What if we took stewarding children's data seriously?

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Summary

"At this school, I don't know what data has been shared [about] my daughter. I know that as parents we are quite cautious of these things. .... At my son's secondary school they collect fingerprints in the canteen for dinner, once I knew this started [I started] sending him with [his own] lunch."

Parent



Most EdTech applications and platforms used in school settings collect and process children's personal (and special category) data in opaque ways. Opting out can be challenging for children and their parents or guardians. Clear advice, governance and accountability needs to be provided by institutional players such as the Department for Education (DfE) and the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), but there are insufficient guardrails and not enough support for schools, parents/guardians and children themselves to engender a culture of data stewardship.

There is a pressing need to shift away from a paternalistic, risk-based posture where children's data is viewed as a by-product of commercial and institutional processes and by extension, available to be used with limited debate or pushback. We fear that the failure to provide good stewardship of children data– especially those from marginalised groups– can have negative impacts on the life pathways of many children.

We call for school leadership teams, local authority education teams, DfE policymakers, and the ICO to adopt a stewardship mindset regarding children's data, which focuses on care and rights above commercialisation and economic growth. Children, parents and guardians have a role in demanding good stewardship.

Undertaking research and analysis across 90 schools in Birmingham; engaging 99 primarily Black/Black heritage parents/guardians, grass root organisations and school staff; reviewing 65 EdTech apps and organising events, we found:

1. **Many parents/ guardians and community members were unfamiliar with the term EdTech**, but once explained, were able, and wanted to participate in further conversation. Only 36% of parents/guardians (n=14) had received information from their children's schools about the use of EdTech.
2. **Parents/guardians with English as a second language faced additional challenges** to understanding their children's engagement with EdTech, with many unaware of its use.
3. **Parents, guardians and community members struggled to voice concerns about EdTech independently.** Few civil society organisations with no vested interest in Edtech exist–and those that do are severely underfunded– limiting their ability to provide the context and vocabulary needed for informed public engagement.
4. **Schools receive limited guidance and support** from institutional players such as the ICO and the DfE to help them make the right decision when procuring EdTech applications and platforms.
5. **Limited regulatory oversight of the activities of the private companies** producing EdTech products. Conservative estimates of this £3.8 billion industry suggest hundreds of these suppliers are in operation in the UK. There were approximately 1,200 EdTech companies operating in the UK as of 2021. Despite this, as of early 2025, only ten had been audited by the ICO in the last five years and the regulator is yet to publish its findings.
6. **Eighty per cent** of EdTech apps whose privacy notices we reviewed **could not be ruled out for using children's personal data for unexpected commercial purposes** now or in the future.
7. **Seventy-five per cent facilitate targeted advertising to children** directly or on third-party sites by placing cookies (their own or other organisations') on children's devices.
8. **Seventy-five per cent** of EdTech apps can potentially **expose children's personal data** due to the length of time, amount, and general opaqueness of their data storage.
9. **Sixty-one per cent** of EdTech apps **open the door to surveillance and profiling of children (especially those from marginalised groups)**– now and in the future– by collecting an excessive amount of special category data and data from which children's socioeconomic status can be inferred.
10. **Very little objective research to demonstrate the efficacy of EdTech apps** used in schools or to substantiate claims made in suppliers' literature. This lack of evidence makes it difficult for schools and parents/guardians to assess their value for money. This applied to ALL the EdTech apps we reviewed.
11. **The disproportionate levels of household poverty among Black households in the UK made digital poverty a significant concern across all participants. It is a key factor to consider when examining the experience of Black and Black heritage children with EdTech.**
