

# Strategies for Mentoring and Advising Evaluation Graduate Students of Colour

Ayesha S. Boyce

University of North Carolina, Greensboro

**Abstract:** *While evaluators have many intersecting identities, ethnicity remains the most salient identity for evaluators of colour. As formal graduate training in evaluation continues to expand, so too does the number of students from ethnic minoritized populations, who are in need of specialized mentoring and advising. Drawing from previous research on evaluation, higher education literature, and personal reflections from the author, an Afro-Latina faculty member, this practice note outlines five strategies for mentoring and advising evaluation graduate students of colour. These include considering the impact of vicarious trauma; assisting with the facilitation of peer and mentor “squads”; respecting, honouring, and celebrating students’ culture, religion, and families; being vigilant of microaggressions and practicing microvalidations; and developing mentoring competence. Each strategy is presented along with reflections and practical examples for implementation.*

**Keywords:** *advising, culture, students of colour, teaching evaluation*

**Résumé :** *Les évaluateurs et les évaluatrices peuvent avoir de nombreuses identités qui s'entrecoupent, mais l'ethnicité reste l'identité la plus importante pour les personnes qui font partie des groupes minoritaires visibles. À mesure que les études supérieures en évaluation continuent à se développer, les personnes issues de groupes ethniques minoritaires sont de plus en plus nombreuses à s'y inscrire. Ces individus ont besoin de mentorat et de conseils spécialisés. En se fondant sur des recherches précédentes sur l'évaluation, sur la littérature portant sur les études supérieures et sur les réflexions personnelles de l'autrice, une membre du corps professoral d'origine afro-latine, la présente note sur la pratique décrit cinq stratégies pour le mentorat et l'orientation des étudiants et étudiantes issus de groupes minoritaires aux cycles supérieurs en évaluation. Il s'agit notamment de tenir compte de l'impact de traumatismes indirects; de contribuer à l'animation d'« équipes » de pairs et de mentors; de respecter, d'honorer et de célébrer les familles, la religion et la culture des étudiantes et étudiants; de faire preuve de vigilance en ce qui concerne les micro-agressions et d'effectuer des micro-validations; et d'améliorer les compétences en mentorat. Chaque stratégie est présentée avec des réflexions et des exemples pratiques pour la mise en œuvre.*

**Mots clés :** *conseiller, culture, minorités visibles, étudiants et étudiantes, enseignement de l'évaluation*

**Corresponding author:** Ayesha Boyce, 252 School of Education, UNC Greensboro, 1200 Spring Garden Street, Greensboro, NC, 27412; [ayesha.boyce@uncg.edu](mailto:ayesha.boyce@uncg.edu)

*“All graduate students can fly; some just need a longer runway.”*

Jackie Hughes-Oliver (personal communication, 2019)

On September 20, 2016, Kevin Lamont Scott was fatally shot by police in Charlotte, North Carolina—one of 266 African Americans killed by US police in 2016 (*The Guardian News*, 2019). The next day, I met with two graduate students who identified as Black. News of the shooting was everywhere, and protests had erupted throughout our home state of North Carolina. When they walked into my office, it was evident that both students were upset. I calmly asked how they were doing. After a brief, uncomfortable pause, all three of us broke down in tears. Instead of spending an hour discussing evaluation project updates, we shared anger, fear, and frustration at the state of our nation. Then, after moments of reflective silence, we wiped our tears and resumed our professional faces. The continued killing of unarmed persons of African descent, along with mass shootings, white supremacy, and the current global political climate, can lead to long-term adverse mental health effects for persons of colour (M. T. Williams, 2015). From the moment I was hired at my current institution, I have been sought out by students of colour both within my department and across the university to talk, debrief, and recharge. The need for mentors who can create safe spaces and can nurture, support, and advise minoritized students is clear.

All graduate students experience heightened stress and increased demands, putting them at increased risk of developing psychological and physical health problems (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Toews et al., 1993). Graduate students from historically minoritized ethnic groups, however, also encounter isolation, microaggressions, fear, distrust, and betrayal (Auguste et al., 2018; McCabe, 2009; M. S. Williams et al., 2016). In addition, they experience education violence—the structural, cultural, and direct systems of schooling that account for how higher education has been an engine of racial hierarchy and white supremacy, ultimately limiting and taking Black and other marginalized lives (Mustaffa, 2017). High-quality mentoring can neutralize these experiences and increased psychological risks while supporting student enrollment, retention, graduation, and job attainment (Zachary, 2000). Graduate students of colour are in need of specialized mentoring and advising (Blake-Beard, 2001a; K. M. Thomas et al., 2007; M. S. Williams et al., 2016) and often have less access to mentors and role-models than their non-minority peers (Girves et al., 2005). Further, previous studies have indicated that students of color have not always received the same quality of mentoring as their peers (Blake-Beard, 2001b; Ellis, 2000).

Overall, there is little research on mentoring graduate students in applied social science inquiry fields. As formal graduate training in evaluation continues to expand (LaVelle, 2018; LaVelle & Donaldson, 2010), so too do the number of students from ethnic minoritized populations (NCES, 2010). While evaluators have many intersecting identities, ethnicity remains the most salient identity for many evaluators of colour (Boyce et al., 2017). Current mentoring efforts by Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs), such as the American Evaluation Association (AEA) Graduate Education Diversity Initiative (GEDI)

program, are for “students who are not already enrolled in an evaluation program / specialization or pursuing an evaluation degree” (AEA, 2019, para. 7). Additional insights are therefore needed for marginalized students seeking evaluation-specific graduate degrees. This practice note outlines five strategies for mentoring and advising evaluation graduate students of colour.

## DIMENSIONS OF PRACTICE

Understanding the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) is essential when discussing how to mentor students of colour. The goals of this approach are to situate teaching within students’ home and community cultures—not often found in schools (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982)—allowing students to succeed academically while maintaining their cultural integrity (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008). Ladson-Billings (1995) outlines three propositions for culturally relevant pedagogy:

### *Conceptions of self and others*

#### **Culturally relevant teachers**

- believe that all students are capable of academic success,
- see their pedagogy as art—unpredictable, always in the process of becoming,
- see themselves as members of the community, and
- see teaching as a way to give back to the community. (p. 478)

### *Social Relations*

#### **Culturally relevant teachers**

- maintain fluid student-teacher relationships,
- demonstrate a connectedness with all students,
- develop a community of learners, and
- encourage students to learn collaboratively and be responsible for another. (p. 480)

### *Conceptions of knowledge*

#### **Culturally relevant teachers believe**

- knowledge is not static, but is shared, recycled, and constructed,
- teachers must be passionate about knowledge and learning,
- teachers must scaffold, or build bridges, to facilitate learning, and
- assessment must be multifaceted, incorporating multiple forms of excellence. (p. 481)

One predictor of a successful mentor relationship is the mentor’s ability to balance advocacy and personal support with the duty to produce a competent professional

(Biaggi et al., 1997). As such, a key barrier to any mentoring relationship is the mentor's lack of skills, competencies, and interest. While mentors are more likely to be motivated to mentor students who present as similar to themselves (Lankau et al., 2005), ethnically marginalized students can be effectively mentored by white faculty (K. M. Thomas et al., 2007).

Despite shared culture and lived experiences, mentoring relationships between faculty members of colour and students of colour are not automatically effective. Other identities (e.g., gender, the nation of origin, age, and sexuality) can impede initial mentor-mentee connections. And in addition to balancing teaching, research, and service responsibilities, faculty of colour are often already overburdened by navigating their own experiences with isolation in the workplace. Invisible service, in this case with the additional time needed to adequately mentor students, is not rewarded in the promotion and tenure process (Matthew, 2016).

Beyond their participation in VOPE-sponsored training programs, there is as yet no research or theoretical musing about the experiences of evaluation graduate students of colour. In a promising development, foundations such as W. K. Kellogg, Robert Wood Johnson, and Annie E. Casey have begun to support the goal of diversifying our field (Dean-Coffey, 2018). Christie and Vo (2011) have outlined the strengths and sustainability challenges associated with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Evaluation Fellowship program for those underrepresented in program evaluation. In addition, new scholarship is emerging that urges evaluators to consider culture, equity, race, and class in the teaching of evaluation (Boyce & Chouinard, 2017; V. G. Thomas & Madison, 2010).

## TEACHING CONTEXT

I am an Afro-Latina tenure-track assistant professor in an educational research methodology department. With critical (Everitt, 1996; Fay, 1987) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) as a guide, I have taught the following courses: Advanced Evaluation Theory, Advanced Research Methods for Dissertating, Culturally Responsive Approaches to Research and Evaluation, Educational Measurement and Evaluation, Educational Research Methods, and Evaluation of Educational Programs. I currently advise 13 Master of Science and Doctor of Philosophy students, nine of whom identify as persons of colour. Each has additional intersecting identities of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), some of the most salient being religious preference, nation of origin, sexuality, and ability status. I hope these students will have a strong methodological foundation, conduct studies based on democratic principles, and promote equity, fairness, inclusivity, and diversity. I encourage them to utilize cultural responsiveness, sensitivity, and competence to dismantle archaic discourses of power and inequity within social science inquiry (Symonette, 2004; V. G. Thomas & Madison, 2010).

The theoretical foundations of this article rest on the literature of critical race theory (CRT) (Bell, 1999; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and

culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and are based on evaluation research, higher education literature, and personal reflections. I have spent a great deal of time reflecting on my experience as a Black graduate student. And since the beginning of my second semester as a tenure-track professor, I have kept a journal about my experiences and have noted the needs of my students, especially those from minoritized populations. As I examined my experiences and reviewed the literature, I positioned all of my interpretations using the key tenets of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, as cited by Ladson-Billings, 2013):

- belief that racism is normal or ordinary, not aberrant, in US society,
- interest convergence or material determinism,
- race as a social construction,
- intersectionality and anti-essentialism, and
- voice or counter-narrative.

I have also drawn lessons from previous research by evaluators of colour who examine how and in what ways the intersections of ethnicity and race, socioeconomic status, gender, sector of employment, education, years of experience, and US political climate affect the identity, role, and practice of evaluators of colour (Reid et al., 2020).

## LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

K. M. Thomas et al. (2007) outlined strategies that they believe to be essential and necessary for increasing access to, and the quality of, mentoring for students of colour. These strategies are grouped by the entity responsible, including organization, faculty, and minority graduate student. My reflections, research, and review of literature have led me to five strategies for mentoring and advising evaluation graduate students of colour. They expand existing higher education literature and are the first of their kind within the field of program evaluation.

I offer three caveats. First, much of what I present may not be relevant only for mentoring students of colour. While white graduate students and their minoritized peers are similar in terms of their capacity and capability, their journeys are unique due to the “intervening effects of racism” (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008, p. 5). As such, I have attempted to offer contextualized examples that may seem generic. Second, I recognize that neither persons of colour nor their experiences are homogeneous (Ladson-Billings, 2013). There are subjective and objective differences between groups, including group-specific assumptions and biases. Third, as Crenshaw’s (1989) foundational work has pointed out, there are many intersecting identities of oppression and privilege. I have purposely chosen the narrow focus of racism, as previous research has highlighted its salience for evaluators of colour (Boyce et al., 2017). It is my hope, however, that others will take up the important task of research and theoretical musings on recommendations for mentoring students with other identities.

What follows is a brief discussion of each strategy, along with reflections and practical examples for implementation.

### ***Consider the impact of vicarious trauma***

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota. For nearly nine minutes, a white police officer knelt on his neck while he was handcuffed face down on the street. Onlookers and other police officers watched as he pleaded for his life. After a video of his death was shared on social media, uprisings worldwide decried human rights abuses in the United States, focusing on police brutality and violence against Black people.

In the age of Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter, news and current event updates are ubiquitous. In late June 2019, pictures of the drowned bodies of Salvadoran immigrant Oscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his toddler, Valeria, circulated broadly on television and social media accounts. Videos of the moments before the deaths of Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Ahmad Aubrey, Sandra Bland, and many others have been similarly shared. While knowledge and acknowledgement of these events are necessary for fighting inequity and injustice, repeated exposure to racial violence can trigger the same symptoms as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (M. Williams & DeLapp, 2016). Research on professionals who work in high-stress and trauma-exposed fields has deepened our understanding of the impact of vicarious traumatization (Pearlman & MacLan, 1995) and secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 1995; Stamm, 1995), and recent literature has suggested that people of colour are especially susceptible to experiencing vicarious trauma (M. T. Williams, 2016).

Advisors of evaluation graduate students of colour should create spaces for students to express their feelings and, if they choose, be vulnerable and open about the stressors of simply being a person of colour in a world with white supremacy woven into its very fabric. While these opportunities do not need to happen solely during closed-door conversations, the use of townhall and open forums requires agreement about norms and the consequences for breaking them. In addition, for example, to discussing Scott's murder with students in my office, I also moderated critical discussions during class that semester. Even when the content scheduled for class doesn't lend itself to conversations about current events or social justice, I often give students a chance to have formal check-ins.

### ***Assist with the facilitation of peer and mentor "squads"***

US congresswomen Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Ayanna Pressley refer to the community they've built upon their professional friendships as a "squad" (Sullivan, 2019). A squad is a group of people who have your back, who have your best interests at heart, and who are in solidarity. Research with African-American doctoral students has suggested that mutual peer support from those with similar backgrounds can increase feelings of self-reliance (Lewis et al., 2004). Similar findings have been self-reported by faculty of color (McGowan et al., 2019) and advocated for by Ladson-Billings (1995). While peer-support

systems are critical, evaluation graduate students of colour should also have access to multiple mentors. These students need a “squad” of mentors, including peers, family, and faculty (Kram, 1985).

Whenever a prospective student emails me, I put them in touch with current students in my department. I find this is especially important for international students; I am unable to speak to how the culture in North Carolina and in our department differs from their home culture. I also aim to introduce students to faculty across campus who have similar cultures and backgrounds, something done for me when I was a graduate student. On the day I interviewed, the first thing my future advisor Dr. Jennifer Greene said to me was, “You would probably like to chat with an African-American faculty member?” I agreed, and she walked me upstairs to meet with Dr. Jim Anderson (a renowned Black historian of education). She gave up time with me so that I might spend time questioning him and learning about his experience. It truly takes a village, and one faculty member cannot be everything a student of colour will need in a mentor.

### ***Respect, honour, and celebrate students’ culture, religion, and families***

Studies of students from Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, and Black ethnicities have highlighted the vital roles that spirituality and family play in their lives. A study of Chicana doctoral recipients, for example, found that active family socialization assisted them when they encountered messages of unworthiness (Morales, 1988). Native American graduate students have described the meaningful role that spirituality plays in their resilience and internal development (Hampton, 1995). And Christianity and the family unit have prominent places in Latinx and Black cultures. It is critical that advisors and mentors honour, support, and respect these and other cultural tenets. Shahjahan and Barker (2009) argue for the legitimization of spiritual epistemological perspectives of ethnically minoritized graduate students as a way to enhance equity in higher education culture.

Advisors of evaluation graduate students of colour can research or have conversations about the norms and dates associated with the holidays and events that their students observe. When it comes to Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Kwanzaa, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, I try to avoid scheduling important deadlines. While I can’t know all the traditions observed by my students, I encourage them to inform me about their cultural and religious traditions as appropriate. One evening a few years ago, one of my students was hit by a stray bullet that came through her apartment wall. I knew this student was a practicing Christian. When I got to the emergency room, the first thing I said was “I have already prayed for you, and I believe everything is going to be ok.” I saw some relief and comfort cross her face. It is necessary for me to connect with my students on a spiritual level. Finally, when we have class presentations, I encourage students to bring a dish to share. This often becomes a celebration of cuisines from around the world, with students sharing recipes and related stories during the class break.

### ***Be vigilant of microaggressions and practice microvalidations***

Students of color experience subtle forms of racism, known as microaggressions, that are often directed towards them by peers and faculty (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; McCabe, 2009). As a result, they experience discomfort, self-doubt, exhaustion, isolation (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; McCabe, 2009), and a lowered sense of belonging and academic connectedness (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). Microaggressions, a term first coined by Chester Pierce and colleagues (1978), are racially insensitive comments, acts, or “put-downs” toward members of a minoritized group, which can include having their name mocked or mispronounced, being asked where they are *really* from, or inappropriate comments about hair or dress.

It is not enough for advisors and mentors to not be racist; they must be anti-racist (Kendi, 2019). Kendi (2019) suggests the following tips: acknowledge your own racism (denial is the heartbeat of racism); confess your racist ideas; define racism and antiracism; identify racist systems; and work to change racist systems. In addition, a key tenet of culturally responsive pedagogy is to believe that all students are capable of academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Therefore, advisors and mentors should also practice giving microvalidations (Packard et al., 2011), small acts and words that validate who graduate students believe they can be. My post-doctoral advisor always praised me in public and raised concerns in private. I regularly let my advisees know that I am proud of them, see their potential, and believe in them. I learn every student’s name and work to pronounce their names correctly. And I make a concerted effort to refer to my advisees as my colleagues.

### ***Develop mentoring competence***

Graduate students are not the only community in need of mentoring and development. Faculty should also seek professional development, especially related to mentoring and diversity (K. M. Thomas et al., 2007). Faculty are not usually trained to be advisors, nor are they evaluated on the quality of mentoring they provide (Johnson & Huwe, 2002); evaluations are usually related to scholarly productivity, including publications, presentation, and grants (Girves et al., 2005), which do not necessarily indicate appropriate mentoring.

Each of these strategies is important. I have committed to professional development in the areas of classroom and laboratory management, providing feedback, and improved interpersonal skills as they relate to mentoring relationships. Further, I have spoken to my department chair and others to facilitate peer relationships and workshops for those interested in developing skills related to mentoring, supervising, and advising graduate students. Thus far, I have attended workshops related to understanding various People Styles (Bolton & Bolton, 2009), providing graduate students with feedback, and the importance of reflection.

## **CONCLUSION**

As this issue highlights, the teaching of evaluation literature continues to be essential as our field expands and professionalizes. Literature from other fields



suggests that good mentoring can have positive impacts, both personally and professionally (Zachary, 2000). It is my desire that all evaluation graduate students receive high-quality advising and develop meaningful relationships with mentors. I have outlined five strategies for mentoring and advising evaluation graduate students of colour, some of which may be useful for all students. Mentoring takes time and commitment from both advisor and student, and it is a responsibility and privilege for all evaluation teachers. Consequently, there should be a culture of support to help all faculty effectively mentor students of colour. Empirical research and additional insights about effective best practices are clearly needed, both for graduate students of colour and for students of various identities.

While I have focused on interactions with students of colour as an important factor for high-quality mentoring, our conversations and actions while students of colour are not in the room are just as important. Therefore, I conclude with a few questions for reflection. Do you advocate for students of colour and their best interests during department meetings? Are you on the lookout for, and committed to, dismantling systematic racist ideas, procedures, and policies within your institution? Have you publicly spoken out against racism? Have you held others—especially those in power—accountable when you have witnessed sexist, racist, or oppressive language, ideas, or actions from your colleagues? What are you doing to create a safe and inclusive environment for students of all ethnicities, racial backgrounds, religions, ability status, socioeconomic backgrounds, first-generation status, nation of origin, sexualities, and gender identities? In the words of Desmond Tutu, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor” (as quoted by Brown, 1984, p. 19).

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## AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Ayesha Boyce** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Research Methodology at UNC Greensboro. Her scholarship focuses on attending to value stances and issues related to diversity, equity, inclusion, access, cultural responsiveness, and social justice within evaluation—especially multi-site, STEM, and contexts with historically marginalized populations. Dr. Boyce also examines teaching, mentoring, and learning in evaluation.