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Generational Diversity among Teachers in the Workplace: Implications for Teacher Relationships, Identity and Development

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This contribution aims to introduce a conceptual framework on generational diversity of teachers in order to analyze and understand its influence on the processes and results of professional interaction in schools.

Methodology: In this conceptual piece, first, the relevance of generational diversity among teachers in their workplace is examined and justified, emphasizing the increasing aging of teaching staff. Next, generational diversity is explored by analyzing the concept of generation and the attributes used to distinguishing generations (particularly, age). Furthermore, evidence is considered regarding the impact on the construction of teacher relationships, paying particular attention to the context of collaborative relationships between teachers belonging to different generations and its effects on teacher learning and identity.

Findings: Conclusions are drawn as to the potentialities of intergenerational learning.

Value added: Despite representing a clear challenge for the educational organizations, generational diversity and intergenerational collaboration among teachers and school leaders have been scarcely studied so far.

Recommendations: Conclusions are drawn as to the potentialities of intergenerational learning and implications for professional induction and collegial professional development are presented as well.

Key words: Teachers, generations, teacher diversity, teacher collaboration, teacher professional development.

JEL codes: I21, I24, I28, J71, J26

Introduction

Even though it has seldom been dealt with in specialized literature, teachers' aging is a tangible reality which is becoming increasingly important (Kaskie, 2017). This tendency can be explained by the gradual aging of the population in certain areas of the labor market but, also, by other key factors linked to one's professional career expansion: better health conditions, job security, a greater commitment and satisfaction with one's job or uncertainties regarding retirement (Kaskie, 2017; Paganelli & Cangemi, 2019).

This phenomenon intersects, in turn, with the growing and steady integration of teachers in a temporary, provisional, and even precarious fashion, to the extent that it represents a considerable proportion of the total of teachers, although it is true that it is difficult to specify its size due to the contractual relationship which binds said staff with the institution (Beaton, 2017). The factors which explain this other tendency do not limit to those of an economic nature, but include changes in the student population, changes in study plans or in the relationship with the labor market (Levin & Montero, 2014). In any case, the working conditions of these teachers are more adverse than those of the previously alluded to, in relation to senior teachers. Moreover, while it can be assumed that these teachers are usually younger than those linked to the institution in a more secure way, there is evidence that among the former, a significant variance has been taking place, not presenting a huge disparity in their average age with respect to the latter (Levin & Montero, 2014).

This way, it can be considered that teaching institutions have gradually turned into workplaces where age has become (and will continue to do so) progressively more important and, consequently, teachers of different generations coexist in these workplaces, carrying out the work that they are meant to do. And this generational diversity has a great significance as a phenomenon which explains the existing diversity in organizations.

Certainly, teachers' generational replacement is a crucial challenge yet to be tackled; one which gets more and more attention in our educational system (Romero-Tena, Perera, & Martín-Gutiérrez, 2020). However, the challenge of addressing the generational diversity already identifiable among the teaching staff does not seem a lesser one, and this is likely to persist for a prolonged period of time. On the other hand, said diversity can eventually lead to significant improvements in the quality of education or training and, in general, in the institutions responsible for providing these.

This is evidenced, on the one hand, by their direct connection with the construction of the teaching profession identity, considering the generation itself as a determining, almost constituent, factor of that identity and, on the other, by its relationship with the development and learning of the teaching profession, regarding generational diversity as the context and driving force of collaborative relationships.

Conceptual framework

Organizational diversity and generational attributes

The way in which organizational diversity has been understood is not homogeneous, but rather significantly diverse. Nevertheless, certain common patterns can be identified (Qin, Muenjohn, & Chhetri, 2014). In particular, it is common to use this notion to make reference, at least ultimately, to the differences between the people who compose the organization, differences which are usually related to the (shared) attributes identifiable in them.

There is growing attention to the phenomenon of differences in terms of certain personal characteristics, to the extent that it has been habitual to notice the large number of attributes and, hence, the differences that can be deemed relevant in the organizational environment.

In certain occasions, the available information on personal traits has been utilized to infer collective characteristics, attributed to the organization as a whole. From that point of view, the organization is not diverse per se, but it is so inasmuch as its members differ between each other to a greater or lesser degree, with respect to one or more attributes (Harrison & Klein, 2007). More specifically, it is common to equate diversity with the distribution that said members display in relation to those attributes, so the organization

will be more or less diverse (that is, heterogeneous or homogeneous) depending on the greater or lesser variance in the personal characteristics considered relevant, respectively (Qin, Muenjohn, & Chhetri, 2014). This way, for instance, Harrison & Klein (2007, p. 1200) defined organizational diversity as "the distribution of differences between the members of a unit with respect to a common attribute "X", such as gender, race, nationality, the type of contractual relationship with the organization, the position held in it, the duty performed… Among these examples of attributes that condition diversity, the first three are included within the category of the usually labelled "demographic" factors.

Age is precisely another demographic factor that gets increasingly more attention when characterizing the observable diversity in an organization. This way, it has been considered a specific form of diversity, relevant to the organization (Boehm & Kunze, 2015). Differences in relation to age are not important per se but depending on other differences explicitly relevant to the organization they are linked to. Among these, the following have been emphasized: health, cognitive capacities, performance at work, work engagement, performance at work, and wellbeing at the workplace (Hertel & Zacher, 2018).

Generations: conceptual outlooks

The concept of generation has been addressed from different perspectives leading to a great deal of conceptual variation which requires further explanation. Two perspectives can be highlighted among those: generations understood as a succession of descendants bound by a relationship, and the generations understood as a cohort of equals in relation to the period of birth and, therefore, their age (for instance, Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010). This latter perspective has two important variations. If, on the one hand, it has been equated to a birth cohort (that is, the group of people born within the same period) (Green et al., 2012), the

generation has also been linked to the fact of sharing a number of singular experiences and, therefore, perspectives, ideas, values, attitudes or behaviors, in line with what Karl Mannheim designates (see, for instance Timonen & Conlon, 2015). In this way, belonging to a generation would entail having experienced the same social or historical events or situations which impact, due to the sociological context, in a certain manner on that group of individuals (Green et al., 2012). This would explain how events which affect people of all ages impact differently on different generations, as said events may be endowed with similar values, characteristics and beliefs which differ from those of the members of other birth cohorts.

Especially in the case of organizations, the life stage in which people are found at the time (for example, the stage in one's professional life) is also a basic gauge to identify generations and generational differences can be explained by "the fact that individuals are at the time in a different life stage" (Kelan, 2014, p. 22). In the characterization of generational differences, the existing literature has highlighted that the social differences between generations also carry over to the workplace (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

This way, it is possible to differentiate between generations according to the era and the technological and digital phenomena which characterize it (thus, differentiating between digital natives and immigrants, or Generation Xers, Generation Y and Generation Z), assuming that the knowledge, beliefs, emotions, habits, etc., which are attributed to them shape a different identity for each generation. An exhaustive review of Woodward et al. (2015) in the specialized literature on this issue has evidenced the existence of generational differences regarding six areas:

1. Communication and technology;
2. Work motivation or preferred working characteristics;
3. Work values;
4. Work attitudes;
5. Conduct in the workplace or at the university degree;
6. Leadership preferences or behaviors.

However, the same authors stress that there is not a unanimous consensus which explains the generational differences and that "popular" generations that have emerged in this context do not result from proven empirical evidence. It would be necessary, hence, to reconsider the concept of "generation", adopting the teachers' perspective to determine which groupings are made and in relation to which identity attributes.

Impact of generational diversity

The potentiality associated with generational diversity among teachers in schools, while scarcely or partially evidenced, is normally linked to effects in processes of professional interaction and their subsequent results, particularly in the shape of learning associated with areas of teachers' thinking and behavior which are built and developed over the years.

Inter-professional relationships

What relationship is there between generational diversity and the professional relationships that teachers cultivate in their workplace, the school environment? To which extent does belonging to a generation determine or shape the process and the result of those teaching relationships? And, in that case, which generational attributes affect which relational dimensions?

As the interactions between teachers in the school environment and, singularly, the relationships of collaboration depend to a great extent on the conditions in which these are produced, it is reasonable to think that generational diversity is bound to acquire a special relevance for the development and efficiency of those relationships. As Geeraerts et al. (2018) state, the learning which is derived from the interaction between teachers of different generations brings about opportunities for promoting professional development.

In this line, empirical evidence shows that professional development (multi and interprofessional) between different generations benefits all of them. For instance, Kardos and Johnson (2007) affirmed, after completing their research, that the development of an "integral professional culture" characterized by the professional exchange between more and less experienced teachers led to successful schools. Other studies have given evidence of the contribution that professionals belonging to older generations can make to those of a younger generation (Geeraerts, Vanhoof, & Van den Bossche, 2016). The benefits that a more veteran generation can yield in a less experienced one have also been evidenced, though to a lesser degree (Lerham, 2008). All this involves assuming that there are significant generational differences between teachers which can influence their professional development and learning.

The interactive processes which take place between generationally different people and groups (as it is the case of veteran and retired teachers who act as mentors, on the one hand, and those who are acquiring their initial training as teachers, novice teachers or beginners, on the other), bring about or at least contribute to professional learning and, especially, professional development (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2009; Ropes, 2013). But while the importance given to the interaction between professionals belonging to different generations is patent, the attention has been focused on the contribution that professionals related to older generations can make to those affiliated with younger ones (Geeraerts, Vanhoof, & Van den Bossche, 2016). Much less attention has been paid in the specialized literature to the contribution that the latter can make to the former in the workplace (Murphy, 2012). The influence, therefore, on the collaborative professional development could be bidirectional.

In this regard, these patterns have been identified and characterized in formal modalities of collaborative professional development, but also in more subtle and informal processes, which tend to acquire a special relevance in intergenerational learning (Kyndt, Gijbels, Grosemans, & Donche, 2016; Marcelo & Vaillant, 2018).

Likewise, the few studies which are more centered on this issue are focused on the transmission and transfer of knowledge between teachers of different generations (Brücknerová & Novotný, 2017; Geeraerts, Tynjälä, & Heikkinen, 2018; Geeraerts, Vanhoof, & Van den Bossche, 2016).

But it is worth conjecturing that generational idiosyncrasies in a context of collaboration contribute to the introduction of challenges (Stoll, Harris, & Handscomb, 2012) or "dissonances" (Menter & McLaughlin, 2015; Opfer & Pedder, 2011) which promote:

- Activities demanding the participants' inquiry and reflection in relation to relevant problems in the professional practice (Lieberman & Miller, 2014; Loughran, 2010).
- Activities in which the asymmetry between knowledge and experience is more pronounced (Huizing, 2012; Murphy, 2012; Yip & Kram, 2016).

In this regard, it would be appropriate to consider the possibility of exploring other forms of collaboration in which the asymmetry related to the experience is the opposite of the one expected, and even those in which said symmetry is less pronounced or practically non-existent. If the opportunities of teachers' interaction are constant and prolonged in time, their impact on professional learning will be greater, not only regarding their influence on the cognitive and instrumental aspect of teaching behavior, but also on the emotional component (for example, learning to know and experiencing passion for teaching).

Similarly, if learning has, as we will see later, a transformative character, it could impact on the professional dispositions (for instance, a way of thinking and performing one's profession), an aspect which, in turn, can contribute to providing greater perspectives of continuation in the profession (Henderson & Noble, 2015; Santoro, Pietsch, & Borg, 2012). Otherwise, these synergistic effects would increase its potential efficacy when the collaboration is perceived as an effort which supports the transformational endeavor (Kennedy, 2014). When transformations are produced in

teachers' professional aptitudes, these tend to be reflected on the professional performance, so these changes end up having a positive repercussion on the students' learning process. What is more, these latter changes can again influence the professional "agency" of teachers and, consequently, their search for new experiences of professional development (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Teachers' professional identity

What relation is there between the generational attribute and teachers' professional identity? To what extent does the link to one or another generation determine or shape said identity? And in that case, which generational attributes affect which identity dimensions?

Identity can be characterized as a generational identity. There is a direct relationship between both constructs, in the sense that belonging to a generation contributes, as a contextual factor, to the construction of the collective (or socio-professional) dimension of one's own identity.

This singular complex construct is not static nor is it uniform and evolves throughout time due to the influence of the cognitions and emotions which the teacher develops when interacting with the environment they are part of, which includes the relationships with their colleagues in the workplace.

The identity, to begin with, involves perceiving oneself as a certain type of person (or professional) and being acknowledged as such within a specific context (Marcelo & Gallego Domínguez, 2018). However, the view on who I am as a professional and as a teacher is a more complex one, as a result of the multiple and diverse dimensions it encompasses. In a comprehensive approach to professional identity, various authors (Abu-Alruz & Khasawneh, 2013; Hanna, Oostdam, Severiens, & Zijlstra, 2020; Hong, Greene, & Lowery, 2016) point at the following:

- Motivation (why do I want to teach/why am I teaching?);
- Self-image (what am I like/how do I see myself?);
- Self-esteem (how do I value myself?/am I able to?);
- Commitment (to what extent do I commit/get involved in?);
- Task perception (which are my role and duties?);
- Job satisfaction (does my job fulfil me?).

We can observe so far a certain correspondence with the variables that were linked above with the effects of age as a generational attribute. However, other authors (McDonough & McGraw, 2021; O'Neill, Hansen, & Lewis, 2014) focus their attention, instead, on the teachers' dispositions, understood as inclinations towards certain ways of thinking about teaching and the teaching profession, assuming that these imply in turn other predispositions to certain actions or behaviors. Not unlike the notion of attitudes, also professional outlooks or orientations, what is remarkable in our opinion is that all these lines of research offer valuable conceptual frameworks to analyze and comprehend the identity attributes and generational diversity within the teaching profession, and as a result, teaching diversity.

In this sense, it is reasonable to conclude that the interaction between teachers of different generations, especially when it is close and prolonged in time, will have a greater impact on the development of different professional identities and that such development will be larger when that interaction brings about a learning process. This is evidenced by studies on initiation programs or professional integration which involve both novice and beginner teachers and experienced or veteran ones. These initiatives promote a specific context (of action and interaction of both types), where professional identity can be built in an evolutionary and interpersonal manner, in such a way that the individual reflects and negotiates meanings and emotions on certain aspects about his/her role and teaching duties.

Professional learning and development

As we can observe, the evidence available supports the idea that generational diversity between teachers can impact positively on the teaching collaboration processes which take place in schools, bringing about professional learning and development. But it is important to deepen into the relationship of influence established between generational attributes and professional learning processes in specific contexts of collaboration, taking into account different particularities which could be attributed to learning processes.

On the one hand, what different generations learn from each other is not always defined and explicit, but usually ambiguous and tacit, which happens frequently in the case of learning professional dispositions. Obviously, the fact that learning takes place incidentally and informally does not necessarily mean that it will not be carried out deliberately, as it is the case with professional initiation programs, where the role of mentors is deemed fundamental (Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001). Anyway, the propositional character does not end in the conscious possibilities, as Schugurensky (2000) states: intentionality, or even being conscious about the subject, are not necessary preconditions for incidental or socialization experiences to bring about learning.

For his part, Illeris (2017) talks about sensitivity and dynamic balance between will, motivation and emotion as precursors of action in teachers' professional learning processes. In any case, learning will entail two different processes which need to be activated in the individual and which can be produced simultaneously or separately; on the one hand, a process of "interaction" between the individual and his/her environment (social and material); on the other, an internal psychological process (cognitive and

affective) of "acquisition" of the specific contents of the learning process (Illeris, 2017, p. 24).

On the other hand, what is learned by means of intergenerational relationships (and, therefore, the type of change that this promotes) may vary depending on the sense or basic objective that the learning process adopts (Calleja, 2014; Ukpodoku, 2016), specifically:

- Transmission, when the acquisition, reproduction and accumulation of steady and even static content (for example, certain facts, skills, norms, or values) are sought for.
- Transformation, when a finer, or more satisfactory personal-global balance (a new way to think, feel, and act) is sought for by means of assessment or review (reflection) of the previous outlook.

Various authors (Fraser, Kennedy, Reid, & Mckinney, 2007; Kennedy, 2014) call attention to the fact that teachers' learning simultaneously activates multiple and different facets in teachers, that is:

- Personal: referred to the teacher's beliefs, values and attitudes along with interests and motivations to fulfil which contribute enormously to the construction (and change) of the professional identity, as well as the teacher's self-confidence and his/her sense of self-efficacy;
- Social: referred to relational skills between individuals and groups in a context which facilitates the acceptance and assumption of risks. These contribute to the access to new resources, obtaining personal support and they encourage the reconstruction of the professional identity, through the mediation of the new beliefs, meanings and expectations which are shared;
- Occupational: referred to the construction of connections between theory and practice together with the intellectual stimulation and professional relevance. The workplace itself (school, classroom) is the most appropriate

environment to stimulate learning inasmuch as it facilitates the awareness of one's actions and their consequences.

Additionally, the eclectic character of professional learning can be manifested in other ways. For instance, Eteläpelto et al. (2014) consider that professionals and communities exert "agency" when they influence, take decisions and adopt positions regarding their work and professional identity (view of themselves and commitment as actors with ideals, interests, beliefs, values and ethical and professional standards). This recent construct, agency, would be a necessary quality for the teachers to be able to renegotiate their work identity contextually and develop their professional practice continuously and perfectively; relevant learnings normally associated with a singular type of teaching interaction, as is the case with collaboration (Durksen, Klassen, & Daniels, 2017).

Conclusions and Implications

Firstly, it is necessary to research more deeply about which type of generational groupings the teachers' are currently doing and based on which attributes. In this sense, it is important to characterize these groupings defining the respective similarities and differences and clarifying the value assigned to those. Emphasizing the concept of generation and characterizing it is relevant to be able to comprehend the professionally significant generational singularities which can be identified within them.

Presumably, well-grounded knowledge on generational attributes and their diversity in schools will provide us with a solid foundation to tackle two important and complex challenges (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010) which the educational system features, specifically:

- The loss of knowledge and skills in older generations, who usually possess a variety of resources which are difficult to replace, at least in a limited amount of time (Fibkins, 2012) and which are deemed valuable, especially regarding ex-

perience, when it comes to mentoring those who debut in the profession, no matter how qualified they are;

- The need to enable the interaction between generationally diverse professionals and identify ways in which to manage and participate in the intergenerational professional development in the workplace requires focusing the attention on the generational differences and singularities which are professionally relevant. Besides, ageism is conceived as a hindering element for this specific challenge.

However, despite representing a clear challenge for the educational organizations, these have been scarcely studied so far (Watts, 2014). For this reason, after that initial research, it is necessary to delve into the effects which enhance or instead impair generational diversity, that is, their impact or influence on the teacher's professional learning and development. The wealth of knowledge available suggests that there are relevant implications for social relationships and those of professional collaboration which should be taken into consideration if we want to turn generational diversity into an opportunity to improve the educational institutions. The commonly accepted idea of making the workplace a learning environment (Billett, 2004) is in line with the idea of generational diversity as an instrument to construct more effective opportunities for teachers' training and pedagogical guidance, particularly in the scope of the initiation in the professional career and collegiate professional development.

The specialized literature and the limited evidence on how to tackle those challenges reveal the necessity of focusing on lines of research which deepen into these aspects and provide empirical evidence of their influence. Said evidence needs to be appropriately expanded as well as contextualized with the purpose of making it updated and endowing it with a greater consistency with regard to its political and practical implications.

Apart from that, delving into these characterizations (or other possible ones), considering other aspects they interact with (the nature of the learning processes, for instance) and highlighting the

importance of these in multi/intergenerational initiatives would allow to develop environments and methods of collaboration between teachers which facilitate intergenerational professional learning, creating an opportunity for change and enhancement of the teaching identities and competencies, as well as an increase of the quality of the action plans in teaching institutions.

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