Mobile Phone Use In Uganda's Boarding Secondary Schools: A Case Study Of Bushenyi District

Richard Merichard Twebaze

The question whether secondary school students should be allowed to use mobile phones in school remains a controversial one. In this study carried out in a rural district of Bushenyi in Uganda the researcher sought to establish the usage of mobile phones among secondary school students in boarding schools. The researcher also sought the views and opinions of students, teachers and parents about the use of mobile phones by students in the schools. The study established that despite the official ban on use of mobile phones by students in school, 34% of the students said they were aware that some students own and use mobile phones in school. It was further established that 40% of teachers said they were aware that some students owned and used phones in school while 20% of them supported the use of phones by the students. Meanwhile, 40% of the parents supported the use of mobile phones by students in school. It was noted that the battle against the use of mobile phones by students in secondary schools might soon be lost due to the increased availability and benefits associated with their use.

KEYWORDS: Mobile Phones, Bushenyi District, Boarding Secondary Schools.

INTRODUCTION

The question of allowing secondary school students to use mobile phones in school has generated a lot of debate and will continue to do so for some time. There are strong opinions on each side of the debate with plausible arguments. According to Kinju-Kieme (2015) many public schools continued to resist allowing mobile phones in the classroom but the acceptance of these devices has been growing. In a study in the US, the author reported that beginning

Richard Merichard Twebaze ✉
Senior Lecturer, Bishop Stuart University, Uganda
Director Ishaka Vocational Sec School, Ishaka Bushenyi Uganda.
Email: twebazer@gmail.com

March 2015, New York City, which is the largest School District with 1.1 million students, would reverse its long-standing ban on cell phones in school. He also reported that critics of mobile phones believe they would encourage their non-educational use in school to a point where they will become a distraction and a potential tool for cheating, cyber-bullying and addiction to social media during lessons. Meanwhile, Broody and Sharp (2015) reported that most students in New York City welcomed the end of the ban on cell phone use in schools with many of them admitted that they had ignored the rules for a long time anyway.

The critics of mobile phone use by students in school argue that the benefits of cell phones in education are far outweighed by the distraction factor which appears to be much more appealing. For instance, Lepp et.al (2015) in a study done among a sample of US college students reported that increased cell phone use was associated with decreased academic performance and recommended that there was need to sensitise students and educators about the potential academic risks associated with high frequency cell phone use. However, other teachers argue that it is not necessary to keep pushing against technology so schools should embrace the use of phones to avoid further separation from students. They advocate incorporation and collaboration to see how best phones can be used rather than banning and punishment.

Similarly, Maya (2015) argues that the reality is that banning cell-phones is a policy that is hard to enforce. The author quotes a 2010 Pew Internet survey, which found that 65% of cell-owning teens at schools that completely ban phones bring their phones to school every day anyway! Schaffhauser (2014) opined that educators are faced with the stark reality that they can no longer keep students from using their cell phones at school even if they wanted to and should instead focus on teaching responsible use of the phones.

It is further reported even in schools where students were required to keep their phones but switched them off during class time, 43% admitted that they still used their phones in class in disregard of the rule to switch them off. The study revealed that 48% of parents used their phones to monitor their children's location and supported their children's possession of phones arguing that they could be used to communicate with the parents in an event of an emergency or medical problem. Meanwhile Galloway (2015) reported that while most teachers still oppose the possession of mobile phones by students, many parents and children agree that they should be allowed to have mobile phones for communication and academic purposes.

Safe-Search kids (2015) reported that the debate over cell phone use in school is no longer about whether or not these devices should be allowed in school but rather on when and what they can be allowed to be used for. Nagel

(2013) reported that most students in many parts of the developed world are using mobile electronic devices in their studies, either in class or at home and the majority would like to use them more in class. Meanwhile, Soskil (2012) argues that if we are preparing our students for life after school, we should allow them to use the tools they will be using when they get there. Besides, he argues that at a time when schools face tightened budgets, allowed use of personal phones would save the school from having to buy and maintain many computers as students would be able to use their phones for educational purposes. He further argues that it is double standards to allow teachers to go to class with their phones while denying the children the opportunity.

Meanwhile, Debate.org (2015) in a debate conducted online about whether students should be allowed to use phones at school reported that 72% of the respondents support the use of phones while only 28% oppose it. Similarly, in a study done in South Africa, Krentzer (2008) reported that 97% of the students in one school reported to have used a cell-phone in school either for communication, information gathering, gaming or multimedia activity.

 Most of the critics of the policy of allowing the phones in school argue that the phones will be a distraction from serious academic activity. They also cite problems like cyber bullying, accessing inappropriate material, and cheating in tests, taking unwanted pictures or videos and addiction to phone entertainment and social net working. On the other hand the supporters cite advantages like security, access of educational information, communication and an opportunity to teach students to be responsible by guiding them to use phones responsibly.

SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN UGANDA

Uganda is a developing country located in East Africa with a current population of about 34.9 million and an area of 241,136 square kilometres. Bushenyi District, where this study was carried out is a predominantly rural district located in the western region of the country, about 300 kilometres from the capital city. The district has about 36 secondary schools and a secondary school student population of about 20,000 (Twebaze, 2014).

The mainstream education structure in Uganda comprises of the Primary Level, Secondary Level and Tertiary/ University Level. The Primary Level takes children aged between 5-12 while the Secondary level takes children aged between 13-19. After the secondary level, students can join the University when they are aged about 20. The Secondary level is divided into the Lower secondary level, otherwise known as the ordinary Level and the Upper secondary level, otherwise known as the Advanced level.

Most of the students in the secondary schools are teenagers going through the interesting challenges of adolescence. Some of the secondary schools in Uganda are day schools where students come for classes during the day and go back to their homes for the night while others are boarding schools where students stay for the entire school term, which is usually about 3 months. The current study confined itself to boarding schools because these are schools where students are confined within the school campus for up to 3 months. Such students are more likely to get tempted to keep mobile phones in order to keep contact with the outside world.

MOBILE PHONE USAGE IN UGANDA'S SECONDARY SCHOOLS

According to Maestas (2013), a huge part of the population in Uganda has not just one cell-phone but always two and sometimes more. Uganda communications commission (2014) put the tele-density in Uganda at 53.3% in 2014 with over 19 million subscribers while Rage et.al (2011) reported that Uganda was ranked among the ten African countries with the highest number of mobile phone subscribers. Meanwhile, Freedom House (2014) reported that Internet penetration in Uganda had grown steadily following the deregulation and liberalization of the information and communications technology sector in 1997, which ushered in reduction in mobile telephone tariffs and bandwidth prices.

The dilemma of whether to allow or not to allow mobile phones in Uganda's schools can be best seen from the contradictory statements made to education officials. Ssenkabirwa (2013) reported that the Director of Basic and Secondary Education in the Ministry of Education and Sports said that students were free to use phones at school since the phones are an educational resource and not a luxury. The Director was reported to have blamed teachers for their failure to manage change by insisting on banning the use of mobile phones by students in school. A Ugandan Member of Parliament whose son had been recently suspended from school for owning a phone welcomed the announcement. The Member of Parliament argued that schools were not prisons and students should be allowed to own and use mobile phones.

However, the Director of Education's announcement was met with public outrage and Ouga (2013) reported that a few days later, the Minister of Education reversed the announcement and emphasized the ban on mobile phones, citing problems of cheating in exams, vulnerability of female students, promotion of drug use and promotion of criminal behaviour as possible consequences of allowing students to use phones in school.

Currently, most schools in the country have continued to ban mobile

phones in school but the prolife ratio of these devices is on the increase as phone acquisition and maintenance continues to become easier with the drop in prices of the phones and the airtime charges. The result is a protracted struggle between school managers and teachers who are continuing to grapple with the challenge of keeping the phones out and the students who keep bringing the phones into schools despite the ban. While teachers think that possession of phones will compromise discipline among students, the students on their part continue to defy the odds and bring the phones into school so as to be able to communicate with the outside world.

Perhaps the students feel that phones will provide them an opportunity to communicate with the world outside school without having to depend on the school. Students in Uganda (Sagai 2015; Kiiza, 2015) in a contribution to a children's' newspaper pull out dubbed "Straight Talk" argue that mobile phones can be useful in case of medical emergencies or for taking pictures for educational purposes.

However, other students like Nyangoma (2015), Ayen (2015) and Nyakoojo (2015) argue that phones in school would increase problems of social hierarchy, jealousy, bragging and thefts. They argue that the cost of airtime would be an extra burden on parents and students may, apart from being distracted from academics, end up using phones for illegal activities such as drug deals, pornography and taking inappropriate pictures.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study involved 180 male and female students randomly selected from 18 of the 36 schools in the western predominantly rural district of Bushenyi. The age range of the students was 15-19 and these were from the classes of Senior Three to Senior Six.

The survey sought to establish among other things, whether students had access to or owned and used mobile phones while at home. It was established that more than 95% of all respondents reported that they had access to and used mobile phones while at home. 78% of the students said that the mobile phones they used while at home belonged to them. The majority of the students (85%) who said they owned mobile phones said they had been given to them by their parents while the rest said they had bought them on their own or been offered them by relatives.

On whether schools allowed use of mobile phones by students in school, all students reported that the possession and use of mobile phone was banned in their schools. However, 34% of the students said they were aware that some students possessed and used mobile phones while at school.

On what students use phones most for while at school, 36% said they are used for social networking and internet while 22% said they were used for texting and listening to music. 20% said they were used to make voice calls while only 7% said the phones were used to access academic information on the Internet. Meanwhile, 64% of the students said those who use mobile phones at school communicate with friends while 36% said they are used to communicate with girl friends / boy friends outside the school. Only 21% said phones were used to communicate with parents or relatives.

Asked how students who own phones manage to charge them and load airtime the majority said they send friends and staff to charge the phones. Others said students charge the phones illegally within the school by tampering with the electricity to create access points for charging the phones. Some of the students said those who own phones often times escape from school to go and charge them and load airtime. It was also reported that most students who owned phones had to lie to their parents to get money for buying credit.

On whether students should be allowed to use mobile phones in school, 77% of the students said students should not be allowed while 23% said students should be allowed to possess and use mobile phones in school. All students who supported use of mobile phones said students should be allowed to use the phones outside class. However, it was reported that some students use mobile phones in class especially in the large classes where teachers may not be keen to notice the culprits.

Asked about the advantages of mobile phones for students, the majority of students mentioned communication with parents and access to the Internet for entertainment and sports information. A few students mentioned access to academic information and receiving money through the mobile money platform. Others reasons include informing the administration in case of problems at school, accessing sports news and calling relatives and friends.

Asked about how school authorities enforce the ban on use of mobile phones by students in school, 44% said owners are expelled while 39% said owners are suspended from school. The rest said the phones are either destroyed or confiscated by the school authorities. On what should be the best way to control use of mobile phones among students, the majority of students suggested serious and regular checking at the beginning and within the course of the term. Some students suggested that there should be more pay phones installed in school while others suggested heavy punishment or expulsion. A few students suggested that as a means of controlling the use of mobile phones, students should be sensitized about the dangers of using mobile phones in

school.

The study also involved asking 50 teachers from selected schools about their opinions on students' use of mobile phones in schools. All teachers reported that students were not allowed to use mobile phones in schools. Nevertheless, 40% of the teachers reported that some students owned and used mobile phones despite the ban. 20% of the teachers said students should be allowed to use mobile phones at school but only outside class hours.

The teachers who supported use of mobile phones said the phones would give students an opportunity to communicate to relatives and friends while those who opposed, said the phones disrupt the learning process and promote indiscipline amongst students. Most teachers advocated for permanent confiscation of students' mobile phones while others advocated suspension of students from school. A few of the teachers advocated for destruction of the phones. Most of the teachers advocated for serious checking of students when they report to school or when they return from home to stop them from bringing in the phones.

Among the parents, 40% advocated for the use of mobile phones by students while 60% were against them. Those who advocated for them said the phones would make it easy for students to communicate with their parents in case of sickness. They also argued that the phones would enable parents to send money to their children via the mobile money platform. The parents said the possession of phones would reduce on the habit of escapism from school amongst students since the children would be assured of contact with the world outside the school. The parents, who supported the use of phones, also said that they would give a mobile phone to their children, if the phones were allowed at school.

The parents who did not support the use of mobile phones at school said that the phones would distract the student's attention from academic work. They also said that phones were expensive to buy and maintain and an unnecessary burden to the poor parents. Some parents argued that there would be a problem of inequality and social stigma for students whose parents may not afford to buy phones for their children or those who may not afford the fancy and latest models. They argued that allowing possession of mobile phones would turn the school into a show-ground for the most expensive and latest models thus promoting unhealthy competition among the students and even teachers. Besides, they argued this would also promote rampant thefts and conflicts amongst students and teachers. They also mentioned that the practice would promote immorality as boys and girls would have more access to each other within school or with other people outside school. Most of the

parents suggested temporary confiscation of the phones and suspension of the students while others suggested regular checking of students to stop students from using phones.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings indicate that the majority of the students use or own mobile phones at home. These findings are in line with Maestas (2013) who reported that the majority of Ugandans own and use mobile phones. The implication of these findings is that having become used to mobile phones, it is expected that students will want to use the gadgets even when they get into the schools as they would like to keep the connections established when they were at home. The fact that about 78% own their own phones means that there is no limitation from the supply side as far as mobile phones are concerned since the students already have the phones at home anyway.

Although, all schools still prohibit phone usage among students in school, many students still go ahead to smuggle them into school. This implies that the battle against phones is likely to be lost soon or will continue to generate a lot of controversy.

The study established that most students use the phones for social networking on sites like Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. The phones are also predominantly used for texting, perhaps because voice calls are too expensive or are likely to attract the attention of school administrators. The popularity of social networking and media among the youth is a force to reckon with everywhere in the world because many people, especially the youth use the social networks as a source of news, entertainment and keeping in touch with friends and relatives. According to Watts (2015) teenagers are pressured to be on Facebook or other social networks because it is seen as being backward if one is not on them. It is no wonder therefore that teenagers in Ugandan schools are jumping on the bandwagon of being on these networks that necessitates them to have forms.

It was established that most youth in schools use the phones to communicate with the friends most of whom are their age mates. Whereas most students will present the reason for the need to communicate with their parents, in truth they need them to communicate with their age mates with whom they show more interests than the parents.

A considerable number of students said that students who own phones at school charge them illegally at school by tampering with electricity lines to create access points for charging the phones. This is a dangerous practice that puts students at the risk of electrocution and the school infrastructure at the

risk of fires. No wonder, in the last few years, school fires have been more rampant in Uganda's boarding schools than ever before.

It was established that the majority of students still support the ban on mobile phones among students. Even those who supported them say students should be allowed to use the phones outside class. This contradicts with the situation in the western world where a debate is no longer about phone possession in school but about whether they should be used in class or not.

The majority of students who supported phone possession and usage want them for communication and entertainment rather than academic purposes. If schools are viewed as centres of academic activity, then perhaps the ban on mobile phones should be maintained. However, if schools are viewed as places of preparing students for the kind of life they will live after school, then perhaps it is better that students should be allowed to have all the gadgets that they will use in their life after school.

While only 20% of the teachers supported use of phones by students in school, 40% of the parents were in the support. This could be perhaps because teachers understand the dangers and challenges of students using phones at school more than parents. The fact that more parents support the phone usage than teachers is likely to be a source of conflict as teachers is likely to be a source of conflict as it may lead to more parents giving phones to their children in defiance of the ban. This is likely to further alienate teachers from students and is likely to cause disagreements, strife, strikes and fights between teachers and students who have the support of their parents.

The question of how to deal with those found with mobile phones in school is as controversial as the question of whether to allow the phones or not. While some students, parents and teachers advocate for expulsion of the culprits, others advocate for suspension or confiscation of the phones while some advocate for destruction of the phones. One of the teachers explained that when phones are confiscated, it leads to build up anger on the part of the students and it is a recipe for disaster as this leads to bad blood between the students and teachers. Some teachers end up using or selling the confiscated phones thereby increasing the chance for bad blood and friction between the teachers and the students.

The debate about mobile phones in schools will remain a hot one for sometime but the trend seems to be in the direction of inevitable acceptance of the reality that sooner or later, mobile phones will be allowed in the schools.

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