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Aims and challenges of handicraft and home economics education in Estonia

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Abstract

Handicraft and home economics (HHE) are two school subjects taught as one subject by one teacher in Estonian comprehensive schools. The current article describes the development of the subject through certain historic periods that have affected the nature and teaching of the subject. The aim of this article is to determine HHE teachers' understandings of the subject's aims and challenges. Two focus group interviews with nine HHE teachers in two geographically located places in Estonia were conducted. Transcriptions were analysed qualitatively with the ATLAS.ti program. Inductive thematic analysis revealed three main themes: the aims of the subjects, the teaching process and the learning environment. The last two themes are the main challenges in teachers' everyday practice. Outcomes characterizing the subjects' aims reveal teachers' concerns about students' knowledge and skills needed in the future, for example, how to manage their everyday life. Emerged challenges are related to organizational, economic and social aspects, for example, the mandatory exchange of study groups, divergent conditions and students' poor handicraft skills. The main idea to work on is the promoting of the importance of the subject and separation of the handicraft and home economics lessons.

KEYWORDS

Estonian schools, handicraft, home economics, teachers' understandings

1 | INTRODUCTION

Rapid changes in society imply different expectations of teachers and their work. How do handicraft and home economics (HHE) teachers see themselves, their work, and the role of the subject in the school? The concern about the essence of the subject and teachers' voice has been discussed in several studies (Dewhurst & Pendergast, 2008; Ma & Pendergast, 2011). There are recent Swedish studies which raise concerns about the resources available for home economics lessons (Lindblom, 2016), about the cultural beliefs embedded in the subject (Bohm, 2016; Höijer, 2013; Petersson, 2007) and about the selection of content for the lessons (Granberg, 2018; Lange, 2017). Alongside Sweden, in Finland the subject focuses on

home economics only and similar concerns about the classroom activities (Venäläinen, 2010), classroom facilities (Malin, 2011) and teacher's cooperation over the subject borders (Janhonen, 2016) have been raised. In Estonia the subject covers both HHE, which makes the development of the subject unique. In addition to Taar (2017), there is hardly any research about HHE teachers' everyday teaching practices in Estonia. This unique combination makes it difficult to find comparative studies from other countries. In Estonia, previous studies by Lind, Pappel, and Paas (2009) and Randla, Ehrpais, Kotkas, and Hirsnik (2012, Riiklik eksami- ja kvalifikatsioonikeskus, Tallinn, unpublished results) have focused on the content of the HHE subject and the teachers' expectations of the subject in comprehensive schools. Their studies have shown a considerable

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difference between theory and practice—teachers in schools follow their own principles, teaching the same way as they always have even though the needs of society have changed. Lind and Veeber (2015) discovered that, in HHE, handicraft was mainly technology-based; teachers first demonstrated, step by step, a new technology, and after that, the pupils practised the technology on some swatches. Home economics lessons, if there were any, comprised mostly cooking. The comparison might be drawn from experiences in other countries, as Ma and Pendergast (2011) highlight, when the complexities of this discipline are not intelligible it is often characterized as “cooking and sewing” or “cooking and baking” (Granberg, 2018; Hjälmeskog, 2013; Höijer, 2013). Hereby former statement adapts well to Estonian context as both the home economics and the handicraft are emphasized.

The teachers who work in Estonian schools nowadays have passed diverse teacher education programmes, as societal changes in Estonia have also influenced the scope and content of teacher training (Paas, 2015). According to Trasberg (2002, p. 35) teachers' educational backgrounds constitute one of the main challenges in the development of the subject taught at school. She claims that most of the teachers studied during Soviet times and received teacher training that was very much teacher- and subject-centred. Therefore, teachers were best prepared for delivering a monologue on the subject matter and, nowadays, may be unable to support social learning in classrooms, which is necessary when putting into practice the contemporary Estonian curriculum (see Taar, 2017). The fact that these kinds of teachers are in the schools may be confirmed with the average age of teachers in Estonia, as the results of The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) shows that the average teacher in Estonia is older (47.9 years) than in most other TALIS countries (average 42.9 years) (OECD, 2014).

At the same time, the educational paradigm shift from traditional to liberal in Estonia during the last 25 years has directed teaching towards a student-centred and more dialogue-like teaching (see Rõuk, Walt, & Wolhuter, 2018), which continues today in all school subjects, including HHE. The concept of learning in the current National Curriculum (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2014) is not clearly named; however, according to the general description, the socio-constructivist learning approach (see for example, Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1997) is identifiable, although the sociocultural approach is also identifiable, as Taar (2017) has concluded in her study. This divergent background of contemporary Estonian HHE teachers gives reason to believe that the experienced meaning of being an HHE teacher may differ. The aim of this article is to determine HHE teachers' understandings of the subject's aims and challenges. To achieve this aim, the two research questions were set:

1. What do the HHE teachers studied see as the aims of the HHE subject?
2. What kind of challenges do the HHE teachers face, based on their experience?

1.1 | Brief history of HHE in Estonia

Different regimes and authorities in Estonia have played a significant role in the formation of HHE (Paas, 2015). The geographical position, Western Europe on the one side and Russia on the other, has influenced the development of culture and education through the centuries (Lind, 2012). The first note about teaching handicraft in parish schools in Estonia dates back to 1804 (Andresen, 1974, p. 219). It was not common, but some examples also could be seen in the so-called “folk schools” where, in the middle of the 19th century, girls had needlework at the same time boys attended gymnastics. Generally, the teaching varied greatly depending on the school and the teachers' skills. Later, there were recommendations to have separate schools for boys and girls (Pöld, 1933). Lind (2012) states that Estonian craft education was formed by Nordic and Western countries, as their reformatory ideas spread with active promoters. The compulsory craft subject emerged in folk schools at the end of the 19th century by order of the Russian Tsar when the reformation of the school system was carried out. New forms and methods of study were practised; until that time, the studies had been mostly with “book and word” (Lind, 2005).

Traces of home economics education can be found in parish schools from 1811, however, the subject became more important at the end of the 19th century, first as short courses for girls after they had finished folk or village school. After a while, home economics schools were established, and they formed an important part of the vocational system in Estonia (Taar, 2015). Paas (2015) adds that in most cases the founders of home economics educational institutions were young Estonian women who had received their home economics education abroad, for example, in Finland or other European countries. During the time of Estonian independence from 1918, home economics education was highly valued in society to raise the awareness of the home and its culture (Kuus, 1997). The Soviet occupation from 1940 caused changes in the content of education. In addition to religious studies and civics, home economics was excluded from the study programmes, as the Soviet authorities considered these subjects to be bourgeois (Liivik, Karmin, Janulaitiene, & Montvilaite, 2013). Lind (2005) notes that, in the 1950s, the pedagogical value of craft studies was not seen, and therefore there was a short pause from 1951 to 1954 in teaching this subject in schools. Home economics was included in the school curriculum in autumn 1957. Due to the forced pause and deprived physical environment, the studies were mainly theoretical. After a while, the subject developed into an integrated subject, HHE, where handicraft techniques were more highlighted and home economics receded to transmit primary cooking skills for girls (Taar, 2015).

For a brief time from 1996 to 2002, the first curriculum in the re-independent Estonia designated HHE as two separate subjects. Despite this change, these lessons were still organized together, focusing more on craft skills (Taar, 2015), therefore two subjects were combined again. In the 1990s, the HHE lessons were compulsory for girls only. Boys attended craft lessons such as wood and metalwork at the same time (Vabariigi Valitsus, 1996). Changes in the recent

curriculum (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2014) have broadened the content of home economics and developed an obligatory amount of lessons for achieving the study aims, yet it has not been examined to what extent these instructions are followed in different schools. Since 2002, the requirement that boys should also gain some home economics knowledge was approved by the mandatory change of HHE and craft study groups (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2002). In general, HHE is taught in the second and third stages of study in comprehensive schools, grades 4–6 and 7–9, having one or two lessons each year (see more in Vabariigi Valitsus, 2014), as is also the case in the Nordic countries, where the position of the subject is relatively strong as compared to countries in central Europe.

2 | METHODS

To discover teachers' understandings of the aims and contemporary challenges of HHE in Estonia, the narrative method (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) was used. The focus was on personal actions, thoughts and reflections as well as the social and institutional context in which the teacher works (Moen, 2006). The focus group method was chosen to bring together HHE teachers and to share their experiences of the distinctive practices. This method (Morgan, 2001) provides a valuable platform to discuss and share experiences for participants who have high involvement with the topic. The emphasis is on social experiences (Belzile & Öberg, 2012) through which participants of the focus group co-construct meaning of the given issue. To select the participants, the overall geographic distribution of HHE teachers was considered first. This led to the decision to organize two focus groups. One group would consist of representatives of schools from the capital area and the other group would consist of teachers from the rural area of Estonia, in order to have representatives from diverse types and varied sizes of schools so that the number of students could be considered.

To reach different teachers, the first author searched the HHE teachers' contact e-mail addresses from the general education schools' web pages and sent the information letter with a request to participate by e-mail to 25 HHE teachers in schools from the capital area and nearby districts. Ten teachers responded to the request, nine positively, but only four managed to attend the focus group meeting in the proposed time. Therefore, a second round of e-mails ($n = 8$) was sent out to receive more teachers. From this set, five teachers answered positively, and two were able to fit the proposed time into their plans. Altogether, an agreement with six teachers was reached.

The first focus group interview with five HHE teachers from different primary and secondary schools from the capital city area of Estonia was organized by the first author in June 2016. One teacher cancelled her participation due to unexpected reasons. Participant teachers ($n = 5$) met as a group at the Tallinn University campus for the first time in this meeting, and only two were previously familiar with each other. All the teachers had received their education in different time periods representing diverse educational backgrounds, and had work experience as teachers ranging from 1 to 30 years.

To gather the second focus group from the rural area of Estonia, the idea to draw together teachers from different counties was discounted due to complex organizational reasons. The teachers' group was found through the regional HHE teacher community. The county was chosen randomly, and the first contact to ask permission to participate in this research was accepted. The second interview took place in the beginning of January 2017. As the focus group interview followed the teachers' regional meeting, three were not eager to participate in the study and left after their obligatory part; therefore, only four teachers remained. This focus group session took place close to the participants ($n = 4$) schools in the home economics classroom of one central Estonian school. This focus group was more homogeneous in age and work experience compared to the first one. According to our study purpose, we found the smaller groups more convenient as teachers have a close relationship to the topic and much to share.

To promote the discussion in the focus groups and to stimulate teachers' thinking, the data collection started with teachers' personal writing. The respondents were asked to write a letter to the Minister of Education and Research with the following instruction: *Write a defence letter for this subject (HHE) explaining why it is important. Why is it needed in schools? What are the essential aims and learning outcomes? What would you like to change?*

All respondents completed the writing task in about 30 min. After the writing, the data collection continued directly with a focus group discussion in which the same questions as the questions in the writing task were discussed again to get a better understanding of why teachers think or feel the way they do. The teachers were led to further discuss open ideas that they agree/disagree with other teachers. The process followed Morgan's (2001) "sharing and comparing" method. Conducted focus groups reached the point of theoretical saturation (Krueger & Casey, 2014), therefore additional groups were considered unnecessary.

The first focus group discussion lasted 1 hr and 54 min, and the second lasted 1 hr and 29 min. In both discussions, a digital recorder and a video recorder were used at the same time to have the advantage of preserving the entire verbal and nonverbal parts of the interview. The handwritten letters and recorded discussions were transcribed for further analysis. All research activities were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles stated in the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012), which are followed by the University of Helsinki.

2.1 | Analysis

To analyse the teachers' writings and the narratives they shared and collectively constructed in the focus group interview, qualitative thematic analysis was used, where emphasis, as Riessman (2006) states, is on the context of the text—on "what" is said more than "how" it is said. This approach is useful for finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). We used the inductive analysis method, where analysis is data-driven,

meaning that the themes related to research questions were identified during the coding process. Our aim was to “give voice to the participants” and, thereby, better understand their meaning-making processes (Lehtomäki et al., 2014).

The collected data were coded and analysed separately with the help of ATLAS.ti (version 7) software. The analysis began with multiple readings of the collected material. During the reading process, the first author identified emerging codes, made notes and marked fragments of sentences that captured something important in relation to the research questions—for example, when teachers described their teaching principles, their actions, or what they expect from their students. After the coding, the three main themes that rose inductively from the teachers’ stories were (a) the aims of the subject; (b) the teaching process; and (c) the learning environment and resources.

3 | RESULTS

In focus group interviews, HHE teachers described a multitude of distinctive features of being an HHE teacher. Results of the study are presented in Table 1, where three main themes are divided into subthemes. The division of themes into aims and challenges is based on the results.

3.1 | Aims of the subject

In general, the teachers constantly emphasized the subject’s aim to prepare students for their independent life, explaining what HHE knowledge and skills students will need in the future. From the aspect of handicraft, making by hand was strongly underlined as the basis of this subject, or more precisely, how to use a needle and thread; basic skills of craft techniques; and the idea of being part of

the process from setting the idea to the real outcome. In the study process in school, teachers value hands-on learning, where students can practice the joint operation of their eyes-hands-mind.

The students acquire skills through practical experiences, which gives them the courage to explore, to try and to learn from their mistakes.

T8: So s/he will not remain helpless, just being able to, see this as the idea of our subject, to cope with life as well as s/he plans something and does it: “I’m not afraid of this sewing machine” and seeing that “I go, explore, take a manual, try.”

They also showed their concern that some knowledge and skills that previously were common at home, for example what a needle or iron looks like or how to iron, have disappeared from students’ everyday practice.

T3: Some wash...dishes for the first time in the home economics lesson, for example.

Also, maintaining the national handwork was named as an important aim of the handicraft subject.

T3: So we could appreciate [national handmade crafts], especially in today’s world where nations mingle, and if our Estonians do not value our Estonian thing, or even worse, we do not know about it, then who else will?

The aims that related specifically to home economics were healthiness, making choices, managing in the kitchen, good manners, and etiquette, as well as practising cooperation and consideration skills. The last two are also general competencies in the curriculum for all

TABLE 1 Themes and subthemes of the data

	Themes	Subthemes
Aims	Aims of the subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing for independent life • Teaching manual skills • Maintaining national handwork • Promoting healthiness • Practising subject skills, such as managing the kitchen • Practising general skills, such as cooperation skills
Challenges	Teaching process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Composition of the student groups • Gender issues • Students’ diverse skills • Individual instructions • Students’ helplessness • Division of subjects
	Learning environment and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsatisfactory resources • Need for tools and materials • Parents’ involvement • Social environment

subjects. In addition, teachers stated that both subjects promote students' creativity and self-expression and give joy. In addition, the teachers said that the subjects also develop general competencies like functional reading skills and integrate different school subjects, such as mathematics or language.

Challenges are themes that teachers were most concerned about. These bring up the uniqueness of the HHE subject.

3.2 | Teaching process

Participating teachers agreed that the current school curriculum is flexible and meets society's needs. At the same time, they pointed out both the negative and positive sides of the flexibility. For example, in some schools, HHE teachers can have students from grade 4, while the others have those in grade 5. In this case, the fourth graders are taught by a class teacher. In the teachers' opinion, this indicates that the subject skills are not achieved.

In addition, the mandatory study group exchange is challenging for teachers. For example, the exchange is problematic in one of the schools where boys are in physical education lessons while girls have HHE lessons. In the HHE group, there are mainly girls, although some teachers described the free choice in class, where students, along with their parents, have made the choice of which group they want to be involved in, and therefore, some teachers also have boys in HHE lessons. Teachers' concern with the required exchange is that the amount of HHE lessons has been reduced.

The number of students in the classroom depends on the school type and the area where school is located. Teachers admitted that generally the group is too big, and as there is mainly independent work in handicraft, it is challenging to reach every student. In small schools, the students from different grades are put together, which, as a result, form bigger groups with diverse ages.

T4: They [the school administration] put [classes together] according to money. For instance, I have this year fifth and sixth grades, which, in practice, is the teaching of basic skills, so that you could do any creation. Parallel classes are put together, just for money.

There are students with diverse backgrounds in the classroom. They have different skills learnt from home, experiences such as preparing morning porridge, and abilities. Teachers highlighted that, nowadays, students have poor handicraft skills and, therefore, teachers are more involved with individual instruction compared to the former whole-group teaching process. In addition, the number of students with special needs in the classroom is increasing, which makes the teaching process more complicated. Teachers encourage these students to participate and value their own work throughout their education, meeting every student year after year from 5th to 9th grade. The process of doing and making in HHE lessons was described as therapeutic for students with behavioural difficulties, especially in urban schools where special classes for such students are common. For example, students

achieve a positive experience after succeeding in cooking, which raises their self-confidence, while washing dishes is calming.

In home economics, the students mainly work together in small groups. The formation of groups might be voluntary or guided by the teacher. In handicraft classes, in some cases, the students wait in a line to get help from teachers without trying to solve it by themselves. Some teachers then use the help from students who have better skills. Sometimes, the teacher is also occupied during breaks between lessons helping the students who struggle with their work. Therefore, teachers value the new possibilities of using digital technologies and videos. Videos are also good for helping students learn or remember certain handicraft techniques when needed, for instance when being at home.

Teachers discussed the possibility of separating these two subjects—HHE—yet, they concluded that, even if these subjects were separated, they would like to teach both.

T3: Home economics could be a class on its own, but I really liked that Finnish system, that they have the home economics year in seventh grade

3.3 | Learning environment and resources

All teachers who participated in the current study had a special environment for HHE lessons, although not all of them were satisfied with the current conditions, such as the absence of sewing machines. One teacher described a situation with only cold water available in the home economics classroom, which is rather unusual. The solutions she had offered to the principal had been rejected due to the poor economic conditions of the school.

T4: We have a small dishwasher, and in reality, I am the one whose role it is to wash the dishes, and it starts to disappear that the kids, well...some of them still want to wash, but we have cold water, and really that way, in the bowl, you cannot wash. And the school administration has the opinion to do the minimum amount of home economics lessons, and this is a sick attitude.

Teachers suggested that there should be a certain amount of resources (money) available so that they could buy needed tools and materials. In the capital area, this kind of possibility was once offered, but it was limited to certain stores; therefore, there were few choices and inadequate quality of the items.

Usually students bring their own tools and materials to handicraft lessons, and if students leave their own things at home, the teacher offers them the use of her tools and materials in the class. In some schools, parents bring many textiles and yarns to the school, and the teacher uses them to practise the technique. The teachers stressed that there are not many of this kind of parent any more who has such a collection of materials available at home. They were the remains of the Soviet period.

T3: In reality, no finances from the state are coming that are officially prescribed, and we would be down on all fours in a given situation, and we live quite well thanks to these charitable people.

The parents were also mentioned in the case of helping students at home. There are certain parents who want to help their children, for instance, doing work for them, such as knitting some rows or expecting the best results and ripping up their child's work if it is not perfect. Sometimes students' work influences parents so much that they also start to do something with their hands.

T3: And several children come with that verve from home, ... mom also felt the irresistible urge to knit, for example, mom started to knit also, or I taught mom this or that.

In home economics classes, students bring to school almost all foodstuffs they need for cooking class. Some schools have ingredients such as flour, sugar and oil available. Teachers see it as a possibility to teach about foodstuff and how to choose them, although they think that mothers are more connected to buying food than students. Bringing their own foodstuff promotes students' self-responsibility and consumer awareness. However, teachers also face a situation where students bring too accurate an amount of the needed foodstuff. Teachers acknowledged that the choice of foodstuff might be different when she could bring them.

T4: I have told them, too, that if I could bring the foodstuff, we would make completely different things, but as this comes from your wallet, I have to do a little calculating and considering.

Teachers' shared the attitude that students like the HHE lesson and come to the class with pleasure. This differs from other school subjects. Usually there is a casual atmosphere where students feel free to talk with the teacher about all sorts of things that interest them. Students like to make things with their hands and are glad when their practical thing is finally finished and they can use or wear it.

4 | DISCUSSION

The aim of this article is to better understand HHE teachers' views of the subject in Estonia. The results support Randla, Ehrpais, Kotkas, and Hirsnik (2012, Riiklik eksami- ja kvalifikatsioonikeskus, Tallinn, unpublished results) study, highlighting that HHE teachers in Estonia experience it as teaching a very important subject essential for everyone to succeed in their everyday life. Estonian teachers perceive a lot of autonomy in teaching (Erss, 2018), as they can make decisions according to the limited resources they have in the school and the students they teach, therefore there is a gap between the wishful thinking attitude

of the curriculum and the classroom reality (Taar, 2017). However, this is also the case in other Nordic countries, such as Sweden (see for example Lindblom, 2016) and in Finland (see for example Venäläinen, 2010). In some Estonian schools, the HHE learning environment does not meet the requirement set in the National Curriculum for Basic Schools (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2014), where the "school shall make sure that the furnishings and design of the premises used are expedient for the purpose of studies." This has also been recognized in Finland (Malin & Palojoki, 2015) and in Sweden (Höijer, 2013; Lindblom, Erixon Arreman, & Hörnell, 2013). In Estonia, municipalities own the schools, and therefore, study kitchens' conditions vary greatly, and in handicraft, parents' support with resources is favourable.

The teachers in the current study could feel the shifted paradigm in education: they are no longer the main source of information, and they are guiding the students to acquire the skills and knowledge to cope with daily life tasks, as the current National curricula for basic schools (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2014) emphasize. Contemporary aims and outcomes of HHE expect teachers to think carefully about why and what to teach. Student-centredness reflected by teachers corresponds the subject aims in HHE syllabus (Subject Field: Technology, 2014). At the same time, teachers noticed the poor skills of today's students and recalled memories of a time when there were more handicraft lessons in schools and more demanding handwork was made. The reason for the decreasing number of handicraft lessons is the developmental works of the Estonian national curriculum in 2002 and 2014. Adding requirements for a certain number of home economics lessons, compulsory project work and changing study groups with craft have diversified the teaching of the subject. However, teachers find the latter quite challenging as HHE and craft might not be in the same time in school timetables. Therefore, more handicraft lessons are made. Knitting socks and gloves are still part of the learning process in schools where teachers value more traditional handicraft and heritage. They see themselves as very important maintainers of national handicraft traditions who also shape the corresponding values in students. At the same time, there is a need to highlight the contemporary aims of the HHE subject to reach a wider audience, for example, society in general. Regarding this, the parents play a key role. However, that is also a challenge, which corresponds to Höijer, Hjalmskog, and Fjellström (2011) study; parents have different expectations for this subject based on their own experiences when they had HHE lessons in school.

As the the habit of doing things by hand has decreased over the years and these skills are learned less at home, the students need a lot of individual help from the teacher in the learning process. At the same time, the growing concern is students with special needs. In Estonian schools, the European system of "inclusive education" (The European Agency..., 2014) is being implemented in which students with different learning abilities and backgrounds are studying together with all the other students (see also Venäläinen, 2010). Häidkind and Oras (2016) state that this is the most significant change in the Estonian educational landscape since regaining

independence. However, the teachers who participated lack the education and support to manage a diverse group of students in everyday teaching. Teachers' need for differentiation instructions and professional development activities related to teaching students with special needs is supported by TALIS 2013 survey (Kall, 2014), emphasized by 28% of Estonian teachers.

The above-mentioned challenges indicate that HHE teachers experience intense workload, hardly taking any breaks during school hours, and as a result, the HHE teacher is occupied in her own classroom and has less time to interact with other teachers in school. Being an HHE teacher, therefore, can be quite lonely, as usually there is only one HHE teacher in an Estonian school.

Hjälmeskog (2013) determined that a Swedish home and consumer studies teacher can be understood as complex, contradictory and always in change. The statement can also apply to Estonian HHE teachers, the complexity is perceived as teachers teaching two subjects—handicraft as one and home economics as another. Teachers still talk about boys' and girls' groups, when indicating HHE and craft groups, although some teachers have them both at the same time in the lesson. The strong historical roots and traditional distribution of students for two gender-based groups are still visible in some schools today. To go one step further, the teachers need to critically think about the artefacts that are made in handicraft lessons, whether they are something that suit both genders. In home economics, the exchange group mainly has cooking lessons, and in teachers talk they referred to it as "cooking", not home economics.

From the aspect of change, teachers shared and strongly emphasized a clearer separation of the two subjects studied. If HHE were separated, then it would be easier to plan classes better and have a certain amount of lessons for both subjects; have a fixed time for the lessons; and focus more deeply on the subject-specific didactics of both subjects. The idea of separation is strongly supported by the Finnish school system, where there are separate subjects: handicraft together with craft and home economics as an independent subject (Finnish National ..., 2016). The positive and negative aspects of this transformation, as well as the resources allocated to the subject, require further development and discussion among HHE teachers and educational specialists.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

HHE teachers in Estonia have experienced complicated times throughout history (Paas, 2015). Curriculum developments have changed the subject to include broader aims and division between these two subjects: HHE. Participating teachers shared a common notion about the subject of HHE, supporting the aims of HHE in the National Curriculum (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2014), whereby the dominant purpose of the subject is to prepare students for independent life, where they can manage with primary HHE knowledge and skills. Yet, the results of the current study revealed that, although there are precepts about the physical learning environment, it is still divergent

depending on the school and its maintenance. Therefore, achieving the HHE subject's contemporary aims entirely is problematic in some schools. In spite of the challenges, HHE teachers work enthusiastically in promoting the important aspects of the subjects. The study shows that HHE teachers need more relevant professional development activities to support them in managing a diverse group of students.

According to teachers' view, the importance of the subject is not seen generally in society, and therefore, further explanatory statements and visible outcomes from teachers and researchers of the current area are necessary. It may be concluded that teachers are the link between the subject and society, and for this reason, teachers need to carefully consider the artefacts made in HHE and what message they send to students' homes and to a wider audience.

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