

**Teacher as social entrepreneur:
Practices of an innovative and resourceful urban elementary school teacher**

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from the case study of an urban elementary school teacher committed to improving the outcomes of schooling for her students, their families and communities. Unlike entrepreneurs in the private sector, this teacher functioned as a social entrepreneur, someone concerned with the issues of racism, poverty, and disability—all issues that acutely affected her students and their urban community. The study shows how “entrepreneurial” skills, attitudes and practices can provide new tools for teachers committed to social justice and willing to act as “agents of change.”

Introduction:

Urban schools are complicated places for educators to navigate because of the unique social, political, and economic characteristics of the urban centers in which they are located (Sachs, 2004). The demographics of these areas often include “high numbers of families that are homeless or living in poverty, many new immigrants... a concentration of joblessness and marginalized groups, single-parent households, and more” (Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000, p. 537). These issues, in addition to funding and accountability structures that negatively impact urban school districts, contribute to urban schools that can be characterized by large class sizes, inexperienced teachers, outdated facilities, dwindling budgets, and a concentration of students with high needs (Cuban, 2004; Warren, 2005).

Given this plethora of problems, school educators and leaders must respond to the growing needs of their educational contexts in innovative ways that extend the impact of their limited resources (Brown & Cornwall, 2000). Educational researchers have begun to assert that entrepreneurial skills and processes may be one way of responding to these challenges (Cuban, 2004; Portin, 2000). This means that educators should begin to understand their students’ needs in relation to the often overlooked strengths of their urban communities, including their “high degree of diversity and heterogeneity, conflicting lifestyles of people who live in close proximity, cultural richness, a concentration of material resources, ease of communication, geographic

mobility, and the coexistence of fluidity and rigidity in intuitional and personal behavior” (Gordon, 2003, p. 189). Additionally, they should be able to see opportunities where others perceive problems, understand how to maneuver constraints in their educational institutions to improve educational services, and garner needed resources and support for the implementation of innovative initiatives (Boyette & Finlay, 1993).

This paper examines how one elementary school teacher was able to employ these and other entrepreneurial practices and processes in a manner that took advantage of the strengths associated with her students, school, district, and community in order to meet the unique needs of her students primarily, but also their parents and communities. We begin by further describing the theoretical framework of social entrepreneurship employed in this paper. We then describe the methods involved in selecting, researching, and further analyzing the data from this case study. Finally, we discuss findings from this study, centering our discussion around four major innovative initiatives in which our case study subject was integrally involved.

Theoretical Framework

While there is no agreed-upon definition of entrepreneurship (Bygrave & Hofer, 1991), there is considerable support in the current literature for conceiving of entrepreneurship not just as “starting a new business” or “a personal alertness to potential sources of profit” but rather more broadly as a process that involves all the functions, activities, and actions associated with recognizing opportunities and taking concrete actions to implement new ideas (Timmons, 2004). Hence, we do not view our case study subject as an entrepreneur in the traditional sense, interested mainly in personal or economic gains (e.g. Blaug, 1995). Instead, we view her work as an *educational social entrepreneur*. Social entrepreneurs are defined as “transformative forces: people with new ideas to address major problems who are relentless in the pursuit of their visions, people who simply will not take ‘no’ for an answer, who will not give up until they have spread their ideas as far as they possibly can” (Bornstein, 2004, p. 1). These entrepreneurs are less motivated by profit and more interested in providing “value-added services” to the public sector (Boyett, 1997). Specifically, in contrast to entrepreneurs associated with the private sector, social entrepreneurs are often most concerned with challenges associated with racism, poverty, disability, and sexism, thereby acknowledging the deleterious affects of privatization, capitalism, and globalization on marginalized populations (Bornstein, 2004).

The process of entrepreneurship, whether taking place in the private sector or in not-for-profit organizations, includes: understanding needs and envisioning new solutions; taking initiative to act on that vision; gathering resources; building organizations or coalitions to protect and “market” a vision; providing energy and sustained focus to overcome inevitable resistance to their innovations; and finally, to continue improving, strengthening, and broadening the vision “until what was once a marginal idea has become a new norm” (Bornstein, 2004, p. 3; Boyette & Finlay, 1993).

Thus, the impetus behind viewing the practices of our case study subject through the lens of social entrepreneurship relates to: 1) her committed interest and involvement in improving the social and educational outcomes of her students, especially as it relates to her understanding of the multiple webs of discrimination they face, and 2) the unique process by which the needs of our case study subject’s students and their broader community were addressed in her everyday practice.

Research Design

This particular case study is part of a larger study aimed at exploring how educators use entrepreneurial attitudes and practices to improve the educational and social outcomes of their students and their broader communities. This teacher, the recipient of a New York State Teacher of the Year Award and a Disney National Teacher Award, was chosen as a case study participant because of her demonstrated success with implementing several innovative initiatives that enhanced the educational and social outcomes of her students and families. Furthermore, her track record of obtaining financial support for various innovative activities, totaling above \$50,000 in small and large grants, made her an even more obvious candidate for participation. Finally, this teacher’s undeterred resolve in fighting institutional obstacles in order to provide her students with the necessary resources and opportunities to attain success was another reason for requesting her participation in this study.

Data collection, spanning from January 2005 to May 2006, followed a standard protocol in which the researchers used multiple sources of data to understand 1) the entrepreneurial skills, attitudes and behaviors employed by the entrepreneurial educator, and 2) the internal and external characteristics of the educator’s organization that supported or hindered her entrepreneurial activities. Thus, the units of analysis for this research is at the individual level (i.e. the

entrepreneurial educator), although taking into consideration the educational and social contexts in which the subject undertook her entrepreneurial initiatives.

Data sources included transcriptions from four interviews with the subject, lasting approximately an hour and a half each; transcriptions from interviews with two collaborators, or individuals who worked with the educator on an entrepreneurial initiative; and artifacts from initiatives implemented by the educator such as official documents, informal written communications, and relevant media clips.

Prior to data collection, a coding system was developed by the research team which was then used to analyze the transcript data. All transcribed interviews and summaries of artifacts were imported into the qualitative analysis software program, N6. Using the pre-established codes, the documents were then coded within N6. We ran various forms of analysis to find patterns within the data. After completing this step, we further synthesized the data into a “case-study database” that followed a pre-established organization derived from the coding scheme. While creating the database, we also kept track of emerging themes.

To improve validity and reliability, findings were triangulated with multiple sources of data, disconfirming evidence was deliberately sought, and member checks were conducted with the study participant. Members of the two-person research team met bimonthly to discuss emergent findings, alternative points of view, and any concerns with methodology.

Findings

Findings from the case-study provide insight into how this teacher used entrepreneurial practices to improve the educational and social outcomes of schooling for her students and their families. Below we will briefly report on a selection of these findings, by first providing some background information on the subject, then describing in more depth four examples which are illustrative of this teacher’s use of entrepreneurial attitudes, skills, and processes in her educational practice, and finally summarize in table form how each of these initiatives reflect specific entrepreneurial behaviors, practices, and processes identified in the literature on entrepreneurship.

Lynn Gatto: Born to Teach

Gatto was born to be a teacher. Yet given her personality, family background, and professional context, Gatto also drew strongly on entrepreneurial behaviors she had seen in her family members and learned throughout her childhood experiences in order to become the successful teacher she is now. For example, Gatto claims that even before entering into kindergarten, she played “school” with her dolls, not “house” like others her age. When she was only nine years old, she built on this passion by distributing business cards to her neighbors, advertising a babysitting service she would provide for her community’s children.

As she went through school, her desire to teach only grew stronger, and in college she majored in elementary education. Yet when she found it difficult to get hired with just her bachelors, she went on to obtain a masters in special education. She grabbed the first possible job after graduating, one which she claims was vacant due to its unappealing nature. The kids in her class were described to her as uncontrollable; yet the opportunity to teach was more appealing than any horror story her prospective colleagues could tell her. She took the job as a long-term substitute teacher for elementary school aged children in a large urban school district and ended up staying within the district for more than thirty years.

Given her passion for teaching, one might imagine that Gatto enjoyed her own schooling experience. Ironically, however, school is one of the places where Gatto most vividly recalls being a “failure”. She found the teachers too boring, the subject matter too unapproachable, and the tests too confining. Instead of flipping through the pages of a textbook during class, Gatto secretly read books of her own liking which she tucked secretly under her desk. Given her outgoing personality, Gatto took advantage of any unstructured learning time to chat with her peers. Gatto was interested in exploring and understanding the world around her, not being forced to learn about subjects she found irrelevant to her own life. While these behaviors and traits got Gatto into a lot of trouble and eventually caused her to do poorly in school, it is these very traits that Gatto now attempts to inculcate into her own students.

Furthermore, these traits have also helped Gatto become one of the most celebrated and accomplished teachers in her school building, district, and state. Having won several prestigious local and national awards for teaching and instruction, Gatto has found ways to push her students to reach their best, regardless of the enormous obstacles associated with their school, community,

and familial circumstances. Specifically, because Gatto teaches in a large city school district which reaches a large concentration of students in poverty, she has had to find innovative ways to help each of her students reach their individual best, despite individual and institutional challenges. The district's "dysfunction", as explained by Gatto, is evidenced by its large budget deficits, its high turnover of school and district administrators, in addition to exceedingly low test scores. Yet Gatto finds she could use that dysfunction as an advantage. She states, "It's like living in a dysfunctional family, and no one can really keep tabs on you; so for someone who is highly motivated, knows how to teach, knows what to do, this is a wonderful place to work because I can just tulle along."

Yet Gatto also adds that other challenges are associated with the type of people the field of education attracts. She feels that educators are often afraid to disrupt the status quo, and instead often simply comply with district mandates, even when they are hurting students' chances for academic and future success. Specifically, in an age of high stakes tests and accountability, this means that many of her colleagues fall prey to simply "teaching to the test." This has caused Gatto to search for professional partners that extend beyond just her school walls. Often, she has asked parents and community members to join her classroom to help her with certain activities and curricular units. Other times, when implementing a new or highly innovative unit, she has relied on professional networks that she had developed over the years by attending national educational conferences, professional development retreats, and other professional activities. Despite this extensive circle, she still occasionally feels isolated at school, as she finds that some of her building colleagues do not understand or appreciate what she is trying to do. Yet this has often led Gatto to feel even more motivated to attain her own professional success, which typical of the field of education, is inevitably linked to the success of her students.

Finally, though national and federal mandates require students to demonstrate certain levels of academic performance, they fail to provide teachers with resources that would otherwise help these students reach high levels of academic and personal achievement. For Gatto, this has again pushed her to use her creativity, networks, and vicarious reading habits to her students' benefit. In particular, she has worked tirelessly to obtain resources and provide opportunities for her students to engage in experiences that will in fact help them succeed in both the short and long term. For example, Gatto has had frequent flier miles donated to her students, in order to provide them with unforgettable field trips. She has also obtained money to purchase and install

computers in her classroom, and has used the expertise of her family friend's to have internet lines installed into these computers. More recently, she has even had a SmartBoard installed into her classroom, which was given to her when she received a national award for teaching science. Gatto has found ways to obtain money for these resources in part because her interest in reading has exposed her to numerous ideas and opportunities that have in turn benefited her students. For example, she has often found advertisements and informational pieces on grants that are available to school teachers on line, in fliers, and in academic journals. Being the go-getter that she is, she has often taken advantage of these opportunities, seeing them as a chance to fulfill the numerous needs of her students, their families, and schools.

Examples of Innovative Initiatives

In total, Gatto has received over \$50,000 in small and large grants which have been used to enhance the opportunities available to her students, in an attempt to provide them with the social and cultural capital needed to succeed in this world. This money has been used in numerous ways throughout her thirty year teaching career. Amongst all of these activities, there are at least four initiatives that best demonstrate the expanse and depth of her innovative practices.

The first of these initiatives includes a video she made at the beginning of her teaching career for parents of children with learning disabilities. Specifically, at the beginning of her career as a special education teacher in an urban elementary school, Gatto realized that parents were unsure of what a learning disability meant for their children. To respond to this need, she secured a grant of \$500.00 that paid for the production and distribution costs of an educational video. The video explained learning disabilities to parents and helped them understand how they could work with their children and their teachers to improve the educational and social outcomes of their schooling.

The second of these initiatives is the creation of a cookie cutter guide in the shape of New York State and an accompanying curriculum that was created and distributed by her fourth and fifth grade class. This initiative arose at a time when Gatto was working with a multiage group of 4th and 5th graders. Because state geography was a major portion of the Social Studies curriculum, Gatto was scouring for hands-on activities that could give her students a better sense of their state's geographical landscape. During this time, she read about an activity using cookie

cutters in the shape of the United States; yet when she could not find ready-made cookie cutters in the shape of New York State, she found and obtained a grant of \$1,000 to create the cutters herself. The class used money from the grant to also publish and sell student-created teacher's guides that described educational activities using the cookie cutter. After realizing the success of this initiative, she invited an expert to talk to the students about how to run a business, and thereafter they formed their own business around the New York State cookie cutters. Every student was given a role in writing, developing, and distributing the teachers' guides and cookie cutters. This project involved students learning more about geography, mathematics, writing, reading, and business and generated money for future classroom projects.

A third initiative took her innovative teaching practices to a new level. Here, she worked with an established publishing company to create an innovative science curriculum that has now been marketed and sold nation-wide. Specifically, while attending a national science teachers' conference, Gatto was walking around the exhibits and found a science curriculum she liked. Yet when she noticed that it was not marketed for elementary school teachers, she asked why. The owner of the educational science company pursued her to work on developing a curriculum that would be appropriate for the elementary school market. After being convinced of its educational value, Gatto signed a contract with the company and ended up developing nine science kits related to the national standards. She had substantial input in how to develop this. Most importantly, she did not want it to be "teacher proof" and hoped for it to be hands on. Since the completion of this project, the curriculum has proven to be a very successful initiative. Furthermore, Gatto is now doing workshops and presentations based on the success she has had with these published materials.

Finally, a fourth example of her innovative teaching practices includes a field trip where she took her students to the Hudson River farms in Kentucky, in order to expose her students to cultural and ethnic diversity, in addition to a variety of other curricular-related goals. Specifically, after years of working in the urban school system, Gatto realized that several of her students never traveled or even left their urban neighborhoods. If she were to provide students with any opportunity to compete with students from wealthy backgrounds once in the job market, she felt they would need at least some understanding of their broader surroundings. Thus, she wanted to make a culminating trip at the end of the school year that took her students outside of their city neighborhoods to suburban and rural places both within and outside of the state. Since

she recognized that neither the district nor her students' parents would be able to finance such trips, she and her students fundraised each year in order to pay for the expenses and obtained donated frequent flyer miles to pay for flight expenses. After the September 11 attacks, the district canceled all field trips, including the trip her students were scheduled to take to Kentucky. Gatto's resolve, however, did not falter. She enlisted the support of her students and their parents, who together wrote letters to district officials and thereafter were able to take their field trip to Kentucky as originally planned.

Analysis: Finding the Intersections

Taken together, the entrepreneurial practices and projects described in the previous two sections have greatly increased the educational and social value of education for Gatto's students and their families, as measured in terms of high student test scores and increased student, parent, and community involvement. In this section, we attempt to demonstrate how knowledge about her innovative and resourceful practices can help other educators understand how to use entrepreneurial skills and attitudes, in combination with the strengths of their students, families, and communities, to respond to the pressing issues of race, class, and disability that face most urban schools. More specifically, our focus here is in understanding how innovative educators such as Gatto used the processes and characteristics involved in developing, launching, and sustaining successful entrepreneurial education-related initiatives. Drawing from the literature on entrepreneurship, we identified the following aspects to be key elements in the process of entrepreneurship: recognizing or evaluating an opportunity, motivation or personal benefit, securing resources to launch the initiative, planning the initiative, implementation, and dealing with challenges at any point in the process. Importantly, these steps were not conceived to be linear in nature; instead, each of these steps were understood to influence and be affected by one another.

In Gatto's case, we found that indeed these steps did not always follow a set pattern, and that they often led to a more dynamic entrepreneurial process, where previous accomplishments, networks, or experiences led Gatto towards a new entrepreneurial initiative. Yet almost without exception, Gatto became convinced of the success of an initiative based on a deep understanding of the academic, social, and professional needs of her students, their parents, and her educator colleagues.

The following chart brings us back to the four initiatives highlighted in our case study to identify more explicitly the ways in which each fits within the aforementioned process of entrepreneurship.

	Initiative 1: Video on Disabilities	Initiative 2: State Cookie Cutter	Initiative 3: Curriculum Guide	Initiative 4: Yearly field trip
When	Early in professional career; labeling students with disabilities was new	Early-mid career, working with a multi-aged 4 th & 5 th grade class	Mid-career, worked with a publishing company	Most recent in her professional career, working with a class that loops for three consecutive years
Need	Parents knew little about the labeling categories and were confused about its implications for students' future success	Wanted to do a hands-on, multi-disciplinary activity that focused on the geography of New York State; could not find proper resources	No innovative science curriculum kits available for elementary education teachers	Her students had little exposure to people, ideas, and places located outside of their inner-city communities
Idea	Create and distribute a video that will explain the learning disability to the parents	Create a large cookie cutter in the shape of New York State	Create and sell a science curriculum that all elementary school teachers could use in their classrooms	Take students on yearly field trips where they could be exposed to new people, ideas, and places
Opportunity	Found a flier advertising a \$500.00 grant	Knew about a school-to-work grant that offered \$500.00 to teachers who would provide their students with work-related skills	Was walking around at a national conference where she met the publishers and was approached by them to work on creating the curriculum with them	Met up with a teacher in Kentucky who shared a similar philosophy and goals as Gatto and who was interested in working with her on making this fieldtrip possible for her students
Challenges	None	None	Personal and professional reputation was at risk	Personal and professional reputation was at risk.

Success	The video was an educational tool used to help parents become more familiar with what a learning disability meant for their children	The project ended up becoming a multidisciplinary unit. Students created an accompanying curriculum guide which was sold to teachers throughout the United States. Subsequent profits were used to fund additional activities for the students.	The curriculum guide has been adopted by several school districts throughout the nation, resulting in lucrative profits for both the publishing company and for Gatto. Additionally, Gatto has been approached to do numerous professional development sessions based on this guide.	The students gained substantial cultural capital through this activity, as they were exposed to a diverse body of students, various professional people, such as university professors, and a place that was significantly different from the inner-city life they were used to.
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Conclusions

The examples reported in this paper illustrate how this entrepreneurial teacher never took “no” for an answer; found innovative ways to respond to the unique needs of her students; found funding for initiatives, totaling over \$50,000 in grants; formed social networks with community members—including businesspeople, parents, and educational researchers; and enlisted student and parent support for endeavors her district initially resisted. When taken together, we assert that these entrepreneurial practices and projects have greatly increased the educational and social value of education for her students and their families, resulting in significant student achievement with greater parent and community involvement.

Further, we believe that knowledge about her innovative and resourceful practices can help other urban educators understand how to use entrepreneurial skills and attitudes, in combination with the strengths of their students, families, and communities, to respond to the pressing issues of race, class, and disability that face most urban schools. Connecting entrepreneurial practices to the students in the urban classroom allows teachers the opportunities to expand horizons and to equal the playing field.

Education research has not yet capitalized on the contributions entrepreneurship can offer to empower educators, and teachers in particular, to become more effective agents of change. We

hope that this paper has begun to address this gap by contributing a better understanding of what it means to be an entrepreneurial teacher and what benefits schools and students can derive from entrepreneurial teachers.

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