# Mentorship Matters: Co-Thinking and Emotional Anchoring for Preservice Teachers in Urban Contexts

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**Abstract**

Today's classrooms, particularly in urban and underserved communities, are marked by increasingly complex realities, including a rise in behavioral challenges, special education referrals, and mental health needs. The convergence of poverty, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and visceral trauma has reshaped what it means to teach, mentor, and lead in K–12 education. This article examines mentoring strategies used in one urban school district to support a pre-service teacher. The experienced educators serve not just as content and pedagogical guides, but as emotional and professional anchors for pre-service teachers navigating challenging environments. Drawing on both current research and field experience, this piece explores how urban schools and teacher preparation programs can develop responsive, trauma-informed, and culturally sustaining mentorship models to support pre-service teachers during student teaching semester

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Urban education today faces a complex set of challenges that significantly affect both student learning and teacher preparation. Many students and families in urban settings experience mental health challenges, behavioral dysregulation, and the enduring impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences [ACEs], which often manifest as trauma, disrupted learning, and increased emotional support needs (Burke Harris, 2018; Souers & Hall, 2016). These challenges are further intensified by systemic inequities, including disparities in school funding, limited access to high-quality resources, and a lack of representation in the teaching workforce (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Amid these conditions, effective mentorship emerges as a critical support for preservice teachers. Mentors provide not only guidance in pedagogy and classroom management but also emotional support and practical strategies for navigating the layered realities of urban classrooms (Hudson, 2013; Zeichner, 2005). Research supports the need for culturally responsive and trauma-informed mentorship programs specifically designed for urban education settings (Gay, 2018). However, there remains a notable gap in research and training addressing the unique needs of preservice teachers preparing for placements in urban schools (Sleeter, 2008). Mentorship plays a pivotal role in equipping preservice teachers with the tools, confidence, and cultural competence necessary for success in urban and underserved school environments (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006). Beyond content knowledge, effective mentors model empathy, resilience, and reflective practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This support is essential not only for professional development but also for fostering inclusive, equitable, and sustaining school communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017).

This article shares a mentorship story through practitioner reflection methodology that provides a set of guidelines for preservice teachers in urban schools, focusing on the role of the cooperating teacher as an instructional guide and emotional support. Often volunteering their time with minimal compensation, cooperating teachers serve as both pedagogical mentors and emotional anchors, enriching the profession by attracting and retaining the next generation of educators to the field (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010). Drawing on current research and a firsthand student teaching experience in an urban education setting, this article explores how one urban school/cooperating teacher and teacher preparation program support mentorship that is responsive, trauma-informed, and culturally sustaining. Investing in strong and innovative mentorship structures represents a powerful step toward educational equity and long-term teacher retention in urban school districts (Carver & Feiman-Nemser, 2009; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

While existing research highlights the importance of culturally responsive and trauma-informed mentoring, much of it is conceptual (Gay, 2018). Fewer studies center on the experiences of the mentor and mentee relationship in the urban education setting. This article proposes to bridge the gap to provide a lived experience that highlights how trauma-informed practices and culturally sustaining pedagogies are interpreted and used in practice.

Practitioner reflection is grounded in the tradition of reflective practices that emphasize that educators are knowledge creators that systematically reflect on experiences to inform professional learning and ideas (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Larrivee, 2012). This approach aims to create co-construction between mentor and mentee. A co-thinking perspective reflects broader research findings that state effective urban education mentorship is not hierarchical; rather, it is reciprocal and relationship-based (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006).

**Foundational Concepts in Urban Education Mentorship**

There are three primary types of school cultures within the United States education system: rural, suburban, and urban. While suburban and rural school environments often share similarities in structure and expectations, urban schools tend to differ significantly in both challenges and needs (Milner, 2012). Unfortunately, these distinct norms are frequently overlooked in teacher preparation programs (Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner, 2005). It is essential for preservice teachers in urban settings to have strong mentor teachers to grow and understand the complex needs of students, staff, and

the broader school community. Effective mentorship within the school community enables preservice teachers to navigate cultural dynamics, trauma-informed practices, and institutional inequities more successfully (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Souers & Hall, 2016). The following sections provide insights and individual reflective experiences that identify several guidelines defining and sustaining urban education mentorship.

Miss P. is a second-grade teacher at Duquesne City School District [DCSD], a kindergarten through eighth-grade school located in Western Pennsylvania. Four years ago, DCSD and Robert Morris University [RMU] established a partnership that began with the placement of a preservice teacher. That initial collaboration between the cooperating teacher, Mrs. S. (now the principal at DCSD), and the preservice teacher provided a foundation of support and mentorship that has continued to grow over the years.

By year three of the partnership, Miss P. had developed and refined a mentorship approach around four foundational practices: positioning mentors as co-thinkers, prioritizing relationships over content, shifting from trauma-informed to healing-centered practices, and emphasizing ongoing reflection and processing. Together, these four elements form a cohesive and intentional foundation for supporting preservice teachers in urban settings. Grounded in specific school community contexts, the discussion that follows draws on the four foundational practices to provide a lens for understanding Miss P.'s practitioner reflection through her story and lived experience.

**Mentors as Co-Thinkers, Emotional Supports, and Instructional Guides**

Casey, an early childhood education major at a private suburban university [RMU], entered her student teaching year eager but inexperienced in urban education. After a field visit to DCSD, she requested a pre-student teaching placement in an urban setting. Through the RMU–DCSD partnership, she was placed in Miss P.'s classroom.

In preparation for the year, Casey reached out to her cooperating teacher, Miss P., to build a relationship before the formal placement began. Miss P. was immediately invested, not only in Casey's development as a teacher but in supporting her as a whole person. As a veteran educator in an urban school, Miss P. understood that the challenges her students faced were significantly different from those encountered in many other teaching contexts. She also recognized that student teachers and mentors often enter the relationship from very different perspectives, shaped by varying levels of experience, cultural backgrounds, and emotional readiness (Carver & Feiman-Nemser, 2009; Hudson, 2013). As Miss P. reflected on her mentorship of Casey, she shared:

> *I was in my 11th year of teaching at DCSD when I was approached by the principal to see if I would be interested in being a cooperating teacher for a student teacher that would be coming to second grade. Of course, I jumped at the opportunity to shape and mentor a new teacher. In my experience, most teachers in an urban school do not come from an urban upbringing, thus making the transition one filled with anxiety if you do not have a strong mentor.*

Miss P. emphasized that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was not just a theory, but a practical guide for teaching in an urban school. Students must have their basic needs met such as food, sleep, and safety before learning can occur (Maslow, 1943; McLeod, 2023). In urban schools, students often arrive in the classroom seeking emotional support, nourishment, and security. Preservice teachers must understand and respond to these realities before they can focus on pedagogy and instructional practices (Souers & Hall, 2016).

In addition to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Miss P. also highlights the importance of ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) as a critical lens for Casey to understand the complex realities that many students may face in and out of school spaces. Awareness of both ACEs and Maslow's framework helped Casey to begin to recognize and understand how trauma can impact student learning and preservice teacher development.

A recent comparative study (Mbhiza, Nkambule, & Masinire, 2024) highlights the distinct dynamics of mentorship in urban versus rural schools. Mentor and mentee relationships in urban settings are often emotionally complex due to heightened exposure to student trauma and behavioral challenges. These findings reinforce the importance of differentiated mentor

training that prepares cooperating teachers to support preservice teachers in high-stress, underserved environments. Cooperating teachers also play a critical role in providing psychological safety not only for their students but also for the preservice teachers they mentor. Strong, reflective, and collaborative forms of mentoring are linked to increased confidence, emotional well-being, and long-term professional growth among new educators (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Miss P.'s approach aims to create co-construction between mentor and mentee to highlight how this relationship develops. A co-thinking perspective reflects broader research findings that state effective urban education mentorship is not hierarchical but rather is reciprocal and relationship-based (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006).

When Casey began her full-time student teaching placement, she was paired with Miss P., who didn't just guide her through lesson planning and classroom management; she built a relationship with Casey. Miss P. describes this process as co-thinking, becoming an emotional anchor, and an instructional mentor. Their relationship blossomed into something more than just professional. It was built on trust, vulnerability, and a shared purpose. Miss P. didn't see herself as someone with all the answers, but rather as a partner in growth. She was modeling, listening, and walking alongside Casey every step of the way. In doing so, she helped build Casey's teacher self-efficacy, confidence, and teacher identity. Creating the conditions for preservice teachers to thrive emotionally, relationally, and professionally, while building skills that are practiced throughout the semester. The most impactful mentors focus not only on instructional guidance but also on building authentic, human connections with their mentees (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006; Paris & Alim, 2017). Urban classrooms need not only more teachers, but better prepared and better supported teachers. Investing in mentorship structures that allow for co-thinking is a powerful lever for equity and teacher retention.

**Relationships Over Content**

One of the most powerful takeaways in Casey's experience is the value of relationship-building. Miss P. consistently reinforced those relational practices by stating, "When students know you care and when you're real with them, they will show up for you." She recalled a student once saying, "I have your back, Miss P." She further explained, "You can't change a student teacher's personality, but you can help them understand that being authentic is non-negotiable, and students will not learn from someone they don't like." Effective mentors lead with care, build trust, and maintain high expectations of both their students and preservice teachers (Gay, 2018). They understand that growth happens in spaces that are both psychologically safe and brave. They create learning spaces where preservice teachers can take risks, reflect honestly, and feel supported (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Moreover, Miss P. shared that being a successful teacher isn't just about performance in the classroom but also about sustainability and retention within the field. Preventing burnout, building confidence, and staying culturally responsive all require intentional care for self and others (Jennings, 2015; Santoro, 2018). Preservice teachers need support in developing healthy boundaries, self-care, and routines that allow them to bring their best selves into the classroom each day. Additionally, she emphasized:

> *It is important for preservice teachers to understand that students will not learn from a teacher they do not like. Children know if you are sincere or if you are just there for the paycheck. I stressed this to Casey. Get to know the students and what drives them, what makes them tick. You can then incorporate their interests into the lessons to make them more interested in learning.*

Another piece of advice she offered was simple yet profound, "meet student teachers and students where they are." Students often arrive with gaps in learning which is referred to as the "opportunity gap." Rather than reinforcing this gap, effective teaching focuses on students' current knowledge and builds from there (Gorski, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006). As Miss P. explained:

> *If you don't meet a student's basic, most fundamental needs first, you won't need to worry about lesson planning, curriculum, or content because they won't be learning from you anyway. Understanding this is key to relationship building.*

DCSD prioritizes a "Maslow before Bloom" approach

by intentionally addressing students' social and emotional sense of belonging and overall well-being a foundational prerequisite to rigorous academic instruction and higher-order thinking (Bloom, 1956; Maslow, 1943).

Mentors can coach simple but powerful relational strategies, such as morning check-ins, consistency in classroom routines, and affirming students' cultural identities (Emdin, 2016; Hammond, 2015). These practices build the trust and connection that lay the foundation for rigorous learning. As part of their mentorship, cooperating teachers can model these strategies and co-plan for opportunities for preservice teachers to practice and grow. In fact, many mentoring programs could benefit from developing a simple relationship-building checklist tailored to urban and high-needs settings (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006; Hudson, 2013). Relationship building is an essential part of teaching, but even more important when considering and understanding the trauma that students may bring to the school community.

Overall, this emphasis on relationships is consistent with culturally responsive teaching frameworks, which position trust, authenticity, and care before academic engagement (Gay, 2018; Noddings, 2005). In urban classrooms, these relational practices are not supplementary but foundational, reinforcing research that suggests student engagement and achievement are deeply tied to relational trust and belonging (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017).

**Moving from Trauma-Informed Teaching to Healing-Centered Engagement**

When student teachers arrive at an urban district with little or no experience around trauma-informed teaching, it creates a barrier and bias that fails to support the school culture or the students within it. Students experience numerous traumatic events within the community. As Miss P. states:

> *There is violence, housing insecurity, and food insecurity to name a few. During one of our training sessions, the presenter spoke about students coming to school with an open amygdala in their brains. Physical, mental, and emotional stressors can often trigger the flight-or-fight response in the amygdala. It is hard for an adult to regulate their amygdala, so imagine how hard it would be for a child to regulate theirs. The adults, no matter what kind of day you are having, must be the calm to their storm. When this happens, it is important to just sit with the child and listen.*

Miss P.'s perspective reflects a shift from trauma-informed teaching toward healing-centered engagement (Ginwright, 2018), which emphasizes identity, resilience that aim to support students who have experienced adversity and high ACEs. Trauma-informed teaching emphasizes understanding the impact of trauma on student behavior and learning, prioritizing safety, trust, and emotional co-regulation within the classroom (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). This approach seeks to avoid re-traumatization and frames students through a lens of what has happened to them. In contrast, healing-centered engagement moves beyond a trauma-centric view, focusing instead on student strengths, cultural identity, and collective well-being (Ginwright, 2018). It views healing as a holistic process involving meaning-making, empowerment, and connection to community, rather than solely addressing individual trauma. While trauma-informed practices are important, healing-centered engagement is proactive and strength-based, aiming to affirm students' identities and foster co-regulation rather than merely coping for the preservice teacher.

The practices modeled by Miss P. illustrate this shift, demonstrating how Casey can move beyond responding to trauma toward identity, teacher self-efficacy and hope.

Teaching Casey to process behaviors from a healing-centered perspective allowed her to focus on student voice, cultural affirmation, and teacher agency, which are crucial to avoid teacher burnout and high levels of visceral trauma. Miss P. prompted Casey to gain a deeper understanding of the urban contexts where students, often Black, Brown, immigrant, or low-income face intersecting inequities rooted in racism, poverty, and displacement which is important for preservice teachers to experience and reflect upon.

This approach also reframes schools as spaces not just of safety, but of possibility and transformation. It recognizes that healing is not merely the absence of trau-

ma, but the presence of hope, joy, and belonging. DCSD and Miss P. strive to emphasize community connection and holistic development. Healing-centered engagement empowers students and educators to co-create a more just and affirming learning environment. For urban education to truly be equitable, it must move beyond managing trauma to fostering healing, identity, and purpose for students, staff, and school leaders. Miss P. shared a story with Casey that illustrates the complex and layered way she provides her students with support:

> *On the second to last day of school this year, D. would not come into the building. The adults finally coerced him to come into the school, but he sat outside of the classroom and would not get up. I went out, sat next to him, and asked what happened. He told her something bad happened at home and he was mad. I listened, then told him something funny and he smiled. I then requested his help inside the classroom and asked him to come inside the room. He smiled and agreed. Throughout the day he got better, but every day in our school, in all schools across America, students come in having a bad day with their amygdala open. Before any learning can happen, we need to close it and bring them back to a calm state. Breathing exercises and grounding techniques can help calm them down.*

Once again, this ties back to Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, building relationships and preservice teachers as co-thinkers. If basic needs are not met, no real learning will likely occur.

Miss P. continues to recognize the importance of a healing-centered approach and its link to mentorship. She is trained to understand how trauma affects learning and behavior, and she passes that lens on to her mentees. During reflective conversations Casey indicated that Miss P. helped her to process her own emotions and build the resilience needed to stay in the profession long-term.

### Processing Classroom Management through Reflection

Cooperating teachers and mentors play a crucial role in guiding student teachers through the emotional complexities of school environment, especially when they encounter secondary trauma stemming from students' externalizing behaviors, such as aggression or defiance. Miss P. recognizes that classroom management is one of the most significant challenges for preservice teachers. Experienced educators, like Miss P., are key in modeling practices and strategies, helping student teachers process challenging incidents, and fostering reflective spaces for emotional co-regulation and professional growth. Through structured mentorship and reflective practice, Casey was able to understand that disruptive and challenging behaviors are often expressions of unmet needs, not simply disciplinary issues. This understanding led to empathy-based, rather than punitive, responses (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2024).

Mentor teachers, such as Miss P., also support preservice educators in recognizing symptoms of secondary trauma and emotional exhaustion. She emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy and resilience-building as foundations for sustainable teaching (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Hydon et al., 2015). These strategies not only promote teacher well-being but also model emotional intelligence and professionalism for future educators.

Reflective teaching practices are essential for professional growth and for coping with the demands of managing a classroom and high-quality teaching. Research underscores the importance of embedding structured reflection in teacher preparation programs to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Larrivee, 2020). However, this process is neither automatic nor easy that requires the guidance of skilled, reflective mentors who can support preservice teachers in critically examining their beliefs, emotions, and instructional choices.

The reflective process is central to preservice teacher growth and development, as it enables educators to critically examine their assumptions, interpret classroom experiences, and adapt their practice in responsive ways (Larrivee, 2020). In this article, reflection functioned not only as a mentoring tool but also as a methodological lens through which meaning, for both Miss P. and Casey, was constructed.

### The Role of Collaboration Between Higher Education and Urban Education

It is true that it takes a village to support a preservice teacher; it requires collaborative effort across a school community.  As schools around the country struggle with attraction and retention to the field, we must ask ourselves why this is a growing challenge. To support Casey in an urban school placement, it takes a new and different type of mentorship and collaboration. When Casey approached her university instructor, it was immediately fostered and supported as a positive student teaching placement. The University collaborated with the school district to create a system that provided on-going safety in learning and growing within the school community that moved beyond the classroom to community events and activities. When university supervisors and mentors are open to various school placements and understand the need for innovative mentorship, it creates a layered support system that fosters success and growth.

It takes strong administrative leaders to accept and guide preservice teachers within their school communities. Through this partnership, DCSD has hired two teachers directly from the student teaching semester, demonstrating the power of sustained mentorship and leadership.

As the preservice teacher phases into the student teaching placement, it is imperative that the team learn and grow together and provide a space to reflect and process within the school placement as well as with preservice peers away from the school placement. Utilizing the university seminar course to move toward a differentiated mentoring model values preservice teachers' unique experiences within each placement community (urban, suburban, rural). Building strong relationships with district leaders and mentor teachers is essential because partnerships grow and change depending on individual school communities and preservice teacher needs. Three years ago, RMU's first student teacher was placed in a second grade classroom at DCSD with now Principal S. who built a welcoming and open learning space to develop both the teacher heart and skill. The four foundational practices have grown into a multilayered support system for RMU preservice teachers to learn and grow.

In reflecting on Casey's journey, Miss P.'s experience is not just a story, it's a guide. Mentors have the power to shape the future of education by showing up as co-thinkers, emotional anchors, and instructional guides. When mentors lead with relationships, everything else can follow. As Miss P. expressed,

> *I believe that when you mentor someone, you can have the ability to mentor them for life. Casey's student teaching experience ended at the beginning of May. We were hoping she would get hired in the district. She knew the students, and she knew and understood the trauma that came with them. No openings were anticipated for the next school year. It looked like she may not get hired. Then, on August 13th, she received a call offering her a position at the school. The next day, she was at the school, preparing her classroom.  As she was driving to school that next morning, she drove past a group of children huddled under a blanket. As she passed, she saw it was one of our students, D, and his younger siblings.  She called me and asked what she should do. She was pulling up at the school, so she let the administration know, and I called the police. A few of the administrators went up to check on them and when they arrived, they were gone. Just like I will always mentor Casey, not as a student anymore, but as a colleague, the trauma is still all around us. I will always help Casey navigate the difficult times, situations, and happenings that we come across every day at our school. Raising scores is important, but we have students out on the street, huddled under blankets, trying to raise their siblings.  D was one of the brightest students I ever had. He most likely would pass that state test with flying colors. However, that isn't what is important to him; survival is. The trauma is real, and it shows its face every day in our students.*

Before Casey even stepped into the classroom, she was already reflecting and planning to support each student's unique needs. Miss P. was ready and willing to support her based on Casey's mentoring needs. Miss P.'s strong relationship with Casey allowed her to know what Casey needed through reflective discussion and problem solving together. Miss P.'s Mentor Activity Worksheet (Table A) is shown in Appendix A. It provides a powerful way to guide preservice teachers in their efforts based on Miss P. and Casey's experiences.

Using the four foundational practices to support Casey's individual needs and development were crucial to this story. It takes a village to support and mentor a preservice teacher. Although this is one story, it is a powerful tool to build educational mentorship for our future teachers.

Taken together, Miss P.'s practitioner reflections contribute to the existing body of literature by illustrating how mentorship is layered and enacted within the realities of one urban school community. It highlights the importance of relational trust, emotional support, and reflective co-thinking as mechanisms through which preservice teachers develop self-efficacy, skill, and heart. By situating these findings within existing research, the study demonstrates that effective urban mentorship is not a singular strategy, but a dynamic, context-responsive practice shaped by both theory and lived experience. Miss P.'s story illustrates that mentorship in urban education is not simply instructional; it is relational, emotional, and deeply human.

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**Appendix**
**Mentor Activity Worksheet**

| Focus Area | Why It Matters | Mentor Observations (Check All That Apply) |
|---|---|---|
| **Recognize the Impact of Trauma** | Life experiences affect learning for students and preservice teachers. | ☐ Responds with empathy<br>☐ Avoids punitive reactions<br>☐ Uses healing-centered language |
| **Prioritize Maslow Before Bloom** | Safety and belonging must come before academic rigor. | ☐ Checks for basic needs<br>☐ Creates emotional safety<br>☐ Adjusts expectations when needed |
| **Build Relationships with Families** | Family partnerships increase student success. | ☐ Communicates respectfully<br>☐ Honors cultural differences<br>☐ Builds trust over time |
| **Uncover What Makes Students "Tick"** | Interests drive engagement and motivation. | ☐ Asks about interests<br>☐ Connects learning to passions<br>☐ Encourages student voice |
| **Set & Sustain High Expectations** | High expectations signal belief in every learner. | ☐ Communicates belief clearly<br>☐ Provides scaffolds<br>☐ Maintains academic rigor |
| **Reinforce Expectations Consistently** | Consistency builds structure and safety. | ☐ Reviews expectations regularly<br>☐ Uses predictable routines<br>☐ *Resets calmly when needed* |
| **Be Authentically Present/Create Co-thinkers** | Authenticity builds trust and connection. | ☐ Shows genuine care<br>☐ Is emotionally present<br>☐ Maintains professional boundaries |
| **Connect with the Broader Community** | Context deepens understanding and empathy. | ☐ Knows community context<br>☐ Attends school events<br>☐ Integrates community knowledge |
| **Meet Student Teachers Where They Are** | Differentiation supports developing educators. | ☐ Adjusts support level<br>☐ Focuses on growth<br>☐ Gives actionable feedback |