Cultural sustainability: a hidden curriculum in Swedish home economics?

Ingela Bohm

To cite this article: Ingela Bohm (2023) Cultural sustainability: a hidden curriculum in Swedish home economics?, Food, Culture & Society, 26:3, 742-758, DOI: 10.1080/15528014.2022.2062957

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2022.2062957

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 15 Apr 2022.
Cultural sustainability: a hidden curriculum in Swedish home economics?

Ingela Bohm

Department of Food Nutrition and Culinary Science, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

ABSTRACT
The school subject home economics (HE) provides education on food, meals, and sustainability. Drawing on observations and interviews with eight Swedish HE teachers during 2018, this paper conceptualizes HE as an ambiguous perceived space between the conceived space of state-controlled learning goals and the lived space of a traditional Swedish, feminine, middle-class home. The subject's focus on cooking and housework lowered its status and marginalized it from the rest of the school. It seemed in constant threat of neglect and dissipation, which together with the chaotic nature of student cooking gave rise to a need for order and control. This extended to norms surrounding food, cooking, and eating that blurred the line between knowledge content and value judgments. Based on these findings, I suggest that HE is permeated not only by the social, ecological, and economic sustainability perspectives of the syllabus but also a fourth – cultural sustainability – which is not explicitly defined but rather underpins the subject in the form of a hidden curriculum.

KEYWORDS
Home economics; space; food culture; education; sustainability; cooking; food culture; cultural sustainability; cooking education; ethnography

Introduction

Home economics (HE) is a school subject with a strong focus on food, meals, and cooking from the perspectives of social, economic, and ecological sustainability (NAE, 2011a). In Sweden, the first version of HE was introduced at the end of the nineteenth century as a response to social problems (Johansson 1987). The state wanted young working-class women to become good housewives and contribute to improved living conditions, which meant they needed to learn frugality, discipline, and proper consumption habits. Women from the higher classes had to manage a household with servants, and here the focus was on aesthetics, pleasing environments, artistic pursuits, and being a good wife. Over time, HE has evolved to include students of all genders, and its focus has broadened to cover how private consumption patterns relate to social, ecological, and economic sustainability (NAE (National Agency for Education) 2011a; Gisslevik et al. 2016; Oljans et al. 2018). It is taught to students between 11 and 16, and is grouped together with Art, Music, Crafts, and Physical education as “practical-aesthetic subjects.” Such subjects have fewer hours than more academically oriented ones, and HE is the...
smallest with a total of 118 hours at the time of the study.\footnote{During this time, teaching must cover knowledge content related to three main areas: food, meals, and health; consumption and personal finance; and environment and lifestyle (NAE 2011a).} Current research on HE debates the possibilities and challenges of applying theoretical knowledge about sustainability in practical cooking (Beinert et al. 2020; Gelinder, Hjälmeskog, and Lidar 2020; Gisslevik, Wernerson, and Larsson 2017), with the goal being “a process where thinking, sensory experiences and action are all interlinked” (NAE 2011a, p. 43). However, time and again, the same results reappear: HE teachers navigate a difficult environment with at most 118 hours of instruction (Bohm 2021), and struggle to teach sustainability and cooking methods at the same time that they try to satisfy student tastes (Bohm et al. 2015a; Bohm, Lindblom, Åbacka, Hörnell and Bens 2015b, 2015c; Gisslevik, Wernerson, and Larsson 2017; Gelinder, Hjälmeskog, and Lidar 2020). Despite the knowledge goals of the syllabus, producing a culturally familiar meal based on a HE-specific cuisine takes precedence (Bohm 2021; Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2014). The issue is further complicated by the fact that culture is part of the HE syllabus, both as knowledge content to do with cultural traditions and commensality and as a more general curricular focus on socialization. Culture is defined as “the codes, conceptions, values, experiences and thought patterns that groups of people share, more or less consciously, about the activities that occur in a home” (NAE, 2011b, 10), but it is unclear which cultural expressions pertain to the knowledge content to be discussed and graded, and which ones are only to be enforced and obeyed as part of a normative socialization process. This leaves teachers to independently – and idiosyncratically – interpret and apply this aspect of the syllabus.

The cultural aspect is also what connects HE to the home. But despite these ties, HE is still a part of the educational system, and cooking in a classroom supervised by a teacher is qualitatively different from cooking in the home. There are marked differences between educational and domestic spaces, creating boundaries that students struggle to cross (Palojoki 2003). In this paper, therefore, I aim to explore teachers’ production of HE as an ambiguous space between home and school, with a special focus on cultural aspects.

**Theoretical framework**

I employed Lefebvre’s (1991) triad of conceived, perceived, and lived space as a foundation for my fieldwork and analysis. Conceived space is here understood as abstract goals and ideals that are codified in policy documents and frame factors. It is connected to bureaucracy and the industrial rhythms represented by clocks, and it can be imagined as an intellectual schema that is superimposed more or less successfully on already existing, physical, and social spaces. Examples include syllabi, schedules, and classroom layouts, which impact everyday activities in schools. To illustrate this impact, we can ponder how earlier Swedish syllabi promoted specific instructions for classroom design to enable cooking and housework (Skolöverstyrelsen 1969, 1963). While newer syllabi (NAE, 1994, 2011a; Skolöverstyrelsen 1980) lack such details, 1960’s classrooms are still in use. They can therefore be seen as physical manifestations of past policy, even though pedagogic ideologies have changed (Höijer, Fjellström, and Hjälmeskog 2013). On the other hand,
classrooms can also lack furnishings that make cooking possible (Lindblom, Erixon Arreman, and Hörnell 2013). This creates mismatches that teachers need to handle in the everyday interactions that occur in perceived space.

Perceived space is the dimension of space that can be perceived by the senses. It has to do with bodily rhythms and experiences, such as satiety and hunger, the smell of cooking food, the heat from ovens and stoves, and the sounds of clattering utensils and running water. It involves social interactions and every-day activities, such as cooking together, handling utensils, and discussing group work. The perceived space of a HE classroom can resemble a domestic kitchen in some respects but is in fact a public environment made for formalized learning. While it typically contains home-like furnishings such as stoves, sinks, and work surfaces (Höijer, Fjellström, and Hjälmeskog 2013; Lindblom, Erixon Arreman, and Hörnell 2013), the layout with several kitchens in one room recodes them as educational work stations. Ingredients and recipes are often subject to teacher control (Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2014), and the room is subdivided into teacher and student spaces, such that students may not take what they want from the refrigerator or cupboards (Höijer, Fjellström, and Hjälmeskog 2013).

Against this background, it may come as no surprise that students view food in HE as less authentic than food in the home (Höijer, 2013), and this brings us to the final dimension of Lefebvre’s (1991) model, lived space. Here we find the psychosocial, cultural, and emotional dimensions of cooking and eating, such as the symbolic use of specific dishes to mark relationships, times of the day, and holidays (Lupton 1996). These may differ from person to person depending on their background, but the overarching goal of home cooking is often to satisfy hunger and/or to build relationships and identities within a cultural network of values (Bisogni et al. 2002; Fischler 2011). It can have a pedagogic dimension if children are invited into the kitchen to learn in a master/apprentice fashion, but this occurs within a relatively homogenous group of people that share a lived space. In HE, food, kitchens, cooking, and eating carry different meanings since they are part of a curriculum. Teachers view HE as a way of compensating for a home where knowledge of nutrition is low (Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2011). They choose dishes based on factors pertaining to conceived space, such as lesson length, the number of steps in a recipe, and sustainability aspects (Bohm 2021), but also on perceived space, such as how many stoves a classroom contains. Beyond such practical concerns, they tend to choose dishes that reproduce their own cultural values (lived space), which may or may not coincide with those of their students (Gelinder, Hjälmeskog, and Lidar 2020; Gisslevik, Wernersson, and Larsson 2017; Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2014). This reveals tension between the lived spaces of teachers and students, but also between lived space and the conceived space of policy documents. Since the HE syllabus includes knowledge content to do with culture and food traditions, lived space is also a part of the subject’s educational goals.

To harmonize with the dimensions of space in Lefebvre’s (1991) theory and with the HE syllabus, my use of the term culture in this paper refers to the everyday practices (perceived space) and meaning-making (lived space) of social actors within a temporal and physical space based on educational ideals (conceived space).
Method

Between April and October 2018, I interviewed eight female HE teachers and conducted participant observations during their lessons. Depending on the teachers’ willingness to let me visit, I observed between one and six lessons at six schools in three Swedish towns. I found the teachers by contacting principals and by posting in a dedicated HE Facebook group. The study was approved by the regional ethics board (Dnr: 2010-255-31 M), and all participants provided written consent when I visited their schools. Initially, six teachers agreed to participate, but when I visited two schools, colleagues of the original participants also expressed interest, resulting in a total of eight participants and over 50 hours of recorded material. Through the interviews, I gathered data on teachers’ educational goals and frame factors that impacted these (conceived space), how they perceived the reality of cooking in HE (perceived space), and what they thought it should or could be (lived space). Since issues to do with food and health can be ethically sensitive, I positioned myself as an equal rather than an outside judge and strove to build rapport based on my being a fellow HE teacher. For example, when I asked about taken-for-granted truths in the subject, I explained that I needed the teacher to describe things in their own words for the sake of my study, even though I might already understand as a fellow HE teacher (cf Finlay 2002).

During the interviews, I asked to observe a few lessons, and six teachers agreed to this. I offered to participate in preparations and also chatted with them during lessons, which led to a type of work-along situation that prompted discussions I might not otherwise have initiated (cf Joosse and Marshall 2020). During observations, I photographed and filmed representations of conceived space in the form of classroom layouts, schedules, lesson/semester plans, recipes, and instructions. I wrote field notes on perceived space by noting how teachers gesticulated, handled objects, moved around the room, shopped for groceries, used technology, and interacted with students. My own perceptions also formed part of the data. The rush of pouring water, the sizzle from frying fish, and the clatter of utensils were all captured by the mp3 recorders we wore, and I jotted down any olfactory input such as whiffs of melting butter, the sharp odors from food that burned, and the sweet aroma from finished apple pies. I also noted my feelings and bodily reactions, such as boredom, restlessness, stress, or headaches. Finally, data on lived space was gathered through recorded speech where teachers explained the meanings of rules and the proper way of doing things in HE.

After each lesson, I complemented my sound files and written notes by immediately recording impressions on my mobile phone. I talked about emerging patterns and themes, and used metaphors such as the semipermeable classroom that shaped my thinking about the space while I was still in the field (cf Lakoff and Johnson 2008). To mitigate observer bias and avoid letting my personal views color my analysis, I also discussed my attitude to the teachers’ way of teaching, and made explicit any preconceived notions about what good teaching was (Finlay 2002). The recordings were partly summarized and partly transcribed verbatim, and then merged with my field notes (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The transcription and analysis focused on how teachers acted during lessons, and how they described the classroom, the students, and their teaching (perceived space); but also on how they justified their actions by referring to educational and/or cultural ideals they wished to live up to (conceived and lived...
space). To ascertain that nothing relevant was left out, I repeatedly listened to the recordings throughout analysis, thus retaining a feel for the context as I coded the data according to recurring phenomena such as “HE is a low status subject,” “teachers combat disorder,” and “Swedish dishes are central.” These were later grouped into themes that were discussed with colleagues and underwent several reorganizations before finding their final form in this paper (Braun and Clarke 2006). To uphold confidentiality, I avoid connecting teacher pseudonyms with school pseudonyms.

Results

Balancing freedom and control

The door to the HE classroom marked the transition to a specific set of rules. While the studied classrooms were typical Scandinavian public spaces with muted colors – white, beige, or naked wood – teachers had also added aesthetic touches such as fake flowers, traditional earthenware, and posters of vegetables and fruits, signaling the culinary and aesthetic nature of HE as soon as one stepped over the threshold. Educational posters on health and the environment, learning goals from the syllabus, models for correct eating, and lists of rules that promoted hygiene, orderliness, etiquette, aesthetics, and the correct chronological order of cleaning tasks also lined the walls. There were no pictures of meat, butter, sugar, or sweet foods, unless as part of cautionary articles about unhealthy eating. Vanja mentioned that she always told her students to leave their energy drinks on the stairs outside, because they did not belong in HE.

For cooking, important ideals were planning, moderation, and limitations, perhaps partly because of the chaotic nature of HE where many different things happened at once in a room filled with dangerous heat and knives. Food could burn, batters could spill, and split-second decisions had to be made to salvage dishes or prevent accidents. Since the space was used by many classes, order was important but difficult to achieve:

It’s chaos in these drawers. It’s like ... it always is. It’s ... you know, for half a day it’ll be okay, then half the things are in the blue kitchen or they borrow from each other and you can’t find anything, and like ... it’s totally hopeless. It’s a really difficult thing to keep order, and where things are supposed to be. So, I feel like ... I do a raid every now and then, but I can’t do it all the time because then I wouldn’t do anything else. (Birgitte)

When I asked Birgitte what would happen if she let students put things where they wanted, she said it would create confusion and irritation. To combat this, teachers marked cupboards and drawers with the utensils they should contain to facilitate quick retrieval. Helene had even stopped using the cupboards altogether because she was tired of searching for everything, and students could put inappropriate objects like dirty dishcloths and bread dough in them. Nowadays she stored utensils on trolleys instead, a form of organization more reminiscent of restaurant kitchens than domestic ones.

Freedom of choice was limited, especially for younger students, since too much freedom could create unpredictable situations. Generally, teachers prepared all ingredients and even cut them up or weighed them so that students did not take too much. Even when Vanja arranged a “raid the cupboards” lesson where students were given seemingly random foods to cook from, she planned it meticulously and expected students to see what they were supposed to make from the offered ingredients. Students were free to
choose minor ingredients such as spices, echoing earlier findings (Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2014), but Birgitte laughed when she saw that someone had fetched curry to use in a minced meat sauce, indicating that this was strange. The Internet could also be unpredictable: Sofie said that students who searched for hamburger sauce found “strange” recipes, so she offered them one of her own instead. Interestingly, students were said to be extra enthusiastic when they could cook what they wanted. Sofie had even “tricked” a class into making fish (which was unpopular) by giving them three recipes to choose from. Recounting the story, she expressed slight trepidation, as if the students’ enthusiasm threatened the integrity of the lesson.

Another aspect of the HE space that challenged teacher control was the layout, which was not designed for traditional teacher activities. A relatively trivial example of this was that Sofie had trouble moving between student desks to help with written tasks because they stood so close together. More importantly, four of the teachers did not have a teacher’s desk. This desk can symbolize what is sometimes called “desk teaching” in Sweden, a pedagogical ideology that focuses on theoretical tasks and the teacher-as-expert who conveys their knowledge to passive students. In later curricula it has been replaced with more student-centered teaching styles (NAE (National Agency for Education) 2011a), but the absence of a desk meant teachers lacked somewhere to keep recipes, student lists, instructions, lesson plans, textbooks, and student assignments. Instead, they used the edge of the students’ dining table, a bookcase, or a work surface in an unused kitchen. Birgitte felt as if she encroached on the students’ space by putting her things on their table, but saw no other alternative.

The classrooms were designed to enable cooking in separate kitchens that teachers could visit to supervise and offer individual help, but they lacked a central area where teachers could gather everyone to demonstrate cooking techniques for the students to mimic. Instead, some teachers used students’ kitchens for this, which meant their demonstrations were partially obscured by cupboards or by students that crowded in a half circle rather than around a cooking Island. Indeed, during the observed demonstrations, the atmosphere was scattered and distracted and teachers had to repeatedly remind students to pay attention. Perhaps because of these problems, demonstrations were not that common, and teachers seldom showed students how to carry out their work. Sofie said she liked to leave students to their own devices during cooking, and observations confirmed that students were mostly left to independently divide the work between them and carry out their tasks. Most teachers only stepped in when students asked questions or ran into trouble.

However, this too was complicated by the layout. During Sofie’s lesson, I drew a sketch of the classroom and tracked all movements during five minutes. This revealed that students repeatedly crossed the same piece of floor to reach the rubbish bin or a shared cupboard, and this was also the space where the teacher – and I as an observer – stood to survey student activities. It certainly explained why I constantly felt in the way. When I mentioned it, Sofie said she sometimes wished she could hang from the ceiling to see everything that went on. This lack of overview was a recurring problem. Village School and Slope School had an open layout, but at Forest School, Hill School, and Harbor School, cupboards obscured the teacher’s vision. The number of kitchens also impacted overview. Harbor School and Village School had ten kitchens each, which meant teachers could have the students work in pairs or even alone, while Forest School only had four
kitchens and students had to work in groups of three or four. This was not ideal, since – as Birgitte put it – she lost control and did not “see” the students. Worse, Field School had two adjoining classrooms, one with kitchens meant for cooking and one with desks meant for theoretical work. The teacher found this layout stressful since she could not see students at all if they went into the other room.

Thus, teachers strove to reconcile a conceived space of order and harmony with the perceived chaos of cooking in large and constantly changing student groups, in classrooms that hampered overview. But teachers also controlled less obviously necessary areas, such as choice of utensils and cultural norms surrounding food, cooking, and meals.

**Culture as knowledge content and value judgment**

In HE cooking, there were sometimes discrepancies between theory and practice. Environmental issues and physical health were usually discussed during introductions, and sustainable choices were promoted in theory and sometimes – but far from always – applied in cooking assignments. Correspondingly, the less sustainable choices were not explicitly discussed from a cultural or psychosocial health perspective, even though this too formed part of the syllabus. This mismatch between theory and practice was mirrored in the physical space. The classroom décor exclusively promoted healthy and environmentally friendly food even though the storage spaces also housed ingredients like chocolate sauce, ice cream, and sprinkles. Tables of seasonal vegetables on the walls were not necessarily reflected in the refrigerator, which could contain cauliflower and lettuce in April even though they were out of season. In HE textbooks, meat-centered and sugar-filled recipes contradicted the chapters on health or the environment just a few pages away, without explaining or reasoning around why. Rather, a taken-for-granted repertoire of dishes was presented, making any conflicts invisible. During lessons, students typically made white pasta with minced meat sauce, traditional Swedish holiday foods, pancakes, and cinnamon rolls. This has been described as a HE-specific cuisine that is basic, traditional, versatile, and cheap (Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2014). It may be debated whether minced meat – a very common ingredient used in the subject – is really that cheap, but it is central in Swedish cuisine (Bohm et al. 2015c; Holm et al. 2015). As Birgitte summarized it, “if they can bake bread and buns and cook pasta with minced meat sauce, they’ll be alright.”

When I asked specifically about food culture in HE, all teachers associated the term with foreign food or traditional, even old-fashioned Swedish cooking, rather than with everyday practices. For example, Katja mentioned that her students came from a wealthy neighborhood and holidayed abroad, picking up new preferences and broadening their taste palette, which echoes the middle-class norm of cultural omnivorosity (Johnston and Baumann 2007). Both Vanja and Katja lamented what they saw as the decline of traditional Swedish cooking, and several HE teachers strove to uphold traditions that were tied to specific times of the year, such as gingerbread snaps and saffron buns for Advent. However, Vanja also celebrated Halloween, a fairly recently imported American tradition, by letting her students bake cupcakes and decorate them with things like spider’s webs. Other “foreign” traditions were rather acknowledged as problems, for example when students were not allowed to eat or even cook in HE during Ramadan.
Birgitte taught many immigrant students, and when I asked her about their traditions, she said it would be fun to acknowledge them as well, but pointed out that she lacked knowledge and that students often took time off school during holidays like Eid. During another conversation, she mentioned how excited many immigrant students were to bake Swedish pastries and take them home to show their parents. Thus, baking and cooking in HE may have contributed to integrating these students into Swedish culture. However, Birgitte also told me about a lesson when most of the Swedish students were absent and she let those who remained cook their native dishes, such as spicy chicken with couscous and leaf parsley. According to Birgitte, they had a lot of fun during this lesson and expressed a longing for food they recognized from home. By only cooking such food when most Swedish students were absent, it was marked as different, a phenomenon that also occurred when HE teachers collaborated with Social science by letting students work on themed projects that focused on different countries and their food traditions. By giving “foreign” cooking special treatment, teachers separated it from “ordinary” and unquestioned HE cooking. The same tendency was seen when, for the sake of convenience, Birgitte divided her students into groups based on who ate halal meat and who did not. Similarly, Helene ran through a regular recipe for cinnamon rolls with the whole class, only to then have a separate run-through of a gluten-free recipe with one group. Thus, teachers clearly marked which kind of dish was viewed as normal and what was deviant (cf Bohm et al. 2015b).

Not only whole dishes were treated as normal or different, but also individual ingredients. Both Mette and Sofie mentioned that many students did not like onion, but they were expected to use it. Mette said she did not force students to eat anything, but when onion came up she said it was impossible to take everyone’s tastes into account. Birgitte said students found the activity of chopping fun and seldom complained about the taste, but when they did, she waved it off and told them to make tiny pieces. Earlier research has found that students often want to exclude onions, while teachers urge them to at least have a taste (Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2014), and also that onion functions as a mandatory spice (Bohm et al. 2015a). This makes onion unique both as a vegetable and a spice, since these food groups are seldom mandatory in HE but rather subject to student choice (Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2014).

Desserts, bread, and pastries featured prominently during the observed lessons. Birgitte mentioned that she found baking in HE cozy, which echoes Granberg’s (2018) discussion of sweet baking as a form of care, where teachers create opportunities for cozy commensality among their students. Indeed, fika (coffee or tea with a sandwich or something sweet) is an important Swedish relationship builder (Morley et al. 2018). It is also worth mentioning that during the write-up of this study, a new syllabus in HE was proposed where baking was removed from the core content but then put back in, indicating its continued importance. However, not all baked goods were equal. For example, several teachers brought up chocolate mud pie as a troublesome dessert that students often wanted to make, but which had to fulfil certain criteria to be acceptable. Mette said it depended on the context and lesson goals, since you could make a healthy version with dates and black beans. Sofie mentioned the opportunity to compare store-bought varieties with homemade ones to become aware of additives and difference in taste. On the other hand, Birgitte said it made for a bad lesson, since students quickly threw together the ingredients and then just waited while it was in the oven. Perhaps
because of this, Vanja only allowed students to make it as part of a dessert with more steps involved. Both Birgitte and Vanja also mentioned that students made mud pie at home, which meant they did not need to practice it in HE.

They want to make mud pie. That’s the first thing they say: “Can we make mud pie?” (Vanja) “Well,” I said, “You can make it in ninth grade when you get to decide [what to do].” But that’s not really possible either, because that’s when they bake with yeast or baking powder, and I say, “Mudpie doesn’t contain any baking powder.” (Vanja) Because that’s how they discovered mudpie. But if we make a dessert, perhaps they can make it, but no . . . And I also say, “You’re supposed to do things you often haven’t done before, and learn new things.” (Vanja)

Generally, teachers valued the practicing of cooking methods highly, and consequently looked for recipes with many steps. There was also an element of aesthetics, such as Helene’s focus on the proper formation of cinnamon rolls. What separated acceptable and unacceptable baking was thus a shifting combination of some of the following factors: that students learned something new, that the recipe had many steps, that the pastry was fairly healthy and environmentally friendly, and/or that it was culturally important. For example, apple pie was a classic Swedish dessert based on seasonal fruits or berries, and it involved steps such as dicing apples and distributing margarine in flour and sugar. Interestingly, Vanja mentioned that many students already made dessert pies at home, indicating that cultural importance could eclipse the value of learning new methods.

The cultural aspects of HE extended beyond food. Mette and Helene mentioned having to correct students who handled eating utensils “wrong” during meals. Some teachers required students to take off their hats during cooking and/or eating, citing hygiene or etiquette. Mette and Asta said hat-wearing signaled difficulty adapting to a group culture, and if the teacher gave in, students would go on to question other rules. Vanja quoted a student who jokingly argued that since hijabs were permitted, he should be allowed to wear his hat because “it was his religion,” but she did not allow hats because of hygiene issues. In contrast, Birgitte had no qualms about students wearing hats. She argued that dirt could gather on a student’s bare head as well as on a hat, which made the hygiene issue moot.

Behavioral norms were sometimes connected to the idea that the classroom represented a home. For example, Mette told me her students were not allowed to wear shoes in the classroom:

Mette: We don’t wear shoes in our classrooms. And it’s really good. Really good. We think.

Researcher: Yes, that’s . . . that’s a bit unusual. (Vanja)

Mette: Yes, but my . . . a former fellow student of mine, they didn’t have it either, because, like, it’s a home, we cook food. You don’t wear shoes indoors, you know?

The no-shoes norm pertains to the Swedish working and middle classes, but rules may differ in upper class and immigrant homes.

Despite teachers’ attempts to treat the classroom as a home, it was sometimes difficult since nobody actually lived there. For example, leftovers were not reused or made into lunch boxes, perhaps because there was not enough storage space and/or no use for them during future lessons. Vanja allowed students to throw leftovers away, but pointed out
that they should not do so at home. Helene kept leftovers as long as students remained in class, but threw them away in secret. Any attempts to treat the HE classroom as a home could therefore be resisted by the space itself, and teachers needed to negotiate these dilemmas by deciding which space – the public learning space or the imagined home – was to be salient at any given time.

**A central subject at the outskirts**

HE’s unique position between school and home created a sense of marginalization. HE was a world of its own, removed from other subjects because of its practical nature and its focus on cooking. At Field School, the HE classroom was even physically located in a basement, which is a common phenomenon for practical-aesthetic subjects (Höijer, Fjellström, and Hjälmeskog 2013; Törnquist 2005). When colleagues visited to discuss non-HE issues, conversations often shifted onto what students were cooking, which reproduced HE as a space for domestic activities. Non-HE teachers did not willingly substitute in HE because it was deemed too chaotic, and the classroom was not normally used for other subjects, although student assistants or language teachers could sporadically borrow it to cook with individual students or second language learners. Therefore, the space was seldom frequented by non-HE teachers. Paradoxically, the subject still made itself known by “leaking” to the rest of the school, for example through rumors about what students cooked or, more concretely, through odors. Birgitte mentioned how students would “follow the smells” to visit their friends during lessons. Since it was impossible to conceal what was cooked or baked, this marked HE’s presence in the school but also its difference from other subjects.

Aware of their risk of isolation, HE teachers strove to bridge the gap by erasing the borders surrounding HE and by frequenting non-HE spaces. For example, Helene fostered a culture of openness where students could come to the classroom to ask for leftovers, and Alice chatted to students in the school corridor about coming lessons. Sofie and Alice liked to assist during other teachers’ lessons because it helped build relationships, and Alice and Vanja enjoyed being mentors for students because it made them feel like part of the teaching staff. Sofie and Vanja also made a point of working in the office they shared with colleagues:

> I think it’s important that we’re part of the school. Home economics is so … it’s in a different location, and … well, many have the [opinion that] … the subject isn’t as important, um … in some places. And I feel it’s really important to be a part of … So that I’m not “that woman in Home economics”, “the one down there” or “over there”. (Sofie)

Thus, HE teachers’ physical presence in non-HE spaces was important, but the tendency for long lessons could sometimes make this difficult. For example, when all the teachers at Vanja’s school were invited to have ice cream together in the teachers’ lounge, Vanja taught an 80-minute class and could not participate. Speaking about this memory, Vanja seemed to feel left out, which echoed other situations where she was overlooked, as when mathematics teachers were offered opportunities for in-service training but she was not.
This sense of marginalization tied into the issue of status. The few hours allocated to the subject meant HE teachers were either alone or one of a pair at their school, and Alice described their position as lonely and weak in relation to the principal. They risked seeming whiny when they lodged a complaint because they were not part of a group. Alice had taught a more academic subject earlier in her career, and experienced a loss of status now that she only taught practical-aesthetic subjects. She mentioned similarities with society at large, where manual work offered lower wages and white-collar workers had a wider margin for making mistakes. According to Mette, not even HE’s representative in the National Agency of Education had enough knowledge of HE to give advice or be its voice, thus confirming HE’s marginalization at a higher political level.

The teachers’ feeling of marginalization was accompanied by a parallel conception of HE as unique and central, an interdisciplinary hub with ties to several other knowledge areas. The overlapping learning goals with other subjects sometimes enabled more or less planned collaborations across subject boundaries, since theoretical knowledge from other subjects could be applied in practice. For example, during an observation when students calculated the price of ingredients, Sofie pointed out that they were “using practical math.” Alice even told me her “dream school” would be completely organized around practical-aesthetic subjects, creating a physical nave in the middle of the school building and offering opportunities for working thematically together with more academic subjects. Sofie also mentioned ways to connect HE to local society by making outings to homesteads to bake traditional Swedish thin bread.

Despite this longing for connection, teachers could also express a wish to contain and protect their small subject from outside intrusions. For example, Hill School’s classroom lacked a designated space for meals and deskwork, so students ate their HE meals in the school canteen outside the classroom, next to a corridor full of noise and movement. The teacher perceived this as disruptive when she wished to discuss lesson content with students while they ate, indicating the importance of boundaries to focus on what was unique for HE:

> And the worst thing, I think, is this. Like, out here, this is where we sit and eat. [Teacher opens the door to show me. The recording fills with background noise that almost drowns out her voice.] (...) So, a lot of the time we’re in here [in the classroom], because it’s quiet and calm in here, when we’re talking and things like that. But ... So sometimes I book a regular classroom as well. To feel like ... you know, that it’s a little better, but ... Yeah. (Teacher at Hill School)

Sometimes, outside actors hired the classroom for non-school evening activities, which meant that the teacher had to lock away HE’s ingredients, and a separate, non-HE refrigerator took up space in the classroom. In this way, the outside world could encroach on the otherwise isolated and protected HE space. Another example of this was when Vanja’s colleagues and students borrowed bowls and carafes for non-HE activities without ever returning them.

Discussion

The study revealed difficulties harmonizing the three dimensions of space (Lefebvre 1991) in HE. In the following, I will discuss how ideas from the conceived space of policy documents may be incompatible with the perceived space of HE cooking;
how certain lived spaces were prioritized and given legitimacy as representations of conceived space; and how HE’s marginalization may therefore have been partly reproduced by teachers themselves.

From an educational perspective, HE’s marginalization in the school makes little sense, since the subject includes several important knowledge areas to do with sustainability and life skills. In the conceived space of policy documents, HE is an interdisciplinary subject with ties to several other knowledge areas. It is even a potential coordinating hub for all sustainability education in Swedish schools (Edman 2005). On a syllabus level, it shares a focus on nutrition with Natural science, on cultural traditions with Social science, on health with Physical education, and on arithmetic with Mathematics (cf. Granberg et al. 2017; NAE (National Agency for Education) 2011a).

However, these ideals are in stark contrast with perceived space, which was chaotic, cramped, dated, and isolated. This makes the HE classroom a physical manifestation of power relations: the ever more ambitious goals of consecutive syllabi are not accompanied by adequate resources, which means that teachers are left alone to navigate any shortcomings.

The marginalization of HE can be explained by the conceptual division between manual and intellectual work in Western thought. Embodied phenomena such as food and cooking are connected to the feminine, the working class, and humanity’s uncontrolled, animalistic nature, whereas abstract thought is connected to the Christian soul, purity, the masculine, and the higher classes (Lupton 1996). This Cartesian tradition of separating body and mind, even of philosophically denying that thought itself is embodied (Lakoff and Johnson 1999), may explain why HE was not seen as both practical and academic despite having one foot in the domestic sphere and one in the public sphere of commerce and politics (Thompson 1995). Another explanation is that the domestic connotations were the most salient: whenever HE was talked about or made visible in the school, the focus was on food – whether through smells, rumors, discussions with colleagues, or reasons to borrow the classroom and specific utensils. HE’s more academic content that touched on social, economic, and ecological sustainability was not as salient.

In fact, the School Inspectorate (2019) has found that Swedish HE teachers tend to prioritize cooking to the detriment of other content, showing a mismatch between the learning goals of the syllabus (conceived space) and actual teaching (perceived space). This tendency may partly stem from the fact that cooking makes HE popular among students (Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2011; Petersson 2007), and its popularity may be one of the few things that combat its marginalization. It is also possible that time poverty and arrhythmia leave teachers feeling as if they have not covered the contents of the syllabus unless they devote a lot of time to cooking (Bohm 2021). Others have pointed out that a reason for baking is that using cheap ingredients with a long shelf life, such as flour and sugar, makes sense when economic resources are scarce (Granberg 2018). By choosing to make cinnamon rolls, then, teachers fill a lesson with culturally familiar content that most students enjoy, even as several baking techniques are covered and nary a dent is made in the budget. However, it also takes more time than is available, and can therefore give rise to stress, which seems counter-intuitive (Bohm 2021).

The present study therefore offers an additional aspect to consider: the choice to cook culturally familiar dishes can make sure the complex and chaotic activities in perceived space run relatively smoothly, even though it comes at the cost of ignoring alternative
cultures and sustainability issues. Making a generally accepted dish or pastry gives lessons a natural “dramaturgy” (Bohm 2021), and functions as the culinary equivalent of a literary canon, where checking off a limited set of prototypically Swedish dishes gives teachers the feeling that they are keeping up with the curriculum. If teachers were to loosen their control by allowing a plethora of random dishes from various cuisines instead of the expected pancakes and pasta, this might challenge not only the dominance of Swedish culture, but the integrity of the subject itself. For example, if all students do not know how to make pasta and minced meat sauce when they leave school, has the teacher failed? You could argue for removing minced meat dishes from the curriculum for sustainability reasons, but this might also be viewed as a rejection of the Swedish culinary canon (cf Bohm et al. 2015c; Holm et al. 2015), leaving teachers with the feeling that they have not covered the cultural contents of the syllabus. They would also be met with student resistance (Bohm et al. 2015b; Bohm et al. 2015c), which further dissuades from such choices. Already a low status, chaotic subject in constant danger of disruption and dissipation, HE might find itself in an even more precarious position if it lost student goodwill.

On the other hand, it is possible that a shift toward more sustainable and experimental cooking (cf Bohm 2021) could raise HE’s academic status. However, it is difficult to imagine such an approach when there is such little guidance to be found in the syllabus. By now it is no secret that sustainability takes a back seat to culture during HE lessons (Gisslevik, Wernersson, and Larsson 2017; Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2014), but this problem is built into the text of the syllabus itself. Because what is the point of its focus on culture? Are students meant to gain a general awareness of sustainable choices and different food cultures, but be socialized into a specific culture that is based on traditional Swedish, feminine, middle-class norms? This is not explicitly stated, but in the absence of specific instructions, teachers tend to reproduce their own hegemonic view of culture, thus elevating their own lived space to the status of conceived space. This tendency is strengthened by HE-specific traditions. For example, the feminine, middle- and upper-class ideals of order, cleanliness, moderation, planning, and aesthetics were encoded into the subject from its inception (Johansson 1987), and adhering to these ideals may help teachers feel as if they are keeping the subject’s boundaries and content intact. But such values are not a universal given, and therefore the syllabus’ definition of culture as “the codes, conceptions, values, experiences and thought patterns that groups of people share” (NAE (National Agency for Education) 2011b, 10) is problematic, since it takes for granted that these things are in fact shared.

Commensality can be used to illustrate this. It is part of the knowledge content of HE but also governed by the Swedish curriculum’s general focus on socialization (NAE 2011a). During the HE meal, the overarching goal of socializing students into functioning members of society meets the HE-specific goal of promoting the meal as an important social event. It occurs in a perceived space where commensality actually happens, but overlaid with the conceived space of learning about idealized and culturally specific commensality. Thus, socialization into a normative meal culture and learning about commensality as a concept coincide as students eat what they have cooked, and it is up to the teachers to decide, for example, whether the wearing of hats at the table is acceptable or not. The hat debate is several decades old in Swedish schools and does not only concern HE, but may come to a head here because students handle food. Arguments against hat-wearing indoors typically
revolve around etiquette and respect for authority (Raby 2012). To complicate the issue, the wearing of religious symbols such as hijabs is protected by Swedish law as opposed to cultural insignia like baseball caps. This means that “foreign,” feminine, and religious headwear is allowed at all times while more traditionally Swedish, masculine hats are not. Interestingly, the hat rule does have Christian origins and is also masculine-coded, since men were required to remove their hats indoors and in the presence of women (Raby 2012). Thus, the removal of hats again reproduces HE as feminine, but with an added religious and multicultural aspect that highlights the conflicting norms of different lived spaces, and shows how problematic it can be to teach shared values that are in fact not shared.

I suggest that HE is permeated not only by the three sustainability perspectives of the syllabus – social, ecological, and economic sustainability – but also a fourth, cultural sustainability. This perspective is not explicitly defined, but rather underpins the subject in the form of a hidden curriculum (Wren 1999). Using both Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of space and the definition of culture in the syllabus (NAE 2011b) as a starting-point, cultural sustainability in HE might be defined as an effort to preserve and develop everyday practices (perceived space) and meaning-making (lived space) of social actors (students and teachers) in accordance with cultural, gendered, and classed values (lived and conceived spaces). Because of their efforts to uphold cultural sustainability, teachers conflate their own value judgments with the knowledge content of the syllabus, consequently reproducing HE as a lived space mainly based on a traditional Swedish, middle class, feminine home, even though students might come from and plan to live in a different type of home.

**Limitations**

The study is based on data gathered in a relatively short time in the field, but instead I visited several different schools, which generated data from a variety of sources that yielded similar themes. The transferability is potentially low, since norms may differ in different Swedish regions, specifically between city and countryside, and between the north and the south. However, earlier research on HE in various geographic locations have shown similar results, which strengthens my findings.

**Conclusion**

HE was perceived as a world of its own, governed by traditional Swedish, feminine, middle-class norms that preserved its unique nature but also contributed to its marginalization. It seemed in constant threat of neglect and dissipation, which together with the chaotic nature of student cooking gave rise to a need for order and control. This extended to norms surrounding food, cooking, and eating that blurred the line between knowledge content and value judgments. Based on these findings, I suggest that HE is permeated not only by the social, ecological, and economic sustainability perspectives of the syllabus but also a fourth – cultural sustainability – which is not explicitly defined but rather underpins the subject in the form of a hidden curriculum.

**Notes**

1. During write-up, this was changed to 130 hours.
2. Swedish researchers have even debated whether the term *kitchen* should be used at all in HE, since it devalues the research area by virtue of its domestic connotations. The proposed term *kitchen unit* instead signals the pedagogic function of the space. However, the act of distancing HE from the home to raise its status in academia risks constructing the home as academically unimportant. Since this paper focuses on HE teachers’ production of space in relation to the home as well as the school, I will use the term *kitchen* in line with my respondents.

**Acknowledgments**

The author wishes to thank the participating teachers for sharing their time and thoughts. Thank you also to Sofia Rapo and the two anonymous reviewers whose suggestions helped me refine and polish the final manuscript.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Notes on contributor**

*Ingela Bohm* is a senior lecturer in the Department of Food, Nutrition and Culinary Science at Umeå University, Sweden. Her research interests include food sociology, food culture, time/space, and social identity. ORCiD: 0000-0002-9898-7055.

**ORCID**

Ingela Bohm [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9898-7055](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9898-7055)

**References**


