

Corporal Punishment in Nigerian Schools from Psychological Perspective: Issues and Recommendations

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of corporal punishments from psychological positions. Focusing on the rationales developed in support of corporal punishment in pedagogy, the paper argues that the punishment, both in its function and nature, is less an effective deterrent in correcting delinquent behaviours. The paper suggests some positive and non-corporal methods of correcting student's misbehaviour and improving achievements both in Nigerian schools and elsewhere. The purpose of this paper is to (1) highlight the harms and ineffectiveness of corporal punishment and (2) illuminate the corrective techniques for stopping and changing undesirable behaviour, in any settings (schools and homes), by individuals (teachers, parents and other caregivers, authority figures and strangers) or groups. This paper is intended to appeal to anyone who deals with educational matters, including social psychologists, legal scholars, sociologists, and policy makers at national and international level to use alternative disciplinary strategy.

Keywords: Corporal Punishment, Human Rights Law, Nigerian Schools, Psychological Perspective

1. Introduction

Teaching in schools goes beyond gathering students for learning only but also in addressing behavior problems of students (Nakpodia, 2012). Schools face more complex acts of misconduct by students than previously experienced. While some teachers argue that punishment is the answer, others prefer instilling discipline among learners (Mugabe and Maphosa, 2013). Hence, teachers and administrators impose corporal punishment on students for a variety of reasons. They beat pupils who perform poorly on exams, who talk in class, or who misbehave in countless other ways. Many teachers, administrators, and parents believe that these violent punishments are necessary to teach children a lesson and to discourage them from similar practices in the future. Other teachers say that they prefer not to use physical means of disciplining students; however, they say that they must resort to these methods because they may be responsible for seventy-five or more students per class, and that they have no other way to maintain control of such a large group of young persons (Human Rights Watch, 1999). There are layers of beliefs and practices that cloak corporal punishment under the guise of love, care and protection, when it is actually an abuse of authority that harms the child. This follows from the belief that those in whose care children are entrusted in school or other institutions are *'in loco parentis'* and will therefore always act in the interest of the child.

Along with literacy and numeracy achievement levels, school discipline ranks as one of the major concerns voiced by the public about schools and the school system in countries worldwide (Slee, 1995). There is a continuing and growing perception that behaviour problems are endemic in schools, that teachers are struggling to maintain order, and that school authorities are unable to guarantee the safety of students. These concerns are echoed in frequent and often dramatic media reports of disruptive behaviours of students, student riots, bullying and violence in classrooms, playgrounds and halls of residence (Busienei, 2012).

According to educators and psychologists, teachers can oversee classrooms activities and develop students' knowledge, skill, and aptitude through means other than corporal punishment. For example, they claim that praising students' good behaviour, imposing non-physical punishments, involving children in making the school rules significantly reduces disciplinary problems. These educators and psychologists argue that alternative methods of discipline are more beneficial and less detrimental to a child's development than corporal punishment. These alternatives do not necessarily require the investment of significant amounts of additional funds (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

In Nigerian schools, the use of corporal punishments is often treated as an integral part of education, holding a place in schools teaching. The understanding has been that corporal punishment has the potential of decreasing misbehaviours amongst children, with the goal of increasing the likelihood that the children will subsequently engage in desirable behaviours in the future, even when parents or adults are not around to discipline them. Many schools appear to have taken the practice too far, injuring, and disabling and even killing some children. For example, in 2012, a Secondary School teacher in Awka, Anambra State, was reported to have flogged a female student to death on the basis that the girl has refused to do her assignment. Similarly, in Osun State, a pupil was beaten to death by his teacher over a case of truancy. Again, in Port Harcourt, Rivers State a 13-year-old student was alleged to have been flogged by his principal till he slumped to the floor and died (Olupohunda, 2013).

Because of its relationship with student academic performance and moral maturity, school discipline is

often viewed as a national concern that is becoming more serious by the day for all societies (Slee, 1995). Practicing teachers, educationists, parents and students across the globe must increasingly get concerned with discipline-related problems in schools (Busienei, 2012). In its management efforts, many educationists and researchers have sought to identify the most efficacious methods of enhancing school discipline without physical punishments. The use of rewards and punishments, stemming especially from the psychological research works of Skinner (1989), have been used by many school educators, although in varying degrees, in managing students' behaviour. Of these methods, the use of corporal punishment has gained much debate, especially on its efficacy and its consequences to students.

2. Defining Corporal Punishment

Corporal punishment is defined as intentional application of physical pain as a method of behaviour change (Straus, & Mouradian, 1998). It include a wide variety of methods such as hitting, slapping, spanking, punching, kicking, pinching, shaking, shoving, choking, use of various objects (i.e. wooden paddles, belts, sticks, pins, or others), painful body postures (such as placing in closed space), use of electric shock, use of excessive exercise drills, or prevention of urine or stool elimination (Gershoff, & Bitensky, 2007). However, corporal punishment in schools does not refer to the occasional need of a school official to restrain dangerous students or use physical force as a means of protecting members of the school community subject to imminent danger (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

While the word "corporal" derived from the Latin "*corpus*" meaning a body, the term "punishment" comes from the same root (Latin *poena*) as do the words "penalty" and "pain." (Maurer, 1974). Thus, corporal punishment unmistakably means inflicting pain upon the body of the person, usually by some instrument such as a cane, strap or other object by parents, by school personnel or by judicial officers. The aim is to award punishment in the hope of guiding recipients away from error, effecting a reformation, or performing an action in the interest of order, rule, or control by authority.

3. Prevalence of Corporal Punishment in Nigeria

Many studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of corporal punishment and it seems that the majority of researchers found the end results of corporal punishment to be unpredictable. Even if this punishment discourages misbehaviour it does not foster appropriate behaviour. It is also argued that corporal punishment negatively affects relationships and often creates resentment and hostility which have been associated with dropout and vandalism (Shaikhmag, Assan & Loate, 2015).

For example, variety of surveys has shown the prevalence of school corporal punishment in Nigeria to control or change children's behaviour. These surveys show that the use of implements occurs in any setting (including the home, school, and workplace) and by individuals (teachers, parents and other caregivers, authority figures and strangers) or groups. For instance, according to UNICEF survey that focused on violent acts inflicted on children by caregivers and other family members; authority figures; peers and strangers, both within and outside the home, over 60% of adults in Nigeria think that physical punishment is necessary to raise/educate children. In terms of subjection of children to corporal punishment, 91% of children in Nigeria aged 2 to 14 years experienced violent discipline (psychological aggression and/or physical punishment) in the home in the month before the survey. Also, 79% of children aged 2 to 14 years experienced physical punishment and 81% of children aged 2 to 14 years experienced psychological aggression (being shouted at, yelled at, screamed at or insulted). Over 30% of children experience severe physical punishment (hitting the child on the head, ears or face or hitting the child hard and repeatedly) (UNICEF, 2014).

In another study that looked at the situation of children and women in Nigeria, and measured key indicators that would allow the country to monitor progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other internationally agreed upon commitments, carried out by the National Bureau of Statistics, it was shown that 90% of children ages 2-14 years were subjected to at least one form of psychological or physical punishment by household members in Nigeria during the month before the survey. In addition, about 34 percent of children were subjected to severe physical punishment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

A similar study that examined eye injuries resulting from corporal punishment in school settings, and involving 172 elementary school teachers in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, found that 80% of surveyed-respondents had seen pupils being punished by the school teachers with a cane; 46% had seen pupils being punished with a horse-whip, called "koboko" in local parlance, and 30% with a hand; 61% had seen pupils being hit on their buttocks, 49% on their back, 52% on the palm of their hand, 20% on their head and 16% on their face. In addition, 50% of pupils claimed they favoured the use of corporal punishment by their teachers (Mahmoud, 2011).

In a study on violence against girls carried out by African Child Policy Forum (ACPF, 2010) in five selected countries from Western and Central Africa, namely, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria and Senegal, it was found that physical violence such as beating, hitting, kicking, burning,

strangling, shaking, and forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions were a very widespread form of abuse. In Nigeria, the study established that 84% had been hit during their childhood, 90% beaten, 55% kicked, 71% denied food and 17% choked or burned. This study also found that parents and close relatives were the major perpetrators of physical violence (The African Child Policy Forum, 2010).

However, advocates of corporal punishment still maintain that, in order to enforce child discipline, it is necessary to punish the child with a cane or any implement, hopefully deterring future rule infractions. Despite this, promotion of good behaviour is a daunting task facing teachers and it requires a motivated teacher to inspire learners to display positive behaviour. Thus, many teachers are of the opinion that without corporal punishment, classrooms are out of control (Busienei, 2012). Teachers also believe that they are not equipped with alternatives to effectively deal with classroom management, nor do they feel supported by the relevant education specialists. In a study by Maphosa and Shumba (2010) it was found that alternative to corporal punishment were ineffective as disciplinary measure in schools, hence corporal punishment has been used as a quick-fix solution which raises fear and pain and should therefore be replaced by instilling self-discipline. In terms of punishment in educational settings, approaches differ throughout the world.

4. Problems with Corporal Punishment: The Social Science Scrutiny

At the level of both theory and practice, there seems to be consensus amongst scholars in the fields of psychology, social work, and pediatrics on the limited effectiveness and deleterious side effects of corporal punishment. This unanimity was captured by Burke who highlighted the position of the American Academy of Pediatrics on the subject as follows:

- *Corporal punishment is of limited effectiveness and has potentially deleterious side effects.*
- *The more children are spanked, the more anger they report as adults; the more likely they are to spank their own children; the more likely they are to approve hitting a spouse; and the more marital conflict they experience as adults.*
- *Spanking has been associated with higher rates of physical aggression, more substance abuse, and increased risk of crime and violence when used with older children and adolescents (Burke, 2010).*

The awareness of such a position highlighted above has been helped in no small part by several modern researchers who have conceived of corporal punishment as a harmful phenomenon. In particular Gershoff (2007), a developmental psychologist, examined the association between parental corporal punishment and potentially desirable child constructs (i.e., immediate compliance, moral internalization, quality of relationship with parent, and mental health), as well as undesirable child constructs (i.e., aggression, criminal and antisocial behaviour, abuse of own child or spouse, and victim of abuse by own parent). The only positive impact of corporal punishment reported by Gershoff in her meta-analytic research which involved an examination of 88 studies conducted over the last 62 years was immediate compliance; even so, corporal punishment was not associated with long-term compliance. This implies that corporal punishment, on the long run, can lead to undesirable consequences on the interior life of the child, such as fearing, avoiding, and resenting the adult.

Exposure of children to severe corporal punishment has been associated with antisocial and violent behaviours on their part (Ohene, Ireland, McNeely & Borowsky, 2006); suicidal behaviour (Straus & Kantor, 1994) and other psychiatric disorders such as Post-traumatic stress disorder-PTSD (Medina, Mejia, Schell, Dawson & Margolin, 2001) and substance abuse (Lau, Kim, Tsui, Cheung, Lau & Yu, 2005). Also, corporal punishment is related to the intergenerational transmission of intimate partner and family violence (Deater-Deckard, Lansford, Dodge, Pettit & Bates, 2003), and it is associated with risk of being victim of physical abuse and risk of abusing one's own child or spouse (United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, 2007).

On the whole, the use of corporal punishment sanctions the notion that pain and learning are kindred, and that it is acceptable to be violent toward children, thereby devaluing them in society's eyes. Such notion not only encourages children to resort to violence because they see their authority figures using it, but also harms children in teaching them that violence is acceptable, especially against the weak, the defenceless, and the subordinate. Far from being allied with achievement and learning, this is a fact that can be reasonably assumed will negatively affect generations yet unborn. Corporal punishment is not acceptable and educational establishment must not support it by sanctioning its use in the classroom. It is against this background, amongst others, that positive discipline and other non-violent methods of correcting children's misbehaviour become pertinent.

5. Alternatives to Corporal Punishment Educational Establishment

Corporal punishment is defined as a kind of discipline that entails direct infliction of pain on the physical body. However, it can also be taken beyond the physical to emotional and psychological domains, e.g. verbal abuse and deprivation of basic needs like food and the use of the toilet (Leigh, Chenhall & Saunder, 2009; Tozer, 2010). Alternative to Corporal Punishment (ATCP) is defined as a disciplinary strategy that emphasizes positive reinforcement, guidance and counselling, alternative punishments setting rules and expectations. Others are effective communication, respect and positive educational exchanges between teachers and students, the

recommended disciplinary measures are verbal warning, detention, demerits, community work and small menial physical tasks (Chisholm, 2007).

5.1. Positive Reinforcement

According to educational experts who oppose the use of corporal punishment, use of positive reinforcement techniques reduces the frequency and extent of misbehaviour (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Human Rights watch (1999) further states that teachers can reward students in a variety of simple ways. An instructor can praise a pupil in front of the student's classmates or other instructors, award special certificates to children who perform well or are particularly caring or list their names on notice boards. A teacher can write positive comments in a child's exercise book. Teachers can also hold school wide competitions and give material rewards like exercise books or pens to those who perform well. If teacher rewards students by giving them positive attention, a teacher can punish a particular pupil by ignoring that pupil's attempt to be disruptive. If the teacher is not ruffled or angered by the pupil's misdeed, then the student is less likely to perform the act in future.

In his research, White (1975) found teachers responding more frequently to negative than positive behaviour in attempting to control behaviour by inhibitions and checks. McNamara (1985 and 1986) confirmed that, in secondary schools, the use of punishment still far outweighed the use of rewards. Caffyn (1989) found teachers hanging on the view that corporal punishment was more effective than positive reinforcement in changing student behaviour. Wheldall and Merrett (1987) explored teachers' reactions to different types of behaviour. They found that where students' work was concerned, teachers' use of positive responses far outweighed the negative i.e. students who produced good work were rewarded far more than students who produced poor work who were punished. The opposite was true when teachers were dealing with student conduct; undesirable behaviour was punished while good behaviour was not rewarded. They concluded that many students who did not do well in their studies gained little reward from their schooling and that perhaps extrinsic rewarding system were needed to motivate such students.

5.2. Guidance and Counselling

Teachers may also use guidance and counselling. According to Human Rights Watch (1999), a teacher is more likely to elicit appropriate behaviour if the teacher can understand the situation that the child faces and offer guidance and counselling to the student. Some students may not conform to their teachers' requirements due to reasons outside of their control. They may not have enough to eat, they may travel long distance to school, their parents may expect them to work when they are not at school, they may need to take care of their younger siblings, or their parents may quarrel often. These external factors affect the abilities to concentrate and the amount of time and energy they can devote to school. Under these circumstances, beating a child is unlikely to be productive punishment, according to educators and psychologists who oppose corporal punishment (Human Rights Watch, 1999). A teacher is more likely to elicit appropriate behaviour if the teacher can understand the situation that the child faces and offer guidance and counselling to the student and the student family. However, teachers and educators need more training in order for them to effectively implement guidance and counselling programmes.

5.3. Alternative Punishment

Educators and psychologists who oppose the use of corporal punishment state that teachers should impose non-physical disciplinary measures as an alternative to beatings. Advocates propose that teachers require students to write a statement describing the negative effects of their behaviour or to apologize for the mistakes in front of their classmates. Instructors can require the misbehaving child to sit on a chair or a mat at the back of the room and to think about his/her mistakes and of ways to improve his/her behaviour (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Human Rights Watch (1999) found out that many opponents of corporal punishment argue that instructors may also discipline a child by assigning non-abusive physical tasks. They state that teachers can ask students to perform light chores, to water, weed a school farm or fix what they have broken. Learners who build chairs are not apt to break them. Learners who wash walls are not to make them dirty on purpose. If learners are reinforced for keeping their school yard neat and clean, they are less likely to throw thrash on it. However, these punishments should be administered in thoughtfully and not in an excessive or exploitative manner.

According to Save the Children (2001), giving up corporal punishment does not mean giving up discipline. Children need clear limits and guidance on what is right and wrong and abandoning the short cut of violence is likely to produce better disciplined children. They further stated that, teachers need to see clearly that there is always an alternative, and this can be found if corporal punishment is no longer considered as a possible tool for meting out discipline. School discipline has two main goals: ensure the safety of staff and students and create an environment conducive to learning. Serious student misconduct involving violent or criminal behaviour defeats these goals and makes headlines in the process (Moles, 1989).

Research done by Gottfredson (1989) found out that schools can decrease disruptive behaviour by first

setting out clear rules and consequences of breaking them and be communicated to staff, students, and parents by such means as newsletters, student assemblies and handbooks. Research has shown that social rewards such as smiling, praising and complimenting are extremely effective in increasing desirable behaviour (Gottfredson, 1989). Discipline problems will be reduced if students find school enjoyable and interesting. Sometimes problem behaviour occurs because students simply do not know how to act appropriately. Kopansky (2002) found that corporal punishment was not effective and that more effective disciplinary methods existed; most teachers do not use corporal punishment, but many favour keeping it as an option and that smaller classes, increased parental involvement, improved teacher training and the development of specific discipline plans would all help to improve student conduct.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper looks at that the function and nature of corporal punishment in Nigeria, and highlights how fraught an issue it is psychologically. It also highlights the key points from the findings by scholars in the fields of psychology, social work, and pediatrics to the effect that corporal punishment does not lead to better control in the classroom, enhance moral character development, and increase the student's respect for teachers or other authority figures in general; nor does it offer greater security for the teacher. A renewed emphasis is also placed on the associations between corporal punishment and a range of child behaviours and experiences, including higher risk of anxiety and depression, higher rates of aggression toward others and a more distant relationship with their parent.

The paper further shows that the use of corporal punishment in the school environment falsely and perfidiously reinforces physical aggression as an acceptable and effective means of eliminating unwanted behaviour in our society. Teachers, parents, administrators, and legislators, therefore, have a duty to put in place appropriate measures to ensure that discipline is administered in a manner consistent with students' human dignity and in conformity with the human rights mechanisms. Violence begets violence, anger begets anger, and the loss of control makes corporal punishment all worse. And, to endorse corporal punishment as a legitimate means of correcting the misbehaviour of the students in the schools, may amount to a violation of the national law and international Convention, as well as perpetuation of students' vulnerability to the abuse of adults.

Therefore, there is a need to ensure that teacher trainees while undergoing training should be adequately equipped with alternative methods of discipline and should be taught the importance of such methods in disciplining students in educational settings. Such methods are counselling, reinforcement and rewards. In addition, a counselling unit in the school is necessary with professional counsellor who will employ behaviour management techniques to promote pro-social behaviour among students. By so doing, this will serve to uphold and protect student's human dignity and right as well as assist the school authorities in conforming to the national, regional and international mechanisms on the rights of the young, in the utilization of an alternative to corporal punishment at all levels. Government at all levels should also disseminate materials on modern discipline methods and also through the mass media.

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