

Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y: Who Will Lead Our Schools?

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Abstract

Populations can be divided into clearly defined generational cohorts. Each generational cohort is shaped by its own set of shared experiences and enters adulthood with its own unique characteristics and qualities. Currently, the teaching population is made up of three distinct generational cohorts: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. This study examined 391 teacher leaders to determine whether there was a difference in how these generational cohorts viewed the desirability of becoming a school principal. The study assumed, based upon prior research, that the demands of "time" and "stress" are the two main reasons that teachers choose not to become principals. The question examined was, do Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y view the demands of "stress," "time," and the changing nature of the principalship differently when making the decision of whether or not they want

to become principals? The survey found that there was no statistically significant difference between the way Baby Boomers and Generation X viewed the factors of "stress" and "time" as deterrents to becoming principals, however, there was a statistically significant difference in how Generation Y and Generation X/Baby Boomers viewed "time" as a deterrent. The study also found that there was a statistically significant difference in how Generation Y and Baby Boomers viewed the changing nature of the principalship as a deterrent.

Keywords: Principalship, Generation X, Generation Y, Baby Boomers.

1. Introduction

The shortage of school administrators is a regular topic of conversation at meetings of school superintendents and has been predicted by researchers for over 15 years. Increasingly, the attention of practitioners and scholars has focused on where the next generation of educational leaders will come from? In a survey of 176 superintendents, Whitaker (2001) found that 39.8% of superintendents reported a "moderate" shortage of principal candidates and 50% of superintendents reported a "somewhat extreme" or "extreme shortage" of principal candidates. Whitaker also found that superintendents perceived a decrease in the quality of applicants with 29% rating the quality of the candidate pool as being "poor" or "fair" and 51% rating the quality as "good." Only 20% of superintendents rated the principal candidate pool as being "very good" or "excellent." Similar findings were observed by Carnine, Denny, Hewitt, and Pijanowski (2008) who reported that superintendents from the state of Arkansas felt they had 40% fewer candidates today than they would have had 15 years ago. They also found that superintendents felt that only 45% of the applicants for the principalship met the minimal qualifications to be interviewed for a job vacancy. The question is; why are fewer teachers interested in becoming school administrators? One element that may be leading to the shortage of principal applicants is the changes in the way generational cohorts look at leadership and the workplace.

Hornblower (1997) defined the different generational cohorts based upon their early life experiences. The generation defined as Matures was born between 1909 and 1945 and were shaped by the depression and World War II. The Baby Boomer (Boomers) generation was born between 1945 and 1964 and was influenced by a period of affluence where economic prosperity was viewed as an inevitability. Hornblower asserts that a defining characteristic of the Boomers was the freedom and opportunities they had to focus on idealistic endeavors and personal development. Generation X (Xer's) grew up in the American recession of the early 1980's. Following this recession the Xer's also experienced a second economic recession in 1990-91 that followed a stock market crash in 1987. Unlike the Boomers, the Xer's realized they could not assume they would be successful or secure in a chosen career. According to Gardner and Eng (2005), Generation Y (Yer's) makes up the latest generation and they were born after 1982. This new generation is more ambitious and optimistic than the Xer's and also the most ethnically diverse of any past generation. The question that will be explored in this paper is whether teachers who have grown up as a part of Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Generation Y are less inclined to enter into the school principalship.

2. Review of the Literature

Generation X as a label for this generational cohort originated in about 1993. According to Tulgan (2000), Time, Newsweek, Business Week, and Fortune all focused on the new generation and solidified its identity as Generation X. Although many didn't believe it was a good descriptor, the term stuck. The birthdates for the Xers is also not rigidly defined but there seems to be fairly widespread agreement regarding the time-frame. Armstrong (2005) placed the Xers as being born between 1966 and 1981, while Fisher (2009) defines Generation X as being born between 1965 and 1978. Stuenkel D.L., De La Cuesta K., and

Cohen J. (2005) set the birth date range for Generation X between 1961 and 1981. These dates place Generation X between the older Baby Boomer generation and the younger Generation Y. According to Yan (2006), the Generation Y cohort was born during the second half of the 1970's and extended into the second half of the 1990's. Generation Y is now the cohort providing new workers into the workforce.

When it comes to size, the Xer generation is significantly smaller than the Boomer generation that preceded it and the Y'ers that follow it. According to Hornblower (1997), Boomers totaled over 78 million while the Xer's account for only 45 million individuals. The younger Yer's rival the Boomers in size with an estimated 76 million individuals (French, 2010).

The Xer's have very different views and priorities than the preceding Boomer generation. Hornblower (1997) attributes the uncertainty of the work place as the influencer that caused the Xer's to reject what they perceived as the false security of a career. Generation X looks at the workplace cubicle with its offer of delayed gratification, success, and future security only to conclude this does not guarantee life-long security. Wendover (2005) found that while Xer's may be very hard working on the job, they don't take the job home with them like the Boomers, thus separating their work life and their home life. They will put in extra work, grudgingly, but expect to be noticed for their additional commitment. Joyner (2000) found that Xer's are serious about work, but that they don't take it too seriously, nor do they take themselves seriously. According to Filipczak, as cited by Joyner (2000), "they (younger workers) tend to want to get the job done and go home at 5. They want to have a life" (p. 64). Xer's are reluctant to spend any more time at work than is absolutely necessary or required. When looking at the difference between Boomers and Xers, Wendover (2005) states that "Boomers grew up in a world of expanding possibilities, tremendous economic growth and the Camelot of John F. Kennedy. Generation X was born into lay-offs, inflation, recession, Watergate, and the social chaos of the 1960's" (p. 25). Generation Y differs from the Xer's in the way they view the work place. According to Nikravan (2011), the Xer's have been pampered and made to believe in their own self-worth. The Yer's believe they will have an impact in whatever career they pursue. Family and time spent with their family are very important to the Xer's. Armstrong (2005) stated that the Xers want a job that "includes fewer hours and allows more time with family and friends" (p.41). Salkowitz (2008) reported that Xer's "have always prioritized personal time over work and are continuing to do so as they transition into family life" (p. 141). He further reports that Xer fathers cut back on time spent at work or working from home to raise children at much greater rates than previous generations. Carlson (2004) reported that Xer's are focused on peace of mind and enjoying leisure time while seeking a high quality of life. The Xer's will always put family before work. This emphasis on family may be a result of the experiences Xer's had growing up in families that were not stable. Hornblower (1997) reported that Xer's are skeptical about marriage because over 40% of them spent time in a single-parent home before reaching the age of 16. This childhood experience resulted in an increase in the average age of marriage for the Xer's. Since 1970 the average age for men to marry has crept up from 23 to 27 and for women it has moved from 21 to 25 (Hornblower). The Xer's, as adults, want the stability and a home life that they didn't experience as children.

Tulgan (2000) identified four themes or qualities that are important to Xer's in the workplace. First, they want to know if they can make a significant contribution to the team. Second, they want to know if they will have access to information and training to continue to grow. Third, they want to have freedom to be problem solvers, work at their own pace, and produce results. Finally, they want to be able to see tangible results for their efforts so they can see success based on their efforts. Wendover (2005) reported unique qualities for the Xer generation which include:

"A short job tenure. Most Xer's who are finishing college report that they expect to spend less than three years in their first job. Xer's don't view their jobs as a career.

Xer's view their job as a contract between them and their employer to deliver a service.

Baby Boomers tended to see their jobs as a calling that helped define who they were.

When a job doesn't live up to the expectations of the Xer, they will feel that a "contract"

has been broken and probably leave the job. The same will be true to commitments such as

training. If the promised training is not provided by the employer, it will be seen as a break in the contractual relationship and the Xer will likely search for a new job. Xer's will use technology to a much greater degree than the Baby Boomers. Why ask someone when you can look it up? Why hold a meeting when you can e-mail everyone?" (p.25)

Yu and Miller (2005) reported that Xer's, in contrast to "Boomers," are more loyal to their profession rather than to their employer. They seek a high degree of autonomy and flexibility in their jobs and life outside of work. Generally they don't feel a need for leadership. According to Loomis (2000), as cited in Yu and Miller (2005), "Xer's tend to be more independent, self-motivated and self-sufficient. Baby Boomers, on the other hand, tend to be more diligent on the job and prefer a more stable working environment" (p. 36). According to Thorman (2007), the Yer's do not reject the opportunity to assume leadership. However, they view leadership as enabling others to be leaders. The Yer's are not drawn to hierarchical authority but prefer a collaborative and cooperative workplace.

Watching the stress experienced in the workplace by their parents may be one of the reasons that Xer's may not want to assume management responsibilities, including the school principalship. According to Zemke as report by Satin (2003):

"In the eyes of Gen-X, their parents devoted their lives to the religion of work. Xer's are distressed by the high prices their parents paid for success: stress and health problems, divorce, drug and alcohol abuse....So it is that Gen-X is committed to more balance in their own lives." (p. 12)

Generation X views the workplace differently than the Baby Boomer generation. Salkowitz (2008) felt that Xer's possess a cynicism as well as a strong sense of self-reliance which can be attributed to their relatively small numbers and growing up in an era in which institutions have proven themselves bankrupt and unreliable. This has resulted in Xer's having a strong sense of self-reliance, a distrust of authority, and a situational view of the world.

When it comes to hard work, the Xer's are difficult to define. Hornblower (1997) stated that Xer's have been portrayed as lazy, confused, unfocused and listless. They are portrayed as not being clearly defined, which resulted in the label of "X," for fill-in the blank, or, there isn't anything there. However, Tulgan (2000) reported that contrary to some reports, Xer's are not lazy and are willing to put in a large number of hours on the job. However, they resent it when their time is wasted by others. They want to insure their time is focused on being productive. It is very difficult for a Xer when someone else takes control of one of their most valuable resource, their time. Xer's are very reluctant to work long, unproductive hours. According to Tulgan (2000), Xer's seek a work environment in which they have opportunities to be creative, attain a sense of belonging, and feel that their contributions are recognized. They don't have to be the most important person in the company but they do have to feel that they are making a contribution and that they make an impact.

3. Purpose of the Study

Carnine et al. (2008) found that the top five reasons that teacher leaders chose not to become principals were related to the heavy time demands and stress of the job. These reasons included: testing / accountability pressures too great, the job is generally too stressful, too much time is required by the job, societal problems make it difficult to focus on instruction, and it is too difficult to satisfy demands of parents and/or community.

In looking at the specific characteristics of Xer's, Boomers, and Yer's the questions explored in this study include:

- Are Generation X teachers less likely to enter the principalship than Baby Boomers or Generation Y?
- Do Generation X teachers view the factors of stress and time as related to the principalship differently than Baby Boomers or Generation Y?
- Do the three generational cohorts perceive that over a period of time there has been a change in the role of the principal and does this impact their decision to choose not to seek the principalship?

- Are the teachers identified for this study as being leaders different in age from the total population of teachers in state of Arkansas?

4. Methodology

A survey was sent to principals in 245 school districts throughout the state of Arkansas. The principals were asked to identify, "those people who are leaders at your school and have the personal and professional qualities that would make them outstanding school administrators, but they have chosen not to go into school administration. In fact, they may have stated to you that they would never want to be a school administrator." There were 391 teachers identified from 139 different school districts. Based upon identified years of experience in teaching, ages were approximated and it was determined that 225 respondents were Generation X, 100 respondents were Baby Boomers, and 69 respondents were from with Generation Y. Individual random contacts were made with 50 respondents to insure teaching experience equated with actual age and it was found that 49 of the 50 respondents were properly categorized.

The first two questions addressed in this study involved the use of time. Do Xer's view the time demands of the principalship differently than Boomers and Yer's? The second item explored focused on job stress. Do Xer's, Boomers, and Yer's view the stress of the principalship differently? The third item explored how Xer's, Boomer's, and Yer's perceive the current job of the principal as having changed over what the principalship was like in the past. The final question explored was to determine if teacher leaders identified in this study differed from the total population of teachers in the state of Arkansas.

5. Analysis of the Data

This study examined the different generational cohorts view of the factors of "time," "stress," and whether the job of the principal has changed from the perceptions of the job as it was in the past. This examination was designed to determine if there was a difference among the generational cohort groups and if one group might be more interested in or more likely to assume school leadership, specifically the principalship.

5.1 Teacher Leaders and Arkansas Teachers

According to Ingersoll (2009), the average age for all teachers in the state of Arkansas teachers is 43 years while the teachers participating in this study had an average age of 36 years. The upper quartile of teachers in Arkansas begins at age 51 while the participants in this study had an upper quartile that started at 42.5 years. The top of the lower quartile was 34 years for all Arkansas teachers while for the participants in this study the top of the lower quartile was 29.5 years. Table 1 illustrates that the teachers identified by their school site principals as teacher leaders appear to be younger than the overall population of teachers in Arkansas.

Table 1: Mean Age of Teacher Leaders in the Study and All Teachers in the State of Arkansas

	Mean Age	Beginning of Upper Quartile	Top of Lower Quartile
Teacher Leaders	36.0	42.5	29.5
All Teachers	43.0	51.0	34.0

5.2 Stress of the Principalship

The primary reasons that teacher leaders chose not to become principals related directly to the heavy time demands and the stress of the job (Carnine et al., 2008). These two factors would appear to relate to qualities that are highly important to Xer's. The question is: do Xer's find the demands of time or the stress of the job to be a larger deterrent in becoming principals than Boomers or Yer's? This study found, as presented in Table 2, there was no statistically significant difference between the three generations on how they viewed the stress of the job as a deterrent to becoming school principals.

Table 2: Comparison of Generational Groups

Variable	Gen Y (n=69)		Gen X (n=225)		Boomers (n=100)		F(2, 391)	p	η
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Job stress	3.57	1.34	3.73	1.25	3.74	1.26	0.50	.61	.05
Time demands	2.99 ^a	1.45	3.60	1.25	3.57	1.34	6.09	.002	.17
Principal past	1.99 ^b	1.33	2.41	1.35	2.57	1.32	3.99	.02	.14

a) Gen Y is significantly less than Gen X and Boomers

b) Gen Y is significantly less than Boomers

5.3 Time Demands of the Principalship

On the factor of "time" there was no difference between the Xer's and the Boomer's. Table 2 shows that there was a statistically significant difference at the .002 level of confidence between Boomer's, Xer's and their younger successors, Yer's, on how they viewed the demands of time. The Yer's study participants did not see time as a major deterrent to the principalship. The Xer's and Boomer's did not view the factors of time or stress differently.

5.4 Demands of the Principalship in the Past

Carnine et al. (2008) found that teachers who have chosen not to become principals felt the stress and time demands of the principalship are excessive. However, do the generational cohorts believe that the demands of the principalship have always been excessive or was there a time in the past when the job may have been more satisfying and thus more manageable? The participants were asked if the job was less satisfying than it was in the past and whether that had an impact on them electing not to become school principals. Table 2 shows that the change in the principalship had little impact on the decision of the Yer's in electing not to become principals. For Boomer's and Xer's their perception of a change in the nature of the principalship had a much greater impact on their decision not to become school principals. There was a statistically significant difference at the .02 level of confidence between the Yer's and the Boomers/Xer's.

Conclusions

During the formative stages of the development of this study there were several assumptions that were made. Hornblower (1997) reported that the Xer's were lazy, confused, unfocused and listless. Armstrong (2005) reported that Xer's want jobs that require "fewer hours and allow them to spend more time with family and friends" (p.41). Based upon these assumptions, it was anticipated the Xer's would not seek a position as a principal because of the time and pressure of the job. It was thought that Xer's would be substantially different from the older and more work oriented Boomers. However, the results of this study show that there is no difference between the Xer's and the Boomers in how they view the stress and time demands of the principalship. There was a difference between the Xer's and Yer's, which may indicate Yer's are more open to becoming principals. But, due to the small number and the relatively recent introduction (last six years) of Generation Y into the teaching profession, it would not be prudent to make any sweeping conclusions about this new and younger generation. Overall it would appear that there is little difference between the way Generation X and the Baby Boomers view the principalship.

When looking at teacher age, the respondents identified for this study were on average, about six years younger than the overall population of teachers. It might be assumed that those who took leadership roles at the school site and were identified by their principals as leaders had more energy than the overall population of teachers. This may be related to the longevity/age of the Baby Boomer generation, with older teachers being content to work and lead less as they age. Carroll and Foster (2009) reported that, "over 50% of the nation's teachers and principals are Baby Boomers" (p. 2). This is a sizable difference from the study population of only 25.6% and shows that the Boomer's may be ceding leadership at the school site to the Xer's and Yer's. It was the Xer's who were perceived by their principals as having the greatest leadership potential. While the Xer generation comprises approximately 32% of the teaching population they accounted for 57.5% of the identified teacher leaders surveyed for this study. The place of youth in future leadership may turn out to be highly significant. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2005), around 18% of all teachers are under the age of 30 (Generation Y). In selecting teachers who have leadership ability and potential, the younger Generation Y teachers comprised 17.4% of the study population. This percentage of teachers in Generation Y will continue to grow as the Baby Boomers retire and Generation Y steps forward. The retirement of Baby Boomers has a significant implication for the work place. Salkowitz (2008) identifies this factor clearly when he states:

"The Baby Boom generation (1946-1962) over 78 million strong in the United States, is nearing retirement age, potentially leaving a yawning gap in skills, leadership, knowledge, and experience. Members of the smaller cohort, Generation X (1963-1980, when birthrates were much lower), usually described as cynical, independent, and distrustful, are entering the stage of their careers where they become candidates for management and leadership positions." (p. 139)

The retirement of the Baby Boomers, and the small overall size of Generation X, means that in another decade Generation Y will become the dominate group in the teacher workforce. The unanswered question that needs to be monitored is, will this new wave of Generation Y mature and become the new wave of leaders for public education? They will have the numbers to dominate, will they have the will? Behrstock and Clifford (2009) felt that the new, young, Generation Y teachers are ready and willing to assume leadership roles. However, the more seasoned teachers of Generation X and Baby Boomers want this new generation to prove themselves first. Richardson (2008) believes that Generation Y teachers will not hesitate to assume leadership in education and become the next generation of principals. After only three or four years in teaching they will feel they are ready to move forward.

There was no statistically significant difference between the way Xer's and Boomer's viewed the stress and time demands of the principalship as a deterrent to seeking the job. It could have been expected that Xer's, with their passion for spending time away from work and with

family, would have perceived time as a much greater deterrent than the Boomer's. This is an area that should be studied further. It could be speculated that individuals who go into teaching, regardless of generation, are unique from the general population and therefore generalizations about the total population of a generation group may not apply. Since this survey involved Baby Boomers who are nearing the end of their career, the Baby Boomers surveyed may not represent their generational group. Currently, most school leaders are probably from the Baby Boomer generation. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2008), the average age for school principals in Arkansas is 49. According to Techniques: Connecting Education and Careers (2000), the pre-retirement Boomer population of teachers makes up about 42% of the teacher workforce. The study may have yielded different results if Baby Boomers at age 35 could have been compared to Xer's" at the same age. Unfortunately this type of longitudinal study is not possible.

The statistically significant difference between the Yer's and the Boomers/Xer's regarding the perception that the principals job is harder today than it was in the past may lead to two possible conclusions. The younger Yer generation may not be restricted or inhibited by prior knowledge about how the principalship has changed in recent years. This lack of prior knowledge may be a positive factor in motivating the Yer's to seek a principals position in the future.

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