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GENERATION GAPS

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Boom, X & Y in the workplace

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GENERATION GAPS

Examining the difference between Boom, X & Y in the workplace

By Dr. Karen Edge Illustration by Pete Ryan

When considering the possible influence of the generational mix in schools, the gap between teachers and students is often the first to spring to mind. As students become increasingly technoliterate, street smart and social media-savvy, the gap between students and teachers can be seemingly – or actually – vast. If the buzz within corporate research and popular writing is to be recognized, it is perhaps not the student/teacher gap that warrants more attention at the school level, but the often ignored generational differences between teachers and leaders within schools and across the school system.

A generation is a cohort of people who have lived a shared experience of cultural, social, political and economic events that have influenced their view of the world and produced a set of identifiable generational pattern character and values dispositions (Zemke, et al, 2000). Most importantly, the multigenerational workforce in Ontario schools is comprised of: Baby Boomers (1945–65), Generation Xers (1965–1980) and Generation Ys (1980–00).

Within the private sector, a growing number of academics, talent management professionals

and thought leaders are pursuing two strands of inquiry. The first strand explores generational influence on task performance, professional learning, rewards and motivation, career aspiration and development (Deal, 2007; Erikson, 2012; Zemke, 2000). The second strand explores challenges and opportunities of multigenerational workplaces and, in turn, the implications for leaders and system-level professionals (Hewlett, 2009; Hewlett Leaders-Chivee, 2011; Zemke et al, 2000).

School leadership research has often centred on experienced professionals, which has created an implicitly Boomer focus within the development of the field. An emerging field exploring Generation Y teachers is providing some insight into professional development and retention (Behrstock & Clifford, 2011; Cogshall et al., 2011). However, the work of incoming Generation X (Gen X) leaders has remained almost invisible on the research landscape. As a result, critically thinking about generational patterns will be helpful for leaders, schools, researchers and policy makers.

Within the new Young Global City Leaders research study, the team at the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the Institute of Education, University of London, is leading the charge to understand more about the emerging new Gen X (under 40-year-old) cohort of school leaders in London, New York and Toronto. Given the belief that Gen X leaders are the future of the system, and their generational pattern of skittish commitment to organizations and careers, the research team aims to learn more about and engage with them in new and interesting ways. Working across the three cities, the team has observed anecdotal differences in system and school-level readiness and support of younger school leaders. As such, the research will also focus on learning how leading, from a relative position of youth, is different in each city.

The Young Global City Leaders research project is focusing on just Gen Xers at work within multi-generational schools in London, New York and Toronto. Within each city, the research team is working with an impressive and expanding cohort (new members welcome) of Gen X principals and vice-principals to better grasp: what makes them tick; how they arrived in their leadership posts; and how they define their aspirations

for their students, their schools and their futures. The team's work is underpinned by a commitment to disentangling Gen X leadership and issues of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and ability. During the first year, data showed interesting trends related to the generations' approaches to leadership, collaboration, career development and experiences in leading between Generation Y (Gen Y) and Baby Boomers (Boomers). There have also been interesting patterns related to work/life balance, gender, technology and ambition. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the United Kingdom, the research work includes very active and high-level Advisory Groups in each city with policy and practice leaders involved, including the OPC, along with young leaders themselves. As Gen Xers ourselves, one of the teams' goals is to try and change the traditional dynamics of research programs, providing opportunities for our Gen X leader participants by offering research collaboration, leader networking, blog writing and policy engagement.

While much of the broader research and discussion focuses on the generational differences, there is merit in foregrounding the commonalities across the cohorts. Deal (2007) highlights

two: all generations have similar values and all generations want respect. However, each generation differs in how they express their values, define respect and perceive power and authority. It is usually in the enactment of the commonalities that challenge arises. We believe that a more formal examination into multigenerational working in schools might provide a helpful and unique approach to school-level leadership discussions.

Two caveats remain central to the generational reflections. First, generational patterns can't be generalized across an entire age cohort. Second, the North American-centric and private sector-focused nature of most generational workplace research creates inherent historical and contextual bias, coupled with an ignorance of public sector and educational contexts. However, caveats in hand, recognizing the challenges and opportunities within the multi-generational school might unlock some interesting points of debate and consideration.

In support of understanding the generational characteristics and work-related behaviour patterns (Deal, 2007; Erickson, 2012; Hewlett, 2011; Zemke et al, 2000), and based on the evidence gathered, here are three fictitious and generationally stereotypical teachers /leaders: Ayesha (Gen Y), Mark (Gen X) and Barbara (Boomer).

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Generation Y: Ayesha, 25

Ayesha is a 25-year-old Gen Y teacher who recently accepted her first permanent teaching post. She is optimistic, confident, social and street-smart. Motivated by a sense of civic duty, Ayesha and her peers are part of a diverse cohort with a commitment to, and expectation of, a diverse workforce. Professionally, Ayesha is self-directed, tech savvy, well networked and connected. She is willing to commit to the organization and is eager to get ahead, which is demonstrated by her constant desire for learning and expanded responsibility. At times, Ayesha is easily intimidated by colleagues. She likes structure and supervision in the form of personalized learning and mentoring opportunities. Ayesha and colleagues thrive with robust orientation programs and large group collaboration under strong leaders.

Generation X: Mark, 37

Mark, our stereotypical Gen Xer, is a 37-year-old. He is a technoliterate vice-principal, though he is frequently out-techsavvied by his Gen Y colleagues. He taught in five schools during his first six years of teaching, due to seniority reassignment. Thankfully, he is comfortable with change! He is at ease with people from all backgrounds. Mark is globally minded and has travelled and studied abroad. While he is comfortable with, and even craves, collaboration, he is content working on his own and is self-reliant. His sense of fun and informal approach to relationships and work is palpable. For Mark, work is defined by task, not time and place. However, he holds his commitment to his partner and family close to his heart and defends his work/life balance. Mark is a great colleague because he is adaptable, creative and unintimidated by authority. However, his independence has fostered a less than ideal set of people skills and his cynicism can often get in the way.

Boomer: Barbara, 55-year-old

Barbara is optimistic, personable and very much a relationship-oriented principal. At work she is a great team player, eager to please her colleagues, keen to be involved in any district-level initiative and always willing to 'go the extra mile.' Yet, she is also anxious of conflict, sensitive to feedback and reluctant to challenge her peers. Her natural tendency to focus on processes and to be nervous of budgeting processes can be to the detriment of the end result within an accountability, outcomes-driven culture. Barbara can also be fairly judgmental of those with a different perspective, and sometimes strays into self-centredness.

To generate an initial top-level picture of the generational trends in Ontario, the research examined publically available data from the Ontario College of Teachers (2012) and the Ontario Principals' Council (2012). While the datasets are flawed in two ways, they illuminate the overall landscape and posits some future directions in demographic analysis. The



Each generation differs in how they express their values, define respect and perceive power and authority

first flaw is that membership data serves only as a proxy for the number of working teachers and leaders in schools, not those actually in posts. The second flaw is that the data is aggregated around decade-based cohorts, not generational age ranges. However, this preliminary evidence does provide three school-level generational insights:

- principalships are still predominantly held by Boomers, with Gen Xers accounting for less than a third of leaders and Gen Ys not registering on the scale.
- vice-principalships mark the entry of Gen Y to senior leadership ranks, with Gen Xers holding the largest number of posts, followed by a smaller number of Boomers.
- the largest group of teachers is from Gen X, followed by Boomers, then Gen Ys.

Given Ontario-based retirement and recruitment patterns, these trends are not surprising. While a more nuanced examination of the demographic data would provide a more exact picture, the trends emerging from the information above offer ample rationale for considering how the three generations at work in Ontario schools may be living up to their generational reputations.

If generational patterns hold true, it is possible to see implications for school system and district-level policy leaders in how generational factors may influence everything from uptake of mentoring and career development programs to the implementation of the Ontario Leadership Strategy. For school leaders, considering how their own generational position may influence how others follow and how their

own multi-generational schools function may offer interesting and new insights. Generational considerations, with a stronger evidence base, may provide leaders with yet another tool in their leadership arsenal for understanding how cohorts of individuals approach their work, collaboration, change adoption and work-life balance. Within a multi-generational school, possible questions to consider include

- How are generations working together in organizations?
- How do you manage the generational collide?
- Do leaders need different repertoires of skills and strategies to recruit, retain, motivate and support staff from each group?

The repertoire of skills required of leaders as they implement change and strive for school

improvement is vast. As other sectors find value in considering how these different cohorts may not only respond to change, but accelerate change, perhaps there are lessons for school and system-level initiatives. The Young Global City Leaders research gives specific thought to the following questions as they relate to generations, leadership and school-level change:

- How does the generational positioning of leaders influence their approach to leadership? How does their understanding of the generational politics and practice within their school influence their ability to improve teaching and learning?
- How can considering generational theory influence the design of recruitment, orientation, mentoring and training development initiatives?
- How do/how can leaders make the most of their multigenerational schools?

From your own school or system-level vantage point, it may be worth spending a few minutes (or “ticks” in London speak) considering just how these concepts may influence your own thinking and leadership.

As the research continues, the authors welcome feedback from Ontario school leaders through reflections, comments and ideas. Collaborators are also welcome. ▲

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