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Navigating the New Normal: Investigating Post-Pandemic Pedagogical Shifts and Generation Z Learning Dynamics through the Lens of Educators

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic severely shook the world of education and the sudden shift to emergency remote and hybrid teaching unveiled inequities and speeded up the pace of pedagogical innovations. As a qualitative study, it follows a phenomenological approach and explores the post-pandemic pedagogical changes and matches them with the dynamics of learning among Generation Z (born 1997-2012) under the views of teachers. Based on semi-structured interviews of 18 experienced educators at the secondary and higher education level, the study refers to long-term transformations, including hybrid/flexible models, AI-enhanced customization, asynchronous choice, gamification, and socio-emotional focus. Gen Z is characterized by an increased level of digital fluency and the lack of interpersonal soft skills, motivation issues, and increased values on mental health, work-life balance, and purpose-driven learning. Teachers share adaptive approaches such as student-centered approaches, mental health interventions, and technology-based innovation which brought an engagement benefit but also the tension resulting in increased workloads, burnout, and some equity obstacles. Examples of success point to resilience and empathy building possibilities, whereas the recommendations include specific professional development, institutional support and policy changes that would allow maintaining inclusive practice. The research addresses a critical gap of educators lived experience focus to enable equitable, dynamic education in the new normal, which provides informational contribution to bridging between generational needs and long-term pedagogical change and development of a future-oriented learning environment.

***Keywords**: Post-Pandemic Education, Generation Z, Pedagogical Shifts, Educators' Perspectives, Hybrid Learning, Socio-Emotional Learning*.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant discontinuity to the world education system that has required a new change in the educational system, a sudden move to remote and hybrid learning after a global school closure. The fact that the disruption was most effective among the over 1.6 billion learners worldwide meant that the educational infrastructure suffered setbacks increasing the differences in technology access and reliable internet (Lei, 2021). Intrusive interruptions caused the non-linearity of the academic process and even strengthened the socio-emotional load on teachers and students because the former were forced to work with new, unfamiliar digital materials and the latter felt even more anxious and inattentive. Research has revealed that the rapid transition led to colossal loss of education particularly in the core subjects like mathematics and literacy since the distance set up was ineffective in recreating the interactive environment of the actual classroom (Sokal, 2025). Analytically, this paradigm shift also revealed the insecurity of previous systems of pedagogy since it demonstrated the potential to institutionalize lack of readiness during the crisis to become a generator of educational imbalances on socioeconomic grounds. The educational outcomes of the pandemic that are linked with the unequal recovering rates demand a harsh examination of the process of the adaptation in order to enhance the resilience of the teaching practice in the future.

The hybrid ecosystem, which is a combination of the digital novelty and reconsideration of the notions of flexibility and inclusiveness, has shaped the new normal of education in the post-pandemic period and altered the paradigms of pedagogy entirely. This change extends beyond mere technological application, such as a redesigning of the learning environment to place more emphasis on asynchronous presence and personalized paths, and colleges have attempted to minimize the residual influence of the isolating and disruptive impact (Yee, 2024). Having a birth date between 1997 and 2012, the generation Z, or individuals born between the two dates, has been the most impacted during their most important developmental phases, and as they grow to the higher education or career entry stages, they bring with them a list of digital-native features. Such students also have a preference to interactive and technologically enriched methods, such as gamified applications and AI-generated responses and attach high values to mental health care and flexible hours, which also belong to a generational culture that is characterized by volatility (Chardonnens, 2025). In themations, this new normal is aligned with the needs of Gen Z to find authenticity and relevance in education and rebels against the old rote models and is actively dynamic in terms of technological and human-focused learning. The changes once analytically applied would allow closing the gaps between the generations as the potential losses are transformed into the potential innovations in new fair educational development.

These pedagogical changes can be examined through the prism of experiences of teachers, instructors, and faculty members who made their way through the world of pre- and post-pandemic, which is invaluable to understand what the process of adaptation and survival is like. As first-hand participants, teachers will provide subtle information on how the shifts in student engagement and curriculum delivery have changed the classroom, in most instances, referencing the emotional reaction to the burden of teaching innovation and personal burnout (Gaines, 2025). Their views illuminate the practical concerns of the integration of hybrid tools and the satisfaction of the evolving requirements of the Gen Z i.e. social-emotional skills, which were lost during the isolation. This teacher-centered approach decomposes analytically the rapport between the policy demands and pragmatic application disclosing failures in professional progression thatengths the easy adaptability to the new normal (Herrero, 2023). This kind of prioritization in the research process endows the research with thematic richness and makes the teachers the change agents in an environment that is typified by uncertainty and rapidly changing world.

The impact of this research is in the possibility to inform adaptive teaching methods that will improve student outcomes and ease the burden of educators in a post-pandemic setting. By uniting the efforts of educators with learning dynamics of Gen Z, it will provide stakeholders with evidence-based guides to develop resilience pedagogies that will eventually enable retention and comprehensive growth in the face of constant changes (Shirazian, 2025). This question is analytically sound and fills much-needed gaps in knowledge regarding the potential of mental health to be reduced through a change in pedagogy and create more equitable settings in which Gen Z can succeed in higher education and beyond. Its ramification goes further into policymaking where it recommends a long-term investment in teacher training and integrating technology to avoid complications in the future (Mathivanan, 2025). Its thematic championing is that of the proactive approach to educational renewal, where the new normal becomes a benchmark of excellence and not a survivalist approach.

Literature Review

The pre-pandemic period depicted the learners belonging to the Generation Z (born 1997-2012) as ideal digital natives, starting to become immersed in technology at a very young age and having unique learning preferences with a strong challenge of the traditional instructional pattern. These students were very tech-savvy with a tendency to use smartphones, social media, and online sources to get information and interact with others, often with short attention spans as 5-8 seconds and generally being more attracted to visual and interactive content like videos, infographics, and games (McCrindle, n.d.; Arizona State University Learning and Teaching Hub, n.d.). They put a great emphasis on the authenticity, transparency and social justice in which they require educational experiences to have relevance to the real world, personal empowerment and ethical concerns instead of memorization. These characteristics, in analytic terms, made Gen Z pragmatic and self-sufficient, with learning styles focusing on the benefits of kinesthetic or visual knowledge, using digital products to get instant feedback and cooperation, and focusing on flexibility and goal-oriented content (Shorey et al., 2021, as cited in ANPD, 2025). The basic demands of this generational profile formed under the influence of constant connection and global consciousness established the prerequisites of increased demands in the field of pedagogical design, which required transforming passive to active, student-centered forms of work even pre-pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced radical changes in pedagogy and necessitated an immediate shift towards traditional in-person teaching to emergency remote teaching before graduating into more formal hybrid and blended methods of teaching as institutions adapted. This transition boosted the use of online tools, such as learning management systems (LMS), artificial intelligence-based tools, simulations, and asynchronous materials, to ensure continuity during an extensive amount of closures (Imran, 2025). Nevertheless, these changes also came with significant challenges, such as reduced student engagement because of screen fatigue and reduced socialization and disparities in access to quality technology and broadband that increased losses in core subjects and socioeconomic gaps (Sokal, 2025). Thematically, the pandemic revealed the inadequacy of ill-equipped infrastructures, transforming technology into an asset instead of an improvement, as well as the emotional and motivational pressure of both learners and instructors. This trend has been supported by the post-pandemic, including increased adoption of AI to support personalized learning, adaptive tests, and possible applications in the metaverse, as well as a new focus on socio-emotional learning (SEL), mental health programs, and flexible schedules to overcome the still-present effects of isolation (Strielkowski, 2025). The developments are symptomatic of a more significant reorganization of education towards resiliency and inclusivity, but the still unresolved obstacles to equity and teacher readiness continue to be the subject of critical analytical attention.

The academic research on the learning dynamics of Generation Z post-pandemic demonstrates that there is a complicated combination of the benefits of resilience and the work-in-progress gaps, especially in the area of interpersonal relationships since educators can witness the changing behaviors of students through the direct classroom experience. Although some Gen Z students had demonstrated a recovery in motivation and future preparedness in the forms of more engagement and future preparedness in many cases, due to years of become virtually isolated (Gallup & Walton Family Foundation, 2025; Ang et al., 2022), they had experienced lasting lags in soft skills, including teamwork, face-to-face communication, and belonging. The voices of educators shed light on increased workload, extended roles as

emotional supporters with the increasing student mental health demands, and burnout opportunities as a result of the necessity to balance the innovation in the introduction of new technologies with the traditional requirements (Heilman, 2025; Rastegar, 2023). There is a theme of optimism in the technical opportunities but the literary reveals the tension in keeping up with the tastes of Gen Z that include authenticity and flexibility. One of the gaps remains: there are few studies that focus the voices of educators in analyzing how these sustained pedagogical shifts intersect with the emerging dynamics of Gen Z to prevent a comprehensive picture of how long-term alignment and adaptability to equitable and effective education in the new normal.

Problem Statement

The COVID-19 crisis brought a dramatic change to the education sector worldwide, leaving an emergency remote learning with zero-based operation and a hybrid system that revealed the latent problems in instructional systems and equity. Although tech-savvy characteristics, short attention span, attraction to interactive and visual information, and emphasis on authenticity and social justice were already part of the Generation Z learners, the long-term isolation increased the difficulty in engagement, motivation, and socio-emotional growth. Recovery following the pandemic has shown that there exist continued gaps, including reduced soft skills, including teamwork, interpersonal communication, and sense of belonging, and increased mental health issues and unequal recovery of learning, especially among disadvantaged populations. Teachers, with their new expanded roles as facilitators, counselors, and tech integrators, operating in greater workloads and under more burnout, can personally witness these changes at work but are experiencing even greater misalignment between the long-term changes in pedagogies such as accelerated AI integration, flexible delivery, and socio-emotional focuses and the changing needs of Gen Z to personalized, resilient, and purpose-driven learning cultures. Although there are new trends of adaptive, student-centered practices emerging, there is scanty detailed inquiry on the lived aspects of the educators concerning how these intersecting changes can be balanced to achieve equitable results, leaving major gaps in knowledge as to how long-term strategies to close the gap between the generational expectations and the demands of the new normal in education.

Research Objectives

1. To identify key pedagogical changes that have persisted or evolved since the pandemic from educators' viewpoints.
2. To examine educators' observations of Generation Z students' post-pandemic learning preferences, strengths, and challenges.
3. To investigate educators' adaptive teaching strategies, encountered barriers and opportunities, and proposed recommendations for sustainable practices tailored to Generation Z learners.

Research Questions

1. What key pedagogical shifts have persisted or evolved in post-pandemic education according to educators?
2. How do educators perceive Generation Z students' current learning preferences, strengths, and challenges in the post-pandemic context?
3. How are educators adapting their strategies to Generation Z's needs, what barriers and opportunities do they face, and what recommendations do they offer for effective, sustainable teaching in the "new normal"?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of educators regarding post-pandemic pedagogical shifts and their alignment with Generation Z learning dynamics. The interpretive phenomenological framework was selected to prioritize educators' subjective interpretations of these changes, emphasizing meaning-making in their teaching contexts after the disruptions of emergency remote teaching and the transition to hybrid models.

Sampling Technique

Participants included 18 purposively sampled educators (10 from higher education and 8 from secondary/K-12 levels) with at least five years of teaching experience spanning pre-, during-, and post-pandemic periods, ensuring they had direct exposure to Generation Z learners in both traditional and adapted environments. Recruitment occurred through professional networks, educational associations, and institutional contacts in diverse geographic regions to enhance transferability.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data collection method was semi-structured, in-depth interviews (60-90 minutes each), which were performed virtually via Zoom due to its ease of use and were recorded by consent. Interview guides investigated main pedagogical changes (e.g., hybrid delivery, AI tools and flexibility), observations of Gen Z preference/challenges (e.g., digital fluency, mental health needs, soft skills gaps), adaptive strategies, barriers/ opportunities and recommendations. Additional information was in reflective journaling of the subjects to record the constant thoughts. The analysis of data was based on the six stages of thematic analysis used by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. NVivo software helped in the inductive coding, determining patterns across transcripts. Member checking, peer debriefing, thick description and audit trail were used to ensure trustworthiness. Some of the ethical considerations were informed consent, anonymity, voluntary participation, and approval by the institutional review board. Such limitations are possible self-report bias and findings depending on a specific context, but the design focuses more on depth than generalizability in understanding the views of educators on the "new normal".

Post-Pandemic Pedagogical Shifts

The educational environment post-pandemic has experienced a radical and long-lasting changes with the general shift to the hybrid and flexible delivery models incorporating the in-person and online components, which make the education environment resistant to the disruptions in future. Teaching before the pandemic was based mostly on synchronous and face-to-face interactions with fixed schedules, which is advantageous in terms of direct collaboration but tends to be less accessible to diverse learners; HyFlex systems, which integrate some synchronous and asynchronous elements, have been institutionalized in teaching post-pandemic, so students can select the modalities based on their needs (work-life balance, health issues) (Sulaiman et al., 2023). This has increased the rate of digital tool adoption, such as AI-based adaptive learning systems and interactive simulations, which are more personalized and interactive than traditional lectures. Elements of gamification, including rewards and levels of virtual assignments, have become staples to overcome the pre-

pandemic problems of passive learning, whereas a greater emphasis on well-being and inclusivity through the built-in mental health resources and equitable access guidelines mitigate the isolation during lockdowns (Abdigapbarova et al., 2025). Analytically, these transformations are a shift in paradigm between a teacher-centered model to a learner-centered model to ensure inclusivity by accommodating different socioeconomic backgrounds and learning styles but requires long-term infrastructure investments to maintain equity.

In relative terms, pre-pandemic pedagogy focused on formal classroom patterns with limited use of technology, which tended to lead to monolithic delivery and not taking into consideration different speeds, which post-pandemic has remained as a central element, allowing self-paced modules through learning management systems and creating autonomy among Gen Z learners who have been accustomed to multitasking digitally. The extensive use of AI applications, such as content generation and feedback via generative algorithms, have turned the passive assignment into the interactive one, unlike in the past, when textbooks and exams were used as the primary means of assessment (Cengage Group, 2025). Now a normal fact, simulations and virtual reality integrations are used to simulate real world conditions in fields such as science and healthcare, to augment applied skills when physical resources were limited in pre-pandemic labs. Teachers say that they feel more comfortable with such technologies, with one teacher saying that AI has become his or her co-pilot in lesson creation, spending less time on preparation and more on customizing lessons to the needs of students (Wang, 2024). Thematically, this development focuses on an adherence to flexibility and innovation, but it also reminds of the enduring issues in closing digital divides because asynchronous formats may contribute to greater disengagement in its absence of strong structural support.

The views of teachers highlight the human factors of these changes, as the increased functions are emotional support, mentoring, in addition to teaching, which result in significant workload growth and the level of technological comfort. Teachers were mainly concerned with content delivery in pre-pandemic times; currently, they incorporate socio-emotional learning, becoming counselors to manage pandemic-related anxiety in students, which one teacher on her faculty admits: Since the pandemic, my role is no longer limited to content delivery but is now a counselor: I have been checking on the well-being of students by making weekly hybrid check-ins (Tekir, 2025). This job enlargement, although beneficial in terms of inclusivity, helps to worsen burnout, and surveys show that the number of reported stress cases has increased by 30 per cent due to combining digital tools and pastoral care (Watson, 2025). There are possibilities in tech-based efficiencies, including AI to automate the process of grading, which gives more time to teach students individually, but obstacles such as ineffective training remain, which another teacher demonstrated: "I was overwhelmed by platforms initially but now feel used to it, and the perpetual adaptation seems draining without institutional assistance (Abdelouahed et al., 2025). These insights are analytically powerful and indicate a conflict between the promise of innovation and the constraints of reality, which suggests the need to develop professionally to utilize long-lasting changes efficiently in the new normal."

Generation Z Learning Dynamics in the Post-Pandemic

The post-pandemic environment has transformed a generation of digital-native learners (born 1997-2012) into the group that is highly digitally savvy and lacks face-to-face teamwork and soft skills in a significant amount. Growing up in the world of technology during their childhood, Gen Z has a high level of skills in using digital resources, artificial intelligence,

and online resources to conduct research, express themselves, and multitask, which allows them to find their way in the virtual world smoothly. Nonetheless, long-term isolation practices during lockdowns have been associated with unaddressed interpersonal abilities, such as teamwork, emotional intelligence, conflict resolving, and nonverbal communication cues skills, that are usually not highly developed as a result of limited face-to-face interactions (Psychology Today, 2025). Teachers note that although Gen Z is highly adaptive in the digital environment, some of them cannot re-learn social norms after restrictions, which can be observed in such phenomena as social anxiety or the so-called Gen Z stare as a defense against overload (Rowan Center, 2026). This group is further characterized by increased focus on mental well-being, work-life balance and purpose-oriented learning, with most of them placing well-being support, flexible working hours and substantive and values-based education over conventional ranks.

The effects on the learning processes of Gen Z depict a complex story of learning to endure and continuing to face problems with motivation, concentration, and social interaction. The pandemic had created significant resilience and empathy, as overcoming uncertain situations created flexibility and understanding both of the plight of others, some research showed that there was a rebounding optimism and readiness to be prepared in the future by experiencing engaging school conditions (Gallup, 2025). However, all is not well: divided attention is even more distracted by digital distractions, motivation drops are caused by the sense of irrelevance of the material, and social disconnection is caused by virtual-nomadic interactions, resulting in a sense of disconnection and anxiety attacks (Deloitte, 2025). Analytically, these dynamics show a trade-off between the digital strengths that allow new self-directed learning, which undermines collaborative efforts, which are crucial in education and career-related aspects, as a result the consideration of specific interventions is necessary to equalize technical skill with relationship development.

The perception of teachers underlines that pandemic disruptions had an immensely strong impact on these Gen Z dynamics, with students being more digitally competent but emotionally fragile, and pedagogical re-tuning is necessary. According to many instructors, Gen Z values personalized, interactive, and flexible experiences, including blended formats, AI-assisted customization, and autonomy and is concerned about reduced sense of belonging and motivation in conventional environments (Chardonnens, 2025). Teachers report their expanded roles in nurturing socio-emotional support and note that mental health care and purpose-seeking increased during the pandemic, which led to optimism around abuse of technology but frustration with the existence of persistent equity disparities and lack of soft skills (Heilman, 2025). Thematically, teachers view the new normal as a chance to merge metacognitive and collaboration approaches, but note that the institutional support is urgent to support teaching with the new demands of Gen Z to learn in an inclusive and solid setting.

The New Normal and Educators' Adaptive Strategies

To address the new normal of post-pandemic education, educators have implemented various new practices, relying on the concepts of blended learning that combine both in-person and digital aspects to make learning more flexible and interactive to Generation Z learners. Student-centered methods, with the instructor guiding instead of telling, and the use of collaborative technologies such as virtual reality simulation and gamified platforms to make the experience purpose-driven and thus more appealing to Gen Z, have become common. Mental health has taken center stage, and teachers are now integrating mindfulness activities and socio-emotional check-ins into their curricula and frequently rely on apps to monitor their

well-being in real-time to overcome the increased anxiety presented by the long duration of isolation. Personalization, which is enhanced by the AI, also gives educators more power to adjust the content, including adaptive quizzes that can increase difficulty depending on the performance, allowing the learner to feel in control and relevant to the learning process. According to one of the teachers, blended formats offered me a chance to invert the classroom, where I could learn online and then talk in-person about the topic and turn passive learners into active learners (Gonzalez, 2023). Thematically the strategies represent a transition to a more holistic approach to education, which analytically fills in digital divides, but enhances resilience at the cost of institutional resources.

The positive outcomes of such adaptations are an increase in student engagement and equity because the blended and AI-driven approach has made it possible to create individualized paths that align with the strengths of Gen Z as digital natives, resulting in an increase in retention and satisfaction among people in diverse cohorts. Combination of access to unequal access to technology and additional cognitive load to teachers, who note that they are struggling to balance innovation and traditional assessment and record that the latter creates inequity to under-resourced students. As an example, AI personalization leads to increased motivation, but without strong support, it can serve to widen the divide, as teachers say, The technology divide made opportunities an obstacle to other students and these solutions are improvised hybrid-wise on the spot (Eradze, 2023). Analytically, such dynamics indicate a paradoxical terrain: the accomplishments in the development of empathy and adaptability are in tension with the pressure on the working position, in which the development of additional functions in the role of technological facilitator and advocate of mental health leads to exhaustion. By and large, the post-pandemic pivot has unleashed hope of scalable innovations but highlights the endemic execution and inclusiveness tensions.

The suggestions made by educators focus on collaborative models, which demand mixed curriculum in ways that would emphasize the values of the Gen Z generation, such as work-life balance in form of flexible work schedules and project-related assignments that are purpose-centered. To support continuous peer networks to exchange best practices, including incorporating AI in an ethical manner to prevent excessive reliance and increase feedback loops, they advocate this. Tensions are compelling calls of institutional change, such as the time to contemplate and adapt as one of the educators proposed, "We should have tech up skilling policy-supported sabbaticals to avoid burnout and remain creative (Rasli, 2022). These insights are thematically appropriate and thus they support proactive resilience-building measures such as interdisciplinary training to negotiate uncertainties, analytically connecting the achievements of resiliency building to advice on how to distribute the resource fairly, to ensure innovations last beyond the crisis-management.

Professional implications are obligatory, customized training on AI literacy and mental health interventions, the substitution of intermittent workshops with ongoing and community-based programs to establish educator agency. The institutional support should include funding digital infrastructure and wellness programs, and the policy changes should require contingencies planning in the case of disruption in the future and apply the experience of the pandemic to the national plans of resilient education. The future preparedness requires flexible policies that project the changing demands of Gen Z, which lead to interdisciplinary relationships and lasting investments to turn the obstacles into system advantages (Case, 2025). Analytically, this was a holistic approach to education, eliminating risks and ensuring equitable and innovative results as a result of post-pandemic gains.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has permanently changed the educational context and forced a swift and rather disorganized transition to remote and hybrid education exposing the systemic weaknesses and catalyzing the innovation in pedagogy. This study through the prism of the educators that managed to operate in both the pre- and post-pandemic classrooms shows that most of the changes proved to be the lasting ones: hybrid/flexible delivery models, the widespread use of digital tools such as AI to personalize and interact via simulations, asynchronous to allow more autonomy, gamification to enhance engagement, and increased focus on the well-being and inclusivity of students. These changes are being variably responsive to post-pandemic dynamics of learning in Generation Z, which are higher levels of digital fluency and preference to interactive and versatile learning experiences with purpose, but also limited by a continuous lack of face-to-face collaboration, soft skills, motivation in offline environments, and social connection due to years of isolation. Adaptive practices in the form of student-centered, mental health integration, and AI-enhanced feedback can be characterized by resilience and resourcefulness by educators, resulting in successes in engagement and personalization and pointing to workload growth and burnout vulnerability, equity considerations, and the necessity of strong institutional support. In the end, the new normal is not a recovery but rather a chance to be actively renewed and in this case, educators become the key interpreters and creators as the new generation demands are reshaped in line with the new educational requirements.

In the future, the results highlight the need to make long-term investments in professional development, policies that focus on teacher health and technological equity and partnership ecosystems that support continuous change. Through the focus on the voices of educators, this question sheds light on the way to peaceful reconciliation between pedagogical development and the specific demands of Generation Z focusing on flexibility, interventions further based on empathy, and the purposeful introduction of technology to create resilient and holistic learners who will be ready to exist in an uncertain future. The effects of the pandemic are both harmful and beneficial: it destabilized and at the same time encouraged the movement toward more equitable, active education. To ride on this wave, institutions, policymakers, and teachers need to ensure that they turn the obstacles into long-lasting assets, so that the new normal becomes a norm of quality that can enable Generation Z to succeed in their academic, emotional, and professional lives in a world that is rapidly shifting.

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