

BTR Commencement Address  
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Becoming a teacher – like becoming a doctor or a judge – should not be easy. I think the Boston Teacher Residency has this covered. Few among this graduating cohort of residents would describe BTR as easy. That’s good. Teaching is too important a job and requires too much skill, craft, and understanding to let anyone simply walk into the profession. Similarly, being a family member, partner, or friend of a BTR resident is also tough at times. For a year our loved ones and friends listened to our gripes and complaints, picked up the slack when we let our domestic responsibilities slide, and tolerated our work schedules. Your compassion and encouragement enabled us to persevere. We know it wasn’t easy for you either, and we are grateful for your patience and support. In particular I’d like to recognize and thank the children of the residents in the program for their generosity. And though I am not a parent myself, at least for a few more hours, I know that your moms and dads do this work to help make sure that the schools, the city, the country, and the world you inherit is as healthy and fair as possible.

I’m going to try to frame some thoughts about this moment in time, what public education in the United States in 2007 looks like, and what we’re about to do. Let’s start with the Supreme Court’s ruling last month on two school desegregation cases that came out of Seattle, Washington and Jefferson County, Kentucky. These districts had in place student assignment plans that allowed family choice and considered race as one of many variables for the purpose of maintaining desegregated schools. These districts wanted their schools to reap the social and educational benefits of diversity and avoid the well-documented harms of racial isolation. These plans are now illegal. The Supreme Court

struck them down in a 5-4 decision. The ruling was based, just as *Brown vs. Board of Education* was 53 years ago, on the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Chief Justice John Roberts in his decision said that “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.” According to Chief Justice Roberts, the laws and policies that for centuries discriminated against and denied citizenship to groups defined by race – the Black Codes, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Naturalization Act (we could go on all day) – are the equivalent of Jefferson County and Seattle’s voluntary desegregation plans. Justice Clarence Thomas insists that this recent ruling carries forth the spirit and fulfills the mandate of *Brown vs Board of Education*. His argument underlines the utter perversity inherent in this decision. In a single blow the Supreme Court has knocked us back decades and may have all but shut the door on legal remedies to advance integration and address systemic racial discrimination. Meanwhile, the school desegregation gains that peaked in 1988 have seriously eroded and today almost 40 percent of all African-American and Latino students attend schools with high concentrations of poverty where fewer than ten percent of the students are white. This is where we are in the summer of 2007.

Racial segregation matters because it enables other forms of racial oppression and it facilitates the flipside, racial advantage and privilege. I know this from experience. The school district I attended, Scotia-Glenville in upstate New York, was probably 99% white when I was a kid. In early elementary school I was tracked into higher level reading groups. In middle school, I was in honors and advanced tracks for all of my classes. I took three AP courses in high school, and two electives ironically called “critical thinking” that were really SAT drill courses. I did pretty well on the SAT’s, a gate-

keeping test that just happens to reward the cultural capital in which I had been seeped since birth. Although I was not a particularly hard-working student, I am not being hyperbolic when I say that I would have had to go out of my way to avoid winding up at a four-year college. Movies I saw gave me a sense that my school was probably better than a high school in the Bronx or East L.A., but I never once considered my experience to have anything to do with privilege. In my mind, my school was nothing extra or special, it was just the way schools are supposed to be. The school the next town over, *they* were privileged. They had nicer soccer fields. With built-in sprinklers.

I understand now that schools, by design, worked for me in a way that they historically have not worked for students with disabilities, students of color, women, and immigrants. And we know that today, race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender, ability, immigration and social class still matter when we're talking about education.

African-American students make up about 17% of the public K-12 population, and only 12% of the four-year college population. Latino(a) students represent 19% of the K-12 population, but only 10% of the four-year college population. And as I'm sure you know, there has never been a worse time in our nation's history to be a young adult without a high school diploma.

So why do we have these gaps in educational outcomes? Well, there are plenty of people out there who have a one-word explanation. The word is "culture." And they aren't talking about the dominant mainstream culture that denigrates and threatens the positive self-identity development of young people of color and people for whom English is not their first language. These people are talking about what they perceive as an anti-

intellectual culture of African-Americans, Latino(a)s, Native Americans, and immigrants. “It’s their culture,” they’ll tell you. “They just don’t value education.”

In the past many people would say that some races don’t achieve because, biologically, they’re not as intelligent. This is called eugenics. It’s less socially acceptable today to assert the eugenic viewpoint, but now, to act in its place, we have *cultural* explanations for the colloquially referred-to achievement gap. Make no mistake, this is the new eugenics. Do not buy into it. The notion that a whole group of people, defined by the social construct of race, don’t care about their children’s educational success, or would rather perform poorly in school than risk being seen as “acting white” is rooted in bald racism.

Yet this idea has powerful currency in 2007. Its supporters in the academic world pump out books and articles that contain either no supporting research, or wafer-thin, scientifically insubstantial research that crumbles in the light of investigation. Indeed, the some of the brightest education scholars in the U.S. have spent the past thirty years on the defense, conducting research and producing writing that counters this fundamentally racist explanation. Historian James Anderson has documented that between 1914 and 1932, African Americans contributed more than five million dollars to build about 5,000 schools in 900 counties. We’re talking about a very cash-short economy at this time. This does not strike me as a group of people who don’t value education. Yet the belief persists and permeates.

If this hasn’t already happened to you, I’ll bet you that it will. You’ll be at a wedding, or a party, and you’ll meet someone new. They’ll ask you what you do, and you’ll tell them that you teach. “Where?” they’ll ask. And when you say Boston Public

Schools, they'll say something like "Ooh, that must be rough." If you're like me, you'll say: "What do you mean?" They're not expecting this question. And they'll say: "It must be rough trying to teach those kids."

It's the kids. Or the families. Or both. This belief persists, despite its inherent racism, despite mountains of evidence to the contrary, for two reasons: one, it's an easy answer, and two, because it lets all of us off the hook. If we believe that historically oppressed groups aren't succeeding in schools and in society because of their values or lack of motivation, we don't have to acknowledge that what we really have is not an achievement gap, but an educational opportunity gap.

We know, for a fact, that Black, Latino(a), and Native American students, compared to their white and Asian-American peers, are more likely to: be taught by a teacher lacking a major or minor in their subject of instruction; attend schools that are increasingly segregated by race; receive less per-pupil funding; be assigned to special education programs and lower-track course work, have less access to rigorous curriculum; and receive out-of-school suspensions.

In our history, the United States has never, ever, provided Native American, African-American, Latino(a), immigrant students, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty with equal educational opportunity. Never!

It hasn't happened in New York, it hasn't happened in Philadelphia, or Washington, D.C. or Atlanta, or Birmingham. It hasn't happened in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, Chicago, Milwaukee or Detroit. And it hasn't happened in Boston.

At the middle and high school levels, certainly, Boston Public Schools is a tiered system. Black and Hispanic students make up 77% of district's grade 7-12 population but represent only 16% of the Boston Latin student body. Many ninth grade students arrive on the first day of school to find that they've been placed, without their knowledge or family's consent, in a class for the U.S. Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps. A disproportionate number of African-American boys are assigned to behavior-related special education programs and are segregated from the general education population, in some cases they literally spend their days in a school basement. There are more than 8,000 Boston youth ages 16-24 who are out of school with no diploma or GED certificate. This is where we are in 2007.

These conditions are not unique to Boston. You can find some variation of them in most large urban public school districts. And there are many exciting things happening in BPS, BTR not least among them. So many dedicated teachers, community partners, and administrators. I've learned a lot from many of them, I will continue to learn from them. But I cite the intolerable inequities here in BPS to point out the challenge before us. This city, this country, has never been where we are now endeavoring to take it. Contemplating this situation, education and psychology scholar Beverly Daniel Tatum uses the metaphor "There is no road."

So where and how do we fit in to all of this? Or, as a student named Tory asked out loud one early morning when my mini-lesson was bombing: "What are you doing with your life?" It was a fair question then, and it's a fair question now. Are we now part of some movement working toward educational justice? Throughout this year, people have told us that in fact, we are. I disagree. We are not, by virtue of teaching in the

Boston Public Schools – or any other urban or rural district – part of a movement. As actors entering an enormous system that has historically distributed educational opportunities according to race, class, language, and ability, the odds are that, even with our most sincere and diligent efforts, we will simply contribute to producing more of the same: some outstanding student successes alongside the hemorrhaging of other students from the system.

But this year has brought us to a point where we now have the *opportunity* to be part of a movement for educational equity and justice. Our actions from this point forward, collectively and as individuals, will determine whether we grab hold of this opportunity.

Professor Karen Mapp, one of our instructors and someone whose contribution to improving education in Boston is a worthy benchmark for all of us, describes us as “warriors for social justice.” I appreciate Professor Mapp’s optimism and faith, and while I may not personally ever be comfortable wearing a title as romantic-sounding as that, Professor Mapp’s invocation of justice is critical. Let us not imagine ourselves as altruistic strivers doing something to help – and this next phrase is in quotes – “the disadvantaged kids of Boston.” The young people of Boston do not need our charity. They do not need us to give them pieces of ourselves, whether those pieces are chunks of knowledge and experience, or chunks of sympathy. They do not need us to save them. What they need, I argue, is for us to simply ensure that they receive the high quality education that is their right, that the education system of which we are now part, works *for* them the way it works for students right over there in Brookline and Lexington, the

way it worked for me, and not the way it has worked *against* too many students for too long.

Easier said than done, I know. This year, no matter in what grade level, subject, or school we found ourselves, we shared a common experience. As teachers, especially new teachers, often the level of our effort does not correspond with the level of our success. When you spend nights, weekends and vacations planning units and lesson plans, when you work one-on-one with students after school, when you make the phone calls home and have the meetings, when you do your very best and the results fall short of the learning gains you so badly wanted students to reach, it hurts.

But teachers have an advantage that policy makers, researchers, and central office staff members don't have: we're right there with the students. Teaching is a passport to their world, and that's a privilege. I'm talking about the pure electricity that runs along currents of pink ink in a writer's notebook, and the exposure to new slang that will be yesterday's papers by the time your friends pick it up. I'm talking about seeing your students on the T. I'm talking about watching a young woman give a persuasive speech in support of gay marriage and marking the exact moment that you feel her future explode and bust wide open. I'm talking about the dancing finale in the play *Mr. Popper's Penguins*, staged by Jack McCauley's multihandicapped class at Charlestown High School. I'm talking about inappropriate but harmless student humor that tests your self-control. This is the good stuff and this is the fuel. It keeps us going and it makes us better at our jobs.

So what are our jobs? We might not have a common answer to that question, but I think we would all say that we want our students to achieve academic success and have

access to the opportunities that follow. Incoming Superintendent Johnson had a slogan in Memphis that I hope she brings to Boston: “Every student, every day, college bound.”

The hopeful news, and the challenge to all of us graduating tonight, is that research shows that the most important factor for student learning – more than class size, per-pupil funding, segregation, or any other institutional variable – is quality of teacher instruction. The research also shows that the vast majority of us won’t hit our stride as effective teachers until we’re about five years into the profession. I’m going to assume that the resident year counts as one of those.

But if we want educational justice and equity, if we want to be part of a movement, academic success is not enough. We need to help students do well not only for themselves, but others as well. We have to teach to transform the lives of students so that they will help transform the world. It’s not a radical idea. Isn’t that what happened to each of us graduating tonight? Someone, somewhere helped instill in us the value of working for a good greater than ourselves.

I want to personally acknowledge and thank my wife, Jessica, whose courage and leadership as a teacher and activist roused me from my slumber and inspired me to be a teacher. Without her I would not be here. We need to keep this stuff going.

I know that amazing scholars are going to come out of Ver-Nard Fernandes’s classes, and they could become lobbyists for chemical companies, or they could become civil rights lawyers. There’s no doubt that sick mathematicians are coming out of John Walker’s classes. They could become hedge fund managers, or they could be the next Bob Moses. Ramneek Saxena is definitely going to help develop brilliant scientists. They could invent a way to make deodorant last longer, but we need them to help us reverse

global warming, figure out why all these city kids are getting asthma, and better understand how people with autism learn. Thanks in advance, Ramneek.

You know, educational opportunities for African-Americans, for immigrants, for women, for people with disabilities, for religious minorities, are without a doubt better than they were in the past. This is not to say that we've reached any goal. But we must recognize where improvements have been made so that we can examine how change came about and then do more of that. On the surface it may seem that Chief Justice Warren's decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* led to school desegregation, or that Congress's enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1974 opened the door for people with disabilities. But we know how these things happened. They started with activism – organization, mobilization, and resistance – in the very communities that were targets of oppression. Since the beginning of educational injustice in this country, when slaves literally risked life and limb to acquire literacy, there have been movements of resistance. And the students and families in the communities most deeply affected by unequal educational opportunity will be the ones to continue to power the advancement of educational equity.

Therefore we have an imperative: we have to learn how to teach students how they can activate and develop their agency, to understand, through research, the problems that confront them, and to take action. This work is happening. It is happening in Baltimore where students involved in the Algebra Project not only tutor younger students in high-level math, they coordinate actions to pressure the state to provide more resources and a better education to city students. It's happening in Los Angeles, where students and families demanded, and got, a college preparatory curriculum for all high school students.

It's happening in Boston, too. Until recently Boston still had a lock-out policy in effect for tardy students. If you came from Mattapan to Charlestown and arrived ten minutes late, you could not get into the building. No school for you that day, you were supposed to go home. The School Committee changed this policy before the beginning of the last school year, but if you want to thank someone, you should really thank the group of Brighton High School students whose research and activism were instrumental to this policy change. This is can be our movement, if we want it.

There's a Jewish proverb that says: "The work is not yours to complete, but neither are you free to desist from it." We may not get where we want to go. But our students, or their students, might. Let's teach to help them develop and use their voices, and let's use our voices, too.

This past year many of us found ourselves confronted with school conditions and policies that simply should not be –and we felt powerless to change them. Do not let the everyday sight of these inequities soften your outrage. Do not get used to them. I'm not exactly what sure yet what using our voices in the service of institutional change looks like. I suspect it means never being quite comfortable. If I'm not getting pushback from someone or someplace, I must not be pushing hard enough. I know what Jesse is thinking: "get your instructional chops down first." But in class last week, Marques talked about us being conduits for students as they travel through our classrooms, and the need for us to embody the qualities we hope they will carry into adulthood. If we want students to be brave, and to use their voices to advance the cause of justice, we have to model that.

I started these remarks by trying to contextualize our entry point into the teaching profession, trying to pinpoint where on the arc of history, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, we are positioned. We can't fully know. To quote musician Joe Strummer, "The future is unwritten." I do know that this time belongs to the young people of Boston, to discover who they are and where they want to go, to dream, to joke, to dance, to write, to read, to explore, to invent new slang, and to develop the skills, knowledge, and consciousness we need them to have so that they can join us in this work toward building a more just world. Let us do our best to make sure that their right to an equitable education is delivered.

Beverly Daniel Tatum reminds us that "there is no road." A proverb by Spanish poet Antonio Machado says that "We make the road by walking." Perhaps the greatest value of BTR is that as we work toward educational justice, we do not work alone. We will make the road by walking – with students, families, and each other.

Thank you for listening.