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Cell Phones in the Classroom

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Introduction

In the past decade, cell phones—a multi-purpose mobile computing and communication device—have taken over the social work, and school lives of individuals in America (Parasuraman 2017). So much so that according to a study done by Pew Research Center in 2019, over 96% of Americans own a cell phone, an 81% increase from a previous study done in 2011 (Pew Research Center 2019). The cell phone, however, is not always used in the right context or right place, and this has resulted in a new phenomenon: cell phone addiction (Cha 2018). This is especially prevalent in adolescents. According to a study done by Common Sense Media, in which over 1200 interviews were done with adolescents aged 12-18 years old, it was found that over 50% of teens reported to feel addicted to their cell phones (Common Sense Media 2016). This addiction is not just prevalent to adolescents at home or in their social lives, but also in the classroom. One study on digital distractions in classrooms found that students spent an average of 20.9% of class time using a digital device for non-class purposes (McCoy 2016). Instead of improving classroom instruction, cell phones are actually hindering it and thus, the question arises: should cell phones be banned in the classroom? Because of the cell phone's role in emergency situations, cell phones should not be banned in the classroom, but rather excessive cell phone usage should be mitigated by requiring school districts to implement The Good Behavior Theory in classroom instruction in middle schools and high schools.

Distractions in the Classroom

Cell phones can pose as a major distraction that hinders students' learning. So much so that according to NEA Today, a publication from the National Education Association, students are often distracted from their schoolwork, and many times teachers are not sufficient at using technology and properly managing their classroom (National Education Association Today

2018). As a result, students' learning experience are hindered and academic performance are negatively affected. This is further confirmed by a study done by Scott Titsworth, a professor of communications and expert on classroom communication effectiveness at Ohio University. The impact of text-messaging and academic performance were evaluated in high schools, and it was found that student groups where phones were not allowed had a 10-17% higher letter grade and 70% better retention of information (Titsworth 2013). Overall, by not allowing cell phones in the classroom, students' academic performance has been shown to increase.

Benefits of Cell Phones

While cell phones may often pose as a distraction in the classroom, they can also be an asset. Allowing phones in classrooms can help prepare individuals for the workplace because in the workforce, discipline around cell phone usage is mandatory (Li 2019). By allowing students to be able to develop the discipline in using cell phones early on in their education, the transition from schools to the workforce would be easier.

Cell phones also act as important communication devices during emergency situations, such as school lockdowns or active shooter situations. As anxiety has heightened over active shooter lockdown situations in the past decade with over 57% of adolescents being anxious about an active shooter situation happening at their school, phones may be of use to students who need cell phones to contact relatives and update them on their situation (Pew Research Center 2018). By having their cell phones as a reliable form of communication to the outside world during lockdowns, cell phones in classrooms may help reduce stress during these situations and improve the safety of the students and staff (FBI 2014).

Solution

Due to the concerns surrounding excessive cell phone usage and its effect on learning, many schools have started to completely ban cell phones from classrooms using products such as Yondr. Yondr is a pouch that locks until tapped with a magnetic sensor that demagnetizes the lock (Hobbs 2011). The reasoning behind this is that students are still able to have the psychological security of having a phone near them, but can not look at the screens or check notifications. However, while there has been strong anecdotal evidence about the benefits of these products, this product is a temporary solution to a permanent problem of excessive cell phone usage. According to a study done by the National Education Association in 2016, it was reported that over 70% of school districts that implemented policies to ban cell phones using products such as Yondr, actually reversed the policies a year later as a result of parent backlash and concerns of communicating with their children (National Education Association 2016), thus demonstrating that completely banning cell phones often does not actually work.

Instead of banning cell phones all together, implementing a method of classroom management called the Good Behavior Game Theory (GBG) would be a better alternative. GBG is a classroom management technique that promotes and awards good behavior where rules for acceptable behavior are implemented (Flower 2014). The class is divided into different teams, where points are given for good behavior. The team with the most points at the end are then rewarded for their behavior. This method applies the herd mentality theory, as when students see others awarded for good behavior, they will follow as well (University of Exeter 2014). It has been so successful that in a study done by Sheppard G. Kellam, a physician and researcher at John Hopkins University, when the GBG was applied to aggressive and disruptive behavior, students who participated in GBG during elementary school had less levels of aggressive later on

in life than students who had a standard instruction program without the GBG (Kellam 2011).

This classroom management technique can be applied to developing cell phone usage discipline

in middle schools and high schools, where many students start developing cell phone usage

during classroom instruction. By attacking the issue of excessive cell phone usage early on using

the GBG method, excessive cell phone usage may be mitigated (Collins 2019).

Furthermore, this classroom management technique not only teaches teamwork skills, but also

allows students to self regulate themselves, and develop discipline (which will be important in

the workforce), as the performance and final score of the team is dependent on the collective

behavior of the team rather than the individual student.

      However, the GBG also has some limitations as well. Because the classroom

management techniques endorses competitiveness among peers, the camaraderie among students

may be hindered. This has a negative impact on a student's education, as poor interaction

between peers may create a hostile environment of learning (Cappella 2013). But, because the

GBG uses a positive reinforcement system (awarding students for good behavior) rather than a

negative reinforcement system (punishing students for bad behavior), the feeling of competition

among peers will be decreased (Joslyn 2014).

      As more and more adolescent teens get addicted to their cell phones and use them

inappropriately during classroom instruction, direct action has to be taken in order to properly

educate the future generation. However, while completely banning cell phones is not a feasible

solution as cell phones play a key role during emergency situations, and while the GBG method

may not completely stop excessive cell phone usage during classroom instruction, implementing

the GBG method into classroom instruction is a starting step in the right direction to give

students a prosperous education.

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