

Teachers' Self-Discovery

by Susan Eleuterio

A GROUP OF middle-class white teachers stood awkwardly around a Middle Eastern grocery in suburban Chicago, gazing at foods and spices exotic to them. When the butcher plunked a whole goat on the counter, the deer hunters in my folk culture course stepped forward, suddenly experts at explaining this seemingly unfamiliar culture to their peers. At the end of this course, one teacher wrote, "I've usually thought of myself as a 'plain white person' without any real culture. Being in this class inspired me to look more closely at my family and identify our own special customs."

I've been working on a model of professional development for teachers that may be useful to others interested in learning how to get into the folk culture of their students, schools, and communities. I've developed this model with teachers in Glenbard Township High School District 87 in DuPage County, Illinois, and with the support and encouragement of Marge Trybus, School Improvement Coordinator.

Teachers receive in-district credit for the course. The key components are an ongoing relationship with the district's professional development staff person and with teachers from the district's four schools. Glenbard, like many suburban districts around the country, is seeing a change in its student population, from a primarily white, middle-class, formerly rural student body to a more ethnically and culturally diverse population including new immigrants as well as refugees. Also like many suburban school districts (and urban for that matter), the staff is primarily white, middle-class, and suburban.

Another key component is developing an introductory course focusing on the teacher as a culture bearer rather than on students as culture bearers. At the same time, lesson plans and activities conducted with the teachers are designed to be used with students as well, and teachers are encouraged to try the activities with their classes. Previous models of professional development have often focused on students as the bearers of culture. While students do bring unique culture to school, focusing only on their culture can reinforce the idea that students, especially those from ethnic, cultural, or class backgrounds that differ from the teacher's, are in some way exotic and different. This seeming exotic nature of students, although positive in some teacher's eyes, can be seen negatively as when teachers say "they (the students) just don't act normal, they have such weird customs, their families don't care about school," and so on.

This model spends a lot of time getting teachers to reflect on their own cultural traditions such as naming customs, family food traditions, childhood games, folk speech, oral and family history, holiday customs, and personally significant artifacts. Exercises from *Folk Arts in Education: A Resource Handbook*, by Marsha MacDowell, are particularly useful at drawing out teachers' own practices and beliefs. At the same time, teachers are encouraged to pay attention to attitudes,

beliefs, and practices of their students through simple observation or quick interviews.

Teachers are also introduced to the basics of folklore fieldwork, including ethics, permission forms, and documentation techniques. Once teachers have explored their own culture, the second phase of professional development involves a field-trip to a local site. Hence our visit to the Middle Eastern grocery.

Based on this experience, teachers helped me design a second course spotlighting four cultural groups in the district. We conduct fieldwork together and hear speakers from each of the cultural groups we study. While we are again referring back to the idea of student culture as somewhat exotic, I believe since the teachers have already explored their own culture, they can see these cultural groups as more similar than different and as people just like them, who have inherited various values, beliefs, and traditions that they may practice in varying ways.

When studying immigration or incorporating it into professional development, remember that teachers have culture too. This model presents a method for beginning with teachers' own traditions, then focusing on students' and community culture and shows teachers how to be ethnographers of their own culture, including their own occupational folklife, while encouraging them to be aware of the ethnography of their students at the same time.

Susan Eleuterio, an independent folklorist, museum consultant, and educator, conducts folklore fieldwork and professional development courses for teachers, and workshops for students in the Chicago area.