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O QUE PENSAM OS ALUNOS SOBRE O USO DO SMARTPHONE NA ESCOLA
WHAT STUDENTS THINK ABOUT SMARTPHONE USE AT SCHOOL
LO QUE PIENSAN LOS ALUMNOS SOBRE EL USO DEL SMARTPHONE EN LA ESCUELA

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RESUMO

Introdução: Nos últimos anos, a utilização dos *smartphones* por crianças tem aumentado significativamente, levantando questões sobre o seu efeito na aprendizagem, socialização e bem-estar.
Objetivo: Compreender as perceções de alunos/as do 2.º e 3.º ciclos do ensino básico sobre a utilização e proibição do *smartphone* na escola.
Métodos: Adotou-se uma abordagem qualitativa, de caráter exploratório, recorrendo à realização de três *focus group* com 23 alunos/as representantes de turma de um agrupamento integrado no Programa Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária. Os dados foram analisados através de análise de conteúdo.
Resultados: Os/as alunos/as reconhecem o *smartphone* como um recurso útil para a aprendizagem, para a comunicação com a família e para a organização pessoal, mas manifestam preocupações com o uso excessivo, a distração, o isolamento social e a dependência. Referem ainda inconsistências na aplicação das regras escolares e sugerem medidas de regulação.
Conclusões: As perceções dos/as alunos/as revelam uma visão equilibrada, que valoriza o *smartphone* como ferramenta útil, mas também reconhece os seus riscos. Os resultados reforçam a importância de políticas escolares participativas e educativas, que promovam a regulação responsável do uso dos dispositivos móveis e o envolvimento dos/as alunos/as na definição das regras.

Palavras-chave: utilização de *smartphones*; políticas educativas; perceções dos/as alunos/as; territórios educativos de intervenção prioritária

ABSTRACT

Introduction: In recent years, the use of smartphones by children has increased significantly, raising questions about their effect on learning, socialization, and well-being.
Objective: To understand the perceptions of students from the 2nd and 3rd cycles of basic education regarding the use and prohibition of smartphones in school.
Methods: A qualitative, exploratory approach was adopted, using three focus groups with 23 class representatives from a school cluster integrated into the Priority Intervention Educational Territories Program. Data were analyzed through content analysis.
Results: Students recognize smartphones as a useful resource for learning, communication with family, and personal organization, but express concerns about excessive use, distraction, social isolation, and dependency. They also point out inconsistencies in the application of school rules and suggest regulatory measures.
Conclusion: Students' perceptions reveal a balanced view, valuing smartphones as a useful tool while also recognizing their risks. The results reinforce the importance of participatory and educational school policies that promote the responsible regulation of smartphone use and the involvement of students in defining the rules.

Keywords: use of smartphones; school policies; students' perceptions; priority intervention educational territories

RESUMEN

Introducción: En los últimos años, el uso de *smartphones* por parte de los niños ha aumentado significativamente, planteando cuestiones sobre su efecto en el aprendizaje, la socialización y el bienestar.
Objetivo: Comprender las percepciones de los/las estudiantes de los ciclos 2.º y 3.º de la educación básica sobre el uso y la prohibición del *smartphone* en la escuela.
Métodos: Se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo, de carácter exploratorio, recurriendo a la realización de tres grupos focales con 23 estudiantes representantes de clase de un agrupamiento integrado en el Programa de Territorios Educativos de Intervención Prioritaria. Los datos fueron analizados mediante análisis de contenido.
Resultados: Los/las estudiantes reconocen el *smartphone* como un recurso útil para el aprendizaje, la comunicación con la familia y la organización personal, pero expresan preocupaciones sobre el uso excesivo, la distracción, el aislamiento social y la dependencia. También mencionan inconsistencias en la aplicación de las normas escolares y sugieren medidas de regulación.
Conclusión: Las percepciones de los/las estudiantes revelan una visión equilibrada, que valora el *smartphone* como una herramienta útil, pero también reconoce sus riesgos. Los resultados refuerzan la importancia de políticas escolares participativas y educativas que promuevan la regulación responsable del uso de los dispositivos móviles y la implicación de los/las estudiantes en la definición de las normas.

Palabras clave: uso de *smartphones*; políticas escolares; percepciones de los/las estudiantes; territorios educativos de intervención prioritaria

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, we have witnessed a very significant change in the relationship between children and electronic devices, particularly smartphones. Several reports indicate not only that the number of children who own or have access to a smartphone has increased substantially, but also that the age at which access begins has been steadily decreasing (EDULOG, 2019; UNESCO, 2023). This development results, among other factors, from the reduction in the cost of these devices, as well as from increased access to the internet and the widespread use of social media (OECD, 2025; Parente et al., 2020; Ponte & Batista, 2019; Sudan et al., 2016). This phenomenon has fuelled an intense debate among different stakeholders—researchers, educators, parents or guardians, and policymakers—focused mainly on the implications of smartphones for students' learning, socialisation, and well-being (e.g. Burns & Gottschalk, 2019; Ponte & Batista, 2019).

In the school context, this debate takes on particular contours. Research presents a contradictory picture that reflects the very nature of these devices. Systematic reviews document consistent benefits when smartphones are deliberately integrated into structured pedagogical activities, such as digital quizzes, guided research tasks, or collaborative work, although these outcomes depend on the prior development of digital competences among both students and teachers (e.g., Calderón-Garrido et al., 2022). Studies involving students and teachers also support this perspective, identifying practical advantages such as rapid, portable, and convenient access to the internet, as well as the use of a compact and multifunctional device that supports learning by integrating diverse resources, ranging from calculators to cameras (e.g., Gao et al., 2017; Howlett & Waemusa, 2019; Walker, 2013).

However, this promising side coexists with growing concerns. Recent meta-analyses establish negative correlations between frequent smartphone use and academic performance (e.g., Sunday et al., 2021), while experimental studies demonstrate how the mere presence of a smartphone can impair students' concentration, a phenomenon referred to as "brain drain" (Ward et al., 2017). Concerns also extend to emotional well-being, with research linking problematic smartphone use to mental health issues, ranging from depressive symptoms to experiences of cyberbullying (e.g., Yang et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it should be noted that previous research has largely focused on smartphone use across various contexts, rather than specifically within the school environment. At the same time, there is a broad consensus regarding the negative effects perceived by teachers and students, including disruption of learning, distraction during lessons, and the facilitation of inappropriate behaviours (e.g., Gao et al., 2017). This duality creates a dilemma for those responsible for decision-making in schools. Each documented advantage appears to have its downside, and each opportunity its corresponding risk. Acknowledging this complexity, many experts now advocate for balanced approaches based on careful regulation and education for the responsible use of technology, avoiding both categorical rejection and uncritical acceptance. This perspective is echoed within school communities themselves: teachers and students tend to recognise the need for clear rules, but do not always support a total ban (e.g., Gath et al., 2024).

In practice, however, reality has often been different. Faced with immediate pressures related to student distraction and well-being, many education systems have opted for the most direct route: restricting or banning devices altogether (Selwyn & Aagaard, 2021). Yet, evidence regarding the effectiveness of such measures remains inconclusive. While some studies report improvements in academic performance following bans, others warn of risks such as digital exclusion and the displacement of problems beyond the school context (e.g. Campbell et al., 2024). A recent study in the United Kingdom concluded that banning smartphones in isolation did not lead to significant improvements in either academic achievement or student well-being, suggesting that any positive impact depends on the integration of such restrictions within broader and more coherent educational policies (Goodyear et al., 2025).

In Portugal, during the 2024/2025 school year, the Ministry of Education and Science issued an informational note—Recommendations to schools on the use of smartphones—which included a set of guidelines encouraging schools to restrict smartphone use, while allowing them the autonomy to decide whether or not to implement these recommendations. However, in August 2025, with the publication of Decree-Law No. 95/2025 of 14 August, the use of smartphones was formally prohibited in the 1st and 2nd cycles of basic education, allowing exceptions only for pedagogical purposes or health-related reasons. This measure raises important questions regarding its implementation and acceptance within school communities, especially considering that international studies document students' preference for autonomy in the use of these devices, regardless of existing institutional policies (Gao et al., 2017; Walker, 2013).

Despite the growing interest in the role of smartphones in schools, several dimensions remain underexplored. Much of the existing research has focused on older students, particularly those in secondary or higher education, leaving the perceptions of younger students—such as those attending the 2nd and 3rd cycles of basic education—less examined. This gap is even more evident in contexts of greater social vulnerability, where everyday school dynamics and conditions of access to technology take on specific characteristics that cannot be overlooked.

It is within this context that the present study is situated. The study aims to contribute to the production of knowledge about the perceptions of students in the 2nd and 3rd cycles of basic education regarding the use of smartphones at school, in a school cluster integrated into the Educational Territories of Priority Intervention programme. The knowledge produced also seeks to inform decision-making by the school cluster's governing bodies regarding the use of this device in the school context.

Using a qualitative approach based on focus groups with student class representatives from the 5th to the 9th grade, we seek to understand how these students weigh arguments concerning smartphone use at school, how they interpret existing rules, and what proposals they put forward for managing this technology in their educational daily lives.

More than merely collecting opinions, the aim is to capture how these students construct meanings around the role of smartphones in school and suggest possible pathways for their regulation, thereby contributing to a more informed debate on this issue. Their perspectives offer valuable insights into how to balance the benefits and risks of smartphones, supporting more balanced approaches that prioritise regulation and education for the responsible use of technology.

2. METHODS

The present study adopts a qualitative, exploratory approach, with the main objective of understanding the perceptions of students in the 2nd and 3rd cycles of basic education regarding the use and prohibition of smartphones at school. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the experiences, opinions, and meanings attributed by the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Focus groups were used as the data collection technique, allowing interaction among students and the emergence of different perspectives within the context of collective discussion (Morgan, 2019).

2.1 Context and participants

The study was conducted in a public school cluster integrated into the Priority Intervention Educational Territories program. A total of 23 students participated, aged between 10 and 15 years, attending grades 5 to 9 of basic education. Participants were selected based on their role as class representatives. This choice made it possible to obtain a broad overview of class-level perceptions, as in many cases the representatives had previously gathered their classmates' views through formal or informal voting processes.

2.2 Data collection

This study originated from a request by the school leadership team, which was responsible for contacting parents or guardians to obtain authorisation for students' participation. In the case of the students, they read and signed an informed consent form to take part in the study. Data collection involved three focus groups conducted on 26 February 2025, each lasting approximately 60 minutes and held in a private space within the school. At the beginning of each session, the researchers outlined the objectives of the study, emphasised the voluntary nature of participation, and ensured data confidentiality through the assignment of codes to each participant. All sessions were audio-recorded with prior authorisation from the participants.

The focus groups guide included open-ended questions organised around five main dimensions: experiences and perceptions regarding smartphone use at school; perceived advantages and disadvantages; knowledge and application of existing rules; opinions on the Ministry of Education's recommendation concerning the prohibition of smartphones; and proposed solutions for managing smartphone use in the school context.

2.3 Data analysis

The focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim and subjected to categorical content analysis. The analytical process involved several stages: initial familiarisation with the data, identification of recording units, categorisation, and review (Bardin, 2016). An initial coding framework was developed based on the focus groups' guide questions and on themes that emerged during data reading. This framework comprised five main categories: (i) smartphone use in different school spaces, (ii) smartphone use in the classroom, (iii) rules and norms regarding smartphone use, (iv) students' proposals concerning its use, and (v) perceptions of risks and of the Ministry of Education's recommendation. Coding was carried out collaboratively by the two researchers, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

3. RESULTS

The majority of students expressed a favourable opinion towards the presence of smartphones at school, although this view was often associated with the need to establish clear rules to limit their use. In several classes, opinions had been gathered through formal or informal voting processes, revealing that some groups supported smartphone use only during breaks or at specific times, while a minority opposed any use. The results are presented according to the categories that emerged from the content analysis of the focus groups.

3.1. Smartphone phone use in various school spaces

In this category, both reasons for and against smartphone use in different school spaces emerged, as well as some suggestions for reducing its use during breaks. Table 1 presents the subcategories, indicators, and the frequency of recording units.

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Table 1 – Subcategory and indicator frequencies for the category *Smartphone use across school spaces*

Subcategories	Indicators	RUs/I	RUs/SC
Reasons in favour	Communication with family	21	36
	For distraction	9	
	To avoid being late	3	
	Using the smartphone, but not for playing	3	
Reasons against	Distracts students	4	7
	Smartphone use is addictive	1	
	Because they do not play	1	
	Using the smartphone to record images and bully	1	
Suggestions to reduce smartphone use during breaks	More physical activities / provision of resources	5	5

Note: RUs/I = Recording Units per Indicator; RUs/SC = Recording Units per Subcategory

Reasons in favour of smartphone use across different school spaces were the most frequently mentioned by students, with 36 recording units (RUs) compared to 7 RUs related to reasons against. The main reason in favour was communication with family (21 RUs), particularly in situations where students arrive at or leave school alone or when there are unexpected changes in schedules. This contact is seen as a way to reassure both students and parents: "If we come to school alone, we call our parents when we arrive so they don't get too worried. And when we leave, we call in case a teacher is absent, and we leave earlier, so they are aware" (FG1, N).

Another relatively frequent reason (9 RUs) was the smartphone's role in leisure time, especially during breaks or free periods, where it is used for playing games, watching videos, or listening to music: "Or sometimes, imagine, we have a free hour. We just want to stay on our phones, like in our corner, without talking to anyone. For me, it's useful" (FG2, S).

Less frequently, students also mentioned the smartphone's usefulness for personal organisation, helping them avoid being late to class (3 RUs), and for various situations beyond playing games (3 RUs), such as emergencies, both at school and outside school.

However, some reasons against smartphone use also emerged (7 RUs), mainly related to distraction during lessons and missed opportunities for socialisation: "The 'against' group said that students get distracted in class and don't socialise; they just play on the smartphone" (FG1, I). Less frequently, students mentioned reasons related to smartphone use being addictive, taking time away from playing, and its potential use in cyberbullying, through recording and sharing images of peers: "Because some are bullying and filming" (FG1, G).

As an alternative to excessive smartphone use, several participants suggested that the school provide physical activities and recreational resources during breaks (5 RUs) to occupy free time: "I think there could be more resources outside, for example, for us to play games. Often we don't want to stay inside the school and we have nothing to do" (FG2, A).

3.2 Smartphone use in the classroom

Students identified reasons for and against smartphone use in the classroom, as well as various ways of using it in this context. Table 2 presents the subcategories, indicators, and the frequency of recording units.

Table 2 – Frequency of subcategories and indicators for the category *Smartphone use in the classroom*

Subcategories	Indicators	RUs/I	RUs/SC
Reasons in favour	Educational resource	11	14
	As a clock	3	
Reasons against	Disrespect towards the teacher	1	1
	Conducting Kahoots	12	30
	Internet research	5	
	Submitting tasks or assignments	4	
Forms of use	Clock	2	
	Responding to questionnaires	2	
	As a calculator	2	
	Tests	2	
	Accessing the code to enter Canva	1	

Note: RUs/I = Recording Units per Indicator; RUs/SC = Recording Units per Subcategory

Comparing the reasons for and against smartphone use in the classroom, reasons in favour stand out, with 14 recording units (RUs) versus only 1 RU against. Reasons in favour concern the use of the device as an educational resource (11 RUs), but also as a clock (3 RUs). The single reason against, although negligible (1 RU), indicates that using a smartphone in class without permission is perceived as disrespectful to the teacher.

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Regarding the ways smartphones are used in the classroom, students reported different forms of use (30 RUs). The most frequent use occurs in pedagogical activities, such as digital quizzes (Kahoots) (12 RUs), internet research, submission of assignments through digital platforms, and as a calculator: "In class, for doing Kahoots, calculations, or research, when the teacher tells us to" (FG2, A5).

In addition to pedagogical use, smartphones are often used as clocks, particularly because many classrooms lack bells or visible clocks: "We always have our phone nearby to check the time. Either they ring bells, or we have no other solution" (FG2, S).

3.3 Rules and regulations regarding smartphone use

Students identified reasons for and against smartphone use in the classroom, as well as various ways of using them in this context. Table 3 presents the subcategories, indicators, and the frequency of recording units.

Table 3 – Subcategory and indicator frequencies for the category Rules and norms for smartphone use

Subcategories	Indicators	RUs/I	RUs/SC
School rules	Do not take photos or record	3	
	Do not use in the classroom	3	10
	Use only with teacher permission	2	
	(Un)awareness of rules	2	
Rules established by the students themselves	Self-regulation	4	6
	Peer regulation	2	
	Varies by teacher	13	
	Confiscate the smartphone	12	
Actions in response to non-compliance	Send the student outside the classroom (to management, SFSS, corridor)	13	48
	Teachers give warnings	6	
	Send an email to the class director	2	
	Hand over to parents/guardians	2	

Note: RUs/I = Recording Units per Indicator; RUs/SC = Recording Units per Subcategory

Students reported that there are school-established rules prohibiting the taking of images and recordings, as well as smartphone use in the classroom, except when authorised by the teacher (8 recording units, RUs). However, albeit less frequently (2 RUs), some students revealed a partial lack of knowledge about these rules, indicating that only some of them are posted in the school or on the institutional website.

In addition to the school rules, forms of self-regulation and peer regulation were also identified, in which students themselves establish informal rules to control their own smartphone use, as well as that of their classmates:
- Sometimes I try to distract myself, to not be like that; sometimes I leave my phone in a corner, or I leave it at home so I don't bring it and avoid using it. I play something or go to the library to get a book (FG1, L).
- I see that my classmates spend all breaks playing, and I myself have created, so to speak, these rules so they don't get too addicted to the phone (FG1, I).

Regarding the ways of addressing non-compliance, students highlighted a clear perception of inconsistency in rule enforcement (13 recording units, RUs), which varies depending on the teacher's profile and the subject:
- I have teachers who agree with the smartphone ban. And I have teachers who disagree (FG3, RP).
  When teachers are more relaxed (…), some students put their backpack in front and keep their smartphone to play (FG2, K).

In cases of non-compliance, the most frequently reported measure was removing the student from the classroom (13 RUs), with the student being sent to the school leadership, the Student and Family Support Office, or simply outside: "They would take the student either to the SFSS [Student and Family Support Service] or to the principal's office" (FG1, N). Another frequently mentioned measure was teachers confiscating the student's smartphone (12 RUs). Less frequently cited measures included verbal warnings (6 RUs), sending an email to the class coordinator, and handing the smartphone to the parents or guardians: "The teacher warns, or otherwise, she takes the student's phone and gives it to the principal. The parents have to pick it up" (FG2, S).

3.4 Children's proposals for smartphone use

Students put forward a set of proposals regarding smartphone use at school. Table 4 presents the subcategories, indicators, and the frequency of recording units.

Table 4 – Frequency of subcategories and indicators for the category Students' proposals regarding smartphone use

Subcategories	Indicators	RUs/I	RUs/SC
Storing the smartphone before class	Placing the smartphone in a box	11	
	Each classroom has a locker to store smartphones	1	12
Creation of new rules	Rules for other school spaces	7	10
	Smartphone use is allowed only from the 6th grade onwards	3	
Strengthening activities during breaks and in DTA	Creating more activities at school during breaks	9	
	Creating a project in DTA to address issues related to smartphone use	2	11
Participation in defining the rules	Listening to everyone's opinions	6	
	Rules decided only by teachers and the principal, to be complied with by students	2	8

Note: RUs/I = Recording Units per Indicator; RUs/SC = Recording Units per Subcategory

Students put forward various proposals for managing smartphone use at school. The most recurrent was the creation of boxes or lockers (12 recording units, RUs) where smartphones would be stored at the beginning of lessons and returned at the end. According to one student: "After entering the classroom, the teachers should have a box, and students would line up to leave their phones, so they don't play during class" (FG1, L).

Another proposal concerned the reinforcement of activities (11 RUs), both during breaks and in discussions about the topic with class coordinators in the context of DTA [Tutorial and Guidance Sessions]: "I would provide more distraction resources in the playgrounds to keep students engaged and reduce their desire to use their phones" (FG3, D).

Proposals also included the establishment of new rules (10 RUs), such as not using smartphones during meals or while walking around the school, as well as age-based restrictions, allowing use only from 6th grade onwards: "I would allow smartphones only from the sixth grade. Those in fifth grade and below are still too young" (FG1, N).

Finally, some students argued that they should participate in defining the rules through regular meetings involving students, teachers, and school leadership, while others considered that this decision should be made exclusively by adults: "Everyone should give their opinion. Students, teachers, principals, all together in a meeting to find solutions" (FG3, L).

3.5 Perceptions about risks and about the Ministry of Education's recommendations

Students have a clear perception of the risks associated with excessive smartphone use and of the arguments that may underlie the Ministry of Education's recommendations regarding the use of this device in schools. Table 5 presents the frequencies of the subcategories and indicators for this category.

Table 5 – Frequency of subcategories and indicators for the category *Students' perceptions of risks and of the Ministry of Education's recommendation*

Subcategories	Indicators	UR/I	UR/SC
Risks of excessive smartphone use	Addiction and risk behaviours	10	
	Social isolation	5	
	Excessive/prolonged smartphone use	3	20
	Physical health problems	2	
Recommendation of the Ministry of Education	Health problems/addiction / sedentary behaviour	3	
	Sharing school-related incidents/videos of fights	2	
	Negative impact on learning	2	
			7
View opposing that of the Ministry of Education	Contradiction within the Ministry of Education's own position	2	2

Note: RUs/I = Recording Units per Indicator; RUs/SC = Recording Units per Subcategory

Students demonstrated awareness of various risks associated with smartphone use (20 recording units, RUs), namely social isolation, excessive use, physical problems such as those related to vision and posture, and addictive behaviours:

- I would say you can use it, but not too much, because sometimes you might end up without friends (FG1, G).
- And then we get vision and posture problems, too (FG1, A).
- Sometimes not. It's really hard to stop when someone is very addicted (FG2, RA).

Regarding the Ministry of Education's recommendation to ban smartphones, some students associated the measure with preventing health problems and addiction: "Some people are addicted to smartphones, and that can be harmful" (FG3, D); with preventing the dissemination of incidents occurring at school, such as fights: "Because it can spread a lot of things (…) like there's a fight, people record it, and it gets posted on social media" (FG2, R); and with the idea that excessive smartphone use can affect students' learning.

However, although less frequently (2 RUs), some students were critical of the Ministry of Education's recommendation, considering the measure inconsistent with the growing digitalisation of school practices: "It doesn't make sense, because they want to put more and more computers and smartphones in schools (…) now they're even trying to do exams on computers, and then they want to take away smartphones. I don't think it makes much sense" (FG2, A).

4. DISCUSSION

The study results highlight the multiplicity of students' perceptions regarding smartphone use in school, revealing both recognition of its potential and concerns related to risks. On one hand, the smartphone is valued for its usefulness as a means of communication with family and, to a lesser extent, as an educational resource; on the other, it is identified as a source of distraction, social isolation, addiction, and vulnerability to cyberbullying. This ambivalence mirrors the dilemmas highlighted in the international literature and reported by students in other studies.

The most prominent dimension in students' discourse relates to the smartphone's role as a safety tool and a means of family contact. Previous studies have also emphasised this function (Gath et al., 2024). This valuation by the students themselves highlights a central tension in regulatory debates: restrictive policies tend to focus on pedagogical and well-being risks but may overlook practical needs that students and families identify as legitimate. Such tension points to the importance of school governance models that integrate different perspectives on utility and risk, avoiding uniform solutions that disregard the diversity of family and territorial contexts.

At the same time, the smartphone was valued as a pedagogical support in interactive activities, quick research, and content recording, in line with studies that report benefits of intentional and mediated use of digital technologies (Calderón-Garrido et al., 2022). However, students themselves emphasised that productive use depends on clear rules and effective supervision, underscoring the importance of teacher regulation in technological integration.

On the opposite side, concerns emerged regarding distraction caused by smartphones, both in the classroom and during breaks. The theme of addiction also appeared recurrently, mainly associated with the use of games and social media. Students acknowledged difficulties in self-regulation, highlighting the addictive nature of certain applications. These testimonies align with research identifying increased anxiety and compulsive symptoms among frequent young users (e.g., Yang, 2020).

Another highlighted aspect was the reduction of face-to-face interactions during breaks, attributed to intensive smartphone use. This finding parallels studies problematising the impact of technology on socio-emotional development and students' socialisation practices (e.g., Verduyn et al., 2021).

Similarly, concerns were raised regarding episodes of cyberbullying, particularly through recording and sharing videos without consent. Such situations reveal the vulnerability of this age group (students in 2nd and 3rd cycles), confirmed by European research, and emphasise the need to strengthen digital and citizenship education (Ponte & Batista, 2019).

It is also important to note students' perceptions of inconsistency in smartphone rule enforcement, which varies among teachers and classes. This perception of incoherence can hinder internalisation of norms and compromise their legitimacy (Selwyn & Aagaard, 2021).

Despite these concerns, evidence of self-regulation strategies developed by students themselves also emerged, either through personal rules or peer intervention. This finding is particularly relevant in the context of debates on digital citizenship and student participation. The capacity demonstrated by students to develop informal regulatory mechanisms suggests that purely restrictive policies may underestimate their potential for agency and self-regulation. Contemporary theoretical perspectives on digital education advocate precisely for models that promote shared responsibility rather than paternalistic approaches centred exclusively on adult control (UNESCO, 2023). The results reinforce this view, indicating that students are not merely passive recipients of rules but agents capable of negotiating and constructing norms for coexistence.

The proposals put forward by students focus on solutions that seek to balance regulation and autonomy, with the most recurrent being the use of boxes or lockers to store smartphones. Simultaneously, the suggestion to promote alternative activities during breaks reflects the perception that isolated restrictive measures are insufficient, and that an integrated approach is preferable (OECD, 2021). These proposals directly engage with theoretical debates on effective educational policies: rather than total bans, students suggest contextualised regulation, combining restriction at certain moments with autonomy in others. This position aligns with participatory governance models, in which school rules result from negotiation among different actors, gaining greater acceptance and effectiveness (Campbell et al., 2024).

Regarding the Ministry of Education's recommendation to ban smartphone use, divergent opinions were recorded. While some students considered the measure positive, associating it with the prevention of health problems and addiction, others noted its inconsistency in light of the increasing promotion of digital technologies for educational purposes. This stance resonates with international debates questioning the effectiveness of prohibition policies (Gath et al., 2024; Goodyear et al., 2025).

In summary, the collected perceptions reveal a multifaceted picture in which dimensions of safety, learning, socialisation, and well-being intersect. The analysis underscores the relevance of involving students in the formulation of policies that affect them.

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The results thus indicate the need for integrated strategies combining clear regulation, digital education opportunities, socialisation alternatives, and participatory processes.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that students perceive smartphones as a useful learning resource, an essential means of communication with their families, and an important tool for time management. However, they also expressed concerns about excessive use, identifying consequences such as distraction, addictive behaviours, and social isolation.

Despite these concerns, students demonstrated openness to measures that promote more balanced smartphone use in the school context. Among the proposals put forward, the most notable were limiting usage time during breaks and free periods, collecting devices before the start of lessons, creating alternative activities and resources during breaks, and establishing clear and consensual rules developed with the involvement of the entire school community. Students emphasised that compliance with these rules depends on effective communication and a joint effort to ensure they are known and respected.

The results reinforce the importance of involving students in the development of school policies on smartphone use, promoting a participatory approach rather than exclusively restrictive measures. Schools should adopt integrated strategies combining regulation, digital education, and well-being promotion, particularly in more vulnerable contexts.

Following the data collection for this study, Decree-Law No. 95/2025 of 14 August was published, which prohibited the use of internet-connected devices by students in the 1st and 2nd cycles of Basic Education. This legislative decision, imposing a broad restriction, contrasts with students' perceptions gathered in this study, which point to the need for more balanced measures adapted to the school reality.

The data suggest that, while regulation is essential, policies that take into account students' opinions and needs may be more effective in promoting a healthy, inclusive school environment that aligns with the dynamics of everyday school life. Listening to students' voices and involving them in rule-making is a crucial step to ensure the legitimacy and success of implemented measures.

It is important to acknowledge some limitations of this work. The sample consists of only 23 students from a single TEIP school cluster, which naturally limits the transferability of the results to other contexts, particularly schools with different socio-economic characteristics or located in other regions. The decision to include only class representatives, while allowing access to peer-collected perspectives, does not guarantee that the diversity of experiences and opinions of all students is fully represented.

This study suggests several avenues for future research. Comparative studies between schools with different profiles would be relevant to better understand how socio-economic and territorial contexts influence students' perceptions. Longitudinal research could track changes in attitudes and practices following the implementation of the recent legislation, assessing its effects on academic performance, well-being, and forms of socialisation. Finally, studies incorporating the voices of teachers, parents/guardians, and other members of the school community would provide a more comprehensive and integrated understanding of this issue.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization, A.G. and B.V.; data curation, A.G. and B.V.; formal analysis, A.G. and B.V.; investigation, A.G. and B.V.; methodology, A.G. and B.V.; validation, A.G. and B.V.; writing-original draft, A.G. and B.V.; writing-review & editing, A.G. and B.V.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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