

Dystopian Schools: young people imagine the future of schooling

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ABSTRACT – Dystopian Schools: young people imagine the future of schooling. This qualitative and interpretive study examines the school dystopias imagined by students from six Latin American countries, who envisioned through writing what the worst school of the future would be like. The findings were analyzed using grounded theory. The results indicate that the dystopian school of the future is one that divides, indoctrinates, and dehumanizes students. The analysis of the findings is presented through four analytical plots: inequality, power, dehumanization, and homogenization. The conclusions reveal that the worst school of the future embodies paradoxes, fears, and desires concerning both the present and the past, which are articulated through a discursive affinity about school across the region.

Keywords: Future. Youth. School. High School. Latin America.

RESUMEN – Escuelas Distópicas: jóvenes imaginan el futuro de la escolarización. Este estudio cualitativo e interpretativo muestra las distopías escolares de estudiantes de seis países latinoamericanos, que mediante la escritura imaginaron cómo sería la peor escuela del futuro. Las evidencias se analizaron a partir de procesos de codificación basados en la teoría fundamentada. Los resultados demuestran que la escuela distópica del futuro es aquella que divide, adoctrina y deshumaniza al estudiantado. El análisis de resultados se expone en cuatro tramas analíticas -desigualdad, poder, deshumanización y homogeneización-. Las conclusiones muestran que la peor escuela del futuro encierra paradojas, temores y deseos sobre el presente y el pasado, que se expresan mediante una afinidad discursiva sobre la escuela a lo largo de la región.

Palabras clave: Futuro. Jóvenes. Escuela. Educación media. América Latina.

Introduction

In a school located in the middle of the desert, the brightest minds of a declining humanity attend classes for “hours and hours, completely tied to a vertical steel board, where the only thing they can do is listen to what the ‘teacher’ [robot] on duty has to say, these lessons often promote the worship of machines, reducing humans to mere tools”.¹ Yet humans are still educated, since only they can create and innovate in art and science. In another imagined school of the future, within a totalitarian state, students are taught “exaggerated, biased ideologies” that run “against freedom of thought and debate”. Every gathering of young people is surveilled by cameras and digital devices. In this scenario, uniformity prevails: students learn in isolation, and personal identity is strictly prohibited. Meanwhile, in other possible future, socioeconomic inequalities become even more pronounced than they are today. There are schools for the wealthy and schools for the poor. The latter are marked by deteriorating infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, a lack of materials, widespread violence, and teachers described as “unprepared, [...] uninterested in teaching,” and stripped of authority. Unable to fulfill even its basic role of social discipline, such a school becomes the prelude to its “total closure.” No in all cases, but in this latest vision of the future it is the end of public education, though not necessarily of private schooling. As one student put it: “We mortals, that is, those of us in the lower classes, who do not have the exuberant amount of bitcoin to buy that [technological and educational] modification, have to live with our shortcomings”.

This article examines youth narratives about dystopian schools of the future. The research has three main objectives. The first is broad in scope: to study the ways in which high school students in Latin America imagine what schools will look like. This objective also seeks to connect young people’s conceptions of schooling with wider social processes, such as the impact of technology on school life and the homogenization of educational discourse across the Latin American region. The second objective is to analyze what young people dislike about schooling, as expressed in their writings on schools of the future. This goal is related to the practices, selection of knowledge, and pedagogical relationships that students today consider irrelevant or, in some cases, irritating and even repulsive. Finally, the third objective is to address Articles 12 and 13 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognize the right of children and young people to be heard and to express their opinions (Sosenski, 2016, p. 44). Beyond fulfilling our ethical commitment to horizontal research, this objective rests on the political conviction that transforming schools is impossible without considering the perspectives of an irreplaceable actor in the educational process: students (Plá; Ramírez Achoy; Bazán, 2025).

Likewise, this research explores how schools imagine their own future within the educational system, drawing on fictional and non-fictional texts, podcasts, and videos created by students in school settings. The teaching methodology on which the study was based—with its teachers, schedules, and assessments—was an international Latin

American exercise in which the future of schooling was both taught and learned, in school and for school. Thus, the worst school in the world, with its features of inequality, authoritarianism, dehumanization, and homogenization, is presented here as it was imagined by young people in their role as students. This locus of enunciation tends to resemble dystopian visions of school life, as if there were only one type of school, despite the countless particularities of each educational center. We have therefore found that Latin American students' hopes and fears about dystopian futures tend to converge. At the same time, these hopes reveal the reverse side of the "bad school": the image of a school adapted to each student—that is, a customized school. This article is about these fears and desires of students regarding the future of schooling.

To present the analysis and interpretation of the nefarious school futures imagined by young people in Latin America, we have organized the results into four analytical plots. Each of these is structured around aporetic relationships. The first addresses the antithetical relationship between schools of equality and schools of inequality. The second is defined by negative opposites: the authoritarian school and the undisciplined school. The third highlights a problem of inverse proportionality between the desire for abundant technology and its simultaneous threat to human nature. The fourth is paradoxical: everyone desires the same thing—a customized school that nonetheless fosters homogeneous subjectivation. In other words, the contemporary cultural trend that envisions a school tailored to each student emerges as a homogeneous tendency across the six countries in the study.

Analytical plots, in our view, are categories that allow us to focus on the ambiguous nature of our object of study while also presenting it in narrative form. This approach differs from the more common ways of examining the two major fields of research we bring together here: future studies in education and research on what we colloquially call the bad school.

In a nutshell, much of the research on the future of schools has focused on their didactic dimension. This line of inquiry examines teaching and learning processes in a time yet to come (Hicks, 2002; Inayatullah, 1998; Anguera and Santisteban, 2016), curriculum design (Hicks, 2002; Facer, 2011; Priyadharshini, 2021), future literacy (Vidgor, 2023), and the future of different school subjects (Menéndez et al., 2022), such as environmental education (Ochando; García; García, 2017), communication (Facer, 2019; Braun et al., 2024), history (Duque, González; Santisteban, 2023), and geography (Anderson, 2010; Pauw, 2015). This trend has been useful to us for instructional design and as a source of tools for data collection. However, we distance ourselves from it because of its tendency to prescribe a single possible future or to reduce its scope to what is considered appropriate or inappropriate in planning (Priyadharshini, 2019). Here, we do not seek to define what is right or wrong; rather, we inquire into students' desires and fears, as well as the meanings of the future through which the school defines

itself. Hence, we value both non-fictional and fictional narratives to distinguish discursive plots that give meaning to school life.

The other major line of research – the bad school – has immeasurable dimensions. In the 1960s, schools were condemned for reproducing social and cultural inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2009), for restricting freedom (Illich, 1971), and for going against the nature of children (Holt, 1974). More recently, research has focused on bad teachers (Georgakopoulos; Guerrero, 2010; Hosgorur, 2015), poor material conditions in schools (Miranda, 2018), and violence in schooling processes (Renick; Reich, 2021), among many other topics. Perhaps most notably, studies on educational quality and their attempts to “fix” educational systems have generated a vast body of research that essentially reaches the same conclusion: school does not work (Plá, 2018), and therefore sustainable futures for education must be created (Papa; Saiti, 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic has also generated research that brings together school futures and bad schools, now approached from the perspective of educational actors (Gidley; Inayatullah, 2022; Madalena; Nolasco, 2021). Although this body of research is indispensable for understanding failing schools, we distance ourselves from it. Our aim is not to correct the school itself, nor to correct students’ fears and desires, but rather to interpret the meanings of dystopian schooling in the contemporary world.

We have divided the article into two main sections. In the first, we describe the methodology and the theoretical and practical characteristics of the analytical plots. In the second, we expand on the analysis and interpretation of the students’ texts. We conclude with reflections that, we hope, will open up new questions.

Methodological and Theoretical Tools

Methodological notes

This research is qualitative, collaborative, instructional, non-extractive, and horizontal, establishing a dialogic relationship among researchers, teachers, and high school students from six Latin American countries. It relied on a convenience sample. Multiple qualitative research tools (Flick, 2007) were employed to collect data, including virtual ethnography, task forces, discussion groups, and field journals. The pedagogical approach, in turn, made it possible to implement activities that generated the primary sources for analysis, such as written narratives and various graphic and audiovisual representations. All instruments were jointly designed by teachers and researchers.

The methodology employed combines elements from various qualitative research approaches. Alongside pedagogical methods, we adopted a horizontal and non-extractive research perspective. In this regard, we followed the guidelines proposed by Corona Berkin (2020; Corona Berkin; Kaltmeier, 2012), who argues for the creation of collaborative networks in which the informant is also considered a researcher. Likewise, horizontal methods are understood as the collective production of knowledge that fosters dialogical forms for analyzing

and interpreting shared spaces (Corona Berkin; Kaltmeier, 2012). This horizontal methodological stance rejects the imposition of “correct names”—the products of public policies (economic, educational, scientific) that establish social hierarchies—and instead promotes the development of “proper names.” From this perspective, the only universal principle is the discursive equality of any speaker in relation to another (Rancière, apud Corona Berkin, 2020, p. 42). This stance aligns with the work of several decolonial scholars, such as Smith’s (1988) proposals for Indigenous methodologies, particularly storytelling, envisioning the future, and sharing what has been created (p. 145–161). The first enables the merging of place, past, present, and future through storytelling; the second imagines possible futures; and the third acknowledges the collective creation of knowledge. Nevertheless, these are approximations, since our study was conducted in non-Indigenous and formal schooling contexts, unlike Smith’s research.

The inquiry process was designed in stages. It began with a group seminar composed of high school social studies and literature teachers from six Latin American countries. During this workshop, participants agreed on the basic frameworks through which the student groups would collaborate. Two models were established: in the first, a teacher of one nationality worked with students from three different nationalities; in the second, each group included two international teachers and students from two countries. All teaching strategies and content were determined exclusively by the teachers. At the same time, students created networks connecting young people from different schools. Beyond envisioning the school of the future, students themselves decided on apocalyptic narratives, idealized scenarios, uses of AI, and presentation strategies across different formats. Based on the preferences of both students and teachers, the project generated science fiction stories and nonfiction essays. In this way, a story was told, a future imagined, and knowledge collectively produced (Smith, 1988). This last aspect materialized through the publication of a book (Plá; Ramírez Achoy; Bazán, 2025). The volume features 171 authors, including high school students, teachers, undergraduate students involved in the project, and researchers. Thus, everyone who voluntarily participated and chose to write—either individually or collaboratively—a free-form text about the school of the future was recognized as a producer of knowledge. The book aims, in its own way, to serve as a virtual archive of the school.

It is important to note that, although students from six Latin American countries participated in our study, the project did not include Indigenous youth and was not grounded in Southern epistemology. Rather, it focused on the production of school-based knowledge about the school itself. For this reason, the study cannot be strictly described as decolonial or intercultural, even though it shares certain methodological and theoretical principles with those perspectives. Furthermore, given its distinctive nature and the extensive information collected, part of the study also employed additional methodologies, such as grounded theory coding processes.

The study was conducted in two phases, each lasting one year. Three countries participated in the first phase, and in the second, the number expanded to six: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Uruguay. In total, 16 social science and literature teachers, 319 students, and 12 public schools participated, along with one private school and one charter school (see Table 1). Over the course of two years, 38 international classes were held and recorded, and the research produced 24 *Padlets*, 7 *Mentimeters*, 52 *podcasts*, 57 *reels*, 9 fanzines, 44 *memes*, and 123 student texts (Plá; Ramírez Achoy; Bazán, 2025), all addressing the theme of the school of the future. The entire educational and research process took place within virtual learning environments.

Table 1 – Participation by country

	Argentina	Chile	Colombia	Costa Rica	Mexico	Uruguay	Total
Students	39	12	51	67	73	77	319
Teachers	2	2	2	4	4	2	16
Texts	21	2	30	4	29	37	123

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Just as the use of tools from horizontal methodology does not make this study strictly decolonial, grounded theory was not employed in its entirety but only in its technical core of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss; Corbin, 2002; Flick, 2007). Grounded theory is a method that links data collection, analysis, and the theory that emerges from these analyses and data (Strauss; Corbin, 2002). Although this tripartite relationship is not lost in the present research, we also incorporated elements of historiographical analysis to define the analytical plots—an approach external to grounded theory itself and discussed in more detail in the following section. For us, theory is produced through the interaction between data and broader concepts or theoretical frameworks from other disciplinary fields; it does not arise solely from the data. Our position departs, at least partially, from Strauss's objectivist grounded theory and moves closer to the proposals of Kathy Charmaz (2006, 2009), which emphasize the situated construction of reality and the active participation of the different agents in the research. This approach acknowledges the partial nature of data and the dynamic quality of concepts—concepts that emerge from the data yet are constructed in dialogue with the researchers' preexisting historical and theoretical understandings (Charmaz, 2009, p. 141). Consequently, we recognize that our categories and narrative plots remain open, ambiguous, or, as we have termed them here, aporetic.

As a result of the coding processes, five core categories were established—cosmotecnics, perfectibility, inequality, emotional education, and customization—along with three devices of discursive articulation: temporal articulation, pedagogization of discourse, and aporetic relationships. Additionally, six descriptors of school culture were identified: place, knowledge, subjects, material culture, evaluation,

and relationships among actors. Each category and device include subdivisions, as illustrated by the aporetic relationships discussed in this article. In total, 9,850 coded segments were generated. For the case of the worst school in the world the data were also synthesized from minor codes, including military, authoritarian, dictatorship, tyrant, control, surveillance, punishment, discipline, repression, chaos, and disorder, among others.

Theoretical tools

Since we have chosen to focus on the results section, we cannot explore the theoretical components and their interactions with each of the codes mentioned. Therefore, we will concentrate exclusively on aporetic relationships and analytical plots. Both belong to the broader category of discursive articulation—that is, the strategies that young people employ to make sense of their narratives about the future of school. The first of these is the chain linking past, present, and future, or the regime of historicity (Hartog, 2007; Koselleck, 2012). The second is the pedagogization of youth discourse on education, which, for us, differs from the perspective of Depaepe and Simon (2008). Here, it is not the role of pedagogy in society, but rather “the use of specialized educational language by students” to define their own conditions of schooling (Plá; Muñoz; Eugenio, 2024, p. 10).

The third strategy involves aporetic relationships as a fundamental element of discourse meaning, understanding meaning as a principle of comprehensibility (Bárcena, 2004, p. 30). Aporitic relationships encompass two true but opposing principles that generate rational unfeasibility, a phenomenon that contains and produces its own opposite. An example is the aporia of progress, in which “progress produces [...] decline” (Koselleck, 2012, p. 109). Nevertheless, we recognize that aporetic relationships can also be described as antinomic or even paradoxical. Antinomies have long been a theme in pedagogy, from Rousseau with his dichotomy of civilization and nature, to Herbart with authority and freedom, and Freire with emancipation and domination. Yet, we prefer to think of them as two opposing components of the same entity, rather than as two separate tendencies. In this regard, we align with the Aristotelian position described by Aubenque (2021). According to this author, Aristotelian aporia is both a procedure and a given situation. The former is a method of focusing on contradiction to pursue truth. The latter is “a state of the soul,” that is, “‘not an attribute of contrary reasoning,’ but a state of the soul resulting from an equality of contrary reasoning” (Aubenque, 2021, p. 74). This Aristotelian perspective establishes, through a process of inquiry, the oppositions within our object of study during the research process rather than a priori, while simultaneously recognizing the irreducible ambiguity inherent in all educational acts. In short, aporetic relationships function both as an instrument of inquiry and as a defining feature of the situation under investigation.

Finally, when we refer to the analytical plot, we mean an expository mechanism that allows meanings to be articulated within a piece

of research (Certeau, 2006, p. 58). The plot is the procedure that organizes and hierarchizes the various components of a narrative, giving it meaning through the act of configuration or comprehensibility. The narrative itself is an explanation: it demonstrates how it mediates between fact and interpretation, establishes a temporal order, and identifies causalities (Ricoeur, 1987). Accordingly, we use the term analytical plot as the common thread running through the narratives, enabling us to interpret the meanings of the worst school of the future as imagined by young people. In summary, aporetic relationships were first identified within the students' narratives and subsequently transformed into explanatory plots. In this way, narratives constitute the primary source of our study, and the results are presented in the form of a narrative plot—or, in Ricoeur's (1987) terms, the quasi-plot characteristic of the human sciences.

Analytical Plots

Inequality

Inequality is a central feature of a poor school, both in the present and in visions of the future. We refer to inequality because, for the young people in the study, it is not merely a matter of whether a school has excellent facilities, innovative digital technologies, or teachers committed to their learning. Rather, a bad school is one in which some students have access to quality education while others do not—where private and public schools coexist, curricula differ for the rich and the poor, and some schools foster inclusion while others exacerbate discrimination.

A bad school is characterized by terrible, damaged facilities. One student describes, "I imagine completely destroyed furniture, inadequate bathrooms, [...] unusable chairs, [...] a soccer field that is completely out of shape." Furthermore, there will be no space for "physical activity [or] movement for students" in the classrooms. There will be no "library, laboratory, or technological tools that enable learning," and the school will be inaccessible "to students with multiple disabilities or special needs." As another student notes, "despite being in the future, the school has very deteriorated facilities, with little natural lighting, crowded spaces, no green areas, and precarious conditions."

With the economic crisis, it will not be possible to "continue maintaining public schools, which is why [...] people who have economic stability [...] will enjoy that privilege." Public schools and the support associated with them will be abandoned, meaning that "students will no longer have government assistance, they will not have access to scholarships or food," "there will be no free tickets so that students cannot use public transportation," and tuition will become increasingly "expensive and [without] offering financial support to students who need it." This is why inequality manifests itself between the public and private sectors. The worst school in the world is not limited to what occurs within its walls; it encompasses the inequality of the ed-

ucation system, with public schools characterized by “limited resources, crowded classrooms, and obsolete technologies.” Meanwhile, in the private sector, opulence is evident: ultra-modern facilities, cutting-edge technologies, and adaptive educational programs tailored for each student”. On the other hand, the economic crisis “would not affect all students; wealthy families would receive a different education, which would seek to teach them what they need to know to occupy high-level positions, while those who cannot afford a privileged education would be educated as laborers.” Bad schools will perpetuate the inequalities of the present into the future, since “in these times, education continues to be a privilege, and we cannot guarantee that this will not continue to be the case in a few years' time.” For students, attending a bad school is inseparable from questions of social class.

The digital gap is another recurring issue. Technology is simultaneously seen as a panacea for equal opportunities and as a threat to educational equality, since in a poor school access to digital technology will be conditioned by purchasing power. “This is because it is well known that technology is expensive and not everyone will be able to access it easily,” which has a direct impact on access to education, since today entering school “is difficult for many children who do not have the same opportunities, and assuming that in the future this problem will be even greater with technology.” Therefore, in the future, school will only be reserved for “those with the ability to afford expensive subscriptions to large-scale digital educational platforms,” which raises the question:

Could we find equality in a place where only one group has access to these new technological advances, where only a few people with greater purchasing power have the opportunity to access these tools, while others do not have the same possibilities? The worst school of the future would be unfair, as some would be able to advance, but others would not.

The unfair school system is also structured around curricula segmented by social class. For the wealthy, there is a “different education, which would seek to teach them what they need to know to occupy high-level positions”; for the poor, an education “as labor to serve” the wealthy. In this type of school, students would be taught only “basic things that would not be of much use to them,” following an ‘outdated’ curriculum “that does not reflect the needs of today's society, focusing on memorization without providing a deep understanding or practical applications. In addition, there could be [...] poor development of social-emotional skills.” This inequality in knowledge, education, and training is further compounded by ongoing discrimination.

Discriminatory practices will be promoted and not everyone will be given the same opportunities. In my opinion, this is something that is happening now and will continue to happen in the future if we don't start to change our behavior. Making someone feel bad because of their skin color or sexual orientation is not right. Each of us is free to express what we want, but without making others feel bad. We have to put ourselves in other people's shoes and start to empathize with them.

The ideas expressed by young people in this section reveal how they appropriate and employ discourses characteristic of pedagogical analysis, such as the relationship between school and society, the

meanings attached to public schooling, and the conception of education as either an agent of social mobility or a mechanism for reproducing inequalities.

In this sense, students speak about the imagined school by intertwining their own school experiences with their lived present, shaping expectations within a horizon of what is not yet, which nevertheless carries their desires and fears regarding school. Within this temporal relationship, or regime of historicity (Hartog, 2007; Koselleck, 2012), the socioeconomic conditions that students experience in the present—with their inequalities, deprivations, and discrimination, among other factors—are articulated. Thus, the inequalities they encounter today become obstacles to envisioning a future school that fosters social justice. Added to this long and specific list of inequities, the worst school of the future is imagined as dominated by authoritarianism or descending into lawlessness.

Power

Indiscipline and discipline are antonyms, but in this case, they are not necessarily antithetical. They represent two scenarios in which the school of the future seems to embody broader social fears. On one hand, there is a fear of totalitarianism, in which the school is, to paraphrase Althusser, an ideological apparatus of the state, but also an ideological apparatus of machines; on the other hand, there is a leaderless, chaotic school. Within this panorama, it is difficult to identify an aporetic or antinomic relationship; instead, we encounter two dystopian scenarios that stand in opposition to each other.

The first image evokes the classic representation of totalitarianism found in George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. In one of the few national particularities we encountered, students from Argentina and Uruguay recalled the military dictatorships that ravaged their countries in the last century. Projecting that past into the future, they imagined societies ruled by censorship and repression, devoid of freedom, where the education system enforces a single way of thinking. In this future built upon the ruins of the past,

A dystopian education in the future could be an education under a dictatorship, as happened in Uruguay in 1970 and in Argentina in 1976, when the human rights of students and teachers were violated and they were unable to attend classes. Problems even arose between students, teachers, and civil guards, creating an atmosphere of violence and aggression.

Authoritarian schools are hierarchical and coercive. They lack freedom of expression, thought, and appearance; what is taught is censored, and the rules are restrictive. The school is based on a system of rewards and punishments. "The worst school in the world in the future would be one with little flexibility in terms of student opinion [...] and that there continues to be a hierarchy in which the teacher is the most important person in the classroom," in which "there is complete censorship, accompanied by repression," and in which "any attempt at oral participation is seen as a disciplinary offense and punished with physical punishment and isolation in completely empty rooms where

silence is your worst enemy." The body and personal image are standardized: "they wouldn't let us in with dyed hair, tattoos, or piercings; there would be no freedom of expression."

Surveillance within school facilities will be absolute: "surveillance technologies will be installed in schools and independent education will be lost," "the classroom will have a large surveillance camera on the ceiling," and "technology will dominate us, [...] we will be hyper-enslaved." The "excessive use of devices that constantly monitor students, invading their privacy and not allowing them moments of privacy or reflection," will give rise to a paranoid society that "frightens me, not knowing if the people around us are watching us, or if they are our friends, or perhaps both." In the realm of youth science fiction, a certain nostalgia persists within the imagined future: "after that voice, a three-minute announcement plays. Luckily, that sound doesn't reach the bathroom, the only place where I feel like I'm not being watched. What must it have been like to live in the past, when there weren't all these laws and people lived freely?"

In addition to surveillance, there is both physical and psychological violence. It is "an education through fear," marked by "severe punishments for a simple mistake, feeling as if we have no freedom to make mistakes and learn from them." Misbehavior will lead students to "be subjected to physical punishment, such as being hit with a ruler as was done in the past, or psychological punishment such as insults or bullying by older students."

Although surveillance technologies will be responsible for instilling fear, the stereotypical evil teacher retains his sorrowful place of honor. He becomes the dictator in a school "where teachers are allowed to humiliate and denigrate their students," where "teachers will restrict ties between students," "beat students for not understanding," and return "to the methods of the past—teachers who had absolute, unrestricted authority over their students." We refer to this use of the past as something negative as *retro-dystopia*, as a counterpoint to Bauman's *retrotopia* (2022). Ultimately, teachers will also seek to control bodies: "in the school of the future, teachers will be very strict about students' behavior and appearance, and this will prevent people from expressing themselves freely and being who they truly want to be; in other words, they will not be able to develop as human beings." The control of appearance thus becomes part of a larger, dehumanizing process.

Absolute control has another fascinating and paradoxical feature: I arrive at the place where I study, where I have to spend eight hours, otherwise I will be punished with community service. Education has become so compulsory that it is a crime not to go to school. We choose our subjects based on our personality and who we are. We can no longer choose anything we want to study; we are left with no choice but to be prisoners of our virtues, exploiting them to the fullest, until we are no longer useful and it is our turn to die in a nursing home.

It is a form of totalitarianism grounded in the hyper-individualization of students. School technologies will make it possible to identify the qualities each person is born with, which will then have to be exploited to the fullest, leaving no room to become anything other than

what we were predetermined to be. We will be complete, unique individuals, but not as a result of our own choices; rather, we will be enhanced by a school system that decides and selects what we are to become. Hence the paradox: individualized totalitarianism.

Yet among young people, some believe that the absence of teacher control over appearance is itself enough to create a dystopian world. In a school with no control over “the institution’s dress codes, we could wear whatever clothes we wanted without restrictions, and that would lead to a large number of people feeling uncomfortable or unhappy with their environment.” Without minimal “dress codes,” the school would tend toward disorganization—it would be a place “with a lot of licentiousness.” In such a space, “the administrative and teaching staff would not be interested in maintaining a clean environment,” and “there would be no hygiene whatsoever, leading to chaos, dirt, and disorder.” A leaderless school, then, becomes disorganized, filthy, and lawless.

“In the worst school of the future, teachers could lack motivation and preparation, be uninterested in teaching, and not be committed to their students’ learning.” “They would always have a very negative approach, letting students do whatever they wanted and showing no authority in response.” In the most dramatic case, it would be a world “turned upside down, let’s say [...] it will be the students who are, in quotation marks, completely ruling the school.” This, according to many students, is not only a projection into the future but also a symptom of the present: “One thing that worries me a lot [...] would be for teachers to completely lose their authority, because if we already see less and less respect for authority today, what awaits us in the future?”

The anxiety provoked by a school without authority forms part of a broader diagnosis: the possibility of a future society without schools. A school that collapses under its inability to fulfill its social function—the disciplining of youth—appears as the ultimate dystopia. As one student imagines, “it would be complete chaos, there would be no order, everyone would do what they wanted, they would not function as a team, so no one would want to go to that institution to work, let alone take classes, therefore [...] action would be taken, and it would be closed down completely.” This, then, is a dystopia—but, as we have seen throughout this section, its opposite is equally dystopian.

In this vein, two negative perspectives emerge. On one hand, there is a view connected to an authoritarian past that continues to shape the present for many young people living in contexts of school and social violence. On the other hand, there is a lax present, marked by a lack of order and discipline. The articulation of these experiences—which imbue their vision of the future with a sense of temporality—combined with a pedagogization of educational discourse portraying school as a space for discipline and training, leads many young people to imagine antinomic futures for education: one characterized by a total absence of discipline, the other by panoptic surveillance. Whichever scenario prevails, in both cases, it reflects a profound crisis of the school and, consequently, its future disappearance.

Dehumanization

Digital technology in schools is a recurring theme in students' responses, yet it can signify either an advantage for education or a threat to humanity. On one hand, there is the "bad school" shaped by analog, retro-dystopian tendencies, which fails to incorporate digital tools into teaching and learning, relying instead on "old-fashioned" practices such as "instead of using a PDF, we would use a physical book, or instead of a touchscreen blackboard, we would go back to a chalkboard." On the other hand, there is the risk that Artificial Intelligence (AI) could render education so effortless that it produces "disinterest in learning." In short, a lack of technology in education hampers progress, but its misuse may accelerate the decline of humanity. We categorize the negative consequences into two dimensions: cognitive and ontological.

The use of digital technology as a learning tool carries the risk of cognitive dependency. If young people at school become accustomed to AI solving academic challenges, they may cease making an effort and lose interest in learning. It would be a school that "encourages mediocrity, [which] makes us stop producing our own ideas," fostering "people to be very conformist and do everything the easy way." Cognitive dependence, in turn, facilitates the spread of false information and erroneous learning, given that "a lack of curiosity [makes] us believe most of what we see on the internet, without verifying its veracity." It is as if, in this scenario, the worst school in the world were operating like social media itself.

In the school of the future, the digital world will replace one technology with another, without substantially changing its function. What will truly be replaced, however, are students' own capacities to solve problems and acquire new knowledge. It is not the school's material culture or, where applicable, the teacher who will be substituted by a robot, but rather the learners' skills themselves. Young people, as agents of their own learning, "would lose the ability to research and learn independently." "People would cease to do things for themselves, since technology will do them more easily and quickly. We would no longer know how to do them on our own." This marks a shift from autonomy to automatism.

The second negative consequence of the abuse of technology in schools is the deprivation of the social nature of human beings—an ontological loss. Schools, once spaces for socialization, would undergo a profound mutation, beginning with the disappearance of human teachers. The robot teacher imagined by the adolescents in this study takes multiple forms: sometimes an android, sometimes a chatbot, sometimes merely a tablet. Regardless of its appearance, a robot that teaches displaces the relational essence of the pedagogical act, misplacing the human element. "Since it is not a human education and robots have no feelings, there will be no meaningful communication between students and teachers." This statement subtly redefines the teacher's place in contemporary schooling, underscoring their irreplaceable role as a subject of sociability that nurtures our social nature.

Furthermore, the study's results reveal an emerging division of labor: the robot teacher devoted to cognitive learning, and the human teacher relegated to the role of emotional listener.

Another impact of technology is the replacement of physical space by virtual schooling. This imagined transformation appears to be shaped by the schooling processes that young people experienced during the pandemic. Solitary, home-based learning severs the possibility of interaction with others, of "going to school, regardless of whether it is to study, to be with people, to socialize." In other words, the loss of the social meaning of school – first as social discipline due to a lack of authority, and then as a space for sociability – feeds the fear of the disappearance of face-to-face schooling, since the school institution remains one of the few spaces that contemporary models of urbanization in Latin America have left for young people.

According to the students, isolation in the future would be detrimental to the acquisition of knowledge, since the school as a physical space offers opportunities for encounter and social interaction that would vanish with a complete shift to virtual learning—from the support of teachers to the sociability essential to learning processes: "I feel that human contact is very important, not only for learning the subjects taught, but also for the development of students' personalities." And beyond that, a silent school.

"Humans" fell into the trap of choosing the easy option, comfort, but lost something that characterizes them: being social. People are now immersed in their own minds, they have what they want thanks to those chips, the information acquired travels back and forth, but... everyone has the same thing. Knowledge is no longer shared or felt, and with this, oral tradition has also disappeared; we don't need teachers, we no longer talk or listen out of a desire to learn new things (emphasis in the original).

Sociability is recognized as a fundamental aspect of youth, of being a student, and of being human. The worst school of the future, however, neglects it entirely. For some contributors to the study, the acquisition of knowledge becomes meaningless if it cannot be shared. Moreover, this transhumanist-tinged observation opens two avenues for reflection. The first, which can be posed as a problem, concerns the critical role of oral communication within the school environment – in learning, in teaching, and in the practices that constitute our humanity within the educational space. While virtual schooling does not eliminate oral communication, it transforms the school soundscape (Plá, 2022), thereby altering the ways in which we speak, listen, interact, and learn. The second avenue involves the process of homogenization that characterizes the worst school in the world.

Homogeneity

To conclude our analysis, we highlight a paradoxical relationship, an oxymoron. Extreme individualization—the tailoring of school to the needs of each child—paradoxically produces homogenization. Homogeneous individuality. By this, we refer to the process through which the individualized approach that a customized school of the future entails actually functions as a mechanism of cultural homogenization

that the school perpetuates. It is important to note that this oxymoron arises from our interpretation; young people often frame it instead as an antinomy. For them, individualization is desirable, while homogenization is undesirable. Yet if all students aspire to the same customized school experience, does that shared aspiration not itself constitute a cultural desire, a homogeneous longing? This insight has drawn our attention in considering students' broader visions of schooling in the future, as our study reveals remarkably few national variations in their conceptions of school—as if there were only one school, and as if the schooled youth with whom we share this experience were essentially one and the same across the region, or at least strikingly similar to one another.

The dream of a customized school emerges most vividly when contrasted with its opposite: retro-dystopia. The school as an adversary of personal identity is the traditional school, where memorization reigns as the emblematic—and nefarious—teaching strategy. “What I imagine when they say [...] ‘the worst education of the future’ is [one that] would emphasize only memorizing and memorizing information without giving its students the tools they need to analyze, question, and apply that knowledge critically.” Yet, when we project this image forward, we encounter a transformed vision: “the traditional model of teaching [will be replaced] by an automated model that does not respect diversity, autonomy, and student interaction,” in which “all students are forced to be exactly the same as each other.” This automated model of schooling...

would be a place where students are treated as mere recipients of information, without encouraging creativity, critical thinking, or problem solving, and instead of inspiring a love of learning, this institution would suffocate them under a mountain of homework and standardized tests.

Individual identity is diluted within the traditional model, which spans past, present, and future. One could argue that, in terms of individuation and subjectivation, school has been, is, and will continue to be the worst in the world for young people—particularly when considering the persistent imposition of homework, rote memorization, and its culmination in standardized tests. These automated processes of schooling will be governed by robots, shaping students in their own image and likeness. The idea recurs relentlessly: the worst school of the future...

would be a school where we are all taught like robots, where we are all taught the same thing, where thoughts are imposed on us, where we cannot have a critical opinion or critical thinking, nor can we infer what we are, our future, what we are seeing, but rather they try to teach us all the same thing, dictated by the government or the institution, and we are all the same. We all think the same, we are all like robots.

State control, indoctrination, sameness, and the mechanization of the self inevitably evoke images familiar from dystopian science fiction literature and film. In an exercise characteristic of student science fiction, the scene is rendered with heightened drama:

My eyes are beginning to lose their ability to distinguish colors; the world is turning gray, as if the very essence of life were fading away. The machine I am connected to

seems to absorb my identity, stripping me of my human essence. "Leonardo, your resistance is a hindrance to evolution. Your attachment to the past and to individual freedom is an obstacle to progress. In our quest for perfection, we must eliminate those who cling to human emotions" (quote marks in the original).

The worst school in the world robs students of their subjectivity, here expressed as emotions—imperfect, yet irreducibly human. The recurrence of these perspectives, or future fictions, finds its counterpart precisely on the positive, desired side, where customized schooling paradoxically becomes homogeneous. It is the dream of a school meticulously tailored to the individual student.

"The worst school of the future would be one that does not adapt to the needs, interests, and potential of students" and, almost identically, "one that does not adapt to the individual needs of students, does not offer personalized learning options, and does not take into account the individual differences of students." This process of customization brings with it a generational reversal of the concept of adaptation: whereas previously young people adapted to society through education, now the school must adapt to the needs of young people. The good school of the future will facilitate "personalization, with education adapting to the individual needs of each student, using advanced artificial intelligence technologies to offer more personalized learning" to the extent that certifications will disappear. "Instead, each student will have their own personalized curriculum, based on their interests, abilities, and learning styles, with the help of teachers and artificial intelligence guides, facilitating learning and focusing on developing our skills."

As we have already mentioned, for students, the worst school of the future is one that perpetuates the current educational model: a school that neither moves beyond memorization nor alters its teaching strategies or forms of assessment. It is a model that falls behind the advances in digital technologies designed to promote student-centered education through algorithmic guidance.

These ideas highlight what we understand as the pedagogization of educational discourse, since when describing school, students use language characteristic of pedagogy and educational psychology, present in their reflection on how harmful the "traditional model" is and the need for "personalized learning." In doing so, they adopt discourses belonging to specific pedagogical currents, such as the pseudo-New School (Brailovsky, 2019; 35), which combines the principle of the child at the center of the New School's educational process with the entrepreneurial individualization of neoliberalism. In turn, the pedagogization of discourse contains forms of temporal articulation in which an ideal future is privileged over an apparently atrocious past or, in other words, where educational personalization through digital technology is posited as a solution or an advance over the obsolete strategies and methods of the bad school.

The customization of schools is a homogeneous, ideological, generational, and cultural desire. It belongs to almost everyone, yet it is precisely this desire that some voices warn may lead to educational

hell. This “teaching model only aims to train individualistic and selfish people” and “people are now immersed in their own heads, they have what they want thanks to those chips, the information acquired travels back and forth, but... everyone has the same thing.” The object of desire—being oneself based on total subjectivity—will entail “the excessive automation of teaching, eliminating human interaction,” with digital technology itself becoming dominant. There will come “a point where we cannot control it, but rather it, that is, technology, controls us in the field of study and we are always dependent on technology [...] and we lose contact with people.” And, taken to the extreme, individualization could be so absolute that technology would prevent free assembly among students, and if anyone dared to rebel, “they could punish my mom and dad for unauthorized gatherings.”

Conclusions

The narrative summary can be outlined as follows: in the future, the worst school in the world would be a precarious institution that reproduces inequalities between the public and private sectors, widens the digital divide across social classes, and exacerbates discrimination based on class, ethnic identity, gender, and disability. This school would be governed by machines, imposing an ideology that suppresses critical thinking. Alternatively, it could be a government unable to ensure that schools fulfill their basic social functions. Yet, in general, the totalitarian school dominated by robot teachers prevails, undermining human cognitive abilities by replacing them with AI. Conversely, while the worst school could be retro-dystopian, outdated, and antiquated, what predominantly emerges is the hyper-digitized school, which strips humans of their creative spirit and, above all, erases their social dimension and their right to identity.

The narrative synthesis allows for a series of final reflections that span multiple strata. For the contributors to this study, the worst school of the future is simultaneously the school of the present and of the past. Inequality, precariousness, discrimination, institutional violence, authoritarianism, and homogenization are all characteristics of schools that sociology and pedagogy have examined extensively. One might say, therefore, that the worst school of the future is precisely the one that exists and has always existed.

The discursive similarity among high school students is a finding that should not be overlooked. Throughout the research, very few variations were observed between different countries. The same pattern appears in studies conducted in England (Priyadharshini, 2019). This suggests that school, understood as a technology (Narodowski, 2022), represents a uniform trend that, despite the particularities present in each institution, is experienced as a single, coherent entity. Likewise, a discursive affinity emerges throughout the region, revealing a shared language about school among young people—a phenomenon we have termed the pedagogization of educational discourse (Plá, Muñoz; Eugenio, 2024): the assimilation of a pedagogical discourse derived from

the pseudo-New School (Brailovsky, 2019), which privileges a school tailored to each student.

The fears evoked by the school of the future are manifold. There is the fear of absolute control by machines and the state, without specifying the ideology that either would impose. The problem lies in control and surveillance itself, which remains an undeniable concern in the present. There is also a fear of losing agency—whether because we are dominated by the digital world or because AI will solve everything for us, rendering us not only useless but dependent. This loss of agency manifests in the erosion of individuality and freedom. Yet it is precisely this collective, cultural, and age-related fear that also gives rise to the desire for a school that, through digital technology, can respond to the learning needs and personal interests of students. In such a personalized school, AI, brain-embedded chips, or robot teachers may facilitate learning in mere seconds, while human teachers would be required to attend to the emotional needs of young people. This desire, remarkably consistent among the contributors to our study, is what we term a customized school, potentially entailing a fundamental shift in the role of the teacher—from moral model to emotional support. Yet this vision can also devolve into a nightmare, in a world so subjective and individualized that everyone in school ends up teaching and learning while staring at their own reflection in the water, seeing only themselves.

Received on January 16, 2025
Approved on September 26, 2025

Note

¹ All texts within quotation marks are direct quotations from the young collaborators in this study. The original spelling has been preserved. In some cases, minor adjustments were made to the wording to improve clarity and comprehension. At no point were the intent or meaning of the participants' statements altered. Furthermore, to ensure readability and protect the anonymity of minors, no identifying codes or labels for individual collaborators are included.

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Availability of research data: the dataset supporting the results of this study is published in this article.

Editor in charge: Iris Verena Oliveira

