

Educating the consumer-citizen in a world of finite resources

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Abstract

In order to improve conditions for individuals and families in the home and in global society, an examination of the intersection and overlap among Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), consumer-citizenship, and Home Economics education is undertaken. Underlying meanings of ESD and consumer-citizenship are teased out. While the meaning of ESD is consistent, consumer and citizen have subjective meaning depending on the user and the temporal period of use. Consumer-citizen is most often used to reflect the making of ethical choices, with a goal of least global harm. The goal of Home Economics education is found to be similar to the goals of ESD and consumer-citizenship. It is found that Home Economics education is morally obligated to incorporate ESD and justice-oriented consumer citizenship education. It is also questioned as to whether or not it is actually possible for families and individuals to live sustainably in current day society.

Keywords: *consumer, citizen, education, education for sustainable development (ESD), Home Economics*

Introduction

Though some might say that we should live for the present, it is my belief that the future is important. Personal decisions are repercussive. They include consumer choice, modelling behaviour, and community action, and they impact the sustainability of my life, my community and the common future of the greater world.

Many students are ignorant of the sources of food and textiles that they use and consume. Home Economics/Human Ecology is a subject that should facilitate an understanding and awareness of ecological interconnectedness, including explicit connections between individuals, their families, and their base needs. The theme of disconnect within society demonstrates a need for greater levels of facilitated knowledge in this area. Because all life is ecologically interconnected, a thriving variety of life is needed in order that future life be sustainable, and even exist in the long term. Preservation of biological and ecological variety is dependent on human re-connection. I encourage educators in facilitating student understanding about their personal connection to one another and to other species and environments, so that the interconnected relationships on Earth can flourish.

This research attempts to conceptually examine some key concepts of *education for sustainable development* and *consumer-citizenship education*. Underlying ideologies of these

concepts and their parity with Home Economics education are examined, in order to guide the practice of professional Home Economists and other educators. Research begins by defining and teasing out backgrounds and underlying meanings of *sustainable development* and *consumer-citizenship*. It then examines the relationship between these philosophies, in an attempt to understand if Home Economics could become a centre for educators hoping to facilitate student success and understanding about the meaning and importance of sustainable living and a sustainable future. A sustainable common future is of paramount importance, and Home Economics education might be used to provide an understanding of a critical citizenship, that includes examination of everyday life as meaningful, since everyday life impacts 'lives worth living in an ecologically desirable society. We must do this [examine everyday life as meaningful] by becoming active participants in transformative processes' (Vaines, 2004, p. 135).

Conceptualizing terminology

Sustainable development

The first formal use of the term *sustainable development* occurs at the first United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992. The concept was seen to gain international prominence in the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, inclusive of the years, 2005-2014 (Canadian Commission for UNESCO, n.d.). The Sustainable Development Solutions Network, launched by the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon in 2012 promoted *sustainable development* as a cornerstone for the post-2015 global Sustainable Development agenda (2012a, p. viii). The United Nations provided a brief historical development of the term *sustainable development* on their website (2011), but their timeline lacked conceptual clarity regarding the underlying meaning of the term. As such, this research explores significance and ideology.

Sustainable development and *sustainability education* are terms that are often used synonymously. *Sustainability education* is one that is 'concerned with formal, non-formal and informal education that addresses the current confluence of threats to the environment and to human society globally... education that questions and offers alternatives to dominant assumptions and current orthodoxies' (Sustainability Frontiers, 2009). The United Nations (UN) Decade of Sustainable Development was initiated with an aim of integrating and establishing *sustainable development* into educational programmes. With regard to terminology, *sustainability* refers to a long-term goal, such as a sustainable global future; and *sustainable development* refers to the way in which sustainability may be achieved by our actions (UNESCO, 2012). *Sustainable development* was described by the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (UNESCO, 2012). For the Rio + 20, UN Conference, *sustainable development* was conceptualised 'as the guiding principle for long-term global development... consist[ing] of three pillars: economic development, social development and environmental protection' (United Nations, 2011). A fourth dimension was added in a special report to the UN Secretary General as 'good governance, which is sometimes described as the foundation of *sustainable development*... [so that *sustainable development* finally becomes conceptualised as] society's commitment to four interconnected objectives: economic development (including the end of extreme

poverty), social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and good governance, including peace and security' (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2012b, pp.1-2).

Education for sustainable development incorporates and values the three terms, *sustainability*, *sustainable development*, and *sustainability education* in the goal of creating a sustainable future through engagement of world-wide educational systems. It is upheld from the critical assumption that environmental, social, governmental, and economic states in the 21st Century need mending, and that current day society threatens and creates risk for a sustainable common future for humanity and other species and environments.

In Home Economics scholarship, McGregor applies the four pillars of Education for Sustainable Development to consumer education. Though her description is similar to the four goals set out in the post-2015 Development Agenda (United Nations, 2013) and in the UN draft Framework for Sustainable Development (2012), McGregor's fourth focus is culture, as opposed to the UN's, which is government. McGregor describes the four pillars, as follows:

The society pillar refers to the role social institutions play in change and development, with a focus on full, informed participation... It encompasses human rights, peace and human security, gender equality, cultural diversity, health and governance. The economic pillar touches on people's sensitivity to the limits and potential of economic growth (especially consumption)... This pillar includes poverty reduction, corporate responsibility and accountability, and the market economy. The environmental pillar involves people's awareness of the fragility and finiteness of the physical environment, leading to a commitment to favour environmental concerns in social institutions and economic policy. This pillar involves resources, climate change, rural development, sustainable urbanization and disaster prevention and mitigation... [The cultural pillar] reflect[s] the role of values, diversity, knowledge, languages and world views... It gives consumer educators a lens to help learners gain a sense of the connectedness between themselves and others, which is why sustainability matters in the first place. (McGregor, 2009, p. 260).

Consumer-citizen & citizen-consumer

The terms *citizen/citizenship* and *consumer/consumption* are inseparable. Their differences are semantic and representative of oppositional facets of personhood. The term meanings have developed and changed historically to hold different meaning at different times. For example, in arguing for marketing practices to promote social awareness within consumption, Cabrera and Williams (2012) described the term *consumerism* as being historically associated with 'selfish pleasure and status-seeking difference', and *citizenship* as being representative of 'the common pursuit of the social good' (p. 1). Soper (2007, p. 206) extended a conceptual distinction between the terms, explaining that they

have conventionally been regarded as oppositional and belonging to separate areas of study. Whether their consumption choices have been theorised as authentic expressions of selfhood or as socially constructed, individuals qua consumers have most often been presented as obedient to forms of self-interest

that either limit or altogether preclude the capacity for the reflexivity, social accountability and cultural community associated with citizenship. Only in their role as citizens do they supposedly look above the parapet of private needs and desires or could be said to have an eye to the public good. This perception is further reinforced in the theoretical division between a public domain of citizenship—and its concerns with rights, duties, participation and equality—and the private domain of the supposedly purely self-interested consumer.

The complicated and personal nature of the meaning of the term *citizenship* depends on the individual and political orientation of its user. A good citizen means something entirely different for one person than for another, as the meaning of *good* is dependent on personal background and influence, such as history, circumstance, education, and the global, national, and civic-rural location in which one lives. In McGregor's example, a republican citizen may understand that good citizenship is

belonging to a political community, loyalty toward one's homeland, and the predominance of civic duties over individual interests... [while a] liberal tradition of citizenship focuses on individualism and the central idea that all individuals are equal and have inalienable rights (e.g., human rights) that cannot be revoked by the state or any social institution.
(McGregor, 2002, p. 4)

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) supported McGregor's distinction of different political leanings within the term *citizenship*. In discussing ways in which citizenship could benefit democracy, they described a justice-oriented citizen, one that could 'critically assess social, political, and economic structures and consider collective strategies for change that challenge injustice and, when possible, address root causes of problems' (p. 243) as most capable of emancipatory action, and thus upholding the ultimate ideal of what is good.

While the term *citizenship* has a difference in meaning according to personal orientation, the term *consume* changes equally as much, and has done so throughout history. Traditionally, it meant to use up, waste, exhaust, and eat. In the last century it took on new meaning to include pleasure, enjoyment, and freedom, particularly as consumption became a force representative of positively driving the economy (Collins, 2011; Soper, 2007; McGregor, 2002). Recently, the term *consumption* represents something less positive than was implied over the recent part of the last century, and has come to mean something more insidious and negative, reflective of its traditional meaning, particularly in light of overconsumption (McGregor, 2002; Soper, 2007).

Just as the terms, *citizenship* and *consumer* are complementary, *consumerism* holds different meaning depending on its user. 'Consuming may or may not be a detriment to civic life. It all depends on what kind of consuming under what kinds of conditions' (Schudson, 2007, p. 242). For example, consumers can create civic and political acts through boycotting. The term *citizen/citizenship* can be regarded as overly pious; there is no reason why it should only be conceptualised as praise, with consumerism vilified (Schudson, 2007). The terms *consumer* and *citizen-as-consumer* may be regarded as concepts developed by advertisers, and "as inauthentic and as 'manufactured' as the products the corporations are selling" (Schudson,

2006, p. 194). Schudson (2006) calls out a negativity inherent in advertising as advertising 'manufactures a product of its own: the consumer, perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored' (from Lasch, cited by Schudson, 2006, p. 194). The conception of *citizen-as-consumer*, valuable for feeding the monetary gain of business is opposed to a citizenship that values everyday life. A conception of citizenship that values harmony and balance in everyday life is held in Home Economics (Smith, Peterat, & de Zwart, 2004; Pendergast, McGregor, & Turkki, 2012). It may be true that a discontented view of everyday life is sold to citizens (Schudson, 2007); but this does not imply that citizens are consumers in need of a product to satisfy their 'manufactured' discontent with everyday life. Home Economics educators are tasked to contend with a societal conception that everyday life is monotonous and boring, and that shopping is the solution.

Everyday life is not simply mundane or insignificant because the everyday is an indispensable aspect of the way people experience the world... Humble, daily living activities sustain humanity... [and these activities hold] penetrating insights into the complexity and intricacy of humanity's very existence.

(McGregor, 2012, para. 3).

Possibly because of their conceptual overlap, the terms *citizen* and *consumer* have been melded together into a new term, the *consumer-citizen*, or *citizen-consumer*. Unfortunately, this new term is as subjective and diverse in its meaning as the two terms are individually. "The idea of 'consumer citizenship' is at once descriptive of the relationship between government, consumers, and businesses, and ideological, in that it promotes a particular vision of the social good" (Cabrera, 2012, p. 2). The term *consumer-citizen* can only be conceptualised for each individual's value system. It includes the weight, subjectivity, and ethics of choice, and the assumption that one choice is better than another. Unfortunately, the concept of good is subjective. Although it may be proposed that ethical consumption and ethical citizenship respects cultural differences, a consistent ideology of respect among cultures is not present.

However, regardless that there are indisputable global cultural differences about the meaning of responsible consumption and good versus bad, the Western conception of a *consumer-citizen* is upheld with morality and the making of ethical choices. In this light, a *consumer-citizen* makes ethical choices when purchasing and using, and is involved 'in a lifelong learning process, with *citizen* meaning a responsible, socially aware consumer willing to make reasoned judgements and sacrifices for the common good' (McGregor, 2002, p. 5). For example, in researching the problematic effects of Walmart on the United States' economy, Collins (2011) described consumer-citizens in the new millennium as individuals who use purchasing power to affect social change, by urging government to improve policy on the rights, safety, and fair treatment of workers. The ideal consumer-citizen is globally aware, making purchasing and consuming choices with a mindset of least harm, regarding the impact (of consumption) on others. The Consumer Citizen Network Website defined the consumer-citizen as 'an individual who makes choices based on ethical, social, economic and ecological considerations. The consumer citizen actively contributes to the maintenance of just and Sustainable Development by caring and acting responsibly on family, national and global levels' (2013).

The ideal of a consumer citizen is conceptualised more conscientiously by McGregor (2002), as she sketches the *participatory consumer*, a ‘conscientious citizen participating in their role of consumption with the interests of themselves balanced with the interests of society, future generations and the ecosystem’ (p. 14). McGregor conceived of the participatory consumer as one who takes the future wellbeing of the world into consideration, along with the present while exploring an ultimate way for consumer education to contribute to sustainable development. Acting as a consumer-citizen or participatory consumer may be one avenue by which individuals may take action toward the goals of sustainable development by translating their ‘ethical values into everyday practice through conscientious participation in the market... [and] be instrumental in the globalization of civil society concerns and... potentially contribute to correcting imbalances’ (United Nations Environment Programme, 2010, pp. 6-20). *Education for sustainable consumption* is a conceptual theme that has further emerged as foundational to the UN Decade of Sustainable Development. The UN Environment Programme (2010) insists that sustainable consumption, the ‘incorporating [of] the concept of responsible consumption into daily actions is a process and must be developed and modified over time in response to changes in society’ (p.8). Sustainable consumption creates practical links between citizens, consumers, and the goal of sustainable development.

A similar conceptual ideology among Home Economics education, sustainable development and consumer-citizenship

It appears clear that the conception of *consumer citizenship* is but one aspect within the overall ideology of *sustainable development*. However this does not diminish its importance; rather *consumer citizenship* is identified as a conceptual ideal whose understanding is well suited to facilitation in Home Economics education. The ideological parity and connections among Home Economics education, *education for sustainable development*, and *education for consumer-citizenship / participatory consumerism* have been mapped by Home Economics scholars (Smith, 2008; Hjalmskog, 2012; Lorek and Wahlen, 2012; McGregor, 2009/2002). Many contend that the ideals of sustainable development have long been shared by professionals in the field of Human Ecology/Home Economics (O’Donoghue, 2012). Because scholarship in this vein is detailed, it is recommended for reading, and similar detail will be avoided in this research.

The intent of Home Economics education is to improve conditions for families and individuals in the home and in global society, by engaging individuals in critical study of domestic and consumer environments. Such critical study can empower individuals and families to overcome apathy, and develop autonomy and responsibility to, and in the world (Elias, 2011; Vincenti & Smith, 2004; Storm and Plihal, 1989). This type of empowerment is reflective of the goal of sustainable development (Lee, 2008), which ‘helps the citizens of the world to learn their way to a more sustainable future’ (UNESCO, 2012). In their call for the field of Home Economics to increase the level of explicitly facilitated sustainable development, Lorek and Wahlen (2012) promoted a need for environmental protection. In citing the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the International Energy Agency, they decreed that the need for environmental reform was so immediate that change initiated beyond the year 2015 would be too late, with regard to risks and worldwide damages associated with greenhouse gas emissions. They also cited calculations, by the Global Footprint Network, which demonstrated that global human society uses significantly ‘more

resources in one year than nature can regenerate within this year' (2012, p. 171). These facts are troubling and they represent a need for immediate curricular, pedagogical, and policy reform towards explicit infusion of sustainable development and consumer-citizenship throughout all avenues of education, including Home Economics education.

This research draws a relationship (Figure 1) among the framework for sustainable development, the goals of consumer citizenship education, and a Home Economics view of everyday life, which is meant to be facilitated in Home Economics education. A Home Economics view of everyday life is represented by the work of Eleanore Vaines, a respected Canadian, Home Economics scholar and mentor (Smith, Peterat & de Zwart, 2004), with her Spheres of Influence Map (from Vaines, cited by Peterat, Mayer-Smith, Lee, Sinkinson & Tsepa, 2004). The Spheres of Influence are used to guide professional Home Economists in describing and understanding

integrated human systems that incorporate the individual, the public, the family, institutions, the biosphere, the cosmos, the unknown and unknowable... [and it is] a visual reminder that our beliefs, knowing, and actions are embedded in a much greater web of complexity and paradox

(Peterat et al., 2004, p. 26).

As Home Economics educators attempt to facilitate an understanding of the breadth and complexity of *integrated human systems*, it is difficult to argue the relevance of, and complementary nature of the goals of sustainable development and consumer citizenship (Figure 1), since these concepts are intertwined in subject applications, such as the impact of choice of fabric in textiles studies, and the importance of understanding food systems and food security in family planning.

Regarding the facilitation of education in consumer citizenship, a deeper ideological perspective of justice is recommended by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), as it is perceived to have a strong impact towards developing sustainability mindset (Smith, 2010). In discussing strategies for facilitating *education for consumer-citizenship* and *sustainable development in Home Economics*, Smith (2010) promoted classroom delivery modes that reflected the ideology of Consumer Citizenship, such as 'awareness and knowledge of issues related to consumption and consumerism ..., analysis and reasoning about issues related to consumption and consumerism ... [and] reflection (on what is best to do for long term positive consequences on self and others...)' (Smith, 2010, pp. 9-10). Facilitating an understating of *participatory consumerism* in Home Economics education has the potential to emancipate students from cultural acceptance of materialistic consumption, and promote other notions of what a good life is composed of (Hjälmeskog, 2012; McGregor, 2009). McGregor (2009) recommended that consumer educators embrace Bandura's Social Learning Theory in facilitating *sustainable development* to their students. She argued that Social Learning Theory could empower consumers with an 'internal moral reinforcement' (2009, p. 258), and posited that such incorporation could support worldwide sustainable development goals set out by the UN.

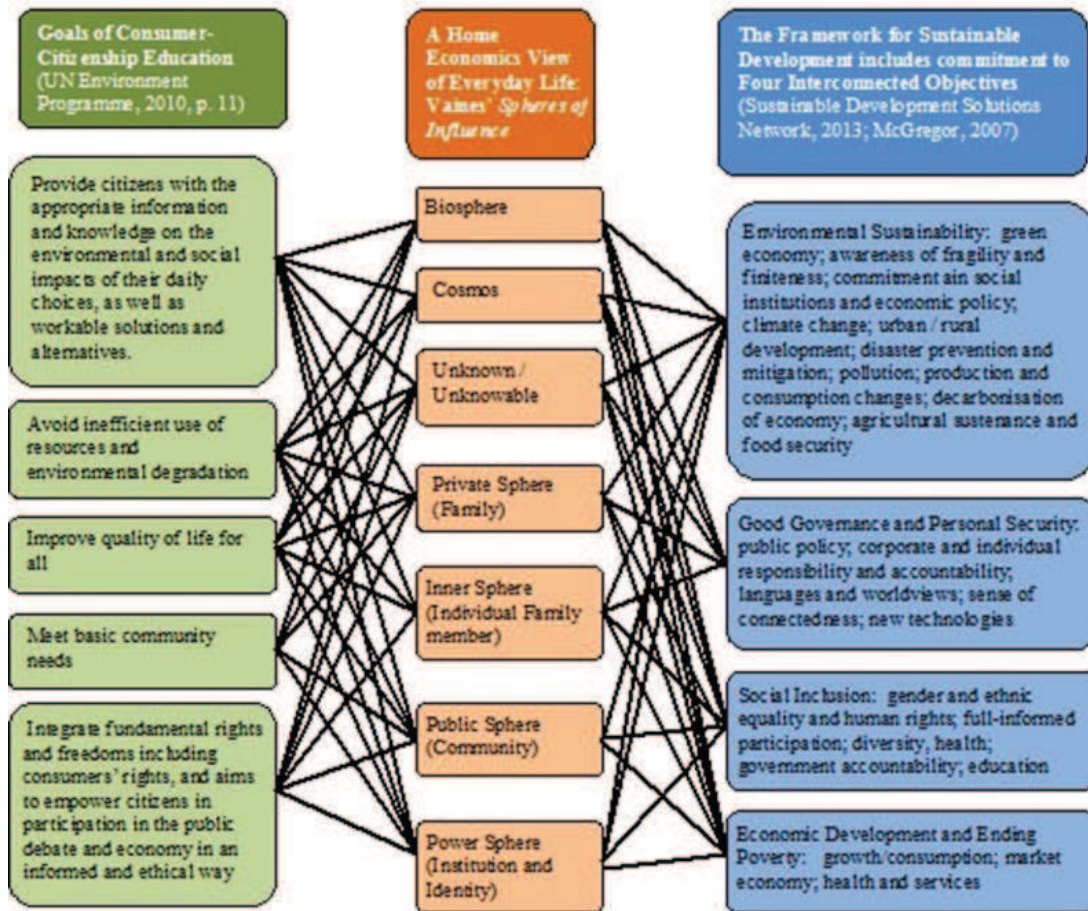


Figure 1 Drawing relatedness between a Home Economics view of everyday life, the framework for Sustainable Development, and goals of Consumer-Citizenship education

Conclusion and further questions

The conceptual relevance of *sustainable development* and *consumer citizenship / participatory consumerism* to Home Economics education is inarguable. Explicitly connecting these ideologies in Home Economics curriculum and pedagogy has the potential to reconnect individuals to the interconnected ecological domains that they encounter in everyday life, including in their relationships with government and culture, environment, society, and economics. The intent of Home Economics, to improve life for individuals and families morally obliges professional Home Economists to explicitly include *sustainable development* and *consumer-citizenship* in the future of Home Economics education. Because of a perceived high ideological relatedness among *sustainable development*, *consumer-citizenship*, and Home Economics education, it is realistic to research further evidence of their complementary nature, and practical applications of their relatedness.

While the need for sustainability is difficult to argue, I am the first to admit that it is easier to talk the talk, than it is to walk the talk. For example, the practicality and financial burden of practising a sustainable lifestyle in current mainstream Western society needs to be

addressed. Regardless of the skill of Home Economics educators, and the ability, or buy in, of learners to understand the relative importance of *sustainable development* and *consumer-citizenship*, practical issues need to be addressed. For example, what is the cost of achieving sustainable living for the average individual? What is the practicality of living sustainably, while interdependent with a global and technical society? What is the price of buying into sustainably developed industry in Canada? Can average Canadian families afford to buy in? More importantly, would families willingly sacrifice ease in daily life for a lifestyle change that is more sustainable, in order to make a difference for our common future?

Neutralization theory may explain typical immoral consumption and shopping behaviour. 'Neutralization is a technique that allows an individual to rationalise or justify an immoral or illegal act' (from Sykes & Matza, cited by McGregor, 2008, p. 265). Although rationalizations are just that, some are validated by economic burden and by selfishness, which might be argued is human nature.

A first step towards achieving sustainability is by communally establishing that it is important for society. Development of social agreement on this may be facilitated by an education in Home Economics that can, explicitly and with clarity, colour the importance of *sustainable development* and *consumer-citizenship* in everyday life. This facilitation may empower critical understanding of the interconnectedness among ecological domains, and lead in to a second step of personally and transformatively reconnecting individuals to these domains, within and outside of formal education settings. In the European community, working groups that develop frameworks for sustainability are gaining prominence, but North America is being left behind. The Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living (PERL), centred in Norway, is a group of educators and professionals dedicated to the promotion of responsible living. With results and publications based upon six years of research by the Consumer Citizenship Network (CCN) (n.d.), PERL (n.d.) has designed many resources for empowering citizens, businesses and government towards choosing sustainable lifestyles and choices. SPREAD Sustainable Lifestyles 2050 is a 'Social Platform identifying Research and Policy needs for Sustainable Lifestyles', and is a social consortium, based in Germany, that ran between 2011 and 2012. It provided an avenue for stakeholders 'to participate in the development of a vision for sustainable lifestyles in 2050' (n.d.). These European resources are useful in Canada, as complementary to UNESCO's platform on Education for Sustainable Development (n.d.) and the Education for Sustainable Development Canada Web Site (n.d.). A critical examination of the resources created by these European organizations is relevant for further examination, to determine their use to Home Economists and others interested in educating and living for sustainability in Canada and other places outside of Europe.

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Biography

Ayala Johnson values everyday life with her family, and all that it encompasses. She avidly promotes urban food gardening and processing. Currently, she is pursuing a Master of Arts

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