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Uncovering biases: A critical discourse analysis of the British Columbia curriculum

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At the time of writing this paper Janelle was graduating from the Human Ecology and Everyday Life (HEEL) Master of Education program at the University of British Columbia. As a food studies and music teacher, her graduate research focused on curricular discourse analysis and advocating for more inclusive and social justice-based education. Janelle is exploring future directions as a community coordinator, helping families to access the resources and support they need to thrive, or a school administrator with a focus on empowering educators to guide students in realising their full potential across all subject areas.

Abstract

This paper presents a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the British Columbia (BC) Food Studies curriculum, examining its treatment of food security, social justice and cultural representation. While the curriculum includes references to food justice and Indigenous food sovereignty, these topics are often broad, supplementary or framed through a consumerist lens. Food security is particularly underemphasised and primarily discussed in relation to food safety rather than systemic inequities. Additionally, the curriculum's placement within the Applied Design, Skills, and Technology (ADST) framework reinforces a neoliberal approach, prioritising technical skills and entrepreneurship over structural food-justice education. Indigenous food traditions are acknowledged but are increasingly reduced to Canada's Food Guide (Government of Canada, 2025) at higher grade levels, limiting deeper engagement with Indigenous perspectives. This analysis highlights the need for a more justice-oriented curriculum that integrates food security as a core competency and provides clearer guidance for educators on teaching cultural sensitivity and systemic food issues.

Introduction

Analysing curriculum documents is a crucial step in understanding how educational systems frame complex social issues like food insecurity. The BC Food Studies curriculum, as part of the ADST framework, serves as a primary site where students may engage with topics related to food. However, a closer examination reveals that food security is not a clearly defined focus within the curriculum, and its treatment is largely left to individual educators' interpretations. This raises important questions about who the curriculum is designed to serve and what perspectives are prioritised in shaping students understanding of food systems, access and justice.

Food insecurity is a rapidly growing issue, both globally and locally. In Canada, 28.4%—more than one in 4—children under 18 are living in food-insecure households (PROOF, 2024). Home economics classrooms are one of the few educational spaces where food is not only discussed but also physically present, often with opportunities for students to access meals at no cost. Given this reality, food insecurity is not an abstract issue for many students; it is a lived experience. This makes it even more critical to examine how the BC Food Studies curriculum does, or does not, equip students with the knowledge and critical thinking skills to understand and navigate food insecurity in their own lives and communities.

Curriculum is never neutral; it reflects the cultural, social and political forces that shape its development (Fairclough, 1995; McGregor, 2004). The ways in which food are discussed within educational guidelines reveal underlying assumptions about what knowledge is valued and whose experiences are centred. In the case of BC's Food Studies (2020) curriculum, the emphasis

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remains on technical food skills and consumer-based approaches, often at the expense of deeper engagement with systemic issues such as food insecurity. This paper critically examines the curriculum to uncover explicit content, implicit messages and notable omissions related to food security. Through this analysis, the dominant narratives that shape home economics education in BC are explored, questioning whether they align with the lived realities of students or reinforce a limited, depoliticised understanding of food systems.

Identifying the gaps in how food insecurity is addressed, or overlooked, highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach to home economics education, one that moves beyond skill acquisition and engages with equity, sustainability and social justice. A curricular discourse analysis provides insight into how existing structures shape what is taught, ultimately influencing how students conceptualise food security and their roles within broader food systems. Understanding these curricular limitations is a necessary step toward reimagining home economics education in ways that are more inclusive, critical and responsive to contemporary social challenges.

Through this analysis, the dominant narratives that shape home economics education in BC are explored

Methods

The terms used in Table 1 were used to guide the CDA and to compare findings. Each of these terms is described below.

Each of the headings indicate a frame of analysis:

- *Key terms and framing (textual):* documents how critical terms like 'food security', 'equity' and 'access' are presented; notes tone, frequency, inclusivity and any implicit messages within the curriculum text
- *Alignment with societal discourses (discursive practice):* evaluates how curriculum content reflects or challenges dominant narratives (for example, neoliberalism, sustainability, equity); includes interpretation of the intended discourse and potential misalignments with contemporary social issues
- *Addressing local and cultural contexts (socio-cultural):* analyses whether the curriculum integrates considerations of BC's diverse cultural and socioeconomic landscape, including local food systems and systemic inequities
- *Posner's curriculum perspectives (cultural, experiential, cognitive)* (Posner, 2004)*:*
  - » *Cultural:* captures elements of heritage and history in the curriculum related to food systems and food insecurity
  - » *Experiential:* assesses opportunities for hands-on learning or experiential engagement with food security topics
  - » *Cognitive:* determines whether critical thinking and problem-solving skills about equity and food systems are fostered
- *Observations and gaps:* summarises key findings, noting strengths, areas for improvement and omissions in the curriculum's approach to food security education

Key findings

Critical discourse analysis of the British Columbia Food Studies curriculum

The BC Food Studies curriculum presents a foundation that leans toward social justice education, incorporating themes of ethics, environmental concerns and cultural awareness (BCME, 2020). However, a closer analysis reveals key gaps that limit its effectiveness in fostering a critical understanding of food insecurity and systemic inequities. While the curriculum introduces concepts such as food justice, Indigenous food sovereignty and ethical food systems, these discussions often remain broad and non-specific, missing opportunities to engage deeply with BC's local food realities. Additionally, the curriculum's framing heavily emphasises consumer responsibility, encouraging ethical purchasing and individual decision-making, rather than addressing the structural barriers that shape food access and security. This analysis within Table 2 highlights both the strengths and limitations of the curriculum, identifying areas where a sharper, more justice-oriented lens could enhance its impact.

Table 1. Headings for the critical discourse analysis of the British Columbia Food Studies curriculum

Course/ grade level	Key terms and framing (textual)	Alignment with societal discourses (discursive practice)	Addresses local and cultural contexts (socio cultural)	Posner's curriculum perspectives (cultural, experiential, cognitive)	Observations and gaps

Table 2. Critical discourse analysis of the BC Food Studies curriculum

Course/grade	Key terms and framing	Alignment with societal discourses	Addresses local and cultural contexts	Posner's curriculum perspectives (Posner, 2004)	Observations and gaps
Applied Design, Skills and Technology 8	• 'Food security', 'equity', 'access', 'social justice' not mentioned, implying that they are peripheral or unimportant topics • Focus on practical skills highlights individual growth instead of collective societal growth • Includes First People's practices and 'variety of eating practices' to encompass other cultures	• Neoliberalist framing: focus on skills, entrepreneurship and innovation • Ethics and environment considered, no global justice • No discussion of systemic barriers or power structures	• Local food systems noted but lacking Indigenous and diverse cultural perspectives • Cultural influences on food choices are implied but not explicit	• Cultural: No mention of heritage or historical food systems except 'First People's food use'; no connection with BC's diverse food cultures • Experiential: Hands-on food preparation encouraged. Pro: Develops basic skills; Con: Misses opportunity for deeper engagement with systemic inequities in food access • Cognitive: Encourages evaluating factors influencing food choices, but lacks emphasis on critical analysis of systemic barriers to food access	• No social justice framing: lacks terms like 'food security' or 'equity' • Neoliberal focus • Limited cultural representation: First Peoples' food use is surface level • Hands-on but lacks justice context • Missed critical thinking: encourages reflection on food choices but not equity or barriers
Applied Design, Skills and Technology 9	• 'Food security', 'equity', 'access' not mentioned • 'Health', 'economic' and 'environmental' factors, but framed as 'food choice', implying individual responsibility • 'Ethical issues related to food systems' mentioned; potential social justice initiatives • Referencing to First People's food practices, but no other cultures • Framed within ADST: focus on individual skills	• Neoliberalist framing: food skills and choices seen as personal responsibility • Environmental and economic factors mentioned, but limited engagement with global food justice or ethical sourcing • Systemic food barriers ignored	• Broad framing misses local inequities • First People's food practices included; other cultures absent • Acknowledges 'health, economic, and environmental factors' in food choices, which could include local considerations	Same as ADST 8	• Limited social justice framing • Neoliberal focus • Cultural gaps: Indigenous references but diversity is absent • Misses systemic analysis: considers economic and environmental food factors; lacks depth in analysing systemic inequities
Food Studies 10	• 'Food security' still absent • 'Global food systems and how they affect food choices' makes assumption that all students can choose • ADST: design thinking, problem-solving, and practical skills emphasised • Incorporates First People's Principles and ethics of cultural appropriation, recognising that food is a core aspect of culture	• Neoliberal framing: individual skills prioritised over systemic food justice • Environmental, ethical and economic factors in food choices; lacks critical engagement with food justice, labour rights or corporate impact	• Encourages exploration of food choices in community • Lacks explicit local cultural/systemic discussions	• Cultural: Cultural influences noted, but not required learning. Pro: Encourages exploration of food culture; Con: Lacks structured learning on historical and systemic food inequities • Experiential: Practical cooking, but no food justice ties • Cognitive: Encourages analysis of factors influencing food choices, yet does not explicitly include critical examination of inequities in food access	• Food security not addressed: Frames food as a choice, ignoring systemic barriers • Neoliberal framing • Cultural engagement limited: appropriation mentioned; systemic food inequities avoided • Surface-level ethics • Lacks critical analysis: Encourages food choice exploration but does not engage with systemic barriers to access

Course/grade	Key terms and framing	Alignment with societal discourses	Addresses local and cultural contexts	Posner's curriculum perspectives (Posner, 2004)	Observations and gaps
Food Studies 11	• 'Food security' mentioned once, but tied to 'food recalls', implying that food security is a consumer concern as opposed to a structural inequity • ADST framing (individualistic) • 'First People's food guides' mentioned, but specifically under the umbrella of Canada's food guide • Diverse cultural food mentioned only under 'ethics of cultural appropriation' • No mention of food systems, environment, or government involvement in food policies except for food guides	• Neoliberalist framing • Ethics framed through consumer responsibility • Food security framed within 'causes and impacts of food recalls', reinforcing a consumer safety perspective • Environmental and economic factors mentioned; limited discussion on labour rights, food sovereignty or indigenous food systems	• 'Economic, environmental, and social factors' mentioned, allowing local discussion, but lacks BC focus (Indigenous and other cultures) • No direct focus on local socio-economic disparities in food access or affordability	• Cultural: Indigenous food guide noted, but cultural diversity missing. Pro: Acknowledges Indigenous food knowledge; Con: Does not explore colonial impacts on food systems or diverse cultural food traditions. • Experiential**:** Hands-on, but lacks direct engagement with food security issues (for example sourcing local, sustainable foods) • Cognitive: Ethics introduced but lacks structural food security framing. Pro: Introduces ethical considerations in food choices; Con: Misses critical analysis of power structures affecting food access	• Food security misframed: consumer safety focus • Neoliberal framing • Limited cultural engagement • Surface-level ethics: Focuses on consumer lens over labour rights or food sovereignty. • No structural analysis: mentions environmental and economic factors but avoids systemic barriers
Food Studies 12	• 'Food justice' mentioned, with 'food security, food sovereignty, worker's rights and animal ethics' in the sub point • ADST framing (individualistic) • 'Ethics of cultural appropriation' mentioned again • Corporate food issues included • Indigenous food sovereignty' discussed but elaborated as 'Indigenous peoples from around the world'. Risks watering down information from local or BC Indigenous groups	• Neoliberalist framing • Explicitly mentions food justice, ethical sourcing, and environmental considerations, but framed as an elaboration • Limited discussion on labour rights, Indigenous food sovereignty or global food inequalities • Encourages critical thinking about ethical consumption and food systems	• Mentions food justice, but no direct mention of local food sovereignty or policies affecting food access in BC • Mentions 'environmental and ethical factors', but lacks expectations for exploring regional socio-economic disparities in food access • Encourages analysis of global and local food-related issues • No mention of BC cultural diversity	• Cultural: Mentions food justice and Indigenous food sovereignty but lacks deep colonial history Pro: Acknowledges systemic food inequities; Con: Limited discussion of cultural food systems beyond Indigenous perspectives • Experiential: Emphasises hands-on food preparation but lacks direct engagement with food security initiatives (for example community gardens, food banks • Cognitive: Encourages ethical discussions and sustainability; no requirement to critically analyse structural food inequities. Pro: Promotes ethical awareness in food choices; Con: Does not mandate deeper critical thinking about power and policy in food systems	• Food justice mentioned but not central • Neoliberal framing • Indigenous food sovereignty generalised: global focus, lacking BC-specific context • Limited cultural and structural analysis: avoids deep engagement with colonial histories or inequities • Hands-on without activism • Misses BC-specific issues: global focus, no explicit local policy discussions

This discourse analysis indicates several key areas where the BC Food Studies curriculum could better align with social justice principles. While the curriculum does contain positive aspects, such as fostering practical skills and including some references to ethical considerations, it consistently falls short in its ability to deeply engage with food security, structural inequities and the complexities of cultural representation. The curriculum often frames food studies in a way that emphasises individualism and consumerism, missing the opportunity to explore collective societal issues related to food access, sovereignty and justice. Additionally, while Indigenous food systems are referenced, there is a need for more robust engagement with Indigenous perspectives and broader cultural diversity within the curriculum. These gaps highlight the necessity of reevaluating the placement of Food Studies within the ADST framework, the level of emphasis on food security and the depth of cultural sensitivity woven into the curriculum.

Food Studies in the Applied Design, Skills and Technology curriculum

The categorisation of Food Studies along with other home economics courses as ADST curriculum in BC raises concerns about its appropriateness and the effectiveness of the design model in addressing the broader realities of food education. The ADST framework, with its emphasis on design thinking, technical skills and entrepreneurship, inherently aligns with neoliberal ideologies that prioritise market-driven solutions, individual responsibility and economic productivity over collective wellbeing and social equity. Hodge (2017) comments that neoliberalist ideals have increasingly infiltrated educational curriculums, which will likely prove problematic in the long run, particularly for social justice and equity standards. Hodge (2017) states, '… imagining curriculum alternatives therefore stands to not only disturb the horizons set on thought and imagination by a neoliberal imaginary, but to realise the potential squandered in neoliberalism's drive to efficiency' (p. 344). Situating home economics within the ADST framework risks reducing food studies education to a set of skills focused on preparing students for workforce participation—whether through culinary entrepreneurship, food product development or other consumer-driven pursuits—rather than fostering a critical understanding of food systems, sustainability and food justice.

While ADST emphasises the design process—focusing on ideation, prototyping and testing—this approach does not always translate well to Food Studies, which is inherently more about nutrition, food security, sustainability and cultural foodways than it is about iterative design (Ronto et al., 2017). Framing Food Studies primarily through a design and entrepreneurial lens risks trivialising its broader societal implications, such as the impact of food systems on climate change, labour rights in agriculture and the growing issue of food insecurity (Brown & Paolucci, 1979; Wassil, 2022). The neoliberal framing within ADST encourages an individualistic, market-based approach to food issues, emphasising solutions such as food innovation and consumer choice rather than addressing systemic inequalities and advocating for policy-driven change.

This discourse analysis indicates several key areas where the BC Food Studies curriculum could better align with social justice principles

Moreover, ADST's focus on technical skills and business-oriented learning reinforces the idea that food education should be about personal economic gain rather than collective responsibility and social change. This perspective limits opportunities for students to critically examine the structural causes of food insecurity or to consider alternative food systems that prioritise sustainability and equity over profit. A more fitting placement for Food Studies could be within Social Studies or Humanities, or Practical Arts, as this would allow for a deeper exploration of the systemic and ecological aspects of food. Alternatively, restructuring Home Economics as a standalone subject area that includes Food Studies with clear learning outcomes related to food security, nutrition and sustainability would ensure that students engage critically with the complexities of our food systems rather than reducing the subject to just a set of technical skills geared toward the labour market.

Mentions of food security within the British Columbia curriculum

The framing of 'food security' within the Food Studies 11 curriculum, particularly in the same context as 'causes and impacts of food recalls', positions it primarily as a consumer concern rather than a structural issue. This emphasis suggests that food security is about ensuring food safety and reliability for individuals, rather than addressing the broader systemic inequities that contribute to food insecurity, such as income disparity, geographic access and policy-driven barriers (BCCDC, 2022; McIntyre, 2011). Linking food security to food recalls implies that the curriculum frames it as a matter of contamination and product safety rather than a reflection of social, economic and political conditions that determine who has consistent access to nutritious food. This consumer-focused perspective risks overlooking the deeper causes

of food insecurity, which are rooted in structural inequities rather than individual purchasing power or market fluctuations (Caraher, 2016). To foster a more comprehensive understanding, food security could be integrated into discussions of economic justice, social policy and community-based solutions that address the root causes of food access disparities.

The inclusion of 'food security' under the elaboration of 'food justice' in the Food Studies 12 curriculum (BCME, 2020) suggests that it is framed as part of a broader conversation about fairness and systemic inequalities in food systems. This is a step forward compared with the earlier grades, where 'food security' was either absent or framed primarily through a consumer safety lens (for example, food recalls in Food Studies 11). However, its placement within the elaboration rather than the core curricular competencies or content suggests that it may be treated as supplementary rather than essential learning.

Positively, the framing 'food security' within 'food justice' implies recognition of systemic factors influencing food access, which aligns with a social justice approach. This location offers the possibility that food insecurity is not just about individual choices or market fluctuations but is deeply tied to issues such as poverty, racial and geographic disparities, and policy decisions. However, none of this is mentioned in the curriculum until Grade 12, implying that younger students are not ready to engage with these complex social justice issues. Without explicit curricular expectations that require students to critically analyse and engage with structural causes and solutions, the risk remains that food security will be discussed in a general or abstract way rather than as a pressing social issue requiring actionable change. To foster a deeper understanding of food security as a structural inequity, the curriculum could benefit from making 'food security' a standalone learning outcome rather than embedding it within an elaboration. This would elevate its importance and ensure that educators prioritise meaningful discussions on how policies, economic systems and social structures impact who has access to nutritious, culturally appropriate food.

… explicit warnings against cultural appropriation may heighten anxiety among educators

Across ADST, including home economics courses such as Food Studies, social justice-related topics are never positioned at the forefront of the curriculum content (BCME, 2020). Instead, core competencies tend to emphasise practical skills, technical knowledge and consumer awareness, primarily focusing on nutrition and health. Discussions on ethics, sustainability and social justice often appear as secondary considerations within elaborations. For example, in Food Studies 12, 'food justice in the local and global community' is included as an elaboration under the broader learning outcome of evaluating 'ethical issues related to food systems' (BCME, 2020). This topicalisation (McGregor, 2004) or structural choice, subtly deprioritises food justice as an essential area of study, instead framing it as an optional or supplementary topic.

To integrate social justice more effectively into Food Studies education, these themes could be explicitly included within the primary curricular competencies rather than treated as secondary considerations. Elevating topics such as food security, food justice and systemic inequities to the same level of importance as food safety and preparation would ensure that students develop not only practical skills but also a deeper understanding of the broader social and ethical implications of food systems (Renwick & Smith, 2020).

Cultural sensitivity and Indigenous representation in the British Columbia Food Studies curriculum

British Columbia's Food Studies curriculum advises educators to avoid cultural appropriation when teaching diverse food traditions (BCME, 2020). While the intent is to promote cultural sensitivity, this caution may have unintended effects. Ironic process theory suggests that efforts to suppress specific thoughts can make them more persistent (Wegner, 1994). Consequently, explicit warnings against cultural appropriation may heighten anxiety among educators, causing them to focus more on avoiding missteps than on fostering meaningful cultural engagement, or choosing not to teach the topic to avoid any controversy.

This is particularly evident in how the curriculum addresses Indigenous food practices. While grades 9 and 10 feature some positive examples of Indigenous food traditions—such as the importance of harvesting, land stewardship and food sovereignty—grades 11 and 12 tend to present a narrower view. In these higher grades, Indigenous food systems are discussed through the lens of Canada's Food Guide (Government of Canada, 2025) and government imposition on Indigenous lands, which can reduce them to a set of health guidelines, overlooking the cultural significance and ecological relationships inherent in Indigenous food systems. This presentation risks stripping away the rich cultural context that underpins Indigenous food sovereignty, reducing it to a mere nutritional framework rather than a

complex system rooted in traditions of reciprocity, respect for the land and community wellbeing (McIntyre & Rondeau, 2009).

Psychological reactance also plays a role. When educators perceive restrictions on what they can teach, they may avoid engaging with Indigenous or other cultural food traditions altogether, fearing they might be accused of cultural appropriation (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). This avoidance, while intended to prevent harm, can lead to a curriculum that marginalises world cultures and reinforces a solely western-centric food narrative. The result is a missed opportunity for students to engage meaningfully with Indigenous food sovereignty and multiculturalism, and to develop a deeper understanding of the cultural, ecological and social dimensions of food systems.

To address this, the curriculum should shift from a prohibitive approach to one that encourages informed, respectful engagement with diverse food cultures, including Indigenous food traditions. Rather than focusing on what should be avoided, the curriculum could provide clear guidance on how to integrate these traditions in a culturally sensitive manner. This could include exploring the historical and cultural contexts of Indigenous food practices, collaborating with Indigenous communities and offering hands-on learning opportunities that immerse students in authentic cultural exchanges (Robin & Cidro, 2020). Fostering critical thinking and appreciation through this approach would better align with social justice principles, promoting equity, inclusion and respect for all cultures.

Conclusion

The BC Food Studies curriculum presents both strengths and limitations in addressing food justice, food security and cultural sensitivity. While it fosters practical skills and acknowledges ethical considerations, it falls short in addressing systemic barriers to food access, particularly in relation to food security and Indigenous food sovereignty. The curriculum often reflects a neoliberal, consumer-driven perspective, which prioritises individual responsibility over addressing collective structural inequalities.

These gaps highlight an opportunity for change. Integrating a more critical approach to food systems, emphasising structural inequalities and providing actionable resources for educators could lead to a more just and equitable approach to food education. This shift would support the inclusion of food security and social justice within the curriculum, empowering educators to foster a deeper, more nuanced understanding of food systems.

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