

# Yes, We Belong in this Different World: Poetic Renderings of Being a Teacher Educator in an HBCU Space

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*The Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) space is a producer of many Black teachers. Out of this space comes both beautiful and burdensome experiences that add to the richness of the HBCU experience. Through poetic renderings, I use personal reflections through phenomenological exploration to highlight my own lived experience as a Black woman teacher educator in the HBCU space. The ultimate goal of preparing (1) culturally responsive urban educators, (2) reflective practitioners, (3) collaborative stakeholders, (4) professionals who consistently meet high expectations, and (5) educators who remain authentic is explored.*

*Keywords:* HBCUs, Black women, teacher preparation, teacher educator, phenomenology

## **Be-long-ing in the HBCU Space**

I see you

You see me

Here I am seen

Here I can simply be

Education has been my life for the past twenty years. Pursuit of my own higher education, the elementary education of other people's children, and now the goal of higher education for young and more veteran adults. As a Black woman educator, I confidently walk in my life's purpose and calling. Unashamedly, there is a pride that comes with being one who teaches and learns with others as a profession. Being an educator means that you give of yourself in an immeasurable way with the outcome of success for those you teach. Along the way, there are

intrinsic rewards that inspire continuing in the profession. Ultimately, there is a feeling of belonging. Belonging in the Historically Black College and University (HBCU) space has a completely different meaning. This means embracing a rich history while striving for innovation and relevance in today's society. This belonging moves beyond individual pursuits into more communal efforts. While fully being me, there is an opportunity to be seen by those with similar, yet varied, lived experiences. This space is unique. This space is special.

### **The Meaning of Space**

Constantly overlapping with time  
Filled with the nuances of daily life  
Concrete, but cannot touch  
Both seen and unseen

Through a phenomenological lens, what is the meaning of space? Phenomenology, simply, is the study of lived experience with a recognition that everyday human experiences have meaning (van Manen, 1997). My everyday lived experiences as a Black tenure track professor in an HBCU space is invaluable. The everyday lived experiences of Black preservice teachers in the HBCU space also have great meaning to be explored. When we consider space, particularly the HBCU space, it is important to note that space is not something that exists, but it is produced, and it has a history connected to a particular culture (Lutterbie, 2001). HBCU spaces have been produced through the literal sweat, blood, and tears of many ancestors working to provide educational spaces for Black Americans. Historically and currently, there is a thriving culture on HBCU campuses across the country. This culture comes from years of perseverance, hardships, joys, and sorrows. We cannot acknowledge the produced spaces of HBCUs without recognizing the rich history they hold. This history is affiliated with time, both past and present. Time is inextricably linked to space (Schleirmacher, 1985). It is not possible to identify one without the other. The production of space and history of space all happens over time. We must also note that while relating to a space, bodies also inhabit it (Moran, 2000). Black bodies inhabit the HBCU space, and again, create a culture over time that ultimately leads to a differential space. In these differential spaces, there is a failure to reproduce the dominant narrative through disruption that leads to a new imagined space (Kinkaid, 2019). In the HBCU curriculum, this might show itself through the decolonization of implemented curriculum (Ashby-Bey et al, 2021). This examination of space leads me to wonder: What has been and continues to be produced in the HBCU space? How does the culture of the HBCU space impact a Black teacher educator? What do the Black bodies of preservice teachers inhabiting the space take away from their HBCU experience? What am I doing as a Black teacher educator to maintain this differential space?

## **The Lived Experience of Reflection**

Thinking back

To look within

Progressing

Confidently knowing myself

In the wise words of Patricia Hill Collins (2009), “Other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward personal empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-valuations lies within the individual woman herself” (p. 130). Reflection has been and remains a necessary process that helps to remind me of the power in who I am and what I do as a Black woman teacher educator. Reflection is a part of “crafting one’s own agenda” (Collins, p. 40) as well as a continual reminder that in my Black skin, “I am truly a drop of sun under the earth” (Fanon, 2008, p. 27) therefore, illuminating any space which I possess. Working to prepare highly effective, culturally responsive, and confident Black woman teachers includes ongoing reflection which leads to introspection, change, and progression in providing the best learning experience for K12 students.

Although a part of course instruction and assessment for preservice teachers, reflection also resides with me as a teacher educator. My goal is to model critical reflection, which goes beyond mere opinions and insights on lesson or instruction but incorporates our own assumptions of culture and history (Shandomo, 2010). The hope is that my students, the preservice teachers, will “come to interpret and create new knowledge and actions from their ordinary and sometimes extraordinary experiences...to form new knowledge constructions and new behaviors or insights (p. 101). Linking these new behaviors and insights with cultural competence and a desire to deeply know their K12 students, is what I ultimately hope for through reflection. Moreover, critical reflection also calls for action on the part of the teacher. Through an analysis of education course assignments, Gorski and Dalton (2020) identify that critical reflections include a preservice teachers’ “preparedness and willingness to be an agent of social justice change in and out of school contexts and to reflect on the areas of continued growth one needs to be an agent of social justice change” (p. 363). These components build upon us grappling with our assumptions and propel us into an action-oriented positionality for the advancement of all diverse students.

For my own growth, development, strength, and sense of belonging in the field of education, reflection is critical. Consistent reflection helps me to remain personally and professionally centered in the right space and place. Unfortunately, many people, “feel lost, feel bereft of a sense of direction, feel as though they cannot see where our journeys lead, that they cannot know where they are going. Many folks feel no sense of place” (hooks, 2009, p. 1). Phenomenological reflection helps me to maintain my sense of place as a Black woman educator teaching and learning in an urban HBCU context. The revelations from reflection are not always easy to accept or exciting to explore, but always necessary.

As a teacher educator, the goal of phenomenological reflection is to grasp the essential meaning of my particular lived experience in education pedagogically (van Manen, 1997). In other

words, when reflecting phenomenologically, it is necessary to take on the lived experience in that particular role: teacher, wife, mother, etc. Honestly, knowing that life is intersectional, many of my life roles tend to overlap and impact my pedagogical experiences in higher education. This is precisely why phenomenological reflection is the right path to journey when sharing my experiences in the HBCU space. Phenomenological reflection leads me to question how much reflective thinking goes into my continuous decisions as a teacher and how the reflective process enters my teaching (Van Manen, 1995). I continue by taking it a step further and ask, “Why does this reflection matter for me as a Black woman, teaching Black students?” These questions all connect and allow me to continually question and examine my unique role as a Black woman teacher educator at an urban HBCU, what this means for teacher preparation, K12 teachers, and K12 learners, while considering how my multiple identities find a meaningful place in this HBCU space. This matters because part of my personal goal when working with preservice teachers, particularly Black women, is to prepare and equip like an educator, love and support like a wife, while also nurturing and correcting, when necessary, like a mother. Part of the reflection allows for honest and difficult moments to note what is effective and that which is not, or even detrimental, to my own well-being and that of my students.

Thankfully ideas emerge when there is a genuine “connection to self” (Mortari, 2012, p. 529) and a continuous curiosity to explore the lived experience of others in the HBCU space. What is the lived experience of preservice teachers at urban HBCUs? Their insights will undoubtedly provide practice and policy considerations for faculty and leadership at these institutions. Aside from my own insights, I wonder what is the lived experience of other Black women teacher educators at HBCUs? Black women’s experiences need to be centered and highlighted honestly, with our voices magnified for others to hear the good, the bad, and the beautiful (Patton et al, 2022). Additionally, thinking about what the lived experiences of Black K12 students taught by HBCU graduates are, and how cultural competence, critical reflection, and care show itself in their classrooms could impact teacher preparation and continued support for novice teachers throughout their initial years in the K12 classroom. Each of these potential explorations will shed light on the path from teacher preparation to K12 classroom instruction, providing invaluable insights for stakeholders with a desire to enhance the HBCU faculty and preservice teacher experience, while empowering both students and faculty to always authentically do what is best for Black learners.

Through my own phenomenological reflection, it has been revealed that while there is beauty in the HBCU space, there are also burdens to bear. The challenge is ensuring that the beauty almost always outweighs the burdens in order to avoid the scars of academia and to continue pursuing the best learning experience for students and myself.

### **The Beauty of the HBCU Space**

Beauty

All around me

Air filled with community

Sounds of motivation and unity

My first day on campus was nerve wrecking. Arriving to interview for a tenure track position, I did not know what to expect. Was I really up for the task? Would the faculty and staff think I fit in well with their culture? After speaking with the Dean, Chair, and faculty panel, I had a strong desire to be selected. I knew that once in this space, I would thrive and just bring more joy to the teacher education department. Fast forward a few months later, I am back on campus. Now it was my first day as a tenure track professor. Again, nervousness built up. Not only was it my first day as a tenure track professor, but I was also working at an HBCU. Honestly, I did not know what to expect, but when I walked into the auditorium and heard the laughter, saw the hugging, and viewed the beautiful faces of all those Black folks, I was hooked! How exciting it was to be in a space with so many people who looked like me and on one level or another, could understand my lived experience as a Black woman. On opening day for faculty and staff, each leader that stepped onto the stage was Black, including the University president. All of the news shared that day was not positive, but I was uplifted just knowing that I now worked in a space that constantly reminds me of why I do what I do at such a high level.

In the coming weeks beyond opening day, I met my students. Again, almost all of them looked like me. There were instant connections and an easy rapport found in this space. All genuine and meaningful, built on mutual interests and the desire to see students reach their academic and professional goals. These relationships continue to flourish and over the past four and a half years, the beauty in this space continues to overshadow the whispers of mediocrity, failure, and irreversible hardships. Fortunately, countless opportunities have come my way and by embracing each one, there has been inevitable growth in my posture as a scholar, teacher educator, and partner in success for student growth and development.

### *Foundational Rememberings*

Such rich memories  
Steeped in a deep and dark history  
From slavery to freedom  
The pursuit of knowledge and wisdom  
Never forget the sacrifice  
Ancestors' wildest dreams fulfilled through your life

HBCUs have and continue to serve a critical need for Black students. Even though some question their relevance in today's world, HBCUs continue to produce proud, competent, and socially conscious Black students who know their worth and what they have to offer (LeMelle, 2002). Since the 1800s, Blacks in America have engaged in the necessary work to found, fund, and sustain learning spaces for uneducated Black people (Allen et al., 2007). This has not been and remains an uneasy task, but again, this is necessary work because these spaces not only serve

as a refuge, but this is where “the fundamental nature of being Black is revered” (Mobley, Jr., 2017, p. 1038). To be revered in any space as a Black person in America is rare and empowering. Those students who are often overlooked because of their socioeconomic status, educational challenges, and first-generation status, are welcomed to HBCU campuses to pursue their academic dreams (Anderson et al., 2020). There is a sense of “comprehensive mattering” or fully being seen (Carey, 2019; Carey, 2020) in the HBCU space that can only be found when there is genuine care in relationships.

Nationally, HBCUs continue to produce 50% of all Black educators, even though they only account for 3% of all colleges and universities (Coprledge et al, 2023). With this, teacher preparation programs at HBCUs provide useful insight into recruiting, retaining, preparing, and supporting preservice teachers. Based upon Ladson-Billings’ framework for teacher preparation, Lee (2019) examined seven of the top ten HBCU teacher preparation programs that produce programs. Components of the teacher preparation programs at Tennessee State University, Jackson State University, Virginia State University, Mississippi Valley State University, Fayetteville State University, Elizabeth City State University, and North Carolina A&T University were examined. While there is great variation among program offerings, it is clear that academic excellence and cultural competence were prioritized while other components, including field experience in urban schools and sociopolitical critique are largely absent from these HBCU teacher preparation programs. While Lee’s study focused on the overview of programmatic components, Toldson and Pearson (2022) instead received insight from School of Education deans from the University of Arkansas Pine Bluff, Claflin University, Alcorn State University, and Southern University Baton Rouge. The deans note that the success of preservice teachers from their institutions is linked to partnerships with school districts, professional development for higher education faculty and in-service K12 teachers, college preparedness of novice teachers, the passing and support for standardized exams, deep understanding of required content areas, and knowing institutional strengths while addressing the needs of both the institution and local school district partners.

In their most recent report on HBCUs, the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) shares best practices across four institutions, Alabama A&M University, Albany State University, Fayetteville State University, and Huston-Tillotson University (Coprledge et al, 2023). Authentic care towards preservice teachers’ relationship building with community stakeholders and centering preservice teachers’ Black identity through creating learning environments that value them and their communities were the highlighted findings. In all of the studies exploring HBCU teacher preparation, there is a focus on the genuine HBCU preservice teacher experience and what this means when they enter the K12 classroom. Considering historical and current approaches and components of HBCU teacher preparation programs will benefit students and lead to an impactful HBCU experience.

My institution has its own historical foundations that are both inspiring and motivating, particularly for local patrons of the city. Since the early 1900s, this institution has trained Black educators. As a teacher educator in this space, I feel honored and privileged to know that with my students, we continue to build upon this rich legacy. From a high school in 1900, to normal school

in 1926, to college in 1938, this institution remains a space that transforms and changes lives through various educational programs, while promoting Black excellence through rigor, care, and a familial learning environment.

### ***Beautiful Black People Everywhere***

Undeniable style	Ideas confirmed
Unmatched beauty	Perspectives challenged
Infectious laughter	Joy unspeakable
Melanin glowing	Beautiful + Black

My husband is Liberian and often in our conversations about growing up, he has a vastly different experience. He grew up in a space and place where everyone looked like him and that was not my norm. I, as wonderful as my childhood was, did not have that experience. Outside of my family and church gatherings, it was uncommon for me to be in any space that was predominantly filled with people that looked like me. Walking this campus, after years of being in this space, still makes me smile. I love seeing the beautiful Black students. Tank tops, ripped jeans, afros, long braids, sweatpants, J's, colorful Crocs, and oh so much melanin! Hearing the dialogue around coursework, student activities, reality television, black culture, and jokes also makes me smile. Not to mention the faculty. Faculty that looks like me with advanced degrees, varied experiences, spicy (some) personalities, all while they walk in the autonomy to be themselves in what could alternatively be an oppressive space. Stylish staff that fill the halls with laughter while displaying gorgeous garments and trendy hairstyles. When I look around, I see beautiful Black people everywhere and it makes me smile. There is something special here. Difficult to describe in words, but very special and necessary for my professional and scholarly soul.

There also seems to be an urgency for excellence, if that makes sense. There is an energy that displays excellence is all around, some undiscovered, but still present. Some untapped, but no less necessary to cultivate and activate for greatness in impact. Working with faculty that know, understand and value the experiences of their students is priceless. Knowing the Black experience and what this means for our students propels us as faculty to go above and beyond in preparing students for their future careers, while being mindful of the barriers and challenges they face to get there.

### ***The Burdens of the HBCU Space***

If you allow it to be  
Black excellence can become a lot to carry

Because of my appreciation and respect for the HBCU space, there will not be much focus on the burdens, but there is no denying that a sense of heaviness does exist here. Beginning my

work as a tenure track professor at a small HBCU, it was easy to take on the perspective of “I get to do this” versus “I have to do this.” As time has moved forward, there have been many opportunities for growth, collaboration, and leadership, but this can be overwhelming. There are so many tasks, and few people to complete them. As one who cares about the advancement of the university and student growth, you find yourself continuously doing more and it can become unmanageable and unbalanced. Aside from the workload, HBCUs often lack resources and enroll students that do not have the academic background and preparation for higher education rigor (Anderson et al., 2020). While maintaining high standards, you must provide support that matches to ensure that students are academically successful.

Another area of challenge is maintaining Black excellence under the guise of white eyes and white decision makers. In other words, the white gaze. In my bubble of autonomy as a teacher educator, there are times to note that decisions are made far beyond my classroom and department. Our university is a part of a bigger system that includes individuals that are not a part of the Black experience, so therefore, there are times when they will not understand what works to help Black students reach their academic and professional goals. French philosopher Frantz Fanon (2008) states, “And already I am being dissected under White eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed. Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare” (p. 87). Renowned author Toni Morrison also shares that her work intentionally resists this misinformed and unwanted critique of focusing on white people in her novels. She shares, “I have had reviews in the past that have accused me of not writing about white people ... as though our lives have no meaning and no depth without the white gaze” (Carroll, 2019). Both of these prolific writers share that there is an imposition of whiteness that assumes superiority and significance to the detriment of Blacks. This gaze is stifling, troubling, and oppressive. The question becomes, in an HBCU space, how do we proceed in Black excellence with this gaze? The answer is to continue walking in our authenticity despite the white gaze that inevitably exists. This is a shared burden to carry, but not one that will overwhelm us.

In higher education, there is supposed to be intellectual and instructional freedom, right? At least that is the expectation, particularly when teaching in an HBCU context. Unfortunately, the reality of high stakes standardized testing has reared its ugly head and now impacts what is taught in my courses. Yes, preservice teachers need to pass Praxis exams in order to be certified in the state. Yes, these exams are problematic, for a number of reasons, minimally including the costs and the limited connection between these test outcomes and preservice teachers’ ability to effectively plan, instruct, and assess student learning. With this intrusion of test preparation as a part of classroom instructional and exploration time, there becomes a façade of instructional freedom. While true that there is no administrative gaze and demands on what is included in my course content and syllabi, there is a felt responsibility to support Black preservice teachers in passing these exams. Seeing and experiencing the brilliance of my students weekly, to only later discover they did not pass these exams, is frustrating. With the constant goal to support them towards reaching their academic and professional goals of becoming teachers, I find myself rallying other instructors to join me in infusing Praxis material, questions, and prompts into our

courses to ensure future success on the exams. Although necessary, the time could be used for much more engaging, interactive, and meaningful learning experiences.

### **Me in the HBCU Space: A Welcomed Imposter**

A sense of jealousy  
Seeing things differently  
Often been one of few  
Provides me with another view  
Now one of many amongst the team  
Serving to support the silenced dream

As an elementary student, I was bussed out of my neighborhood (down the hill) to attend school in another neighborhood (up the hill). The perception was that down the hill people were poor, while people up the hill had money. Of course, this was false, but that was the narrative presented in my community during my childhood. This bussing experience was the first of many where my formal learning would take place in a predominantly white setting. From elementary through graduate school, most of my teachers and classmates were white. With this as my experience, there is no denying that there are times when the notion of being an imposter crosses my mind. To clarify, there has never been an experience during my time working at an HBCU where anyone made me feel out of place. There is just an outsider within struggle (Collins, 1986; 2009). As an outsider within, you are marginalized and there is a struggle of going through a process of fully becoming an insider. As Collins shares her insights from a sociological perspective as a Black woman, there is an instant connection to my role as a Black woman teacher educator. The questions begin to form: Do I want full insider status or am I okay with maintaining my outsider within status? What is the difference between the two? In an attempt to answer, my outsider within status continues to serve me well. There are unique experiences and perspectives that are provided based on my educational background in predominantly white spaces. Not greater or lesser than others, just unique. Being one of few or one of many has given me the opportunities to learn and grow with others who have similar and different viewpoints, ideas, and experiences to help inform the important work needed in the field of education.

### **Teacher Educator within the Space**

A privilege  
An honor  
To teach Black students  
Who want to teach Black students  
The stakes are high  
But impossibility is not an option

Preparing them for greatness  
While I teach  
And live outside my comfort zone  
We all learn  
We are now ready  
To change the world

It is an honor to teach. It is an even greater honor for me to teach Black, primarily women, preservice teachers. These are *my* students. There is a strong sense of responsibility I have for them and their educational goals. As a mentor has for their mentee, there is genuine love and care infused with healthy boundaries in order to maintain genuine connection (Gamble-Lomax, 2016). With high expectations and high support as my overarching teaching philosophy, my preservice teachers must work hard to excel in their courses and to reach graduation. Knowing what it means to be a Black woman educator, there is an instant connection with most of my students around this experience. With all of the societal stereotypes and images of who Black women are, there is a strong desire for my students to rise above all of this and present themselves as flawless. This is one of my mistakes. Everyone has their areas of growth, both academically and dispositionally, so part of my task is helping preservice teachers to identify these areas while working towards improvement.

All of this at an HBCU, particularly one that was founded for teachers, makes it even more critical for me to produce my best instruction, provide great support and build meaningful relationships with my students. My expectations of them are aligned with my own professional practice. There is clear intention in modeling what is expected of them through my own planning, instruction, assessment, and interactions. Through this, my hope is that they enter the profession confidently prepared. This preparation is based on their effectiveness in the following growth goals as (1) urban education culturally relevant teachers, (2) reflective practitioners, (3) collaborative stakeholders, (4) professionals who consistently meet high expectations, and (5) educators who remain authentic.

### ***Cultural Relevant Pedagogues in an Urban Context***

Upon my arrival in the HBCU space, there was an effort to revitalize our programming, ensuring that we were utilizing a culturally relevant curriculum as we prepared teachers for a very diverse P-12 student population (Ashby-Bey et al, 2021). This initial revitalization permeates all of my courses since this is a critically important component of instruction and relationships with students. Ladson-Billings (1995) defines “culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy of opposition (1992c) not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment” (p. 160). This shows that educators engaged in this practice are going against the normalized approach for teaching and considering the students, school, families, and communities, not just themselves. Additionally, standards of academic success for all students,

relationship building, making connections to learning by going beyond the classroom, and using what students already know to bridge the learning gaps are all components of being culturally relevant (1995, 2009). This is not only a component of preservice teachers' lesson planning in my courses, but it is also a component of our instruction, assessment, and approaches to relationship building with all stakeholders.

Failure to be culturally competent leads to lack of connection for both teachers and P-12 students. P-12 students need to know that what they value is highlighted in the curriculum, particularly in urban contexts. My HBCU is located in an urban context, so we must consider urban learners and what their learning experiences are in the urban space. Milner (2012) makes it clear that not all urban is the same in education and breaks down that some of the characteristics include lack of resources, teacher turnover, and additional issues that come as a result of proximity to cities. With the beauty and innovation in urban learning spaces, there is much to glean from those administrators, teachers, and students, that often persevere while facing many barriers. My students are doing both the external and internal work to be culturally relevant teachers in both urban learning spaces and beyond to meet the needs of all P-12 learners.

### ***Reflective Practitioners***

“Not a summary, but a reflection” are words often shared with my students when they provide lots of retelling, but not enough insight when providing a reflection of a lesson, video, or assigned reading. The goal is to push them beyond what questions: What was the content about? What did you teach in the lesson? and into how questions: How does this content connect to other readings, videos, or lessons? How does this challenge or confirm your thinking about the topic and assumptions you have? How will you change your approach as a result of this content? Helping my preservice teachers to dig deeper is important for their professional growth and development. Additionally, this reflection connects to their experiences as Black educators learning in an urban context. It is critical that they continuously unpack their own challenges connected to race and learning spaces. Additionally, a part of this reflective work is acknowledging biases, prejudices, and misconceptions of certain places, people, and perspectives. After the acknowledgement comes the work of continuously examining themselves and putting into practice equitable instructional practices for P-12 students.

As previously noted, my goal is to model this for my students. Reflection is a constant part of my role as a tenure track faculty member in terms of instruction, planning, research, and service. There is a need for me to take time and write some of my thoughts through journaling, but also times when reflection is discussed with my colleagues and students. This reflective conversation often happens in our course “check-in” times, assessing how students are feeling. As an active participant in the check-in, there is an opportunity for honesty, openness and vulnerability, which only increases connection in our learning community. It is important that they know reflection is not just something preached to them, but it is also one of my consistent practices as an educator and professional. It has been noted that, “Incorporating the concept of reflection into teacher

education programs, prepares teachers for a lifetime of reflecting on best practices that impact student achievement” (Lupinski et al., 2012, p. 91). Knowing this propels me to continue in this much needed work for myself and my students as they prepare for the P-12 classrooms.

### ***Collaborative Stakeholders***

Teaching is not a solo sport. Although a teacher’s name might be the only name on the room door or the report card, there are many people collectively working together to ensure student success. As an educator, collaboration is key. Personally, as a tenure track professor in the HBCU space, collaboration has made my professional life much easier. With the work of a team, more goals are accomplished, and everyone has the opportunity to work smarter, not harder. Also, my experience in the HBCU space has been filled with a celebrated culture of collaboration. Interdisciplinary journal publications, cross-departmental grant acquisitions, and collaboratively planned professional developments are just a few of the many ways faculty, students, and staff work together for the advancement of the institution. This communal spirit of collaboration inevitably permeates my classroom and instruction. With my students, collaboration is embedded in how *we* learn. Group presentations, lesson planning feedback, face-to-face and virtual discussions, as well as group study sessions are just a few of the methods used to support collaboration.

Beyond our classroom, my students must build relationships with their P-12 students, colleagues, families, and community members. These connections must be authentic, so this takes time. A part of our teacher preparation program encourages students to connect with all stakeholders, especially families, through in-person and written communication. We all know that learning starts at home and since family members are P-12 students’ first teachers, without a collaborative approach to instruction, there are undoubtedly unidentified areas of concern that will be overlooked. Moreover, the reality is that institutions do not singlehandedly prepare teachers for the classrooms. Institution, district, and community partnerships are pivotal in preparing highly qualified teachers (Toldson & Pearson, 2019).

### ***Professionals who Meet High Expectations***

Professionalism is a key component in teacher preparation programs. In this current HBCU space, professional dispositions are infused throughout various courses with my students. It is important that they understand the need to always maintain professionalism, even when they think no one is watching. This professionalism starts in our courses in how we speak to one another, interact, complete coursework, and share our varying perspectives through rich discussions. Once in the P-12 space, the goal is for my students to maintain a high level of professionalism through planning, instruction, assessment, and relationship building. A good question is, how exactly is professionalism defined for my students? Yes, punctuality is important and a part of being a

professional, but there is more. Of course, dressing professionally and appropriately is one of the areas, but again, there is more.

Ultimately, for my students, professionalism is continually striving to meet high expectations across all components of evaluation. This extends beyond both the informal and formal observations that occur both during internship and when preservice teachers become teachers of record in their classrooms. My idea of these components of evaluation are what is important for the preservice teachers themselves, in addition to components of the formal evaluation. For example, if connecting with community members is a component of teaching that a preservice teacher deems important for their own professional growth, but it is not included on any formal evaluation, operating as a professional continually working towards meeting high expectations, the preservice teacher would maintain that component as an area of significance. While working with my students, professionalism is fluid and evolves over time based on their professional goals. While there are critical areas of teaching that remain focal points (planning, instruction, assessment, professional development, etc.), my students know that there are personal components connected to their cultural competence that needs to be addressed. While operating in an authentic environment, my students are learning to thrive as professionals.

### ***Remaining Authentic and Embracing Self***

My own personal fulfillment in being a teacher largely comes from the space to be my authentic self. There is freedom in being both a scholarly nerd and a reemerging spoken word artist. While learning with my students, we laugh, empathize, and challenge one another. Mentions of my husband and children sometimes impede our time together in the classroom and that is welcomed because this is all a part of my life and how I authentically show up to engage with my students. It is critically important that my students enter the profession being their authentic selves on a daily basis. There is so much they have to offer based on their backgrounds, experiences, insights, and perspectives that P-12 students would suffer a great loss if these teachers entered the classroom as fraudulent beings. Through creating a safe and collaborative learning space for my students, the goal is that they are always comfortable with sharing their thoughts and speaking their own truths, respectfully. Failure to do so would make for an unbearable professional journey.

### **Looking Ahead: Illuminating the HBCU Space**

I feel at home  
Once trying to escape it  
Now a full embrace  
With an overall goal  
To illuminate a hidden space

In a very popular passage of scripture from Matthew 5:14-16, it reads,

You are the light of the world – like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see...” (New Living Translation Version Bible, 1996/2007).

Because of the state of the current racial climate and skewed views of Black Americans, often HBCUs are like the city atop a hill that are hidden. HBCUs have so much to offer, but often cannot provide what Black students need because of their hidden state. My personal goal while in the HBCU space is to ensure it is placed on the stand so its beauty can be illuminated for all to see. With the personal growth goals as a guide, HBCU preservice teachers will enter their K12 classrooms ready to fulfill the powerful role of classroom teacher. By preparing urban education culturally relevant teachers, the preservice teachers are ready for the world, and particularly the uniqueness and beauty that urban learners bring to the learning environment which enriches the curriculum and learning experience. Reflective practitioners know how to critically analyze themselves, the educational space, and work towards meaningful changes with an emphasis on that which is just for all learners and stakeholders. As collaborative stakeholders, the preservice teachers embrace partnership with students and families, recognizing the value and insight they bring to strengthen the learning experience for all. The goal of meeting high expectations should translate from teacher to student, with teachers modeling that high expectations can always be met with communal support and dismantling of barriers towards success. Being your genuine self is the most critical growth goal as preservice teachers work toward creating inclusive and engaging learning environments that challenge themselves and learners toward continuous growth. Although not an easy task, with one preservice teacher, one discussion, and one connection at a time, it is possible. I am an illuminator of the hidden HBCU space.

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