

# A Study on the Ethics of Student Management System from the Perspective of Critical Pedagogy

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## HOW TO CITE:

Han Shang Kun, Putu Kerti Nitiasih, M.A, Ni Wayan Surya Mahayanti, Putu Nanci Riastini, (2026). A Study on the Ethics of Student Management System from the Perspective of Critical Pedagogy. International Journal of Special Education, 41(13s), 254-264

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## ABSTRACT:

Student management systems have become pervasive instruments of governance inside contemporary schooling. This study interrogates the ethics of such systems through the lens of critical pedagogy. The inquiry adopts a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA protocol. Thirty six records were identified through database searching and six through other sources. Four sources met the inclusion threshold and these comprise two documented case studies and two peer reviewed articles. The corpus is read through a Foucauldian and critical theoretical apparatus. Three analytical foci organise the synthesis. The first focus examines hegemonic surveillance and algorithmic governance. The second focus examines critical consciousness and dialogic praxis against digital panopticism. The third focus examines the dialectical tensions and reciprocal causality among dataveillance and emancipatory agency and technocratic dehumanisation. The evidence shows that systems introduced for safety migrate quickly toward discipline and metricisation. The same systems also generate residues of refusal and counterconduct. The study argues that the ethical horizon of student management lies in the restoration of dialogue and the cultivation of critical consciousness. The findings carry implications for educational policy and for the humane design of educational technology.

**Keywords:** critical pedagogy, algorithmic governance, digital panopticism, dataveillance, technocratic dehumanization, emancipatory agency

## 1. Introduction

The student management system has shifted from paper filing to a living system of governance. The school has installed cameras and facial recognition and tracking applications and learning analytics, all of which are managed under one roof. These systems are marketed to parents and teachers as tools of safety, efficiency and equality. But the same systems also subtly reshapes the moral landscape of the school. They

make the learner an always legible object. This study does not consider that conversion to be an upgrade but an ethical event.

There is still a lot of instrumentalist scholarship. It presents the issues of educational technology as usage and management issues, and connectivity issues (Williamson et al., 2024). This framing situates the more profound one of what kind of a subject these systems produce. The present inquiry rejects the bracketing. It poses

questions about the distribution of power in student management systems, and the ways in which they limit or facilitate emancipatory education.

This question is given its normative guidance by critical pedagogy. Tradition holds that education is never neutral. It either domesticates the learner or it produces a critical reading of the world. The emancipatory project is at the centre of dialogue and the awakening of critical consciousness. Both are at risk from surveillance driven management. It is a substitute for dialogue and a substitute for conscience and a substitute for compliance.

The Chinese experience is a rich empirical ground for this argument. The country is a pioneer in saturation of schools with monitoring devices (Shi et al., 2024). By the end of 2021 about 90 percent of its schools had installed closed circuit systems (Shi et al., 2024). The ethical implications are stark in this deployment which is so large and so fast.

This study has three analytical thrusts. The first focus analyzes hegemonic surveillance and algorithmic government within student management systems. The second focus reclaims critical consciousness and dialogic praxis as counterforces to digital panopticism. The third focus theorises the dialectical tensions and the reciprocal causality among dataveillance and emancipatory agency and technocratic dehumanisation. The argument is supported by a systematic literature review to ensure it is based on real evidence. The review is conducted by following the PRISMA protocol and the number of each is reported transparently and quantitatively.

## 2. Theoretical and Philosophical Framing

This study has a conceptual scaffolding that weaves three strands. The first strand is the Foucauldian analytic of power. The second strand is critical pedagogy of emancipation. The third strand is a vocabulary of new constructs made for the digital condition.

The *dispositif* is a strategic arrangement of discourses and institutions and material objects that produces governable subjects (Foucault et

al., 1980). The student management system functions as a *dispositif* of this kind. It connects cameras, dashboards and policy discussion in a single, effective machine (Bailey et al., 2013). The signature diagram of this machine is still the panopticon. The disciplined subject takes the look into itself and regulates itself even if there is no one looking (Foucault et al., 1995). This power is not just repressive in this account. It is generative in the sense that it constructs norms and desires and identities.

The panopticon has been extended to the algorithmic register by contemporary scholars. Now, the classroom has an artificial intelligence that does not only observe but also classifies and predicts and nudges (Dai et al., 2025). I name this configuration the *datapticon*. The *datapticon* is a panoptic structure, but it's not made of masonry; it's made of data. It's a discipline that goes from metrics and scores to automated alerts. There is a complementary vocabulary that distinguishes three optical regimes (Meishar-Tal et al., 2024). The panopticon is a structure that allows the few to observe the many. The synopticon is the means by which the many look upon the few. The *omnipticon* blurs the line and all watch all with the aid of rotating recordings.

Critical pedagogy answers this diagram with a counter diagram. Education for this tradition is a practice of freedom rather than a practice of sorting. The learner is a subject of dialogue and not a deposit account for transmitted content. Subjectivity itself becomes a site of struggle where the neoliberal script can be refused (Ball et al., 2016). The teacher in turn is not a neutral conduit. The teacher is the theatre in which subjects are formed and contested (Ball et al., 2025). Chinese civic pedagogy has long enacted a Foucauldian observation that fuses moral cultivation with quiet correction (Zhao et al., 2019). The same young subjects however can be compliant or cynical or critical and the critical posture is the one that critical pedagogy seeks to nourish (Zhao et al., 2014).

The philosophical kernel of critical pedagogy is a rejection of the banking model of instruction. In that model the teacher deposits inert facts into a

passive receptacle. The receptacle is the silenced learner. Dialogue overturns this relation because it treats knowledge as something forged between equals. The datapticon revives the banking model in an electronic key. It deposits surveillance rather than facts and it withdraws agency rather than ignorance. The ethical quarrel of this study is therefore a quarrel between deposit and dialogue.

From these strands I derive the working constructs of the study. Pedagogical metricisation names the reduction of teaching and learning to scoreable signals. Affective dataveillance names the capture of emotion as governable data. Emancipatory residue names the surplus of agency that the apparatus cannot fully metabolise. These constructs guide the synthesis that follows.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review because the method offers a transparent and replicable route to authentic evidence. The review is reported through the PRISMA protocol. The procedure moved through identification and screening and eligibility and inclusion.

The search interrogated five sources. These were Scopus and Web of Science and ERIC and the Taylor and Francis database and Google Scholar. The search combined three thematic clusters through Boolean logic. Table 1 records the strings. Searches were limited to English language outputs published between 2016 and 2026.

**Table 1. Search strategy and terms.**

| Parameter             | Specification                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cluster A (system)    | "student management system" OR "smart campus" OR "classroom surveillance" OR "smart uniform" OR "facial recognition" |
| Cluster B (lens)      | "critical pedagogy" OR ethics OR governmentality OR emancipation                                                     |
| Cluster C (mechanism) | panopticon OR dataveillance OR "algorithmic governance" OR discipline                                                |
| Boolean rule          | Cluster A AND Cluster B AND Cluster C                                                                                |
| Databases queried     | Scopus and Web of Science and ERIC and Taylor and Francis and Google Scholar                                         |
| Filters               | Published 2016 to 2026 and English language                                                                          |

The selection applied explicit criteria. Table 2 specifies the inclusion and exclusion rules. Records had to address a student management or campus monitoring system inside a school

setting. Records also had to permit an ethical or critical reading. Purely technical evaluations were excluded.

**Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.**

| Inclusion criteria                                               | Exclusion criteria                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Addresses a school based student management or monitoring system | Concerns non educational surveillance only |
| Permits an ethical or critical reading                           | Purely technical or commercial evaluation  |
| Empirical case study or peer reviewed study or documented report | Opinion piece without evidence             |
| Published 2016 to 2026 in English                                | Published before 2016 or not in English    |

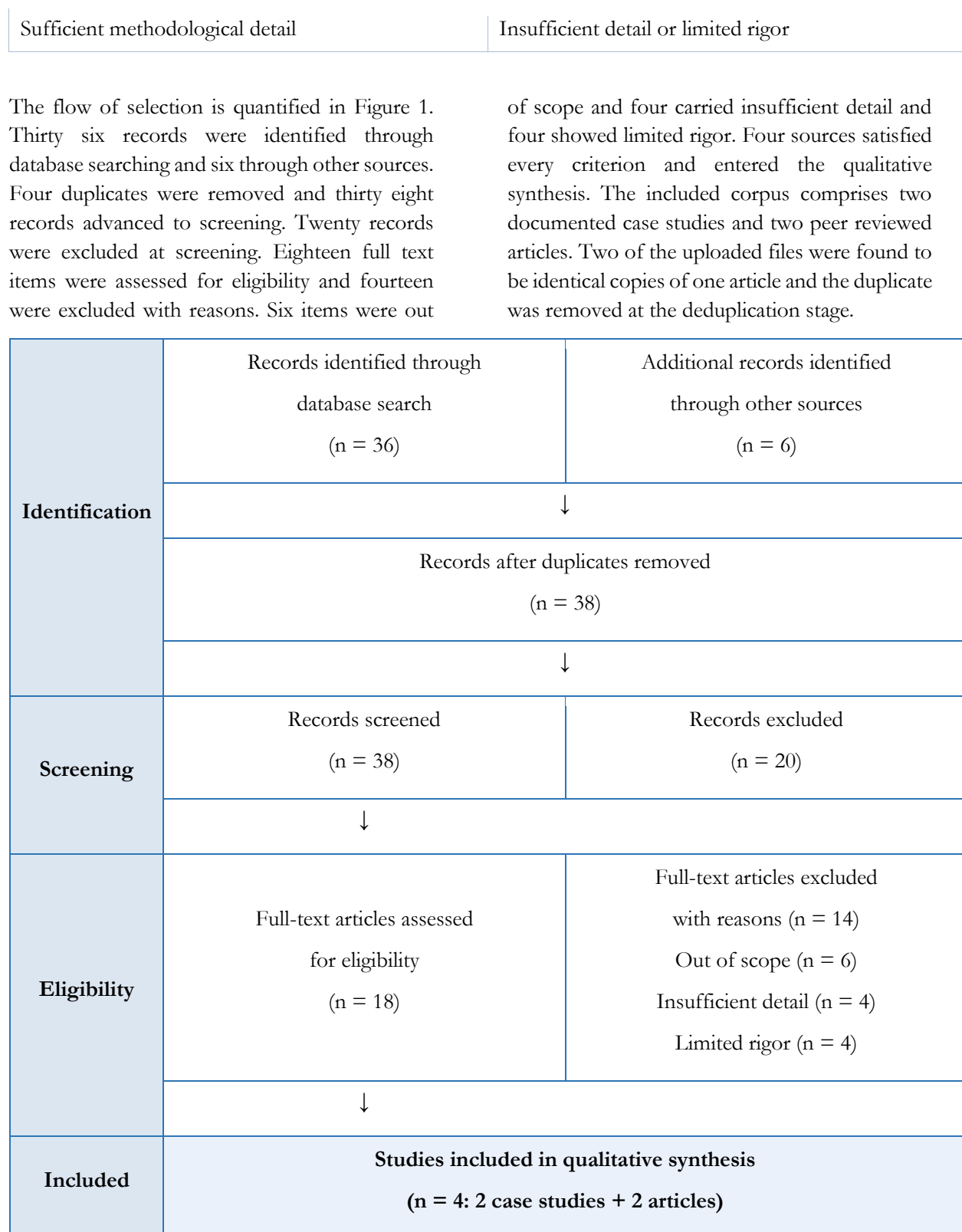


**Figure 1. PRISMA flow of study identification and selection.**

The corpus is rich and quantitatively dense. Case study one reports a smart classroom behaviour system that scans each pupil at short intervals and assigns a real time attentiveness score to the teacher (Best Practice AI et al., 2018). Case study

two reports chipped uniforms that transmit short video clips and arrival alerts to parents (Tang et al., 2019). Article one is an ethnographic study of one school that packed 690 cameras into a campus of 0.1 square kilometre and grew that

count by 70 percent across seven years (Shi et al., 2024). Article two is a Foucauldian study of recorded courses that linked elite providers to 248 recipient schools and reached 72000 pupils between 2016 and 2018 (Li et al., 2026).

Analysis proceeded through deductive thematic coding. Three a priori codes mirrored the three analytical foci of the study. Each source was coded for the presence and intensity of every

theme. Table 3 reports the resulting intensities. All three themes appeared in all four sources which signals strong thematic saturation. Trustworthiness was strengthened through transparent counts and through the triangulation of journalistic and scholarly sources. The chief limitation is the small corpus which suits a critical and interpretive aim rather than a statistical generalisation.

**Table 3. Thematic intensity across the included corpus.**

| Source                       | Hegemonic surveillance | Critical consciousness | Dialectical tension |
|------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Case study 1 (Hangzhou)      | High                   | Low                    | Moderate            |
| Case study 2 (Guizhou)       | High                   | Low                    | Moderate            |
| Article 1 (Shi et al., 2024) | High                   | High                   | High                |
| Article 2 (Li et al., 2026)  | High                   | Moderate               | High                |

#### 4. Findings and Critical Synthesis

Table 4 maps the three themes onto their subthemes and the supporting evidence in the corpus.

**Table 4. Thematic synthesis matrix.**

| Theme                                             | Subtheme                 | Evidence in the corpus                   | Source                          |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Hegemonic surveillance and algorithmic governance | Function creep           | Safety devices repurposed for discipline | (Shi et al., 2024)              |
|                                                   | Affective metricisation  | Expression scored at short intervals     | (Best Practice AI et al., 2018) |
|                                                   | Commercial capture       | Teaching sold per grade each year        | (Li et al., 2026)               |
| Critical consciousness and dialogic praxis        | Exempted space           | Unwatched grove used by pupils           | (Shi et al., 2024)              |
|                                                   | Refusal of the script    | Teacher prefers self made lessons        | (Li et al., 2026)               |
|                                                   | Narrowed fearless speech | Contested themes avoided on camera       | (Li et al., 2026)               |

|                                              |                     |                                 |                    |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Dialectical tension and reciprocal causality | Expansion loop      | Evasion drives more cameras     | (Shi et al., 2024) |
|                                              | Recognition loop    | Star desire sustains submission | (Li et al., 2026)  |
|                                              | Dehumanisation loop | Body reduced to a signifier     | (Shi et al., 2024) |

#### 4.1 Hegemonic Surveillance and Algorithmic Governance

The first focus exposes how student management systems operate as engines of hegemonic surveillance and algorithmic governance. The evidence reveals a relentless function creep. Systems justified by safety drift swiftly toward discipline and management (Shi et al., 2024). In the ethnographic case the camera count rose

from 410 in 2014 to 690 in 2021 which is a 70 percent expansion across seven years (Shi et al., 2024). Nationally about 90 percent of schools had installed closed circuit systems by the end of 2021 (Shi et al., 2024). The apparatus does not merely grow in size. It grows in ambition.

Table 5 compares the surveillance dispositif across the four sources.

**Table 5. Cross case comparison of the surveillance dispositif.**

| Dimension            | Case study 1 Hangzhou    | Case study 2 Guizhou    | Article 1 Shi and Xu         | Article 2 Li             |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Surveilled object    | Expression and attention | Location and attendance | Whole campus conduct         | Teacher and pupil pace   |
| Stated justification | Better learning focus    | Child safety            | Campus security              | Educational equality     |
| Technology           | Classroom analytics      | Chipped uniform         | 690 cameras and gates        | Recorded course platform |
| Mode of consent      | Pupils said to accept    | Parents reassured       | Banal acceptance             | Deficit framing          |
| Visible resistance   | Not reported             | Mild parental worry     | Indifference and blind spots | Refusal after removal    |
| Critical reading     | Affective dataveillance  | Bodily tracking         | Net widened discipline       | Cruel optimism           |

Algorithmic governance refines this desire in the datapicon. In case study one, the smart classroom scans each pupil every 30 seconds or so, and parses six types of behaviour and seven types of expression (Shi et al., 2024). The system then provides the teacher with a real time attentiveness score (Best Practice AI et al., 2018).

Now, emotion itself is controllable data. I name this capture affective dataveillance. The inner life of the child is translated into a metric and the metric is the lever of correction. The simplest form of pedagogical metricisation is the one in which a frown or a daydream is recorded as a deviation.

The governance is also business-like. As mentioned in article two, the recorded courses platform transforms teaching into a product that can be sold, and the annual price of each grade is 35000 yuan. For one rural school this sum consumed about 22 percent of the entire operating budget (Li et al., 2026). The company's interpretation of good teaching is via editing and deadlines and thus, it annexes the pedagogical conscience of the teacher (Li et al., 2026). Platform pedagogies therefore shift labour and authority from the classroom to the vendor (Perrotta et al., 2021). The teacher becomes a producer of branded content, and not an author of dialogue (Perrotta et al., 2016).

The apparatus is never one, but a layered assemblage. The school integrates cameras and facial recognition gates and parental tracking applications into a single organism (Shi et al., 2024). In one city the authorities spent about 10 million yuan to place facial scanners in 361 schools so that every pupil must submit to a three second scan to enter (Shi et al., 2024). In another place, a school bought these wristbands for approximately 4.84 million yuan, and the wristbands recorded the motion and even the number of times a hand was raised (Shi et al., 2024). The scopic field is then widened to the point where the body becomes a continuous readout.

This regime's most insidious characteristic is its hegemonic consent. Hegemony is not a matter of force, but of a contrived consensus. The chipped uniform is welcomed by parents as it provides a reassuring alert (Tang et al., 2019). A pupil says that he will accept the supervision as his job is just to learn. (Tang et al., 2019). A vice principal claims that the watched pupils soon improved their conduct (Best Practice AI et al., 2018). The deficit discourse completes the spell by blaming rural pupils for weak foundations and thereby naturalising the hierarchy (Li et al., 2026). Surveillance becomes banal and then becomes desirable (Lindh et al., 2016). The docility engine runs smoothly precisely because its subjects oil its own gears. This normalisation is the signature achievement of dataveillant governmentality (Keddie et al., 2016).

#### 4.2 Critical Consciousness and Dialogic Praxis Against Digital Panopticism

The second focus turns from domination toward the openings for freedom. Critical pedagogy refuses to read the panopticon as a sealed fate. The evidence supplies a vocabulary of cracks and refusals which I gather under the term emancipatory residue. This residue is the agency that the datapticon cannot fully absorb.

The cracks appear first in space. The saturated campus still contained exempted zones because toilets and dormitories and offices held no cameras (Shi et al., 2024). Pupils discovered an unwatched grove and used it for meeting away from the gaze (Shi et al., 2024). The administration answered by planting more cameras under the trees yet new blind spots kept emerging (Shi et al., 2024). The dream of total coverage is therefore asymptotic and never complete.

The cracks appear next in the psyche. The self disciplining effect that the panopticon promises proved fragile and uneven. Teachers reported that warnings issued in the morning failed to survive until the afternoon (Shi et al., 2024). The strongest and the weakest pupils alike shrugged at the lens (Shi et al., 2024). This stubborn indifference is a primitive form of counterconduct. It demonstrates that internalisation is a contingent outcome rather than a mechanical certainty.

The cracks appear finally in accountability. The school hoarded footage to dodge responsibility yet the same archive could rebound against it (Shi et al., 2024). When police or parents forced disclosure the evidence escaped managerial control which is the boomerang effect (Shi et al., 2024). Surveillance can thus arm the watched as well as the watcher.

The gaze also turns upon those who command it. Teachers in the recorded courses are watched by the company and by distant classrooms at once (Li et al., 2026). Some teachers resented this scrutiny of their own performance even as they wielded it against pupils (Shi et al., 2024). This mutual visibility cracks the myth of a single sovereign eye. It shows the apparatus as a web of

crossed gazes rather than a tower with one watcher. Within that web small refusals can travel in many directions.

Table 6 sets out the typology of emancipatory residue traced in the corpus.

**Table 6. Typology of emancipatory residue and counterconduct.**

| Mode of residue          | Manifestation in the corpus           | Source             | Critical pedagogy reading      |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Spatial evasion          | Use of an uncovered grove and toilets | (Shi et al., 2024) | Limit of total visibility      |
| Psychic indifference     | Warnings fade within hours            | (Shi et al., 2024) | Internalisation is contingent  |
| Accountability boomerang | Footage forced into the open          | (Shi et al., 2024) | The watched can arm themselves |
| Pedagogic refusal        | Preference for self made lessons      | (Li et al., 2026)  | Seed of conscientisation       |
| Delayed flourishing      | Growth only after the course ends     | (Li et al., 2026)  | Cruel optimism exposed         |

Critical pedagogy reads these residues as raw material for conscientisation. The awakening of critical consciousness begins when a subject perceives the apparatus as a contingent arrangement rather than a natural law. Subjectivity becomes a site of struggle where the neoliberal demand can be refused (Ball et al., 2016). The recipient teacher who confessed a preference for the lessons she designed herself was voicing exactly such a refusal (Li et al., 2026). Her colleague flourished only after the recorded courses were abolished (Li et al., 2026). Dialogic praxis names the antidote to monitoring. It restores the teacher as an interlocutor and the pupil as a coauthor of meaning. Yet digital panopticism actively narrows this dialogic space because the watched teacher dares not stray toward serious or contested themes (Li et al., 2026). The fearless speech that dialogue requires is throttled by the omniopicon (Meishar-Tal et al., 2024). The critical task is to widen the aperture again so that the young subject may become critical rather than merely compliant (Zhao et al., 2014).

#### **4.3 Dialectical Tensions and Reciprocal Causality Among Dataveillance and Emancipatory Agency and Technocratic Dehumanisation**

The third focus theorises the relations among three forces. These forces are dataveillance and emancipatory agency and technocratic dehumanisation. The relations are dialectical and not linear. Each force calls forth its opposite and each opposite reshapes the first force in turn. I call this a reciprocal causality within the subjectivation circuitry of the school.

The first circuit is between dataveillance and resistance. The apparatus grows and fills all the gaps, but each time it is evaded it grows again. As pupils continued to find ground that was not being monitored, the number of cameras increased from 410 to 690. Resistance is thus not just an opposition to surveillance. Resistance helps to perpetuate the growth it opposes. That is the sad irony of the datapicon. The second one is the recognition to submission loop. The watched teacher is afraid of being caught, yet

wants to be the star performer (Li et al., 2026). Both poles are enhanced simultaneously in the three optical regimes (Meishar-Tal et al., 2024). The teacher lets himself be looked at not out of fear, but out of the desire for valorisation. It is a kind of cruel optimism, in that the flourishing is the very process that limits it. The recipient teacher was given the possibility of renewal but the structure prevented her from ever doing it (Li et al., 2026). Emancipatory agency and technocratic capture are thus knotted together inside a single wish.

The third loop is one of metricisation – dehumanisation. Technocratic dehumanisation is a process that reduces a person to an identificatory signifier (Shi et al., 2024). Each strip removes a layer of personhood, from the attentiveness score to the facial scan and the arrival alert. The body becomes a package of data, the child becomes a dashboard tile. Then three conflicting time regimes break up the learning of the recipient pupils, so that a 40 minute video can take up much more than 40 minutes of real teaching (Li et al., 2026). The temporal disorder is in itself a quiet violence against the human rhythm of understanding (Tierens et al., 2024) (Barbera et al., 2015). The dialectic resists closure, however. Technocratic dehumanisation fosters discontent that can give rise to emancipatory agency. The frustrated teacher, the indifferent pupil, and the boomerang archive are all the result of the system that was trying to suppress them. Dataveillance produces docility and at the same time produces its own negation. Within this negation, the ethical opening is found. A critical pedagogy of technology would turn the emancipatory residue into organised dialogue and would thus interrupt the loop that ties the human to the metric. (Ball et al., 2025) (Röhl et al., 2025).

## 5. Discussion

The synthesis results in an integrated ethical diagnosis. The student management system is not a neutral instrument but a moral machine which produces specific subjects. The same pattern was observed in all four sources. Safety systems became metricisation, discipline, commercial

extraction. Quantitative signals are clear. The apparatus extends to immense reach, with a 70 percent increase in cameras and a 90 percent national coverage and a 22 percent bite into a school budget. This diagnosis is a call for a longer discussion on governance in Chinese education. Researchers have demonstrated how schooling can foster desirable, manageable desires and disciplined citizens (Kipnis et al., 2011) (Woronov et al., 2009) (Naftali et al., 2014). The datapticon is the latest and smallest piece of that project. It is a governance based on quality talk and on data to the same extent. The anthropology of ordinary ethics is a reminder that the watched still make moral judgements in the little spaces of everyday life (Lambek et al., 2010) (Stafford et al., 2013). The emancipatory residue described above is the empirical residue of that judgement.

The argument also has a pointed warning regarding reciprocal causality. A managerial reflex is to consider any gap in coverage a defect to be patched. But for every patch comes another evasion, and for every evasion another patch. The school can thus pursue totality indefinitely and never attain it. This relentless drive consumes budgets and undermines trust, and undermines learning itself. A more sensible approach would be to acknowledge that there has to be some unsupervised area if a school is to be humane.

The moral point is obvious. The school that measures everything knows nothing of what is essential. There are no points for trust and curiosity and fearless speech. There is therefore a need to strictly limit the function creep of monitoring systems in policy. Exempted spaces must be regarded as something to be protected rather than as a 'technical gap'. Dialogue is better than dashboards and the learner is not a signal source, but an interlocutor. The teacher should not be demoted to a content producer of brands (Perrotta et al., 2016) (Fransson et al., 2019) but should be re-established as a pedagogue. It is not about the end of technology, but about putting technology in the service of the emancipatory mission of education.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined the ethics of the student management system through the prism of critical pedagogy. A systematic review distilled 36 records into a focused corpus of four authentic sources. The corpus revealed a digital panopticon that governs through hegemonic surveillance and algorithmic metricisation. It also revealed a stubborn emancipatory residue that the apparatus could not fully absorb. The relations among dataveillance and emancipatory agency and technocratic dehumanisation proved dialectical and reciprocal rather than linear. Domination and refusal were shown to manufacture one another inside the same circuitry.

The central argument is that the ethical horizon of student management lies in the recovery of dialogue and the cultivation of critical consciousness. The datapticon reduces the child to a metric and the teacher to a relay. Critical pedagogy demands the opposite movement. It demands the restoration of the human as a thinking and speaking and judging subject. Future research should attend to the lived experience of the watched pupils whose voices remain faint in the present record (Shi et al., 2024). It should also test whether deliberate dialogic design can convert the emancipatory residue into durable agency. The school can remain a place of freedom only if it refuses to become a perfect machine of sight.

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