

Generation Gaps in Special Education: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This review is meant to understand the generational gaps of special education teachers. As the field changes, so must the educators, but the field of special education encompasses four different generations of people as of 2024, so the amount of change per educator is vast. Identifying the gaps within these generations of educators will enlighten administrators as to what the strengths and weaknesses are in the groups of teachers that they employ. Districts can use this information to encourage their teachers in varying generations to teach to their strengths and collaborate with others to build upon the skills they need to strengthen. To acquire the literature, several education-based journals were searched, as well as a university's library. The key terms listed below were used, and themes were found in the results. Only literature that was peer-reviewed and published within the last ten years was considered. The results of the research were limited; there is not as much research done on this topic as there is for other topics surrounding special education. As a result of the findings, there should be more efforts from public schools to close the generational gaps that are described in the review to create a more cohesive education setting for students who receive special education services.

Keywords: generation gaps, age, special education, teachers, assistive technology, teaching methods, experience, mental health

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1. Introduction

Special education and our understanding of it as educators is constantly changing. Every year there are changes in policies, laws, language, instructional methods, and training (NJDE, 2022). With these evolutions throughout the time that special education has been relevant in public schools, there have been various generations of teachers. In 1975 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) was passed, allowing students with disabilities to receive educational opportunities in public school (USDE, 2024). This means that the generations of teachers since the start of special education programs includes Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996), and the youngest generation eligible to enter the teaching profession in 2024, Generation Z (1996-2012). The pedagogy taught for special education teachers is different for the new generation of teachers coming into the field now than it was for millennial teachers, and different for millennial teachers than for Generation X teachers. Understanding the gaps in the generations of these teachers can help us to determine the generation of teachers best equipped to instruct students who receive special education services. The noticeable generational gaps in the research surrounding this issue are assistive technology, mental and emotional well-being and support, effective teaching methods, and teaching experience.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Assistive Technology

Assistive technology (AT) has become more advanced throughout the years of special education. With recent technology, assistive technology can range from pencil grips to tablets. Constant developments of assistive technology require proper training for special education teachers to be familiar with using these tools (Adebisi et al., 2015).

On one end of the spectrum of this training, there are Baby Boomer teachers and Generation X teachers who require additional training on updated forms of AT (Adebisi et al., 2015). Self-efficacy is the goal of assistive technology training; in a study done to measure the relationship between generations and technology self-efficacy, the researchers reported no statistically significant findings but referenced a previous study that had

conflicting results. That previous study resulted in teachers under the age of 45 demonstrating higher levels of technological self-efficacy and teachers older than 45 demonstrating low levels of self-efficacy (Woods et al., 2021, as cited in Li et al., 2015). Another study centered around self-efficacy of assistive technology reported the need for teachers to have specific skills to use assistive technology in the classroom using certain pedagogies designed for that technology (MacCallum et al., 2014). All this said, self-efficacy is important for special education teachers to have when they work with assistive technology, but that self-efficacy comes with additional trainings for existing teachers, especially those falling in the age categories mentioned in Li's study.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are teachers in Generation Z and Millennial teachers who have more AT self-efficacy but have not had any exposure to AT prior to entering the field of teaching. Insufficient training of younger teachers in assistive technology is impacting the use of it in classrooms (Atanga et al., 2019). Two separate studies, Atanga (2019) and Jones (2021), reported that most of their participants had no exposure or experience with assistive technology as they were finishing their undergraduate teaching programs. Jones's (2021) study found that implementing programs that include content about assistive technology in undergraduate teaching programs will improve the ability to appropriately select assistive technology for students. Teachers in older generations require more training to achieve self-efficacy while teachers in younger generations need more exposure to assistive technology before they enter the field as professional special educators.

2.2 Mental and Emotional Well-Being and Support

Managing the mental and emotional well-being of teachers has been a higher priority for public schools since the start of the teacher shortage following COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a shortage of educators around the country and school systems have had to emphasize the importance of maintaining mental and emotional well-being of their teachers to reduce burnout and reduce the risk of losing teachers. However, maintaining mental and emotional health in teachers differs for those in varying generations. Studies by Berger (2023), Cavioni (2023), and Fox (2020) have all reported that older special education teachers (those falling into the Baby Boomer generation, Generation X, and some Millennials) are at the highest risk for emotional burnout due to consistent exposure to trauma in the classroom and pressures in their personal and school lives. Other studies emphasized the relationship between home-work family conflict and turnover intention in special education, stating that special education teachers with more stress at home and at work are at higher risk of leaving their jobs (Ding et al., 2022; Karaca et al., 2024). Turnover intention is defined in Ding's (2022) study as a teacher's intention to leave their job after facing burnout, work overload, or dissatisfaction (Ding et al., 2022).

Cuadra's (2023) study about the sandwich generation, defined in this study as special educators who, at home, are taking care of children and an elderly parent, explores this specific group of special educators whose generation is defined by their home life (Cuadra et al., 2023). The combination of caring for students who receive disability services during work hours and then going home to care for their own children and their parent(s) increases the risk of burnout exponentially for the individuals falling into the sandwich generation (Cuadra et al., 2023). In the year 2024, the generation encompasses educators in Generation X, but also some Millennials.

Most of the research points to older special educators as the group that are at the highest risk of mental and emotional burnout (Antoniou et al., 2022; Fu, 2021). This is due to external pressures from home and extended exposure to traumatic situations at work. In a study done by Fu (2021), the results found that special education teachers who show constant engagement in their students and school environments were less likely to experience burnout—however the study did not specify if the results referred to teachers of all generations. Fu's (2021) study focused on a large age range of teachers, but the research also stated that teachers with higher emotional intelligence acquired through experience in the field do show signs of better well-being (Fu et al., 2021).

2.3 Effective Teaching Methods

Effective teaching methods for students who receive disability services require constant adaptation to the population of student teachers receive every school year. Lowell and Morris (2019) emphasize the importance of adaptability in special education teachers, specifically (Lowell & Morris, 2019). If effective teaching methods change yearly, there will be major gaps in what different teachers believe is effective. A method that has been essential to the special education field for several years is Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs). An advanced understanding of EBPs is necessary for special education teachers to have as they enter the field and to adapt to as those EBPs change throughout their career because they must match them appropriately with content and curriculum (Freeman et al., 2021). This advanced understanding of EBPs is taught in more current teacher preparation programs, in turn passing this new pedagogy onto the younger generations of teachers (Freeman et al., 2021). Another effective teaching method that has become embedded in special education practices is co-

teaching, according to a study done in 2023 (Coleman et al., 2023). Coleman's (2023) study involved participants practicing co-teaching in a class of secondary students who receive special education services (Coleman et al., 2023). In the study, young teachers just starting to enter teaching reported positive experiences co-teaching (Coleman et al., 2023).

In a study done by Jakobson (2022), the purpose was to gain information about general and special education teachers' instructional practices regarding reading comprehension. The researchers reported that the participants, who ranged in age from 24-66, had an overall limited knowledge of instruction surrounding reading comprehensions strategies (Jakobson et al., 2022). According to the results, only one fifth of the participants included reading motivation and readers' background knowledge as factors that drove their instruction (Jakobson et al., 2022). These two components of reading instruction, in previous reports, have been cited as key factors in constructing effective reading lessons (Jakobson et al., 2022). Though this study encompassed a large age range of teachers, this is another example of effective teaching methods being a weakness for teachers in older generations and one of the only pieces of literature showing effective teaching methods also being a weakness for teachers in younger generations. One of the supportive pieces of literature for older generations is from Gauthier (2016), who emphasizes teachers needing to maintain ebbs and flows of learning communities in the classroom, which is achieved with years of experience (Gauthier et al., 2016). Overall, literature is more supportive of younger generations regarding effective and appropriate teaching methods.

2.4 Teaching Experience

When considering candidates to fill a special educator position, teaching experience in the field is a major contributing factor to choosing that candidate. Teaching experience in this review is defined as teachers with multiple years of teaching in special education settings on their résumé, making the target age for hires Millennials and Generation X educators. There are arguments to be made that hiring educators with more experience might be more successful for students because of their exposure to the special education field. However, there are counter arguments that pull for younger teachers with less experience to be given those positions because of the current special education pedagogy they have been provided in their undergraduate programs as well as their technological literacy. In a study that interviewed principals about the hiring process of special education teachers, the researchers reported that principals preferred candidates with more teaching experience, but candidates with 15 years' experience were not differentiated or more preferred than candidates with five years' experience (Giersch et al., 2018). Another study that tasked older teachers with training a group of younger teachers who were about to enter the special education field found that the older teachers reported severe gaps in the trainees' knowledge of special education, specifically in the following areas: content and course delivery, field experiences, interest in the profession, state education requirements, learner characteristics, and collaboration with faculty (Sharp et al., 2019).

The appeal of younger special education teachers is that they are considered "digital natives," or people who grew up surrounded by technology and can adapt to technological changes quickly. Marrero (2023) studied the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and how schools have adjusted to using ICT programs in their normal curriculums post-COVID. Examples of ICTs include Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams—programs that assist people with communicating and exchanging information technologically. Marrero (2023) expressed the challenges and complexities of transitioning to digital teaching and stated that educators who have not previously attained advanced digital skills will not be able to use ICT to teach (Marrero et al., 2023). The results of the study found that ICT-trained teachers (Generation Z, in the year that the study was done) can act as allies to teachers who are not ICT-trained and who fall into older generations (Marrero et al., 2023). The ICT-trained teachers have earned the title of "digital natives" (Marrero et al., 2023). As Marrero (2023) expressed, ICT teaching requires adaptability and a characteristic that was identified of digital natives was their ability to quickly adapt to technological changes (Marrero et al. 2023). Cun and Huang (2024) emphasize the importance of the combination of technological knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and content knowledge working in unison; naturally, teachers falling into the "digital native" title will have more of an advantage in the technological knowledge portion of that trifecta (Cun & Huang, 2024). Another study used the IMPACT assessment, a performance-based assessment for educators with a weighted score based on classroom observations, to study classroom performance (Jacob et al., 2018). In this specific study, teachers with more classroom experience scored lower on the IMPACT assessment than teachers with less classroom experience (Jacob et al., 2018). The literature provided some contradictory information on this theme, making arguments for both ends of the age spectrum.

3. Conclusion

The gaps in special education teachers are prominent, but they are strongly supported with research that makes good arguments for continuing to hire younger teachers as well as keeping older teachers in their current positions. Within the research's identified themes, both assistive technology and teaching experience have literature that supports older and younger generations. The other two themes, mental and emotional well-being and support and effective teaching methods, show more support of the teachers in younger generations earning and maintaining jobs within the special education field.

One of literature's strengths is that it gives recommendations for ways that school systems can alter their programs to better benefit students who receive special education services. The studies also had participants with wide age ranges and varying levels of experience which provided a good scope for the review's intended purpose. One weakness is that the research did not specifically focus on the age and generations of teachers in special education, truly because there is limited research on this subject. Based on this review, additional studies should include identifying the demographic ages and graduation years of participants to further investigate ways to support special educators across generations. Further research should explore the needs surrounding generational groups to encourage educators to collaborate their knowledge and improve their teaching (Liu & Gu, 2024).

The next steps that need to be taken to solve this problem are for education systems to make necessary adjustments for the respective generations present in the field at the given time and reevaluate how they can get those groups to work together. These systems need to put effort towards combining the strengths of the varying generations to create effective learning environments for students who receive special education services.

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