

# Enhancing All – Island Teaching in Home Economics (EAT-HE)



Home Economics Teachers' Perspectives  
and Experiences of Strengthening the Divide  
between Nutrition Theory and Culinary Skills to  
Ensure Best Practice in Teaching Practical Food  
Lessons at Junior Cycle and Key Stage 4.

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# Executive Summary

It is well recognised that what teachers do in the classroom directly influence students learning. The SCoTENS EAT-HE project is a collaborative cross-border research study that documents experiences and perceptions of post-primary Home Economics teachers across the island of their execution of food practical lessons at Junior Cycle and Key Stage 4. The project had two main aims. First, to provide a forum for practising Home Economics teachers to share their experiences of conducting practical food lessons with a view to identifying the challenges of combining nutrition theory and culinary skills in a meaningful way. Second, to afford Home Economics teachers the opportunity to debate issues surrounding best practice in facilitating Home Economics food practical lessons and to learn from each other, thus enabling the sharing of best pedagogical practices. The study's findings highlight a strong level of teacher enjoyment in their teaching of Home Economics Food Practical classes in both NI and ROI. The findings also revealed that the teachers experienced similar challenges, regardless of their location. A key challenge was the issue of time paucity which impacted on pedagogical practices. Other challenges which came to the fore included a decline in learning of life skills in the home and in particular practical culinary skills, and the issue of food poverty which impacted on recipe selection and modification in instances where ingredients were not provided by schools. Consequently, it could be argued that the remit of Home Economics as a mission-oriented field which seeks to apply learning to issues experienced in everyday life has never been so crucial for families across the island as it is today.

**It has been highlighted (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations [FAO], 2019) that school-based food and nutrition education is a key strategy for improving the diets and wellbeing of school children. Lavelle et al. (2016) posits that learning cooking skills during childhood or adolescence is linked to better cooking habits, more positive attitudes toward cooking, and improved diet quality in adulthood. Home Economics classes, within which food and nutrition education is a key focus, are widely regarded as important in educating young people in the key life skill of preparing food for themselves and their families (Lichenstein & Ludwig, 2010; McCloat & Caraher, 2016; McCloat et al., 2017).**

On the Island of Ireland (IOI), that food education in secondary (post-primary) schools sits firmly within home economics is viewed as a benefit (McCloat and Caraher 2020a). They argue that ‘the pedagogical approach utilised in Home Economics education in both the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland (NI) facilitates the subject to play a key role in developing practical and theoretical food competencies in young people’ (p.8).

It is well established that what teachers do in the classroom directly impacts students’ learning (Kolb, 2015). Post-primary Home Economics (HE) teachers on the IOI teach practical food lessons which are an integral element of this second-level subject. The intent is that practical food lessons will integrate knowledge and skills in a meaningful way, in keeping with the remit of Home Economics as a mission-oriented field which seeks to apply learning to issues experienced in everyday life (Smith, 2017).

Due to the dearth of information pertaining to HE teachers’ experiences of executing practical food lessons, this project aimed to explore teachers’ perspectives and experiences on strengthening the divide between nutrition theory and practical culinary skills to ensure best practice in teaching practical food lessons on the IOI.

**Therefore, taking an island of Ireland perspective, this collaborative research project aimed to:**

- **Ascertain the perceptions and experiences of Home Economics teachers on their execution of food practical lessons at Junior Cycle and Key Stage 4.**
- **Provide a forum for practising Home Economics teachers to share experiences of conducting practical food lessons with a view to identifying the challenges of combining nutrition theory and culinary skills in a meaningful way.**
- **Afford Home Economics teachers the opportunity to debate issues surrounding best practice in facilitating HE food practical lessons and to learn from each other, thus facilitating the sharing of best pedagogical practices.**

This study adds an IOI perspective to the growing body of work which addresses international best practice in teaching and learning in HE.

# Section 2: Literature Review

## 2.1 Background

**In the common perception and understanding of HE, food education tends to be a central feature (Pendergast, 2021). It is well-established that food education is more effective when practical actions, including cooking skills are incorporated into education programmes, rather than just theory alone (Hawkes et al., 2015).**

At post-primary level, the subject HE, particularly the practical food studies element, affords students multiple opportunities to engage in experiential learning. Kolb's experiential learning cycle is one of the most cited models of experiential learning theory. The tenet of this theory has life experience as an essential core element of the learning process (Morris, 2019) and because HE is a discipline that focuses on everyday life skills, it is not surprising that this theory is used by many teachers to scaffold student learning in a practical food lesson.

Delving deeper, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, articulated originally by David Kolb in 1984, famously posits that knowledge is not simply absorbed; rather, it is actively forged through the transformation of experience. Kolb suggests that this process unfolds through a four-stage cycle: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation, and Active Experimentation (Kolb, 1984). In HE and in particular in practical food lessons, students typically engage in the Concrete Experience as they have the opportunity to prepare dishes, prepare ingredients, and operate kitchen equipment. This direct, hands-on approach forms the foundational step. What follows is often Reflective Observation, where students are prompted to critically consider what happened during the practical session. This might involve conducting a sensory analysis, or evaluating their time plan, or identifying any errors or successes in their culinary skills or techniques. This step is frequently facilitated through guided debriefs by the class teacher or through peer discussion (Lehrer, 2024).

The insights gained from reflection then transition into Abstract Conceptualisation. At this stage, students make the connection between their practical experiences and the underlying theory, such as nutrition and food science,

food safety guidelines, or culinary techniques. Finally, in Active Experimentation, students apply these new understandings to future practical tasks. They might alter an ingredient ratio to observe the outcome or perhaps experiment with different cooking methods to achieve a desired result or modify a recipe to meet a certain nutritional requirement, thereby testing their hypotheses and modifying approaches based on prior learning (Kolb, 1984). The core emphasis on hands on engagement and structured reflection as highlighted in Kolb's cycle undeniably remains relevant within HE. This cycle not only fosters the development of essential life skills but also cultivates critical thinking, problem solving, and adaptability. This highlights the efficacy of experiential learning in deepening understanding and enhancing practical competencies (Murakami & Lehrer, 2022). The inherent practical and real-world nature of HE, therefore, makes it an ideal environment for applying Kolb's cycle, ensuring learning is deeply embedded in meaningful, lived experiences rather than remaining merely theoretical.

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## 2.2 Home Economics in the Northern Ireland Post-Primary Curriculum

### 2.2.1 Key Stage 3

In NI, HE is established as a statutory component of the Key Stage 3 curriculum (ages 11-14). As outlined by Learning for Life and Work (CCEA, 2017a), HE at this stage consists of three key concepts: Healthy Eating, Home and Family Life, and Independent Living. Practical cookery, a core element of the subject, ensures students gain hands on experience in safe and hygienic food preparation and cooking, giving young people the ability to make informed food choices and develop essential life skills (CCEA, 2017b).

### 2.2.2 Key Stage 4

For students aged 14-16 (Key Stage 4), a choice exists to continue their studies in HE, with Food and Nutrition being a prominent option offered by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA, 2016). This particular pathway serves to extend Key Stage 3

learning, further integrating and developing subject content with practical skills (Baird, 2010). GCSE Food and Nutrition itself comprises two key components: Component 1 (Food and Nutrition), assessed through a 2-hour exam at the end of the course and Component 2 (Practical Food and Nutrition) assessed through a controlled assessment task, which requires students to undertake research in relation to a specific topic, with each assessment having equal weighting (McCloat and Caraher, 2020a).

The GCSE Food and Nutrition specification is designed to equip learners with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills essential for understanding food and nutrition. Key features of the specification include food provenance, food production and processing, macronutrients and micronutrients, nutritional and dietary needs, priority health issues, food safety and being an effective consumer when shopping for food (CCEA, 2016).

A pivotal feature of the specification is its strong emphasis on the progressive development of practical cookery skills. Throughout the course, students will have the opportunity to develop their knowledge, understanding and skills in food preparation, cooking and presentation skills.

The course presents opportunities to demonstrate planning skills through the creation of ingredient and equipment list, costing recipes and devising time plans. Technical skills will also be acquired through the use of a range of kitchen equipment, cooker management and using a range of cooking methods. Food preparation skills will be progressed with students having to develop higher level skills including, knife skills for meat, fish and alternatives, making soups and sauces, making and shaping dough, using raising agents and setting a mixture. Students will also be encouraged to think creatively on how to present and serve dishes through the use of garnishes and decoration. The demonstration of food preparation, cooking and presentation skills is assessed through Component 2 (Practical Food and Nutrition), where students are presented with a specific task title

and they must research and justify a suitable 3 course meal and then plan, prepare and cook and evaluate the meal. The design of this assessment ensures that students are not merely tested on theoretical knowledge but, crucially, on their ability to use and execute a range of skills and equipment, handle food safely and hygienically and use their presentation skills to present the dishes (CCEA, 2016). Ultimately, successful completion of GCSE Food and Nutrition prepares students effectively for further study and equips them with practical life skills, fostering greater independence.

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## 2.3 Home Economics in the Republic of Ireland Post-Primary Curriculum

**In the ROI, HE is an optional subject for both lower (Junior Cycle) and upper (Senior Cycle) secondary education.**

### 2.3.1 Junior Cycle

A new Specification for Junior Cycle Home Economics (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2017) was introduced in all schools in September 2018. Junior Cycle HE is studied by lower secondary students (aged 12-15) over three years and is designed to be taught for a minimum of 200 timetabled hours of study. The broad aim for HE set out in the Specification is:

*'...to develop students' knowledge, attitudes, understanding, skills and values to achieve optimal, healthy and sustainable living for every person as an individual, and as a member of families and society' (DES, 2017, p.5).*

The Specification is made up of three strands: Food, Health and Culinary Skills, Responsible Family Living, and Textiles and Craft. The first strand: Food, Health and Culinary Skills focuses on developing a 'healthy, sustainable attitude and positive relationship with food through practical experiential learning' (DES, 2017, p. 10). Strand two: Responsible Family Living 'enables students to explore, from a systems perspective, responsible

family living' and 'students develop an understanding of the different forms and role of families as the core social unit' (p.11). Finally, the third strand: Textiles and Craft 'focuses on developing students' textile skills, knowledge and creativity' and 'practical textile and craft skills are integral to this strand' (p. 11).

Learning outcomes are set out for each strand separately; however, the curriculum specification emphasises that this should not be taken to imply that the strands are to be studied in isolation. The intent is that students' engagement and learning are optimised by a 'fully integrated experience of learning in HE' (p.11), thus, the outcomes for each of the three strands are grouped by reference to four elements, namely: individual and family empowerment; health and wellbeing; sustainable and responsible living and consumer competence.

As this research study focuses on teachers' classroom practices around conducting practical food lessons, further detail on strand 1 of the specification is warranted. Food, Health and Culinary Skills requires students to apply their knowledge and understanding of nutrition, diet and health principles to make informed decisions which will positively impact their health and wellbeing as well as that of their families. This first strand aims to develop students' food, health, and culinary skills through hands-on learning. The intent is that students 'are enabled to develop a healthy, sustainable attitude and positive relationship with food through practical experiential learning' (DES, 2017, p.15). The specification goes on to emphasise that the 'application of practical food and health literacy skills is integral to this strand' and outline the aspects included, namely: menu planning; shopping; cooking; health and safety food skills; portion control; reading food labels; dietary analysis; costing; sensory analysis; and food waste.

Assessment of junior cycle HE comprises two parts, with each contributing 50% to the final grade. The first is a 90-minute practical cookery exam, which is externally assessed by an examiner appointed by the State Examinations Commission (SEC). Students also sit a two-hour written examination.

## 2.4 Similarities and differences between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland regarding focus, approach to teaching, and assessment of food lessons

Curriculum specifications for both GCSE and Junior Cycle (JC) HE each emphasise the importance of nutrition education and the development of practical cooking skills. The ROI JC HE curriculum takes a wide-ranging, practical, and life-skills-based approach to the study of three stands: food, family living and textiles and craft. It weaves together food, textiles, family life, sustainability, and consumer competence through hands-on and theoretical learning, with both continuous and terminal assessments. On the other hand, it could be argued that the NI GCSE HE: Food & Nutrition, is a more academically rigorous curriculum within which there is clear focus on nutrition science, food processing, safety, and a strong emphasis on the development of practical cookery skills.

There are similarities in the approach to teaching and learning in both curricula, for example hands-on practical cookery is central to both specifications, as is an emphasis on food hygiene, safety, and nutrition. A constructivist approach to student learning is a feature of both (Mc Cloat and Caraher, 2020a), and practical tasks are used to reinforce theoretical learning, albeit that the ROI curriculum includes textiles & craft and responsible family living along with food, health and culinary skills while the NI curriculum focuses solely on food and nutrition.

The assessment of each specification requires students to plan, prepare, cook, and evaluate food-based tasks, and in both jurisdictions, the practical examination accounts for 50% of the marks available. However, they differ in respect of the duration of the examination – the NI GCSE examination is three hours long, while the ROI JC is ninety minutes. In NI the practical examination is referred to as a 'controlled assessment' and it is internally marked by the teacher, but externally moderated; while in ROI, the examination is marked by

an external SEC-appointed examiner.

## 2.5 Theory in/to practice in Home Economics Education

The focus of HE as a discipline is to ‘achieve optimal and sustainable health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities’ (IFHE, 2008), and this underlines the approach taken to teaching and learning, including food education, by HE teachers in their classrooms (Deagon, 2021). Mc Cloat and Caraher (2020b) in an analysis of food education curriculum policy across seven countries concluded that HE is a comprehensive curriculum that combines nutrition, scientific theory, and practical cooking skills in a structured and integrated way. What differentiates home economists from others who engage in food education/instruction is that this strong philosophical basis informs the practice of HE professionals, which impacts on the both the content covered in a lesson and the approach to teaching and learning employed. Pendergast (2012, p.8) captures this nicely when she explains how HE ‘does not teach a skill for the sake of that skill, it teaches for application, it teaches informed decision making [...] it teaches evaluative and critical thinking skills, it empowers individuals - no matter what their context’. That said, employing a critical science perspective to teaching and learning in HE is not without challenges, a point which is well recognised (Wanago et al., 2024).

A common challenge faced by HE teachers globally is the issue of how to integrate theory to inform practice and skill development in a meaningful way in food lessons. The issue appears to be exacerbated by two factors: timetabling constraints, and a content-overloaded curriculum. In Norway, Bienert et al. (2021) report that teachers face time constraints, which limits their ability to cover all aspects of the curriculum, and despite acknowledging the importance of nutrition education, teachers tended to prioritise practical cooking skills over theoretical knowledge in practical food lessons. In a study which examined school food education in England following the introduction in 2014 of Cooking and Nutrition

as part of the National Curriculum for all schoolchildren aged between 5 to 14, most teachers responded that they placed ‘a significant emphasis on the development of practical skills and health and nutrition knowledge’ (Hart and Page, 2020, p. 680). However, only one third of secondary teachers reported that they had sufficient time to deliver all the content set out in the national curriculum guidelines, the upshot being that teachers tended to be selective about what they taught and how they taught it, which resulted in a reduced focus on practical cooking skills.

Bohm (2022) laments the issue of the ‘frequent mismatch between scheduled time and planned activities’ in Swedish HE classes, resulting in teachers prioritising time-consuming recipes and post-lesson classroom cleaning over the theoretical components of the broad curriculum. More recently, in Australia, Mc Manus et al. (2023) noted that teachers expressed concerns around the invisibility of practical food education within the curriculum, and how that, coupled with ‘time paucity’ impacted negatively on the development of practical cooking skills among students. Lack of time, reduced resources and overcrowded classrooms were all highlighted as factors which impacted on effective teaching of food skills in an American study (Gaston et al., 2025). ‘Hands-on learning’ (p. 8) which encompasses integration of theory to include budgeting, nutrition and time management alongside practical food preparation skills were all identified as central to successful food education; however, the teachers in this study found this a challenge.

# Section 3: Methodology

A mixed methods approach for data collection was undertaken by the research team. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2017), mixed methods research offers a comprehensive approach by combining the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research. This allows for the exploration of multiple perspectives, enhancing the depth and breadth of understanding. This research study employed the use of focus groups, surveys, and a workshop enabling triangulation of data, supporting richer interpretation, and ensuring that both subjective experiences and measurable trends were captured effectively.

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## 3.1 All-Ireland Survey

An online survey was administered via Microsoft Forms in April 2024 to a purposive sample of post-primary HE teachers in ROI and NI who were invited to share their experiences of teaching practical food lessons at lower secondary stages (aged 12-16): Junior-Cycle (ROI) and GCSE (NI). Participants were recruited through the Association of Teachers of HE (ATHE) in ROI and the School of Education, UU in NI. Using a combination of Likert-style items and open-response items, respondents were invited to indicate their lived teaching experiences of delivering the practical food element of their respective curricula. Following preliminary analysis of the survey data and identification of themes, a series of focus group interviews involving teachers from NI and ROI were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of how food practical lessons are structured, resourced, and experienced across both jurisdictions.

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## 3.2 Focus groups

The qualitative aspect for the data collection fieldwork consisted of two online focus groups via MS TEAMS and one face-to-face focus group, all of which employed purposive sampling. The participants were recruited with the assistance of ATHE in the South and the School of Education, UU for the North. Teachers attending the in-person focus group in Drumshanbo were also asked to bring a resource/s that they found useful in their teaching of practical food classes.

## 3.3 Full day CPD on Methodologies for Practical classes

At a full day in person continuous professional development (CPD) workshop in Sligo, an exemplary food practical lesson was led and facilitated by a food teacher and HE expert from the Food Teachers Centre UK. The Food Teachers Centre were invited by the research team to facilitate the workshop as it is a well-established platform for post primary teachers in the UK to exchange best practice, give advice and support to teachers, answering practical concerns and keeping them abreast of the latest curriculum changes. They have extensive experience in the delivery of both in-person and online CPD for HE teachers. Twenty-two teachers from across both jurisdictions participated in a hands-on practical food lesson and were paired NI/ROI. The format of the workshop provided an opportunity for teachers to work together collaboratively on a hands-on practical activity to prepare pasta from scratch and cook a vegan meal using it.

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## 3.4 Data Analysis

For the compilation of the questionnaire results all data was imported into Microsoft Excel to aid analysis and intercoder comparison. With regard to the qualitative analysis, following transcription of the focus group data, thematic analysis was used to identify themes.

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## 3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee at University of Ulster and the ATU IREC committee was also notified of the study and this ensured that the necessary ethical permissions were covered for the data collection on the IOI. All participants were provided with an information sheet; they could opt in or out of the research aspect of the project. Participation in the workshop was not dependent on their involvement in the research aspect of the project. All participants were over 18 and were not vulnerable groups or children, and as the data being collected was not sensitive, it was not envisaged that there were any ethical issues of concern. The study adhered to the guiding principles of general data protection regulations (GDPR) in both jurisdictions.

# Section 4: Findings

## 4.1 Survey of teachers

### Participant Profile

A total of 145 HE teachers completed the survey with respondents spread across both jurisdictions, ROI (63%, n= 87), NI (37%, n=52) which allowed insights from teachers across the island of Ireland to be captured.

### Jurisdiction in which respondents were teaching

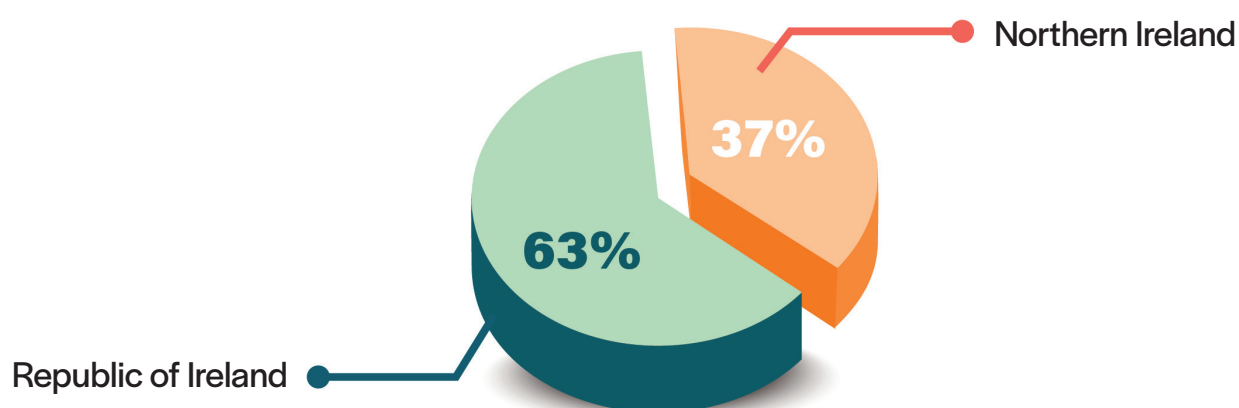


Figure 1: Proportion of teachers teaching in Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland (NI)

Respondents were generally experienced educators, and the largest proportion of respondents had between 11 and 20 years of experience (26%), followed by those with 21–30 years (19%). In contrast, only 15% were early career teachers (0–4 years), and fewer than 1% were trainees.

Just under a half of teachers were members of a subject association. Membership of subject associations showed a regional disparity, with 69% of respondents from ROI reporting to being a member of a subject association, compared to only 10% in NI. The Association of Teachers of HE (ATHE) was the most common association which teachers were affiliated to.

## Timetabling of Practical Lessons

When asked how long HE lessons were allocated, lessons in ROI were scheduled for between 127–146 minutes per week across first to third year, with an average of 49–55 minutes allocated specifically for food practical lessons. In NI, HE lessons in year eleven and year twelve averaged 159–160 minutes weekly, with practical lesson times averaging 64 and 45 minutes respectively.

Junior Certificate	Average length of practical lesson	Key Stage 4	Average length of practical lesson
Year 1	49.1 minutes	Year 11	64.5 minutes
Year 2	50.3 minutes	Year 12	45.3 minutes
Year 3	55.4 minutes		

*Table 1: A comparison of the time allocated to practical cookery lessons at Junior Certificate level (ROI) and Key Stage 4 (NI)*

A notable finding was that in NI, the average weekly time allocated to practical food lessons declines from 64.5 minutes in Year 11 to 45.3 minutes in Year 12, representing a reduction of nearly 30%. The opposite was the case in ROI, where there was a gradual increase in time allocation for practical food lessons as students progressed through the Junior Cycle, rising by 6.3 minutes from 1st to 3rd Year.

## Sufficiency of Time for Practical Lessons

Most teachers (71%) reported that the time allocated for food practical classes was insufficient. This concern was consistent across both jurisdictions, with many respondents citing constraints such as class duration, setup and cleanup time, and the challenge of balancing practical activities with theoretical knowledge. Several teachers highlighted how limited time restricts the ability to effectively teach and assess core practical skills, with one teacher noting:

*“Pupils don’t have sufficient time to develop practical cookery skills competently.” (T150)*

Another teacher raised concerns about the knock-on effects for learning quality:

*“Under pressure for time with 58-minute classes. Integrated theory and evaluations are impacted.” (T68)*

## Demonstration Practices

Demonstrations were used by 85% of respondents, with demonstrations typically focusing on techniques including knife skills, sauces, and handling raw meat.

Examples of demonstrations included:

*“chopping, grating, juicing, marinading, mashing, melting, peeling, proving, sieving, tenderising, trimming, and zesting.” (T6)*

*“Key skills e.g. creaming method, oven safety, presentation and garnish of finished product.” (T30)*

Respondents consistently cited demonstrations as beneficial for setting standards, and for ensuring consistency in task execution.

Teachers noted:

*“Focuses class, allows for integration of theory, opportunity for differentiation and formative assessment.” (T8)*

*“Modelling is an essential part of learning a skill. If a student cannot see, observe and ask questions about the task then it is a pointless exercise.” (T31)*

Another teacher emphasised the role of demonstrations in reducing confusion and supporting all learners:

*“To break down steps easily for pupils to follow and to ensure pupils understand. Helps to scaffold tasks.” (T49)*

## Integration of Nutrition and Food Science Theory

When asked whether they integrated nutrition and food science theory into their practical food lessons, most teachers responded affirmatively:

### Do you always integrate nutrition/food science theory into the food practical class?

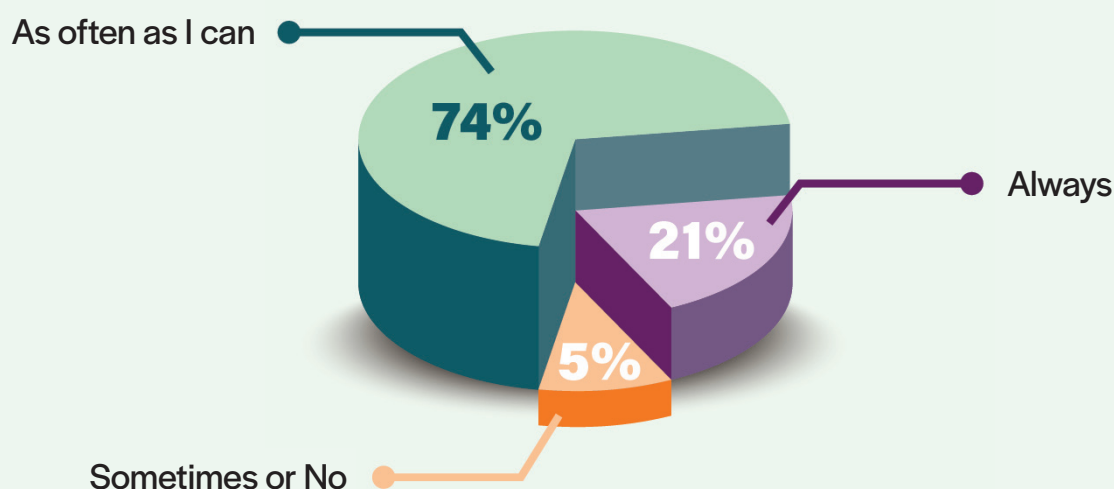


Figure 2: How often teachers integrate nutrition or food science theory into practical cookery classes.

Teachers offered a range of explanations that highlight their approaches and the challenges they face. Many stressed the pedagogical value of integration, for example:

*“It is important to link learning, it helps students to understand theory better.”*  
(T123)

*“To ensure pupils view the subject holistically and not as 2 separate entities.”*  
(T53)

However, some of the respondents noted barriers, particularly related to limited lesson time, with one teacher stating:

*“Time bound to complete practical. Focus often on practical skills.”* (T27)

## Ingredient Provision

Survey responses reveal a diverse range of approaches to ingredient provision. Schools providing ingredients accounted for 37% (n=51), while 47% (n=65) required students to bring them, and 16% (n=23) reported a mixed approach.

### Are students required to buy their own ingredients or does the school provide them?

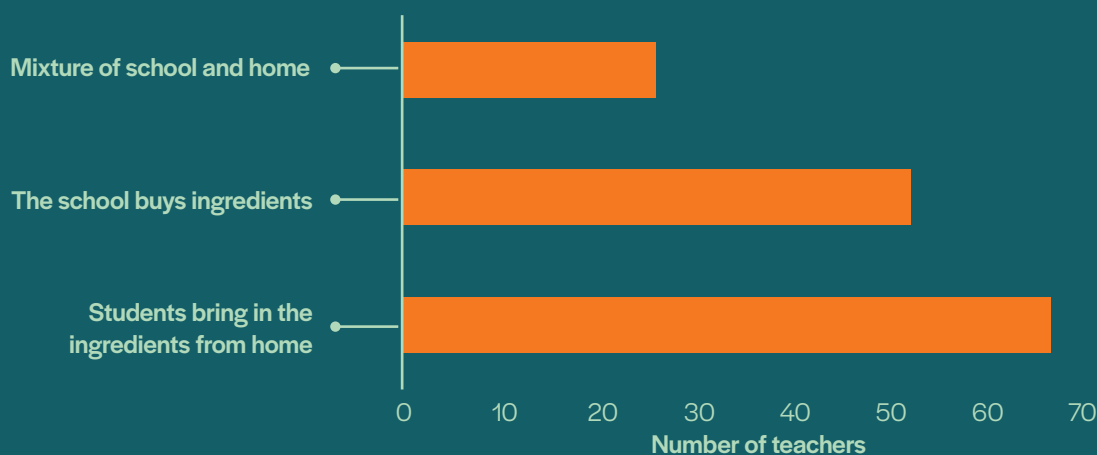


Figure 3: How ingredients are supplied for practical cookery lessons.

A stark contrast exists between NI and ROI in terms of who supplies ingredients for food practical lessons. In NI, ingredient provision is predominantly handled by schools (83%), whereas in ROI, the majority of teachers (70%) rely on students to bring ingredients from home.

## Use of Pre-Weighed and Pre-Chopped Ingredients

For those students that were required to bring in their own ingredients, teachers often reported that students brought pre-weighed ingredients to save time. Others noted, that whilst it was a requirement, many pupils did not have access to scales at home.

However, some teachers also noted the downside, one teacher highlighted that:

*“Yes - although I think this is taking away from a key skill.” (T10)*

There was a stronger consensus against students chopping ingredients in advance of practical lessons. Teachers discouraged this practice, seeing it as a lost opportunity for students to develop basic knife and preparation skills.

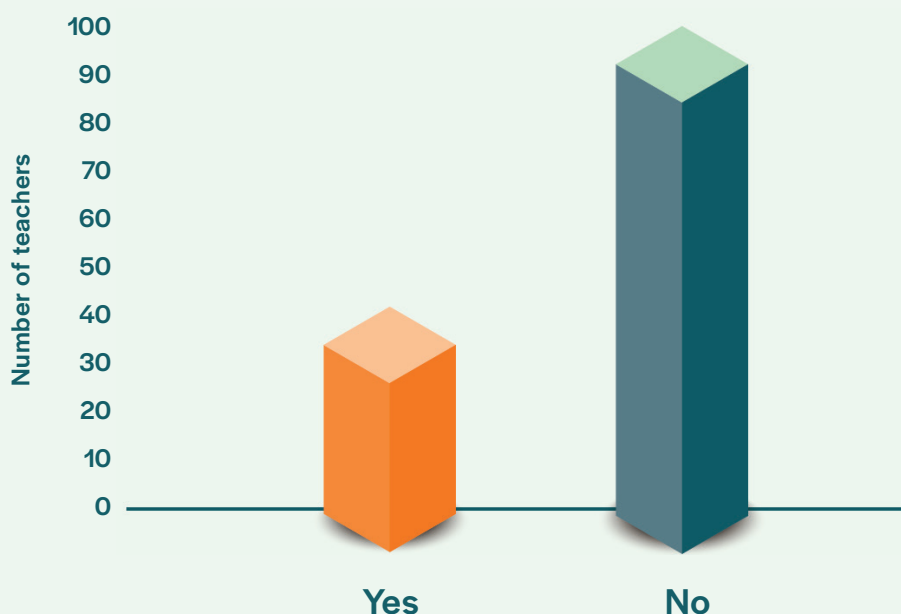
*“No, as I want to see students doing these things themselves to give feedback on skills.” (T58)*

*“No - teaching knife skills is part of the practical.” (T108)*

## Technician Support

Of the valid responses, 67% of respondents (n=93) do not have technician support.

### Do you have a HE Technician in your school?



A notable contrast emerged between ROI and NI. In NI, 89% of respondents reported having a technician, whereas in ROI, 100% of respondents reported having no technician support.

Those teachers in NI who had access to a technician described the technical support as critical to the functioning of practical classes, as they performed a wide range of safety and preparatory tasks, including weighing and setting out ingredients, managing orders and stock rotation and catering for students with allergies or dietary needs.

Teachers noted the following roles:

*“Set up practical lessons - shopping for ingredients, premeasurement of some ingredients, manage the budget for ingredients. Assist with students if required.” (T44)*

*“Vital support. Weighing out/part cooking if necessary. Setting up trolley for all classes. Ordering in bulk. Maintaining hygiene.” (T97)*

## Challenges in Teaching Practical Lessons

A range of challenges which impact the effective delivery of food practical lessons across both jurisdictions emerged from the survey results, with time appearing as the main challenge.

Other challenges noted include:

- **Class size and student diversity**
- **Lack of technician support**
- **Inconsistent access to ingredients**
- **Limited storage and outdated facilities.**

Some of the comments noted by teachers include:

*“Lack of prep time with back-to-back practical classes and cleaning the kitchen suitable for the next class. Lack of basic skills, limited exposure to home cooking / baking.” (T25)*

*“No support. Rising cost of ingredients. Limited budget to purchase equipment.” (T27)*

*“Growing number of allergies and intolerances, rising food costs, time restrictions.” (T47)*

## Teacher Enjoyment

The vast majority (87%) of teachers responded positively when asked if they enjoyed practical food lessons. Teachers described food practical lessons as engaging, rewarding, and impactful in helping students build real life skills. Teachers who enjoy practical lessons cited the following benefits:

*“Students love practical classes so they are enjoyable to teach and it is always satisfying as a teacher to see students progress and become more confident in their cooking skills with more practice.” (T58)*

*“Can see the children blossom and develop skills, all students achieve and experience success, worthwhile skill and knowledge.” (T101)*

While overall sentiment was positive, some teachers expressed more measured views. Key concerns included; excessive pressure due to time constraints and managing health and safety, with a teacher highlighting;

*“I used to but now because of time constraints it is far less enjoyable.” (T11)*

## Supporting Teachers

Teachers across both jurisdictions identified a range of supports that would enhance the quality and feasibility of teaching food practical lessons. The following were suggested supports; additional time and timetabling flexibility, technician support, access to high quality resources, funding for ingredients and equipment and curriculum aligned planning materials. Specific suggestions from respondents included:

*“Budget friendly recipes, teacher skill development workshops.” (T7)*

*“A technician. Cookery classes focusing on key skills to help build confidence, up-skill teachers.” (T27)*

*“Tried and tested recipes showing higher level skills within a time frame.” (T42)*

*“Videos of each skill. Videos making the recipes that students can watch before cooking.” (T57)*

In summary, the survey findings highlight a complex picture of food practical lessons across the IOI. Time limitations emerged as a prevalent issue, where compressed class time and increased class sizes restrict the full delivery of practical lessons and hinder theory integration. Alongside these pressures, regional differences in resource provision were evident, while NI schools often benefit from technician support and ingredients sourced in school, counterparts in ROI face a more fragmented model, placing additional burdens on teachers and students alike.

Despite these systemic challenges, teachers across both jurisdictions demonstrate strong professional commitment, routinely using demonstrations to scaffold learning and striving to integrate theoretical concepts where possible. Their enjoyment of practical teaching and belief in its educational value remain high, underscoring the subject’s relevance in equipping students with essential life skills.

### 4.2 Cross-Border Focus Group Interviews with Teachers and Full day CPD workshop

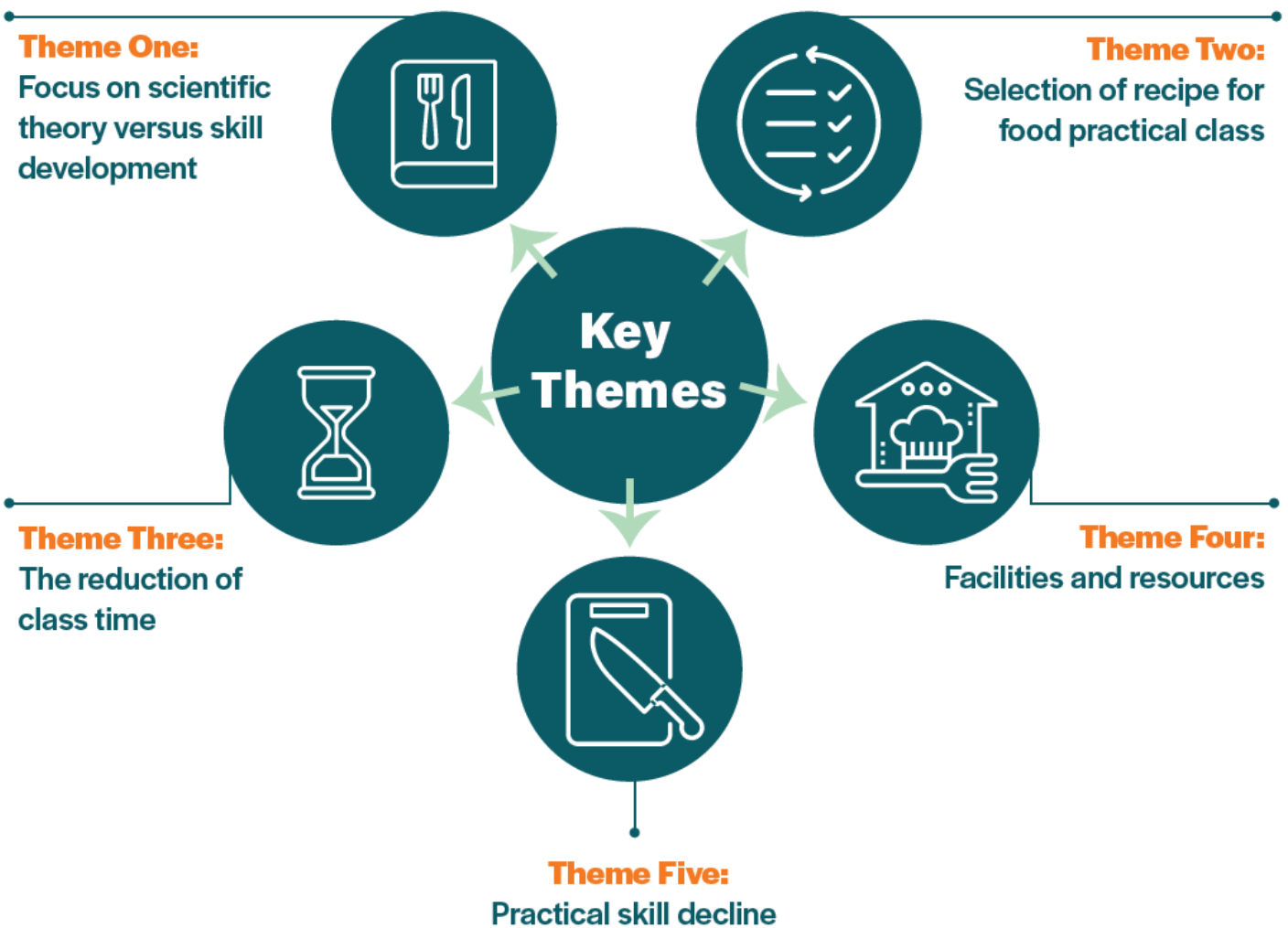
A breakdown of teacher participant numbers is provided in the following table below.

Date	Total	NI	ROI
May 2024 (In person)	8	3	5
October 2024 (online)	8	4	4
October 2024 (online)	7	3	4
April 2025 (CPD Day)	22	14	8

## 4.2 Cross-Border Focus Group Interviews with Teachers and Full day CPD workshop (Cont'd)

It is interesting to note that none of the teachers in the focus groups or the CPD workshop day had ever engaged with HE teachers from a different jurisdiction previously, so this was a new experience for all participants, which is surprising considering our proximity and the similarities of both curricula.

The following themes emerged from the three focus group sessions;



### Theme One: Focus on scientific theory versus skill development

It was very evident across both jurisdictions that the teaching of practical food culinary skills has a higher priority for teachers in their lesson planning than integrating scientific theory into the practical lesson. The main reason for this is the high proportion of marks awarded to skills in both the controlled assessment (NI) and practical examination (ROI).



*“The skills are top priority because of the Junior Cert. The skills are 30 marks.” (ROI 1)*

## Theme One: Focus on scientific theory versus skill development (Cont'd)



*“There’s 120 marks for the GCSE and 40 of those are for the skill based practical exam.”*

*“In Key Stage 3, so the junior cycle, we’ll have built up the chopping, the knife skills, all of those and then it gets to GCSE, we’ll do maybe pastry making, we’ll do bread making, we’re doing the sauce making. So we’ll take a skill, you know, for each lesson because the practicals, although we don’t have a lot of practicals because it’s very course content heavy, I’m trying to make sure they have those key skills because that’s what their 3 hour practical exam is going to be based on. They have to have those skills, yeah.” (NI 2)*

It was also apparent that after the integration of practical culinary skills within the lesson plan, health and safety/ food hygiene aspects were next on the priority list of learning intentions as again there are marks assigned to both in the formal practical assessment.

*“After the skills I would go around the room and focus on hygiene and safety as that another big thing in a practical lesson.” (ROI 4)*

*“Food hygiene is actually a skill now the students need to learn, like how to wash dishes in a sink as they all have dishwashers at home or the difference between a tea towel and a dish cloth.” (NI 6)*

When it comes to the integration of scientific theory into the practical food lesson the teachers in all instances tried to match the practical with a theory topic they were covering at the same time where possible.

*“We now have 58-minute classes. In the past we had 80-minute classes, and it was much easier to integrate theory when the classes were longer. I try to incorporate a demonstrate and this is where I get in some theory but it’s very fast as you are getting them to make the dishes, get wash up done and everything out of the oven and get the place ready for the next crew coming in.” (ROI 4)*

*“We also have 80-minute classes, so I teach the theory in a class before the practical class and just revise the theory quickly during the practical while the students are making the dish.” (NI 3)*

## Theme Two: Selection of recipe for food practical class



In both jurisdictions there has been a move away from allowing the students to select the recipe they are going to prepare in the food practical lesson. There are many justifications for this shift based on reduced class time allocation, skill competency progression, ingredient cost, available equipment and pre-established outcome of a tried and tested recipe.

In many instances teachers have created their own bank of tried and tested recipes which will meet all the assessment criteria in terms of skill and creativity showcasing for the students to access.

*“We would tell them in advance what they’re making and actually we’ve all our recipes up in Google classroom.” (NI 6)*

*“We still have them in booklets and the students can write notes on the recipe but we the teachers decide on the recipe as a HE department at the beginning of the year when doing our schemes of work.” (NI 4)*

*“Same with me, I print the recipe for them, and I get them to stick it into a booklet, and they will write their evaluation of the dish underneath and that way I have proof for an HE inspector that this was cooked.” (ROI 5)*

*“The recipe has to be something they are going to be able to do again for the exam so that’s why it’s important that I selected them and not the students as they don’t really think about the marks.” (ROI 10)*

The cost of the ingredients was also a consideration for the teacher in the recipe selection.

*“At the parent/teacher meeting now, and I was quite surprised a few mentioned the food cost issue, which was an eye-opening thing to me, I had a parent sitting in front of me, she’s a nurse and he’s a teacher and the child was making chicken goujons, wedges and coleslaw, and she said to me, ‘Do you realise the price of chicken at the moment?’ you know, and I was feeling so bad and like those are middle income people like. They’re not, you know.” (ROI 2)*

*“I find myself swapping out ingredients in a recipe for cheaper ones to cut out down on cost for the parents You know I might replace chicken fillets with oyster cut thighs or sea food mix instead of a cut of fish. And that can mitigate the level of skill of students as they are not filleting or coating as a result perhaps.” (ROI 1)*

*“100 % - food poverty is an issue for us.” (NI 3)*

*“Because our exam is 3 hours and we don’t have 3-hour classes the students have to practice a lot at home and that’s very costly for the parents as well.” (NI 1)*

*“Depending on the kids you have in the class, some of them you’ll find don’t bring in ingredients when they have to because they can’t afford it.” (NI 6)*

### Theme Three: The reduction of class time



In the ROI there is a move amongst many post-primary schools to timetable all classes for a duration of one hour instead of 40 minutes for theory and 80 minutes for practical classes. This reduced time allocation for practical classes has clearly impacted on the amount of content to be taught in a food practical lesson. The NI teachers all had 80 minutes for their practical classes.

*“We encourage them to weigh out at home now as we don’t have time in class.” (ROI 4)*

*“The lessons are very tight now. I would always call them to do demos, you know, different to ages and we’re talking about the actual ingredients as opposed to the nutritional content of them and just given them a bit of background towards that and then, quite often, our practicals are linked to maybe a topic that we’re studying and maybe it’s not nutrition based and therefore, the discussion doesn’t lend to it. But what we tend to do for maybe homework activities and built into their student booklets; we do have an evaluation section that talks about evaluating the recipe.” (NI 2)*

### Theme Four: Facilities and resources



The teachers in NI reported better facilities and resources for practical class execution. For instance, a fully fitted resource room with laundry facilities was common, as too were the services of a HE technician. Their role is to set up the practical classes for the HE teacher and often assists the students during the actual food practical class.

*“Usually, well like most set ups, there’s like 2 home ec rooms. There’s a resource room in the middle where you keep resources you need. Then we have a prep, a technician’s prep area. So, we are not doing like all the laundry afterwards.” (NI 2)*

*“For resources we currently have only one kitchen in our school and there are 4 HE teachers so we are having huge problems trying to plan out who can cook and when they can cook. (ROI 2)*

*“The technicians are often students from Ulster University who want to become a HE teacher and they bring so much to the classes for example they often do demonstrations in the class or assist the pupils with skill development during the practical classes or even run cookery clubs in the school.” (NI 5)*

While the HE technician is obviously a huge asset to any HE department in a school in NI, a role that is not available to HE teachers in the ROI, there is a bigger issue in NI which was highlighted by the teachers, namely, non-specialists teaching the subject.

*“In the school where I am there are two of us and it’s a big school of 1600 students. So, there are five non specialist taking junior key stage 3 so the two of us that are qualified are operating off three sites and we are constantly doing the practical’s because the non-specialist are taking the theory. Shortage of teachers in the North has proven to be a major problem.” (NI 5)*

## Theme Five: Practical skill decline



In both jurisdictions the teachers spoke passionately about the decline of practical life skills in particularly culinary skills.

*“I have found over the last few years the culinary skills and the students’ level of independence have declined, and they need more scaffolding in comparison to maybe a few years ago.” (NI 1)*

*“The students are doing less hands on cookery at home, so they get things handed to them, so they are coming into school with very little skill and very little opportunity to practice the skills learned in school at home.” (ROI 4)*

In summary, the focus group findings concur with the survey results by painting a multifaceted picture of the nature of food practical lessons across the IOI. Time limitations, regional disparities in resource and facilities provision, non-specialists teaching HE were just a few of the challenges that were further reiterated by the teachers. However, one of the notable findings of the qualitative data collection was the teachers’ commentary on the decline of life skills evident amongst their students, which was of concern.

### 4.3 Workshop April 2025

A full day in person workshop took place in ATU St Angelas in April 2025. Twenty-two teachers took part: 14 from NI and 8 from the ROI. This was a practical food kitchen-based workshop where HE teachers from North and South got the opportunity to cook alongside each other and share and exchange professional opinion of HE issues such as curriculum content and assessment for and of learning in addition to facilitating teacher networking, resource sharing and collaboration.

## Section 5: Discussion

Regardless of jurisdiction, this research study highlights a strong level of teacher enjoyment in their teaching of HE Food Practical classes, a feature which has been reported elsewhere as being important for teachers' self-efficacy (Nanayakkara et al., 2024). Maintaining enjoyment as a teacher has been found to have a positive outcome on student learning (Frenzel et al., 2018) which is a welcome finding, considering the challenges faced by teachers and the pressure of a grade focussed examination system in both jurisdictions.

Previous work by Mc Cloat and Caraher (2020c) with teachers in ROI highlighted how teachers employed a constructivist approach to teaching and learning in their HE classrooms and viewed practical hands-on learning by students as central to effective learning. The findings of this study corroborate this and highlights that this view is shared by HE colleagues in NI.

Given the strong emphasis on the acquisition of skills in both curriculum specifications, along with the fact that a practical food preparation examination accounts for half of the assessment marks in both cases, it is not surprising that the teachers in this study prioritised food preparation skills during practical food lessons. Food skills are widely regarded by HE teachers as being central to their classroom practice (Fordyce-Voorham, 2017; Beinert et al., 2021). In the execution of practical food lessons, time management and finishing on time has been identified as a key priority (Lindblom et al., 2016). Similar to findings reported by Beinert et al. (2021) and Hart & Page (2020), teachers in this study identified time as a key challenge in planning and conducting practical food lessons. School timetabling policies beyond the control of teachers had a significant impact in both ROI and NI. Unlike some other countries where the curriculum guidelines specify minutes per lesson (Nanayakkara et al., 2024), in both ROI and NI, it is a matter for school administrators to allocate times for all subjects. However, there is a minimum time allocation of 200 hours (over 3 years) for JC HE set out in the JC HE Specification (DES, 2017) and 120 hours (over 2 years) in the GCSE HE: Food and Nutrition Specification (CCEA,

2017), so the annual allocation of hours for HE is similar in both jurisdictions, with ROI being slightly higher.

The central emphasis of the field of HE is the practical problems of individuals and families in their everyday lives. Three systems of action have been identified as the basis for solving such problems: instrumental/technical action, communicative/practical action and critical/emancipatory action (Brown and Paolucci, 1979). Instrumental/technical systems include the knowledge of 'how to' and the development of skills for providing physical and other necessities. Home Economics programmes and practitioners, including teachers, are often criticised for their dominant adoption of the technical mode (Brown, 1993; Mc Gregor et al., 2004).

Pendergast & Dewhurst (2012) contend that the integration of nutrition/food science/sustainability by teachers, while employing a social constructivist approach when teaching practical food skills is essential for moving learning beyond the technical to critical/emancipatory, thus realising the goals of HE education. In a recent study, McCloat & Caraher (2020c) found that Irish HE teachers displayed a high level of understanding of the philosophical basis of HE. The findings from this study also support this and provides insights into how that philosophy informs HE teachers' classroom practice, and the challenges they face in doing so.

Elsewhere, concerns have been expressed about unqualified/ 'out of field' teachers engaged in HE teaching (Dewhurst & Pendergast, 2008), and this emerged as an issue for NI teachers during focus group interviews, though heretofore, this has not been reported as a concern in IOI. Wood-Griffiths and Lawson (2020) in lamenting the decline availability of food teachers in England and the absence of food as an academic subject at A-level, noted that in NI, this has not been an issue, and teaching remains a popular career choice. The situation is similar in ROI, where recruitment of students to initial teacher education programmes in HE remains strong (Kelly-Blakeney et al., 2023).

The decline in learning of life skills in the home and in particular practical culinary skills was raised in all three of the focus groups sessions by the HE teachers. This is in line with the findings of Lavelle et al., (2023), which also reported a waning in opportunities for children to learn culinary skills in the home environment because of parental barriers such as time and perceived safety concerns around children conducting certain skills. Lavelle et al. (2023) highlight the fact that the skill of cooking is now widely promoted as a preventative strategy for numerous health outcomes such as mental wellness, cardiovascular disease and childhood obesity so this finding in particular is disappointing. Furthermore, the decline in the opportunity to develop culinary skills at home is likely to place even more pressure on HE teachers who are already stretched due to time constraints, as they will be required to spend more time on the basic culinary skills that once were taught at home.

One of the findings of the focus groups which was a cause of concern amongst the research team was the issue of food poverty and the specific impact of this on food practical lessons, particularly regarding recipe selection and modification. While the finding was a concern it was to be expected as the “Communicating food poverty on the island of Ireland” report published in 2024 by Safefood highlights that in the current milieu of the environmental, geopolitical and socioeconomic instability internationally, and the resulting threats to food systems, it is probable that for a significantly greater number of families across the IOI, the impact of food poverty on their everyday lives will soon become an issue. In the Safefood report, food poverty is said to occur when an individual or family does not have sufficient access to an acceptable quantity and quality of food to achieve a nutritionally adequate diet. Consequently, it could be argued that the remit of HE as a mission-oriented field which seeks to apply learning to issues experienced in everyday life has never been so crucial for families across the island as it is today.

## Section 6: Conclusion

It must be acknowledged that due to the small sample size, the findings of this research are not generalisable, however valuable learning did take place. ATU St Angelas and Ulster University have a long history as higher education providers of HE teacher education on IOI. This research project provided a supportive framework for collaborative research and professional activities in HE teacher education between the two cross-border higher education institutions. The findings from this research - which will be of interest to policy makers in both jurisdictions - points to a pressing need for targeted investment, ranging from enhanced technician access and timetabling reform to resource provision and curricular supports to ensure the continued viability and equity of practical food education across the island of Ireland.

The beneficiaries of this project were the practising HE teachers and HE teacher educators from across the IOI. The buy-in from participants and the outcomes served to simultaneously build capacity between both groups to potentially inform their future professional practice. The best learning that took place was from the in-person workshop

and focus group session, and the two online focus groups with practising post primary HE teachers. These sessions provided an open space for teachers for the first time in their careers to have honest and frank dialogue and share their experiences about pedagogical approaches, assessment issues and barriers and facilitators for effective teaching of food practical classes. Opportunities around the sharing of examples of best practice and resources between the teachers was facilitated. On a positive note, there is a clear interest in and appetite for further collaboration between HE teacher educators and teachers to engage in further all-island dialogue and exchange. Without doubt, an IOI forum that can accommodate continuing cross-border dialogue and sharing of teaching resources is worthy of further consideration and will be explored by the research team.

For the discipline of HE, this research contributes to an under-researched aspect of HE teacher practice on the IOI by examining pedagogical practices of HE teachers in executing practical food lessons.

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