

Rethinking the role of technology in the classroom

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Preparing elementary school students for active citizenship in an increasingly digital world requires introducing them to the latest technologies, but engaging those same kids in the classroom and

involving their parents and caregivers in the process is more than a matter of providing children with access to the latest electronic devices.

Tablets and laptops have their educational virtues, according to Annahita Ball, an assistant professor in the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, but her research suggests they have limitations as well.

"You can't simply throw technology at kids and expect [positive outcomes](#)," says Ball, an expert in educational justice and [school social work](#) whose new study shows a decrease in academic motivation for students who participated in a technology-based intervention.

Students' attitudes toward school, how they respond to the challenges of learning, their confidence about managing assignments and whether they work hard and try their best are all a part of [academic motivation](#)—or the degree to which a student cares about school.

Though several factors other than the presence or absence of tablets might influence that motivation, Ball says the results of her study point to the need for looking more closely at how technology fits into the early-learning environment.

"The critical piece for me is not about being anti-technology, but to emphasize that even with, or especially with, technology, schools must work on the interpersonal things that happen in schools," she says.

"Schools are communities and we should find ways to help teachers understand how technology plays into the classroom; help kids use it in ways that facilitates their learning; and then help parents understand how to work with their kids."

Ball's study, published in the journal *Children & Schools*, sought to close the broadband gap by giving tablets and home Wi-Fi to students in an urban New York State school district to see how it would affect

classroom and parental engagement.

About one in three children from [low-income families](#) are without a high-speed internet connection at home, compared to higher-income families where one in 1,200 children are without such a connection.

Previous research has shown that relationship building between families and their children's schools, known as [family](#) engagement, predicts strong student motivation.

"My focus is family engagement research, so I'm always interested in the ways that families engage with schools and how schools try to engage with families," Ball says. "I'm also interested in changing classroom dynamics to help student-teacher relationships and positive youth development."

Over the course of four months, Ball studied two fourth-grade and two fifth-grade classrooms. Each student had a tablet for use in the classroom, but students in a randomly selected class in each grade also received a take-home tablet and free broadband access at home. Teachers were interviewed about their students' participation, and the students' parents completed surveys.

Ball says this latest work is a pilot study that she hopes will help guide further research.

"These technology programs are being rolled out massively and the evidence on their effects is mixed," says Ball. "Context plays a role, because teachers reported seeing more collaboration among the kids, so there is something that can be leveraged within the learning context to help kids benefit from these tools.

"We need to do more work to determine what that specifically might

be."

More information: Annahita Ball et al, Closing the Broadband Gap: A Technology-Based Student and Family Engagement Program, *Children & Schools* (2019). [DOI: 10.1093/cs/cdz015](https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdz015)

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