DIGITAL FUTURES FOR CHILDREN
Research at LSE and 5Rights Foundation

Growing up in the digital classroom: EdTech and AI in UK schools

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Parliamentary briefing

Introduction

'So it would be quite hard because robots probably haven't been taught you're not allowed to hurt children. But if children were talking in class when they're not supposed to, the robot might hit them, which could harm them or potentially fatally harm them.'
Year 6 pupil, England

Educational technology (EdTech) is now firmly embedded in school life, shaping how children learn, complete homework, interact with teachers and access information, both inside and beyond the classroom. Yet we know relatively little about how children and teachers experience these technologies in practice, how decisions are made about their use, and whether they are always supporting learning. In England, schools have considerable autonomy over the technologies they procure, often within tight budgets, raising important questions about how purchasing decisions are informed, what evidence is considered and whose needs and interests they serve.

These questions are particularly pressing at a time when there is growing public and political scrutiny of the technology children use in their personal lives. But children's digital lives do not stop at the school gates.

This briefing provides a summary of new research by the Digital Futures for Children Centre, a joint research centre established by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and 5Rights Foundation. Through workshops with 454 children aged 6–18 across five primary and six secondary schools in all four nations of the UK, and interviews with 21 teachers and education professionals, the report, *Growing up in the digital classroom: Experiences of EdTech and AI in UK schools,* explores how EdTech is shaping education, the benefits and concerns identified by those using it, and what needs to change to ensure technology supports children's rights, learning and wellbeing.

This research aims to inform these important conversations and help find the right balance: ensuring children have access to high-quality, rights-respecting technology that supports their learning, while teachers are properly supported to make informed decisions and remain at the centre of children's education.

Technology used in the classroom must serve the needs of children and teachers, not dictate them.

Key findings

1. Generative AI in the classroom

"I don't like it when they use it for the whole [PowerPoint] slide because it feels like the AI is teaching me more than the teacher." - Year 9 pupil, England

- **AI is entering children's education faster than we know how to assess it**: Children are already using AI for learning, research and revision, yet many are unsure whether they can trust what it tells them or distinguish what is real from what is fake. Meanwhile, AI is being promoted and adopted in education without clear evidence of whether or how it benefits children.

- **AI might be compensating for gaps in human relationships**: Some children said they felt more comfortable asking AI questions than asking a teacher or parent, in some cases because they did not want to be a burden. Children also described their teacher's marking and preparatory work as signals that they are cared about and taken seriously. AI may be masking a deeper issue: some children do not feel entitled to adult time and attention, something that basic AI safeguards cannot address.

- **Personalisation and automation are not serving all children**: Children described supposedly personalised systems as surprisingly rigid – giving harder work after success, repeating tasks when they were stuck, or responding in ways they could not understand. They could distinguish between personalisation by an algorithm and personalisation by a teacher. Greater reliance on automated systems also raises questions about how much confidence teachers retain in their own professional judgement.

- **Children are absorbing the governance gap**: In the absence of clear policies or discussion at school or home, children are developing their own rules and boundaries for using AI. AI is developing faster than schools, teachers and families can keep up, leaving children and adults to navigate emerging risks without clear guidance.

2. Digital homework

'I just do it on a tablet. I don't have a laptop. I can do it on my brother's laptop though' - Year 5 pupil, England

'I use my mum's phone' - Year 5 pupil, England

- **Digital homework can reinforce existing inequalities**: Having access to technology does not necessarily mean having what a child needs to use it effectively. Differences in devices, Wi-Fi, paid subscriptions and support can create an unequal homework experience, with children who have fewer resources facing greater obstacles and having to find their own workarounds.

- **School surveillance is extending into the home**: Children described being aware that their activity could still be monitored at home through school devices and filtering systems. This can blur the boundary between school and home, leaving children feeling that they remain visible to school outside the classroom. Children need time when they are not learning, being monitored or expected to respond.

- **Children are optimising for the platform, not their learning**: Rigid demands such as timers, exact-match answers and fixed task formats can lead children to find

workarounds simply to satisfy the system. When the technology becomes an obstacle to completing the work, children can end up learning how to succeed within the platform rather than engaging with the learning itself.

3. Gamification and engagement-driven design features

'Even if you get them all right, you can still be at the bottom of the leaderboard' - Year 10 pupil, Northern Ireland

- **Reward systems can distort what successful learning means**: Children described getting answers right but still feeling they had 'lost' because points were taken away or leaderboards rewarded speed. These systems can create a competing definition of success, making it harder to see whether children are actually learning or simply learning how to succeed within the platform.

- **Automated judgement is not neutral**: Timers, leaderboards and behaviour systems may apply the same rules consistently, but consistency is not the same as fairness. Children and teachers described systems disadvantaging some children, recording unexplained demerits and repeatedly rewarding or penalising the same children. Standardised rules can make individual circumstances less visible rather than better understood.

- **EdTech can import the wrong design logic from social media:** A child receiving homework notifications at midnight shows how consumer technology features can enter education without the same scrutiny of whether they serve children's learning or wellbeing. EdTech should adapt to children's needs, rather than asking children to adapt to the logic of the platform

4. The impact of Big Tech and commercial businesses in the classroom

"Big tech is EdTech and it's right in our classrooms at the moment."

Computing and Online Safety Lead, England

- **School identities are being shaped by Big Tech**: Schools are increasingly associated with the technology brands they use, while our evidence shows technology can also influence what and how they teach. Where commercial availability or design begins to determine educational practice, there is a risk that education adapts to technology rather than the other way around. Who gets to shape what education looks like?

- **Children can't escape advertising – even at school**: Advertising and commercial models are entering the classroom through general purpose platforms and freemium products, with some additional features and protections behind paywalls. This raises a basic question: should the protections children receive in education depend on what their school can afford?

- **Commercial technology increasingly decides what children can see and what gets flagged**: Schools are relying on commercial filtering and monitoring systems to determine what content is blocked and what activity is flagged for attention. Children described legitimate learning being blocked while inappropriate content still got through, and systems sometimes failing to distinguish between deliberate searches and accidental activity. These decisions are not neutral: they are shaped by the design, rules and assumptions built into commercial products. Safeguarding therefore requires scrutiny not only of what these systems protect children from, but of who gets to decide what children can see and what counts as concerning.

5. Procurement

"There's thousands of things out there. How do we know which is the best? How do we know which is the most impactful? Because at the end of the day, we're in the business of helping kids, not making money."

Assistant headteacher and Geography teacher, England

- **Schools are being left to assess EdTech with too little evidence or support**: Across all four nations, teachers and school staff described having to decide for themselves whether products were worth procuring, often relying heavily on claims made by the companies selling them. While governments emphasise school autonomy, staff called for clearer guidance and stronger evidence about what works. Without it, schools are left making expensive decisions with limited information.

- **Brand reputation can become a substitute for independent standards**: In the absence of clear guidance, teachers described relying on brand name, longevity or awards when deciding whether to adopt a product. These may be useful signals, but they are not independent evidence that technology is effective, safe or appropriate for children.

- **EdTech is beginning to shape education itself**: Teachers described technology influencing what and how subjects were taught, including where commercial viability affected the resources available. We also heard concerns about adapting educational practice to technology companies' rules, including US age thresholds. As AI develops, this raises a bigger question: who gets to decide how we educate children?

Recommendations:

Schools need clear standards and practical support to ensure the EdTech they use genuinely benefits children's learning, rights and wellbeing. Government must urgently to intervene to establish a robust, evidence-informed framework for assessing educational technology, setting clear expectations for the products and features

permitted in schools, and ensuring that decisions are guided by children's needs and pedagogical value:

1. **Establish clear, child-centred standards for EdTech procurement.**
   The Department for Education's proposed EdTech and AI product safety certification scheme is a welcome step towards greater assurance of the products used in schools. However, standards must go beyond product safety to establish what makes educational technology inclusive, rights-respecting and pedagogically sound. They should be informed by independent evidence, children's experiences and teachers' professional expertise, and set clear minimum requirements for products used in schools. Products that fail to meet these standards, or include features that pose unacceptable risks to children or undermine learning, should not be eligible for use in schools.

2. **Assess features and functionality, not just whole products.**
   Standards should consider how specific design choices affect children's learning, rights and wellbeing, across different types of EdTech. Features such as competitive leaderboards, streaks, timers, intrusive notifications, behavioural tracking and automated labelling should be assessed against clear pedagogical and child-rights criteria. Where features are shown to distract from learning, disadvantage particular children or create unacceptable risks, they should be restricted or prohibited in educational settings.

3. **Make independent evidence the basis for approval.**
   Certification should assess not only whether products meet minimum safety requirements, but whether there is credible independent evidence of educational benefit. Assessment should consider safety, inclusion, privacy and wellbeing, rather than relying on provider claims, measures of engagement or narrow attainment measures. Government should invest in long-term research and ensure independent assessment of products, including specific scrutiny of AI tools used in education.

4. **Ensure standards remain effective after procurement:** Certification should not be a one-off exercise. Products and their features should be subject to ongoing monitoring as they evolve, with clear routes for children, parents and teachers to raise concerns. Providers should be required to address problems, and products or features that no longer meet the standards should be subject to restriction or withdrawal. Children and teachers should be meaningfully involved in developing and reviewing the standards and evaluating the technologies they use.

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