

# Generational change in schools: Addressing the challenge of ‘generational collision’

**Phil Lambert**

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## Introduction

'They ask questions!' This observation from Josh (played by Ben Stiller) to his partner Cornelia, in the 2015 box office hit *While We're Young*, signals his growing fascination with Jamie and Darby, a younger couple who initially impress Josh and Cornelia with their energy and general take on life and work.<sup>1</sup>

As the storyline unfolds, Josh's views regarding the younger couple alter, while he works to bridge the gap between his own generation and that of the young couple. Josh's final comment regarding Jamie ('He's not evil, he's just young'), provides a stark illustration of generational difference, something that is more pronounced today than has been the case in the past. This change is being recognised increasingly and, reflecting this, *While We're Young* is just one of a number of recent films dealing with such generational differences.<sup>2</sup> These differences give rise to tensions in social settings, in the home and also in the workplace, particularly when it comes to career trajectories and changing perspectives on work.

Lancaster and Stillman (2003) highlight workplace tensions in their best seller, *When Generations Collide*, which draws on various examples from the corporate sector, where the different values and behaviours of generation groups cause considerable challenges for companies and leaders in managing their staff, maintaining morale, dealing with conflict and recruiting and retaining staff.

A key factor in this is a recent phenomenon – three generations (Baby Boomers<sup>3</sup>; Gen Xers<sup>4</sup> and Gen Ys<sup>5</sup>) together in the workplace, sharing the same workspace and, for a good number of them, sharing the same aspirations for career enhancement and advancement. As Lancaster warns in relation to this phenomenon,

*In short, the potential for collision, conflict and confusion between the generations has never been greater.*

(Lancaster, 2004)

### Three generations in the schools workforce

The backdrop to this phenomenon, and its potential impact, is a growing number of Baby Boomers staying on in the workforce beyond the traditional retirement age, and an increasing number of Gen Ys eager to advance in life and work, including into leadership positions (Marks, 2013). In addition, ‘stuck in the middle’ are the Gen Xers, finding things are not quite going to script. To them it was not meant to be like this.

The education sector is not isolated from such changes and for schools, like other organisations, this scenario is very real (Lambert, 2012; Marks, 2012). There remains a large bubble of Baby Boomer principals and middle executives who were meant to have moved out of schools and schooling systems by now. Gen Xers, that patient supply of professionals gaining

Careers in education are no longer based on lock-step procedures as they once were

insight into the workings of their schools and leadership from years of experience as teachers, were expected to advance into the vacancies left by their Boomer bosses. However, it just has not happened that way. Neither the career plans of Gen Xers nor the succession plans of education bureaucracies for that matter, are going to plan (Marks, 2012).

The rules have changed. Careers in education are no longer based on lock-step procedures as they once were; ‘retirement’, as both a word and a phase of life has diminished in its usage and practice (Mackay, 2007; Marks, 2012); and accepted notions such as waiting your time for promotion and the value of experience over precocious ambition are no longer shared.

Engelmeier describes this in her own way, as follows.

*[B]oomers don't want to relinquish the reins and Gen Y knows where the horse should go, Xers feel the crush every day.*

(Engelmeier, 2012)

In a 2012 study undertaken in a large number of public schools in metropolitan Sydney and reported on in *Generational Change in Australian School Leadership: Collision Path or Smooth Baton Change?* (Elliott, et al, 2016 In Press), the issue of generational change in school leadership was analysed. The study looked at the leadership aspirations of those from the three generation groups, the extent to which generational change in leadership was happening, and whether the transition in leadership was likely to be smooth or otherwise.

The findings from this study reveal a great deal about the generations, their views on each other and the degree of change taking place in school leadership.

The extent to which the situation in metropolitan Sydney is common across schooling systems, in other locations in Australia and in other countries, is unknown. However, at a recent presentation on this study at the International Confederation of Principals congress in Finland (Lambert and Marks, 2015) there were strong indications – from school leaders from such diverse locations as Ireland, The Ukraine, South Africa, New Zealand, China and Canada – that the findings resonate.

There will be more on this study later in the paper. Before that, it is important to understand who the actors are in this mix of generations in our schools: Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Ys. While caution needs to be applied when generalising about individuals in such groups it is well understood that the members of each generation who, having shared common experiences, have been similarly influenced by particular world events and social developments that took place in their formative years (Salt, 2004; Zemke et al, 2000). It should not be surprising, therefore, that they tend to hold similar attitudes to work and life – and not necessarily in that order.

Boomers are the large group who have been loyal to their place of work. They have built their lives based on their careers. They live for work and the kind of work they do defines them. World events – such as the assassinations

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## About the Author

Dr Phil Lambert PSM is General Manager, Curriculum at the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). His other positions include Adjunct Professor, University of Sydney and Adjunct Professor, Nanjing Normal University, China. He has extensive experience in education as a principal, inspector, Executive Director, Assistant Director-General, Regional Director and General Manager. Dr Lambert is a Fellow of both the Australian College of Educators and the Australian Council for Educational Leaders and has received a number of honours, awards and acknowledgements during his career. In the 2012 Queen's Birthday Honours he was awarded the Public Service Medal for his outstanding contribution to education and was the 2013 recipient of the prestigious Australian College of Educators' award, the Sir Harold Wyndham Medal.

## About the Paper

Dr Lambert discusses how the different values and behaviours of generation groups cause considerable challenges for companies, organisations and leaders in managing their staff, maintaining morale, dealing with conflict and recruiting and retaining staff. He identifies the implications of three generations – Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Ys – working together in schools, sharing the same workspace and, for many, sharing aspirations for career enhancement and advancement – but with differing perceptions of what this means for them. The education sector is not isolated from generational issues and Dr Lambert summarises actions needed to address, 'generation collide', which has the potential to damage relationships, workplace culture and school renewal reforms.

The author draws on current literature in the field of generational change; findings from research conducted in the Sydney metropolitan area in 2012; and a recent conference presentation by the author and Dr Warren Marks at the International Confederation of Principals conference, Helsinki, Finland. Dr Lambert was one of the four researchers involved in the 2012 research project in Sydney. The major findings from that study will be found in the journal article by Elliott, Johnston-Anderson, Lambert and Marks, 'Generational Change in Australian School Leadership: Collision Path or Smooth Baton Change?', in the *Journal of Educational Administration*, for anticipated publication in 2016.

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