

Executive
Summary

Governance of digitalization of education:

reflections from Latin America and the Caribbean





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In October 2023, Brazilian activists and researchers revealed that 1,700 public schools in Paraná, Brazil, implemented facial biometrics systems with artificial intelligence (AI) to monitor student behaviours and their emotions. The implementation, justified by the department government, was based on a World Bank study which indicated that 36% of teaching time was spent on administrative tasks, such as roll call. Eliminating this “waste of time” task, facial biometrics also sought to improve school efficiency and detect facial expressions to prevent violence and evaluate content comprehension.

This case exemplifies what Morozov (2018) defines as “technological solutionism”: the belief that technology can solve all kind of social problems, and that it is always oriented towards humanity progress. However, this approach omits the fact that technologies are sociotechnical systems, not neutral, which can (re)produce social biases, such as race, gender and other discrimination, in addition to causing associated risks, such as surveillance, commodification of personal data, and privatization of education.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms of large technology companies were adopted in education, in a massive way, bringing new challenges especially for public education in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The business model of corporations such as Google and Microsoft is based on the exploitation of data. These companies attract users by offering free of charge products and then using their data for profit and with little transparency. This strategy produces the phenomenon of “platformization of education” which extensively collects personal data and information on educational behaviours, often without the clear consent of students, families, and teachers.

This report explores the complexities of governance in the context of digitalization of education, highlighting the importance of revisiting and better understanding this concept considering the increase in *multistakeholder* alliances, that is, spaces that integrate governments, society and companies, supposedly to define public policies, collaborate and innovate.





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DICT Policies in LAC education: brief history and mainstream discourses



Since the 1980s, Digital Information and Communication Technologies (DICT) policies in education in LAC have been influenced by international organizations such as the World Bank, which promoted education as an essential sector to train workers according to market demands.

The first official policies for the installation of computer laboratories in education were based on practices promoted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the United States of America, such as the LOGO programming language and later the *One Laptop per Child* (OLPC) project. This project consisted in the distribution of portable microcomputers for individual use, generating local initiatives monitored by external agents.

During the 1990s, the idea of “knowledge economy” and “information society” became popular. The internet catalysed these concepts, promising to democratize knowledge previously limited to certain groups. However, this ideal has been compromised by the dominance of proprietary social media platforms that control much of global communication.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, under the argument that it was necessary to avoid ruptures in educational trajectories, private technologies of large corporations have spread rapidly in public education, promoting processes of privatization of digital education infrastructure.

Although access to digital literacy and information are basic rights in the 21st century, it is urgent to understand the risks that these technologies can pose to diversity, inclusion, academic freedom, privacy, among others, promoting a qualified and inclusive debate to find ways to minimize them.





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Contemporary digital context



Big tech corporations benefited from the global financial crisis of 2008, investing in key infrastructures such as data centres and high-speed cables. These corporations have reconfigured their technologies into digital platforms to maximize data capture. Meanwhile, international organizations such as the World Bank and OCDE have promoted the expansion of *big techs* into previously inaccessible territories.

During the pandemic, nearly half of school-age children and adolescents in LAC did not have internet access at home. Most schools lacked adequate internet connection as well as necessary equipment. To quickly overcome these shortcomings, many initiatives to promote virtual classroom spaces were implemented by Google and Microsoft through partnerships with governments.

The recent advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and other digital technologies has significantly transformed education. This confluence made the distinction between “educational” and “non-educational” technologies obsolete, due to the interoperability and integration fostered by AI. Likewise, the influence of technology corporations, especially based in the Global North, on education policies have increased.

Such process has unveiled a new challenge for the defence of the right to education, “digital colonialism.” Defined by South African author Kwet (2021) and Brazilian researchers Siñani & Accorssi (2023), this concept is characterized by the control of technology corporations over infrastructure, knowledge and private data to maintain populations in the Global South permanently dependent. The dependence is also manifested in the educational field, since students and teachers often use devices and applications initially provided free of charge by these companies, which are subsequently charged so as not to be taken away from users.





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Digital education and the issue of governance



The influence of non-state actors, including private and philanthropic sectors in education, and especially on issues related to the digitization of education, poses significant challenges in terms of governance.

In recent years, the idea of *multistakeholderism* has become an appealing discourse, understood as a collaborative mechanism in which actors from public sector, civil society and private sector work together to propose solutions to public problems. Although presented as inclusive, this model often favours large corporations that dominate decision-making and policy implementation.

Multistakeholderism, originally associated with corporate governance, is now used as a strategy to broaden the participation of diverse actors in decision-making in educational policies, processes and projects. However, this model has shown deficiencies, especially due to conflicts of interest, an imbalance of power among those who participate in these spaces, and lack of transparency in the selection of actors and definition of educational political agendas.

Thus, it is urgent that the governance of digital education addresses equity, data protection and sustainability, ensuring that digital technologies respect human rights and promote diversity and equality.





Final considerations and recommendations

1

Digitization of education in LAC presents opportunities and risks. It is essential that education policies integrate a critical and reflective view on the use of ICTs, ensuring that technological implementation does not compromise the rights of students or promote the privatization of education.

2

As it has been mostly implemented, digital technology tends to favour an individualized approach to education, reducing opportunities for socialization and learning in real-life scenarios. Therefore, digital transformation in education must be complementary and not replace face-to-face education. It must be inclusive, considering the specific needs of each local context and guaranteeing a full realization of the human right to education for all.

3

Digital technologies must be seen not only as tools, but as sociotechnical systems that involve changing realities. As ICTs are constantly evolving and generating changes in everyday life, it is essential that education considers learning about ICTs, especially AI. Understanding how contemporary technologies work and collectively deciding which technologies can enter the realm of education minimizes risks such as invasion of privacy, commodification of data, and privatization of public education.

4

Connecting the school is no longer just about providing internet access or using a digital tool in the classroom, it is necessary to think about the whole ecosystem. Physical infrastructure, such as cables, server networks, routers, and backups are crucial because, even if open or free software platforms are adopted, it is necessary to know where this infrastructure will be hosted. The technology used may be open-source, but still rely on physical infrastructures linked to proprietary hardware. On the other hand, the ecosystem for digitizing education includes data security and policies that address the educational objectives to be achieved with the support of ICTs. It also implies environmental impacts, which must be considered when defining which technologies to adopt.

5

Public authorities must adopt a new way of conceiving public education facing the challenge of digitisation. The predominance of few technology companies in digital infrastructure of education significantly affects educational practice, from the curriculum to assessments, compromising educational sovereignty. In this context, it is essential to strengthen the role of the State as a regulator of the use of technologies in education.

6

Leadership, democratic management and collaboration can be strategies for any hiring and/or adoption of technology company products to be carefully thought out and discussed. A critical and reflective approach is essential, with strong participation of educational communities, in addition to interconnecting the realization of the right to education with the realization of digital, environmental and labour rights.

7

Multistakeholder partnerships must be transparent, inclusive and equitable, prioritizing the protection of digital sovereignty and human rights. The lack of transparency about which companies participate in these alliances and under what criteria, can lead to an overrepresentation of private interests, which can silence or diminish the voices of teachers, students and other fundamental educational actors. This imbalance facilitates the signing of opaque contracts between private actors and states, and promotes the adoption of technologies whose educational impact has not been adequately evaluated, leading to a waste of public resources. Therefore, a broad and open debate on these spaces is urgent.





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Realisation

Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education (CLADE)

CLADE's study coordination

Laura Giannecchini and Nelsy Lizarazo

Research and writing

Priscila Gonsales

Critical contributions

Laura Giannecchini, Israel Coelho and Nelsy Lizarazo

Final editing and proofreading

Esteban López

Translation

Israel Coelho and Pía Figueroa

Layout and illustrations

Manthra

Images

www.freepik.es

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CLADE Steering Committee

Agenda Ciudadana para la Educación en Costa Rica
 Campaña Argentina por el Derecho a la Educación
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CLADE's Office

Av. Prof. Alfonso Bovero, 430, cj. 02, Perdizes, São Paulo - SP - CEP 01254-000, Brazil
 Phone: 55 11 3853-7900
 E-mail: clade@redclade.org
www.redclade.org

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