What is a Teacherpreneur? Ask Sarah Henchey

By C. Steven Bingham, Associate Professor of Education, Gardner-Webb University

“It’s a great time to be a teacher!” said Sarah. Coming some ten minutes into my telephone interview with her, Sarah’s remark was one of unvarnished joy. Amid unrelenting pressure for improved scores on student standardized tests, legislation to eliminate tenure, reduction of collective bargaining rights, stagnating teacher wages, increased classroom sizes, and even talk of arming teachers with semi-automatic pistols, joy might seem a bit out of place.

Had Sarah been speaking anywhere other than in the context of my May 9, 2013 interview with her and on the specific topic about which I sought to learn more, one might have reasonably questioned her enthusiasm. By their own admission, teachers as a group have never been less enthusiastic about their job or under more stress because of it. Results from the 2012 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership show that only 39 percent of our nation’s teachers is “very satisfied” with their job, plunging from 62 percent just four years ago. More troubling, over half of responding teachers indicated that they were “under great stress several days a week.” Public education supporters receive this as grim news indeed.

So what was it that had Sarah so fired up about a job that my own children, born of career public educators, refused even to consider? Where, one might ask, is the joy in a profession that loses one-third of its practitioners after three years and nearly half after five years? More important, why was Sarah taking her lunch hour to talk with this new associate professor of education from Gardner-Webb University?

Sarah Henchey is jazzed because she is a teacherpreneur. Don’t bother with spellcheck. It’s a made-up word. As it turns out, teacherpreneurship is an emergent movement whose advocates claim that teachers can provide leadership within and across the profession without leaving the classroom.

On loan from Orange County Schools located in the piedmont region of North Carolina, Sarah is working for one year as a Teacher-Leader-in-Residence at the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) in Carrboro, NC. Supported by funds from various education foundations, CTQ is contracting with her district to employ Sarah to advance the cause of teacher leadership and teaching. While Sarah is working with CTQ, her employee
benefits, including contributions to the NC Teachers and State Employees Retirement System, continue to accrue. She plans to return full-time next year to her language arts teaching position at Stanback Middle School.

Among Sarah’s responsibilities this year, however, is leading teachers in the implementation of Common Core Standards. She told me that she essentially “facilitates and brokers opportunities for innovation.” From Seattle to Tampa, Sarah is one of a half-dozen teachers whose salaries are paid in part or full by CTQ and its funders to advance the non-profit organization’s bold ideas.

Most of CTQ’s teacherpreneurs have remained in the classroom, “leading without leaving,” as CTQ President, Barnett Berry, writes. Berry, in fact, has co-written with Ann Byrd and Alan Wieder a book, TEACHERPRENEURS: Innovative Teachers Who Lead But Don’t Leave, published by Jossey-Bass. The term “teacherpreneur” actually comes from an earlier book by Berry and a team of twelve accomplished teachers, TEACHING 2030: What We Must Do For Our Students and Our Public Schools.

As a rationale for a new way to conceive of teaching and teachers, information about teacherpreneurship is found on the CTQ website. Readers of education policy and practice will recognize the historic dilemma facing classroom teachers who, after mastering their craft, begin to yearn for a place to grow but not go:

“Traditionally, teachers who have wanted to advance in their careers have either had to pile duties on top of full-time teaching—or leave the classroom for full-time administrative roles. But couldn't—and shouldn't—we think of teaching more flexibly? Teacherpreneurs spend part of their day or week teaching students and the other part working to change policies and practices beyond their schools and districts.” Retrieved from http://www.teachingquality.org/teacherpreneurs.

According to the website, teacherpreneurs “write books, blogs, and articles; lead virtual learning communities; design new technological tools and edugames; conduct research and advocate for effective education policies; lead reforms with nonprofits and community-based organizations; build and score new assessment tools; and create teacher-led schools.” For this kind of opportunity and influence, perhaps even my cynical, fortune-seeking children could have gotten on board. So what might have stopped them? The conversation continued.

“If teacherpreneurship is such a good idea,” I asked Sarah, “what prevents every teacher who wants it from being a teacherpreneur right now?” In her reply, Sarah talked
to me about “in-the-box thinking concerning the role of the teacher.” She suggested that policymakers, and even some school administrators, conflate standing in front of children with teaching them. In that view, what corporate educators call “platform hours,” managing face-to-face learning in a traditional classroom, equals student learning. May I offer you a ride in my buggy?

In Web 2.0 World, of course, face-to-face as the only way to teach and learn is drawing its dying breath. For example, my own university is urgently considering how to increase its online presence just to compete with alternative higher education programs offered both by traditional brick-and-mortar institutions and online-only universities. Gardner-Webb University is not alone. Administrators in halls no less hallowed than Harvard are reportedly sleeping less-soundly as they ponder the impact of MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses) and their ilk. That line of thought prodded me down another path.

So I asked Sarah to talk to me about the role of higher education in supporting and propagating the teacherpreneurship movement. What do we in pre-service and graduate education need to be doing, I wondered. First of all, Sarah explained that, the currency of the teacher leader or teacherpreneur movement notwithstanding, teaching and by implication training people to teach, remains at the core of the profession.

“The founding of one’s professional expertise lies in the heart of teaching, but teachers need opportunities to explore, innovate, and problem solve with other adults,” she said. To drive home the point that the teaching craft takes center stage, Sarah added, “Nobody ever says ‘leader teacher;’ it’s teacher leader.” (In her pre-publication review of my draft, Sarah suggested that readers interested in more ideas for improving teacher preparation may find helpful resources at http://www.teachingquality.org/content/teachers-release-recommendations-preparation-routes.)

As our growing appetite for lunch inevitably closed in on us, I wanted to learn what, in Sarah’s mind, were next steps for the movement. She linked her response with earlier conversation about the role of state and federal government.

“If teacherpreneurs and teacher leaders are going to have impact, key individuals, including policymakers, must re-calibrate and re-think how school funds are allocated. A teacherpreneur can be funded by an outside agency. But whatever is done must be supported by policy,” said Sarah.
Sarah and I promised to reconnect around possible resourcing for my session on Teacherpreneurship at the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and School of Business Summer Leadership Conference at the Center for Innovative Leadership Development, July 29 and 30, 2013. The need for a convergence of minds across institutions, agencies, and business communities could not be more pressing.

In my opinion, teaching is nearing a crossroads. On the one hand are well-meaning university graduates who choose to matriculate through a boot camp of sorts, enter teaching without the traditional undergraduate education programming that would otherwise introduce them to a career path, serve a two or three year stint and leave, much as young adults in my generation did with the Peace Corps. And there’s nothing wrong with that. But such alternative programs will never reliably produce the teaching force, in quantity or quality, which our nation deserves.

On yet the other hand are institutions of higher education producing eager beginning teachers whose light is too often dimmed by in-the-box thinking about what should happen in schools and classrooms across America. “If teachers standing alone in front of students in overcrowded classrooms for six hours a day isn’t getting us the standardized test results we want, then let’s do more of it,” say the traditionalists.

Thankfully, other people have a better idea. To circle back to the beginning of my interview with Sarah, I will give her the final word.

“The way I explain teacherpreneurship is like this: Imagine yourself in a collegial conversation as we greet children in the hallway over a cup of coffee. Or maybe it’s after work and we’re enjoying time together over a beer. We talk about how things could be different. We get excited. But far too often, the conversation that so resonated with us fails to go anywhere.” Without missing a beat, Sarah continued:

“The idea behind teacherpreneurship is that teachers need time and space for these ideas to grow legs, a challenge when one’s day is already overly-full. Teacherpreneurs advance bold ideas, experiences, and best practices that lie at the core of our profession,” she said.
As a professor whose instructional responsibility lies primarily in graduate education teaching aspiring principals, superintendents, and district senior leaders, I hope to make my students increasingly aware that if teaching is to become the profession our nation so needs for it to be, education and business leaders together must confront and eliminate the policy and practice barriers with renewed focus, galvanized and empowered by teacherpreneurs like Sarah. Maybe it’s a great time to be a teacher after all.

References


