BOOK REVIEW

Title: Digital Diversity: Youth, Equity, and Information Technology

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The chapters in this edited book present findings from a multi-site research project entitled, The Equity and Technology Research Alliance. The project explored “access to, use of, and skill with ICT in various subgroups of youth” (p. 15), identified as teachers, and teacher candidates. While there is a proliferation of studies examining the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education, this book offers a different perspective on this topic by focusing on equity and marginalized youth in the regions of Nunavut and Nova Scotia in Canada. The editors argue that as ICT continues to be positioned as an enabler for equity among people, more research about ICT is needed to present a realistic picture of actual use of technology by different subgroups of youth. Hence, the research sites were selected to be representative of areas having marginalised populations geographically and culturally.

Chapter 1, written by the editors, provides a comprehensive overview of the study, including: The theoretical underpinnings; links between ICT and education policy; the digital divide; the context of the study; data sources, collection, and limitations; and the outline of subsequent chapters. Major sources of data include: Surveys with high school students and teachers; interviews and focus groups with university faculty and teacher candidates; as well as interviews with youth in alternative settings such as youth shelters. Each subsequent chapter, contributed by different authors, uses data from the research project to highlight how different factors, such as location and gender, influence ICT access and use among different youth groups, and in education. For example, chapter 2, by Dianne Looker, examines how geographic location impacts ICT access and use while chapter 3, by Victor Thiessen and Dianne Looker, explores how computers and the internet are used to develop and strengthen social capital. Chapter 4, by Brian Lewis Campbell and Alyssa Henning, looks at how gender influences attitudes towards and use of ICT while chapter 6, by Dianne Looker and Ted Naylor, focuses on teacher attitudes and practices related to ICT integration in the classroom. Finally, in chapter 7, Jeff Karabanow and Ted Naylor discuss the ICT experiences of street youth in Halifax.

This edited book makes an important contribution to the literature as it provides research based evidence of how computers and the internet are accessed and used by youth in remote and marginalized communities; comparisons are made between rural and urban youth and among Inuit, Mi’kmaq, Black, Asian, and White youth. A unique contribution of the book is a chapter that explores the experiences of street youth with ICT in Halifax. As noted by the chapter authors, Jeff Karabanow and Ted Naylor, limitations of the study are that comparisons of youth experiences with ICT were done in 2005 and only in two geographic locations in Canada. Furthermore, some survey data related to access may be outdated as internet connectivity has since improved in remote communities in Nunavut. Nevertheless, the results of the study assist policy makers in
reconceptualising the purposes of ICT to meet the needs of various education groups and subgroups in those regions.

The chapters in the book are organized so that each chapter sets the context for subsequent chapters and reference is made to findings in previous chapters. This type of organization provides a step-by-step explanation of the data, but it could be regarded as a limitation if the reader would prefer reading each chapter independently, and in random order. As well, inclusion of the full survey as an appendix associated with chapter 1 would have been beneficial for the reader to follow the interpretation of data as laid out in subsequent chapters, especially inclusion of the nineteen survey tasks mentioned in chapter 2. Chapter 2, 3, and 4 make effective use of descriptive bar graphs and statistic tables to illustrate the relationships between ICT access and geographic location, cultural groups, and gender differences respectively. In chapter 3, the notion of social capital was effective to frame the discourse around how youth use computers and the Internet to develop bonding capital (connecting with others who are similar) and bridging capital (connecting with others who are different). Within these chapters, many new concepts such as “cultural groups” and “ICT literacy” were introduced. However, additional explanations of these concepts are needed to provide clarity of meaning in the context of this book.

Another feature that would have enriched the chapters is the inclusion of concrete examples to support recommendations for policy and practice. For example, in chapter 6, the authors recommend putting in place institutional supports, such as institutional practices, for teachers who are implementing and sharing innovative ICT teaching practices. However, providing an example of an appropriate institutional practice would help readers envision theoretical recommendations as practical solutions. Overall, a significant strength of the book is that chapters conclude with provocative questions and discussion to engage the reader in critical re-examination of existing assumptions about how ICT is and can be used to promote equity for youth. For example, chapter 2 raises the notion that patterns of computer and internet access and use among youth are not simply a matter of geographic location, but are also affected by a complex interplay of a variety of factors such as social and cultural contexts. The latter aspects are then explored in subsequent chapters.

In chapter 6, Looker and Naylor, challenge the belief that “if only teachers knew how to use technology better, then the true benefits of ICT’s in schools would be unleashed for all students” (p. 156). The authors point out that a variety of factors, such as ICT education/training and infrastructure supports, are needed for teachers to implement ICT in schools. Readers are challenged to frame the discourse on ICT access and use in ways that do not conform to extremes of “haves” and “have nots” (p. 54) or to correlation trends such as “ICT teaching practices” and “transformative teaching” (p. 154). Rather, Looker and Naylor provide evidence for supporting a re-conceptualization of ICT education from the simple digital divide approach to a digital diversity approach. This book sparks and generates thought-provoking questions and directions for future ICT research in education.