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Manifesto/Polemic: Best Teacher Corps Wins!

“The best educated nations win.”

Or: “The best educated and most entrepreneurial nations win.”

There is more to life than education.

There is more to life than entrepreneurship.

Yet these two variables are increasingly important in the years ahead—and those years are rushing toward us at an unprecedented pace. In technology change, yesterday’s decade is today’s two years—or less.

If these two variables are important, then it more or less follows that our teaching corps—especially for the first 8 grades—are the most important members of our society. (Singapore more or less—mainly more—believes this and acts upon it.)

Implication: *The very best and the very brightest and the most energetic and enthusiastic and entrepreneurial and tech-savvy of our university graduates must—must, not should—be lured into teaching.* (They need not stay for life—one would be happy with 5 years, ecstatic with 10.)

In the USA and other nations (many if not most if not almost all), the variables set out above and associated with excellence in teaching required to meet the challenges of 2020, let alone 2040, alas, do not describe our fresh caught teachers. One could even argue, stopping short of cynicism, that those variables are often the antithesis of the ones associated with those attracted to teaching today. This is simply unacceptable in the face of the most likely scenarios for economic excellence—or, for that matter, survival.

(FYI: To reiterate one of the initial points—we must attract instinctively entrepreneurial candidates—there are more of such candidates than one might imagine. Attracting entrepreneurial candidates, of course, requires a system that is open to change and which celebrates rather than condemns rebels. Concerning the proclivity or fitness for entrepreneurial adventures, Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus put it this way: “All human beings are entrepreneurs. When we were in the caves we were all self-employed . . . finding our food, feeding ourselves. That’s where human history began . . . As civilization came we suppressed it. We became labor because they stamped us, ‘You are labor.’ We forgot that we are entrepreneurs.” Bottom line: Super-genes are not required to foretell an entrepreneurial penchant—among other things, the millions upon millions converting to entrepreneurial ventures out of choice or perceived necessity courtesy the Web are more or less proof of Yunus’ assertion.)

The very best and the very brightest and the most energetic and enthusiastic and entrepreneurial and tech-savvy of our university graduates must—must, not should—be lured into teaching.

(FYI: Once in the classroom, can one, no matter how disposed thereto, teach entrepreneurial behavior? Perhaps not “teach,” but the teacher can create a supportive context. Consider these on-the-money words from movie director Robert Altman upon receiving an Oscar for lifetime achievement: “The role of the Director is to create a space where the actors and actresses can become more than they’ve ever been before, more than they’ve dreamed of being.” The classroom fit is obviously 1-to-1. In the same vein, can you teach “curiosity”/“creativity”? Again, perhaps not. In fact, the trick is not “teaching” it, but getting out of the way. Every healthy 2-year-old is a genetically enabled curious-creative entrepreneur. Picasso got it right: “Every child is born an artist. The trick is to remain an artist.” Likewise, former Notre Dame football coach Lou Holtz on “motivating” players: “I don’t ‘motivate’ players. They arrive motivated. I try not to de-motivate them.” Again the translation to the classroom is 1-to-1. But a teacher who gets off on sometimes annoying curiosity and entrepreneurial disruptiveness is mandatory—and mostly AWOL among those we attract to teaching, circa 2013.)

Finding and educating these new-criteria teachers requires a revolution in both content and the incentive structure needed to attract the best of the best—and to induce them to experiment boldly once aboard the education train.

(FYI: Re content, there is a school of thought prevalent in the USA which demands an immediate curricular shift toward “STEM”—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. To be sure, no harm done, lots to applaud. However, Rhode Island School of Design President John Maeda recommends instead “STEAM”—science, technology, engineering, *the arts*, and mathematics. His argument is based upon an assessment of future bases of competitive advantage as computers make vast inroads to existing jobs; the concept or something akin thereto arguably—or, in my opinion, inarguably—makes a great deal of sense.)

This necessary revolution in teacher inducement and development, no matter the urgency assigned, will not happen overnight—or in the next five years, even if one and all, including teachers’ unions, agreed on the premises above.

In the meantime, we cannot wait ...

Our universities today do turn out magnificent “products” who can meet the specs above and de facto launch the education revolution—today. We must immediately move to unmistakably and with governmental approval (and, one dearly hopes, reduced teachers union recalcitrance) and towering private sector contributions bag these candidates as they march out of the graduation auditorium with their spanking new degrees.

(FYI: In my opinion, the impact of the new technologies is such that we need a very young teacher corps—one that has the demographics and restless mindset of Facebook or Twitter or Google new-hires. Assertion: With rare exceptions, older

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teachers—35+??—will have the devil’s own time identifying with the experiences of the students who walk into their classrooms, circa 2020—and, for that matter, circa 2013. And the devil’s own time embracing new “upside down” approaches to teaching. For example, as many forward thinkers have said, the teacher must in effect partner with rather than dictate to students who in many ways are more technically qualified and disposed than their teachers; and partner with students in ventures that de facto foreshadow an appetite for entrepreneurship. Likewise, and curiously, in the best, though not all, cases “gamification” can be an extraordinarily useful and positive learning and curiosity inducing tool; for example, the overarching goal of most good cooperative games—and virtually all the successful games are cooperative ventures—is not ultimate victory, but constant improvement; hence an emphasis on trying and failing and trying yet again is the norm, as it rarely is in a standard classroom which eschews failure and thence induces extreme cautiousness; Steven Johnson’s book *Everything Bad Is Good For You* provides a provocative take on this.)

Role models needed (and, praise be, available): Teach For America is an example of an approach that appears to provide a semblance of a road map for others. It is hardly “the answer” to this “save the nation” need. But it does provide an exceptionally worthwhile and tested case—both its successes and failures, the latter of which illustrate the pushback that this entrepreneurial approach induces in, at least, the USA. Teach For America, however, is almost proof positive that, under the right circumstances, the very best and the very brightest from leading institutions can be attracted in surprising numbers to at least a stint as educators; this proven attraction predates the 2007++ crash, so it cannot be written off as merely a response to a lousy job market for graduates. (Teach For America is but one example. In particular, courtesy charter schools among other efforts, a plethora of de facto experiments are in train in the USA; some are of course fiascos, but many of the successes are truly imaginative to the point of “eye-popping.”)

Also in the role model set could be the likes of the Robertson scholars—a “full ride” university scholarship program established by philanthropist Julian Roberts and overseen by an evaluation process so rigorous that it merits comparison to the Rhodes program, though at the university entrance juncture. In one way or another, identifying our future “save the nation” teachers is a bit like developing sports and musical champions; while one can go far too far, ID-ing talent early is an imperative strategy. Which is to say that the attraction to, in effect, nation-building-through-a-matchless-teaching-corps should mark university entrance as well as post-university work. (FYI: this latter assertion about funneling top university candidates into the system in no way suggests funneling them toward schools of education—alas, the latter are often laggards rather than leaders in developing the needed skills and proclivity for risktaking and experimentation laid out at the beginning of this paper.)

The ideas presented here—hastily and in the roughest form—were developed subsequent to a discussion during my New Zealand sojourn on building a cadre of teachers that matches the likely needs of these turbulent times. (My only previous stick-your-neck-out effort of consequence concerning education is recorded as Chapter 22 in my book *Re-Imagine: Business Excellence in a Disruptive Age*.) I had no intention of writing anything like this—but as I wrote I found myself almost pounding the keyboard into mush. Like it or not, complex problems call for complex solutions. Yet I am coming to see the “simple” solution of BBFs/Best & Brightest & Feistiests, as I am now calling them, becoming the base for a transformed teacher corps as a national necessity on a par with national security; in fact, obviously, it is an issue of national security.

**19 March 2013
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