Chapter 8

RESPONSES FROM THE TEACHERS

Comments from Beverley Cockerham, Vivian Stephens, and Patricia White

BEVERLEY COCKERHAM

I wrestled with the question Gloria Lee asked me: Do you think of yourself as a teacher who happens to be African American or an African American teacher? The question, I believe, presents a false distinction. I am not going to minimize my professional identity as a teacher, but I am an African American teacher. I am first an African American, and I happen to be a teacher. I could be a doctor or a lawyer, or whatever, but I am an African American first and a teacher. Being an African American, as a matter of fact, has enhanced my teaching. I bring my experiences, my prior socialization, and my background to my classroom. I share these experiences with my students.

With my African American students, I ask them to think of their heritage. “What would your grandmother say about this?” “What about your grandfather?” I tell my African American students that they must represent our race well. They must represent their family with excellence. For some reason, my teaching always comes back to the family.

I think of myself as a culturally responsive teacher and make cultural connections with my students with whom I share common interests. I give my students a questionnaire at the beginning of the school year to determine what they enjoy doing and encourage them to plan with me. A culturally responsive teacher, I think, promotes real-life lessons for her students. However, a culturally responsive teacher goes beyond these classroom activities. I always involve the parents and the community through
phone calls, classroom visits, home visits, and attendance at church services in the community. Being a culturally responsive teacher means being aware of my students, maintaining their dignity, and being positive. You have to recognize your students’ strengths and their weaknesses and try to work with them. I believe that my personal relationship with them helps a great deal. I also permit my students to see me as a learner. I am always reading something. If I attend a workshop or a seminar, my students know about it.

The CULTURES professional development assisted me in becoming a more culturally responsive teacher by encouraging me to incorporate more books and stories about African American culture and more community involvement into my teaching. I can think of two examples. I taught one student who was very interested in a book that we read, which subsequently inspired her to find out more about her family history. She interviewed her family in Tuskegee, Alabama, took photographs, and shared the information with the class. As a result of this student’s interest and enthusiasm, the class made a heritage wall and brought in pictures of their family members. Another student, a special education student, was very interested in football so I invited a football player to come to my class and mentor him. As a result, the student began to read the sports pages of the newspaper and books about football. Consequently, I try to find activities that match my students’ interests and incorporate these elements into writing, reading, and mathematics classroom activities.

Finally, I felt honored to participate in this book project because I felt I might gain some experience and learn something about myself as a teacher. This particular type of research about professional development is important because it allows teachers to reflect and because it gives us a voice in expressing our opinions and our feelings on education. I must admit that initially I wondered if this writing project would result in extra work for me, but it didn’t. Gloria Lee accurately described the events in my classroom and I felt nothing essential was omitted from her chapter.

VIVIAN STEPHENS

I think of myself more and more as an African American teacher than I have in recent years. In the past I thought of myself as a teacher who just happened to be African American because I received a lot of respect from my school system and my school for being just a teacher.