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I Need You To Survive: Black Women Resisting White Supremacy Culture for Faculty and Student Wellbeing

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Abstract

The K-12 teaching population in the United States remains overwhelmingly White despite rapid changes in racial demographics. Black prospective educators enrolled in teacher preparation programs often find themselves isolated and subjected to racism. Racial affinity groups have been established to support students of Color. Faculty mentors of these groups spend substantial time, physical, and emotional energy supporting students who navigate the violence of higher education institutions. Given recent and ongoing pandemics, supporting students to survive, thrive, and develop psychological literacy is critical work and has become more time intensive. This article examines the experiences of two Black women faculty mentors working with Black undergraduate students. Findings indicate that notwithstanding the labor, mentoring has supported faculty members' wellbeing, thereby disrupting traditional notions of service leading to burnout. The authors posit that affinity mentoring is mutually beneficial for faculty and student wellbeing. Implications and transferability are discussed.

Keywords: Affinity groups; mentoring; Critical race theory; White supremacy culture; faculty wellbeing; student wellbeing.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified the inequitable nature of schools and schooling in the United States (US) and globally. The quick pivot to remote learning revealed a lack of access to technology and disproportionate Wi-Fi capabilities, among other things. Maintaining a healthy work-life balance was already a struggle for educators before the pandemic, and teaching remotely exacerbated existing tensions as there was no longer a separation between home and school. Teachers and students took on the roles of caregivers while engaged in virtual teaching and learning. As a result, teachers were expected to provide additional emotional support for students, often ignoring their self-care. And although the COVID-19 pandemic has changed shape, existing pandemics (e.g., anti-Black racism, xenophobia, and cisheteropatriarchy) have been illuminated and continue to thrive. Acknowledging some of the challenges mentioned above in the classroom is essential as higher education faculty consider supporting prospective teachers' wellbeing as they prepare to work in K-12 classrooms.

Student mental health and wellbeing took a sharp decline, as evidenced by a rise in cases of students experiencing anxiety and depression (Camacho-Zuñiga et al., 2021; Martin, 2010). These issues are not unique to higher education systems in the US. In other countries, James and colleagues (2019) noted that because higher education operates using a neoliberal approach, college students are treated as "consumers as opposed to learners" which negatively affects their wellbeing (p. 78). Trends focused on college students' mental health are even more concerning in colleges of education, where future teachers must consider their own wellbeing in addition to the wellbeing of the K-12 students they serve in their field experiences. Although

some universities instituted mental health support offices, much of the work to support student wellbeing falls on the faculty and staff, increasing stress and exhaustion (Savage & Morrissey, 2021). Moreover, college mental health services can be difficult for students to access and are often generic in delivery, which fails to account for students' various intersectional identities, lived experiences, and contexts.

Building from the work of Brooker et al. (2019), we started our study by examining how universities diminish wellbeing. We argue that wellbeing must be viewed through a holistic framework that simultaneously attends to our cultural, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social wellbeing. More specifically, we posit that several characteristics of White Supremacy Culture (WSC) (Grim, 2023; Okun, 1999) contribute to the stress and trauma Black students experience in teacher preparation programs. These characteristics, outlined in the next section, are fundamentally used to promote racism, capitalism, assimilation, and hegemony. However, just as WSC was constructed over time by the self-proclaimed power elite, we have the power to name and deconstruct them to support our students' flourishing. To do so, we need critical frameworks to understand and unpack the nuances of WSC, higher education, teacher preparation, and mental health. Next, we discuss how teacher preparation and WSC are inextricably linked and continue to reinforce that status quo in higher education.

Teacher Preparation and White Supremacy Culture

In 1999, Dr. Tema Okun wrote a brief article outlining specific characteristics of WSC by describing how White Supremacy operates within organizations. The initial goal of this work was to provide shared language about WSC so that she and participants in her racial justice training sessions could have helpful tools to unpack and dismantle WSC in their respective spaces (Grim, 2023). While discussing or defining all 19 characteristics in this article is not feasible, we begin by sharing why this lens is useful. Here, we unpack a few characteristics and how they manifest in teacher education and preparation. Later, we reflect on the characteristics of WSC in our positionality statements and themes from our data analysis. We encourage readers to study Dr. Okun's work for a fuller explanation of each characteristic, antidotes she suggests to counter them, and a caution about weaponizing individual characteristics of the tool. Okun (2021) offers this framework to:

> help us understand the water in which we are all swimming so that we can collaboratively work together to build and sustain cultures that help us thrive as communities and individuals. Cultures that are not based on abuse of power and accumulation of profit. Cultures that are based on interdependence, justice, and respect for each other ... Cultures that embody the belief that we all do better when we all do better. (p. 29)

This offering resonates with us deeply and undergirds our commitment to the education, mentoring, and liberation of Black prospective teachers. Also, we recognize that this journal has an international readership and that the race-based divisions (people of Color vs. White) that are so salient in the US present differently in other places (e.g., social class, caste, religion). Therefore, we use this lens to explain how WSC operates in the *waters* of teacher preparation *in* the US. Such shared language will become useful as we later offer themes illustrating how mentoring Black prospective teachers facilitates our mutual survival in higher education.

Colleges and universities in the US were built on stolen lands using free labor from enslaved Black and Brown bodies. We argue that this theft and exploitation continue today. Universities are eager to recruit students and faculty of Color to increase their diversity numbers to better achieve status via public rankings and attract donations. These efforts are connected to at least two characteristics of WSC a) progress is bigger and more, and b) quantity over quality. "Progress is bigger and more" asserts that success is tied to size without respect for people's experiences. So, while our institutions yearn to recruit more students, faculty, and staff of Color, they often fail to protect us from racism and microaggressions on campus, leaving us "exploited, excluded, and underserved" (Okun, 2021, p. 16). This characteristic is closely linked with quantity over quality, in which quantitative goals are paramount. This leads to annual reports where institutions tout increased diversity and are eager to claim designations such as minority-serving or Hispanic-serving. Such reports rarely, if ever, speak to the quality of people's experiences, as emotions are not welcome in capitalistic spaces.

Continuing with this example, we find that our institutions fail to address racial and identity-based aggressions and systemic exclusion of Black individuals. One may think that addressing racism and deficit-based thinking in teacher preparation is central to educator development since future teachers will undoubtedly teach in increasingly diverse spaces which require cultural competence. However, the opposite is true, as many institutions expect Black students and faculty to *turn the other cheek,* which means responding with nonviolence, patience, and grace. Two additional characteristics of WSC explain this injustice, a) fear of open conflict and b) the right to comfort. Fear of open conflict is when leaders choose to ignore "difficult" conversations, blame the person who raises the issue instead of acknowledging the issue and the perpetrator, encourage "politeness," and force the offended party to divorce their feelings by requiring them to "calm down." Insisting that Black women and Black girls need to calm down is commonplace since we are often labeled aggressive and strong, which is at odds

with White women being seen as soft, feminine, and incapable of harm (Accapadi, 2007; Motro et al., 2022; White, 1999). Leaders in higher education regularly insist that White colleagues and students "did not mean anything" or that their racist acts were "innocent mistakes." Failing to hold perpetrators of racism, sexism, etc., accountable assumes their right to comfort. That is, there is an inherent assumption that our White colleagues should feel free and safe from confrontation despite the pain and harassment we were subjected to. As such, we are expected to suppress or ignore our emotions continually.

A final set of WSC characteristics woven throughout teacher preparation and relevant to this article are perfectionism, one right way, paternalism, and objectivity. Although Okun initially introduced these four characteristics individually, she highlights their intersectional nature in her recent writings (Okun, 2021). In the US, teacher preparation programs are notoriously rigid in their courses of study. Most prospective teachers get no credit for the existing skill sets they bring to their programs (e.g., multilingualism, cultural competence, informal K-16 teaching experience), and most programs offer little to no choice for elective courses. Professional dispositions documents offer guidance on how future teachers should communicate, dress, "present" themselves, respond to feedback, and more. Teacher candidates have no voice in determining these policies (e.g., paternalism), although they must adhere to them. These expectations suggest that there is one right way that teacher preparation occurs, and teachers that fail to meet these standards can be disciplined. Fear of illegitimate discipline causes some Black students to abandon aspects of their identities (e.g., wearing their natural hair, speaking in African American Vernacular English, etc.) to chase the illusion of perfectionism. This undue burden, directly related to double consciousness, an internal conflict experienced by Black people, who are forced to navigate between two contrasting identities or perspectives, has a deleterious effect on Black students' self-image and wellbeing (Du Bois, 1903/1989). Similarly, Black faculty serving on academic disposition committees are often tasked with educating others about Blackness and advocating for Black students not to be unfairly punished, which is additional emotional labor on us.

Universities directly impact the wellbeing of Black students, faculty, and staff, as we are regularly subjected to unchecked institutional violence and standards created to maintain White supremacy. Acknowledging that relationships in the academy are created and maintained within a system built upon characteristics of WSC allows us to reframe the dialogue about educator burnout. Instead of suggesting that mentoring students in support of their wellbeing leads to educator burnout, we assign blame to the system that fails to protect Black students, faculty, and staff from trauma and violence. That is, we are collectively tired of fighting White supremacy in teacher preparation. *We are not tired of each other*. This article fills a critical gap in the field by discussing how our collective efforts to mentor Black students actually combats neoliberal systems and how such resistance supports our mutual wellbeing.

Now that we have described the waters and Whiteness of teacher preparation in the US, we provide our positionality statements. After sharing these, we discuss our theoretical framing and methods. We use critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework, as both WSC and CRT begin with the premise that race was socially constructed, and that Whiteness is used as a tool to promote racism, classism, and other "-isms." We then share examples from our narratives to illustrate how our praxes are already dialogical. That is, resisting interlocking systems of oppression cannot be done independently. *We need one another to survive*.

Positionality

We chose to include our positionality statements for two reasons. First, we draw on Milner's (2007) work around race, culture, and researcher positionality, and we offer stories about ourselves to center our experiences as *normal*. Next, we agree with Baker-Doyle's (2019) statement that invisible identities do not equal objectivity and neutrality in research. Instead, it is critical to acknowledge that how we work, know, and feel is directly tied to our experiences as Black women. Presenting our statements offers insight into our journeys, how we experienced and came to understand elements of WSC in our upbringing and practice, and how our racialized experiences in the US are critical elements of our theoretical framings, particularly our choice to use CRT. Moreover, choosing to be transparent about our positionality and how our identities are both marginalized and privileged is a direct choice to challenge objectivity, which is a characteristic of CRT and WSC. Additionally, much of our work with Black students is tied to lessons we continue to learn as we navigate and resist WSC.

We write this article as two Black women scholars in education who are committed to equity, justice, and disrupting systemic oppression. One of the primary ways we seek to do this at our current institution is by mentoring Black students in teacher education programs. While much of this work occurs in informal spaces (e.g., one-on-one meetings, gatherings off campus), this article focuses on our collective work supporting teachers in #BlackTeachersMatter (#BTM), a student group focused on "help[ing] educators navigate and center a variety of Black perspectives in the field of education as well as challenge system norms" (#BlackTeachersMatter, n.d.).

Author 1. I am **Marrielle Myers**, a Black, cis-gender woman born and raised in North Carolina. My parents were college educated, and my dad earned a graduate degree. My maternal grandparents were also college educated and were K-12 educators. My paternal grandparents grew up in rural areas, and while they were not able to attend college, they ensured that their four children could. I was raised to be a rule follower (e.g., in school, in the Southern church), and while that afforded me many opportunities, it also clouded my vision. Either/or, binary thinking and perfectionism, all characteristics of WSC, permeated both home and school life. For example, math problems were right or wrong, and behaviors/choices were either aligned with or in opposition to the Bible. Perfectionism manifested in me being chastised for my behavior in school. Yes, I was talkative, but it was often because I had finished my work. Instead of teachers choosing to connect the behavior (talking) to how quickly I completed my schoolwork, it was attached to my character, and I was labeled problematic and inadequate. Because I did not want to disappoint my parents and violate their expectations, I engaged in the either/or thinking that I had internalized and determined that if who I was "wrong," I must need to become someone else. Classmates often labeled these behaviors as *acting White* (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In my quest to be obedient to the rules, I was unaware of the system that made the rules and its roots in oppression. I was not aware that my parents had successfully navigated WSC to achieve their status and, as such, were preparing us to do the same. As a mathematics teacher in a high-poverty high school, I vividly recall an internal struggle and frustration when my students did not follow the rules. I wanted them to experience the same "success" I had and thought that rule-following was the way. I also saw the ways schools were harmful spaces to them. I did not know how to resolve this tension, especially when my school advocated for carceral logic over curiosity. While my graduate program opened the door, it was my elders, academic mothers, and colleagues who worked with me to hone my skills to see, name, and challenge the system. I am most proud of this journey, which has allowed me to heal, question the rules, and now work to disrupt them so that I can live a liberated life. I am proud to disrupt interlocking systems of oppression, including WSC, for myself, my niece, and all the Black and Brown girls who are labeled bossy when in actuality, they are extraordinary leaders. My work, labor, journey, and this article are all in service of disrupting racialized oppression to create a more humane experience for those harmed by anti-Blackness.

***Author 2*.** My name is **Lateefah Id-Deen**, and I am a Black woman born and raised in Oakland, California. The Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, CA, so its presence and impact were evident throughout the city. I now understand that their work in local communities, such as providing free food and medical care to community members, was an act of resistance toward an oppressive system that ignored their needs. Individualism, a characteristic of WSC, started at a young age. During my K-12 school experience, I was taught to solve mathematics problems on my own. There were always mathematics competitions that encouraged me to complete math problems quickly and on my own. These types of instructional strategies led me to look for individual recognition and credit. As a result, I adopted the mindset of working alone and navigating spaces where collaboration was not encouraged. I continued to experience individualism as an undergraduate student at the University of Arkansas-Pine Bluff, a historically Black college and university (HBCU). In my mathematics courses, everyone valued competition more than cooperation. Although I graduated with honors, I later realized the power of working with others. As a mathematics teacher, several of my students struggled to learn the content. As a result, I developed informal support networks through peer collaborations and mentors for my students. Students learned the benefits of collectivism in learning spaces as well as how working with one another can help them outside of the classroom. I continuously reflect on how my mathematics learning experiences affect the ways I support students within and outside of schools as an associate professor, advisor, mentor, researcher, and family member to young Black people in my life.

Theoretical Framing

We situate our work in CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Solórzano and Yasso (2002) build upon the tenets of CRT to explicate what they term *critical race methodology*. Their theory a) centers race in the research process, b) highlights intersectionality as essential to understanding any phenomena, c) challenges traditional research paradigms, and d) posits that interdisciplinary frameworks are necessary to fully understand the experiences of those forced to the margins (Solórzano & Yasso, 2022). We have previously used the characteristics of WSC to outline how Whiteness is present in teacher preparation programs. Here, we describe four tenets of CRT and explain how they help ground our work. We do so by offering relevant examples from our lived experiences and context at a primarily White institution (PWI).

The first tenet of CRT is that race is endemic to society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Therefore, racialized acts are not accidental or can be treated as isolated incidents. Solórzano and Yasso (2002) extend our understanding of this tenet and state, "A critical race methodology in education also acknowledges the intercentricity of racialized oppression—the layers of subordination based on race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality" (p. 25). This point is aligned with our argument that higher education is a space of WSC. As such, using CRT supports our claims that racism undergirds traditional definitions of wellbeing and success.

Second, CRT challenges dominant ideologies, specifically objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yasso, 2002). Policies in teacher education are stated to be "objective" and designed with a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, students at our institution sign up for field experiences online, and the matching between students and the school site is done anonymously. Such approaches, praised for being equal, fail to account for the unique needs that historically marginalized students have in the field (e.g., being isolated in predominantly White schools, never working with a mentor teacher of Color despite multiple field placements in the program, and being forced to drive extreme distances which multiplies existing financial burdens). Using CRT allows us to call out such practices and recognize that proclaimed "neutrality" often comes at the expense of Black and Brown students (Parker & Stovall, 2004).

Third, CRT values and centers the experiential knowledge of those from historically marginalized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Therefore, storytelling, oral histories, and other forms of knowledge, such as autoethnography, are essential for understanding our lived experiences (Solórzano & Yasso, 2002). For this study, we co-developed a set of questions that allowed us to reflect on our upbringing, K-12 schooling experiences, collegiate experiences, intersectionality, and journeys to academia. We then told stories about our definitions of personal wellbeing and success and student wellbeing and success. We concluded our stories by articulating why we choose to mentor Black students, what we gain from doing so, the tensions we experience in doing so, how our identities influence our mentorship, and our hopes for our Black students. We used our narratives as the data for this article as we recognize that our experiences as Black women serve to counter traditional narratives about mentoring and wellbeing in higher education.

Finally, CRT research employs an interdisciplinary approach to further illuminate intersectionality and contextualize interlocking systems of oppression. This integrative approach allowed us to demonstrate the deep connections between WSC and teacher preparation. Using WSC by no means suggests that CRT was inadequate to frame our context and study. Instead, these frameworks intersect in powerful ways. As faculty who push back against the status quo in an attempt to help create more socially just institutions, we *use* the concept of intersectionality as a heuristic to describe the complexities of our communities (Collins, 2019). Single-issue struggles are insufficient for Black students and faculty who span gender, class, faith, sexuality, and ability. As such, we employ complementary frameworks to highlight our context's complexity and chart a path toward liberation.

Methods

As a research approach, autoethnography enhances understanding by emphasizing personal experiences as a foundation for inquiry (Ellis et al., 2011). By centering this research within the context of our lived experiences, autoethnography enabled us to gain deeper insights into how we support Black students in a racial affinity group. Autoethnography recognizes the importance of allowing individuals and communities to express their unique experiences, perspectives, and stories that may have been historically silenced or neglected within mainstream discourse (Golba, 2022). This article draws upon autoethnography by describing the experiences of two Black women who looked inward to uncover and analyze social structures and power dynamics through impactful moments. Analyzing our personal narratives allowed us to critically interpret our experience as Black women who are faculty in higher education. Through its immersive depth, a skillfully crafted autoethnography can actively unlock, disclose, promote healing, invigorate, pose challenges, and empower individuals (Keles, 2022). The perspectives shared help better understand Black women's experiences and how our intersectionality exists within higher education. However, we acknowledge that these experiences are not universally applicable or representative of all Black women. We want to avoid generalizing these experiences as the standard by recognizing the importance of acknowledging individual differences and the unique nature of our narratives.

Data Sources and Analysis

Both authors responded to a set of interview prompts. We organized our interview questions across four domains: a) background and demographic information, b) personal wellbeing, c) student wellbeing and student success, and d) support for #BlackTeachersMatter and mentoring Black students. All recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai. The final data set for this study is our individual stories and meeting transcripts from our debrief and coding sessions.

After uploading each of the transcripts to a shared drive, we cleaned up our transcripts, as Otter.ai is not 100% accurate. We then independently coded the transcripts using what Saldaña (2012) outlined as *First Cycle* coding. First Cycle coding methods are often considered open coding, where the researcher uses a variety of codes to label and organize the data. Saldaña's coding scheme was most appropriate for our work because the First Cycle coding methods allowed us to a) gain a broad overview of each other's responses using holistic coding, b) describe the data using descriptive coding, c) honor our voices using In Vivo

coding (Saldaña, 2012), and d) attend to affective elements of the data using emotion and values coding. In the following table, we list examples from our raw data and First Cycle codes to illuminate this process for the reader (see Table 1).

Table 1

Examples from First Cycle Coding

Coding Method	**Code Name(s)**	**Sample Quote**
Descriptive	Recognizing the System of Schooling Underprepared Naive Commitment	I would say I was ill-prepared and understanding the system. And because I didn't understand the system, there were things that I did that reproduced the system, which in turn underserved those students, and so I had to learn the system so that I could navigate the system for them for their benefit and so that their brilliance could be recognized. (Author 1) Approximately one week after I completed my student teaching, the superintendent called me to his office. He offered me a full-time job teaching five mathematics courses beginning in January. He had one cautionary comment before I decided to take the job. He said something like, "These kids have had three substitute teachers in one semester, and they all quit." I had so many questions in my head, "Will these kids respect me?" "Am I really ready to teach five mathematics classes all by myself?" After much thought, I agreed to take the position. I started with no mentor and a group of over 120 students. This position was a real challenge. However, I saw myself, a Black student from a low SES background, in all of them. So, I used that to calm my nerves. (Author 2)
In Vivo	Right Relationship	I feel like my whole self when I am with my family! The love we have for one another is like no other. We don't always get along, but we know the love will always be there. When we have a great meal, music and laughter, it's the best feeling in the world. We could be in the States or in another country and we will find ways to laugh and have fun. (Author 2)
Values	Authenticity Affirmation	I probably feel my best when I'm around friends and family, and loved ones. And in spaces where I'm just truly affirmed and affirmed for being me. The best part of being the best version of myself is when I can just be me, not a professor, not an academic, not any of titles, but just me… when I can relax, when I can unwind, when I can be imperfect, which is who we all are, and [still be] embraced. (Author 1)
Emotions In Vivo	Overwhelmed Not Happy	I am still suffering from burnout, but I am doing better with saying no. Maybe it's because I have tenure, but I have declined several writing collaborations because I am overwhelmed. I continue to work on a healthy work-life balance. I am doing better with finding time to be with my friends and family and doing things that make me happy. (Author 2)

While First Cycle coding allows researchers to gain an overview of and summarize the data, Second Cycle coding is necessary to build themes by searching for patterns in First Cycle codes and clustering them (Miles et al., 2020). After an independent review of each other's First Cycle coding, we met several times to engage in pattern, focused, and axial coding. This process allowed us to identify several First Cycle codes that emerged across our independent analyses (e.g., balance, personal commitment, recognizing and navigating racialized systems, and counter spaces) and what these patterns told us about educator and student wellbeing. Further, these conversations allowed us to engage in an iterative axial coding process whereby we recognized and maintained the nuance of some themes (e.g., relationships and navigating systems). For example, navigating systems was a theme in our data that consisted of several codes, including a) recognizing systems, b) understanding the players in the system (e.g., individual and institutional), c) battling macro and microaggressions, and d) needing to understand this process for ourselves so that we can shield our students from as much of the effects of the system as possible. While we identified several themes in our two-step analysis process, here we report on and offer depth for two themes: Seeking Balance and Building and Maintaining Relationships.

Data and Themes

Several themes emerged in our analysis, and we present three here that highlight how our mentoring work with Black prospective teachers is critical, intentional, and in direct opposition to the tensions created by WSC.

Seeking Balance

One theme that emerged in our stories was balance. Our data shows the various nuances of how balance can show up when supporting students. While traditional notions of work-life balance are common in the discourse around wellbeing, our analysis revealed two manifestations, including a) the exclusion of balance in universities' conceptions of wellbeing and b) modeling the complexities of achieving work-life balance.

Universities' attempts to implement a uniform model of student success often dismiss students' wellbeing (Kuh et. al, 2006). Our institution's definition of student success is synonymous with achievement and is articulated in the five-year strategic plan. Our college's Office of Institutional Research reports on student success by tracking a) undergraduate retention rates, b) the number of degrees conferred, c) six-year graduation rates, and d) licensure examination pass rates. While we agree that these four criteria are essential, we suggest they are rooted in WSC, which centers speed, resources, and quantitative data. Marrielle challenges these measures and states:

> We hear a lot about graduation in four years and what that means for student loans…But what we don't always hear that paired with is how students are feeling. Something that feel[s] important for me is ... balance …When I think about the institution's definition of student success, it feels kind of rigid to me … I also think that well-being [and] mental health must be as important as, quote, academic success.

Both of us had similar examples in our narratives about the challenges we faced in our education as the only student of Color or the only girl in an upper-level class. Even though both of us graduated and passed our exams, we paid a mental and emotional price as students. As such, Marrielle shared that she constantly speaks up at faculty meetings and other spaces to challenge linear and rigid notions of wellbeing so that students' emotional needs are prioritized in addition to what the university values, thereby advocating for a more balanced definition of student success.

The next example of this theme was modeling what it looks like to work toward work-life balance. Trying to balance mentoring for students and faculty commitments takes more time than is allotted by the university (Baik et al., 2019). Helping Black students work towards a healthy work-life balance can be a tool for their self-preservation and psychological literacy (Brooker & Woodyatt, 2019) as they learn to resist WSC. Lateefah admitted that achieving such balance is a work in progress for her and that she navigates this journey publicly. She stated:

> I am trying my best to find a better work-life balance on the tenure track. Currently, there are too many things pulling at my time that prevent me from attaining a healthy work-life balance. However, I truly enjoy what the BTM space provides for me. One of my motivations for finding balance is showing and telling BTM students that it is OK to lean on others for support and find spaces that feed their souls.

Amid figuring out what a balanced work-life looks like, Lateefah finds ways to be an example. More importantly, she is open about her difficulties when trying to find that balance. Lateefah viewed collectivism as a strength in that students are encouraged to support each other in the quest to achieve work-life balance, which sometimes means prioritizing others' needs. Extending yourself to others is typically viewed as a burden that detracts from one's own balance, as WSC pits individualism against collectivism. However, Lateefah's example highlights how seeking work-life balance in community actually contributes to her wellbeing. She also shows how modeling this for students serves as accountability for herself. An undertone in both examples of balance we highlighted here is community and relationship, which we present and unpack next.

Building and Maintaining Relationships

In the previous section, we outlined two ways balance emerged from our stories as we work to support students' wellbeing. This section discusses the importance of relationships and communities in this process. While this singular theme of needing to establish, cultivate, and maintain relationships was central in our narratives, the data indicated a causal relationship between personal experiences and momentum for action. Specifically, we both drew upon our need for relationships and community to support our wellbeing as faculty. We discussed how it motivated our mentoring work with Black students to create spaces for their wellbeing.

Both authors attended HBCUs for their undergraduate education. Those experiences were culturally affirming as it was a time when our race was not the focal point of our identity. Being students in all Black spaces allowed us to be ourselves, feel safe, and flourish. HBCUs are different from PWIs in that the purpose of HBCUs' was to educate Black students during segregation in the US. HBCUs instill a sense of pride in some Black students by providing culturally rich experiences and events. These practices create a nurturing environment that facilitates a positive collegiate experience (Solórzano, et al., 2000). Lateefah describes her experience with #BTM and how it relates to her HBCU experience concerning building relationships. She said:

> Being in an all-Black space at a PWI feeds my soul. I got a similar feeling when I attended my HBCU. I felt supported and built relationships with not only other students but also mentors with whom I still stay in contact today. It's also heartwarming to support #BTM students, similar to ways that helped me flourish at my HBCU.

WSC values rugged individualism. Therefore, our insistence on building and maintaining relationships is essential to living and overcoming systems designed to destroy our wellbeing. Relationships are foundational to how we survive, thrive, and remain well. As bell hooks (1992) noted, "One of the most vital ways we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone" (p. 278). This sentiment is echoed in our wellbeing stories and undergirds our mentoring efforts. We work to create a place for students to experience affirmation, joy, a sense of home, and ways to navigate the destructive forces of racial capitalist systems. And our desire to create such spaces for our students is connected to relationships being central to our wellbeing.

Intentional Decision Making

A final theme we present here is that both authors offered examples of how we were intentional in making personal and professional decisions and how we share these choices with students. For Marrielle, attending a large PWI for graduate school after attending an HBCU was a "jarring experience." The macro and microaggressions were challenging, and although she made it through, she chose to cast a "narrow" net when searching for positions in higher ed. She stated:

> Part of my self-care plan, if you will, in the job search was that I only was looking at jobs in Black cities. After the experience I had in graduate school, I wanted a culturally affirming space, and that was very important for me.

Marrielle went on to say:

> So, in addition to wanting to be in very diverse cities, I also was very intentional about not wanting to be at a research-focused institution because I did not want the publish-or-perish culture. I did not want all I had experienced or seen with some of my professors and advisors. There were times when they had to put other things aside that were important to them because of the need to, you know, pump out more papers, more papers, more papers. I knew I didn't want that pressure of having to always pump something out. And so…So I kind of, I guess I tried to, quote, prevent burnout, if you will say, by not being at an R1 [large, research-focused institution]. I wanted to kind of insulate myself from that. And I also wanted to be in a city that could affirm me culturally because I did have insights of the pressures and isolation of being a person of Color in the academy. I never felt like I would be affirmed in the academy. I always felt like I needed to make sure I could be affirmed in the city that I was in.

Lateefah also made intentional decisions in her life and career. When discussing how her identities impact the ways she engages with Black students, Lateefah said:

> I identify as an unapologetic Black woman at work. Part of this means I was not hesitant to wear braids during my university interviews and in the classroom. Although in the past, I was told I should attend interviews with a "professional look." I want them [Black students] to see that you can bring whatever part of yourself to the workspace. I want to resist perceptions of what professors should look like. I want them to be who they are in their schools.

Although neither of us was familiar with the specific characteristics of WSC at the time we made intentional decisions to seek departments, cities, and other spaces that affirmed our Blackness, our decisions and accompanying rationales speak to our resistance to characteristics such as perfectionism, one right way, and bigger as more. Because we were both trained at large, research-intensive institutions, the "expectation" was that we would see the same kind of institution as that is what we were "supposed to do." Instead, we both chose institutions that we thought would afford more of a balance, where research in school-based settings would be valued and in cities where we could be ourselves. By openly sharing these and other decisions with our students, we hope to empower them to choose to teach in schools that they feel morally and spiritually connected to instead of believing the narrative that more funding and less diversity is the best decision. We know that our students are hearing our words and watching our actions. As we mentor students in #BTM, we consciously strive to maintain personal authenticity as we establish genuine connections and foster an environment of trust and openness.

Implications

Abery & Gunson (2016) noted that student and faculty wellbeing are interrelated and stated, "the emotional wellbeing of [higher education] staff, student wellbeing, and retention are deeply connected in a cyclic chain" (p. 69). We add nuance to this argument because of our shared racial history as Black people in the US. The trauma of anti-Black racism, neoliberalism, and the prevailing Whiteness in teacher education are ever-present threats to students and faculty alike. Our wellbeing must necessarily be connected with our students to disrupt shared traumatic experiences. Therefore, we ask academic leaders in higher education to consider how they might design workload models that support faculty to engage in service opportunities aligned with their personal histories, intersectional identities, and core commitments instead of overburdening faculty with vain service duties. Previous and current #BTM advisors have said many times to one another that this is our favorite part of our job. Unlike most other "service" commitments, designated in our annual review to fulfill the Teaching/Research/Service faculty responsibilities, our participation in this group is an affront to the neoliberal mechanics of the university. It is a method of creating the balance we need for our wellbeing. It is a space to deepen relationships with one another, our students, and their families. Within the context of the extraction that WSC demands, it is a source of replenishment. And we charge academic leaders to engage with faculty and staff to create spaces for them to experience what we have experienced.

Baik et al. (2019) stated, "[S]eeking, analyzing and acting on students' suggestions … helps to foster their sense of inclusion and empowerment … the goal of improving student mental wellbeing can only be achieved through an effective partnership between students and institutional actors" (pp. 684–685). #BlackTeachersMatter was created in response to Black students' requests for Black faculty support within a PWI. Over the past four years, alongside students enrolled in our teacher preparation programs, we and other advisors have co-constructed an organization that responds to Black students' initial call for support. As former K-12 teachers, we had first-hand experiences of the systemic racism in US public schools and know what awaits our teacher candidates upon entering the profession. Our unique experiences as Black women in education help us support Black students to construct what balance means for them, survive and thrive (James et al., 2019). Our collective work also supports prospective teachers in developing the psychological literacy they need to be the fullest version of themselves while navigating a profession that devalues them. Having developed our critical consciousness from personal relationships, experience, and study, we understand the value of working "beside our young people" in community.

Another implication for this work is the complexity of the construct of *balance* and whether or not it is attainable given our context. While our work does disrupt some aspects of WSC for the students we serve, we are nowhere near eradicating it. We also recognize that we cannot entirely shield ourselves or our students from the effects of such systems. Both of us talked specifically about balance and self-care in our narratives. Because current forms of self-care in popular culture and social media are individualistic and often rooted in supporting capitalism, it is essential that we own OUR perspective of balance and self-care and why we see it as necessary for this work. First, each of us struggled as new teachers because we were not equipped to understand the systems of schooling and how interlocking systems of oppression would impact us and our students. This level of stress, coupled with the current political climate, is causing many teachers to leave the profession. Although we had to learn how to address our mental and emotional health while simultaneously learning about WSC in K-12 education, we aim to center balance for our future teachers so that wellness becomes habitual for them. Second, the counter space we have created and continue cultivating is a communal space necessary to protect the collective. We hope that as we learn and grow, we can support and develop our teacher candidates and that our efforts will have a ripple effect in teacher education programs and the schools our teachers eventually work in. Finally, we ascribe to American writer and professor Audre Lorde's (1988) assertion that self-care is not self-indulgence but instead that it is a political act and necessary for warfare. We both stand firm in acknowledging that we do not care for ourselves solely to re-enter the system and remain on the publish or perish wheel. Instead, our self-care and desire for balance are so that we can continue to support our students, so we can network and earn seats at the tables where policies that affect us are being made, and so we can expand our activism work outside of our counter space to our programs, the college, and the community. Balance is necessary so that we have enough inside of us to continue to serve and learn alongside our future teachers.

Conclusion

We have found that creating and supporting Black students in counter spaces allows us to resist WSC by broadening traditional notions of student success (e.g., progress towards graduation) to include community, relationships, self-care, and balance (van der Zanden et al., 2019). Additionally, unilateral definitions of student success and wellbeing ignore the unique experiences that Black students face in higher education. The qualitative nature of those experiences can only be captured by hearing students' stories rather than by data tracking systems in a university research office. So, while we acknowledge that educator burnout and stress are relevant and timely challenges causing many faculty to consider leaving academia, we argue that WSC and interlocking systems of oppression drain us, not mentoring our students. We acknowledge that transferability is possible

when readers establish connections between their own lived experiences and those presented by the author, thereby facilitating a process of identification and resonance. Alternatively, transferability can be fostered by the autoethnographers' experiences that are foreign to readers, prompting them to discern similarities and differences in the author's encounters and thereby gain fresh insights and perspectives (Ellis et al., 2011). By sharing our experiences authentically and contextually, other faculty members can counter prevailing narratives that often limit identities and roles within higher education. Our examples describe how systems of oppression, such as racism, affect how we navigate higher education. We recognize that even in the US, racism and other -isms are experienced in various ways. For example, racism in the US can manifest differently in the South compared to the North, primarily influenced by historical, cultural, and demographic factors. Racism is a complex and multifaceted issue that permeates society at various levels, including individual attitudes, institutional practices, and systemic structures. While navigating these spaces is necessary, it does not help disrupt oppressive systems. Countries worldwide face various forms of discrimination and social issues beyond racism. While racism is a significant concern globally, different countries and regions may grapple with specific forms of discrimination and social challenges based on their unique historical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. So, we invite readers to think about transferability in your context through the following reflective question:

1) What interlocking systems in your context contribute to burnout and disrupt your wellbeing? What can it look like for you and your students to dismantle those systems?

Our data suggest that engaging in *service of the soul* – in this case, Black faculty mentoring Black students – can be a vehicle to nourish our wellbeing, which for us, prevents burnout. Although our work is labor intensive, our premise is that this work is mutually beneficial for our students and us. As we heal, we help our students heal, and seeing their healing provides medicine for our souls. As we learn to resist, we teach our students how to resist, and in turn, we are able to liberate each other. We have needed and continue to need each other to survive and thrive.

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