
Special Issue Editorial:

Digital Inclusion and Digital Divide in Education Revealed by the Global Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: The global pandemic has brought about fundamental changes in education. The abrupt closing of schools has disrupted the teaching and learning processes and presented challenges for schools worldwide. This Special Issue explores “digital inclusion” through the use of technology-facilitated learning platforms and modalities within the multicultural environment of schooling. It especially gives attention to cases that highlight the responses of parents, teachers, administrators, and students in countries that have the digital infrastructure and technological advancement and in those that do not in order to question the “digital divide” and the challenges and implications that this disparity brings to education.

KEYWORDS: Digital divide, digital inclusion, online education, digital literacy, global pandemic

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Since the advent of personal computers and the world wide web in the 1980s, using information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance learning experiences and teaching outcomes has been integral in schools that have taken leadership in advancing education and innovation in a digital age characterized by free transfer of knowledge and quick sharing of information. These schools have built a digitally-inclusive educational landscape where learning can take place from a distant or remote location and through online or digital and blended or hybrid platforms. As the world becomes rapidly digitized, the

use of ICT in education has become an imperative and digital literacy a demand of the 21st century. However, innovative applications and integration of ICT in education have been skewed towards the developed and highly industrialized economies; only those that have the capacity and resources have lived this reality.

After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) a global pandemic in March 2020, schools all over the world were mandated to go online and embrace remote teaching and learning processes regardless of capacity, resources, preparation, and readiness. The health implications and government mandates have imposed fundamental changes in educational settings, greatly accelerating virtual learning worldwide. While it may no longer be “scary” (Scully et al., 2021) for some schools, the implementation of online classes has placed most schools in an “emergency” situation because of problems related to pedagogical practices, digital competence, and school infrastructure, including availability and connectivity issues of ICT resources and other digital educational technologies.

The abrupt closing and delayed opening of schools have undoubtedly disrupted learning and limited education opportunities for students. Some have fallen behind in curricular contents while others have completely dropped out of school. As for teachers, the mandatory distance or remote learning has forced them to assess and question their digital skills and digital literacy. For school practitioners and scholars, the effect of the global pandemic on education has reignited and intensified debates on the digital divide in education.

Recognizing the lack of digital inclusion, the increase in digital inequity, and the grim global landscape of online education, the *International Journal of Multicultural Education (IJME)* and three Guest Editors affiliated with higher education institutions in the US and Korea have partnered to ask and find answers to several questions that became the focus and direction of this Special Issue. What are the implications of online modalities of learning to teacher training, curriculum design, school certification, student assessment, and other aspects of education? How does online learning affect the academic and socio-cultural landscape of the classroom? What are alternative ways in which ICT and digital literacy can be used to promote education, social justice, and equity? What have school administrators and teachers done to minimize the learning disruption and mitigate the academic problems resulting from digital illiteracy and digital divide? What are some pressing issues about justice and equity relevant to the digital divide and how might these be addressed to promote educational equity and access for all?

As a result, this Special Issue brings together seven interesting papers investigating the digital divide and other challenges and implications that this disparity brings to education. These studies highlight the practical responses of schools and classrooms in countries that have the digital infrastructure and technological advancement and in those that do not have the technological availability and Internet connectivity needed in online learning platforms and modalities within a multicultural or diverse schooling environment. Of the seven, three studies focus on pedagogies, two on immigrant parents, and two deal with

school administrators, teachers, and students. In terms of context, most studies are situated in the US while others are in Canada, Pakistan, and Israel. The authors of these scholarly works have chosen a variety of research methods (e.g., narrative inquiry, comparative case study, etc.) and theoretical frameworks (e.g., digital critical race praxis, digital literacy, critical literacy, etc.).

Pedagogies in Virtual Learning

To introduce one of the three pedagogically-inclined studies, the authors, Leticia Rojas and Daniel D. Liou, investigate ways to improve social justice training online in a self-paced teacher certification program at a large non-profit multiple campus university. The self-study describes digital critical race praxis and self-narrativization as methodologies for evaluating various practices to help new teachers examine and transform their racialized expectations of all students. This study suggests several practices, including critical dialogue and journaling, to help new teachers increase their understanding of students of color and challenge negative expectations that all too often limit educational opportunities. Given the ongoing pandemic, the authors recommend making these practices available virtually and using online pedagogy as a tool to prepare pre-service teachers for equity and social justice.

Meanwhile, in Crystal Shelby-Caffey's paper, a literacy methods course is used as an avenue for pre-service teachers to develop critical consciousness and confront injustice using ICT in the classroom. The author explains that the course provides pre-service teachers with a foundation for literacy teaching and also raises their "awareness and competency in culturally responsive teaching and culturally sustaining practices." In this study, she calls for educators to "move beyond literacy discussions centered on apple pies, popsicles, and patriotism (the American niceties of texts)" and focus on creating learning contexts that sensitize pre-service teachers to matters of diversity, race, power, and privilege. She also critically explores how digital divide meets racial divide, especially in the midst of the pandemic and in the ongoing political and racial tensions in the US. Interestingly, however, the work of Susan G. Porter, Kai Greene, and M. C. Kate Esposito explores the disproportionate impact of distance learning and school closures during the pandemic on the legal rights and quality instruction for special education students and their families. The authors highlight that special education students experienced reduced access to inclusive education when schools switched to virtual learning due to limited home access to the Internet. The authors present an emergent pedagogical framework that informs and guides instruction for special education students in virtual learning environments.

Immigrant Parents and Online Schooling

In terms of immigrant parents, Emma Chen's study shows how Chinese immigrant families in Canada coped with their children during the pandemic using a narrative inquiry approach. Four emergent themes were drawn from the narratives of the parents, including communication barriers, concerns on language development, children's wellbeing, and support from home language and community. One finding suggests that more research should examine the manner in which immigrant parents' knowledge informs education and classroom instruction. In another study by Jie Y. Park, Laurie Ross, and Deisy Rodriguez Ledezma, the authors examine the manner in which Latina mothers engage in their children's remote classroom instruction in the US. Drawing from digital literacy and *mujerista* theory, the authors analyzed group data and found that Latina mothers struggled with understanding online platforms but also felt minimal support from an educational system that was not responsive to economic constraints and stressors faced by families. The authors illuminate mother-child pedagogies that emerged during the pandemic.

Comparative Voices of Teachers, Administrators, and Students

The last two studies have taken a comparative approach to reveal the experiences of teachers, administrators, and students. Using metaphors as a unique research tool, Tali Hayosh and Ilana Paul Binyamin, in their study, comparatively explore the teaching experiences and perceptions of Jewish and Arab teachers in Israel during the time of the pandemic. The authors reveal that Jewish and Arab teachers are members of the majority and minority groups in the country and that the binaries of individualism and collectivism, tradition and modernity are two education systems in Israel that maintain separation. The authors strongly argue that the "differences in Jewish and Arab teachers' perceptions do not merely derive from cultural differences... [they] relate to the existent inequality in Israeli society and significant gaps in allocating materials and available resources." Finally, in another comparative study, Sunaina Asher looks into the reactions of students, faculty, and administrators to the challenges posed by the pandemic at two very diverse colleges in the US and Pakistan. The comparative case study enables the author to document key similarities and differences between those realities and reactions. Interestingly, the author finds a common lack of teacher preparedness for moving online in both settings. The differences between countries were significant, with much less technology, connectivity, and infrastructure in Pakistan, not to mention the cultural factors that severely undermined the move to online teaching. However, the pandemic has provided the backdrop for educators in both situations to improve online skills and attitudes for the future. Recommendations include increased training and technology support, and further study and knowledge sharing.

Conclusion

Overall, the collection of seven Special Issue papers is a result of rigorous qualitative investigations through which we critically understand the impact of the global pandemic on education and the need for educators to assess and capitalize on digital learning technologies, engage and educate parents, train pre-service teachers, and prepare students—including those with special needs—to live and navigate the 21st century with digital literacy, critical thinking, and independent information processing.

In *Rethinking Online Education*, Mitsikopoulou (2013) recommended a focus on critical pedagogy to raise students' awareness and enable them to construct counterhegemonic discourses, ideologies, and identities. In addition, self-efficacy, cultural aspects, and trust are critical factors that affect the e-learning system usage of students in education (Almaiah et al., 2020). Conclusively, in the digital age, one important work of teachers is to guide students in the construction and distillation process of knowledge (Milakovich & Wise, 2019) using digital equity strategies. If there is a silver lining to this global COVID-19 pandemic, it is the opportunity to discover and experience augmented, virtual, and mixed realities (Donally, 2018) of learning in the ways students and teachers interact with the digital world. This unprecedented crisis also opens doors for building collaborations among policymakers, researchers, educators, and parents to interrogate inequities in the system and achieve breakthrough learning and transformations in education.

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