The Perceived Work Ethic of K-12 Teachers by Generational Status: Generation X vs. Baby Boom Generation

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ABSTRACT

This was an investigation of the work ethic of K-12 educators from Generation X and Baby Boomer generations. Teachers of the baby boom generation were born between 1946 and 1964, and many are beginning to retire. There is an impending teacher shortage due to the large numbers of this group retiring or leaving the profession. School administrators and public school human resource specialists are beginning to focus on strategies to replace this experienced workforce. Administrators need to know if this group has different work ethic than later groups of teachers. In this study, Generation X teachers scored higher on the subscales of Easy Going, Dependable, and Committed. While Baby Boomers and Generation X teacher about the same on Dependable, Baby Boomers are more “engaged”. Though these differences in the subscales were not significant, The overall MANOVA for the comparison of work ethic as measured by the Occupational Work Ethic Inventory was significant at the p<.05 level. Many older teachers complain about the newer younger generation of teachers and their so-called “lack of a work ethic”. Unfortunately, there were not enough data to study teachers from the latest, millennial generation however; this study points to data that indicate there is more to this difference in perception that originally thought that could affect hiring and training of new generations of teachers.

Keywords: Baby Boom, Education, Generation X, Generational Status, Teachers, Work Ethic

INTRODUCTION

This study is an investigation of the work ethic of K-12 educators from Generation X and Baby Boom generations. Although much has been written about the baby boom generation, there have been few studies that investigated the work ethic of teachers born between 1946 and 1964 (Gribbin, 2003; Keller, 2002; Petty 2009; Petty 2010; Petty & Brewer, 2008).

Additionally, there exists a teacher shortage in many parts of the United States due to the large numbers of this group retiring or leaving the profession (Rappaport, Bancroft, & Okum, 2003). The first of this generation reached retirement age in 2008 although many have not retired due to their personal financial situation. School administrators and public school human resource specialists are beginning to focus on strategies to replace this experienced workforce (Johnston & Packer 1987; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2007).

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New teacher training in career and technical education should focus on generational differences, their influences, and the impact on the workplace. Our beliefs and work ethic that we have as adults are developed in our youth. It would be impossible to describe a generation without comparing it to the generations that preceded and followed it. A study of generational differences would not be complete without a narrative of whom these groups are and where they came from or hope to go (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Therefore, a general overview of each generation’s prominent influences is provided here to aid understanding.

In an effort to examine salient differences between these two generations, the Occupational Work Ethic Inventory (OWEI) designed by Dr. Gregory Petty (1991) was used to survey the two groups and make comparisons. It is hoped that any differences or similarities will offer insight into instructional strategies that will influence the K – 12 teacher educator or school administrator.

BACKGROUND

Some researchers (Zemke et al., 2000) suggest that understanding generational differences is critical to creating harmony, mutual respect, and joint effort in the workplace. Otherwise there will be suspicion, mistrust and isolation that will work against the organization and not for it. A workplace must consist of the tools used to get the job done and of the people who complete those jobs. Our upbringings and histories influence the way we work and relate to others.

Howe and Strauss (2000) suggested investigating three common generational attributes “(1) perceived membership in a common generation; (2) common beliefs and behaviors; and (3) a common location in history” (p. 41). They claimed that there was not a solid line that divided one generation from the next, and even within generations there were distinct cohorts that further divided the generation into smaller, more distinct groups. “There are no hard stops or road signs indicating when one generation ends and the next begins.... but the specific affections of a generation’s formative years do bind them together in exclusive ways” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 3).

Values development, so important to one’s work ethic, is significant when categorizing people by generations. Each decade is unique and those who grow up in a particular decade develop values that are different from those who grow up during other decades (Hicks & Hicks, 1999; Yeung & Fung, 2012). Children in their values development stages are influenced more by events and view events differently from adults who had the ability to filter the event through their established value system (Hicks & Hicks). The experiences and value development of younger generations are fundamentally different from those of older generations (Massey et al, 2008; Wallace, 2001). Hicks and Hicks divided people by generation by exploring the historical context of each decade and categorized by comparing the values similarities within decades.

In the 1950s America experienced both a population boom and economic growth, almost simultaneously. As a result, automobile and home sales flourished. The National Highway Act promoted increased travel to national parks. Church attendance grew, and women voluntarily returned to housekeeping and child rearing. Televisions were commonplace and significantly influenced the children of the 1950s. Society focused on the children. The popularity of suburbs grew quickly, and television became the single greatest influencing factor on the value development of children (Hicks & Hicks, 1999).

The 1960s, still in recent memory for many was a turbulent decade that gave rise to civil rights laws, feminism, and contraceptives. Young people from this decade questioned the values of their parents and of the government. Major accomplishments of this decade included medical advances, the lunar landing, and a rise in attendance at institutions of higher education (marking the first time children were more educated than their parents). Martin Luther
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