Surveillance in our schools: Beneath the friendly exterior of ClassDojo

January 22 2019

ClassDojo is one of the most popular education apps in the world. Its company estimates it is used by millions of teachers and children across 180 countries. Beneath its friendly exterior lie disturbing implications, say researchers.

"Happier Classrooms: the simple way to build an amazing classroom community." So reads the message greeting visitors to ClassDojo's website. The app is free for teachers and is widely embraced as an innovative means of encouraging positive behaviour in students and building harmonious school environments.

Its interface is colourful and inviting. Each child in a class or school is assigned an avatar: a smiling, cartoonish monster that represents them in the app. Based on a student's behaviour in different areas, the teacher can assign—with a Pavlovian ding or harsh buzz—positive, neutral or negative Dojo points to their avatar.

This gamifies behaviour for students and helps teachers to keep extensive data on each of them. The app has expanded to become, in many places, a school-wide social media and content sharing network. Users can sign up as school leaders, teachers, parents, or students.

In a new paper, education researchers from the University of South Australia (UniSA) say that while the technology may be innovative, ClassDojo encourages an archaic approach to school discipline and neglects a genuinely educational approach to developing behaviour.

Further, they express concern that the app conditions children to accept rising levels of surveillance and control.

"Class Dojo can be understood as yet another data-gathering surveillance technology that is contributing to a culture of surveillance that has become normalised in schools", said Jamie Manolev, a doctoral candidate at UniSA and the study's lead author.

One of the biggest problems, he said, is that the app focuses on controlling students rather than helping them to build a deeper understanding about the why and how of behaviours in a social setting.

ClassDojo uses Dojo points to deliver a system of rewards and punishments based on a group of pre-selected behaviours. The ClassDojo company even recommends that teachers attach real world prizes to Dojo points. While rewards and punishments can be effective in the short-term, Manolev said research shows they can undermine children's intrinsic motivation for positive behaviours.

Further, said Mr Manolev, Dojo point scores reduce students' behaviour to a number, creating an illusion of simplicity that does not help teachers understand the factors driving positive or destructive behaviours. Instead, it creates "a behaviour economy in which individuals appear as balance sheets of behaviour."

Each child's total Dojo points—whether in the green or the red—are visible to them, and can be put on display. This too can serve as a means of control.

"Capable of being broadcast on large classroom screens to the entire class, visible to anybody who enters, a numbered ranking of students according to their behaviour fills the screen and invites a comparison of students, said Mr Manolev.

"The audit-like nature of this approach promotes competition between students in race to the top of the rankings while creating a hierarchy that may influence the way in which students understand themselves."

Mr Manolev said the app conditions students to accept "being watched" on an everyday basis. "The surveillance mechanisms embedded within ClassDojo extend beyond the walls of the classroom", he said.

"Through its digitised communication network ClassDojo provides teachers with the ability to deliver a child's behaviour data directly to parents, in real time, along with continual access to constantly updated behaviour profiles in the form of student reports."

"This feature effectively subjects students to a weekly report card of their behaviour delivered directly to a parent's inbox."

"If teachers modify their practice to implement ClassDojo according to company recommendations, students will be subject to an intensification of surveillance at school that encroaches into their homes, extending school-based disciplinary regimes further in the lives of young people."

As an alternative to the approach to discipline encouraged by ClassDojo, the authors argue for a more educational approach to discipline. "Such an approach would be underpinned by the values of respect, caring, and dignity, promoting practices that exhibit and develop such qualities in students."

"It would recognise the complexities of behaviour and consider the role of not only internal, but also external influences on behaviour such as curriculum, pedagogy, relationships, and student experiences.

"It would shift away from controlling discipline practices to practices that engage students with learning, and incorporate student voice."

Mr Manolev points to the detrimental aspects of subjecting students to high levels of surveillance, such as reducing risk taking, creativity, and trust, while simultaneously increasing anxiety.

Comparison can also be drawn between ClassDojo and China's Social Credit System which works much like a financial credit rating but based on behaviour. Both systems rely on surveillance, rewards and punishments as behaviour reinforcements, converting behaviour data into a score, and using those scores to govern individuals and shape their behaviour.

Provided by University of South Australia