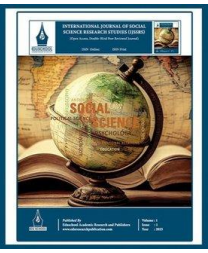
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH STUDIES (IJSSRS)
(Open Access, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Journal)
ISSN Online: 3108-1932 ISSN Print: 3139-4566



The Digital Divide in Education: Examining Technology Access, Digital Literacy, and Educational Equity in the Post-Pandemic Era

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Article information

Received:6th November 2025
Received in revised form:10th December 2025
Accepted:11th January 2025
Available online:8th February 2026

Volume:2
Issue:1
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63090/IJSSRS/3108.1932.0009

Abstract

Access to technology in education is more critical than ever, yet significant disparities persist that leave many students without the necessary tools for academic success. This study examines the persistent digital divide in education, its evolution from simple access gaps to more complex inequalities in usage and outcomes, and the implications for educational equity. Drawing upon research from 2020 to 2025, including national surveys, policy analyses, and international comparative data, this analysis reveals that while nearly all (96%) high school students now report having access to a smartphone at home and 87% have access to a laptop computer, significant disparities remain across income levels and racial/ethnic groups. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these disparities by making remote learning necessary while revealing stark differences in digital readiness. The U.S. Department of Education's 2024 National Educational Technology Plan identifies three distinct digital divides: the access divide concerning device and internet availability, the use divide regarding how students engage with technology, and a newly identified design divide related to teacher preparation for designing technology-enhanced learning experiences. Research indicates that students from higher-income families are significantly more likely to have home access to computing devices and express higher confidence in using technology for learning. These findings have significant implications for policymakers, educators, and educational technology developers seeking to ensure equitable access to quality education in an increasingly digital world.

Keywords:- Digital Divide, Educational Equity, Technology Access, Digital Literacy, Online Learning, Educational Technology, Socioeconomic Inequality, COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

Access to technology in education is more critical than ever, yet a significant gap persists, leaving many students without the necessary tools for academic success. This disparity, often termed the "educational digital divide," has far-reaching implications, not only affecting individual students but also contributing to broader societal inequalities (Pierce and Cleary 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these issues, making remote learning a necessity and starkly revealing disparities in access to technology that had long existed but received insufficient attention.

The concept of the digital divide has evolved significantly since it was first articulated. Earlier studies primarily conceptualized the digital divide in terms of access, commonly referred to as the "first-level divide." However, subsequent research expanded this notion to include the "second-level divide" concerning differences

in skills and usage, and the "third-level divide" focusing on outcomes or benefits derived from technology use (Liu et al. 2020; Yang and Ma 2024). This progression reflects a broader recognition that the digital divide is not only technological but also social in nature, shaped by factors such as income, gender, education level, and geography.

The U.S. Department of Education developed and released the 2024 National Educational Technology Plan (NETP) with a call to action to close the digital access, design, and use divides. This plan identifies the digital design divide as a third dimension that builds upon existing divides and creates greater inequities. The digital design divide focuses on the inequitable access to high-quality professional learning and support provided to educators to help them design high-quality learning experiences that utilize educational technology appropriately.

This research article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the digital divide in education by examining current patterns of technology access and use, identifying factors that contribute to digital inequalities, exploring the impacts on educational outcomes, and reviewing policy responses and interventions. The study addresses several key questions:

- What is the current state of the digital divide in education?
- How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect digital inequalities?
- What factors contribute to disparities in technology access and use?
- And what approaches show promise for closing digital divides?

Literature Review

Evolution of the Digital Divide Concept

The discussion on digital inequality has broadened significantly since the term "digital divide" was first popularized in the 1990s. Scholars have increasingly examined how government initiatives, school leadership, and community partnerships can mitigate digital disparities through targeted programs, teacher training, and infrastructure development (Kuo-Hsun et al. 2018; Yersel et al. 2023). Research indicates that higher national income and greater political freedom are associated with increased investment in research, development, and education, which in turn helps narrow digital divides.

A bibliometric analysis by Hashim and Radzil (2025) investigating research trends in the digital divide in education found a significant increase in publications since 2016, with pronounced growth following the COVID-19 pandemic. This reflects heightened concern for digital education disparities. The analysis also traced changes in research themes, with growing focus on socio-cultural, gender, and policy-related dimensions of digital inequality. The co-citation network indicates an interconnected research landscape with leading researchers influencing discussions on digital inclusion and equity.

The Three Digital Divides

The 2024 National Educational Technology Plan provides a useful framework for understanding the multidimensional nature of digital inequality in education. The digital access divide refers to inequities in access to devices, reliable high-speed internet, and other technological infrastructure necessary for digital learning. As of March 2024, roughly 24 million Americans lacked access to fixed broadband connectivity, many of whom live in rural, Tribal, and/or low-income communities (Center for American Progress 2024). A study from Pew Research Center in 2024 found that only 57% of households with income less than $30,000 subscribed to broadband internet compared to 76% in the next highest income bracket.

The digital use divide refers to the inequitable implementation in how students use technology in the classroom. For example, some students may use technology actively in their learning, while others may use educational technology only to passively complete assignments. Students from marginalized communities often don't have the chance to engage with technology in meaningful ways, being limited to using technology for digital worksheets, watching videos, or emailing teachers rather than developing apps, creating projects, or engaging in other active learning experiences.

The digital design divide, newly emphasized in the 2024 NETP, focuses on the inequitable access to high-quality professional learning and support provided to educators. In systems where the average teacher can access more than 2,000 digital tools, training on basic functionality is insufficient. Closing the design divide moves teachers beyond formulaic use of digital tools and allows them to actively design learning experiences for all students within a complex ecosystem of resources. No matter how great the access to internet, devices, and curriculum resources, the digital use divide cannot be closed until school leaders address the digital design divide.

Socioeconomic and Demographic Disparities

Research consistently documents that technology access varies significantly across socioeconomic groups. According to a 2024 ACT study, students from higher-income families were significantly more likely than those from lower-income families to report having home access to desktop computers, laptop computers, tablets, and smartphones. While gains across all income groups indicate that more students are now connected, disparities in access to technology remain significant. Students from higher-income families also expressed higher confidence in using technology and were more likely to trust information they find online.

Racial and ethnic disparities also persist. The pandemic spurred efforts to close longstanding gaps in digital access that affect African American, Latino, and lower-income students, but challenges remain (PPIC 2025). Dial-up internet access, which is inadequate for most educational purposes, was more common among Black and Hispanic students (5% and 4%) than Asian and white students (3% and 2%) according to ACT research. A 2024 study from Stanford Center for Racial Justice found that underserved populations are more at risk of falling behind on new technologies including artificial intelligence.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology to synthesize existing research on the digital divide in education. The review followed established guidelines for educational research synthesis and incorporated studies using diverse methodologies including quantitative surveys, qualitative case studies, and policy analyses.

Search Strategy and Data Sources

Searches were conducted in ERIC, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar using terms including "digital divide," "educational technology," "technology access," "digital literacy," "educational equity," and "online learning." Government and organizational reports from the U.S. Department of Education, OECD, UNESCO, and research organizations such as Pew Research Center and ACT were also incorporated. The search was limited to studies published between 2020 and 2025 to capture the most current evidence, particularly regarding pandemic-related changes.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they examined technology access or use in educational settings, focused on K-12 or higher education populations, employed rigorous research methodologies, and were published in peer-reviewed journals or by recognized research organizations. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on non-educational technology use or lacked clear methodological descriptions.

Results

Current State of Technology Access

The review confirmed substantial improvements in basic technology access alongside persistent inequalities. According to ACT's 2024 research, nearly all (96%) high school students reported having access to a smartphone at home, and 87% had access to a laptop computer. These figures represent improvements from ACT's 2018 study. However, students from higher-income families remained significantly more likely to have access to multiple devices and reliable high-speed internet connections.

A concerning finding from the ACT study is that 70% of students expressed concern about having enough money to purchase the technology needed for college. This forward-looking worry suggests that even students who currently have adequate access may face barriers as they transition to higher education, potentially affecting college enrollment and success rates.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities by shifting education online and revealing stark differences in student preparedness for digital learning. Research by Pierce and Cleary (2024) found that children from households with lower income levels and less educated parents were less likely to have access to computers and internet, thereby widening the achievement gap during remote learning periods. The study employed a value chain approach to demonstrate that initial access gaps affect subsequent stages including educational content delivery and academic achievement.

The pandemic also highlighted inequities in how students used technology when they had access. Some students engaged in active, meaningful learning experiences while others were limited to passive consumption of content. These use gaps often followed the same socioeconomic patterns as access gaps, compounding disadvantages for students from lower-income backgrounds.

School-Level Factors

OECD data indicates that school capacity to enhance teaching and learning using digital devices is greater in socioeconomically advantaged schools than disadvantaged schools. On average across OECD countries, in 10 out of 11 indicators measured, students in advantaged schools were more likely to attend schools whose principals agreed that the school's capacity to use digital devices is sufficient. This finding suggests that even when individual students have similar access at home, school-level resources and capabilities create additional inequalities.

A 2025 report from the State Educational Technology Directors Association found that while state and district leaders have made significant progress in closing student access gaps to devices, internet, and other technology, these gains have not led to "meaningful improvements in teaching and learning." The report attributed this gap in part to a lack of sustained teacher professional development in helping students engage in deeper learning experiences through technology.

Policy Responses and Interventions

The review identified several policy approaches to addressing digital divides. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) set forth a $65 billion investment in broadband internet, largely to be used by states and territories to finance broadband deployment. The Biden-Harris administration's Internet For All initiative devoted funding and resources to ensuring that all Americans have broadband internet access. State and local initiatives have also expanded, with many districts providing devices to all students and establishing community Wi-Fi programs.

The 2024 NETP provides several key recommendations including establishing and maintaining a cabinet-level educational technology director to ensure wise and effective spending of educational technology funds; conducting regular needs assessments to ensure technology properly supports learning; leveraging public-private partnerships and community collaboration to bring broadband to under-connected areas; and integrating digital and media literacy curricula into academic standards.

Discussion

The findings of this review demonstrate that the digital divide in education remains a significant challenge despite substantial progress in expanding basic technology access. The evolution of the concept from a simple access gap to a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing access, use, and design divides reflects growing understanding of the complexity of ensuring equitable educational technology integration.

The persistence of socioeconomic and demographic disparities even as overall access improves suggests that addressing digital divides requires more than simply providing devices and internet connections. Students need not only access to technology but also skills to use it effectively, quality educational experiences designed around technology, and support systems that help them translate digital skills into academic and career success.

The identification of the digital design divide as a critical barrier highlights the importance of teacher preparation and professional development. In an era when teachers may have access to thousands of digital tools, knowing how to select and integrate appropriate technologies into meaningful learning experiences becomes essential. Without addressing this design gap, investments in devices and connectivity may not translate into improved educational outcomes.

The emergence of artificial intelligence in education presents both opportunities and risks for digital equity. AI-driven adaptive learning tools could potentially personalize education to meet diverse student needs, but research from the Stanford Center for Racial Justice warns that underserved populations are at risk of falling behind on new technologies. Ensuring that AI benefits all students will require proactive attention to equity concerns from the earliest stages of development and implementation.

Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of the digital divide in education reveals that while significant progress has been made in expanding basic technology access, substantial inequalities persist that threaten educational equity. The evolution from conceptualizing digital divides as simple access gaps to understanding them as multidimensional phenomena involving access, use, and design provides a more complete framework for addressing these challenges.

Key findings from this review include documentation that nearly all high school students now have access to smartphones, though significant disparities persist in access to computers and reliable internet, particularly across income levels; evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities by revealing and amplifying differences in digital readiness; recognition that closing access gaps alone is insufficient without also addressing how students use technology and how teachers design technology-enhanced learning experiences; and identification of promising policy approaches including infrastructure investments, professional development initiatives, and digital literacy curricula integration.

For policymakers, these findings suggest the need for continued investment in infrastructure alongside increased attention to teacher preparation and support. For educators, the research underscores the importance of designing technology-enhanced learning experiences that engage all students in active, meaningful learning rather than passive technology use. For educational technology developers, the findings highlight the importance of considering equity implications in product design and ensuring that new tools are accessible and beneficial for all students.

Future research should continue to examine how digital divides evolve as technology changes, the long-term impacts of pandemic-era disruptions on educational outcomes, and the effectiveness of various interventions for closing digital gaps. As technology becomes ever more central to education and economic opportunity, ensuring equitable access and use remains essential for achieving educational equity and social mobility.

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