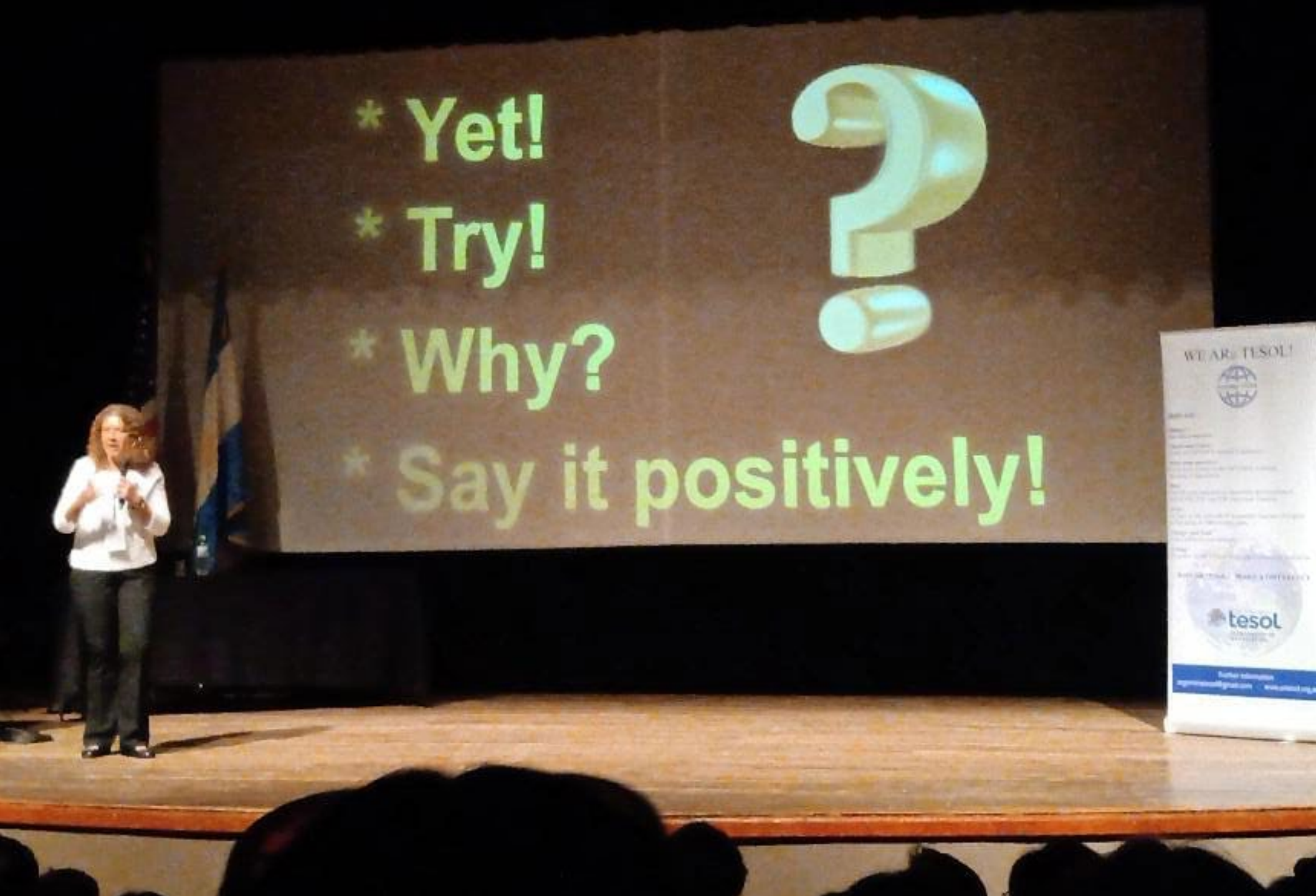


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TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

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Why Responding to Generational Differences Matters for Renewed Educational Leadership

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Why Responding to Generational Differences Matters for Renewal of Educational Leadership

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In the realm of education, it is becoming increasingly clear that generational shifts are impacting teaching, learning, and, above all, the expectations of all stakeholders. From Baby Boomers to Generation Alpha, each generation brings unique perspectives, perceptions and values that influence practices and policies as well as wants and needs that have to be cared for. Leading with generations in mind is the key.

The Gener(AI)tional Panorama in Education

The current educational environment is characterized by a diverse mix of generations, each contributing to the dynamic nature of our schools. It is important to note that, although generations share a specific mindset originated in common historical moments, these collective descriptions are based on statistics and research-based data and are not predictors of individual behavior. Individuals may freely adhere to the values and understandings of another cohort or identify with a mix of them.

As one of the most generationally diverse work ambits, schools are facing a most intricate scenario. On the one hand, they deal with the coexistence of the procedures and beliefs of generations that no longer populate society, but we still live with the legacy of their organizational structures and rituals. On the other, institutions also face and incubate the perceptions of emerging generations who are still in their formative years, a collective of emerging citizens whose mindsets do not know of the world without the Internet, online activity, service delivery and generative artificial intelligence (genAI). Making room for differences, empathetic understandings and generational potential may prove to be fruitful and rewarding.

“The interplay of generational shifts is fascinating and the emergence of new collective perceptions keeps requiring complex systems such as schools to adapt.”

Because of events that shape each generation’s unique and collective consciousness, individuals within each generation tend to share idiosyncratic characteristics. Here is a summary of some such widely accepted ones:

Traditionalists (Born before 1945)

Traditionalists, also known as the Silent Generation, have shaped the early foundations of modern education with their emphasis on stability, formality, and respect for authority. They were educated in a system that valued rote learning, strict discipline, and a clear distinction between teacher and student roles. This generation values a strong sense of duty and a structured approach to education, often preferring traditional teaching methods and clear guidelines.

Traditionalists have retired. Yet, their legacy continues to influence educational practices, often providing a counterbalance to the more progressive approaches of subsequent generations. Their impact is evident in the enduring respect for educational institutions and, oddly enough, in some activities and hobbies that emerging generations have embraced and made their own due to the emotional connection they experience with their grandparents.



Baby Boomers (Born 1945-1964)

Baby Boomers has been instrumental in establishing many of the foundational protocols and procedures that guide educational institutions today. They have traditionally valued structured, hierarchical approaches to education that emphasizes discipline, standardized testing, and clearly defined roles within schools. As they transition out of leadership positions, their influence remains and may collide with the perceptions of the more results-oriented generations that follow them.

Generation X (Born 1965-1976)

Known for their independence and resourcefulness, Gen X is most often characterized by its pragmatic approach to education. They grew up during a time of significant social and economic change, which has shaped their preference for flexible, results-oriented practices. Gen X educators and parents tend to value work-life balance and are strong advocates for student-centered learning. Their expertise and flexibility is on full display during these times of generative artificial intelligence.

Millennials (Generation Y, Born 1977-1995)

Millennials, now a significant presence in the teaching workforce, bring a collaborative and tech-savvy approach to education. Having grown up with the internet and digital technologies, they are comfortable integrating new tools into the classroom and are avid proponents of blended learning environments. Millennials value diversity, inclusivity, and experiential learning, seeking to create engaging, interactive experiences for their students. Their collaborative mindset proves to be an asset in creating opportunities for engagement of the full range of education stakeholders.

Generation Z (Born 1996-2010)

As students and the newest members of the teaching profession, Generation Z is reshaping education with their demand for instant access to information and their preference for visual and interactive learning formats. They are digital natives, accustomed to a world of smartphones, online service delivery, social media, and on-demand content. Generation Z expects education to be fast-paced, personalized, and relevant to their real-world experiences, and they approach the teaching profession in the same way, redesigning social structures with their unique mindset. Education is also being impacted by this Gen Z phenomena.

Generation Alpha (Born 2010 onwards)

Though still young, Generation Alpha is already beginning to influence educational practices, particularly in lower secondary education. This generation is expected to be the most technologically immersed yet, with artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and other advanced technologies likely to play a significant role in their learning experiences. Educators are starting to prepare for the challenges and opportunities that Generation Alpha will bring, including discovering the consequences of the COVID-19 disruption creating the need for even more personalized and adaptive learning environments. Early access to information about national and international political dilemmas and the challenge to discern fake from real in a GenAI-mediated world also color their shared learning needs and require teaching professionals to respond in innovative ways.

Juggling Generational Shifts for a Renewal of Leadership

Understanding the unique characteristics and needs of each generation is essential for creating an educational system that is both inclusive and successful. As Baby Boomers make way for Generation Alpha, educators, administrators, and policymakers must be prepared to adapt to new ways of thinking, teaching and learning, understanding the reasons behind their choices. This means not only embracing new technologies and methodologies but also fostering an environment where diverse perspectives are valued and both novice and veteran stakeholders have a voice in shaping the future of education.

The interplay of generational shifts is fascinating, and the emergence of new collective perceptions requires complex systems such as schools to be responsive and adapt. By recognizing and accommodating diverse generational populations, we can create more dynamic, responsive, and forward-thinking education models that meet the needs of everyone involved by providing the pre-requisites that allow us to try and succeed.

Silvia Breiburd is a global teacher trainer and generational action researcher and consultant. She is a professor for teacher training at the Universidad Tecnológica Nacional and at the Instituto Hispano Argentino Pedro Poveda, both in Buenos Aires. Silvia currently serves as Vice-President of Argentina TESOL, a local TESOL affiliate dedicated to advancing the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages. 