

# The Impact of the Silent Generation and Gen Alpha

### Key Points of This Chapter

- The Silent Generation shaped a significant part of the culture of our current schools.
- Gen Alpha will be the most tech savvy and advanced generation in history.
- We need to repurpose our schools to meet the needs of Gen Z and Gen Alpha students.
- Some ideas, like the power of professional mentorships and positive relationships with students, transcend the generations.

Allow me to tell you a tale of two Theodores, a tale of two generations at separate ends of our education history.

One Theodore is Theodore “Ted” Smith, and the other Theodore is his great-grandson, who is named after Ted and goes by the name of “Theo.” Ted was born in 1933 and is a member of the Silent Generation (T. Smith, personal communication, July 12, 2020). Theo was born in 2014 and is a member of Gen Alpha. Ted is 88 years old, and Theo is five years old; Ted is a retired school administrator, and Theo has just started kindergarten. They are separated by four generations—83 years of technology accelerations, dramatic societal shifts, a globalized economy, and vastly varied life experiences.

If we understand these two Theodores, it can help us make more sense of where we are and where we need to go as 5-Gen leaders. Think of these two groups as the bookends of 5-Gen leadership. Their generations represent our education past and our education future.

## Lessons From the Silent Generation

First, let's look at the impact of Ted's generation on American schools. When we look at the history of generational leadership in schools, we would be remiss not to mention the generation that did so much to create the school systems we have today: the Silent Generation, whose members were born between 1925 and 1945. They are the parents of the boomers, and they led our schools through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

They had a tough start. This generation grew up in some of the most frightening times in American history. In their formative years, they experienced the uncertainty of the Great Depression in the 1930s, the existential fear brought about by World War II in the 1940s, and the global tensions created by the Atomic Age that lasted through the 1950s and 1960s.

Imagine the nightmares coming out of *that* trifecta of American angst.

The Silent Generation was given its name by *Time* magazine in 1951 because its members didn't complain about their lives or the state of the world; they kept their heads down and remained silent (Howe, 2014). They were taught to survive. To them, work was a privilege, and they took whatever job they could find. They didn't believe in fads or quick success stories. They believed the way to success was through hard work, and there were no shortcuts. Members of the Silent Generation were known as being persistent. They couldn't survive a Depression and a world war unless they knew how to dig deep and see the job through to the end. They were able to ride the growing post-World War II American economy for most of their adult lives. Money was to be saved, so their thriftiness allowed them to become our wealthiest generation. The remaining members of the Silent Generation today still tend to be civic-minded and patriotic, and they vote in high numbers. Conformity is still valued, and they are known as team players (Kane, 2019).

The Silent Generation school leaders didn't have to deal with social media, school shootings, and the challenges of preparing students to enter a global economy, but they led schools through a radically changing American society: the civil rights movement and the integration of schools, the counterculture and hippie movement, the introduction of illegal drugs on a broad scale into American life, and the Vietnam War protests. Those could not have been easy times to lead schools for many Silent Generation leaders.

I think of my superintendents and principals, who were members of the Silent Generation, I knew when I was a student in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of the school leaders in my hometown were white men who wore white shirts and bland ties with silver tie clips. I would guess their leadership abilities ranged from average to good. Maybe one or two were great, and perhaps one or two weren't competent. I wouldn't know about that. The public was often shielded from what

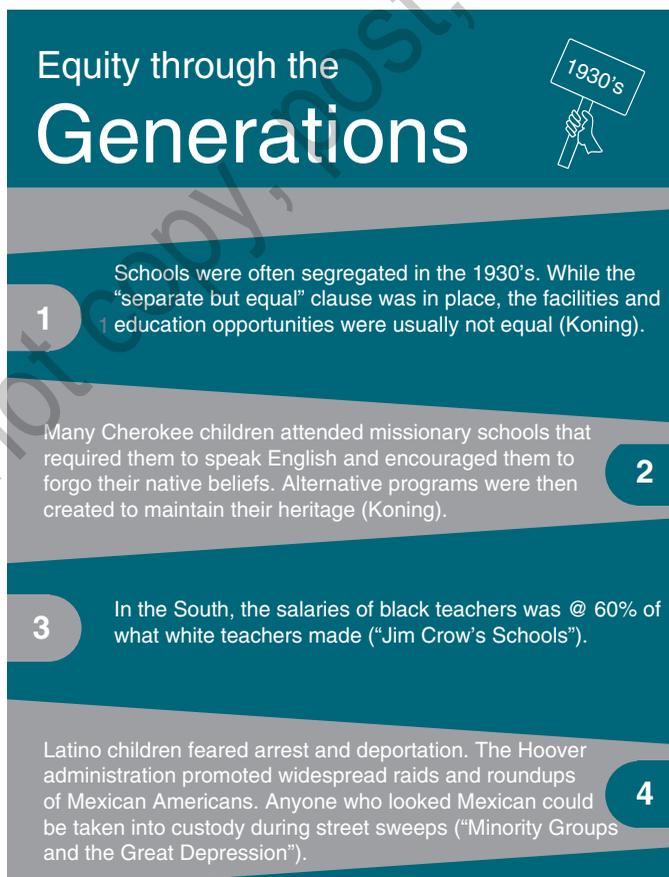
happened behind the principal’s door—it was a different time when leadership foibles were less public and weak administrators could be more easily hidden.

I sometimes wonder what I would say to my former principals if I could go back in time and sit across their desk from them, a school leader from the future talking to a school leader from the past, which brings us to a bigger question: “What can we learn today from the Silent Generation school leaders?”

I interviewed our first Theodore, Ted Smith, to find out (T. Smith, personal communication, July 12, 2020). He spent most of his education career as a school administrator, and he epitomizes the Silent Generation (see Figure 2.1).

Ted was born in 1933 in Huntsville, Ohio, and like many other members of the Silent Generation, he grew up in a small town. By 1920, more Americans lived in cities and small towns than lived on farms (Recchiuti, n.d.). Technology took a huge step in the 1920s and early 1930s when radios were introduced on a broad scale into American households (Scott, n.d.). Ted remembers his family’s radio, which was large. He estimates it was over 30 inches tall, about half as large as the

**FIGURE 2.1** Equity Through the Generations



television he watches today. “We had electricity,” he said, “but my grandparents both had battery-operated radios. . . . They had kerosene lights in their house.”

When asked what kind of toys he had as a child, Ted dug back into his memory and said, “I had a wooden truck, and I had a wind-up car.” He laughed and added, “That was high tech for those days!” Games were an important part of childhood fun for the Silent Generation, and they were usually played with others, not alone. *Checkers* was a popular game, he said, “and card games like euchre. My cousins always came to my grandparents’ house on Sundays. We would play ‘Red Rover, Come Over.’”

I can’t help but compare Ted’s childhood to my childhood as a boomer. I see some similarities, but technology was already changing toys. The technology transition had begun. Some of my toys in the 1960s were wind-up, but we had a lot of toys powered by batteries. The batteries didn’t last nearly as long as they do today. I remember a lot of batteries being dead by Christmas night. I played “Red Rover, Come Over” on my elementary school playground in the 1960s. Perhaps it was taught to us by one of our Silent Generation teachers who, like Ted, had played it in her youth? All of my elementary teachers were women. It was one of the few professional avenues open to Silent Generation females. I visit a lot of elementary schools today, but I don’t see “Red Rover, Come Over” played at recess anymore.

Ted attended the same high school as his parents, and one of his teachers had taught his parents, which means *that* teacher had probably begun teaching in the early part of the previous century. Ted played varsity basketball for all four years—there were only 11 boys in the entire school, so being on the basketball team was *mandatory* in order for the school to field a team. He was the valedictorian of his graduating class. And here’s something wonderful Ted shared about his school: “It was such a small school that if a new family moved in and new students came into the school, we all went down to talk to them, to say, ‘Hi.’”

Ted’s childhood occurred during the Great Depression and during the food-rationing days of World War II, but Ted’s family was lucky: Both sets of his grandparents were farmers. “Farmers always had plenty of food,” he said. “Even though we didn’t live on a farm, we’d go to my grandparents’ and bring back food we’d cook later.” It helped that his father had a steady paycheck. “My father was lucky,” said Ted. “He had a teaching job. . . . For those times, we were fairly well off.”

Now let’s compare Ted’s youth to his Gen Alpha great-grandson, five-year-old Theo, a member of Gen Alpha in today’s schools. While Ted grew up with wooden toys and a big box radio, Theo is growing up with an iPad, apps, and YouTube videos. For Ted, playing card games with his cousins was an interactive, social event. Theo likes to play a few card games, but most of his games are found on his iPad—and he plays them alone. One of Theo’s favorite activities is to FaceTime his grandmother, who lives over a thousand miles away. He can take his mother’s phone (he figured out the password to open the phone by watching her), open the app, and

tap on his grandmother's name to initiate the call. As a child, Ted's view of the world came from what he heard on the radio and what he saw in his small town, but Theo's boundaries will stretch as far as his YouTube videos and FaceTime conversations will take him. As an adult in his 20s, Ted's life changed when he got a television. Try to imagine the technology Theo will have in his life when he is 25 years old in 2040. Then think about what he'll experience in 2050, 2060, and beyond.

Like the Silent Generation, Gen Alpha will have to overcome its own childhood existential challenges. The Silent Generation grew up with outbreaks of polio and whooping cough. Theo, in the fall of 2020, began his first official year of his schooling (kindergarten) at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a five-year-old, he learned to look forward to a future when the virus would be less of a threat. "When the virus is over . . ." he would say, and then he would talk about how much fun it would be to take a vacation and swim in a pool again.

Ted began his career as a junior high school science and history teacher. "Junior high" was the term used at the time, and the schools usually had seventh, eighth, and ninth graders in them. Today's middle school concept of forming an environment to help young adolescents didn't exist; junior high schools were designed to leave the elementary culture behind and to systematically prepare students for the perceived rigors of high school. After all, think of their names: junior high schools. They were mini high schools for the younger students (Davis, 2008). The members of the Silent Generation attended junior high schools, and then some of them helped reshape junior high schools into middle schools. It was a bold move: School leaders of the Silent Generation pushed back against a deeply ingrained education philosophy that had been around for almost a hundred years.

The idea of forming junior highs came out of a reform effort launched in 1888 by the president of Harvard University, Charles Eliot. At that time, American education often had two levels: elementary schools, which were Grades 1–8, and high schools, which were Grades 9–12. Eliot and his peers, who formed the powerful National Education Association's Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies, wanted to increase the rigor of the upper-elementary grades to better prepare them for high school, so they decided to shift the seventh and eighth grades into more of a secondary setting: They kept six grades (Grades 1–6) in the elementary schools and moved Grades 7 and 8 into the secondary level. Thus, we had six grades in the lower level and six grades in the upper levels of American education. Secondary schools across America began to form into intermediary schools (Grades 7–8), junior high schools (Grades 7–9), and junior–senior high schools (Grades 7–12). By the 1940s, over half of America's young adolescents were in junior high schools. By 1960, that number had climbed to 80 percent (Middle Schools, 2021).

It wasn't just middle school educators that began to form a new philosophy of teaching and learning in the last two decades of the 20th century; during the Silent Generation's tenure as leaders, the overall American K–12 system began to

recognize the fundamental importance of emotional well-being in the formation of academically successful students. This philosophy continues in American schools today.

Sort of.

The shift to the middle school concept is also symbolic of a strange paradox in American schools, one we have to resolve if we are going to transition into schools that fit the needs of Gen Z and Gen Alpha: At the time we began to focus on developing each individual, we also began to give them standardized tests and accountability labels. Educators said to their students, “Be who you are! Let us help you develop as an individual!” while the system was saying, “But take this test now regardless of where you are in your individual growth or abilities! You are this age, so you take this test, and this is how we will rank you, your teacher, your school, and your district!” Educators were gravitating to more student-centered views at the same time government leaders were moving toward mass accountability. This conflict survives in schools today. It is at the heart of the tension in school reform movements. Educators want to treat students as individuals, yet most of them in the public schools are forced to throw their students into the meat grinder of standardized testing (more of this topic will be covered in Chapter 3).

Ted later became a high school principal and an assistant superintendent in various spots in Ohio. When asked about his biggest challenge as a principal in the 1950s and 1960s, he says it was having to discipline students—but it wasn’t quite like the discipline challenges school leaders face to today. “The kids were much different then,” he said. The transgressions were simpler. Corporal punishment was an accepted form of discipline in American schools. “If you got a paddling at school,” he said, “you got one at home. It was a rural area, and the kids were usually honest. I didn’t have to call the parents when they got a paddling; the kids would tell them, and then they got one at home. They would come back and tell me.”

While it was a tumultuous time in American society, Ted was somewhat shielded from it in his schools. “In the country schools, there weren’t a lot of social issues,” he said. Even when Ted became an assistant superintendent in a suburban community in the late 1960s and 1970s, he didn’t have to deal with the student unrest that was roiling university campuses at that time. Social media and viral videos were still four decades away, and while some middle school and high school students were politically active, many of them had views of the world that were more confined to their own city blocks and schools.

Ted is most proud of impact on the quality of teachers he was able to bring into the school. “I hired good teachers. They made me as a principal,” he said. A significant number of his hires would have been boomers. Times were already changing, and teacher preparation programs were beginning to transform. “I thought the younger teachers might have been better prepared than the older teachers,” Ted added.

While Ted's generation is generally thought of as being risk averse, some of its school leaders were extreme risk takers: They led the way into one of the most daring concepts ever tried in American schools, the open classroom experiment of the 1970s (Cuban, 2011). This generation grew up conforming, yet it tore down the classroom walls. In that decade, they also presided over a period of increased opportunities for African American students, for immigrant students, and for students with learning and physical disabilities. Women began to take on more prominent roles in school leadership (Encyclopedia.com, 2020); some of the Silent Generation leaders opened the leadership doors for them—and some of the boomer women had to kick in the leadership doors to get into those offices. From 1988 to 1998, the percentage of female school principals increased from 20 percent to 48 percent (Helterbran & Rieg, 2004). Today, 54 percent of American principals are women (Ramaswamy, 2020), which means they have achieved a slight majority in building leadership positions.

One of these early pioneers was Dr. Mena Leo, a former superintendent in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Dr. Leo is a boomer who was born shortly after World War II, and she led through the transition as more opportunities opened for women. When asked about her challenges, she points to challenges many professional women today experience: the balancing of a career with motherhood. “My greatest challenge was that of being a mother to five children as I was being expected to be available to staff and parents and community.”

Dr. Leo offers these insights from her leadership days.

It's clear Dr. Leo, like other female trailblazers, had to be resilient, especially to move all the way up the leadership ladder to the superintendent's office. That resiliency is still needed today. Even in 2021, female administrators are brushing up

When I assumed my first administrative jobs, the trend was beginning to change regarding female administrators. The greatest challenge was probably that of men who had been in administrative positions for some time. They did not readily accept that women were now leading building staff. They had been accustomed to doing minimal job requirements and to keep their verbal responses to a minimum. As more women entered into leadership positions, there was a silent resentment from males to females “doing more than was necessary to get the job done.”

I remember sitting in a meeting with 20 other principals, participating in a lively discussion about our guiding staff to change our philosophy about the teaching/learning process. I was sitting next to my former boss, a male middle school principal who never offered any of his thoughts. He had been a principal for over 10 years. I had been somewhat verbal, thinking how exciting it was to learn from one another. At the end of the session, I asked him why he had not participated in the discussion. His answer was, “Why? The more you talk, the more they call on you and the longer we have to be in there!” Needless to say, that was not enough to keep me quiet, ever.

*(M. Leo, personal communication, September 14, 2020)*

against the glass ceiling when it comes to being a superintendent. Three-fourths of American educators are females, but only 24 percent of American superintendents are women (Ramaswamy, 2020). If the majority of the building-level leaders are female, why don't we have more female superintendents? There could be a number of reasons. Like Dr. Leo, many female leaders today still balance the roles of being an administrator and a mother. Moving up the administrative ladder often requires a series of moves from one district to another, and if the administrator is the primary parent, this could be hard on kids, which makes it hard for the administrator to change districts. One study found 81 percent of superintendents came from middle schools and high schools, and men have 67 percent of the high school principal positions and 60 percent of the middle school principal positions, while women fill 68 percent of the elementary positions (Ramaswamy, 2020). Men appear to have the inside track to superintendent's office.

Other reasons are also in play. Some women won't apply because they might view their qualifications differently than men. A study by Hewlett-Packard in 2013 showed that men are more likely to apply for a job if they have some of the qualifications, but women often won't apply unless they have the majority or all of the qualifications. This was backed up by a LinkedIn study of what it had observed through its site in 2019 (Youn, 2019). A Pew Research Center (2015) study found that most people believe it's easier for men to achieve key leadership positions than it is for women.

It's fair to say many female educators and educators of color must still fight harder to get into leadership positions. But it's also fair to say we've never had as great of a need for diverse leadership as we have today—because Gen Z and Gen Alpha are the most diverse generations in history (Fry & Parker, 2020). They need to see role models who look like them in leadership roles.

## Gen Alpha, the New Generation

Before we take a close look at the generation at the other end of our leadership lens, Gen Alpha, let's first consider some commonly asked questions: "How did we get the name Gen Alpha? How did we jump from Z to A, from Gen Z to Gen Alpha? Who's making up these names?"

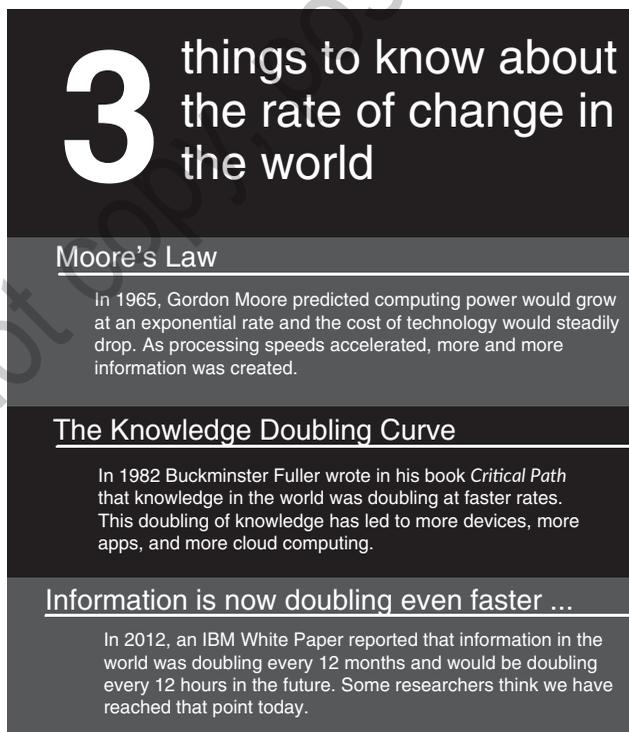
To get the answers, we have to jump across the Pacific, all the way to Australia, and study the work of Mark McCrindle. He's also a demographer, futurist, and social commentator—and he and his company are credited with creating the Gen A moniker (Bologna, 2019). According to McCrindle, a movement was already underway to follow the name of Generation Z with the name of Generation A, but he felt a more appropriate moniker was needed, so he suggested Alpha, which translates more into a beginning or the "start of something new" (Bologna, 2019).

It's appropriate to think of Gen Alpha as the beginning; we are entering a new phase in global history. In *Leading Schools in Disruptive Times* (2021, 2nd ed.), I wrote with Dwight Carter about three essential points to know if we are going to understand technology accelerations: Processing speeds keep getting faster, which leads to more information, which has brought the world to a point that knowledge is doubling every year and will be doubling every 12 hours in the future (see Figure 2.2). This is the world in which Theo and his Gen Alpha peers will live: The information learned this morning will be supplanted by twice as much information this evening, and it will be doubled twice tomorrow, the next day, and the next day.

Gen Alpha is already showing trends that separate it from previous generations. Its members can be called “upagers” because it is expected they will physically mature faster and adolescence will arrive earlier in their lives. They are also expected to be more sophisticated socially, psychologically, educationally, and commercially at an earlier age than their millennial and Gen Z predecessors (McCrindle Staff, n.d.a). Much of this is because of what they are seeing and experiencing on the internet.

A study by Common Sense Media in 2017 found 98 percent of Gen Alpha students under the age of eight in America are growing up in a household with mobile

**FIGURE 2.2** Three Things to Know About the Rate of Change in the World



**SOURCES:** Moore's Law (“Over 50 Years of Moore's Law”); Knowledge Doubling Curve (Rosenberg); Information is now doubling. . .(Rosenberg)

devices like tablets and cell phones. That number is up dramatically: Six years ago, the percentage was 52 percent. The number of minutes of usage has grown from five minutes per day in 2011 to 15 minutes per day in 2013 to 48 minutes per day in 2017 (Kamenetz, 2017). Another study by Common Sense Media in 2019 found Gen Alpha and Gen Z students between the ages of 8 and 12 spend almost five hours each day online, and Gen Z teenagers spend seven-and-a-half hours online. That doesn't count the number of minutes spent online in school—and this was before the school closures of 2020 when kids were home all day doing school online and had more free time for online gaming (Rideout & Robb, 2019).

According to researcher Mark McCrindle, Gen Alpha come from families that move more often, increasingly live in urban environments, and have parents who change careers more frequently (Bologna, 2019). Elwood Carlson, a demographer and professor at Florida State University, says that Gen Alpha has a higher number of kids who are not growing up with two biological parents in the household. In the United States, this generation will have more young people who have immigrant parents or are immigrants themselves (Bologna, 2019).

If we thought Gen Z was the technology generation, consider the life of Gen Alpha: When Gen Alpha was “born” in 2010, the iPad was introduced, and the American Dialect Society’s word of the year was “app.” McCrindle says Gen Alpha is being born into “the great screen age” (McCrindle Staff, n.d.a). Another name given to Gen Alpha is “Generation Glass” because of the way they will constantly interact with their computer screens, the pop-up screens they will have on their vehicle dashboards, and the interactive desks at which they will sit in the future (Bologna, 2019). They will be the most tech-savvy generation ever, even more than Gen Z (McCrindle Staff, n.d.b): “Not since Gutenberg transformed the utility of paper with his printing press in the 15th century has a medium been so transformed for learning and communication purposes as glass—and it has happened in the lifetime of Gen Alpha” (McCrindle Staff, n.d.a, para. 13).

Take a moment and think about that comment: The 2020s will be a decade of the most dramatic teaching and learning transformation since the 1400s.

*The 2020s will be a decade of the most dramatic teaching and learning transformation since the 1400s.*

Natalie Franke, the head of community at the business management firm HoneyBook, believes Gen Alpha will merge with technology more completely as increasingly powerful technology enters its daily life. She says they might “prefer a virtual world over their real world.” They will live with autonomous cars, stronger AI, and have more apps that do things for them. “I predict this will lead to an unprecedented rise in creativity, education and self-care, with Gen Alpha spending more time exploring their passion, prioritizing mental wellness and seeking education for the simple joy of learning,” notes Franke (Bologna, 2019, para. 23). Furthermore, Franke believes

“technological advancements, combined with the rising cost of college, will allow Generation Alpha to reject traditional education and pursue learning through other avenues. That attitude promotes ‘the passion economy’ as younger generations may continue the growing trend of freelancing and starting their own businesses” (Bologna, 2019, para. 24).

In 2030, Theo will be a teenager, and he will have devices, apps, and artificial intelligence that we can barely imagine. He already loves his iPad; his journey on the Gen Alpha moving sidewalk of change has begun.

## Gen Alpha’s Impact on Education

Now, what can we do as 5-Gen leaders today to help Theo and his Gen Alpha and Gen Z peers stay ahead of the massive societal/economic shifts that will shape their lives?

Assuming Franke is right and Gen Alpha rejects traditional education, it means they will be searching for a new model. Today’s school leaders have the expertise, research, and experience to create new types of schools for Gen Alpha.

To begin to understand how to transform our schools, let’s look at the legacy handed to us by the Silent Generation and see how parts of it can help us to educate Gen Alpha and which parts must be overcome as we move into this new model.

Our schools are meant to be mirrors of American democracy, and the Silent Generation built the pillars that still support today’s school cultures. Think of this: Which character values are most rigorously promoted in schools today? Here are some of them: hard work, tenacity, a respect for authority, efficiency, safety, security, consistency, teamwork, fairness, and friendliness. In many ways, these quintessential American school values given to us by the Silent Generation form the “American Way” of doing things. These are the ideals most often associated with the Silent Generation (Kane, 2019). These traits are still considered great values, and they can still be a part of a roadmap to success in the 21st century for Gen Z and Gen Alpha.

Yet when we look at Gen Alpha’s screen-dominated, independent lifestyle, we have to ask: *Can today’s schools add to or adjust their cultural pillars to make room for students whose learning styles, interests, and goals are more varied and more independent than ever before?* Remember how Ted told us part of the reason he was successful was that he “worked hard”? Besides being a part of the Puritan work ethic that has been passed down through generations since the colonialization of America, the characteristic of hard work is an integral part of the Silent Generation. It was an era of conformity; Ted was expected to play basketball for the good of the school and the team. And he did. While there are still some small schools where students

would make this sacrifice, most Gen Alpha and Gen Z students are being raised differently from the Silent Generation; students have become more independent, and their voices are heard today. They usually are not expected to participate in an extracurricular team activity unless they *want* to do so.

Schools in the 2020s must balance the need to teach collaboration with the need to promote entrepreneurial thinking. The students will have *to want to come to school*. As one researcher has written,

Existing evidence suggests that our schools will have to establish their presence in more than content and skill. Generation Alpha students will look for reasons to go to school that are beyond learning to read and master numeracy skills. These expectations start in kindergarten and are expected to continue. They will love their teachers and enjoy their friends but question why they have to spend six hours (or more), five days a week inside of a school. They will look at software programs that are used (often with fidelity) to develop literacy and numeracy skills and wonder why they are using programs at school (instead of being in the comfortable confines of their home or public library). For this generation it is the experience and action that leads to learning; not just instruction and content-based inquiry. (Britten, 2019, para. 20)

Our graduates will need to have an entrepreneurial mindset, which means we have to build an education model for Gen Alpha and Gen Z centered on creativity, not standardized test scores. In a world in which people explore their passions, learn for the sake of learning, and have increasingly powerful virtual worlds into which to escape, students and parents simply will not tolerate an education model centered on high-stakes testing. Gen Alpha's constant exposure to screens is resulting in shorter attention spans, higher levels of digital literacy, lower levels of social competency, and a greater need for schools to employ digital gamification to engage them (McCrindle Staff, n.d.b). Their biggest requests are for more devices and screen time (Pasquarelli & Schultz, 2019). The teaching and learning must have a strong technology component. Artificial intelligence can't be shunned in the classroom; it must be embraced (see Figure 2.3).

Let's think of the type of school five-year-old Theo will need in this decade. As he matures and reaches a point where he wants to learn in his own way, will the system allow him to do so? What if he wants a different schedule, a different end and start time to his school day, a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning, and his own way of showing he has learned something? These are the traits of Gen Alpha, not the traits of today's schools.

Consider this: Theo will graduate from high school in 2033. We need to imagine the world of 2033, 2043, and 2053. But we can't stop there. Because of advances in medicine, procedures, and gene modification, the average Gen Alpha child will

FIGURE 2.3 Five Steps to Lead Gen Alpha

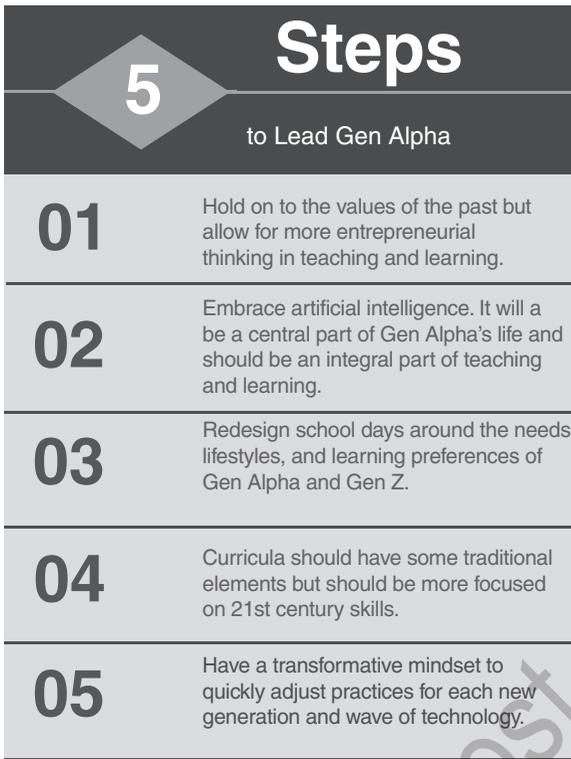
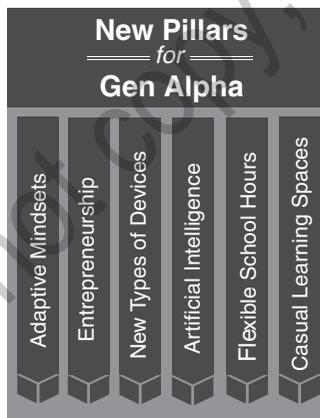


FIGURE 2.4 New Pillars for Gen Alpha



we see what that future will be? No. But we know we need to give our students a head start in developing their own entrepreneurial mindsets so they can more effectively sort through options and create new paths and new lifestyles.

**New types of devices:** Hopefully, we've reached a point in our progression where we will readily adapt and use new technology as it appears in our classrooms,

probably live to be over 100 years of age (Malito, 2019), which means Theo could be alive in 2120. Gen Alpha will be the first generation of this century to survive in record numbers to see dawn of the 22nd century (McCrinkle Staff, n.d.c). That's a long life built upon the skills we help them acquire today.

So 5-Gen leaders must retain pillars given to us by the Silent Generation, but 5-Gen leaders must add six new pillars to serve Gen Alpha (see Figure 2.4).

**Adaptive mindset:** A part of the new education model is to understand that the teaching profession will have to adapt at constantly faster speeds to keep up with accelerating increases in artificial intelligence. One of my favorite sayings for teachers in my trainings is "We must be comfortable being uncomfortable."

**Entrepreneurship:** As we reconfigure schools today, we also need to push our imaginations out into a *Star Trek* world and think of Theo's life in 2080 and 2090. Can

from artificial intelligence to robots to holograms. But this means we must be willing to let go of some of our old technology. When I was in junior high, I was taught to use a slide rule (a slide rule is a ruler-like, hand-operated computer used to figure mathematical equations). Besides learning of the novelty of the device, it was pretty much a waste of teaching and learning time: I've never used a slide rule in my life other than in 8th-grade science class. I don't fault the teacher or the district; electronic calculators were just being introduced, and slide rules were still used in industry. But the slide rule can be a metaphor of technology that was once a mainstay in classrooms and has been relegated to the history pile. As education technology in the future morphs into something incomprehensible today, will laptops or handheld calculators become the slide rules of the 21st century? Old devices must be abandoned more quickly than ever to keep up with accelerating change.

**Artificial intelligence (AI):** Consider how AI will affect schools in this decade. In 2020, a company called OpenAI launched a new software called GPT-3, which was “the most powerful ‘language model’ ever created” (Manjoo, 2020). In other words, it could write letters, reports, scripts, and short stories in a more convincing manner than any previous software. We already have speech-to-text apps on our phones, and they are becoming more popular. In 2018, 20 percent of Google searches were done with voice commands; that number was expected to jump to 50 percent by 2020 (Romero, 2018). The day is coming when Gen Alpha students will ask, “Why do I have to write this paper when my AI does all of my writing at home?” Or “Why do I have to solve this math or science problem when I can quickly ask Alexa to do it for me?” And what does this mean for standardized testing as we know it? We are already using an obsolete testing model; will we also be testing obsolete skills? By the end of the decade, 5-Gen leaders will have to lead their staffs through a complicated, torturous, thrilling process of determining what it means for Gen Alpha to be educated.

**Flexible hours:** The rise of artificial intelligence, the demands of Gen Z and Gen Alpha, and the COVID closures of 2020 will force schools to do what other businesses are doing: take a hard look at the set hours and schedules for schools, especially in the upper levels of high school for students who are more independent and mature. We are in the last iteration of huge brick-and-mortar high schools. The Gen Z and Gen Alpha upagers will be looking for new options. School will be where they use their AI; it will not always be the desk where they sit in the classroom.

**Casual learning spaces:** Have you been in a new school lately? Almost every school built today has some form of common, flexible learning space where students can spread out, sit in alternative types of furniture, make presentations, and work together. We will still need schools in the 2030s and beyond, but the increase

in education apps that link learning, the lifestyles of students, and the demands for collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and communication will mean the schools will continue to morph into new floor plans and functionalities.

To build these pillars, school leaders must create staffs that function as strong collaborative teams while allowing individual teachers to take new, entrepreneurial approaches to teaching. As we saw in Chapter 1, our younger teachers—our millennials and Gen Z teachers—sometimes feel they are in too restrictive of a teaching environment. This problem is only going to deepen with each passing year as more Gen Alphas rise through our schools in the 2020s and begin to join the millennials and Gen Zers in our teaching ranks in the early 2030s. As 5-Gen leaders create new types of schools, they must create new types of staffs. They must hold on to the values provided by the Silent Generation, look at Gen Alpha's needs, and then translate these ideas into new types of teaching and learning.

## The Transcendent Power of Relationships

Finally, two of Ted Smith's recollections provide insight into how leaders of the Silent Generation are similar to today's generations of educators. More precisely, they remind us that, as we take steps to repurpose our schools, we must remember the importance of using our kindness and wisdom to help others.

First, Ted was effusive in his praise of his mentor, Jim Diley. Diley had been Ted's coach in high school, and he later became an administrator who hired Ted. Then Ted followed him through several school districts, working his way up under Diley's tutorage from teacher to principal to assistant superintendent. "Mentors did a lot for me. They determined my career," Ted said. "What Jim Diley did for me allowed me to take all those steps. I'm grateful for what he did for me and my family. He was really influential on my career. And I tried hard."

Can't most educators today, especially school administrators, point to mentors who helped them at key points in their careers? As Ted points out, mentors can be heavily influential. It's a reminder that the mentorship chain though the generations of educators is vital and powerful. When we mentor young educators today and then they mentor younger educators during their careers, it means we are doing more than just helping our younger associates—we are shaping education far into the future. The leadership chain continues. Think of it this way: Part of our mission now is to mentor the next group of leaders so we can assist the Gen Z, Gen Alpha, and Gen Beta leaders we will never know. And with the changes coming to the world and to education in the next decade, mentorship is more essential than ever.

Here's a second powerful point to consider that transcends generations: the satisfaction to be found in positive relationships with students and other educators. Ted said helping young people was the best part of his job:

*I particularly liked the students. I knew all the students' names and knew basically their abilities, and we had really outstanding students. I guess the best part was just knowing the students and knowing their families and where they came from and knowing about their lives. It was a school district where we knew the parents. Many of them were from farm families or worked locally for other farmers. Just being able to know the students and their parents [was the best part].*

Dr. Leo (personal communication, September 14, 2020) also mentioned helping students and educators:

*For myself, the most enjoyable part of being an administrator was that of being able to help other educators grow in their personal beliefs about how they, too, could influence others around them to make the educational experience for children more relevant. I valued the skills and abilities of others and wanted to help them develop to their fullest capacity.*

We shouldn't be surprised by this, should we? That message resonates with me as a boomer. As I consult in schools, I spend around 170 days on the road each school year. I usually take 45 to 50 flights per year, and I'm in a lot of airports, shuttle buses, rental cars, and hotels. It's a hard, exhausting trek, but luckily, I get to spend my days in schools. When I become weary, I often remind myself, "It's about the students. What you are doing to help principals and teachers will help their students."

When I speak with teachers and school leaders of younger generations, they, too, get the most excited when they discuss their students. This is the magic thread of purpose and fulfillment that runs through

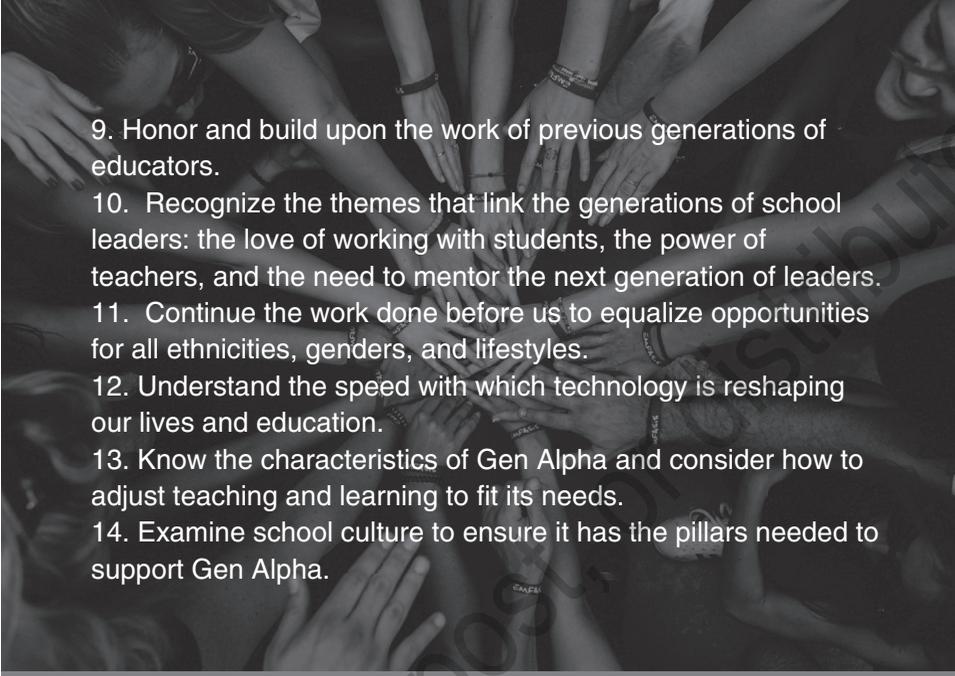
generations of educators: It's an innate, altruistic desire to help young people to live better lives, to help them grow and to be happy. It will always be dominant. If five-year-old Theo, as a member of Gen Alpha, dedicates his life to education and is a teacher in the middle of the 21st century, then he probably will say the same thing. Regardless of what technology can do at that time, students will still need human interaction. Educators will play a vital, somewhat new role in the 2020s and beyond: *In a world*

*increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, teachers will show students the beauty of being human.*

*This is the magic thread of purpose and fulfillment that runs through generations of educators: It's an innate, altruistic desire to help young people to live better lives, to help them grow and to be happy.*

FIGURE 2.5 Tips for Transitioning to 5-Gen Leadership

## Tips for Transitioning to 5-Gen Leadership

- 
9. Honor and build upon the work of previous generations of educators.
  10. Recognize the themes that link the generations of school leaders: the love of working with students, the power of teachers, and the need to mentor the next generation of leaders.
  11. Continue the work done before us to equalize opportunities for all ethnicities, genders, and lifestyles.
  12. Understand the speed with which technology is reshaping our lives and education.
  13. Know the characteristics of Gen Alpha and consider how to adjust teaching and learning to fit its needs.
  14. Examine school culture to ensure it has the pillars needed to support Gen Alpha.

Do not copy, post, or reuse

Do not copy, post, or distribute