Students' Perspectives on Teachers' Mobile Phone Usage in Classrooms: Insights on Distraction and Classroom Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions of Grades 4–10 students regarding their teachers' use of mobile phones during classroom instruction in a Maldivian school. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 80 students through a structured survey combining Likert-scale and open-ended questions. Findings indicate that students often observed teachers using mobile phones for personal rather than educational purposes, leading to perceptions of distraction, reduced engagement, and a less focused learning environment. The study also identifies student recommendations for regulating mobile phone use to enhance classroom focus and teaching effectiveness. These insights highlight the need for clear policies that balance the potential benefits of mobile technology with its risks, ensuring its integration supports learning rather than disrupts it.

Keywords: Student perception, Teacher mobile usage, Classroom distractions, Technology in education, Personal versus educational use, Classroom management

Introduction

Mobile technology has become a constant presence in daily life, including education, where it can enhance lessons, provide instant access to information, and support classroom communication. Yet, teachers' use of mobile phones during lessons has raised concerns among students. This study surveyed students in Grades 4–10, revealing that phones were often used for personal rather than instructional purposes. Many students felt such use distracted teachers, disrupted the flow of lessons, and reduced classroom engagement. These findings highlight the tension between technology's potential benefits and its capacity to divert attention. The study emphasizes the need for clear, balanced school policies to ensure mobile devices support effective teaching and a focused learning environment, while also fostering a positive teacher–student dynamic.

Objectives

- **Assess students' perceptions** of how often teachers use mobile phones during lessons and whether this use is mainly personal or educational.

- **Examine the impact** of teachers' mobile phone use on classroom engagement, including perceived distractions and effects on learning.

- **Gather student recommendations** for managing teachers' mobile phone use to create a more focused and productive learning environment.

Scope of Study

This study investigates how students in Grades 4–10 perceive their teachers' use of mobile phones during classroom instruction, focusing on a single school to provide context-specific findings.

It examines the frequency and purposes of mobile use, distinguishing between personal activities such as texting or browsing social media and educational purposes like using apps or accessing online resources.

The research also explores students' views on how mobile phone use by teachers influences their learning experience, including its potential to distract, reduce attention, and affect classroom engagement and academic performance.

Additionally, the study assesses the broader impact on the classroom environment, particularly in terms of student–teacher interaction, classroom management, and overall learning atmosphere. Drawing on student feedback, it will offer recommendations for policies or guidelines to ensure mobile phone use supports effective teaching while minimizing distractions.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Strengths:

- **Mixed-Method Approach:** The combination of quantitative and qualitative data provides a comprehensive understanding of students' perspectives, with qualitative feedback adding depth to survey responses.

- **Student-Centered Perspective:** The study prioritizes student voices, offering valuable insights into how teacher behavior affects their learning experience.

- **Actionable Recommendations:** The qualitative suggestions (e.g., policy guidelines, alternative technologies) provide practical solutions for schools to implement.

Limitations:

- **Small Sample Size:** With only 80 students from Grades 4 to 10 participating, the study may not fully represent the views of all students in this age group.

- **Sample Specificity:** The study's focus on lower grades may limit generalizability to higher grades, where students' observational sensitivity or classroom expectations may differ.

- **Self-Reported Data:** Reliance on student perceptions may introduce bias, as students may misinterpret teachers' intentions or exaggerate the frequency of phone use.

- **Lack of Teacher Perspectives:** The study does not include teachers' views on their phone use, which could provide context for their behavior (e.g., administrative tasks, professional communication).

- **Limited to One School:** The study was conducted in a single school, so the findings may not reflect the experiences or opinions of students in other schools or regions.

- **Short Timeframe:** The study was done over a short period, so it may not capture long-term patterns or changes in how mobile phones are used in classrooms

Literature Review

While much research has focused on students' mobile phone use and its impact on learning, growing attention is being given to students' perceptions of teachers' phone use in class. This literature review examines studies on how such use

affects classroom dynamics, student engagement, and perceptions of authority, highlighting it as a potential distraction and noting gaps in research on teacher-specific behaviors.

A growing body of research identifies mobile phones as a major source of distraction in educational settings, with most studies concentrating on student use. Findings consistently indicate that using phones during class impairs concentration, lowers academic achievement, and disrupts classroom dynamics.

In a study based on the topic "Non-academic internet use in the classroom is negatively related to classroom learning regardless of intellectual ability" it was found that a negative link between non-academic phone use and academic performance, noting that students switched between coursework and their phones an average of 3.52 times per hour, which reduced their ability to retain lecture content. (Ravizza, Hambrick, & Fenn, 2014).

Similarly, a study on meta-analysis revealed that heavy smartphone use is associated with lower GPAs and increased distraction, often due to multitasking activities like messaging or browsing social media. (Amez & Baert, 2020)

Although limited in number, studies examining students' views on teachers' mobile phone use reveal diverse opinions shaped by the purpose and context of that use.

Teachers' mobile phone use plays a critical role in shaping classroom dynamics, influencing student engagement, teacher-student relationships, and perceptions of authority. Berry and Westfall in 2015 found that when teachers demonstrate responsible technology use, it promotes a more focused and respectful learning environment. In contrast, using phones for personal reasons can diminish student trust and engagement. This issue is heightened in schools with strict phone policies for students, where teachers' personal phone use may be seen as hypocritical, leading to frustration and perceived unfairness. (Berry & Westfall, 2015)

Ott et al. (2017), for example, reported that Swedish secondary students felt discontent when teachers used phones during lessons while enforcing strict rules on student use. Additionally, teachers' mobile phone use can worsen distractions, particularly for students who struggle with self-regulation (Ott, Magnusson, Weilenmann, & Segerstad, 2023) . In another study based on "The distracting effects of a ringing cell phone: An investigation of the laboratory and the classroom setting" revealed that even the sound of a phone ringing can impair cognitive performance, highlighting how teachers' notifications may disrupt the learning process. (Shelton, Elliott, Eaves, & Exner, 2009)

A study examining the effects of mobile phone bans in schools on student academic outcomes employed a difference-in-differences (DID) approach using survey data from schools in four English cities alongside administrative records. By leveraging variations in schools' independent decisions to implement phone bans, and controlling for student demographics and prior achievement, the researchers found a significant improvement in test scores following the bans—an average increase of 0.07 standard deviations. Notably, the gains were most pronounced among lower-achieving students, indicating that unrestricted phone access may disproportionately hinder their performance. The findings suggest that banning phones can be an effective, low-cost strategy for mitigating educational disparities. (Beland & Murphy, 2016)

This study examined the challenges posed by mobile phone use in college classrooms by surveying both faculty and students. It investigated perceptions of mobile phones as a source of distraction, concerns about their potential use in academic dishonesty, and attitudes toward restrictive classroom policies. Overall, respondents viewed phone ringing as a significant issue and expressed strong support for formal regulations limiting mobile phone use during class. (Campbell & Scott, 2006)

Conducted at the Central University of Punjab, the study *"Navigating Digital Distraction on Learning"* explores the impact of digital device use on university students' academic performance. Based on interviews with students from the 2022–2024 cohorts, the research found that simultaneous use of multiple digital devices contributed to reduced academic achievement, heightened anxiety and stress, and health concerns such as sleep disturbances. The study also identified a general lack of awareness around digital detox practices, which could mitigate these effects. It calls for universities to educate students

about digital wellness, enforce stricter in-class device policies, and implement strategies to reduce digital distractions and promote a healthier learning environment. (Mondal, Exploring the Impact of Digital Distraction on Learning: A Qualitative, 2024)

A study conducted at the Central University of Punjab examined how digital devices—such as smartphones, laptops, and smartwatches—contribute to student distraction and hinder academic performance. Using a quantitative method and interviews with 300 students, the research found that multitasking with multiple digital tools negatively impacts academic success. Most participants were unfamiliar with the concept of "digital detox," highlighting a gap in awareness regarding digital well-being. The study underscores the need for universities to promote digital distraction awareness, educate students about digital detox practices, and enforce stricter classroom policies on device usage to foster more effective learning environments. (Mondal K. P., 2024)

Distractions significantly affect student learning by impairing cognitive functioning, academic performance, and long-term intellectual growth. This research identifies both internal and external sources of distraction as major barriers to sustained attention and effective information retention. Theoretical and empirical evidence underscores the importance of sustained focus for deep learning, with interruptions proving detrimental to this process. Addressing these challenges requires a shared responsibility among students, educators, and institutions. Promoting a culture of concentration, self-discipline, and cognitive resilience is essential to support students in maximizing their academic potential amid growing distractions. (Kaur , 2025)

Push notifications and alerts from apps pose significant distractions for students using mobile devices for learning. Maintaining focus demands selective attention and strong self-regulation to resist the temptation of diverting attention to entertainment or non-educational content. Even subtle phone activations—such as chimes, rings, or vibrations—can disrupt concentration and cause students to lose focus, regardless of their initial engagement with the class material. (Stockton University, 2019)

Studies indicate that multitasking with mobile phones reduces students' focus and engagement with educational content. Additionally, notification alerts during class disrupt the flow of teaching and learning, causing avoidable distractions. (DeFlitch, n.d.)

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on students' perceptions. The study surveyed 80 students from Grades 4–10 in a selected school.

- **Sampling and Participants**

Purposive sampling was applied to ensure diverse age groups and perspectives, with balanced representation across grades.

- **Data Collection Instrument**

A 15-item questionnaire included Likert-scale items to quantify attitudes and open-ended questions for detailed feedback. Questions covered the frequency of mobile use for personal vs. educational purposes, the degree of distraction, and student suggestions for improvement.

- **Procedure**

Surveys were conducted in a controlled setting during school hours, with permission from school authorities and informed consent from students and guardians. Clear instructions ensured understanding and reduced bias.

- **Ethical Considerations**

Responses were anonymized, personal identifiers were excluded, and participation was voluntary with the right to withdraw.

This methodology enabled the study to identify both statistical trends and the underlying sentiments shaping students' perceptions of teachers' mobile phone use in the classroom.

Analysis

This paper explores how students feel about teachers using mobile phones during class—how often it happens, why it's done, and how it affects the overall classroom environment. Using a mix of survey results and student feedback, the study takes a closer look at the patterns, what they might mean, and offers some practical suggestions based on the findings.

1. Frequency of usage of phone by teacher

Most students said their teachers use mobile phones very often in class. This was especially common among younger students, who might be more aware of their teachers' behavior because of their age or what they expect from a classroom environment. The results suggest that phone use by teachers happens a lot—so much that it may seem normal in some classrooms. But because students notice it so often, it can have a bigger impact—possibly making it seem like teachers are distracted or not fully focused on teaching, especially if the phone use isn't clearly related to the lesson.
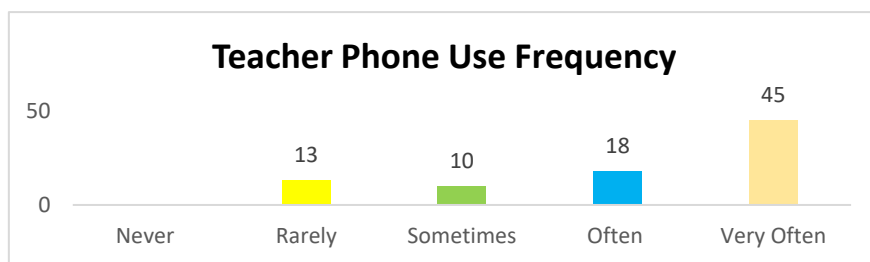
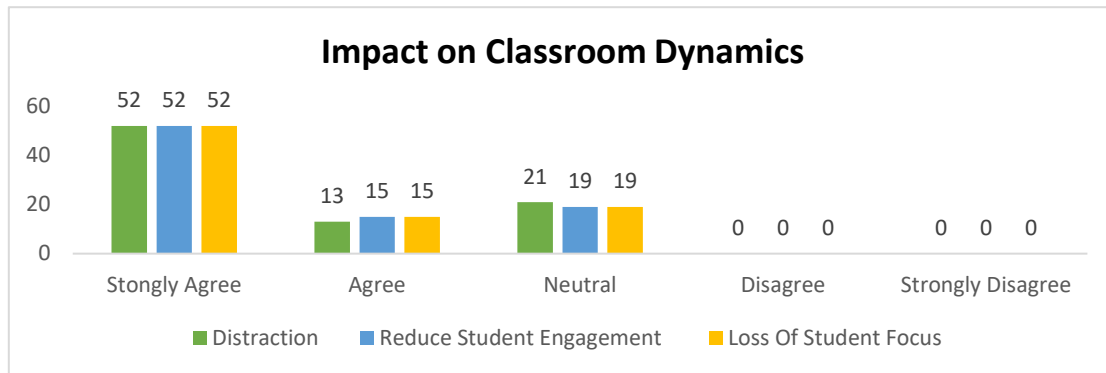### 2. Educational vs. Personal Use

Students shared that teachers rarely or sometimes use their phones for teaching, but very often for personal reasons. Most felt that phone use was mainly personal, though a few weren't entirely sure. Overall, students clearly see teachers' phone use as mostly unrelated to instruction—things like scrolling or checking messages came up frequently. This points to a gap between what phones *could* be used for in the classroom and how they're actually being used. The comments students shared back this up too, often mentioning that teachers seemed focused on things not connected to the lesson, reinforcing the idea that personal use is taking priority.
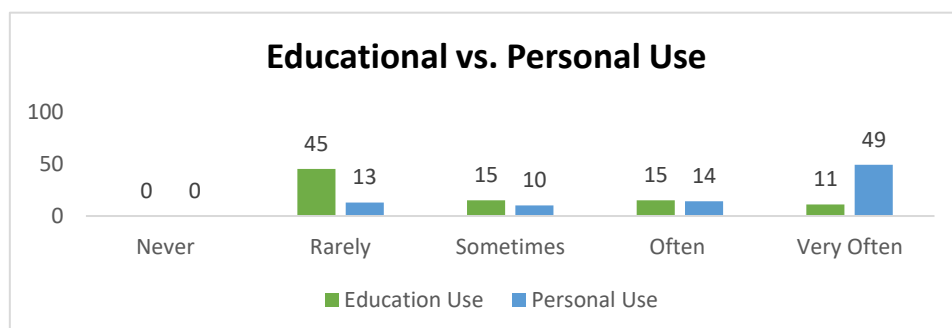
3. Impact on Classroom Dynamics

The survey results for reveal significant negative impacts of teacher phone use on classroom dynamics:
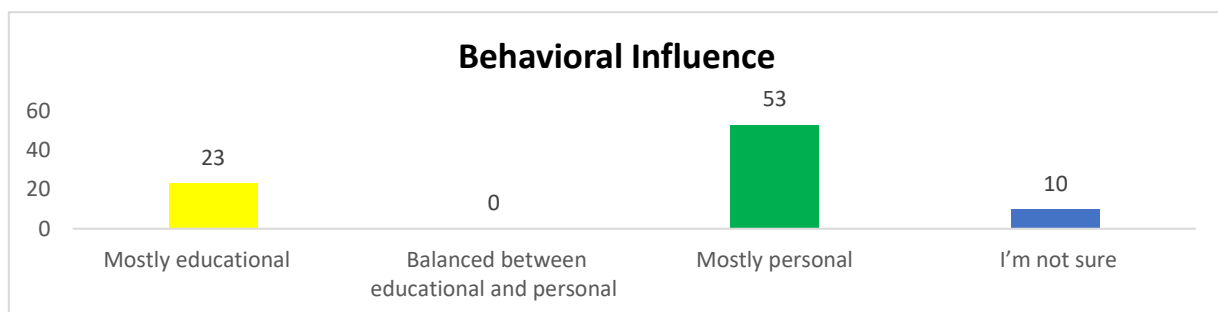
- **Distraction :** Over 60% of students "Strongly Agree" that teacher phone use is distracting. This high percentage suggests that students perceive phone use as a disruption to their focus and the overall learning environment.

- **Reduce student engagement:** A similar trend of strong agreement indicates that teacher phone use reduces student engagement, likely due to reduced teacher presence or interaction during lessons.

- **Loss of focus :** Students also strongly agreed that teacher phone use leads to a loss of focus, reinforcing the perception that it detracts from the classroom's learning objectives.

Impact on Classroom Dynamics

	Stongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Distraction	52	13	21	0	0
Reduce Student Engagement	52	15	19	0	0
Loss Of Student Focus	52	15	19	0	0

These findings collectively point to a significant negative impact on student-teacher interactions and the classroom's learning atmosphere. The distraction caused by teacher phone use may disrupt the flow of instruction, reduce student motivation, and hinder effective communication.

4. Behavioral Influence

Most students strongly agreed that when teachers use their phones for personal reasons, it sets a bad example. This kind of behavior might have a ripple effect—students could start to copy it or feel like classroom rules aren't being taken seriously. It highlights how much teachers influence the tone and behavior in the classroom. When they're distracted by their phones, it can weaken their authority and make the class feel less structured and focused.

Behavioral Influence

Mostly educational	Balanced between educational and personal	Mostly personal	I'm not sure
23	0	53	10

5. Impact on Learning and Respect

- **Improvement in learning:** Responses were split between "Strongly Agree" and "Agree," indicating mixed views. Some students may recognize occasional educational benefits of phone use (e.g., accessing resources or managing classroom activities), but the lack of consistent instructional use limits its positive impact.

- **Feeling Disrespect:** A majority of students reported feeling disrespected when teachers are distracted by phones. This emotional response suggests that students perceive teacher phone use as a lack of prioritization of their learning, potentially eroding trust and respect in the student-teacher relationship.
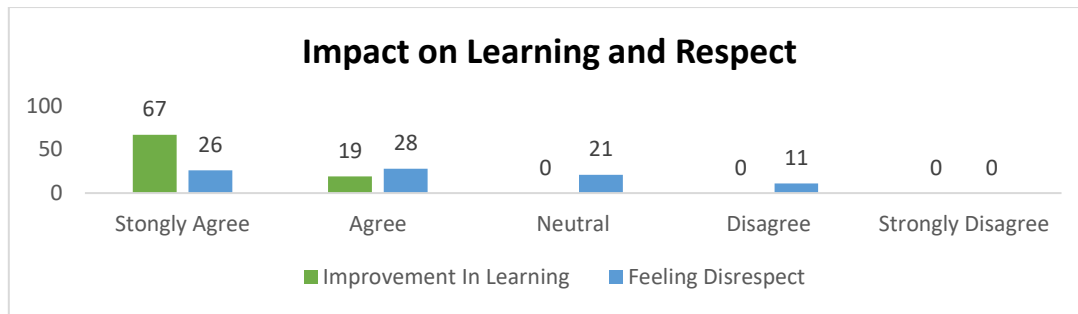
6. Qualitative Insights

The qualitative feedback provides deeper context to the quantitative findings, revealing students' detailed perspectives and actionable suggestions:

- **Conditions for Acceptable Use :** Students generally agreed that phone use is acceptable for lesson support or emergency personal use. This reflects a mature understanding of context, where students differentiate between appropriate (e.g., accessing educational apps) and inappropriate (e.g., casual scrolling) uses.

- **Negative Experiences :** Students frequently mentioned other students' misbehavior and feelings of disengagement when teachers use phones. Comments like "I feel what the teacher is looking in phone when they scroll" suggest that students internalize teachers' distraction, which may foster a sense of neglect or reduced respect for the learning environment.

- **Suggested Guidelines :** Students proposed rules such as using phones only for educational purposes or urgent personal matters. These suggestions indicate a desire for clear boundaries to minimize distractions and maintain a professional classroom environment.

- **Preferred Alternatives :** Students overwhelmingly favored structured technological tools like laptops or TVs over phones for educational purposes. This preference highlights the value students place on visible, intentional, and collaborative technology use in the classroom.

- **Monitoring Recommendation :** Suggestions for collecting feedback from students and parents reflect a desire for accountability and inclusion in shaping classroom policies. This indicates that students want their voices to be heard in addressing teacher phone use.

7. Key Themes and Implications

The dataset reveals several critical themes:

- **Perceived Distraction and Disengagement:** Students consistently view teacher phone use as a source of distraction, reducing engagement and focus. This perception is particularly strong when phone use is personal rather than instructional.

- **Behavioral Modeling:** Teachers' personal phone use is seen as setting a poor example, potentially encouraging similar behaviors among students or undermining classroom discipline.

- **Emotional Impact:** Feelings of disrespect highlight the emotional toll of teacher phone use, which may weaken student-teacher relationships.

- **Contextual Acceptance:** Students are not opposed to phone use outright but advocate for its use in specific, educationally relevant, or emergency contexts.

- **Desire for Structure and Accountability:** Preferences for alternative technologies and feedback mechanisms suggest that students value structured, transparent, and inclusive classroom policies.

This implies that the teacher phone use plays a key role in shaping classroom energy and student focus—and schools need to address it.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to address teacher phone use in classrooms:

1. **Policy Implementation:** Schools should develop and enforce clear policies restricting teacher phone use to instructional or emergency purposes. These policies should be communicated to both teachers and students to set expectations.

2. **Monitoring and Feedback Loops:** Establish regular feedback mechanisms, such as anonymous surveys or focus groups, involving students and parents to monitor teacher phone use and its impact on classroom dynamics.

3. **Awareness Training:** Provide professional development for teachers on the impact of phone use on student perceptions and classroom engagement. Training should emphasize strategies for minimizing distractions and modeling positive behavior.

4. **Use of Alternative Technologies:** Encourage the use of structured tools like projectors, laptops, or interactive whiteboards for educational purposes, reducing reliance on mobile phones and enhancing visibility and collaboration in the classroom.

Conclusion

The study highlights that students, even in lower grades, are smart observers of teacher behavior and perceive frequent, personal phone use as distracting, disengaging, and disrespectful. While students are open to contextual phone use for educational or emergency purposes, they advocate for clear boundaries and alternative technologies to maintain a focused and respectful learning environment. By implementing targeted policies, fostering accountability, and promoting structured technology use, schools can address these concerns and enhance classroom dynamics.

Teachers' mobile phone policies and personal phone use significantly influence students' perceptions of fairness, engagement, and classroom dynamics. Inconsistent or non-educational phone use by teachers can erode trust and authority, while transparent, pedagogically relevant use can enhance learning. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of policy consistency and cultural variations in student perceptions to inform balanced classroom phone policies.

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