

The Millennial Generation Special Education Teacher: Promise or Problem

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Abstract

Young Americans born between 1982 and 2002 (also known as members of the Millennial Generation) are now or soon will be beginning their careers in many professions, including special education. This article describes why Millennial Generation special education teachers are vital to the current and future development of the field. It also details commonly reported traits of these individuals that may have a positive or negative impact on their efforts to educate children with exceptionalities. Specific strategies for teacher educators, special education supervisors, co-workers, and other stakeholders are discussed as to how to best guide and support these teachers.

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Why Millennial Special Educators Make a Difference

According to the U.S. Department of Education, approximately six million, or one in ten, school age children receive special education services. However, the recruitment and retention of highly qualified special education teachers continues to be a severe and chronic problem for American public schools (Council for Exceptional Children, 2007). It is therefore critical that administrators understand the attrition problem and what they can do to best meet the unique needs of these educators. The purposes of this article are to address the potential strengths and needs of the youngest cohort of special education teachers, and to give administrators insight regarding how to support these individuals as they advance in the field.

The Millennial Generation (also known as Generation Y or Echo Boomers) are the approximately 76 million Americans born between 1982 and 2002 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennials are currently starting their careers in many professions including special education. Their presence and contributions to the field will have a serious and long-reaching impact.

Fifty percent of all public school teachers in the United States are currently eligible for retirement; an estimated one-hundred thousand teachers are expected to step down by the 2010-2011 school year (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2009). Many additional mid-career teachers are advancing into administrative and other supervisory roles. It is therefore critical that teacher-educators, administrators, co-workers, and other stakeholders better understand the unique strengths and potential

challenges of those directly responsible for the current and future education of children with special needs.

Both Their Biggest Asset and Greatest Liability

One of the most important things to remember about Millennial special educators is that they are the first generation of teachers whom have all been born well after national special education laws were put into place in the 1970's. These individuals have never lived through a time when concepts such as "least restrictive environment", "free appropriate public education", and "individualized education plan" were not a standard part of the American public school system.

It is unclear whether this factor is more of an asset or liability in regards to Millennials' attitude, efforts, and commitment to the field of special education. On the positive side, as students, the Millennials have been regularly exposed to inclusion, co-teaching, differentiated instruction and many other strategies and programs used to fully integrate children with disabilities into the general education curriculum. As teachers, they may need substantially less motivation and convincing that such activities are valuable to schools and the students they serve.

An opposing point of view states that Millennials are incapable of fully appreciating the historical struggles, setbacks, and discrimination encountered by children with disabilities without having lived through it. It may be argued that the impact and significance of inclusion cannot be truly valued, unless an individual has witnessed the era of segregation and institutionalization before it. Further complications may arise if Millennials make assumptions that every professor, co-workers or administrators shares their perspective regarding what they consider the best placement and practices for students with disabilities.

Limitations

Before describing common Millennial attributes, it is vital to acknowledge the limitations of the discussion. In their book, *Millennials Go to College*, Howe and Strauss (2003) addressed this issue:

Every generation is full of all kinds of people. But each generation has a personality with core traits. Not all members of that generation will share those traits, and some may even personally rebel against them, but-like it or not-those core traits will define the world inhabited by every member of a generation.

Select Strengths of Millennial Special Education Teachers

Millennials have many traits considered positive and desirable by most members of society. Some traits may have a direct impact on the field of special education. The next section addresses three of these common traits: (a) appreciation for diversity, (b) mastery of technology, and (c) commitment to the group.

Appreciation of Diversity

Millennials are described as the most diverse generation in the history of the United States (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This is represented in the wide variety of cultures, ethnicities, and national origins amongst its members. Although previous “melting pot” generations have also been diverse, their differences were met with tolerance at best, and discrimination at worst.

Conversely, Millennials are known for their skills at embracing and celebrating the diversity of others. It is not hard to see how this trait would be of great value to a quality special education teacher. There are few more heterogeneous environments in the typical school than the special education classroom.

The accomplished teacher must know how to work with any number of physical disabilities, cognitive impediments, and behavioral challenges in the course of a day. A positive attitude and a sincere desire to accept the differences of others make this task much easier. Furthermore, comfort and ease with other cultures may help bridge the inherent sociological gap between the majority of special education teachers who are white females and the large percentage of her African-American male student counterparts (Nettles & Perna, 1997).

Mastery of Technology

It comes as no surprise to state that most Millennials fully embrace technology. After all, they shared a bassinet with the World Wide Web. They know how to best utilize technology to make their lives easier and more fulfilling. They have the potential to do the same for their students.

Instructional technology can vastly improve the academic lives of many children with special needs. However, there are perceived limitations on its successfulness. Research shows that one variable that influences the usefulness of an instructional technology is the technology comfort level of the instructor (Morris, 2002; Cuban, 2001). Millennials hold the potential to not only fully incorporate instructional technology into the classroom, but to also be actively involved in the creation and implementation of the tools of tomorrow.

Commitment to the Group

Millennials are described as being extremely team-oriented (Howe & Strauss, 2003). More than any past generation, they rely upon devices such as the internet, cell phones, and personal digital assistants in order to stay in close communication with family, friends and associates. They may have thousands of friends on Face Book or send up to the minute “tweets” on Twitter. They have been shaped in school by cooperative learning and group projects. Their Little Leagues and soccer teams shifted in emphasis from competition to teamwork. They understand and value commitment to the group.

Collaboration is an especially valuable and needed skill for special education teachers. They are regularly asked to contribute their expertise with other professionals as part of a multidisciplinary team. They must work with parents, professionals, and often the student herself as part of the IEP team. Other prominent special education practices such as response to intervention and co-teaching require teachers to utilize strong interpersonal skills. All of these activities may come much easier to those whom have an innate ability to “play nice with others.”

Select Challenges of Millennial Special Education Teachers

Not all news about the Millennials is positive. For example, a recent survey revealed that nearly a third of polled business recruiters described members of this generation as “poor performers” (Lawrence, 2008). Some of the specific traits may have a negative impact on special education. They include (a) praise hunger, (b) leading sheltered lives, and (c) perceived lack of job commitment.

Praise Hunger

Young adults have grown up in a culture with an immense amount of specific and immediate feedback. Parents, relatives, teachers, and other adults have showered them as children with substantial recognition and rewards. The downside of the shift in youth sports from a priority of competition to one of teamwork is that participation is valued over achievement. Critics feel that this “everyone gets a trophy” mentality may have severe negative repercussions as this generation enters the work world.

In a survey of 1000 Millennial employees, the majority of respondents desired “daily feedback from their supervisor” (Robert Half International, n.d.). Many school administrators might feel that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible to provide feedback to every teacher on a daily basis.

Leading Sheltered Lives

Members of the Millennial Generation have often been perceived as being overly protected and sheltered. They were the babies referenced on the infamous “baby on board” car signs. In elementary school, they were D.A.R.E.-ed to “just say no”. They served as the precious cargo of “helicopter parents” who constantly floated nearby and swooped in at the slightest sign of academic or behavioral trouble.

Historically, children with disabilities have also been sheltered. In the past, society has made assumptions that many of these children were “too slow”, “too naughty”, or “too frail” to learn alongside their non-disabled peers. Times have changed, and modern special educators favor self advocacy, self-determination, and transition skills as means for people with disabilities to live their lives as independently as possible.

It is unclear what impact a Millennial teacher brought up in an environment of risk adversity and safety first might have on her students. Will she give students the “right to fail” or might she innately worry that these children should “play it safe” and take all the support, guidance, and charity that society may feel obligated to provide?

Perceived Lack of Job Commitment

Several books have been written on how to recruit and retain Millennials in the workplace (Sujansky & Ferri-Reed, 2009; Alsop, 2008; Tulgan, 2009; Marston, 2007). The literature mentions several challenges in regards to keeping young workers in their twenties. These challenges include their innate sense of “specialness” and “entitlement”, prioritizing their social lives over their work lives, and a perceived impatience with advancement and promotions. This final point is highlighted through a Robert Half International survey (n.d.) which found almost half of Millennial respondents expected to work no more than one to two years “paying their dues” in an entry level position.

If these factors are not met, it is possible that many Millennials will not hesitate to move on to another position, another worksite, or even another career. This would be especially detrimental to America’s schools. It is estimated to cost 7.3 billion dollars annually to recruit, hire, train, and retain our nation’s K-8 teachers (The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2007). In addition to the enormous fiscal burden, the special education field would continue to be especially hit hard by turnover. Ninety-eight percent of the nation’s schools report a shortage of special education teachers (ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, 2001). If Millennials leave the field in large numbers, these problems will only be exacerbated.

Suggestions for Administrators

It is not enough to simply recognize common traits of Millennial special education teachers. Administrators should be proactive in how they deal with these individuals to ensure a more satisfying workplace for the adults and a more productive learning environment for the children. Some specific suggestions to meet this goal are discussed below.

Cater to their Strengths

There are many needs in schools that are a perfect fit for the strengths of this generation. For example, they might be called upon to lead an in-service regarding the latest in educational technology. Another strategy could be to utilize their affinity for group work through leadership roles in organizations such as the school social committee or the local parent-teachers organization. By catering to their strengths, Millennials may feel more personally invested in their schools and their jobs. This in turn, may lead to greater levels of professional satisfaction and commitment to the profession.

Recognize their Efforts.

It may not be feasible to provide the daily praise or feedback that Millennials desire, but it is important for them to know that their co-workers and supervisors understand and appreciate the job that they do. A brief personal email of encouragement after a challenging conference, or a handwritten note of praise after an observed lesson could often be extremely valuable to beginning teachers. Small gestures of recognition and appreciation allow these teachers (and others regardless of the generation) to feel as if their efforts make a difference and that they are valued.

Treat Them as Individuals

The most important piece of advice is to not be influenced by preconceived notions regarding Millennials. Making assumptions based on generalizations may lead to miscommunication, disappointment or distrust. Each teacher brings a distinct set of talents, needs, and experiences to their classroom.

Familiarity of the common characteristics of the Millennial Generation should not serve as some sort of “magical instructional manual” that explicitly explains “what makes these people tick.” Supervisors, must treat each new teacher as an individual rather than as an identical and interchangeable member of a strictly defined group. The field of special education has long implored people look beyond the label when it comes to children with disabilities. Should we not be expected to treat our teachers the same way?

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