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Building Better: DAT Equipped for the Challenge

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The Shelter for our Future Selves

Thank you for the invitation to speak at this event. I am certainly among peers when and feel comfortable in a room full of teachers to be absolutely myself. For the teachers in the room who have been my teachers, or have been my students, or have seen me teach, you are now probably afraid of what I might say. At my best and most comfortable self, when I do have to speak it is certainly very clear and honest. When the organizers invited me to speak, I was worried about this very thing - how can I be myself and say what I truly think about what we need to do to improve our education system in the age of climate change, without being exactly myself and embarrassing my teachers?

You may ask, why was I thinking about my teachers at all? I'll tell you why. I am a third generation educator. Legend has it my grandfather started his own school in a rural community. My grandmother was a nurse for most of my life, but into her retirement people still called her Teacher Mary from her days in the classroom when she was a young girl. My aunts have had so much influence in their 50 years or more of shared service, that they have a whole street named after them as part of the first group of teachers targeted to be upwardly mobile by investing in what is now a sprawling suburb of my home community. I also come from a very long line of math and science educators, one of whom was the first to teach information technology at the CXC level in Dominica.

So yes, legacy. I think about what my teachers think because teachers have been all around me because teachers have been so fundamental in shaping my personal and professional life.

I think it's worth noting that we are fortunate to live in a culture that still, at least ceremonially, highly regards the work of teachers. Trust me, this may not feel like a tangible reward but it certainly means something that we are able to organize and advocate and be visible and

acknowledged for educating the national public. We are here today to continue to think about how we can continue to advocate for more than just legacy and respect in words and see that reflected in the actions and attitudes of the public, but more importantly, to see that reflected more strongly in our individual and collective self-worth as educators in this great country.

Your theme today meditates on the last six months of recovering from a collective trauma and our national desire to never let another do the same damage. In the spirit of the nation's call to Build Better, you have responded as educators and taken charge of what is presumably the most critical sector to the survival of other sectors in this country. You also claim, in this theme, that you are equipped for the challenge. Here comes the part where I start embarrassing my teachers: Are you really? And how? Let me phrase that differently: are we ready?

I don't know. Since I received this invitation, I've been thinking a lot about what I would say about this theme. I thought about the diverse types of work I must engage everyday, all under the umbrella of education. I am administrator, researcher, teacher, counsellor, entrepreneur, fundraiser, cheerleader, and on the most stressful, mundane of days, a good old secretary-in-chief. I think that many of you feel the same. Teachers go to work and exercise the complexity and diversity of critical thinking, problem solving, crisis management, project management, risk management all day long. And for many of us, at the end of it all, a nice "Thanks for your service" is what we get as if the multitasking and performance of education is a Saturday morning volunteer opportunity.

So it doesn't strike me, if we're being honest with ourselves, that we have really spent enough time - amidst our personal losses and traumas, and throughout dealing with those of our students and colleagues, that we have necessarily prepared ourselves to be equipped for any challenge that involves us being asked to give more. This is not in judgment. This is just me asking you to be honest with yourself about where you are and what we are able to do. For now.

But I digress. I return to the moment when I figured out what I wanted to say to you today. I'm working on a project now that has me visiting one particular community frequently. My students and I stopped at the school grounds and the lasting image in my mind, from about a month ago,

was the blown away tarpaulins that struggled to cover the structure, the tents outside and more importantly, the scene of children and mothers walking through the first floor of the building - washing clothes, eating meals, having a life.

Months following the storm, our schools were needed as hurricane shelters. The people there had nowhere else to go. Many of us here experienced the moral and ethical dilemma of this experience. In the days and weeks following Hurricane Maria, we were frustrated and even angry that our schools were essentially occupied by the newly-homeless. Many of us fought the inner conflict of wanting to bring our students back to school and recognizing that some of these very students would have no home to retreat to at the end of the school day. This struggle, now mostly “resolved” has forced me into an existential crisis about what exactly we do as teachers, what are our responsibilities and what are the duties of the public to make that happen.

Every time I sat to write this speech, I thought of only one question: what is school, if not a shelter?

I’m going to tell you something real: If you want to build back our schools to be better than they were, you need to stop obsessing over the buildings right now. Yes they matter. I’m not here to tell you they don’t. Yes, we have to keep our foot on the necks of those who can to help us create safe and secure buildings where our children can be their best selves while learning. What we build back and how depends so heavily on what we see or understand as school. Perhaps the first step to building better is to re-imagine our concept of school and redefine it as the shelter for our future selves.

This wouldn’t be a teachers’ event if we didn’t have a lesson so here is a brief one on etymology: the word shelter comes from the word “shield” in the late 16th century. It is originally defined as a structure providing protection from danger or distress. In many cases, it is said to originate from the word “shield,” and many of the definitions of shelter - verb and noun - use this word to explain the context. I ask you to think about the implications of this definition as a way to consider how we might make our classrooms and school communities more sustainable by

thinking about the ways we can shelter our students, and empower them to protect each other for the natural, psychological and emotional traumas that life may throw at us.

Shelter is refuge. It is reprieve. It is the sigh of relief of entering a space and no longer having to hold your breath that something go wrong with your day. All over the world, we see the way that social and political injustices of a wealthy and greedy few are fueling instability and keeping students away from the safety and security of a sound education. We have the story of Malala Yosefi, the girls of Boko Haram, the students at Sandy Hook, Connecticut and in Parkland, Florida, the numerous college students who have fallen prey to the scams of for-profit universities. Trauma and violence of all kinds continue to make access to education difficult and impossible for many. Our children here are not yet at great threat for being shot in a classroom but we certainly can recognize the ways in which our school has not always sheltered them in the most necessary ways.

Are we creating spaces for them for free expression of their talents and ideas that have nothing to do with a fixed curriculum and a syllabus we have to cover? Are we teaching our students proper conflict resolution and the skills they need to ask for help without acting or sounding entitled? Are we actually doing that ourselves? Think of your last staff meeting or principals' meeting or administrative conference. Do we actually handle chaos and confusion in our professional lives in a way that we implicitly expect students to understand? Are we shielding them from the future of trigger reactions - pun intended - to getting what they want, blaming others and skipping steps to get there? The culture of our school has to be transformative and restorative and actually make a home for children who otherwise have nowhere else to feel safe, sometimes not even in their own heads.

Shelter is protection. We take for granted the ways that we protect our students by having them in school all day long. We all know the student who shows up hours before the first bell and remains at school into near darkness. Every school has at least one or two. Why are they there? Some have horror stories from home; unfortunately one story of abuse of any kind in the home space is one too many and we certainly see and hear our fair share. But for other students, the reasons may be a little more benign, but no less significant. For many, school environment is the

only space where some children get to think, daydream, explore in peace. Yes, in many cases, that includes the wifi. They stay for the wifi. But this time of independent, unstructured and uninterrupted exploration seems to exit our vocabulary after discourses of early childhood education where play is promoted. I am a living testament to the power of undirected learning, and in the programs I design I look to models of free experimentation with learning and building to allow my students that same freedom.

For many children, the school space is the only space where they have the time and the mental clarity to have that exploration. School is protection from the emotional and psychological distractions to their imagination and if we want to build a better Dominica and a better world to live in, we have to guarantee that we allow the tiny humans responsible for our future selves to access the yet to be discovered solutions to these problems by giving them space to think. But back to the original question: are we equipped to provide that protection? Are we giving ourselves the space and freedom we need to explore, imagine and discover new approaches to teaching and learning? Are we eager for professional development and even basic reading on the emerging trends in our fields of teaching and in educational theory and policy? Or are we sucking our teeth any time the Ministry or Principal mandates another workshop? Real question, to paraphrase author Toni Morrison: when was the last time we released our imagination and what do we need to do that?

Shelter is community. This is an important piece to me. I get to be privileged and stand before you and make you take a pledge to foster community with the parents and families of the students who are in your care. But I have chosen a career in higher education that doesn't require me to interact with parents or family members regularly. However, by the time students get to college, we recognize by their academic performance and campus behaviors, the ways in which their lives up to this point have included a relationship between home and school that was healthy and consistent. I absolutely believe that culturally school and home governance and participation are largely separate despite the desire of parents to see academic excellence in their children and despite their eagerness to stay in touch with the teachers, especially in cases where their children feel slighted by their teachers.

However, there is a real gap in the way parents and guardians take ownership of the school communities to which their children belong and where they spend most hours of their days. To the extent that parents are actively involved in fundraising, advocacy on behalf of teachers, lobbying for improved resources in their children's schools, and volunteering new ideas for improving curriculum, our schools are sorely lacking. The onus is not only left to teachers to begin this process, but the reality is that, especially for economic reasons, we have to be the ones we have been waiting for to make this change. We need to start the conversation and sustain it over time, through social activities, more interactive PTAs and use of technology to share resources. We have to help and collaborate with parents to shelter our students' from the threats' of isolation and alienation, and reassure them that they belong and they matter and they are enough.

Shelter is care. What do I mean by care? Care is the intentional attention to your spiritual and emotional wellness. School should be a space where students see their beliefs and values reflected in the practices and choices of the institution where they learn. It should be a space where they have an opportunity to learn about spiritual and emotional journeys without fear of questioning or discovering their truest selves in the process. Are we making space for students to nurture their whole selves without imposing or coercing our own choices into their lives? Are we having conversations that allow us to align the spiritual and emotional practices of the school space with their home spaces and their larger communities? Moreover, are we equipped to do better in building stronger centers of integrity and ethics within ourselves as professionals and within our schools so that these practices will become effortless and not appear forced and inauthentic, and therefore distrusting, to our students?

School does not only belong to the students we encounter in the years we spend as teachers. School belongs to us. For those of us who are career educators, we spend more time in our schools and classrooms than we do with our families, with our own children, with our friends, with ourselves. We have arguments and debates about how much of our resources we devote to a profession that many people who admire us believe is not "worth" what we put in, or at least, does not reward us what we put in.

But here's the thing: what exactly do you expect as a reward? Money is nice. It pays the bills, repairs the roof and . But the reward is here: shelter. Shelter for our future selves. We have been the recipients of a harsh reality. Climate change is here. The global economic, social and political forces driving the acceleration of global warming do not stop to think of how small we are, how poor we are, how beautiful we are as a country and a people before laying at our doorstep the most forceful consequences for horrible care of our planet. The thing we learn the most from Hurricane Maria is that no amount of money or luxury or even accolades and respect could spare us this inevitability. So the payoff here is really about making sure we are safe; our children and their children have the knowledge, skills and sensibilities required to act more aggressively for a protected and more just way of life - whether it is in our attention to the natural environment, the equitable provision of shelter for people no matter where they come from and the ethical and moral impulse to commit to sustainable living, community accountability and planetary responsibility. That's our shelter into our retirement; our insurance; our investment in a planet for the future.

I am telling you these things from a very personal place. School was a great place of peace for me. It was a place where my exploration of unfamiliar things was encouraged and where I was encouraged to speak my mind and experiment with learning without fear. So it doesn't just take a building to provide a shield, a protection, a safe place for our students. Let us all work toward creating a shelter for our future selves.