



## To ban or not to ban: Differences in mobile phone policies at elementary, middle, and high schools



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### ABSTRACT

The present study was to examine differences in mobile phone policies at elementary, middle and high schools. We surveyed 245 elementary, middle and high schools teachers in Shenzhen of China, using a specially designed 18-item questionnaire. Teachers' responses indicate that, across elementary, middle and high schools, significant differences exist in (1) students' percentages of using mobile phones among students, (2) students' dependence of mobile phones, (3) the number of schools banning students' mobile phone use, (4) oral and written forms used by schools to ban students' mobile phone use, and (5) policy reinforcement strategies used by schools. However, no school-level differences was found in (1) students' fondness of using mobile phones, (2) teachers' assessment of low-level effectiveness of mobile phone policies, and (3) teachers' policy improvement recommendations. Significance and implications of the findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Importance of the present study

The present study mainly concerns regulation of students' mobile phone use in K-12 education, an emerging and important area in human computing behavior research. Historically, when various new technologies (e.g., Internet) are introduced at school, various challenges (e.g. online safety) are generated, and consequently various policies and regulations (e.g., Children's Internet Protection Act) are implemented. It is particularly important for the human computing behavior research community to study mobile phone use policies at elementary, middle, and high schools for five major reasons.

First, mobile phones, including basic phone, smart phones, and other types of mobile phones, have been widely used by school-age students. Based on the well-known PEW report on teens and mobile phones (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010), in 2009, 75% of American teens aged 12–17 had a mobile phone. According to the latest PEW report on teens and technology (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013), 78% of teens

aged 12–17 now have a cell phone, and 47% of them own smartphones. Diamanduros, Jenkins, and Downs (2007) found that 98% of college students owned a mobile phone. These mobile phone ownership estimations indicate that, for the first time in the human history, every student might own a mobile phone that is truly individual-based for their learning at school in the foreseeable future, just like their personal pens and textbooks. This necessitates and challenges mobile phone regulation at school, given that mobile phones are becoming the most ubiquitous technology with claimed features of 4E, everywhere, everytime, everything, and everyone (Yan, Chen, & Yu, 2013).

Second, mobile phones as an effective learning and teaching tool have been extensively documented (Chen, Chang, & Wang, 2008; Chu, Hwang, Tsai, & Tseng, 2010; Chuang & Tsao, 2013; Gromik, 2012; Martin & Ertzberger, 2013; Lan & Sie, 2010; Lee, 2013; Meurant, 2007; Uzunboylu, Cavus, & Ercag, 2009). For example, Rau, Gao, and Wu (2008) found that mobile phones instant messaging helped bond student and instructor in the instruction process effectively and increased students' extrinsic motivation without causing higher pressure significantly. However, before all potentials of mobile phones for learning and teaching can be fully realized, students must have mobile phones, concerning the ownership issue, and must be allowed to use mobile phones during class, concerning the policy issue. While more and more students have their mobile phones, clearly, if mobile phones are banned completely or partially at school in general and in class in

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particular according to a school policy of mobile phone use, it makes almost impossible to use their mobile phones for learning and teaching. Thus, a dilemma emerges: banning it as a source of distraction vs. using it as a tool of learning. Banning or not banning mobile phone use at school now becomes the very policy door for students and teachers to enter the educational wonderland of mobile phones.

Third, empirical evidence of various positive and negative impacts of mobile phone use on students' learning and development has been rapidly accumulated. On one hand, researchers documented various issues related to the use of mobile phones at school, including distractions to the learning environment (Campbell, 2006; Gilroy, 2004), mobile phone rings and instant messaging impacting on academic performance (End, Worthman, Mathews, & Wetterau, 2010; Fox, Rosen, & Crawford, 2009), cheating on tests by accessing previously stored notes (Katz, 2005; Meer, 2004; St. Gerard, 2006); or using calculator functions to cheat on math tests (Hurst, 2004), and even clinic symptoms of psychological distress (e.g., Beranuy, Oberst, Carbonell, & Chamarro, 2009). On the other hand, other researchers reported enormous potentials of mobile phones in obtaining learning materials anytime and anywhere (Lan & Sie, 2010; Milrad, 2003), facilitating second language acquisition (Chu et al., 2010; Chuang & Tsao, 2013; Gromik, 2012; Lee, 2013; Meurant, 2007; Nyiri, 2002), keeping parents and students in touch with each other (Devitt & Roker, 2009), and promoting school safety in a crisis (National School Safety, 2005). Given these observed positive and negative impacts of mobile phone use, thoughtful mobile phone policy research is needed to develop effective regulation practices at school in order to maximize positive impacts while minimize negative impacts.

Fourth, empirical research on mobile phone policies as new research field (e.g., Campbell, 2006; Hopke & Marsh, 2011; Lenhart et al., 2010; Obringer & Coffey, 2007) is starting to emerge in the past eight years, while there exists heated public debates about whether schools should ban or allow mobile phones (e.g., Galley, 2000; Gilroy, 2004; Hurst, 2004; Meer, 2004) and multiple legal studies about whether it is lawful to ban mobile phones at school based on the Fourth Amendment (e.g., Maddox, 2012; Vorenberg, 2012). As a new field of research, mobile phone policy now may concern various aspects, including policy design, policy development, policy implement, policy assessment, and policy improvement (Blakemore, 1998; Jenkins, 1978; Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991; Weiss, 1972).

Campbell (2006), for instance, is one of the earliest, best, and most cited empirical studies on mobile phone policies. In this study, the researcher surveyed 96 college students and 80 college faculty members and found positive attitudes among students and faculty toward a university or instructor policy against the use of mobile phones during class time, significant age differences in students' attitudes toward the policies, and recognized destructive impacts of texting, cheating, and ringing on regular classroom learning. Rigorous instrument development, thoughtful data collection, and solid data analysis made this "exploratory study" a pioneering and seminal work. In a national survey study, Obringer and Coffey (2007) investigated 112 high school principals in 44 states about mobile phone use policies. According to these high school principals, 84% of schools had a written policy, 82% of parents were supportive of school mobile phone policies, the text-messaging feature of mobile phones was a problem during tests, and the most common response was immediate confiscation of mobile phones if a student's mobile phone rings during class. This study provides the first and best nationwide high school baseline data of mobile phone use policies from the perspective of school administrators. Similar to the high quality of Campbell (2006), this study is another widely-cited pioneering and seminal work in the field. Adopting the questionnaire developed in

Campbell (2006), Hopke and Marsh (2011) surveyed eight university professors and 189 undergraduate students. They found that students' mobile phone use in class was significantly influenced by two factors, whether a policy was specified in the course syllabus and whether instructors reinforced the policy in class. In one of the latest and most comprehensive reports of school mobile phone policies, Lenhart et al. (2010) surveyed 800 youth aged 12–17 and their parents and revealed an alarming fact that, while most schools ban students' mobile phones use, middle and high school students nevertheless still bring their mobile phones to school and text messages frequently during class.

These pioneering policy studies have not only revealed real-life complexity of how mobile phone policies have been made and implemented at universities as well as at middle and high schools but also made important empirical, methodological, and practical contributions to the current understanding of mobile phone policies.

Finally, and most importantly, the existing mobile policy studies on mobile phone use, mobile phone impacts, and mobile phone policies has inspired and motivated a series of new research questions and one of important questions is to know whether differences exist in mobile phone use, mobile phone impacts, and mobile phone policies at elementary, middle, and high schools. Elementary, middle, and high schools are three major educational levels in the K-12 education, and during this time period students grow up from the early, middle, and late childhood into the early and middle adolescence. Thus, if significant differences indeed exist in purposes, contents, forms, effectiveness, and other aspects of mobile phone policies at elementary, middle, and high schools, then we should not generally debate theoretically or practically whether we should ban or not ban the mobile phone use in the K-12 education as one homogeneous unit. Instead, we ought to consider the K-12 education as three heterogeneous units, to take the school level difference seriously, and to develop different mobile phone policies in order to have effective impacts on students at all the three school levels.

## 1.2. Study design and research questions

Motivated by and built upon the emerging mobile phone policy research, this study was intended to produce empirical evidence of differences in various aspects of mobile phone policies at elementary, middle, and high schools. The design of the study has the following features to accomplish the goal.

First, we decided to use the survey approach to collect initial descriptive evidence of existing mobile phone policies at elementary, middle and high schools. Such descriptive baseline data can be used to design further research to examine, explain, predict, and intervene with various mobile phone use issues merged in daily school settings.

Second, we decided to focus on school teachers instead of administrators, students, or parents. It is appropriate to use teachers as unit of analysis for the mobile phone policy research for several reasons: (1) Teachers are normally those who directly make oral or written policies in their own classrooms and deal with students' mobile phone use problems in a daily basis. (2) Substantial variations exist in form (e.g., oral or written), degree (e.g., banning completely or partially), strategy (e.g., with or without reinforcement), and other aspects of mobile phone policies within one school (Campbell, 2006; Hopke & Marsh, 2011; Obringer & Coffey, 2007). (3) Interactions between teachers and students in China are generally close due to a special classroom-level management system. That is, besides regular teaching, teachers normally have a duty of managing students as classroom supervisors or classroom masters.

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