MENTORING BLACK PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS TO THE CLASSROOM
An Othermothering/Otherparenting Approach

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Lynnette was in the car making a 3-hour round-trip drive just to drop off a study book to Jacinta (pseudonyms used throughout) for her teaching certification exam and thinking about this long journey. This book, plastic spiral binding and bent pages, had already made a journey from the headquarters of Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, NJ to our Historically Black college/university (HBCU) in southern Chester County, PA. From there, it made an hour and 15-minute journey in Emery’s car to
Lynnette's house in Philadelphia. Lynnette took the book from her for the long car ride to Jacinta's student-teaching site in northern New Jersey in order for her to have the study materials for the certification exam she needed to pass. The book's long journey is symbolic of the long, sometimes winding, pathway that Black pre-service teachers (college education majors) take in order to become licensed teachers.

Since the desegregation of schools, the population of Black teachers (like Jacinta) has drastically declined in the United States (Oakley, Stowell, & Logan, 2009). In 2012, only 7% of teachers in the United States were Black (Golding, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2016), an increase of only one percentage point from 6 years prior (Roberts & Irvine, 2009; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). There are many variables that account for the challenges to creating a more racially diverse teaching profession. Two important variables are recruitment (Poloma, 2014) and high turnover rates for teachers of color in under-resourced schools (Ingersoll, 2015). Another significant factor is the high-stakes exams that pre-service teachers have to pass at various points along their matriculation.

There are a number of screens in place at different points of the teacher education process that are intended to make education programs more selective and improve teacher quality. One set of screens is the front-end entrance requirements, such as GPA selectivity, outlined by the Council for the Accreditation of Education Preparation (CAEP, 2013)—an accreditation body for teacher education programs. Other screens exist in the form of licensure exams. In most states, pre-service teachers must pass basic skills/professional readiness exams in reading, writing, and mathematics to be admitted into a teacher education program. In addition to completing coursework, field internships, and other requirements, they must also pass a content area exam toward the end of their program to be recommended for licensure to the state. Many states are also implementing edTPA—a teaching performance exam that tends to be costly and time-consuming—as an additional exit requirement.

Despite their original intention to increase education and employment opportunities, high-stakes and standardized exams have long had an adverse impact on communities of color (Lemann, 1999). In teacher education, this was the case with the influential National Teacher Examination of the mid-20th century and its various iterations (Haney, Madaus, & Kreitzer, 1987) up through the Praxis exam developed and administered by ETS and used widely for admission into teacher education program. In an influential study about pass rates by race on the Praxis exam, Nettles, Scatton, Steinberg, and Tyler (2011) found that African American prospective teachers were roughly half as likely to pass the exam on their first attempt compared to White test takers. Studies have suggested that some Black test takers perceive the test to be culturally biased against them (Baker-Doyle & Petchauer, 2015; Petchauer, 2015), and that the exam triggers stereotype threat in some Black test takers (Bennett, McWhorter, & Kuykendall, 2006; Graham, 2013; Petchauer, 2014). Stereotype threat is the additional cognitive and affective load produced by a situation that puts a person at risk of confirming as true a stereotype about a social identity group to which they belong (Steele, 2010). Results of other studies suggest that the exam appropriately screens out prospective teachers of color who would be less successful if admitted into a teacher education program (Gitomer, Brown, & Bonett, 2011).

Considering these roadblocks, HBCUs, along with many other minority serving institutions, are a significant factor in diversifying the teaching profession (Gasman, Castro Samayoa, & Ginsberg, 2016; Petchauer & Mawhinney, 2017). It is estimated that 50% of Black public school teachers were educated and received their certificates from an HBCU (Albritton, 2012). Teacher education programs at HBCUs have worked diligently to institute formal mentorship programs in order to support education majors. This is offshoot of the time-honored tradition of care that is rooted within HBCUs themselves.

Most HBCUs were established to train and educate emancipated slaves (Anderson, 1988), and foundational to this purpose has been the informal practice of faculty “lifting up” students through the ethic of care (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Hale, 2006; Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, & Bennett, 2006; Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002; Palmer, Maramba, & Gasman, 2013; Teranishi, 2011). This caring support becomes prominent when discussing issues of teacher licensure and testing for teachers of color. HBCU teacher education programs often call for formal and informal mentoring practices to work with students on the logistical and emotional components of preparing pre-service teachers for these licensure exams. This chapter explores the ways we developed formal and informal mentorship at an HBCU within a teacher education program where we both started out careers as professors.

We situate this chapter and our mentorship approach among the three areas of this book: theory, design and practice, and impact.

**THEORY**

**Pushing Past Mentorship: From Othermothering to Otherparenting**

Mentoring is the act of providing guidance toward a mentee (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007) with opportunities to learn and grow within a career (Patton, 2009). Patton’s (2009) study on female African American graduate
students distinguishes between an advisor and a mentor, as a mentor can provide psychosocial support and accountability with keeping task with their studies. This juxtaposes with Mertz’s (2004) conceptual framework on work relationships. Mentors can provide career advancement, such as mentorship programs established for novice teachers in certain states (Hobson, Harris, Buckner-Manley, & Smith, 2012), requiring minimal involvement (e.g., limited encounters or just being there when needed). Advisors require a mid-level of involvement and provide professional development, such as academic advisors in colleges and universities. The maximum level of involvement comes from role models since they provide psychosocial development. Whether considering Patton’s findings or Mertz’s framework, there is a further concept of mentorship that pushes past these supports—othermothering.

Othermothering is when people act as “fictive kin” and take on familial responsibilities to people outside of their genetic family (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Collins, 2000). The concept is rooted in the historical realities of slavery, where orphaned children separated by circumstance (e.g., auctioned to different master’s homes, parent died during transatlantic transport, etc.) were “mothered” by a person outside of their genetic family (Case, 1997; Guiffrida, 2005; Hirt, Amelink, McFeeter, & Strayhorn, 2008). Black educators have taken on this role of othermother in the classroom (Foster, 1993; Roseboro & Ross, 2009; Siddle Walker & Tompkins, 2004; St. John & Cadray, 2004), as school leaders (Loder, 2005), in the academy with professors of color (Bernard et al., 2012; Esposito, 2014; Guiffrida, 2005), and specifically at HBCUs (Flowers, Scott, Riley, & Palmer, 2015; Hirt et al., 2008; Mawhinney, 2011/2012).

Othermothering has been “socialized as an institutional HBCU value” (Flowers et al., 2015, p. 60) and embedded within the framework of HBCUs. Most faculty at HBCUs ascribe to the “lifting up” ethos, where othermothering becomes a significant part of that effort. Hirt and colleagues (2008) define othermothering at HBCUs as: ethic of care, cultural advancement, and institutional guardianship. Research has shown that the supportive nature of faculty at HBCUs is considered a major positive to attending one in the first place (Borum & Walker, 2012) as the simple act of caring is activism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999), and teacher education at HBCUs continues to be framed in service, activism, and social justice (Harper & Mawhinney, 2017).

Since othermothering is an HBCU institution-wide framework, research has discussed othermothering as “gender-neutral” (Flowers et al., 2015) and not limited to women (Hirt et al., 2008). This is why we argue for a non-gender-binary definition, in what we call, otherparenting. It was through this concept of otherparenting that we used formal and informal supports for our pre-service teachers in supporting them on the pathway to becoming teachers.

Lynnette previously published her framework of othermothering (now otherparenting) in connection with Vogt’s (2002) description of caring teachers. These same principles also apply to Emery’s approach to otherparenting and have been updated (and indicated with brackets):

1. **Pedagogical commitment.** The teacher’s role is to ensure that learning is occurring in the classroom. There is a commitment to providing extended time and care in creating lessons, while also setting high and achievable academic standards.

2. **Relatedness.** Similar to Vogt’s (2002) work, relatedness is the approachability of the teacher and providing time for building the relationship.

3. **Advocacy.** Often connected to relatedness, advocacy is the teacher [supporting and promoting the students’ needs, often outside the classroom and within institutions of power].

4. **Expression of care.** The teacher shows care of the student and the relationship through emotional and physical expression. Emotional expression is through providing genuine [encouragement, feedback, and counseling beyond the academic realm]. Physical expression is through giving hugs when needed, connected to Vogt’s (2002) definition of a cuddly teacher.

5. **Financial.** The teacher providing the resources needed by the student. This can be for support inside and outside the classroom. (Mawhinney, 2011/2012, p. 216).

The framework of otherparenting, as the theory posits, is intimately connected to who we are as pedagogues and how we approach supporting pre-service teachers.

Otherparenting and mentorship approaches are often discussed through the thread of race (Griffin, 2013), which has deep importance and meaning. But in our experiences, as Griffin & Tolkson mention (2012), “Ultimately, faculty from any racial or ethnic background can and should mentor Black students” (p. 103). Lynnette (a biracial woman who identifies as Black) and Emery (a White man) approached our otherparenting of pre-service teachers through the lens of being student-focused (Guiffrida, 2005). For our design and practice of otherparenting, we utilized formal and, more importantly, informal approaches to guiding future teachers.

**DESIGN AND PRACTICE**

We share our concept of formal mentorship and informal otherparenting approaches to working with pre-service teachers through the storied
experience. In short, these stories below are a record of our approaches, experiences, and perspectives. We share this, as a pertinent aspect to sharing one’s stories is memory (Berry, 2005). Berry (2005) explains that:

Telling the story is important; however, equally important is what is remembered and what is selected to be told from that memory. Written experiences are based on the writer’s memories, reflect the writer’s ability to recall, as well as how and what the writer recalls. (p. 36)

Here are our stories, memories, and truth in how we approached and worked with students at the HBCU.

Formal Programs: A Mentorship Practice

Although this chapter is focused on informal approaches to otherparenting, it is important that we first outline our formal mentorship programs. Fitting into our concept of pedagogical commitment, we generated a variety of formalized programs in order to provide guided mentorship for high-stakes teacher exams. Initially, Emery started the first centralized efforts to support students in their exam preparation. Most often, institutions have few supports in place to help their students prepare for licensure exams. Students are left on their own. For students who have had negative experiences with high-stakes and standardized exams, this decentralized approach can create additional problems. At our institution, Emery created and facilitated a weekly preparation cohort. In it, students would become familiar with the exam form and content, practice problems, and discuss solutions. Much more than just a study group, the cohort also attended to the affective and attitudinal aspects of exam preparation (see Petchauer, Baker-Doyle, Mawhinney, & Ciarkowski, 2015). Since this preparation cohort was housed outside of courses, it did not add additional financial burden to students or take up precious credit space in their schedules. Moreover, with all the state requirements for teacher education courses, there was no space to add to the required courses. The cohort model was the best approach in terms of time, course space, and financial needs of students.

Another form of support came from partnering with ETS, who made and administered the exam. Lynnette reached out to her networks, and ETS voluntarily came to the university to conduct an all-day workshop. The workshop focused on guidelines and materials for studying, tips for taking the exam, and psychological tips for stress management. This was part of a pilot workshop for ETS, and we were the last university to participate in the pilot without any costs. Further, free study guides and materials were distributed to the students. We were given permission to duplicate these materials without copyright issues, thus cohorts of students for years after received the materials from the workshop.

We also decided to hold evening sessions to assist students in registering for the exam (as it was a complicated process) and signing up to receive university transportation to the nearby university to take the exam. We understood that even being accountable to register for the exam was a stressful and daunting process, and these evening programs were designed to limit that stress. Moreover, on testing day, Emery would ride along with students in university transportation to the testing center. This way, students saw a familiar face that had been alongside them during preparation, and he could monitor part of the exam administration site for irregularities that might impact student comfort and performance.

In order to gather more ideas, we attended an all-day meeting at ETS with other HBCUs. The meeting was set up by ETS to hear how HBCUs were handling the issue of low African American passing rates of the basic skills exam, but our agenda was to network and gather ideas from other institutions on how they were mentoring pre-service students through this process.

Informal Approaches: An Otherparenting Practice

Our otherparenting approaches were the foundation of our mission for our pre-service teachers to be successful and obtain their degree and certification. This was mainly achieved through expression of care, advocacy, and financial support. We provide a vignette for each element of our informal approaches.

Expression of Care

Our expressions of care were not only attentive to the emotional and affective dimensions, they were also directly honest with students when they needed to hear it. A common need for this honesty was in response to students who engaged in avoidance or self-sabotage behavior when it came to preparing for the exam. In one such instance, I (Emery) overheard two of my students outside my office talking about the licensure exam coming up the next month and how their plan was to pray to God for the right answers the day of the test. These were students who had signed up for the preparation cohort but missed some of the sessions. To the students’ surprise, I stepped out of my office and interrupted their conversation. “There’s nothing wrong with praying to God,” I told them while giving a slight smile to signal where I was going with the comment. “But why don’t you pray that he will get you to the preparation cohort this week?”

My eavesdropping and interruption initiated a conversation about why they had been avoiding the most obvious ways to prepare for the exam. The
answer to this question deals with students’ attempt to avoid situations that might reveal academic weaknesses, even if these situations would likely help them prepare for the exam. The path of least resistance was to avoid these situations and try to muster up confidence on the day of the exam through faith and prayer. This approach typically did not yield passing scores. Although I was frustrated by this avoidance behavior, the expression of care directed me to respond much differently, working to understand the roots of this behavior and proceeding from there.

Expression of care in this way also meant valuing students beyond their performance on the exam. In situations such as these, it was important to express that students’ value as people was not tied to their performance on the exam and that we saw them no differently if they passed or failed. “The exam cannot change who you are” was a phrase often repeated to students. Reinforcing this value also served to take some of the extra pressure of performance off of students.

**Advocacy**

There were many times that we needed to be a voice of advocacy. Kevin’s plight with the basic skills exam is a great example of this. Kevin, a health and physical education major, was a student in my (Lynnette’s) Foundations of Urban Education course. One of the first assignments pre-service teachers complete is an educational autobiography. In the paper, Kevin discussed how reading has been a challenge for him since kindergarten. His teacher noticed, but never mentioned it to his mother. Sadly, neither did any other teacher in his K–12 schooling.

When taking a quiz at the end of class the following week, I noticed Kevin’s coping mechanisms for reading. He had to read aloud to himself each question three times, and then he was able to formulate his answer. This was a time-consuming process, and I had to give him extra time after class to complete the quiz. Kevin always performed well with class assignments and assessments as long as he was given the time needed.

Since Kevin’s K–12 teachers never had him assessed for reading, Kevin did not have an individualized educational plan (IEP) that would grant him modifications for extra time on the basic skills exam so that it would be a more valid measurement for him. Kevin tried the exam twice, but he just kept running out of time to complete all the questions. Informally, I spent many hours over a 2-month period reading ETS’ policies and making phone calls on how to get Kevin modifications for extra time. In short, Kevin needed to undergo a diagnostic test for reading challenges to have it “officially” documented since it never was during his K–12 years. Since he was 21 years old and out of the K–12 system, the expense of the testing would fall on his shoulders. I called numerous diagnostic testing sites to see if we could get a discount, but the lowest price we discovered was $1,200.

Kevin and I collectively tried to find ways to fund this endeavor, but it was too much and Kevin decided to switch majors to Sociology. Although the financial obstacle before Kevin was too great to surmount, this example illustrates the layers of advocacy that are sometimes necessary for students who have not received the necessary supports during their K–12 years.

**Financial**

Financial support, in our otherparenting framework, is not about just giving money to support the pre-service teachers, although we did do that at times. The emphasis was more on ensuring that the supports and resources were available to the pre-service teachers when needed. This example brings us back to Jacinta and our collective efforts to rally around her.

Jacinta struggled to pass one portion of the basic skills exam. Eventually, Jacinta graduated with her education degree without being certified. Immediately after graduation, Jacinta transferred to an institution in her home state where I (Lynnette) was a professor. This state did not require the basic skills exam at the time (although the state laws have changed since then). Now she would be able to take a senior capstone course, student teach (e.g., internship experience), and complete her final teaching certification exams. I advocated for Jacinta to be placed in my senior capstone course and also for me to be her student teaching supervisor. Jacinta’s school placement was near her home, a 3-hour round trip drive from my house. The college would not reimburse for all the travel, but I was willing to take on those financial burdens in order to see Jacinta achieve in the program.

This is what also caused Emery and I to mobilize on our day off in order for Jacinta to receive the resources she needed to study for her last set of teaching certification exams. Thankfully, this Facebook post came a few short weeks after receiving the study materials:

God is so Good! I wanna give him praise first and foremost! Secondly, big thanks to all my friends and family for all their support. I finally passed my Praxis 2 [teaching certification exam]! Watch out now I’m climbing my way up the ladder!! (April 3, 2011)

**IMPACT**

Our otherparenting approach with pre-service teachers is like a family portrait. The framing of the portrait is always outlined by our pedagogical commitment to our students. Inside the frame, and what makes up the pieces of the family portrait of otherparenting, are the aspects of relatedness, expression of care, advocacy, and financial support. In order to do effective otherparenting, there are two points that faculty should be aware of: (a)
how to provide support beyond the classroom and (b) finding a balance in prevent burnout. These will assist other university faculty, within a minority serving institution or predominantly White institution, in order to build and develop lasting professional relationships with students.

**Beyond the Classroom and Into Higher Education**

The otherparenting approach to mentoring has also meant supporting students beyond their professional trajectories as classroom teachers. Approximately half of new teachers leave the profession within 5 years, and these figures are intensified for Black teachers in under-resourced schools (Ingersoll, 2015). Consequently, mentoring Black teachers through the high-stakes gatekeepers into the teaching profession is often only half the duty. They must also be mentored through the profession and, in many cases, out of the profession into other ones. It is important to build their professional capacity during the early stages of their career so they will be poised to make vertical moves when their time in the classroom comes to an end.

One of the most important modes of professional mentoring in this way is involving undergraduate teacher education students and classroom teachers in scholarly projects that lead to peer-reviewed publications. These kinds of opportunities are seldom made available to undergraduate students in the field of education, particularly at under-resourced HBCUs or institutions without graduate programs. As each of us moved beyond an HBCU to work at better-resourced institutions, we took the initiative to involve our former HBCU students in scholarly projects at these new institutions. These efforts have led to conference presentations (Bentley & Mawhinney, 2008; Mawhinney, Rinke, & Zullo, 2016; Pitts & Mawhinney, 2009), book chapters (Petchauer & Garrison, 2014), and peer-reviewed articles (Jennings & Petchauer, 2017; Mawhinney, Irby, & Roberts, 2014; Mawhinney, Mulero, & Pérez, 2011) for our current or former students. These efforts are particularly important because they set up former students to make career advancements (often graduate school) once they leave K-12 teaching. Importantly, these efforts also enable former students to make the move to education-related fields even as they may leave the classroom as teachers.

As former students have entered graduate school or teaching positions in higher education institutions, this mentoring beyond the classroom also has entailed helping them to navigate racist colleagues and oppressive institutional structures. Many of these challenges are not one-time events but ongoing and evolving situations with many complex layers. Some of these situations have extended well over a year and blur the lines between professional and personal. Attention to these stressors is important because otherparenting requires valuing the student beyond their professional value and success. In other words, professional success is not worth the cost of private turmoil. We must support students not only to have successful careers but healthy ones as well.

**Balance and Burnout**

Mentorship at the level of otherparenting requires caution toward a work-life balance. Without a doubt, many of the mentoring activities we have outlined in this chapter fell well outside the boundaries of a job description. We were not financially compensated for driving materials to students, accompanying them to a testing site Saturday mornings, or facilitating preparation activities. The culture of many HBCUs is to do “whatever it takes” for students to be successful. These examples of otherparenting certainly fall in line with this culture. Notwithstanding, without a healthy balance, mentoring relationship will be burdensome, cumbersome, and quickly lead to burnout.

Lynnette had to learn this lesson from the mistake of having a lack of balance in her otherparenting approach. As previously published (Mawhinney 2011/2012), Lynnette took on a ridiculous $9,000 burden for financially backing her students in a dual-enrollment program connected with the HBCU. This was from Lynnette not creating a certain boundary or set-point for her otherparenting approach. It caused years of financial debt and stress, creating burnout personally and professionally, and she had to ultimately leave the institution and students she loved in order to remedy this financial situation.

Yet, this mistake taught Lynnette how to effectively create a healthy balance when otherparenting students. She does not field calls late in the evening to assist students anymore. Instead, she turns her phone and email off at 8:00 p.m. in order to focus on life at home. The expression of care (themes from Mawhinney, 2011/2012, p. 216) aspect of otherparenting also requires remembering to care for oneself in the process. Lynnette’s hard lesson about the financial aspect is that not everything gets accomplished through financial support can be provided in multiple, non-debilitating ways.

Providing balance can also limit the chance of burnout occurring. Burnout has three core dimensions: exhaustion, depersonalization/cynicism, and a lack of personal accomplishment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In the otherparenting framework, burnout is usually caused by emotional exhaustion. Research has shown that humor plays a big part in teachers showing lower levels of emotional exhaustion (Ho, 2016) and is an important coping skill of educators (Kmita & Mawhinney, 2016; Mawhinney, 2008). We often use humor between ourselves and with our students, as it is an aspect of relatedness in our otherparenting approach.
But the humor assists in building relationships while counterbalancing any emotional exhaustion of otherparenting. We find it to be almost foundational in our approach to work-life balance.

Moreover, the use of humor provides a means to establish resiliency. Research shows that a higher sense of resiliency in teachers and education causes less burnout (Richards, Levesque-Bristol, Tempkin, & Graber, 2016). Although humor is our approach to resiliency, professors and mentors can ask themselves this central reflection question in order to establish their resiliency mechanism: What is an activity, practice, or hobby that “fills my spirit” that can also be shared with my students?

CONCLUSION

Like the route Jacinta’s study guide traveled, the professional path of many Black teachers is seldom straight. It is a complex roadway filled with twists and turns related to high-stakes exams and larger obstacles in the profession. The otherparenting approach to mentoring we address in this chapter is equally complex yet necessary to mentor Black teachers along their professional journey into the classroom, and sometimes out of the classroom. Our approach pushes traditional professional boundaries and attempts to fit the needs of students, rather than making students fit the needs and design of the institution.

Professionals often learn from the storied experiences of others, and it is our hope that our honest discussion concerning mentoring and otherparenting of pre-service teachers provides support for other educators within various contexts. Our plight and mission has been to sustain a student-centered focus when working with our pre-service teachers, and we hope that our approach to otherparenting can be a guideline for what to do and not to do in order for there to be balance with the established professional relationships.

REFERENCES


at the intersection of dialectical harmony, ethics, aesthetics, and panoply of voices (pp. 93–110). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense.


