The unheard impact: technology and the teaching profession

By Lainie Keper,
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Education International (EI) recently hosted a consultation event to provide feedback into the 2023 Global Education Monitoring Report on technology and education.

EI members from across the world made it clear that technology is being woven into education in ways beyond a piece of equipment in a classroom.

It shapes curricula, pedagogy, teacher management systems and the nature of the profession itself. Technology is not only changing how we teach, but what we teach, who teaches and, as the pandemic has shown, where we teach, as schools and teachers implemented and led an almost overnight shift in the delivery of teaching and learning.

While it enables access to education during school closures, technology also creates a new context that both teachers and learners need to adapt to and navigate, with new challenges and consequences.

However, the ways in which technology in education is impacting the teaching profession itself are often overlooked.

To provide a more holistic perspective on working with technology in education, the consultation centred around the working lives of teachers.

The consultation generated some lively discussion and identified three salient takeaways on the ways technology in education impacts the teaching profession.

Working conditions

The implementation of technology and the move to teleworking has had a profound impact on the working conditions and well-being of teachers and education service personnel.

EI's Global Report on the Status of Teachers 2021 demonstrated a concern that technological advances and policy changes are contributing to increased teacher workload and a decrease in teacher well-being. As the accessibility of the teachers has become greater, the lines between work and home have become blurred, as the right to disconnect has been challenged.

Teachers expressed how technology, which should in theory reduce the administrative load, is increasing the administrative burden in practice and raising concerns around digital privacy rights, not only regarding students' data, but teachers as well.

For instance, the input of teacher management systems to track teacher attendance can often lead to repercussions for the teacher, while failing to address the root causes of teacher absenteeism.

The ease of data capture, storage and surveillance in digital spaces requires robust regulation, oversight and regular auditing by teachers and their unions.

Curriculum and assessment

The curriculum and pedagogy are also transforming due to technology in education. As digital skills become a priority, teachers are seeing a prioritising of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects and a de-prioritisation of those which can be more easily digitised, at the expense of breadth of learning opportunities.

Similarly, as systems switch to digital assessments, curriculum is narrowing to be shaped by the test. Teachers are also concerned over the ways in which inequity can be exacerbated when using digital tests (typing speed, familiarity with the device, navigating the testing browser, etc).

There were serious concerns raised around who owns and develops the curriculum. As teachers are placing more of their content onto digital platforms such as Google Schools, teacher ownership of the curriculum, resources and content that they

developed, which can include worksheets, readings, videos, audio files and lectures, is unclear.

Once the content has been uploaded onto the platform, it becomes the employers' (when it goes onto the platform), but then is also accessed by the tech company and mined for data.

At the same time, an increasing amount of edtech companies are moving into the curriculum development space, selling it in accompaniment to the devices.

New forms of shadow education through online courses, digitally enhanced private tutoring and even social media platforms, means schools will be increasingly dependent on digital infrastructure provided by giant technology corporations and on resources, tools and platforms provided by the edtech industry.

EI affiliates expressed concerns over the lack of information on how much money and data is being exchanged in contracts between education systems and these companies.

This raises questions about who is creating and delivering free, high-quality content being presented in schools: teachers with professional expertise and experience or tech giants?

Nothing about teachers, without teachers

Decisions around the planning, implementation, regulation and evaluating of technology includes the training, curricula, pedagogy and materials or equipment being used.

Teachers, school leaders and education service personnel must be included in these decisions.

In a 2020 EI study, Teaching with Tech, we found that 45 per cent of respondents were not at all consulted with regards to the introduction of new digital technologies, while 29 per cent were consulted on "only a few aspects".

Unilateral top-down decision-making means that teachers have no pre- implementation opportunity to raise questions or flag concern. This also holds true for monitoring and evaluation of the technology.

Union leaders shared examples of how the quick switch to online assessments, with little input from unions, led to rocky implementation.

Social dialogue is a key step forward, particularly in collective bargaining spaces, albeit in a limited capacity.

This digital transformation of, and in, education ought to be reflected in collective agreements. In the beginning of the pandemic, EI's member organisation in Argentina, CTERA, reached an important collective agreement with the government, aimed at restructuring work in education during the lockdown and combating the work overload imposed by teleworking.

The agreement set out the first-ever defined concept of the right to disconnect, and it required the Ministry of Education to invest in providing technological resources for distance education.

Technology is not going to disappear from schools, and many of the challenges we face with regards to edtech around equity, access and quality, existed pre-pandemic.

However, it is urgent to learn through these experiences, evaluate impact and measure positive and negative effects of the new ways of working with technology in education.

The ways we use technology should stem from deliberate choices and should not just move forward, blindly accepted as the new normal for the teaching profession with no questions asked.

A report summarising the key takeaways from this event is available at: bit.ly/3QObpAg

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