

Lab Notes

This is an initial synthesis
of workshop discussions
shared to support further
conversations.

Jan/Feb 2024

EdTech in Schools Design Lab

How can affected communities have a powerful voice in shaping
the adoption of data-driven technology in schools?

January 2024

Workshop notes: contents

- About the lab
- Proposals
- Key themes
- Next steps

About the lab



About the lab

How can affected communities have a powerful voice in shaping the adoption of data-driven technology in schools?

We brought together **17 participants** for **two online workshop sessions** in **January 2024** to explore:

- the growing use of data-driven educational technologies (EdTech) in UK schools;
- challenges around who has, and who does not, have a say in EdTech adoption;
- possible approaches to give affected communities a more powerful voice in EdTech decision making.

Participants included teachers and school counselors, teaching union representatives, & education researchers. Sessions were designed with support from [Defend Digital Me](#).




Image: zoomed out view of Miro board used across four hours of online workshop sessions.

Provisional proposals



Proposals for action

Data-driven technologies are being introduced into schools without pupils, families, teachers, school staff and the wider community having adequate say and opportunity to shape decisions.

The lab mapped out potential actions that can address this gap, asking:

- What is the change?
- Who would it give voice to/ include in decision making?
- Who can make it happen?

This section presents a synthesis of potential actions for policy makers, regulators, industry, educational settings, and families to take.

Policy makers

National and local
government

CONNECTED BY DATA

Too many parents in different educational settings are told they are 'the only one' with problems with how education technology is working. Policy makers need to:

- Recognise and address the missing infrastructure to **include families in procurement** when technology is chosen, and to **enable concerns to be heard** on an ongoing basis, in order to ensure only safe, proven and high-quality EdTech products are in use in schools;
- **Create the institutional infrastructure to support national and local data governance** through establishing an Office of the National Education Data Guardian (ONEDA) and a network equivalent to the NHS Caldicott Guardians* who can help their organisations to ensure confidential information from education is used ethically, legally and safely.

* A Caldicott Guardian is a senior role in organisations processing health and social care personal data responsible for ensuring personal information about those who use the organisation's services is used legally, ethically and appropriately, and that confidentiality is maintained.

Regulators

Ofsted, Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) etc.

Regulators have a critical role of play in ensuring the quality and compliance of EdTech. Regulators should:

- Recognise when the risks and harms of EdTech voiced by parents should be **addressed as a safeguarding issue**;
- **Actively listen to the concerns raised by young people**, and to the perspectives of young people on school use of EdTech, and use of their personal data;
- **Clearly define and assign roles and responsibilities** for governance, oversight and scrutiny of EdTech;
- **Gather complaints from the education sector** (eg IT network managers) to identify common issues of mis-selling, anti-competitive situations, and unfair contractual practices.

Industry

EdTech providers, Industry bodies, Grids for Learning

Educational technology firms need to demonstrate that their products deliver clear benefits, are purpose led, and rights respecting. Developers, vendors and other industry stakeholders should:

- **Increase the transparency of product aims, design, functionality** and data handling in order to support informed conversation between education settings, educators and families about the products and platforms that might be used;
- **Adopt a rights-based approach** to product development and deployment.

Education Settings

School staff, School boards and governors, Unions

Schools, colleges and other education settings often have the ultimate responsibility for deciding which technologies to use or not. Education settings should:

- **Assign a clear go-to role**, with an equipped individual who is responsible for communication to families in the pre-procurement, set up, deployment and end-of-life of any EdTech product;
- **Enable pupil and parent voice to be heard**, particularly around how products affect learning, the experience of education, mental health, etc;
- **Enable staff voice to be heard** in how products affect workload (e.g. back office admin).

Families

Parents, Guardians,
Learners

Families often feel that they have limited power, and even basic information, when it comes to decisions about EdTech use. To support more productive engagement we suggest families should:

- **Ask schools to provide a termly or annual summary of EdTech tools** that use pupil data, to be shared alongside pupil reports.

Some EdTech provider's apps already offer a relatively easy way for schools to generate such a report. In other cases, families may need to start a dialogue about how this could be done.

Key themes



Key themes

The preceding proposals were based upon an open discussion exploring

- **Challenges** related to EdTech adoption;
- **Decision making** about EdTech;
- **Visions for change**; and
- **Actors responsible**.

The focus on challenges is not meant to suggest there are not many positive uses of technology in education. However, our starting point for this lab was the growing concern about rapid adoption of data-rich technologies in schools, without adequate dialogue or oversight.

**Understanding the challenge:
what are the issues to address?**



Commercial vs. educational interests

- Most EdTech companies are ultimately motivated by profits not by educational goals.
- Many technologies are designed to maximise engagement and attention - which is often not beneficial to young people.
- Many EdTech companies are motivated by data extraction.
- EdTech is surrounded by hype, and this over-promises on what it can do and the issues it can resolve.



Pressure on teachers and schools

- Teachers face workload pressures with the need to learn about, and review, these technologies becoming an additional burden.
- There is a lack of teacher training or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) available to support engagement with EdTech.
- The narrative that these technologies are time saving is frequently false as it does not account for the time burden of understanding and evaluating them.
- Decisions around technology are made at an individual school level, with different schools more or less equipped to manage this, and a high level of duplication happening as each school must evaluate technologies separately.



Impacts on learners

- The use of these technologies has impacts which are as yet unknown, such as changing the relationship between teacher and pupil when mediated by technology.
- Use of EdTech may be changing how students' time is spent within and outside of the classroom, but little is known about how.
- Equality Diversity & Inclusion concerns span access, implementation, and the operation of these technologies, but these are not accounted for in technology design
- Safeguarding has been associated with “safety tech”, which involves surveillance of young people’s activities. These technologies are sold as enabling safeguarding, with little evaluation or regulation.

**The decision space:
who is shaping change?**



Lack of transparency

- The influence on DfE (Department for Education) decisions are not transparent, and participants felt that a limited set of stakeholders get disproportionate say.
- Specific national academies are well connected into policy decision making, and also partner with tech companies, giving them a disproportionate voice in agenda setting.
- Large academy trusts also shape curriculum approaches and policy, which impacts technology decision making.



Lack of independent institutions

- Since the dissolution of [BECTA](#) (British Educational Communications and Technology Agency) there has been no independent regulatory or advice giving institution focussed on EdTech.
- There is an important role for international institutions such as UNESCO/OECD (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization / The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development).
- Participants felt that the CMA (Competitions and Markets Authority) could be doing more to regulate EdTech. So could Ofsted.
- DPIAs (Data Protection Impact Assessments) could be bolstered to consider equality impacts and wider risks.

**A vision for change:
what do we want to see?**



Protecting conditions and skills of educators

- Ensuring EdTech not add to workload pressures.
- Educator expertise feeding into all stages of cycle: development, deployment and evaluation.
- Retain teacher autonomy and creativity.



Participatory governance

- Building collaborative knowledge communities and collective decision making.
- Ring-fenced funding for tech to ensure equality across school system.
- Government or arms-length independent guidance and regulation to support schools.



Technology development & deployment

- Proof of beneficial outcomes before deployment.
- Purpose-led use of tech integrated into wider vision for curriculum.
- Socio-technical audits.
- Scrutiny and understanding of systems and vendors.
- Rights-based approach to EdTech product design.

Who & What & How?

Who needs to be heard?

by lawmakers & technology developers

- Teaching unions
- Teachers
- Parents
- Young People
- Education researchers
- Governors and trustees

What needs to be heard?

Better messages & narratives

- EdTech is a learning issue, not a tech issue
- Different schools have different needs
- Tech can lead to big issues and problems if not designed and governed well
- This is an opportunity to demo good governance and participation with EdTech

Who can make it happen?

Some key current actors

- Local Authorities
- Multi-Academy Trusts
- Unions
- DfE
- Ofsted
- School governors

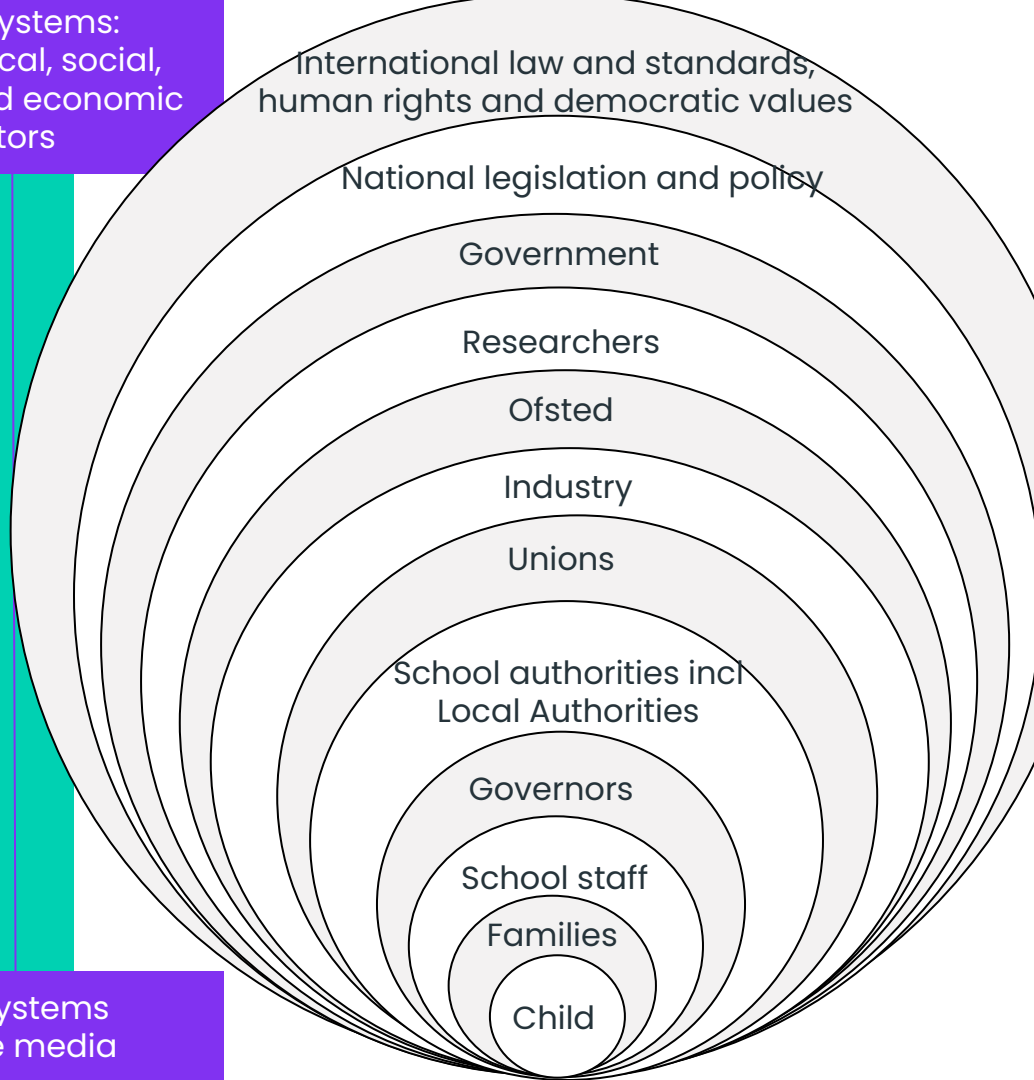
How is voice heard to make change happen?

Understanding the ecosystem

CONNECTED BY DATA

Macrosystems:
Legal, ethical, social,
political and economic
factors

Microsystems
incl. the media



Next Steps



A starting point...

Our brief (four hour) design lab convened only a small number of stakeholders, and didn't involve any direct engagement with school communities, parents or pupils.

However, it demonstrated the **critical need for deeper and more inclusive conversations** about how data-driven technologies are being introduced in education.

Future work is needed to broaden and deepen the conversation.

Continue the conversation:

Get in touch if you would like to support, or be involved in, future dialogue and advocacy around inclusive governance of educational technology.

Take action: Find information about current campaigns to protect children's rights in education to privacy and family life at <https://defenddigitalme.org/>

Dig deeper: Book a chat with Connected by Data to explore ways of embedding the voice of affected communities into your data and technology decision making.

<https://connectedbydata.org/>

Further information

Helena Hollis: helena@connectedbydata.org

Adam Cantwell-Corn: adam@connectedbydata.org

Published February 2024