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Transforming creative and inclusive teaching practices with digital media: A professional development process

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Summary

A review of the literature has revealed that teachers' continuous training often emerges from a dominant discourse prioritizing the agency of knowledge producers (researchers) over knowledge consumers (teachers). This article focuses on the critical importance of professional development for teachers, specifically in the context of digital media use. It aims to examine how collaboration between researchers and teachers can drive essential transformations in professional development, fostering educational change and advancing social justice. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a questionnaire with multi-situated ethnography conducted between 2021 and 2024. Data were collected through participant observations, interviews, informal conversations, document analysis, and virtual ethnography across eight schools in areas of high complexity, situated in both rural and urban regions nationwide. The findings demonstrate that collaborative efforts between researchers and teachers around the innovative use of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) can create transformative educational environments that challenge the prevailing hegemony in teacher-training processes. The article highlights key aspects, such as the active engagement of researchers, collaborative reflection processes, and their influence on teacher professional development, and consequently, on educational practices.

Keywords

Inclusion; critical ethnography; digital media; professional development

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State Research Project I+D+i "Discursos y prácticas de enseñanza creativas e inclusivas con medios digitales en escuelas de especial dificultad" (PID2020-112880RB-I00)

Transformando con el profesorado las prácticas de enseñanza creativa e inclusiva con medios digitales. Un proceso de desarrollo profesional

Resumen

El análisis de la literatura muestra que la formación continua del profesorado se desarrolla desde un discurso dominante que privilegia la agencia de los/as productores/as de conocimiento (investigadores/as) frente a los/as consumidores/as (profesorado). Tomando como referencia la importancia del desarrollo profesional del profesorado en torno al uso de los medios digitales, el objetivo de este artículo es identificar cómo la interacción entre investigadores/as y profesorado puede influir para generar transformaciones esenciales para el desarrollo profesional orientado al cambio educativo y la justicia social. La investigación incluye un estudio basado en un cuestionario y la etnografía multi-situada (2021-2024) a través de observaciones participantes, entrevistas, conversaciones informales, análisis de documentos y etnografía virtual en ocho escuelas de especial complejidad, ubicadas en espacios rurales y urbanos del territorio nacional. Los resultados muestran cómo la interacción y trabajo conjunto entre investigadores/as y profesorado en torno al uso creativo de las TIC generan escenarios educativos transformadores que desafían la hegemonía dominante en los procesos de formación de profesorado. El artículo destaca aspectos clave como el compromiso del/a investigador/a, la reflexión conjunta entre investigador/a y la transformación en relación con el desarrollo profesional del profesorado y consecuentemente de las prácticas educativas.

Palabras clave

Inclusión; etnografía crítica; medios digitales; desarrollo profesional.

Introduction

This article emphasizes the importance of teachers' professional development in using digital media to foster socially just schools. Inclusive education, social justice in education, and digitalization are highly valued in today's society by different international organizations, particularly for addressing the needs of vulnerable populations facing social and educational disadvantages (UNESCO, 2023). Inclusion is interpreted as essential for achieving personal, intellectual, and social well-being through education. It is both a goal and a process, requiring the equal participation of all groups and members involved in educational endeavors (UNESCO, 2017). Social justice, as considered here, is rooted in recognizing all individuals as intellectual contributors capable of active participation (Gramsci, 1971). However, current continuous teacher training systems often fail to guarantee this equal participation (e.g., Rivas, 2019).

Teacher training is a key scenario where hierarchical knowledge structures are reproduced, hindering full inclusion in schools. The literature review reveals that dominant discourses shape teacher professionalism by positioning teachers primarily as consumers of knowledge, rather than as learners or creators of it (Vigo-Arrazola & Beach, 2024). This dynamic subordinates teachers within a discourse that privileges knowledge producers (researchers) as the primary agents of change, relegating teachers to intermediary roles (Beach & Vigo-

Arrazola, 2024). These patterns are particularly evident in research on the use of digital media in teaching practices, which has become increasingly important in post-pandemic education.

Studies have frequently emphasized what teachers should or should not do with digital media, often in relation to professional-development processes involving reflection and transformation. However, instead of fostering creative and inclusive approaches to teaching and learning (Craft & Jeffrey, 2004), these practices often perpetuate homogenizing practices. This is closely related to teacher training models (e.g., Cabero & Ruiz-Palmero, 2018; Cho et al., 2020; Eurydice, 2019; Grimaldi & Ball, 2021; Sancho et al., 2020; Selwyn et al., 2017).

In this context, designing and implementing models of teacher professional development that integrate inclusive education, social justice, and digital media use is ethically essential (Rivas, 2019). Teacher learning in schools, through research, provides an ideal setting for professional development rooted in teachers' lived realities, knowledge, and identities (Brito Rivera et al., 2018; Esteban-Guitart et al., 2023).

This article explores the interaction between researchers, teachers, and students as a form of professional development of the teaching staff. Collective work is highlighted as a means to transcend the division of labor characteristic of expert societies, where knowledge and roles are sharply differentiated between researcher/research/science and teacher/practice. These conventional distinctions inhibit the creation of emancipatory theories (Beach, 2005).

Research can play a transformative role, not only by generating context-sensitive knowledge to support professional development for social justice but also by fostering equitable changes in schools, their educational projects, and underlying ideologies (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2024; Harris, 2011). Interaction between researchers and educators can influence teaching practices, shift perspectives, and inform how knowledge is implemented in classrooms and schools (Hernández-Hernández & Anguita, 2024). When participants recognize the need for change (Mansfield, 2014), research can become a powerful catalyst for transformation.

In this article, we aim to demonstrate how research can support professional development for educational inclusion and social justice, with a particular focus on practices involving digital media—a key component of the post-pandemic educational landscape, especially in vulnerable school contexts (Martínez-Lozano et al., 2023).

Spain, a country that has seen substantial progress in educational inclusion, which has resulted in changes to policies, school management, and teaching practices (Arnaiz et al., 2021), serves as the setting for this study. Similarly, the adoption of digital media has accelerated, particularly following the 2020 health emergency. Despite these reforms, the outcomes have rarely resulted in more equitable institutions or practices (Sancho et al., 2020). Rather, inequities often persist, raising critical research questions:

- (1) What types of interactions occur between researchers and teachers that promote professional development for social justice?
- (2) What changes in educational discourses and practices emerge from these research processes?

The main objective of this research is to examine how researcher–teacher collaboration can drive transformative professional development to support educational change and social justice. The study seeks to illustrate and analyze interaction processes that contribute to educational transformation, drawing on ethnographic research on digital media use in schools serving vulnerable communities across several Spanish regions.

Methodology

Design

The article employs an Explanatory Sequential research design (Creswell, 2011), developed as part of the aforementioned project, combining quantitative and qualitative methods across three phases during the 2021/2022 and 2023/2024 academic years. In the first quantitative phase, the DesEi questionnaire (Torres-Sales et al., 2025) was administered to explore teachers' perceptions of creative and inclusive practices using digital media. Responses from 220 primary school teachers—39% from rural schools and 44% from urban schools—were analyzed to identify schools with a demonstrated willingness to adopt such practices. These results led to a second qualitative phase involving six focus groups that discussed the questionnaire findings, which had been previously shared with the participants. This phase guided the selection of 20 schools for the multi-site ethnographic study (Eisenhart, 2017), with teachers' interest and willingness to collaborate being key factors in the selection of both schools and classrooms. In the third phase, a multi-site ethnographic study was conducted in the selected schools and classrooms, enabling a detailed exploration of teacher–researcher interactions and the contextual dynamics surrounding digital media practices.

To analyze these interactions, the study employs the framework of critical ethnography, which transcends traditional ethnographic methods. While ethnography typically aims at providing a faithful representation of contexts and experiences (Ingold, 2017), critical ethnography is rooted in the pursuit of justice. It emphasizes creating a sense of community between researchers and participants, counteracting the performance often associated with conventional research practices (Elfreich & Dennis, 2022). Adopting an activist research stance implies, on one hand, recovering historical narratives, and on the other hand, generating new stories and fostering collective agency (Harris, 2011). The overarching goal is to challenge systemic oppression, promote justice, and advance a more engaged and accountable academic practice that seeks to challenge the status quo and overcome the fragmentation of knowledge (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2024). This activist perspective aligns with Troman's (2006) assertion of the importance of the ethnographer's interpretive role in shaping the narrative.

The study's rich dataset includes over 1,500 hours of participant observation, analysis of relevant documents, informal conversations, and more than 30 interviews conducted with school inspectors, principals, teachers, and families.

Research scenario. Participants

This study is part of a larger project aimed at exploring creative teaching practices with digital media in high-complexity schools (PID2020-112880RB-I00) (Ministry of Science and Innovation). The research involves 17 researchers from teams based in Aragon, Madrid, Castile and León, Andalusia, and Extremadura. It draws on the experiences of teachers in “schools of special complexity” during the health emergency. This classification, also referred to as “particularly difficult schools,” was introduced in the late 1980s (Royal Decree

895/1989, of 14 July). These schools face complex socio-pedagogical challenges, with their specificities varying by region (Poveda & Matsumoto, 2024).

This article focuses on the classroom teachers and management teams from eight schools located in remote rural and urban areas with a high percentage of foreign-born students. See Table 1 for a description of the classroom characteristics under study. The selection of these schools aligns with the methodology and design of the larger project (see the Design section).

Table 1.

General characteristics of schools

	Population	School	Classrooms
School of Aragon (EsAl)	Province of Zaragoza. Rural area / Agricultural sector / 40% foreign population / Medium-low socioeconomic level.	>9 units Cultural diversity (60% Maghreb and sub-Saharan origin) Teaching staff: 5 Students: 42	1st, 2 nd , and 3rd grade Primary Education classrooms (21 students); 4th, 5 th , and 6th grade classrooms (17 students)
School of Aragon (EsCal)	Province of Huesca. Rural area / Service sector in nearby towns / New settlers / Medium socioeconomic level.	>9 units (10% South American population) Teaching staff: 3 Students: 16	Primary Education (6 students from 2nd, 3rd, 5 th , and 6th grades)
School of Aragon (EsOl)	Province of Teruel. Rural area / Agricultural and industrial sector.	CRA (7 seats) Teaching staff: 26 Students: 76	5 students, ages 3–11 years
School of Extremadura (EsAlb)	Province of Badajoz. Service and livestock sector / Medium socioeconomic level.	18 units High percentage of students in disadvantaged social and economic situations	3rd grade Primary (19 students)
School of Extremadura (EsCe)	Province of Badajoz. Service sector / 22.2% Portuguese population	12 units High level of absenteeism	1st grade Primary (10 students)
Madrid School (EsVa)	Madrid. Large historically working-class and culturally diverse district.	12 units 15% students with specific educational support needs, 20% students of Roma ethnicity, and 20% students of foreign origin Teaching staff: 29 Students: 367	1st grade Primary (16 students)

School of Andalusia (EsAn)	Urban center in a designated “Need for Social Transformation” area in the province of Seville	Learning community. 95% Roma students / 5% students of foreign origin / Families in situations of social exclusion Teaching staff: 25 Students: 88	3rd–5th grade Primary
School of Castile and León (EsLe)	Marginal peripheral area of León. Street vending / 50% Roma families Low socioeconomic status	9 units/ Spanish-French bilingual school /99% of students of Roma ethnicity. Teaching staff: 13 + 5 shared Students: 148	3rd grade Primary

Currently, all these schools are implementing various plans and programs to integrate digital media and foster students’ digital competencies (e.g., the Digital Whiteboard Program). These initiatives are supported by various legal provisions, including the Resolution of July 26, 2022 issued by the Director General of Innovation and Vocational Training, which outlines the instructions for the Digital Plan of the Center 2022–2024.

Analysis

The analysis focused on identifying patterns and connections within the studied realities, exploring how these are experienced, challenged, and transformed by those involved. A cautious and deliberate categorization process, guided by the research questions, was undertaken (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The initial analysis provided descriptive insights into the eight contexts under study. Broad and flexible thematic nuclei emerged, highlighting discourses and practices related to the training needs for creative and inclusive practices with digital media in schools of special complexity, particularly in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

The analytical process involved iterative reading, analysis, and cross-referencing of data collected from field notes, document analysis, and discussion groups. Initially conducted individually, the process evolved into collective discussions between researchers and participants, fostering collaborative interpretation. Through this iterative process, new categories emerged to explain the interactions between researchers and teachers, leading to deeper insights into the realities being studied. The final categories were the following: (i) identifying teachers’ and schools’ needs and strengths regarding the use of digital media; (ii) encouraging reflection on the possibilities and potential of creative practices with digital media; and (iii) facilitating the transformation of educational practices using digital media, leveraging the identified strengths and opportunities. The categories identified are not

mutually exclusive but instead interconnected, and they gain significance through their interactions. Together, they enable the generation of new theoretical frameworks, which is a defining aspect of ethnographic research.

Results

The analysis provided answers to the research questions, illuminating the nature of interactions between researchers and participants during the study. These interactions were instrumental in fostering processes of social transformation using digital media.

Recognizing needs and potentialities around the use of digital media

The data highlight how researchers acknowledged and actively listened to the needs of high-complexity schools while valuing the practices already implemented by their teachers. These schools served a high percentage of foreign populations and Roma ethnic minorities facing social exclusion. Teachers expressed challenges in using digital media in their educational practices.

The researchers demonstrated a commitment to fostering change and transformation, earning the participants' trust by addressing their social and material conditions as well as their professional needs and potential. They avoided being mere observers of the teachers' work, instead actively engaging in classroom activities. For example, in an urban Madrid school, a researcher seamlessly integrated into classroom dynamics, supporting the teacher's activities:

In a plastic arts activity, the task was to make a collage about the students' neighborhood. Examples from other schools were presented on the interactive whiteboard. When some students struggled to understand the task, [the researcher] intervened to help them, following the teacher's individualized approach while considering the whiteboard model. (Field note, 10/11/2024, EsVa)

Researchers did not only observe but also acknowledged teachers' challenges, as demonstrated in a report from a school in Extremadura with substantial student absenteeism. The Head of Studies commented,

/.../ We have a problem with the digital divide /.../ The use of a virtual classroom is very complicated in some grades because not all families have Internet access, nor do they consider it a priority. Many children have mobile phones, almost all of them, but not all can access the Internet to search for educational resources or use the virtual classroom. (Interview with Head of Studies, 15/06/2023, EsCe)

The researchers showcased creativity in addressing teachers' needs while recognizing their potential. In one case, a school where 95% of students were Roma, broke traditional boundaries between personal and professional roles during the health emergency. Teachers used WhatsApp to address families' basic needs, exemplifying this dynamic:

Principal: “Of course, just as we gave our phone number, many teachers gave their phone number during the pandemic health emergency situation to parents. Parents now call to communicate anything. So, the communication is fluid.”

/.../

Researcher: “I understand that this is a resource here in the neighborhood, but at the same time, I imagine that you will also consider your work there /.../ With this level of closeness, do you feel comfortable?”

Principal: “Yes, in fact, we were looking at alternatives because we discovered digital WhatsApp numbers, and we are looking for alternatives to the lecturers’ personal phone numbers. Last year, we raised this because teachers have an absolute right to protect personal phone numbers.” (Interview with Principal and Head of Studies, 28/04/2022, EsAn)

This acknowledgment of teachers’ needs and strengths by the researchers facilitated reflective practices among participants. A teacher from a rural school in Aragon noted during an informal conversation.

What I like the most is that, as researchers, you provide an external point of view; because we are inside, and we are not always aware of many things—both good and bad. For me, it is important that you provide your perspective /.../ because it helps me see things I might overlook or take for granted. (Field notes, 03/06/2022, EsAI)

Through these interactions, the research process fostered a sense of validation and recognition of teachers as intellectual professionals capable of reflecting on and transforming school practices. A dual awareness emerged during the process: researchers deepened their critical understanding of the realities they studied, while teachers adopted reflective and transformative approaches to their use of digital media.

Promoting reflection on the potentialities of creative practices with digital media

The research process in schools of special complexity fostered a shift in understanding educational realities, challenging the conventional model of knowledge distribution that separates the roles of researcher and researched. Instead, participants were recognized as active, reflective agents. This transformation was documented in the field notebooks of the researchers:

Today we gathered at one of the faculties—researchers and participants—to discuss and contrast the analysis of the information collected in each school. The presentations highlighted various aspects of field interactions that have taken place in the field. Some focused on detailed descriptions of digital media usage, others on the reflective processes undertaken by researchers and the participants alike, and some in transformative actions. Several teachers noted how the research process allowed them to reconsider the meaning and use of digital media. (Field note, 12/01/2024, Seminar)

In these exchanges, the researchers leveraged their expertise to contribute to processes of educational justice, acknowledging teachers as responsible, capable professionals reflecting critically on the role of digital media in fostering inclusive and participatory practices for all students. The researchers revealed a need to reconsider how research on digital media practices was conducted, especially in cases where teachers adhered solely to dominant state ideologies without addressing the specific needs and interests of their students. For instance,

Today, we met with teachers from three different schools. The collected data were contrasted, and one of the teachers reflected on their use of digital media for routine calculation exercises. Meanwhile, another, from a different school, discussed opportunities for students to express their experiences and interests through written language. (Field note 03/24/2023)

The researchers recognized the importance of empowering teachers to exercise critical control over their practices and engage in meaningful reflection and transformation. Researchers facilitated this process by fostering dialogue and collaboration:

As researchers, we listen to teachers as conscious, reflective agents seeking to understand not only the “what” and “how” but the “why” of their practices. We engage in conversations with teachers and families, share our experiences, and collectively reflect on our shared lives and challenges. (Field note, 12/01/2024)

The findings underscore the necessity of creating participatory spaces that enable shifts in digital media practices. Researchers actively collaborated with teachers to imbue their experiences with revolutionary significance, turning them into catalysts for educational activism aimed at community engagement and social transformation.

Transforming practices with digital media from the identified potentialities

This phase of the research highlights the creation of projects by teachers that effectively bridge students' and families' lived experiences with the curriculum through digital media. The interactions between researchers and educators have led to deconstructing and reconstructing pre-existing practices and innovative ways of integrating stakeholders into the research process.

In the Madrid school, teachers and researchers collaborated to adapt and expand a workshop proposal based on community needs and interests:

Workshops on the soundscape of the school were organized with first-cycle teachers in February 2023. In response to the research team's proposal, the teachers suggested linking it to the school's quarterly project on water. After several meetings, they developed a gymkhana with five stations across the school, where students recorded sounds using provided materials. The collected sounds were used

to create a soundscape mural of the school. (Summary of field notes, EsVa 15/02/2024)

This initiative empowered teachers to exercise their agency while focusing on students' active participation, creating a collaborative and dynamic learning experience. This was the case in the context of another one of the classrooms studied.

Students drew their favorite part of the town, which was then projected on the digital board. They explained their choices and then analyzed the less-favored areas to propose solutions, either through the school or community. This process allowed students to express their perspectives on the town and critically evaluate what needed improvement. We will address that a bit later, focusing on what can be improved from the children's perspective. They often provide us with exceptionally valuable, insightful, and authentic ideas. (Interview with tutor, EsAlb, 14/12/2023)

These examples illustrate methods for creating spaces that actively promote and engage in social transformation in tangible ways, moving beyond mere reflection. Researchers and teachers collaborated not only to discuss their practices but also to acknowledge their value while developing and testing strategies for meaningful change. This collective effort toward social justice and equity involved a shared process of deconstructing and reconstructing research and educational practices within these contexts.

Discussion and conclusions

This article has sought to highlight how interactions between researchers and participants can facilitate the professional development of teachers in using digital media to advance educational justice and foster social transformation. The examples provided demonstrate how research has contributed to professional growth by integrating digital media through creative and inclusive approaches, addressing the challenges of the complex post-pandemic educational reality. The findings illustrate that processes rooted in respect, recognition, and empathy by researchers toward participants lead to reflection and social transformation.

By employing a critical ethnographic research design, this study emphasizes the importance of researchers' commitment to change and transformation, addressing teachers' needs, social and material conditions (Weis & Fine, 2018), and potential while building trust (Harris, 2011). Interactions throughout the process transcended the traditional model of researchers as detached intellectuals separate from participants. Instead, researchers collaborated with teachers, collectively analyzing and influencing their shared reality (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2019) and breaking down hierarchical divisions between researchers and participants.

This approach disrupted conventional paradigms of professional development (Rivas, 2019), fostering transformative research-production relationships and bridging the gap between theoretical conceptualization and practical implementation (Elfreich & Dennis, 2022; Vannini & Vannini, 2020). These collaborative engagements enabled a more holistic approach to professional development that directly advances social transformation, rather than merely aspiring toward it. Within this context, teachers are increasingly developing innovative

pedagogical practices that promote inclusive classroom participation by critically reflecting on and reconstructing their methodologies through collaborative research interactions.

Drawing on Gramsci (1971), this study supports the idea that intellectual work is not confined to a designated few but includes all individuals who engage in problem formulation, solution development, and the reconciliation of social divisions. Studies by Vigo-Arrazola and Beach (2024) echo these findings, showcasing similar collaborative dynamics between researchers and educators that create inclusive environments on a broader scale.

Our findings align with earlier studies on the impacts of health emergencies in vulnerable school settings serving socially marginalized populations. For instance, Martínez-Lozano et al. (2023) documented how health crises prompted resilient strategies in schools, reinforcing previously tested methodologies, fostering collaboration between families, communities, and schools, and generating hybrid research-teaching scenarios. These mixed scenarios leveraged digital tools to mediate educational challenges during crises. The authors highlighted the transformative potential of these scenarios, wherein breaking down hierarchies and sharing knowledge fostered synergies between research, teaching, and socio-educational intervention. Likewise, Martínez-Lozano et al. (2023) introduced the concept of “transformative hybrid scenarios” (Macías-Gómez-Estern, 2020; Macías-Gómez-Estern, 2021; Macías-Gómez-Estern & Lalueza, 2024) to account for the transformative potential of these collaborative mixed scenarios, the “transformative hybrid scenarios,” which include the following key elements:

1. Equal participation of all agents in shared activities and interactive spaces.
2. Presence and participation of socialized elements or subjects across diverse “activity scenarios,” including varied cultural, generational, national, gender, socioeconomic, and professional backgrounds.
3. Creation of shared motives and goals.
4. Opportunities for face-to-face, emotional, and empathic connections with “others” through contextualized interpersonal interactions.
5. Possibility of using varied communicative forms, including art and diverse discursive genres.

Our analysis illustrates how interactions between researchers and teachers can embody these “transformative hybrid scenarios,” offering pathways for change and social transformation.

These findings present opportunities for promoting social transformation in teacher training related to digital media, benefiting both in-service educators and those in initial training. Beyond professional development, the results have substantial implications for shaping policies and practices that utilize digital media to foster inclusion and social justice.

However, this study acknowledges limitations, particularly the pervasive influence of dominant hegemonic cultures often accepted as “common sense” in teacher training and research policies. These assumptions may restrict a fuller understanding of teacher development grounded in recognizing potential, fostering reflection, and driving transformation.

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