

ESRC Education Research Programme (ERP)

Knowledge Exchange in Education. Briefing Note #4

In-depth ethnography in education as a resource for knowledge exchange

Introduction

This briefing note argues that sustained, in-depth ethnographic research is essential for advancing effective knowledge exchange between education stakeholders. Drawing on data from the ERP project, *Towards equity-focused EdTech: A socio-technical approach*, this briefing note explains how ethnographic research yields insights that other methods cannot easily generate and that are rarely reflected in the scarce evidence base on EdTech and its potential to reduce inequalities (Eynon et al., 2025).

Ethnography in education

In-depth ethnography has been a core method in education research since at least the 1970s (Willis, 1977). It has been especially valued for its capacity to capture the lived experiences of students and teachers and the broader social and cultural forces that shape educational practices and outcomes. This tradition contrasts with the more recent commitment in education policy to “evidence-based practice” and the privileging of experimental methods such as randomised controlled trials (RCT) with which it is associated (Biesta, 2007; Moss, 2024). Accompanied by “disseminate to” strategies, the experimental tradition can lock entire systems into particular patterns of interaction that are hard to change (Moss, 2024). Yet experimental methods overlook the depth, nuance, and contextual insights that ethnography provides and that prove useful for stakeholders.

A socio-technical approach

This project set out to explore the ways technology is embedded in secondary school practices, and how this relates to ideas about equity and educational opportunities. The study was based in six secondary schools in England, chosen because they vary: geographically, economically, culturally and in terms of technical resource. Data for each school included fieldnotes from daily school visits for the duration of one term, 40 interviews with students and teachers, 50 hours of lesson observations across year groups and subjects, technology audits, and student workshops.

Such an intensive period of data collection enabled a thorough investigation of how the technical dimensions of educational technologies (EdTech), including the pedagogical, commercial, and equity values they carry with them (Gleason & Heath, 2021) interact with the rich and varied social and educational practices of the school.

The following data extracts underscore the importance of sustained ethnographic research for understanding and informing equitable education policy and practice. The first example centres on teachers’ work, while the second focuses on personalised learning. Both topics have been central to current policy debates.

Edtech interrupting teacher work

While EdTech is often promoted as beneficial for teaching and learning, the reality is more complex. In some cases, technology can support with planning, organisation and administrative tasks, yet it can also introduce challenges for classroom practice. For instance, as this extract from fieldnotes illustrates, the requirement to log student behaviour on a digital system during lessons can escalate low-level disruption and interrupt the flow of teaching:

In the staff room, teachers talking about the difficulty of “sanctioning” and giving corrections in lessons. One said that when you get to the point where you need to sanction five students, things can escalate quickly because when you are logging the corrections on the computer, further disruption breaks out... “My heart breaks for those who are sat quietly and patiently, waiting to learn.” This point was also made in teacher 4’s interview last week. [Source: Field notes, Draymoor Academy¹]

This is just one example of how technology can interfere with teacher work. The ethnographic research revealed several others, including devices malfunctioning or failing to work as intended, and the potential to distract embedded in the design of certain platforms and tools.

The current policy emphasis on using technology primarily to save teachers’ time often frames the benefits in terms of efficiency (e.g., DfE, 2025). But the ethnographic insights show that EdTech can create additional work, cause interruptions, and lead to unintended consequences that are invisible to its proponents. Through sustained observation across multiple year groups and subject areas, combined with immersion in the day-to-day school environments and engagement with teachers and students through interviews and informal conversations, the research was able to trace how these interruptions unfolded, understand their underlying causes, and gain insight into their impact on teaching and learning from different vantage points.

Edtech and personalisation

Although personalisation in EdTech is widely promoted as a means of enhancing learning outcomes, in practice it is often limited to adjusting content in response to a student’s ability to input correct answers, generating performance data for the system. As the student in the extract below articulates, key aspects of her learning profile, such as the nature of her dyslexia, were not addressed:

“[I’m] not the biggest fan of it [adaptive EdTech programme] ’cos it sort of speaks to you like I’m a two-year-old (...) it’s like, so sort of, my [dyslexia] problem, it doesn’t stem from like what you actually sort of do in [the programme] almost do you get what I mean? Like, mine’s more like spelling and like swap, like words looking the same and like swapping them or using wrong type of words, erm but then (...) like sort of [the programme], I don’t like how slow it is in between and it, it plays a little song

for you after every question you do and it says like ‘well done’ and stuff.” [Student aged 13, Milborough High¹]

“Adaptive” EdTech products that claim to personalise learning through rule-based systems or algorithmic models cannot do so in a holistic sense as they are unable to account for the full range of an individual’s identity, experiences, and needs. In practice, this student described the programme’s feedback as patronising and better suited to much younger children, and noted that the activities did not target her specific difficulties with spelling and word recognition.

This was not an isolated case. Ethnographic research across multiple schools revealed that both students and teachers frequently expressed similar frustrations and concerns about these adaptive systems. Sustained classroom observations enabled close examination of how these products operated in practice, with particular attention to their inequitable implications for students and their learning. Complementary technical walkthroughs provided detailed insight into the systems’ design, revealing how embedded values and technical limitations restricted their capacity to deliver genuinely personalised learning in diverse, real-world education contexts. Edtech does not always produce positive outcomes for students experiencing multiple or intersecting disadvantages.

Conclusion: Ethnography is essential for knowledge exchange

In-depth ethnography provides a powerful foundation for meaningful knowledge exchange with stakeholders because it captures the evolving, interconnected realities in which policies and practices unfold (Couceiro, 2024). By spending extended time in schools, researchers can trace how technologies are woven into institutional cultures and daily routines, revealing the nuances and contradictions that other methods often overlook. Its analytical strength derives from the capacity to collect data from multiple perspectives over an extended period, thereby enabling identification of recurring patterns across a range of voices and experiences. Importantly, ethnography foregrounds the lived experiences of teachers and students. When applied across multiple research sites, this approach also enables comparative insights that strengthen the evidence base for informed policy and practice.

Insights from ethnography, made visible and explicitly integrated into edtech evidence-building,

procurement decisions, and policy development, can promote full, free and open debate among stakeholders. While this briefing note makes a case for the importance of ethnographic research in the context of edtech, prioritising this approach across education more broadly will help ensure that policy and practice are informed by nuanced, context-rich understandings necessary to promote effective and equitable learning for all.

To join the debate

This series of briefing notes invites readers to consider whether education has yet settled on the most productive ways for policymakers, researchers and other stakeholders in education to interact. We welcome further contributions debating the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches.

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¹ School names are pseudonymised to ensure privacy and maintain confidentiality.

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