

The Aspirations and Expectations of the New Generation of Teachers

It's a well known fact that we are an ageing population. A report by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) found that the late 40s is now the average age for teachers (MCEETYA 2004, p. 10). As these teachers leave the profession a new generation of young teachers is entering the profession. In Victoria this amounts to over 3500 teachers annually, a cohort large enough to make a significant impact on the profession over the next few years. Contrary to some views portrayed in the media that these teachers are unlikely to embrace teaching as a career, new teachers are choosing teaching because they want to work with and help young people and many do want to stay in teaching, seeing this as a long-term career.

However, research has identified that 'dealing with these demographic changes and specifically recruiting, retaining and managing Generation Y has emerged as one of the biggest issues facing employers today' (McCrindle 2006, p. 2).

This discussion starter, prepared by Emma Richardson, looks at some of the research on the next generation of teachers, or 'Gen Y' as they are popularly known, and what it has to say about their potential to build on the quality of our profession. Emma is a fifth-year teacher at Carrum Downs Secondary College, seconded to the Institute in 2006. She is currently on family leave and completing her Master of Education at Monash University.

A different world

The next generation of teachers has been born into a prolonged period of sustained economic growth and therefore has a sense of confidence about their economic future. They are growing up, both economically and socially, in a different world from that of previous generations and this influences their attitudes to work and lifestyle choices. Research indicates that one future Gen Y embraces is about mobility, adaptability and change, which sets them apart from their parents' view of a job for life (Saulwick and Muller 2006, pp. 5–8).

Low unemployment also supports this view of work with Wyn asserting that 'young people do not live to work – rather they work to live' (Wyn, J 2004b, p. 19). What this means is that they value a sense of community, demonstrate strong loyalty to friends and many are disillusioned with materialism. In a work environment this generation of teachers looks for trusted guidance through real life models and mentors (Wyn, J 2004b, pp. 19–20).

Media often portray Gen Y as 'fickle, self focused and transient' (McCrinkle 2006, p. 10), which would lead us to believe that those who enter the teaching profession are more demanding and calculating in their working lives, offering themselves to the highest bidder and changing schools, or even professions, for the best deal.

Research into motivation to teach undertaken by Manuel and Hughes over three years provides a different view. They have found that this generation of teachers wants to make a difference, to help people and to work with young people. They suggest that there is some weight to the notion of teaching as a 'calling' for Gen Y and that many enter the profession for humanistic reasons. 'For a group of participants with the average age of 21 years, such ideals, idealism, forward thinking and optimism are well worth celebrating. It is also a reflection on the effectiveness of their own educational experience, so that many identified the transformative power of education and wished to become part of that through teaching' (Manuel and Hughes 2006, p. 20).

Watt, Richardson and Tysvaer looked at post-graduate teacher education students and identified three 'types' of beginning teachers, two of which were characterised by low scores on 'planned persistence', and less likely to want to teach their whole career. Research by Johnson et al into the Next Generation for Teachers in the U.S. found that '... teachers' age is one of the most reliable predictors of departure from one's job, with a u-shaped distribution in which younger and older teachers are more likely to leave' (Johnson, SM 2005, p. 8).

Keeping new teachers in the profession

The issue for the profession and for schools is how we retain new teachers and prevent the drift out of teaching during their first few years.

There is a significant amount of research that underscores the importance of effective mentoring and induction of new teachers in terms of improving professional practice and addressing high attrition rates. Johnson and the team of researchers investigating the next generation of teachers have ascertained that the way a teacher is employed and matched to the working environment is directly related to how they feel about the job and whether the teacher stays in the profession (Johnson, SM 2005, pp. 28–29). Boyer, Maney, Kamler and Comber have researched the effect of mentoring on teachers of English in Victoria and they identify that the benefits of this relationship are not just limited to that of the young teacher but the experience can also be highly positive for the mentor. This is clearly one solution to the issue of transience raised by McCrinkle and the researchers suggest that 'given the increasing average age of the teaching workforce, finding ways to rejuvenate the profession, whilst inducting and supporting early career teachers is of great importance' (Boyer et al 2004, p. 141).

Similarly, in a research study on the next generation of teachers in the US, differences in the learning styles of new and older generation teachers were identified. Gen Y teachers are more likely to be interested in '... collaboration, a preference that seems at odds with that of the teachers ... studied in 1963–64, who put a premium on privacy and autonomy' (Johnson, SM 2004, p. 73).

What do you think?

Is the new generation of teachers markedly different in their attitudes and views on work from the generations of teachers who have come before?

How do schools draw on the knowledge and skills of the new generation of teachers and support them in their practice so that they stay in teaching?

What research or experiences can you share that support or challenge the assertions that:

- Gen Y embrace mobility, adaptability and change and/or are fickle, self focused and transient?
- New teachers look for guidance through mentors and role models and are more collegial and collaborative in their approach to learning?

We are interested to hear from teachers and researchers who have investigated the issues raised in this discussion starter and have a view to express. Click on 'Respond here' on the webpage to complete the online form and submit your response.

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