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Between Generations. Organizational Culture in Polish Primary Schools in the Context of Generational Diversity Management – A Case Study



ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore how generational diversity influences the organizational culture of Polish primary schools.

Methodology: A qualitative case study based on semi-structured interviews with six educators representing four generational cohorts.

Findings: The study demonstrates that generational affiliation significantly shapes how teachers perceive and co-construct a school's organizational culture, resulting in distinct value systems, work styles, and expectations regarding leadership and change. These differences manifest as "invisible boundaries" and generational tensions within teaching teams, particularly in the absence of formal mechanisms for intergenerational integration. However, when generational diversity is managed effectively – through intergenerational mentoring and inclusive leadership, for example – these differences can be transformed into a source of innovation and strengthened school community.

Value Added: The study reveals how generational differences can be managed to support school development and organizational learning.

Recommendations: To effectively address generational diversity in Polish primary schools, it is crucial to implement strategies fostering dialogue and collaboration across age groups. School leaders should develop intergenerational mentoring programs where experienced educators share institutional knowledge while younger staff contribute digital skills and innovative pedagogies. Training in generational intelligence and diversity management for principals will strengthen their capacity to mediate between varying work styles and expectations. Institutions should establish transparent procedures for task assignment, promotions, and participation in innovation projects to avoid perceptions of favoritism. Moreover, integrating participatory leadership practices – such as strategic councils involving representatives from all generations – can enhance trust and engagement. Policymakers are encouraged to design systemic support tools for onboarding

Generation Z teachers and sustaining Millennial engagement. Finally, fostering a culture of open communication and mutual respect will transform generational differences from a source of tension into a driver of organizational learning and school development.

Key words: generational diversity, organizational culture, education management, intergenerational cooperation, Polish primary schools

JEL codes: I21, M12, J24

Introduction

The dynamic transformations occurring in Polish education – including structural reforms, growing societal expectations, and increasing generational diversity among teaching staff – highlight the need to re-examine how organizational culture develops within primary schools. Amid evolving demographic and professional realities, schools are not only educational institutions but also workplaces where different generations of teachers, shaped by distinct values, experiences, and expectations, must collaborate under shared goals.

This article explores the complex relationship between organizational culture and generational diversity in Polish primary schools. Drawing from a socio-constructivist perspective, it assumes that professional meaning and institutional identity are co-created through everyday interactions shaped by personal worldviews, intergenerational influences, and institutional narratives. Organizational culture, in this context, is understood not only as a system of formal values, norms, and routines but also as a living social fabric shaped by informal dynamics, relational practices, and generational negotiations.

The main aim of the study is to investigate how generational diversity manifests in everyday school practices, how it influences organizational climate and professional cooperation, and what types of tensions or synergies arise when different generational cohorts work together. To address these questions, a qualitative



case study approach was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers representing four generational cohorts (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z), encompassing various professional roles. The thematic analysis identified dominant cultural patterns, mechanisms of intergenerational transmission and conflict, and the role of leadership in facilitating or inhibiting mutual understanding.

Findings indicate that intergenerational diversity within schools is both a potential asset and a latent challenge. Differences in values, communication styles, and work attitudes influence the dynamics of collaboration, sometimes reinforcing informal hierarchies or undermining cohesion. Despite this, many teachers recognize the benefits of multigenerational cooperation, particularly when school leadership fosters a culture of openness, shared reflection, and inclusive dialogue. The data also point to a lack of structured onboarding and mentoring systems for younger educators, which often exacerbates generational distance and limits opportunities for knowledge exchange.

This article contributes to the growing body of literature on educational leadership and organizational culture by highlighting the underexplored link between generational diversity and institutional functioning in schools. It offers practical recommendations for school leaders and policymakers seeking to cultivate inclusive, resilient school cultures that draw on the strengths of all generational groups. In doing so, it positions generational diversity not as a problem to be managed but as a resource to be activated for collective growth and organizational learning.

Organizational Culture – Theoretical Framework

The concept of organizational culture has long been regarded as a cornerstone of management theory. In E. Schein's (2010) classic perspective, organizational culture is defined as a set of fundamental assumptions developed by a group as it learns to cope with problems of external adaptation and internal integration.

These assumptions operate on multiple levels: at the visible level of artifacts (observable structures and behaviors) and at the invisible level of norms and values, which reflect the deeply rooted beliefs of organizational members. Cameron and Quinn (2006) proposed the Competing Values Framework, identifying four types of organizational culture: clan (focused on relationships and commitment), adhocracy (innovative and flexible), market (results-oriented), and hierarchy (formal and procedure-oriented). From the perspective of educational institutions, the dominant cultural model is typically hierarchical, often complemented by elements of a clan culture – especially within teaching teams characterized by strong interpersonal bonds. A crucial aspect of organizational culture is its informal dimension, often referred to as the “shadow culture”, which manifests in hidden communication codes, unwritten rules, and institutional rituals (Zbiegień-Maciąg, 2005). In schools, this can be observed in the way meetings are conducted, the influence of “informal leaders”, and mechanisms that may marginalize individuals who introduce new approaches. This study adopts a broad understanding of organizational culture, encompassing both formal elements (such as leadership styles and communication structures) and relational, affective, and generational aspects. This perspective enables a more comprehensive grasp of the phenomena occurring within school teams, where multiple generations with differing professional and social experiences must develop a shared code of operation.

Organizational Culture in Polish Educational Institutions – A Definition Review

In Polish educational literature, school organizational culture is described as a multidimensional construct that shapes institutional functioning, social relationships, and organizational climate. Dobrzyniak (2015) emphasizes that the organizational culture of an educational institution provides a framework for the entire teaching and educational process, influencing both teacher–teacher and teacher–student interactions. The author underscores that this culture functions as a specific “code of organizational meanings”, expressed through shared values, norms, operational standards, and the overall institutional atmosphere. Kinal (2023) highlights



the growing strategic importance of organizational culture in public schools. According to this view, culture is no longer merely a set of static values and norms but serves as a tool for guiding long-term institutional development. The school principal – viewed as an educational leader – is a crucial participant, with their leadership style directly influencing the preferred type of organizational culture. Effective culture management, Kinal argues, requires a shift from an operational model that responds only to immediate needs to a strategic model grounded in long-term planning, reflexivity, and the deliberate shaping of institutional identity. Lazar-Siekierka (2009) conceptualizes school organizational culture as a dynamic, living system subject to transformation by both external environmental influences and the institution's internal goals. According to this author, culture permeates all levels of school functioning – from interpersonal relationships and management styles to the implementation of educational objectives. She asserts that a high-quality organizational culture is based on the conscious coexistence of individual and institutional values and supports the creative professional development of teachers. Within the Polish context, there is an increasing emphasis on integrating both axiological (values-based) and operational approaches to school culture. Organizational culture is understood not merely as a collection of artifacts or procedures, but as a dynamic network of meanings that affects everyday decision-making and the overall working atmosphere (Dobrzyniak, 2015; Kinal, 2023).

International Perspective – Models of School Organizational Culture

Internationally, the organizational culture of educational institutions is conceptualized in a similar manner to Poland's, though with greater emphasis on socio-cultural context and the role of transformational leadership. Schein (2010) identifies three levels of organizational culture – artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions – a framework widely utilized in studies of schools in Anglophone countries. According to this approach, a school's effectiveness is linked to the extent to which members of the school community internalize institutional values and reflect the school's mission in daily practices. According to Stolp and Smith (1995), school organizational culture is founded on the

transmission of shared meaning patterns – norms, traditions, myths, and symbols – that are co-created by all members of the school community rather than imposed from the top down. This view underscores the symbolic dimension of leadership and the importance of institutional rituals in shaping a cohesive culture. In the United Kingdom and Scandinavian countries, there is increasing interest in cultural models grounded in shared responsibility, reflexivity, and inclusivity. Handy (1991) distinguishes between role, person, task, and power cultures, with the “person” (relationship-focused) and “task” (collaborative and innovation-oriented) types being most favored in education. Cameron and Quinn (2006) similarly argue that clan and adhocracy cultures foster creativity and broad participation in schools characterized by a high degree of teacher and student self-governance – an approach exemplified by Finnish schools. Importantly, the international discourse now emphasizes the necessity of managing both cultural and generational diversity within schools as a foundational pillar of modern organizational culture. Schools in Canada and Australia, for example, promote an open model based on intercultural and intergenerational collaboration, treating a positive organizational culture as an element of the institution’s social responsibility (Kinal, 2023).

Teacher Generations – A Sociological and Professional Profile

Baby Boomers (born ~1946–1964). The Baby Boomer generation, shaped by the post-war reconstruction and a period of socio-political stabilization, is associated with values such as loyalty, commitment, and a strong sense of duty. Raised in hierarchically structured societies, they tend to value discipline, respect for authority, and stable professional relationships. In their professional lives, Baby Boomers often demonstrate high organizational identification, with job stability and procedural predictability serving as primary motivators. They generally prefer to adhere to established rules and procedures rather than pursue innovation, and their aversion to risk is balanced by a pronounced sense of responsibility and loyalty. As teachers, Baby Boomers are often seen as custodians of educational tradition. They frequently serve as “institutional mentors”, passing on knowledge and cultural norms to younger colleagues. Their teaching style is predominantly



linear, teacher-centered, and authority-based. Although they may be open to dialogue, many in this cohort struggle to adapt to rapid technological change, which can hinder effective communication with younger generations. In Scandinavian and Anglophone countries, Baby Boomer educators also exhibit a conservative, centralized style, but they tend to display greater adaptability thanks to system-wide professional development programs. In Poland, by contrast, the digital skills gap among this cohort has remained largely unaddressed, which further deepens the generational divide and isolation of older teachers. Generation X (born ~1965–1980). Generation X, shaped by the socio-economic transitions and uncertainties of the late 20th century, is characterized by pragmatism, individualism, and high adaptability. While generally loyal to their institutions, members of this cohort also seek greater autonomy in decision-making. They tend to demonstrate strong independence, an ability to juggle multiple professional roles, and resilience to organizational stress. Unlike the Baby Boomers, Generation X educators value decentralized and flexible management structures, although they can function well within traditional hierarchical systems when necessary. In schools, Generation X teachers often occupy leadership positions (e.g., as principals or vice-principals), making them key actors in shaping the school's organizational culture. They are typically willing to compromise between tradition and innovation, acting as “bridges” between older and younger staff. Gen X educators generally handle modern digital tools effectively, though their enthusiasm for sweeping systemic reforms may be moderate. In many Western countries, Generation X has a similar intermediary role in middle management and has demonstrated an aptitude for leading organizational change. In Poland, however, their efforts are often burdened by bureaucratic constraints, which limits their creativity and operational flexibility. Millennials (Generation Y, born ~1981–1996). Millennials came of age during an era of rapid globalization, digitalization, and the rise of the information society. They are typically marked by a high level of self-awareness, a strong focus on personal development, and a desire for immediate feedback. Their relationship with work is often viewed as transactional – they expect a sense of purpose, flexibility, and a healthy work-life balance in return for their commitment. Millennials tend to favor flat organizational structures, a culture of open dialogue, and shared decision-making in the workplace. They value authentic

leadership, openness to change, and ample opportunities to develop and apply digital competencies. Notably, their career mobility is higher than that of previous generations, reflecting a willingness to change jobs for better alignment with their values or career goals. In Polish schools, Millennials have begun to introduce new technologies and project-based learning methods, and they place a strong emphasis on increasing student agency in the classroom. However, they often encounter both systemic and generational resistance. Their working style is sometimes perceived by older colleagues as overly “unsystematic” or lacking in rigor. Millennials generally expect open dialogue with school leadership and a receptive attitude toward innovation. When these expectations are unmet – due to rigid institutional structures or a top-down management style – it often results in professional frustration for this cohort. In countries such as Finland and the Netherlands, Millennials now form the core of many innovative school teams. Their developmental needs and desire for professional autonomy are recognized and supported through formal institutional policies (e.g., mentorship programs, collaborative planning time). In Poland, by contrast, the potential contributions of Millennial teachers remain underutilized, largely due to the absence of a strategic approach to human capital management in the education sector.

Generation Z (born ~1997–2012). Generation Z has grown up in a world dominated by ubiquitous technology, social media, and ongoing narratives of global crises. They exhibit high levels of digital fluency but are also more prone to anxiety, and they have a strong need for authenticity and immediacy in their interactions. They tend to value diversity, openness, and purpose-driven work. Members of Generation Z are highly flexible and often engage in short-term or project-based assignments. Their motivation depends largely on how well an organization’s mission and values align with their own personal ideals. They also expect transparent communication and clear pathways for professional development. Notably, Gen Z educators respond poorly to authoritarian leadership styles and excessive control, preferring guidance and feedback over directives. Generation Z is only just entering the teaching profession and often faces significant barriers, including excessive formalization, organizational rigidity, and the relatively low social prestige attached to the teaching career. Their working style is highly collaborative, characterized by multitasking and the use of modern



educational tools and digital resources. However, young teachers from this generation are sometimes met with skepticism by older faculty members, who may view them as “immature” or “overly entitled”. Many education systems in the European Union have recognized these challenges and have implemented formal mechanisms to support new Generation Z teachers – such as structured mentoring programs, coaching, and inclusion in innovation teams – to ensure their successful integration into the school community. In Poland, however, such mechanisms for fostering intergenerational integration and systematically onboarding new teachers remain largely absent. This gap highlights a pressing need for policies that facilitate knowledge transfer and cooperation across generational lines, ensuring that the strengths of each cohort are harnessed to enrich the school’s organizational culture.

Materials and Methods

The aim of this study was to explore the diversity in the perception of organizational culture in primary schools depending on the generational affiliation of teachers. The central research question posed was: *How do representatives of different generations involved in the organizational life of the school perceive and co-create its organizational culture?*

The study adopted a qualitative research design, with a focus on capturing the subjective interpretations, experiences, and reflections of individuals employed in educational institutions, while simultaneously taking into account their generational background. The use of the case study method enabled an in-depth analysis of phenomena occurring within a defined social and institutional context.

Method and Research Techniques

The study employed the case study method and involved three primary schools located in the Silesian, Lesser Poland, and Świętokrzyskie Voivodeships.

A semi-structured interview was used as the primary data collection technique. The interviews were conducted based on a pre-developed protocol containing open-ended questions focused on three thematic areas:

1. the understanding of the concept of organizational culture within the school context,
2. the identification of dominant values and norms within the organization,
3. the evaluation of relationships and collaboration between representatives of different generations.

The interview protocol also included supplementary questions regarding perceptions of leadership style, communication flow, readiness for change, and the role of new technologies in the functioning of the school.

Sample Selection

The selection of study participants followed a purposive sampling strategy based on the principle of maximum variation, typical for exploratory qualitative research (Patton, 2002). The primary criterion was the generational affiliation of the respondents, enabling comparison of how representatives of different generations perceive organizational culture in primary schools. However, the sample was not limited to biological age. A range of functional and institutional criteria were also applied to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and professional roles.

Six teachers and specialists from public primary schools participated in the study, representing four generations: Baby Boomers (1), Generation X (2), Generation Y (2), and Generation Z (1). The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Generational diversity – The aim was to ensure representative inclusion of each generation currently functioning within the educational system. This allowed for the observation of both different work styles and diverse approaches to norms, values, and organizational practices.



2. Diversity of professional roles – The sample included not only teachers of general education subjects (such as Polish language, biology, and history) but also a school pedagogue, an early childhood education teacher, and a school principal. This enabled the examination of organizational culture from various institutional perspectives.
3. Level of organizational involvement – The selection encompassed both individuals in leadership or additional roles (e.g., school principal, subject team leader, internship supervisor, project coordinator) and teachers without administrative responsibilities. This made it possible to capture differences in perceptions of organizational culture between those holding formal authority and those who participate in it.
4. Type and location of school – Institutions of various types were deliberately selected: urban and rural schools, as well as those located in county and voivodeship cities. This geographical diversity was intended to highlight the influence of local context on the formation of organizational culture and intergenerational relations.
5. Professional experience – The sample included individuals with extensive professional experience (over 30 years), moderate experience (10–20 years), and novice teachers. This allowed for the exploration of professional integration dynamics, differences in expectations toward the institution, and diverse career development trajectories.
6. Attitude toward innovation and change – During the preliminary selection stage, participants' openness to new technologies, involvement in development programs (e.g., Erasmus+, eTwinning), and participation in institutional projects were also considered. This criterion was crucial for assessing to what extent the generations differ in terms of implementing and adapting to organizational innovations.

Table 1 presents the full characteristics of the interview participants, including demographic data, job roles, professional experience, and institutional context. All respondents provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

Table 1. Characteristics of the interview participants

Nickname (Pseudonyms)	Generation	Sex	Age	Describe
B-1	Baby Boomers	Female	63	She's an early childhood education teacher with over 35 years of professional experience. She works in a municipal primary school in the Silesian Voivodeship. Barbara does not hold any additional roles but is distinguished by her long tenure, strong preference for traditional teaching methods, and low proficiency in digital technologies.
T	Generation X	Male	52	Serves as the principal of a primary school located in a small town in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship. With more than 25 years of experience, he also participates in the municipal education committee. Tomasz adopts a moderately system-oriented perspective, displays leadership competencies, and tends to view the institution through an administrative lens.
J	Generation X	Female	41	She's a Polish language teacher with 18 years of experience. She teaches at a rural primary school in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship. She serves as an internship mentor and head of the subject team. Joanna is characterized by her reflective attitude, awareness of generational issues, and active involvement in educational projects.
D	Generation Y	Female	34	She's a biology teacher with 10 years of experience. She works in a county town primary school in the Silesian Voivodeship and serves as the Erasmus+ coordinator and a climate education leader. Dominika is known for her innovative approach and high level of digital competence.
M	Generation Z	Male	27	He's a history teacher with 3 years of experience in a primary school in a large city in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship. As a cultural life animator, he is noted for his generational self-awareness and modern approach to teaching and school engagement.
B-2	Generation Y	Female	46	She's a school pedagogue with 21 years of experience in a primary school located in a voivodeship capital. She participates in the crisis management team and the teaching council. Beata is distinguished by her reflective thinking and her experience in managing interpersonal and organizational conflicts.

Source: developed by the Author.



The sample was not intended to be statistically representative but followed the logic of theoretical relevance. The goal was to gather rich, informative cases that could offer insights into the studied phenomenon without aiming for statistical generalization (Flick, 2011). Only public-school teachers were included, which – while potentially limiting – allowed a focused analysis within a highly standardized and regulated institutional environment.

Fieldwork Timeline and Procedure

Fieldwork was conducted between June 1 and June 20, 2025, in accordance with ethical research guidelines and with respect for participants' time and working conditions. Preparatory steps included consultations with school principals to obtain institutional approvals, as well as individual consent from each participant. Respondents were granted full anonymity and the opportunity to review their interview transcripts prior to final analysis.

Each interview lasted between 35 and 55 minutes and was conducted using a semi-structured protocol. Most sessions took place in person on school premises in a private setting (e.g., guidance counselor's office, library, or staff room). Two interviews (Maciej and Beata) were conducted online via Microsoft Teams due to the participants' absence from their workplace.

All interviews were audio-recorded (with prior written consent), and transcriptions were completed with full attention to pauses, digressions, and tone shifts. Approximately 280 minutes of recorded material were collected, resulting in over 60 pages of transcripts. A short demographic questionnaire accompanied each interview, gathering data on age, years of experience, education, job function, and previous experience in generationally diverse teams.

The study adhered to the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2017) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Participants could access their data and comments and received a summary report upon request. Transcripts were anonymized and institutional details generalized.

Post-interview, analytical memos were prepared for each case to support data coding. Particular attention was given to non-verbal cues signaling

engagement, emotional distance, or tension during discussions on generational differences, authority, and trust in leadership.

The research process was preceded by a pilot study conducted in January 2025 with two teachers unaffiliated with the main sample. This allowed for verification of question clarity, interview length, and the structure of the protocol.

Description of Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This procedure was selected due to its interpretive flexibility and its ability to identify meaningful patterns within large sets of narrative data. The process unfolded in six stages: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) open coding, (3) theme generation, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) final report preparation.

In the first phase of analysis, the researcher read each transcript multiple times, making margin notes that identified areas of emotional engagement and ambivalence. Open coding followed, during which meaningful units were assigned to codes capturing various aspects such as: “communication style”, “attitude toward change”, “understanding of authority”, “intergenerational relations”, “professional development”, and “school’s technological culture”.

After the initial coding phase (resulting in a total of 146 unique codes), the codes were grouped into broader thematic categories: (1) dominant organizational values, (2) generational conflicts, (3) work styles and expectations, (4) innovation versus tradition, and (5) inclusivity and marginalization. Each category was illustrated with representative quotations highlighting generational differences and underlying tensions.

In the third stage, data triangulation was carried out using interview notes, demographic questionnaires, and contextual data related to school types. This enabled validation of the coherence between participants’ statements and their institutional roles. To ensure objectivity and minimize interpretive bias, part of the dataset was reviewed by a second independent researcher (peer review), who confirmed the relevance and accuracy of the identified categories.



The analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti 23 software, which facilitated code organization, quote management, and the creation of conceptual maps. As a result, five overarching research themes and several sub-themes were generated, forming the analytical framework of this article.

Throughout the analytical process, methodological rigor was maintained: consistency of interpretation with empirical material, transparency in the operationalization of categories, and systematic coding procedures. The outcome is a structured yet in-depth depiction of the diversity in perceptions of organizational culture in a multigenerational work environment.

Results

Organizational Culture Values and Norms – A Generational Perspective

The organizational culture of a school, understood as a set of beliefs, norms, values, and rituals shared by members of the educational community, emerges as an area marked by significant generational diversity. Although the general discourse on schooling is dominated by the image of an institution rooted in continuity, stability, and communal values, data from the conducted interviews reveal deeply ingrained generational differences in the interpretation of these concepts.

For members of older generations – Baby Boomers and, to some extent, Generation X – the school’s organizational culture is strongly associated with institutional order, stemming from clearly defined roles, norms, and hierarchies. Emphasis was placed on tradition and the “ethical” identity of the teacher as an “educational missionary”:

“It’s not just about teaching – it’s about upbringing. About passing on values – those that were and always should be: respect, responsibility, punctuality”. (B-1, 63)

This age group demonstrated a predominantly normative stance, viewing organizational culture as a stable framework for action rather than a space for negotiating meanings. As one school principal noted:

“In the past, there was no such debate – there were rules, staff meetings, and that was enough. Today, everything is more blurred”. (T, 52)

In contrast, members of Generations Y and Z emphasized the dynamic and relational nature of organizational culture. For them, the school is not just an institution but a community that must be actively shaped, questioned, and modified. Values such as inclusivity, collaboration, flexibility, dialogue, and transparency were frequently cited as the foundations of the “modern school”:

“For me, school culture is something we build together – with students, parents, and the administration. It’s not something fixed – it changes with us”. (D, 34).

Respondents’ statements also revealed a generational asymmetry in expectations toward the institution. Younger teachers expect participation, co-decision-making, procedural justice, and access to information. Older teachers, by contrast, prioritize organizational security and clear operational frameworks.

Within the analysis of values and norms, the concept of teacher authority held a central role. While Baby Boomers viewed authority as structural – deriving from one’s professional position – Generations Y and Z considered it relational and situational:

“Authority? You have to earn it with your everyday behavior. It’s not enough to be older or stricter. Students notice everything”. (M, 27)

Findings indicate that professional authority is undergoing democratization – it is no longer tied to age, but to competence, coherence, authenticity, and the ability to build relationships. This shift in meaning often generates generational tensions, particularly in hierarchical relations, where older teachers expect deference and respect “by default”, while younger ones seek openness and recognition of their innovative ideas.

Generational Attitudes Toward Organizational Norms and Values

It was also observed that generational groups differ in their approach to formal and informal norms. Teachers from Generation X emphasized the need to return to “principles” which, in their view, have become “blurred” in recent years. In



contrast, the youngest generations highlighted the need to redefine these principles in light of contemporary social challenges:

“Some rules, like teachers not being allowed to message students on Messenger, are outdated. We need to find new boundaries, but do it flexibly”. (B-2, 46)

These issues reflect a broader generational debate on the role of technology, modes of communication, professional distance, and the redefinition of privacy boundaries within the school as an organization.

An interesting phenomenon is the internal ambivalence expressed by teachers from Generation X, who often act as a “bridge generation”. On one hand, they share many values with Baby Boomers (e.g., institutional loyalty, respect for hierarchy); on the other, they resonate with younger colleagues, particularly in the context of digitalization, individualized work styles, and the need for self-development:

“On the one hand, I support modernity – trainings, changes, innovation. But on the other, I don’t want the school to lose its spirit. I feel like I’m caught between a rock and a hard place”. (J, 41)

The collected responses portray the school as an arena for negotiating generational identities, where different cohorts construct their own understanding of what constitutes a “good school” and its social role. These differences are rooted not only in biological age but in distinct historical, technological, and cultural contexts.

In summary, organizational values in primary schools are neither uniform nor collectively agreed upon – they are dynamically negotiated by representatives of different generations. This places the responsibility on school leaders and teams to create space for open dialogue, mutual learning, and the mediation of intergenerational tensions.

Generational Differences in Work and Communication Styles

One of the key dimensions of generational differences within school organizational culture concerns work style and modes of communication within the team. Interview transcript analysis revealed marked contrasts in self-organization,

preferred communication channels, the level of formalization in professional relationships, and expectations regarding collaboration.

Respondents from the Baby Boomer generation and the older segment of Generation X emphasized the importance of self-discipline, long-term planning, and the avoidance of excessive spontaneity. Their statements were framed by language reflecting responsibility and professional ethos:

“I always try to have everything prepared in advance. Chaos is bad – for the student and the teacher”. (B-1, 63)

“We were raised to believe that if you do something, do it properly. Don’t improvise at the last minute”. (T, 52)

The work style of these generations showed a greater attachment to regulations, documentation, structure, and formal procedures, often accompanied by skepticism toward excessive “flexibility”, which was equated with irresponsibility or superficiality.

For Generations Y and Z, the work style was based on agility, multi-tasking, and adaptability. Using applications like Trello, Teams, and Google Workspace, and organizing work iteratively were practices characteristic of younger teachers:

“I keep everything in apps – plans, notes, checklists. I tried traditional planners once, but they’re just not for me”. (D, 34)

“I collaborate with teachers from Spain and Lithuania, so I’m always online. Traditional meetings? They’re fine – but only as a supplement”. (M, 27)

Regarding internal communication, there was a clear generational divide in channel and style preferences. Baby Boomers favored direct, formal communication based on organizational hierarchy. Younger generations preferred asynchronous, remote, more egalitarian and informal interactions:

“I don’t need to talk to someone during recess if I can just send them a message in chat and have it documented”. (B-2, 46)

This misalignment sometimes led to misunderstandings and communication errors – particularly when the generations had different expectations regarding response times, tone, or even email etiquette:

“Sometimes someone younger writes to me without a greeting. I know it’s not malicious, but I feel overlooked”. (J, 41)



At the same time, certain aspects of professional communication are evolving rapidly, and teachers – regardless of age – frequently learn from each other. Generation X respondents acknowledged adopting practices from younger colleagues:

“I’m not a digital native, but I admit – Maciek taught me a few shortcuts, and now I manage documents faster”. (T, 52)

Generational Differences in Collaboration and Communication Styles

In terms of collaboration style, Baby Boomers preferred individual work with clearly defined responsibilities, while Generations Y and Z favored interdisciplinary, project-based, and horizontal collaboration. These differences at times led to frustration and misinterpretation of intentions:

“I feel like younger colleagues always want to change something but rarely finish what they start. They lack patience”. (B-1, 63)

“Sometimes I feel like older colleagues look down on us. But we just work differently – faster. That doesn’t mean worse”. (M, 27)

At the level of values, older generations emphasized individual responsibility and independence, while younger generations valued shared responsibility and resource distribution. These differences may lead to divergent expectations regarding team leadership, grassroots initiatives, and the decision-making process.

Communication analysis also revealed generational differences in language use – including vocabulary, idioms, brevity, and style. Generations Y and Z frequently use concise messages enriched with digital and memetic terminology, which older teachers sometimes find alienating:

“Sometimes I don’t understand what they’re saying. All this jargon, acronyms, hashtags... I just have a different rhythm of conversation”. (B-1, 63)

Finally, it is worth noting that school leadership often functions as a mediator between these styles – attempting to balance formalism and loyalty with the need for flexibility and responsiveness. This requires competency in managing generational diversity, which is increasingly not only a relational issue but a key condition for effective knowledge and innovation management within schools.

Innovation versus Conservatism – Readiness for Change

The contemporary primary school represents a dynamic space for implementing both technological and organizational innovations. The analysis of interview data revealed a clear polarization in generational attitudes toward change, encompassing emotional responses as well as the willingness to implement change in practice.

Older generations – Baby Boomers and Generation X – expressed caution or reservations toward change, especially when it was imposed from above or implemented without consultation. Their narratives reflected themes of lost control, lack of influence, and distrust in the stability of new solutions:

“There’s always something new. Just when you get used to something, they change it again. Reform after reform – it feels like someone’s experimenting on us”. (B-1, 63)

“We change tools, but no one asks if we have time to learn them. In the end, everyone does it their own way anyway”. (T, 52)

This attitude did not reflect complete resistance to innovation, but rather a conditional acceptance – change is welcomed if preceded by proper implementation, training, and practical support. There is a strong sense of professional responsibility – if a change threatens the quality of student engagement, it is critically scrutinized.

Younger generations – especially Y and Z – demonstrated a pro-innovation professional identity. New technologies, digital tools, unconventional pedagogical strategies, and experimentation with organizational forms (e.g., project-based learning, interdisciplinary teams) were treated as a natural part of the teaching profession:

“Change is part of my job. Without it, I’d be bored. I need to test and improve things. That’s what gives my work meaning”. (D, 34)

“Digital tools aren’t an add-on for me – they’re everyday essentials. Communication with parents? Through an app. Student tasks? On a platform. And it works!” (M, 27)

These accounts suggest that innovation not only increases a sense of agency but is also a key source of job satisfaction for younger generations. Working with new tools is not perceived as a burden but as a developmental challenge.



However, this openness does not always meet with enthusiasm from older colleagues. Several respondents from Generations Y and Z reported experiencing “passive resistance” – a lack of support or the downplaying of their initiatives:

“I was really enthusiastic about introducing a tutoring program. But I was told, ‘we tried that before – it didn’t work’. That’s really discouraging”. (B-2, 46)

This contrast creates a tension in which innovation becomes not only a technological matter but also a symbolic one – signaling generational belonging and serving as a source of (non-) recognition. Nonetheless, examples of constructive intergenerational knowledge transfer were also present:

“There are teachers at school who don’t understand tech, but they’re happy to listen when I show them something. It works – if there’s trust”. (M, 27)

The data suggest that readiness for change is not solely a function of age but is shaped by relational capital, leadership style, and organizational climate. Where trust and collaboration exist, generational differences can become an asset – young teachers contribute innovation, while older ones provide stability and institutional knowledge.

One particularly divisive area was participation in European, digital, and interdisciplinary projects. For Generations Y and Z, involvement in Erasmus+, eTwinning, or Norwegian Fund grants is a given. For many older teachers, such activities are seen as unnecessary “complications”:

“In my day, you taught your lesson, and that was it. Now – conferences, reports, evaluations... And the kids are more tired than ever”. (B-1, 63)

As a result, innovation in schools emerges as a selective cultural mechanism – it integrates those who understand and embrace it while potentially marginalizing those who feel alienated by it.

Intergenerational Management and Institutional Tensions

The style of school leadership and the relationship between management and teachers emerged as one of the most conflict-prone yet fascinating axes of generational differences. Data analysis revealed that different generations have varying expectations of leaders, different definitions of what constitutes a “good principal”, and diverse sensitivities regarding how organizational decisions are enforced.

Teachers from the Baby Boomer generation and part of Generation X viewed the principal as a figure of formal authority – someone who should make decisions independently, command respect, and not be subject to negotiation. Their preferred management style is hierarchical, based on a clear division of roles:

“A principal must be decisive. They can’t try to please everyone – school isn’t a democracy; it’s an institution”. (T, 52)

In contrast, younger generations – especially Y and Z – advocated for participatory leadership in which the leader does not dominate but facilitates, supports, and co-creates decision-making processes. In their view, a good principal “dismantles the hierarchy” and remains open to team input:

“I need a principal who not only tells us what to do but also asks: how do you feel about it? What do you think?” (M, 27)

“The modern school needs a dialogue leader, not a manager from a bygone era”. (D, 34)

These expectations often clash with the realities of a rigid institutional structure subject to extensive external regulation (e.g., from the Ministry of Education, school boards, or local governments), which restricts leadership autonomy. Principals find themselves torn between their traditional bureaucratic role and that of a modern, supportive leader:

“I’m often a mediator. Older staff want order and loyalty, younger ones expect flexibility and instant feedback. You can’t please everyone”. (T, 52)

This role division can result in institutional tensions that transcend individual attitudes. Respondents noted a lack of generational integration strategies, ineffective communication, and asymmetric influence on decisions:

“I feel I have no voice. Staff meetings are just a formality. Older teachers speak, and we stay silent – not because we don’t care, but because there’s no space”. (B-2, 46)

The findings point to a need for managing not only individuals but also the structure of intergenerational relationships as organizational capital. The studied schools lacked formal mechanisms for mentoring, intergenerational coaching, or mixed-age project teams – despite a declared willingness by respondents to engage in such practices when framed as collaboration rather than procedural formality.



Leadership style impacts organizational security and belonging – both critical to school culture. For older teachers, security means stability; for younger ones: understanding, openness, and feedback. Without these conditions, frustration, disengagement, or burnout can result.

“If no one asks how I feel in the team, I stop engaging. Young people need communication, not just instructions”. (M, 27)

“I’m not against change. But when it’s imposed overnight, without discussion – it’s hard to keep up. That’s not leadership; that’s surprise management”. (B-1, 63)

Effective intergenerational leadership requires a hybrid approach that combines formal authority with relational openness, procedural control with flexible communication. The key is not a one-size-fits-all model but generational intelligence – the ability to read contexts and respond appropriately to diverse staff needs.

School Culture as Community or Generational Arena

One of the most paradoxical findings from the study is that the same institution – primary school – can be perceived either as a community of shared values, collaboration, and professional identity, or as a competitive arena marked by generational tensions over influence, status, and agency.

Statements reflecting strong identification with the school often came from older teachers who tied their professional ethos to the workplace:

“I’ve worked here for 30 years. This isn’t just a school – it’s my place in the world”. (B-1, 63)

“I’ve always been loyal to this school. I helped organize events, fix things – even after hours. I felt it was our shared cause”. (T, 52)

Among younger respondents, there was more organizational distance, flexible identification, and stronger attachment to personal rather than institutional values. For them, “school” was one of many contexts for educational engagement, not a place of emotional anchoring:

“I don’t get attached to buildings. What matters is who I work with and whether I can grow. If not – I’ll go elsewhere”. (M, 27)

Importantly, this distance did not indicate a lack of commitment. Younger generations reported strong intrinsic motivation, but did not tie it directly to a single institution. This shift in loyalty sources sometimes caused team tensions:

“I’ve been called disloyal for not staying after school for staff meetings. But I don’t get it – if it’s after hours, why is it mandatory?” (D, 34)

Such situations resulted in internal divides between the “core” and the “new-comers”, the “involved” and the “part-timers”, deepening the sense of fragmentation and suspicion about professional solidarity.

In some schools, respondents openly spoke of silent generational divisions affecting team dynamics:

“Our team is split. There are those who do everything the old way and won’t listen, and those with fresh ideas who aren’t heard. We need a bridge”. (B-2, 46)

The lack of intergenerational dialogue often leads to passive rivalry for recognition and influence – particularly during class assignments, promotions, project leadership, or school representation.

“When projects come up, the older staff usually get the ‘important’ ones. Younger teachers have to prove themselves again and again”. (M, 27)

Despite these tensions, many schools provided positive examples of intergenerational integration – especially where leaders fostered a culture of openness, respect, and shared purpose:

“There are teachers I really connect with despite our age gap. We laugh, we collaborate. Age doesn’t matter if there’s trust”. (D, 34)

“Some younger colleagues teach me more than any training. And sometimes I show them the ‘old way’ – because it still works. We support each other”. (B-1, 63)

These findings suggest that school culture as a community is not a given – it must be continuously negotiated and built. Key enablers include relational support structures, clear communication, opportunities for intergenerational collaboration, and symbolic recognition of diverse styles and competencies.

Absent these elements, the school risks becoming a space of generational competition – split loyalties, exclusionary rituals, and mutual distrust. With effective management, however, it can evolve into a laboratory of generational synergy, where differences become assets rather than threats.



Findings

This chapter presents the main empirical findings of the study, which explored how generational diversity shapes organizational culture and professional interactions within Polish primary schools. Drawing on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, the analysis identifies key themes and patterns that emerged across generational groups and institutional contexts.

The findings are structured around four core dimensions: (1) the manifestations of organizational culture in daily school practices, (2) generational differences in work orientations and values, (3) intergenerational communication and cooperation, and (4) the role of school leadership in navigating generational complexity. Each section integrates illustrative excerpts from the interviews and highlights both recurring tensions and successful practices that emerged from the data.

By focusing on the lived experiences of teachers from four generational cohorts, the chapter seeks to shed light on the subtle dynamics that influence collaboration, inclusion, and the professional climate in school settings. These findings lay the groundwork for the subsequent discussion, which will further contextualize the results within existing research and offer practical recommendations for school leaders and policymakers.

Manifestations of Organizational Culture in School Practice

The study revealed that the organizational culture in the participating schools is shaped by a complex interplay between formal structures and informal relational norms. While official school policies emphasize collaboration, openness, and shared responsibility, everyday interactions among staff often reflect hierarchical tendencies rooted in traditional authority structures. These include rigid communication patterns, unequal access to decision-making, and deference to seniority. Despite formal declarations of inclusivity and participation, generational distance sometimes reinforces silent divisions, limiting authentic cooperation.

Interview data suggest that organizational culture is often experienced through symbolic routines: weekly briefings, mentoring assignments, seating

arrangements in staffrooms, or even informal codes of “who speaks first” during meetings. These cultural artefacts reflect unspoken power dynamics and frequently exclude the voices of younger teachers. Senior staff members – particularly Baby Boomers and Generation X – often act as cultural gatekeepers, establishing norms that are not always transparent to newer colleagues.

Generational Differences in Values and Work Orientations

A central theme emerging from the data is the difference in values, expectations, and professional styles between generations. Baby Boomers and older members of Generation X value institutional loyalty, procedural clarity, and long-term commitment. They associate professionalism with responsibility, discipline, and continuity. Younger cohorts – particularly Millennials and early Generation Z – prioritize flexibility, authenticity, and pedagogical innovation. They seek feedback-rich environments and favor collaborative, non-hierarchical modes of working.

These divergent orientations often lead to misunderstanding and mistrust. Senior teachers sometimes interpret younger colleagues’ need for work-life balance or reluctance to conform as a lack of dedication. Conversely, Millennials and Gen Z teachers perceive rigid structures and “unwritten rules” as obstacles to creativity and psychological safety. Generational stereotypes – e.g., “entitled youth” versus “rigid traditionalists” – were found to influence how colleagues interpret each other’s behavior, often reinforcing distance rather than understanding.

Communication and Intergenerational Cooperation

Communication practices emerged as a significant arena for generational conflict and learning. While older generations rely on direct, often formal modes of communication (e.g., emails, staff meetings), younger teachers prefer informal, fast, and visual forms such as messaging apps or collaborative digital platforms. Differences in tone, expectation of response time, and openness to feedback frequently triggered frustration.



Despite these tensions, instances of successful intergenerational collaboration were also reported – particularly in schools where principals encouraged mentoring, team teaching, or shared planning. In such cases, knowledge flowed in both directions: senior staff offered institutional memory and pedagogical wisdom, while younger colleagues introduced digital tools and student-centered approaches. These partnerships thrived when they were voluntary, mutually respectful, and allowed space for both structure and experimentation.

However, in many schools, mentoring was either absent or limited to administrative onboarding, failing to address cultural or relational integration. As a result, early-career teachers were left to “decipher” school norms through observation, trial, and occasional error, which heightened their professional insecurity and hindered their agency.

Role of School Leadership in Managing Generational Diversity

The role of leadership proved to be pivotal in shaping whether generational diversity became a source of tension or synergy. In schools where principals actively fostered intergenerational dialogue, implemented inclusive decision-making processes, and modelled reflexivity, staff reported greater cohesion and psychological safety. These leaders tended to adopt a participatory style, recognized the unique strengths of different age groups, and deliberately countered stereotypes. They also created protected spaces for feedback and reflection, such as cross-generational project teams or staff learning communities.

In contrast, where leadership defaulted to authoritarian or technocratic models, generational rifts deepened. Younger teachers felt sidelined or invisible, while older staff remained unchallenged in their routines. In such environments, turnover among early-career teachers was notably higher, and collaboration was replaced by parallel work.

The findings underscore that generational diversity is not inherently problematic. Rather, it is the institutional conditions and leadership approaches that determine whether it becomes an asset or a liability. Schools that treat intergenerationality as a strategic resource – rather than an inconvenience – are more likely to foster cultures of trust, innovation, and shared responsibility.

Final Remarks

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature and International Context

The results of the conducted research clearly demonstrate the impact of generational affiliation on the functioning of teachers within the organizational culture of schools. Observed differences in values, work and communication styles, approaches to change, and expectations regarding management confirm findings from international studies on generational diversity in education.

According to the literature, the organizational culture of a school – understood as a set of norms, values, beliefs, and practices – is key in shaping the work climate, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and the level of teacher engagement. Research conducted in Poland indicates the predominance of an institutional model characterized by hierarchical structures and a strong attachment to traditional roles and frameworks (Dobrzyniak, 2015). Findings from our own study confirm this diagnosis, especially in the narratives of Baby Boomers and Generation X teachers, for whom stability and clarity of norms constitute an essential component of organizational security. Compared to Scandinavian countries, where the model of “school as a community of professionals” prevails, Polish schools are still marked by a greater power distance and lower employee participation in strategic decisions (Lazar, 2012). This lack of participation – especially felt by younger generations – creates structural tensions that may weaken the sense of belonging and increase staff turnover. On an international scale, the approach to managing generational diversity in Poland remains in its infancy. In countries such as Canada, Germany, or the Netherlands, strategies are being implemented to develop the competencies of educational leaders in mediating between generations, along with mentoring programs enabling mutual learning between experienced and younger teachers. Meanwhile, Polish schools still lack institutional tools to support such integration. It is also worth noting that the concept of “innovation” is understood differently across countries. In many Western European educational systems, innovation is perceived as a communal process – emerging from the analysis of the needs of the local educational community. In



Poland, as suggested by both literature and research findings, innovations often take the form of top-down reforms, which may explain the resistance of older generations of teachers toward their implementation. The research suggests the need to transform the organizational culture of schools from a hierarchical model to a learning organization that supports intergenerational knowledge sharing. This entails, among other things, creating spaces for generational dialogue, strengthening the role of interdisciplinary teams, and redefining the role of school principals – from administrators to leaders of professional communities (Dobrzyniak, 2015). Moreover, the analysis of the international context shows that generational differences do not necessarily lead to conflict if the organization develops conciliatory mechanisms based on mutual recognition and flexibility. Therefore, it is recommended to implement programs for the development of communication and relational competencies for entire teaching staff – taking into account generational communication specifics and mediation tools (Lazar, 2012). It is also advisable to consider adapting best practices from countries that have successfully built inclusive organizational cultures – such as Finland (trust and autonomy model), Canada (partnership-based team relations), or Denmark (student-oriented structuring and shared responsibility).

Conclusions and Practical Recommendations

The results of the conducted qualitative research reveal a complex picture of the organizational culture of Polish primary schools in which generational differences among teachers are particularly significant. These differences – although they may constitute a potential source of conflict – can become an important organizational asset and a factor of innovation when managed appropriately.

Conclusions

1. The organizational culture of the school is not homogeneous – its perception and practice depend largely on generational affiliation. Older generations (Baby Boomers and Generation X) prefer stable, predictable structures based on authority and loyalty. Younger generations (Y and Z)

are more open to change, innovation, flexible management forms, and horizontal communication.

2. The leadership style of the school principal significantly influences inter-generational relations. Autocratic leaders gain recognition among older staff, while those with a participative and coaching style respond better to the needs of younger teachers.
3. The absence of formal mechanisms for intergenerational integration leads to the emergence of ‘invisible boundaries’ within teaching teams. These divisions manifest in resistance to innovation, conflicts over work styles, and unequal access to professional development opportunities.
4. The concept of organizational loyalty is generationally differentiated – for older staff it is attachment to the institution, while for younger ones it is loyalty to values and relationships. This necessitates a redefinition of traditional management models in education.
5. Innovations in education are perceived by younger generations as a natural element of the teaching profession, while for some older teachers they represent a source of uncertainty and destabilization. Therefore, strategies are needed to bridge this gap.

Practical Recommendations

Based on the conducted research, the following recommendations have been formulated for school principals, governing bodies, and education policy makers:

1. Introduction of intergenerational mentoring programs – Establishing pairs or working groups in which experienced teachers share organizational and pedagogical knowledge, while younger ones contribute digital and innovative competencies. This knowledge transfer should be bidirectional and based on mutual respect.
2. Developing generational intelligence among school leadership – School principals should enhance their competencies related to understanding the expectations and work styles of different generations – for example,



through training in diversity management, relational communication, and mediation.

3. Review of professional advancement and task assignment rules – Transparency in decision-making processes regarding assignment of functions, participation in projects, and allocation of hours should be ensured to avoid generational favoritism.
4. Strengthening organizational culture as a culture of dialogue – Schools should create regular spaces for discussions about mission, values, and organizational vision. Integration meetings, strategic councils involving representatives of different generations, and joint project activities can contribute to building trust and community.
5. Developing teachers' metacommunication skills – Introducing training in generational communication, assertiveness, and constructive feedback can help reduce tensions in teams. Teachers must be able not only to teach but also to collaborate – despite generational differences.
6. Considering generational needs in change planning – New organizational and technological solutions should be consulted with teachers from different generations. This will facilitate their implementation and reduce resistance stemming from a lack of sense of agency.

In conclusion, generational diversity in schools should not be treated as a problem but rather as a strategic opportunity to build an organizational culture based on a balance between tradition and innovation. However, the prerequisite for utilizing this potential is conscious and competent management – both at the internal school level and within education policy.

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