

2020

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#### Recommended Citation

Nolker, D. Brett and Ramsey, Nicole K. (2020) "Changing Perspectives of Music Education Leaders from Boomers to Gen Z," *Visions of Research in Music Education*: Vol. 35 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol35/iss1/5>

## Changing Perspectives of Music Education Leaders from Boomers to Gen Z

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### Abstract

*Teachers involved in leadership at any level may be leading groups of people from different generations, so an understanding of expected attitudes and practices of leadership is imperative. Perspectives between generations differ in many ways, and changing views of the role and actions of a leader are important differences that directly impact music teaching and learning and the professional lives of music educators. Generation Z has now entered the university, and with them comes many differing ideas about leadership practices. Understanding leadership differences between generations can help us prepare preservice teachers for future professional roles both in the classroom and throughout their careers.*

*This study will uncover and identify beliefs about leadership in the classroom and professional organizations of a group of music education leaders. This qualitative, multiple case study will use open and axial coding to reveal emergent themes from interviews with representatives from each of the generations currently professionally active, from Baby Boomers through Generation Z. Each interview participant has been elected to a leadership position in music education, with representation at the local, state, and national levels. Participants will be asked to describe their views on leadership, such as (a) motivations for leadership, (b) the role of the leader, (c) the role of the follower, (d) the ideal structure of leadership, (e) what is valued in leadership, and (f) how leadership activity interacts with teaching activity. Themes identified from responses will be compared and contrasted as they relate to generational characteristics.*

**Keywords:** Music Education Leadership, Generational Cohort Theory

Perspectives between generations differ in many ways, and changing views of the role of a leader and the actions of leadership are an important difference that directly impact music teaching and learning and the professional lives of music educators. Generally accepted to include people born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2015), Generation Z, or Gen Z, has now entered the university, and with the influx of a new generation comes many differing ideas about leadership practices. Lack of alignment in philosophy, procedure, and communication between leaders and members of an organization can cause friction that could lead to a variety of issues, including a decline in participation, which can be problematic for a program's longevity. Understanding leadership differences between generations and their effects on our professional organizations can help us prepare preservice teachers for future professional roles as leaders, in the classroom, in their professional organizations, and throughout their careers.

Many states include leadership as a required component of teacher evaluations, which often include categories of leadership that require the teacher to lead in their classrooms, in the school, and in the teaching profession. To prepare for evaluation systems that contain measures of leadership, preservice teacher programs often include opportunities for undergraduate students to engage in leadership roles. Modeled after the progression in the teacher evaluation system, these activities can include leadership in enrolled education classes, university and organization leadership, and external community and professional organization positions. For music educators, involvement and leadership in professional organizations is important for continued professional development and growth. Teachers involved in leadership at any and all levels are usually leading groups of people from different generations, so an understanding of differing

expectations, attitudes and practices of leadership, as well as expected traits and qualities that may differ by generation, is imperative.

The purpose of this study was to uncover and identify beliefs about leadership in the classroom and professional organizations of a group of music education leaders. This qualitative, multiple case study used open and axial coding to reveal emergent themes from interviews with music education leaders who (a) represent each level of professional leadership in one state, and (b) are members of each of the generations that are presently professionally active, including Baby Boomers, Generation X (Gen Xers), Generation Y (Gen Yers or Millennials), and Generation Z (Gen Zers). Each interview participant had been elected to multiple positions of leadership in music education and had experience in music education leadership at the school level and above. Participants described their views on leadership, such as motivations for leadership, the role of the leader, the role of the follower, the ideal structure of leadership, what they valued in leadership, and how leadership activity interacts with teaching activity. We compared and contrasted themes identified from responses as they related to generational leadership characteristics in the literature.

### **Literature Review**

To frame this research and its purpose, this review contains literature from several different areas: First, we discuss the literature-based benefits of professional organization membership for music educators. Second, we present the history and literature related to Generational Cohort Theory and Maturation Theory. Finally, we present current brief descriptions of the Baby Boomer, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z cohorts.

## **Professional Organizations in Music Education**

Several authors have written specifically about the benefits of membership in a professional organization for music teachers. Madsen (2010) discussed benefits in three categories: (a) benefits for the teacher, (b) benefits for the students, and (c) benefits for both. Some of the benefits he cited specifically for the teacher included access to research and best practices journals, a community of like-minded individuals, and opportunities to collaborate with teachers of other music specialties. The benefit he discussed for students is the ability to participate in events like All-State Band and Honors Choirs. Finally, he mentioned that the advocacy and lobbying components of a professional organization are a benefit to both teachers and students. Gilbert (2016) posited that professional organizations, focused on specific areas such as technology, can help with integration of those ideas into the classroom.

The National Association for Music Education (NAfME) has published several statements about the benefits of membership. According to Lambert (2012), NAfME has a specific benefit over other professional organizations for preservice music teachers because it is the organization that will continue to support in-service teachers throughout their careers. The benefits for preservice collegiate members, according to NAfME, are (a) increased professional credibility, (b) a network of professional contacts, (c) access to job opportunities, (d) insight into the professional world before taking a first job, (e) a forum to exchange ideas through the Internet and also at conferences, (f) opportunities for leadership, exposure to new teaching methods, techniques, and innovations, and (g) financial discounts on education materials for members, especially students (Lambert, 2012). The NAfME website also lists the following benefits for in-service members: advocacy; professional development; access to journals; an online learning community; the ability to participate in student performance and adjudication

events; and various financial benefits, such as insurance programs for teachers (National Association for Music Education, n.d.).

### **Generational Cohort Theory**

The concept and definition of *generation* is complex. Early writings on the concept of a generation defined it as the succession of a parent by their children, or approximately every thirty years (Berger, 1960). However, it is more than time that defines a generation. In the 1950s, scholars began to note the sociological impact of generational cohorts (Mannheim, 1952). Since then, many authors have discussed the importance of social change on a generation, such as technological advances, world events, and social upheavals (Arsenault, 2004; Berger, 1960; Dulin, 2008; Gentry, Griggs, Deal, Mondore, & Cox, 2011; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Ryder, 1965; Salahuddin, 2011; Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007). Especially important are the years of adolescence and early adulthood. Sessa et al. (2007) added that “a generation is a social creation rather than a biological necessity” (p. 49). In this study, we combined the aforementioned concepts to define a generation as a cohort of people born in a similar time, similar social context, and experiencing similar world events.

Scholars have written about the impacts of generational cohorts on values, worldview, and beliefs for decades, with formal theories forming in more recent years. Many authors acknowledged the impact of what has been called “generational mentalities” or “the spirit of an age” (Arsenault, 2004; Berger, 1960; Cucina, Byle, Martin, Peyton, & Gast, 2018; Dulin, 2008; Gentry et al., 2011; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Ryder, 1965; Sessa et al., 2007; Yu & Miller, 2005). While it is important not to unduly stereotype members of a particular generation, as not all members of a generation think alike, there are notable common worldviews, attitudes, and approaches to professional roles (Dulin, 2008). A better understanding of the values, worldviews,

and beliefs of a generation may provide insight into choices made by members of that generation in the workplace and elsewhere.

Strauss and Howe (1991) coined the term generational cohort theory (GCT), and researchers have used and refined the term over the past several decades. GCT states that people born in similar years with similar social contexts and similar experiences tend to share certain attitudes and values and that these similarities tend to cycle back approximately every four generations (Gentry et al., 2011; Sessa et al., 2007; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Researchers have used GCT in studies to explain differences in attitudes and values in marketing, the workplace, and other areas (Fisher & Crabtree, 2009). However, there are some authors who have acknowledged that any age-related differences in values come from a combination of both generational and age factors (Parry & Urwin, 2011; Rhodes, 1983). Therefore, we must also take maturational theory into account. Maturational theory states that people's views, beliefs, values, and attitudes can change as they mature and grow older (Sessa et al., 2007). When exploring differences between generations, we must take into account a balance of generational cohort theory and maturational theory as both work together to create the whole picture of age-related differences.

### **Key Characteristics of Generational Cohorts**

**Baby Boomers (1940–1964).** As the senior generation represented in this study, baby boomers have the longest history of noted characteristics. Some of the attributes common to members of this cohort were clearly represented in our findings and may include that (a) they sometimes struggle with technology changes, (b) they generally tend to be hard working, (c) they focus on team perspective, (d) they sometimes do not appreciate the nontraditional workstyles of younger generations, and (e) they are most comfortable in work settings that feel familiar to them

(Birkman International, 2016, pp. 6, 11). One clearly articulated characteristic was that they desire to mentor younger people (Sessa et al., 2007).

**Gen X (1965–1982).** Gen Xers tend to be independent, yet are loyal to colleagues. Like members of the baby boomers cohort, they sometimes struggle with working with other generations. In the area of technology and communication, they tend to prefer email or voicemail (Birkman International, 2016, p. 6). They tend to crave community and personal relationships, even in professional settings. In the area we identify as “social context,” they believe the team should support the individual. A characteristic that is particularly important for our profession is that they tend to crave mentors from older generations (Sessa et al., 2007).

**Gen Y/Millennials (1982–1995).** Millennials believe they can make a difference in the world. They tend to be more socially conscious than previous generations, working on social causes, and tend to be more accepting of diversity. They are technologically savvy (Fisher & Crabtree, 2009; Sessa et al., 2007), thinking of themselves as able to multitask. They are respectful of communication needs, approaching communication from the perspective of the receiver. They tend to need structure in the work environments (Birkman International, 2016, p. 6).

**Gen Z (1995–2010).** Sessa et al. (2007) acknowledged that there are inconsistencies and overlap in the designations of the beginnings and ends of generations. Seemiller and Grace (2015) noted, however, that the commonly defined range for Gen Z (also called iGeneration or Net Generation) is anyone born between the years 1995 and 2010. By this definition, the oldest Gen Zers have just begun to enter the workforce and collegiate years. Given the youth of this generation, there is limited research and literature exploring data-driven characteristics of Gen Z as they enter young-adulthood. Most authors publishing about Gen Z have relied on popular

media, news stories, and observations to make their claims. One such example in the field of music education is an article aimed at helping music teachers encourage Gen Z students to practice (Crappell, 2018). Crappell pointed to the immersion of this generation in the Internet as an influence on their behaviors, resulting in a desire for instant gratification and an effort to multitask. Seemiller and Grace (2015) pointed out that this technological integration also gives Gen Z a desire to problem-solve and find instant answers to their questions. These authors also noted that Gen Zers' self-reported characteristics included things like compassion, loyalty, thoughtfulness, open-mindedness, responsibility, and determination. In one mixed-methods study that speaks directly to one aspect of professional leadership, Andrea, Gabriella, and Timea (2016) found that Gen Zers are distrustful and would prefer to work with other Gen Zers as opposed to working with older generations.

Many websites, blogs, and popular media articles discuss characteristics and traits of Gen Z, but rarely cite research. Discovering which characteristics of Gen Z are evidence-based and which are purely speculation or stereotype will require further research. In this study, we provide some data-driven insight into common themes and shared and contrasting perspectives among our participants from varying generational cohorts.

## **Method**

### **Design**

For this study, we used a qualitative, multiple case study design. Qualitative research involves the interpretation of qualities, themes, and phenomena with the goal of finding meaning and understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is flexible and includes emergent themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, discussion of the data and answers to research questions is procedural and will focus on examination of emergent themes found

through data analysis. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe case study research as the examination of a “bounded system” resulting in a case description and case themes. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also stated that multiple cases strengthen a case study. The cases in this study are that of the four participants, all current leaders in their profession, from NAFME Collegiate chapters through the highest levels of national leadership. The participants each represent their generational cohort from baby boomer to Gen Z, and represent each generation that is presently professionally active. We use thick, rich description, characteristic of both qualitative research and case study, in addition to coding of emergent themes.

### **Data Collection**

We collected data from January to May of 2019. One individual interview per participant and one focus group interview served as the primary data sources. All interviews were semistructured and took place in person. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis and coding. The initial individual interview allowed a chance to gain some diagnostic information and the participants’ views on leadership, their own experiences, and their perspectives on current and future leadership in music education. The focus group allowed participants to engage in a discussion with each other regarding similarities and differences between their perspectives on the aforementioned topics. Follow-up conversations with individual participants allowed for member checks and confirmation of themes. Informal conversations and email communications also served as data.

### **Sampling**

Our access to a cadre of professional leaders that represented each level of leadership in our profession while possessing key characteristics that were unusually consistent, allowing for potential opportunities for comparison, motivated this study. It was our hope that our analysis

could provide unique insights into leadership attributes that would inform professional preparation and development for our students and preservice music educators. All participants were choral music specialists from the same state who held the highest office available at their professional level at the time of this study. The participants represented each level of leadership in music education, including campus, state, and national leadership. These leadership positions included (a) a preservice music education student who had served as campus collegiate president and served at the time of this study as the president of her state Music Education Association collegiate chapter; (b) a probationary teacher in school and county-wide leadership who served as collegiate chapter president and state collegiate president; (c) a teacher in midcareer, who had served in collegiate and previous state positions and served at the time of this study as the state president of the Music Educators Association; and (d) a recently retired teacher who had served in collegiate, state-level, and divisional leadership and later as the NAFME national president.

While together they were all on the same professional leadership trajectory, each participant represented a different generational cohort: baby boomer, Gen X, Gen Y (Millennial), and Gen Z.

### **Cases**

#### **Mary, Baby Boomer (b. 1942)**

“Mary” was a leader who had served at every level of the profession. She had begun her professional activity as a college student, serving as the Music Educators National Conference (MENC) student chapter president. After graduating in 1965, she began her teaching career and taught choral music continually until her retirement. Throughout her career she had served in a series of positions with increasing responsibility, starting with state Music Educators Association (MEA) board member-at-large and chair of State Honors Chorus, and later in an ongoing

position as state conference coordinator. After serving as state MEA president, she held the position of MENC division president, and later MENC national president.

When asked about her professional mentors, Mary's focus was on continuing the leadership legacy of mentors from previous generations. Likewise, she described a passion for mentoring upcoming leaders from younger generations, and especially collegiate-aged students. However, in her own leadership practices, she valued common goals and common ideals. She described a positive experience in leadership by saying that "all of us were like-thinkers because we were all about the same age." Her self-indicated strongest leadership qualities were equity, fairness, and equal access to representation, along with an ability to see the "big picture." When asked about technology, she admitted that it was one of the biggest universal changes through her years in leadership. She often connected age and generational cohort difference with differing technology skills and preferences.

### **Jennifer, Generation X (b. 1970)**

"Jennifer" was a respected leader in her state who had begun her leadership experiences early with informal leadership during her undergraduate study. Mary had served as cooperating teacher for Jennifer's student teaching experience. After her graduation in 1992, she began her teaching career and taught continually since. She completed her Master of Music Education degree in 2004. Her professional leadership positions began, like her mentor, with state MEA board member-at-large and chair of State Honors Chorus. She then served as state MEA choral board member-at-large and state choral chair. In her associated area-specific professional organization, she served as American Choral Directors Association repertoire and resources chair for both high school choirs and later community choirs. At the next leadership level, she served

as MENC division member-at-large and division chair. At the time of this study, she was serving as state MEA president.

Like Mary, Jennifer named leaders from past generations when asked about her most important mentors. Jennifer had a desire to mentor first-year teachers and to be sure that they had opportunities to lead. Servant leadership and interpersonal dynamics drove her leadership decisions. She said that leadership is “mission service” and emphasized the idea that leading “is about we, not me.” Like Mary, Jennifer also noted that technology changes were a challenge, especially when the information is kept on a variety of platforms. She valued organizational advocacy and professional support and preferred to focus on the big picture when making leadership decisions.

#### **Sarah, Generation Y (Millennial; b. 1994)**

“Sarah” was in the early stages of her career, at the time of this study in what her state designated as her beginning, probationary period. During her undergraduate study, she served as collegiate chapter president for the NAFME chapter at her institution and as state MEA collegiate president. She also served as sergeant-at-arms for her chapter of the Sigma Alpha Iota music fraternity. After graduating in 2017, she began her teaching career in middle school choral music and assumed responsibility as coordinator for pre-Music Performance Adjudication performances for her county.

Sarah’s professional focus was providing support for her colleagues, especially those around the same age. She provided mentoring and opportunities for other teachers in her county as well as opportunities for their students. Like Jennifer, she valued service leadership and strove to provide for others, observing, “The organization should ultimately be for the kids.” She emphasized the importance of providing professional development for young teachers, but

mentioned that she had seen an increase in selfish behavior from young leaders. She developed a way to communicate across generations by adapting to the technology and communication needs of the receiver of the communication instead of her own. While she was prompted by Mary in the focus group interview to think about the big picture in leadership, her responses often showed a focus on a specific, particular task.

### **Hannah, Generation Z (b. 1998)**

“Hannah” was a senior music education major who had served in leadership roles throughout her undergraduate study. She began as teaching assistant / resident assistant for Residential Life on her campus and a university community ambassador. She served as a board member for the Sigma Alpha Iota music fraternity as well as NAFME chapter president at her institution. By election, she took on a series of state-level leadership positions including state MEA collegiate secretary and vice president, and at the time of this study served as MEA collegiate state president.

Like Sarah, Hannah had a desire to provide support to collegiate students younger than herself. Her named mentors were others from her own generation who had inspired her. Hannah’s leadership concerns and focus were very personal, and she believed that leadership should be for the benefit of the organization and not just for personal gain. She stated that good leaders hear individual input and work to incorporate others’ perspectives and was aware of the difference between the needs of the group versus the needs of the individual. Her concerns for leadership were a lack of long-term commitment from younger students, and therefore she focused on the importance of providing mentorship and personal relationships within the profession.

### **Themes**

The interview process generated a small but highly consistent group of themes. Each participant clearly addressed these themes; similarities and differences in the perspectives formed the body of outcomes and the motivation for further inquiry. The themes were (a) communication, (b) technology, (c) characteristics of leadership, (d) mentorship, and (e) social context. These themes arose during individual interviews, but we explored them again throughout the focus group discussion.

### **Communication**

One consistent theme across the responses of our participants was the style, preferences, and tools of communication. The tools mentioned included mail, telephone calls, email, texting, and social media. Participants perceived communication as an identity gesture that reflected individuals' leadership and professionalism. The generational differences in perspectives of communication practice was consistent and strong across all participants. The perspectives varied widely: Mary stated, "I communicate my ways and try to be thoughtful and professional, but I must use the ways I am most comfortable," while Hannah indicated, "I must strategize to find the best ways to reach each of the individuals I lead." An example of the thoughtfulness given this topic was Sarah's observation, "I don't think that [Mary's] generation thinks about how people want to be communicated with." The progression of change for each was consistent with their generational cohort. The general position of the younger two participants was that the leader should use the preferred communication method of the receiver. For instance, Hannah's position was, "Communication method is a person's individual choice." One interesting position held by all was that there are now "too many communication pathways." The concern was that

this could lead to loss of communication, loss of data, and “missed connections.” Sarah supported this: “There are so many platforms of communication, it’s all getting lost.”

### **Technology**

Technology was one of the most ubiquitous themes discussed in almost every aspect of leadership. Mary and Jennifer both mentioned changing technology as something they have had to adapt to throughout their leadership careers. Jennifer noted the changing of technology reflected by the archives of her organization and the lack of consistency in the databasing of important materials. When she took over her leadership role, she was met with a physical box of documents, a USB drive with others, and both emails and online copies of information, with no way to know what information could be found where. She noted that “digital stuff changes so fast. It’s great that we have it, but if we’re not careful we’re going to lose the history of our organization.” Generational literature mentions baby boomers as having the most trouble adapting to new technologies and being most comfortable in working environments with which they are familiar. Mary mentioned, “The biggest difference I’ve noticed is that I’m old-school and I don’t know much about technology. You could probably run circles around me.” While she did not feel comfortable with her own ability to work with the new technologies, she did appreciate that younger people do know how to utilize it to better the organization. “I did notice [that] everybody was going forward so quickly with technology, and I think that’s a good thing. The young teachers who are coming along now, they can do anything and everything and I think that’s wonderful.”

### **Characteristics of Leadership**

A theme addressed by each participant, was the importance of long-term commitment by those who lead professional organizations. These statements included Mary’s simple

observation, “It takes long-term commitment,” and Hannah’s discussion that one of her tasks in leading Gen Zers was helping them to “discover the importance of making commitments.” One subtheme that could also relate to social context was the consistent idea that leadership decisions should reflect a team of stakeholders and not just autonomous decisions by the leader. An example of this was Jennifer, “Your philosophy as a leader has to be ‘We’ not ‘Me.’” This portion of the discussion led to a universal support for the idea of servant leadership, which they expressed as a concern for ambitious or selfish leaders instead of those who lead while maintaining a focus on outcomes that benefit the group or the members of the group. One characteristic of leadership that each participant addressed was a “dichotomy of the young leader.” Each participant agreed that it was best to begin professional leadership early, and they each admitted that they had had early leadership opportunities. However, they each honestly expressed concern over having organizations led by leaders who were too young or inexperienced. A characteristic supported by each participant was that anyone leading a professional organization should have vision: They must be someone who can see the big picture and have a central focus for the organization and those they lead.

### **Mentorship**

All participants mentioned mentorship as not only being an important aspect of leading and being led but also a point of emotional connection and sometimes pride. All participants mentioned leaders who had inspired them, and all mentioned mentorship as something that was important to them. Consistent with generational literature, our baby boomer and Gen X participants (i.e., Mary and Jennifer) cited mentors from previous generations, whereas our Gen Y and Gen Z participants (i.e., Sarah and Hannah) cited important mentors who were from their own generational cohort, as well as some from older generations. Each participant expressed

specific mentorship goals. Mary said, “My mantra as national president was the collegiates, because to me, they are our future.” She showed a strong desire to serve as a mentor for the youngest generation of teachers, which baby boomer literature reflects. Jennifer replied to that concept:

I think mine is young teachers. I’ve been known, if someone says something out of the way about a young teacher, to say, “Give them a chance.” Because that’s the only way they’re going to [learn], just to back away and give them a chance.

Sarah’s mentorship focus was on having a “safety net of people that do the same thing that you do, and bounce ideas off of one another,” which reflected in her drive to provide opportunities for other young teachers in her county. Hannah expressed concerns about younger members of her generation who she said “lose focus through the success,” adding, “They just don’t quite know what they want yet.” She hoped to mentor them in a way that could give them direction and help them to discover their drive and potential.

### **Social Context**

A theme that was consistent with larger discussions of generational change was the differing perspective of social context, or the difference between a focus on the group as opposed to the individual. This theme was the most linear progression in position from Mary, when discussing her mentors and early leadership: “We would think alike, and worked for the group.” This perspective was markedly different from Hannah’s input that included the statement that, “The leader’s job is to hear, and incorporate, individual perspectives.”

### **Implications**

Each of our participants focused on their own specific ideals and beliefs about music education leadership while responding to interview questions. While the participants’ answers

tended to align with their generational cohort, all participants addressed the themes described above. Similarities and differences in responses from members of differing generational cohorts, along with the fact that our participants represent the four generational cohorts actively involved in the music education profession at the time of publication, indicate that an understanding of generational differences in leadership may be helpful to organizational leaders and to those faculty designing professional development experiences for music educators. Preservice teachers may benefit from leadership training that includes strategies for collaboration with colleagues from multiple different generational cohorts. Future comparative research on the differences and similarities across the generations in music education may inform the design of leadership training models for preservice and in-service teachers.

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