

PEDAGOGY

What Makes a Great Physical Education Teacher? Insights from University Students in Rural Communities

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Abstract

This study investigated the qualities that Generation Z students in rural communities prefer in their PE teachers. Using a qualitative-ethnographic approach, data were collected from 20 Generation Z students through open-ended questions validated by experts. The findings highlight four key traits that students value in PE teachers: Teachers who “walk the talk,” modeling the behaviors and skills they teach; Considerate teachers who are understanding and flexible with

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students' needs and circumstances; Teachers who are optimistic, energetic, and motivational, using their positive attitudes to engage and inspire students; and Dedicated teachers who are actively involved in supporting and guiding students in PE. These insights highlight the importance of PE teachers who serve as role models, are empathetic, motivational, and committed to fostering a dynamic and supportive learning environment that meets the needs of Generation Z students in rural settings.

Introduction

Generation Z, born from 1995 to the early 2010s, has significantly influenced societal norms, cultural shifts, and educational systems, profoundly shaping generational dynamics (Dolot, 2018). Known as the first group born entirely in the digital age, Gen Z has grown up immersed in a world of technological advancements, globalization, and rapid access to information (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Cilliers (2017) stressed the importance of understanding this generation's values, challenges, and perspectives for educators, policymakers, and scholars aiming to design educational programs that cater to Gen Z students' distinct needs and preferences, particularly in the context of PE.

Research in the United States has shown that Generation Z is unique in its values, mainly shaped by its experiences with digital technology, social media, and instant connectivity (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Their comfort with technology has influenced their learning styles, prioritizing interactive and tech-driven educational experiences (Iorgulescu, 2016). Generation Z is also distinguished by its pragmatism and resilience, traits developed in response to economic challenges, political shifts, and a rapidly changing job market. They are driven by inclusivity, fairness, and authenticity, with strong values rooted in social justice, environmental sustainability, and equity (Mohr & Mohr, 2017). These attributes demand educational frameworks that integrate technological tools and support these core values (Nioda & Tagare, 2024).

However, as Generation Z moves towards digital platforms, there is growing concern about their decreasing levels of physical activity and increasing sedentary habits (Kenney & Gortmaker, 2017). Traditional PE methods, which focus on outdoor activities and

sports, still prevail in rural communities, where access to technology may be limited (Gapa & Tagare, 2023). This creates a gap between the digital preferences of Gen Z and the conventional PE methods practiced in rural areas. To bridge this gap, innovative approaches integrating technology with physical activity—such as gamification, mobile apps, and online resources—are essential for promoting active lifestyles. The PATH-Fit program, designed to provide a comprehensive and interactive educational experience, aims to address the specific challenges and needs of Gen Z students in rural communities by promoting physical fitness and overall well-being.

Despite this, implementing PE in tertiary institutions in the Philippines faces numerous challenges (Junio & Liwag, 2016). These include curriculum deficiencies, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient emphasis on PE, which is often politically sidelined (Asio & Tagare Jr, 2024). Cariaga (2014) highlighted the historical and systemic issues that hinder the development of tertiary PE, while Abbasov and Mavlyanov (2019) stressed the importance of improving quality education through increased resources and better teacher training. These challenges are not unique to the Philippines, as countries such as Brazil and Malaysia face similar issues with underfunded PE programs (Kilue & Muhamad, 2017; Osborne et al., 2016).

In response to these challenges, the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has mandated the adoption of the Physical Activity Towards Health and Fitness (PATH-Fit) program across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the country (CMO 39, s. 2021). This initiative aims to provide a standardized and comprehensive curriculum that emphasizes holistic development, essential life skills, and physical well-being (Peromingan et al., 2023). PATH-Fit's goal is to transcend traditional PE frameworks by offering an inclusive program that combines physical fitness with crucial life skills, creating an educational experience that equips students to lead healthier lives while fostering personal growth (Velez, 2023).

Previous studies on Generation Z have explored their behaviors and preferences in various fields, including education (Bhore & Pandita, 2022). For example, Ajmain (2020) highlighted how technology influences the social and communication skills of Generation Z, while Shorey et al. (2021) emphasized the need to incorporate

technology into education to meet their learning preferences. In PE, studies such as those by Escomes et al. (2021) and Panganiban (2019) have emphasized the need to adapt curriculum and teaching methods to align with the interests of Generation Z, thereby ensuring relevance and engagement. Graciano (2022) and Lobo et al. (2022) also emphasized the importance of considering student preferences and feedback to enhance the quality and effectiveness of PE programs.

Although there have been several studies on Generation Z and tertiary PE, there is a notable gap in understanding the kind of PE teachers that Generation Z students in rural communities of the Philippines prefer. This research contributes to the academic conversation by investigating the traits and qualities that rural Generation Z students seek in their PE teachers. This study aimed to identify the specific characteristics that resonate with these students, offering insights that could inform the development of more student-centered teaching approaches. By focusing on what students value in their PE teachers, this study provides a foundation for improving educational practices and pedagogical methods in rural settings. The findings can be used to design culturally sensitive and personalized teaching strategies that cater to the needs of rural Generation Z students, making the learning experience more engaging and relevant to their lives. This research is a step toward creating a more fulfilling and responsive educational environment for students in these communities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design, especially an ethnographic approach. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), qualitative research is a methodology that seeks to comprehend human events by thoroughly examining evidence that is not expressed in numerical form. Ethnographic research is a qualitative research approach in which researchers fully immerse themselves in the natural environment of a specific social group or culture to comprehensively understand and study its features (Brewer, 2000). Ethnographic research seeks to understand the customs, beliefs, behaviors, and routines of the society being studied by immersing oneself in the culture, conducting interviews, and engaging in participant observation.

Gobo (2011) describes this method as involving thorough and detailed on-site research. This approach enables the researcher to establish a strong relationship with participants, gain an insider's viewpoint, and uncover insights that would not be evident using other research methods. The ethnographic study delves into the social connections and symbolic importance inherent in the lives of the individuals being researched to gain a thorough understanding of culture (Hammersley, 2006). This research utilized a qualitative-ethnographic approach because it is well-suited to understanding the preferences of Generation Z students in rural communities regarding their PE teachers. The method provides a detailed depiction of the characteristics that students in these areas value most, offering more profound insight into their unique educational environment.

Participants and Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling to select 20 Generation Z individuals as the primary data source. According to Campbell et al. (2020), purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on their relevant experiences, insights, or perspectives. This method is commonly used in research to obtain an in-depth understanding from individuals with specific knowledge or experiences, ensuring that participants can contribute valuable insights to the research topic (Tongco, 2007). In this study, participants were required to meet specific criteria, including being part of Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2010), currently enrolled in PATH-Fit classes, and residing in rural communities.

The sample size of 20 Generation Z students from the Cotabato Province in the Philippines was sufficient to capture diverse preferences regarding the kind of PE teachers they prefer. Qualitative research focuses on obtaining detailed and rich data from each participant rather than seeking a broad representation. The selection criteria ensured participants shared common characteristics and experiences while allowing for variation within these parameters. Though the sample may seem small, it was adequate for capturing the varied perspectives and experiences of rural Generation Z students, aligning with the qualitative nature and objectives of the study.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument used in this study was a set of open-ended questions specifically designed to investigate what kind of PE teachers Generation Z students in rural communities prefer. These open-ended questions enabled participants to express their opinions freely and authentically, providing in-depth insights into their preferences. The questions enabled a comprehensive exploration of the participants' views, ensuring their perspectives were captured in detail. To ensure the reliability and relevance of the questions, they were validated by experts through a rigorous evaluation process.

In addition to the interview guide, various tools were utilized to enhance data collection. A camera and voice recorder were employed to capture verbal cues, facial expressions, and environmental factors, providing additional context for interpreting participants' responses. Using multimedia techniques enriched the data, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and surroundings, thereby contributing to the depth and accuracy of the research findings.

Data Analysis

The study utilized the Colaizzi Method (1978) for data analysis and interpretation. This approach entailed careful and systematic data analysis, including reducing, categorizing, and abstracting information to derive meaningful and essential findings from the participants' experiences. The Colaizzi Method involves transcribing interviews or data and identifying crucial comments and phrases pertinent to the research inquiries. The following steps entail extracting the meanings and patterns from these statements, categorizing these patterns into groups, and finally creating a thorough representation of the studied topic. The Colaizzi Method was chosen for this study due to its compatibility with the exploratory character of the research, which aims to comprehend the problems and ideas of Generation Z students in rural communities. The acquired data were methodically and meticulously analyzed to understand the participants' experiences and viewpoints fully. The method's flexibility enabled the identification of themes derived from participants'

views, which is crucial for capturing the varied and plentiful insights of Generation Z students in rural contexts.

Results

Table 1

Sub-themes on the Suggestions for the Teachers

Themes	Description	Sample Transcript
1. Walk the talk	Encourages teachers to model the behaviors and skills they teach, providing a practical example for students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...it would be great if our teachers were role models and physically fit..." • "...teachers should practice what they preach, so it's important that they are role models and physically fit themselves..." • "...I would like teachers to not just stick to printed materials but to also set an example and actively demonstrate the lessons..."
2. Considerate	Highlights the need for teachers to be understanding and flexible regarding students' circumstances and needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...teachers should be considerate of students' situations..." • "...it would be great if they were not too strict and showed consideration for the different weaknesses and abilities of students..." • "...despite the injury, the teacher still required them to perform, which wasn't appropriate given their condition..."
3. Optimistic, Energetic, and Motivator	Emphasizes the value of teachers maintaining a positive and energetic attitude to inspire and engage students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...teachers should motivate us to do well and stay physically active..." • "...positive and enjoyable teachers help students realize they should also be that way..." • "...if a teacher appears tired or lacks energy, it can also make students feel more sluggish and less motivated..."
4. Dedicated Teachers	Underlines the importance of teachers being committed and actively involved in supporting and guiding students in PE.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...teachers should be dedicated to teaching, with a constant willingness to guide students effectively..." • "...activities should be meaningful and foster learning, rather than just assigning tasks without proper guidance..." • "...their commitment greatly influences students' engagement and interest in PE..."

Discussion

Walk the Talk

This theme highlights the importance of teachers being role models in PE. Participants expressed a desire for teachers to be physically fit and actively participate in activities alongside students. They believe that when teachers demonstrate the lessons themselves, rather than just relying on printed materials, the learning experience can be more engaging and motivating. Teachers who embody the principles they teach can create a positive environment, helping students to focus on having fun and effectively understanding the lessons. To wit:

...it would be great if our teachers were role models and physically fit. Teachers should act as coaches, participating in the routines alongside students. This can help motivate us to engage in activities and create a positive, enjoyable environment where the focus is on having fun rather than stressing out... – *Benjamin*

Teachers embodying their teaching principles convey that it can significantly enhance student motivation and credibility. When teachers actively demonstrate their teaching skills and behaviors, students are more likely to view the lessons as relevant and authentic. This alignment between teaching and practice can create a more engaging and motivating classroom environment where students are inspired to mirror their teachers' positive attitudes and skills. Consequently, this approach can foster a more meaningful connection to the subject and encourage greater student involvement and effort.

Furthermore, Crisol Moya and Caurcel Cara (2021) explained that PE teachers must walk the talk and set an example for students, as their behavior and attitudes can significantly influence students' perceptions and habits regarding physical activity. When PE teachers are committed to fitness and healthy living, they serve as role models, inspiring students to follow suit (Casey & Kirk, 2020). Leading by example reinforces the lessons taught and helps build credibility and trust. It demonstrates to students that the principles of PE are not just theoretical but also practical and beneficial, encouraging

them to adopt and maintain active, healthy lifestyles (Demchenko et al., 2021).

Considerate

This theme emphasizes the importance of teachers in understanding and being flexible towards students' unique situations. Participants expressed that PE teachers should accommodate students' different needs and circumstances, such as offering alternative options for those who miss practical exams for valid reasons. They also emphasized that teachers should consider students' abilities and weaknesses, avoiding overly strict approaches. Engaging with students in a supportive and empathetic manner can create a more inclusive and enjoyable learning environment, ensuring that all students are treated fairly and given appropriate opportunities. Based on the research participants:

...I suggest that PE teachers consider students' situations. For example, if a student is absent for a valid reason during a practical exam, there should be alternative options to make up for it, like home-based activities. Teachers should offer flexibility and not be overly strict, accommodating different circumstances and providing opportunities for students to complete their work... - *Bogart*

...teachers should be considerate. Last semester, when I was in my first year, there was a classmate with an ACL injury. Despite the injury, the teacher still required them to perform, which wasn't appropriate given their condition... - *Gelay*

This implies that when teachers show flexibility and understanding toward students' needs and situations, it can help reduce stress and enhance students' ability to engage effectively with the curriculum. This consideration helps ensure that all students can participate fully and benefit from the lessons, leading to a more inclusive and positive educational experience. As a result, students may feel more supported and valued, which can improve their overall motivation and performance in PE.

Furthermore, students need considerate teachers in PE because their heavy academic load in other subjects can lead to stress and

burnout. A considerate PE teacher recognizes this and creates a supportive, enjoyable environment that provides a necessary break from academic pressures (Ferry & Romar, 2020; Tagare, 2024). Being understanding and accommodating, PE teachers can help students manage stress, improve their overall well-being, and foster a positive attitude towards physical activity. This balanced approach ensures that PE contributes to students' mental and emotional health, making their educational experience more holistic and fulfilling (Leo et al., 2022).

Optimistic, Energetic, and Motivator

This theme highlights the role of teachers in maintaining a positive and energetic environment in PE. Participants expressed that teachers should motivate students to stay active and excel, acting as inspirational figures like second parents. They believe that teachers' optimism and energy make classes enjoyable and engaging. Positive and enthusiastic teachers can influence students' attitudes and participation, while teachers who appear tired or unapproachable may contribute to disinterest and a lack of motivation among students. According to them:

...teachers should be optimistic because their energy greatly affects students. Positive and enjoyable teachers help students realize they should also be that way. The teacher's energy radiates to the students. Even if a teacher tries to appear happy but is not genuinely so, students can often tell if they are being insincere... - *Yan*

...teachers should be jolly and energetic so that their enthusiasm can positively influence students. If a teacher appears tired or lacks energy, it can make students feel sluggish and less motivated... - *Jasmin*

This denotes that teachers who bring positive energy and enthusiasm to their classes can inspire students to participate more actively and maintain a higher level of interest. This positive atmosphere makes the learning environment more enjoyable, helping students stay motivated and engaged, which in turn enhances their overall performance and commitment to physical activities. Teachers' dy-

dynamic and supportive presence can create a more vibrant and practical learning experience for students.

Moreover, Abós et al. (2019) explained that having an optimistic and motivating teacher benefits students by creating a positive and inspiring learning environment. Such a teacher's enthusiasm is contagious, boosting students' morale and engagement (Öngel & Tabancali, 2022). Their optimism helps students overcome challenges and fosters resilience, while their energy keeps the class dynamic and enjoyable. Wenström (2020) also said that as motivators, these teachers encourage students to strive for their best, build confidence, and develop a love for learning. This supportive and lively atmosphere enhances students' educational experience and promotes a positive attitude toward school and personal growth (Weinhold, 2021).

Dedicated

This theme emphasizes teachers' commitment and engagement in their teaching roles. Participants expressed that teachers should constantly be willing to guide and support students effectively. A teacher's dedication significantly impacts students' interest and engagement in PE. They believe activities should be meaningful and include proper guidance rather than just assigning tasks without sufficient support. A dedicated approach ensures students receive valuable learning experiences and feel genuinely supported in their educational journey. Based on them:

...teachers should be dedicated to teaching and constantly willing to guide students effectively. Their commitment greatly influences students' engagement and interest in PE...
– *Christmas*

...teachers should be dedicated and not neglect their students. Activities should be meaningful and foster learning rather than just assigning tasks without proper guidance. It should be more than self-study; a genuine focus should be on student learning and engagement... – *Namikazee*

This indicates that when teachers demonstrate a strong commitment to guiding and supporting their students, it enhances the quality of instruction and engagement in PE. This dedication ensures

that students receive meaningful guidance and support, fostering a more focused and engaged learning environment. As a result, students are more likely to benefit from well-structured activities and personalized attention, which can positively influence their learning outcomes and overall experience in the subject.

Additionally, teachers must be dedicated because their commitment to teaching, and student success has a profound impact on the learning experience. Dedicated teachers invest time and effort in creating engaging lessons, providing personalized support, and fostering a nurturing classroom environment (Alves et al., 2019). This dedication helps students feel valued and motivated, enhancing their academic performance and emotional well-being. When committed, teachers inspire students to take their education seriously, develop a strong work ethic, and pursue their goals with determination (Legrain et al., 2019). The positive influence of dedicated teachers extends beyond academics, shaping students' attitudes and behaviors for future success (Burden, 2020).

Conclusions

The findings of this study underscore the specific qualities Generation Z students in rural communities prefer in their PE teachers. First, students value teachers who “walk the talk” by embodying the teaching skills and behaviors they teach. This aligns with the student's desire for authentic role models who can practically demonstrate lessons in real-world contexts. Furthermore, being considerate is emphasized, as students appreciate teachers who show flexibility and understanding of their diverse needs, acknowledging that individual circumstances often affect their performance and participation in PE.

Additionally, students prefer optimistic and energetic teachers who serve as motivators. A positive and enthusiastic attitude helps engage students, encouraging them to participate fully in physical activities. Ultimately, dedication stands out as a crucial trait, with students expressing a desire for teachers who are committed to their development and provide ongoing support. Together, these traits underscore the importance of PE teachers in creating an inclusive, inspiring, and responsive environment that promotes physical skills and fosters students' overall well-being and growth.

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