EdTech at a crossroads:
Pedagogy, profit, rights

Sonia Livingstone
7 March 2026

Digital Futures For Children

THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

5RIGHTS FOUNDATION

Smartphones in schools? Or not . . .

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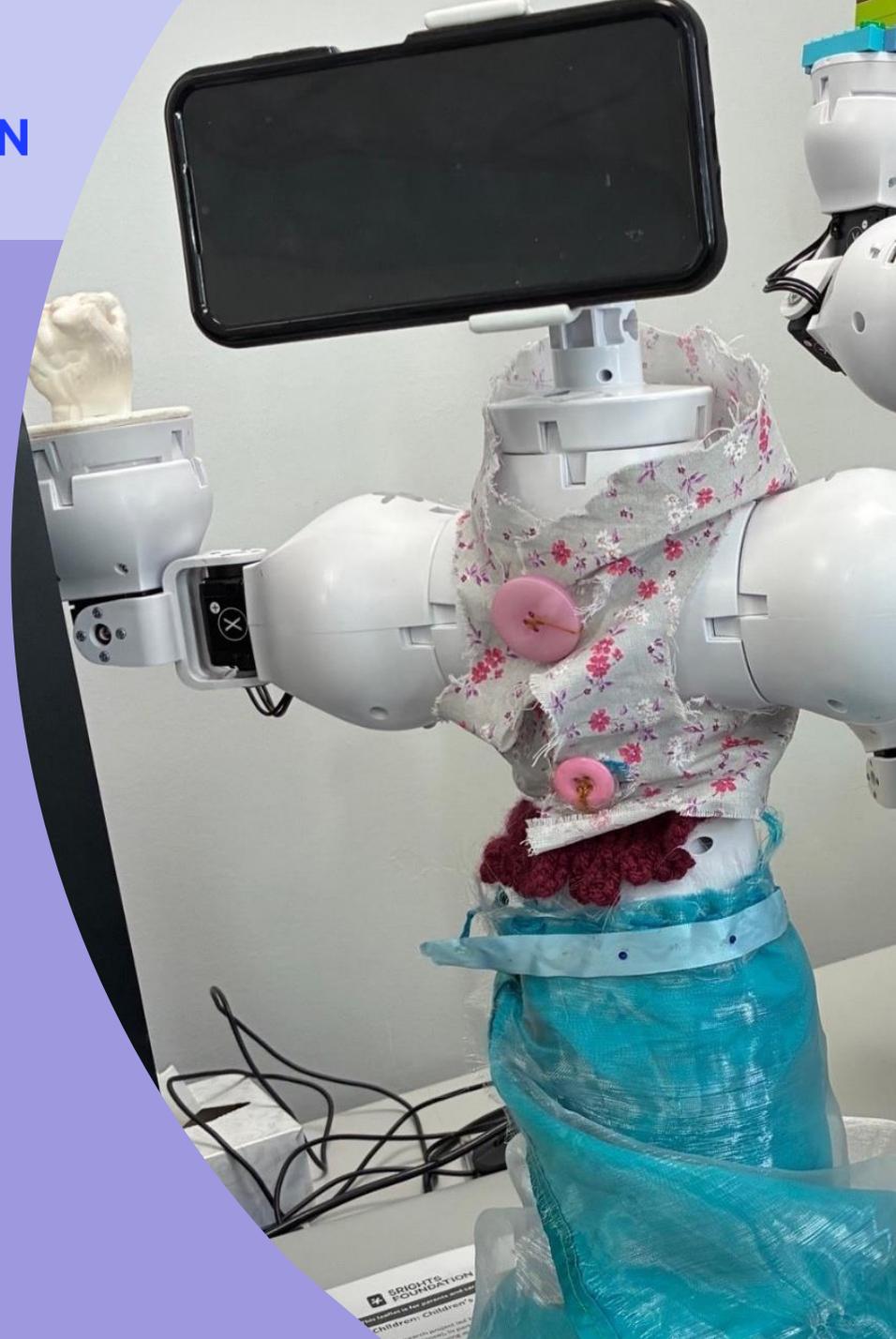
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Which countries in Europe have banned or want to restrict smartphones in schools?

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Americans' support for school cellphone bans has ticked up since last year

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Children under 11 will be BANNED from having smartphones, Macron says

Story by David Averre · 3d · ⏱ 3 min read

- Macron entered the issue into his presidential agenda at beginning of the year

Emmanuel Macron will support a proposed ban on the use of smartphones for under 11s and social media for under 15s across France, it emerged last night.

THE TIMES

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Doctors declare effects of child phone use a public health emergency

We see the damage from harmful online content and excessive screen time every day, the Academy of Medical Sciences has told ministers

Caroline Wheeler, Political Editor

Saturday January 17 2026, 9.30pm GMT, The Sunday Times

Daily Mail

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Prince Harry and Meghan Markle make surprise appearance at Oprah launch event for book about the perils of smartphones and social media on children

By ELIZABETH HAIGH, SENIOR NEWS REPORTER ✕
PUBLISHED: 16:50, 8 January 2026 | UPDATED: 19:49, 8 January 2026

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Prince Harry and his wife Meghan have made a surprise appearance at an **Oprah** book launch event where they spoke about the perils of smartphones and social media on young children.

The Duke and **Duchess of Sussex** dialled in remotely to speak with authors Jonathan Haidt and Catherine Price, who have just released The Amazing Generation, a book

Evidence, consultation, advocacy . . .

Smartphone policies in schools: What does the evidence say?
Miriam Rahali, Beeban Kidron and Sonia Livingstone
September 2024
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JAMA Pediatrics

Viewpoint

The Case Against School Cell Phone Bans

Sonia Livingstone, BSc, DPhil[1]

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Is a cell phone like a knife or a pen
siderable capacity to harm; hence, sch

"Phones can be useful for learning and staying connected, but they can also distract students. Instead of banning them completely, schools could have clear rules about when phones can and can't be used. That helps students learn balance and focus while still keeping access when it's needed for learning or emergencies." (Adil, 16, Canada)

"Phones should be used in school as they are part of our everyday lives, and school is supposed to make our lives better. Instead of restricting phone use to the degree where students dislike it, we should make sure at least a majority of children want to learn and know why school is necessary." (Sher, 16, Indonesia)
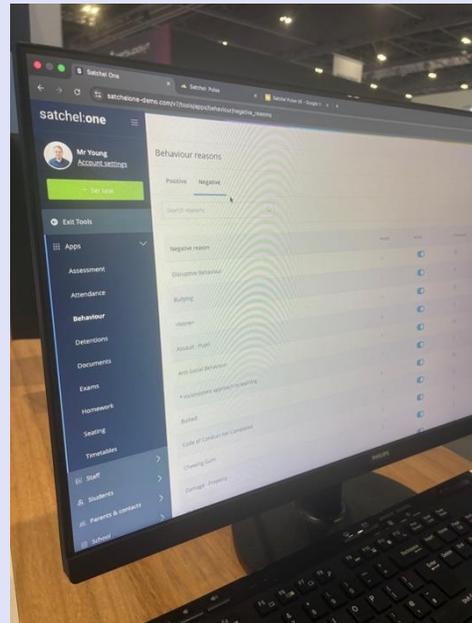
"I am actually not against [phones in schools], if they are used in moderation. For example, in my school, we are allowed to use our phones during breaks or maybe sometimes during the lessons for school stuff, but a lot of the time we have to hand in our phones at the start of the lesson...I do agree with this rule, because a lot of my classmates then started using phones to play games, which would then distract the whole lesson." (Sara, 15, Slovenia)
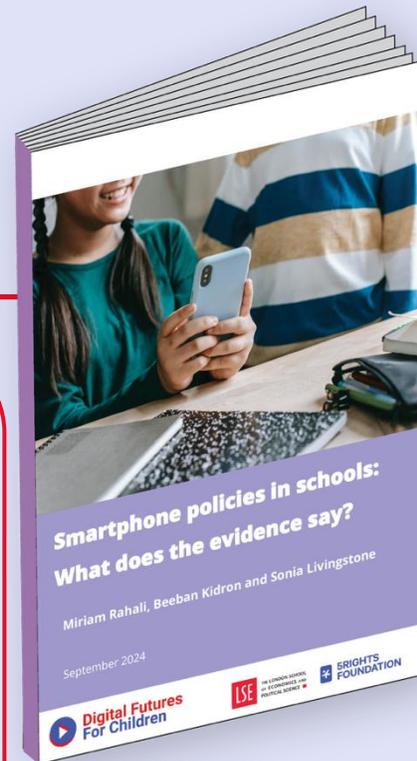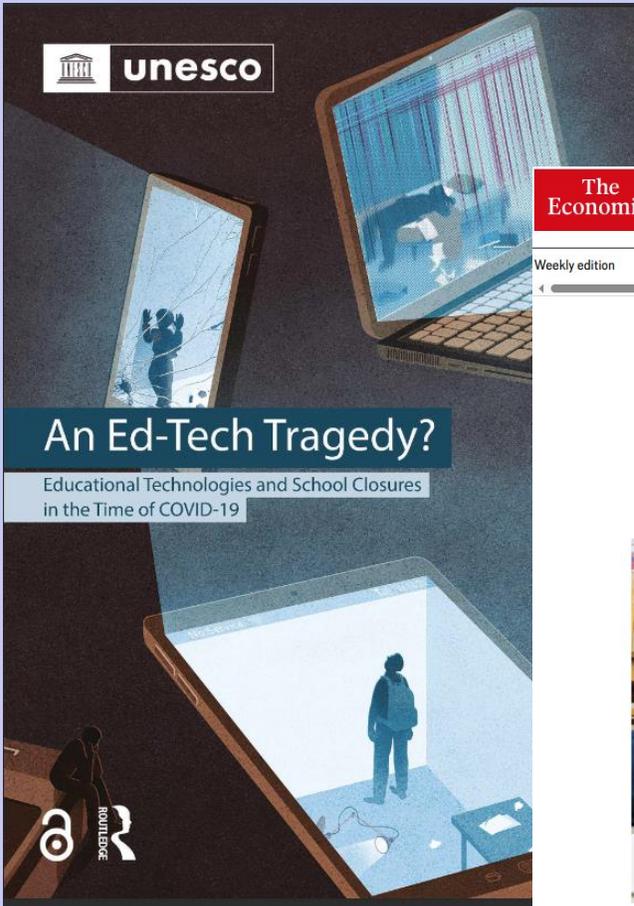
These questions are bigger than smartphones

EdTech - "Technology deployed by schools for educational purposes that is used by or impacts on children. It covers various tools, including digital platforms, learning management systems, online resources, AI character chatbots, educational apps, and software."

Crossroads of pedagogy, profit and rights

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United States | Failing the screen test

Ed tech is profitable. It is also mostly useless

Independent research identifies few learning gains

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Out with the chalkboard PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

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TUC Changing the world of work for good

An urgent call for educator voice in AI and EdTech from 10 unions

A joint statement from AEP, EIS, GMB, NAHT, NASUWT, NEU, UCAC, UCU, UNISON and Unite.

We are ten unions representing millions of educators acros
school leaders, and workers throughout the education syst
schools, colleges, and universities across all jurisdictions o

As AI is being rolled out rapidly in education, there is an ur
and professional judgement of these educators. We recog
complement human-centred education. But we know that
problems: underfunding, teacher shortages, overwhelming
educators face every day. And without clear guardrails, the
worse and undermining both quality of education and stud

To realise the potential that AI in education can offer, edu
stage of AI adoption, from policy formation and design, th
All actors and institutions must ensure that AI and EdTech
relationships between all education workers and students.

We set out here the ways in which educator voice must be
levels of regulation to decisions at local levels.

At the national policy making level

Educators and their representatives must be directly invol
expertise to define what problems need solving and wheth
We call for political commitments to early and ongoing co
regulatory frameworks, and genuine representation and d

In the design and development of s

Early involvement of educators and their representative u
ensuring that EdTech has a positive impact on teaching a
support, rather than undermine, the irreplaceable human

US EDITION ∨

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Screens in schools have been a catastrophic failure

MARY WAKEFIELD

ISTOCK

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About a decade ago, the people I dreaded meeting most at parties were the ed tech evangelists – men and women who lit up with zealous excitement about bringing screens into schools. If only every schoolchild had a laptop, they thought, then humanity

A children's rights approach to EdTech

Source: Designs © UNICEF

General comment No. 25

United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child

CRC/C/GC/25

Distr.: General
2 March 2021

Original: English

Committee on the Rights of the Child

**General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment**

The future is a place we are all going to — and your voice matters!

Let's speak up and work together to make sure it is a place we want to be.

Here are some questions for you:

You know a lot about your own needs and experiences.
What would you like to explain to the adults who make decisions about digital technologies?

Digital technologies should be designed and used in ways that work well for you.
What do you want to tell tech companies to make a better digital world in the future?

Now it's your turn!
Share your ideas, speak up, and help create the digital future you want.
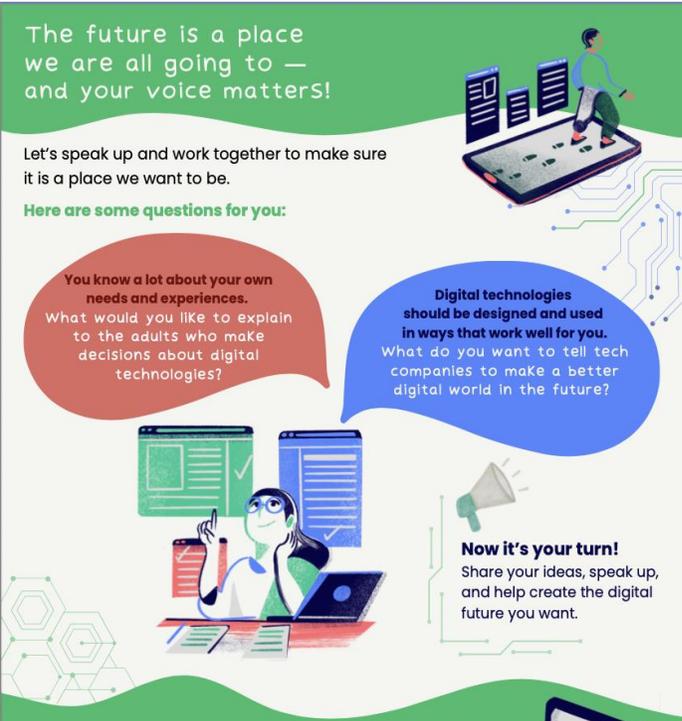
4 BIG IDEAS from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

WELLBEING
Do you feel well when you use digital technologies?

Children must always be supported to live safely and grow up without restrictions or harm. Your survival and development are very important. Digital technologies should support rather than harm your mental, emotional, and physical health.

EQUITY & DIVERSITY
Do all children have the same opportunities to be included and protected in the digital world?

Every child has the right to be included and treated fairly. It doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, your family, what language you speak, or whether you have a disability. No one should experience discrimination.

CONSULTATION
Are your views listened to when adults make decisions that affect your life?

Children have important insights about their lives and about society – and about technology. You may have good ideas about the role of online educational tools, social media or 'artificial intelligence'. Adults should respect and listen to these.

BEST INTERESTS
When deciding things about children's lives, do adults put your needs first?

Governments, companies and adults must think about what helps you to grow, learn and stay safe. What is best for children should be the main factor guiding laws, businesses, and technology design. It shouldn't only be about making a profit.

Your rights online are important, this is what General comment No. 25 says about them:

RESPONSIBLE
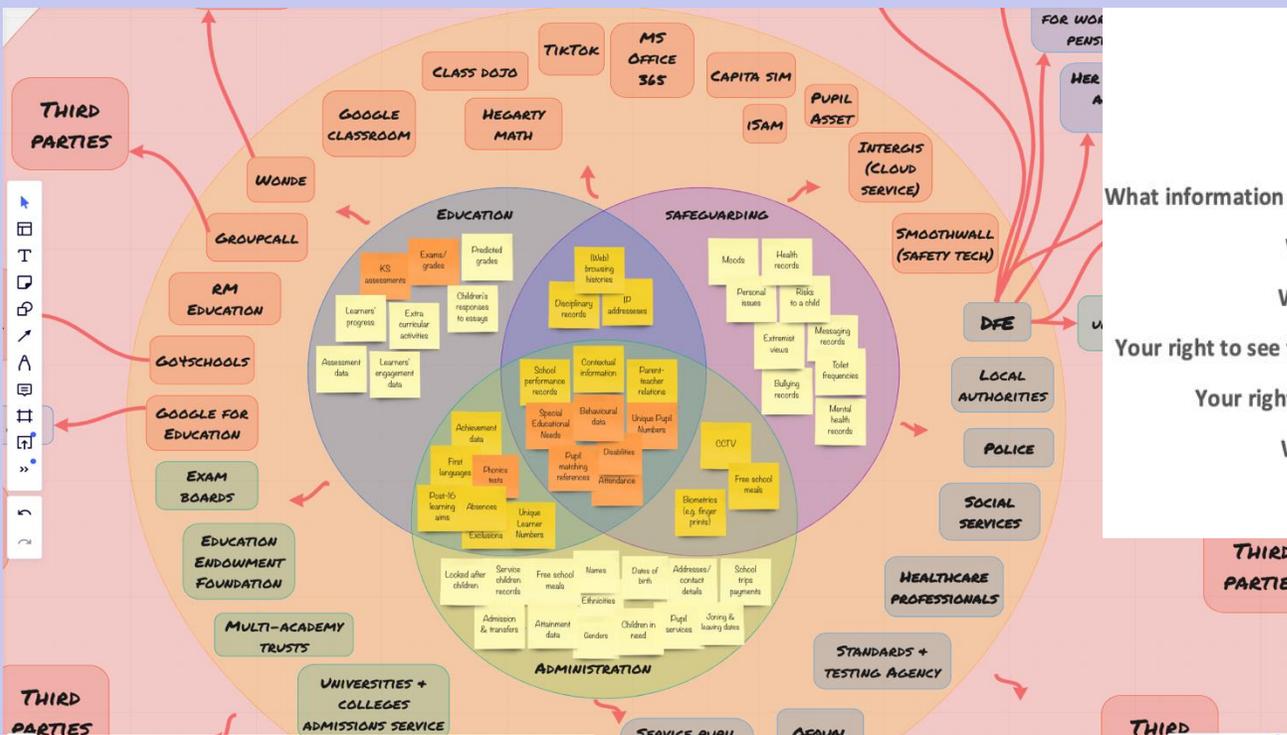Whose responsibility do you think it is to make sure the digital world works well for children?

Governments have the main duty to protect you and your rights. They must also make sure that digital businesses respect your rights from the start and fix things if they go wrong. They must also give you information you understand and offer help when you need it.

AGE-APPROPRIATE
What makes digital technology feel 'just right' for someone your age?

As children grow older, they need different kinds of support, freedom, and protection. This could mean explaining things clearly when you are younger and giving you more control as you get older.

PARTICIPATION
Can you participate freely, express your opinions, and find reliable information online?

You have the right to speak, learn, find truthful information, and join communities safely. The digital world should support you to share your opinions, creativity, and culture without fear, lies, or bullying.

PRIVACY
Do you know who sees your personal information and how it is used?

Businesses should not take your personal information: you have the right to privacy and to protection for your data and identity. Privacy builds trust, and it lets you explore and take part in the digital world without being watched or having your information used in ways you do not know about or understand.

SAFETY
Do you feel safe and protected from harm online?

Every child has the right to be safe from violence, abuse, and exploitation. Risks and harm online should be prevented and stopped before they can hurt you. Adults should make sure you know where to get help, and they should act fast if something goes wrong.

DEVELOPMENT
Does technology help you learn, play, and belong?

Every child has the right to education, rest, play, and culture. Digital technologies should spark creativity, curiosity, and friendship, helping you discover who you are and what you can do. They should also support you to learn and explore so that you can grow and thrive, instead of targeting you to make more money.

AGENCY
Do you feel in control of your digital world?

You have the right to make your own choices and to be free from manipulative or exploitative designs. Digital technology should support your decisions, not pressure you to spend too much money or time, or trap you in endless scrolling or spending.

So what does good look like for children?

Has your school talked to you about the following? (%)

Why your school uses technology for teaching and learning	29
What information about you is kept by the apps or websites you use at school	18
What information about you is shared with the government	11
What information about you is shared with other companies	13
Your right to see the information kept about you and to correct any mistakes	15
Your right to opt out of any of the technologies that your school uses	15
Which organisations to trust with your personal information	19
None of these	50

I think there are questions about Google and the use of data, and there are questions about how Google and Microsoft and Amazon become part of the infrastructure of education, and how that goes beyond just remote learning, or beyond a tool that you use at certain times or to support your practice.
(National Education Union)
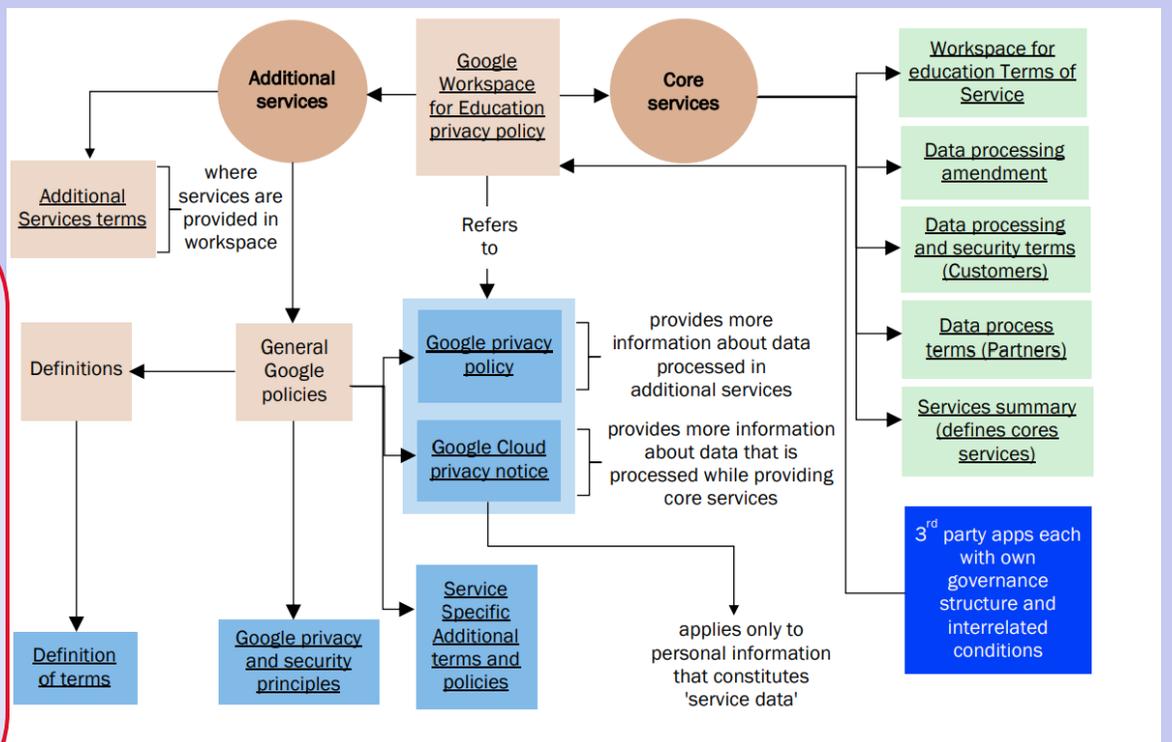
Better EdTech "by design and default"

Better EdTech futures for children

The research investigates how EdTech shapes learning and rights in diverse contexts, to stimulate a debate (in the UK) about:

1. Which EdTech systems are being used by children, for what purposes?

2. How does EdTech impact on children's rights, including to education, and does this vary according to their circumstances?

3. What are children's experiences, views and calls for change?

4. Can EdTech features be redesigned to maximise benefits and minimise harms to children's learning and rights?
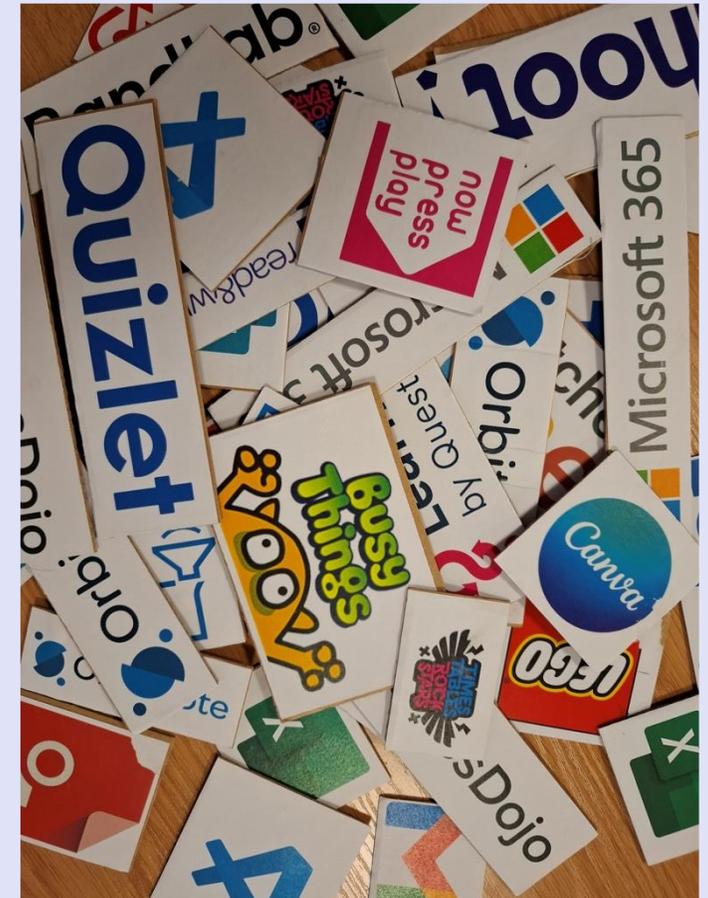
Child participation research, primary schools (200+ UK children)
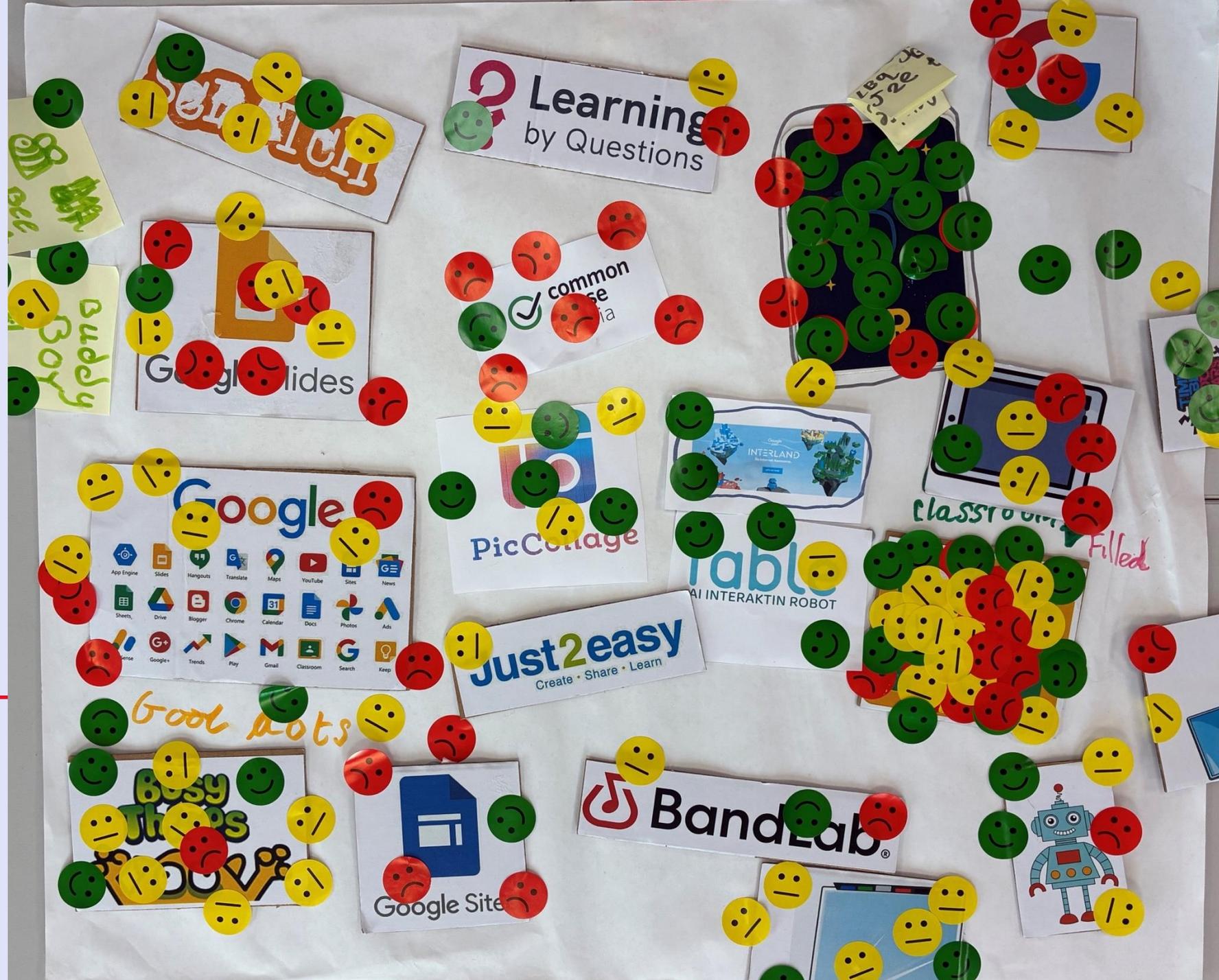
Child participation, secondary schools (200+)
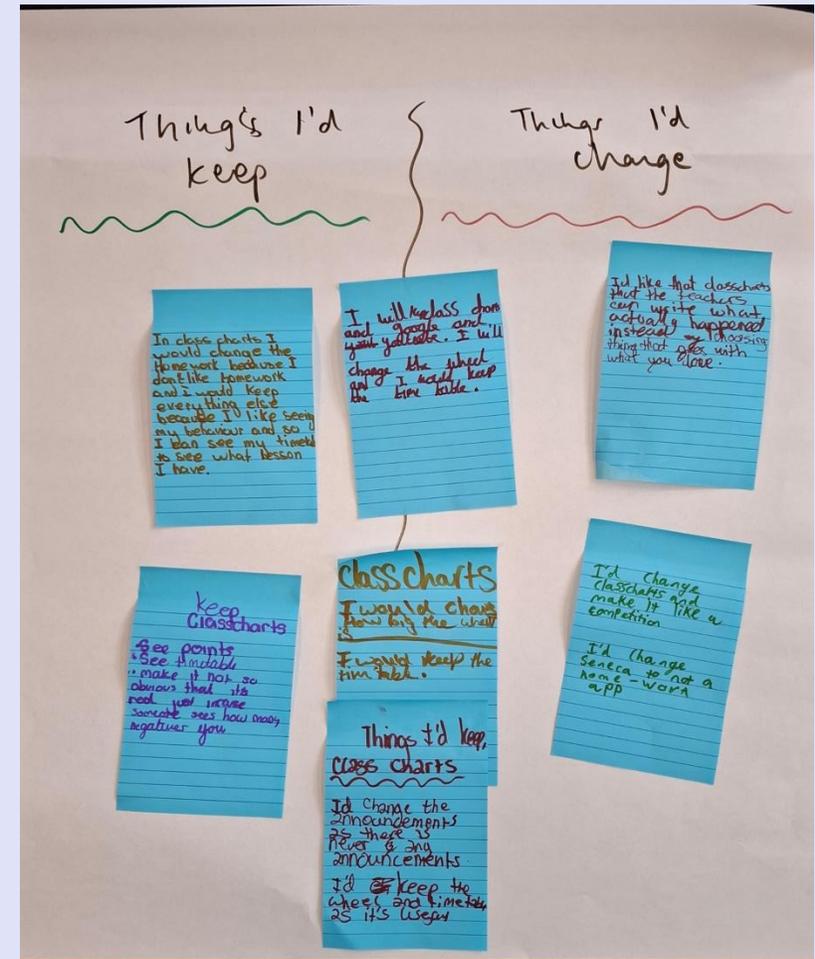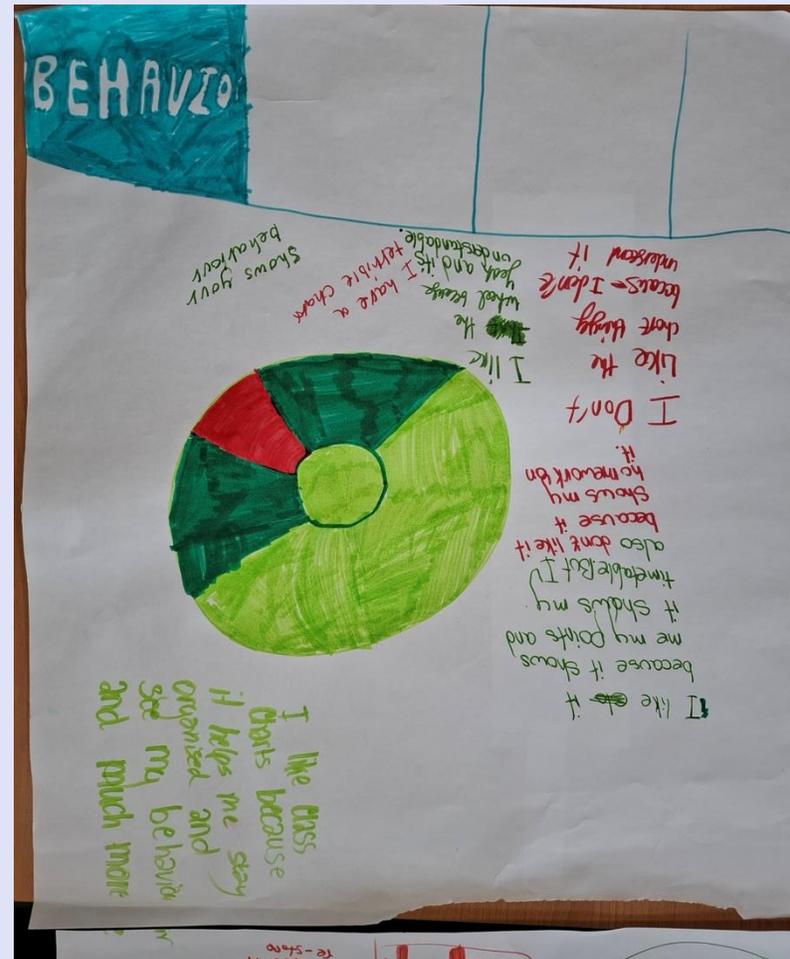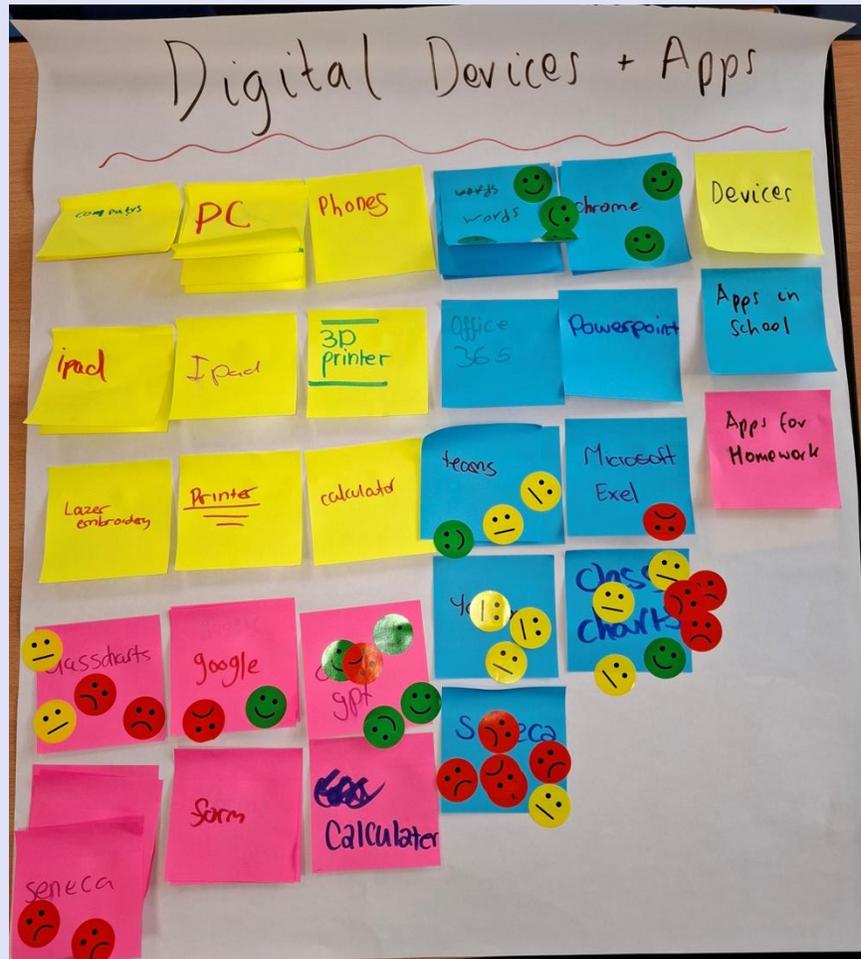
EdTech procurement: Who decides and how?

'[W]e're a **Google reference school** [...] we kind of find out about all the updates and things quickly and get training from Google [...] I've just been in **Madrid in half term for three days** for a symposium where you find out about updates [...] We knew with Google that the information was very **secure and safe**, and a lot of us were **already using Google-based things**. We wanted to put all of our planning and stuff on the cloud, and we knew that they were going to be **very robust in keeping data and leading the way with the AI** and things like that.'   (Year Lead, Primary, England)
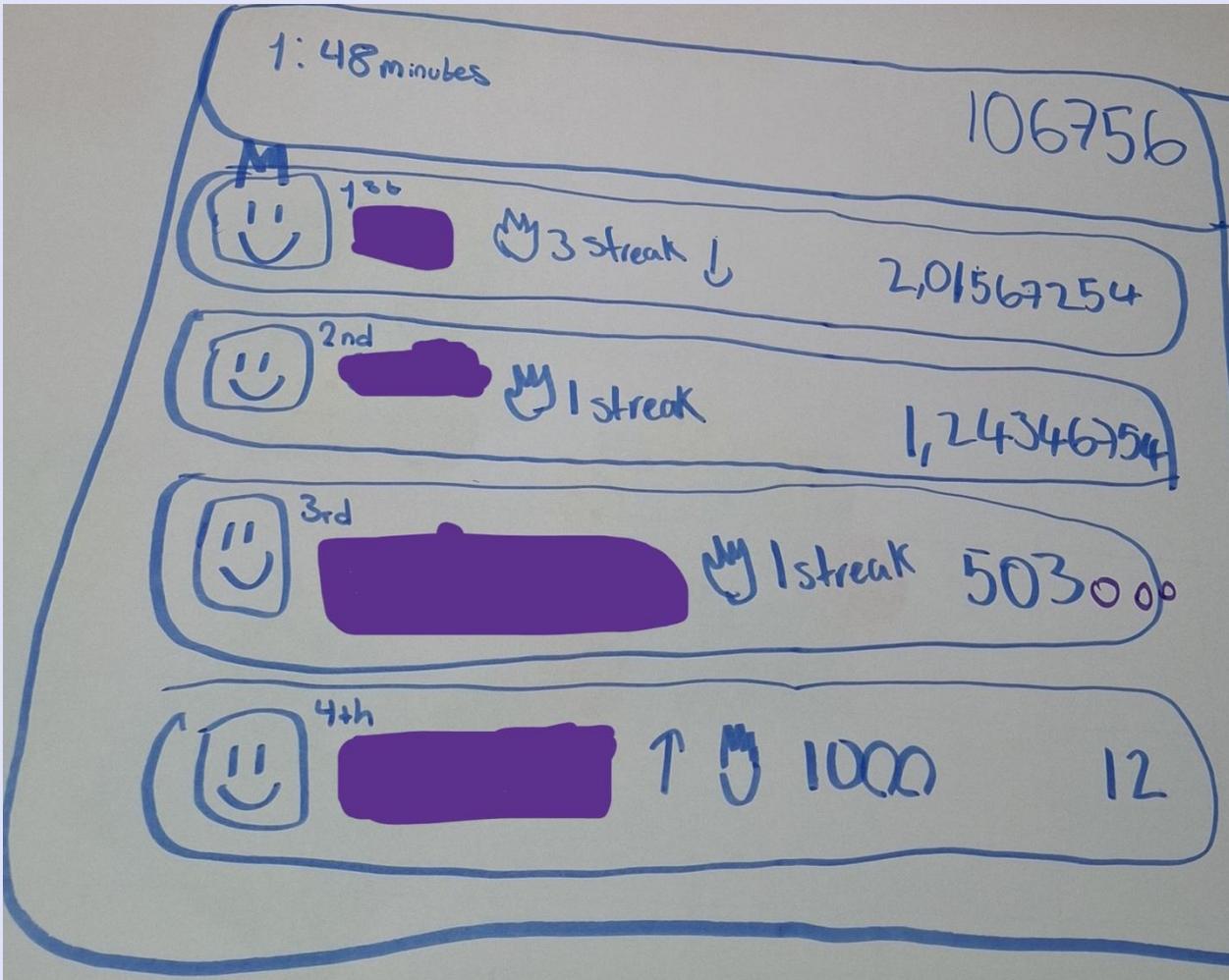
Gamification in EdTech

'Blooket is like another way of like doing quizzes like these little games that you get asked questions and it's like **whoever has like the most points or something at the end wins**.'

(Year11, Northern Ireland)
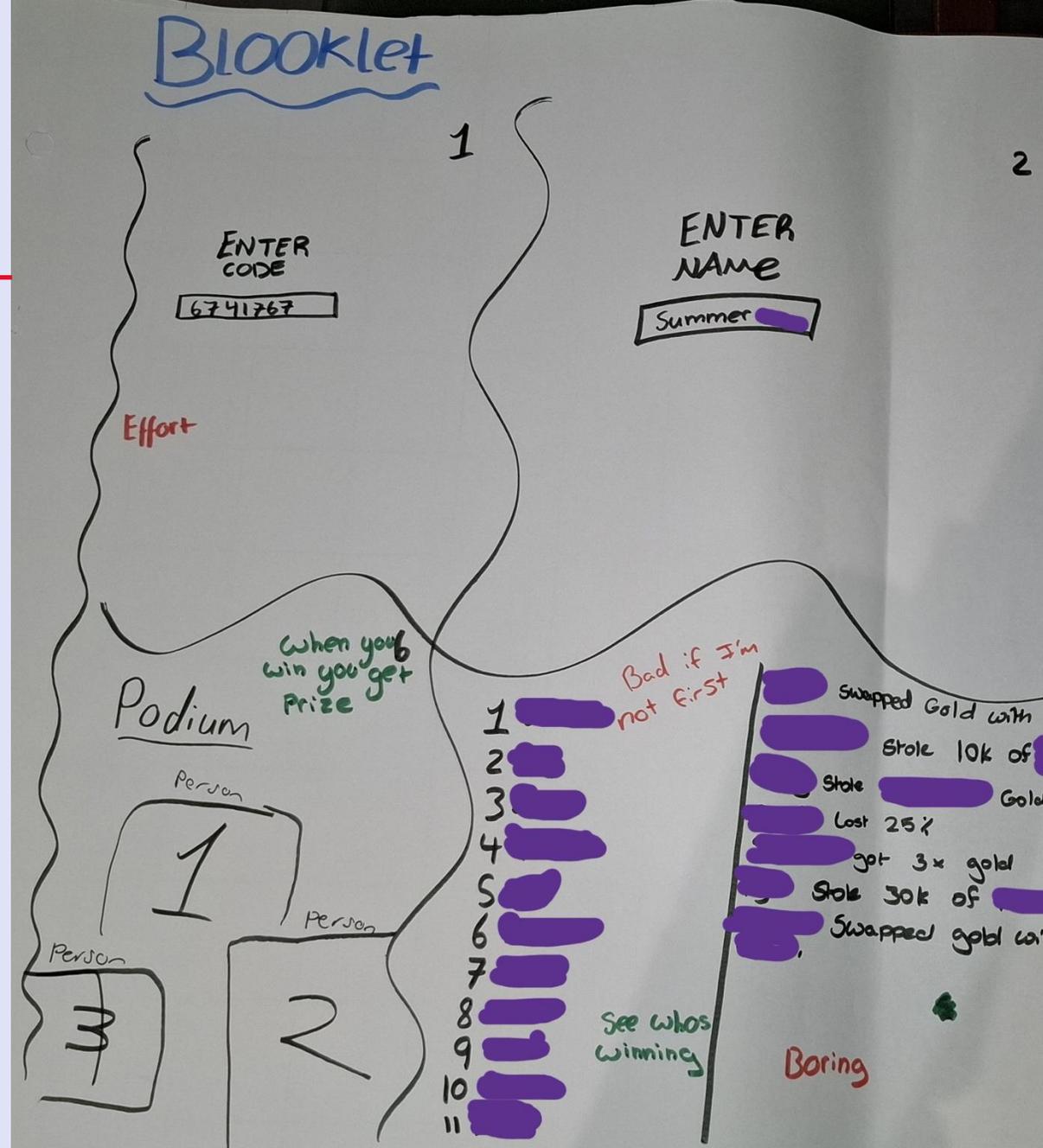
Homewok timers: Setting children up to fail

'[The] time limit, [...] when it's, like, going too low, yeah, I just go a little bit more faster. And **when people go a little bit more faster, they get the wrong answer**. And I'm going to get the wrong answer. Like, I'm crazy.'

(Year 5, England)

'If you leave it for, like, I don't know, 10 minutes to go to the toilet, it's going to knock you out.'

(Year 9, England)

Homewok apps and AI

'I use Gauth because **Sparx does not help you learn at all**. It just gives you the question. It has a video, but sometimes the question that they're doing in the video is way easier than the question that you're doing. So if you don't understand it, then there's no way for you to do it without searching it up or asking somebody.'

(Year 9, England)
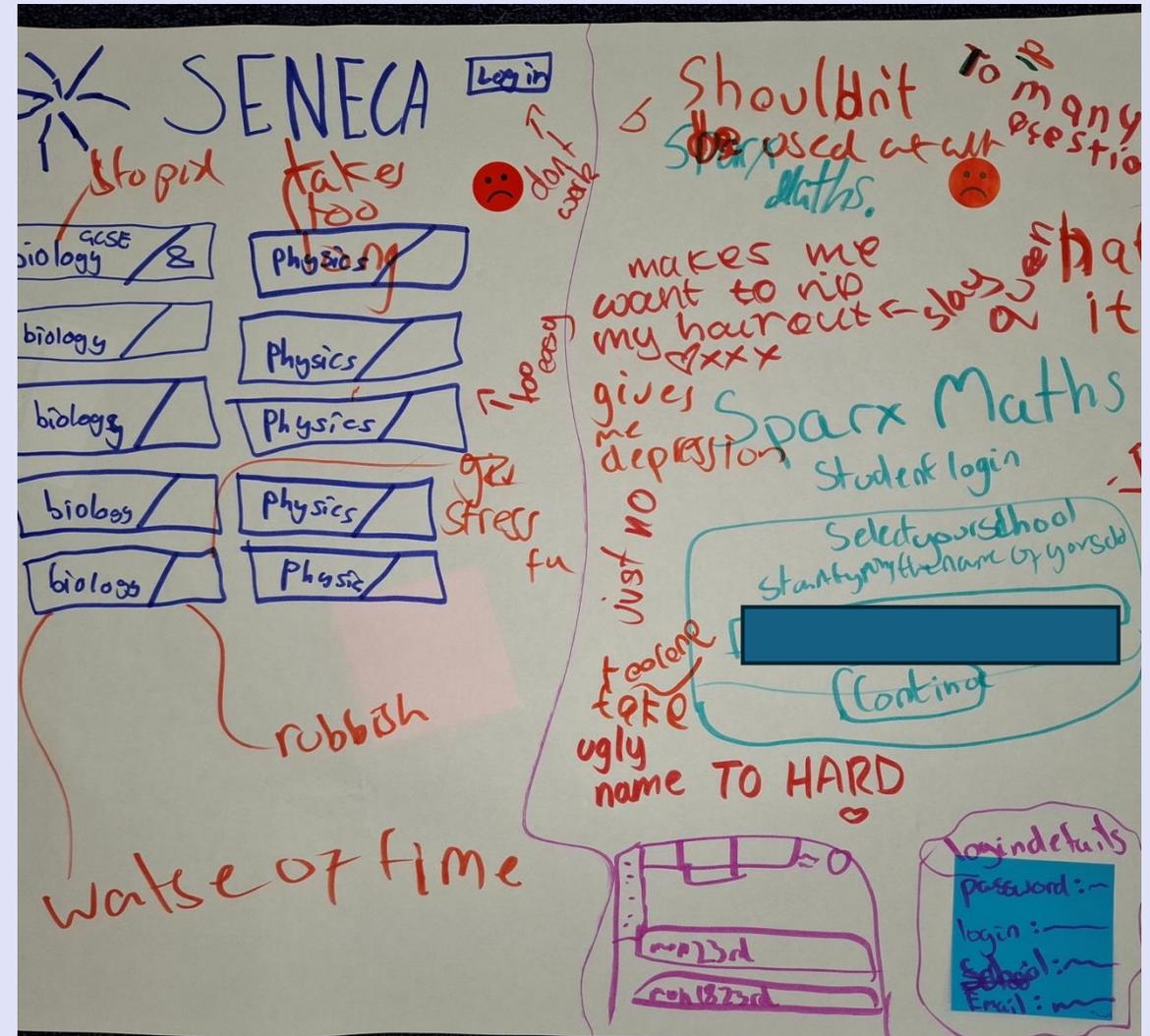
AI for lesson plans

'I've seen some resources that teachers have made for their learners using AI that have **obvious errors** or is **clearly being used as a labour-saving device rather than one that optimises learning**. […] I've been asked to cover classes before and been given lesson plans that are AI-generated and **almost entirely useless.**'

(Creative Media Teacher, Secondary, England)
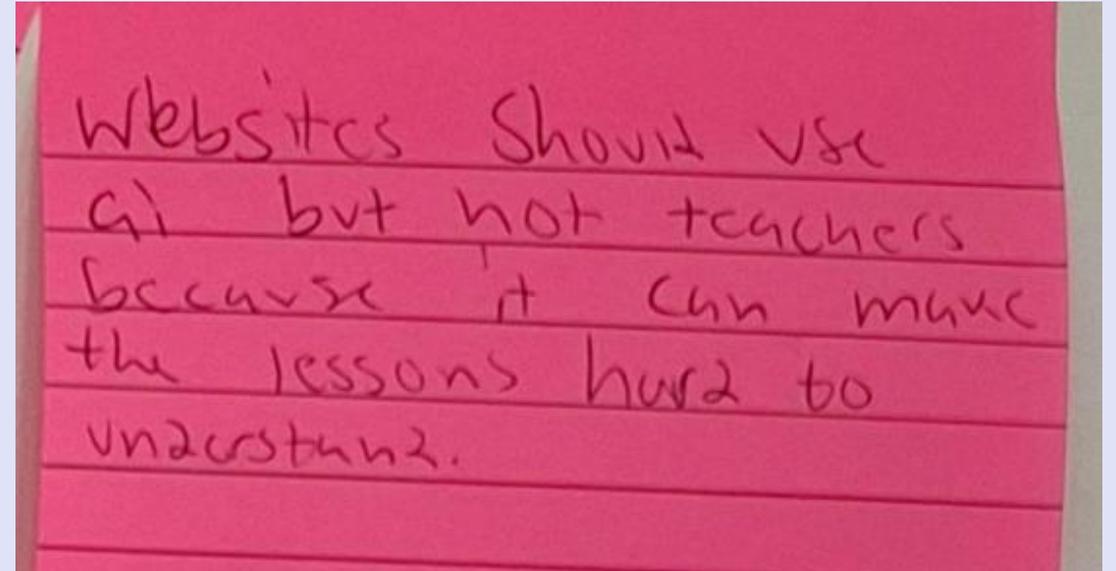
So, what is a better EdTech future for children? and what are the implications for their rights?

Thank you! And thanks to the DFC team

Visit https://www.digital-futures-for-children.net/home

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