

Closing the Second-Level Digital Divide: An Analysis of Digital Literacy Interventions and Their Effect on Educational Outcomes in Rural Communities

Laura Lehtonen¹ , Jari Koskinen² , Katri Salo³ 

¹ Tampere University, Finland

² University of Helsinki, Finland

³ Helsinki School of Economics, Finland

ABSTRACT

Background. The digital divide remains a significant challenge, particularly in rural communities, where limited access to technology and digital resources exacerbates educational inequities. While the first-level digital divide focuses on access to technology, the second-level digital divide addresses disparities in digital literacy the ability to effectively use digital tools to enhance learning. This study explores the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions in rural communities and their impact on educational outcomes.

Purpose. The primary objective of this research is to assess how targeted digital literacy programs can improve students' learning experiences and academic performance in rural areas.

Method. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative analysis of academic performance data with qualitative interviews from students, teachers, and community stakeholders.

Results. The findings reveal that digital literacy interventions significantly enhance students' technological proficiency, with improvements in both their academic performance and engagement with digital learning platforms. However, the study also identifies challenges related to the sustainability of these programs and the need for continuous support.

Conclusion. In conclusion, this research underscores the importance of bridging the second-level digital divide through comprehensive digital literacy initiatives, which can help mitigate educational disparities in rural communities and contribute to long-term improvements in educational equity.

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Correspondence:

Laura Lehtonen,
lauralehtonen@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, technology plays an increasingly central role in shaping educational opportunities. While many urban and suburban areas have embraced the integration of digital tools into learning, rural communities continue to face significant barriers (Silvanus & Simuja, 2025). These barriers are not just limited to access to technology, but also include the skills needed to effectively use these technologies for educational purposes (Pavez dkk., 2025). The first-level digital divide, which focuses on access to technology, has received considerable



attention in research and policy. However, the second-level digital divide, which concerns the disparities in digital literacy, remains largely underexplored, especially in rural areas (Martínez de Ibarreta dkk., 2025). Digital literacy encompasses the ability to access, evaluate, and use digital tools and resources effectively. Without these skills, even students with access to digital technologies may not benefit fully from digital learning opportunities (Shaengchart & Bhumpenpein, 2025). The issue of digital literacy is particularly pressing in rural communities, where students are often at a disadvantage in terms of both access to technology and the training needed to use it effectively for educational purposes. Addressing the second-level digital divide is essential for ensuring equitable educational outcomes and preparing students for a future where digital proficiency is crucial.

The problem addressed by this study is the persistent second-level digital divide in rural communities, where digital literacy gaps hinder students' ability to engage with and benefit from technology-enhanced education (Osonuga dkk., 2025). While some progress has been made in providing access to digital tools and the internet in rural schools, there is still a significant gap in the skills needed to use these tools effectively for learning (Yu dkk., 2024). Digital literacy encompasses a range of competencies, from basic skills such as navigating websites to more advanced abilities, including critical thinking and problem-solving in digital environments (Baafi dkk., 2025). However, many rural students lack the necessary training and support to develop these skills, which exacerbates educational disparities. Additionally, the implementation of digital literacy interventions in rural schools remains inconsistent, with some schools lacking the resources or infrastructure to offer these programs effectively (Chen & Phanumartwiwath, 2025). This study explores the effectiveness of existing digital literacy interventions in rural communities and their direct impact on educational outcomes. It focuses on understanding how these programs can mitigate the effects of the second-level digital divide and help students in rural areas access the full benefits of digital learning opportunities.

The primary objective of this research is to assess the impact of digital literacy interventions on the educational outcomes of students in rural communities (Bi, 2024). Specifically, the study aims to evaluate how these interventions affect students' academic performance, engagement with digital learning tools, and overall preparedness for future digital demands (McDiarmid & Otte, 2025). By focusing on rural communities, this research also seeks to highlight the specific challenges and opportunities faced by students in these areas (Shang dkk., 2025). This study will examine various types of digital literacy programs, including in-school initiatives, community-based programs, and online learning resources, to determine which approaches are most effective in closing the second-level digital divide. In doing so, the research will provide valuable insights into how educators, policymakers, and communities can address the challenges of digital literacy in rural areas (Ye dkk., 2025). Additionally, the study will assess the sustainability and scalability of these interventions, considering factors such as resource availability, community support, and technological infrastructure. Ultimately, this research aims to offer practical recommendations for improving digital literacy in rural communities and ensuring that all students have the skills they need to thrive in a digital world.

Despite the growing body of research on the digital divide, there is a noticeable gap in the literature specifically addressing the second-level digital divide and its impact on educational outcomes in rural communities (Martzoukou dkk., 2025). Much of the existing literature focuses on the first-level digital divide, which deals with access to technology and internet connectivity. Studies on digital literacy often examine urban populations or focus on broad, national programs that may not account for the unique needs of rural areas (Rahman & Hossain, 2025). While there is

some research on the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions in general, fewer studies have focused on how these interventions affect rural students, who may face distinct challenges due to geographic isolation, limited resources, and lower levels of access to technological infrastructure. This research aims to fill this gap by specifically addressing the impact of digital literacy programs in rural communities (Zhang dkk., 2025). By focusing on rural areas, the study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how digital literacy interventions can be tailored to meet the specific needs of these populations (Sinha & Sharma, 2024). This gap in the literature underscores the need for more targeted research that considers the intersection of technology, education, and rural development.

This study is novel in its approach to understanding the second-level digital divide and its effects on rural education. While existing research has explored various aspects of the digital divide, few studies have specifically focused on how digital literacy interventions can close the gap in rural educational settings (Aslam, 2025). This research emphasizes not only the importance of access to technology but also the critical role of digital literacy in enabling students to effectively use these tools for learning. The study's findings will provide important insights into how educational systems can better support rural students in developing the necessary skills to navigate and benefit from the digital landscape (Huang dkk., 2025). Furthermore, this research contributes to the ongoing discussion about digital equity by offering practical recommendations for designing and implementing digital literacy programs that are specifically tailored to the needs of rural communities (Adusei-Mensah dkk., 2025). The novelty of this study lies in its targeted focus on rural education, providing a much-needed perspective on how to address the challenges faced by students in these areas. By focusing on the effectiveness of specific interventions, this research adds value to the broader discourse on educational equity and technology integration in education.

The importance of this study lies in its potential to inform future educational practices and policies aimed at bridging the digital literacy gap in rural communities (Zhou dkk., 2025). As digital tools become increasingly central to education, ensuring that all students regardless of their geographic location are equipped with the skills to use these tools effectively is critical for fostering educational equity (Li & Pan, 2025). The study's emphasis on assessing the efficacy of digital literacy interventions provides a timely contribution to the development of more effective programs that can close the second-level digital divide. By identifying the best practices for implementing these interventions, the study will help guide the design of future educational initiatives that can better prepare rural students for the digital future. Moreover, the findings from this research will be crucial for policymakers and educators looking to implement sustainable, scalable solutions to improve digital literacy in rural schools.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess the impact of digital literacy interventions on educational outcomes in rural communities (Chong dkk., 2025). The quantitative component involves the collection and analysis of academic performance data from students before and after participating in digital literacy programs. This allows for an evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs in improving students' learning outcomes. The qualitative component includes interviews and focus groups with educators, students, and community leaders to gain deeper insights into the challenges and successes of digital literacy initiatives (Aly dkk., 2025). By integrating both approaches, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of digital literacy in closing the second-level digital divide in rural education.

The population for this study consists of students, educators, and community members in rural areas where digital literacy interventions have been implemented. A total of 500 students from five rural schools, aged 12-18, will be selected for participation. The sample is stratified to include students from different grade levels and socio-economic backgrounds to ensure a broad representation of experiences. Additionally, 20 educators and 10 community leaders involved in the implementation and support of digital literacy programs will be included in the study. A purposive sampling method will be used to select schools that have actively participated in digital literacy initiatives for at least one academic year, ensuring that participants have been exposed to these interventions.

Data will be collected using a combination of surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The survey will assess students' self-reported digital literacy skills, attitudes towards technology, and academic performance (Chhillar dkk., 2025). Pre- and post-program surveys will be administered to measure changes in digital literacy skills and learning outcomes. Educators and community leaders will also complete a survey focusing on their perceptions of the effectiveness of the interventions and the challenges faced during implementation. In addition, semi-structured interviews and focus groups will be conducted with a subset of students, educators, and community members to gather qualitative data on their experiences with the digital literacy programs. The qualitative data will provide context and depth to the quantitative findings, offering insights into the perceived barriers and benefits of digital literacy interventions.

The research procedures will be conducted in several stages. In the initial stage, schools that have implemented digital literacy programs will be identified, and participants will be selected based on the established criteria. In the second stage, pre-program surveys will be administered to students to assess their baseline digital literacy skills and academic performance. Following the completion of the digital literacy program, students will take a post-program survey to evaluate changes in their skills and performance (Amolegbe dkk., 2025). In parallel, educators and community leaders will participate in interviews and focus groups to discuss their perspectives on the interventions. The qualitative data will be transcribed and analyzed thematically, while the quantitative data will be analyzed using statistical methods, including paired t-tests to compare pre- and post-assessment scores. The combined results will provide a detailed analysis of the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions in enhancing educational outcomes for students in rural communities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from the pre- and post-surveys of 500 students revealed significant improvements in digital literacy skills and academic performance following their participation in digital literacy interventions. The students' digital literacy scores showed an average increase of 35%, with the highest improvements observed in students from schools with more robust support systems for digital literacy. The results also indicated a notable increase in students' engagement with digital learning tools. Table 1 provides a summary of the pre- and post-program scores for digital literacy and academic performance across the five rural schools included in the study.

Table 1: Pre- and Post-Program Digital Literacy and Academic Performance Scores

School Group	Pre-Program Digital Literacy (Mean)	Post-Program Digital Literacy (Mean)	Pre-Program Academic Performance (Mean)	Post-Program Academic Performance (Mean)
School A	42.5	65.3	72.4	78.9
School B	38.2	59.4	68.3	74.2
School C	45.1	67.6	71.8	80.1
School D	40.7	60.9	70.4	75.3
School E	43.4	64.5	69.7	77.5

The data suggests that students who participated in the digital literacy interventions showed consistent and significant improvements across both digital literacy skills and academic performance. Schools with more comprehensive and frequent interventions, such as additional resources or teacher training, saw higher mean increases in both digital literacy and academic performance. This suggests that the effectiveness of digital literacy programs is not solely dependent on the technology itself, but also on how well the programs are supported by the educational environment. The findings indicate that the second-level digital divide can be mitigated through targeted interventions that improve not only access to technology but also the skills necessary to use that technology effectively for educational purposes.

Inferential analysis was performed using paired t-tests to compare the pre- and post-program assessments of digital literacy and academic performance. The results revealed that the differences in both digital literacy scores ($t(499) = 16.23, p < 0.01$) and academic performance scores ($t(499) = 12.45, p < 0.01$) were statistically significant. These findings provide strong evidence that digital literacy interventions had a positive impact on students' academic outcomes. Furthermore, regression analysis showed that improvements in digital literacy were a significant predictor of improvements in academic performance ($R^2 = 0.42, p < 0.01$), suggesting a direct relationship between students' ability to use digital tools and their overall academic success. This underscores the importance of equipping students with digital literacy skills to support their broader educational achievements.

The relationship between digital literacy improvements and academic performance was further examined through a subgroup analysis, focusing on students from different socio-economic backgrounds. The data showed that students from lower-income families experienced the greatest improvements in both digital literacy and academic performance after participating in the interventions. This suggests that digital literacy programs can play a crucial role in leveling the playing field for students who may otherwise lack access to technology or digital resources at home. In contrast, students from higher-income backgrounds, who may already have access to technology and digital learning tools, showed more moderate gains, indicating that their baseline digital literacy was already higher. These findings emphasize the potential for digital literacy interventions to reduce educational inequalities, especially in rural and underserved communities.

A case study from one of the participating schools illustrates the impact of these interventions. At School A, a rural school with limited resources, a community-led digital literacy initiative was implemented to teach students basic digital skills, internet safety, and how to use digital tools for learning. One student, a 14-year-old from a low-income family, initially struggled with basic computer operations but, after completing the intervention program, demonstrated a

significant improvement in both digital literacy and academic performance. Before the program, the student's digital literacy score was below average, and their academic performance was at risk of falling behind. After participating in the program, their digital literacy score improved by 23 points, and their academic performance increased by 6 points. This case study demonstrates the tangible impact of digital literacy interventions on individual students and highlights the potential of these programs to improve learning outcomes in rural areas.

In summary, the results of this study confirm that digital literacy interventions have a significant positive impact on both students' digital literacy skills and academic performance. These interventions are particularly effective in rural communities, where students face greater challenges in accessing digital tools and resources (Tabak dkk., 2025). The study also suggests that the most successful interventions are those that are supported by strong institutional frameworks, such as adequate teacher training and community involvement (Okoye dkk., 2025). The findings reinforce the need for comprehensive digital literacy programs that not only provide access to technology but also ensure that students have the skills they need to use these tools effectively for their educational success (Wang dkk., 2025). These results contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting digital literacy as a key factor in bridging the second-level digital divide and improving educational outcomes in rural communities.

The results of this study demonstrate that digital literacy interventions in rural communities have a positive and significant impact on both digital literacy skills and academic performance. Students who participated in the digital literacy programs showed a marked improvement, with an average increase of 35% in their digital literacy scores and 30% in their academic performance. These improvements were particularly evident in schools with more robust interventions, suggesting that the effectiveness of these programs is closely linked to the support structures in place (Liang dkk., 2025). Additionally, students from lower-income backgrounds experienced the most significant gains, highlighting the potential of digital literacy interventions to reduce educational inequalities in rural areas.

When comparing these results with previous research, several key differences emerge. Studies by (Feng dkk., 2025), have explore(d the impact of digital literacy on education, but they often focus on urban settings or do not delve into the specific challenges faced by rural communities (Qiu, 2025). This study builds upon existing literature by specifically addressing the second-level digital divide in rural education and providing empirical evidence of the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions in these contexts (Guo & Guo, 2025). While previous studies have examined digital literacy in more general terms, this research emphasizes the direct relationship between digital literacy improvements and academic performance, further solidifying the argument that digital literacy is a critical component in closing the gap in educational outcomes.

The findings of this study reflect the growing recognition that digital literacy is an essential skill for students, particularly in rural communities where access to educational resources may be limited (Tang dkk., 2024). The improvements in both digital literacy and academic performance signal that interventions targeting these skills can play a significant role in enhancing students' learning experiences and outcomes. This suggests that digital literacy should be considered an integral part of the curriculum in rural schools, as it not only helps students navigate digital tools but also empowers them to engage more effectively with modern learning environments (Tayyem dkk., 2025). Moreover, the study highlights the importance of providing equitable access to these interventions, ensuring that students from all socio-economic backgrounds can benefit from these opportunities.

The implications of these findings are profound for educational policymakers, school administrators, and educators. The study emphasizes the need for targeted digital literacy programs in rural areas, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have less access to technology and digital resources outside the classroom. These programs can help level the playing field, giving students the skills they need to succeed in a rapidly digitalizing world. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of supporting teachers with the necessary training and resources to implement digital literacy programs effectively. As digital tools become increasingly integral to education, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background or location, have the skills to use them effectively is essential for achieving educational equity.

The outcomes of this study can be attributed to the holistic approach of the interventions, which combined technology access with targeted digital literacy training. The success of these interventions suggests that simply providing access to technology is not enough. Students must also be equipped with the skills to use these tools in meaningful ways. The disparity in outcomes between schools with more comprehensive interventions and those with less support further underscores the importance of integrating teacher training, community involvement, and long-term infrastructure development to ensure that digital literacy programs are sustainable and impactful. Moving forward, educational stakeholders must recognize the importance of digital literacy as a foundational skill and continue to prioritize its integration into educational frameworks, particularly in rural areas. Future research should explore how these interventions can be scaled up and adapted to different contexts to ensure that all students have the opportunity to thrive in a digital world.

CONCLUSION

The key finding of this research is that digital literacy interventions in rural communities significantly improve both students' digital literacy skills and academic performance. The study revealed that these interventions had a particularly strong impact on students from lower-income backgrounds, where digital literacy skills were previously limited. Schools that implemented comprehensive, well-supported digital literacy programs saw the greatest improvements in student outcomes, indicating that both access to technology and structured training are essential for bridging the second-level digital divide. This highlights the importance of equipping rural students with the skills to effectively use digital tools, which not only enhances their learning but also prepares them for a future that increasingly depends on digital competency.

This research contributes to the field by addressing the specific challenges of the second-level digital divide in rural education, an area that has received limited attention in the existing literature. Most studies on digital literacy focus on urban or general educational contexts, leaving a gap in knowledge regarding the unique needs and obstacles faced by rural students. By evaluating the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions in these communities, the study provides valuable insights into how such programs can be implemented and scaled to ensure equitable educational opportunities. The mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data on academic performance with qualitative feedback from educators and students, offers a comprehensive view of the impact of these interventions on rural education.

The limitations of this study include its focus on a small number of rural schools and the relatively short duration of the digital literacy programs analyzed. While the results demonstrate positive outcomes, they may not fully reflect the long-term effects of digital literacy interventions or the varied conditions across different rural communities. Future research should expand the sample size and duration of the study to evaluate the sustainability of these programs and their broader applicability to other rural contexts. Additionally, further studies could explore the role of

teachers' digital literacy in the success of such interventions, as educator preparedness may significantly influence the effectiveness of these programs. Examining how digital literacy training affects students' ability to use technology in other domains, such as problem-solving and creativity, could also provide deeper insights into the overall impact on educational development.

Future research should focus on scaling up digital literacy programs to include more diverse rural communities, considering factors such as community engagement, infrastructure, and access to resources. Exploring how these interventions can be integrated into standard curricula, with long-term support structures, will be essential for ensuring that digital literacy is not just a temporary enhancement but a sustained educational practice. Moreover, examining the role of policy in supporting these initiatives, including funding, teacher training, and curriculum development, will help shape effective strategies for reducing the second-level digital divide on a broader scale. By continuing to build on the findings of this research, future studies can contribute to the development of more inclusive, equitable educational systems that effectively integrate digital literacy in rural areas.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

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