A new generation is entering the teaching force, and understanding their generational “DNA” can help school leaders better attract, engage, develop, and retain their services. Called Generation Z, the oldest members of its cohort are graduating from college and getting their first jobs—meaning you’ll see them in the educator pipeline soon, if you haven’t already.

Most education researchers identify Gen Z (also commonly known as the iGen or “digital natives”) as people born between 1995 and 2012, though Pew says the generation began in 1997. Its members have never known life without the internet; other defining events shaping Gen Z are 9/11 and the war on terror, global warming, the Great Recession, and the rise of social media.

Although cultural changes and historical events affect everyone, their shaping impact is greatest when witnessed during an individual’s formative years. Put simply, a generation can be defined as a group of people who share a collective mindset. Gen Z is no exception; its members tend to be individualistic, risk-averse, and more naturally adept in the digital, visual, and global realms.

Born Digital

Gen Z teachers are defined by these elements as well as childhood “overparenting,” and these are seen as factors in how they approach the world. They might require more immediate, personalized attention than older colleagues during initial in-service professional development. Moreover, digital natives are seen as inseparable from technology, which might help or hurt their progress in the workforce.

On the one hand, novice teachers might be more comfortable with rapid change and facilitate innovation; on the other, they might feel at a loss when the technology in use doesn’t meet their standards. Helping digital-native Gen Z teachers develop an old-school, “analog” Plan B might save time and energy if an internet Armageddon threatens.
Administrators should also be aware that some Gen Z teachers might have attended traditional training institutions and been trained to teach using outmoded educational paradigms. This might compound the generation gap involving their training, school curricula, and a changing student body.

For many schools, differentiating Gen Z staff—in an open-minded, generationally friendly way—might be crucial to paving the way toward a more inclusive school culture and establishing effective multigenerational teams. Leaders can help Gen Z bridge the generational divide using a “facilitating” leadership style; peer observation, role-playing, and shadowing can work wonders.

For example, Gen Z teachers differ from their millennial counterparts in more than their extreme tech-savviness. The Z cohort is also more pragmatic, diverse, and individualistic than its predecessors, and this last characteristic might create tension in joint school projects. Gen Z teachers might prefer working alone and at their own pace to working with others, so specifying—or better still, negotiating—clear team objectives and the means to reach them might help improve collaboration skills.

Gen Zers have always experienced a world where personalization is the norm.

Addressing Contradictions
Thanks to the World Wide Web, Gen Z has experienced a world full of confusing dichotomies: global vs. local, true vs. fake, real vs. virtual, permanent vs. ephemeral. These contrasts have shaped their collective persona and might result in paradoxes in performance. Three generational contradictions illustrate the point:

1. Empowered vs. risk-averse. Research shows that due to parental overprotection, Gen Z was limited in risk-taking and shielded from failure. As a result, novice teachers might have all of the necessary professional qualifications but dodge risks to avoid failure. At the same time, the internet has given them a sense of empowerment; they didn’t always need an adult to learn, so they might make decisions without consultation when they should consult a supervisor before acting. A set of clear, concrete protocols, monitoring, and regular coaching or peer mentoring might prevent these problems and give Gen Z teachers the emotional and practical “scaffolding” they need.

2. Individualistic vs. hyperconnected. Gen Zers have always experienced a world where personalization is the norm in everything from the office coffee to smartphone apps, so they tend to be individualistic. Yet, their collective outlook sees a world that has always been connected, where problems are solved through crowdsourcing or Siri. Giving Gen Z educators specific direction regarding the school’s electronics policies might prevent them from broadcasting sensitive issues on social media.

3. Just-in-time vs. just-in-case. Born at a time when change is routine, Gen Z teachers prefer their learning to be timely rather than preventive, so coaching likely needs to be handcrafted to make it relevant. The generational cohort has a shorter attention span and a higher propensity for anxiety and depression, so addressing Gen Z’s traits through strategic planning might enhance professional development and save administrators time and energy.

It should be noted that the group description is not meant to stereotype the newest teachers, but instead to reflect upon what have been identified as common behaviors. As the old saying goes, “People resemble their times more than they resemble their parents,” but the interpretations presented here might be insufficient to describe individuals or their performance.

Developing novice Gen Z teachers’ positive traits and diminishing their weaknesses might enrich your staff and facilitate school innovation. School leaders have the unparalleled opportunity to leverage Gen Z as a key human resource and create conditions in which promising teachers can adapt, flourish, and stay in their posts. 

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WHAT MOTIVATES GEN Z

When asked what led them to pursue a career in teaching, more than half (54 percent) of Gen Z teachers and teachers-in-training said they enjoy working with children, says a new survey commissioned by Microsoft from the Economist Intelligence Unit. Nearly half (46 percent) want to make an impact on future generations, and 37 percent want to make a contribution to society.