

# Whose knowledge is most worthwhile?

By Linda Peterat & Richard Fairbanks with assistance from  
Ellen Hall, Susan Horner & Marian Dodds

In Family Management classes, a common topic taught is **marriage**. This is often in the context of a "natural" progression of dating, relationships and intimacy, communication, human sexuality, mate selection, weddings, marriage, etc. From the myriad of sub-topics that could be included in lessons on these topics, what does get taught in the classroom? And what doesn't get taught? In the last article, we raised the question of whose knowledge gets taught in home economics classes. The question of this article is closely related. What gets taught in lessons is always a selection among many possibilities and is often based on larger beliefs about the purpose of courses and classes. In this article, we focus on teaching about marriage and consider how the teaching of this topic may perpetuate myths, biases and inequities.

Why do we believe it is important to teach about marriage? In some classes, marriage is interpreted as planning a wedding, a "popular" rendering of the topic with senior grade young women who may be close to getting married themselves or may just enjoy indulging in the fantasy. Let's consider some possible reasons for teaching about marriage and weddings. We may want students to understand the cultural and religious significance of marriage and weddings, the variety of traditions and ceremonies, and thus be more tolerant and appreciative of differences. We may want students to understand the legal implications of marriage and thus be informed and cautious in their own lives. We may want students to recognize the high costs associated with weddings and thus have a realistic view of an affordable wedding. We might want students to examine the history of weddings and critically question current practices and whose interests they may be serving. We might have students interview people who have married at different ages to have them understand the different expectations and meanings that women and men bring to marriages. We might have students interview people who have and have not married, can and cannot marry to explore the meaning of marriage and long term relationships to the men and women involved. We might have students critically examine the

role of boys/men and girls/women in relation to weddings and marriage. For example, who decides to marry whom? Who asks whom? Who plans what? Who pays for what? Where do these practices come from and are they still relevant today? In other words, students might question the power and control of women and men in relation to weddings and marriage, hoping that in the future they might create their own more equitable and inclusive practices. These are possible reasons for teaching about marriage and weddings, some of which some of us may find more justifiable than others.

When marriage and weddings are taught in family management classes with an emphasis on **wedding planning**, we wonder if this fosters knowledge that is most worthwhile, and for whom? If we believe that education can be equitable, that is, inclusive of and non-alienating for both girls and boys, we need to examine equity problems inherent in teaching topics such as wedding planning. In her study of family management classes, Jane Thomas (1992) found that much of the teaching conveyed a women's/girl's orientation through stereotyping of boys, reliance on discussion about girls'/women's experiences, and the absence of men's/boys viewpoints and experiences. The boys Ellen Hall (1993) spoke with in studying boy's participation in family management classes also believed that class discussions perpetuated stereotypes about boys/men, and that "girls'" topics such as marriage and pregnancy took too much class time. If we believe that family management classes could be a powerful influence in creating gender equitable relationships between girls and boys presently and in future families, wedding planning could be a topic in which gender awareness and equity could be a central focus.

Wedding planning as approached through the guidance provided by popular brides' magazines and books is commonly alienating of boys/men. It establishes a very traditional and unrealistic vision of women and men in relation to roles and responsibilities in weddings, marriage and families, and panders to the commercial and bourgeois interests which underlie these traditions. Such an emphasis largely excludes men/boys from meaningful participation and can be oppressive to girls/women in several ways. First, wedding planning can engage girls in a world of fantasy and unrealistic expectations. Many girls may not be able to afford or attain the type of weddings presented in popular bridal magazines. Second, a "bridal magazine-type" wedding is only one way of getting married, other ways exist which might be more appealing for some girls and boys. Non-western cultures may view western traditional weddings as unappealing or irrelevant to their own marriage customs. Third, some girls and boys will not be getting married. Jane Kenway (1993) discusses current trends in marriage and states that 20 to 25 per cent of the present generation is not expected to marry at all. This group includes those that choose not to marry, and gays and lesbians that cannot marry. Wedding planning excludes these students. Thus, when we teach wedding planning and marriages, we often make several assumptions about the lives our students are or should be leading. If we cut through our assumptions the knowledge most worth having might centre around questions such as: Should we marry? Should we have weddings?

### **What Knowledge Is Most Worthwhile?**

Questions for teachers (and students) to ask about what is being taught in any topic or unit

1. Is this topic or unit equally relevant and important for girls and boys? Are inequities in participation analyzed and critiqued?
2. Are the experiences and meanings of the topic for both girls and boys in contemporary culture examined in the unit or topic?
3. Are the experiences and meanings of the topic for girls and boys historically and cross culturally examined?
4. Are the influences on students' beliefs and assumptions (e.g. media, adolescent and children's literature, families) about the topic identified and critiqued?

If we believe that home economics classes have an important purpose in fostering a desire

in boys/men to create and live in equitable domestic/familial relationships, what should be taught about weddings and marriage? What would it mean to teach about weddings and marriages in ways that would be more inclusive of boys/men? It would seem that the most important things to teach would be those things that can foster an understanding of diversity and inclusivity. This would mean having students probe their own beliefs and expectations about marriage and weddings, to understand the sources and forces which have shaped those beliefs and expectations, with particular sensitivity to gender differences. It would mean exploring the *meanings* of weddings and marriage to peoples of different ages, races, religious beliefs, sexual orientations, and cultures. It may mean a critical analysis of children's and young women's literature, bridal magazines, and fashion shows to identify and analyze the stereotypes and myths perpetuated. It would not mean browsing through brides' magazines dreaming of dresses and unattainable "perfect" beauty and pleasures. It might mean creating a "groom's" magazine, or an emancipated" bride's magazine.

In the last article we talked about analyzing and critiquing psychological and sociological theories as part of an approach to re-constructing understanding. The suggested approach of moving in lessons from student experience and understanding to others' interpretations and understandings to relevant theories to reconstructed personal understanding can also be applied to the study of weddings. The term wedding" can be redefined. For example, it might be defined as a celebration of two people entering into a committed relationship. Drawing on experiences, interviews, and visual and audio materials, there could be many definitions offered by students and teacher so that everyone could see that weddings have many meanings. Research and theory on marriage could be studied. Students could then explain how they would envision their own celebration. Although students, and even the teacher, may have little personal experience with weddings, boys and girls may still have definite ideas about what their wedding would look like and what part they would play in planning it. Those who do not see themselves getting married in the traditional sense could still give their interpretation of what a wedding means and offer an alternative to a wedding which they could see themselves participating in. Wedding preparation is only one aspect of marriage. Exploring the diversity

of beliefs about and critiquing the traditions of all aspects of wedding and marriage will help to make teaching about these subjects inclusive of all students.

### **References**

Hall, Ellen (1993). Boys' participation in family management classes. Unpublished master's thesis, University of British Columbia.

Kenway, Jane. (1993). The wing beneath girls' wings: Gender justice, social change and home economics. *Canadian Home Economics Journal*, 43(2), 86-91.

Thomas, Jane. (1992). Two worlds of curriculum: The case of family life education. In Linda Peterat & Eleanore Vaines (Eds.). *Lives and plans: Signs for transforming practice* (pp. 69-88). Mission Hills, CA: Glencoe