

Operant Conditioning & Class Dojo Behavioural Tracking App in Australian Primary Schools :

More than half of the Primary Schools within Australia are now active users of a classroom-oriented Behaviour tracking app called “*Class Dojo*” (one of the most popular educational applications in the world): A piece of software that is designed to track the activities, and behaviours, of children using a 'points' based scoring system.

The app graphically assigns a cartoon-style 'monster' avatar to each child and they are electronically rewarded with extra points when they do the right thing, However, When the children act out they are deducted points from their score: which is (often) also displayed for the whole class to view on interactive whiteboards at the front of the class.

Class Dojo relies heavily upon converting behavioural data - which is input by teachers – and yields either an increase in score (Resulting from a Child's Positive Behaviour) or decrease in score (Misbehaviour). Then, Depending on a child's total score: Their teachers will use either rewards or punishments, so as to reinforce the ideal, target behaviour that's intended (aka overall positive, non-disruptive).

Mr Manoley, An Australian Teacher, had said that he observed some schools using the app to decide whether students could participate in recreational activities, all based upon a child's current score, and that some were missing out due to late homework submission or talking during class, and so on. Despite this, *Class Dojo* is proving quite popular with Australian teachers, as it creates a quick and simple 'behavioural fix'. But, Mr Manoley sees this as potentially dangerous: as it sends a message that children should simply behave appropriately in hopes of being rewarded for it – rather than because it's the right thing to do – and that any and all misbehaviour will be punished regardless of that child's learning ability, individual personality, attention span/focus levels, etc.

Researchers are also concerned with the unhealthy competition it may introduce: seeing as other children's scores can be viewed on the whiteboard. Another Primary School Teacher, Ms Cairns, claims it is beneficial as it provides critical data on those students who have a repetitive pattern of acting out or bad behaviour. She says that it can be a positive experience in overall: if accompanied with discussions between teachers, students, and parents, in order to address abnormal behaviour issues or any potential learning difficulties - improving classroom behaviour on a larger scale.

These problems and ideas can be found in, and discussed in terms of, the works of B.F Skinner and his studies in Behaviourism, more explicitly, Operant Conditioning.

Skinner's thoughts on conditioning were that in response to some sort of stimuli, people would display certain predictable behaviours, and over time, would modify those behaviours in response to the potential consequences: as well as from the notion of reinforcement or punishment. Skinner broke down these actions of reinforcement and punishment into two additional sub-types: For Reinforcement there is Positive Reinforcement or Negative Reinforcement; For Punishment - Punishment or Response Cost.

The reward contingency put in place with this method requires that the subject (the child) be reinforced for good behaviour by either the removal of negative stimuli, or addition of positive stimuli - working to praise their actions with ultimately psychologically attractive consequences.

If they display misbehaviour or enact bad actions then they are punished by the removal of positive stimuli or additional negative stimuli is added. This, then, establishes the idea that negative actions will lead to negative, undesirable consequences; Whereas positive and well-mannered behaviour will be rewarded with good results and consequences.

When the concepts and applications of *Class Dojo* are considered in reference to these ideas of conditioning, We can observe that the children are now shaping actions and behaviour to adhere to a rigid, artificial reward system that encourages them to be studious, quiet, and obey a teacher's authority – Whilst also being discouraged from any boisterous, unfocused, or disruptive behaviour.

This may seem like a positive system, but it neglects other factors, such as: any learning disorders and environmental issues (parental divorce, low levels of sleep at home, hormonal activity related to puberty and growth). On top of this, individualistic personality traits (that differ in all humans – Refer to the Five Factor Model of Personality) can be misconstrued in such a system: introversion and conscientious behaviour ('Good student', Hard working) being seen as more worthy than extroverted, overly social (“chatty, disruptive”) behaviour.

Additionally, factoring in the public classroom display of 'scores' on the whiteboard and the usage of cartoon digital avatars: this could draw the children towards overly-competitive behaviour, jealousy, and a sort of psychological disconnection from their actions versus their rewards, as they start to see it as a game – rather than being a more tangible reality.

As a general educational & psychological tool, 'Class Dojo' could be utilized easily and widely by teachers in order to control classroom-wide behaviour (increasingly more important now given the larger class sizes in recent years) and to motivate children towards positive social interaction and psychologically beneficial actions via a simple, digital system.

However, if the app is not applied pragmatically and integrated alongside other existing systems: including parent-teacher communication, consideration of certain children's needs (learning disabilities, mental illness), proper analysis of students who 'act out' due to struggling to learn at the pace of other children (rather than simply being disruptive or socially maladjusted), and other such critical factors – then it could end up doing more harm than good. To properly apply and implement this system a school must be vigilant about the teachers using it, pay attention to students within a class more closely, and not use it as a mere 'means to an end' for teachers to moderate general classroom control and maintain authority.

Written by Andre Jones (21st January 2019)

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<https://www.theage.com.au/education/it-s-all-about-controlling-students-researchers-slam-popular-app-20190118-p50s8l.html>