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Teacherpreneurs and the Future of Teaching & Learning

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Over the last three decades, a steady stream of empirical evidence has shown that teachers are the most crucial *in-school* factor for student learning.ⁱ In top-performing nations like Singapore and Finland, policymakers have invested in teachers, both in their preparation and cultivation as leaders of school reform. However, in other nations like the United States (where students do not fare as well as on international measures of academic performance), policymakers have tried to improve teaching by focusing primarily on firing teachers assumed to be “bad” and recruiting teachers assumed to be “better.”ⁱⁱ And although other nations, like Australia, are following this same policy blueprint, it is clear from international studies of teaching quality that these strategies are not the most effective improving student learning.ⁱⁱⁱ Meanwhile, the stakes are getting higher for students and the context is becoming more challenging for both teachers and administrators. This article explores this circumstance and introduces the concept of the ‘teacherpreneur’ and examines the future of teaching and learning.



The kind of teaching needed today requires teachers to be high-level knowledge workers who constantly advance their own professional knowledge as well as that of their profession. But people who see themselves as knowledge workers are not attracted by schools organized like an assembly line, with teachers working as interchangeable widgets in a bureaucratic command-and-control environment.

—Andreas Schleicher, writing for the OECD in its comprehensive 2012 report on teachers and school leaders^{iv}

Introduction

Over the last three decades, a steady stream of empirical evidence has shown that teachers are the most crucial *in-school* factor for student learning.^v In top-performing nations like Singapore and Finland, policymakers have invested in teachers, both in their preparation and cultivation as leaders of school reform. However, in other nations like the United States (where students do not fare as well as on international measures of academic performance), policymakers have tried to improve teaching by focusing primarily on firing teachers assumed to be “bad” and recruiting teachers assumed to be “better.”^{vi} And although other nations, like Australia, are following this same policy blueprint, it is clear from international studies of teaching quality that these strategies are not the most effective improving student learning.^{vii} Meanwhile, the stakes are getting higher for students and the context is becoming more challenging for both teachers and administrators.

Teachers must now help *all* students grasp and apply a wide range of skills: cognitive (academic mastery, critical thinking, creativity); interpersonal (communication and collaboration, leadership, global awareness); and intrapersonal (growth mindset, learning how to learn, intrinsic motivation, grit).^{viii} At the same time, growing numbers of American students—nearly one in four—live in poverty. And one in ten of the nation’s children live in what sociologists call *deep poverty*. For these students, effective teaching is necessary, but not sufficient: schools need to morph into hubs of integrated academic, social, and health services.^{ix}

At the same time, today’s students are digital natives who expect to learn in and out of cyberspace. Recent studies show that three-quarters of American children play computer and



video games outside of school, and researchers have shown that “edugames” (or interactive game play) can be a powerful driver for teaching students 21st century skills.^x To engage students and tap into evolving technology in meaningful ways, teachers must develop new instructional strategies, deftly moving between face-to-face and virtual interactions.

These are not temporary challenges. Futurists claim that schools will face more, not less, economic disparities among students and must organize differently to serve the changing population in a global economy—with more expansive leadership, new forms of assessment, and “diverse learning agent roles.”^{xi} Teachers will need to build and score new assessment tools tied to internationally benchmarked standards and partner with community organizations to help students access the resources they need. And while technology can allow students to engage in personalized learning experiences like never before, it will take well-prepared expert teachers, soon to be known as learning architects, to design and broker educational opportunities.

Individual school principals, even with a small band of assistants, do not have the know-how and/or bandwidth to perform these roles, much less to transform schools into 24/7 “hubs” for integrated academic, social, and health services. In America today, 75 percent of principals report that their job is “too complex.”^{xii}

Overwhelmed administrators will not solve America’s education challenges. Instead, the pervasive problems of public education demand a class of teachers who serve as boundary spanners with interorganizational experience, transdisciplinary knowledge, and strong cognitive capabilities.^{xiii}

Unlike their peers in Finland and Singapore, accomplished American teachers have few opportunities to extend their impact beyond their classrooms *while continuing to teach students*. Too often, ambitious teachers face a difficult choice: teach full-time or leave students behind for full-time administrative roles that broaden their reach (and often boost their compensation). The latter option is less than appealing: 84 percent of the nation’s teachers report that they are not interested in becoming administrators. But nearly one in four is “very” or “extremely” interested in serving in a hybrid role that makes it possible to lead without leaving the classroom behind.^{xiv}



Now is the time for a bold brand of teacher leadership—including teacherpreneurs—to fuel the future of teaching and learning.

The Case for a Bold Brand of Teacher Leadership

Teacherpreneurs are classroom experts who teach students regularly, but also have time, space, and reward to spread their ideas and practices to colleagues as well as administrators, policymakers, parents, and community leaders.

In the United States and a number of other nations, education entrepreneurship has been positioned as an antidote to the “enormous difficulties inherent in trying to turn around established (school) organizations.”^{xv} Entrepreneurs take risks in making decisions about what to do and how it is going to be done. They launch initiatives and accept full responsibility for the results. They are self-reliant and highly optimistic. They are idea generators. They work outside the lines. They are mobilizers.

There are many teachers in our schools today who share these qualities. In *Teacherpreneurs*, we documented the careers of eight teachers who are exceptional—but not the exception. Lori Nazareno, who incubated and launched Denver’s first teacher-led school, reminded us again and again: “Many teachers can do what I have done—under the right conditions.”

But let me be clear: teacherpreneurism is not so much about establishing a new income stream for individuals as it is about promoting and spreading a new culture of collective innovation and creativity in the education sector, which has woefully (and ironically) lacked it.

What I am suggesting is that a group of professionals who have been vastly underused—teachers—establish that culture. What I am suggesting is a brand of teacher leadership that is not just about disrupting the education system, but *transforming* it on the basis of the knowledge, expertise, and skills of those who teach children and adolescents.

A Long-Overdue Cultural Shift

What will teacherpreneurism disrupt and transform?



For most of the history of education in the United States, teachers have operated at the bottom of the organizational chart, expected to do as they are told. Typically isolated from one another, American teachers work, on average, 52 hours a week managing, instructing, grading, and planning for hundreds of students with a wide range of needs and skill levels.^{xvi}

Some innovative principals and teachers have found ways to work “around” the system to collaborate: for example, scheduling planning periods so that small groups of teachers to meet as professional learning communities. Beyond these schools, informal mentoring and discussion often occurs at the copy machine or between classes, but rarely in a systematic way. For the most part, neither education policies nor school cultures have encouraged teachers to make their effective teaching practices visible to their colleagues. In many districts, “professional development” still consists of “sit-and-get” presentations by consultants or coaches who are not practicing teachers.

Meanwhile, the evidence of the importance of collaboration is palpable. Nearly 25 years ago Susan Rosenholtz documented extensively that “learning-enriched schools” were characterized by “collective commitments to student learning in collaborative settings... where it is assumed improvement of teaching is a collective rather than individual enterprise, and that analysis, evaluation, and experimentation in concert with colleagues are conditions under which teachers improve.”^{xvii} More recently, other researchers have found that students achieve more in mathematics and reading in schools with higher levels of teacher collaboration,^{xviii} and when teachers report “frequent conversations with their peers that centered on (in this case math), and when there was a feeling of trust or closeness among (them).”^{xix} Schools that exhibit “high trust” not only involve teachers in collective decision-making, but they are also more likely to spread reform initiatives.^{xx}

Of late, even more powerful proof has surfaced. Economists, using sophisticated statistical methods and large databases, have concluded that students score higher on achievement tests when their teachers have opportunities to work with colleagues over a longer period of time and spread their expertise with one another.^{xxi} And other sophisticated research has surfaced that certain types of classroom experts, such as National Board Certified Teachers, are more likely to be more helpful to their colleagues, and certain professional development strategies, like the National Writing Project, can promote the spread of pedagogical expertise and changes in



instructional practices.^{xxii} Teachers themselves put an exclamation point on these empirical findings: Over 90 percent of them reported that *their colleagues* contribute to their own individual teaching effectiveness.^{xxiii} Without a doubt, teaching is a team sport.

Imagine how much more effective America's teachers would be if policies strategically *supported* collaboration, professional growth, and the wide sharing of effective practices. How many more practitioners would take on the teacherpreneurial spirit of innovation and creativity when allowed more opportunities to work together?

We see this happen on a daily basis in our virtual community, the CTQ Collaboratory, where teachers discover and share pedagogical and policy ideas; network with peers around the world; and work together to pose solutions to pressing problems. As an administrator told us of teacherpreneur Ariel Sacks, "She is always bouncing her ideas off other teachers in your online community—and this makes her better at it here at our school."^{xxiv}

The Spread of Teacherpreneurism

Today's conceptions of teacher leaders remain too narrow—often reifying the existing, and quite archaic, school structures. Educators rightfully have called for distributed leadership and for teacher leaders to serve as mentors, instructional specialists, data experts, and grade-level and department chairs.^{xxv} But if we want 21st-century students to reap the full benefits of teacherpreneurism, even more dramatic changes will be necessary. Here are five ways to advance the spread of teacherpreneurs:

1. *Have more administrators teach so more teachers can lead.*

Nations whose students consistently outperform American students spend far more on teachers and teaching. In the U.S., barely 50 percent of the \$600 billion spent annually on public education is focused on instruction, and only about 43 percent of all of the nation's education staff are classroom teachers. In high-performing nations, about 75 percent of the education resources spent go directly to instruction, and classroom teachers represent somewhere between 60 to 80 percent of all staff.^{xxvi}



In top performing nations like Singapore and Finland, teachers only teach students for 12-18 hours a week, focusing their remaining workweek on developing curricula and assessments as well as conducting lesson studies in order to critique and improve each other's teaching. In other countries, teachers take on many of the roles conducted by educational consultants and specialists in the United States. They are able to do so because principals, particularly in Finland, are also expected to teach.

2. *Prepare and socialize new teachers as teacherpreneurs.*

Steve Lazar, also profiled in *Teacherpreneurs*, is a prolific teacher blogger who co-created a new school in New York City. When we interviewed Steve, he explained how the community externship in his teacher education program was instrumental in his well-traveled worldview of teaching as a profession. And teacherpreneur Jessica Keigan revealed that her program had pushed her to engage in reciprocal mentoring with a veteran teacher, which led both to innovate. Unfortunately, most American teacher education programs still train new recruits in isolation from one another, and do little to promote the mindset for incubating new ideas and trying them out.

Preservice teachers—and their future students and colleagues—could benefit tremendously from preparation designed to socialize them as collaborators and innovators. For example, programs could strategically organize preservice teachers in small cohorts; structure assignments that require novices to test new ideas; and offer experiences that extend their understanding of community context and/or educational policy.

American teacher education programs can also capitalize on the advent of the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) for student teachers, a new tool whereby novices will prove themselves by explaining their lesson plans and analyzing digital recordings of their “practice” teaching. And of course, education programs can tap into virtual communities like the CTQ Collaboratory (and others), encouraging novices to think and act like teacherpreneurs by connecting them to expert teacher leaders.

3. *Evaluate and pay for teacherpreneurism.*



There is an old adage suggesting that *what is assessed is what is respected*. Today's teacher evaluation and pay systems in America, despite modest changes of late fueled by federal policy, do little to identify, develop, and maximize teacher leadership. While school districts in 42 states have created some form of merit pay for teachers, most offer only modest rewards for improved test scores,^{xxvii} doing little to improve student achievement.^{xxviii}

However, it's possible to create evaluation and pay systems that are successful in driving teacherpreneurism. Consider Singapore, where teacher evaluation is designed for public collaboration and professional ownership, both of which are essential for building trust between schools and communities.^{xxix} Singapore's system places a premium on teachers' development of their abilities to "address long-term fundamental issues...influencing the school's relation to the external world" as well as to "highlight and resolve issues that affect teacher effectiveness." And high-performing teacher leaders in Singapore can earn more than a 30 percent increase in pay, and—in some cases—earn more than the principals in their schools.

4. *Promote teacherpreneurs — from inside the unions.*

Over the last several years, my organization, the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) has supported 17 teacherpreneurs, purchasing part of their teaching load from their school districts so they can lead without leaving their classrooms. These teachers have designed new schools with personalized learning systems for students; virtual communities that support teachers in implementing the Common Core State Standards; conducted policy research to inform teacher evaluation reforms; established firm footing as authors of books, journal articles, and blogs; and launched CTQ's first global network of teacher leaders.

These (and other) teacher leaders look to the Collaboratory as a "safe space" with both structured and unstructured opportunities for teachers to learn the language of policymakers. CTQ has also supported them to write (and eventually speak) in compelling ways about the intersection of pedagogy and policy. (In one year, more than 80 different teacher leaders from the CTQ Collaboratory published more than 700 well-crafted pieces.)

What if America's teacher unions took a more active role in enforcing standards of pedagogical practice? Morphed into professional guilds, teacher unions could cement their



relevance. They could add several zeroes to the small handful of teacherpreneurs that CTQ has cultivated and supported over the last several years, helping teachers secure individual and small-team contracts with different agencies to better meet student needs. Eventually, unions could become better known for brokering the expertise of teachers than for winning political campaigns.

5. *Make teacherpreneurs more public.*

The American public continues to have a great deal of trust and confidence in teachers. In 2012, *almost three-quarters* of those polled (72 percent) give higher marks to teachers than any other public officials (in keeping with patterns of recent years).^{xxx} It is a great time to market the work of teacher leaders, as well as that of administrators who are committed to teacherpreneurism. As Lori noted:

I am wondering if there is something to be learned from other scenarios in other contexts. What comes to mind first is ATMs and debit cards. We didn't know we needed them until we had them. Now I can't even imagine how we managed without them. Certainly, making the work of current teacherpreneurs publicly known, particularly their impact on student learning and school improvement, is crucial to creating demand. What if we started with new recruits to teaching? What if we modeled how we have learned to lead for them? What if we helped them find their own path to lead without leaving.

America's students deserve to learn from teachers whose working conditions encourage innovation, creativity, and collaborative efforts to improve. But America isn't the only nation that has yet to truly leverage teachers' expertise. Jenny Luca, media specialist from Melbourne, makes it clear that classroom experts worldwide are ready to push their governments to look to teacherpreneurism:

Here in Australia (recognizably a much smaller population base than the United States), our Federal Government, as part of the Digital Education Revolution initiative, has set aside \$40 million for teacher professional development. Of the approved projects I've



seen, none look at supporting teachers with the recognized skill set to keep one foot planted firmly in the classroom, while allowing time to support their colleagues both within their schools and further afield.^{xxxxi}

Almost 50 years ago, Peter Drucker characterized entrepreneurs as those who “search for change, respond to it and exploit opportunities.”^{xxxxii} It is time to cultivate teacherpreneurs who will do the same, deepening and spreading best policies and practices for 21st century teaching and learning.

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