

Excavating the Millennial Teacher Mine

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The Millennials, born from 1980 to 2000, have begun entering the profession, and many will not stay longer than 5 years. They have a unique set of talents, skills, and work ethic, unlike those from previous generations. They are extremely eager to be successful. If strong supportive programs of mentoring, induction, career ladders, and ongoing staff development are provided, they can develop into outstanding educators, and the odds are good that they will stay in the profession.

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Adrienne Cuff (a pseudonym) was student body president in her senior year of college, volunteered time in the community, was actively involved in the college's music program, and was in the social hub of college life. She had several teaching offers and accepted the position where she believed she would have the most opportunities to make substantive contributions. Adrienne just completed her first year of teaching in a rural high school in a mid-Atlantic state, where she taught English, for which she was trained, and advised for the school newspaper, in which she had no experience. Micah Morgan (a pseudonym) originally wanted to be a professional gamer; however, his love of eating and political science won out, so he opted to become a teacher. The leaders of one quasi-urban district were so impressed by him that they made a part-time position full-time in order to entice him to work for them. This translated into him spending his first semester teaching in a prestigious school and his second semester teaching in a school that had a high teacher turnover rate. Initially, Adrienne stated that she would stay in teaching for only 5 years, then move on to something else, whereas Micah thought that teaching would be his lifelong vocation. By the end of their first year, Adrienne felt that she might stay in teaching as a career, and Micah said that if he had to stay in the second school he would leave teaching.

On the surface, these newly minted teachers appear to be representative of their predecessors, but are they? How are they different from the previous generations of GenXer and Baby Boomer educators? Who is this new generation of teachers called the Millennials? What do they need in order to grow into, learn about, and stay in the profession?

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Generational Characteristics Exhumed

The characteristics a generation acquires are not a conscious choice. A generation breaks with the outlook and fashions of the young adult generation, rectifies the decadences and overindulgences of the midlife generation, and takes on the social role that the elder generation is leaving. "Millennials will rebel against GenX styles and attitudes, correct for Boomer excesses and fill the role vacated by the GIs" (Howe & Strauss, 2007, p. 22). This generation is not interested in reliving olden times but in updating the values and retooling them to meet the current beliefs.

Each generation has distinctive qualities that are unique to them because of major events and inventions that occurred during their formative years. Some of the major influences on the Millennials include Oklahoma City, Columbine, 9/11, Katrina, Afghanistan, Iraq, the advent of iPods, and the dominant presence of home computers. In their lifetime, there has been only one Germany, professional athletes have always participated in the Olympics, and reality television has been a part of the entertainment landscape.

Precious Cargo Unearthed

Since their birth, from approximately 1980 to 2000, the over 90 million Millennials have been highly protected and fussed over. This is the "Baby on Board" generation who have worn helmets and knee and arm pads, been given awards and recognition just for participating in school and activities, and been overscheduled in a myriad of pursuits.

Unlike GenXers, who were known as latch-key children and whose parents had the highest divorce rate this country had seen, the Millennials are surrounded more by extended family and have parents who have stayed married. Their parents and siblings tend to be their best friends, and, on average, they have 200 cyberfriends.

One out of five Millennials has a parent who is an immigrant. They believe in a global society and actively seek ways to make a substantive difference. Millennials believe in the good of the group and have a high rate of volunteerism and community service.

This generation does not know a world without numerous forms of available technology. They process information in nonlinear and visual ways and are excellent multitaskers. Communication is done extensively through texting, instant messaging, and e-mailing. According to Tresser (2007), they spend about 16 hours a week on the Internet, 80% regularly read blogs, and 40% create blogs. Although their technological communication may be quite sophisticated, their one-on-one in-person style may be weak.

To the Millennials, average means failure. They value and strive for high grades. To them, a poor grade, which often means a B or lower, equates to a less-than-adequate future. Getting into a quality college is critically important because they

believe that this will help ensure a bright future for them. They are serious long-range planners; having a 5- to 10-year plan is the norm. They tend to move back home after college so they can more quickly pay off their college debts and make a solid first choice of a job.

Parents of the Millennials are often referred to as helicopters, from the Boomer generation, or stealths, from the GenXer generation, because they have a tendency to hover over their children, control their choices and activities, make decisions and do battle for them, and/or even attend job interviews with them. Because of this, Millennials may lack experience with decision making, and their expectations about the world of work may be unrealistic. They may feel disenchanting if they find themselves in a professional situation that is not ideal and may abruptly quit. They are comfortable with and respect authority as well as being rule followers who believe that everyone should live by and follow the same regulations.

Marbled Learning Layers Explored

The Millennials are lifelong learners and think it is the gold standard to be smart. They are excellent at producing, in a literal way, what is asked of them yet need the time, support, guidance, materials, and encouragement to dig deeply, be creative, and take concepts to a figurative level. If they believe they and their ideas are respected, they will continue to be inspired to discover what lies in the depths of the knowledge vaults. To help them do this, they need to see the whole picture and how it relates to real life, with a timeline, clear goals, and measurable objectives of success laid out. Once this is done, chunk the tasks, give them the latitude to produce the work in a way that makes sense to them, and encourage them to take risks and be creative. Part of what motivates them is working with others and being responsible to a group. Simultaneously, praise their work in a timely manner and provide positive supervision and direction as they do not respond well to direct criticism (Howe & Strauss, 2007; "Millennials Need," 2008; Richardson, 2008).

Because they are excellent multitaskers, however, they may have a tendency to take on too much at a time and burn out. "What demoralizes them is not pressure per se, but rather situations in which their best effort under pressure does not ensure success" (Howe & Strauss, 2007, p. 144).

Teaching Profession Tapped and Cultivated

Currently, the most and least experienced educators are leaving the profession, whereas almost one third leave after their first 3 years and close to 50% leave after their 5th year (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003; Tresser, 2007). Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) stated that "the problem does not lie in the number of teachers available; we produce

many more qualified teachers than we hire. The hard part is keeping the teachers we prepare." Millennials thrive on contact and having quality time with people as well as having successful experiences. They tend to be optimistic and want to make valuable contributions to their students and the profession. What are some things that can be done to encourage and keep these young, vibrant teachers in the profession?

- *Induction program:* This should be comprehensive over at least a 3-year period and include having a grade- or content-specific mentor at the new teacher's school; observing peers' classes, being observed by mentors and one or two peers, and having follow-up conferences shortly afterward; having time to meet and plan with mentors, other new teachers, and/or additional professionals as appropriate; and having the time and resources to do individual planning and to obtain suitable materials.
- *Staff development:* Attending ongoing staff development sessions is vitally important to the success of the new teacher. It should include topics such as the standards and expectations of teaching, goals and vision of the school and district, interpreting and effectively using data, classroom management, how to motivate students, students at risk, parent conferences, the community, available resources for both personal and professional lives, and specific pedagogy for a grade level and/or content.
- *First-year assignment:* Two of the major reasons teachers leave the profession early on in their career are a sense of isolation and difficult work assignments. A common scenario is that new teachers are the rovers and have no specific classroom or place that is specifically theirs. They are often assigned the most demanding classes, which might frazzle even the most seasoned teachers. If at all possible, assign the new teachers one classroom for the year. When they are more experienced, then they can be part of the roving group. Assign them a group of students who are perceived as average, not those who are behaviorally challenged and/or academically superior. If they must be assigned to one of these groups, have them team teach with an experienced teacher.
- *Technology:* Utilizing technology is second nature to the Millennials. They think in terms of visuals, sound bites, film clips, and online communication. Straight lecture is an ineffective way for them to learn, so it stands to reason they will not use it with their Millennial students. Regular access to technology such as computers and smart boards will help them teach in a way that makes sense to them and to their students.
- *Career ladder:* Provide a career and pay ladder. This generation is highly goal oriented, so they need to know what other jobs in the profession could be available and how they can move up the career and pay ladder. This could prove to be a strong incentive for them to stay in education and develop their skills.
- *Principal and administrative support:* This generation wants personal contact with and support from the principal and the administration. Because they highly respect those who are older and more experienced, the Millennials are genuinely interested in what the administration has to say. They want the administration to visit them in the classroom, although they do not want to feel like they have to put on a show. They need timely and supportive feedback. They would like to go into the administrator's office, chat, and have a personal connection with them. This will help the Millennials feel more a part of the school and its culture.

- **Balance:** Although members of this group have been overscheduled their entire lives and are excellent multitaskers, having balance is critically important to them. They need to make certain they have time for a personal life, which includes marriage, family, and pursuing hobbies and interests. Sharing and practicing personal and professional time management are vitally important so that this generation stays in teaching.

Teacher Mine Excavated

This exciting generation of teachers is now entering the classroom, rich with knowledge, eagerness, and enthusiasm in their veins. They see the classroom as an integral part of a global community and want to make meaningful contributions to society and guide their students to do the same. They are our future. If we want to retain, support, and nurture this new generation of teachers, it cannot be business as usual. Birkeland and Johnson (2002) stated, "When a faculty, department or teaching team deliberately creates paths and structures for exchanging information, sharing, views, offering aid and developing new ideas, new teachers are more likely to find success" (p. 21). It is up to the current group of educators to guide, support, respect, and listen to the Millennials so that they can successfully tap into and unearth their talents, which in turn will enrich their students during a full career.

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