Protecting and Equipping: EU-LAC Stakeholder Perspectives on Youth Digital Policy

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Executive Summary

Governments and private actors across the EU and LAC are simultaneously restricting access to smartphones and social media and investing in digital skills programs, often without these two policy tracks informing each other. This brief asks why that gap persists and what closing it could look like. Drawing on interviews with educators, parents and caregivers, NGO practitioners, industry actors, and researchers working directly with young people across both regions, it offers a ground-level map of how different stakeholders understand the tension between protecting young people online and equipping them to thrive in digital environments. Readers will find an account of where stakeholders diverge, where they are beginning to converge, and what practitioners across both regions are already doing to hold protection and provision rights together, treating digital skills as part of what provision rights mean in practice. The brief closes with four directions for EU-LAC cooperation that build on what is already working on the ground, treating the diverse approaches being tried across both regions as a shared resource for regulatory learning.

1. Context and Problem Statement

At a time when governments across the world were moving to ban smartphones from classrooms and restrict social media access, digital skills were being named among the most critical competencies for the twenty-first century (UNICEF, 2025). Digital technology is rapidly becoming a defining feature of how young people learn, socialize, and engage in public life (Council of Europe, 2020), while simultaneously emerging as a subject of growing alarm among policymakers, parents, and public health researchers (WHO/Europe, 2025).

As the debate has taken shape, these two responses, restricting access and building digital skills, have developed largely in parallel with limited dialogue between them. Restrictive measures have rarely been systematically assessed for their impact on skill acquisition, and digital literacy initiatives have tended to be designed with limited reference to the regulatory landscape shaping children's access to digital environments (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2025).

This tension has sharpened over the past decade. As smartphones became ubiquitous and social media expanded among younger age groups, governments faced growing pressure to legislate in response to documented harms including cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, and risks to mental health (Bhaimiya, 2024). Restrictive measures such as smartphone bans, platform age limits, and content filtering emerged as visible, politically tractable responses weighted toward protection. At the same time, international organizations and governments were investing in digital literacy programs, recognizing digital competency as a prerequisite for civic participation and economic inclusion.

Understanding what is at stake for young people in this debate requires attending to their specific rights and needs. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, extended to the digital environment through General Comment No. 25, establishes that all actions regarding digital environments should ensure children's best interests and be responsive to their ages and stages of development (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021). Scholars and practitioners commonly organize children's rights into three clusters: protection, provision, and participation, and propose that a holistic approach requires advancing all three together (Cortesi & Gasser, 2017; Livingstone & O'Neill, 2014). Seen through this lens, the parallel development of these two policy tracks points to the need for a more integrated approach.

How the debate has unfolded in practice reveals the range of perspectives on what a more integrated approach to all three rights would entail. Those who support restrictions argue

that young people need guidance to navigate digital environments safely, and that unsupported access can pose real risks to their wellbeing and development (OECD, 2025). Critics counter that broad restrictions, applied without investment in skills development, tend to deepen existing inequalities by removing access without providing alternatives (UNESCO, 2023). This concern is especially significant in regions such as LAC, where 225 million people still lacked mobile internet access in 2023, and where restrictions imposed on top of already unequal access risk widening the digital divide rather than addressing it (GSMA, 2024). Unintended consequences have also been noted, as measures such as removing accounts for minors may lead platforms and digital providers to deprioritize safety resources tailored to younger users, working against the very protections they aim to deliver (OECD, 2025; UNICEF, 2026).

Across both regions, policymakers have moved quickly to regulate young people's digital lives, but the two policy tracks have accelerated separately rather than together. On the protection side, a growing number of European countries including France, the Netherlands, Italy, Hungary, and Greece have implemented or are actively debating smartphone bans in schools, while Brazil enacted a federal law in early 2025 limiting smartphone use for students aged 4 to 17 nationwide. At the platform level, the EU's Digital Services Act introduced measures to protect children from online risks such as grooming, harmful content, and cyberbullying, applicable to all online platforms accessible to minors. On the provision and participation side, UNICEF's regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean has been working to develop digital skills in education systems, promoting digital citizenship and coexistence skills for teachers, children, and adolescents (UNICEF, 2026). The EU's DigComp framework has meanwhile become one of the primary reference tools for digital literacy programs internationally, including those adapted for use in UNICEF initiatives (Nascimbeni & Vosloo, 2019).

Where there is broader agreement is on the inadequacy of approaches taken in isolation (Livingstone et al., 2011; Livingstone et al., 2018). Research consistently suggests that the most effective interventions are those that treat protection, provision, and participation as mutually reinforcing rather than competing obligations, embedding all three within wider frameworks that address mental health, relationships, and civic life (Frontiers in Digital Child Safety Working Group, 2025). Young people's experiences of risk and opportunity online tend to be deeply intertwined, and developing the skills to navigate digital environments can itself function as a form of protection (Cortesi & Gasser, 2026; Frontiers in Digital Child Safety Working Group, 2025). Policy designed around one dimension alone tends to fall short of young people's actual needs.

To examine how these tensions work in practice, this brief draws on interviews with educators, parents, researchers, and industry leaders across the EU and LAC regions. These stakeholders work directly with young people and provide grounded insights into the trade-offs of youth digital policy. While the direct voices of young people themselves remain a recognized gap in the field and an important direction for future research that we hope to motivate, EU-LAC cooperation offers a productive space for advancing a more holistic response, including common competency standards, cross-regional exchange mechanisms, and evaluation tools that treat protection, provision, and participation as complementary rather than competing goals.

2. Methodology

This section describes the approach used to map the values and dynamics driving current policy divergence in youth digital governance. The analysis is designed not to resolve that divergence but to make it legible: to surface what are the values underlying each approach,

who upholds them, how they travel across actor types and regional contexts, and where convergence or dialogue might be possible.

This brief builds on the working group's prior youth policy brief about how age is used as a narrative in digital governance. Where that work examined policy documents and regulatory frameworks to map how the bifurcation is constructed at the policy level, this brief moves closer to where policy is actually experienced: in classrooms, community organizations, and family homes across the EU and LAC regions. Through semi-structured interviews with educators, parents and caregivers, NGO practitioners, industry actors, and researchers, it asks how the values, needs, and concerns of those closest to the debate shape how the bifurcation is understood, sustained, and in some cases navigated in practice. The perspectives of young people themselves are not directly represented in this analysis, which remains a recognized gap in the field and one that this brief hopes to encourage future research to address.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) to cover a range of stakeholders involved in shaping, implementing, and experiencing youth digital policy, including educators, public institution representatives, civil society and NGO practitioners, and researchers with expertise in digital governance, children's rights, and media literacy. Geographically, participants from Latin America and the Caribbean were based in Argentina, Uruguay, the Dominican Republic, and Peru, while European participants were based in Germany, Italy, and Spain, with several working in organizations with reach across both regions.

Interviews were conducted synchronously via video call or asynchronously via structured email exchange, in Spanish and English. Themes were allowed to emerge from the data in response to a set of guiding questions. This analysis uses their accounts to shed light on the broader values, assumptions, and structural conditions that sustain the bifurcation identified in the problem statement.

3. Values Shaping The Digital Youth Policy Debate: A Stakeholder Perspective

The bifurcation described in the previous section, between policy tracks that restrict access and those that build digital skills, reflects deeper and genuinely different perspectives about young people, about risk, and about where responsibility for their digital lives should sit. Understanding where those differences are sharpest, and where they are beginning to converge, is a necessary step toward moving the digital youth policy debate forward. This section draws on interviews conducted with educators, parents and caregivers, NGO coordinators, industry practitioners, and researchers working directly with young people across the EU and LAC regions.

3.1 Where Stakeholders Diverge

Mapping where and why stakeholders hold different views on this debate is a productive pathway for “regulatory learning”, as a process which *involves gathering, analyzing and utilizing any evidence or knowledge relevant to current or future regulatory policy, typically produced through the process of experimenting with innovative regulatory approaches (Gasser et al, 2025)* a conceptual cornerstone of the HEMISPHERES Project. What looks like points of divergence often reveal that different actors are looking at the same problem from different positions, each capturing something real about risk, equity, how young people develop, and where accountability actually sits. Three recurring tensions are particularly

worth understanding from this perspective, and the interviews presented here provide substance to how different stakeholders across the EU and LAC regions are making sense of them.

3.1.1. The Mechanism of Protection Matters as Much as Its Intent

Parents, policymakers, and many educators share a genuine concern: that unregulated digital access during developmentally sensitive periods exposes young people to content and interaction architectures that are difficult (e.g., impulsivity, social sensitivity, vulnerability to comparison) to perceive or resist without support. Dominican parent Sugeldi Rosario Mena articulates a view shared by many across both regions: parents feel called, by social expectation and by law, to ensure the safety of their children online. From this vantage point, the case for restriction is not only understandable but compelling, driving much of the political momentum behind restrictive measures.

Researchers and civil society organizations, however, draw attention to something the protection-first view can miss: the mechanism of protection matters as much as its intent. Parental monitoring tools and school surveillance platforms collect data on intimate dimensions of young people's lives, even when deployed with care. Educators and researchers s reported that the collateral effect of these measures may be the erosion of relational trust rather than greater safety. Relational trust is arguably the most effective protective resource a young person can draw on in a moment of genuine digital distress. Age verification mandates that require identity document uploads or biometric scanning introduce a different kind of risk: they expose young people to data vulnerability and normalize citizen identification practices whose implications extend well beyond their protective purpose.

What this reveals is that the design of protection measures shapes their effectiveness as much as their intent (Cortesi & Gasser, 2026). When the mechanisms used to protect young people erode the relational trust they depend on in moments of genuine digital distress, or expose them to new data vulnerabilities, the protective purpose of those measures may be undermined by their own implementation (Bello, 2025). General Comment 25 of the UNCRC establishes that all children's rights, including provision and participation, apply in the digital environment, and that states are obligated to ensure children can realize them safely (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021). Measures that restrict access without attending to these broader rights obligations may therefore fall short of states' full duties under the Convention. Young people, in this view, are not simply recipients of governance but stakeholders in it, with a legitimate interest in how protective measures are designed and evaluated.

3.1.2 The Same Measure Protects Some and Excludes Others

The debate over school device bans brings the equity dimension of the bifurcation into sharp focus. The same measure that functions as a protective boundary in one context can function as a barrier to access in another, and the interviews suggest that stakeholders on both sides are responding to that tension from genuinely different positions.

Proponents of bans argue that removing devices from classrooms may level the playing field among students, reducing the visibility of inequalities in device quality and data plan access. They also point out that school-enforced boundaries around device use can offer a form of consistent protection that parents and caregivers in under-resourced households may find difficult to provide at home, particularly those working long hours who cannot afford daycare or after-school supervision for their children. Educator Dominik Siegel, working in Freiburg, Germany, described how, in lower socioeconomic contexts, parents and caregivers working long shifts often have little time to engage with their children around device use, leaving young people with smartphones and several hours of unsupervised screen time. From this

perspective, the school ban may function as a form of institutional care, potentially upholding the right to protection for young people whose parents or caregivers work long hours and cannot always sustain consistent oversight at home.

Stakeholders working in different contexts, however, see the same measure differently. In communities where home internet access is intermittent and shared devices are the norm, school-based digital access is often the primary means through which young people exercise their right to provision and participation. Parent Yeymi Saavedra described how, in lower-income households, parents and caregivers often share a single device, leaving children without reliable access of their own and making school-based provision of computers and after-school hours essential for young people to complete their work. In rural areas, the situation can be even more stark. An educator from Peru noted that in some communities, internet providers simply do not reach, and that without school-based provision and offline alternatives, young people in those areas have no meaningful access at all. NGO coordinator Jacinto Sención, working in the Dominican Republic, suggested that in this context blanket restrictions can disproportionately harm the most vulnerable, effectively deepening the digital divide for those who already have the least access. Uruguay's Plan Ceibal, which integrates device provision with digital citizenship education, has built this recognition into its design from the outset, treating access and protection as conditions that need to be built together rather than traded off against each other.

As an NGO practitioner and lecturer, Luisina Ferrante cautioned, device ban policies developed in one socioeconomic context are often applied in very different ones, and the structural consequences of strict exclusions can be considerably more complex than policymakers anticipate. This is not an argument for applying different rules to different groups of young people. The concern is rather that uniform policies applied across unequal contexts may produce unequal outcomes, and that governance which treats all young people as if they were starting from the same place risks deepening the very inequalities it aims to address. EU-LAC cooperation, across regions with significantly different socioeconomic and infrastructural contexts, may offer a productive space for developing frameworks that are shared in their rights commitments while remaining responsive to the conditions in which those rights need to be realized.

3.1.3 Responsibility Is Assigned Where Capacity Is Weakest

Perhaps the most consequential tension in this debate concerns where responsibility for governing young people's digital lives actually sits, and whether those assigned that responsibility have the capacity to fulfill it. The stakeholder positions here are genuinely different, and mapping them helps explain why both policy tracks, whether protective measures or building digital skills, can feel inadequate when implemented without addressing the structural conditions that shape what young people encounter online.

Many families, policymakers, and community members tend to hold the conviction that parents and caregivers bear primary responsibility for their children's digital lives. The difficulty, as practitioners in both regions observed, is not one of intent but of capacity. Parent representative Sugeldi Rosario Mena described how most parents come from an analog era, while their children tend to be considerably more agile at getting around the boundaries adults try to set. This generational gap is compounded by the absence of the kind of protective structures that exist in other areas of young people's lives. Industry practitioner Moritz Hutzler noted that while young people tend to be intuitive and capable with technology, the guidance and safeguarding frameworks that protect them in physical environments are largely missing in digital ones. Researcher Matías Dodel, himself digitally fluent, described his own difficulties configuring parental control tools, suggesting that the limits of family-level governance may apply even where the will and technical capacity are present.

Part of what makes this so difficult is the nature of the environments young people are navigating. Practitioners across both regions drew attention to something that tends to get lost when responsibility is framed primarily as a family matter: the platforms young people use are not simply neutral spaces. They are environments that may be deliberately engineered, at least in part, to capture and hold attention. These design choices actively shape how young people exercise their right to participation in ways that may work against their right to protection.

Industry practitioner Sandra Arellano described how large technology companies deploy personalized algorithms whose primary purpose tends to be monetizing user engagement, while educator Francisco Pérez noted that keeping users on screen for as long as possible appears to be a central goal of platform design rather than merely a side effect. Educator Dominik Siegel added that these systems tend to surface content that confirms and engages, potentially nudging users toward habitual and sometimes harmful patterns of use. Hutzler suggested that young people may therefore face structural risks through algorithm-driven platforms that go well beyond individual behavior or family-level choices, and that relying solely on external restrictions may leave young people ill-prepared for digital environments that will only grow more complex.

NGO practitioner Ezequiel Paseron suggested that expecting families and schools to govern young people's digital lives without regulating the companies whose design choices shape what those lives look like in practice may be asking the wrong actors to carry the heaviest load. He cautioned that framing digital harms as individual or family failures risks directing attention away from the platform architectures generating the behavior, and that when addiction language is used, it tends to position the young person as the problem rather than the systems they are navigating.

Mapping this disagreement does not dissolve it. But it does signpost what more effective governance may need to do: distribute responsibility in ways that are more proportionate to each actor's actual capacity to shape outcomes, and build frameworks in which platforms, families, schools, and the state each carry the part of the load they are genuinely equipped to handle, placing greater obligations on those with the greatest structural capacity to determine how young people's rights to protection, provision, and participation are realized in practice.

3.2 Where Stakeholders Converge

Despite the different points of view mapped above, the interviews and the evidence suggest a set of emerging shared understandings that may cut across stakeholder positions. These are not settled conclusions. They are areas where practitioners, researchers, parents and caregivers, and policymakers from different vantage points appear to be arriving at similar places. Taken together, they may provide a foundation for the priority directions developed in the roadmap section that follows, and for the EU-LAC cooperation agenda this brief argues for.

3.2.1 Engagement as a Path to Digital Skills

Across both regions, stakeholders who have worked through the tension between digital skills building and protection are increasingly recognizing that the capacity to navigate digital environments responsibly tends to develop through structured engagement with those environments, not through prior abstinence from them. Industry practitioner Moritz Hutzler described how the key challenge is not to eliminate digital tools but to teach young people how to use them responsibly, drawing a parallel with how societies approach other potentially dangerous technologies: we do not ban cars because they are dangerous, we teach people how to drive them safely.

Governance that defers skills building and participation until young people are deemed ready for protection may be working against the very outcome it seeks to achieve. Educator Marcela Tovar argues that while temporary restrictions may be appropriate for very young children, the ultimate policy goal needs to focus on building the awareness and judgment that allow young people to make autonomous decisions, rather than maintaining external controls indefinitely. Hutzler reinforced this point, suggesting that without skills, young people tend to remain dependent on those external controls, and that preparing them for digital environments increasingly shaped by AI may require building both protection and skills together rather than in sequence.

3.2.2 The Design of Protection Shapes Its Effectiveness

Measures that erode relational trust, expose young people to new data vulnerabilities, or remove the very access through which provision and participation rights are exercised may undermine their own protective purpose. Industry practitioner Moritz Hutzler cautioned that parental control tools can sometimes function more like surveillance systems, and that building trust with young people may require respecting a degree of privacy within the family. NGO practitioner Ezequiel Paseron similarly noted that strict enforcement mechanisms can introduce new risks of their own: age verification systems that require biometric data from young people may open up vulnerabilities that are as serious as the harms they aim to prevent.

Stripping away access entirely may also disproportionately affect the most vulnerable. Jacinto Sención suggested that for marginalized young people, losing access to digital platforms can deepen the digital divide rather than protect them from it. Similarly, Luisina Ferrante observed that blanket prohibition tends to function as a quick response that leads to exclusion rather than the development of the skills young people actually need. Effective protection may therefore need to be designed with its broader rights consequences in mind. As Ferrante suggested, the goal may be better understood as a collective process that ensures young people can be safe online while also equipping them with the tools to navigate their digital lives actively.

3.2.3 Responsibility Needs to Match the Capacity to Act

Stakeholders across both tracks are beginning to recognize that more effective governance may require distributing responsibility in ways that better reflect each actor's actual capacity to shape outcomes. Rather than placing the heaviest obligations on families and schools, whose capacity to govern digital environments is structurally limited, governance frameworks may need to place greater accountability on the platform companies whose design choices most directly determine what young people encounter online. NGO coordinator Jacinto Sención suggested that moving forward may require a shared approach in which each sector, including the state, schools, platforms, and families, plays a clearly defined role, with the state stepping in as an active regulator rather than leaving families to manage alone. Researcher Matías Dodel reinforced this, observing that without the genuine involvement of all these actors together, any governance solution is likely to fall short.

3.2.4 The Three Rights Are Interdependent

Perhaps the most significant area of emerging shared understanding is the recognition that protection, provision, and participation may need to be addressed together. Researcher Adrián Gutiérrez observed that promoting digital skills and protecting young people from online risks tend to be complementary rather than competing objectives.

Restricting access without building the conditions for provision and participation may leave young people unequipped the moment the restriction lifts. Educator Marcela Tovar noted that the goal of regulatory policy may need to go beyond maintaining external controls, focusing

instead on building the awareness and judgment that allow young people to make more autonomous decisions over time. Industry practitioner Moritz Hutzler similarly suggested that without skills, young people may remain dependent on those external controls rather than developing the capacity to navigate digital environments on their own terms.

At the same time, building skills without attending to protection may leave young people to navigate, alone, environments that are designed to capture and shape their behavior. Educator Francisco Pérez noted that expecting young people to navigate these spaces without protective safeguards can be difficult, given that the primary goal of many platforms appears to be keeping users engaged for as long as possible. Hutzler added that without adequate protection, young people may be exposed too early to structural risks they are not yet fully equipped to assess.

The most promising approaches may therefore be those that treat protection, provision, and participation as mutually reinforcing rather than competing demands on governance. Hutzler suggested that by combining both protection and skills building governance approaches can prepare young people for digital environments that are likely to change over time.

4. From Divergence to Practice: Four Directions for EU-LAC Cooperation - Building the Roadmap

The convergence points identified above are already being translated into practice by educators, NGO practitioners, researchers, and industry actors across the EU and LAC regions, often without the coordinated frameworks that would allow that practice to be systematized, evaluated, and scaled. Four directions in particular stand out across the interviews, which build on what is already working on the ground and point toward what EU-LAC cooperation could concretely do to support, connect, and extend it.

4.1 Toward Regulated Autonomy: Beyond Banning or Allowing

Stakeholders across both regions agreed that the case for protecting young people in digital environments is compelling. Where they diverged, as section 3.2.1 showed, is on the mechanism. The interviewees consistently suggested that the design of protection matters as much as its intent, and that measures which undermine relational trust or remove the very access through which young people develop digital skills may work against their own protective purpose.

What practitioners across both regions are finding is that the most promising alternative to blanket prohibition is regulated autonomy: progressive, context-sensitive models that build digital self-regulation as a capacity to be developed rather than assuming it exists before access is granted. Researcher Matías Dodel described how the goal is for a young person who can choose not to use their phone during a lesson, not because an adult is watching, but because they have developed the internal capacity to make that choice. Educator Dominik Siegel described how his school builds this through a progressive model in which students earn increasing levels of digital independence as they demonstrate sustained responsible use. Another promising approach described by Educator Francisco Pérez is how his school regulates devices by context rather than banning them outright, keeping the rule clear, situational, and consistent.

These models are generating meaningful outcomes but are operating without shared frameworks to support or evaluate them. EU-LAC cooperation could systematize this practice-level knowledge by learning from regulated autonomy pilots already underway,

including Brazil's national school phone regulation enacted in early 2025 and local hybrid models across the EU, and building mechanisms to share that learning across institutional and regional boundaries. Bi-regional observatories, peer exchange programs between schools, and shared evaluation criteria that track both safety and skills outcomes would all serve this purpose.

4.2 Digital Literacy That Goes Beyond Safety Tips

The interviews consistently identified a significant shift already underway in innovative curricula across both regions: from teaching young people how to use platforms safely, toward helping them understand how platforms work and why they are designed the way they are. This shift matters because, as section 3.3.1 showed, the most durable thing education can build is the adaptive, critical capacity to navigate digital environments, not just proficiency with today's tools.

Curricula emerging from the interview data are moving toward a systemic understanding, including how recommendation systems tend to be optimized for engagement, how to evaluate information sources critically, and how the attention economy operates as a commercial system with real consequences for how young people see themselves and each other. Educator Dominik Siegel described how classroom discussions about compulsive use and social comparison can help young people recognize that experiences they had assumed were personal failings are in fact structural outcomes of deliberate platform design. This reframing, practitioners noted, builds both individual resilience and the quality of conversation between young people and adults in ways that purely restrictive approaches tend not to.

Scaling this requires embedding digital literacy within broader educational frameworks, around health, relationships, and critical thinking, rather than delivering it as a standalone safety module. The challenge, identified consistently across the LAC interviews in particular, is that this kind of curriculum requires educator capacity, institutional support, and time that are unevenly distributed across and within both regions. EU-LAC cooperation could support this by developing shared curriculum resources that treat systemic digital understanding as a core educational outcome, supporting educator training across both regions, and ensuring these approaches reach the contexts where provision and participation rights are most at risk.

4.3 Shared Responsibility: Matching Obligations to the Capacity to Act

The interviews consistently pointed toward a fundamental mismatch between where responsibility for young people's digital lives is assigned and where the capacity to shape outcomes actually resides. Educator Francisco Pérez described how expecting families and schools to manage young people's digital lives without regulating the companies whose design choices define those environments may be asking them to work against the current. NGO practitioner Ezequiel Paseron cautioned that framing digital harms as individual failures risks directing attention away from the platform systems generating the behavior. NGO coordinator Jacinto Sención suggested that moving forward may require a shared approach in which each sector, including the state, schools, platforms, and families, plays a clearly defined role. Researcher Matías Dodel observed that without the genuine involvement of all these actors together, any governance solution is likely to fall short.

The direction this points toward is binding requirements for age-appropriate design: slower feed content recommendations for younger users, transparent algorithmic disclosure, and privacy by default data handling, as conditions of market access rather than voluntary commitments. The EU's Digital Services Act has taken significant steps in this direction,

establishing enforceable obligations for large platforms that represent the most advanced regulatory framework currently in operation. The LAC interview data suggests that regulatory capacity varies significantly across the region, and that many of the young people most affected by platform design choices may have the least access to the protections the DSA is beginning to establish.

This gap is not an argument against cooperation. It may be the strongest argument for it. EU-LAC exchange on regulatory design, implementation experience, and enforcement could offer both regions something they may not easily build alone: the scale, diversity, and shared commitment needed to hold global platforms more accountable for how their design choices affect young people's rights to protection, provision, and participation.

4.4 Equity as a Design Condition

The debate over school device bans, mapped in section 3.2.2, revealed a sharp distributional tension that runs through both policy tracks. The same measure can function as a form of institutional care for young people from low-income households with limited home supervision, and as a removal of the only structured digital access available to young people in under-resourced communities. Both things are true, and both matter.

Parent Yeymi Saavedra described how, in lower-income households, parents and caregivers often share a single device, making school-based provision essential for young people to complete their work. The Peruvian educator noted that in some rural communities, internet providers simply do not reach, and that without school-based provision, young people in those areas may have no meaningful access at all. NGO practitioner Luisina Ferrante cautioned that device ban policies developed in one socioeconomic context are often applied in very different ones, and that the structural consequences of strict exclusions can be considerably more complex than policymakers anticipate.

Any regulatory measure that shapes access to digital environments may need to be accompanied from the outset by investment in alternative access and skills development. Uruguay's Plan Ceibal, which integrates device provision with digital citizenship education, offers a regional model for what it looks like to build equity into the design of a program rather than retrofit it afterward. EU-LAC cooperation could support this by developing shared evaluation tools that assess distributional consequences as a core metric of policy success, alongside learning outcomes and safety indicators, and by mapping and connecting initiatives across both regions that are already building equity into their design.

5. Beyond Bifurcation: A Pathway for Regulatory Learning

The two responses that have come to define this debate, restricting access and building digital skills, have too often been treated as separate policy problems rather than dimensions of a single governance challenge. As this brief has shown, the stakeholders closest to implementation, educators, parents, researchers, and industry leaders across the EU and LAC regions, tend not to experience these as competing demands. In practice, many already work to advance protection, provision, and participation together, embedding all three within the daily realities of how young people learn, socialize, and engage in digital life.

The evidence reviewed here consistently suggests that policy designed around one dimension alone tends to fall short of young people's actual needs. Restrictive measures, while associated with lower risk exposure, can limit the very opportunities through which children learn, explore, and build resilience. Digital literacy initiatives, designed without reference to the regulatory landscape shaping children's access, may fail to reach those who

need them most. What the most effective approaches share is a recognition that developing the skills to navigate digital environments can itself function as a form of protection, and that protection, meaningfully delivered, creates the conditions in which young people can learn and participate safely.

EU-LAC cooperation offers a productive space for advancing this more integrated approach. The diversity of socioeconomic contexts and regulatory traditions across both regions is a resource rather than an obstacle, creating opportunities to develop shared yet adaptable frameworks, including common competency standards, cross-regional exchange mechanisms, and evaluation tools that treat skills development and protection as complementary rather than competing goals. Promising approaches are already emerging from those closest to the daily realities of young people's digital lives. The task for policy is to listen, learn, and build on what is already working.

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