



THE ABSORPTION EXPERIENCE OF GEN Y BEGINNING TEACHERS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS, FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE BEGINNING TEACHERS AND THEIR MENTORS

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The present study aimed to understand in depth the experience of identity formation of beginning teachers (BTs), members of Gen Y in their first year at elementary school, and teaching students of Gen Alpha from the perspective of BTs and their teacher mentors (TMs).
Background	The purpose of the study was to compare the aspects described by BTs and their mentor teachers of the initial experience of teaching and of shaping the professional identity of BTs, members of Gen Y, in elementary schools, from the perspective of BTs and teacher mentors (TMs).
Methodology	This was a qualitative study. Two groups participated in the study: (a) 75 BTs, members of Gen Y, and (b) 40 mentors of beginning teachers.
Contribution	The findings of this study indicate that the creation of an emotionally and professionally supportive community led to a fruitful discussion on issues related to the process of absorption and integration of BTs in the school. This process advanced their professional development, expanding knowledge, abilities, strategies, innovative pedagogical practices for classroom management, and meaningful teaching and learning in the classroom. The supportive community provided an emotional, professional, social-organizational, and evaluative-reflective response to the needs of BTs, facilitating meaningful interactions between the BTs and their students. It created a space for students to practice emotional training, organize and manage behavior, regulate emotions and behavior, reduce feelings of anger, and arouse a feeling of optimism.

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Findings	The findings show that there was a conflict between the BTs' and TMs' perceptions of school reality. The mentors expected the BTs to adapt to the existing system, whereas the BTs perceived the process as one of formation of their identity as teachers. It turned out that parameters important to Gen Y teachers, such as knowing the school organization and being an influential factor that brings about change, were less important to their mentors. The findings of the present study reinforce those of previous studies that investigated the employment characteristics of Gen Y.
Recommendations for Practitioners	A supportive community at school is likely to increase the level of mental well-being of Gen Y teachers. To this end, support communities of teachers should be created by form and discipline of study. In the community, emphasis should be placed on reflection and mental resilience in all situations and challenging events that happen to the BTs to help them cope with the accumulated stress.
Recommendations for Researchers	Students need a sensitive environment that is appropriate for Gen Alpha children. This environment must allow for emotional training and regulation, behavior organization, and management to arouse a feeling of optimism and reduce anger. Teachers must teach with love, sensitivity, affectivity, and empathy to develop students' emotional, social, and cognitive abilities.
Impact on Society	To retain BTs and prevent them from quitting their career, schools must ensure that members of Gen Y understand the school organization and are satisfied with the way the organization is managed. They must have a sense of being significant partners in the life of the school. Under optimal working conditions, Gen Y teachers may greatly contribute to the values of education and equal opportunity, maximizing the personal potential of each student and the classroom as a whole and making the school relevant.
Future Research	Future studies should examine the characteristics of students belonging to Gen Alpha. One of the difficulties mentioned by BTs was a misunderstanding of the characteristics of Gen Alpha, which created problems in the interactions within the teaching staff and between the teachers and the students and prevented gaining authority with other teachers and with students.
Keywords	information and communication technology (ICT), smartphones, internship, beginning teacher, teacher-mentor, identity, interactions, mental well-being, the Gen Alpha, Gen Y, teacher retention, teacher attrition

INTRODUCTION

The research literature describes the first year of teaching as characterized by a sense of mission and desire to succeed (Maskit, 2011), struggle, and survival. Many beginning teachers (BTs) are struggling to cope with a new reality (Fenwick, 2011). The purpose of the study was to compare the aspects described by BTs and their mentor teachers of the initial experience of teaching and of shaping the professional identity of BTs, members of Gen Y, in elementary schools, from the perspective of BTs and teacher mentors (TMs).

BEGINNING TEACHERS: THE FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING

For many teachers, the first year of teaching amounts to “floating or sinking” (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). The BTs must deal with four main aspects in their first year of teaching: professional (teaching and classroom management), organizational (absorption in the school and acquaintance with school-work culture), emotional (relating to the beginning teaching and shaping of professional identity), and

processes of evaluation toward professionalization. The research literature describes central difficulties that BTs experience in the process of their absorption in the educational institution, which include issues such as coping with differences between students, enforcing discipline, managing the schedule and workload, pedagogical issues, issues related to teaching content, communication with parents, evaluation of students, motivating students, organizing class assignments, and more (Romano & Gibson, 2006). The learning curve in the first year of teaching greatly affects the professional development of the BTs and the construction of their professional identity (Tammets et al., 2019). BTs strive to apply generic principles they learned during their teaching training and to design their professional work patterns. Many studies indicate that the success of teachers' integration into the school at the beginning of their careers depends on the creation of a support package for teachers during their absorption by the school community. Such a package is likely to help shape the professional identity of the BTs and promote their absorption in the educational system (Alub et al., 2016; Bennett et al., 2013; Buchanan et al., 2013; Gray & Taie, 2015; Ingersoll, 2012; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2019).

Gen Y beginning teachers and Gen Alpha students

Various age groups are affected differently by changing factors that shape people of the same age, such as living environment, technological developments, shared experiences and issues, events of local and global significance, etc. The teachers who participated in this study are members of Gen Y; their students are members of Gen Alpha. Members of Gen Y have characteristics that distinguish them from the generations that preceded them, as do the members of Gen Alpha.

Who are the members of Gen Y? Gen Y children, also referred to as millennials, were born between 1980 and 1998, preceding Generation Z. The parents of members of Gen Y belong mostly to the Baby Boom generation born between 1946 and 1964. Gen Y grew up in a period of many technological developments, especially the rapid emergence of the Internet. Researchers (Bolton et al., 2013; Eastman & Liu, 2012; Parment, 2013) described the members of Gen Y as independent, entrepreneurial, having mental resilience and self-confidence, and engaged in innovation. They adopt new technologies and services, especially everything related to social networks. They seek technological innovation and tend to adopt it quickly. They are social status-aware (Eastman & Liu, 2012), sophisticated consumers with a strong orientation toward online consumption (Eastman & Liu, 2012; Jackson et al., 2011), and consumption of luxury brands (Butcher et al., 2017). Gen Y members look for challenges and meaningful work and tend to question authority. They want to be listened to and taken into consideration. To improve and develop, they need attention, feedback, and reinforcements. They are considered to be a more communal generation than their predecessors; therefore, they prefer to work in a structured, communal way and receive feedback and evaluation clearly and regularly (Anderson et al., 2017; Frye et al., 2020; Magni & Manzoni, 2020).

Who are the members of Gen Alpha studying in elementary schools today? They were born in 2010 and later. Their parents are mostly members of Gen Y. Gen Alpha children live and behave naturally in the digital environment. The digital presence permeates all areas of their lives, shaping them and leading to a high level of digital literacy and flexibility in their learning methods (Bonell & Booy, 2020; Taylor & Hattingh, 2019; Viner et al., 2020; Ziatdinov & Cilliers, 2021; Zilka, 2022a, 2023). Members of Gen Alpha are independent learners who are aware of themselves, their abilities, and their desires. They prefer to consume visual information and have a high ability to absorb and process visual information quickly. Their eyes are used to the fast recognition of situations. The content they usually prefer is short, focused, eye-catching, and clear, and the information they consume is mostly visual, short, and catchy. They have the ability to initiate processes, create things, and express themselves succinctly in a variety of ways, mainly visually. These children are used to the convenience and immediacy that technology allows and express resistance when they are expected to do things or learn through less rapid means, such as outdated digital learning environments.

The role of the teacher and the role of the teacher-mentor

Researchers (Lamb, 1982, 1999; K. Liu, 2015; M. Liu et al., 2014; Zilka, 2019a, 2019b, 2022b, 2022c; Zilka et al., 2018) have described the diverse and interconnected roles of teachers: providing emotional, social, and educational support to students; simultaneously being a teacher, a tutor, a mentor, a coach, and an integrator, as well as educator, class manager, and more. Researchers claimed that teachers exert a critical influence on the development of the social skills of students (Lamb, 1982, 1999; Zilka, 2022c).

Great importance has been attributed to the guidance and support of BTs by a teacher-mentor in the initial stages of teaching. The purpose of mentoring is to guide the BTs in real-time, to assist with their optimal absorption and with working with students, help them deal with the needs of different students and improve their teaching skills, and make the connection between BTs' theoretical and practical knowledge to develop their professional self-efficacy. TMs significantly influence the development of BTs, and the mentoring process is considered to be an important part of absorption and support programs for BTs (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017; Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2021).

The purpose of the present study and the research question was to compare the aspects of the experience of beginning teaching in elementary schools, as described by BTs and TMs, in shaping the professional identity of BTs, members of Gen Y, from their respective vantage points.

METHOD

This was a qualitative case study (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Fletcher-Watson, 2013; Yin, 2012). The data were collected in Israel in 2022.

SAMPLE

The research population included 115 teachers representing two groups:

1. Seventy-five teachers in their first year of teaching at a school. Of these, 15 were men, and the rest were women who taught regularly and continuously in elementary schools. The age range of the participants was 26-30 years. All teachers belonged to Gen Y. All participants had a bachelor's degree and a teaching certificate. In Israel, a BT in the first year of teaching, during the internship period, is also referred to as an "intern." All the BTs in this study participated in an internship workshop and were assigned a TM.
2. Forty TMs with at least five years of teaching experience. The age range was 35-60, eight men and the rest women. All TMs completed a TM training course.

RESEARCH TOOL

The study was based on a demographic questionnaire and open questions. The open questions were based on previous questionnaires: self-efficacy questionnaire, resilience questionnaire, motivation questionnaire, challenge/threat questionnaire, and teacher role perception questionnaire (Bandura, 1986; Kasalak & Dağyar, 2020; Lazarus & Folkman, 1988; Zilka, 2020, 2022a, 2022c; Zilka et al., 2019). The open questions were:

1. Share with us your experiences during the year as a beginning teacher/teacher-mentor.
2. Successes: What do you think made you successful in your work this year? What worked well for you? What components contributed to your success? What is important to know when starting to work in teaching? Tell your success story.
3. Challenges: In your opinion, what are the most common and dominant challenges in the teacher's work? How did you deal with these challenges?
4. What do you think should be done to enable the optimal absorption of beginning teachers?
5. Things you want to add.

THE DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

Data processing was based on the approach described by Bernard and Ryan (2010) and Fletcher-Watson (2013). The participants described the positive experiences and challenges, feelings, and emotions. The data analysis made it possible to listen to the voices and observe teachers' thought processes and emotions. The data received from the participants about their experiences and the explanations they provided constituted the building blocks of the findings. Content analysis was conducted on two levels: normative, to differentiate between prominent trends, and interpretive, to discover different perceptions and insights. The common themes that emerged from the data coalesced into central categories in relation to the research question. In the course of the content analysis, we extracted statements, events, and situations from the data. Subsequently, we identified significant recurring code-anchors, which were grouped into concepts and concepts arranged by categories (Galletta, 2013). In the course of the spiral process, the identified nuclear elements gradually coalesced into a picture that reflects the participants' experience of beginning teaching (Glaser & Strauss, 2012). Significant recurring trends were identified.

The processing of the data into themes was carried out in three stages (Galletta, 2013):

1. *Open coding*, when the concepts were located and defined.
2. *Axial coding*, when the concepts were grouped into categories in the process of merging, separating, and detecting connections between the concepts.
3. *Selective coding*, when themes were consolidated, and all the data that did not match the formulated themes were filtered out.

The ethics committee approved the study, and it was carried out while fully maintaining the privacy and anonymity of the participants.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented by the themes that emerged from the data analysis. One hundred and fifteen teachers, divided into two groups, participated in the study: a group of TMs (n=40) and a group of BTs (n=75). No differences were found between the genders.

The BTs who participated in the study mentioned the following aspects of their experiences: peer community; evaluation of their work by their students, colleagues, and the students' parents; dealing with students and with classroom discipline and management; dialog with students; teaching methods; contact with parents; and the conduct of the school organization.

The TMs who participated in the current study mentioned the following aspects of their experiences: evaluation of their work by colleagues at school, dealing with students and classroom discipline and management, teaching methods, and contact with parents.

THE NEED FOR THE EVALUATION OF TEACHERS' WORK

A dominant aspect of the experience that all the BTs referred to was the importance of evaluation of their work by colleagues, students, and parents. The TMs mentioned the assessment of the beginning teachers as part of their work but did not refer to the BTs' need for ongoing assessment and reinforcement. They referred to their need for evaluation by the BTs, the school principal, and the other teachers.

DIALOG WITH STUDENTS

All BTs spoke about the importance of conducting a dialog with their students. Some (n=40) perceived such dialog as a success, as a key to change, and to creating a feeling that teachers cared for their students and were interested in them, that they were available and accessible to each student, and concerned about them.

Some BTs (n=35) described this as a challenge that was difficult to meet, despite the great importance of conducting a dialog with students to create a personal, caring, and inclusive relationship. Others (n=30) stated that personal conversations with a student took place, unfortunately, only when there was a crisis or before providing an assessment of the student's academic and social performance.

BTs (n=30) stated that despite the difficulties, they did their best to provide personal, encouraging feedback to each student. Some TMs (n=8) noted the need to talk with students in times of crisis and when required but mentioned no ongoing dialogical communication.

Sample quotes:

- I had a significant conversation with a student who experienced a great deal of difficulties at the beginning of the year. We managed to carry out a dialogue that allowed him to express himself and allowed me to understand and contain his difficulty.
- After the conversations, I felt that the student was happy, and felt that I cared about him and wanted to advance him.

TEACHING METHODS

The BTs spoke about teaching methods. Some of the teachers wrote that they tried to provide students with opportunities for structured independent learning in the course of the day (n=35); organized a space that would allow for significant independent learning (n=25) and group learning (n=25); assigned tasks for group study (n=30), work on classroom projects (n=25), and PBL project-based learning (n=20); matched tasks to the children's strengths (n=30), developed teaching units and diversity in teaching methods (n=40); provided reinforcement and tailored solutions for students (n=37); designed student research assignments (n=40), creating diverse options for personal expression (n=27) and cooperation between learners (thinking communities) (n=30); encouraged both struggling and outstanding students to take responsibility for their learning process (n=40); offered students a choice between multiple options (n=30); encouraged development of reflective skills, mainly of students with behavioral problems (n=30), and development of social emotional skills (SEL) (n=40).

All the TMs mentioned aspects related to teaching methods, including their willingness to share knowledge with the BTs (n=40). Some TMs (n=29) expressed displeasure with the desire of BTs to incorporate "too many" visual aids, digital applications, etc., into their teaching. Sample quotes:

- It is difficult for them to sit for a long time and listen to the teacher.
- They prefer to receive assignments in a digital environment, mainly through videos, especially short, fast ones.
- They have no patience for information written in a book or pamphlet that needs to be studied at length and in detail.

COMMUNICATION WITH THE STUDENTS' PARENTS.

The BTs expressed a sense of partnership in responsibility for the child (n=30); described having a dialog with parents (n=40), parents' participation in decision-making (n=20), and providing explanations, support, and guidance adapted to parents (n=20); mentioned creating opportunities for parents' participation in class activities (n=48); reported on differential communication with parents (n=40); and felt difficulty managing time with parents (n=40) because of parents who required attention and long, frequent conversations (n=37). BTs felt that they were unable to establish contact with some parents (n=27). The contact with the parents was usually initiated by the parents, except for "parent days" (n=30).

The TMs noted the difficulty of BTs in dealing with students' parents, but in a general way and not similarly to how the BTs described it themselves. All the TMs mentioned that communication with students' parents was a major challenge for BTs.

Sample quotes:

- Something small that happened to me in class caused an uproar, and the students' parents ganged up on me.
- I was overwhelmed. Instead of backing me up and scolding their children for running amok in class, they stood up against me.
- It broke me. I didn't come to school for a few days. It was hard for me to go back to class.
- I have a constant fear of criticism from students, parents, and the school staff. I feel under attack.

In my opinion, the biggest challenge for a new teacher is dealing with the parents. I now know the smart and correct way to approach a student's parents, what to do or not to do, and, of course, how to do it. We must be very empathetic toward them, calm, and have a steady and non-aggressive tone, compliment their children, emphasize the strengths they have, gently bring up the problem, and find a solution together.

A COMMUNITY OF PEERS

All the BTs spoke about a "peer community," mentioning productive work with coworkers (n=35); openness, transparency, sharing, and cooperation (n=30); getting acquainted with the school culture (n=40); ongoing dialogue and coordination with teachers and officials (n=30); and with the educational counselor (n=34) at school. At the same time, BTs described feeling alone in this process and had no supporting community (n=40).

Teachers who felt part of an inclusive and supportive community of peers expressed a willingness to stay in school (n=36); teachers who experienced a sense of foreignness and alienation expressed a desire to leave the school (n=30).

The TMs used expressions such as "absorption in the school" and "understanding the school organization," but not the concepts of school or form teacher community. The TMs mentioned the need for the BTs to adapt to working with the students, their parents, and the school staff. Most of them did not use the term "community." Some TMs (n=30) used the term "community" to refer to optimal absorption of BTs. All the TMs mentioned the need for adaptation of BTs.

Sample quotes:

- Being a teacher brings satisfaction, but it is a demanding role.
- What made me successful was a lot of help from the school staff.
- The subject coordinator, as well as teachers more experienced and senior than myself, helped me learn the material, make it accessible to students at different levels, and design tests.
- I acquired from them numerous tools for teaching and working in the classroom. Encouragement and boosting of morale are also very important.
- The success of a new teacher depends on many factors. First, collaboration with teachers greatly helped my success. They made me feel trusted, allowed me freedom of action, and listened to my requests.
- At the beginning, at school, I felt like I was drowning, "I was thrown into the water," as they say. Over time, I learned to ask for help and receive support from the team, but in my opinion, a beginning teacher needs a broader and more personal response.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

All the teachers mentioned difficulties in "classroom management." Student characteristics (n=40) and student learning habits (n=46) were not addressed; there were many disciplinary (n=60) and behavioral (n=50) problems. BTs experienced difficulty in time management (n=65) and allocating time for personal conversations with the students to get to know them better and create a sense of trust

(n=35). BTs mentioned the interconnectedness of the teacher's roles (n=47) and viewed the role of the teacher as a holistic one (n=45).

All the TMs treated issues related to classroom management as a challenge in the work of BTs: controlling the classroom, managing the lesson, and dealing with disciplinary problems. Most TMs (n=35) credited the successful management of a class by BTs as their own success as TMs. If BTs succeeded in managing the classroom, they saw it as successful absorption; if BTs failed to manage the class, they saw it as a failure in the teacher's absorption at the school.

Sample quotes:

- Only after a few months on the job did I understand the connection between the “components of the job” of being a teacher: dealing with disciplinary problems, behaviorally challenging children, students' academic difficulties, and the desire to reach everyone; academic progress and reducing gaps left over from previous years; teaching the material and at the same time being able to include to all students and listen to them.
- It took me a while, but I understood the connection between what was happening in my class and the tasks I gave them, on the one hand, the way I spoke to the students, on the other. I understand much better the great influence I have on my students in all matters – studies, social, emotional.

SELF-MANAGEMENT, SELF-PRESERVATION, AND BURNOUT PREVENTION

All BTs stated that they would not stay in a workplace that they did not feel good about and did not provide them with meaningful work or allow them to effectuate changes. BTs mentioned difficulties in setting boundaries and working hours (n=59). They referred to the use of diverse tools to organize and manage the class (n=40); weekly, monthly, and annual planning (n=47); developing self-awareness and self-acceptance (n=35); sharing difficulties and asking for help and support (n=49). All of them mentioned the fear of revealing their difficulties and of being told that they were not suitable for the job. Some teachers stated that there was a change in their self-awareness, in the ability to understand the processes they experienced, and their actions and reactions (n=35). Some wrote that despite the great difficulty, they felt that they had undergone a change and were better suited to being a teacher than at the beginning of the year (n=36). There have been changes in their perception of themselves, habits, and behavior, and felt that they have developed during the year. The connection between their actions, words, and behavior and what was happening in their classrooms became much clearer. Many teachers (n=50) mentioned an experience of self-criticism in various contexts.

Some of the BTs (n=35) stated that their TM focused on teaching and acceptance of students but less on the acceptance of BTs and aspects that were important to BTs. Others (n=25) felt that the TM sought to sway their point of view without trying to understand it.

THE WORK OF THE TMs

Some of the BTs (n=35) spoke about the work of TMs. They (n=28) stated that the TMs helped mostly with classroom management and teaching methods and less with innovative teaching methods and personal support of the BT. Some BTs (n=15) mentioned guidance and support in everything they requested.

All TMs indicated the need for emotional support of the BTs but noted difficulties in accepting the BTs. They noted character traits of the teachers who came into the system as different from previous years (n=30) and compared to their own situation as BTs (n=25).

Sample quotes:

- Today, I'm much more observant of what I say to myself and others and the effect my words have on me and others. There has been a change in my “inner discourse.” Today, I have fewer negative thoughts that weaken my self-confidence and more positive thoughts

about myself and my relationship with others. There has been a change in my self-image and self-confidence, in what I think about myself, and in the way I perceive my skills and abilities in different areas.

- I felt that I was expected to be available 24/7. It's important to know how to combine work and personal life. Often, there is an imbalance between work and home, and this is frustrating.
- I asked myself whether I'm a bystander in the lives of my students or a significant teacher figure so that each and every one of my students is like my own child.
- Over this year, my awareness of the connection between my personality and the way I perceive my role became more focused: the task of managing the class, of being a teacher in the class, the activity I brought to the class, the way I dealt with social problems in the class, etc.; the right amount of "assertiveness," balanced by a right amount of pleasantness and kindness, and emotional support that I provided to my students.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to compare the aspects described by BTs and TMs of the initial experience of teaching and of shaping the professional identity of BTs, members of Gen Y, in elementary schools from the perspective of beginning teachers and TMs.

The findings show that there is a conflict between the BTs' and TMs' perceptions of school reality. The mentors tended to see the absorption process as adapting to the school and expected the BTs to adjust to the existing system, whereas the BTs perceived the process as that of the formation of their identity as teachers. They expected the absorption stage to provide them with opportunities for collaboration and innovation. It turned out that parameters that were important to Gen Y teachers, such as knowing the school organization and being an influential factor that brings about change, were less important to their mentors.

The findings also show that Gen Y BTs needed a structured absorption, a supportive community that provides feedback and shows appreciation for their work, listens to them, and is ready for change. BTs sought to bring about change in the school or quit. Our findings reinforce those of previous studies that investigated the employment characteristics of Gen Y. They show a need for the school community to provide professional, social, and emotional support for Gen Y teachers upon their initiation into the education system and acquaint them with the school organization. Under optimal working conditions, Gen Y teachers may be significant figures for teaching the values of education and equal opportunities, maximizing the personal potential of each student and the classroom potential, and making the school relevant.

GEN Y BTs: ADAPTATION VS INNOVATION

The BTs who participated in this study stated that they would not stay in a workplace where they did not feel good and that did not provide them with meaningful, challenging work, community work, feedback, and appreciation. Therefore, they prefer to bring about a change in the schools or quit their job. As one of the BTs put it: "I tried to bring about change at the school, but this is hopeless. That's why I won't continue working as a teacher. I'll look for another profession that suits me better so that I have a desire to get up in the morning and go to work. This year, I felt that my self-confidence had been undermined and that I didn't understand what I was doing at school at all. I thought this was my mission, but no, it only undermined me." This is consistent with the findings of previous studies on the importance of school community support for BTs (Bennett et al., 2013; Buchanan et al., 2013; Gray & Taie, 2015; Ingersoll, 2012).

Most of the TMs (n=35) expected to help the BTs adapt to the school system. However, in practice, there were differences of opinion between the TMs and the BTs. Disagreements arose mainly from

having different perceptions of the situation. The BTs wanted to be absorbed and make a difference, whereas the TMs wanted the BTs to adapt to the system and accept the existing situation.

Similar findings were reported in previous studies (Clarke et al., 2013; Langdon, 2014; Ulvik & Sunde, 2013), where it was found that practical matters were important for TMs, especially classroom management. Many mentors focused on the transfer of their knowledge and experience to BTs (Hudson, 2013; Richter et al., 2013). However, the needs of Gen Y BTs must be addressed, as in other fields and professions, in all aspects related to the absorption of members of Gen Y in the labor market. The absorption of BTs must focus not only on aspects related to adapting to the school organization but also on the development of leadership already in their first year of work at the school.

Researchers (Richter et al., 2013; van Ginkel et al., 2016) mentioned the need to secure fulfilling roles for BTs in their first year, to help them create connections based on dialog and reflection within the school community, adapt to the existing and preserve it, but also accept the new. For example, a BT said: “I was afraid to embarrass myself, I didn’t dare to talk about my difficulties, and it was very difficult for me. I felt alone in the system. The most important thing I learned is that I should ask, not be afraid, and not be ashamed. In retrospect, at the beginning of the year, it took me a long time to achieve what could have been done in a shorter, clearer, less frustrating way.”

Members of Gen Y have unique characteristics that are different from those of the generations before them; therefore, the system that wants to absorb Gen Y teachers must address this uniqueness. The research literature (Butcher et al., 2017; Eastman & Liu, 2012; Jackson et al., 2011) shows that they are independent, entrepreneurial, self-confident, and love innovation. They are aware of social status, seek challenges and meaningful work, and tend to question authority. They want to be listened to and taken into consideration. To improve and develop, they need attention, feedback, and reinforcements. Researchers (Laird et al., 2015; van der Merwe et al., 2014) found that members of Gen Y are ambitious, favor specific learning styles that include experiential and active learning, prefer multi-tasking, and use advanced communication technology for access to educational and interpersonal information. They respond fast to stimulations and are skilled in simultaneous work on several channels. Their generational characteristic is that they are used to jumping from one experience to another and from one emotion to another, making it difficult to operate in a hierarchical framework, as they prefer a personal and empathetic attitude. They are considered to be a more communal generation than their predecessors, prefer to work in a structured, communal way, and receive feedback and evaluation clearly and regularly (Anderson et al., 2017; Frye et al., 2020; Magni & Manzoni, 2020).

All the participants in this study mentioned aspects that characterize their students. The aspects they mentioned were reported in previous studies that explored the characteristics of Gen Alpha. Some disagreements between the new and veteran teachers were concerned with the educational approaches appropriate for students and members of Gen Alpha.

One of the BTs stated: “I had a lot of disagreements with other teachers regarding the mode of communication with students. You need to understand them and adapt teaching methods to them, but the school staff made the punishment for disciplinary problems more and more severe instead of realizing that it was necessary to change their attitude.”

Another teacher said: “I know how hard it is for them at school because the teachers don’t understand this generation. I had many confrontations with my mentor and the principal of the school. I gave up. I don’t want to be a teacher anymore.”

Members of Gen Alpha are characterized by high digital literacy, curiosity, and flexibility in learning (Bonell & Booy, 2020; Taylor & Hattingh, 2019; Viner et al., 2020; Ziatdinov & Cilliers, 2021; Zilka, 2022a, 2023). They are independent learners who are aware of their abilities and know what they want. They prefer to consume visual information and have a high ability to absorb and process visual

information quickly. The content they usually prefer is short, focused, eye-catching, and clear, and the information they consume is mostly visual, short, and catchy. They have the ability to initiate processes, create things, and express themselves succinctly in a variety of ways, mainly visually. They are used to the convenience and immediacy that technology allows and express resistance when they are expected to do things or learn through less rapid means, such as outdated digital learning environments.

The teachers who participated in this study stated that it was difficult for the students to sit through an entire lesson and listen to the teacher. They preferred to work in groups, explore, and discover rather than memorize. Teachers must allow their students to learn and develop while strengthening their own resilience, self-sufficiency, and efficiency in teaching and learning and emphasizing the perception of their roles as leaders and trailblazers capable of coping with challenges, changes, and differences between students. Teachers must encourage students to dream and fulfill their dreams, assuming responsibility for acquiring diverse content bases and learning methods. BTs should be assisted in planning and carrying out educational initiatives and learning activities that allow their students to develop initiative in an inclusive and empathetic environment.

The teachers mentioned the complexity of managing a class, discipline and behavior problems, difficulty in managing time, and allocating time for personal conversations with the students in order to get to know them better and create a sense of trust. The BTs found it difficult to manage their time and had a feeling of “putting out fires” of events chasing events. One of the recommendations was to have access to a mentor in real-time, at the start of their employment, who can help them manage their time and create a routine, rather than having to navigate “in a storm” all the time.

To be successful in classroom management, teachers must instill in students a commitment to the learning process; allow students to choose between options, texts, and assignments; develop their reflective and social-emotional skills (SEL); promote active inquiry learning; make students use digital libraries, learning centers, and information centers available to learners; encourage cooperation between learners as a thinking community; encourage dialog between teacher and students and between students; and address differences between students. The adoption of these principles in learning and teaching involves students in challenging learning that encourages innovation and entrepreneurship and cultivates personal characteristics, attitudes, skills, and abilities (Zilka, 2022b). Throughout elementary school, children establish the foundation of their understanding of the various fields and develop cognitive, emotional, and social skills that constitute the infrastructure for their achievements in childhood and adulthood (Phillips et al., 1987; Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). Various factors have been found to contribute to the optimal development of children in diverse fields and their success, including affectivity, belonging, reciprocal relations, creativity, space for personal expression, enjoyment, motor, and rhythmic development, development of an aesthetic sense, and cultivation of social and group skills. The experiences and processes of children at this age establish the infrastructure for their development (Phillips et al., 1987; Vygotsky & Luria, 1994; Zilka, 2021, 2022a, 2023).

PERSONAL IDENTITY IS SHAPED AS A RESULT OF THE ENCOUNTER WITH OTHERS

The first year of teaching is a learning year, and it greatly influences the construction of the BTs’ professional identity (Tammets et al., 2019). Researchers (Erikson, 1959; Oris et al., 2018; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Yanos et al., 2010) have noted that personal identity is shaped by the individual in the encounter with others. Who am I? Where do I belong? What part of my identity challenges me most? What does this mean to me? How, where, when, with whom, and why did these challenges arise? Why do I want to be a teacher? Is this the job I want to get up for in the morning? The gap between BTs’ expectations and the reality they found at school slaps some of them in the face.

The findings of this study suggest that the part that challenged the formation of the BTs’ personal and group identity the most was their encounters with their colleagues, students, and parents. These encounters brought to light difficulties and problems. The process of “identity perception” occurs

through interaction with others – simultaneously and not sequentially, “one after the other.” Some of the beginning teachers felt that they had been able to learn “who I am,” acquired more self-awareness, better understanding of their ways of acting, and developed alternative ways of acting. The findings show that teachers who felt they were part of an inclusive and supportive peer community expressed a willingness to remain in the school, and those who had a sense of foreignness and alienation expressed the desire to leave the school as soon as possible. BTs need support, inclusion, and guidance.

Self-identity derives from personal characteristics, roles, values, goals, and past experiences, and it is shaped by the person as a result of social negotiation (Erikson, 1959; Oris et al., 2018; Yanos et al., 2010). According to researchers (Erikson, 1959; Oris et al., 2018; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Yanos et al., 2010), identity is a dynamic process of formation and change, as opposed to a static state. Together with permanent factors in a person’s consciousness, there are changing factors that affect the shaping of identity, as it is formed by integration as opposed to conflict. Identity is a dynamic process of developing self-consciousness in the individual as a means of achieving a sense of belonging and identification with a social group. Personal identity and the sense of group belonging are in a constant process of formation. Researchers (Erikson, 1959; Roccas & Brewer, 2002) insisted on the dynamic and changing nature of identity, dependent on social, interpersonal, and psychological contexts.

CONCLUSION

A supportive community at school is likely to increase the level of mental well-being of Gen Y teachers. To this end, support communities of teachers should be created by form and discipline of study. In the community, emphasis should be placed on reflection and mental resilience in all situations and challenging events that happen to the BTs to help them cope with the accumulated stress.

The findings of this study indicate that the creation of an emotionally and professionally supportive community led to a fruitful discussion on issues related to the process of absorption and integration of BTs in the school. This process advanced their professional development, expanding knowledge, abilities, strategies, and innovative pedagogical practices for classroom management, as well as meaningful teaching and learning in the classroom. The supportive community provided an emotional, professional, social-organizational, and evaluative-reflective response to the needs of BTs, facilitating meaningful interactions between the BTs and their students. It created a space for students to practice emotional training, organize and manage behavior, regulate emotions and behavior, reduce feelings of anger, and arouse a feeling of optimism. To provide students with a learning process that responds to the characteristics of Gen, it is necessary to learn and teach with love, sensitivity, affectivity, and empathy. Students need a sensitive environment that reads their signals and provides an adequate response to their needs so that they can develop emotional, social, and cognitive abilities, which will facilitate their openness and development. It is necessary to establish social-emotional relationships for them and create social-emotional security circles that produce a sense of security and increase the urge to live, initiate, create, and establish relationships with other children and with the teachers. All this must be accomplished in a process of in-depth examination and investigation where it is possible to choose appropriate ways to enable the realization of an affectionate and inclusive space. Teachers must create situations in which the students can deal with emotional and social aspects based on a positive resonance and in a climate that becomes increasingly affectionate, inclusive, and shared.

Students need a sensitive environment that is appropriate for Gen Alpha children. This environment must allow for emotional training and regulation, behavior organization, and management to arouse a feeling of optimism and reduce anger. To develop students’ emotional, social, and cognitive abilities, teachers must teach with love, sensitivity, affectivity, and empathy.

To retain BTs and prevent them from quitting their career, schools must ensure that members of Gen Y understand the school organization and are satisfied with the way the organization is managed. They must have a sense of being significant partners in the life of the school. Under optimal working conditions, Gen Y teachers may greatly contribute to the values of education and equal opportunity, maximizing the personal potential of each student and the classroom as a whole and making the school relevant.

FUTURE STUDIES

Future studies should examine the characteristics of students belonging to Gen Alpha. One of the difficulties mentioned by BTs was a misunderstanding of the characteristics of Gen Alpha, which created problems in the interactions within the teaching staff and between the teachers and the students and prevented gaining authority with other teachers and with students.

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