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# 'I hope this email finds you well': how synthetic affect circulates through MagicSchool AI

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how MagicSchool AI (MSAI), an educational technology platform, mediates affective dimensions of teacher-family communications through its Email Family Tool. Drawing on an algorithmic audit informed by politeness theory, the authors analyze how MSAI's underlying language models structure and standardize emotional expression in teacher-family communications. The authors introduce the concept of *synthetic affect* to theorize how platforms algorithmically produce and circulate humanoid feeling through predetermined scripts of professional discourse. The analysis reveals how MSAI's consistent patterns of politeness strategies and selective filtering of certain affective registers reflect a form of governance that shapes which emotions are deemed appropriate for professional communication. While MSAI positions itself as addressing teacher burnout through automated efficiencies, the authors argue that this technological solution simultaneously responds to, reinforces, and profits from the structural conditions producing burnout, while transforming systemic challenges into problems of individual efficiency.

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The mission statement for Magic School AI, a platform designed to support teachers by automating time-consuming tasks, begins with this sobering statistic: 'More than four in ten K-12 teachers in the U.S. (44%) say they "always" or "very often" feel burnt out at work – outpacing all other industries nationally' (Mission n.d.c). The use of the word 'feel' is significant for its gesture toward the fraught affective atmospheres that envelop the lives of teachers, particularly those working in schools in the United States. From ideologically motivated book bans to low pay and the ever-present specter of violence, U.S. teachers toil under the weight of a profession that demands they carry the baggage of a society that increasingly seems to have abandoned its commitment to education. It is a society that asks teachers to feel too much for too many for too long and for too little.

It is within this context of supersaturated affective labor that platforms like Magic School AI (MSAI) have emerged, promising to streamline much of the drudgery of teaching and carry some of the emotional baggage through the power of generative AI. Founded in 2023 by former educator Adeel Khan, MSAI positions itself as a comprehensive platform offering over 80 AI-powered features designed to assist teachers (and students) across a range of activities (MagicSchool, n.d.b; Melas-Kyrizazi et al. 2024), with over 3 million educators and 1 million students using the platform across thousands of school districts (Anthropic n.d.), reflecting an expanding market for AI support for overworked educators. With its focus on reducing teacher burnout, MSAI specializes in automating such time-consuming tasks as lesson planning, creating assignments, providing personalized feedback

on student work, and composing professional emails to students' families. This latter feature, the 'Email Family Tool,' stands out as a particularly revealing site for exploring the intersection of AI, affect, and teachers' relational labor. While AI assistants are increasingly integrated into popular email clients (e.g., Outlook), MSAI's Email Family Tool represents a more specialized intervention, one specifically designed for the often high-stakes terrain of teacher-family communications. The synthetic quality of these emails, however, raises questions about the nature of 'professionalism' being promoted, as well as the implications of outsourcing teachers' affective, relational labor to machines.

By examining how AI mediates the affective dimensions of teacher-family communications, this study extends current scholarship on AI in education to consider how platforms like MSAI reshape the nature of teachers' relational labor, as well as the sociotechnical contexts in which it takes place. In framing teacher burnout as a problem amenable to automated efficiencies, platforms like MSAI paper over the structural conditions that produce burnout while reshaping teacher labor in ways that warrant critical attention. These processes, we will suggest, reflect a troubling normalization of the forces that have helped create the AI in education market in the first place: chronic underfunding of education (Baker, Di Carlo, and Weber 2024), the erosion of teacher autonomy (Daliri-Ngametua, Hardy, and Creagh 2022), and the growing influence of commercial interests on edtech policy and practices (Williamson and Komljenovic 2023). And while advances in generative AI continue to improve the technical sophistication of synthetic text, these technologies still require significant affective labor when users work to calibrate, contextualize, and moderate outputs for specific tasks and contexts (Perrotta, Selwyn, and Ewin 2024).

Current conversations over AI's possibilities for education often overlook teaching's affective qualities, despite some prior attention to emotion-sensing technologies in educational contexts (McStay 2020). As scholars have demonstrated, teaching is inherently embodied, relational, and charged with feeling (Leander and Ehret 2019), with affect saturating everyday interactions between students and educators, from building relationships with colleagues, students, and their families (Platsidou and Diamantopoulou 2020) to managing their own well-being (O'Hara-Gregan 2024). This elision of teaching's affective dimensions is perhaps unsurprising given the tendency of debates around AI to center cognitive perspectives on human activity, often framing AI primarily as a quest to solve the riddle of, and then mimic, cognitive intelligence (Pasquinelli 2023). Indeed, the very notion of artificial *intelligence* and its related concepts (e.g., neural networks) foreground cognition as a metaphor for computational processes designed to mimic human capacities, an emphasis that features prominently in conversations about the potential for AI to automate different forms of work. A similar cognitive bias underwrites MSAI's vision that educators will 'use MagicSchool to help lesson plan, differentiate, write assessments, write IEPs, communicate clearly, and more' (MagicSchool n.d.a), under the guiding assumption that teaching primarily involves cognitive tasks that can be optimized or even automated with AI.

For teachers, whose voice is central to their profession – the voice that imparts, corrects, relates, and inspires – the emergence of AI-powered platforms like MSAI raises critical questions about the relations among voice, affect, and the economies of communication that shape so much educational labor today. In taking up these issues, we want to consider how the tasks of understanding who is speaking and who is feeling become not only unscaled – that is, extracted from the intimate, contextual relations in which they naturally occur – and put up for sale, but also move well beyond human subjectivity. In these movements, crucial questions arise about the nature and implications of AI-mediated educational interactions. We ask, what does it mean for the relational aspects of teaching to become subject to forms of machinic 'politeness' that augment or supplant the situated, subjectivity-rich liveliness of human language? And how do such processes enter into relations of capital within affective economies in which feeling is harvested, parsed, and served by data networks operating at a global scale?

To begin, we bring together Ahmed's (2004) thinking about affective economies with Bakhtin's (1952/1986) theories of voice and genre, focusing on how affect and voice circulate within digital platform ecologies. We then present a data illustration drawn from an algorithmic audit of

MSAI's Email Family Tool, using Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory of politeness as an analytic lens to understand how the platform's algorithmic logics structure and mediate affective communication between teachers and families. Building from this analysis, we introduce the concept of *microeconomies of synthetic affect* to theorize how platforms like MSAI reshape the circulation of feeling in educational contexts. We conclude by considering the implications of these synthetic affective microeconomies for understanding the ongoing platformization of education, tethered as it is to ideological and political-economic forces that seek to automate and commodify ever more aspects of educational practice, including the feeling teachers must do.

## Voice and genre in affective economies

For Sara Ahmed (2004), affective economies are the social, material, and discursive circulations through which affects 'do things' by shaping relations of alignment, displacement, and difference. Affects, in this view, are always collective, not located within individual subjects but rather move between signs, objects, and bodies, accumulating value and intensity through their circulations, with *value* gesturing both toward relational significance and the accumulation of capital, *intensity* toward the strength of affective response. While Ahmed's primary concern is with affect as a model of circulation rather than its relation to capital, platforms like MSAI press us to consider how AI-mediated affective relations function as what we might call, drawing from Bourdieu (1986), an immediate translator between affective and financial economies. Put differently, the platform's automation of affective labor operates as a kind of trading floor where feelings are harvested, calculated, and mirrored back through technology-mediated interactions.

As AI platforms begin to mediate educational communications, they reshape not just what is said but the very nature of pedagogical voice and its role in building relationships with students and families. Speech genres, as Bakhtin (1952/1986) understood them, shape the expressiveness of utterances that operate as transit points linking chains of communication. While Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia (literally, 'many different voices') describes the multiplicity of voices present in any utterance, we prefer to think with the term *heteroboglossia*, an adaptation of Bakhtin's concept that theorizes how AI platforms combine human and machine voices, with the 'bo' gesturing toward 'robot' and the machinic quality of these hybrid expressions, where AI serves as an emotional intermediary at the center of these relations. This conceptual pivot allows us to articulate how platforms like MSAI facilitate the outsourcing of affective labor, where the complex work of navigating feelings and 'face' in emotionally charged interactions is delegated to technology operating as a kind of emotional translator or servant.

In the case of MSAI's Email Family tool, these dynamics manifest at multiple levels: in the massive language corpora used to train the underlying models, in the fine-tuning processes that optimize outputs for particular contexts, and in the template-like generic structures that govern responses to specific kinds of prompts. The result is an algorithmically mediated affect that circulates through an intervocal chorus of the multitudes: the training data, the developers who train the models, and the users who prompt and elicit machine-generated synthetic text. This outsourcing of affective labor is marketed as a form of professional efficiency in a world where teachers are asked to feel too much for too many, echoing broader patterns in affective labor being redirected through algorithmic intermediaries, like customer service and therapy chatbots. To explore how these dynamics play out in the platform, we turn now to our algorithmic audit of MSAI's Email Family Tool, examining how the platform's underlying language models structure and mediate affective communication between teachers and families.

## Politeness in the machine

To understand how heteroboglossia manifests in practice – that is, how human and machine voices combine to mediate affective relations in platform environments – we conducted a small-scale

algorithmic audit (Bandy 2021; Sandvig et al. 2014) of MSAI's 'Email Family Tool,' a feature designed to partially automate teacher-family communications. Following Gillespie's (2024) similar study of AI chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT), our goal was not to study how the tool is used by teachers in situ, but rather to explore its underlying tendencies as reflected in the responses it generates when prompted to create emotionally laden content. Our approach used only hypothetical prompts and involved no real teacher, student, or family data. As Gillespie noted, this audit method aligns with Weidenger and colleagues' (2023) framework for evaluating AI systems, which focuses on a system independently and before considering its interaction with human users in situated contexts or its larger, system-level effects. And like Gillespie (2024), given the nature and scope of our method, we want to be careful in the kinds of claims we make, as this was by no means a full-fledged audit, but rather an exploratory interrogation to surface patterns that might warrant further inquiry, what Gillespie termed an 'algorithmic poke' (3). In this spirit, we offer the following as a data illustration, a modest window into the machinic production of relational labor and the circulation of what we will later theorize as synthetic affect.

### ***Platform architectures and affective gatekeeping***

The E-mail Family Tool presents itself to users through a minimalist interface, structuring the compositional process according to a platform logic that obscures technical complexity while emphasizing teacher input and professional standards. Rather than connecting teachers directly to a single large language model (LLM, e.g., ChatGPT), MSAI operates as an intermediary layer, pairing particular tools with particular LLMs, including Anthropic's Claude AI, OpenAI's ChatGPT, and Google's Gemini (MagicSchool n.d.d). Through this infrastructural arrangement, which also includes straightforward educator account creation requiring only an email address (a process we followed to access the platform), MSAI positions itself as a sort of affective and relational gatekeeper by making choices about which model is best suited for different kinds of labor while at the same time rendering those decisions – and the criteria behind them – opaque to the end user.

After accessing the E-mail Family feature, teachers are presented with a form-based interface with two primary input fields: 'Author Name' and 'Content to include in letter to family.' The interface offers two other supplementary functions that allow users to 'Clear Inputs' and view an 'Exemplar.' According to MSAI, the platform's outputs are fine-tuned in response to 'educator focused guidance' and 'high-quality output examples' (MagicSchool n.d.d), although the actual substance of these elements – that is, what constitutes educator-focused guidance, who provides it, what makes an email to a family 'high quality,' and how these inputs shape the platform's outputs – remains hidden from view. This selective disclosure, where general information obscures underlying technical processes, maintains an appearance of professional authenticity while standardizing teacher communications through opaque algorithmic means. To surface what's going on beneath the interface and understand how MSAI processes and structures affective communications, we designed a series of prompts that would test the platform's handling of different emotional registers in teacher-family interactions.

### ***Politely prompting***

The communications we are concerned with in Magic School are those that seem emotionally or affectively laden for a number of different reasons – interactions that, as former high school English teachers ourselves, we recognize teachers might deem 'tricky' or difficult to negotiate. For various reasons, many of the interactions of teachers with parents or caregivers could fall into this category, including an imagined focal interaction (following) involving writing an email to a student's parent concerning their child's disruptive behavior. In such a scenario, we understand the teacher's email as potentially threatening both participants' professional and personal reputations, since the email may challenge the parent's sense of authority and competence by implying they have somehow

failed in their parental responsibilities, while also potentially exposing the teacher to criticism of their practices or conflict with the parent. To explore how MSAI mediates such communications, we designed our algorithmic audit using six, minimally-different prompts, each with a different affective valence:

- **Neutral:** Write an email to a parent about their child's disruptive behavior in class;
- **Disappointment:** Write an email to a parent expressing disappointment about their child's disruptive behavior in class;
- **Frustration:** Write an email to a parent expressing frustration about their child's disruptive behavior in class;
- **Anger:** Write an email to a parent expressing anger about their child's disruptive behavior in class;
- **Optimism:** Write an email to a parent expressing optimism about their child's disruptive behavior in class; and
- **Humor:** Write an email to a parent expressing humor about their child's disruptive behavior in class.

We settled on these particular emotions because they represent a range of affective states teachers might experience or want to express when communicating with a student's family about a sensitive issue like behavior. It's important to note, however, that we designed our prompts to be minimalist in nature. Rather than attempting to simulate a realistic scenario or imagine what we imagine a teacher might do in practice, our minimalist prompts aimed to gain insight into how the system encounters, encodes, processes, and reproduces affective difference. While teachers would undoubtedly provide more contextual detail in actual practice, we are primarily concerned with revealing the underlying affective architecture that might structure any output, regardless of prompt complexity. Leaving the 'author name' field empty, we entered each prompt into the field for 'Content to include in letter to family,' doing so five times for each prompt but doubling that number for two prompts to confirm that any observed patterns remained consistent. We then copied each output to a spreadsheet for analysis.

### ***Patterns of politeness, governing politeness***

As one means of analyzing how such interactions are negotiated, we turn to politeness theory, first formulated by Brown and Levinson in 1978 and then later, after becoming widely popular, released as a book in 1987. While studies and critiques of politeness theory are vast and beyond the scope of this article, we find the basic concepts of face and politeness cast by Brown and Levinson (1978) to be useful for our purposes of analyzing how the LLM of Magic School mediates identities and relationships via text. Our use of politeness theory is not intended as an analytical lens for identifying affects, as if affects were somehow readily coded as forms of positive and negative face wants associated with individuals. Rather, because we conceive of affects as forms of circulation that move between signs, objects and bodies, we use politeness theory as a means of analyzing generic language forms in the LLM that mediate affective circulations in patterned and often conventional ways. Thus, we are interested in politeness theory not as a means of describing how affect works, but rather as a means of describing how MSAI works *on* affective circulations.

The premise of politeness theory is that, in engaging in communication we are always enacting and protecting identities. Brown and Levinson (1978) draw on Goffman (1967), who defined 'face' as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [or herself] by the line others assume he [or she] has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes' (5). In a synthesis of Brown and Levinson (1978), Goldsmith (2007, 244–246) identifies several characteristics of face:

- Face is social and public
- Face is situated
- Face is claimed (as a form of enactment and not just given by role)
- Face involves emotional investment
- Face is cooperative; we are collectively motivated to honor face ['I'll save your face and you save mine' (Goldsmith 2007, 245)].

Politeness theory is based on the observation that we don't always directly say what we mean in the most efficient or direct way. Rather, in the midst of an interaction we are managing our desires for validation (positive face wants) and also our desires for autonomy (negative face wants). While positive face wants signal a desire for something to happen (affirmation), negative face wants signal a desire for something *not* to happen (such as imposition or intrusion). During the course of interaction, we may be concerned with our own face wants (as a speaker) and those of our interlocutor (as a hearer). Politeness theory is primarily a way of framing how we respond to occasions that threaten the face of the hearer – occasions termed 'face threatening acts' (FTA's).

The interactional strategies we use to make FTA's less threatening offer us a type of analytic tool to unravel the dynamics of interaction where threats to face are at stake – a broad framing of the functioning of politeness. From Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), and as interpreted by Goldsmith (2007), interactional strategies may be divided into five broad options:

- (1) *Bald on record*. Obviously saying something bald or blunt with no mitigation of face would involve the highest risk of threat to face.
- (2) *On record with positive face redress*. Again, positive face wants have to do with validation, so in this case strategies might include the speaker claiming common ground with the hearer, fulfilling some wants of the hearer, offering or promising something positive to the hearer and the like.
- (3) *On record with negative face redress*. Since negative face has to do with intrusion or imposition, in this case some effort is made to minimize such negative impact, often by using the language of deference. Common strategies involve being indirect, using hedges or questions, directly communicating a desire not to impinge, and acknowledging one's debt to the hearer.
- (4) *Off Record*. This strategy is very indirect, involving avoiding saying the FTA altogether. Instead, the speaker suggests or hints at the FTA without saying it. Embedded in the strategy is the possibility of later being able to avoid that the FTA was said at all, implying for instance that the hearer misinterpreted.
- (5) *Silence*. This strategy is essentially the opposite of 'bald on record,' and the FTA is avoided entirely.

As the entire notion of 'face' is situated, politeness theory takes a highly contextual approach to the question of which strategy might best be used on any occasion. Moreover, the theory notes that strategies are often used in combination and relationship to one another. Some of the considerations used to determine the 'size' or 'weight' of an FTA include the relative power of the speaker to the hearer, the social and relational distance between them, and culturally shared ideas about how much different acts affect face, or the 'rank' of acts (Goldsmith 2007, 252).

To illustrate how we used politeness theory as an analytical lens, consider the example of an email generated by MSAI, this one a response to the 'frustration' prompt, 'Write an email to a parent expressing frustration about their child's disruptive behavior in class':

Subject: Concerns Regarding Classroom Behavior

Dear [Parent's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. I want to take a moment to express my appreciation for your involvement in [Child's Name]'s education. I am reaching out to discuss some concerns regarding [Child's Name]'s behavior in class.

Recently, I have observed instances of disruptive behavior that have affected not only [Child's Name]'s learning but also the learning environment for other students. I believe it is important for us to work together to address this issue.

I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this further and explore strategies to support [Child's Name] in being more engaged and focused during lessons. Your insights would be invaluable in finding a positive way forward.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards,

We coded the subject line, 'Concerns Regarding Classroom Behavior,' as bald on record because it states the email's purpose relatively directly. The precise nature of the behavior (good or bad) is not stated, so there may be a small degree of mitigating a potential face threat. The opening two sentences – 'I hope this message finds you well. I want to take a moment to express my appreciation for your involvement in [Child's Name]'s education' – were coded as *positive face redress*. Together, these sentences aim to create common ground between the teacher and the parent, fulfilling the reader's presumed desire to be viewed as a caring, involved parent. Next, we see a turn toward *bald on record speech* in the next two sentences: 'I am reaching out to discuss some concerns regarding [Child's Name]'s behavior in class,' and, 'Recently, I have observed instances of disruptive behavior that have affected not only [Child's Name]'s learning but also the learning environment of other students.' These sentences directly address the issue at hand, with little attempt to soften the blow or minimize the face-threatening nature of the news being shared.

This relatively bald speech is followed by a sentence we coded as *positive face redress*, being that it establishes common ground between the teacher and parent: 'I believe it is important to us to work together to address this issue.' The following sentence was coded as *negative face redress*, in that it reflects a kind of deference for the parent's autonomy: 'I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this further and explore strategies to support [Child's Name] in being more engaged and focused during lessons.' This move is followed with a statement of *positive face redress*, a statement that strongly validates the role of the parent and positions them centrally: 'Your insights would be invaluable in finding a positive way forward.' The next two sentences, 'Thank you for your attention to this matter' and 'I look forward to hearing from you soon' show some deference, indebtedness, and hedging ('I look forward'), recognizing also the parent's independence, and were thus coded as *negative face redress*.

By coding the email according to the politeness strategies deployed in its construction, we can illustrate how the AI system works to manage the affective dimensions of the potentially face-threatening exchange. It professionalizes and governs the explicit emotion of 'frustration' into something more palatable, effectively smoothing over a desire to express negative feelings in favor of a measured, bureaucratic tone. The response to the 'Frustration' prompt follows this pattern of strategies, in this order, to mitigate the face-threatening act of writing the parent about their child's behavior:

- Bald on record (Subject line)
- Positive face redress (Sentences 1–2)
- Bald on record (Sentences 3–4)
- Positive face redress (Sentence 5)
- Negative face redress (Sentence 6)
- Positive face redress (Sentence 7)
- Negative face redress (Sentences 8–9)

The patterned nature of politeness strategies in this email generated by MSAI was made even more apparent to us after running the same prompt, with the same affective direction (frustration) five different times. While there were some wording changes across the multiple runs, the generic order of politeness strategies, as listed for Run 1, held throughout all five runs. As an illustration of smaller-level wording changes, in Run 5 of the prompt, Sentence 6 was produced as follows: ‘I believe that with your support, we can work together to help [Child’s Name] understand the importance of maintaining focus and respect in class.’ In this case, we still coded the sentence as positive face redress. However, the sentence also includes some language that is more direct or bald in comparison to that produced in the first run, substituting a hedged statement of ‘this issue’ with ‘maintaining focus and respect’ (Run 5).

In our experiment, the patterned nature of politeness strategies changed somewhat between prompts that had different affective states. For instance, the optimism prompt (‘Write an email to a parent expressing optimism about their child’s disruptive behavior in class’) revealed the following pattern across multiple runs:

- Positive face redress (Subject line)
- Positive face redress (Sentence 1)
- Bald on record (Sentence 2)
- Positive face redress (Sentences 3–5)
- Negative face redress (Sentence 6)
- Positive face redress (Sentence 7)

In this generic politeness structure, for the affective prompt of ‘optimism,’ the email is flooded with positive face redress, expressing validation of the parent, common ground, and assurance of positive outcomes. The behavioral information (Sentence 2) is embedded within these strategies and the request for engagement (Sentence 6) is mitigated with deferential language and hedging (e.g., ‘Please feel free to share any concerns or insights you may have’). As an exception to this consistent pattern, Runs 3 and 4 in our prompt experiment added a relatively bald sentence requesting engagement more directly around the position of Sentence 4 (e.g., ‘I encourage you to discuss the importance of focus and respect in class with [Child’s Name]’). Again, our analytic interest is not merely in the presence of a politeness strategy that has been turned into a rhetorical structure, but in the stability of that structure across multiple runs of the prompt. The strong impression this experiment leaves is that the prompt itself, or perhaps a key word in the prompt (‘optimism’), activates a particular and relatively consistent strategy of politeness that provides the central structure for the email. In other terms, the email output structure is an affective formula – a pre-determined patterned way of being with respect to another, given a particular affective prompting, that remains relatively stable across occasions.

These consistent patterns of politeness strategies reveal how MSAI’s algorithmic infrastructure works to standardize and regulate teachers’ affective expression. While the platform promises to help teachers craft ‘professional’ emails, what we see in practice is the systematic conversion of raw emotional states (frustration, disappointment, optimism, etc.) into highly templated forms of communication that follow predictable patterns of face management. This standardization of affect through politeness formulas reflects the platform’s broader role in reshaping teacher labor, as well as in responding to a perceived market need, where the messy, situated work of navigating difficult conversations becomes subject to algorithmic logics of efficiency and scalability. The scalability of these patterns across multiple runs suggests that MSAI is not simply helping teachers communicate more efficiently, but rather reflects a fundamental reconfiguration of how affect circulates between teachers and families through predetermined scripts of professional discourse.

The type of relatively stable patterning of politeness strategies was stable *within* each of our affectively diverse prompts across multiple runs, and the degree of similarity across runs was striking. From the data, our sense was that the LLM treated each affective occasion as a face-threatening

act that could be matched with a relatively generic politeness strategy. While a full analysis is out of the scope of this paper, one exception to these findings was the case of the humor prompt (“Write an email to a parent expressing humor about their child’s disruptive behavior in class.”). In this case, the language model seemed to fail with respect to communicating humor, and instead, sometimes relayed anecdotes about the child being humorous herself, including

Just the other day, during a quiet reading session, [he/she/they] decided that it was the perfect time to demonstrate how to ‘fly’ using a backpack as a cape. While the class erupted in laughter, it did take a bit of time to regain focus!

We are interested in (and humored by) the model’s lack of capacity to produce humor as part of a teacher’s affects (rather than a child’s actions), and curious not only in the technical challenge for the LLM, but in the ‘preferred affects’ that may be generated as part of the model’s capacities. Rather than performing humor itself, the model redirects the prompt toward reporting humorous incidents, implying certain constraints in how platforms like MSAI process and reproduce affect. These constraints point to a kind of affective hierarchy or typology encoded in the system, where some emotional registers – professional concern, measured optimism, respectful disappointment – are readily reproduced while others – humor, perhaps anger and frustration in their raw forms – are filtered out or transformed. Such limitations raise important questions not only about the technical capacities of these systems, but also about which affects are deemed ‘appropriate’ or ‘professional,’ and how these determinations shape the emotional contours of teacher-family relationships. This ordering of affect – what gets expressed, what gets transformed, what gets filtered out – reveals how heteroboglossia operates in practice: rather than simply combining human and machine voices, the platform actively shapes the affective possibilities of teacher communication through algorithmically encoded norms of professional discourse.

### **Synthetic circulations and platform economies of feeling-at-scale**

The rise of large language models has introduced a new vocabulary to educational discourse – generative AI, transformers, training data, etc. – and challenged how we should think about the relation between human and machinic expression (Robinson 2023). Terms like ‘synthetic text’ have gained prominence in discussions about AI-generated language to capture how content is derived from algorithms and numerical data rather than more direct forms of human expression. Making a similar move and drawing on our analysis of MSAI’s Email Family tool, we introduce the concept of *synthetic affect* to capture how platforms algorithmically produce and circulate humanoid feeling. Why *humanoid*? Because this term emphasizes how these AI-generated affective expressions are designed to closely resemble human emotions, even as they are artificially produced. Just as the term ‘synthetic text’ refers to machine-generated language, synthetic affect describes both the algorithmic production of feeling states as well as their commodification within platform economies. In the case of MSAI, we see this synthetic affect at work in how the platform’s email outputs enact certain alignments and differences in relationships between teachers, parents, and students through AI-generated emails – themselves structured by latent politeness rules and laden with algorithmically modulated performances of disappointment, frustration, and optimism – moving within the platform’s affective economy to shape perceptions and relations among actors.

Of course, we recognize that referring to algorithmically generated text and affect as *synthetic* may seem to imply the existence of an unmediated ‘authentic’ text and affect. To reify such a simplistic binary, however, would be to elide the complex mediations to which meaning and affect have always been subject. By invoking ‘synthetic affect’, then, we do not intend to indicate that affect provides access to a true, stable, and intentional self. While terms like synthetic text and synthetic affect offer provisional ways to account for processes of algorithmic mediation, we want to avoid framing the issue as one of artificial constructs versus some organic human essence. Indeed, the integration of novel technological mediations with older materializations, including capital, merits careful

interrogation of long-held assumptions about the nature of voice, authenticity, and affect. At the same time as qualifying our use of ‘authentic,’ we want to underscore how particular mediations, however mundane, have ethical consequences regarding our ways of being human, regarding possibilities for human growth, regarding human relationships, and regarding the capitalization of affective and emotional human lives. These ethical considerations include but also extend well beyond a first glance at the issues, where we would note the degree to which a personal voice is mediated by a machinic one.

### ***Dialogue without becoming***

First, if we begin from the assumption that individual ‘selves,’ while not stable, still engage in a process of becoming through dialogue – that selves are fundamentally dialogic – then we are compelled to consider the nature of such ‘dialogue’ and its possibilities for becoming. A key lesson from Bakhtin (1952/1986) is that all expression assimilates and re-accentuates the words of others in endless chains of communication. This description of dialogue as combining many voices (heteroglossia) is simultaneously a description of a process of becoming, moment by moment, in relation to others. For Bakhtin, when one encounters the other, one speaks answering words for the self (‘and I am’). In contrast, the heteroboglossia produced through the MSAI LLM is directed toward an efficiency model of produced text-tasks and not toward the becoming of the (teacher’s) self.

MSAI advocates an ‘80–20 Approach’ to using the platform, encouraging teachers to ‘use AI for the initial work’ and then ‘add your final touch, review for bias and accuracy, and contextualize appropriately for the last 20%’ (MagicSchool n.d.d). This 80–20 division recalls the Pareto principle, a well-known efficiency heuristic from business and marketing claiming that 80% of outcomes often come from 20% of causes. Even if we were to assume that the machinic banal voice of the LLM was a possible interlocutor for human becoming through dialogue, the framing of interaction in this case is not fundamentally dialogic – is not designed for growth. The process comes as a single, reduced turn at talk after the machine has produced 80% of the output. The notion of ‘contextualization’ is imagined as surface window dressing to an interaction, the addition of surface features that make a general statement ‘adjusted’ for one occasion or another. A process of ‘dialogue’ is meaningful only in relation to a resulting product. Process itself – as growth process, as affective exchange and transformation – is radically minimized.

### ***Affective governance***

If heteroboglossia describes how AI platforms combine human and machinic voice, with AI serving as an emotional intermediary, then synthetic affect represents the actual content and circulation of that mediated emotion. As our analysis above demonstrates, this is not simply a matter of machines mimicking human feeling, but rather involves the active shaping of affective possibilities through encoded norms of professional discourse. The platform’s consistent patterns of politeness strategies, its selective filtering of certain registers (like humor), and its transformation of raw feeling states into templated forms of communication, all point to how synthetic affect, at least in this context, works to standardize and regulate teachers’ emotional expression. While it is of course true that teachers have always strategically modulated their affective expression in professional communications, carefully considering how frustration might be couched as ‘concern,’ for example, MSAI represents a qualitative shift from such situated, relational work to systematized, templated responses that operate independently of particular teacher-family relationships and histories. What emerges is a new kind of affective infrastructure (Zembylas 2023) where human feeling is not just mediated but actively governed by algorithmic processes that determine which affects are deemed appropriate for professional communication and how they should be expressed.

### ***Relationships without situation***

If the majority of the affective work is being performed by the platform, which, as we have shown, structures such work through standardized politeness norms, what are we to make of that remaining 20%? Having had one's affective expression anesthetized by algorithmically optimized politeness norms, perhaps what is left – that personal touch – serves mainly to nudge us into accepting such synthetic performances as sincere while eliding the increasingly untenable affective demands placed on educators. In addition to diminishing dialogic growth of the human (teacher), a third ethical consideration of MSAI's LLM involves the designed abstraction and standardization of relationships. Occasions of conflict involving children, emotional attachment, ethics of discipline and coordinating action are highly contextualized for teachers and families – no one occasion is just like another. The highly situated nature of teacher-family communications, as a matter of relationship, and its conflict with algorithmic standardization becomes particularly apparent when we consider Brown and Levinson's observation that politeness strategies are not universal or predictive of how people actually navigate face-threatening encounters in their lives. And yet, the probabilistic nature of MSAI's LLM, with its capacity to generate content that consistently conforms to particular politeness strategies, effectively renders these strategies predictive in practice, risking a form of affective governance that shapes how teachers express and manage emotion. Concerning relationships with families, an ethical question for teachers involves what does it mean to engage in a type of abstracted and standardized relationship with families, rather than in a situated relationship to them?

### ***Exchange relations between economies of affect, labor, and money***

In contrast to the broader circulations of affect that structure relations writ large, we see in our data illustration the circulation of *microeconomies of synthetic affect*, where the algorithmic deployment of politeness itself becomes a form of capital, a currency of circulation that both reflects and intensifies the affective flows between teachers and families. These microeconomies reveal how affects 'do things' through mundane exchanges that create distinct affective microclimates in educational contexts. In MSAI's affective microeconomies, the platform's politeness strategies serve to standardize and smooth the circulation of synthetic affect, amplifying its resonance while attenuating the complex, situated qualities of human interaction. Of course, these microeconomies cannot be fully disentangled from larger affective economies. The synthetic affect circulating through MSAI is itself the product of affect as it was culled at a global scale through the training of LLMs, creating a sort of scalar collapse where the intimate, localized circulations of affect in teacher-family encounters are underwritten by the aggregate affective labor of countless people whose online interactions have been mined to build the very models that generate synthetic affect.

Thus, a fourth ethical consideration of the movements of synthetic affect in the everyday world of teacher work involves the ways in which micro and macro economies of affect, in and around schooling, come into circulation and exchange relations with economies of teacher labor and with the financial economies of companies producing tools such as Magic School AI. MSAI, from its own value statement, steps into a social space where 44% of the teachers it serves 'always' or 'very often' feel burnt out at work. At the individual level, this burn-out is an emotional problem and may be presented as such to the teacher considering using the tool. At the school, district, and national level, such burn-out is a problem of preserving a labor force: Who will stay in teaching? Given the present circumstances of standardization, low pay, mass shootings, growing opposition to public education, and a growing list of affective and emotional challenges for teachers, ranging from the inconvenient to the traumatic, who will maintain and contribute to this labor force?

The long path toward transforming the social and emotional conditions of teaching and learning in public schools is the least efficient, the most costly, and the most time-consuming. Interrupting this long path is an efficiency model for 'change': transform the emotional labor within which teaching operates, at the individual level. The commodification of these affective exchanges points to a

broader transformation in educational practice, where even the most intimate aspects of teaching – expressions of care, concern, or correction – become subject to the platform logics of efficiency and scale. Here, the MSAI Email Family Tool reflects and responds to larger shifts in pedagogical practice, suggesting a perceived market need for helping teachers traverse the often rocky affective terrain of teacher-family relationships. A shrinking circulation of teacher labor, caused in part by micro and macro (affective) economies of fear, abandonment, and disciplinary control, is ‘addressed’ by the exchange of money to scale up an affect-management tool: MSAI. The tool is aimed not to change the conditions of schooling, but rather the sensibility of schooling and how this sensibility is communicated. The logic of the intervention reads that if the human labor of education becomes affectively too burdensome, then some other profitable investment, toward the non-human, could make it manageable. Of course, even such interventions may reflect what Taylor (2018) termed ‘fauxtimation,’ where human work is needed to sustain the illusion of automation while perhaps intensifying or reconfiguring, more so than alleviating, the affective burdens of teaching.

## Conclusion

This transformation of systemic challenges into problems of individual efficiency has created conditions ripe for technological intervention through platforms like MSAI. While our algorithmic audit of MSAI’s Email Family Tool has provided only an initial window into these dynamics, it surfaces how the emergence of synthetic affect – with, in the case of MSAI, its standardized politeness norms and governance of feeling – suggests a profound reconfiguration of what it means to teach and to be a teacher, what it means to create and nurture pedagogical relations within and beyond the classroom. In this way, MSAI illustrates Pasquinelli’s (2023) insight that AI’s ‘inner code is not constituted by the imitation of biological intelligence but by the *intelligence of labour and social relations*’ (2). The forms of affective governance we observed through our audit reveal a particular vision of what education could/should become: a domain where even the most intimate aspects of teacher labor can be optimized for efficiency.

That said, we do not believe, and neither does our study assume nor suggest, that teachers are mere passive recipients of algorithmic influence, that they simply absorb and reproduce whatever patterns a platform directs toward them. Rather, the forms of affective governance we observed through our audit point to an emerging sociotechnical arrangement in which platforms increasingly position themselves as essential mediators of educational relationships, despite lacking the situated knowledge and relational sensitivities that make such relationships meaningful. Diffracting these dynamics through the concept of affective microeconomics calls attention to how platforms simultaneously respond to, reinforce, and profit from the very structural conditions that produce teacher burnout, while papering them over as a tool for teacherly self-care. This might lead us to ask: In a world of economic, social and political conditions leading to teacher burnout, would the automation of teacher-family communications be viewed as a desirable practice for creating healthy classroom communities? If not, reckoning with these structural conditions – as opposed to developing AI technologies as workarounds to affectively-laden relational life – would, we believe, better serve teachers, students, and families, even if such systemic change demands much more from us than algorithmic solutions promise.

## Disclosure statement

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