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“It’s our life project”: Uncovering the motivations and social entrepreneurial spirit of Yale alumni school founders

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Abstract:

Many individuals dedicate their careers to the cause of serving students and improving their educational experiences, however only a few decide that the best way they can accomplish that goal is through starting their own enterprise and creating a new school. This paper seeks out an explanation of the internal and external motivations that compel school founders’ entrepreneurial vision and belief in their ability to effect change. School founders assume the roles of educators and executives, and thus the subpopulation of them that are graduates of Yale College provide a unique lens onto how their motivations are inflected by the ambitions and self-concepts they develop within an elite institution with a particular point of view on developing leadership. I interviewed nine Yale College alumni who have started their own school to extract common threads in their rationales to pursue a new institution over an existing one, their visions of what they set out to achieve in their schools and beyond, the ways in which their undergraduate years were formative to their thinking and career. This project synthesizes the founders’ narratives with the aim of negotiating school founders’ place as a kind of social entrepreneur and eliciting their broader theory of the potential for social transformation held within education and individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

Since I was 13, I've aspired to eventually start my own school. However, it wasn't until two and half years ago when I joined Kairos Academies as a summer fellow in the months before they first opened their doors that I had the opportunity to engage in this work first-hand. The massiveness of the undertaking and relatively little institutional support for it pushed me to wonder why they all wanted to and then decided to take on such an endeavor, and this question motives the core of this essay. The founding team was entirely teachers, virtually all of them young — a group I could easily see myself in. Assisting them with the start-up process revealed to me that, in addition to representing a continuation of their fundamental callings as educators, creating a school involved everyone to step far outside that comfort zone and develop sufficient expertise across areas divergent as PR and outreach to operations and logistics. The kind of organizational and community stewardship I experienced within my Kairos team is rarely reflected in the discourse of educational change agents. As a result, the fundamentally creative enterprise of starting a school urgently demands a study of its drivers at the same level of analytical rigor applied to other classes of leadership.

Waves around starting new schools as part of a broader renewed focus on education reform is by no means only a recently emergent phenomenon, instead they appear to be cyclical throughout history. The countercultural and anti-institutional critiques of the 1960s provided the historical moment that oversaw the creation over 1000 private “alternative” or “free schools” where “young people are not oppressed by arbitrary discipline and total power characteristic of most public schools and where possibilities for [...] new and better ways for children to live and learn can be explored.”¹ This proliferation came about entirely from the bottom up by disaffected parents, teachers, and community members, and their diffuse movement evidence that the work of starting schools is undertaken by values-driven individuals who believe they can, and must, effect change. In the past twenty years, the development of a favorable federal and state policy environment around the creation of new schools has revived an enthusiasm for new schools as an educational intervention in and of itself.

President Bush and Obama's administrations demonstrated their faith in the potential of new schools through significant financial backing, investing billions of dollars in the Credit Enhancement for Charter School Facilities Program, focused on providing credit to charters to create their facilities, and the Federal Charter Schools Program that sought to “support the planning, program design, implementation, replication, and expansion of charter schools.”² Furthermore, the recommendations of the Race to the Top competitive grants implemented under Obama's tenure played an outsized role in incentivizing several states to lift their caps on the number of charter schools and enable districts to authorize their creation.³ Bush advocated funding new “diverse, creative schools” as a way to “try innovative methods” and foster “more competition and more

¹ Terrence E. Deal and Robert R. Nolan, “Alternative Schools: A Conceptual Map,” *The School Review* 87, no. 1 (1978): 29–49, 30.

² Anna Egalite, “The Growth of Charter Schooling During the Bush and Obama Years” (American Enterprise Institute, January 16, 2018), https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Egalite_Charter-Schooling.pdf?x91208, 5.

³ *Ibid.*

choices for parents and students.⁴ In turn, the “flowering of different program options”⁵ that new school designs bring about have generated substantial inquiry regarding their comparative performance and impact on student outcomes.^{6,7,8} However, relatively little attention has been directed toward understanding the personal leadership that ushers these schools into existence. New schools’ typically higher “autonomy” and “clarity of mission”⁹ means that the educational philosophies and motivations of their founders will have greater potency in the school’s direction. My project aims to reveal the extent to which the impersonal entity of a new school and its ‘innovative’ traits are in fact reflections of its founder’s aspirations and values. Furthermore, because the expansion of charter schools serves as “the nation’s major experiment with school-based decision-making,”¹⁰ the scholarly literature surrounding newly created schools almost exclusively refers to charters, even though they are but one category under that larger umbrella. Thus, my cohort of interviewees adds value to the field by expanding the inquiry about the kinds of schools founders pursue to magnet schools-within-schools, private schools, and international schools.

Just as new schools are distinctive among school models, so too is the professional choice to found a school among other careers in the education field. The choice is hardly one made in isolation. Education schools have had their academic reputation broadly maligned,¹¹ and elite spaces harbor an “institutional snobbery toward teaching.”¹² Schools such as Yale and Cornell have eliminated their teacher preparation certification — a structural signal of what form of involvement in the educational space the school endorses — and the students within these spaces reflect a similar attitude in their own words. Graduates of elite universities that participate in the alternative teaching certification pathway of Teach for America widely expressed that they considered their two-year stint in the corps as the first step toward an “ulterior plan” outside the teaching profession, a plan that centered around “high-prestige,” “lucrative and well-respected careers.”¹³ Within the Yale environment, similar attractions to the even more unorthodox and more visible choice of starting an

⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁵ Mark Berends et al., “Innovation in Charter Schools: An Exploratory Analysis,” in *School Choice at the Crossroads: Research Perspectives*, ed. Mark Berends, Joseph Waddington, and John Schoenig (Routledge, 2018), 92.

⁶ Ayesha K. Hashim, Katharine O. Strunk, and Julie A. Marsh, “The New School Advantage? Examining the Effects of Strategic New School Openings on Student Achievement,” *Economics of Education Review* 62 (February 1, 2018): 254–66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2017.12.002>.

⁷ Howard S. Bloom and Rebecca Unterman, “Can Small High Schools of Choice Improve Educational Prospects for Disadvantaged Students?,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 33, no. 2 (2014): 290–319, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.21748>.

⁸ Lisa Barrow, Diane Schanzenbach, and Amy Claessens, “The Impact of Chicago’s Small High School Initiative,” *Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago*, November 2014, 54.

⁹ Berends et al., “Innovation in Charter Schools: An Exploratory Analysis,” 92.

¹⁰ Marilyn Kourilsky and William B. Walstad, “Introduction: New Perspectives on Social and Educational Entrepreneurship,” in *Social Entrepreneurship*, ed. Marilyn Kourilsky and William B. Walstad, 2003, x.

¹¹ Marilyn Cochran-Smith and David Labaree, “An Uneasy Relationship: the History of Teacher Education in the University,” in *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education: Enduring Questions and Changing Contexts* (Routledge, 2009), pp. 290–307.

¹² Eleanor Barkhorn, “Why Isn’t Harvard Training More Teachers?” *The Atlantic*, November 13, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/11/why-isnt-harvard-training-more-teachers/281432/>.

¹³ Rolf Straubhaar, Michael Gottfried, “Who Joins Teach For America and Why? Insights Into the “Typical” Recruit in an Urban School District,” *Education and Urban Society* 48, no. 7 (September 2016): 627 – 649, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124514541463>

entirely new institution may be at play. The strategic focus of institutional support for experiences that directly build up “leadership” rather than pedagogical study reinforces a perception of the teaching profession as one that is “actually easy,”¹⁴ and does not demand expertise, such that “any smart kid can teach effectively.”¹⁵ Due to the fact that “elite cues can provide an efficient shortcut to political decision making,”¹⁶ the damaging implication that the craft of teaching is not worth Yale students’ time diffuses into the culture at large and reinforces stereotypes of teaching as a lower-skilled vocation.¹⁷ Elite universities’ signals on where it believes its graduates belong and what pathways of social change it validates place downward pressure on the quality of human capital entering the teaching force, which in turn, makes it harder for the profession to change its status. The sharp break from the system inherent in the choice to start a school highlights the need to interrogate the different theories of social change-making that compels one to make that riskier choice.

This project is situated at a critical juncture in the timeline of Yale’s complicated relationship with the teaching of education. The university shuttered its doctorate-granting education department of the Graduate School in the 1950s and dissolved their Master of Arts in Teaching program in 1970.¹⁸ These restructurings reflected a growing “skepticism about pedagogy as an academic field”¹⁹ among leaders of elite institutions, and education schools at Johns Hopkins, Duke, and UChicago also folded in the second half of the 20th century.²⁰ Yale’s resident historian noted that at the time when the graduate department was being phased out, professors themselves openly espoused that pedagogy lacked a reputable basis of scholarly research, that the discipline is on weak empirical standing, and that good teaching is a product of natural talent and time, with no relation to rigorous study of theory and best practice.²¹ The last avenue for Yale students to gain teaching certification folded when Yale abruptly ended its long-standing Teacher Preparation Program in 2011. Officially, Yale pointed to the program’s declining enrollment as the rationale and states that Teach for America, which had seen a rapid rise in interest, fills a similar need for graduates.²² Unofficially, however, students and faculty within the Teacher Prep program at the time felt the decision was based on a view of “teacher preparation as too pre-professional for [Yale]’s liberal arts

¹⁴ Marilyn Cochran-Smith and David Labaree, “An Uneasy Relationship: the History of Teacher Education in the University,” in *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education: Enduring Questions and Changing Contexts* (Routledge, 2009), pp. 290-307, 299.

¹⁵ Pamela Shen, “Missions of Teacher Prep, TFA contrast.” *Yale Daily News*, September 28, 2007, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2007/09/28/missions-of-teacher-prep-tfa-contrast/>.

¹⁶ Delli Carpini, “Elite Cues and Political Decision Making,” 43.

¹⁷ Pamela Shen, “Missions of Teacher Prep, TFA contrast.” *Yale Daily News*, September 28, 2007, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2007/09/28/missions-of-teacher-prep-tfa-contrast/>.

¹⁸ Judith Ann Schiff, “Teaching the Teachers,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*, Jan. & Feb. 2021, accessed September 19, 2021, <https://yalealumnimagazine.com/articles/5268-teaching-the-teachers>

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Marilyn Cochran-Smith and David Labaree, “An Uneasy Relationship: the History of Teacher Education in the University,” in *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education: Enduring Questions and Changing Contexts* (Routledge, 2009), pp. 290-307, 303.

²¹ Cary Cherniss, “New Settings in the University: Their Creation, Problems, and Early Development,” PhD diss., (Yale University, 1972).

²² “Announcement Regarding Teacher Preparation and Education Studies Programs,” Yale University, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://news.yale.edu/2010/11/29/announcement-regarding-teacher-preparation-and-education-studies-programs>

bent”²³ and “the philosophy that teaching does not require any kind of rigorous training.”²⁴ Despite the reduced structural support for students wishing to become teachers, a great deal of student interest remains. Between 5 and 10% of the senior class choose to pursue teaching or curriculum development after graduation, and an even higher percentage do so as their summer activity.²⁵ In line with the university’s promotion of the organization, Teach for America (TFA) has held a spot in university career services’ annual list of top 20 destinations for graduates since 1992. Five years before TFA was founded, about 60 seniors went into teaching secondary school after graduation, and of the class of 2016 (the last year the school was the approximately same size as in 1984), about 110 of them went into teaching.^{26,27}

Clearly, there always has been and continues to be a lot of energy and enthusiasm around education on campus. Yet expressions of this vigor are frequently directed into channels that hold connotations of entrepreneurship or leadership. Yale sets up a wide range of structural support for this outlet. In 1895, Yale is described as having a “national character” and aiming to “prepare young men for national leadership,” and this impulse to scale up one’s impact as much as possible has persisted as part of Yale’s DNA for over a century.²⁸ TFA, which was advertised by Yale officials as an alternative to the defunct Prep credential-granting program, declares their mission is to recruit strong leaders and prepare them for other leadership positions.²⁹ Two-thirds of the Education Studies Program’s mission is non-practice related. The School of Public Health hosts an annual contest for “innovative” and “catalytic” education or health related initiatives,³⁰ and most recently, Yale’s new center for educational leadership — the Broad Center — was established under the umbrella of the School of Management, and through offering a master’s degree in education management, it aims to “prepare students to solve complex problems and the nexus of business and society and to lead organizations of all stripes [...] with purpose.”³¹ The university’s message seems clear: Yalies should train for positions beyond the classrooms, ones involved in executive decision-making.

²³ Akbar Ahmed, “Panel discusses Yale and education reform.” *Yale Daily News*, April 26, 2011, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2011/04/26/panel-discusses-yale-and-education-reform/>

²⁴ Tom James, “It’s not too late to save Teacher Prep.” *Yale Daily News*, December 1, 2010, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2010/12/01/james-its-not-too-late-to-save-teacher-prep/>.

²⁵ “Yale College First Destinations: A Four Year Report,” Yale University Office of Career Strategy, last modified May 2020, <https://cdn.ocs.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/77/2020/05/First-Destinations-Classes-2013-2016.pdf>

²⁶ Peggy Edersheim, “Yale Seniors Explore Options in Secondary School Teaching,” *Yale Daily News*, April 24, 1984, <https://ydnhistorical.library.yale.edu/?a=d&d=YDN19840424-01.2.4&srpos=2&e=-----198-en-20--1--txt-txIN-teaching+career----->.

²⁷ “First Destination Report: Class of 2016,” Yale University Office of Career Strategy, 2017, <https://cdn.ocs.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/77/2020/05/Final-Class-of-2016-Report-6-months.pdf>

²⁸ Cary Cherniss, “New Settings in the University: Their Creation, Problems, and Early Development,” PhD diss., (Yale University, 1972).

²⁹ “What We Do,” Teach for America, accessed September 28, 2021, <https://www.teachforamerica.org/what-we-do>.

³⁰ “Thorne Prize for Social Innovation in Health or Education,” InnovateHealth Yale, Yale School of Public Health, accessed September 28, 2021, <https://ysph.yale.edu/ihy/prizes/prize/>.

³¹ John Besche, “SOM Plans the Broad Center,” *Yale Daily News*, January 15, 2020, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2020/01/15/som-plans-the-broad-center/>.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCOPE

I first investigated the nature of the founders themselves, asking: What are the personal determinants of the entrepreneurial energy and vision of Yalies who chose to pursue a passion for education through creating a new institution of their own as opposed to getting involved in traditional paths? Then, I examined how these internal traits intersect with the specific educational context my sample is drawn from: How did those traits interact with culture and opportunities they experienced as a Yale undergraduate — education-related or otherwise? The third question asks, “How do the founders conceptualize their role within the education landscape and society at large?” That question accessed the scales at which they aspire to impact and their broader sense of the social worth of their ventures.

Using my primary source data in combination with the frameworks provided by the secondary literature, I provide preliminary answers to the first question. However, due to the nature of the sample and the mediating fact of Yale’s influence that the second question raises, I have not been able to say my findings apply to *all* or even most school founders. Regarding the second question, because I can’t know the full rationale behind any of their beliefs or choices beyond what they self-report, I cannot ascribe an impact of Yale’s institutional support on the founders that they do not note themselves. I have synthesized threads that intersect founders’ narratives of their value systems and how they institutionalized it through their schools. Through revealing shared themes in their beliefs about themselves and the purpose of their schools, I’ll be able to make some limited claims about what theory of change motivates school founders. I don’t seek to psychoanalyze the interviewees, but rather study the vision and methods of their form of leadership with the same consideration often given to other innovators in the education space.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Starting a new school is a comparatively rare undertaking — in recent years, the number of public elementary or secondary schools created has barely outstripped the number that close. As a result, there is a scarcity of scholarly literature examining these ventures. Where researchers have studied start-up schools as a unique category, their analyses tend to focus on institutions that are part of more systematic initiatives, like LAUSD’s overcrowding alleviation and the Gates-supported small school proliferation, and their effects on student performance. My project seeks to understand these schools from a process standpoint and examine their origins as ideas of their creators brought to life rather than their quantifiable impacts. To do so, I first ground this study in the few other analyses of school founders’ first-hand accounts, the ways in which innovative educators can and do emulate an entrepreneurial toolkit, and the theoretical scaffold of social entrepreneurship.

Identity and motivation in school founders

Despite the individualized nature of creating one’s own school, a somewhat consistent profile of school founders emerges. A review of charter school founders alongside executives of charter management organizations found that leaders of new stand-alone and portfolio schools tend to be

white and male³², a demographic pattern replicated within one of the few qualitative case studies interviewing charter founders.³³ Scott's review emphasized a prevalence of private sector backgrounds within charter founders and management organization leaders. In addition, both scholarship and data establish that founders are far less likely than traditional school leaders to pursue formal credentials in educational administration.³⁴

Nevertheless, qualitative portraits of school founders reveal they possess a wide and deep bench of experience that provide equal, if alternative, qualifications for their ventures. Many founders still do come from a career in traditional public schools. Fourteen of Sperling's twenty-three New York City charter school founder interviewees had teaching experience,³⁵ and while the role of charter school director is an inexact proxy for school founders at large, a nationally representative sample of charter directors showed that over 90% of them had prior training in instruction.³⁶ Counter to Scott's observations, the occupations of founders interviewed by Murray³⁷ and Sperling³⁸ and compiled by Hentschke³⁹ were predominately social service related. Even among those who do come from "outside of the traditional educational establishment," the professional precursors that pop up across their stories like leading a nonprofit or religious organization demonstrate a common commitment to helping others.

When reviewing existing efforts to capture school founders' start-up journeys in their own words, there is a remarkable convergence around a similar set of articulated motivations. One founder characterized the effort to launch his school as "missionary work"⁴⁰ — this image exemplifies the primacy of a galvanizing vision regarding what is possible for kids or what the purpose of education is that serves as a common thread between all founders' stories. Deal and Hentschke consider "an unwavering commitment to a small number of immutable ideals"⁴¹ to be the north star of all of a school founder's decision-making and Sperling describes their devotion to these guiding principles as a fixation.⁴²

³² Janelle T. Scott, "Managers of Choice: Race, Gender, and the Political Ideology of the new Urban School Leadership," *School Choice Policies and Outcomes: Philosophical ...*, January 1, 2008, https://www.academia.edu/529447/Managers_of_choice_Race_gender_and_the_political_ideology_of_the_new_urban_school_leadership.

³³ Robyn Sperling, "Educational Entrepreneurs and the Founding of Charter Schools in New York City," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ph.D., United States -- New York, New York University, 2012), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1220696041/abstract/F5674C65AE5547BBPQ/1>.

³⁴ Bethany Gross and Kirsten Pochop, "Leadership to Date, Leadership Tomorrow: A Review of Data on Charter School Directors" (Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2007), 6, <https://www.crpe.org/publications/leadership-date-leadership-tomorrow-review-data-charter-school-directors>.

³⁵ Sperling, "Educational Entrepreneurs and the Founding of Charter Schools in New York City."

³⁶ Gross and Pochop, "Leadership to Date, Leadership Tomorrow: A Review of Data on Charter School Directors," 6.

³⁷ Nicole Elliott Murray, "The Start up Challenge: Examining the Role of Entrepreneurship in the Creation of New Charter Schools" (Ph.D., United States -- California, University of California, Los Angeles), accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/305034047/abstract/A3F678BE667248B9PQ/1>.

³⁸ Sperling, "Educational Entrepreneurs and the Founding of Charter Schools in New York City."

³⁹ Terrance Deal and Guilbert C. Hentschke, *Adventures of Charter School Creators: Leading from the Ground Up* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

⁴⁰ Deal and Hentschke, *Adventures of Charter School Creators*, 206.

⁴¹ Deal and Hentschke, *Adventures of Charter School Creators*, 250.

⁴² Sperling, "Educational Entrepreneurs and the Founding of Charter Schools in New York City."

A synthesis of the founders' accounts in Deal and Hentschke, Sperling, and Murray reveal that these overarching visions tend to fall along two categories: (1) create an excellent school to anchor the revitalization of their community and (2) create an excellent school that acts as a proof point for a broader philosophy of education. This dichotomy is further supported by the juxtaposition of the earliest charters for new choice schools that state their purpose as locally governed entities initiated by communities to address their parents' and students' needs with Teske and Williamson's analysis that the decision to found a school reflects a "transformative" inclination to "instigate change in the public education system."⁴³ Sperling finds, expectedly, that founders who are driven by the community revitalization goal are more likely to have deep personal roots in the specific location of their school,⁴⁴ yet Murray argues that the inclination to create a school based on the needs of those one has the most contact with and identifies with most is universal.⁴⁵ Indeed, virtually all the founders interviewed in the three compilations point to a professional experience or an element of their own education that intellectually motivates the vision for their venture. My study expands on this observation by investigating whether any additional explanatory power for their vision lies within the values and belief systems around the purpose of schooling that they might have internalized during their Yale undergraduate experience.

The all-encompassing nature of mission within the processes of school founders importantly extends to their choice in teaching and operational staff. Explaining why they ultimately chose to pursue their educational missions through creating their own school, founders warned that attempting to pull off such an endeavor without the hiring power to assemble a "community of like-minded people" who all had a "shared mission" would be to do it "with one hand tied behind your back."⁴⁶ To these founders, creating a new school provided the freedom needed to construct a deeply mission-aligned team that would be able to faithfully execute their vision and match their own commitment and urgency. This need for self-determination that founders pose as a rationale for why their mission required its own school is generalizable beyond the domain of human capital. Whereas many people shrink away from beginning a venture without a blueprint or significant institutional backing, Sperling finds that school founders explicitly state that they are drawn to this autonomy and see it as a prerequisite for truly doing something differently.⁴⁷ Hentschke takes away a similar conclusion from his interviews with founders, summarizing that they "appear to be attracted to founding charter schools [...] because it gives them a 'chance to play' on their own terms."⁴⁸

Through asking my subjects to trace the beginnings of their idea for a school back farther than most of the current literature does my project parses whether this driving desire for independence is something close to inherent or merely the direct product of professional frustrations in the traditional system. Furthermore, it is notable that virtually all of the literature confounds "newly founded school" and "charter school," mainly offering a treatment of only

⁴³ Paul Teske and Aimee Williamson, "Entrepreneurs at Work," in *Educational Entrepreneurship: Realities, Challenges, Possibilities*, ed. Frederick Hess (Harvard Education Press, 2006), 46.

⁴⁴ Sperling, "Educational Entrepreneurs and the Founding of Charter Schools in New York City."

⁴⁵ Murray, "The Start up Challenge."

⁴⁶ Sperling, "Educational Entrepreneurs and the Founding of Charter Schools in New York City," 51.

⁴⁷ Sperling, "Educational Entrepreneurs and the Founding of Charter Schools in New York City."

⁴⁸ Guilbert C. Hentschke, "Developing Entrepreneurial Leaders," in *Developing Successful Leadership*, ed. Brent Davies and Mark Brundrett (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-9106-2>, 122.

charter schools. While some of my interviewees did indeed found their schools as a charter, I capture a variety of school types in my sample. Using similar lines of inquiry on a diversity of school models proves useful for considering external pressure on the system and the design principle of starting from scratch apart from any connotations the types may have within a more political context.

Founders as entrepreneurial leaders

The use of the word “venture” thus far to describe newly created schools is intentional to prime the comparison of founding a school to starting a business venture. Founders themselves recognize the similarity — one founder reflected that “the business side of leading a charter school was just as important, if not more important than being a good educational leader.”⁴⁹ Bygrave defines entrepreneurship as “perceiving opportunities and creating organizations to pursue them”⁵⁰ and Schumpeter famously characterized the process as “carry[ing] out a new combination” that “produc[es] a new commodity or [...] an old one in a new way” that adds value.⁵¹ Though there is clearly no agreement about an exact definition, the literature broadly homes in on the active creation of something new as a means of improvement, and under this framework the founding of a school can clearly be understood as an act of educational entrepreneurship. Putting a finer point on the concept, an educational entrepreneur creates a new innovative provider of one of the ingredients of high-quality education.⁵² Schools fall into this category, but it also encompasses ventures like Teach for America, The New Teacher Project, and the Broad Residency that aim to increase the talent within the field’s human capital.⁵³ Sperling establishes that there is a pipeline between newly founded schools and these other educational entrepreneurial ventures,⁵⁴ and the background section noted how several like TFA and Broad have created a strong network with Yale. My study builds on these observations to try to answer whether my alumni school founders feel as though their undergraduate experience encouraged their pursuit of an interest in education through the educational entrepreneurship pipeline.

The leadership demands on school founders diverge sharply from those faced by those running traditional public-schools. While “traditional public schools benefit from known sources of students, funding, and administrative and managerial support,”⁵⁵ leaders starting a new school “are

⁴⁹ Deal and Hentschke, *Adventures of Charter School Creators*.

⁵⁰ William D. Bygrave, “The Entrepreneurial Process,” in *The Portable MBA in Entrepreneurship* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2011), 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118256121.ch1>, 2.

⁵¹ Ivan Bull and Gary E. Willard, “Towards a Theory of Entrepreneurship,” *Journal of Business Venturing*, Special Theoretical Issue, 8, no. 3 (May 1, 1993): 183–95, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9026\(93\)90026-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9026(93)90026-2), 186.

⁵² Frederick Hess, “The Supply Side of School Reform,” in *The Future of Educational Entrepreneurship* (Harvard Education Press, 2008).

⁵³ Bryan Hassel, “Attracting Entrepreneurs to K-12,” in *The Future of Educational Entrepreneurship*, ed. Frederick Hess (Harvard Education Press, 2008).

⁵⁴ Sperling, “Educational Entrepreneurs and the Founding of Charter Schools in New York City.”

⁵⁵ Christine Campbell and Betheny Gross, “Working Without a Safety Net: How Charter School Leaders Can Best Survive on the High Wire” (Center on Reinventing Public Education, September 2008),

<https://www.crpe.org/publications/working-without-safety-net-how-charter-school-leaders-can-best-survive-high-wire>, 11.

not typically supported by a district infrastructure.”⁵⁶ Thus in addition to overseeing their schools’ human resources and curricular direction, elements also under the purview of traditional principals, school founders possess a strong ability to marshal physical and financial resources to sustain their operations. Borasi and Finnigan note that a vital quality found in school creators is authentic dedication to developing wide and deep personal and professional networks on the front-end.⁵⁷ In order to assemble all the necessary components for a functioning institution while having minimal in-house operational capacity, founders leverage the connections they nurtured to get key individuals on board who can open doors for their school — credibility, funds, access to policymakers, or facilities, for example.

In addition to a scarcity of resources and guidance, founders encounter the “liability of newness” in that most are unknown, unproven entities in the minds of their target audience. Indeed, “an essential part of the start-up process is attracting ‘consumers.’”⁵⁸ As a result, founders not only develop typical managerial capacities, but also unusual communication savvy as they must assume the role of “public information director” who works with groups “ranging from funders to journalists, legislators, community leaders, and parents.”⁵⁹ What underlies success in both these domains and empowers founders’ ability to sustain and grow their ventures is their mastery of persuasion and motivation.⁶⁰ Hentschke concludes that effective leaders find ways to get out their message and win over constituencies to their side, emphasizing that “in the early stages of invention,” a leader’s talent for articulating the vision and rationale of their venture is “often the only asset that [he or she] has to call upon.”⁶¹

Scholars largely agree that the traditional public school system has not been a conducive environment for entrepreneurialism. The incentive structure of the status quo fosters educators who effectively navigate shifting and politically motivated agendas and “[uphold] professional norms.”⁶² Furthermore, the seniority ladder present in most public-school teaching forces limits the possibilities of advancing through managing up, implementing new instruction techniques, or engaging in larger design thinking about the system.⁶³ The inclination to exit the traditional public system in order to properly pursue their ventures frequently stems from disillusionment after “Byzantine bureaucracies” and “bizarre inefficiencies” stymie their attempts to experiment with new approaches they believe in.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ Ilene Berman, Laura Bloomberg, and Joe Nathan, “Improving Charter School Leadership” (National Governors Association, November 14, 2008), 5.

⁵⁷ Raffaella Borasi and Kara Finnigan, “Entrepreneurial Attitudes and Behaviors That Can Help Prepare Successful Change-Agents in Education,” *The New Educator* 6, no. 1 (March 2010): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2010.10399586>.

⁵⁸ Katrina Bulkley and Jennifer Fisler, “A Decade of Charter Schools: From Theory to Practice,” *Educational Policy* 17, no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 317–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904803017003002>.

⁵⁹ Berman, Bloomberg, and Nathan, “Improving Charter School Leadership,” 5.

⁶⁰ Hentschke, “Developing Entrepreneurial Leaders.”

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶² Hentschke, “Developing Entrepreneurial Leaders,” 115.

⁶³ Frederick Hess, “Politics, Policy, and the Promise of Entrepreneurship,” in *Educational Entrepreneurship: Realities, Challenges, Possibilities* (Harvard Education Press, 2006).

⁶⁴ Christopher Gergen and Gregg Vanourek, “Talent Development: Looking Outside the Education Sector,” in *The Future of Educational Entrepreneurship: Possibilities for School Reform*, ed. Frederick Hess (Harvard Education Press, 2008), 42.

Studies of educational entrepreneurs reveal these leaders tend to possess a common attitude orientation that underlies both their discomfort in perceived complacency and their willingness to chase out-of-the-box solutions: a higher need for control, greater risk tolerance, and ability to see opportunities in dysfunction. Hentschke and Bygrave corroborate the nature of educational entrepreneurs to desire having a high degree of governance over not only themselves but their ventures' decision-making process in general.^{65,66} Larry Rosenstock, chief executive of the charter management organization High Tech High Learning, proclaimed "I have all the agility in the world — and I have nobody to blame but myself if I don't succeed."⁶⁷ His words exemplify the tradeoff of more self-governance in exchange for less security that educational entrepreneurs show a greater willingness to embrace. This category of leaders also demonstrates a propensity to detect when opinion and policy climates are in flux and take advantage of the instability to make deeper inroads with their ventures.⁶⁸ In addition, when considering opportunities, educational entrepreneurs consider not only the risk of failure of a possible venture to address a gap in the field, but also the opportunity cost of missing out on a successful one.⁶⁹ Under this "dual concept of risk," entrepreneurial leaders generally show a preference to risk 'sinking the boat' and failing than 'missing the boat' and let a promising opportunity pass them by.^{70,71}

Though there has been significant investigation of what these qualities are that characterize how entrepreneurialism manifests in education, less focus has been placed on examining from where an individual's entrepreneurial nature emerges. My study contributes an understanding of that by exploring to what extent founders exhibited behavioral tendencies of entrepreneurship during the formative undergraduate years and asking them to explain in detail examples of risk evaluation they undertook while founding their school.

Placing founders within the framework of social entrepreneurship

The characteristics brought out in analyses of educational entrepreneurs — their risk-tolerance, capacity for identifying and seizing opportunities, and savvy for marshaling resources — are mainly taken from the literature profiling traditional for-profit entrepreneurship, casting that category of leader as an alternative formulation of private sector entrepreneurs.⁷² However, it would be remiss to conceptualize educational entrepreneurs entirely as individuals who apply the same skill

⁶⁵ Hentschke, "Developing Entrepreneurial Leaders."

⁶⁶ Bygrave, "The Entrepreneurial Process."

⁶⁷ Kim Smith and Julie Petersen, "What Is Educational Entrepreneurship?," in *Educational Entrepreneurship: Realities, Challenges, Possibilities*, ed. Frederick Hess (Harvard Education Press, 2006), 25.

⁶⁸ Borasi and Finnigan, "Entrepreneurial Attitudes and Behaviors That Can Help Prepare Successful Change-Agents in Education," 22.

⁶⁹ Peter R. Dickson and Joseph J. Giglierano, "Missing the Boat and Sinking the Boat: A Conceptual Model of Entrepreneurial Risk," *Journal of Marketing* 50, no. 3 (1986): 58–70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1251585>.

⁷⁰ Borasi and Finnigan, "Entrepreneurial Attitudes and Behaviors That Can Help Prepare Successful Change-Agents in Education."

⁷¹ John W. Mullins and David Forlani, "Missing the Boat or Sinking the Boat: A Study of New Venture Decision Making," *Journal of Business Venturing* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 2005): 47–69, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2003.08.001>.

⁷² Ana Maria Peredo and Murdith McLean, "Social Entrepreneurship: A Critical Review of the Concept," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, July 2, 2006), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1197663>.

set as private sector entrepreneurs to the domain of providing educational services. Situating this class of leaders in relation to the framework of social entrepreneurship (SE) is useful for illuminating how their consideration and pursuit of opportunities set them apart from classic business-centric focused conceptions of entrepreneurial activity. Once again, there is no commonly agreed-upon definition of SE, however Fowler concisely articulates the essence of the concept as “the creation of viable socio-economic structures, relations, institutions, organizations and practices that yield and sustain social benefits.”⁷³

Though there is significant overlap in traits of for-profit and social entrepreneurs, there appears to be a dimension of moral imperative and human connection that uniquely underlies the motives of social entrepreneurs. Mair and Noboa break down how the intentions of social entrepreneurs develop into two kinds of self-assessments: how appealing of an option is creating the enterprise and how confident are they in their ability to create it.⁷⁴ While the latter is governed by qualities that both social and commercial entrepreneurs hold, Mair and Noboa posit that the determinants of whether one sees starting a socially valuable venture as desirable are their empathy and moral judgment.⁷⁵ They hold that these qualities aid individuals in recognizing the needs of others and promote the desire to take steps to help address those needs.⁷⁶ When social entrepreneurs describe their ideation processes in their own words, they express feeling an intense degree of personal responsibility for fixing the social problem that motivates their enterprise.^{77, 78}

Attempts to characterize the origins of the social entrepreneurial impulse have thus far paid most attention to internal traits and professional experiences. My study that solely focuses on Yale alumni school founders adds to the model of intention formation by grappling with how one’s peer group and beliefs about education formed in the collegiate environment modulate the appeal of creating a social enterprise. This analysis builds toward a SE conceptual backing for more recent reports that some school founders detect a trendiness around the school start-up process and believe that it has garnered a reputation as “the sexiest, best way to do good.”⁷⁹

METHODOLOGY

I approached this topic through conducting qualitative interviews with Yale College alumni who have started schools. The sample of interviewees I connected with was obtained through social networks, online research, and snowballing referrals from some of the other founders. To provide a space as conducive to honesty and resistant to glossy public relations kinds of answers as possible, I

⁷³ Alan Fowler, “NGDOs as a Moment in History: Beyond Aid to Social Entrepreneurship or Civic Innovation?,” *Third World Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (2000): 637–54, 649.

⁷⁴ Johanna Mair and Ernesto Noboa, “Social Entrepreneurship: How Intentions to Create a Social Venture Are Formed,” in *Social Entrepreneurship*, ed. Johanna Mair, Jeffrey Robinson, and Kai Hockerts (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2006), 121–35, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230625655_8.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ David Bornstein, *How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas* (Penguin Books, 2004).

⁷⁸ Lynn Barendsen and Howard Gardner, “Is the Social Entrepreneur a New Type of Leader?,” *Leader to Leader* 2004, no. 34 (2004): 43–50, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ltl.100>.

⁷⁹ Sperling, “Educational Entrepreneurs and the Founding of Charter Schools in New York City,” 71.

withhold the names of the founders and their schools, providing only necessary minimal descriptive details. Table 1 below provides a reference guide for their pseudonyms.

To apply the lens of social entrepreneurship, I began with coding interview text for how the founders' responses aligned with themes of self-efficacy, creativity, and mission-orientation that emerged from my literature review and the theme of Yale's impact on their professional path. Repeated reviews of the text produced organic inductive coding of rhetoric that signaled a convergence or point of departure in the founders' thinking about their visions, rationales, and future hopes.

The case study nature of my data analysis has inherent limitations about the strength of generalized conclusions that can be drawn based on this very niche group, yet extended interviews still offer the best way to answer my research questions because of the opportunities for self-reflection and thorough descriptive detail they provide. The language that my interviewees used to narrate their thoughts and actions is the substance of my comparisons and synthesis, and open-ended questions that encourage longer, potentially winding stories with illustrative detail are the most generative strategy for obtaining a robust data set. This quantity of material enabled me as the researcher to stitch together my interpretation of commonalities and points of divergence. Furthermore, the variety of the types of new schools represented in my initial sample situates each interview as a kind of case within a set. In general, the case study approach invites readers to “add and subtract, invent and shape—reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it more likely to be personally useful.”⁸⁰ This knowledge transfer is particularly productive given that my research provides a leadership profile of school founders as exemplars of an alternative path of making a difference and many of my readers likely share a great deal in common with the interviewees.

⁸⁰ Sharan B. Merriam, “Qualitative Case Study Research,” in *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2009), <https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/1013>.

Table 1.

Founder	School	School Information	Professional Background	Personal Background
Neil	School A	College preparatory academy located in central Africa	Taught high school students during college. Worked as an intern and then as a Prep Teacher at his school's sister institution	Yale College Class of 2021 Male Black
Helena	School B	Charter Montessori PK-8 school located in a mid-size city in New England	Taught English in Nepal during college. Worked as a nonprofit leader and community organizer.	Yale College Class of 2001 Female White
Gabrielle	School C	Independent grade 7-8 school in a mid-size city in New England	Taught music in a public school district for 10 years. Worked in the state Department of Education.	Yale College Class of 2007 Female White
Heidi	School D	Charter all-boys grade 4-8 school in a large city in the mid-Atlantic region	Taught middle school for two years.	Yale College Class of 1987 Female White

Chris	School E	All-girls grade 6-12 secondary school and leadership academy in India	Served as an Americorps volunteer in college. Worked in a large city's district central office and as the development director for a private school.	Yale College Class of 2002 Male Latino
Stephen	School F	Charter grade 6-9 school in a mid-sized city in the Midwest	Taught middle school students during college. Served as Teach for America Corpsmember	Yale College Class of 2015 Male White
Fiona	School G	Independent grade K-3 school in a large city on the west coast	Served as Teach for America Corpsmember, then taught for an additional five years Worked as part of the founding team of a private laboratory school	Yale College Class of 2007 Female White
Penny	School E	All-girls grade 6-12 secondary school and leadership academy in India	Economist and policy advocate	Yale College Class of 2000 Female South Asian

Charles	School H	Independent high school in a small city in the mid-Atlantic region	Taught middle school for two years	Yale College Class of 1996 Male White
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FINDINGS

Synthesizing the nine interviews, I bracket the founders' narratives into four lines of inquiry: the origins of their commitment to education, why they needed to create to contribute, where they derived their confidence in their success, and how they envision their impact through the school. When scaffolded this way, school founders are shown to be driven by a profound belief in the transformative power of excellence in education, as well as an innate need for the autonomy to define and execute their own vision of that excellence. Yale's explicit desire to train the leaders of all fields had a minimal impact on the founders' perspective on pedagogy but encouraged their sense of purpose and ambition, nurturing a strong sense of self-efficacy that fueled their start-up journeys. The founders' ability to identify an unmet need in the educational landscape and then become the solution to it makes them a creative class of leader and exemplars of social entrepreneurship, even as their stories demonstrate that their schools are less ventures than extensions of themselves.

Why they hold a deep commitment to education

A value system where "knowledge means everything"

When their understanding of education as a tool of change and their commitment to becoming a part of that process emerged varied between the eight founders, but a majority were able to articulate a clear turning point that ignited it. One founder, Penny, moved to a prestigious day school after attending her local elementary and middle schools, and there she encountered "really well qualified, highly intentional, like mentor teachers" who proved "transformative" because they became "very deeply invested in her intellectual development." Another founder, Chris, grew up in New York City and attended neighborhood schools with demographics completely opposite of those in Penny's predominately white, semi-rural hometown, yet he described a similar crossroads. He, too, earned a scholarship to a private high school and echoed the importance of a teacher who took him under their wing. "I had a math teacher who was just awesome and spent a lot of time just like helping me understand mathematics, but then also just lots of time, you know, talking about life and everything else," he recalled.

Even beyond these two, other founders frequently homed in on their participation in an educational setting that was more well-resourced — the time and attention of trusted adults being just one example of such a resource. They were particularly struck by the contrasts they were party to. Helena, who attended public schools before moving to a prestigious private school in the same city, explained the eye-opening nature of her exposure to schools with a vast difference in affluence, saying, "comparing my experiences ... it was really clear what kind of privilege existed in the world and how it showed up. So a private school like [mine] that has a sprawling campus and sort of every resource you could imagine? And wasn't super accessible." Heidi arrived at a similar conclusion from a parent's rather than first person perspective. Her decision to join a group working to start a school occurred in the wake of viewing the documentary *Waiting for Superman*, which follows students anxiously awaiting lottery admission to high performing charter schools. She recalls a revelation that, "I have to do this because, you know, my kids go to private school. So they have, like, every opportunity in the world."

These contrasts — particularly the ubiquity of private schooling as their point of comparison — illustrate how founders are compelled by personal experiences that illuminate what education *can* look like at a premium and expose the degree to which those are gatekept. However, it was not merely this awareness that was catalytic— it was how this awareness led to a deep appreciation of this education as a gift. Chris said about his acceptance to his Jesuit high school, “I was very, very lucky, actually.” Neil described his entrance into Yale as his equivalent watershed moment in language that also references defying the odds. He reflected that, “it couldn't have been more unlikely for me to end up at Yale” and that the university almost immediately produced a “realization of how knowledge means everything.” Stephen spoke with similar conviction about what he took away from his education within a private K-12 school in New York City: “The things I really value in my life ... the things that give my life richness and meaning in lots of ways are a byproduct of my education.” In the same way that Helena called her time at her private school a “privilege,” Stephen explicitly called out his family’s ability to send him to his school an “advantage.” The turning points that remain most salient to these founders demonstrate that they hold both an understanding of the disparity between the kind of education that is possible and that which is the default, as well as a personal understanding of the transformative power of closing it.

Serving through “giving back”

As they took up that difficult cause, a universal care and concern for others emotionally sustained their effort. Though the founders would come to view their schools as an achievement, Caroline expressed that the ambition for success only arises out of an intrinsic dedication to the education field. “Ambition isn't everything,” she noted, “You need to have compassion for sure...It's that empathy piece that keeps me going.”

This empathy manifested itself in how the founders almost uniformly conceived of the purpose of the educational creation as “giving back.” Eight of the nine founders are either originally from the location they eventually started their school or spent their formative professional career there. Following from the appreciation they felt for their own educational opportunities that shaped them, the founders express a kind of duty to a place they view as their beginning. After making post-graduate plans abroad, a former boss swayed him to take a teaching job instead with a simple pitch that resonated strongly: “Come home.” Helena also exemplified this sense of responsibility, saying even outside of the context of her school, she has “always been really committed” to her hometown “as a place” and that the effort to get the school off the ground emerged from within a broader non-profit coalition that was striving to “make [the city] as a community stronger.” Neil explicitly noted the reason he began wanting to open his academy “started as a feeling of giving back.” Attending Yale as an international student from the country in Africa where he’s established his school, he described an imposter syndrome where he felt like “an African person wasn’t supposed to be there.” He continued, “I hated that feeling, that being at Yale was borrowing parts of [the world].” Still, his “reading, thinking, [and] education” at Yale “changed [his] life so much.” He frames his academy’s goal as providing that experience to future generation of African students in a way that extinguishes any self-doubt like what he felt, such that they go “through the world as not as they are borrowing, but they own it and it's just as theirs as any other kids’.”

In addition to viewing their schools as in service of a place, they see their addition to the education landscape as in service of broader social ideals. Gabrielle said of the philosophical underpinning of her career choices: “If you are passionate about social justice, education is the place to be because that's where it all stems from, right? That's where inequality starts.” Fiona picked up on a similar thread of education as a lever for systemic transformation, noting that the description of education as “the civil rights issue of our time” she heard while an undergraduate oriented her towards the world view where “the best way to support bringing equality of opportunity to more kids is through school.” Chris described how his desire to uplift others was cultivated in a more hands-on, personal level through the values instilled by his Jesuit high school. He reflected that the school’s requirement of authentic community service “played a lot into this idea of wanting to give back ... in particular wanting to serve those who, for whatever reasons, there might be structural inequity or structural injustice that's getting in the way of them succeeding.” These virtuous intentions reinforce the literature that what sets social entrepreneurs apart from traditional entrepreneurs in the commercial realm is their high levels of “empathetic concern” and the “heightened sense of social worth” they derive from their “helping relationships.”⁸¹

Yet this implication of creating a school as an altruistic endeavor was not endorsed by all founders. Stephen raised the point that with the creation of a new venture like a school, there is the potential for an “upside.” It’s success most importantly generates a benefit to students, but he acknowledges that the reality is not entirely selfless — it also raises founders’ profile within the education community, fast-tracks the careers of those who join it, and gives “credit” to the entities who supported it.

Despite the ubiquity of the concept of giving back within the founders’ narratives, they vehemently defined their school’s purpose in opposition to what they perceived as a “charity mindset.” They instinctually balked at a philosophy of education that casts the people it serves as deficient. Chris explained that one of the reasons he felt driven to create his own school was that the advocacy and non-governmental organizations that were active in the area didn’t align with his beliefs and what kind of change he wanted to see. He described the ideological conflict: “They had a charity mindset in that the constituents that they were serving, it's almost like, ‘Poor them. We have to sort of step in and save them from these horrible conditions that they're in.’ And our thinking was, we don't. We don't have that mindset.”

Once again, this sentiment was broadly, but not universally expressed. On the contrary, Heidi used nearly the exact language Chris rejects to outline how she wanted her school to help: “This is a chance to give these ... boys an opportunity to like, you know, get out of their little world and notice that there's other things happening around in their city.” Still most founders strongly agreed with Chris and took pains to make this point unprompted. Helena noticed a similar contrast between her founding team and other charter leaders she met with in the startup process, and she invoked a related pejorative, saying “it's not about being educational saviors.” Some social entrepreneurship scholars have offered perspectives that fortify the founders’ distaste for the

⁸¹ Sophie Bacq and Elisa Alt, “Feeling Capable and Valued: A Prosocial Perspective on the Link between Empathy and Social Entrepreneurial Intentions,” *Journal of Business Venturing* 33, no. 3 (May 1, 2018): 333–50, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2018.01.004>, 337.

“charity mindset,” concurring that it contains connotations of “a position of superiority on the part of the organization, and of dependency on the part of the recipient.”⁸² Their position follows logically from a belief that an excellent education is not a favor to any subset of children, but rather an obligation to them and a resource for them.

Why they feel compelled to contribute by creating

“I’m ready for the next step”

The founders’ professional backgrounds laid out in Table 1 show that most of them did engage with this passion of educating children through teaching before starting their school — seven of the nine had classroom experience. Several interviewees articulated veneration for their teaching careers. For example, Charles reflected fondly on diving into his first job teaching middle schoolers: “I was better at it than anything else I’d ever done. And it felt like home, and it felt really good.” Not only did founders describe a joy for teaching, but a few also declared a personal conviction that it was a non-negotiable prerequisite for embarking on a journey to start a school. “It was really important that I had experience in the classroom before I got my master’s in education,” Gabrielle told me, “I wanted to know what I was talking about and really be able to speak to what was happening on the ground.” Neil agreed that teaching provides perspective that is vital to staying grounded in other roles in education:

I insist that I always have a class to teach so that I don't lose touch ... Working in education without teaching, I don't know how you can do it. I think there's a risk of reducing people to numbers. Whenever you're in the classroom you can't call a student a number. Their humanity is so in your face.

Stephen and Fiona also noted the necessity of teaching experience, but in the context of it expressly being a steppingstone rather than intrinsically valuable preparation. Fiona remembered her post-grad thought process: “I’m not sure what I want to do next, but I know I want to open a school one day. I’m going to need teaching experience, so maybe now’s a good time to get it.” Stephen was blunter, describing a self-awareness that he would need to have teaching on his resume “if I want to do anything in this field” because of the “street cred” it projected. It happens that the two founders articulating this highly linear perspective are also the two who participated in Teach for America. This may not be coincidence: TFA informational materials cite that the corps does set alumni up to teach longer-term, but also to bring insight from the corps into other avenues for change like “school and district leadership, ... enterprises, or ... other fields that shape the opportunities available to children, like law, healthcare, policymaking.”⁸³

While these two founders may have used the most transactional phrasing to describe how their time spent as a teacher their school was in service of a larger goal, others nevertheless indicated a

⁸² J. Gregory Dees, “A Tale of Two Cultures: Charity, Problem Solving, and the Future of Social Entrepreneurship,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 111, no. 3 (December 1, 2012): 321–34, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1412-5>.

⁸³ Teach For America, “Our Approach,” 2020, <https://www.teachforamerica.org/what-we-do/approach>.

desire to ‘level up’ in the field. Gabrielle initially set out to develop a leadership role on the inside, transitioning to her state’s Department of Education. She recalled her motivations: “I wanted to see what else you could do in education besides being in the classroom...that showed me the bureaucracy side of things.” Neil also qualified his “love” for teaching, saying: “I had this desire to ... have this other side... to go beyond the classroom, I guess. To dare to face the statistics and break chunks out of those statistics.” How the founders describe the decision-making guiding their career trajectory reveals that they harbor a predisposition toward effecting change in a more holistic, bigger picture way that encompasses the atomized units of the classroom.

A need to “try it my way”

That pull founders feel to roles that enable them to set the agenda and maneuver toward their own goals is a sign of their “higher internal locus of control.” Entrepreneurship scholar William Bygrave defines this as “a higher desire to be in control of their own fates,” and like the entrepreneurs surveyed in the literature, my interviewees also showed a great deal of self-awareness of this trait and were quick to claim “independence” as a chief rationale for starting their own school. When I asked whether she had considered pursuing their mission through an existing institution like an advocacy group, Fiona told me, “My personality is, like, I really want to try it my way.” After coming to a fork in his career that forced a choice between dedicating himself full-time to starting his school or moving to a different traditional job, Chris recalls making the leap to do the former because “what I knew at the moment was that I didn’t want to work for anybody.” Both of their accounts encapsulate a need to not be subject to the demands of others.

Consequently, professional experience where they have had to work under the constraints of existing systems produced significant frustration with the rigidity and slow pace they encountered. Charles colorfully articulated the spirit of the founders’ principled sense of urgency: “What I’m good at is being impatient with stuff sucking.” As an example, during her years at a state department of education, Gabrielle found that being higher up on the administrative ladder did not make it easier to organize around plans and goals for improvement. She recalled that “there’s a lot of red tape ... that makes it really difficult to complete any initiatives.” As a result, she became disillusioned: “People just don’t finish the projects that they started.” Over the course of witnessing this piecemeal approach to reform, she determined “there’s not a lot of room for experimentation” in schools that have entrenched ways of operating. Her rationale for a new school was driven by the need to escape constraints and secure the “freedom” to develop a new model. Stephen’s tenure as a teacher in a large, low-income, urban public high school also soured him on the capacity of internal leadership to deliver results. He remembers thinking, “The decisions that my admin are making make no sense and are clearly and directly hurting kids.” Like Gabrielle, he disagreed with the incremental approach of a bureaucracy: “I’m not going to spend my life working my way up ... to make minor changes. I wanted to start a better school.” Founders reject “traditional” avenues to educational leadership within the established pathways because they are perceived as nibbling around the margins of the possible.

This inherent attraction founders have to wholesale change leads them to develop an immersive and proprietary vision and seek out the creative control needed to execute it. For Charles,

the *only* justification for a new school is to instantiate a new idea: “If you're running an independent school and you're running the same criteria as the public school, the only thing you are selling is the right to exclude people.” Penny described why designing from scratch is the best way to do that: “You can really think about, within your four walls, what you want to do and create the vision that we had for what a good education would look like.” For her it was about materializing her own theory of action, someplace “that you could step in and see all of that. It really needed the full school idea to come to life.” Fiona described the allure of starting a new school in similar terms that underscored the feeling that they wanted to have intellectual ownership over the way their concept of education was brought to fruition. Before starting her own school, she was part of the founding team of a laboratory school, and while she “had a pretty blank slate to explore with there and a lot of autonomy to do so,” she explained there was still something missing: “But it was never my school because it was very much [the principal founder’s] vision. There are always some things that are going to make it not really 100 percent my vision.”

While the founders’ need to create is primarily internally driven by these elements of their “do-er” personality, it is also externally incentivized. The audacity of their vision was vital to securing the attention of parties beyond themselves with the resources or institutional power to turn their plan into something real. Stephen was blunt about the differences he perceived in how his goal to start a school was received in contrast to somebody embarking on school improvement through the traditional, institutionalized pathway:

Nobody's going to take a meeting with you if you're like ‘Hey, I'm a teacher and I want to become a better teacher.’... At least nobody with any power ... You’re not going to meet with people who are at the top of their fields or have power or authority.

The people who had what he needed — time, money, advice — were drawn to both his premise and his enthusiasm. “If you're doing something exciting and sexy and that people can believe in, they will go a long way for that energy and that inspiration,” Stephen said about how he was able to gain traction. Fiona also leveraged the outsized nature of her goals to get meetings with heavyweights. While in business school she developed a slide deck outlining her vision for the school and, like Stephen, “shared it with anyone who would listen.” She set out to pitch it to Google as a venture they should take up, and while that particular conversation did not materialize, that quest ultimately got her in front of an ed tech venture capitalist who saw a similarity between her and the lab school principal founder’s ideas and made the connection that placed on that school’s founding team. In the evolution of species, when new features emerge it usually isn’t coincidence, but rather causal for survival. The same principle applies to school founders — it isn’t that school founders *happen* to have extremely high aspirations for an out of the box idea. It is that they *must* because it is those ideas that are the ones that are able to secure the ingredients for actualization.

Why they are self-assured of their ability to make their schools successful

Yale as a training ground for a “sense of agency”

For the most part the founders described their formal education *about* education during their undergraduate years at Yale to be limited. Only two of the eight alumni participated in Yale’s institutionalized programs for education — one took part in the Teacher Preparation Program and another joined the Education Studies for its first two years of existence. Of those two, Gabrielle’s experience in Teacher Prep mirrors the content and tone of Yale Daily News coverage about its place at Yale. Even before its contentious closure, she described feeling “devalued” and “squirreled away in a small corner of the school.”

How Gabrielle described the way in which both the administration and her peers did not hold aspirations to be a career teacher in high regard exactly affirmed my hypothesis that Yale’s support for teaching pedagogy was constrained by a culture that valued changemaking “beyond the classroom,” as another founder put it. Yet the salience of this support or lack thereof appears to be so low in the consciousness of the other founders that it’s difficult to substantiate an argument that the university’s culture around education careers weighed into their decisions to pursue change in the field through opening a school.

For a couple of the founders, their commitment to becoming directly involved in education came online later as the result of integrating post graduate life experiences into their goals. Penny explained how, though she voiced an interest in schooling and especially higher education during college, it took time for her unique perspective on the field to coalesce:

I found this question that I wanted to spend my life answering, which is why are some countries rich in other countries poor? And I think my undergrad was really focused on pursuing that question. And then I realized as I got older and I was an economist, that they’re very interrelated, right? And the piece of really developing broad, strong and current education matters for a country’s growth. I think they came together later on, but not so much in undergrad.

Even for Fiona and Stephen who spent their time at Yale being vocal about their ambitions to eventually open a school, the “eventually” aspect of their goal kept them from having a reason to discover the institutional reception and support of their professional goals within education. Fiona remembers, “I really didn’t think it was what I was going to do right away [...] so I don’t think I was really paying much attention to whether Yale was supporting it or not because I wasn’t looking for them to support that at that time.”

Furthermore, far from Gabrielle’s type of dismissive interactions with other students who found her passion for education baffling, these two founders described finding spaces of peers on campus who encouraged or at least understood theirs. Serendipitously, three out of Fiona’s suite of four girls also expressed an interest in starting a school. The three of them all still work in education and provided encouragement of each other’s big dreams in the field while living together. Stephen noted that politics during his high school and college years had brought several education policy

issues into mainstream discourse. In turn, when he told people he was using his Ethics, Politics, and Economics major to study “ed reform” and “the charter school movement” because “it touches on all three,” nobody seemed to judge this angle because those issues were part of the zeitgeist of current events.

Thus, the mechanism through which I expected Yale to make its mark on the founders’ startup journeys is, by and large, undetectable. Nevertheless, the founders were able to articulate two primary ways in which their alma mater is reflected in their professional paths. First, they seized Yale’s liberal arts education as intensive instruction in the art of persuasion. Second, they took advantage of Yale’s unique opportunities to create and lead outside of the classroom in a way that bolstered their sense of self-efficacy.

Through their coursework in the humanities and social sciences, Yale trained the founders in the art of communication, which they leveraged to make their case for the school to others. Stephen reflected that at the core of his Yale career was the skill to “write papers, figure out how it’s going to get graded, and please the grader. We’re very good at this particular thing.” So when faced with the task of filling out the charter application for his school that would be evaluated on a rubric by a committee, he recognized the challenge — “It was a paper” — and he applied the same skills of constructing an argument with an audience in mind. Chris described how he grew within the undergraduate curriculum more broadly saying, “Figuring out how to articulate clearly and concisely points of view or arguments or changes, that’s something that I think was a skill that was sharpened.” Penny agreed that she “benefitted from a liberal arts approach,” reflecting that “I think the biggest edge that I have is being able to write and communicate.” When describing how that edge served her in her start-up journey, she offered that not being an “educationist” by formal training but rather cultivating expertise in economics, academia, and research prepared her with the ability to share the school’s vision with key supporters. “There’s a whole different set of skills that you need for being able to get donors on board,” Penny explained, “The language that people in education use doesn’t translate. You need to bring the elements that differentiate our school up, but you also have to be able to communicate what that means and why it’s different from a donor’s perspective.”

Even before students meaningfully engage with the university at all, Yale crafts a student body with the raw material of character to make change. Its mission statement reads: “Yale educates aspiring leaders worldwide who serve all sectors of society.”⁸⁴ The phrase “*aspiring* leaders” suggests that those chosen to attend already have defined ambitions for doing well at doing good. Stephen offered a theory of how Yale proactively convinces its student body that their ideas are valuable and that they’re capable of acting on them. In his view, students are prescreened as leadership material — “the person in the room who is the least afraid to speak ... the person who says, OK, let’s make a project plan” — and then “you have for four years everybody telling you ... you’re the leaders of tomorrow.” Stephen is not alone in his perception; Charles also noted an ambient message to students that “you’re really exceptional.”

⁸⁴ Yale University, “Mission Statement,” Yale University, September 3, 2015, <https://www.yale.edu/about-yale/mission-statement>.

This kind of positive feedback falls neatly under famed psychologist Alfred Bandura's category of "social persuasion," which he defines as "encouragements" that "[increase] people's beliefs that they possess the capabilities to achieve what they seek."⁸⁵ Bandura cites social persuasion as one of the primary mechanisms for bolstering an individual's sense of self-efficacy, that is "the belief that one can achieve what one sets out to do."⁸⁶ The second pillar of Bandura's conception self-efficacy is "mastery experiences" — "performance successes" that "strengthen self-beliefs of capability."⁸⁷ As it continue to do now, Yale established ample ways for the founders to acquire such experiences through opportunities to imagine and carry out their own projects.

Three founders described how their engagement in specifically education-related design challenges provided a kind of workshopping space for ideas that directly fed into the school they eventually created. Gabrielle recalled that as part of her certification through the Teacher Prep Program she took "independent studies where I designed my own teaching methods program" and got to institute it within local music classrooms. She was not part of Teacher Prep, but Fiona still took one class with its director, Jack Gillette, and "as part of that course I took with him, you got to write your plan for the school you want to open, which was so fun." An inaugural Education Studies Scholar, Stephen used his capstone to flesh out the concept for his school he opened four years later.

Still, it was outside the classroom that the founders primarily developed their nascent capacity for creative control and organizational management. Stephen emphasized that "one thing at Yale that's distinct from [...] other places is it puts a disproportionate emphasis on extracurriculars." Indeed, when asked what some of their formative experiences at Yale were, three of the founders pointed to their extracurricular leadership as having laid the foundation for how they conceived of their own ability to make things happen. Fiona started a fashion publication on campus, which involved coming up with the idea, applying for her residential college's arts grant, and "getting people on board." The lesson she took away was "if you had an idea, you could pretty much go and make it happen. Someone was going to support you doing it. And for me, it is what I feel like gave me a sense of agency. It's like if you can dream it, you can create it."

Other founders agreed that Yale gave them an expansive sense of what that agency could accomplish. Chris headed up an effort to integrate the Puerto Rican Cultural Center into the Latino Cultural Center, collaborating closely with both the Latino Cultural Center's director and the Yale College Dean's Office. He recalled the effort as a "movement that I was trying to lead within the community," and seeing it be brought into reality ultimately bolstered his concept of his power as an actor in it. Helping others "can be done irrespective of the role that you have," he concluded. "I was a student and I think I still was able to contribute a lot institutionally. [...] We changed the way the university organizes itself around Latino students." Stephen reflected on his time leading a Yale Political Union party to arrive at a conclusion similar to Chris': "I cultivated this organization. There

⁸⁵ Robert Wood and Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Organizational Management," *The Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 3 (1989): 361–84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/258173>, 365.

⁸⁶ Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control (New York, NY, US: W H Freeman/Times Books/ Henry Holt & Co, 1997).

⁸⁷ Wood and Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Organizational Management," 364.

were alumni, I was fundraising — I like really led an organization ... It was small in some ways, but it was real.”

Exactly according to Bandura’s theory, the mastery experiences proliferated by Yale’s slate of extracurriculars with “real” projects and organizational structures allowed students to prove their efficacy to themselves and others. Stephen organically raised the point of how this self-concept contributed to his journey to start his school: “Yale’s emphasis on real extracurriculars that are that are actually led by students creates a feeling of comfort in that structure [of navigating organizational management]. And so you get out, and you’re like I’ve done things like this before a little bit.” Yale students get the nerve to attempt big goals by way of their demonstrable success in smaller ones. The university thus acts as a training ground for self-efficacy within its student body; it turns the will of “aspiring” leaders to the confidence of true leaders through positive reinforcement.

Rather than risky, it “felt natural”

Especially within the education field where professional security is held at a premium, school founders’ choices seem to bear much greater resemblance to those of entrepreneurial leaders, who are distinguished by their “willingness (some would say compulsion) to take risks.”⁸⁸ Indeed, these nine individuals made objectively significant sacrifices in their careers and personal finances; for example, Gabrielle noted she relinquished the promise of a solid pension from her district job and Heidi poured her own financial resources into her school’s start-up costs.

However, when I asked each founder the same question about the risks involved in their project, their organic responses rarely had to do with sacrifices on their end. Instead, the founders almost unanimously framed the primary risk of their school as that which the *parents* took on by placing their trust in a new institution. Stephen succinctly encapsulated the scary leap a new school asks families to take: “Why don’t you take your kid out of their school that exists and then not enroll there, not put yourself on that waitlist and instead commit to coming to a school that does not have a building or a space we can show you, that does not have any staff... has no money right now... you know, it’s like this huge risk.” Several other founders shared the struggle of needing to recruit students before they had secured facilities and underscored how they saw their chief challenge to be inspiring confidence to parents who are making decisions about their children’s lives under incomplete information. Fiona described the added burden of emerging in the wake of a high-profile independent school network’s complete implosion in her area, such that she was fielding questions about “how can we guarantee we’ll still be around?”

Still more surprisingly, pressing them on their own relationship to risk frequently yielded explanations of how the weighing of risk was minimized in their start-up decision or the risk itself was mitigated. Many founders reflected that their choice to start the school was made in a much subtler manner than any kind of cost-benefit analysis. Neil described the move from being a teacher to being a founder as a transition that “felt natural” as opposed to a dramatic undertaking he accepted. Helena also described a degree of seamlessness in her assumption of her role as Board Chair on her school’s founding team. “It was mostly just that work needed to get done,” she explained, “And, you know, somebody needed to do it...I felt committed to making sure that we

⁸⁸ Hentschke, “Developing Entrepreneurial Leaders,” 121.

saw it through.” The language of these founders show they thought of their envisioned school as a given, rather than a decision. Even during what Fiona described as the darkest days of her journey, she reiterated a commitment to herself and her prospective enrollees, “If one family signs up, we're going to move forward with one family.”

The phrase risk tolerance implies that one internalizes the potential for failure and decides to move forward anyway, but the founders demonstrate outward concern exclusively for the question of, as Helena relates, “how do we make it happen?” rather than *if* they will be able to. Hentschke offers an updated version of the traditional conception of entrepreneurs as risk tolerant to account for this risk discounting phenomenon. In his view, entrepreneurs’ “confidence in themselves” and belief “in the inherent value of their venture”⁸⁹ give rise to a perspective that sees objective risks as less relevant threats, and the self-efficacy and mission-orientation of school founders fit neatly into this retooled paradigm.

Other founders took a more proactive and intentional approach to reducing their risk and maximizing their chance of success: growing the new school out of an extant program. Neil and Gabrielle’s schools are both embedded within different organizations with whom they share operational staff and facilities. Heidi lamented, and other echoed, that securing “the building was a huge thing,” so removing that stressor permitted greater focus on establishing the model. In a slightly different vein, Penny and Chris operated an after-school program for years before launching their school, and Chris described how this space offered the “opportunity to try to implement some of the things that we knew that we wanted to have in the end” and demonstrate to parents that their pedagogy worked. Penny said, “the differentiation for us was how we taught and that's what we became known for,” and thus the program developed their expertise and public reputation. Like the “natural” feeling Neil recalled, Chris explained that “because we started a bit slow and staged, I think making the jump to the academy was not as big of a leap as it might have been otherwise.” Both the risk-indifferent and risk-mitigated mindsets illustrate a commitment to staying the course and conviction that their idea would be executed that further speaks to their self-efficacy.

How they see themselves in their schools and the world

Whether to “deepen and strengthen” or expand

Though driven to create their schools by a similar dissatisfaction with the status quo and desire for the autonomy to develop an alternative, the founders exhibited little consensus on the intended wider impact of their institutions. The scale at which they inspired to have influence ranged from the school’s local community to national, and even international, boundaries.

In his commentary about how society should allocate resources, philosopher Friedrich Hayek endorses a theory of action that only works on the local level. He argues “distant actors generally lack the relevant facts and knowledge essential to identify, frame and evaluate a potential opportunity,” and as a result entrepreneurship must arise from “atomized” pockets of expertise and

⁸⁹ Hentschke, “Developing Entrepreneurial Leaders,” 121.

resources.⁹⁰ Hayek's belief in "asymmetric knowledge" dictates that some individuals will have an advantageous point of view regarding "local problems not on others' radars."⁹¹ Helena reveals herself to be one such individual through her firm stance that her school's "goal is to be responsive to families in [her city] and to [her city] as a community." She was self-aware that this scope made her and her school a departure from the norm amongst other new schools that strive to make an "impact through replication," but such a strategy runs counter to the reason for the school's existence. "We don't have aspirations to expand ... in part because it gets you further and further from the families that are most and children that are most affected," she explained.

Helena's perception of her peer institutions was correct — though no single category of impact dominated amongst the founders, the most common was the intent to establish a school as proof of concept that can eventually be replicated within other schools. Heidi and Stephen imagine that these other schools would be additional campuses in other cities that allow the founders to continue instituting the full slate of their innovations in a self-contained way. However, Fiona and Stephen also envision a future where, in Fiona's words, they codify "a model that other communities can implement in their schools." Stephen describes this set up as a non-profiteering kind of licensure that would invite other school leaders to "get trained over the course of years" in his school's methods and then have them "bring it back." Such vignettes of different kinds of replication reveal that these founders think of their contribution in terms of the school of thought and way of teaching encapsulated in their model and demonstrated within their schools.

It seems almost too obvious to state that a school created specifically to approach learning in an innovative way would understand their model as their product. Yet in fact this attitude stands apart from the international school founders who paint their impact in terms of their graduates and the power of their human capital. Neil spoke passionately about wanting his academy and its students to be a part of a broader cultural shift in his home country:

Can we diversify destinations to, in five or 10 years, to create a very diverse citizenship and very diversely educated country? Which would be huge... having the foundation that we can actually build something that can last more than 10 years... If you can send somebody and one person goes to Turkey and the other person goes to Ghana, the other person goes to America, to South Africa, Zimbabwe, and they come back five 10 years later...it's a grand idea of forming a really exciting citizenry and exciting Africans.

He sees enormous potential in the young people his school is designed to serve, and the stakes of unlocking it through a world-class education are high. Preparing students with the tools to succeed in globally competitive settings facilitates the accumulation of a "richness of culture" when they return, which Neil believes to be a critical ingredient in successful "state formation." Penny and Chris reiterate this exact point about cultivating students as engines of future progress in their home.

⁹⁰ Shaker A. Zahra et al., "A Typology of Social Entrepreneurs: Motives, Search Processes and Ethical Challenges," *Journal of Business Venturing*, Special Issue Ethics and Entrepreneurship, 24, no. 5 (September 1, 2009): 519–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2008.04.007>.

⁹¹ Zahra et al., "A Typology of Social Entrepreneurs."

“The scale will come from the students themselves,” Penny explained, “So the whole point is that when you invest this much in our kids, hopefully they’ll be going to schools, and they’ll come back, and they’ll be the ones that are better placed to find the solutions [to problems] that they’ve grown up with.” Setting aside this long-range economic vision, Penny also spoke in multigenerational terms about the power her all-girls leadership academy has to shift India’s cultural understanding of what “girls should be doing.” She used an analogy to describe the cultural barriers women face: “they’re very high fences... And they seem very hard and fast, but they’re very thin fences.” Penny sees her graduates as “role models” that can “show that there’s a different path,” and in turn be the catalyst needed to change others’ minds about what girls are capable of: “Once you see one person do something different, an entire community will say ... now we can do something different.”

Neil, Penny, and Chris’ determination to fundamentally reshape the fabric of their schools’ countries closely parallels the theory of change held by Zahra et al.’s class of social entrepreneur called “social engineers.” Social engineers are motivated by a Schumpeterian belief that “systemic problems” are best addressed by the destroying “entrenched incumbents and prevailing practices” and replacing them with a “lasting structures that will challenge existing order.”⁹² The three international school founders possess ambitions on this same scale, fashioning their schools as the seed of those lasting structures. Though the schools are innovative contributions themselves, these founders’ greatest feat is training a preparing a network of graduates with the capacity to defy national and global expectations and be the authors of the improved social order. Thus, their social engineering occurs from how their vision is diffused through the accomplishments of their students.

Their schools as their “life’s work”

The founders clearly want for their schools to be an arm of a social mission to broaden the reach of their model to more students, an endeavor that serves as a case-in-point of Fowler’s requirement that social entrepreneurship (SE) create structures that provide sustained social value. Their entrepreneurial orientation is even reflected in the core competencies their school models develop in their student bodies: four of the eight schools articulate some variation of student self-efficacy as a cornerstone of their mission. When describing a portrait of their graduates, Charles and Stephen both noted a goal of cultivating “autodidacts”; Fiona cited an understanding “that they’re in charge of their own success” and ability to “take advantage” of “avenues of creation.” As further evidence, Penny and Neil both name entrepreneurship outright as an aspect of their curriculum, describing the instinct she wants to foster in her students as, “If I see something here, if I want to address it ... I feel that I can.” This language so closely parallels the words the founders used to discuss their own skills and mentalities, yet several of the interviewees were still hesitant to claim the mantle of an entrepreneur. Charles said of his professional identity, “I came to do the entrepreneurial part in support of the part of me that’s a teacher, not the other way around.” Helena also explicitly noted that her educational bona fides preceded the vision of starting something new: “I definitely did not set out to start a school.”

Notably, when founders explained their distance from the entrepreneur label, they frequently invoked their image of a typical social entrepreneur and defined their journey in opposition to it.

⁹² Zahra et al., “A Typology of Social Entrepreneurs.”

Helena continued, “I imagine my path is different than a lot of the ed entrepreneurs from Yale. Mine was, really it was organic.” Her impression reflects a pejorative lay belief in school creators as opportunistic, while Neil describes a perception of them as outspoken, perhaps even self-righteous. In contrast, he said, “I never made it into a mission, and I never made it into, like, you know, a flag that I was holding.” It was striking, yet revealing to hear such a reflection from Neil, as throughout this project Neil’s words have emerged as among the most aspirational and mission driven. This pushback evidences the paramount importance they place on the authenticity of their motives and ideology and a concern that any label referring to their process independent of what the process is in service of may dilute it.

While the category of social entrepreneurship can reflect the value these founders’ schools provides to the world, as an identity it does not capture the depth of what the schools mean to their founders as individuals. Several founders characterized their school as a means of “contributing.” Heidi noted she felt pride in having “contributed to [her city]” after establishing the school, while Joseph reflected that he and Penny came to the decision to start their school in the wake of feeling a pull to “contribute to the world ... beyond our professional careers.” Fiona, choosing slightly different language, declared “opening a school is really how I wanted to ... create value for the world.” The founders find purpose within their work to build the school but framing their contributions as “to” something larger than themselves also signals a desire to make a mark that will outlast them.

Because the founders consider their schools as the culmination of their personal and professional paths, the mark they strive to leave on the world is ultimately an extension of their identity. Two founders had possessed the ambition to start a school since middle school, and as a result their startup process felt like fulfilling a promise to themselves. Charles briefly considered moving for different job opportunity but decided the school was too intertwined with his own history to leave: “I did not necessarily intend to be here for my entire career, but it's starting to shape up that way...this place, this town, and the school are my life's work.” His phrase “my life’s work” succinctly underlines how founders’ conceive of their schools as *the* byproduct of their singular combination of personal values and life experiences, a view supported by Neil referring to his academy as his “brainchild.” However, it is precisely this degree of personal investment in their school that makes the all-encompassing nature of an entrepreneur archetype feel imprecise and too superficial. “It is an entrepreneurial project, right? But ... it's much more personal than like, here's a solution to a problem,” Penny explained, “It's like our life project. It's not like it's an entrepreneurial venture that we've done, and we would have done something else instead.” Her final words are inflected with sense of inevitability that underscores how an “enterprise” might be one pursuit out of many, but the act of starting a school is a unique calling founders are compelled to answer.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

What makes this essay’s contribution unique — its sample of exclusively Yale students — is also its greatest limitation. Though a large degree of coherence emerged between just these nine subjects, they’re unable to speak for the entire population of Yale alumni school founders. This cohort was secured through social networks, and as a result they all graduated within a thirty-year

window. The nine represents a product of the university's curriculum and values only as they existed at the historical moment of 1987 and 2021.

Furthermore, focusing exclusively on Yale alumni sacrifices the comparative angle of hearing from founders who went to schools *like* Yale. Such a reference point would be needed to discern whether the connection the founders make between their college years and startup impulses comes from Yale's distinctive experiences or a culture shared broadly at peer elite institutions. Though the nine founders articulated were largely able to articulate ways in which Yale put its finger on the scale of their professional path and personal identity, understanding whether these individuals would have accomplished something similar for similar reasons if they had attended Columbia instead is beyond the project's scope.

Just as the founders interviewed are vastly unrepresentative of the broader population of school founders, so too are the school themselves. Though 35% of public charter schools — again, an imperfect proxy — are part of an umbrella charter management organizations, none of the schools in the present sample are part of a network. Heidi noted her perception of the different experience posed by starting a new branch of an existing brand name as opposed to a stand-alone school: “It would probably be easier to start, like, a KIPP or something ... because you already have the whole network, and you don't have to worry about” as many variables.

It is conceivable that what makes starting a standalone school arguably harder is highly correlated with the kinds of motivations the founders in this study illuminated. Charter management organizations establish a proprietary values system and teaching and learning paradigm that gets replicated within each of their branches. In turn, the staunchly ideological nature of this essay's narratives may not be generalizable to network school creators who do not need to act as architects of a novel vision in the same way. Additionally, an established institutional backing promises startup resources — including public recognition and reputation — up front that standalone school founders must harness from diffuse sources over several years. Because network school founders, as well as those who start schools using their own wealth, do not begin from the same scarcity as this essay's subjects, the persuasive and self-assured personas that propelled these nine individuals' success in those conditions may not be generalizable to a broader typology of founders.

This capstone attempts to isolate the rationales and belief systems held by founders, however, it may be that this disposition can exist successfully inside the system, as well. The term “intrapreneur” refers to an employee who “behave entrepreneurially” without creating an enterprise, they “recognizes opportunities and develops innovations from within an existing hierarchy.”⁹³ The same lines of inquiry posed to school founders in this project ought to be posed to educational intrapreneurs. After this essay has begun to answer why founders decide to exit the system to pursue change, its findings beg the question of why intrapreneurs decide to stay. Their narratives would offer insights about how traditional institutions of public education create conditions that are not only hospitable to but take advantage of employees who have independent ideas they want to enact or who have a higher locus of control.

⁹³ Christine Blanka, “An Individual-Level Perspective on Intrapreneurship: A Review and Ways Forward,” *Review of Managerial Science* 13, no. 5 (November 1, 2019): 919–61, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11846-018-0277-0>.

The findings generated by this research hold significant positive implications for employee satisfaction. This essay demonstrates that founders are energetic and dedicated educators at their core, and studies of corporate settings have shown “innovative employee behavior leads to firm growth and strategic renewal.”⁹⁴ Thus, keeping individuals with entrepreneurial dispositions within the system is likely to benefit the system. Indeed, determining how to grow the habits of mind of entrepreneurship from within is a far more sustainable way of spurring pedagogical innovation than relying on the propagation of school founders.

A remarkable convergence emerged in the founders’ stories of how they arrived at the position of starting of school, demonstrating the value of placing their narratives in conversation with each other. My project stops before a detailed discussion of how they operationally managed transforming a vision into a brick-and-mortar building, but future research should focus on the wisdom their collective experiences can shed on that aspect. Several interviewees mentioned securing donors’ support, but how they connected with these philanthropic organizations and what pitches were most convincing to them remain open questions. My subjects unanimously described the importance of earning parents’ and their community’s trust, but what approaches in this outreach are more or less successful?

Founders’ thoughts on these questions of strategy and maneuvering may begin to form the outlines of a set of recommended practices. It’s clear there isn’t a formula for creating a school — the models and the locations they serve are too different for such broad strokes. Still, Fiona, Penny, and Heidi all looked to precedents set by other founders for guidance during their own start up processes. By showing that school founders constitute a category of leader and entrepreneur, I hope to have drawn attention to the need for founder communities of practice that facilitate learning from each other’s successes and failures.

CONCLUSION

I have approached this project as a leadership study. It represents an effort to understand school founders not as collection of unique case studies, but as a class whose professional choice to improving education from outside the system reflects deeper similarities in their motivations and beliefs about how to effect change.

The founders developed their entrepreneurial impulse from experiences in their own lives and a value system that refuses to accommodate the status quo. Coming from privileged educations themselves led them to appreciate the eye-opening effect it had on them and ignited a desire to rectify the inaccessibility of similar excellence. Most explored this drive to serve through teaching, but the occupation ran counter to their innate distaste for incrementalism and need for creative control.

Disproval of pedagogy as a field of study was felt by the few who interacted with Yale’s education programming, but the founders widely reflected on Yale as the place that homed their sense of self-efficacy. They were inspired by the emphasis on the liberal arts and point to that curriculum as the source of their ability to earn buy-in to their vision. Yale’s goal of training future

⁹⁴ Ibid.

leaders manifested itself in how the founders seized extracurricular opportunities that provided space for and encouragement of bringing their ideas into reality.

Founders hold different opinions on what scale maximizes their model's impact — some designed their institutions to stay local fixture, others to be a thought leader, and still others an incubator of new national ambitions. Though each constitutes social entrepreneurship, many don't identify with that categorization for how it detaches them from their creation. The founders broadly share an understanding of their schools as self-expressions and the best way they're able to be a part of something larger than themselves.

As a field, education suffers from an image problem. Its poor reputation is felt even (or perhaps especially) in elite spaces like Yale, where Charles described the course of study as “notoriously touchy feely” and both he and Gabrielle related instances of peers telling them, essentially, “you're better than that.” This perception is frustratingly persistent. Philosophy educator Don Walhout identified it as far back as 1961 when he penned his essay “The Teacher Image in America: The Reasons for Its Current Low Status,” and just three years ago, I received the same disapproval that my interviewees described in their time after voicing to a classmate my aspirations to be an educator.

Seventy years ago, Walhout offered a prescription to the problem: “convince the American public of the creative possibilities” inherent in education professions.⁹⁵ I strived to do just that in my capstone, shining a spotlight on the ways in which school founders are deeply engaged in a high-stakes enterprise of creation. Dissecting the founder role into the vision, the near blinding faith in it and oneself, the compassion, and the existential desire to make a mark lends gravitas to the process of constructing excellence in education from the ground up. Fiona described the challenge of starting a school as a “design project,” and emphasizing how founders act as designers calls attention to the fact that every aspect of how our society educates its children is a choice. This perspective holds the potential to challenge complacency and command respect for educational leaders who, at any level, decide they'll no longer accept that choice and find a way to make a different one.

⁹⁵ Donald Walhout, “The Teacher Image in America: The Reasons for Its Current Low Status,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 32, no. 1 (1961): 31–35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1980322>, 34.

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