

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Iranian Teachers' Lived Experiences in Educating Generation Z: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z students have great potential to transform the education system due to their mastery of technology, preference for interactive learning, and social values, but Iranian teachers face numerous challenges in educating this generation. This phenomenological study aimed to examine the characteristics of Generation Z, the challenges, and opportunities teachers face in educating this generation, and studied the lived experiences of teachers in Tehran. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers from public and private high schools in Tehran's 1st and 2nd districts and analyzed using thematic analysis in MAXQDA software. Findings indicate characteristics such as technology dependence and preference for project-based learning, and challenges such as infrastructural limitations, cultural mismatch, and teacher stress that threaten the quality of education. Opportunities such as professional development, use of new technologies, and systemic supports were also identified. Suggestions include designing interactive educational content, strengthening teachers' professional training, and providing digital infrastructure. This study responds to the basic needs of the education system in improving the quality of education for Generation Z by providing practical solutions for empowering teachers.

KEYWORDS

Generation Z, Teacher Challenges, Digital Education, Professional Development, Systemic Supports.



Introduction

Globally, teaching Generation Z (Gen Z) presents multifaceted challenges including bridging digital divides and managing diverse learning needs. Mental health issues among this generation, exacerbated by social media and the COVID-19 pandemic, require special attention (Onjewu et al., 2024; Goh & Okumus, 2020). Teachers struggle with effective technology integration, particularly in low-resource settings (Reyes et al., 2020; Seibert, 2021). Gen Z's values—emphasizing social justice and sustainability—demand responsive curricula, yet many educational systems remain rigid (Elizelle, 2017; Bucăța, 2023). In developing countries, these challenges intensify due to socio-economic factors, infrastructural constraints, and cultural norms conflicting with Gen Z's expectations of autonomy (Dania et al., 2023; Tohidian et al., 2023; Mayildurai et al., 2024). The pandemic revealed urgent need for systemic reforms (Marin, 2023).

This article addresses the research question: What are the main obstacles facing Iranian teachers in teaching Gen Z, and how can targeted strategies mitigate these obstacles? The innovation lies in providing a localized framework for teacher empowerment, bridging global theories with local practical applications to improve educational quality and equity for this key generation

Method

This qualitative study employed an interpretive phenomenological approach (based on van Manen, 2016) to understand the lived experiences of Iranian teachers teaching Gen Z students. The research questions focused on identifying Gen Z characteristics, teacher challenges and opportunities, and practical solutions. The study is applied in nature, aiming to generate actionable recommendations for Iran's education system.

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews using open-ended questions about teachers' perceptions of Gen Z characteristics, classroom challenges, successful strategies, and emotional experiences.

Trustworthiness was ensured through: member checking (three participants reviewed analyses), peer debriefing (two doctoral researchers in educational management reviewed coding and confirmed theme coherence), prolonged engagement (4 months), thick description, and triangulation (interviews, library research, digital resources). Inter-coder reliability was established through independent review by two qualitative analysis experts. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and university ethics committee approval.

Findings

Findings indicate characteristics such as dependence on technology and preference for project-based learning, and challenges such as infrastructural limitations, cultural mismatch, and psychological stress of teachers that threaten the quality of education. Opportunities such as professional development, use of new technologies, and systemic supports were also identified. Suggestions include designing interactive educational content, strengthening teacher professional development, and providing digital infrastructure. Next, Figure 1 visually displays the thematic network to illustrate the relationships between Generation Z characteristics, teacher challenges, and empowerment opportunities.

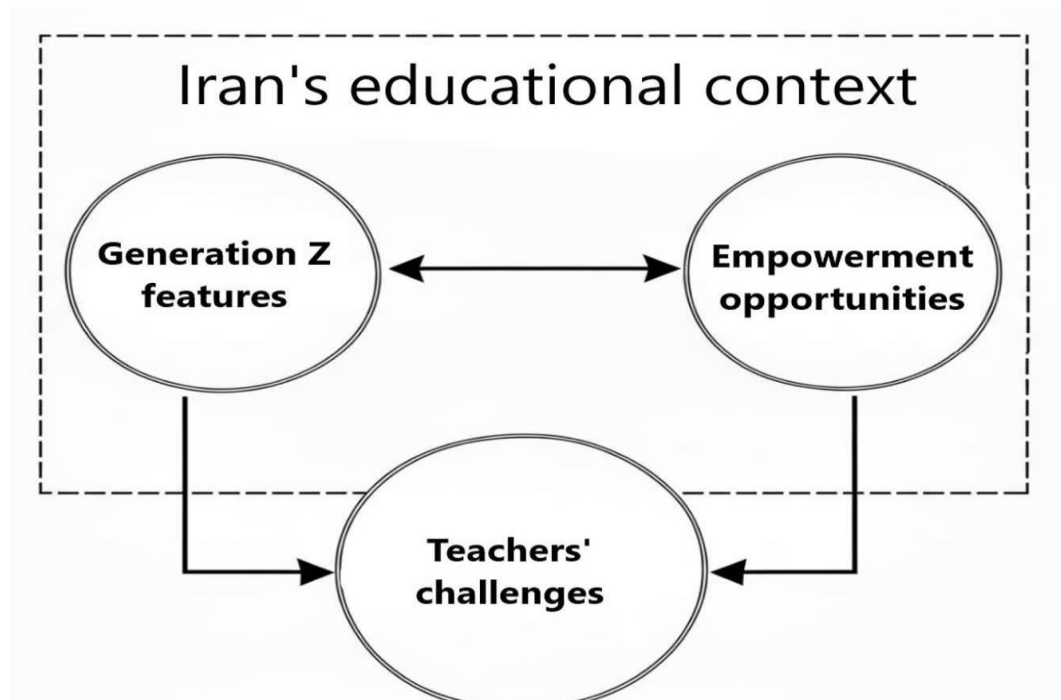


Figure 1: Conceptual model of Iranian teachers' lived experiences in the process of educating Generation Z

A conceptual model (Figure 1) illustrates Gen Z characteristics as starting points shaping teacher challenges, creating a paradoxical position where teachers must maintain traditional authority while becoming dynamic facilitators. However, empowerment opportunities can transform challenges into levers for change. The lived experience represents an "existential transition": from teacher as lecturer (knowledge transmitter) to teacher as co-creator (jointly constructing learning experiences).

Discussion and conclusion

This study confirms Iranian teachers face triple challenges—infrastructural, cultural, and psychological—in teaching Gen Z, aligning with global findings (Chan & Lee, 2023; Chicca & Shellenbarger, 2020; Vogel et al., 2025). The cultural incompatibility is more pronounced in Iran's centralized, authority-based system. Analyzing through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, tensions arise when Gen Z characteristics (microsystem) encounter infrastructural constraints (mesosystem) and traditional cultural norms (macrosystem), destabilizing teacher professional identity.

Limitations include focus on Tehran (limiting generalizability to rural areas), self-reported data, and cross-sectional design. Future research should examine emerging technologies (AI, augmented reality) across Iranian provinces (Chardonnens, 2025; Ebrahimi et al., 2025) and investigate teacher psychological stress causes (Parthiban, 2025). Practical recommendations include: designing interactive, project-based content; mandatory ongoing professional development; upgrading digital infrastructure; establishing psychological support systems for teachers. The essence of Iranian teachers' lived experience is a bidirectional existential transition—from lecturer to co-creator and from reactive system to transformation driver—where educational transformation lies in co-creation of meaning between teacher and Gen Z.

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