Experts call for rethink on school technology

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International researchers are urging a critical rethink of digital technology in schools, warning that many classroom education tools are collecting student data in ways that could threaten privacy and wellbeing.

The team, including experts from the University of South Australia (UniSA) and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), say the hidden workings of education technologies make it difficult for schools and teachers to know what happens to the data they collect about children behind the scenes.

UniSA researcher and contributing author to the new book – *Handbook of Children and Screens* – Dr Jamie Manolev says the lack of transparency around education technologies (ed-tech) raises concerns.

“Ed-tech products have rapidly flooded classrooms worldwide, but this has outpaced regulation and research. As a result, many tools have been adopted without understanding their long-term educational or ethical impacts,” Dr Manolev says.

“Children shouldn’t just be taught with technologies, but about them, which centres on the knowledge and competencies of each teacher, who should be supported to understand the inner workings of the programs they use.

“While ed-tech does present new opportunities for engaging students, supporting personalised learning, improving access, and streamlining school processes, most tools are data-hungry, capturing information during every interaction from lessons and assessments to communication and monitoring.

“It risks turning students into datapoints, limiting their potential as human beings, and raising concerns about student wellbeing, privacy and surveillance.

“Furthermore, while ed-tech is designed to level the playing field – especially for students in rural or remote areas – barriers like internet access, data bias and cost can still leave many behind.”

Platforms like ClassDojo, GoGuardian and Gaggle are used in schools worldwide. However, these technologies often oversimplify student behaviour, reducing it to numerical scores without the necessary context.

Lead author, LSE's Dr Velislava Hillman says that teachers need greater support to understand how education technologies work, including how data is collected and used, so they can make informed decisions in the classroom.

"We need to move beyond the idea that more tech is always better," Dr Hillman says.

"The ed-tech sector is extremely fast, making it hard for teachers to keep up. And while teachers may try to engage in ongoing professional development, they need the time and support to be able to do so.

"Stronger regulation is essential to protect students and ensure that technology supports their learning without compromising their privacy or wellbeing. We must prioritise children's interests to safeguard their future in a safe and ethical way, in an increasingly digitised school environment."

Published in a landmark international volume on childhood studies, the chapter is part of growing calls for reform in how digital tools are used and understood in Australian classrooms.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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