

Call for Abstracts

Journal of International Education Research and Development Education (ZEP)

Informal Learning and (Digital) Educational (In-)Equality

Editors: Jana Costa & Bernd Overwien

In debates on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Global Learning (GL), Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) etc. the potential of informal learning is frequently highlighted (e.g., Overwien 2024; Singer-Brodowski 2023; Adomßent 2015). Informal learning is regarded as a key resource for developing sustainability-related knowledge, attitudes, and willingness to act—precisely because it is self-directed and embedded in everyday life. At the same time, research indicates that questions of social embeddedness and class-specific factors can delimit the scope of informal learning (regarding class-specific choices of learning topics, see Costa & Kühn 2024; regarding voluntary engagement, see Dux et al. 2008). When attention is directed to informal learning, these inequalities become sharply visible, as informal learning is understood as a self-determined and self-organised process guided by individuals' subjective relevance structures. It cannot be steered or externally imposed through (normative) expectations; rather, its goals and timing remain indeterminate, self-directed, and dependent on complex constellations of conditions—among them situational opportunity structures, life-phase-specific occasions, cognitive capacities, and affective-motivational prerequisites (cf. Kaufmann 2015). With regard to sustainability- and development-related learning and educational contexts, this means that issues of social selectivity in informal learning appear not only as general phenomena of inequality but fundamentally shape the possibilities for engaging with global justice, transformation, and sustainability issues. Relevance constructions, learning opportunities, and access to corresponding knowledge and discourse spaces are unevenly distributed.

Unequal conditions for informal learning become particularly visible in digital environments, where access to vast amounts of information and the ability to engage in collective networking and exchange via social media are substantially shaped by existing social, cultural, and digital competencies. On the one hand, structural inequalities emerge with regard to material and technical resources: not all learners have reliable access to digital devices, stable internet connections, or appropriate learning environments. On the other hand, it is precisely

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individual competencies in navigating digital information sources that may exacerbate social disparities. These competencies include, for example, the ability to formulate purposeful and meaningful questions, critically assess the quality and relevance of information, and effectively employ digital tools. Studies have shown that learners need pronounced evaluation competencies to distinguish between reports and commentary and to identify misinformation (Overwien 2013). Since online content cannot automatically be assumed to be democratically equal or free from power, diverse potentials for manipulation arise (cf. Iske et al. 2016, pp. 575f). These dynamics are intensified by rapid developments in artificial intelligence and the growing everyday use of AI tools, whose algorithmic biases reproduce existing inequalities and power structures. An inequality-sensitive perspective is therefore of increasing importance.

The unequal prerequisites that shape informal learning processes—such as opportunity structures, cognitive and sociocultural resources, or life-phase-specific occasions—have so far received limited attention in sustainability and development related discourses, although they appear highly significant. Recent sociological analyses in Germany (e.g., Mau et al. 2023) suggest that societal differences lie less in whether people support climate and environmental protection than in how they evaluate responsibility, assess measures, and perceive the burdens of social transformation. It is precisely here that questions of inequality, justice, and distribution become visible - questions that are negotiated, reproduced, or transformed through informal learning, whether digital or analogue. An intersectional perspective on social inequality is particularly relevant in this context, as axes of difference such as social background, gender, migration history, age, or disability often intersect in informal and digital learning environments, generating specific exclusionary or inclusionary dynamics.

This special issue builds on these considerations and examines the tensions between informal learning, social selectivity, and (digital) educational (in-)equality. The following questions are central, among others:

- How are informal learning processes embedded in different lifeworlds and educational biographies, and how do these embeddednesses shape access to sustainability- and development-related learning and educational contexts?

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- What opportunities and limitations does informal learning offer for sustainability education and Global Learning, and how do broader societal inequalities shape these dynamics?
- To what extent do informal learning spaces—both analogue and digital—contribute to the reproduction or mitigation of social inequalities, particularly where issues of global justice, sustainability, and development are informally negotiated and appropriated?
- What role do digital media play as enabling spaces, filters, or amplifiers of social differences, particularly in sustainability- and development-related learning and educational contexts?
- How do algorithmic selection processes and AI-based recommendation systems influence informal learning opportunities in the context of sustainability- and development-related themes, and to what extent do they reproduce or intensify existing social inequalities?
- What risk factors and protective mechanisms emerge in light of the increasing mediatization and AI permeation of informal learning processes?
- Which theoretical and methodological approaches are suitable for examining informal learning at the intersection of sustainability, justice, and digitality?

We welcome contributions that examine these interrelations **empirically, theoretically, or conceptually** and offer new perspectives on informal learning in the context of (digital) (in-)equality in sustainability- and development-related learning and educational settings.

The submission deadline for abstract proposals (**up to 5,000 characters including spaces, excluding references**), along with **information about the authors** (name, institution, research areas), is 31 January 2026. Please send submissions to: jana.costa@lifbi.de.

Upon acceptance of the abstract, the full papers should comprise approximately 40,000 characters (including spaces and references). Further information on formatting and criteria will be provided with the acceptance notification.

Feedback on the abstract proposals will be provided by the **end of February 2025**, and the final submission of the full papers is scheduled for **17 May 2025**.

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