

ClassDojo poses data protection concerns for parents



*Ben Williamson and Alasdair Rutherford raise a series of concerns about the globally popular classroom management app ClassDojo. They argue that as ClassDojo has grown into a new social media site for schools, it poses a number of risks in relation to data protection and child privacy, and to how children, teachers and parents interact. Ben and Alasdair are both based in the **Faculty of Social Sciences** at the University of Stirling, UK.*

*Ben is a Lecturer in Education, and led the ESRC funded project **Code Acts in Education** to explore the implications of digital data technologies in education. Alasdair is a Senior Lecturer in Social Statistics. [Header image credit: ClassDojo]*

Millions of parents will be familiar with the free mobile app, **ClassDojo**. It allows teachers to award or deduct points to children for their classroom behaviour, and has become a worldwide educational success story, with claims it is being used by over 3 million teachers and 35 million children from 180 countries globally.

Despite its popularity, ClassDojo raises significant concerns many parents may not have considered. As our **ongoing research** shows, in 2016 its Silicon Valley team received over US\$20 million to extend into a 'school-wide' platform, quickly making it into an indispensable tool for connecting schools with parents, enabling a constant flow of dojo points, classroom pictures, messages, videos and digital portfolios of children's work to be sent from schools to homes.

Meanwhile, teachers are involved in producing a huge database about children's behaviour. It's no longer just a cute app for promoting positive behaviour; it's becoming more like a **social media site**.

Cause for concern

ClassDojo's rapid spread is running ahead of teachers and parents' awareness of its risks. We raise a number of concerns here to ignite a constructive conversation between parents and

schools, particularly about what ClassDojo is doing with children's sensitive behavioural information, and any risks associated with its service.

Informed consent

Not all schools seek 'informed consent' from parents to enter their children's data into the ClassDojo system. Although parents are not forced to participate, this doesn't mean their child is automatically removed, which places a massive responsibility on parents, and assumes their expertise to make sense of lengthy privacy documents. It is also not clear whether schools and local authorities are issuing consistent guidance or risk assessments on the use of ClassDojo.

Persistent behavioural records

ClassDojo's new **school-wide and class-linking features** mean it can be used to create a persistent behavioural record of each individual child across the duration of their schooling, and school leaders can use these records to identify children by their behavioural profile. Vast collections of records are likely to be very attractive to a variety of organisations, for research or otherwise. ClassDojo is already in partnership with **Stanford University**, which is using ClassDojo data to evaluate how well its content promotes children's psychological development.

Teacher-pupil contact

The use of ClassDojo in classrooms impacts on teacher-pupil contact time – with points awarded by clicking on the mobile app, teachers become responsible for data entry rather than interacting with pupils. Even 10 minutes of ClassDojo use a day could add up to over a week per school year of teaching time. Many parents may welcome how ClassDojo opens up a communication channel with teachers, but for teachers, this '**digital work**' fills important classroom time.

Individualising the problem

At a time when **children's mental health** has become the subject of serious concern, ClassDojo reinforces the idea that it is the behavioural mindset of the individual that needs to be addressed. Many ClassDojo resources refer to ideas such as 'character development' and 'growth mindset' that emphasise developing individuals' resilience in the face of difficulties, but this doesn't address the social causes of many difficulties children encounter, such as stress about tests. Competitive ranking of children, according to their accumulated dojo points, could easily become a further source of stress and anxiety.

Purchasing the data

ClassDojo is proposing '**premium features**' for parents and school districts, and one way it is seeking to '**monetise**' its service is by selling video content to schools, although its vast databank also has potential for monetisation. Parents, for example, could purchase ClassDojo reports to make inferences about their children and their peer groups. School leaders might purchase ready-made reports to single out children for specific classes or special behaviour programmes. Local government departments could buy the data to compare schools' performance, much as schools are already judged in terms of test scores. In this business model, ClassDojo treats teachers as unpaid data entry clerks contributing to a huge database that can be analysed from far away to generate insights that parents, school leaders and local authorities might then purchase.

Return on investment

ClassDojo's business model leaves it open to a potential 'change of control' that could see millions of children's behavioural data transferred to a different organisation. As a free service, it has so far made no revenue, funded entirely by entrepreneurial **investors** from Silicon Valley. One way of securing a return on investment might be to sell the company, which would mean all ClassDojo

data coming under its new owner's privacy policy, with worried parents responsible for deleting their child's data within 30 days. With other global technology companies already performing unsanctioned **data mining** on children's personal information without seeking consent from either children or their parents, due to its extensive global reach into schools and homes, and its potential for monetisation, ClassDojo would make an attractive acquisition.

Transparent aims

As a globally successful social media site for schools, ClassDojo is becoming as integral to the relationships between children, teachers and parents as mainstream social media is to the everyday lives of millions around the world. It is making teachers into data collectors and data entry clerks, encouraging children to see themselves in terms of their behavioural points, and inviting parents to become users of ClassDojo's services. School leaders can now use ClassDojo data and local government authorities may also be able to access it in future, potentially making it into a key tool of whole-school management and performance measurement.

It is time to support parents and teachers to ask critical questions about ClassDojo. As the owners and controllers of a vast global database of children's behavioural information and a global social media site for schools, its entrepreneurial founders need to be more transparent about what they intend to do with that data, how they intend to generate income from it, and how they want ClassDojo to play a part in interactions between children.

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