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Gen Z Teachers

Dreams and Challenges

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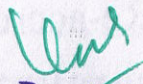
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Part I
Introduction to Gen Z



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Gen Z Learners: Grooming through Soft-skilled Classroom Management

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Introduction

Appalling to read the situation today that the number of candidates opting for the teaching profession is dwindling and the aspirants of the teaching profession feel threatened while perusing the newspapers daily. The student community equipped with social media and electronic devices turns into incorrigible citizens and their behavior in the classrooms becomes uncontrollable as the teacher remains helpless. The question raised among the public today is, whether quality education rests only at the level of obtaining good marks and being awarded certificates or it includes the inculcation of life skills, soft skills, and values along with academic empowerment. Therefore, if we aim at the formation of an integrated personality in the institution, then the classroom

transaction is to be seriously looked into; here comes a series of questions: where do we place the role of a teacher in making a person in the classroom? What are the ingredients of classroom management? Is there anything else other than the content, methodology, and instructional materials? This article visualizes a discussion on the need for exploiting the soft skills to be effectively utilized by the teacher, both to soften the attitude of students and as well as inculcating a transforming education.

Decoding Generations

The Center for Generational Kinetics (2023) says, the people of the universe are classified under various types of generations, which are mainly grounded on three major trends, profiling the characteristics of each specific generation; parenting, technology, and economics those trends. To cite an example, the trend of parenting includes the thoughts of parents who say, 'We want it to be easier for our kids than it was for us', which means a philosophy that makes the needs of the children the due right and entitlement in their lives; this is common among the members of millennials. Similarly, the impact of technology, economic status, and behavior patterns on lifestyles.

it is very difficult to demarcate the generations; there is a common question about the different lengths of generations as well as the variations in the birth years of generations among different sources. Persis C. Rickes (2016) would rightly respond saying, 'While it is obvious that generational cohorts share values and traits given some of their common social and cultural experiences, the dividing dates between cohorts are not rigid and are more for referential convenience'. No generation holds a permanent sway rather the next upcoming group supersedes the previous with another behavior and thought pattern. Researchers do look for patterns or consistency in behaviors and viewpoints of members of each generation so that the cohort is well-defined. Sometimes, one particular and common event may become the point of division to define a generation such as the 9/11 event in the USA. Thus, it is possible to have differences in the classification or definition of generations.

The classification of generation years are as follows: 1901-1924, 1925-1945, 1946-1964, 1965-1979, 1980-1994, 1995-2012, and 2013-2025, and those were born during those intervals are named The Greatest Generation, The Silent Generation, The Baby Boomer Generation, Generation X,

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Millennials, Generation Z and Generation Alpha respectively. The Greatest Generation, also known as the G.I. Generation (1901–1924), is the oldest among the existing cohorts. They are the characteristics of ‘civically minded, optimistic, and team-focused; this achievement-oriented generation was responsible for suburbia and the moon landing’ (Ricketts, 2016). The members of the Silent Generation (1925–1945) ‘adopted a don’t-rock-the boat attitude, played by the rules, and were firmly committed not only to their careers but also to their families and friends. Many members devoted their entire work to a single company’ (Ricketts, 2016).

In contrast to the low-key players of Silent Generations, The Baby Boom Generation (1946–1964) exploded on the scene and as idealistic optimists, Boomers were confident in themselves and became voices for equal opportunities and rights, questioning authority and the relevance of social structures, and showed themselves as ‘risk takers’ (Dutta & Jain, 2016). Gen X (1965–1979) which emerged in the early 1960s, was a generation pegged as cynical and disconnected by the media. As adults, they were the doers and entrepreneurial free agents who learned to trust their instincts, leading to being highly educated (Dutta & Jain, 2016). Millennials or Gen Y

(1980-1994) ‘born to Boomer and Gen X parents’ who are nicknamed ‘helicopter parents’, were the wanted and nurtured children. The children, known as ‘Black Hawks’ for being ‘most aggressive’ are the first true natives of the Information Age and extremely techno-savvy (Ricketts, 2016). The Alpha generation (2013-2025) are known as complete digital natives and spend hours and hours in front of screens.

Psycho-Social Milieus of Gen Z Learners

Currently, five generations are active in society and the Gen Z also called i Gen and Centennials is the major group among them. The Gen Z members undergo an over-protective and pampered attitude under the guidance of Gen X parents and teachers. This new group of citizens is making big waves in all fields including parenting, education, employment, entrepreneurship, sales, marketing, politics, religion, and more. Firstly, Gen Z students are digitally immersed and technology is the gateway for them to know life. Gen Z expects to be connected to the world at any cost and able to access information at any time. This is reflected in education too; they seek autonomy and want to decide by themselves and expect feedback immediately (UMass Global, 2019). Jason Dorsey, President of The Center for Generational Kinetics and Gen Z

expert, says, “95% of Gen Z own a smartphone and over half of the generation use it more than five hours per day. This is their lifeline, and social media is their means to connect and learn about what they like and want. The ‘stars’ of this generation are not those seen on TV or at a big-time concert hall, they’re the people who Gen Z follow every day on their smartphone or tablet” (Salfino, 2018).

Secondly, Gen Z is the most diverse among all the other generations, consisting of racial or ethnic minorities; they’re pursuing college studies, higher than previous generations. This generation also believes that diversity is good for society and is willing to stand with those who speak out against inequality (UMass Global, 2019). Thirdly, Gen Z learners suffer higher rates of depression and anxiety. According to the Pew Research Center, in a gap of ten years, from 2007 to 2017, the total number of teenagers experiencing depression increased by 59 percent. The possible contributing factors include academic pressure, perfectionism, and a lack of adequate sleep (Davis & Geiger 2019, UMass Global).

Ernst and Young (2016) found from their study that Gen Z members were people of respect for others, expecting equal treatment and opportunities for learning, entrepreneurial and

self-sufficient, tenacious, creative, goal-oriented, multitasking, pragmatic, and wanted to enhance themselves with skills in the context of digital development. To put it succinctly, ‘Gen Z values interconnection, information, and interaction’ (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). They feel the need to connect emotionally to what they are doing and want to make a difference where they are; if not allowed, they are quick to move to another space to make an impact (Rampton, 2017 & Moore, 2019). Further, it is to be noted, that Gen Z learners have been growing in an environment of ‘exponential advances in technology, economic volatility and growth, ever-present public violence, and social justice movements’ (Seemiller & Grace, 2017; Moore, 2019). The generation is largely in favor of LGBT rights, gender equality, and access to abortion.

Influences and Consequences

Adobe (2016) emphasized the following: 1. Gen Z students look at technology and creativity as the important and intersecting aspects of their identities. 2. Gen Z students are excited but nervous about their futures. They do not feel fully prepared for the “real world”. 3. Gen Z members learn best by doing and creating, and students and teachers alike want more focus on creativity. 4. Creativity will play a critical role in the

future workforce. 5. Technology will set Gen Z apart in the future workforce. (Adobe, 2016; Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). Gen Z has been influenced by many immediate factors such as the economy, technology, society, and parenting (Sladek & Grabinger, 2022). Among them, the economy is highly stimulated by the unstable political system around the world plays a crucial role. After the advent of LPG, the corporate character is very much criticized and the Z learners have changed their focus on the social realities; they are more interested in social problems and careers helping others than their counterparts who graduated before them. A study sponsored by the United Nations Foundation found that about seven out of eight children, ages eight to 19, give money to charitable organizations (Sladek & Grabinger, 2022).

Due to the rapid growth of technology, the information flow is swift and hence a world of data is at their fingertips, without wasting much of their time on memorizing but on analysis and creation of new knowledge. Needless to say, positively this offers the opening to be innovative, creative, and productive. Let us also be aware that there are unique learning habits created among Z learners such as less rote memory but fastening with Google, becoming more visual learners, and

multi-tasking persons while being connected to the internet. On the other hand, the onset of online information robs the digital natives of their originality but puts them satisfied with available info, without checking the credibility of the content; they are ignorant of the online hazards and the restrictions of intellectual property.

Parents on their part create or thrust the children into competitive environments by setting high expectations, making them struggle to earn a good name and fame for the sake of the parents; this augments the stress level and separates them from being bookworms. A survey revealed that 'over 70% of Gen Z has participated in a team activity where they had to compete for first place and over 54% have competed for first place as an individual' (Sladek & Grabinger, 2022).

Human society swirls around various forces and the Z learners no more today define themselves under the labels of gender, race, religion and sexual orientation rather in the context of the global village due to technology, search for individual recognition due to the prevailing diversity. With the inability to assess the SWOT, they look for popular celebrities in various fields to define themselves, forgetting the darker sides of those

celebrities but presuming them to be their dream models. This is the killing of the uniqueness of the individual.

Approaches and Avoidances of a Teacher

Therefore, to have a fruitful teaching-learning process, the teachers have to approach Gen Z learners, who tend to be digitally immersed, incredibly diverse, and prone to anxiety and depression through various approaches. Remember, today's teachers may belong to Gen X, Y, and Z who are partly or fully literate in ICT; accordingly, the following are to be noted:

- i. *Need to Build a Digital Classroom:* The teacher has to constantly update his pedagogy, making it more student-centric than teacher-oriented; which means, the modern trends have to be absorbed in the transaction of content, inviting the learners, particularly the Z group in the classroom.
- ii. *Ensure the Structure and Feedback:* While Gen Z learners insist on the freedom to work, they must be informed of the expectations. Also, it must be communicated, what is to be achieved. They work more efficiently when they have a goal to work toward.

- iii. *Engage and be Interactive:* The optimum use of educational software, visuals, and tools makes the job easier and keeps Gen Z students engaged. Though we have sufficient learning management systems, the learners could be kept busy through interactive presentations and educational games (UMass Global, 2019). The best way to be effective in the process of teaching will be the policy of adapting or perishing; it invites the faculty to employ yet another strategy of the use of soft skills to enhance the outcome in the classroom.

Spearhead the Usage of Soft Skills

Soft skills (SS), known also as social skills, interpersonal skills, and emotional skills, occupy a pivotal role in creating an effective teacher. A teacher becomes efficient in the classroom when he or she can academically prepare the learners so that the latter can meritoriously end up at the terminal examinations whereas the former becomes effective only when she or he succeeds in crafting the learner academically sound, socially credible, and physically fit to travel in the society along with fellow human beings. To put it in three words, the learner must end up being competent, committed, and compassionate in his

or her workplace. This is to be aimed at the teachers in the four-walled classrooms through the application of soft skills. The major components of soft skills include communicative, psychological, and social; these dimensions are identified, strengthened, and sustained in a person by practicing the soft skills. No doubt, the teacher has every opportunity to consciously practice soft skills, especially in the process of classroom management.

Major SS for Classroom Management and its Importance

Having seen the characteristics of Gen Z learners, the teachers have to adapt themselves to the expectations of the learners as well as the outcomes stipulated. Apart from the content and pedagogies prescribed, the teachers based on the three components of soft skills mentioned above, have to essentially follow or practice some major soft skills such as communication that includes LSRW, interpersonal relationship, self-esteem, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, team building, and decision-making.

Management of the classroom solely depends upon the skill of communication; similarly better communication leads to better academic outcomes. The higher rate of dropouts is partly attributed to poor classroom communication and better

communication builds up the positive relationship between teacher and students which consequently create a conducive environment for meaningful learning-teaching (rise vision, 2021). Positive communication closes the gap between the privileged and disadvantaged and builds good behavior and attitude. In this communication, the dimensions of active listening, understanding, critically evaluating, and decision-making are involved. Before it is spoken, sound reading has to precede the task of noting down the relevant content.

Secondly, the factor of interpersonal relationships occupies a significant role in the management of the classroom. Gen Z are the most diverse generation, based on racial and ethnic minorities, religion, sex, and other political and economic foundations (UMass Global, 2019). They do welcome diversity as a good element in the classroom; there will be more alternative viewpoints and perspectives. The teachers will have to understand the culture, thought patterns, and goals of learners and recognize the biases if any in both teachers and learners. A well-conceived behavior and communication styles will be formed; a different worldview and language will adorn the teacher-personality by interacting with young minds. The learners tend to feel accepted and a congenial atmosphere is

created for a better transaction of content, only when the teacher relates with ease of mind, is simple in appearance, quick in understanding the needs, vibrates with dreams of youth, remains tech-savvy and interacts in the classroom with updated knowledge.

In the progression of maintaining a deeper interpersonal relationship with learners, the teacher is expected to build and sustain due self-esteem so that he or she remains a leader in the classroom. The right self-assessment and continuous review enable a person to preserve an effective teacher; remember, the efficient teacher aims at keeping you on the worldly pedestal with high-scoring marks whereas the effective teacher strives to prepare you for a meaningful and sustainable life with values. This self-esteem starts with, as Greek Socrates says, 'Know thyself' (Alex, 2019). Beginning with SOFT (Successes, Opportunities, Failures, Threats) among industrial companies, Albert Humphrey (1960), a management consultant who was part of the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), slowly coined the acronym SWOT, meaning the four pillars of discovering oneself through the elements of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in one's life (The Decision Lab, 2023). Thus, knowing oneself puts you on a

realistic map, allowing you to recognize your level of self-confidence, control of emotions, decision-making, interpersonal relationship, and happiness (Alex, 2019).

Yet another soft skill for the teachers will be a high volume of emotional intelligence which combines the ability to balance emotions and intelligence. Emotions are part of our human nature which externally appear, though abruptly in a splash of seconds, yet we can become aware of our positive and negative emotions, impacting our immediate neighbors and me. Our continual endeavor to identify and name the origins of those negative and positive emotions will hundred-fold augment our personality. A new dimension of interpersonal relationships will bloom, as we begin to impose restrictions on negative and unfold positive emotions (Reddy, 2017).

Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage the self and the neighbor; the four aspects will be self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Shortly, it is put into two major competence domains namely, personal competence, including the first two, and social competence, counting the last two aspects. The teacher who effectively practices emotional intelligence will have a better outcome for his or her learners. The degree of understanding of

one's own emotions and consequently the level of managing oneself leads to a softer handling of neighbors effectively by emphasizing their emotions and expectations. The management of Z learners exactly prerequisites this approach whereby the teacher can read and vibrate with the life struggles and failures of the learner and his or her family in the framework of socio-politico-economic-religious perspectives. After all, the learners are growing beings and cannot be the complete product of the institutions within a day, month, or year; need to be awarded sufficient time and space. Whereas, the teacher being attributed with more life cum academic experiences and sufficiently aware of the changing worldview will be able to navigate the learners towards the pre-fixed vision and mission of the institution, leading to being a fruitful citizen in the society.

A higher order of proficiency in problem-solving among the teachers will amply improve classroom management. A problem that obstructs our way towards achieving our goal may have umpteen solutions but choosing the right one as the strategy is more essential so that it removes the obstruction and allow us to march ahead toward our goal. Therefore, problem-solving involves designing the right strategy and optimizing its effect of it with minimum resources (Singh, 2011). For a

teacher, problem-solving becomes more important as he/ she has to encounter a variety of new situations; in fact, the action research will bring in more classroom problems for which problem-solving skills be of immense use. The methods of brainstorming, trial and error, abstraction, etc., will come in handy to the teacher. The best way out will be, for the teacher must have clarity about the problem, followed by the analysis of reasons and listing out the alternatives. Lastly, one strategy may be employed in consultation with colleagues. Thus, the skill of problem-solving brings the team together and finds a solution successfully.

In continuation with the above, team building is viewed as yet another skill needed for a classroom teacher, as the learners are of diverse natures and backgrounds and hence bound to have varied interests and aspirations, leading to divisions and confrontations. It is to be also noted that the teacher serves as the leader of the group and consequently the skill of teambuilding is expected of him /her. The teacher has to balance self-interest and group interest so that the goal is smoothly reached (Singh, 2011). Conflict management in the group and individual recognition is both to be paid attention to in the classroom's activities, ensuring the qualities of listening,

respecting others, participation, and sharing among all the learners.

Finally, the skill of decision-making plays a vital role in the person of the teacher while he or she leads the learners in the classroom; Incessant observation in the classroom by the teacher will invite him or her to plunge into new and critical initiatives, which undoubtedly require the skill of decision-making. This skill will to a certain extent align with the skill of problem skill, where the problem is to be ascertained; the alternatives are to be arrayed, not with emotions but in a rational way so that an intelligent solution is ticked off (Reddy, 2017). The teacher then needs to be a man or woman of courage, critical ability, and experience to unite the learners in one voice and mind for a meaningful teaching-learning process.

Preparing Gen X, Y, and Z Teachers: How?

Interestingly, the Z Gen learners are mostly guided by the teachers of Gen X, Y, and Z who are not contemporaries to the learners. Therefore, the task of training the teachers of the above three generations becomes imperative, if we want to have a quality impact in the grooming of learners in the classrooms. How do we go about it? A well-planned

orientation has to be designed to kindle the teachers of X, Y, and Z Gen, in such a way that the latter can possess 'some qualities of a good teacher including skills in communication, listening, collaboration, adaptability, empathy, and patience' (UMass Global, 2019). They also are to be trained in learner-centric pedagogies, classroom engagement through activities, real-world teaching, exchange of best practices, and introducing a lifelong love of learning among the learners.

Parents and Peers in Classroom Management

Is there a role for the parents and peers in the process of classroom management? One may wonder, how is it possible to have parents in the classroom during academic study? Yes, it is possible; innovative thinking will surely say, why not exploit the human resources of the old citizens whose sons and daughters are studying in our institutions? They will certainly set the trend of strong feeding of values and knowledge with the setting of robust structure among the learners, for which the latter cannot but accept the presence of the former. The parents must be given the freedom to mingle with learners to be friends, philosophers, facilitators, and knowledge navigators. Let them involve in any academic cum non-academic activity, only to suffuse a sense of responsibility among the learners.

The rightly-motivated peer group too can do wonders in containing the restlessness of the non-oriented and distracted students through various group projects on campus.

Conclusion

Soft skills are the need of the hour; not only for a businessman or woman but also for all who deal with any growing community. The Gen Z community is ever-growing and swimming across various currents and challenges of the 21st century through technology, knowledge explosion, and information availability. This supposes the teachers in the classroom arm themselves with modern concepts of innovations and use of IT in the classroom, become aware of characteristics of Gen Z learners, and exploit the soft skills for a sustainable growth and development of the learners. Needless to say, learners of all generations promise to renovate and rejuvenate themselves by entering through the gates of soft skills to respect and cooperate with the respectful teaching community. We are sure; the immersion of learners in the pool of soft skills by the teachers will pave the way for a better outcome in the classrooms.

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