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# Unpacking the Millennials: A Cautionary Tale for Teacher Education

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*Abstract: This paper is about the millennial generation. Much has been written about the generation: their character; beliefs; motivations; values; and future potentialities. This literature has gained momentum as marketers, employers, and educators seek to understand the generation as they come of age and enter into positions of social responsibility. The purpose of this paper is to examine the claims made about the Millennials, determine who are making these claims and why, and discuss the utility of such claims for teacher educators. This paper argues that teacher educators should be cautious about accepting and adopting popular discourses about the generation as a basis for the designing and developing millennial appropriate educational practices and pedagogy.*

## Introduction

The Millennials are in vogue. The proliferation of published academic and popular literature on this generation of youth has gathered momentum with their coming of age and their subsequent entry into tertiary education and positions of employment and social responsibility. This literature has generally manifested as an attempt to understand and describe this generation's character, motivations, values, and future potentialities and to compare these qualities and traits to previous generations.

The purpose of this paper is to examine claims made about the Millennials, determine who are making these claims and discuss the utility of such claims for teacher educators. Initially, this paper introduces the generation by focusing on what they are called, when they were born and their estimated numbers. It then, seeks to explain how generations develop particular characteristics by drawing upon concepts relevant to Mannheim's (1952) generational theory. This is followed by an examination of three different perspectives: marketing and advertising; workplace management and training; and higher education and what they are saying about the generation. Finally, the paper presents some cautions about uncritically adopting these claims made for those involved in teacher education.

## Naming the Generation

There is limited consensus on who actually belongs to this generation and what to refer to them as and, as such, there are innumerable estimates of their birth dates and age parameters and a plethora of labels. The proliferation of names for this generation is as much a response to the proclivities of the generation as it is to those

describing and trying to understand them. Some names signify their location in the generational hierarchy, others point to historical date markers, and yet others emphasise supposed common characteristics, inclinations, and preferences.

For example, since the late 1990s, the label Generation Y and its derivatives: Gen Y; Y Gen; or Yers has been popular by authors to identify and locate the generation as the one proceeding Generation X (Marlatt, 1999; McManus, 1999; Sheth, Sisodia, & Sharma, 2000; Stapinksi, 1999). The use of the terms NeXters and Generation Next also fulfils this situating role (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Similarly, the terms Baby Busters, Boomlets, and Echo Boomers (Alch, 2000; Allerton, 2001; Weiss, 2003) identify this generation as offspring of the Baby Boomer generation.

The changing of one century into another has historically had significant psychological impact on Western nations (Strauss & Howe, 1997). The year 2000 was no exception and provided the impetus for designating young adults and teens coming of age at that time. This historical milestone provided the context which generated a slew of names such as the Millennial Generation, Millennials, Generation 2000, and Generation Y2K (Aviles, Phillips, Rosenblatt, & Vargas, 2005; D'Antonio, 2005).

There has also been a propensity to highlight a particular characteristic of the generation and label them accordingly. Mackay (1997) refers to them as the Options Generation due to an apparent aversion to long term commitment and a preference for keeping their options open, and Tillisch (2001) refers to them, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as Generation Goody Two Shoes. However, more commonly, they are referenced to their relationship with digital technologies which are seen as integral to their lifestyles, behaviours, and character formation. This relationship has generated such names as the Net Generation, N-Gen, Internet Generation, Plug and Play Generation, Nintendo Generation, Digital Generation, D (for digital) Generation, Generation Dotcom, e-gen, Cyber Generation, and the Connected Generation (Dembo, 2000; Dobbins, 2005; Green, 2000; Lippincott, 2005; Spanier, 2003; Zaslow, 2005; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).

For the most part, it has been members of the Baby Boomer generation who have been preoccupied with determining a name for this generation. The actual generation in question has yet to determine its own moniker, although when surveyed on their preferences, members of the generation ranked 'Millennials' as their preferred choice (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Arguably, consensus on a name may not eventuate until the generation ages, takes on more social responsibility, and enters into the public discourse about who they are and their place and role in society. Such was the case with Generation X where initial Baby Boomer imposed labels of Twentysomethings, Slackers, Postboomers and the MTV Generation (Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001) were superseded by Generation X's preference for the more common Gen X which, according to them, reflected their intense aversion to the whole concept of labeling (Denham & Gadbow, 2002). The inability to agree on a common name for this generation is also reflected in the conflicting opinions on birthdates and age parameters.


**Locating the Millennials**

Mannheim (1952, p. 290), a germinal author on generational theory, employs the concept *generational location* to explain what he terms the *problem of generations*. Generational location highlights the chronological location of a cohort of

individuals at any given age. It is about individuals being born during a designated historical time period and accordingly having specific resources and experiences available to them which are characteristic of that time period (Edmunds & Turner, 2002):

> . . . belonging to the same generation or age group, endow[s] the individuals sharing in [it] with a common location in the social and historical process, and thereby limit them to a specific range of potential experiences, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action. (Mannheim, 1952, p. 291)

The exact location of the Millennials is disputed. Some authors speculate that the first Millennial individuals were being born into society as early as 1976 (Cui, Trent, Sullivan, & Matiru, 2003; Duff, 1999) which, in 2007, would make the oldest members of this generation thirty-one years of age and overlaps with the birthdates attributed to Generation X, which range from 1961 to 1981 (Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001).

Whereas 1976 is perhaps the earliest estimate for the Millennials, more commonly the birthdates range from 1977 – 1983 with the majority of authors favouring the early-to-mid eighties (Anderson, 2000-2001; Gardener & Eng, 2005; Gronbach, 2000; Tsui, 2000; Weiss, 2000). The confusion continues when trying to determine the span of the generation. 1994 is accepted by some as the final birth date (Allerton, 2001; Darko, 2000; Pekala, 2001), while others suggest that members of the generation are still being born (Gardener & Eng, 2005; Tsui, 2000; Weiss, 2000). This places the generational span, variously, from 15 to 21 years of age with the majority of authors claiming a generational span of 18 to 25 years (Alch, 2000; Chordas, 2001; Gronbach, 2000; Mannheim, 1952; Strauss & Howe, 1997).

The confusion over birth and life span parameters gives rise to differing estimations of the size of the generation. In the North American context, estimates range from as little as 19 million (Brier, 2004) with a generational span of 16 years and a commencing birth date of 1978 to 90 plus million (Spanier, 2003). The majority of authors (Anderson, 2000-2001; Gronbach, 2000; Pekala, 2001) support a figure of approximately 70 - 80 million which constitutes approximately 30 percent of the North American population. This percentage compares to the Australian situation where approximately 30 percent of the population has been born since 1980 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). This large generation has been referred to as the next *great generation* due to their vast numbers and their ability to potentially impact social institutions as they age (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Zemke, 2001). Assuming that the Millennial's birth dates range from the late 1970s to mid 1980s, this would place the oldest members of the generation in their mid to late 20s in 2007.

While there is less consensus about the historical location of this generation and what to refer to them as, there is somewhat more consensus on what they are like. Mannheim (1952, p. 302) explains how individuals born within the same historical period will exhibit similar characteristics by referring to the concepts of *generation as actuality* and *generation unit*.

## Determining the Character of a Generation

### Generation as Actuality

Mannheim (1952) notes that each generational location has a range of potential experiences available to those born during that chronological period, however not all will necessarily share in or partake of them. He proposes the concept of *generation as actuality* (p. 302) which refers to individuals born at a similar time and location and experiencing and responding to the same historical events and phenomena inherent within their location. Unlike generational location, which is a passive category merely situating a social generation along a span of time, generation as actuality or *mobilized generations* (Antikainen & Kauppila, 2002, p. 215) is particularly about how a generation respond to traumatic destabalising social changes and how these responses form the persona of the generation.

Essentially, when critical moments occur, members of each generation will be occupying the same *generational cubicle* or at the same developmental stage-of-life (Strauss & Howe, 1997, p. 66). While it is true that any major social change in history will affect all generations living at that time, how they are affected will differ depending on their generational cubicle. Critical historical events occurring in a generation's formative years are particularly influential in determining the shape of the generation as it is at this stage that youth are learning about the larger society and forming their understanding of the political world (Schuman & Scott, 1989). For example, the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001 was undoubtedly traumatic for, and left an emotional imprint, on all living generations. However, this emotional response differed from individual to individual depending on their generational cubicle. For the younger generation this momentous event and its aftermath of the ongoing *war on terror* will have contributed to how they understand themselves as future adults, parents, homemakers, and global citizens and how they then realise this into their future social beings (Pai, Adler, & Shadiow, 2006).

### Generation Units

Further, Mannheim, (1952, p. 302) proposes that subgroups or *generation units* exist within actual generations. These subgroups or units, while being exposed to the same traumatic and destabalising events, experience, shape, and realise these experiences in different and specific ways. For example, Gee (2002, p. 53) proposes that *Bobos* are a generation unit of elite, professionals within the Baby Boomer generation and that slackers and e-cowboys are two different generation units within Gen X. Edmunds and Turner (2002) summarise the relationship between generational location, generation as actuality, and generation units as:

> A 'generational location' is a cluster of opportunities or life chances that constitute the 'fate' of a generation. There emerges a 'generation as actuality' that shares a set of historical responses to its location and then within a generation there are generation units which articulated structures of knowledge or a consciousness that express their particular location. (p. 10)

Much of the literature generated to explain the character of the generation has emanated from three distinct perspectives: marketing and advertising, workplace management and training, and higher education.

## Examining the Literature

Those involved in the marketing and advertising professions were amongst the first to identify the Millennials as a distinct group of people. This interest in the generation, which largely commenced from the mid 1990s, was undoubtedly motivated by the generation's entry into their early and mid teens and into their lives as independent consumers. They were considered a very lucrative market, having significant discretionary and disposable incomes as a result of indulgent parents and grandparents, an improved economy, and their involvement in part-time employment (Gronbach, 2000; Keating, 2000; Marlatt, 1999). Understandably, the focus of this early literature, which drew upon such market research companies as Saachi & Saachi; Youth Intelligence and The Yankelovich Group (Coeyman, 1998; Goff, 1999; Stapinsky, 1999), was to understand and describe the Millennials as current and future consumers and to develop strategies to market to them (Omelia, 1998; Radice, 1998).

The workplace management and training and higher education literature emerged towards the late 1990s and became more prolific as the new millennium progressed. It was targeted at comprehending the generation as future employees and tertiary students. Indeed, there has been a flurry of higher education literature within the past few years as Universities seek to understand the teaching and learning requirements of their incoming millennial students, improve retention rates, and develop strategies on how best to market their institutions to them. Much of this literature originates from student services divisions, student support groups, and those interested in the first year experience (Bigger, 2005; Krause, 2005; Murray, 1997). While the literature from these two perspectives often draws upon the same sources of data used by those writing from an advertising and marketing perspective, there is also reference to data generated by human resource management firms (Pekala, 2001), individual's own social research (Mackay, 2001) and research aimed at understanding the students' first year experiences (Bigger, 2005; Krause, 2005).

As a prelude to discussing its utility for teacher education, I organise the literature under the most commonly mentioned characteristics across the three perspectives. These are the Millennial's propensity for digital media, their confidence and optimism, and their orientation towards collaboration.

### The Digital Millennial

The three bodies of literature consistently depict the generation as natives and products of the digital culture (Prensky, 2004). Those writing from a marketing and advertising perspective were first to recognise and refer to the generation's digital proclivities and continue to consider it more than the other two perspectives. Their focus, arguably motivated by market and profit driven imperatives, is concerned with identifying the types of digital technologies that the Millennials favour, how, when, and why they engage with these digital technologies and how best to utilise this knowledge for their marketing advantage. For example, Brier (2004, p. 3) speaks about the *at-work market* where advertisers target the millennial Internet user in their

workplace and Keating (2000) advises on how shopping malls should incorporate more digital technologies in their design to attract the millennial shopper.

Although less of a concern than in the above literature, *being digital* is also noted in the other two perspectives. It is elucidated within the context of meeting the workplace and educational needs and preferences of the millennial young adult and adjusting organisational and institutional cultures and practices in light of these needs. For example, Murray (1997) and McGuire (nd) argue that higher education services and resources need to more closely align with millennial expectations for extensive and "well-developed systems in place" (Murray, 1997, p. 42) and Green (2000) and Pekala (2001) argue that workplace supervisors and managers need to adjust their expectations and practices in light of millennial digital characteristics such as having a sense of immediacy, a short attention span, and a propensity to boredom.

**The Confident and Optimistic Millennial**

The three bodies of literature are unanimous in their claims that the Millennials are confident, self assured, have high self esteem, and an optimistic outlook on life (Habley, 1995; Levere, 1999; Taylor, 2003; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Those writing from a marketing and advertising perspective elucidate Millennial confidence in terms of their purchasing behaviour and argue that it stems from being informed, knowledgeable, experienced, and seasoned consumers (Coeyman, 1998; Goff, 1999; Gronbach, 2000; Keating, 2000; Krebsbach, 2001; Lever, 1999; Paul, 2001; Shepherdson, 2000; Stapinsky, 1999).

The workplace management and training perspective also notes their confident and optimistic character particularly as they relate to their role as employees and link these characteristics to a penchant for being ambitious, success oriented, and goal achieving (Raines, 2002; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). This literature describes them as young, optimistic, self assured employees who are driven to succeed, and are confident that they, as "valuable" employees, deserve to have their voices heard and their demands met. However, unlike the previous perspective that offers little in the way of caution, this literature warns that their confidence and self assurance often leads the generation to overestimate their employability, desirability, skills and abilities, and manifests as unrealistic expectations for their supervising managers, for employment, and for career advancement (Chordas, 2001; Durrett, 2004, Gaylor, 2002; Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001; Zemke, 2001).

The generation's over-confidence in their own abilities is also noted by those writing from the higher education perspective. In this case, it is referenced to their academic abilities where as Habley (1995) and Soule (2001) claim they believe that not only their academic and intellectual abilities, but also their artistic and leadership abilities are above average and, in some cases, in the top 10% of all tertiary students.

Unlike the advertising and marketing perspective which claims that the generation's confidence and self assurance stems from being cognisant with the prevailing consumer discourse, those writing from the latter two perspectives agree that this aspect of the generation's character can best be traced to the effects of having been raised in a society preoccupied with protecting its youth from a period of seemingly random, rapid, and relentless sociocultural change and reorganisation (Mackay, 1997; Strauss & Howe, 1997). These protective measures included refocusing social institutions on the interests and future outcomes of their youngest citizens (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).

**The Collaborative Millennial**

It is commonly noted that the Millennials exhibit a collaborative team mentality and are strongly oriented towards their peers (Dembo, 2000; Gronbach, 2000; Raines, 2002; Weiss, 2003; Zemke, 2001). Those writing from the marketing and advertising perspective were first to recognise this aspect of the generation's character and seized upon it in developing and implementing *millennial effective* advertising and marketing strategies, such as peer recommendations and viral advertising (Coeyman, 1998; Shepherdson, 2000).

It is understandable that the workplace management and training and higher education literature would focus on the Millennial's abilities to work with others. Interestingly, unlike the marketing and advertising perspective, who arguably have a vested interest in framing the generation as a collective, these two bodies of literature do make limited mention of their individualism. For Soule (2001) the group's individualistic orientation is most evident in their dislike for collective political activism or participation in political activities. Montana and Lenaghan (1999) claim that the Millennials prefer to be respected as and catered to as individuals in their place of employment.

However, it is more common for the Millennials to be described as having a team orientation or what Zemke (2001, p. 48) refers to as a "leave no one behind" mentality. As employees and tertiary students it is claimed (Durrett, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2003; Zemke, 2001) that they prefer working and learning situations that rely upon collaboration, equality of effort and group and team evaluation over those that promote competition and individual recognition and reward.

The Millennials collaborative attitude extends beyond peer group associations encompassing their relationship with their parents, whom they are said to respect, grandparents, whom they are said to admire and wish to emulate, and social institutions, which they see as supportive of and concerned for their interests and needs. It is when reflecting on these diverse relationships that authors assume that the generation is conservative, traditional and rule following (Donnison, 2004; Durrett, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2003; Weiss, 2003).

Most often changes in pedagogy and educational practice over the previous 20 years is cited as a possible cause for the generation's collaborative orientation and rule following behaviour (Howe, & Strauss, 2003). Indeed, for many of this generation, their enculturation into the discourses of education began at a very early age in child care centres, play groups, and kindergartens. This early exposure to peer group settings, augmented by their later experiences in an education system focused on group work, group assessment, and group evaluation is said to have had significantly contributed to the generation's positive attitude towards the appropriateness, benefits and value of working in peer teams.

As teacher educators, it is tempting to uncritically accept what has been written by and agreed upon by so many about the generation as doing so conveniently packages them as predictable and thereby potentially simplifies the work and role of the educator. Indeed, possessing the above mentioned qualities would appear to bode well for the Millennial's success as tertiary students and future teaching professionals as they appear to mesh with current discourses of pedagogy and educational and professional practice. However, in the following I offer some cautions against unquestionably accepting these qualities as a basis for teacher education practices.

**Discussion**

If, as Sercombe, Omaji, Drew, Cooper, and Love (2002) argue that social categories such as children, youth, and generations are socially defined and constructed, it follows that the aforementioned characteristics attributed to the millennial generation could similarly be socially constructed. Most millennial experts are Baby Boomers; members of the generation that cocooned their millennial children with child safety legislations, child oriented social policies, and child friendly rearing practices. Their treatises on the generation are characterised by accolades and a noticeable lack of negative critique and may be more reflective of their own enculturation into the sociocultural context of the 1980s and 1990s than the generation which they describe. Their construction of the generation as special since birth arguably continues to influence their perception of the Millennials and questions the notion that baby boomer researchers and writers can be objectively detached from their millennial subjects.

There are few Millennials researching or writing about their own generation. Heath (2006), a recent millennial contributor, has attempted to describe and advocate for his generation. Disappointingly, the author's approach takes the form of a rallying cry for generational revolution rather than a serious expose on his millennial cohort. Irrespective, it is interesting that he supports and validates the claims made by the previous baby boomer inspired literature, especially those claims that pertain to millennial positive characteristics such as being optimistic, goal oriented, capable, confident, and achieving.

In general, Millennials have allowed others to determine who they are, what they believe and what they can become. Prior to 2000, much of the discourse about the generation was motivated by advertising and marketing imperatives and depended upon independent market research. Since that time, authoritative voices on the generation have tended to coalesce around a few main authors and researchers: historians, Neil Howe and William Strauss; and, to a lesser extent, workplace management and training researcher and writer, Claire Raines. These authors have dominated the literature, and become "germinal" with their claims being taken as axiomatic and forming the basis and parameters of thinking and research in this area.

Furthermore, these pre-eminent authors, as do most, emanate from a North American perspective, although Australian researchers such as Donnison (2004), Krause (2005), Mackay (1997), and McGregor (2001) have begun to contribute to the field. It is naïve to assume that a global generation can be defined and described based substantially on North American literature, research, and data. It is common for those contextualising millennial characteristics to refer to the Columbine High School massacre, the space shuttle Challenger disaster, and the Oklahoma city bombings as defining events in all millennial's upbringing (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). While it is possible that North American youth may have responded to these traumatic experiences by processing them into similar ways of behaving, thinking, and acting (Mannheim, 1952), it is debatable whether Australian youth of the 1980s and 1990s similarly reacted given their geographic location and the nature of Australian media news coverage at that time.

Given the above concerns, there is an inherent danger in assuming the veracity of the claims made about the millennial generation. Not withstanding, higher education, in general, and teacher education, in particular, recognise the need to

respond to -- not only changing economic and cultural conditions -- but also to changing generational conditions (Luke, Luke, & Mayer, 2000, p. 6). Much of the research in this area has focused on understanding the formation and motivation of the millennial student from an institutional level (Krause, 2005). Research from a teacher education perspective, and especially from an Australian teacher education perspective, has been limited.

Teacher education is about empowering students to be future activist teaching professionals who are reflective, moral and ethical, critical, educational and community activists, advocates for social justice, and organic individuals (Amobi, 2006; Day, 2004; McLaren & Baltodano, 2000; Sachs, 2003). Current baby boomer inspired discourses on the millennial generation, that impose prescribed ways of thinking, acting, and being do little to empower them. For example, anecdotally, many teacher educators would agree that their young millennial students are technologically literate and that this literacy is essential for change agency. However, while the generation may be techno-literate, this does not necessarily translate into change agency. If change agency is also about having a vision for and willingness to embrace change and engage in new challenges (Day, 2004; Fullan, 1993) then the generation's propensity towards conservatism, conservation, and institutional continuity (Donnison, 2004) poses a challenge to teacher educators in their preparation of these future teaching professionals.

There is no doubt that the onus is on teacher educators to develop pedagogically appropriate teaching and learning strategies for their millennial students. These strategies must be informed by sustained educational research that seeks to understand the millennial generation from their perspective rather than be based on the dubious claims of others. It is only when the Millennials engage in the active co-construction of their own discourses that real empowerment will be possible.

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