Chapter 1

MULTICULTURAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN TEACHERS

The Role of Process-Oriented Models

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It was the eighth day of the CULTURES professional development course, and I was driving four of the African American teachers to a cultural immersion experience in the Vietnamese community. As I turned into the driveway of the apartment complex, I felt excited for the teachers who had never met a Vietnamese family. We walked to the small first floor apartment where we met our interpreter, Lyn, a Vietnamese language specialist for the school district. Lyn knocked and a Vietnamese woman came to the door and invited us in. As the teachers attempted to enter the home, I noticed that the door was not completely opened because some of the family’s furniture was behind the door, limiting access to the entrance. Lucinda, one of the African American teachers, was reluctant to enter and said, “I’ll wait out here.” It was obvious that Lucinda thought that she was too big to fit through the tiny entryway. Our Vietnamese host looked at Lucinda, pointed to the sliding glass door at the rear of the apartment, and said, “You too fat. Go around the back.” Lucinda was dumbfounded, embarrassed, and appeared ready to leave the Vietnamese home; however, I encouraged her to enter through the sliding glass door. After about 25 minutes of eating Vietnamese snacks and learning about the culture, we left.

Lucinda did not talk about the incident publicly until I saw her a year later at a CULTURES follow-up meeting. She asked me if I remembered “that
day.” I knew what she was referring to—the visit to the Vietnamese home. She told me that incident was a critical point in her professional development and caused her to reflect deeply on issues of culture and ethnicity.

As an African American teacher working in a predominately low-income, African American school, the CULTURES experience generated questions for Lucinda about the role of race and culture in her classroom. She thought about issues such as: Was the Vietnamese woman who embarrassed her insensitive and racist? How do my Vietnamese students perceive me? How can I build community and connections with the increasing number of students from non-African American backgrounds? Lucinda’s experience in particular, and her participation in the multicultural professional development program in general, gave her a context and a catalyst to begin rethinking about the role of race and culture in the teaching and learning processes.

For Lucinda, her African American ethnicity and culture became a salient aspect of her worldview and, more specifically, of her role as a teacher. Carter and Goodwin pointed out that the “racial identity levels of educators themselves influence how they perceive and interact with children of color.” Teachers’ racial identities and worldviews influence their behaviors, attitudes, and cognitive frames, which in turn shape their responses to and participation in professional development programs for multicultural education. When race and culture become central in a teacher’s worldview, she is more apt to foster children’s racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, respond proactively to crossracial and crosscultural interactions, and choose and implement curricula and pedagogy that is relevant for all students.

Little is known about how teachers develop their worldviews and cross-cultural capabilities to effectively teach diverse students in their classrooms. For example, what experiences in the CULTURES professional development program or the particular incident at the Vietnamese home described above caused Lucinda to think differently about race relations between herself and the Vietnamese community or about her students in her classroom?

The disciplines of counseling and intercultural relations offer some understanding about how people shift their interpretive frameworks. Stage-based models, or “process-orientated models,” define a typical process that people undergo as they learn more about themselves and others as cultural beings. Little research exists that examines the use of such models in multicultural professional development or in the field of education. Examina-