

Integrating Artificial Intelligence into Middle School Education: Pathways, Challenges, and an Ethical Reappraisal from a Practitioner-Scholar Perspective

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: Artificial Intelligence Middle School Education Personalized Learning Educational Equity Teacher Agency Educational Ethics	The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has accelerated its transition in education from conceptual debate to practical classroom implementation. As a pivotal stage in the formation of students' cognitive structures, learning habits, and value orientations, middle school education occupies a particularly sensitive position in this transformation. Introducing AI at this level offers significant potential to enhance instructional precision and learning efficiency. At the same time, it raises critical concerns related to educational equity, the redefinition of teachers' professional roles, and the ethical dimensions of technology adoption. Drawing on the authors' practical experience as middle school mathematics teachers and school administrators and informed by recent scholarship from both domestic and international contexts, this study provides a systematic overview of current AI applications in middle school settings. It examines feasible approaches to the use of AI in personalized instruction, classroom management, assessment practices, and educational resource allocation. Furthermore, from the perspectives of educational ethics and institutional governance, the paper critically analyzes emerging risks, including student data privacy, algorithmic bias, the expansion of the digital divide, and shifts in teacher–student relationships. The study argues that the sustainable and responsible integration of AI in middle school education cannot be achieved through technological advancement alone. Instead, it requires a holistic governance framework that is student-centered, teacher-led, and firmly grounded in ethical principles. Such a framework is essential to ensure that AI functions as an enabling tool for education rather than a source of fragmentation within the teaching and learning process.

1. Introduction

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into educational practice has moved beyond speculative discourse and entered a phase of active implementation. Middle schools, serving as a critical bridge between primary and upper secondary education, represent a distinctive institutional and developmental context in which adolescents' cognitive growth, learning habits, and emerging value orientations are actively shaped. Hu et al. (2026) argue that successful digital transformation requires 'dynamic capabilities' across business, technology, and societal domains. Similarly, middle schools must develop the institutional capacity to adapt their pedagogical strategies and administrative structures

to this new technological paradigm. Unlike primary education, which emphasizes foundational skills, or higher education, which prioritizes disciplinary specialization and learner autonomy, middle school education occupies a transitional stage characterized by heightened developmental sensitivity and institutional regulation (Ryan & North, 2022; Wang & Degol, 2020). Accordingly, the introduction of AI at this level presents a dual dynamic, combining significant pedagogical potential with heightened ethical and professional vulnerability.

AI-enabled tools offer opportunities to personalize learning pathways, enhance formative assessment, and reduce the administrative burden placed on educators (Holmes et al., 2022). Nevertheless, when introduced without sufficient pedagogical

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reflection or institutional safeguards, such technologies risk weakening the interpersonal relationships that underpin effective teaching and learning. Prior studies have shown that automated instructional and monitoring systems may unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities, marginalize professional judgment, or normalize data-intensive surveillance practices within classrooms (Selwyn, 2023; Zhao, 2023). These risks are particularly salient in middle school settings, where students' learning identities and social dispositions remain highly malleable.

Successful AI implementation relies heavily on the culture of the institution. As observed in organizational studies, sustainability-oriented innovation mediates the relationship between creativity and performance (Xie et al., 2025). Despite the rapid expansion of research on AI in education, existing review studies exhibit several limitations that justify the need for a focused reappraisal currently. First, many existing reviews adopt an overarching perspective focused on either the entire K–12 spectrum or higher education, providing limited differentiation of pedagogical approaches and institutional frameworks specific to the middle school context (Cantrell & Hughes, 2022). Second, a considerable number of these reviews concentrate primarily on technical implementation and learning outcomes, while dedicating substantially less analysis to ethical governance, teacher agency, and developmental appropriateness (Zhu et al., 2023). Third, much of the synthesized literature originates from research paradigms prevalent before the rise of generative artificial intelligence. These works often do not sufficiently examine how progress in generative AI since 2022 may challenge established assumptions regarding authorship, evaluation practices, and patterns of interaction between humans and AI within classroom environments (Kasneji et al., 2023). Consequently, there remains a lack of integrative reviews that simultaneously address applications, ethical challenges, and governance questions specific to middle school education in the contemporary AI landscape (Holmes et al., 2022; Selwyn, 2023).

Situated at the intersection of professional practice and academic inquiry, this study adopts a practitioner–scholar perspective informed by the authors' direct experience in middle school mathematics teaching and school administration. Rather than positioning practitioner insight as anecdotal commentary, this perspective functions as an interpretive lens that sensitizes the review to classroom-level decision points, institutional constraints, and ethical tensions encountered in everyday educational practice (Kennedy, 2021). Avoiding both uncritical technological optimism and generalized moral panic, the study aims to provide a balanced, analytically grounded synthesis of current scholarship.

Accordingly, this paper is positioned as a structured, critical scoping review. Drawing on principles of systematic inquiry while allowing for conceptual and ethical analysis, the review examines three interrelated questions:

- (1) How is AI currently applied in middle school educational contexts?
- (2) What pedagogical, ethical, and professional challenges emerge from these applications?
- (3) What forms of governance and institutional mediation are required to ensure responsible and developmentally appropriate integration?

By addressing these questions, the study argues that the sustainable integration of AI in middle school education cannot be achieved through technological advancement alone. Instead, it requires a holistic governance framework that is student-centered, teacher-led, and grounded in ethical and developmental principles,

ensuring that AI operates as an enabling educational resource rather than a source of fragmentation or control.

1.1. Literature Review Approach

To develop a comprehensive and up-to-date synthesis of research on AI in middle school education, this study adopts a structured literature review approach informed by scoping review methodology. In line with the purpose of a scoping review, this study does not seek to assess effect sizes or make causal inferences. Instead, it focuses on delineating key research domains, highlighting conceptual tensions, and synthesizing recurring patterns across empirical studies, theoretical contributions, and policy-oriented literature. The review is guided by selected elements of the PRISMA-ScR framework, thereby enhancing procedural transparency while retaining analytical flexibility (Tricco et al., 2018).

Focusing on literature published between 2019 and 2024, the review reflects both the accelerated pace of AI-related technological development and the parallel evolution of ethical and governance debates in education. Within this temporal scope, particular attention is given to studies published after 2022 in order to assess whether and how generative AI developments challenge earlier findings and conceptualizations. The review process was organized into four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and synthesis (Page et al., 2021).

During synthesis, empirical studies, conceptual analyses, and policy reports were analytically distinguished rather than treated as equivalent forms of evidence. Empirical findings informed discussions of observed practices and documented risks, while conceptual and policy-oriented sources were used to contextualize normative debates and governance frameworks. This distinction supports a more analytically robust synthesis and prevents the conflation of evidence types in drawing review-level conclusions (Sutton et al., 2019).

1.2. Theoretical Underpinnings

The analysis in this study is grounded in a dual theoretical framework that integrates a critical sociotechnical perspective and a constructivist, sociocultural understanding of learning. These frameworks are not introduced as abstract background theory, but as explicit analytical lenses that inform the subsequent review of AI applications, challenges, and governance strategies (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Given the developmental sensitivity of early adolescence, such a combined framework is particularly suited to examining how AI reshapes both institutional arrangements and classroom-level pedagogical relationships.

1.2.1. Sociotechnical Systems Theory

The first analytical lens is derived from Sociotechnical Systems Theory, as articulated within critical scholarship on educational technology (Selwyn, 2023; Feenberg, 2017). This perspective explicitly rejects technological determinism, which assumes that the effects of technology unfold in inevitable and linear ways. Instead, it emphasizes the mutual constitution of technological systems and social structures. Within educational contexts, the deployment of artificial intelligence tools, including intelligent tutoring systems, learning analytics platforms, and automated assessment tools is actively shaped by institutional policies, accountability regimes, market forces, and the power relations embedded within school systems. These technologies, in turn, reciprocally influence and reorganize established educational practices and social relationships (Selwyn, 2023). For instance, AI may recalibrate teacher authority, redistribute decision-making power, or redefine what forms of knowledge and performance are valued within classrooms. From a sociotechnical perspective,

concerns such as algorithmic bias, data surveillance, or the erosion of professional autonomy are therefore understood not as isolated technical malfunctions, but as systemic outcomes arising from complex interactions between technological design and social context.

In this study, Sociotechnical Systems Theory informs the analysis of how AI is institutionally embedded within middle school environments. It guides the examination of governance structures, policy arrangements, and organizational practices that shape the adoption and use of AI in schools. Specifically, this lens is employed to examine ethical risks, including data privacy concerns, unequal access to AI-enabled resources, and the increasing reliance on algorithmic decision-making, by framing them as issues of governance rather than solely as technical problems. (Williamson & Eynon, 2020; Perrotta et al., 2023). By foregrounding institutional dynamics and power relations, the sociotechnical framework enables a critical assessment of whose interests are prioritized in AI implementation and how responsibility and agency are redistributed among administrators, teachers, students, and algorithmic systems.

1.2.2. Constructivist and Sociocultural Learning Theory

Complementing the critical sociotechnical perspective, Constructivist and Sociocultural Learning Theory provides a pedagogical foundation for evaluating AI in educational practice. Rooted in Vygotsky’s (1978) work and extended to technology-mediated learning environments (Luckin et al., 2022), this theoretical tradition conceptualizes learners as active agents who construct knowledge through interaction with others and with mediating tools. Learning is understood as inherently social, culturally situated, and developmentally contingent.

A central concept within this framework is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes the role of guidance provided by more knowledgeable others, typically teachers or peers, in enabling learners to progress beyond their current level of competence. In middle school settings, where students are undergoing concurrent development of cognitive capacities and social-emotional skills, such forms of human mediation are particularly crucial. From this perspective, educational technologies are not neutral delivery mechanisms but

mediational artifacts whose pedagogical value depends on how they support dialogue, scaffolding, and meaning making. This study applies constructivist and sociocultural learning theory to evaluate AI applications at the classroom level. The framework is employed to examine whether AI-supported practices, including personalized learning systems, automated feedback tools, and adaptive content platforms, operate as effective mediational tools within socially embedded learning processes. Rather than focusing solely on learning outcomes or efficiency gains, the analysis examines whether AI supports teacher facilitation, peer interaction, and scaffolded learning aligned with students’ developmental needs (Cukurova et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2022). This perspective also informs the ethical evaluation of AI use by raising concerns about technologies that bypass human mediation, isolate learners, or constrain knowledge construction within rigid, algorithmically predefined pathways, thereby limiting opportunities for dialogic and reflective learning (Sullivan et al., 2024).

1.2.3. Integrating the Dual Framework

Taken together, Sociotechnical Systems Theory and Constructivist–Sociocultural Learning Theory provide a coherent foundation for analyzing AI integration in middle school education. While the sociotechnical lens foregrounds institutional power, governance, and ethical risk, the pedagogical lens centers on learners’ developmental trajectories and the quality of educational interaction. Their integration enables this study to address both the political dimensions of AI adoption and the pedagogical conditions under which AI may meaningfully support learning (Luckin et al., 2022). This dual framework underpins the subsequent analysis of AI applications, challenges, and governance strategies, ensuring that discussions of technological innovation remain firmly anchored in educational values and human development.

Together, these frameworks guide the interpretation of reviewed studies by linking technological design to institutional power relations and learning technologies to developmental and pedagogical processes (Selwyn, 2023). This integration ensures that discussions of AI innovation remain anchored in educational values, teacher agency, and human development rather than confined to technical efficiency.

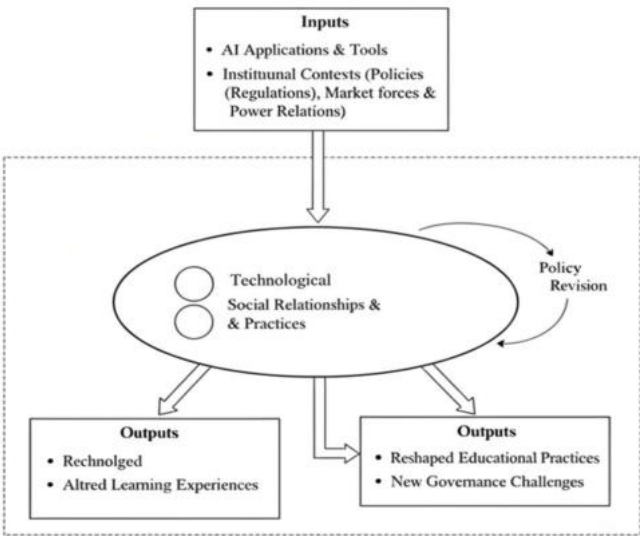


Fig. 1. Theoretical Framework for AI Deployment in Educational Contexts (Selwyn, 2023).

2. Literature Review

The incorporation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into middle school classrooms has generated a diverse set of educational applications, accompanied by sustained pedagogical debate and increasing ethical scrutiny. Rather than treating these applications as a homogeneous category, recent scholarship differentiates AI use in middle school education along functional, pedagogical, and institutional dimensions. Drawing on studies published between 2019 and 2024, this section synthesizes the literature to map key application domains while analytically examining the pedagogical assumptions, empirical effects, and governance implications associated with each.

2.1. Personalized Learning and Intelligent Tutoring Systems

Among the most extensively studied AI applications in education are adaptive learning platforms and Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS). These systems employ machine learning techniques to infer students' knowledge states and algorithmically adjust task sequencing, difficulty levels, or feedback timing. Empirical studies report that ITS can support procedural fluency and short-term performance gains, particularly in structured domains such as middle school mathematics and science (Holmes et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2024).

However, comparative analyses reveal that the notion of "personalization" operationalized in many ITS is pedagogically narrow. In most systems, personalization refers primarily to adaptive pacing and content sequencing within a predetermined curricular framework, rather than to differentiated learning goals, epistemic approaches, or student-generated inquiry. A multi-platform empirical study conducted in U.S. middle schools found that while adaptive systems dynamically adjusted item difficulty and hint provision, they did not accommodate alternative problem-solving strategies or conceptually distinct learning trajectories (Baker et al., 2023).

This distinction between algorithmic personalization and pedagogical personalization is analytically significant. Whereas the former primarily supports efficiency and standardization, the latter emphasizes responsiveness to learners' conceptual understanding, interests, and processes of meaning making. When personalization is limited to algorithmic optimization, learning may become segmented into discrete skill acquisition, thereby constraining opportunities for higher-order reasoning, creativity, and inquiry-oriented learning, which are especially salient during early adolescence (Dillenbourg et al., 2022). These findings suggest that gains in instructional efficiency may coexist with a narrowing of the educational experience.

2.2. Automated Assessment and Feedback

AI has also reshaped assessment practices through advances in Natural Language Processing and learning analytics. Automated writing evaluation systems and process-oriented analytics tools enable the rapid generation of formative feedback, increasing its frequency and consistency at scale (Zhai et al., 2021). Empirical evidence indicates that such systems can assist teachers in identifying learning gaps and monitoring class-wide progress, especially in large or resource-constrained classrooms.

At the same time, methodological analyses highlight systematic limitations in what automated assessment systems could capture. Qualitative dimensions of student work, including originality, rhetorical nuance, ethical reasoning, and socio-emotional expression, remain difficult to capture through computational models (Knight & Shum, 2021). Consequently, assessment practices risk becoming increasingly oriented toward what is readily machine-readable rather than what is pedagogically and

educationally meaningful. From an analytical perspective, this shift has important implications for how learning is conceptualized and valued, as it may subtly privilege efficiency and standardization over interpretive judgment, reflective thinking, and holistic student development. From an analytical perspective, this raise concerns not only about measurement validity but also about the normative effects of assessment technologies (Perrotta et al., 2023). When feedback systems privilege quantifiable indicators, they may subtly reshape curricular priorities and students' perceptions of success, reinforcing instrumental conceptions of learning at the expense of reflective and dialogic engagement.

2.3. Classroom Management and Interaction Analytics

Another growing application domain involves AI-powered classroom analytics dashboards that visualize indicators such as participation frequency, on-task behavior, and collaborative interaction patterns (Holmes et al., 2022). Proponents argue that these systems enhance teachers' situational awareness and support data-informed instructional decisions.

Critical scholarship, however, cautions that the translation of complex social interactions into simplified metrics entails significant epistemic and ethical trade-offs. Engagement, when operationalized through observable and countable behaviors, risks being detached from students' intrinsic motivation, emotional states, and informal peer learning. Perrotta et al. (2023) describe this trend as an emerging "pedagogy of control," in which algorithmic visibility and managerial oversight increasingly shape classroom norms.

Importantly, these concerns are not speculative but are grounded in qualitative studies documenting shifts in teacher practices and classroom discourse following the introduction of analytics dashboards. Such findings underscore that classroom management technologies may reconfigure power relations and pedagogical priorities rather than merely supporting instructional efficiency.

2.4. Resource Redistribution and the Equity Promise

AI is frequently positioned in policy discourse as a tool for advancing educational equity, particularly through the deployment of intelligent tutoring platforms and virtual instruction in under-resourced or geographically remote schools (UNESCO, 2023). These initiatives aim to expand access to high-quality instructional resources and expert support.

Empirical research, however, complicates this narrative by demonstrating that access to AI systems does not automatically translate into equitable educational outcomes. Studies consistently identify a "second-level digital divide" related to differences in teacher capacity, implementation quality, infrastructural reliability, and cultural relevance. A longitudinal study in Chinese middle schools found that identical AI tutoring software produced divergent engagement patterns and learning gains across rural and urban contexts, mediated primarily by teacher training and institutional support conditions (Kong et al., 2024).

These findings suggest that equity outcomes are shaped less by the presence of AI technologies per se than by the socio-institutional environments in which they are embedded. When these mediating conditions are ignored, AI interventions may inadvertently reproduce or intensify existing inequalities.

2.5. Synthesizing Applications, Benefits, and Constraints

To consolidate the analysis, Table 1 synthesizes key AI application domains, their typical functions, empirically supported benefits, and documented challenges. Importantly, the challenges

summarized are drawn from peer-reviewed empirical studies and critical analyses rather than speculative ethical commentary.

Table 1. Overview of Key AI Applications, Benefits, and Challenges in Middle School Education

Application Area	Exemplary Tools/Functions	Claimed/Potential Benefits	Key Challenges & Risks (Literature-based)
Personalized Learning & Intelligent Tutoring	Adaptive Learning Platforms, Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS)	Provides individualized learning paths, addresses knowledge gaps, and can improve efficiency in mastering foundational skills in subjects like mathematics (Chen et al., 2024).	Time: 1-2 month separation (indoor)
Automated Assessment & Feedback	Automated Writing Evaluation, Process Analytics Tools	Enables immediate, scalable formative feedback, reduces teacher grading load, and helps identify class-wide learning needs (Zhai et al., 2021).	Time: 3 sessions, time unknown (indoor)
Classroom Management & Interaction Analytics	Learning Analytics Dashboards, Monitoring of Engagement & Collaboration Patterns	Offers teachers real-time insights into classroom dynamics, supporting differentiated instruction and reflective practice (Holmes et al., 2022).	Time: Two weeks (indoor)
Resource Redistribution & Equity Promise	AI Tutoring Platforms for under-resourced schools, Distribution of digital resources	Aims to bridge geographic and resource gaps by providing access to quality instruction and materials, promoting equity of opportunity (UNESCO, 2023).	Location: Indoor and Outdoor (same day) Noise addition to eye co-ordinates

Challenges listed are derived from empirical and analytically grounded studies.

2.6. Cross-cutting Ethical and Professional Challenges

Rather than treating ethical and professional concerns as isolated add-ons, the literature increasingly conceptualizes them as cross-cutting governance issues that cut across application domains. Three categories of challenges are most consistently documented.

First, data privacy and security risks are empirically observed concerns, particularly in middle school settings involving minors. Studies document opaque data flows, unclear consent mechanisms, and limited institutional oversight in AI-enabled educational platforms (Regan & Jesse, 2019; Willis et al., 2023).

Second, algorithmic bias represents an empirically substantiated risk rather than a purely speculative concern. Research demonstrates that systems trained on historically biased datasets may deliver systematically different learning opportunities and feedback quality to students from marginalized backgrounds (Kizilcec & Lee, 2022).

Third, the literature identifies tensions surrounding teacher professionalism and autonomy. While some empirical studies report reductions in administrative workload, qualitative research highlights processes of de-professionalization, whereby teachers’ pedagogical judgment is increasingly constrained by algorithmic recommendations and performance indicators (Selwyn, 2023).

Collectively, these findings support the interpretation of AI integration in middle school education as a socio-ethical governance challenge rather than a neutral technological upgrade.

3. Discussion

Integrating insights from the literature with practical observations highlights a complex set of considerations that intersect pedagogical challenges and systemic demands. AI offers

unprecedented opportunities for tailored educational experiences. While Hu (2024) discusses differentiation primarily as a market strategy in the international education industry, this principle holds profound pedagogical relevance. By leveraging AI, educators can move from a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model to a differentiated approach that caters to the unique learning profiles of individual students, essentially applying a strategic differentiation framework to the classroom setting to enhance learner engagement and outcomes. The following sections examine these issues in depth, emphasizing both the promise and the tensions inherent in AI integration within middle school education, with explicit attention to pedagogy, governance, and ethics as interrelated dimensions rather than isolated concerns.

3.1. The Algorithmic Paradox of Personalization and Pedagogical Tensions

A key tension arises in the application of AI to personalized learning. Although such systems demonstrate strong capacity for sequencing instructional content and calibrating learning pace at the individual level, this predominantly engineering-oriented logic may be misaligned with constructivist and sociocultural principles of learning. Meaningful personalization entails sensitivity not only to learners’ cognitive needs, but also to their interests, cultural frames of reference, and evolving social identities—dimensions that remain largely inaccessible to algorithmic systems relying primarily on behavioral traces or performance-based metrics (Dillenbourg et al., 2022).

Consequently, there is a risk that a focus on remediating knowledge gaps and optimizing mastery timelines may inadvertently standardize learning outcomes. Students may efficiently reach similar competency benchmarks, albeit along slightly different algorithmically guided pathways. The pedagogical challenge, therefore, does not lie in rejecting AI-supported personalization, but in intentionally incorporating diagnostic insights generated by AI into learning designs that

foster student agency, creativity, and collaborative knowledge construction. These dimensions extend beyond the representational and procedural capacities of algorithmic systems (Knight & Shum, 2021).

In essence, the critical issue is not the automation of personalization itself, but whether AI is used to support more humane, context-sensitive, and developmentally appropriate teaching practices.

3.2. Asymmetry of Power and the Imperative for Data Governance

The ethical terrain of educational AI is shaped by a profound asymmetry of power and expertise. Schools and educators frequently operate as policy takers, obliged to implement digital systems whose algorithmic logic and underlying datasets are proprietary and controlled by external commercial entities, a dynamic that has been critically described as the “phantomization” of education (Perrotta et al., 2023).

This structural imbalance magnifies other ethical concerns. For instance, effective mitigation of algorithmic bias presupposes institutional authority to audit training data and decision rules, a capacity rarely available to individual schools or districts (Stahl et al., 2023). Likewise, student data privacy is compromised when contractual arrangements are non-negotiable and educational data are treated primarily as corporate assets rather than public goods.

Addressing these challenges demands a shift from individual-level vigilance to institutional capacity building and collaborative governance. Districts and schools must cultivate internal expertise or participate in consortia capable of critically evaluating AI systems, negotiating transparent contractual terms, and establishing formal ethical review mechanisms for technology adoption (Stahl et al., 2023). Such arrangements promote collective responsibility and systemic safeguards, aligning AI deployment with public accountability rather than market-driven imperatives.

3.3. Reconstituting Teacher Professionalism: From Tool Operation to Pedagogical Data Fluency

The role of teachers in AI-enhanced classrooms requires nuanced reconceptualization. The primary risk is not outright replacement, but the gradual erosion of professional judgment as instructional decisions become increasingly mediated by algorithmic outputs. The realization of augmented professionalism therefore depends on the development of pedagogical data fluency—a competency extending far beyond operational familiarity with software interfaces (Holmes et al., 2022).

Pedagogical data fluency encompasses the capacity to interrogate the assumptions embedded in metrics (e.g., questioning why certain behaviors are privileged as indicators of “engagement”), to integrate algorithmic recommendations with professional observation, and to design instruction that situates AI insights within a holistic pedagogical framework (Ng et al., 2023). Teacher expertise in synthesizing human judgment with AI-generated information thus remains a uniquely irreplaceable human function, central to ethical and effective educational practice.

3.4. Beyond Access Parity: Toward Equitable Distribution of Benefit and Agency

Equity discussions must extend beyond the mere provision of technology. Achieving fairness in AI-mediated education requires attention not only to access, but also to the distribution of benefits and the agency of users (Kong et al., 2024). This entails a multifaceted approach: ensuring that AI tools in under-resourced

schools are pedagogically robust and culturally responsive; investing in sustained professional learning and in-school technical support; and involving diverse communities in co-design and evaluation processes to avoid reproducing dominant cultural norms.

Absent these deliberate measures, AI integration risks entrenching a subtle tiered system: students in privileged contexts may experience AI as a tool for enrichment and exploration, while disadvantaged peers encounter it primarily as a mechanism for compliance and basic skills acquisition. A justice-oriented framework is therefore essential, positioning educational technology as a lever for equity rather than a vehicle for reproducing structural inequalities (García et al., 2023).

Taken together, these discussions indicate that the challenges associated with AI integration in middle school education extend well beyond issues of technological functionality. They implicate pedagogical integrity, professional judgment, ethical responsibility, and equitable governance, underscoring the need for integrated frameworks of AI adoption (Zimmermann et al., 2023).

4. Conclusion

This study highlights that the integration of artificial intelligence into middle school education represents a critical moment of transition. Evidence from both the literature and classroom practice indicates that approaches dominated by technical considerations, particularly those prioritizing automation, efficiency, and metric-driven outcomes, carry significant risks. These risks include ethical compromise, a narrowing of pedagogical practices, and the potential intensification of existing social inequities.

In contrast, an approach grounded in developmental pedagogy and ethical reflection conceptualizes AI as a supportive component within a holistic educational ecosystem. From this perspective, AI is positioned to enhance rather than replace human relationships, while contributing to students’ comprehensive intellectual, social, and moral development.

Realizing such a vision requires concrete and coordinated measures. These include the development of ethical guidelines tailored to middle school contexts, the empowerment of teachers as curriculum designers and critical evaluators of educational technologies, and the cultivation of inclusive dialogue among educators, researchers, policymakers, families, and students.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal investigations into the long-term impacts of AI on adolescent cognitive, social, and emotional development, alongside studies of school-level governance models that promote accountability, transparency, and equity.

Ultimately, success should be measured not by the sophistication of AI systems, but by their alignment with the enduring aims of education: to cultivate informed, principled, and empowered learners.

Author Contribution

Xiaoling Zhang (first and corresponding author) conceived the research idea, led the design of the theoretical framework, and oversaw the structure and writing of the manuscript. She was also responsible for the coordination of the literature synthesis and the integration of practitioner insights with academic discourse.

Wenwen Xu contributed to the development of the review methodology, participated in the analysis of AI applications and their classroom implications, and assisted in drafting and revising the manuscript.

Both authors reviewed and approved the final version.

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Competing Interest declaration

The author declare that, to their knowledge, they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest regarding the work described in this manuscript.

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