



The Soft Skills Divide: Comparing Student Perceptions on Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z Teachers

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Abstract

Today's teachers come from different generations, leading to varied student perceptions depending on their teachers' generational background. This study explores how students perceive the soft skills—communication, empathy, adaptability, and leadership—of Generation X, Millennial, and Generation Z teachers. Addressing a gap in comparative research, the study employed a multicase qualitative design involving two teachers from each generation and their respective students, selected based on teaching experience and exposure. Focus group discussions were conducted with 36 students to capture insights, and data were analyzed using the KJ Method to identify recurring themes and cross-generational patterns. Findings reveal distinct generational characteristics in the manifestation of soft skills. Generation X teachers were perceived as clear and structured communicators who emphasize discipline, demonstrate care through high expectations, and lead with authority and mentorship. Millennial teachers were described as collaborative and emotionally supportive, balancing flexibility and structure while promoting shared leadership. Generation Z teachers were viewed as relatable, digitally fluent, quick to adapt to student needs, and motivational leaders who lead by example. These perceptions show that while each generation demonstrates valuable strengths, no single approach fully meets all student expectations. Thus, teachers must adapt their methods by blending traditional and modern practices. The study underscores the importance of continuous, generation-responsive professional development to enhance soft skills and optimize classroom engagement.

Keywords: Teacher Soft Skills, Teacher Generation, Student Perceptions

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1. Introduction

Communication, empathy, adaptability and leadership are all vital soft skills for helping create positive and engaging learning experiences. These abilities allow teachers to connect with their students on a deeper level, adapt their teaching methods to accommodate a variety of learning styles, and foster an environment for learning that nurtures both academic and individual development [1]. Soft skills of teachers serve as a foundation for classroom management. Clear communication, for instance, can help build trust between teachers and students, allowing the teachers to address behavioral issues in a constructive manner and ensure a safe and positive environment for everyone. For example, teachers who listen to students' concerns or provide constructive feedback are in a better

position to build stronger relationships that will lead to participation and less disruption [2].

The teaching profession is growing more diverse as Generation X (born 1965–1980), Millennials (born 1981–1996), and Generation Z (born 1997–2012) teachers now share classrooms. Each generation contributes unique views, strengths, and challenges to the teaching profession. Gen X teachers, having experienced pre-digital teaching environments, tend to stress independence and flexibility in their teaching practices. Millennial teachers, however, emphasize teamwork and the integration of technology, leveraging online tools to boost student engagement. Gen Z teachers bring new ideas regarding emerging technologies but need to be mentored by senior peers, especially on classroom management and conventional pedagogical practices [3].

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Students' perceptions are significant in measuring the effectiveness of teaching since they directly reflect the impact of teaching techniques on learning outcomes. Studies show that students appreciate teacher attributes including communication, empathy, adaptability, and leadership [4].

Students' expectations of teachers' soft skills tend to differ depending on generational teaching approaches. Older generations' teaching approaches tend to stress clarity, organization, and authoritarian classroom management. In organized learning settings, students might view these methods favorably, enjoying instructional accuracy and orderly classroom dynamic [5]. Conversely, contemporary or collaborative teaching methods, which tend to be more prevalent among Millennial and Gen Z teachers, focus more on interpersonal skills like empathy, being adaptable, and being inclusive. Younger students prefer teachers who are able to skillfully incorporate technology, promote active engagement, and create a positive learning environment. These differing expectations underscore the requirement for teachers to continually adjust their soft skills in order to comply with changing preferences among diverse student populations so that teaching practices stay relevant and effective [4].

Research on generational differences in teachers' soft skills from students' perspectives is limited, but existing studies offer useful insights. Cabrera (2020) found that generational gaps in technology use affect how teachers engage students [6]. Polat et al. (2019) highlighted that Baby Boomers excel in discipline and mentorship, Generation X in adaptability and communication, and Millennials in technology and student-centered teaching. These findings suggest that each generation's strengths may align differently with students' expectations based on teaching styles and classroom dynamics [7].

Modern learners, especially from Gen Z, tend to want their teachers to model interpersonal abilities like empathy, flexibility, and technological proficiency. Yet, instructional styles of the different generations do not always cooperate with these demands. For example, Baby Boomer teachers who focus on tradition and authority can have their pedagogical method clash with Gen Z's

openness to casual and cooperative learning environments. Generation X teachers, who strike a balance between professionalism and flexibility, might connect more with students who look for structured but flexible approaches to teaching. In contrast, Millennial teachers, who are more focused on innovation and technology, tend to work well with Gen Z students who are born digital. More studies are required to ascertain whether these generational teaching styles successfully meet the changing demands of contemporary learners [3].

The research herein sought to understand student perceptions of soft skills between Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z teachers, observing how each of these generations manifests such skills within the classroom setting. By analyzing generational variations, the research hopes to ascertain how students perceive differing pedagogies influenced by generation-related soft skills.

This study aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) How do students perceive the soft skills of Generation X, Millennial, and Generation Z teachers? (2) Are there significant differences in student perceptions of teachers' soft skills based on generational backgrounds?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Research Methodology

A multicase study design is a qualitative research methodology used to explore complex phenomena in depth by examining multiple cases within their natural contexts [8]. A multicase study would be suitable for this investigation since it can make a focused comparison of student perceptions within several generations of teachers. By considering several cases—Gen X teachers, Millennials, and Gen Z—the research is able to determine patterns, similarities, and differences in students' perceptions of soft skills.

The cases in this study include two teachers from each of the three generational cohorts—Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z—selected based on their years of teaching experience and generational classification by birth year. Each teacher's class provided a group of 20 students, resulting in a total of 120 student participants for the focus group discussions, done separately for each teacher.

Students were purposively selected to ensure they had been taught by the target teachers for at least one academic quarter, allowing them to

provide informed perceptions of their teachers' soft skills.

Table 1. Participants of the study

Cases	Number of respondents
Gen X	40
Millennial	40
Gen Z	40
Total	120

2.2. Data Gathering

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are an effective data-gathering procedure for multicase studies due to their ability to generate rich, nuanced, and diverse insights from participants [9]. The data gathering method for this study was through focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with students to explore their perceptions on the soft skills of their teachers. Each FGD was held separately for GenX, Millennial, and Gen Z student groups, thereby enabling a comprehensive description on their teachers' soft skills. The method guarantees an in-depth comparative analysis of the soft skills commonalities and differences between generations, drawn from first-hand student perceptions.

2.3. Data Analysis

The KJ Method, also known as affinity diagramming, is a qualitative data analysis approach developed by Japanese ethnologist Jiro Kawakita. It is used to synthesize and organize large volumes of qualitative data by grouping similar ideas or responses into clusters, allowing researchers to identify common themes and patterns. In this study, the KJ Method was applied to analyze focus group data across multiple cases, helping to build consensus and highlight cross-generational insights into teachers' soft skills as perceived by students. [10]. In this research, the KJ Method was employed to study the responses gathered during the focus group discussions in order to

systematically categorize the perceptions on teachers' soft skills. By grouping similar responses and identifying recurring themes, the method was able to identify key generational communication, empathy, adaptability, and leadership strengths and weaknesses.

3. Results and Discussion

Two objectives drove this research paper: (1) identification of the perception of students on the soft skills of three generation of teachers, and (2) identification of the differences of these aforementioned soft skills. The results of the qualitative data gathering were as follows:

3.1. Communication

Students typically characterized their Gen X teachers as clear, structured, and authoritative communicators. They enjoyed their teachers' ability to present well-organized lessons, give explicit instructions, and keep a professional tone when talking. Most students mentioned that their Gen X teachers were direct and to the point, which served to make classroom expectations clear. Nonetheless, some students considered their communication style as overly formal or structured, at times restricting possibilities for open discussion or student-initiated pursuit of ideas. Although these teachers were superior in instructional clarity, students recommended that they use

more interactive and student-oriented approaches to communication [11].

On the other hand, students saw Millennial teachers as interactive, accessible, and engaging communicators. They commended these teachers for being able to create inclusive discussions, engage students in discussions, and adjust their language to make lessons more comprehensible. Students mentioned how their Millennial teachers utilized technology and multimedia to enhance communication, and the lessons became more dynamic and interactive. In addition, students enjoyed the manner in which these teachers used practical examples and narratives in their teachings, bridging theory and practice. Nonetheless, some students pointed out that their Millennial teachers' casual and conversational approach would sometimes result in a lack of structure, which made it hard to track complicated themes [12].

Students of Gen Z teachers saw a communication approach that was strongly digital, adaptable, and relatable. Gen Z teachers were characterized as being tech-savvy communicators who skillfully leveraged social media, online environments, and digital tools to interact with students within and beyond the classroom. A large number of students believed that their Gen Z teachers comprehended their language, interests, and online culture, hence making interactions more personal and context specific. Yet, some students were concerned that there was too much reliance on virtual communication, citing that whereas it brought lessons closer to them, sometimes it diluted face-to-face interactions and the level of discussion. Students generally viewed their Gen Z teachers as being very flexible communicators but added that a mixing of digital and conventional modes of communication would give an even better learning environment [13].

In general, students' views about teachers' communication skills identify clear generational strengths and weaknesses. While Gen X teachers are appreciated for their organization and clarity, students want more interactive communication. Millennial teachers are strong in being approachable and incorporating technology, though some students prefer more structured teaching. Meanwhile, Gen Z teachers are perceived as being relatable and very digital, with concerns

regarding overdependence on technology in communication.

These results imply that a balance should be come upon, integrating structure, engagement, and flexibility. It is the most efficient method for teachers from different generations to improve their communication with students.

3.2. Empathy

Students perceived Gen X teachers as professional but caring, frequently expressing empathy through fairness, consistency, and organization. Most students valued that these teachers cared about their academic achievement by having high expectations and providing constructive criticism. Some students, however, felt that their Gen X teachers kept them at arm's length, prioritizing discipline and instruction over personal relationships. Though their empathy style was usually viewed as practical and helpful, students indicated that more expressive emotional involvement would generate a deeper feeling of trust and bonding in the classroom [14].

Students perceived Millennial teachers as very approachable and emotionally supportive. They were commonly described as being understanding, patient, and open to listening to students' academic and personal problems. Students were comfortable disclosing their difficulties with Millennial teachers, who went out of their way to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom setting. Their capacity for empathy with students was identified as a key strength, especially in attempts to meet multiple learning needs and mental health. Nonetheless, some students indicated that their Millennial teachers' high emotional commitment could occasionally undermine authority or the ability to exert firm boundaries, resulting in cases where classroom discipline or authority was lost [15].

For Gen Z teachers, students noticed a peer-like empathetic sense, since these teachers are usually closer in age to their students. Most students characterized their Gen Z teachers as relatable, open-minded, and very sensitive to their academic and personal challenges. Their ability to converse casually and interact online made the students feel listened to and appreciated. Nevertheless, a few students were concerned that this informality might blur

professional lines, such that it became difficult for these teachers to be authoritative in the classroom. While their contemporary and student-focused model of empathy was appreciated, students proposed that there should be a balance between relatability and professionalism that could further enhance their influence [3].

Students' perception of empathy among teacher generations uncover a range of emotional investment, from professional and organized to deeply personal and peer-like. Gen X teachers are admired for being fair-minded and concerned about their students' academic performance, while Millennial teachers are complimented on being emotionally accessible and welcoming. Gen Z teachers are appreciated for being relatable and accepting, even though holding professional authority continues to be an issue. These findings indicate that a combination of emotional support and clear boundaries might produce the most effective empathetic learning environment.

3.3. Adaptability

Students perceived Gen X teachers as organized but flexible to adjust if needed. They observed that many of these teachers had set teaching habits and favored conventional methods, but they were also in a position to adapt when students demonstrate the need for different strategies. Some students nevertheless saw their Gen X teachers as less flexible, particularly where the integration of technology and novel teaching practices was involved. Although they valued the stability and consistency these teachers offered, students recommended more flexibility in fitting different learning styles and contemporary tools of teaching in order to be more adaptable [3].

Millennial teachers, however, were viewed as very flexible and receptive. Students pointed out that these instructors often modify their classes based on student response, used a combination of conventional and technological approaches, and were willing to change their styles to accommodate diverse students. Most students welcomed their flexibility in trying out new teaching approaches and their capacity to move between structured teaching and activity-based learning. Some students were, however, of the view that this flexibility sometimes resulted in inconsistency, with constant

switching between teaching methods creating confusion in understanding what exactly the daily learning routine should be [15].

Students saw a natural ability to adapt in Gen Z teachers, especially in using technology and the latest teaching approaches. Most of the students praised how they could tailor themselves to changing learning styles, blend digital devices naturally, and adjust their methodology on the spur of the moment. Their readiness to adapt to change was cited as a positive, especially within rapidly changing classroom environments. But some students felt that this high degree of flexibility sometimes resulted in a deficiency of structured learning experiences, and thus lessons seemed less predictable or too reliant on online resources. Students proposed that combining innovation with structured planning would improve the efficacy of their flexibility [16].

Overall, students identified adaptability as a necessary soft skill among all teacher generations, although their styles were different. Gen X teachers were characterized as stable but less flexible, Millennial teachers as dynamic but occasionally unstructured, and Generation Z teachers as extremely flexible but sometimes unstructured as well. These observations indicate that a balanced style—blending stability, responsiveness, and strategic innovation—can be central to building flexibility that optimally supports learning for students.

3.4. Leadership

Students perceived Gen X teachers as authoritative and experienced leaders who emphasize discipline, structure, and professionalism in the classroom. Most students enjoyed their sense of authority, which offers a stable and structured learning environment. These teachers tend to be seen as mentors, with students being coached by them with direct expectations and firm choices. But some students did perceive that their leadership style was sometimes too strict, and it was hard for them to express their concerns or feel actively engaged in classroom decisions. Nevertheless, their capacity to keep the class in order and demand respect was considered a defining characteristic of their leadership.

Students expressed a team-oriented leadership style that prioritizes teamwork,

inclusiveness, and student involvement for Millennial teachers. Students stated that these teachers facilitated open dialogue, respected student opinion, and promoted a feeling of shared responsibility in the classroom. This style was perceived as empowering, enabling students to own their learning while still having a guiding influence from the teacher. There was, however, criticism from some students who stated that sometimes such leadership was lacking in firm authority, which created difficulties in maintaining classroom discipline whenever students overstepped. Nevertheless, their balancing act between guidance and cooperation was identified as a major strength.

Gen Z teachers are frequently viewed as student leaders who engaged with students on an interpersonal basis. Their leadership was characterized as friendly and accessible, often alternating between mentoring and peer-like communication. Several students valued them for being able to motivate and inspire while equipping the classroom with a more democratic and student-oriented environment. Some students did, however, believe that this casual style of leadership had a tendency at times to confuse professional boundaries and it was then hard to be firm in classroom difficulties. Students thought that strengthening their leadership through adding more formalized decision-making and authority could increase their impact further.

The perceptions of students on the leadership of various generations were diverse,

such that Gen X teachers were viewed as strict and organized leaders, the Millennial teachers as cooperative and inclusive, and the Gen Z teachers as approachable and inspirational. This implies that successful leadership in the classroom calls for balance in a combination of authority, collaboration, and mentorship to foster a nurturing and well-organized learning environment.

The results of this research draw attention to the various manners through which Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z teachers practice soft skills in the classroom, influencing students' learning experiences and attitudes. Even though Gen X teachers are generally regarded as organized communicators, disciplined leaders, and flexible mentors, Millennial teachers are known for their collaborative communication, compassionate engagement, and creative flexibility. On the other hand, Gen Z teachers are seen as extremely approachable, tech-savvy, and inspirational leaders who promote student-centric learning spaces. These differences between generations highlight the need to find a balance between old and new methods of teaching in order to address changing student needs. In the end, encouraging ongoing professional growth in soft skills among all teacher generations has the potential to build classroom engagement, improve teacher-student relationships, and enhance educational results overall.

Table 2: Student Perceptions of Teachers' Soft Skills Across Generations

Soft Skill	Generation X Teachers	Millennial Teachers	Generation Z Teachers
Communication	Clear and structured; emphasizes discipline and authority.	Encourages collaboration and open discussions; balances professionalism and informality.	Relatable and tech-savvy; informal and engaging communication style.
Empathy	Demonstrates care through structured guidance and high expectations.	Actively listens and fosters emotional connections with students.	Highly approachable; builds peer-like relationships with students.
Adaptability	Adjusts teaching styles but prefers traditional methods.	Balances structure and flexibility; embraces innovation.	Quickly adapts to new technologies and student needs.
Leadership	Authoritative and mentorship-driven; values discipline and responsibility.	Encourages shared leadership and collaborative decision-making.	Motivates students through engagement and relatability; leads by example.

The findings emphasize clear generational differences in the soft skills of teachers as viewed by students. Gen X teachers are appreciated for their organized communication, disciplined leadership, and mentorship-based style, albeit being inclined towards traditionalism. Millennial teachers blend professionalism with collaboration, showing excellent empathy and flexibility while incorporating technology into instruction. Gen Z teachers, as native technology users, are regarded as highly accessible and endearing, and they quickly become attuned to the needs of students and a more casual yet inspirational classroom environment. These findings indicate that all generations possess some strengths but through an intergenerational sharing of teaching methodologies and ongoing professional education, the optimization of soft skills can be realized to respond to changing student needs.

These findings underscore the importance of leveraging generational strengths to enhance soft skills in teaching, ensuring that educators effectively meet the changing student demographics.

4. Conclusions

The following are the conclusions of this study:

The perceptions of students towards the soft skills of their teachers differed between generations, with noticeable differences in all soft skills – communication, empathy, adaptability, and leadership. The results can be classified into the following: (1) Based on communication, Gen X teachers were found to be clear and commanding, Millennials to be engaging and flexible, and Gen Z to be relatable and technology-savvy; (2) On empathy, Gen X teachers manifested organized support, Millennials promoted inclusiveness, and Gen Z manifested a peer-like rapport with students; (3) On adaptability, Gen X teachers drew on experience-based modifications, Millennials struck a balance between flexibility and technology utilization, and Generation Z responded quickly to changing learning requirements; and (4) In leadership, Gen X practiced authoritative direction, Millennials embraced a participative style, and Gen Z was focused on teamwork and innovation. These

differences by generation highlight the need to use strengths between teaching generations to

amplify classroom participation and student learning environments.

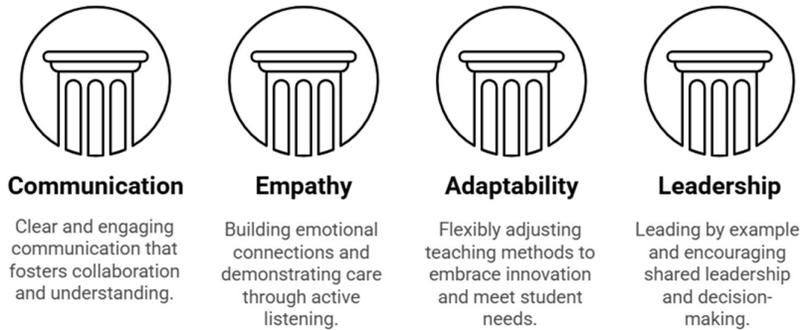


Figure 1. The ideal teacher in terms of soft skills

The figure shows the commonalities in what students recognize about the soft skills of educators across generations, noting the positive traits that make an ideal teacher in terms of soft skills. Although the exact manifestations of Communication, Empathy, Flexibility, and Leadership differs across generations, the expressions are based on the characteristics students repeatedly acknowledge as positive between and among the generations of teachers. Strong, clear, and engaging communication is appreciated in all generations, pointing to the necessity of fostering collaboration and understanding regardless of instructional techniques. Likewise, establishing emotional connections and showing care through listening embodies the very spirit of Empathy, which is still considered a characteristic of successful teachers, whether delivered through personal experience, patience, or sensitivity to student issues. Being able to adapt instruction in a flexible way to innovate and respond to students' needs characterizes Adaptability as a cross-generational strength, since teachers of all generations have managed to change, either by streamlining traditional practices or by incorporating new technology. Lastly, to lead by example and foster collective leadership and decision-making emphasizes the Leadership skills exhibited by all generations, illustrating how teachers motivate and direct students through various but equally effective methods.

These accounts capture the similarities in students' positive perception of teachers' soft skills, illustrating how despite variations in teaching styles, the core aspects of a great teacher remain consistent.

These qualities affirm that while teaching styles may differ across generations, the fundamental soft skills that define an ideal teacher remain timeless and universally valued.

5. Recommendations

To further enhance teaching effectiveness across generations, specific recommendations are provided for Gen X, millennial, and Gen Z teachers in relation to their soft skills.

5.1. Recommendations to Gen X Teachers

For Gen X teachers, who are characterized by their organized and clear communication style, more interactive and student-focused methods, including the use of technology and feedback mechanisms in real-time, can be used to increase involvement. More active listening and personalized assistance can also close generational gaps and make students feel more accommodated. To enhance adaptability, Gen X teachers should adapt to technological innovation and incorporate contemporary teaching strategies in order to respond to the different needs of

students. On the leadership side, promoting collaborative leadership through participation of students in decision-making and classroom activities can generate a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment.

5.2. Recommendations to Millennial Teachers

For millennial teachers, who excel in communication through technology, striking a balance between digital and face-to-face interactions will ensure a holistic approach to engaging students. They need to maintain strong emotional connections with students and establish clear professional boundaries to create a supportive yet organized learning environment. Drawing on their natural innovation instincts, millennial teachers should constantly evolve their teaching approaches to align with changing student attitudes and learning styles. Also, incorporating mentorship in their leadership will enable them to lead students to self-directed learning while promoting the feeling of mutual responsibility in class.

5.3. Recommendations to Gen Z Teachers

For Gen Z teachers, who are digital natives, developing verbal and interpersonal communication skills will ensure that online and face-to-face interactions are well balanced. Exercising patience and greater personal involvement with students will also increase emotional connections and build a more nurturing learning environment. While they are naturally prompted to adapt, Gen Z teachers must work on building resilience against adversity and fine-tuning their skill at negotiating conventional teaching techniques when the situation demands for it. Finally, building confidence in facilitating discussions, handling diverse student needs, and setting authority in the classroom will enable them to become better and more inspiring teachers.

5.4. Recommendations for future studies

Future studies can examine the long-term effects of soft skills development on student outcomes, with specific reference to academic achievement, motivation, and overall student well-being. Studies comparing different

educational environments, for instance, public and private schools, can offer further insights into how generational differences affect teacher soft skills. Moreover, understanding how and why cultural and societal elements influence teachers' attitudes and uses of soft skills can contribute to a deeper insight into the role they play in the learning environment. Other external factors like sex can also be considered in subsequent investigations.

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