

Educational legitimacy in the platform economy: The case of the Google Teacher Approved program

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The project

Google and Apple have a de facto duopoly in app distribution with most people either owning an Android or an Apple device. The majority of the apps that can be found on the marketplaces of these two companies are predominantly targeting preschool children (Vaala et al., 2015), so children's first educational experiences are inadvertently shaped by Big Tech's ecosystems.

The Google Teacher Approved program was launched in 2020, shortly after the Federal Trade Commission fined the tech behemoth for breaching the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act for tracking children under 13 on its YouTube Kids platform. The Google Teacher Approved program requires developers making apps for children under 13 to abide by the Google Play Family Policies and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act.

Developers can opt-in for an additional quality assessment for which they are awarded a teacher approved badge. Teacher approved apps are subsequently included in the children's section on the Google Play Store.

In this project we used the concept of legitimation to explain how Google creates educational value through its Teacher Approved program.

We analysed how 'Teacher Approved' apps are represented in the children's section on the Google Play Store. We also conducted a walkthrough of the course for developers on the Google Play Academy outlining the requirements for the Google Teacher Approved program.

Additionally, we looked at how the program was perceived by industry. For this purpose, we interviewed five people working for developers creating apps for children. The developers were located in four different countries and represented a variety of apps from explicitly educational to more playful.

Key findings

We could not find any concrete criteria for educational assessment in the course for developers on the Google Play Academy, except for the dimension of 'enrichment', which was vaguely framed as 'promoting children's healthy development'.

While Google argues that it uses teachers because of their expertise in child development and children's content, we propose that Google uses teachers as a form of 'authoritative capital' to give the impression that all apps provide educational value.

The way in which the apps are featured in the kids' section on the Play Store is ambiguous with abstract categories such as 'enriching apps' to provide a sense of educational relevance, without referring to explicit educational standards or goals. Educational apps can be found in the same category as apps that have been classified as entertainment by the developer.

The 'Teacher Approved' label – and the way apps are featured in the children's section – enhances the educational value of all apps, regardless of their education potential. This educational 'legitimacy' can consequently be monetised through app subscriptions and in-app purchases of which Google takes a 15 percent stake.

One of the developers we spoke with told us the label provided a 'reputation' or 'legacy' that would help him to establish business relations. The legitimacy of the program among developers themselves, however, was questioned by the developers we spoke with. There was a unanimous view that not all the apps included in the program were of sufficient quality. There seemed to be a (mis)understanding that the program assessed educational quality, even though this is not the aim of the program. The procedures that Google followed were considered opaque, with no feedback provided in cases of rejection. This contrasted with the often-extensive quality assessments and expert consultation in the production cycle of the developers.

✓ Recommendations

The Google Teacher Approved program can be seen as an attempt to monopolise quality control and assessment. A quality label (backed by teachers) reduces the need for parents to look for quality control elsewhere.

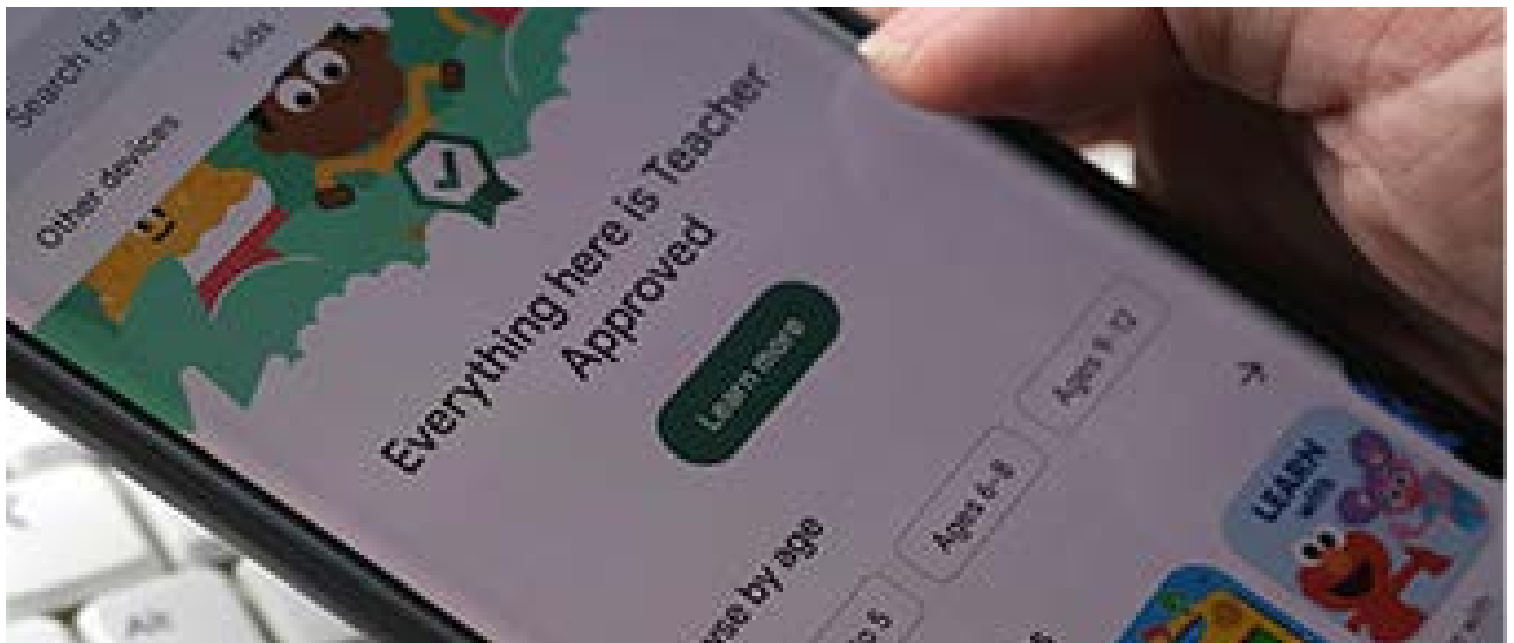
There are independent evaluation sites such as [Common Sense Media](#) (USA) and [Children and Media Australia](#) available for parents, which evaluate apps on data safety practices, pedagogical value and age-appropriate design features. It is important to promote these independent assessment websites among parents and educators looking for educational apps.

We also argue for an independent code for 'designing for children'. While the Office of the Australian Privacy Commissioner is currently working on a 'children's code', that code is mostly related to online safety and privacy. We recommend a code more specifically related to design and monetisation models for children that guard them from tracked advertising and dark design parents (such as lootboxes and other features aimed at monetising children) – something that is insufficiently addressed by Google's Teacher Approved program.

➔ Next steps

We want to create awareness of some of Google's less desirable business practices and inform parents about the benefits and limitations of the Google Teacher Approved program.

We aim to do this by writing a number of blog posts for a variety of media outlets (such as *The Conversation*) and by creating an online resource for parents on the [Digital Child](#) website. This resource will inform parents about the different qualifications and labels used for apps for children and will provide them with independent sources that help them evaluate apps on educational value.



☆ Comment from participant

"How many parents would read any, even just one of those [research] articles? Absolutely zero. But how many people would look at a little graphical badge and go? Oh, I trust this now, because they've got this badge."

📖 References

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