



THIS SEEMINGLY BENIGN EDUCATION APP SEEMS HARMLESS. IT ISN'T.



At first glance, it seems harmless, even heartwarming. Using feel-good language, its creators describe the digital product *Along* as a way to “supercharge” student-teacher relationships and further social-emotional learning by permitting children and teens to record brief video or audio responses to teachers’ questions about topics both superficial and light (e.g., their favorite movies) and deeply personal (e.g., their problems and values).

Along was introduced in June 2021 by Gradient Learning and its partner, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. They designed the free product, Gradient explains, to help upper elementary, middle, and high school students “open up about who they are and what’s really on their mind—without peer pressure.”

So far, so good. The devil, however, is quite literally in the details, write Faith Boninger and Alex Molnar, co-directors of NEPC’s Commercialism in Education Research Unit, in a recent piece in *Phi Delta Kappan*, a journal for educators. Although the app’s website promises that the sometimes deeply personal student data collected is “never for sale” and “only used for educational purposes,” Boninger and Molnar note that the app’s privacy policy and user agreement define “student data” very narrowly to exclude so-called “de-identified” or anonymous usage information. While this may not sound alarming, Boninger and Molnar note that computer scientists and marketers have known for decades that “Data de-identification is a fiction.”

“(T)he data collected by *Along* and retained by Gradient can easily be re-identified,” explain Boninger and Molnar. Even if the students’ names are removed, the data that remains is too often sufficient to figure out which records belong to which students. Further, the terms of

the contracts school officials sign permit Gradient to do as it likes with this “de-identified” data, including selling it, using it for marketing, or creating new products.

The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI), Gradient’s partner in this endeavor, is not—as many believe—a philanthropy. CZI is actually a limited liability company (LLC) founded and led by Meta (formerly Facebook) CEO Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan, who is the chair of Gradient’s board of directors. As an LLC, CZI can and does make investments and earn profits.

Even if *Along*’s data remain in de-identified form, they can still be used to “develop products that purport to predict individuals’ future thoughts, feelings, behaviors, health, and success, based on the specific groups to which they appear to belong,” Boninger and Molnar write. While some potential products may be useful or benign, the personal nature of the information lends itself more disturbing uses, such as “predicting” which students (or others similar to them) will commit crimes, or denying health insurance to those with a higher likelihood of experiencing serious illnesses down the road.

Boninger and Molnar write:

Significantly, because of contracts (such as Gradient’s User Agreement) and laws (such as the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act [FERPA]) that allow education technology providers to use de-identified data, such predictive analytics can legally be developed and used without public oversight, independent assessment of the validity of predictions made, or students’ knowledge.

The authors conclude with recommendations both for policymakers and for educators. Policymakers, they write, need to close a FERPA loophole that defines app makers as “school officials” when teachers sign up their classes for a tool. (*Along* is marketed directly to teachers, who can sign up their classes.) Once they are defined as school officials, companies can then collect and maintain student data without parental consent. Boninger and Molnar also suggest that lawmakers “prohibit technology platforms from retaining student data in any form, establish students as the owners of their data in all its forms, and make technology providers liable for any harm caused by their use of the data they collect.”

As for educators, the recommendations are simple if a bit old-fashioned: *Give teachers time to skip the apps altogether and develop trusting teacher-student relationships through face-to-face interactions that don’t leave digital trails.*

NEPC Resources on School Commercialism

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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