# Home Economics teachers’ experiences of enacting curriculum policy in the classroom using Bernstein’s theory of pedagogic device

**Author Information**

Amanda McCloat1 & Martin Caraher2

1 Head of the Home Economics Department, St Angela’s College, Sligo, Ireland amccloat@stangelas.nuigalway.ie

2 Emeritus Professor of Food and Health Policy, Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London, EC1V0HB m.caraher@city.ac.uk

**Corresponding Author**

Amanda McCloat

Head of the Home Economics Department, St Angela’s College, Sligo, Ireland amccloat@stangelas.nuigalway.ie

**Abstract**

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## Introduction

For over 150 years, Home Economics education has been taught in schools across the world (IFHE, 2008). It was first introduced as a public health policy and a mechanism for improving the health and living standards of families (McCloat and Caraher, 2018; Pendergast, 2001; Caraher XXX; Pendergast, Garvis and Kanassa, 2011). The International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE) (2008) defines Home Economics as a “field of study and a profession, situated in the human sciences that draws from a range of disciplines to achieve optimal and sustainable living for individuals, families and communities” (p.1). From an Irish education perspective, Home Economics is offered to both junior (12-15 years) and senior (16-18 years) students as an optional subject on the curriculum in secondary schools. In 2019, Home Economics was studied by 36% (n=23,043) of students (n=64,330) sitting the Junior Certificate examination (taken after the first three years of study). At senior cycle, 21% (n=12,002) of students (n=56,071) studied Home Economics (State Examinations Commission, 2019).

However, in recent years, junior cycle education in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) has undergone major reform with the publication and implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* in 2015 (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). As part of this reform, a new Specification for Home Economics at Junior Cycle (2017) was introduced in September 2018, as an optional subject, delivered over a three-year course of study. This was the first curriculum policy reform of Home Economics at junior cycle in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) since 1991. The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015) was a renegotiated version of a 2012 Framework which was vehemently opposed by teacher unions as it suggested the abolishment of the Junior Certificate examination (MacPhail, Halbert & O’Neill, 2018). Consequently, curriculum reform in Home Economics policy in 2017 took place against a backdrop of unease and tension in the broader education policy contexts coupled with challenges in food and health policy. For these reasons there is an emphasis in this research on the food, health and culinary skills elements of Home Economics. Other aspects of the subject, such as textiles and craft; and family resource management, are mentioned where relevant but are not the focus of this research. Therefore, this research aims to analyse how Home Economics teachers enact curriculum policy and their pedagogical practices, specifically from a food education perspective, at the micro level of the classroom.

## Bernstein’s Theory Pedagogic Device

The epistemology underpinning the research process in this article draws on Bernstein’s Theory of ‘Pedagogic Device’, this allows the links to be drawn between macro level policy, as in formal curricula documents, and the micro level interpretation of this at school and classroom level (Bernstein, 1996; 2000). Utilising the pedagogic device allows us to analyse how Home Economics teachers enact curriculum policy, specifically food education elements, at the micro level of the classroom and how this has influenced their pedagogical practices. Braun et al. (2011) identifies policy enactment as the “interpretation and translation, that is, the recontextualisation … of the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices” (p.586).

Bernstein (1996, 2000) describes the pedagogic device as setting out the general principles and rules by which policy knowledge is interpreted, translated and evaluated. The pedagogic device provides the grammar regulating the pedagogic discourse and is concerned with the “production, distribution and reproduction of official knowledge” (Sadovnik, 2001, p.4). The official knowledge referred to in this paper is the Government of Ireland Department of Education and Skills (DES) Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification (2017). Of particular significance to this paper, Bernstein outlines three fields of the pedagogic device; namely, the fields of production, recontextualisation and reproduction which are hierarchal and interrelated. The production field is the primary context and involves the creation of new discourse which is non-pedagogical knowledge to inform policy. From a Home Economics and food perspective, this would involve specific research that takes place at sites such as research institutes; higher education institutions and it essentially forms the intellectual field of the subject (Bernstein, 1996, 2000). The types of knowledge and how a subject’s meaning is constructed is described by Bernstein (2000) as common (horizontal) discourses and esoteric (vertical) discourses. What is of particular interest to this research is whether the language of Home Economics is characterised by a strong or weak ‘grammar’. A strong grammar contains a set of discrete and insulated categories of knowledge (Singh, 2002). The level of Home Economics specific research Vis vie food research and the academic regard given to this will have an influence on how the subject’s meaning is constructed. The recontextualisation field involves the dislocating of knowledge from the production field (i.e. where the creation of knowledge has taken place) and the re-locating to form pedagogical knowledge. It comprises two sub fields: the official recontextualising field (ORF) and the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) (Apple, 2002). For Home Economics curriculum policy in Ireland, the ORF is where the official pedagogic discourse is produced and in this context, would involve the development of the Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification by the National Council Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The PRF, in this Home Economics context, constructs the non-official pedagogic discourse and involves Home Economics teacher associations and teacher educators. The reproduction field is the secondary context and encompasses the reproduction of pedagogic discourse in the Home Economics classroom and is the site where the policy is enacted or reproduced.

The findings presented in this research refer to the Home Economics teachers’ experiences of the enactment of curriculum policy at the micro level of the classroom. It involves the ‘instructional discourse’ which is the Home Economics subject knowledge and the ‘regulative discourse’ which is the Home Economics pedagogical practices (Bernstein, 1996, 2000). Within this context classification and framing of the knowledge of a subject are particularly important conditions for learning (Morais, 2002). Bernstein (1996, 2000) utilised codes which are the principles of power (classification) and control (framing) to describe pedagogic discourse and practice. In particular, classification is the translation of power (p.5) and refers to the degree of insulation of the boundary between or within categories for example, between subjects on a curriculum such as Home Economics, Biology, Language and Maths. A strong classification would indicate a subject which has a well-insulated identity and discourse from another. This can then correlate to the power or status a subject, like Home Economics, has within a school. Framing is the translation of control relations and describes the control over communication of the message. Bernstein (1990, 2000) notes framing is “concerned with how meanings are to be put together, the forms by which they are made public” (p.12). Strong framing means the Home Economics teacher has control over the pacing, selection and sequencing of the subject. Campbell and Crowe (2011) found that student teachers identified certain elements of Home Economics to have a strong classification such as food science and other elements to be weakly classified such as sociology and this has an impact on the degree of flexibility the teacher could engage with in relation to pedagogies.

Within the pedagogic device there are three interrelated rules: distributive, recontextualisating and evaluative which means that these rules are hierarchal and temporal in so far as the distributive rules regulates the recontextualisating rules and this then regulates the evaluative rules (Bernstein 1990, 2003). So one is necessary before leading onto another. The distributive rules regulates the distribution of power and knowledge, and is concerned with who can transmit what knowledge to whom. In this context it refers to the Department of Education and Skills official curriculum policy and because of the power attached to the curriculum in an education setting, it holds legitimacy for the teacher and students. Bernstein (1996, 2000) explains the recontextualisating rules regulates when policy is dislocated from the primary site (i.e. Home Economics curriculum policy) and relocated to a pedagogic context (i.e. the Home Economics classroom) where it pedagogised or converted into pedagogic discourse (McCuaig and Hay, 2014). This relates to what Home Economics subject knowledge is taught and how it is taught in schools. Thirdly, the evaluative rules refer to the transformation of policy discourse into specific pedagogic practices. According to Singh (2002) these are concerned with recognising what counts as “valid acquisition of instructional (curricular content) and regulative (social conduct, character and manner) texts” (p.573).

## Methods

Bernstein’s ‘pedagogic device’ informed this qualitative study particularly, the fields of recontextualisation and reproduction. This facilitated us to analyse how Home Economics teachers enact curriculum policy, specifically food education elements, at the micro level of the classroom. Purposive sampling was utilized and an email was sent to Home Economics teachers (n=19) selected for their geographical location and the type of school they taught in. They were chosen to represent a variety of schools, reflective of the location and composition of schools in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2020). These included: all-girls; all-boys; co-educational; urban; rural; public school; private, fee-paying school; and a designated DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) status school which normally has a high proportion of students from a socio-disadvantaged community. A semi-structured interview was used to examine how Home Economics teachers enact curriculum policy, specifically food education elements, in the classroom. Once they indicated willingness to participate in the study, a follow up email with a consent form and a detailed information sheet was distributed to each participant. In order to proceed with a scheduled interview, the Home Economics teacher was required to meet two inclusion criteria: 1) teaching 5 years or more and 2) currently teaching the new Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification. All of the nineteen teachers indicated their consent to participate; however, only 15 met the aforementioned inclusion criteria. A pilot interview was initially conducted with two teachers (n=2); however, this pilot data was not included in the analysis as changes were made to the protocol following piloting. The remaining 13 teachers were provisionally scheduled for a semi-structured telephone interview during February – April 2019. Ethical approval was granted from University London, City, Sociology Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: ETH1819-0576). The interviews, on consent of the participants, were recorded and each file was a password protected saved file. Notes were taken during the interview which lasted between 35-45 minutes. All interviews were conducted by one researcher (AMcC).

Data saturation was reached at interview 10 where no new themes were emerging; the data from those interviewed had essential characteristics in common and each of the variety of schools was represented (Morse, 2015; Baker and Edwards, 2012; Seth and Randall 1999). As the researcher was cognisant of the demands on teachers’ time with practical exam preparation underway, no further interviews were conducted after this point and the remaining three teachers were notified. All interview recordings were transcribed and all transcripts were crosschecked against the audio file for accuracy. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the transcripts were randomly ordered and assigned a code such as Teacher A, B, C etc. Data analysis was conducted using the framework analysis method (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) which is regarded as a flexible, systematic, methodical approach in categorizing and organizing qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews (Gale et al., 2013; Smith, 2011; Furber, 2010).

### Demographics

Nine of the ten Home Economics teachers were female which is anecdotally, reflective of the gender composition of Home Economics teachers in schools nationally. The teachers’ experience ranged from 21 years to 5 years’ experience with the average being 13.5 years. Six of the teachers worked in urban schools and four worked in rural school. Of these, two were official DEIS designated and one was a private, fee-paying school. In terms of composition, five of the teachers worked in schools which were co-educational, four worked in all-girls schools and one worked in an all-boys school. The school size varied from very large (1,200 students) to smaller schools (300 students) with the average size being 632 students.

# Findings

The research aimed to analyse how Home Economics teachers enact curriculum policy, specifically food education elements, at the micro level of the classroom. Findings from the research are analysed using Bernstein’s ‘pedagogic device’ particularly, around the recontextualisation and reproduction of pedagogic discourse.

## The ‘Grammar’ of the subject Home Economics

The classification (power) and framing (control) of Home Economics emerged as a key influencer on the positioning of the subject in schools. In this study, teachers referred to trying to address the notion that Home Economics is not an “academic subject” and promote the subject as teaching more than common knowledge. Teacher E referred to facilitating people to see what was being taught in the food preparation classes in order to somewhat dispel the notion that it was “only a baking class”. Teacher A reiterated this and commented “it’s trying to move the perception away from ‘we only cook buns’” and when asked what was driving this, they noted “I want to be seen for what we actually do”. However, an experienced teacher (Teacher D) who has been teaching in the same school for the past 18 years reported a shift in attitude. She noted the perception of parents has gotten “better as the years have gone on. In the past it was you were preparing my daughter for life by teaching her cooking … but once they [students] start talking about it at home, the parents come in more surprised about how much they do” (Teacher D).

A hierarchy of subjects in schools was commented on by teachers (n=3). One teacher commented, “there is a kind of a subtle sort of pedestal of subjects like the core subjects” (Teacher A) and she noted that Math was a particular focus of the school at present with management and parents but she outlined this does change and is often influenced by the Department of Education and Skills’ policy of the time. Teacher H indicated the high demand of Home Economics is mainly at junior cycle, (there is a waiting list for entry to the class), and unfortunately, the uptake does not translate to the senior cycle programme where consideration for matriculation for entry to University takes priority. She commented the subject has to compete with a science subject and a language, both of which are often required for entry to a particular University course. This is no reflection on the subject she outlines but rather attributes the issue to career guidance who suggest all students study one language and one science subject, if Home Economics is timetabled against one of these then it limits the availability from a timetabling perspective of being able to study the subject at senior cycle. This hierarchy was also noted by Teacher J who commented “society tells them [students] you need a Science or a Business subject” for senior cycle which can often impact the choice of Home Economics at senior cycle but this is not an issue at junior cycle. Furthermore, teachers in this study commented on a dated perception among the public and all regarded it as critical to the continued support and promotion of the subject that they become involved in the wider school community. This resulted in teachers taking on many extracurricular roles that were not necessarily expected of teachers of other subjects.

All of the Home Economics teachers reported a positive perception and status of the subject within the school community that they teach. They described the subject as being ‘positively viewed’ and ‘regarded very highly’ by key stakeholders in the school community including school leadership, board of management, teachers, parents and students. Nine of the ten Home Economics teachers reported a very positive perception of Home Economics by school leadership and the Board of Management; whilst one teacher noted the perception was generally positive but somewhat uninformed about the subject. School leadership in the all-boys school were reported to look very favourably on Home Economics, which is a recent development (in the last five years initially introduced at Junior Cycle) because it is “really a favourite subject with a lot of the boys … there is a real novelty factor … it is tangible and visible and you can see what has been completed” (Teacher I). The association between the perception and status of Home Economics and the ‘grammar’ of the subject will be further explored in the discussion section of this paper.

## Home Economics Teachers and the Reproduction Field

### Teachers Enacting the Home Economics Curriculum Policy

The findings of this research relate to the micro level of the classroom where Home Economics teachers are involved in the reproduction of the Home Economics curriculum policy. In their experiences of enacting the policy into pedagogic practice they were consistent in their view of the positives aspects of the Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification whilst also outlining some of the challenges that curriculum policy reform brings. The modernization of the curriculum and the inclusion of topics such as sustainability was noted by most of the teachers. Teacher J commented “the Home Economics of the 70s and 80s, that way of life, the emphasis is completely and utterly changed and the subject has to move with that and I think the new Specification is allowing for that change”. The modernization of the curriculum was also stated by Teacher D, “it is hugely positive, there was a stage where we were really ready for a change … it is now up to date and modern”. Whilst Teacher G noted “I am thoroughly enjoying teaching it. I think that it has energized me in teaching”. Teacher B commented “at the start I was quite sceptical … but having worked through it, I think as a teacher it gives you great ownership of your classroom”. The relevancy of the topics and the importance of sustainable issues was commented on by Teacher E who stated “it gets people thinking about what their future will be like and how we can actually make sure we have a future to look forward to”. All of the teachers commented positively on the practical food skills focus of the Home Economics Specification, with 50% of externally assessed marks being weighted towards a practical food exam. Teachers identified this as being a key attraction for students when choosing subjects to study. Teacher A commented “50% cookery exam is a huge positive and it’s a huge draw as well for students to take up the subject at junior cycle … it will enhance the food literacy skills [of students]”. This was reiterated by Teacher J who noted “we are moving away from a very rigid knowing how to cook the scones … it’s not just making a dish but making a dish based on informed decisions and weighing up the options”.

The flexibility afforded to teachers in the Home Economics Specification was noted by nine of the ten teachers. Teacher E stated “there is great scope … depending on the kids you have in front of you, you can tailor to them [students] or the community that you are living in so there is great value”. This was reiterated by Teacher B who noted “you are very much afforded the opportunity to look at your students, identify their needs and ensure you’re actually engaging with them and giving them confidence”. Teacher G advocated for the “reduced volume, reduced prescriptive topics, there is more achievable and relevant topics to their lives and … I feel less pressurized”. However, they also conversely talked about the challenges this flexible and reduced prescription of content can bring. Teacher H expressed concern that whilst they enjoyed teaching the new curriculum, the anxiety about what an exam would look like was still of concern to them and their colleagues, “we are still in the old habit of what is the exam going to be … we still have the fear of it”. The notion of “fear” was reiterated by Teacher C who explained “I think teachers, especially those who aren’t newly qualified, are afraid of the change. They are afraid they won’t be able to give their students the best they can give them. They want to do well by their students”. The reproduction of the curriculum policy at the classroom site situates the Home Economics teacher as key agents of the pedagogic device. Of particular importance here is the relations between the Home Economics teacher (transmitter) and the students in the classroom (acquirers) as the pedagogic discourse pertaining to Home Economics is reproduced.

### Home Economics Teachers’ Pedagogical Practices

The teachers in this study were clearly able to articulate their pedagogical practices and how they enacted the curriculum policy at the micro level of the classroom. The mission of Home Economics outlined in the Specification, from a food education perspective, influenced the ‘what’ and ‘how’ the teachers reproduced in the classroom.

The Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification reflects a strong focus on developing food and health literacy skills in students over the three-year period. It is evident from this research that teachers are very cognisant of the necessity for teaching students food related lifeskills which can contribute to their health and wellbeing now and in the future. Teacher F commented her focus in the classrooms is on developing a “positive attitudes towards food and wellbeing”. Teacher B noted a key objective is to develop students so that they can “make informed decisions about health related issues … and in relation to food so that they will adopt a healthy lifestyle”. This sentiment was expressed by all of the teachers in the study who were unanimous in the belief that they can make a difference in the lives of young people, now and in the future, by equipping them with essential lifeskills. Interestingly, four of the experienced teachers identified a “lost generation” in terms of the practical food skills of the students and five indicated a very evident gap between what the students are being taught in school and the food related practices outside the school and in the home. One teacher (Teacher H) emphasized a desire to bridge this theory-practice nexus through the knowledge and skills taught in Home Economics. Teacher G also spoke of “bridging the gap” and facilitating students to develop the discernment and ability to deal with the challenges posed by the food environment “facing you on a day to day basis in life”. Another teacher (Teacher C) revealed their current students are a “missed generation who have a skills gap” in cooking and they identified Home Economics as playing a valuable role in giving “back what has been missed for at least one generation if not two”. Most of the teaches referred to the application and transferability of food skills learned in the Home Economics classroom to everyday life as an important approach when teaching Home Economics. Teachers explained that students were more receptive when teachers utilized real life examples in the teaching of the subject. Teacher D explained, “everything comes back to real life, no matter what we teach … if you can put a real life scenario on it, it makes it much more real for them [students]”.

All of the Home Economics teachers raised, on numerous occasions, the applicability of the subject to real-life. Teacher H noted, “everything we do … is for their real life and not just as a subject on the curriculum with no relevance” and Teacher J emphasized the “universal relevance” of the subject. Teacher C, who stated that the subject gives a “good start to life in general”, reiterated this and noted that students not only have the knowledge but the food related practical skills to transfer the knowledge to real life situations. Teacher J referred to this as “banking the skills now” which can be drawn upon and used in the future. Developing critical thinking and skills of discernment in relation to food and consumer issues was cited by teachers as having a particular focus in the teaching and learning of junior cycle Home Economics. Teachers outlined examples of where these skills are required including; food choices; food provenance; sustainable choices; resource management; consumer confidence; healthy food choices; using technology; and choosing a healthy lifestyle. Teacher J noted a desire to develop students as “savvy, efficient and practical” while Teacher E referred to the development of students’ “health and food literacy skills”. Many of the teachers referenced “empowerment” and being in a privileged position to empower students with the knowledge and skills required for everyday life for the individual themselves and the family. As Teacher D emphasized “there isn’t one part of your life that isn’t touched by Home Economics”.

From a pedagogical perspective, a constructivist approach to teaching and learning food skills in Home Economics was widespread in all of the responses with teachers referring to the subject as facilitating the creation of a “very student centered environment” and their role is to “facilitate the learning in a structured environment”. All of the Home Economics teachers referred to the application of theory to practice and the “practical, hands-on, real-life” nature of the subject as a key pedagogical approach to the subject. As they discussed the teaching and learning of food skills in the classroom, they all indicated the active involvement of the student in the class as adding value and enjoyment to the learning that takes place. Teacher D referenced it as being “what makes students remember the knowledge and skills because it is not just out of a book but you are doing activities related to it”.

Nine of the ten teachers referred to the students’ problem solving in classes, as a central pedagogical approach they utilize in Home Economics classrooms. Interestingly, the concept of “practical perennial problems” was reported by three of the ten teachers, although many of the seven other teachers spoke about the practical and problem solving underpinning approach in the subject. The use of the design brief process as a tool to guide students through a problem or a brief was noted by three of the teachers who espoused the benefits of this approach in assisting the students to be more reflective and critical of their decisions. Teacher B revealed, “you are giving the student a task and allowing them to analyse it and from there it organically develops so they champion their own learning … because they are engaged and active, it allows them to ground their learning in reality and they remember”. This consolidation of learning was further reinforced by Teacher H who indicated, “by letting them [students] do the problem solving … is what will help them close the gap between their knowledge, skills and the application to real life”.

# Discussion

Braun, Maguire and Ball (2010) refer to policy enactment as the interpretation, translation and recontextualisation of policy by the actors in the school environment which they undertake as opposed to simply implementing policy (p.549). In this section, Bernstein’s theory is utilised to analyse the findings and, in particular, how the Home Economics curriculum policy is translated from the macro policy to the micro level of the classroom.

## Contextualising Home Economics Curriculum Policy and the Pedagogic Device

In September 2018, a new Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification was introduced in secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland. The aim of Junior Cycle Home Economics is to “develop students’ practical food and health literacy skills so that they can adopt a healthy lifestyle and make informed decisions that positively impact their health and wellbeing as individuals as well as within their families and society” (DES, 2017, p. 5). The development of the Home Economics Specification became the official recontextualising field (ORF) i.e. the site where pedagogical knowledge was developed following relocation from the site of production (the theoretical and intellectual space).

In order to inform this curriculum policy development process, a background paper was produced by a Home Economics expert for the National Council Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2016. This Background Paper set out the pertinent discourses from the theoretical and intellectual space and identified the knowledge which was to be considered in the development of the Specification at a later point. In particular, it drew on seminal writings on the philosophical and pedagogical underpinning of Home Economics and Home Economics education. Most influentially, the paper also identified four interconnected societal factors (changes to family and social systems; education for sustainable development and responsible living; food and health literacy; home and resource management) which were directly related to the future curriculum and were recognised as being important to ensure the “currency and relevancy for the subject in the lives of individuals, families, communities and society” (NCCA, 2016, p.31). These four interconnected societal factors were the selected discourses from primary contexts which were then recontextualised and transformed to inform the development of the Home Economics Specification. The aim of which would be to achieve optimal, healthy and sustainable living for individuals, families and society. There followed a consultation process (online survey and written responses) on the Background Paper which had a very high level of engagement (244 individuals and 2 written responses) across stakeholders including teachers; students; industry and community organisations (NCCA, 2017). The framing of the discourse in the Background Paper leaned very much towards the role Home Economics can play in health, wellbeing and responsible and sustainable living. In the public consultation report, many respondents noted, given the 200 hours allocation and the breadth of the 1991 syllabus, the area of textiles was a component which needed to be reviewed and reduced to facilitate more inclusion of up to date knowledge in the area of food, health and sustainability. All (99%) of those who responded to the consultation identified the important role Home Economics education should play in addressing a key priority area of health and food literacy skills (NCCA, 2017). When the final edit of the Background Paper for Home Economics was published in 2017, it was the first time in Ireland that Home Economics knowledge was officially set out and it paved the way for the development of the Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification.

Subsequently, the NCCA, through a subject development team, engaged in an iterative process of selecting the discourse which would form the official curriculum policy for Home Economics at junior cycle. According to Bernstein (1990) the power and control relations are very strong at this point as the process of selecting, decoding and recontextualising the knowledge discourse takes place to form the curriculum policy. The impact of this on the development of the Home Economics Specification can be significant, as Ball et al (2011) notes the high level of interpretation conducted by these “policy actors” can be influenced by values, attitudes, interests and the personal and institutional contexts. What is of particular interest is how current research in food and health is reflected in the Home Economics curriculum policy.

As part of the Strand Food, Health and Culinary Skills, students are required to apply their knowledge and understanding of nutrition, diet and health principles in order to make decisions that will empower them to develop a “healthy, sustainable attitude and positive relationship with food through practical experiential learning” (DES, 2017, p.15). Research suggests a lack of food and cooking skills is associated with an increased consumption of processed foods, which lack nutritional quality, and a consequential poor overall diet (Poti et al., 2015; Mills et al., 2017; Monsivais et al., 2014; Kimura, 2011). From a policy perspective, comprehensive interventions, which create an empowering setting for young people to learn healthy behaviours, sustained over the long-term, is more preferable than short piecemeal interventions (Ronto, 2016; Hawkes et al., 2015; McGowan et al., 2015; McCloat and Caraher, 2016; Worsley et al, 2015; Lichenstein and Ludwig, 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising to see a strong focus on food, health and culinary skills reflected in the Home Economics curriculum policy. The Junior Cycle Specification for Home Economics facilitates students to study a broad range of food related skills and although these are listed as learning outcomes in the Specification, the content is still loosely framed and is open to interpretation by the teacher. What will be interesting to determine is whether or not the evaluative rules will heavily influence how the teachers enact the curriculum policy. Bernstein (1996, 2000) refers to the evaluative rules as those concerned with transforming recontextualised discourse into pedagogic discourse and can be influenced by time allocation; resources; and the assessment mode for the curriculum. One of the key changes this curriculum policy reform brought about was the allocation of 50% of the externally assessed marks weighted towards a practical food skills examination which is externally assessed by the State Examinations Commission. The practical food skills examination requires students to apply their nutritional knowledge and food literacy skills in the preparation of a healthy nutritious dish or product to meet the requirements of a pre-determined specified brief. Topics for the brief may include, for example, healthy school lunches; stages of the lifecycle; diet related diseases; healthy family meals; special dietary considerations; resourceful cookery (DES, 2017).

The final curriculum policy, which was introduced in schools in September 2018, reflected the inclusion of a high proportion of discourse around food, health and sustainable and responsible living evident in research in the field of production field. The Home Economics Specification comprises three strands: Food, Health and Culinary Skills; Responsible Family Living and Textiles and Craft. Each of the three Strands are underpinned by four elements which have a focus on Health and Wellbeing; Individual and Family Empowerment; Sustainable and Responsible Living; Consumer Competence. This Home Economics Specification is now the official curriculum policy, mandated by the Government of Ireland Department of Education and Skills, which all Home Economics teachers must enact in the classroom if they are teaching Junior Cycle Home Economics.

## The association between the ‘Grammar’ of the subject Home Economics and its perceived status

Alvunger (2018) notes the concept of a strong and weak grammar of a subject facilitates an analysis of the curriculum content but this also correlates to the status of a subject and how it is perceived by teachers and students (Singh, 2002; Sadovnik, 2001). In particular, the balance between the common (horizontal) and esoteric (vertical) discourses (Bernstein, 2000) in Home Economics seems to influence the positioning of the subject. Esoteric (vertical) knowledge refers to the category of discourse which defines a discipline or disciplinary knowledge and common (horizontal) is the knowledge the can be acquired from everyday context (Singh, 2002). Because of a lack of insulating of the subject and fragmenting of the philosophical underpinning internationally, Home Economics knowledge has been regarded by society as mostly horizontal (common). The view that the subject is not academic but “common sense” and anyone can teach it is a view that has plagued the subject over many years (Cunningham-Sabo and Simons, 2012; Nanayakkara et al., 2018). In this study, teachers referred to trying to address this and promote the subject as teaching more than common knowledge. Through curriculum policy reform, the new Specification aims to have a more positive influence on this perception of the subject as it attempts to insulate the esoteric knowledge of the subject and move beyond common discourses, something which was not undertaken in previous curricula. This is achieved through the use of specific disciplinary knowledge and practices (such as practical perennial problems; systems thinking; and critical theory and emancipatory action) that can be linked back to the philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings of Home Economics.

Not all schools are the same and how policy is enacted can be dependent on the policy enactment environment of the school and particularly, the power dynamics and competing priorities within this context (Braun et al., 2011). The competing forces between subjects which are regarded as having a strongly insulated esoteric discourse, such as Math, and those which are regarded as more horizontal can be seen in this study. This hierarchy of subjects in schools was commented on by teachers in this research particularly the prioritisation of subjects which are considered essential for matriculation for entry to University. Research in Australia and Canada outlines that Home Economics and food education is undervalued by school leaders and is considered much less important than English or Math (Ronto et al., 2017a; Ronto et al., 2017b; Slater, 2013). This is reiterated by Lai-Yeung (2011) in a survey of school Principals in Hong Kong.

The findings in this research identified a direct correlation between teachers who showed ingenuity and developed initiatives and those who reported a positive view of the subject in the broader school community. However, it could also be interpreted that a lack of understanding of the esoteric knowledge relating to the subject means teachers of Home Economics are often drawn into many extracurricular activities as their subject is perceived to be so broad unlike other teachers of what is traditionally perceived as “academic subjects”. This is not necessarily to reflect a negative position but rather to demonstrate a lack of understanding of what Home Economics means. Indeed all of the Home Economics teachers in this study reported a positive perception and status of the subject within the school community that they teach. They described the subject as being ‘positively viewed’ and ‘regarded very highly’ by key stakeholders in the school community including school leadership, board of management, teachers, parents and students. However, whether this is evident in school planning of staffing, resources and timetables is questionable. From a societal perspective, there are some who hold a dated perception of Home Economics and do not perceive the subject to be of relevance in a contemporary society (Harden, Hall and Pucciarelli, 2018; Cunningham-Sabo and Simons, 2012; Nanayakkara et al., 2018). Consequently, there is a constant requirement for Home Economists to strengthen and promote the subject (McGregor, 2019; Christensen, 2019). Teachers in this study reflected these sentiments and all regarded it as critical to the continued support, status and promotion of the subject that they become involved in the wider school community.

For many school subjects, the status and how it is perceived, particularly by students, relates to not only how established the subject matter is but whether or not a subject is compulsory or optional on the curriculum (Paechter, 1993; Bleazby, 2015). Much media attention in Ireland has been focussed on calls to make Home Economics mandatory for all students to junior cycle (Safefood, 2018; St. Angela’s College, 2018; Hickey, 2018; Boland, 2017; Maguire, 2017; Sweeney, 2015; Gray, 2015; McCloat, 2012; 2013). This is premised on the belief that the food skills developed in Home Economics are essential lifeskills and all young people should have an opportunity to learn these. In November 2018, the Irish Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs’ Report on Tackling Childhood Obesity recommended that the “Government should consider the introduction of Home Economics as a compulsory subject on the Junior Cycle Curriculum for post-primary schools” (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2018, p.6). Consequently, it was not surprising that Home Economics teachers in this study suggested the implementation of this recommendation and viewed it a positive step in improving the status of the subject. Similarly, in Australia research suggests young adults and parents (Nanayakkara, 2018; Pendergast et al. 2011); teachers (Ronto et al., 2017a); and food professionals (Nanayakkara, 2017) would support making food education compulsory in Australia in order to raise its status. What is important in the Irish Houses of the Oireachtas Committee policy recommendation was the recognition, by influential policy makers, of the value of the esoteric (vertical) and common (horizontal) Home Economics disciplinary knowledge to the future health and wellbeing of students. Although this policy recommendation is not yet reflected in the structure of the curriculum, it is a welcome start towards dispelling a ubiquitously held belief around what type of knowledge is regarded as high status and important.

## The Field of Reproduction: the Home Economics Classroom

McCuaig and Hay (2014) refers to how Bernstein’s pedagogic device can identify ways in which educational discourse is reproduced from the macro policy level to the micro classroom level. Consequently, despite a prescriptive curriculum, teachers will reproduce and enact the curriculum policy into their own working practices influenced by their classroom context. Braun, Maguire and Ball (2010) note enacting policy can be complex, sophisticated and involves a process of interpretation and recontextualisation. Home Economics teachers are key agents in this field of reproduction but may have had limited involvement in the field of recontextualisation which is the site of the official recontextualising field (ORF) and resulted in the development of the Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification. Therefore, it is interesting to note that all of the Home Economics teachers, in this study, reported mixed views on enacting the new Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification. Teachers were consistent in their view of the positive aspects (inclusion of sustainability; stronger focus on practical food skills; modernisation of the content) of the Specification whilst also outlining some of the challenges that curriculum policy reform brings (open to teacher interpretation; impact of reduced timetabled hours). Interestingly, the teachers reported tensions regarding the reduced prescriptiveness of the new Specification as the impact this has at the micro level of the classroom. They noted the flexibility it affords teachers to teach according to their school context but they also acknowledged the challenges this flexible and reduced prescription of content can bring including the style of the examination and anxiety to do the best by their students. Similarly, MacPhail (2007) noted that teachers were critical of inadequate prescription. The volume of work to prepare resources and materials for the teacher was noted as a particular challenge of the new Home Economics curriculum.

The reproduction of the Home Economics pedagogical discourse in the classroom has two dimensions, according to Bernstein (1996, 2000), the ‘what’ (instructional discourse) and the ‘how’ (regulative discourse) (Daniels, 2004). As noted earlier in this paper, the Home Economics Specification reflects a strong focus and subject matter centred on developing food, health and culinary skills in students. Therefore, this is a key influencer on the reproduction of Home Economics official knowledge at the micro level of the classroom. Teachers in this study, identified a perceived impact Home Economics can have on student’s health and wellbeing, now and in the future and there was a strong sense of belief in the value of what they are teaching emanating from this research. This is despite there being no longitudinal research specifically investigating the impact of early food education on health over a lifespan. There is, however, research which demonstrates a positive correlation with those who have studied Home Economics, food education and cooking skills at an early age and their food knowledge; diet quality; cooking practices; healthy food practices later in life (Wolfson et al., 2019; Worsley et al., 2015; Burton et al., 2017; Lavelle et al., 2016; Wolfson, 2015; Condrasky and Heler, 2010). Equally, the lack of food and cooking skills has been associated with an increased consumption of processed foods, which lack nutritional quality, and a consequential poor overall diet (Poti et al., 2015; Mills et al., 2017; Monsivais et al., 2014; Kimura, 2011). All of the Home Economics teachers raised, on numerous occasions, the applicability of the subject to real-life and the positive association it has with developing food, health and culinary skills in young people which are essential lifeskills now and in the future. This is the legitimised belief that these Home Economics teachers have in the subject matter or the instructional discourse.

Daniels (2004), draws on Bernstein (2000) and discusses the ‘how’ or the regulative discourse which informs teachers’ pedagogical practices in the classroom. The Home Economics Specification refers to students requiring critical decision-making skills to address real-world, practical perennial problems of individuals, families and society now and in the future (DES, 2017). This is informed by the academic work of Brown and Paolucci (1978) who, in defining Home Economics, explains the importance of a critical or emancipatory system of action, applied in a practical way, to address recurrent or perennial problems facing individuals, families and society. The use of the term ‘practical’ is more than technical skills but rather the application of reflective, critical thinking and problem solving skills. As Campbell and Crowe (2011) notes this has resulted in Home Economics teachers embedding key pedagogies, such as teacher demonstrations and student practical laboratories, as central to their teaching of the subject in the classroom. This constructivist approach to teaching and learning was reflected in this research where all of the teachers explained their use of practical, experiential pedagogical approaches in the classroom. They noted this was required so that critical thinking and skills of discernment in relation to food and consumer issues could be developed in students. Research identifies how food education can contribute to the overall health and wellbeing of adolescents and their families (Ronto et al., 2016; Burton and Worsley, 2014; Vidgen, 2016; Boddy, Booth and Worsley, 2019). This further concurs with Condrasky and Hegler (2010) who advocate for sustained, food education which empowers the individual with skills and competencies necessary to encourage long-term healthy lifestyle approach. Consequently, it was not surprising that Home Economics teachers in this study explained a key rationale of their pedagogical approach was to empower students to adopt a healthy, sustainable approach to living now and in the future. It is evident in this research, similar to Daniels (2004), from a Bernstein (2000) perspective both the instructional and regulative discourses influences Home Economics teachers’ pedagogical practices. This in turn can has a positive impact on maximising students potential and facilitating them to acquire more critical, reflective ways of thinking and metacognition around food and health.

# Conclusion

Drawing on Bernstein’s Theory of ‘Pedagogic Device’, this paper provides valuable insights as to how Home Economics teachers enact curriculum policy and their pedagogical practices, specifically from a food education perspective, at the micro level of the classroom. And in doing so, it explores how the Home Economics curriculum policy is translated from the macro policy level to the micro level of the classroom. Issues of status and misperceptions around the subject have beleaguered Home Economics internationally over the years and from this research, this issue still prevails to some extent in Ireland. Although the new Junior Cycle Home Economics Specification (2017) attempts to insulate the philosophical and pedagogical knowledge of the subject, this is only in its infancy in terms of enactment and the impact of this reform on the broader understanding of the subject will take many years to filter through. The implementation of the policy recommendation, by the Irish Houses of the Oireachtas Committee, to offer compulsory Home Economics education for all students in junior cycle would also assist in achieving a better understanding of the subject.

Home Economics teachers, as agents of the pedagogic device at the micro level of the classroom, play a critical role in translating the macro level curriculum policy. Our analysis shows a clear aim of the Home Economics teachers is to develop students’ practical food, health and culinary skills so that the students are empowered to make healthy and sustainable food choices as individuals and within their families and society now and in the future. Evidentially, Home Economics teachers in the classroom facilitates the empowerment of students with the knowledge and skills which are required to engage in critical and reflective thinking around food and health. This is consistent with the Junior Cycle Home Economics curriculum policy and what it hopes to achieve after the three-year course of study. What has emerged from this research is that Home Economics teachers enact the curriculum policy, from a food education perspective, based on a coherent, and indeed homogenous, understanding of the philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings of the subject. (*I THINK THIS NEEDS MORE OF A GRAND STATEMENT TO FINISH ON BUT DOES IT SOUND TOO IDEALISTIC??)*

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# References