Beyond Behavior Management: Exploring the Role of ClassDojo in Parent–Teacher Relationships

Vincent Cho, Sergio D. Barragán, and Sofia Dueñas

Abstract

ClassDojo is one of the most widely used educational apps in the U.S. Once traditionally seen as a tool for classroom management, its newer communication features—direct messaging, social media-style posts, and instant translation—raise questions about the app's potential to build relationships between the school and home. This qualitative study draws on interviews with teachers and parents to explore how ClassDojo's features are perceived as supporting involvement, engagement, and building relationships. Guided by media richness theory and family engagement frameworks, our findings show that ClassDojo's communication features can potentially enable rich, personalized, and equitable connections between families and schools. These insights contribute to emerging literature on sociotechnical change in schools and highlight how apps such as ClassDojo can be leveraged to build relational trust, foster meaningful family–school relationships, and offer more equitable dialogue across languages.

Key Words: family engagement, multilingual families, translation, technology, ClassDojo, media richness theory, parents, teachers, relationships

Introduction

Rich relational communication is essential for collaborative problem solving. For example, organizational theorists have long underlined the

importance of spanning knowledge boundaries, such that diverse experiences and knowledge sets come together to meet new or pressing challenges (Eisenhardt, 1990; Honig, 2006; Tucker & Edmondson, 2003). They point out that effective collaboration is not about simply putting out fires, but also about developing comprehensive and sustainable solutions. Doing so is often difficult, however, because arriving with differences in perspective can also be cause for friction (Carlile, 2002; McDaniel & Walls, 1997). People literally do not see things the same way. Thus, although education scholars have championed the importance of parents and caregivers within collaborative problem solving (Ishimaru, 2013; Rodela & Bertrand, 2021), differences among perspectives can create sticking points. For instance, although parents hold important insights about key issues at their schools (e.g., safety, discipline, cultural inclusivity), they also encounter barriers when attempting to make their voices heard (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2023; Oliva & Alemán, 2019). These barriers may include not only linguistic differences, but also imbalances involving trust, power, respect, and authority (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 2019; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Warren et al., 2009).

In this context, new digital technologies have begun targeting parent–teacher communication (e.g., Shamash et al., 2022). In some cases, these platforms are initially designed with one purpose, adding or pivoting toward parent–teacher communication later on. For example, Laho (2019) describes how one learning management system (LMS) offered email-like messaging in conjunction with its primary work of organizing access to coursework and grades. In a similar way, apps traditionally for classroom management and discipline (MacSuga-Gage et al., 2015; Riden et al., 2019) have also begun facilitating parent–teacher communication (Cho et al., 2021; Gross, 2015). Among such platforms, the most notable is ClassDojo. ClassDojo has been downloaded at rates rivaling Google Classroom and Duolingo, thus putting it in the hands of millions of families worldwide (AppMagic, 2022; Konrad, 2022). Although the app is best known for handling classroom discipline, its developers frame such work as being part of promoting positivity, connection, and community among students, educators, and families (Gross, 2015; PR Newswire 2024a, 2024b). Unlike the LMS described by Laho (2019), ClassDojo did not simply insert email into an already cumbersome and little used schoolwide system. Rather, ClassDojo's business model necessitates parent and student engagement—it is free for teachers and parents, but parents can pay to upgrade their free accounts for additional functionalities. ClassDojo's basic free features include SMS-style direct messaging, Facebook-style classroom updates, and seamless translation into over 130 languages.

These functionalities could have the potential to reshape communication and collaboration among teachers and families, especially in multilingual contexts. However, prior scholarship suggests that parents and teachers may vary or disagree in their communication needs and preferences (Shamash et al., 2022). There is a gap in research about what communication features might best serve teachers and families, and ClassDojo's widespread adoption makes it an important example of currently available tools. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe parents' and teachers' perceptions about communication using ClassDojo. It is guided by two research questions. What ClassDojo communication features do teachers and parents use? How do families and teachers see these features supporting their involvement, engagement, and relationships? By delving into teachers' and parents' perspectives about ClassDojo's communication features, the present study yields crucial insights into how one of the most ubiquitous educational technologies on the market today may be reshaping parent–teacher interactions.

From Involvement to Engagement

Before conceptualizing ClassDojo's potential impacts on parent–teacher relationships, it is helpful to recall that scholars often distinguish between involvement-oriented versus engagement-oriented communication (Graham-Clay, 2005, 2024; Ishimaru, 2019). Involvement-oriented communication is often portrayed as unidirectional and school-centric or top down (e.g., newsletters, report cards, robocalls). For example, educators might aim to make homes more "school-like" by asking parents to weave educational activities into weekend time (Epstein, 2010). Schools might also attempt to involve parents in formal structures, such as encouraging attendance at parent–teacher conferences, at volunteering opportunities, or in parent education programs (e.g., GED; nutrition).

Although involvement-oriented communication would seem to cast parents in a passive role, it is worth noting that such communication has been found to have benefits. Many parents actively wish that their schools provided additional support around everyday challenges, such as supporting student well-being, home-based learning, and parent–child communication (Hamlin & Flessa, 2018). Moreover, encouraging parents to participate in school-centric activities has been found to yield positive outcomes, such as homework completion or on-task classroom behavior (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). In this light, critiques of involvement-oriented communication relate to how it prioritizes educator views and voices above those of parents or other family members. This risks

creating a dynamic where schools create a narrowminded script around what it means to be a good or involved parent, thus creating a deficit orientation around traditionally marginalized or non-dominant communities (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 2019; Barton et al., 2004; Ishimaru, 2019).

Alternatively, engagement-oriented communication encourages two-way interactions and dialogue (e.g., conferences, advisory team meetings; Graham-Clay, 2005). Seen through this lens, engagement-oriented communication may signal a shift in power: parents and other caretakers are treated as experts and active players in educating students, rather than simply as supporting cast members (Barton et al., 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Rodela, 2022). As Lopez (2001) recounts, some immigrant parents invest significant time and resources in educating their children, but in skills and qualities that educators may overlook or misinterpret. Other researchers have highlighted how marginalized or other nondominant families can benefit from intermediaries and other supports for getting their voices heard (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 2019; Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011; Warren et al., 2009). By valuing parent voice—as well as the voices of students themselves and other figures in students' lives—schools can develop important insights on issues ranging from curriculum to special education to inclusivity (Cowhy et al., 2024; Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2023; Rodela, 2022). In this sense, engagement can also be seen as involving social capital. It is difficult to have engagement if educators do not nurture trust or knowledge sharing in their environments (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Warren et al., 2009).

ClassDojo's Shift From Discipline to Engagement

It may also be helpful to understand ClassDojo's evolution since its initial launch in 2011. Prior scholarship has largely focused on its role in classroom behavior management, such as implementing token economies and tiered behavior models (e.g., Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports or PBIS; Kaltreider, 2021; MacSuga-Gage et al., 2015; Williamson, 2017). User-friendliness was prioritized in the app from its inception, with students creating cute monster-like avatars for themselves in the app, and teachers using the app to distribute points to students for desired behaviors. Those points might accumulate and be traded in for prizes or privileges (e.g., pencils, pizza parties). As a result, some teachers have reported that ClassDojo improved student compliance, self-regulation, and motivation (Chiarelli et al., 2015; MacLean-Blevins, 2013). However, others have also voiced misgivings about ClassDojo, expressing concerns that the app intensifies students' anxieties, sense of surveillance, and competitiveness

(Kowalski & Froiland, 2020; Manolev et al., 2024; Soroko, 2016). Notably, these critics have only focused on ClassDojo's implementation of token economies, without examining its communication features. It is possible to use the app only for communication, without engaging in a point system.

Today, ClassDojo brands itself as "Where classrooms become communities" and a way to "Keep teachers, families, and kids connected" (ClassDojo, n.d.). In an interview about the app's apparent shift toward relationships and community (Gross, 2015), ClassDojo's CEO and founder, Sam Chaudhary, stated:

> We thought we were doing something about classroom management, but what we're actually trying to do is build strong, positive relationships between teachers, parents, and students…This is much more about building these positive relationships and helping everyone deepen their understanding of each other and know each other better.

Perhaps in response to critics, Chaudhary eschewed "cashing in" on points, instead emphasizing that points served as opportunities for celebration and relationship-building among teachers, families, and students. During this period, the app launched its social media style feed (i.e., Class Story), direct messaging (i.e., Messaging), and instant translation features (Gross, 2015; PR Newswire 2024a; 2024b).

Scholars have largely ignored ClassDojo's potential as a springboard for communication and collaboration. In a study of K–12 apps with similar features, Cho et al. (2024) found that instant notifications and qualitative notes about students helped parents and teachers to support each other around issues like student well-being and behavior. It is unclear, however, what benefits ClassDojo might yield. For example, although Chen and Rivera-Vernazza (2022) found positive attitudes about ClassDojo's multimedia features, this small study focused only on one preschool teacher and three parents. Also methodologically problematic, DiGiacomo et al. (2022) relied upon undergraduate students' recollections about their middle and high school years. Not only did this study focus on students' estimation of what their parents knew or felt during that time, it did not take into account that the app is geared toward students in younger grades. Finally, Kowalski and Froiland (2020) cautioned that token economies could adversely impact parent–teacher relationships and student well-being, but their study focused generally on the intersection of classroom management and parent–school relationships, without isolating ClassDojo use or investigating its communication features. Altogether, this dearth of scholarship, along with ClassDojo's evolution over time, highlights the need to research the app's potential impacts.

Theorizing on Involvement, Engagement, and Media Richness

Unlike previous scholars who focused on ClassDojo's role in school discipline (e.g., Robacker et al., 2016; Williamson, 2017), we instead conceptualized ClassDojo as a communication tool. To do so, we drew upon media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Thompson & Mazer, 2012). Media richness theory posits that different communication channels (e.g., newsletter, phone call, SMS message, in-person meeting) vary in their capacities to convey information. For example, some media may afford a greater sense of interactivity, tone, and other cues, thus increasing users' perception of richness. It can also be that some information is better transmitted via different media. For example, video conference participants might retain more about speakers' likeability than about the substance of information presented (Ferran & Watts, 2008). Accordingly, people weigh different factors when selecting which channels to use. Some people may even use more than one channel in concert, such as when a text message might precede a phone call. Some of the factors influencing such decisions may be driven by perceptions about the tool at hand, as well as social or contextual forces, such as local norms, relative urgency, or sense of trust among users (Carlson & Zmud, 1999; Watson-Manheim & Bélanger, 2007). For example, some parents may turn toward email because of the complexity of information to be conveyed, or from the desire to generate a "paper trail," or because it feels timely without being intrusive (Graham-Clay, 2024; Thompson et al., 2015).

In this light, media richness theory provides a contrast from education researchers' traditional focus on the directionality of communication among educators and families (Graham-Clay, 2005, 2024; Ishimaru, 2019; Shamash et al., 2022). Media richness theory makes it possible to recognize that even if a modality is two-way (e.g., conferences, phone calls, home visits), it might not feel satisfying or informative. In other words, some nominally "two-way" exchanges can actually feel directive or disenfranchising. Moreover, media richness theory sets into relief how some "one-way" communications might satisfy or enhance users' sense of mutuality and collaboration. For example, although social media posts are often unidirectional, they can also bring viewers into a sense of shared experience and community (Cho, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2010). Similarly, Shamash et al. (2022) argue that technologies may help teachers build rapport with parents by making it possible to contact each other frequently and immediately, as well as by supporting language translation. Thus, we posit that even one-way messages can contribute positively to parent–teacher relationships

when they fulfill users' unique informational, social, and contextual needs (e.g., norms, urgency, trust).

To be clear, we are unaware of anyone whose heart has ever been warmed by a robocall. Rather, we posit that media richness theory provides a way to look beyond directionality, instead examining how different media (or multimedia) might address particular communication needs and aims. Thus, it becomes possible to imagine how addressing the aims of engagement (e.g., transparency, social capital, mutuality; Barton et al., 2004; Ishimaru, 2019) might be approachable even via one-way avenues. For example, one of ClassDojo's features is Class Story, a social media style feed where teachers can share announcements (e.g., early dismissal tomorrow) and multimedia (e.g., photos or videos from a rehearsal). Despite seeming unidirectional, it could be possible for such communications to address the aims of engagement by providing families with a sense of trust, caring, and connection, thus laying the foundation for subsequent collaboration.

Similarly, another ClassDojo feature is Messages, similar to conventional direct or SMS messaging, with the optional addition of a "quiet hours" mode to protect out-of-office times. Through the lens of media richness theory, it becomes possible to envision how a one-way Message could meet involvement-oriented aims (e.g., recruiting a volunteer) as well as more engagement-oriented aims (e.g., celebrating success around a shared goal). These uses do not rule out more contemporary, two-way conversations (e.g., back-and-forth Messages about a sensitive or unexpected issue). In fact, such exchanges can serve the same aims as a phone call or in-person meeting, while also meeting other contextual needs (e.g., timeliness, urgency, record keeping).

Finally, media richness theory also provides a way to conceptualize ClassDojo's language translation features. Integrated into the aforementioned features, the app currently supports real-time translation from among over 130 languages. In multilingual contexts, such translation could make interactions a richer and more meaningful experience, allowing more information to be conveyed among both families and educators (Graham-Clay, 2024; Shamash et al., 2022). Thus, findings about the use of this technology could resonate with education researchers' descriptions of linguistic brokering in multilingual school communities (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016), as well as communication researcher's descriptions of boundary spanning objects (Carlile, 2002). On the one hand, multilingual families may find it easier to express concerns or share insights; on the other, teachers may be able to caption multimedia or interact with a diverse range of families in their own languages seamlessly

and simultaneously, without additional keystrokes or device tapping. As such, research about ClassDojo's various features may help shed light on how technological advancements may be influencing home–school relationships (Graham-Clay, 2024; Shamash et al., 2022).

Methods

Positionality

Our research team was independent from ClassDojo and had no financial or professional relationship with the company. Prior to this study, one team member had used the app in a limited capacity as a classroom teacher. During the analysis and drafting phases of this study, another team member had a child whose teacher began using ClassDojo, though minimally. As researchers, we were also cognizant of the concerns raised about classroom management technologies, including but not limited to ClassDojo (e.g., Cho et al., 2020). In order to support a fair and balanced analysis, we designed the present study to focus on participants' practices and experiences.

Additionally, our team's personal, professional, and academic backgrounds helped sensitize us to issues relating to family engagement and communication. In particular, all research team members had extensive classroom and/or administrator experiences and had served as bridges among multilingual families, teachers, and schools. Two team members were bilingual (Spanish) and had extensive experiences as school staff employing these skills; they conducted any interviews that were in Spanish. Altogether, our collective experiences helped to shape our attention toward the evolving role of technologies in supporting such relationships.

Data Collection

The present study focuses on qualitative data initially gathered within the context a larger, mixed methods study about ClassDojo. See Cho and Dueñas (2025) for a description of the quantitative survey, including how we identified infiltration from bots employing generative artificial intelligence (AI) to commit survey fraud. Our sample was recruited via social media posts and by contacting schools and educators known to be using ClassDojo. Because preliminary analyses of interview data suggested the importance of ClassDojo's embedded language translation feature, we made sure to contact schools serving substantial numbers of multilingual students. Parent interviewees could request to be interviewed in either English or Spanish. In the end, our final sample of teachers consisted of 14 teachers (see Table 1) and 16 parents (see Table 2) from throughout

the United States. (Note: A total of 15 teachers were interviewed; however, one teacher was excluded from the sample after reporting only using ClassDojo's behavior management features). We use the term *parent* to refer to adults serving as the primary caregiver/decision maker for the child, regardless of biological relationship; our sample did include one biological grandparent. Of the eight parents who identified as multilingual, three chose to be interviewed in English and five in Spanish.

The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. Lines of inquiry addressed teachers' and families' uses of ClassDojo and its impact on communication and relationships. For example, teachers were asked questions such as: Tell me about the different tools you use for communicating with parents. When it comes to parent communication, what is ClassDojo best at? What are examples of things you share? Messages you send? How do you see parents reacting to ClassDojo? Parents were asked similar questions, such as: What technologies do teachers use to reach out to you? Tell me about a time you reached out to your teacher using ClassDojo. What are some examples for how you and your teacher engage with [feature] (e.g., Class Story, Translation, Messaging)? What advice would you have for other parents who use ClassDojo?

Table 1. Teacher Demographics

Pseudonyms	School Level	Student Subpopulation	Region
Teacher 1	Middle		Northeast
Teacher 2	Elementary		West
Teacher 3	Elementary		South
Teacher 4	Elementary		West
Teacher 5	Elementary	Sheltered English Immersion	Northeast
Teacher 6	Elementary		Northeast
Teacher 7	Elementary		Midwest
Teacher 8	Elementary		South
Teacher 9	Elementary		West
Teacher 10	Elementary		West
Teacher 11	Elementary		Midwest
Teacher 12	Elementary		Northeast
Teacher 13	Elementary		South
Teacher 14	Elementary		Midwest

Table 2. Parent Demographics

Pseud-onyms	School Level	Language	Student Subpopulation	Region
Parent 1	Elementary	English		Midwest
Parent 2	Elementary	English		Northeast
Parent 3	Elementary	English		South
Parent 4	Elementary	English	Special Education	Northeast
Parent 5	Elementary	English		Midwest
Parent 6	Elementary	English		South
Parent 7	Elementary	English & Spanish	Special Education	South
Parent 8	Middle	English & Indonesian		Midwest
Parent 9	Elementary	Spanish		Northeast
Parent 10	Elementary	Spanish		Northeast
Parent 11	Elementary	Spanish	Special Education	Northeast
Parent 12	Elementary	Spanish	Special Education	South
Parent 13	Elementary	Spanish		Northeast
Parent 14	Elementary	English & Portuguese		Northeast
Parent 15	Elementary	English	Special Education	Northeast
Parent 16	Middle	English		Northeast

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place concurrently with data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We followed Hill et al.'s (1997, 2005) iterative, consensus-oriented process for qualitative coding via the Dedoose qualitative analysis software. In this approach, consensus about the application of codes to excerpts is achieved via dialogue and consistent interaction among team members, even around points of agreement. As such, it hopes to avoid the surface-level agreement associated with simply aiming at a quantified notion of interrater reliability.

Our approach to employing dialogue and developing consensus evolved over time. Throughout these phases, the authors took turns playing the roles of primary analyst or of auditor (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Hill et al., 1997, 2005). The early analysis phase focused on testing and refining a start list of codes, which had been developed based upon our prior knowledge and research experiences relating to ClassDojo and similar technologies.

Analysis during this phase involved two team members serving as primary analysts, while the third served as auditor. The steps for early analysis involved each primary analyst first reading the same transcript on their own, applying the start list of codes and jotting notes or potential revisions into their respective copies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Subsequently, the two primary analysts convened to develop consensus about coding. In line with Hill et al. (1997, 2005), these analysts took turns voicing their rationales for the application of specific codes and excerpts, even in instances of agreement. This helped to externalize and articulate understandings about the codes. From there, the auditor checked for consistency and validity, meeting with the whole team to discuss thought provoking passages, to identify tensions or discrepancies in code applications, and to further refine the codelist as a team. Throughout this phase, the first author served as one of the primary analysts.

Our codelist stabilized after approximately five transcripts were coded in this manner. During the middle analysis phase, transcripts were coded by one primary analyst, then audited by the two other team members. All team members took turns in all of these roles, continuing to meet as a whole team to engage in dialogue around areas of interest, agreement, or tension. Subsequently, the late analysis phase focused on identifying and organizing subcodes within major themes. During this phase, individual team members served as the primary analyst for specific themes, presenting their organization and interpretation of subcodes to the rest of the team for feedback and additional refinement.

As a result of this iterative process, the final codebook addressed uses of ClassDojo's communication features, including: individual and classwide communications; instant translation among languages; sharing photos and media; and cases when ClassDojo was *not* used to communicate. It also addressed perceived effects on parent–teacher relationships, including: sense of immediacy, flexibility, and privacy; personalized and relational communication; and accessibility.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it relied on interview data, which are self-reported and subject to social desirability and recall biases. Moreover, because all participating teachers were voluntary users of ClassDojo, their generally positive views may not reflect the perspectives of less enthusiastic or non-users. The study also did not examine disparities in families' access to premium features, such as upgrades offered via the ClassDojo Plus plan (e.g., decorations for students' avatars, improved

photo management, the ability to flag messages as "Urgent" and to check viewed status). Although no parents reported subscribing to ClassDojo Plus, several expressed frustration with promotional pop-ups or feelings of exclusion from not upgrading. Future research should explore the equity implications of this tiered access and its influence on parent–teacher relationships. Finally, two optional features (Portfolio and ClassChat) were rarely mentioned by participants, and never in the context of facilitating parent–teacher communication. As a result, we were unable to assess their potential contributions to engagement or communication.

Findings

In general, both parents and teachers agreed that ClassDojo was convenient and easy to use. Teachers especially praised its simplicity and practicality. As Teacher 7 put it, "[ClassDojo] is a one-stop shop for me; it's the easiest tool. Everything I need is on Dojo." Other teachers, as well as parents, echoed this sentiment. In what follows, we describe the three ClassDojo features that participants saw as central to their communication practices: Messaging, Class Story, and Translation. Each section opens with a description of general practices relating to the feature (RQ1) before turning toward its role in parent–teacher relationships (RQ2).

Messaging: From Convenience to Connection

Messaging was a mainstay for communication among all family and teacher respondents. Similar to direct or SMS messages, Messaging afforded the sharing of text and photos, but with an increased sense of privacy and work–life balance. In teachers' words, Messaging was "easy," "convenient," and "ideal," because it allowed them to communicate without sharing their personal phone numbers. Additionally enhancing this sense of balance, teachers especially liked the "quiet hours" setting. As Teacher 14 advised, "Make sure to set your boundaries [in Messages] as well. Set those quiet hours so they know you're not available at all hours of the day." Echoing the teachers, families also agreed about the convenience of Messaging. If families commented about quiet hours at all, they were supportive of teachers balancing their time. Moreover, families felt that Messaging was more convenient than traditional ways of contacting teachers. In one salient example, Parent 5 stated that because she worked at night, Messages was a "convenient" way to get a "quick response" without "trying to sit on the phone" during the hours when she would otherwise be sleeping.

Involvement-Oriented Messaging

All teachers and all families described the importance of Messaging to involvement. For example, teachers liked the convenience of sending quick "shout outs" and reminders (e.g., homework details, water bottle forgotten at home). To teachers, these messages felt quick but personalized. For example, when one child in particular had been struggling through a "difficult week," Teacher 9 reported taking a moment to reassure the parents that "[the child] had an incredible day today. Just wanted to let you know." Similarly, Teacher 13 recounted celebrating another student this way:

> I've been watching her grades improve all year, and she got a 100 on her reading test…I had my phone ready, and I said, "Baby girl, you got a 100!"…I snapped that picture, and I [typed]: "The look you make when you score 100," and I sent that right to her mommy and daddy.

Echoing the teachers, family respondents were unanimously positive about these quick, one-sided Messages. Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Thompson & Mazer, 2012) provides one way to understand the value of these messages. In particular, their inclusion of multimedia and instantaneous nature may help families feel more present to their child's day, thus addressing needs like richness, connection, and urgency. In the words of Parent 16, receiving updates about "bright moments" felt like teachers "giving us *true* time" (emphasis was the parent's). In other words, one-sided messages could reaffirm for parents a sense of care. Other parents recounted how helpful it was to have space for important (but non-urgent) messages. Examples of this included scraped knees, test anxiety, losing a tooth, falling down at recess, and successful classroom accommodations. As Parent 4 put it, receiving a quick "heads up," especially when the issue is "nothing major," helped her to feel "more connected." It also felt more sensitive to context, since having such conversations at pick up can feel like getting "ambushed" or making a "big scene."

In line with Epstein (2010), one-sided Messages provided parents with a bridge for making home feel more school-like. This was especially emphasized by Parent 3, who made particular efforts to let her son know about the relationship ClassDojo afforded with his teacher, telling him, "Hey, if there is an issue, your teacher has a way to communicate whatever with me." She characterized his reaction as, "I know that if something excellent happens, my mom will find out." In fact, he recently came home excited about a photo taken of a recent accomplishment: "He kept saying, 'Check your phone! Check it!'" As Parent 16 summed up, seeing snippets of a child's day

established a "comfortable space" to "prompt parents" into creating celebrations about accomplishments at home or conversations about the day's ups and downs.

Engagement-Oriented Messaging

Similarly, most teachers and families also reported that Messages facilitated engagement-oriented dialogue. By their accounts, Messages removed challenges related to access, while also fostering a sense of personal connection. For example, several teachers mentioned being able to see whether parents viewed messages sent via ClassDojo. Teacher 4 took advantage of this function, stating, "If I saw several parents that aren't responding, I'll also send it out on email and just copy, paste it an email, and I'll send it out." This practice may have improved outreach to families on the periphery or who might have gone ignored via other communication strategies.

Teachers also described how using Messages made them feel more "relatable" and within "instant" reach. This sense of accessibility was contrasted with the frictions associated with sitting down to email, calling during lunch time, or using the main office as a go between. Of particular note, Teacher 2 also reported that her "very rural" and "very, very poor" community had trouble with computers and email, and that using a mobile phone app like ClassDojo made things much easier for her families. She went on to highlight how increased accessibility could result in more personalized care for students, describing one student who was troubled by her parents' separation:

> One of my kids was just really off. She was having a really unusual day for her and just crying…so I just sent a quick Dojo message to her mom [and learned it had been a difficult weekend].…Within 5 minutes I was able to solve the problem: pull her over to me, talk to her, give her a hug. I also said, "Do you want to send your mom a message?" I handed her my phone. She typed to her mom, "I love you."

Thus, we interpreted such comments as examples for how back-and-forth within Messages could help teachers build social capital with parents and students.

Interviews with families helped to confirm this finding. As Parent 8 stated, Messages helped her feel "closer to the teachers" and whether they care, because "it's a conversation…like we are really chatting." Similarly, Parent 5 described how Messages made it easier to overcome her sense of "social awkwardness" to feel more at ease with teachers, stating, "You have a little rapport when you see [teachers] communicating back and forth." Families also described how the multimedia format of Messages helped them to

better advocate on behalf of their students, whether by it initiating a quick "check-in" or addressing larger concerns such as those relating to health (e.g., surgery, illness, falling asleep) or disability (e.g., anxiety, speech impairment, ADHD). For instance, Parent 15 had requested videos of what her child's applied behavioral analysis and occupational therapy sessions "looked like" and mentioned that ClassDojo would be "super helpful" for supporting parents' practices at home.

Class Story: A Window Into Classroom Life

In many ways, Class Story provided parents with a window into everyday school life that they might not otherwise have. In practice, Class Story served as a social media-style feed where teachers might post updates and involvement-oriented communication. Class Story was the second most commonly mentioned ClassDojo feature, with most teachers (n = 11) and families (n = 12) reporting about its use. From teachers, we heard how Class Story was a "quick" and "fun" way to share posts to all classroom families, from newsletter-like announcements to photos of class activities and field trips. Teachers also felt that Class Story was more impactful than conventional communication methods. For example, some teachers mentioned that Class Story had a wider reach compared to traditional newsletters; one teacher appreciated that it "gets to a lot more parents." Additionally, another draw was the sense that Class Story offered more privacy than using their personal phones for sharing photos; it also felt more confidential than public-facing social media, such as Facebook. As Teacher 7 explained, he exclusively used Class Story, stating, "I don't want the general public knowing that we have a school dance going on, just for safety and security reasons."

Providing parents with a window into the classroom was especially facilitated by multimedia. Teachers agreed that parents "love getting pictures" and seeing videos at home. For example, Teacher 13 listed several activities she would post, from learning fractions with M&M's, to a visit from the Grinch during the Christmas season, to birthday celebrations, stating, "If you can think of it, I've probably shared it. It's a really good way to connect." Resonating with this, parents were enthusiastic about how "fun" Class Stories were. Some families specifically pointed out the connections they felt to their child and the school via photos received, "I really liked that [the students] got a lot of pictures [taken]," and "I think that's pretty cool…we get to see the pictures, and we're allowed to save the ones with our kids." Parent 3, for example, described how receiving photos was "nice and it brightens up my day, especially when I'm sitting here at work in and out of meetings." This sense of connection was not limited to adults. Two

parents also highlighted how their children became more enthusiastic and "involved" in teacher–family communication, because it felt like more than "just email." On this note, Parent 5 commented, "[My son will] ask me if I've seen the pictures on Dojo, if his teacher posted the pictures from that day." In this way, Class Story was seen as supporting relationships among teachers, parents, and students.

Similar to our interpretation of one-way communication via Messages, teachers viewed the window of connection offered by Class Story posts as helping to build social capital, and parents described how Class Story made them feel closer to the school and opened up opportunities to have school-like conversations at home. In the words of Parent 4, Class Story:

> builds community…it's kind of nice to see things that are going on and get a glimpse inside the school and know what they're doing just beyond schoolwork, because I was like…some kids just are kind of buttoned up about that stuff, so it's kind of fun to see.

Translation

The teachers and families who used Translation generally described its ease of use, efficiency, and utility for communication across languages as a strong point of the app. Reflecting the sentiment shared by most Translation users, Teacher 7 commented how it has "really opened the door for me" to communicate with all families and is "the most important feature that I'm using." Similarly, families were "feel[ing] good" about the Translation feature since it made it "easier" to communicate and "express" themselves in a "quick" and "safe" way. In some cases, families also preferred Translation through the app than through a translator. As noted by Parent 10, "Y como a veces siento que la traductora a veces no, no manda el mensaje como yo lo quiero decir [sometimes I feel that the translator doesn't convey the message as I want to say it]." In this way, Translation gave families a more direct opportunity to communicate with teachers and use their own voice rather than through a third-party. Similarly, Parent 14 appreciated the flexibility the app offered by being able to choose when to use Translation to read and write messages through ClassDojo, "When it's simple, I don't [use Translation] because I force myself to write in English, but when I have any doubts, yes, I use the translation." In these cases, Translation's accessibility and flexibility offered parents ownership over how they communicated with teachers.

Aside from the ease and flexibility of communication, teachers and families also felt that the Translation feature promoted better relationships and offered a more equitable format to communicate across languages. It might

be recalled that multilingual families may feel distance and imbalances of trust and respect between school and home (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2023; Oliva & Alemán, 2019). Counter to these points, teachers believed that ClassDojo brought families closer to the school. Teacher 2, for instance, reported that many of her parents from migrant working communities "feel like they cannot communicate" because they "don't have email…don't want phone calls...and don't want to talk in person." However, ClassDojo's Translation feature "disarmed" these parents by being easy and inviting. Another teacher (13) explicitly mentioned that a multilingual parent thanked her for using ClassDojo: "[The parent] doesn't have to stress…she's comfortable and is able to communicate with me."

Echoing these sentiments, parents confirmed that Translation improved connections to teachers and schools. As one multilingual parent stated, the app makes it "muy fácil de estar al tanto de nuestros hijos y poder platicar con la maestra [very easy to keep up with our children and to talk with the teacher]" and highlights "como hispanos, nos están arreglando bastante la vida con esa aplicación [as Hispanics, this app is making our lives much easier]" (Parent 10). Another multilingual parent, Parent 11, described how the Translation feature changed the relationship she and other families had with the school in terms of communication and distance:

> Simplemente me encanta la aplicación. Es muy útil en la vida de los padres…desde que pusieron esta aplicación, yo me he sentido más informada y más presente, más involucrada en la escuela porque me están avisando cualquier cosa. Yo por escribirle. Entonces es de gran beneficio. [I just love the app. It is very useful in the lives of parents… since they implemented this app, I have felt more informed and more present, more involved in the school because they are notifying me of anything. I can write to them. So it is of great benefit.]

Equally important, we also heard how Translation facilitated parent-to-parent communication. Specifically, Parent 4 who was monolingual, English-speaking, and active in conventional parent involvement roles (e.g., the parent–teacher organization), described how ClassDojo helped her to connect with families in her school community, which included many speakers of many languages, given its location near the city's Chinatown. In her view, Translation supported outreach and participation in events (e.g., sports, plays, fundraisers) by complementing the "diverse ways that people communicate." Overall, teachers and families felt that Translation changed how school–family communication was carried out across languages.

Discussion

The findings presented in this study highlight how ClassDojo's communication features supported richer, more personalized connections. Messaging emerged as an easy and convenient tool for quick, personalized interactions, boosting parental involvement while respecting teachers' privacy. Exchanges, though brief, provided a foundation for support and connection. In addition, Class Story offered families a multimedia "window" into the classroom, enhancing transparency, a sense community, and conversations at home. Finally, the Translation feature improved accessibility and equity, empowering teachers and families to engage in seamless multilingual dialogues. Translation also contributed to a sense of inclusion and closeness with linguistically diverse families. Altogether, these findings highlight how platforms like ClassDojo may serve as a foundation for strengthening home–school relationships in the digital age. Below, we first situate our findings within scholarship on social and technical change. Subsequently, we discuss the potential implications of embedded language translation.

A Sociotechnical Perspective on Building Connections

The present study employed media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Thompson & Mazer, 2012) to explore how features like multimedia, user-friendliness, and ease of access could also play important roles in how parents and teachers interact. We found that even one-way communications could feel rewarding. We believe that this sense of being present and accessible to one another (including across linguistic differences; see below) could enhance relational trust and social capital among parents and teachers. In other words, building positive relationships might be less about the directionality of communication and more about whether educators validate and demonstrate genuine interest in families' lives (Barton et al., 2004; Warren et al., 2009). New technologies, including but not limited to ClassDojo, may offer educators unexpected ways to build such connections.

Expanding upon the recognition that social and technological changes are often intertwined (Cho & Snodgrass Rangel, 2016; Leonardi & Barley, 2010; Markus & Robey, 1998), the present study suggests several opportunities for exploring the impacts of new communication technologies on schools. For example, the present study offered a general overview of teachers' and parents' experiences of only a single tool. Future research could explore whether other commonly available technologies might also foster trust and sense of connection, including how differences in design or

other conditions might impact relationships, practices, and policies over time. For example, although parents in the present study did not use ClassDojo to message each other, we have heard anecdotally that some parents have used this feature to organize and mobilize against perceived wrongs at their school. In this light, there may be opportunities for researchers and practitioners alike to explore ways to support parent-to-parent community building and leadership (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 2019; Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011). For example, what would happen if online community engagement were formally prioritized in everyday work? Encouraging staff to build authentic connections online with all families, especially those on the margins, might bear meaningful fruit for the entire community. Some responsibilities might be additionally formalized into a particular job role, such as a family liaison, whose responsibilities include building connections among parents, rethinking programming to better suit parents' needs, or helping parents to access other organizations and resources.

We also envision ways for school leaders to employ sociotechnical perspectives for improved communication app use. The first involves the schoolwide adoption of apps and sharing of data schoolwide. Because ClassDojo is not typically adopted schoolwide, parents in one classroom or one grade level might learn about or benefit from the app one year, but not another. Schoolwide app adoption might promote sustained improvements, especially when considering how the ability to share information among multiple stakeholders facilitates organizational improvement (Finnigan & Daly, 2012; Schechter, 2008). For example, Cho et al. (2021) describe how instant notifications about student behavior, along with digitized teacher notes, facilitated collaboration among teams and parents. This included facilitating equitable systemwide changes in policy. As such, leaders might consider the ways in which communication apps could also serve as levers for school improvement.

Secondly, leaders should think not simply in terms of parent involvement or engagement, but also in terms of organizational problem solving (Cho, 2016; Cho et al., 2021; Tucker & Edmondson, 2003). This reframing sets into relief how families and other stakeholders may have important strengths and perspectives that could be useful, not just to a particular classroom, but for the school as a whole. From a problem solving perspective, some kinds of communication are transactional or informational (e.g., a quick note about a lost water bottle or unexpected illness). Although consistent interactions like this might contribute to relationships over time, they are not necessarily suited to developing systemic solutions. Yet many challenges facing schools are systemic in nature. Here, mutual respect and

shared responsibility among teachers and parents makes it possible to better address the underlying causes for such problems (Barton et al., 2004; Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016). Moreover, such qualities make it possible to craft school-level solutions. For example, it is one thing for a teacher and family to address a student's individual health or emotional needs, but it is another for a school to realize and address health or emotional needs cropping up across multiple classrooms. In this light, digital technologies are not simply tools for transmitting ideas but are also interwoven with how people view each other and their work together.

Anytime, Anywhere Translation and Empowerment

The importance of access to language translation for building home–school relationships is not something new (e.g., Epstein, 2010). What is new, however, is how apps and mobile devices now make translation available anytime and anywhere, thus connecting teachers and families in new ways. Although some scholars have suggested that translation could benefit home–school relationships, this was largely from a school-centric perspective. It was neither seamless, nor relational. For example, Graham-Clay (2024) proposes using Google Translate to better distribute information via emails or websites. Pavlakis et al. (2019) describe one parent going back and forth between YouTube and translation in order to support her daughter with math homework. Such strategies are not just burdensome; they are geared toward involvement and fall short of authentic engagement.

In contrast, the present study suggests that embedding translation into communication apps brings ease and immediacy to parent–teacher interactions that could otherwise be in short supply. For example, although prior research has highlighted the benefits of having access to human interpreters (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2023; Pérez Carreón et al., 2005), parents seemed to find it empowering to have access to translation always within arm's reach. On this note, it is worth contrasting the rewards of this experience with the challenges associated with access to human interpreters. In schools, access to human interpreters can be unpredictable and sporadic, thus intensifying the precarity and otherness some parents may already experience (Pérez Carreón et al., 2005). Moreover, few schools have cadres of staff ready and capable of translating at any given moment. Rather, parents may find themselves relying upon a student or sibling, a friend, or a staff member pulled away from other duties. Aside from imbalances relating to power and confidentiality, parents may experience frictions relating to specialized vocabulary, regional accents or idioms, or empathy for parents' perspectives.

From this perspective, seamlessly accessible translation features could help to transform school communities, providing parents with an increased sense of inclusion and agency. Such potential offers implications for practitioners. First, it is not enough to assume that different tools and translation features are of equal quality or ease of use. As Shamash et al. (2022) reports, a variety of platforms are beginning to also offer translation. Further, we surmise that advancements in generative artificial intelligence (AI) will become increasingly better at capturing tone, nuance, and voice. Thus, it becomes important for leaders to judiciously evaluate the tools available to them, such as by working with a committee of stakeholders and by collecting feedback from parent testers about accuracy and user friendliness. Second, schools may need help embracing advocacy from parents, students, and other community members (Barton et al., 2004; Rodela & Bertrand, 2021; Warren et al., 2009). Although such help could involve shifts in mindset, such as educators' readiness to receive feedback and to co-construct policies and practices, it could also include structural changes (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 2019). For example, the development of real-time, multilingual translation for videoconferencing platforms (e.g., Google, 2024; Zoom, 2024) could provide various multilingual families with spaces and opportunities to network and collaborate.

For researchers, advancements in multilingual translation open up new avenues for research. One such avenue involves the content and nature of interactions among multilingual families and schools. For example, in what ways are technologically mediated interactions similar to or different from those with human interpreters? Although we surmise that many parents might feel empowered by translation tools, we also imagine that some things can get lost in translation. For example, some terms might not have English-language equivalents or may particularly benefit from a human interpreter's knowledge about culture, policies, or local context. In this vein, another avenue involves parent advocacy and organizing. Additional research could explore multilingual translation's real world impact on curriculum, policies, or relationships among parent groups. This line of research could also explore issues of access, such as when families speak languages that might be less commonly available. Finally, we suspect that advancements in AI will not only reshape how parents communicate with schools, but also their capacity to persuasively advocate for their children, informed by legal and procedural knowledge that might not otherwise be at their disposal. If some educators are already using AI to navigate the complications of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs; Yuan & Hart Barnett, 2024), then it may be high time for parents to also leverage such resources.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored teachers' and parents' perspectives about ClassDojo's communication features. We applied the lens of media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Thompson & Mazer, 2012) to gauge ClassDojo's impact on communication, focusing on the ways the app could promote engagement-oriented aims (Barton et al., 2004; Ishimaru, 2019). Our findings suggest that features such as Messaging, Class Story, and Translation, have the potential for building relational trust, fostering engagement, and offering dialogue across languages. It is possible that other communication apps similar to ClassDojo may also create spaces for connection and mutual trust between schools and families. As technological advancements continue to broadly reshape possibilities for education, researchers and school leaders alike should consider how emerging technologies—particularly those that incorporate real-time translation and AI—can be used to build relationships, support multilingual families, and promote true collaboration between schools and families.

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Vincent Cho is an associate professor at Boston College's Lynch School of Education and Human Development, where he directs its doctoral program in

education (Ed.D.). A former teacher and school administrator, Cho's research is aimed at supporting school leaders in the digital age. His scholarship has spanned leaders' social media practices, 1:1 computing, and the use of academic and behavioral information systems. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Vincent Cho, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Campion 220, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, or email vincent.cho@bc.edu

Sergio D. Barragán is a PhD student in the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College. His research broadly centers on students who have experienced substantial adversity, focusing on issues of racial justice, belonging, and equitable access to education. Prior to attending Boston College, Sergio was a science teacher at an alternative high school in rural Texas.

Sofia Dueñas is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame. Her research interests are broadly centered around stratification and inequality in K–12 schools and the ways that policies and resources can disrupt these patterns. Prior to attending Notre Dame, Sofia was an elementary school teacher in Los Angeles.