# Concerns rise over impact of education technology on children's learning and wellbeing



In recent discussions surrounding childhood education and mental health, growing concern has been voiced over the increasing incorporation of education technology—commonly referred to as "ed tech"—in schools across the UK and beyond. Critics argue that, while often promoted as a modern, efficient means to enhance learning, the rise of digital tools in classrooms may be contributing to poorer educational outcomes and negative impacts on children’s wellbeing.

Jonathan Haidt, an American social psychologist and author of the bestselling book The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness, has been at the forefront of this discourse. During his recent visit to London, Haidt highlighted the detrimental effects of widespread screen use among children, stating that social media, smartphones, and tablets are fostering increased levels of misery, distraction, and antisocial behaviour in young people. Haidt shared a striking statistic that 40 per cent of American two-year-olds now have their own tablets, drawing parallels to past societal shifts such as smoking on aeroplanes, which are now viewed with profound concern.

This surge in digital engagement extends into the classroom where ed tech is growing rapidly. London is now considered the largest ed tech hub in Europe, with the sector expanding by approximately 5.5 per cent annually. Projections indicate that by next year, the UK's ed tech market will be valued at over £9.5 billion. While ed tech companies and some educational institutions argue that digital tools can facilitate learning—citing, for example, videos that explain concepts more effectively than traditional textbooks—there remains significant debate about their overall efficacy, particularly among younger children.

Primary schools now frequently integrate interactive technology where pupils as young as five are taught numeracy by animated artificial intelligence (AI) characters accompanied by celebratory visual effects. Ten-year-olds may be expected to upload essays to digital platforms where peers evaluate the work using emojis. In some critics’ eyes, this constitutes a form of “technological slop” that risks dumbing down education rather than enriching it.

A comprehensive 2023 report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), titled An Ed-Tech Tragedy?, offers a sobering view, documenting a global decline in literacy, science, and mathematics test scores since 2012—a period coinciding with increased ed tech use in education. While causation is not definitively established, the report raises concerns about the role digital tools play in education quality. Additionally, Sweden’s Karolinska Institute has stated that, based on clear scientific evidence, digital tools often impair rather than enhance student learning.

The economic motivations behind ed tech adoption also attract scrutiny. Technology companies are profiting handsomely from the sector and collecting vast amounts of data on children. There are suggestions, though unconfirmed, that some schools may be unduly influenced by incentives from ed tech firms, prompting questions about whether investments are prioritised towards digital platforms at the expense of hiring more or better-trained teachers.

Moreover, the cultural shift in classrooms towards gamified learning—where children receive “dopamine hits” from emojis and animated rewards—has sparked debate about the broader impacts on children’s development. Critics argue that this trend diminishes opportunities to develop crucial social skills such as conversation, conflict resolution, and resilience, which schools have traditionally fostered. The pandemic-induced acceleration of technology use in education has only intensified these concerns.

The Times summarises this evolving situation as a complex challenge where longstanding educational values and emerging technological innovations collide. While ed tech proponents emphasise efficiency and modernity, mounting evidence and expert opinion suggest the need for careful evaluation of how digital tools are shaping the learning experiences and mental health of young learners.

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