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# Foundations of sociology of education in contemporary contexts: inequality, neoliberalism, and digitalization

## Abstract

Contemporary societies are marked by profound transformations driven by digitalization, neoliberal governance, and the reconfiguration of social inequalities. In this context, Sociology of Education offers robust theoretical and analytical tools to understand how educational systems both reproduce and challenge social structures. This article aims to review the contributions of Sociology of Education to key contemporary themes, including educational inequalities, digital platformization, neoliberal rationality, and the crisis of democratic institutions. Based on a qualitative bibliographic review, the analysis articulates classical and contemporary theoretical frameworks – especially those of Pierre Bourdieu, Basil Bernstein, and critical sociologists of digital education – to identify how inequalities are reconfigured, how subjectivities are shaped, and how digital infrastructures transform educational governance. The study argues that Sociology of Education remains essential for critically interpreting the intersections between education, power, and social change in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** sociology of education, inequality, neoliberalism, digital education, platformization

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## Introduction

The contemporary educational landscape is increasingly shaped by global transformations associated with neoliberalism, technological expansion, and the intensification of social inequalities. Educational institutions are no longer confined to physical or institutional boundaries; they are embedded in complex socio-technical networks involving digital platforms, data infrastructures, and transnational policy agendas.

Sociology of Education has historically provided analytical tools to understand the relationship between education and society, particularly how schooling contributes to the reproduction or transformation of social structures. Classical contributions, such as those of Bourdieu,[1,2] demonstrate that educational systems are structured by unequal distributions of capital, which influence trajectories, opportunities, and forms of recognition.

At the same time, contemporary developments – especially the rise of digital platforms and the intensification of neoliberal governance – require renewed analytical frameworks. Educational processes are increasingly mediated by technological systems that not only organize learning but also regulate participation, evaluate performance, and extract data.

These transformations raise critical questions: How are educational inequalities reconfigured in digital contexts? How does neoliberal rationality shape subjectivities within education? What role do digital platforms play in restructuring educational governance?

This article is grounded in the assumption that Sociology of Education remains fundamental for addressing these questions but requires theoretical articulation with emerging debates on digitalization and platform capitalism. Thus, the aim of this study is to review and synthesize the contributions of Sociology of Education to understanding contemporary challenges, particularly those related to inequality, neoliberalism, and digital transformation.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative bibliographic review grounded in theoretical and conceptual analysis.

The review focuses on:

i Classical Sociology of Education;

ii Critical perspectives on neoliberalism and education;

iii Contemporary studies on digital education, platformization, and datafication;

iv Contributions from political economy and critical theory.

Sources were selected based on theoretical relevance, conceptual consistency, and contribution to contemporary debates. The analytical process involved thematic categorization, cross-reading of theoretical frameworks, and synthesis aimed at identifying convergences, tensions, and emerging analytical categories.

## Results

The literature in Sociology of Education demonstrates that educational systems remain deeply structured by social inequalities, even in contexts marked by expansion and technological transformation. Classical contributions, particularly those of Bourdieu,[1,2] show that schools operate as spaces of reproduction, in which cultural capital is unevenly distributed and converted into academic success. This process is reinforced by what Bourdieu and Wacquant[3] conceptualize as symbolic power, through which inequalities are naturalized and perceived as legitimate.

Similarly, Bernstein[4] contributes to understanding how pedagogical codes and forms of curricular organization regulate access to knowledge, shaping not only learning processes but also the distribution of educational opportunities. From a foundational perspective, Durkheim[5] had already emphasized the social function

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of education in maintaining cohesion, which, in contemporary contexts, must be reinterpreted in light of increasing differentiation and fragmentation.

In current scenarios, however, these mechanisms are not merely reproduced but reconfigured. The expansion of digital technologies has introduced new modalities of inequality. As Selwyn[6] argues, educational technologies are embedded in social, economic, and political structures, and therefore tend to reproduce existing inequalities rather than eliminate them. Williamson[7] further demonstrates that the growing use of data in education reshapes governance processes, introducing new forms of monitoring and decision-making based on algorithmic systems.

At the same time, the literature highlights the growing influence of neoliberal rationality in education. Ball[8] shows how global education policies increasingly align with market logics, while Apple[9] critically examines how these transformations reinforce conservative and neoliberal agendas within schooling. In this context, education is reoriented toward performance, accountability, and competitiveness.

The expansion of digital platforms intensifies these dynamics. From the perspective of political economy, Srnicek[10] argues that platforms operate as infrastructures of data extraction, while Zuboff[11] highlights the emergence of surveillance capitalism, in which human experience becomes a source of behavioral data. These processes directly affect education, transforming learning into data and reshaping pedagogical practices.

Thus, the results indicate that Sociology of Education offers a coherent framework for understanding both the persistence of inequalities and their transformation in digital and neoliberal contexts.

## Discussion

The findings discussed above reinforce the continued relevance of classical Sociology of Education, particularly the contributions of Bourdieu,[1,2] in explaining how inequalities are structured and reproduced within educational systems. The persistence of unequal distributions of capital, even in technologically advanced contexts, confirms the analytical strength of this framework. Moreover, the concept of symbolic power[3] remains essential for understanding how inequalities are legitimized and internalized.

However, contemporary transformations require theoretical expansion. Bernstein's[4] analysis of pedagogical regulation gains renewed relevance when considering how digital platforms reorganize access to knowledge. Similarly, Durkheim's[5] reflections on the social role of education must be reconsidered in contexts marked by fragmentation, individualization, and the erosion of collective frameworks.

The incorporation of neoliberal rationality into educational systems, as analyzed by Ball[8] and Apple,[9] contributes to reshaping both institutional practices and subjectivities. Education is increasingly aligned with market principles, emphasizing efficiency, competition, and individual responsibility. This shift obscures structural inequalities and reinforces meritocratic narratives.

Digitalization further intensifies these dynamics. As Selwyn[6] argues, technologies are not neutral tools but socio-technical arrangements embedded in power relations. Williamson[7] extends this argument by demonstrating how data-driven systems reconfigure educational governance, introducing new forms of control based on metrics and predictive analytics.

From a broader perspective, the contributions of Srnicek[10] and Zuboff[11] are fundamental for understanding the economic dimension of these transformations. Platforms operate as infrastructures that extract and monetize data, while surveillance mechanisms reshape behavior and participation. In educational contexts, this results in the datafication of learning and the consolidation of new forms of algorithmic governance.

The convergence of these perspectives suggests the emergence of a new educational regime, in which social reproduction,[1] pedagogical regulation,[4] neoliberal governance,[8,9] and digital capitalism[10,11] are deeply intertwined. This articulation highlights the need for Sociology of Education to incorporate new analytical categories, such as datafication and platformization, without abandoning its classical foundations.

Ultimately, the discussion indicates that understanding contemporary education requires a synthesis between tradition and innovation: classical sociological theories remain indispensable, but must be expanded to address the complexities introduced by digital technologies and neoliberal transformations.

## Conclusion

This article reviewed the contributions of Sociology of Education to understanding contemporary challenges related to inequality, neoliberalism, and digital transformation.

It is concluded that educational inequalities persist, although reconfigured through new mediations associated with digitalization and platformization. Neoliberal rationality reshapes educational practices and subjectivities, aligning them with market-oriented logics and obscuring structural constraints. Digital platforms, in turn, introduce new forms of governance based on data extraction, algorithmic regulation, and infrastructural control.

These findings reinforce the relevance of Sociology of Education as a critical field for interpreting contemporary transformations. At the same time, they highlight the need for theoretical renewal capable of incorporating concepts such as digital governance, datafication, and platform capitalism.

From a broader perspective, the study underscores important implications for educational policy, pedagogy, and research. It points to the necessity of confronting persistent inequalities, developing critical approaches to digital technologies, and defending the public and democratic dimensions of education in increasingly platformized societies.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflicts of interest.

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