Can Technology Help Alleviate Teachers' Burden?

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ABSTRACT

Teachers in Malaysia consistently report that administrative duties, rather than teaching itself, are their primary source of exhaustion. This article examines whether technology can meaningfully alleviate this burden, drawing on recent Malaysian and international scholarship on workload, burnout, and technostress. The evidence reveals a paradox: two decades of digitisation have often intensified teacher workload, layering data entry and reporting obligations onto existing tasks. The article frames this as "digitisation without subtraction", adding tools without retiring the tasks they were meant to replace. Current artificial intelligence represents a genuine departure, capable of performing work such as lesson planning, feedback drafting, and data summarisation rather than merely recording it. Realising this potential, however, requires retiring old requirements, involving teachers as co-designers, evaluating tools against measured time savings, and protecting judgement-based dimensions of teaching from automation. The decisive question is no longer technological capability but institutional willingness to design for teachers.

KEYWORDS

Technology, workload

Ask any teacher in Malaysia what exhausts them most, and the answer is rarely teaching.

It is everything else. The data entry. The reports. The forms that ask for the same information three different systems already have. Local studies have estimated that our teachers work well beyond 60 hours a week, and a substantial portion of that time goes to administrative and clerical duties rather than to lessons, feedback, or students. The evidence on what this is doing to the profession is no longer anecdotal. A recent systematic review of workload research found consistent links between excessive teacher workload and declining wellbeing, with administrative demands repeatedly identified as a central culprit (Ab. Wahab et al. 2024). Another review of studies on Malaysian educators reported that workload, alongside inadequate support, is among the most commonly cited factors associated with stress, anxiety, and poor mental health in the profession (Munusamy et al. 2024).

Perhaps most telling is what teachers themselves say. In an interpretative phenomenological study of Malaysian teachers experiencing burnout, participants described clerical work, endless documentation, and non-teaching duties as forces slowly pulling them away from the classroom work they love (Amzat et al. 2021). Teaching, the actual reason these people entered the profession, has quietly become the thing they do in between.

So when people ask me whether technology can help alleviate teachers' burden, my honest answer is yes. But only if we are willing to learn from an uncomfortable truth first.

Technology is partly how we got here.

Over the past two decades, our education system has digitised enthusiastically. Attendance systems, assessment platforms, learning management systems, reporting dashboards. Each was introduced with good intentions. Yet many of these systems did not remove work; they added it. Research conducted at my own university found that Malaysian secondary school teachers experienced considerable technostress during the pandemic-era shift to digital teaching, a strain that cut across gender and school type, suggesting the burden was structural rather than a matter of individual skill (Wahab et al. 2022). We digitised the paperwork, but we never actually reduced it. In some cases, a teacher now completes a task on paper AND enters it into a system, sometimes into two.

This is the trap I call digitisation without subtraction. We add tools without removing tasks. The result is a teacher who is more connected, more monitored, and more tired.

The current wave of artificial intelligence gives us a rare second chance, because for the first time, the technology can genuinely do the work rather than merely record it. AI can draft lesson plans that a teacher then refines. It can generate practice questions aligned to a syllabus in minutes. It can produce first-draft feedback on student writing, summarise assessment data into something a teacher can act on, and handle the routine correspondence that eats into evenings and weekends. The research literature supports this direction: a systematic review of AI applications for teachers identified planning, assessment, and feedback support among the clearest opportunities, while also cautioning that current systems still fall short of teachers' real needs in important ways (Celik et al. 2022).

Notice what all these examples have in common. They are the tasks around teaching, not teaching itself. This distinction matters more than any feature list.

In my own field of learning analytics, we have long known that data only helps teachers when it arrives as insight, not as another spreadsheet to fill. A well-designed AI system should work the same way. It should reduce the number of decisions and clicks a teacher makes in a day, not increase them. If a new tool requires training workshops, new logins, and new reporting obligations before it saves a single minute, we have simply repeated the old mistake with newer software.

There are also things AI should not touch. The judgement of a teacher who knows that a quiet student is struggling at home. The relationship that makes a Form Four student finally believe they can pass Add Maths. The professional discretion to slow down a lesson because the class is not ready. These are not inefficiencies to be optimised away. They are the core of the profession, and any technology strategy that treats them as automatable has misunderstood what teaching is.

So what would getting it right look like?

First, subtraction before addition. For every new digital system introduced into schools, an old requirement should be retired. If AI can compile a report from existing data, teachers should no longer be asked to compile it manually. The measure of success is hours returned to teachers, not systems deployed.

Second, teachers as co-designers, not end users. The people closest to the burden understand it best. The technostress findings are a warning here: systems imposed on teachers without adequate preparation or support create strain rather than relief. Tools built with teachers, tested in real Malaysian classrooms with real constraints, will always outperform tools procured on their behalf.

Third, honest evaluation. We should pilot, measure actual time saved, and be willing to abandon what does not work. Education technology has survived too long on promises. It is time we held it to evidence.

And finally, we must resist the temptation to reinvest every saved hour into new demands. The burnout literature is unambiguous that sustained overload drives good teachers out of the profession or hollows them out within it. If AI frees five hours of a teacher's week, those hours belong to lesson preparation, professional growth, rest, and students. A teacher with breathing room is not idle capacity. That breathing room is precisely where good teaching comes from.

Can technology alleviate teachers' burden? Yes. The tools now exist, and they are more capable than anything we have had before. But tools do not make decisions; systems and people do. The question is no longer whether technology can lighten the load. It is whether we are finally willing to design for teachers rather than around them.

Our teachers have carried this system on their backs for decades. Perhaps it is time the technology carried something for them.

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