EXAMINING COGNITIVE ASPECTS OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: As noted by UNESCO, the Marrakech Framework for Action can be considered as a call for action to promote and maintain a socially cohesive learning environment inclusive of all. As it pertains to international students successfully attending American schools, colleges, and universities, a welcoming socially cohesive learning environment has been found to be a matter of great importance. This study features primary resources and existing literature that details international students' successes and challenges as they relate to social interactions in academic settings. Findings from this study can be useful to instructors, administrators, student counselors, event planners, and academic advisors of international students.

Keywords: International College Students, Technology, Generational Changes, Sense of Belonging, Cognitive Processing, Alternative Learning Methods, Social Integration in Academic Settings

Introduction

In 2022, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) introduced a global call to action (UIL, 2022). The intention of the Marrakech Framework for Action is to promote and maintain a socially cohesive learning environment that will be inclusive of all. In discussing the framework, Victor Godoy, the Minister of Education for Brazil pointed out the importance of the framework and noted that it "makes commitments to transform the right of lifelong learning into reality" (UIL, 2022a, 01:39). In another discussion, Li Andersson, the Minister of Education from Finland pointed out the framework's potential to "invest in adult education" (UIL, 2022b, 00:04). Andersson also stated that the framework "further strengthens the human rights-based approach" (UIL, 2022b, 00:07). Finally, Ibu Suharti, the Deputy Minister of Education for Indonesia asserted that the framework is likely to have a strong impact on "the health and well-being" of learners (UIL, 2022c, 04:35).

As it pertains to international students, each of the previously mentioned factors are matters of importance, and this is especially true regarding the health and wellness of learners. Zhang and Goodson (2011) examined the health and wellness of international students. In their review of sixty-four peer reviewed studies spanning from 1990 to 2009, they found that social interaction and stress were among the most reported predictors of psychosocial adjustment for both graduate and undergraduate international college students. An additional concern is the fact that recent studies including Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al. (2017), Ngotngamwong (2019), Martirosyan et al. (2019), and Gopalan and Brady (2020) have found similar results as it relates to psychosocial adjustment in academic settings.

This study details some of the factors that have been found to contribute to today's international students' challenges in academic situations. Notable factors include isolation, bouts of low self-confidence, stress, and anxiety (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Siebert, 2021). Prensky (2001) and others, including Twenge (2017), Chicca and Shellenbarger (2018), and Ngotngamwong (2019) have affirmed that solo-participant types of technological activities are playing a role in hindering the social abilities of some individuals from our most recent generations. This study examines these findings and points out some of the variables that are likely to help today's

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international college students improve their social abilities, achieve cognitive stability (Marade, 2021), establish a sense of belonginess, and ultimately, reduce stress and anxiety (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Martirosyan et al., 2019; Seibert, 2021; Strayhorn, 2012).

Technology and Generational Changes

For the past seventy years there have been numerous discussions regarding challenges related to social support and the successful integration of international students into their host country environments (Martirosyan et al., 2019). As we enter the year 2024, these types of discussions are becoming even more important. This is because obstructions and distractions associated with technological advances are increasingly being considered to be factors that affect many of today's college students. Similarly, solo-participant digital activities are considered to be additional factors that are likely to interfere with the social integration of international college students. More specifically, as described by Prensky, "Digital Natives" have "spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age" (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). Along those lines, Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al. (2017) pointed out the fact that the environment from which a person develops can be the "determinant" of their behavior and system of operations (p. 109). Similarly, Ngotngamwong (2019) found that there are both functional and behavior differences in today's generations compared to generations of earlier times. In summation, researchers agree that generational changes including functional and behavior changes can be considered as an effect of technological advancements and individuals' reliance on digital media as a main source of activities and communication.

The grouping and chronological labeling of generational continuities is not a simple task because a precise ending and beginning point between two generations does not exist (Twenge, 2017). Considering the multiple issues that can complicate the goal of chronicling and labeling generations, Reeves and Oh (2007) distinguished a parameter from which to follow. That is,

Figure 1

The Generations Defined
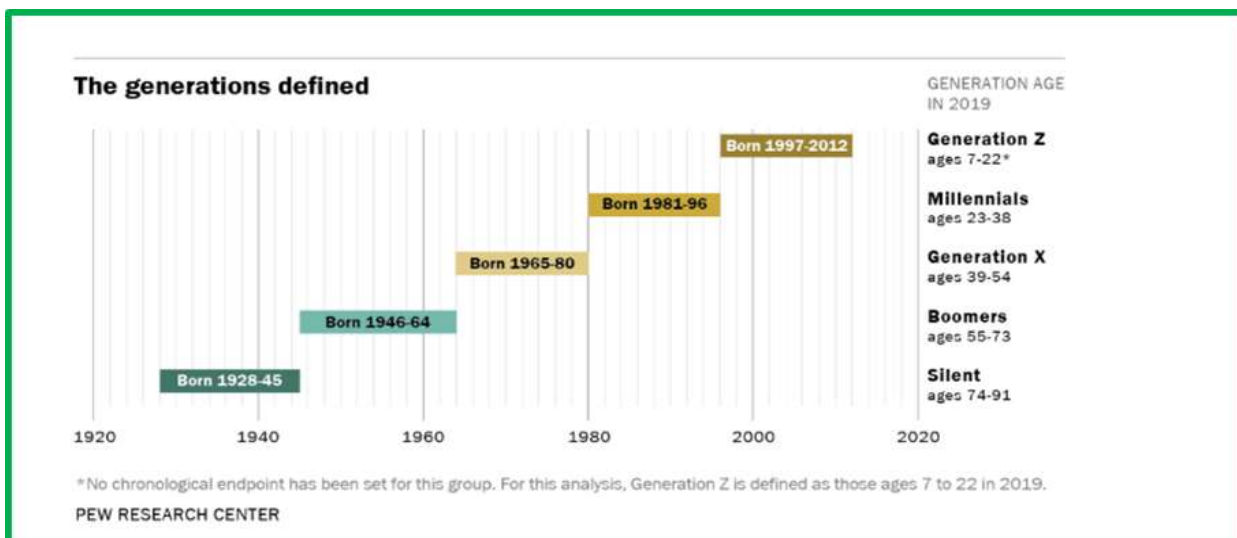
Note. The Dimock (2019) representation of past and recent generational time spans. Copyright 2024 by Pew Research Center. Reprinted with permission.

"Despite the lack of consistency in nomenclature and chronology, most authorities agree that a great deal of variance exists among the distinguishing characteristics within any given generation" (p. 297). That being said, for the purpose of this discussion, a reliable source of distinction is the documentation of Dimock (2019) as compiled for the Pew Research Center.

In his presentation, Dimock (2019) outlined generational changes dating back to the 1920s. As Figure 1 shows, Dimock effectively noted some of the "distinguishing characteristics" (Reeves & Oh, 2007, p. 297) that have defined generations during the past ten decades.

For the purpose of this study, the focus begins with the Baby-Boomer (1946-1964) generation. The Baby-Boomer generation is notable because these individuals lived most of their adult life communicating and functioning in non-digital ways. Moreover, Baby-Boomers were some of the oldest living individuals transitioning to electronic media and digital communications when the new technologies became available for personal use.

Generation X Transforming Baby-Boomers

The longevity of the Baby-Boomer (1946-1964) generation's time span helps to explain the lasting effects of their steadfast way of life prior to the digital age, and their challenges adjusting to new technologies. More specifically, many Baby-Boomers were unmoved as far as entering the new phase of technology was concerned (Heaggans, 2012). As time progressed, the introduction of digital media became a major concern for many individuals of the Baby-Boomer generation because new technologies created the types of changes that would begin to forever change the way that Baby-Boomers experienced life. That is, many personal interactions such as local banking, handwriting letters and physically mailing them, and other basic means of communications were gradually beginning to change. Nonetheless, many older adult learners of technology persevered and eventually learned (Heaggans, 2012).

Heaggans (2012) pointed out that many older adults were much more challenged with the new technologies than the younger generations, and some were overwhelmed in the beginning. In effect, many of these older adults from the Baby-Boomer generation were faced with the choice of learning these new technologies and progressing or ignoring personal advancement and remaining left behind in a rapidly changing world. Looking back, the efforts of Generation X (1965-1980) played a defining role in many Baby-Boomers learning to function in a technological environment. In fact, it was deemed important to determine and document the methods and strategies that contributed to the Baby-Boomers' learning so the process could be continued (Heaggans).

Bridging the Gaps Between Generational Comfort Zones

During the 1980s, Generation X were the primary associates transitioning Baby-Boomers into the technological age. However, today, generational interactions are more diverse. This is because the longevity of generational time spans have changed during recent decades (Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., 2017). Specifically, the "lifetime-long generation transition has become much shorter in the case of the recent generations; the quicker the technological innovations are implemented, the more difficult it is to determine the transition between the generations" (Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., p. 108). Hence, due to the rapid technological innovations, and the shortening of generational time spans that have occurred during the past 40 years, it is very likely that four generations including: Baby-Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996), and Generation Z (1997-2012) may interact at any given time (Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2018; Dimock, 2019; Seibert, 2021; Twenge, 2017).

An issue regarding interactions between multiple diverse generations is the concern that some individuals from the earlier generations may be more socially interactive than some members of the most recent generations prefer (Twenge, 2017). Twenge explained that some members of the most recent generations are highly active online, and they prefer minimal face to face interactions. Twenge credited Generation Z's preferences for mostly texting and communicating via social media to theirs being the first generation to have constant internet access. However, Twenge also stated, some millennials reported extreme technology use, and communication preferences identical to Generation Z.

In a global sense, generational preferences have been reversed over time. More specifically, whereas the Baby Boomers were transformed from their world of personal communications to the digital age, some individuals of more recent generations are being recognized as individuals who may need a transformation from the solo-participant digital world to a zone of personal communication. Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al. (2017) explained one possible solution as follows:

> The discrepancies between generations are often due and strengthened by the different communication of the two generations. As long as a generation is being educated and served by the previous generation, this education will be responsible for any issues with the new generation. (p. 124)

Another perspective was introduced by Chicca and Shellenbarger (2018), they suggested:

> Explaining and demonstrating proper group and interpersonal skills, such as active listening, providing constructive criticisms, and respecting others' perspectives, can help increase social and relationship skills. When providing education, consider including activities that require short bursts of social interactions to help cultivate this skill in Generation Z. (p.252)

Figure 2

Low Cognitive Stability
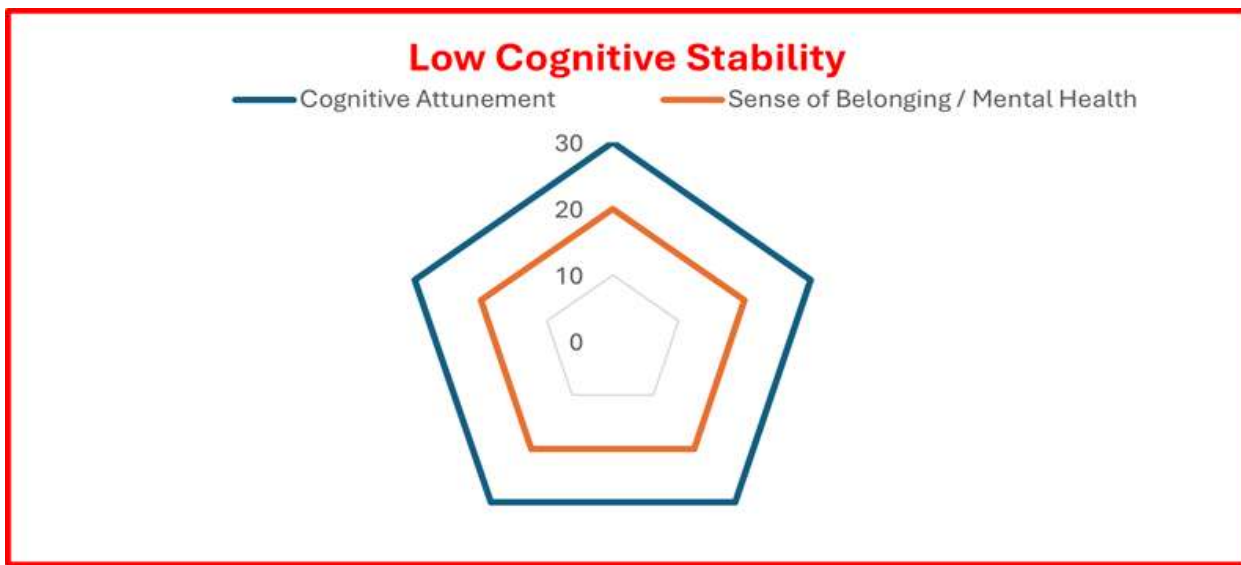
Note. A visual representation of low cognitive stability. Copyright 2024 by Angelo Marade.

Students' cognitive stability, and ultimately, student success is related to their ability to relate to others, communicate with others, and feel a sense of belonging on campus (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Marade, 2021; Strayhorn, 2012). As demonstrated thus far, multi-generational communications (Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., 2017) and successful personal interactions are likely to help achieve these goals.

Cognitive Stability

Many educators have established that there is a relationship between students' sense of belonging, mental health, and student success (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Kitzrow, 2009; Marade, 2019; Stebleton et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). Specifically, a student's sense of belonging is related to sound mental health and cognitive processing (Drigas & Mitsea, 2021; Strayhorn, 2012; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Along those lines, sound cognitive processing, and student success (Sweller, 1994) result from cognitive stability (Marade, 2021). Taken together, a student's mental health and their sense of belonging can affect their cognitive stability because decreases in sense of belonging can lead to decreases in cognitive stability as Figure 2 indicates.

Regarding students' sense of belonging, Gopalan and Brady (2020) stated, "In college, feeling a sense of belonging may lead students to engage more deeply with their studies, leading to persistence and success" (p. 1). However, a student's sense of belonging can be based on varying personal perceptions. Specifically, a perception of being valued by others, and a perception of being respected by others relates to a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). At issue is the circumstance that perceptions of acceptance, including being respected, and one's opinions being valued, are unlikely to be achieved without effective communication skills and effective social exchanges of information (Seibert, 2021; Strayhorn, 2012). Consequently, efforts towards enhancing communication skills and social interaction abilities should be attempted in order to increase the likelihood of achieving a sense of belonging and ultimately, cognitive stability (Marade, 2019).

Cognitive stability is important because a stable cognitive frame of mind is a step forward towards achieving cognitive attunement. As Marade (2021) stated, "cognitive attunement as a process, "revolves around the assumptions that incremental interferences in learning are normal" (p.15). However, interferences must be "attuned/resolved" in order for an individual to "return to a state of cognitive attunement" (p. 15). Experiencing a sense of not-belonging in an academic or social situation can result in destructive stress (Drigas & Mitsea, 2021). In a discussion of metacognition and the intrapersonal experience, Drigas and Mitsea discussed "destructive stress" (p. 12). Specifically, while creative stress can be beneficial, destructive stress cannot. Destructive stress is a form of cognitive interference that can lead to decreases in cognitive stability (Marade, 2021). Accordingly, in order to reach the point of cognitive attunement, destructive stress should be minimized. The ensuing discussion regarding "centers of fear" (Drigas & Mitsea, p. 12) "low-stakes experiences" (Sprinkle & Urick, 2018, p.107) provides further clarification.

In their analysis, Sprinkle and Urick (2018) described the effects of low-stakes experiences and the importance of creating and encouraging low-risk participation in situations when students require assistance interacting with others. Concurrently, the relationship between low-risk opportunities and cognitive attunement is the ability to resolve an issue and proceed forward. More specifically, activities that limit challenges can facilitate likely successful outcomes rather than failures because low-risk opportunities can help to limit fears that individuals may have

about their perceived inferiorities (Drigas & Mitsea, 2021). These types of activities can be helpful for international Generation Z college students who may be less socially interactive because of generational factors, and likely also feel inferior because of their English-speaking skills.

Regardless of their low value in categories such as earning college credits or winning awards, low-risk opportunities can be valuable in several ways. For example, in a recent case involving longitudinal observational research (Marade, 2024), a Chinese student was enrolled in an intermediate Chinese language class. The course-design focused on both Chinese language and culture studies. As the course progressed, the Chinese student was able to help other individuals better understand Chinese culture and language. During that process, the student learned more effective English language skills from conversations that he had with other students who spoke proficient English. In the end, the value of the course was low from the perspective of credits earned. However, taking the course resulted in a high-value outcome that was demonstrated by the student's emotional development, identity development, and improvement in cognitive stability which contributed to his cognitive attunement (Marade, 2021).

In summation, the low-risk low-value experience resulted in a high intrinsic value outcome for the student. The experience helped to make the student feel valued and respected. The experience also helped to make the student feel important to the group, all of which are described by Strayhorn (2012) as factors that contribute to feeling a sense of belonging. As demonstrated in Figure 3, the student's level of cognitive stability increased, which in turn contributed to his reaching a level of cognitive attunement.

Figure 3

Cognitive Attunement
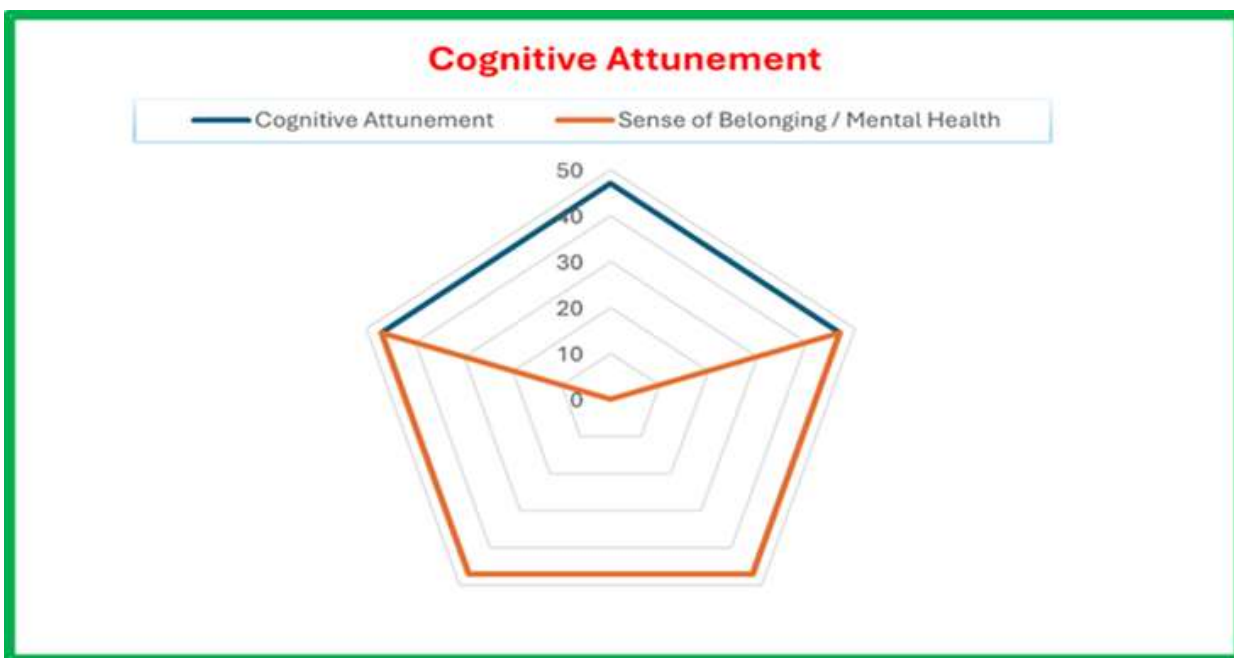
Note. A visual representation of cognitive attunement. Copyright 2024 by Angelo Marade.

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Essentially, the student experienced what Marade (2024) termed "confidence compensation" (p. 3) and increased his cognitive stability. More specifically, the student's English-speaking confidence was low. However, the student compensated via his ability to utilize his proficiency in Chinese language and culture to help others achieve their established goals. Taken together, the student experienced a role-reversal transition from always following to leading. Lee (2013) recognized these types of international student role reversals for herself. Specifically,

> In my own experience as a professor, I have found that many international students tend to be quite shy and quiet in class but have much to offer in a friendlier environment where they don't have to compete with other students for attention. I have truly enjoyed getting to know them during class but especially during my office hours and after class. In many cases, roles reversed whereby my international students were my teachers, enlightening me about their respective cultures and how the class material might relate to their home countries. (Lee, 2013, p. 3)

Role-reversal and confidence-compensating activities can be implemented in other areas as well. For example, a group activity with a focus on areas where one excels – such as art, playing cards, or book reading can increase social interactions when participants have similar interests and relatable conversations (Nielsen et al., 2021). Additional examples include sports activities as a means of social cohesion (Moustakas, 2022). Gil-Lopez et al. (2021) utilized physical education courses to enhance social integration and English-speaking skills. In a related case study, Li and Zizzi (2018) utilized the game of badminton as a means to demonstrate that "physical activity can serve as a social vehicle which facilities intercultural communication within international students" (p. 404). Each of these types of role-reversal and confidence-compensating activities can effectively ease tensions for students who may feel inferior to others. Accordingly, these examples can serve as viable options for event planners and organizers. After all, the fundamental purpose and the ultimate goal in student planning is the activities fall within the skillset and the comfort zone of the students.

Activity planners for international students consistently plan varied events (Martirosyan et al., 2019). However, some international students tended to avoid certain activities (Lee 2013). Li and Zizzi (2018) explained the possibility of international students feeling awkward at social events. The researchers stated:

> In general social occasions (e.g., parties, pubs), international students might feel confused and uncomfortable. For example, international students might need the in-depth knowledge of the local language, social, and cultural background to understand and respond to Americans' jokes. Even if they were knowledgeable in English, the context information was missing. The intercultural communication in physical activity (i.e., sports play, recreational exercise) can be an easier start which does not require context information. (p. 404)

The preceding Li and Zizzi dialogue described perceptions of an event and a person's reaction based on their personal preferences and comfort zone. The situation as a whole aligns with the discussions of Gopalan and Brady (2020) and (Strayhorn, 2012) as they addressed a sense of belonging. In summation, the way an individual feels internally, is their reality. Hence, if an individual feels that they belong, they do. However, if an individual feels as if they do not belong, in their mind – they don't. Thus demonstrating, the cognitive aspects of social interactions can be affected by generational differences, individual preferences, and an individual's perceptions.

As it pertains to generational changes, the combined effects of generational changes that have taken place over the past decade created a complexity of variables that affect international students, and students in general. Generational changes have added another dimension to challenges in regard to social interactions. Specifically, earlier generations consider in-person social interactions to be the normal mode of functioning in our society. Conversely, members of recent generations who are high consumers of technology, consider texting and interacting online to be their normal mode of communication.

Regarding technology, an individual being a high consumer of technology is not a concern solely because of the amount of usage. Instead, extensive usage of electronic media is a concern because it is related to isolation, and challenges with social skills (Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., 2017; Ngotngamwong, 2019; Seibert, 2021). As it pertains to social interactions, Chicca and Shellenbarger (2018) found that "underdeveloped social and relationship skills", and "increased risk for mental health concerns such as isolation, anxiety, insecurity, and depression" were attributes of Generation Z (p.255). Knowing that high technology usage is related to mental health concerns, and mental health is related to cognitive stability, preventive methods should be considered in an effort to support students in need of assistance.

Conclusion

Cell phones and personal computers became prevalent during the late 1980s and 1990s. As time progressed, technological advancements continued and expanded to include the internet, email communications, and ultimately, social media platforms (Heaggans, 2012; Prensky, 2001). The timing of these new technologies benefited Generation X (1965-1980) and Millennials (1981-1996) because these generations transitioned more gradually from a world of extensive personal communication to the digital forums and electronic media that followed. On the other hand, Generation Z (1997-2012) was found to be more affected by technological advances because of their highly digitally driven living environments compared to generations before them (Chicca and Shellenbarger, 2018; Twenge, 2017). In sum, as educators, we should take into consideration both the possible stressors and the possible comfort zones of all students when planning for their endeavors, thus ensuring that they can maintain cognitive stability, achieve true cognitive attunement, and perform at the peak of their ability.

Implications for Future Research

This literature review and presentation of primary observational research demonstrates some of the current effects of generational changes and their effects on cognitive stability. Additional research is needed to better understand the underlying causes of students' lack of a sense of belongingness. Additionally, the roles that low-risk confidence-compensating opportunities including sports can play in reducing students' anxiety and increasing students' sense of belonging in academic situations should be further examined.

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