

## Boston Latin Besmirched

Jeff Zorn

Published online: 20 July 2016

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2016

For six years, grades 7 through 12, Boston Latin School (BLS) developed the latent best in my character and intellect. Its tutelage—insistent, prosaic, cumulatively potent—lifted me from the streets of Dorchester to Dartmouth College, Cambridge, Harvard, and Stanford universities, then a fulfilling career in higher education. In retirement at seventy, I remain deeply in its debt.

Three years ago I returned for my fiftieth reunion and spent a day on campus before our geezer party. I saw BLS thriving as a coeducational, more racially diverse academy, run with a kinder, gentler hand while sustaining the classical curriculum and academic standards that had served me so well. I left gratified and checkbook-ready.

Now Alma Mater stands accused of racism, pilloried for insensitivity toward students of color and an unsupportive climate for their learning.<sup>1</sup> On January 30, 2016, the *New York Times* described in detail “Racial Hostilities Simmer[ing] at Historic Boston Latin School.”<sup>2</sup> Over the next month, the city of Boston School Board heard testimony from aggrieved students of color, and the board’s Office of Equity investigated seven putatively racist incidents. Commentators, community leaders, and activists, including the heads of local NAACP and Urban League chapters, demanded the resignation of headmaster Lynne Mooney Teta. (Dr. Teta did resign on June 20, 2016.) On March 3, 2016, U.S. Attorney Carmen M. Ortiz announced an investigation into alleged civil rights violations at BLS.

---

<sup>1</sup>For the denotation of the phrase “of color” I follow here the practice of excluding Asian Americans. By “students of color” I mean blacks and Latinos. If there were Native American students, they’d be included as well. All these terms—also “whites”—have little if any legitimate use in educational discourse: loose, imprecise aggregates subsuming huge ranges of cultural and individual diversity.

<sup>2</sup>Jess Bidgood, “Students Say Racial Hostilities Simmered at Historic Boston Latin School,” *Education*, *New York Times*, January 30, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/education/students-say-racial-hostilities-simmered-at-historic-boston-latin-school.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/education/students-say-racial-hostilities-simmered-at-historic-boston-latin-school.html?_r=0).

I applaud the students who stepped forward to decry mistreatment from classmates and a blind eye from administrators. Boston remains a city of ethnic enclaves, where you grow up among “your own people.” BLS students usually befriend classmates from all over the city, but apparently some still can’t resist harassing those from alien neighborhoods. As a BLS graduate who endured anti-Semitism from classmates and teachers, and knew not to bother administrators with my troubles, I hope the bigots lose big.<sup>3</sup>

The indictment against BLS gets far less convincing whenever it goes past blatant racism to insensitivity and lack of support. As recent college-level protests have made apparent, “sensitivity” regularly plays out as feckless shielding from intellectual challenge, educators’ “support” as a poor, cowardly substitute for professional judgment. My argument fits all schools aspiring to world-class academic standards: Keep the insensitivity and lack of support coming when the alternatives are stunted, censored discourse and coddled, indulged students.

First things first: The school board found BLS negligent in only one of the seven reported racial incidents. In November 2014 a white student called a black student the N-word and referenced lynching. After a hearing, Dr. Teta exacted an appropriate penalty but was found to have displayed “a lack of urgency” in the matter. Agreeing with that judgment, she vowed to expedite the process. Still, despite clamor to the contrary, a hearing had to be held; an accusation of impropriety cannot justly be the last word.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Charge of Insensitivity**

Two seniors, Meggie Noel and Kylie Webster-Cazeau, initiated the Black at BLS protest through a YouTube video urging classmates and alumni of color “to share their experiences of racial insensitivity or outright racism on social media.”<sup>5</sup> Note well the biased sampling this appeal would elicit, the questions begged: What effects did social media have on the results? How many students and alumni did not respond because they had no such experiences to report? How many, if asked, would admit to practicing “insensitivity or outright racism” toward schoolmates? How many females, if asked, would rate sexist treatment as a far more vexing problem than anything racial?

<sup>3</sup>The victims and perpetrators of bigotry can be of any race. Exempting all but whites from charges of racist attitude and behavior occludes significant portions of social reality.

<sup>4</sup>In addition to accusations lodged by the hypersensitive, some are deliberately falsified. For confirmation, Google “false accusations of racism” and “false accusations of rape.”

<sup>5</sup>Bidgood, “Racial Hostilities Simmered.”

Among the published responses, many are instructive in ways unintended by campaign organizers. Collectively they suggest a Golden Mean approach to sensitivity, avoiding the extremes of speakers' passing malicious, demeaning comments and listeners' taking fierce umbrage at imaginary slights. In no case should race-baiting be tolerated; in no case should hypersensitivity abrogate freedoms of inquiry and expression.

Following the grand jury acquittal of Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, in November 2014 black BLS students tweeted reactions of outrage. Two kinds of return message followed. One batch was raw hate speech, some identified as coming from "not black" classmates.<sup>6</sup> The other batch offered political dissents, not insults. Black BLS students and their adult advocates have characterized these messages as racially insensitive, their senders as deserving stiff punishment from BLS authorities.

But consider the message most frequently damned: "The only racism left in the media is reverse racism; there is no coverage of black on white violence, only the opposite." However ill-timed, however substantively incorrect, the comment calmly states an empirical claim; it is rhetorically measured retort, not diatribe. Educators worthy of the name cannot discourage disagreement like this. Past eighth grade, students (of every ethnicity, every cultural heritage) should be expected to evaluate opposing ideas fairly, weigh evidence and counter-evidence, and, if still unconvinced, deploy the strategies of rebuttal. The worst thing an educator can tell them is "Silence critics who annoy you; we've got your back."

Outcry against reasoned rebuttal presents BLS and other protestors in a bad light: as brittle and peevish, unable or unwilling to engage in intellectual dialogue. Whenever the topic at hand may trigger discomfort or anger in a student of color, classmates are to nod in agreement with everything he says. But then one Black at BLS contributor complains: "You're the only black student in your A.P. history class, and when the subject of slavery comes up, every eye turns to you." Such deference is a learned behavior, *de rigueur*: When racially charged topics come up in class, students not of color are to shut up and listen.<sup>7</sup> To blame them now for *not* speaking up is the gamesmanship of "Heads I win, tails you lose."

<sup>6</sup>"NAACP Wants Boston Latin Headmaster to Step Down in Wake of Racism Incidents," WHDH News Boston, February 22, 2016, <http://whdh.com/news/naACP-wants-boston-latin-headmaster-to-step-down-in-wake-of-racism-incidents>. For argument's sake, I here take "hate speech" as adequately defined and intolerable when directed at schoolmates. Both assumptions are controversial. See Rodney A. Smolla, "Academic Freedom, Hate Speech, and the Idea of a University," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 53, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 195–225, available at <http://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4056&context=lcp>.

<sup>7</sup>"Whiteness studies" classes gained notoriety for insisting on just this deference. See my "Afterwords" comment on Barbara Applebaum, "White Complicity and Social Justice Education: Can One Be Culpable without Being Liable?" *Educational Theory* 59, no. 4 (2009): 371–72.

In another “discriminatory,” insensitive comment, a white BLS student told a black classmate, “Oh you’ll get into college; you’re black.” From its inception, affirmative action has cast suspicion and doubt on fully meritorious applicants. If groups qua groups *demand, take, and benefit from* affirmative action boosts, their members will be identified as *getting* boosts—even the exceptional individuals who needed none. Their quarrel is rightfully with the system of preferences itself. In 1995, when BLS still had racial quotas, Talia White, a black BLS sophomore, sounded exactly the right note: “I think it’s stupid to have a policy like that. A lot of people outside the school are going to think I didn’t earn my way.”<sup>8</sup>

As a University of Massachusetts at Amherst undergraduate, black BLS alumna and teacher Sherry Lewis had a 3.25 grade point average and knew the cutoff for dean’s list was 3.7. At her counselor’s office, however, Lewis learned she actually had made dean’s list: a special list for black and Hispanic students with a 3.0 cutoff. “I was appalled,” she said. “I felt belittled. What’s the message being sent out—that we can’t achieve the 3.7 so you have to lower the dean’s list?”<sup>9</sup>

Calls for sensitivity at BLS, in sum, must be carefully distinguished from calls for hypersensitivity. Teachers and administrators must protect students from attack but not from challenge. In cognitive effect, hypersensitivity locks students in preconception—exactly what Socrates criticized in the unexamined life. In social effect, it can only reinforce and prolong isolation—the worst possible outcome in a city infamous for provincialism.

## The Charge of Unsupportive Climate

Consider the following complaint: “Five years later wondering why teachers at Latin still can’t tell their black students apart.” Again the key question is begged: Can these teachers tell *any* of their students apart? If not, the teachers are not racists but throwbacks, squarely in the school’s tradition of classroom pedagogy.

Since 1635, the job of BLS “master” has been to instruct *well* whoever is in the class. These whomevers could be whatever—in size, shape, religion, ethnicity, home life, place of birth, intended major, and career plan.<sup>10</sup> Whether my classmates and I became Ivy Leaguers or attrition statistics

<sup>8</sup>Sara Rimer, “Challenge to Quotas Roils School in Boston,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/09/25/us/challenge-to-quotas-roils-school-in-boston.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Many veteran teachers in my time had never learned a single student’s name. One legendary grammarian, Frank Sullivan, called on students by number; third row, fifth seat, you were “Thirty-five” for that year. For a good laugh (I hope), see my satirical portrait of Mad Frank at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQY8H1uxpRg>.

was entirely on us, and our own resources. Offering no praise, encouragement, or out-of-class assistance, our teachers gave instruction, assignments, and feedback. At term's end, they gave grades from zero to one hundred with equal equanimity.

Austerity of this sort explains BLS's unrivaled success; it *caused* that success. For nearly four centuries, BLS has enrolled "strivers" from immigrant and working-class homes without books, museum memberships, or season opera tickets. Those who lasted left empowered with knowledge, cultural literacy, study habits, and well-earned confidence. No one got a swelled head, no one's hand was held, no one coasted on native gifts, and no one got inflated grades amounting to lies, today's national norm. Spared no challenge, those who lasted crushed every entrance exam yet devised, then competed evenly in college and beyond with graduates of Andover, Exeter, Choate, Miss Porter's, and the best suburban public schools.

Strivers benefit minimally from the solicitous, unctuous "support" of adults in authority. Typically, strivers have a private life rich in emotional connection; they are loved, nourished, and protected by family members and admired by friends and neighbors; they have nonacademic interests and religious affiliations. At school they need distinctively educational supports: top-quality instruction, purposeful curriculum, intellectual discipline, and initiation into the impersonal procedures of scholarly, commercial, and civic life.<sup>11</sup> In its treachery pandering, romantic progressivism prolongs childishness and cultural disadvantage—exactly the reason working-class parents scorn it.

My visit to BLS showcased far more engaging, personable teachers and administrators than I had known. Their supports of mentoring, personal care, and tutorial assistance strongly improve on what my classmates and I experienced. Beyond these, however, lie salving, stroking, "nourishing," and pep-talking detrimental to students and beneath the dignity of the institution.

## The Complaint of Under-Representation

BLS students of color would feel better supported, they and their advocates say, if the school's student body matched the racial distribution of Boston's school population as a whole. BLS admits students solely on their grades and their scores on the Independent School Entrance Examination, resulting in skewed demographics: Blacks and Latinos make up 74 percent of the district's students, but only 21 percent of BLS students; the district is 14 percent white, BLS over three times that. Barely a quarter of its students are poor; more than three-quarters are white

<sup>11</sup>A sentence in Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* perfectly captures the striver's mentality: "Fortunately, my teachers were unsentimental about their responsibility." *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez: An Autobiography* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982), 18.

or Asian.<sup>12</sup> To many BLS students and their “social justice”-inspired allies, these data indicate the general denials of equal access and equal opportunity.

For twenty-five years (1974–1999), court orders set aside 35 percent of BLS seats for black and Latino students. Many tout these as glory days, expressing deep regret that new court orders and educational priorities ended the quota system. According to then-headmaster Michael Contompasis, however, about 35 percent of black and Latino students dropped out every year, compared with 18 percent of whites, and “about zero percent [of] Asian-American[s].”<sup>13</sup> In replacing merit-based admissions, set-asides leave selective schools suffering both lowered standards and cruel attrition.<sup>14</sup> The accounting here also must acknowledge violating the civil rights of better qualified applicants rejected for reasons of race.

Outreach, tutorial, and enrichment programs for students and parents of color are wise, hopeful investments; preschool, kindergarten, and elementary schools across the city should be the best possible.<sup>15</sup> But BLS is an “exam school” for good reason, dedicated to *advanced* learning in the disciplines, pushing *advanced* students to heights unreachable in mixed-ability classes. Not winning admission because of low grades and test scores is one thing; being denied access due to “a systemic opportunity gap”<sup>16</sup> is quite another. Access and opportunity were right there; the requisite level of performance, individual by individual, was not.

## Coda: Farcical Trickle-Down

Well-publicized protests at college and universities across America inspired and informed the BLS campaign. Here we see “college preparation” taking a bitterly ironic twist, with the *worst* in higher education seeping into high school manners and mores.

<sup>12</sup>Stephanie Ebbert, “At Boston Latin, Little Outreach to City’s Black, Latino Students,” *Boston Globe*, April 16, 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/04/23/boston-latin-little-outreach-city-black-latino-students/of6NIYrJhR8PvxMUYNi50L/story.html>.

<sup>13</sup>Garry Abrams, “Boston Latin School Learns a New Lesson: Shaper of Yuppies Comes to Grips with Reality of Minority Needs in Education,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1985, [http://articles.latimes.com/1985-05-08/news/vw-6592\\_1\\_minority-students](http://articles.latimes.com/1985-05-08/news/vw-6592_1_minority-students).

<sup>14</sup>Contompasis: “Have we lowered the standards? Yes, in some respects we have. We’ve allowed more kids into the pool.” Rimer, “Challenge to Quotas.”

<sup>15</sup>For decades, Jonathan Kozol has characterized Boston public schools as racist hell-holes. I challenge that account in “Duplicity at an Early Age: Jonathan Kozol’s Career,” *Academic Questions* vol. 29, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 205–12.

<sup>16</sup>Rosann Tung, quoted in Jeremy Fox and Peter Schworm, “Black Enrollment at Boston Latin Falls Sharply,” *Boston Globe*, January 31, 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/01/31/amid-protests-racial-disparities-latin-school-come-under-scrutiny/oi5nzNSUBM0JkrsdSXSTxJ/story.html>.

In “The Coddling of the American Mind,” Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt cogently analyze “something strange happening at America’s colleges and universities. A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.”<sup>17</sup> Microaggressions so censored include “I don’t see race” and “America is the land of opportunity.” Students react to these triggers with vindictive protectiveness and purely emotional reasoning.<sup>18</sup>

In the November 2015 Amherst Uprising, supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement vehemently objected to “racially insensitive” posters on campus that proclaimed “All Lives Matter.” Their reactions included tearing down posters, demanding a “zero-tolerance policy for racial insensitivity,” and insisting on “extensive training for racial and cultural competency” for the insufficiently sensitive.<sup>19</sup>

Brian Stascavage, a Wesleyan student and staff writer, submitted an editorial to the *Wesleyan Argus*, judging that “if vilification and denigration of the police force continues to be a significant portion of Black Lives Matter’s message, then I will not support the movement.”<sup>20</sup> As the *Washington Post* reported, “Within 24 hours of publication, students were stealing and destroying newspapers around campus. In a school café, a student screamed at Stascavage through tears, declaring he had ‘stripped all agency away from her, made her feel like not a human anymore.’” A week later, over 150 students, alumni, and staff called for “disposing of copies of the *Argus* on campus.”<sup>21</sup>

At Oberlin in December 2015, the Black Student Union demanded the hiring of “Black financial aid officers,” the immediate appointment of a black woman to head the jazz vocal department, and that “a mandatory professional development program be developed for faculty across the departments in the College and Conservatory that will help facilitate their understanding of the ways in which racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and other forms of violent oppression inform and shape instructional methods in the disciplinary content of their courses.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” *Atlantic*, September 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>“Amherst Uprising—What We Stand For,” Amherst Soul, November 13, 2015, <http://www.amherstsoul.com/post/133122838315/amherst-uprising-what-we-stand-for>.

<sup>20</sup>Brian Stascavage, “Why Black Lives Matter Isn’t What You Think,” *Wesleyan Argus*, September 14, 2015, <http://wesleyanargus.com/2015/09/14/of-race-and-sex>.

<sup>21</sup>Catherine Rampell, “Free Speech Is Flunking Out on College Campuses,” *Washington Post*, October 22, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/free-speech-is-flunking-out-on-college-campuses/2015/10/22/124e7cd2-78f5-11e5-b9c1-f03c48c96ac2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/free-speech-is-flunking-out-on-college-campuses/2015/10/22/124e7cd2-78f5-11e5-b9c1-f03c48c96ac2_story.html).

<sup>22</sup>“Oberlin College’s ABUSUA (Black Student Union) Institutional Demands,” December 16, 2015, 2, 7, 4, <http://chronicle.northcoastnow.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Oberlin-Colleges-ABUSUA-Black-Student-Union-Institutional-Demands.pdf>.

The document also named three professors to be “granted tenure immediately” and eight others for “immediate firing.”<sup>23</sup>

To this account need to be added the shouting-down of “offensive” speakers, the un-inviting of such speakers to campus, and the demands for schools to immediately fire professors guilty of microaggressions. As Peter Minowitz records, “According to guidelines the University of California issued in 2014–2015, you would transgress not only by asserting ‘the most qualified person should get the job.’ Merely saying you *believe* this would apparently qualify....At Guilford College in North Carolina, aggrieved students ‘suggest that every week a faculty member come forward and admit their [*sic*] participation in racism inside the classroom.’”<sup>24</sup>

As reportage on BLS makes clear, all this callow, jejune posturing now guides high school students to prioritize irascible hypersensitivity over reasoned argument and across-the-aisle negotiation. Full marks, then, to the college presidents, deans, and professors not cravenly capitulating to see-all-evil students and their enablers like the Missouri harridan shrieking for “some muscle over here.” May their courage come to pay great dividends at besieged schools like my dear alma mater, Boston Latin.

---

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 7, 8.

<sup>24</sup>Peter Minowitz, “Rescuing ‘Diversity’ from Affirmative Action and Campus Activists,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 45, no. 3 (2016): 147–62.