramid schemes, telephone sales, and problems with products purchased over the Internet.

Children, too, were already becoming the victims of these dishonest business practices. There were reports of elementary and junior high school children being confronted on the streets by direct solicitors, over-charged for services, and pressured into unnecessary purchases.

With the rapid increase of cell phones since the 1990s, children are exposed to even greater amounts of information. (At present, the vast majority of all junior and senior high school students own a mobile phone.) Parents are unable to monitor all of this information, leaving children exposed to predatory solicitation, both commercial and sexual. Sexual exploitation is, in fact, a growing social problem in Japan.

In any case, in the trend of consumerism that exists in today's world, there is no doubt that children would benefit from an education that better their ability to discern the dangers they may meet in everyday life. Children should have an understanding of their fundamental rights and responsibilities and of the concrete protections that are available to them. They need to increase their evaluative and critical skills in order to respond to problems appropriately. It is also important for them to understand that, when they take action as individual consumers to protect their own interests, they are also acting in the interests of society by serving as a watchdog to report wrongful business practices.

The learning of consumer affairs is covered in part by the social studies curriculum; however, it is only in home economics that consumer-related topics are consistently taught from elementary through high school. This is clearly directed in the home economics' Course of Study, which emphasizes the importance of concrete and practical lessons that teach students the best ways to take action themselves as consumers.

The 2009 National White Paper describes the future society for which we should strive as "the consumer citizenship society", meaning a society where citizens would power a grass-roots revolution through their en masse consumer behavior. In turn, high expectations are placed on school education, especially on the consumer citizenship lessons in home economics and social studies.

#### **4-1-3 Living Environment-related Problems**

After the adoption of Agenda 21 at the United Nations Conference on

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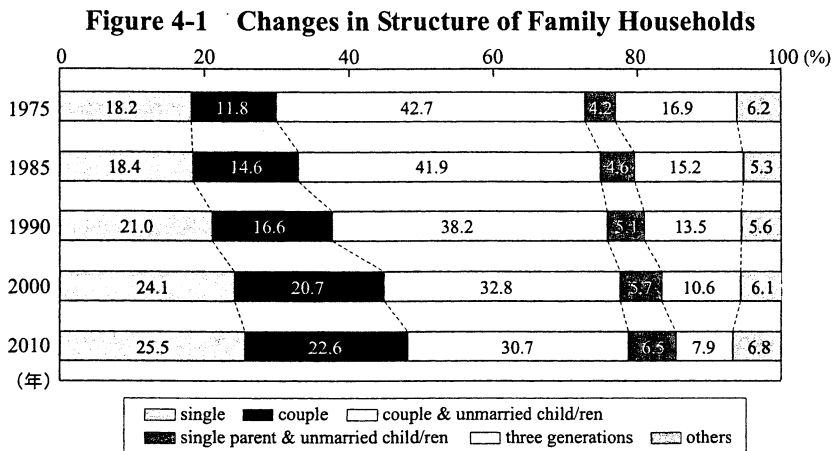
Environment and Development in 1992, there was an increased awareness in Japan of the concepts of sustainable development and environmental protection, which led to concrete plans to check the destruction and pollution of the environment with the view of creating a society in harmony with its surroundings. In 2003, the need for education on sustainable development was recognized at the cabinet level with the implementation of the Basic Plan to Establish a Recycling-based Society.

The question is how to get children to appreciate the necessity of saving energy and protecting the environment, and to do so actively in their immediate surroundings. Specifically, children should learn how to do the following: 1) properly separate recyclables from trash at home and school, 2) reuse or recycle newspapers, milk cartons, plastic, glass, metal items, and clothing, and 3) conserve water, electricity, gasoline and other forms of energy. Furthermore, it is important for them to understand that their individual choices as consumers, such as to buy environmentally-friendly products or services, contributes to the creation of a recycling society. At school, these lessons could be learned in home economics and social studies classes or during extra-curricular and student government activities. One characteristic of home economics, in particular, is that its Course of Study emphasizes the practical understanding of the relationship between lifestyles and natural resources/environment, and it treats these topics in its textbooks consistently from elementary school to high school.

In recent years, there has also been a growing awareness around the world of the special needs of people with mental or physical challenges and the elderly. In Japan, several laws have been enacted to make life easier for the physically and mentally challenged, such as the Disabled Persons Fundamental Law and the Act on Buildings Accessible and Usable by the Elderly and Physically Disabled, commonly known as the Heart Building Law. Local governments, in cooperation with citizens, have started to implement barrier-free building codes into their towns and cities. In school, students could learn more about these topics during the comprehensive learning hour, social studies class or, especially, in home economics. During their study of residential living, for instance, students could go into neighborhoods, conduct surveys, interview residents, and learn by making actual proposals to remove barriers from houses, roads, and public buildings. Since the 1990s there have been reports of such practical learning experiences published in home economics periodicals. Home economics must also be concerned with raising future leaders who have the knowledge and skills necessary to create a livable environment.

#### 4-1-4 Social Problems Affecting Individuals and Families: the Declining Birthrate and the Aging of Society

Figure 4-1 shows the change in family households since 1975. In 1975, 64 percent of households consisted of nuclear families, three-generation families, or families with unmarried adult children living at home. But, by 2010 this number had fallen to 45 percent, while single person households rose from 18 to 26 percent. The percent of households consisting of married couples with no children increased from 12 to 23 percent. In other words, the structure of Japanese family households has undergone a process of diversification as well as size reduction.



Source : The Population Census, Statistics Bureau

All in all, these changes have created a crisis for the country in terms of the decreasing population of children and the growing number of elderly. In recent years the birthrate has steadily continued its decline. Compared with other countries, Japan ranks amongst the lowest, with 1.3 children born per mother on average. If one traces the factors responsible for this trend, one can see that traditional views on marriage have changed, with young people preferring to wait to find their ideal mate. This has led to an increase in people postponing marriage until later in life or becoming opposed to the idea of marriage at all. Women, in particular, are often hesitant to enter a difficult marital situation that requires them to give up their job, and thus their financial independence, and take on the traditional role of housewife and mother. Another factor in the trend against marriage is the expected cost and mental strain of raising children as well as the lack of adequate social and welfare programs to support young families.

The result of all the above has been an per capita increase in the population of the

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elderly. In 2010, the elderly account for 21 percent of the total population. If this trend continues, it is predicted that, by the year 2015, one in four persons will be 65 years or older, creating a truly over-aged society. With men living to the average age of 76 and women to the age of 82, Japan has the longest lifespan of any nation on earth. One of the greatest concerns of the Japanese people is how to make a society in which the elderly can enjoy their golden years in health and ease. The decrease in the number of children has led to a shortage of workers, which has in turn has decreased tax revenues. To respond to this national crisis the government has had to slash welfare and find ways to respond to declining birthrate and reverse the gradual ageing of its society.

Another domestic problem that affects modern families is the increase in the number of unmarried children who remain at home. These so-called "parasite singles" fail to become independent of their parents. Parents, too, are often unable to let go of their children, and this interdependency aggravates the problem of children being unable to find stable employment. These problems have been added to by the long period of economic recession during which young people have had great difficulty in finding good jobs. The government must think of ways to improve the employment situation for young people and provide support in terms of skills training and job counseling.

As stated earlier in this paper, the home economics Course of Study was revised in 1998 to include the new learning area of "family and home" at the junior high school level. From that time forward, students have studied, starting in elementary and continuing through high school, subject matter on the individual and the family. Child-rearing is taught in home economics at both the junior and high school level, while content related to welfare and the elderly is included in the course content at high school.

In studying the individual and the family, it is the aim of the curriculum to get students to reflect on their own birth and upbringing while thinking about their own future families and relationships. Furthermore, it aims to help students understand current affairs in Japan through the study of practical activities that encourage students to think about important issues, such as how to create a society that guarantees the human rights of all its citizens, including the very young, the very old, and those otherwise disadvantaged.

#### **4-2 Gender Problems and How Home Economics Can Help Solve Them**

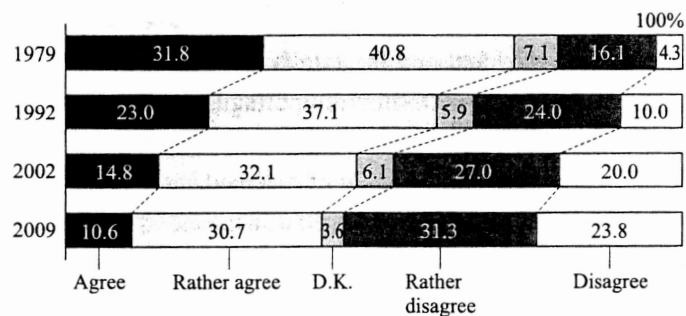
World War II was a turning point for women's rights in Japan. The war ended the strict division of labor based on gender that existed in paternalistic families before the

war and introduced a process of democratization at all levels of society. The new constitution and the new Basic Law on Education included the democratic ideals of equality of the sexes and of equal opportunity. A half century later, however, there remains, in fact, widespread sexual discrimination in society, in the workplace, and in homes. The transformation has not been easy. The question for home economics teachers is how to develop an awareness of gender problems as well as the can-do attitude needed to overcome them. First, I would like to give an overview of the gender issue in Japan.

#### 4-2-1 Gender Problems in the Home

Figure 4-2 shows the changes in Japanese views on gender roles. The number of people who would agree with the traditional division of labor, represented by the once popular slogan "Men work and women home", has certainly decreased during the last twenty years, especially those in the 20s and 30s age group. These young people make conscious efforts not to be trapped into established gender roles. The most resistant to change have been men over 60 years of age; however, as the younger generation replaces the older, one can reasonable expect that old-fashioned attitudes and views about gender will begin to disappear. According to the results of a 2003 study that investigated young people's views on women's lifestyles, a majority of both men and women responded that 1) they viewed work for both partners as a precondition for marriage, and 2) they desired a balance between a career and a home life.

**Figure 4-2 Changes in the Views of Gender Roles  
"Men work and women home"**



Source : Research by Cabinet Office

However sincere these attitudes may be, there has been very little actual change in homes, where housework is still done primarily by women. More than half of all

married women now work outside the home and have managed to make careers for themselves in society. However, the attitudes of men, especially regarding housework, have not proceeded at the same pace. The results of the survey by the Statistics Bureau in 2008 showed that, in the case of working couples, the husband did housework only 38 minutes per day while the wife worked 3 hours and 35 minutes, or 5.7 times longer. By looking at Table 4-1, which compares the responsibility of housework in various countries, one can see that Japanese men spend extremely little time helping out at home. This fact is bore out also by looking at the difference in the number of men and women who request child-care leave from work: 85.8 percent of working women who have given birth versus 1.72 percent of working men ( Government Survey in 2009).

**Table 4-1 Comparison by Country of the Time Fathers Spend with their Children or Doing Housework**

(Total per week / hours, minutes)

	Japan	Germany	U.S.	U.K.	Sweden
Total housework including taking care of children	1.00	3.00	3.13	2.46	3.21
Taking care of children	0.33	0.59	1.05	1.00	1.07

\* Eurostat "How Europeans Spend Their Time Everyday Life of Women and Men" (2004). Bureau of Statistics of the U.S. "American Time Use Survey Summary" (2006), and Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications "2006 Basic Research on Social Life" (Japan)

By these statistics we can see that the number of men taking child care leave is negligible. This partly reflects the lack of interest that most men have in participating in the upbringing of their own children. Some of this can perhaps be accounted for by the fact that most Japanese companies expect their male workers to put in long hours at the office, and men are thus unable to help out at home. The social problems related to marriage and the declining birthrate all have their root cause in these entrenched gender roles, especially in the workplace, or more broadly, within the Japanese business culture. Japan has started to recognize, however, that it has been slow to deal with these problems. At the international level the UN International Labor Organization (ILO) Treaty No. 156 clearly states its goal of having both men and women share equally the responsibilities of house and home. Japan ratified the treaty in 1995. It is one thing to ratify a treaty, but quite another to observe it. The real and urgent question for the country is how to raise the birthrate by getting men and women



to cooperate equally in their daily affairs.

#### **4-2-2 Gender Problems in Society**

Japan's gender problem stands out when compared with the situation in other countries. The United Nations Development Project (UNDP) ranks countries based on a numerical value called the "Gender Empowerment Measure" (GEM), which measures such things as the percent of women representatives in government; the number of women employed as specialists, technicians, executives, and administrators; and the difference between men and women's salaries. Despite the fact that Japan ranks among the world's top countries in terms of its Human Development Index (HDI), which measures life expectancy, literacy, individual GDP, etc, Japan is behind other developed nations with a GEM ranking of only 57 out of 109 countries, according to the 2009 report by the UNDP. While there is no difference in the number of girls and boys attending college (more than 50 percent of high school graduates of both sexes go on to college), women face a number of obstacles and restrictions after graduation, such as difficulty finding jobs, lower salaries, and being expected to quit by a certain age. The GEM ranking enables us to see clearly that sexual discrimination continues to exist in Japan.

#### **4-2-3 Gender Problems in Schools**

Equal opportunity has been achieved, more or less, in the Japanese school system; however, the gender norms of society are still well-established in the sub-culture of schools. The notion that the educational needs of boys and girls are gender-specific has led to certain discriminatory practices becoming common. For instance, class name lists or school assemblies are often divided by sex, with preference given to boys. Course requirements are often different for girls and boys, as was the case for home economics and physical education prior to 1989. Recent studies have shown that the content of courses and textbooks is clearly biased, the content reinforcing traditional gender roles while sending a strong message that boys come before girls. In addition to these visible signs of discrimination there are the more subtle forms of gender bias - a kind of hidden curriculum - that consists of the unconscious speech and behavior of teachers towards their students, the absence of any female teachers in school administrative positions, the unfair work load placed on women, and so on. All of these things send a message to children about gender. It is becoming clear that it is the schools themselves that are passing along gender bias to the next generation. Some individual teachers have attempted to eliminate gender bias in their classes while

encouraging students to define their own expression of gender, but such teachers are still the minority.

#### **4-2-4 The Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society**

In order to correct the aforementioned problems of gender bias in the home and in society, the government enacted in June 1999 the Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society. It is this law that linked the task of creating a truly equal society for men and women with the urgent social problems that face Japan in the twenty-first century. It clearly states the importance of "creating a society in which men and women have mutual respect for each other's human rights, and a society in which individuality and intelligence can be expressed regardless of one's sex.

Since the 1960s the worldwide movement for the liberation of women, encouraged by the United Nations, has focused attention on the gender gap problem and sexual discrimination, and has sparked efforts to correct the situation. In 1979, Japan took the opportunity to ratify the UN Treaty for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women with an sense to reforming the educational system, the law and the workplace to be more equalitarian. Upholding the 1995 UN World Conference on Women's Rights in Beijing, the Japanese Prime Minister's office implemented various measures that would lead eventually to the establishment of the Basic Law for a Gender-equal Society

Mutual respect for human rights and the encouragement of individuality are splendid goals, but the real challenge is an educational one - to teach and nurture humans who are capable of understanding these values and applying them in their own lives. In Article 10 of Chapter 2 of the Basic Law, the need for experimentation in education is expressed in the following way:

##### **Statement of Aims**

To devise more effective means, through education and learning, in both schools and in society, of promoting the ideal of equality of the sexes and of fostering self-reliance. Furthermore, in accordance with the spirit of the Japanese constitution and the Basic Law on Education, to make an effort to create an educational system that is responsive to the needs of a modern developed nation, where respect for the individual and sexual equality are observed.

##### **Concrete measures**

A. The advancement of gender-free education at the elementary and junior high school level

**B. The advancement of gender-free education in home economics**

Adequate guidance in dealing with situations at home and with human relationships in the family. And especially, through home economics education at high school, to teach children the importance of building a home by cooperation between all members of the family, both male and female, and by fulfilling one's role within that family.

In this statement we can see the importance being attached to mutual understanding, cooperation and equality between men and women as well as to the nurturing of attitudes and behaviors favorable to independence and self-reliance. We can also see that home economics is singled out as a school subject of central importance in teaching the value of equality of the sexes. In any case, this document is the first instance in the history of education in Japan in which the ideal of equality of the sexes is clearly expressed as a goal of educational policy. In this light, it can be considered innovative. The law has been adopted and the task now is to prepare schools to be more sensitive to gender issues and raise children in a way that frees them from gender expectations. Home economics can play a very large role in this. In fact, every publisher of home economics textbooks has included content on gender problems in their 2003 high school textbooks. And, in recent years, various educational journals have introduced practical lesson plans that deal with the themes of gender and the sharing of housework.

**4-3 How Home Economics Can Help Empower Students**

How can home economics in Japan empower students to deal with the various issues stated thus far? In conclusion, some of the special qualities of home economics and comment on its potential to help students face the challenges of the future will be summarized.

**4-3-1 The Acquisition of Life Skills**

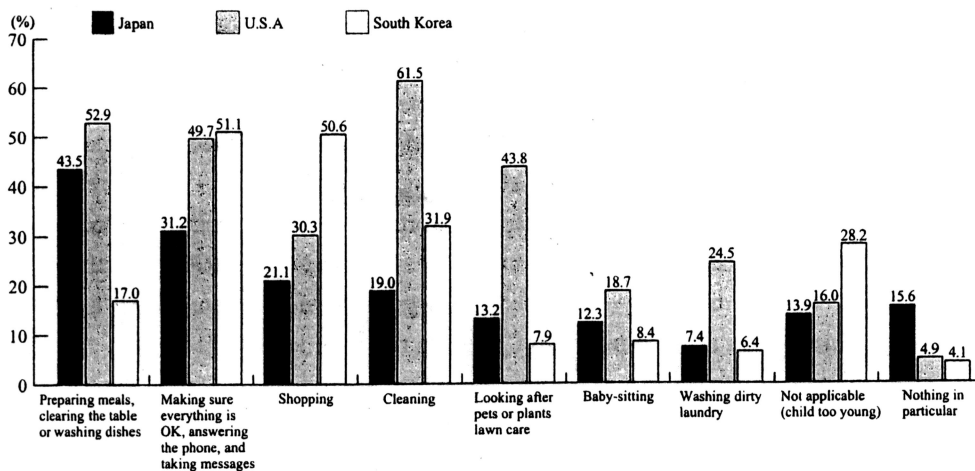
Home economics is a study deeply involved with teaching children the life skills necessary to become independent members of society. Since the 1970s it has been becoming more and more obvious that Japanese children are no longer capable of doing what were once considered simple tasks, such as peeling an apple or sharpening a pencil. This loss of dexterity is one cause of concern. In the age of high economic growth, mass production and mass consumption, the necessities of life can be purchased cheaply, eliminating the necessity to make things by hand. The universality of home electrical appliances has likewise reduced the chance to experience making

things by hand.

Furthermore, it has been shown that, compared to children in other countries, Japanese children spend less time doing housework. Figure 4-3 shows a comparison of the amount of time children spend doing chores in Japan, the United States, and South Korea. Japanese children ranked lower in their ability to do the shopping and cleaning, and to answer the phone. Strikingly, 15.6% of Japanese children answered that they "do no housework at all", compared to 4-5% in the other countries measured. Compared to junior and high school age children, children in the lower grades of elementary school reported helping out frequently. But, when these children get older, household chores are replaced by school club activities or study time for tests. The end result is that older children are not expected to do housework.

In this way, the day-to-day opportunities for children to acquire the skills they will need later on in life have almost disappeared. By learning basic skills in home economics such as cooking and sewing, by acquiring the know-how to organize and manage their lives, students experience first-hand the pleasure and value of making things by hand. Home economics is effective at empowering students to lead independent lives.

**Figure 4-3 A Comparison by Country of the Amount of Time Children Spend Doing Chores**



Source : International Comparative Survey Relative to Children and Family Management and Coordination Agency (1996)

#### **4-3-2 Understanding and Achieving Independence and Collaboration**

Home economics contains subject matter that covers the range of one's life - it is concerned with the growth and development of the individual and the family from infancy to the old-age. The study of home economics is based on two concepts: "independence" for the individual and "collaboration" with others.

Independence includes not only economic and mental/physical self-reliance but also a concern for the affairs of the community, the society, and the government, both regional and national. Acting as a responsible citizen is an important part of being independent. In other words, it is necessary to form children not only capable of making judgments for themselves and acting as individuals, at home or on the job, but who are also able to participate actively in society.

As they say, "No man is an island." When in need, humans seek out the help of others. Collaboration is necessary because humans need to help one another in order to live. It is on the basis of collaboration that equal human relations are built, problems overcome, and human rights protected.

In March of 2011, the huge disaster of the East Japan Earthquake occurred, prompting Japanese people to think sincerely about how to live more safely and with more social solidarity: the notion of "living together". Home economics is a subject that can help students to acquire the practical knowledge they need in order to be truly independent and to develop a sympathetic understanding of others as well as the desire to support one another.

#### **4-3-3 Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills for Raising Democratic Minded Citizens: The Need for Citizenship Education**

Children pass their childhood in the protection of family and trusted adults. When they grow up, however, they must abandon this passive existence and take their place as an active member of society. One necessary goal of education must be to foster critical thinking skills and the powers of judgment that children will need to face the problems in their future private and public lives. In England, for example, the national curriculum for the year 2000 included a new item of study called "Citizenship Education." Around the same period, other nations also have started to realize the need to empower citizens in their own countries through education.

As I have already mentioned, home economics in Japan is made up of learning areas that cover all the basic life skills that children will need: clothing, food, housing, family, child-raising, life management, etc. Furthermore, as I mentioned in Section 4-1,

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students start their study at the very personal, everyday level. Here they examine various issues related to food, consumption, and environment. They discuss gender roles, family and welfare issues. Next, the scope of study broadens out to include public as well as personal affairs: regional and local self government, national policies and measures, the social system, etc. Also, through the study of home economics, students become more aware of problems. They can draw upon their own experiences and learn to examine problems critically. They develop the desire and the capacity to try and solve these problems. In this sense, home economics, along with social studies, fulfills the vital role of citizenship education.

The social studies curriculum focuses on public aspects -facts about national policy, the social system, and the mentality of the individuals who make up the system. Home economics, on the other hand, encourages children to learn about social problems within the context of their own lives: eating, wearing clothes, living, taking care of people. From these commonplace activities, students are encouraged to think about what is important in their own life and in society.

Home economics educators have, as their highest goal, the raising of democratic-minded citizens who will build happy homes and a fair and free society. They are aware of the tremendous responsibility they bear, but have great hope in the promise of their field.

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