

Foreword

As I sit down to write the foreword to this exciting and timely collection, I realize that I have had a number of my own experiences with millennial teachers of color (MTOC), most of which had, until now, remained unlabeled and unexplored. My most recent encounter with the ways of MTOC occurred during a meeting of authors of this very book. The talented, insightful group of about twenty writers and researchers, a mix of millennials, generation Xers, and baby boomers, were gathered both physically around a conference table and virtually on a large screen placed in the front of the room. About halfway through the agenda, I turned to an MTOC friend and colleague sitting next to me and whispered a somewhat-off-topic idea that occurred to me about a comment that one of the MTOC virtual attendees made about engaging in political activism as teachers. The meeting continued, with each author presenting his or her chapter for discussion. Moments later my MTOC neighbor leaned over and quietly informed me that her colleagues had discussed my idea and wanted to meet with me at a later time to explore it further. Apparently, without any break in the larger meeting, the MTOC in the room and on the screen had convened a submeeting via their cell phones or other electronic contraptions, collaboratively discussed an idea about political activism, and come to a mutual agreement about its efficacy! And all this without anyone else in the room realizing it was happening.

I recognize now that this event was iconic of the experiences I have had with other MTOC in my work as a teacher- and principal-educator at a historically black university in Louisiana. The majority of my students are African American and range in age from twenty-five to fifty. Even though they are mostly of the same ethnicity, I have noticed some age-related differences. For one, the generation Xers tend to prefer to work on academic tasks individually, while the millennials prefer group work. I've also observed

what seems to be a difference in their manner of response to the social issues that are currently bombarding communities of color.

Last summer was a particularly hard time in our community. Alton Sterling, an unarmed black man, was shot and killed by white police officers just blocks away from campus. That event was followed by peaceful mass demonstrations, although some members of the same police force that killed Mr. Sterling were on duty and were accused of harassing and injuring demonstrators for no cause. Naturally, these events became a part of our classroom conversation.

One young MTOC described her participation in the demonstration and the inappropriate actions of some police officers. Two of the older students strongly critiqued the demonstrators, saying things like, “Those demonstrators don’t know what they’re doing; they have no plan. They’re just out there starting more trouble. They have no leader; they just go out and do anything.” The younger student countered by saying they didn’t need a leader; they planned on social media together and everyone agreed to what the rules of engagement would be after discussing the issues. They also kept everyone informed on what was happening at any given moment via various modes of technology.

And thus the discussion continued, with many Xers stating a belief in individual action and following a proscribed leader, and with the millennials insisting that group effort, collectively planned via social media, was most important. I finally ended the discussion, but came to more fully grasp that even though all of my students at the time were African American, there were age-based differences in how they responded to current issues.

The millennial generation is the most diverse generation ever to populate the United States. Whereas people of color currently constitute about 28 percent of the baby boomers, they make up more than 44 percent of the millennial generation. The “browning” of the millennials makes it imperative that we develop an understanding of how these complex young people navigate the world, and that we make explicit how the challenges and the gifts of millennial teachers will change the face of education as we know it.

I find that all of my students, of whatever age, struggle with the racism they encounter in the larger society and in schools, especially those schools where African Americans are in the minority in the teaching and/or administrative staffs. They grapple with the unveiled arrogance of some white teachers and leaders who leave them voiceless as they struggle to inject into the conversation what they know about the African American students they

teach. The MTOC struggle, as well, with some of their same-ethnicity colleagues and administrators who don't understand the ways they connect with each other and their students, the activist orientation they often bring, and the ways they use technology to discuss their concerns and plan for action.

And so, I realize more and more the importance of this volume. The millennial teachers of color sometimes differ, not only from "mainstream" millennial teachers who don't have the issues of racism and oppression to contend with on a personal level, but also from teachers of the same ethnicity, who may see the world, its problems, and potential solutions through very different lenses. The chapters in this volume give us an opportunity to get a better understanding of this generation of exhilarating young people. They also provide us, the millennials' older colleagues, with some clues about how to best serve these new teachers' needs, helping them to overcome obstacles and develop their talents. If we don't do so, we risk losing some of the most vibrant educators our country has seen. Even more significantly, learning about how the millennial teachers of color approach the world can expand our own awareness of how to meet the challenges of our collective futures in this great, but often flawed country—in ways we might never have imagined.

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