Worry as the New Normal. Generation Z Facing its Future Through the Educational Process[1]

La preocupación como nueva normalidad: La Generación Z afronta su futuro a través del proceso educativo

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Resumen

Esta contribución examina las características de la generación Z (Gen Z), y el imaginario emotivo de sus miembros sobre su futuro profesional. El objetivo del trabajo es aportar elementos para la mejor comprensión del papel de la educación en la conformación de las proyecciones futuras de estos jóvenes. Para ello, analizamos aspectos relacionados con sus emociones y su sensibilidad, poniendo especial énfasis en una emoción particular: la preocupación. Este examen surge de constatar que no hay mucha literatura que analice las emociones involucradas en las visiones del futuro que les espera a los miembros de esta generación. En términos metodológicos, utilizamos un protocolo de investigación internacional (se aplicó a jóvenes de México y Francia), que desarrollamos para recopilar las opiniones de los jóvenes sobre sí mismos y su futuro y, finalmente, presentamos algunos de los resultados más significativos que tienen que ver con la preocupación y la resiliencia.

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147

Palabras clave: juventud, educación y empleo, conflicto de generaciones.

Abstract

This contribution examines the characteristics of Generation Z (Gen Z), and the emotional imagination of its members about their professional future. The aim of this paper is to provide elements for a better understanding of the role of education in shaping the future projections Gen Z members. To do this, we analyze aspects related to their emotions and sensitivity, placing special emphasis on a particular emotion: worry. And we do this after realizing that there is not much literature that analyzes the emotions involved in the visions of the future that awaits them. In methodological terms, we use an international research protocol (applied to young people from Mexico and France), we developed to collect young people's opinions about themselves and their future, and finally, we present some of the most significant results that have to do with worry and resilience.

Keywords: youth, education and employment, generation gap.

Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z), is often associated with the term Millennials — symbolizing the transition to the 2000s and the new century, and a global appetite for information technologies and the Internet — although this term also applies broadly to Generation Y. However, Gen Z has its own characteristics, and its vision of its future working life and its social imaginaries have been deeply marked by the COVID-19 pandemic during its youth.

Youth mental health is now considered as a central issue for young people themselves, their families ands society as a whole (Landstedt & Coffey, 2017). Aside from the health issue, young individuals are also facing other crises that are not as universally acknowledged in society. Aside from the current statistics indicating a youth unemployment rate of 17.2 % among individuals aged 15-24, compared to 7.5 % for the general working population in France[4], it is worth noting that young people are also experiencing a significant socio-economic crisis, with 60 % of them living in difficult circumstances. Organizations like Restos du Coeur are facing difficulties in managing the excess number of impoverished young individuals, whose suffering has intensified and become more apparent due to the health crisis. The quality of reception conditions in universities and public higher education has progressively declined (Saqué, 2023).

Simultaneously, the incidence of suicide among those aged 18-24 has doubled since 2014, prompting the Senate to vote in mid-January 2024 to officially recognize the mental health of young people as a significant national concern (Agulhon, Forthcoming). Young people also express their concern about the ecological crisis and actively advocate for this cause, despite the limited progress made in achieving the sustainability goals set by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Additionally, they face the disadvantage of not having access to the same natural resources as their older counterparts.

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4   According to data from https://www.insee.fr (2024, March 18).

Despite the prevailing climate of concern, Generation Z remains resolute in their pursuit of education, employment, and entrepreneurial endeavours, which could be indicative of interesting resilience skills. Focusing on what is worrying Generation Z, we elaborate on this population's attributes (Gentina & Delécluse, 2018; Agulhon, 2020), and analyse the relationship between these young people, their professional ambitions (Furlong et al., 2018; Farrugia, 2021,) and society at large. Finally, we outline a number of levers for enhancing intergenerational dialogue and collective resilience, fostering *vivre ensemble* (living together in harmony).

Generation Z under the microscope

Generation Z can be defined by the time period in which its members were born or by the characteristics attributed to them and that make them different from other generations. With respect to the first criterion, that is, from a demographic point of view, we can say, trying to find a common point between the different dates covered by the literature on the subject, that Gen Z encompasses people born around the 2000s (here we will consider those born between 1997 and 2010). With respect to the second criterion, the characteristics attributed to this generational group attributed to them of being proficient in using technology, multitasking, being socially open to technologies, acting quickly and impatiently, and being interactive and resilient (Fernández-Cruz & Fernández-Díaz, 2016). This is the first generation born into a world where digital technology is present in virtually every area of life (Dolot, 2018).

From a more theoretical perspective, related to the characteristics of the time and its subjects, Dufour (2003), argues its distinctive features are the weakening of the Other (the Other of Lacan and the psychoanalysts), and the dissolution of the "great subjects" (social class, family, etc.). These two key elements of modernity functioned as a continent, as containment and legitimate order arising from the very psyche of the subjects. With its weakening, a feeling of deep anxiety is generated in their psyche related to the loss of meaning (collective, historical, psychological, etc.), where now pride of place is held by merchandise. This condition is accompanied in western neoliberal societies by a profound process of desymbolization (Dufour, 2003; Mesnil, 2017), that disrupts the legitimacy and functioning of institutions: in their imaginary and symbolic characteristics, in general, and in particular those of the education sector. This reality is manifest, above all, among Gen Z. For this generation, hierarchies and symbolic dominations tend to fade in favour of a lukewarm relativism, without sound institutional and collective referents. So individual knowledge and experience become central and raise serious questions about the state of knowledge constructed in a collective and methodical way (science), and, therefore, about what emanates from it as a result and about ethical or ontological perspectives (Agulhon, 2020).

This situation, seen from the educational system, manifests itself forcefully when postmodern teaching methods are employed with their associated nihilism, and the current acceptance of them by many people, including actors in the education

Revista Senderos Pedagógicos Vol. 16 Núm. 1. julio - diciembre 2024, pp. 149 - 157.
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149

system. This leads to a loss of achievement milestones, especially for people from socio-cultural backgrounds who suffer at the same time from other divides (linguistic, monetary, digital, social, religion, etc.). In this context, Gen Z is a section of the population that is particularly difficult to train, educate and make useful for the labour market. On top of that, Gentina and Delécluse (2018) consider that Gen Z should be analysed as a whole and not only in terms of one of its statuses (e.g. students or workers), keeping in mind the following elements: (a) the advent of information and communication technologies (greater mobility, dematerialization of relationships); (b) the living conditions of post-industrial society (over-information, zapping, hypermedia), and also, (c) new family relationships (more egalitarian relationships between parents and children, unstructured, blended families).

To these elements we could add those that are somehow inherited from Generation Y, particularly those related to technology and the attraction for contradictory values such as the search for freedom and social success, the affirmation of their group identity and subversion, the aspiration to compromise and disinvestment. Despite the above, Gen Z seems to share fewer values or priorities than Gen Y with previous generations in their ties to training and professionalization. The will to co-create and the search for authenticity or for credible alternative knowledge, which are also characteristic of this generation, threaten the traditional managerial and pedagogical models that were accepted by previous generations (Casoinic, 2016).

These characteristics, added to the demographic importance that this generational group represents, denote an important cultural impact for secondary socialization institutions such as schools or businesses. It should not be forgotten in this regard that, in the modern world, an important function of training institutions is that their teaching expands the future of their learners and that historically, schools were guided by faith in reason and human progress that would bring about social justice and emancipation. With this in mind, we can say that if the imaginary of learners in general (i.e. students), and of those of administrative staff, teachers and structures do not connect in their teleological and axiological dimensions, then, the institutions of modernity that sustain our daily life will continue to weaken with significant costs and social consequences. Finally, one should note that Gen Z is in higher education or has already started working like Generation Y (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021), and will soon represent a particularly high proportion of the economically active population (EAP), in many countries around the world. These young people can aggravate the crisis of the traditional institutions or, on the contrary, generate a global and positive adaptation of these same entities and frameworks, through Gen Z's innovative skills and spirit.

Last but not least, our research considered the previous literature concerning the training of young people as workers so as to take a step back from current representations of young people. Historically, it has been proposed to transform young people into workers with training, accompaniment mechanisms, etc. (Farrugia, 2021), looking at the social and demographic transformation of students or how good young people's jobs are becoming over time (Tannock, 2001; Furlong et al., 2018). From the perspective of the political economy of youth, emphasis is placed on the role of young

workers in the production of value and its consequent exploitation (Côté, 2016). This exploitation is revealed by the fact that young people are incorporated without much friction, for example, thanks to the marketing techniques of social networks. Finally, others critically explore and question the meaning of work in the production of the subjectivity of youth (Weeks, 2011), or the power relationship between work and the most personal and intimate sides of young people (Farrugia, 2021), including their emotions (Scribano & Lisdero, 2019). So, by keeping in mind those frameworks of analysis, we became able to approach the modern social imaginaries of Gen Z towards its professional future. Modern social imaginaries represent a complex space and a "key to understanding the practices that take place within a given society" (Taylor, 2003, p. 2). Those imaginaries feed the process of personal fulfilment of modern subjectivities (Farrugia, 2021) and the transition to economically productive adulthood (Tannock, 2001).

A multi-layered methodology Gen Z towards its future: the preponderant place of concerns and worries

Our research on Gen Z and its projection into the future involved management science students from four urban sites in France and Mexico, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The socio-cultural realities of these two western countries are very different, even if their education systems share many points in common. However, the concerns and worries of this generation seem to transcend contexts.

During our inquiry, we conducted an initial phase focused on gathering unfiltered opinions from young individuals understand the role of training in projecting its students into the future. We employed non-directive and ethnographic methodologies for almost a year to obtain this data. During the initial stage at the primary facility, which mostly provided work-related Bachelor programs, we established a weekly presence from April 2018 to 2020, initially in person and later through remote means. A study agreement was established with the center, and a consent form for research participation was created and signed by all the participating learners. A total of 32 participants were recorded in the initial year. Out of the total 32 participants, seven individuals made contact on two occasions, while six participants made contact at least three times over the years 2019 or 2020, either through in-person meetings or remotely (Agulhon, Forthcoming).

While this exploratory research was initially focusing on youth's relation to future through training mediation, students integrate school as an institution. This institutional status is both a reality they have to face and that is also part of their imagination. In all, five elements were often mentioned by these young people: their enrolment in Master's degree course, the construction of an occupational project, the construction of a life experience, especially internationally, the preparation of generic applications in the academic and professional world, and a change in their career choice. The discourses of these students were mainly analysed on the basis of the following criteria: the reflective process of construction of identity and

Revista Senderos Pedagógicos Vol. 16 Núm. 1. julio - diciembre 2024, pp. 151 - 157.
ISSN: 2145-8243, E-ISSN: 2590-8456. Medellín, Colombia

151

objective and subjective knowledge, the construction of a projection of their future (Ernst & D'Argembeau, 2017), and the effect of socialization and status through the educational institution (Dubar, 2010) on the phenomenon of alternation of identity with socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1986).

The second phase of information consolidation was conducted in Mexico and France in 2021 using online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the interviews were conducted, universities were working in a hybrid way in both France and Mexico so interviews were conducted using both distance and face-to-face methods.

In France, we conducted a second phase of data collection at another training center that was similar to the first one, after the confinement restrictions were lifted. The management of this center was able to evaluate the efficiency of our study system. The researcher was approached by the second center to establish a schedule that would be compatible with the training timeline. The second stage of data collecting, facilitated by the sponsorship of the training center's administration, entailed conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups. A total of 20 individuals, who were enrolled in two vocational degree programs, participated voluntarily. After the pandemic and the disruption of educational connections due to two periods of lockdown, the participants expressed great enthusiasm for these meetings. They found them valuable for reestablishing a learning routine and for discussing their emotions in the aftermath of the health crisis.

On the same period, a cohort of 20 mexican undergraduate students pursuing degrees in management sciences were interviewed for the second phase. The study was conducted at two university centers of a prominent university in western Mexico, one with a TSU program and one without. The study was approved by the relevant career coordinators, who were informed about the specific instruments that would be used to gather information: a general data questionnaire, an in-depth interview, and a Letter of Informed Consent to be submitted to the interviewees. The interviews commenced during a period when the University was operating in a hybrid mode as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Consequently, it was determined that interviews would be carried out digitally, with some being conducted face-to-face with students who willingly approached the study team. Furthermore, an additional French training center was also sought, with criteria that were equal to those of the first phase center in terms of the number of interviewees, age, level of education, and vocations.

The majority of youth mental health studies are quantitative and rooted in psychology or psychiatry. On the other hand, qualitative studies are crucial in gaining a deeper understanding on youth experience *per se* (Landstedt & Coffey, 2017). They have shown that young people perceive mental health as positive and negative emotional experiences, internal and relational feelings, happiness, balance, self-esteem, stress and self-confidence (Johansson et al., 2007). At the same time, young people themselves are shown to view mental health as an interaction between the individual and his/her environment (Ott et al., 2011). Consequently, our theorical framework is based on youth perceived interactions with the environment, focusing on emotional experiences related to fear in their discourse: scared, panicked, anxious,

nervous, uneasy, worried, apprehensive, hesitant, jittery, frightened, paralyzed, intimidated, startled and alarmed. We excluded terrified, petrified, dreadful, trembling, shaken, horrified feelings as they were present in peculiar situations considered out of scope for data congruence.

Results: Gen Z's anxieties and worries about future

In general, the results of this international study allowed us to characterize the young people of Gen Z on educational courses involving management issues, analyse the way in which they understand training for working life and the place they give to the educational institution in this process, notice the imaginaries of the young people interviewed with respect to their aspirations, their future and their social life, and check if there is any degree of desymbolization in their conformation as social actors. A global trend towards anxiety as a state of uneasiness and apprehension, as about future uncertainties; and worries that is to say feeling uneasy or concerned about something being troubled; particularly marked our study. And as this trend was pre-existing but reinforced and extended by the pandemic, it is now time to learn more about those fears and feelings so that action can be taken before the cognitive dissonances experienced by Gen Z with the discourse of their elders in an institutional context further threatens youth mental health or the ideals of living together. Young people from Gen Z consider the completion of their studies as paramount. These students are looking to graduate, to go on to do a Master's degree, and are afraid of being disappointed or undertaking the wrong training course. When students do not enjoy their course, their state of mind deteriorates quickly affecting their long-term mental health. At the individual level, reorientation seems to be a difficult stage to live with, even when the transition ends up going well. This type of test tends to be repeated as a significant failure of the student's personality. It should be noted that these young people find it difficult to open up to their teachers and more generally to the staff of training centres about this experience of suffering, as for any subject they consider intimate, personal feelings (which is distinct from issues related to sex, drug use and other traditional taboos). In addition, the selection processes on beginning studies such as a Master's degree course are also tough tests for these young people. In addition to the fact that places on courses are limited while Gen Z is particularly numerous, the fact that they have grown up in a society where the child was particularly well regarded (or even pampered), and relatively protected from academic failure (in appearance), with average and even mediocre results means that entry into higher education where autonomy, sense of effort and curiosity are the key words for selection, sometimes comes as a shock.

The overwhelming majority of young people surveyed consider that the pandemic has negatively affected their learning experience, especially because of difficulties in concentration related to smartphones as a digital medium because of regular notifications from social networks. The pandemic has also severely affected students from modest backgrounds, who have had to compensate for the loss of purchasing power

Revista Senderos Pedagógicos Vol. 16 Núm. 1. julio - diciembre 2024, pp. 153 - 157.
ISSN: 2145-8243, E-ISSN: 2590-8456. Medellín, Colombia

153

of their households by taking on jobs to pay their way through their studies (deliveries, retail jobs, etc.). In both France and Mexico, many have stopped their studies altogether to alleviate the situation. In this sense, French block-training (*alternance*), is a vital opportunity for young people to obtain decent financial resources while continuing their education to obtain a diploma that will ensure a better level of remuneration in the medium term. Some young people are even willing to follow a course that they do not like so as to benefit from this opportunity, which also explains a difference in motivation between their time in a company (which they cannot afford to forgo), and on their course (which serves them above all to obtain the qualification required to work in a field, and will allow them to enjoy a better future as graduates).

In general, young people are not very interested in political projects that do not concern them directly but they may be strongly committed to what does affect them: inequality, discrimination, etc. In both Mexico and France, the fear of the absence of possibilities or choices persists, even though options and educational alternatives might be offered by both countries. The simplification of career guidance procedures and the collection of general careers information providing greater transparency for users also generates hope among young people who receive little family support with decoding what a particular course entails and its significance for their own career paths. While young French people consider lifelong learning as a right rather than an opportunity, which is how their Mexican counterparts see it, their knowledge of higher education remains relatively limited because, even if digital resources are available, some contents cannot readily be conveyed by this information channel. Because there is often a lack of an experiential aspect to careers content, young people might have difficulty imagining the reality behind generic keywords of higher education, which is why politics of emotions are a promising avenue for research and practice to connect with Gen Z (Scribano & Lisdero, 2019), particularly after young people have been isolated due to lockdown at a critical stage for making decisions about their own future (Romo Morales & Agulhon, 2022).

Moreover, if Gen Z is willing to make many concessions not to shock rather than defend all their freedoms from a theoretical point of view, their tendency to comment excessively on the situations in which they find themselves, their immediate environment and others also make them a generation that is prone to denigration and harassment. To express itself excessively, or even without thinking about what it says, this generation can sometimes lack tact and courtesy or even know-how about living together. Paradoxically, these same young people sometimes have a hard time taking criticism despite what may look like proud attitudes and gestures displayed in the photos they post. Despite their hedonistic character traits, Gen Z know little about themselves because they are very much in the action-experience, in communication (e.g. on multiple social networks), or in self-forgetfulness (via a frantic consumption of TV series), and refuse boredom and the aimlessness that accompany self-awareness and searching for oneself.

Gen Z might dream less than previous generations because they often take a pragmatic or even pessimistic view of their future career prospects and quickly flee to their virtual world. Not being highly focused on effort without clear motivation or being

prone to hesitation, Gen Z imagines transforming itself when discovering its own path and its profession-passion, but can lose sight of the fact that success is built on constant in-depth work. Moreover, Gen Z mostly wants to professionalize, which sometimes leads to less consideration being paid to the other missions of the education system relating to its civic education, paradoxically creating new tensions and challenges in terms of the integration of employees within companies (Segal, 2022).

Beyond the precincts of education, Gen Z dreams of family life and, despite sometimes difficult communication with other generations, it feels particularly attached to this value. Finding love, getting married, starting a home, having children, taking care of parents all occur spontaneously in the discourse of young people and in their vision of happiness and success. Managing the work-life balance is particularly important to them, especially since the discovery of the possibility of generalizing working from home to a large proportion of occupations. Finally, Gen Z members from working-class backgrounds or recent immigration are particularly afraid of disappointing their loved ones by choosing a line of work that does not require (long) studies because the sacrifices due to precariousness as well as the weight of discrimination that their elders had to bear weigh on their consciences, even if they do not talk about this directly with the main actors concerned.

Finally, Gen Z is worried about climate change, as highlighted by Greta Thunberg with her call for a strike in 2019. Young people are convinced of the reality and gravity of climate change and point an accusing finger at political inaction. However, although young people are genuinely concerned about pending ecological disaster, their daily behaviours are not very different from those of older generations. In particular, young people show a certain taste for shopping, digital equipment and practices, unsustainable food production in both France and Mexico, and air travel, depending on their social origins. But they do have more ecological habits in two areas (Koschmieder et al., 2019): first, on a daily basis, they favour walking, cycling, public transport and carpooling; second, they take a strong interest in alternatives to buying things that are brand new such as purchasing second-hand items, renting, borrowing, reselling, barter, etc. (Le Goff & Bensebaa, 2021).

Perspectives and levers

As can be observed, Gen Z might not be as well prepared for their future as they might appear to be to other stakeholders (parents, teachers, managers, etc.). As developed by Baillergeau and Duyvendak (2022), their capacity for aspiring to goals even tends to dwindle as anxiety and worries get deeper. As this skill depends on how individual life trajectories and the accumulated experience of social interactions become resources to explore the future in a productive way, it seems all the more important to accompany these young people who have suffered lockdown without being able to take control of their own destiny. Nevertheless, this research also underlines that Ge Z is endowed with an interesting potential for developing organizational resilience, with regard to its relationship to communication, reliability and emotions.

Revista Senderos Pedagógicos Vol. 16 Núm. 1. julio - diciembre 2024, pp. 155 - 157.
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155

While we acknowledge that intergenerational relationships might be a challenge, other generations should participate in (a) Gen Z empathy and benevolence enhancement to resist a tendency to make instantaneous judgements of the world, and (b) Gen Z accountability enhancement. By becoming aware of their rights and duties, Gen Z might indeed align the world with its values (ecology, equality, identity respect, etc.) by inspiring older and younger generations, but it might also foster intergenerational dialogue, recreating social bounds and resilience.

However, other generations also bear a collective responsibility for giving these young people some hope with concrete results, by making efforts and changing their own habits at every level of society and limiting cognitive dissonance due to discrepancies between words and deeds. Otherwise, this Gen Z might simply squander its capacity to adapt, its ability to create and its aspirations to see the emergence of a fairer world.

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Revista Senderos Pedagógicos Vol. 16 Núm. 1. julio - diciembre 2024, pp. 157 - 157.
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157