

SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION

A Think Piece : Consumer Education for a Sustainable Society, Swedish Home and Consumer Studies as an Example.

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Introduction

An overall challenge of the world today is to eradicate poverty and achieve prosperity for all at the same time as the survival of the planet is secured. Issues such as equity, justice, economics, climate change, pollution, energy use and sources of energy, health, and many more, have to be dealt with in different ways. Within the area of education these problems have been addressed in terms of “education for sustainable development”, ESD¹. The fact that education plays an important role for sustainable development was emphasised through the UN decade for education for sustainable development (2005-2014). In Sweden, the school’s task, according to the National Curriculum, is “to promote learning by stimulating the individual to acquire and develop knowledge and values” (Lgr11, p. 11). Further, ESD should be part of the curriculum as the school is responsible for ensuring that each pupil “has obtained knowledge about the prerequisites for a good environment and sustainable development” (Lgr11, p. 16). As I will show below, the school subject Home and Consumer Studies, HCS, contributes to the fulfilment of that specific task by including sustainable development as a central feature, stating that choices and actions in the home and as a consumer should be assessed from a sustainable development perspective. The overall aim of this think piece is to discuss the challenges that education for sustainable development brings to teachers teaching Home Economics/HCS. My aim is not to put forward a right way to teach, but to present incitement for further discussions of a complex teaching assignment.

Home and Consumer Studies in Sweden

In Sweden Home Economics started out in the late 1800s as a girls’ subject. In earlier work (Hjalmeskog, 2000) I showed that the aim of the subject during the first 70-80 years could be understood in three different ways, or discourses: as a vocational education for girls in areas suitable for women, as an education for women’s calling as mothers and housewives or as an education for

¹ Sometimes the abbreviation ESE is used, meaning Environmental and Sustainability Education.

rationalization of household work enabling for women either to be efficient housewives or to free up time for them to have paid work outside the home. None of these discourses go beyond a traditional femininity. What I then did was to create a possible alternative, a fourth discourse: Home Economics as citizenship education. The source for this creation was what I called "hidden gems", i.e. statements, discussions and pieces of texts that actually stood out in the debate that spoke a different language, statements that pointed to new opportunities. In this discourse boys and girls should be educated in Home Economics to fulfil their duty as citizens including responsibility for home and family life as well as working and taking part in societal life. This way of thinking goes beyond traditional views on femininity and masculinity.

When Home Economics became compulsory for all pupils, boys as well as girls, in Swedish Compulsory schools in 1962, the aim of the subject was not expressed in terms of citizenship education. Rather, the change can be regarded as shifting from educating girls with different purposes, but still within the traditional femininity, to educating boys and girls to become good consumers. It is stated in the syllabus from 1962 that "[a]ll education in Home Economics should be consumer education" (Lgr62, p. 340, author translation). The aim of educating consumers was further highlighted as the name of the school subject was changed from Home Economics to Home and Consumer Studies (HCS) in 2000.

A revision of all subject syllabuses for Swedish compulsory school was made in 2011 (Lgr11), and the aim was to make the aim, core content and knowledge requirements easier to understand. In addition, for HCS, the aim was to adjust the content to the amount of time the subject is studied during the 9 years of compulsory school, i.e. 118 hours. From the revision followed a more narrow or limited content, expressed for example by changing the overarching perspectives. Health, resource management, culture and gender equality became health, finance and environment. Gender equality has lost its overarching status and is now confined to be about division of household work. Also culture vanished and instead finance has become a perspective. Additionally, the core content has changed as the four areas of food and meals, housing, human relations and consumer economics has become three: food, meals and health; consumption and personal finance; environment and lifestyle. This means that the emphasis on food and meals is stronger and other areas of housework such as cleaning and laundry have been given less attention. Notable is that human relations no longer is a central area of content in HCS. The abilities the student should learn in HCS is according to Lgr11, to:

- plan and prepare food and meals for different situations and contexts
- manage and solve practical situations in the home, and
- assess choices and actions in the home and as consumers, from sustainable development perspective

The notion of sustainable development is used in the syllabus, and all choices and actions should be valued from a sustainable development perspective. In a commentary material it is stated that in HCS sustainable development is about health, finance and environment (Skolverket, 2011), parallel with the three of the dimensions, social, economic and ecological, often applied to the concept of sustainable development (Unesco.org, 2010).

Consumer society and Home and Consumer Studies

The contemporary society is by many, both within politics and academia, named a consumer society (see for example Bauman, 1998; Jackson, 2009). The view on society as a consumer society is built on the idea of constant economic growth, and that constant growth is the way to increase prosperity (Jackson, 2009). In this view there are things that are taken for granted, for example that in a consumer society everyone need to continue or even increase the consumption. The view includes a “thing oriented society”, which means that what people highly and most of all value is material things. Further, the view on prosperity is taken for granted and so is the way of measuring prosperity in economic terms (cf. Jackson 2009). Kasser (2007) argues that this vision of prosperity, of what it is to live a good life, have consequences for example on what we ask for as consumers, he says:

For if wealth and seemingly limitless consumption form our vision of prosperity, what more would we ask for than policymakers focused on maximizing GNP, powerful corporations with massive amounts of capital at their disposal, opportunities to be informed about wonderful products and services we might want to purchase, and a group of future workers and consumers highly motivated by money? (p. 1)

If this is how we think of our society and of the role of the consumer, what would the task for HCS be? Is it to educate consumers who are eager to consume, who measures status and personal welfare in “things”, who are attentive to information about bargains, new products and services and eagerly works to get the money to continue her or his consumption? I argue that the changes made in the revision of the HCS syllabus in 2011 are possible to understand as a move in such a direction. This shows through the inclusion of finance as one of the overarching perspectives together with the core content-area “consumption and personal finance”, which can be understood as in line with the view on society as a consumer society where material things are highly valued and with money as a main motivation. But as Englund (1986) and others (for ex. Hjalmeskog 2000) have shown curriculums and syllabuses as texts are contingent of political and ideological debate and power relations meaning that the content is not to be taken for granted, and that the texts often are both contradictory and interpretable. One example of such a contradiction or conflict is the emphasis on consumption and finance at the same time as one of the abilities students should learn is to assess choices and actions in the home and as consumers from a sustainable development perspective.

Alternative Visions

The idea of economic growth as the corner stone for our society has been criticized. Jackson (2009) discusses that it is criticized for its material consequences such as pollution, climate change etc. and for the fact that it does not seem as people become happier, rather the opposite. Canadian economists Victor & Rosenbluth (2006) also put forward critique of growth, focusing on developed countries, and talks about three main lines of arguments why developed countries should consider managing without growth:

1. continued economic growth worldwide is not an option owing to environmental and resource constrains, and so developed countries should leave room for growth in developing countries where benefits for growth is evident;
2. in developed countries growth has become uneconomic in the sense that it detracts more from well-being than it adds;
3. economic growth in developed countries is neither necessary nor sufficient for meeting specific policy objectives such as full employment, no poverty and the protection of the

environment (Victor & Rosenbluth, 2006, p. 492).

Like Jackson they forward environmental as well as human suffering as consequences of consumerism, i.e. if we continue to regard that the highest personal and societal goals are to create greater material wealth, or in other words, if we continue to rely on continues growth.

Research from different disciplines such as Philosophy, Economics and Psychology in different ways highlights alternative views on society, growth, prosperity and thus on people's wellbeing and happiness. Tim Kasser, professor in psychology, suggest a kind of "revolution of values", he argues:

But while there is no doubt that the materialistic goals embodied in capitalism and consumerism have brought about prosperity in one sense of the word, we must also recognize that if a different set of values are applied to evaluate our current personal and social circumstances, capitalism and consumerism must be considered remarkable less successful, if not unmitigated failures (Kasser 2007 p. 1).

Because, he says, the large increase in economic growth and consumption since the early 1960s have no counterpart in increase in people's happiness (Kasser, 2007; cf. Gardner & Assadourian, 2004). Further, the more people adjust to the materialistic aspirations and goals encouraged by consumerism, the lower their happiness and life satisfaction, the more increase the report of depression, anxiety and unhappiness (Kasser 2007; cf. Gardner & Assadourian, 2004). Instead of a vision of prosperity based on materialist values Kasser suggests a vision of prosperity based on intrinsic values (or goals) such as self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling. He argues that these are the very values and goals that empirical research demonstrates promote personal happiness, positive social involvement, and ecologically sustainable behaviour. For example studies shows that a strong focus on intrinsic values and goals promotes a more caring attitude towards ecological sustainability and less greed in terms of material resources (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Sheldon & McGregor, 2000)

Another way to approach the issue is presented by philosopher Kate Soper (2007; 2008). She argues:

Sustainable development is best promoted, I believe, by challenging the widespread presumption that the lifestyle changes essential to secure it will detract from satisfaction rather than enhance it. It is not the self-restraint but *the pleasure of breaking* with the growth-driven, shopping mall culture that needs to be emphasized (Soper 2008, p. 1, authors emphasis)

She introduce the concept "alternative hedonism", and discuss the way affluent consumption is compromised both by its negative effects (including situations from pollution, and climate change to overwork, and stress) and its prevention of other possible pleasures such as the feeling of breathing fresh air or the taste of a sun ripe tomato. This could mean that the choice of taking the bicycle to the working place becomes a positive choice instead of a choice of refraining something.

Finally, the economist Tim Jackson (2009) in his report Prosperity without growth written for the UK government in his capacity as Economics Commissioner for the Sustainable Development Commission challenges the assumption of continued economic expansion in the rich countries, and asks if it is possible to achieve prosperity without growth. Among other things he discuss production

and consumption of novelty as one of the factors that drive the growth dynamics in contemporary society. The restless desire of the consumer to buy new things together with entrepreneurs and firms production of things drives the growth forward. But for the consumer this is creating anxiety that undermine social wellbeing. Many have already adopted an anti-consumerism lifestyle, trying to escape the “iron cage of consumerism” (Jackson, 2009, p. 65) for example the small-scale “intentional” community Findhorn in Scotland and the “transition town” movement. The problem is that the structures and values dominating the society make it difficult. The dominating culture of consumption rather prevents and even penalise people for taking such anti-consumerist stand and act accordingly.

If our thoughts of our society and of the role of the consumer were in line with the alternative ideas presented above, what would the task for HCS be? Would it be to educate consumers who actually question the demand to consume, who looks for other pleasures in life than consumption and who measures status and personal wellbeing on intrinsic values?

Home and Consumer Studies as Education for Sustainable Development

When it comes to HCS in Sweden it is possible to understand the introduction of the core content “environment and lifestyle” and sustainable development as a value against which all choices and actions in the home and as a consumer should be assessed as a reason for introducing alternative views of society as those presented above. The notion of sustainable development opens up for another interpretation of the core content and the perspectives in the HCS syllabus. It urges the students to learn about different views of society, of growth and of prosperity. So, teaching HCS and taking the task of educating consumers for a sustainable society include a number of challenges. Several questions need to be considered, for example: How do we discuss what it is to flourish, to live a good life, to be happy? How are un-materialistic lifestyles focusing on intrinsic values addressed in HCS? In what different ways do we highlight the consequences of consumption, negative bi-products, but also as obstacles for other joys? How do we talk about sustainable consumption in ways that means getting something rather than abstain? How do we deal with what the individual / family can do in relation to the political, economical and social structures? Considering these questions and what views and visions of society and of consumers students have possibilities to explore in HCS may have consequences for how HCS teachers plan their lessons and thus for what students learn, including what alternatives are made visible and what choices are seen as possible.

Educating Citizens and/or Consumers?

The notion consumer-citizen or citizen-consumer is often used to describe a consumer acting in sustainable ways. Though, conventionally citizens and consumers have been regarded as oppositional and belonging to different areas of study. The division is reinforced in the theoretical division between a public domain of citizenship and its concern with rights, duties, participation and equality; and the private domain of the supposedly pure self-interested consumer (Soper, 2007). Today, for example in discussions within Consumer citizenship network, CCN, these two notions have been mingled. The historian Kroen (2004) has written an article on the political history of the consumer and she states that today the language of free enterprise and consumer goods is often used to describe the rights and benefits of citizenship, and the process of democratic politics. Further she argues that this positive conception of the consumer as the quintessential citizen, and free enterprise as the ideal medium for democracy is prevailing since the WW II, first in the US then in Europe. In this view the ideal

is that of the consumer as citizen simultaneously fulfilling personal desires and civic obligations by consuming. This view of the consumer-citizen is built on the very view that Jackson (2009) criticises: that the private mass marketplace, in what is assumed to be an ever expanding economy, would solve the nation's social and economical problems, in this capitalism is a partner for assuring democracy and justice. As this view is based on economic theory it assumes that people act according to the model of rationalising utility-maximizer.

When we now discuss future consumer education and sustainability it might be wise to discuss the limits and possibilities of the fusion appearing in the concept "consumer- citizen". First, the risk with presenting consumer and citizen as a successful fusion is that it may obscure the base of theoretical assumptions of the consumer society (the taken for granted). Second, it can be a problem to operationalize citizen-consumer as a way of empowering consumers. Malpass et al. (2007) argue that "the appeal to personal responsibility and choice in current appeals to the 'citizen-consumer' can be experienced as overwhelming and numbing by individuals and families when it comes to complex global problems such as climate change" (Malpass et al., 2007). This means that adding an excessive burden on the individual consumer or household can cause the protests to stop and the action force to decrease.

Third, another issue concerns commitment and inclusion, as citizenship implies mutual commitment and inclusion while consumers can make choices unburdened by guilt or social obligations (Gabriel and Lang, 1995, p. 173). And even if consumers make choices guided by a sense of social obligations for example buy eco-labeled or fair trade products, it happens in a world where different groups have varying degrees of access to material and cultural resources. The difficulties lies in the fact that if consumption would be the way to build a better society the possibility to consume need to be equally distributed among the consumers, and this is not the case in society today (cf. Barnett et al., 2005, p. 42).

Conclusions

My vision/alternative discourse was that Home Economics in Sweden would be regarded a citizenship education, in terms of including education for home and family life as compulsory education for boys and girls. Since 1960s boys and girls have studied Home Economics in Sweden, so far so good. In the syllabus from 1962 it is stated that all education in Home Economics should be consumer education, a task further emphasized in the change of name in 2000 to Home and Consumer Studies, HCS.

Today the school subject HCS seems to be, at least partly, framed by an idea of a consumer that simultaneously fulfil personal desires and civic obligations by consuming in line with a view of economic growth as a cornerstone of society. At the same time the current syllabus include a core content concerning environment and lifestyle and the aim that students should develop the ability to assess choices and actions in the home and as a consumer from a sustainable development perspective. And this, I argue, points towards other ideas about consumption and the consumer. It makes it important to teach about alternative views on society, and about different ways of acting as consumers maybe even questioning the materialistic values characterizing our consumer society. Furthermore, and equally important is the question of how we in HCS, and this includes choice of

subject content as well as teaching methods, meet the variety of students we have in the classroom, with different ideas, visions and dreams about life and consumption. As home economists we need to continue and develop the discussion on how the teaching in HCS can support the students to make all the decisions they will have to make growing up as citizens and consumers in a complex and contradictory society?

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Karin Hjalmeskog : A Think Piece: Consumer Education for a Sustainable Society, Swedish Home and Consumer Studies as an Example

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