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Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/me

Editorial

# Empowering Postdigital Childhoods: From Familial Practices to Educational Reimagination

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## CHILDHOOD IN THE EYE OF THE POSTDIGITAL STORM: PLATFORMS, GENERATIVE AI, AND DATAFICATION

Recently, the Italian philosopher Colamedici (under the pseudonym of Jianwei Xun, 2025) used the term "hypnocracy" to define the transformation our societies are going through in the face of a pervasive digitality packed with datafication, platforms and generative AI: a societal governance based on algorithmic manipulation behind social media platforms that provokes a form of trance where the citizenry is no longer able to distinguish between reality and made-up narratives. He goes on saying:

> When even the most private spaces have been colonized, when every intimate experience has been digitalized and optimized, everything becomes part of a recursive and boundless mirroring. There are no walls, no borders. No clear directions can be perceived. It is a gaseous reality, where every element dissipates, shifts, and overlaps. Nothing is static, nothing is permanent. Nothing remains in control for long. This is not a flaw of the system – it is its secret. Continuous destabilization is the very foundation of power (Xun, 2025, p.55).

Indeed, with the advent of generative AI, the processes of data extraction and usage for the purposes of providing humans interacting with chatbots immediate responses have just expanded exponentially (Graux *et al.*, 2024). People are sharing personal and sensitive information with the genAI-powered chatbots easily reachable through widely spread apps such as WhatsApp, Messenger, or Instagram (Meta, 2025; Solon & Fiegerman, 2024). In parallel, with the positive values attached to social networks as a pro-social space during the last decade, people have been sharing more and more personal information, in a rush to capture attention through social desirability (Hui *et al.*, 2024). Being visible goes hand in hand with capturing data, and it is therefore actually powered as a mechanism by several key features within the platforms such as filters, characters, and AI-powered audio and video connections; in time, this determines negative social effects like polarization, information impoverishment and de-skilling (Robertson *et al.*, 2024). The same type of effects are multiplied with AI-usage: information distortion, flattening, and bias are embedded in many of the results we get through interactions with chatbots (Floridi, 2023; Scott, 2023; Cristianini, 2023).

Children, as any other citizen with attributed rights, are also part of this landscape. As Barassi (Barassi, 2020, p. 14) explains, children's datafication "is not linear, cohesive, nor rational, but it is rather a complex and messy process that is defined by a plurality of technological possibilities, designs, and organizational intentions" (p.14). Large datasets formed upon the children's exposure to social media, AI-powered toys, and interfaces embed bias and injustice (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). The data captured from toddlers' overexposure to videos watched on social media platforms, later monetized in the commercial recommendations made to parents; images extracted because of the practices of sharenting, later modified through AI tools; or acts of cyberbullying on adolescents using pictures from their infancy, are just some of the unpredictable ways in which the postdigital life of children becomes a source of risk and harm to them. Moreover, the interest in extracting data to shape a particularly anxious approach to parenthood and education – where the child is surveilled as an object of scientific curiosity with no agency – needs urgent consideration. Childhood is nowadays being made a subject of bio-codification, including genomics, neural and


ISSN 2038-3002 (print) | ISSN 2038-3010 (online) | DOI: 10.36253/me-17836

cognitive predictions blended with computational big data studies (Mascheroni, 2020; Williamson, 2016). Therefore, children's rights to their identity and to a safe growing up are being violated (Rivera-Vargas *et al*., 2023; Swist & Collin, 2017).

Up to this point, it appears that the common citizen's interaction with digital interfaces inevitably exposes her to data traces, the monetization of that data by platforms, and algorithmic strategies designed to capture and manipulate attention. The concept of the postdigital captures this transformation – not merely as a technical shift, but as a cultural and societal condition. Importantly, however, the postdigital also introduces a critical lens, for it foregrounds the struggles of individuals and communities to respond to these changes in active and imaginative ways**,** rather than accepting them passively. As Cramer and Jandrić (2021) suggest, the postdigital is not just about recognizing technological saturation, but about envisioning and generating alternatives to digital dystopia – futures grounded in agency, resistance, and collective reconfiguration. Therefore, to consider childhood at the center of the postdigital storm is also to explore the forms of agency exercised by families and educators as they navigate the intersecting forces of platformisation, generative AI, and datafication.

## EDUCATORS AND THE POSTDIGITAL CHILDHOOD: WILL THEY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Datafication and platformisation in early childhood education and care do not only relate to families' media consumption. The platforms pose critical problems too when dealing with pedagogical documentation, a consolidated practice for ECEC educators. Seen as a key approach to analyse, assess, and evaluate children's progress within ECEC institutions, pedagogical documentation has entered into the postdigital era like any other human activity, encountering the problems of platformisation. Particularly, the use of pedagogical documentation to share the results of educational work with families is frequently entangled with the use of social media – a space where educational practice meets the media consumption expectations of families, pushing for more and more "children's content" (Restiglian *et al*., 2023).

According to recent research on datafication at school and higher education levels, educators face the critical dilemma of whether to "resist" or "align" with the external pressures from institutions or families to adopt platforms and their technological infrastructure (Jacovkis *et al*., 2022; Raffaghelli, 2022b). Indeed, in this scenario, educators' overall dispositions and imaginaries towards data practices are connected to competing ideologies promoted by actors such as the market, developers and technologists, and the public space between the government and civil society (Kuhn & Raffaghelli, 2023). Their attitudes and educational practices are deeply connected with their ability to make choices and to adopt technology not "as it is" but through approaches that make sense to themselves, their classrooms, and the communities they refer to. Their approach to algorithmic manipulation and the constraints of platforms' functionalities is one of reshaping, hacking, or resisting (Pangrazio *et al*., 2024; Raffaghelli, 2022a).

In any case, the prospect of protecting children's rights, as championed by Sonia Livingstone, has brought to the fore the complexity of making everyday decisions about how to appropriately deal with datafied educational technologies. Livingstone and Pothong (2022) indeed argue that educators are increasingly concerned about the complexity and challenges of using education data to support – rather than compromise – children's needs and rights. Routine practices, though often unintentional, are contributing to the creation of unregulated and potentially hazardous data environments.

All staff engaged in the schooling system generally strive to follow regulations and uphold children's rights. However, educators and teachers often work under pressure – overburdened, under-resourced, and without adequate training or guidance. This makes them susceptible to relying on shortcuts or defaulting to established routines rather than considering more principled approaches. The demands of engaging with educational technologies can easily distract teachers from their core mission: teaching the children before them. In addition, the data systems they must navigate are often opaque, and the same EdTech companies that create challenges for schools also offer purported 'solutions' to those very issues. Still, there are potential benefits in using education data to support children's wellbeing – for instance, through interagency data sharing to address safeguarding concerns (Toomey, 2022). Yet it remains uncertain whether such practices can be implemented without opening the door to further commercial exploitation of children's data.

In a nutshell, while avoiding blame on overstretched schools faced with an almost unmanageable task, there is a compelling need to pay attention to how institutional cultures within education are playing a role in the ongoing datafication of childhood (Toomey, op.cit). This perspective is convergent with other research carried out in different educational settings, where the technological complexity described above is also embedded in what we have elsewhere called "an educational data

culture"(Raffaghelli & Sangrà, 2023b): meaning with this concept that each institution generates situated ways in which it configures its organisational values, narratives, approaches, and strategies towards data – attributing both positive and negative values.

Up to this point, the problem posed by generative AI is both new and old – framed by an energetic call from companies and governments to introduce AI as "the future" of human societies and, therefore, central to children's education. However, one cannot neglect the increasing concern about screen exposure, which at the international level – and in more than one national policy – is being addressed by forbidding mobile phone usage in educational contexts (Selwyn, 2023; Selwyn *et al.*, 2023). The problem of screen and AI-powered toys, voice assistants and chatbots exposure for toddlers is under increasing scrutiny, as awareness grows about its negative impacts on future life outcomes, from attention difficulties to the inability to cope with stress, frustration in real-world interactions, and consequent isolation (Barassi, 2017; Barassi & Scanlon, 2019; Mascheroni, 2020).

Therefore, while adults may blame themselves for being unable to prevent screen and, very soon, AI-powered tools exposure, there is also a contradictory (or at least tense) feeling of needing to "prepare" children for a future dominated by such technologies. This elements resonate with current international reflections on how digital platforms are reshaping not only individual behavior but the very relational fabric of family life. As Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2025) argue, the platformization of the family involves both internal negotiations and external dependencies that increasingly mediate care, intimacy, and identity (pp. 9–14). Far from neutral infrastructures, platforms structure how families compose themselves and are socially imagined, demanding a critical, relational lens on digital engagement in early childhood. Moreover, we cannot neglect the role of educators a in this equation, for even at earliest stages of education, platformisation also impacts the educational services and professionalism.

The portrayed scenario requires further understanding and exploration. There is a compelling need to study the relationship between platforms, families, and the ECEC system from several interdisciplinary perspectives. Questions arising from this emergent landscape that address relevant research include:

- Are decreasing birth rates in the Western world generating families and educational approaches that push for bio-codification and digital tracking as a means of control and achieving optimal outcomes in parental and educational roles?
- Are there specific contextual factors influencing the engagement (by families and ECEC institutions) with datafication and platforms?
- Is the promise of easy data tracking and visualisation – supporting good decision-making about the child's health, education, and social life – shaping parents' and educators' media consumption?
- Can families and educators imagine and deploy collaborative approaches to improve media consumption?
- How can families and educators generate spaces for creativity or resistance to platformisation?

We considered this special issue as an opportunity to reflect on the questions above and others brought to the fore by the academic community committed to advancing research and practice in this field. The contributions received underline the richness of national empirical research on the topic, laying the groundwork for future curriculum innovations for both pre-service and continuing education of professionals operating in ECEC.

This special issue strongly builds on the reflection initiated within the framework of the DataChildMap project, funded by the University of Padua, which investigated the impact of datafication and platformisation on childhood, with a specific focus on early childhood education. The issue was catalyzed by the international conference organized as part of the project, which brought together scholars, educators, and policymakers in a transdisciplinary dialogue that enriched and deepened the perspectives offered here. The conference featured contributions from prominent voices in the field, including the University of Barcelona (Spain) team, which presented ongoing work with schools on platformisation and critical data practices with Pablo Rivera Vargas; Giovanna Mascheroni (Catholic University of Milan, Italy), whose longstanding research on childhood, digital rights, and datafication within the framework of EU Kids Online provided a powerful lens for framing normative and policy implications; Luci Pangrazio (Deakin University, Australia), a pioneer in the conceptualization of data literacy and its pedagogical potential in countering the effects of datafication; and Maria Ranieri (University of Florence, Italy), an internationally recognized scholar in media education who strongly advances the national research in the field and who also collaborates with scholars in media education as Renee Hobbs (US), bringing those debates into the European context.

We are hopeful that this special issue is not only representative of national research and well connected to the international panorama, but also an instrument to shape a possible (and different) future that "frames" or even better, "embraces" childhood in a postdigital society – a

society that is no longer divided between the analog and the digital, but one where technology is deeply embedded in everyday life and requires active and reflective positioning by both families and professionals.

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE PRESENT SPECIAL ISSUE

As we expected during the call, the authors in this special issue contributed to build a constellation of interdisciplinary contributions that collectively illuminate the complex, layered relationship between early childhood, digital technologies, and educational practices in a postdigital society. We did not forced an overly critical approach to what we consider the postdigital (a pervasive, platformised, datafied digitality), but we accommodated the several perspectives on what we consider genuine research interests and researchers' professional and political positionings, for this is what will actually let us embrace complexity (Raffaghelli & Sangrà, 2023a).

Bridging perspectives from pedagogy, sociology, neuroscience, media studies, and education policy, the articles assembled here reflect a growing need to address the systemic implications of datafication and platformisation – not as abstract technological shifts, but as lived experiences affecting families, children, and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services.

At the heart of this special issue lies a shared concern: how digital infrastructures, from touchscreen media and voice assistants to data-driven educational platforms, are reconfiguring not only the environments in which children grow and learn, but also the expectations placed upon the adults who accompany them. The contributions underscore how families and ECEC professionals alike are navigating these changes, often with limited resources, guidance, or shared conceptual frameworks. In doing so, the articles map the societal challenges posed by ubiquitous technologies – including inequalities in access, moral anxieties about screen exposure, the erosion of children's privacy through datafication, and the contradictions of parental media use – while also pointing to the growing demands on educators to integrate digital tools meaningfully, ethically, and creatively into their work.

Importantly, the special issue does not approach these transformations with a technophobic lens. Rather, it opens a space to consider the emergence of new professional and educational imaginaries, where digital competence is not reduced to functional literacy but reconceptualized as a dynamic, situated, and ethically informed capability. Across the contributions, readers will find a strong orientation toward transformative and creative engagements with technology – where educators and families are not passive users but active agents, capable of shaping digital environments in ways that support children's rights, well-being, and capacity for critical and expressive participation in a digitalised world.

The first article, "Parenthood 0-6 and technologies, between the perceptions on usage and datafication" by Stefano Pasta and Marco Rondonotti, offers a robust quantitative foundation by analysing longitudinal data from the *Centro Internazionale Studi Famiglia* (CISF) reports across 2017 to 2024. By focusing specifically on households with children aged 0 to 6, the study sheds light on shifting parental attitudes toward digital media – from cautious scepticism to a more normalized, if ambivalent, integration of technology in daily family life. Through innovative indices such as the Heteronomy Index and the Artificial Intelligence Homing Index (AIHI), the authors capture the evolving identity of the "postdigital family", shaped by a convergence of relational dynamics and data-driven domestic technologies. The study's focus on the domestication of AI and the granular understanding of digital integration into family routines provides a crucial sociological and cultural backdrop to the issue, setting the stage for the more pedagogically oriented articles that follow.

Building on this sociocultural framing, the second article, Rosy Nardone moves into the heart of educational settings, critically examining how the widespread use of touchscreen media is both resisted and reproduced by the very same families that express concern over its developmental effects, through her article "Digital media in 0-6: educational design between services and families." Drawing on action-research experiences and pedagogical experimentation, this contribution delves into the "educational paradox": while digital devices are often rejected in institutional pedagogy due to fears of harm, they are simultaneously normalized in family life – used unreflectively and without critical mediation. The article argues convincingly that early childhood education services – nurseries, preschools, libraries, play centres – are uniquely positioned to act as cultural mediators, offering grounded and holistic pathways toward digital literacy. With references to Montessori's theories on prepared environments and relational learning, the authors suggest that pedagogical design must go beyond binary positions of prohibition or enthusiasm, advocating instead for integrated models where digital technologies become tools for exploration, narration, and shared meaning-making between adults and children.

This emphasis on conscious mediation finds continuity in the third contribution, "Digital competence

in early childhood: the dialogue between pedagogy and neuroscience for screen education in the Di.Co. Each project" by Cosimo di Bari, Irene Balboni, Claudio D'Antonio and Ester Giamberini. Here, the interdisciplinary approach becomes particularly salient. The article brings together insights from neuroscience, pedagogy, psychology, and education policy to explore how excessive and unmediated screen exposure can affect child development – and what kinds of educational and familial responses are most constructive. Based on qualitative and quantitative data – including focus groups with parents, educators, and pediatricians – the article surfaces an urgent need to reframe digital competence not merely as a skill to be acquired, but as a developmentally informed practice, built through dialogue and evidence-based reflection. In doing so, it complements the preceding articles' emphasis on adult responsibility and critical pedagogical design, while adding a neuroscientific layer that reinforces the importance of early and mindful intervention.

In our journey connected to the usage of platforms, we move towards a proactive perspective on digital technologies, where educators and the community take an active role in shaping usage and engagement.

From this developmental lens, the fourth article, Marina de Rossi and Cinzia Ferranti lead us to discover a concrete example of how systemic professional development can be designed to support educators in navigating the digital turn. In her study entitled "Digital Integration in Early Childhood Education and Care: Innovating Educators' Competencies," based on a long-term research-training initiative within the *Territorial Pedagogical Coordination* (TPC) of Parma, the authors map changes in educators' digital attitudes before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, using the DigCompEdu framework as a guiding structure. Findings show that while educators increasingly value digital tools for documentation and communication with families and peers, the integration of technology into direct work with children remains cautious. This hesitancy, however, is not framed as resistance, but rather as a space for professional discernment, where educators reflect on how to align technologies with ethical, relational, and developmental priorities. The article thus resonates with earlier contributions in its view of educators as critical agents, not passive adopters, and stresses the importance of systemic, community-based support for sustainable innovation, hence emphasizing the importance of educational professionalism and professionals.

A broader, global lens is introduced in the fifth article by Francesca Cubeddu and Picarella Lucia in their study "Environmental sustainability education through digital platforms: case studies in Latin America and Europe." While focused primarily on environmental education, the article enriches the special issue by showing how digital platforms can serve as vehicles for socio-cultural transformation, particularly when linked to Agenda 2030 goals and local pedagogical initiatives. Through a comparative case study analysis (Italy and Colombia), the article illustrates how digital technologies can be repurposed beyond individualised learning or surveillance functions, enabling collaborative, justice-oriented educational experiences. This work links the digital not only to environmental and civic literacy, but to broader forms of participatory citizenship – further expanding the notion of digital competence introduced in earlier contributions, now understood as relational, ethical, and planetary.

Finally, the sixth article, "Image, narrative and multimedia: Storytelling through animated pictograms and the creation of an audiovisual product," by Ilenia Sgobba brings the special issue to a creative and experimental close. Focusing on a preschool educational project that integrates pictograms, silent books, and stop-motion video production, this article exemplifies how digital media can be used to foster inclusive, multimodal learning environments. Rather than framing technology as a threat to traditional pedagogies, the study positions multimedia storytelling as a strategic tool for communication and narrative development, particularly for young children still developing verbal language skills. This contribution ties back to the earlier discussions on relational and sensory pedagogies, illustrating how aesthetic and expressive engagements with technology can coexist with critical digital literacy, fostering both cognitive development and emotional expression.

Together, the six contributions highlight the multifaceted implications of living and learning in a platformised and datafied world – one where early years' education becomes both a site of challenge and of opportunity. Whether addressing families' digital habits, institutional contradictions, neurodevelopmental considerations, professional upskilling, global educational justice, or creative expression, the articles invite the reader to reimagine digital childhood not as a passive outcome of technological progress, but as a field of ethical, educational, and cultural negotiation.

In light of the evidence and reflections presented across these contributions, the special issue underscores the urgent need for policy frameworks and curricular innovations that are capable of keeping pace with the ethical and pedagogical complexities of digital transformation in early childhood education. Rather than advocating for uniform or top-down solutions, the arti-

cles collectively call for context-sensitive approaches that respect the relational, developmental, and cultural dimensions of early learning. A recurring theme is the recognition that digital competence in early childhood is not a matter of early coding or passive exposure, but of educational mediation, where technologies are introduced within environments that privilege dialogue, exploration, creativity, and care.

From this perspective, curriculum development should move beyond discrete digital literacy modules and instead integrate postdigital sensibilities into the broader educational ecosystem: training educators to critically engage with data cultures, fostering participatory practices with families, and supporting the creation of hybrid pedagogical spaces where digital tools complement, rather than replace, embodied and sensory learning. Policymakers are thus called to support multilevel investment – in educator training, interprofessional collaboration, family engagement, and inclusive access to digital infrastructure – while ensuring that children's rights, agency, and well-being remain at the centre. In this spirit, the special issue offers not only a snapshot of current research, but a foundation for reimagining early childhood education in a time where technologies are deeply woven into the fabric of everyday life – and where educators, families, and children themselves must be empowered to navigate, shape, and transform that fabric with vision and responsibility.

The international exchanges and scholarly collaborations initiated by the project DataChildMap have infused this special issue with a critical, forward-looking orientation, grounded in both empirical research and theoretical innovation. They have also affirmed the need to bridge global concerns with local practices, bringing into conversation diverse educational realities while collectively advancing the field of early childhood education in the postdigital age. We hope that the articles presented here will contribute to an evolving and participatory conversation – one that continues to question, co-create, and expand the boundaries of what it means to educate, care for, and protect children in a world increasingly mediated by data and digital infrastructures: in a way that the "hypnocracy" never become true.

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