

Special Issue

Digital Education Platforms and Schooling: New Challenges and Alternatives Toward Education Equity and Children's Rights

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Digital Education Platforms and Schooling: New Challenges and Alternatives for Educational Equity and Children's Rights

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Abstract: This article introduces the special issue, which explores and analyses the impact of the development, distribution, and use of digital platforms in educational contexts. Organised in three

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sections for a comprehensive understanding, the first part outlines the concerns that motivated the guest editors, presenting the conceptual and social framework, historical and current, and focusing on the debate about equity and digital inclusion in education, in a context dominated by large technological corporations. The second section details the eight articles, distributed along two axes: theoretical review and empirical. Finally, the third part synthesises considerations derived from the materials presented, with contributions from diverse geographies and traditions. This collection highlights the tension between digital innovation and social inclusion in education, underlining the need for initiatives that favour the use of digital platforms focused on data governance by educational communities, the protection of users' privacy and diversity of access to information, and alternatives towards education equity and children's rights.

Keywords: digital platforms; digital equity; technology corporations; digital education; children's rights

Plataformas digitais educativas y escolarización: Nuevos retos y alternativas hacia la equidad educativa y los derechos de la infancia

Resumen: Este artículo introduce el presente número especial, que explora y analiza el impacto del desarrollo, la distribución y el uso de plataformas digitales en contextos educativos. Para una comprensión global, el artículo se ha organizado en tres secciones. La primera parte esboza las preocupaciones que motivaron a los editores invitados, presentando el marco conceptual, social, histórico y actual, y poniendo el foco en el actual debate sobre la equidad y la inclusión digital en educación, en un contexto dominado por las grandes corporaciones tecnológicas. La segunda sección describe los ocho artículos, los cuales están distribuidos en dos ejes: revisión teórica y empírica. Por último, la tercera parte sintetiza las consideraciones derivadas de las contribuciones incluidas, las cuales integran aportaciones de diversas geografías y tradiciones. Esta colección pone de manifiesto la tensión entre innovación digital e inclusión social en educación, subrayando la necesidad de promover iniciativas que favorezcan el uso de plataformas digitales centradas en la gobernanza de los datos por parte de las comunidades educativas, la protección de la privacidad de los usuarios y la diversidad de acceso a la información, y alternativas hacia la equidad educativa y los derechos de la infancia.

Palabras clave: plataformas digitales; equidad digital; corporaciones tecnológicas; educación digital; derechos de la infancia

Plataformas digitais de educação e escolarização: Novos desafios e alternativas para a equidade na educação e os direitos das crianças

Resumo: Este artigo introduz o número especial, que explora e analisa o impacto do desenvolvimento, distribuição e utilização de plataformas digitais em contextos educativos. Organizado em três secções para uma compreensão abrangente, a primeira parte delinea as preocupações que motivaram os editores convidados, apresentando o enquadramento concetual e social, histórico e atual, e centrando-se no debate sobre equidade e inclusão digital na educação, num contexto dominado pelas grandes corporações tecnológicas. A segunda parte detalha os oito artigos, distribuídos em dois eixos: revisão teórica e empírica. Finalmente, a terceira parte sintetiza considerações derivadas dos materiais apresentados, com contribuições de diversas geografias e tradições. Esta coletânea evidencia a tensão entre inovação digital e inclusão social na educação, sublinhando a necessidade de iniciativas que favoreçam o uso de plataformas digitais centradas na governação dos dados pelas comunidades educativas, na proteção da privacidade dos utilizadores e na diversidade de acesso à informação, e em alternativas para a equidade educativa e os direitos das crianças.

Palavras-chave: plataformas digitais; equidade digital; empresas de tecnologia; educação digital; direitos da criança

Digital Education Platforms and Schooling: New Challenges and Alternatives for Educational Equity and Children's Rights

The presentation of this special issue is organised in three sections, which seek to provide a common framework for understanding the potential impact of the development, distribution and use of digital platforms in educational contexts. To this end, the first part presents the conceptual and social framework in which the work is framed, emphasizing the current debate on equity and digital inclusion in a context of consolidated predominance and influence of large technological corporations on the design of educational systems. The second part describes the two thematic axes—a theoretical review axis and an empirical axis—that organise the collection and briefly presents each of the eight articles that comprise it. Finally, in the third part, we point out some considerations that we have been able to extract from the reading of the theoretical and empirical material presented here, composed of relevant voices from different geographies and traditions.

A primary contribution of the papers included in this special issue is that, in addition to being based on solid theoretical frameworks, they address and analyse theoretically and empirically social problems in Australia, Spain, Argentina, Mexico, Italy, and Chile, demonstrating the cross-cutting nature of the phenomenon addressed in this special issue. Thus, this special issue makes it possible to establish some connections between continents and to make visible how education has been and continues to be a territory of tensions between digital innovation and social inclusion.

The Accelerated Digitisation of Contemporary Education Systems: The Enactment of Digital Commercial Platforms in the Education Sector

The explosion of the COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point in the evolution of contemporary education systems. Although it is true that digital technologies had already been present in a large number of education systems for several decades, the pandemic context drastically accelerated their massive incorporation into teaching-learning processes due to the confinement measures implemented in a large number of countries. In this scenario, digital technologies allowed the continuity of remote and hybrid teaching-learning processes. These circumstances made it possible to glimpse some of the potential of digital platforms and technologies in the face of emerging challenges generated by new global crises.

However, the intensification of digitalisation processes in education systems also raises new questions such as: How has the use of commercial digital educational platforms impacted school cultures and children's rights; how and to what extent do these commercial platforms condition the teaching-learning process; what are the effects of the introduction of commercial digital educational platforms on children's rights; what are the potentialities and limitations of these digital platforms for improving educational opportunities for young people and adolescents; and what are the potentialities and limitations of digital platforms for improving educational opportunities for young people and adolescents; what are the effects of the introduction of commercial digital educational platforms on children's rights; what are the potentials and limitations of these digital platforms for improving the educational opportunities of young people and adolescents; what are the consequences of the use of commercial digital educational platforms on the governance of educational systems and (public) schools what are the consequences of the use of commercial digital

educational platforms on the governance of educational systems and (public) schools? Undoubtedly, these (and other) questions are key for current and future educational research in the post-pandemic context.

Post-pandemic education systems are characterised by the consolidation of new and expanding digital infrastructures in public education systems (Mann et al. 2021; Williamson & Hogan, 2020) and by the growing influence of BigTech and other private actors in educational governance (Cone et al., 2022; Saura et al., 2023). In the recent crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, these actors led a global techno-solutionist response (Saura et al., 2023) and, at the same time, demonstrated a strong capacity to generate digital innovation and deliver it rapidly to schools (Sancho et al., 2020). Moreover, in some cases, public administrations themselves have opted to adopt a subsidiary role in the provision of digital technologies, thus favouring the influence of private actors (Parcerisa et al. 2022; also see Jacovkis et al. in this issue). Digital technologies also contribute to a wider, large-scale process of datification of school systems (and social life in general). As Raffaghelli (2020) points out:

Digitised data has entered our lives on a massive scale in the last ten years. Beyond the Internet in the age of the information society, we are witnessing the emergence of a “datified” society, where vast amounts of digital data, the DNA of information, are driving new social practices. (p. 179)

According to Zubbof (2019), digital technologies play a crucial role in the development of a new surveillance capitalism that allows dominant social groups to design, control, store, and manage information collected from citizens through the use of platforms. In the particular case of school systems, the recontextualisation of the digitised society entails instantaneous and massive data collection processes, along with the implementation of algorithms and digital tools for decision-making.

The contemporary phenomenon of the digitised society cannot be understood in isolation and without emphasising other social processes such as platformisation. Platformisation of education refers to a social phenomenon linked to the introduction and widespread use of digital platforms (which may be developed by BigTech or other public or private providers) in education systems. The concept of a digital platform refers to “(re-)programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalised interactions among end-users and complementors, organised through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetisation, and circulation of data” (Poell et al., 2019, p. 3).

In the education sector, the widespread use of digital platforms favours the emergence of new forms of governance and the emergence of new bio-datified subjects (Williamson, 2016, 2020; Williamson & Hogan, 2020). The platformisation of education can facilitate the extraction, processing, and massive storage of data by BigTech. In a context of nascent regulatory development in multiple countries and supranational spaces, this brings new questions and challenges related to data protection and student privacy (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). However, while it is true that the penetration of BigTech in schools through their platforms has been massive and predominant, there are also alternative initiatives to the management of large technological corporations, which defend the use of certain digital platforms based on the following principles: (1) favouring the governance of the data generated by the educational community in the educational centres themselves, (2) focusing on the protection of users’ privacy, and (3) defending the diversity of access to information and content (Selwyn, 2021).

In short, the platformisation and datification of education are rapidly transforming teaching-learning processes and generating new challenges in dimensions such as school justice, privacy,

equity, and the right to education (Mann et al., 2021; Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021; Stoilova et al., 2020). The following section presents the structure of this special issue and the content of the contributions it incorporates, which delve into these and other dimensions of particular relevance for understanding the transformations experienced by contemporary education systems in the context of the digital society.

Presentation of Articles

For the initial call for papers (first phase), 24 contributions were received from different continents, regions, and intellectual and political traditions. In the second phase, after peer review, 8 of these contributions were selected and subsequently categorised into two main thematic strands: theoretical review works and empirical works. This organisation facilitates a more structured and detailed understanding of the issues, encompassing both theoretical analyses and insights from empirical research conducted in a range of geographical contexts (Australia, Spain, Argentina, Mexico, Italy, and Chile).

In the theoretical review section, we find two articles by leading global figures in the field of digital inclusion in educational contexts. These proposals offer a comprehensive theoretical analysis, aimed at generating innovative proposals for the formulation of educational agendas and policies. They focus on how digital platforms can be used in an effective and reflexive way in the educational sphere, thus contributing to the improvement of pedagogical practices.

In “The Critical Study of Digital Platforms and Infrastructures: Current Issues and New Agendas for Education Technology Research,” Carlo Perrotta and Luci Pangrazio analyse how platforms have become an infrastructure in education and the implications this has for educational processes. This review article also highlights the importance of further empirical and theoretical research, outlining a research agenda for critical studies on platforms in education. In the second theoretical review, “Educational Digital Platforms and Formative Justice,” Juan Sosa-Alonso, Anabel Bethencourt, Dagoberto Castellanos and Maneul Area-Moreira reflect on the possibilities offered by digital educational platforms to guarantee not only distributive justice (equity) but, above all, formative justice.

The empirical section consists of six research papers. These papers are dedicated to examining specific cases and direct experiences related to the impact of the use of digital platforms in school environments. They provide valuable insights into the practical application of these technologies in education, illustrating their effects and challenges, and enrich the debate on technology integration in education with concrete and relevant evidence.

“Educational Platforms at School: Uses and Challenges in the Post-Pandemic” by Patricia Ferrante and Alejo González López Ledesma is an ethnographic empirical study discussing the place of digital technologies in education and the impacts that the uses of commercial digital platforms have on Argentinean schools. Next, the contribution by Judith Jacovkis, Lluís Parcerisa, Diego Calderón-Garrido and Moreno-González, “Platforms and Digitisation of Public Education: Exploring their Adoption in Catalonia” empirically analyses the process of adoption of digitisation education policies, showing the limitations of the process of platformisation of education and the disconnection between technological architecture and pedagogy.

“Tensions in the Discourses of Schools, Public Administration and Big-Tech regarding the Use of Commercial Digital Platforms in the Catalan Education System” by Gustavo Herrera, Pablo Rivera-Vargas, Belén Massó-Guijarro and Sònia Folguera-Álvarez presents a mixed study carried out in Catalonia (Spain). This study raises the tensions in the discourses between different relevant educational actors and highlights the need for greater involvement by the public administration to ensure the safe use of digital platforms in schools while protecting children’s rights.

The main objective of “Digital Leap in the New Mexican School since the Pandemic Lockdown” by Cecilia Peraza and Mauro Jarquín was to identify, from the actors' perspective, some of the effects of BigTech corporations in Mexico and the expansion of digital capitalism. In “Pedagogical Documentation in the Era of Digital Platforms: Early Childhood Educators' Professionalism in a Dilemma”, Emilia Restiglian, Juliana Raffaghelli, Monica Gottardo and Paola Zoroaster show the need to deepen the professional development requirements of early childhood educators in Italy, in the context of an increasingly data-driven post-digital society. Finally, in “Normative Becoming in the Digital Sphere: WhatsApp Parents' Groups in Chilean Education,” Camila Moyano, Ismael Tabilo, María Vera-Muñoz and Samanta Alarcón analyse how stereotypes, emotions, and collective norms are mediated in the participation of families in WhatsApp groups in schools in Chile.

Final Words

This special issue has brought together a set of significant contributions that combine theoretical reviews and empirical studies from various disciplines and methodological approaches. These articles offer an up-to-date and in-depth perspective on the dynamics and challenges presented by commercial digital platforms in educational contexts. In this sense, the articles analyse in detail the impact of these technologies on school cultures, the management of education systems—with an emphasis on the public sector—and on children's rights. In addition, these studies reveal how these platforms can influence the teaching-learning process and the development of educational opportunities for young people and adolescents. They also highlight the impact of the intensive use of these platforms on the daily life of schools and the associated concerns expressed by teachers, families and young people.

In summary, this special issue set out to enrich knowledge about the use of digital education platforms in the global education environment, focusing on how they affect key issues such as teaching, learning, equity, privacy, digital identity, school communities, and children's rights. It is up to the reader to judge whether or not these intentions have been realised.

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