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Home Economics Contribution to UNESCO's New Social Contract for Education

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Abstract

In September 2024, the United Nations held a Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow. In this context, UNESCO is interested in the role of governance in forging a new social contract for education to replace the neoliberal, capitalistic current contract. This conceptual paper explores the potential role of home economics in the governance process inherent in creating this new social contract for education. With its focus on the family as a social institution, home economics has a unique opportunity to socialize individuals and families to become active change agents who can influence governance leading to a social contract for education predicated on education being a human right for individuals and a common good for the collective. In their proposed governance role, home economists can help families appreciate that they are a social institution, view themselves as part of a governance flotilla, learn the critical science perspective, learn participatory action skills, value a futures literacy and an entrepreneurial attitude, and draw on the human ecosystem perspective to garner the power of the interdependent collective.

KEYWORDS: HOME ECONOMICS, SOCIAL CONTRACTS, EDUCATION, SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS, FAMILIES, GOVERNANCE, UNESCO

Introduction

This conceptual paper concerns the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) (2022a, 2022b) initiative for a new social contract for education and the role that home economics can play in this process. The document is called *Forging a new social contract for education: Perspectives on governance* (UNESCO, 2022a). We were moved to respond to this document about governance, education, and social contracts because we felt this aspect of home economics practice was underdeveloped especially the governance and social contract notions. We reasoned that with richer knowledge of these aspects of practice, home economists would be more inclined to be swayed by UNESCO's vision of a new social contract for education grounded in governance.

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A contract is an agreement that specifies certain rights and obligations between two or more mutually agreeing parties. In a *social contract*, citizens consent (implicitly or explicitly) to give up some of their freedoms and rights and yield or submit to an authority (often government) in exchange for protection of their remaining rights or to make sure the social order is maintained. *Social order* refers to the degree to which society is stable and orderly in part because citizens have agreed (in the social contract) to accept and maintain existing *social structures* to minimize chaos and disorder (Castiglione, 2015).

Social structures are arrangements that organize groups or a society (e.g., the class system, schools, and religion). In contrast, *social institutions* are specific social structures intentionally designed to meet basic *social needs* (e.g., food, water, shelter, security, health, communication, transportation, and employment). Examples of social institutions include the family, education, the economy, politics, the labour market, media, the justice system, and health care. An orderly and stable society depends on social institutions helping people meet societal needs (Deji, 2011; Garcia-Alexander et al., 2017).

For a society to be orderly and stable, people must be *socialized* into it as members, who in turn must be nurtured, maintained, and replaced. A stable society further depends on the production and consumption of goods and services; hence, the powerful role of the economy, labour market, and marketplace institutions. An orderly society also depends on legal and judicial systems, political systems, and economic systems. Of note herein, the education system transmits knowledge and culture to societal members to bolster social order (Deji, 2011; Garcia-Alexander et al., 2017).

Indeed, education itself is often viewed as a social contract—“an implicit agreement among members of society to cooperate for shared benefits” (UNESCO, 2022b, para. 4). Citizens agree to avail themselves of education provided by the government and/or the private sector, and the nation and economy benefit from an educated populace. However, contracts are often imbalanced, and both parties can be in breach. Indeed, UNESCO’s International Commission on the Futures of Education (ICFE) (2021) faulted the existing social contract for not being inclusive enough and lacking a focus on both rights and the collective; it thus claimed that a new social contract is needed for education.

To continue, ICFE (2021) urged that any “new social contract [for education] needs to overcome discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion. We must dedicate ourselves to ensuring gender equality and the rights of all regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, age, or citizenship status” (p. 5). Although governments contract with society to provide education, and society agrees to be educated, experience has shown that what is ultimately available, and citizens’ actual level of engagement, is inadequate for meeting the needs of an orderly society. Things must change.

UNESCO’s Proposed Social Contract for Education

To that end, UNESCO was interested in the role of *governance* in forging a new social contract for education (ICFE, 2021; UNESCO, 2022a). Governance is the process of making and enforcing decisions within a society (Bevir, 2012). UNESCO’s interest in governance stemmed from the United Nation’s (UN) planned September 2024 *Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow*. The UN is deeply concerned about gaps in global governance.

Respecting this concern, UNESCO is holding the development of a new social contract for education to a different set of governing principles than what materialized with the current contract. The latter reflects a (a) neoliberal ideology (e.g., privatization, deregulation, decentralization, and individualism); (b) capitalist business model; and (c) numbers-driven game of competition and standardization (ICFE, 2021; UNESCO, 2022a). “The rational and data-driven modes of governing educational systems are dramatically distinct from the ... qualities of practices of caring (serving and teaching)” (Tarc et al., 2024, p. 302).

Unfortunately, under the terms of this social contract, too many people are being left behind and left out. Society is not being served by its education system. Citizens did not get what they bargained for or needed. Tax monies paid on education (instead of some other rights) did not generate the education that society needed. The trade-offs on both sides left too many disadvantaged (Apple, 2006; ICFE, 2021). To mitigate the damage caused by the current social contract for education, ICFE (2021) argued that the new one must be predicated on foundational principles other than neoliberalism, namely “(1) the right to education and (2) a commitment to education as a public societal endeavour and a common good” (p. 11). As do all caring professions (Tarc et al., 2024), we maintain that home economists have a role to play in perpetuating this new governance approach.

Role of Governance in Social Contract for Education

ICFE (2021) and UNESCO (2022a) are especially concerned with the role of governance relative to a new social contract based on different foundational principles, which include but are not limited to cooperation, justice, solidarity, participation, inclusion, diversity, and trust. Governance is from Greek, *kubernan*, ‘to steer’ (Harper, 2025). The assumption that governance is the purview of governments has been challenged. To illustrate, Webb (2005), who developed the notion of *sustainable governance*, asserted that, although

the state has certain significant advantages in terms of governing when compared with nonstate actors, it doesn’t have a monopoly on effective, efficient, and responsive governance approaches—whether they entail institutions, instruments, or processes. Sustainable governance recognizes and draws on the largely untapped potential of the private sector, the third (voluntary) sector and individual citizens to assist in governing. (p. 246)

Like mindedly, Rajabifard and Box (2009) clarified that “governance is a ‘steering’ function, providing leadership and an enabling framework for collective decision making” (p. 1). They likened governance to steering a flotilla (i.e., a small fleet of ships or boats) with the flotilla containing independent yet interdependent vessels (e.g., stakeholders and agents from many sectors). To keep everyone on course, whomever is steering (per Webb’s, 2005, assertion that it may not be government) “must provide an unambiguous definition of the collective and individual responsibilities for decision making, implementation and evaluation, together with the mechanisms that enable these” (Rajabifard & Box, 2009, p. 3). Our intent with this paper is to explain how home economics can contribute to UNESCO’s revisioning of education (from a governance perspective) and the social contract that guides education.

Home Economics Contributions to UNESCO's New Social Contract for Education

The 125-year-old profession is optimally primed to offer a family-oriented approach to governance pursuant to a new social contract for education. Home economics' mandate is to strengthen and empower families as a key social structure and social institution (Brown & Paolucci, 1979). One of its main instruments to this effect is home economics education (International Federation for Home Economics [IFHE], 2008). As a caveat, we assumed that home economics professionals automatically teach and educate regardless of their career path. That said, McGregor and Yoo (2022) explained that

home economics education involves teaching home economics to non-home economists including school children, college and university students, and adults within the general populace. This education helps people *learn* about home economics and *from* home economists and the powerful role they play in their lives. Through home economics education, people can gain knowledge, clarify values, and take inspired action relative to the concerns of everyday living. (p. 1)

That makes home economics a key stakeholder for the creation of any new social contract for education. Not only is it one of the vessels in the flotilla that is governing this process, but it is also empowered to help families assume this responsibility as well. Upon reading UNESCO's (2022a) call for contributions to a collection about governance, intended for release prior to the *Summit of the Future* (see final collection at Tawil & Toukan, 2024), we focused on *Enquiry 4: Strengthening capacity, leadership, and learning*, which was framed thus:

What capacities do States and other stakeholders need [in order] to effectively govern increasingly complex landscapes, players, purposes, and spaces, of education? What processes for capacity building, training, and leadership development are needed? How can research, and innovation contribute to forging a new social contract for education? (UNESCO, 2022a, p. 4).

Home economists are guided by their belief in the family as a pivotal social institution that fulfils key functions as the bedrock of society. A society renews itself through families. Thus families (regardless of what they look like) must add new members and then provide physical, emotional, and financial care; maintenance; socialization; social control; protection; and morale for its individual members and the family unit (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; McGregor, 2009; Sokalski, 1992). What do families need to know and do to help create and then respect the terms of a new social contract for education? What capacities should home economists strive to instill in families so they, as a responsible and accountable social institution, can be more effective governing partners? Based on extensive reflection on UNESCO's vision (ICFE, 2021) and home economics' mission and vision (Brown & Paolucci, 1979), we propose and discuss six ways that home economists can contribute to this endeavour (see Table 1).

Table 1 Home Economics' Contributions to UNESCO's New Social Contract for Education

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help families appreciate that they are a social institution • Help families view themselves as part of the governance flotilla • Teach families the critical science perspective • Teach families skills from the participatory action domain of learning • Teach families skills for futures thinking and an entrepreneurial attitude • Help families view education as a human right and a common good |
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Families as a Social Institution

To ensure their voice is heard and respected amongst others in the governance flotilla, home economists must inculcate in families the idea that they more than a standalone unit or household. They are a social institution with responsibilities to society. Institution is from Old French, *institucion*, 'foundation' (Harper, 2025). Social institutions are the load-bearing part of human life—the machinery through which humans organize to meet their basic social needs. Social institutions provide structure, established practice and procedures, patterns of behaviour, traditions, role expectations, and a system of relationships that helps people meet their needs and improves chances of human survival and flourishing (Barnes, 1942; Bogardus, 1922).

Each social institution, especially families, plays a vital role in how society functions. Whether healthy or not, institutions tend to be enduring and stable. The rules that govern specific institutions are usually ingrained in basic cultural values. Home economists must help people appreciate that the family social institution is very important and interdependent—dependent on other institutions—meaning families must also be aware of what is going on in these institutions including education as a social contract (Barnes, 1942; Bogardus, 1922).

Families Key Part of Governance Flotilla

In this regard, the home economics profession could be faulted for asking too much of families. However, as families are part of the social contract for education, wherein their tax dollars are being used to sustain the system for everyone, they have a responsibility to be attuned to the politics of governance. Instead of families just rowing along independently in the system, fending for themselves, they must learn to view themselves as an interdependent part of the flotilla and maybe even take the lead on where to steer the flotilla into the future (per Webb, 2005).

Indeed, Kawalek and Wastell (2008) explained that the identity of the leader governing a flotilla often changes as the situation and context changes. Moving in the right direction requires shifting from alignment to innovation and then expedience followed with alignment ad infinitum. Home economists would help people to become cognizant of these shifting roles and objectives and to accept that families have every right to step into and assume this governance responsibility.

Critical Science Perspective

To participate in forging and implementing a new social contract for education, home economists must use a critical science approach to help families learn how to critically analyze the current system instead of just critiquing or complaining about it. Families must be able to intuit power dynamics and discern who wields influence and control over the education system in all its manifestations (McGregor, 2006, in press): daycare, public school, private school, home schooling, tertiary education (e.g., colleges, technical institutes, and universities), and lifelong learning.

Employing the critical science lens requires learning three new languages: (a) the language of critique, (b) the language of possibility and potential and (c) the language of action (Rehm, 1999). First, using the *language of critique* (from Greek, *kritikós*, ‘discerning, capable of judging’) (Harper, 2025), people can uncover hidden or unspoken assumptions, ideologies, and values. In this process, they slowly gain critical insights and critical consciousness with people ultimately realizing they have the power to effect change. With self-reflection, people gain insights into their thoughts and behaviour (and that of others) and can reframe things in a more positive light conducive to their rights and that of the common good. When people frame and name a problem (problematization), they gain more control over marginalized and exploitative situations. A detailed analysis and critical assessment of society (including the education system) can reveal oppressive power relations that can be challenged using the language of critique.

Second, the *language of possibility and potential* (from Latin, *potentia*, ‘power’) (Harper, 2025) entails exercising one’s personal voice, authorship (one’s own story), and agency to help achieve society’s potential. Making the best possible use of resources available (including critical insights and self-power) is inherent to home economics as is ensuring that individuals and families learn empowerment and autonomy; thus, speaking up to evaluate and/or ensure that governance supports educational entitlements follows naturally from this principle. Individuals and families would come to view themselves as legitimate change agents with an obligation to influence the creation of governance models pursuant to a new social contract for education.

Third, the *language of action* depends on dialogue, consensus building, and taking collective, empowering action for solidarity to right the wrongs weighing on society, including an oppressive social contract for education. The transformative language of action is spoken by people who have found their political autonomy and opted to contribute to the formation of society. Critical science values the principles proposed for the new social contract for education (e.g., care, trust, diversity, cooperation, and inclusion) (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; Rehm, 1999). Home economists can help emphasize the value of and promote these traits as they discuss with people the notions of family-community and family-policy interactions vis-à-vis governance for a social contract for education.

Participatory Action Skills

Per the above, home economists should help families develop a roster of skills comprising the participatory action domain of learning. This goes beyond, yet complements, the cognitive domain of learning (i.e., gaining, applying, and critiquing knowledge). The participatory domain concerns empowered action for social change. The intent is to help people gain (a) an eye-opening and paradigm-shifting sense of how the world really works, (b) an appreciation for how others feel living in that world and (c) the confidence that they can affect and change that world (Diaz et al., 1999).

Relevant participatory domain skills conducive to governance for a new social contract for education include critical observation, research, argumentation and rhetoric, strategizing within awareness of context and potentialities, and anticipating and dealing with resistance by knowing one's supporters and detractors. It also includes negotiating and bargaining; debating and dialogue; networking; mobilizing; and self-reflection as well as reflexivity (i.e., awareness of one's own values, biases, and belief system and how reflexivity informs one's engagement in governance) (Diaz et al., 1999).

Futures Thinking and an Entrepreneurial Attitude

Whereas taking a critical stance on the current realities of education and individuals and families current needs can inspire home economists to revisit the current content and pedagogical activities in courses they may deliver at any level, it should also spur them to look more keenly beyond "What is in place now?" to "What would be a desirable future for individuals, families, and communities vis-à-vis a social contract for education? Home economists' participation in re-envisioning their own discipline within a larger framework of a social contract for education governance will contribute to nurturing individuals and families along a likeminded path. This should lead to future citizens who can (a) see the home and family as a context for learning throughout life and (b) seek to play a role in creating learning environments outside the home to meet prevailing, emerging, and anticipated needs.

These future citizens will need *futures thinking literacy*, which Vidergor (2023) recently described as "a meta-literacy [that] integrates [each of] language, digital/information, and scientific/critical literacies to enable [people] to think about the future in any topics or disciplines they study" (p. 1). Pouru and Wilenius (2018) further asserted that "through enhancing one's individual futures literacy, a person learns to use the future more consciously" (p. 2). This skill is sorely needed relative to creating the governance process for a new social contract for education.

Buckingham (2015) clarified that novel literacies are not created in isolation, but rather are an integral part of the social and institutional structures in which they are situated and so enable social action. Futures thinking literacy is one such example. Because a new social contract for education is part of the future, individuals and families should be exposed to futures thinking literacy. We propose that home economics is well-suited to add futures thinking literacy to its current multiple literacies (Piscopo, 2016) and then help individuals and families learn about its importance relative to education governance.

Home economists should not only nurture a futures thinking literacy among individuals, families, and communities but also a sense of agency and an entrepreneurial attitude (e.g., passion, risk taking, proactiveness, and integrity) (Wales et al., 2020). Entrepreneur is from Old French, *entreprendre*, 'to undertake' (Harper, 2025). Individual and family social entrepreneurs would embrace a futures thinking literacy as they undertake gaining (a) the visionary capacity to imagine alternative futures, (b) an open mind toward change and alternatives and (c) a commitment to collaborate for the development of such futures in an ethical manner whilst safeguarding the wellbeing of humans and natural environments. The new social contract for education and its governance would benefit from futures thinking and a futures literacy.

Education as Human Right and Common Good

Finally, to further ensure that families can partake in forging and implementing a new social contract for education, home economists must also orient people to ICFE's (2021) imperative that people view education as both a (a) human right for each person for their entire life span; and (b) common good, whereby the entire society—everyone—benefits from education. Families must be socialized to value these two principles.

Regarding education as human right, home economists must meet people where they are, so the latter can avail themselves of their right to education. To that end, home economists would offer education in a variety of contexts conducive to what people need as their life unfolds in a predictable and unpredictable manner. This means respecting that quality education must be relevant and provided in (a) formal (organized and authority-sanctioned), (b) nonformal (organized and context-specific) and (c) informal (unorganized and organic) settings.

Regarding the common good, most people view education as benefiting a particular person, which is an idea emanating from neoliberalism and individualism, the crux of the current social contract for education (Apple, 2006). ICFE (2021) strongly urged those forging the new contract to commit to viewing education as a common good, which “refers to those facilities—whether material, cultural or institutional—that the members of a community provide to all members in order to fulfill a relational obligation they all have to care for certain interests that they have in common” (Hussain, 2018, para. 1; see also Sharma & Sayed, 2024).

To continue, the selfish, individualistic nature of the current social contract for education compromised the mutual interest inherent in the common good (ICFE, 2021). Home economists could draw on a human ecosystem perspective to socialize families to respect the common good, and the collective. An ecosystem is a community of interacting organisms and their immediate environment. A human ecosystem is a community of humans interacting with four different levels of environment: human group, human-built, sociocultural (including the community and the common good), and natural (McGregor, 2020).

“Human ecology theory assumes that families are: [sic] (a) an *ecosystem* where the parts and the whole are interdependent; (b) a key democratic social *institution* that carries out functions for its members and the common good” (McGregor, 2020, p. 162). “A human ecology perspective interprets the processes, patterns, products, and mediating factors that regulate human behavior using a systemic and holistic framework that accounts for multiple factors and the interrelations between them” (Lawrence, 2014).

Indeed, from its earliest beginnings as a discipline, home economics has adopted, what Goel et al. (2010) termed, *situated learning*, which recognizes the mutually constituted nature of society and mind. The interrelationships and interactions among individuals and families, as they function in physical, economic, technological, and sociocultural environments, which are conscientiously identified, criticized, problematized, and addressed within home economics, allow for responsible, empathic, and innovative approaches to choices and actions for human betterment and a thriving world. Using this perspective, families would thus feel entrusted to pursue governance that protects and entrenches the common-good imperative in any new social contract for education.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper developed the idea that the home economics profession has the wherewithal and opportunity to socialize families into their role as a social institution in the ensuing conversation about a new social contract for education. UNESCO envisioned this contract as predicated on education as a human right for individuals and a common good for the collective. It also advocated for a governance imperative that focuses on a new set of principles undergirding the social contract: cooperation, justice, solidarity, participation, inclusion, diversity, and trust (ICFE, 2021). Drawing on a roster of recommended strategies, home economists can orient itself and families to view themselves as part of the governance flotilla that is concerned with forging a new social contract for education. This new contract will take society beyond the neoliberal ideology and capitalistic business model of education toward a model focused on human rights, the collective, the common good, and human flourishing.

Biographies

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