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Book Review

AI Schools and the New Child Labor, by Kenneth J. Saltman, Cambridge University Press, 2026, 75 pp., (ebook), ISBN: 9781009853453.

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There is something worth pausing over in the title of this book. The phrase "child labor" carries a weight that most readers associate with factories, mines, and fields, with small bodies doing dangerous physical work in places far removed from the classroom. Placing that phrase next to artificial intelligence and schools feels, at first, like a provocation. But the argument the author builds is more careful than the title might suggest, and by the end of the book, the connection feels less like a rhetorical move and more like a genuine analytical claim that deserves serious engagement. The book argues that when schools adopt AI-driven platforms, children are not simply learning with new tools. They are producing something, specifically data, and that production has real economic value that flows to private companies while the children themselves receive nothing in return. This, the author contends, is a new form of child labor, one that is compulsory, unpaid, largely invisible, and dressed up in the language of innovation and personalization.

In fact, the book's central argument is that the integration of artificial intelligence into schooling is not a neutral technological development but a structural transformation of education into a site of data extraction, one in which children's cognitive and behavioral activity is converted into commercially valuable information without their consent, their awareness, or any meaningful benefit to their learning. The author frames this transformation as a form of labor, specifically a new child labor, and it is around this provocative claim that the book's most generative tensions gather.

AI Schools and the New Child Labor is organized across three substantive chapters and a concluding section, each advancing a distinct stage of the book's argument: the theoretical construction of a new form of child labor, its institutional embodiment in a real school, the possibility of a critical alternative, and a political call to contest the current direction. The book moves deliberately from diagnosis to case study to possibility, and this structure gives its argument both analytical depth and practical urgency.

The first chapter establishes the book's theoretical and political-economic foundations. It defines what the author calls "the new child labor" by arguing that digital educational privatization has transformed schools and students' everyday pedagogical activity into sites of value extraction. When children interact with AI learning platforms, they produce cognitive, affective, and

behavioral data that is harvested by technology corporations for commercial purposes, including advertising, product development, and behavioral prediction. The author documents the scale of this extraction with precision: 96 percent of school applications share data with third parties, and 75 percent of popular educational apps profit directly from student data. This is not incidental data leakage but the structural design of systems whose business model depends on behavioral extraction. Drawing on Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism (2019), the chapter argues that technology corporations do not merely infringe on privacy but actively acquire personal data to shape desires, conduct, and consciousness. The chapter also traces the cultural and political consequences of this process: the normalization of data production as a component of learning, the reduction of education to continuous measurement and testing, the standardization and homogenization of content, the erosion of teachers' professional capacities, and the expansion of surveillance and techno-authoritarianism within the school. The author situates all of this within the broader context of authoritarian politics, the private plunder of public institutions, and the weakening of democratic governance, drawing on Henry Giroux's sustained critique of neoliberalism and its effects on public education (Giroux, 1983, 2004, 2011, 2019).

The second chapter applies this theoretical framework to a concrete institutional case: Alpha School, a private institution in Florida that has become a flagship model for AI-driven education. Alpha's model is built around what its founders call "two-hour learning", in which students complete their academic work through AI-managed platforms in the morning and spend the remainder of the school day on entrepreneurial and life-skills activities. Adult staff function not as teachers but as guides or supervisors of an automated process they did not design. The author's analysis of this model is detailed and damning. The two-hour learning claim rests on a deeply impoverished understanding of what learning actually involves. Learning is not the efficient transfer of information from a database to a student's memory; it is a slow, recursive, socially embedded process of meaning-making that requires time, confusion, conversation, and the kind of responsive human presence that no algorithm can provide. Williamson's work on big data in education (2017) is directly relevant here: what appears as personalized, student-centered learning conceals a deeper standardization, in which students follow algorithmically generated pathways optimized not for their individual development but for the production of clean, analyzable data. Selwyn's empirical documentation of the gap between educational technology's promotional rhetoric and its actual effects on teaching and learning (2016, 2019) reinforces this point throughout the chapter. The author argues that the displacement of teachers by technology is not merely a technical adjustment but a fundamental decision about the value of education, the role of the teacher, the relationship between school and community, and the nature of democratic schooling. Freire's foundational critique of "banking education" (1972) serves as the chapter's implicit normative horizon: the student in an algorithmic classroom is not an agent of inquiry but a data-generating node, and the Alpha model does not accelerate learning so much as replace it with the performance of learning. Fuchs's analysis of digital labor (2014) extends this argument by showing that students in compulsory schooling are in a more coercive position than even the nominally voluntary users of social media platforms whose unpaid activity generates platform value. Eubanks's work on automated inequality (2018) adds a further dimension: algorithmic systems trained on data that reflects existing educational inequalities will not correct those inequalities but optimize around them, directing different students toward different futures in ways that are opaque and difficult to contest.

The third chapter moves from critique to possibility. Having established what AI schooling currently does and how it operates, the author asks whether artificial intelligence can be placed in

the service of critical, public, and democratic education rather than against it. The chapter draws a careful distinction between the limited organizational uses of AI, such as information management and administrative efficiency, and the irreducibly human demands of critical pedagogy, which depends on lived experience, historical and social context, questions of power and inequality, and genuine human dialogue. Technology is not inherently condemned to extractive use. The chapter examines examples of investigative and political uses of technology that have served to expose power and violence, recover suppressed knowledge, support collective inquiry, strengthen social and political agency, and produce public knowledge. These examples do not resolve the contradictions the book has identified, but they demonstrate that the current trajectory is not inevitable. The question of what AI does in schools is ultimately a political question, not a technical one, and the answer depends on who controls the technology, for what purposes, and under what conditions of democratic accountability.

The concluding chapter draws together the book's central thesis: AI in education can either transform schools into data factories for authoritarian capitalism or be deployed within a framework of critical and democratic pedagogy. The conclusion insists that technology has no predetermined destiny. The path taken depends on political struggle, public policy, and the active participation of teachers, students, unions, and communities. This is not a counsel of despair but a call to contest the new child labor before its institutional infrastructure becomes irreversible.

The theoretical scaffolding the book erects is substantial. Drawing on Freire's foundational critique of banking education, in which knowledge is deposited into passive students rather than constructed through dialogue and lived experience, the author argues that AI-driven personalized learning systems represent not a departure from this model but its most technically perfected expression (Freire, 1972). The student in an algorithmic classroom is not an agent of inquiry but a data-generating node, responding to prompts, completing tasks, and producing behavioral signals that the system processes and monetizes. Freire's insistence on education as a practice of freedom, as a relational and dialogic encounter between teachers and students embedded in their social world, serves as the book's implicit normative horizon, the vision of schooling against which the AI school is measured and found wanting.

Giroux's work on critical pedagogy and the politics of neoliberalism provides the book with its structural analysis. Giroux has argued across several decades that the reduction of education to measurable outcomes, the displacement of teachers' professional judgment by standardized protocols, and the subordination of public schooling to market logics represent a form of authoritarianism that operates through the language of efficiency and innovation rather than through overt coercion (Giroux, 1983, 2004, 2011). The book applies this framework directly to the AI school, reading the algorithmic management of learning not as a technical solution to pedagogical problems but as the institutional expression of a political project: the privatization of public education, the erosion of democratic accountability, and the replacement of the teacher as a thinking professional with the teacher as a monitor of automated processes. Giroux's more recent work on the terror of the unforeseen (2019) resonates throughout the book's warnings about the irreversibility of these transformations once they become embedded in institutional infrastructure.

The book's engagement with Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism is perhaps its most theoretically productive move. Zuboff (2019) demonstrated that the major technology companies of the digital economy do not merely collect data as a byproduct of their services; they systematically harvest behavioral data to construct predictive models of human desire and action, which are then sold to advertisers and other clients seeking to influence behavior at scale. The

book extends this analysis directly into the school, arguing that educational technology platforms operate according to the same logic: the child's engagement with a learning application generates data that is far more valuable to the platform's commercial interests than any educational outcome it might produce.

Williamson's work on big data in education (2017) provides the book with its most granular account of how datafication operates within schools. Williamson has shown how the introduction of digital platforms into classrooms creates what he calls "platform pedagogies," in which the apparent personalization of learning conceals a deeper standardization: students follow algorithmically generated pathways that are optimized not for their individual development but for the production of clean, analyzable data. Selwyn's sustained critical examination of educational technology (2016, 2019) reinforces this point, documenting the gap between the promotional rhetoric of educational technology and the empirical reality of its effects on teaching, learning, and the professional lives of educators.

The book's treatment of teachers deserves particular attention. One of the most consistent findings in the critical literature on educational technology is that the introduction of digital platforms tends to deskill teachers, replacing their professional judgment with algorithmic recommendations and reducing their role to the management of student compliance with platform requirements. The author documents this process in detail, arguing that digital privatization makes incessant data production and testing the dominant mode of pedagogy and systematically undermines teachers' professional capacities to relate knowledge and learning to student experience, community knowledge, and the broader social and political world. This is not a minor adjustment to professional practice; it is a fundamental transformation of what it means to be a teacher, and the book is right to treat it as such.

The labor argument at the book's center is both its most original contribution and its most conceptually demanding. The author contends that what is at stake in AI schooling is not only surveillance but the reorganization of students' and teachers' everyday pedagogical activity as a form of value-producing labor. Fuchs (2014) has argued that users of social media platforms are unpaid laborers whose activity generates the surplus value that sustains the platform economy; the book applies this framework to the school, where the compulsory nature of attendance makes the extraction of student data even more coercive than the nominally voluntary participation of social media users. Yet the labor framework also introduces complications that the book does not fully resolve. Labor as a category has long been anchored to adult workers in contractual employment, and stretching it to encompass children in compulsory schooling risks either weakening its analytical force or rendering invisible the particular forms of vulnerability that define childhood as a social condition. Children are not simply small adults whose data is being extracted; they are developing persons whose cognitive, emotional, and social capacities are being shaped by the environments in which they learn. Eubanks's work on automated inequality (2018) is relevant here: algorithmic systems do not merely extract value from marginalized populations but actively reproduce and entrench the conditions of their marginalization.

The book is not without its limitations. The analysis is occasionally more polemical than the evidence strictly supports, and the author's normative commitments, while clearly articulated, sometimes lead to a flattening of the genuine complexity of the educational technology landscape. Not all AI applications in education are equivalent, and the book's tendency to treat them as expressions of a single extractive logic can obscure important differences in design, governance, and effect. The book also engages relatively little with the perspectives of students themselves,

which is a significant omission in a work that places children's experience at the center of its argument.

These are real limitations, but they do not undermine the book's central achievement. *AI Schools and the New Child Labor* makes a serious and well-grounded case that the current trajectory of AI integration in education poses fundamental threats to children's development, teachers' professionalism, and the democratic purposes of public schooling. It does so by bringing together critical pedagogy, surveillance studies, and the political economy of platform capitalism in a synthesis that is theoretically rigorous and practically urgent. At a moment when AI is being promoted as the solution to every educational problem, this book performs the essential critical function of asking what problems AI schooling itself creates, and for whom.

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