

Corporal Punishment in Zimbabwean Schools: Aetiology and Challenges

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***Abstract:** Corporal punishment has become a very controversial issue to eliminate in schools locally and internationally. The problem appears to be due to the parallels between what happens at home and in schools. Some child-rearing practices within the home mandate parents to use corporal punishment when disciplining their own children but the laws and regulations within the schools forbid teachers from using corporal punishment. This study is a part of a larger study that examined the epidemiology and aetiology of child abuse in Zimbabwean primary schools. This study seeks to determine: (1) pupils' myths and beliefs on why teachers use corporal punishment in schools; (2) if pupils have knowledge of the laws and regulations that protect them against corporal punishment in schools; and (3) recommend possible alternatives that could be used by teachers to discipline pupils in schools. A self-administered Pupil Questionnaire (PQ) was administered to a convenient sample of 200 Form one pupils selected from five rural secondary schools in Masvingo province of Zimbabwe. The questionnaire used was first pilot studied to an equivalent sample of Form one pupils to determine if the questions used were clear to the respondents. The study found that the majority of the respondents (84.5 %) believe that teachers physically abuse them because 'they want to control pupils who do wrong things'. The study also found that pupils hold various myths and beliefs on why teachers use corporal punishment in schools. The implications of these findings are discussed in detail in this paper.*

Introduction

Corporal punishment has been a conventional method in disciplining children and has become a very controversial issue to eliminate in schools locally and internationally because it appears that there are parallels between what happens at home and in schools (Newell, 1993; O'Brian & Lau, 1995; Shumba, 2003a,b; Zindi, 1995). Corporal punishment refers to intentional application of physical pain as a method of changing behavior (Shumba, 2003a;, Straus & Mouradian, 1998) and includes such methods as hitting, slapping, spanking, punching, kicking, pinching, shaking using various objects such as wooden paddles, belts, sticks, electric cords or others (Grossman, Rauh & Riveira, 1995; Shumba, 2003a,b & 2001).

Some child-rearing practices within the home mandate parents to use corporal punishment when disciplining their own children but the laws and regulations within the schools bar teachers from using corporal punishment. In communities in which the school has developed as a recognizable social institution, corporal punishment has not only been tolerated but has been prescribed as an essential part of the pedagogue's function (Dow & Mogwe, 1992; O'Brian & Lau, 1995; Payne, 1989; Sebonego, 1994). The belief that corporal punishment is a necessary and effective in disciplining children has become engrained and uncritically accepted in most traditions. It is this belief that has been used as a justification for the kind of disciplinary action in society and schools. As such, it has become very difficult to draw a line between what happens in the school and home since the school is an extension of what happens in the home (Shumba, 2003a,b &

2001; Shumba & Moorad, 2000; Straus, 1994). It appears that it is the home culture that is extended to the school by some teachers in the name of discipline with teachers acting *in-loco-parentis* within the school (Shumba, 2002 & 2001). As such, teachers seem to view this as exercising their *loco-parentis* role within the school and not as a violation of any regulations (Dow & Mogwe, 1992; Magagula, 1992; Sebonego, 1994; Shumba, 2003a, b). Current research notes that parents and teachers who were physically abused as children are more supportive of corporal punishment than those who were not (Climinillo, 1980; Hyman, 1988). This implies that violence is transferred from generation to generation and perhaps a suggestion why some teachers use corporal punishment in schools. Some parents who were beaten at home or school claim that they never suffered any negative consequences (Hyman, 1988; Payne, 1989; Poole, Ushokov & Nader et al., 2003).

In a recent comprehensive study carried out by the South African Human Research Council (HSRC), parents admitted to hitting their children and nearly a third of parents said that they beat them severely (Ntshingila, 2004). The HSRC study found that: (1) a third of those who admitted to hitting their children said they beat them severely using a belt, stick or other objects; (2) divorced parents were more likely than married ones to smack their children; (3) African parents were most likely to beat their children severely, followed by white and Coloured parents, with Indian parents the least likely to do so; (4) children under three years were likely to be 'smacked' but from four up, were more likely to be 'beaten'; (5) parents aged 25 to 35 were most likely to smack their children, while those over 35 were more likely to beat their children; and (6) there was a link between parents who maltreated their children and those in physically abusive relationships with their partners (Ntshingila, 2004: 1). Despite the incidence of corporal punishment revealed by the study, current research shows that South Africans hit their children less than the Americans or Britons where similar studies show that 90 % of children will be smacked at this stage of development (Newell, 1993; Ntshingila, 2004; Payne, 1989; Poole, Ushokov & Nader, 2003; Shumba, 2001; Shumba & Moorad, 2000; Straus, 1991, 1994 & 1996). Although most experts in South Africa have called for the banning of corporal punishment in the home, it appears a tall order to implement and control.

On the contrary, other studies assert that approximately one half of students who were subjected to severe punishment develop an illness called Educationally Induced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (EIPSTD). Such a disorder is a symptomatology analogous to the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) often characterized by depression and anxiety (Hyman, 1988; Hyman, Irwin & Laily, 1982). This mental health imbalance is induced by significant stress and with EIPSTD; the stress is caused by the inflicted corporal punishment (Hyman, 1988). Hence, such physically abused students often have difficulty with sleeping, fatigue, experience feelings of sadness and worthlessness, harbour suicidal thoughts, manifest anxiety episodes, increased anger with feelings of resentment and outbursts of aggression, deteriorating peer relationships, difficulty with concentration, lowered school achievement, antisocial behavior, intense dislike of authority, a tendency for school avoidance and school dropout and other high risk adolescent behaviors (Dubanoski et al., 1983; Hyman, 1988; Hyman et al., 1982). This appears to be consistent with research that claims that physically abused children tend to become more rebellious and are more likely to demonstrate vindictive behaviors within the school or home (Poole et al., 2003).

Most studies available appear to suggest that African parents believe that corporal punishment is part of the African culture of child-rearing practices (Dow & Mogwe, 1992; Sebonego, 1994; Shumba, 2003a & 2001; Zindi, 1995). As such, it has now become common practice by most African parents to use corporal punishment to discipline their children at home and that some parents believe that corporal punishment makes pupils 'perform well' in school (Shumba, 2003a,b & 2001). As such, some of the parents seem to be completely and totally oblivious of the laws and regulations that govern the treatment of pupils by their teachers in schools because whatever teachers do is believed to be 'always right' (Dubanoski, Inaba & Gerkewicz, 1983; Shumba, 2003b).

However, the practice within the school is different from that at home because there are stipulated procedures on how to discipline pupils in schools (Secretary of Education Circular P 35, 1993; Statutory Instrument 65 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 1992). In Zimbabwe, corporal punishment should be inflicted only by the school head or a teacher to whom authority has been delegated by the head, or any other teacher in the presence of the head, and should be inflicted on the buttocks with a suitable strap, cane or smooth light switch (Secretary for Education and Culture Circular P 35, 1993; Statutory Instrument 65 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 1992).

Current research shows that although the head is the only officer within the school with the authority to use corporal punishment on pupils, it is now uncommon in Zimbabwe to find some school heads being charged for excessively canning pupils (Newell, 1993; Shumba, 2003a, b & 2001; Zindi, 1995). Other reasons why some teachers use corporal punishment in schools given in interviews conducted with Education Officers responsible for handling and processing all child abuse cases by teachers in Zimbabwean schools appear to suggest that some of them tend to become too emotional when dealing with pupils and end up taking the law into their hands (Shumba, 2003a,b & 2001). When in such an emotional state, some school heads or teachers tend to by-pass the stipulated procedures by the Public Service Commission that teachers should obtain a mandate to use corporal punishment on their pupils from the school head (Secretary of Education Circular P 35, 1993; Statutory Instrument 65 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 1992). It appears that some of these perpetrators tend to become too emotional when dealing with pupils and end up taking the law into their hands. Under such an emotional state, the perpetrators do not follow the stipulated procedures by the Public Service Commission that they should obtain permission to use corporal punishment on their pupils from the school head (Statutory Instrument 65 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 1992). Other studies also shows that most cases of physical assault reported tend to involve injuries on pupils and such cases are handled and processed by the police before being handed over to the courts of law (Newell, 1993; Shumba, 2003a, b & 2001).

Other studies on why some teachers use corporal punishment in schools suggest that there is violation of stipulated laws and regulations because of certain beliefs regarding the effectiveness of corporal punishment and on lack of knowledge concerning disciplinary alternatives to corporal punishment in schools (Newell, 1993; Payne, 1989; Zindi, 1995). For example, Dubanoski et al. (1983) found that both society and teachers hold four common myths about corporal punishment: the belief that corporal punishment builds character; the belief that corporal

punishment teaches respect; the belief that corporal punishment is the only thing some children understand; and, the belief that without corporal punishment, behavioral problems increase.

Other studies found that some cultures view the deliberate infliction of pain on children 'as vital to the development of strength, endurance and cultural allegiance' (Anderson & Payne, 1994; O'Brian & Lau, 1995; Payne, 1989). Similarly, in some cultures, corporal punishment is viewed as an instrument used in teaching the child values and norms of the society during the parenting process (Benatar, 2004; Straus, 1991). However, Greven (1990) argues that while corporal punishment is viewed as a positive aspect of parenting that provides children with the necessary structure of personality growth, it involves inflicting pain partly for retribution, and teaches a child that those in power can force others to obey. If corporal punishment has effects on children, it is debatable that it promotes positive cultural values and norms of the society (Dow & Mogwe, 1992; Sebonego, 1994; Shumba, 2003a, 2002 & 2001). Similar research shows that those who believe in the use of corporal punishment in schools do not have proper classroom order and to them corporal punishment is the only technique left to preserve academic control (Dubanoski et al., 1983; Payne, 1989; Sebonego, 1994; Straus, 1994).

The Zimbabwean School Context and Corporal Punishment

Before the attainment of independence in Zimbabwe in 1980, teachers were allowed by the law to administer corporal punishment on their pupils without even accounting for it (Mutema, 1988; Zindi, 1995). However, in 1982, new legislation abolishing corporal punishment was by the Zimbabwe government. This was, however, short-lived because it was alleged that some pupils were bullying their teachers in schools (Zindi, 1995) and that discipline had become a problem in schools. This breakdown of discipline and control of pupils forced the Ministry of Education and Culture to reintroduce corporal punishment in 1985 through an act of Parliament (Zindi, 1995).

In 1989, the Supreme Court of Zimbabwe contested corporal punishment in schools and won its case that corporal punishment should be outlawed in schools (Zindi, 1995). However, in 1992, the government of Zimbabwe nullified the 1989 Supreme Court judgment and reintroduced corporal punishment on boys only in cases of "continued or grave neglect of work, lying, bullying, insubordination, indecency, truancy or other offences of such like gravity" (Statutory Instrument 65 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 1992: 446). Corporal punishment was applied on girls' hands only instead of their buttocks. According to the present regulations, corporal punishment should be "inflicted on the buttocks with a suitable strap, cane or switch cord by the head, or by a teacher with the head's (head-teacher's) authority, or by a teacher in the presence of the head" (Statutory Instrument 65 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 1992). The school head is required by law to keep a register or record of all cases of corporal punishment (Secretary of Education Circular P 35, 1992; Statutory Instrument 65 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 1992).

It appears from the above history of corporal punishment in Zimbabwean schools that there is disagreement as to whether to maintain or abolish corporal punishment in schools. Whilst most pupils are against administering of corporal punishment on them (Zindi, 1995), there are some teachers and parents who seem to believe that corporal punishment has done good than harm to pupils (Kurebwa, 1987; Magagula, 1992; Mutema, 1988; Zenenga, 1994). Research available suggests that this dilemma is caused by the fact that there are some teachers and parents who believe that their success in life was a result of the painful smacks and beatings which they got

from their own teachers when they were school pupils (Kurebwa, 1987; Magagula, 1992; Mutema, 1988; Zenenga, 1994; Zindi, 1995). For example, in his analysis of the views and attitudes of 600 pupils, 538 parents and 21 schoolteachers towards the administration of corporal punishment on pupils, Zindi (1995) found that although most professionals were against its use, there is a significant number of parents and teachers who felt that the use of corporal punishment in schools should continue. This is a contravention of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (U.N. General Assembly, 1989) that outlaws the use of corporal punishment in schools, and which Zimbabwe ratified in 1992 (Shumba, 2003b). There is no doubt from the above research evidence that the issue of eliminating corporal punishment in schools locally and worldwide is still debatable despite the fact that pupils themselves are opposed to its use on them (Mutema, 1988; Shumba, 2003a,b & 2001; Zenenga, 1994; Zindi, 1995).

As such, it is such cultures that condone violence against children as acceptable and useful in society that have made physical abuse or corporal punishment a very controversial issue to eliminate in schools worldwide (Anderson & Payne, 1994; Dow & Mogwe, 1992; Dubanoski et al., 1983; Sebonego, 1994; Shumba, 2003a,b & 2001). Hence, the purpose of this study is to determine: pupils' myths and beliefs on why teachers use corporal punishment in schools; if pupils have knowledge of the laws and regulations that protect them against corporal punishment in schools; and recommend possible alternatives that could be used by teachers to discipline pupils in schools.

Method

The Pupil Questionnaire was administered to a convenient sample of 200 Form one pupils (50 % male and female each) was conveniently selected from five rural secondary schools in Masvingo province. Form one pupils were used instead of primary school pupils in this study because it is assumed that since the primary school perpetrators are no longer present, these pupils are likely to verbalize freely the nature of child abuse perpetrated on them by some teachers when they were in primary schools. However, it should also be acknowledged that this study has a limitation that some of the pupils are likely to have forgotten what happened to them when they were in primary school and are likely to mix up the information (Bell, 1996; Kinard, 1994).

Both Form one boys and girls used in this study were aged between 12 and 14 years with mean ages of 14.1 and 14.2 years, respectively. This means that there was no significant difference between the mean ages of the study sample. It must be noted that most of the boys and girls at this stage of development are in their puberty period (Lefrancois, 1997; Mwamwenda, 1996).

Results

This study sought to determine pupils' myths and beliefs on why teachers use corporal punishment in Zimbabwean schools. Table 1 below shows pupils' beliefs on why teachers use corporal punishment in schools.

Table 1: Why Teachers Physically Abuse Pupils in Schools (n = 200)

| Reasons | True | | False | |
|---|------|------|-------|------|
| | n | % | n | % |
| (a) they want to be feared | 121 | 60.5 | 79 | 39.5 |
| (b) they want their power to be felt | 74 | 37.0 | 126 | 63.0 |
| (c) they were drunk | 78 | 39.0 | 122 | 61.0 |
| (d) they cannot teach | 47 | 23.5 | 153 | 76.5 |
| (e) they want to show their anger | 109 | 54.5 | 91 | 45.5 |
| (f) pupils deserve it | 91 | 45.5 | 109 | 54.5 |
| (g) they want to control pupils who do wrong things | 169 | 84.5 | 31 | 15.5 |

The majority of the respondents (84.5 %) believe that teachers use corporal punishment because ‘they want to control pupils who do wrong things’; 60.5 % believe that ‘they want to be feared’; and 54.5 % believe that ‘they want to show their anger’. On the contrary, the majority of respondents (76.5 %) believe that it is not true that teachers use corporal punishment because ‘they cannot teach’; 63.0 %, 61.0 % and 55.5 %, respectively, believe that it is not true that ‘they want their power to be felt’; ‘they were drunk’ or ‘pupils deserve it’.

Table 2 below shows pupils’ knowledge of regulations that protect them against physical abuse in this study.

| Reasons | Yes | | No | |
|---|-----|------|----|------|
| | n | % | n | % |
| Knowledge of laws and regulations that protect them | 159 | 79.5 | 41 | 20.5 |

The majority of the respondents (79.5 %) have knowledge of the laws and regulations that protect them against corporal punishment in schools. On the contrary, it is interesting to note that (20.5 %) of the respondents had no knowledge of these laws and regulations.

Discussion

It appears very clear from the above findings that pupils hold a variety of myths about why some teachers use corporal punishment in schools. The majority of pupils seem to suggest that teachers ‘want to control pupils who do wrong things’ and ‘they want to be feared’. Perhaps, the question that we must raise is that why should teachers resort to such strategies if they are capable of delivering their subject matter? Teachers who are conversant with their subject matter are likely to be able to create a positive atmosphere during the learning process and motivate pupils to play their part. Current research suggests that it is most often a headache for some teachers to maintain classroom control in schools because ‘many teachers fail to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect between their pupils and themselves or as originating in failed pedagogical relationships’ (Benatar, 2004; Mushoriwa & Shumba, 2002). This often results in compromising their positions within the classroom because such teachers appear to lack the ability or the inclination verbally to communicate expectations to children in a professional manner. It is

unfortunate that some of the teachers seem not to believe in rewarding good behavior but in punishing the bad behavior (Benatar, 2004).

It is important for teachers to be able to motivate their students during the learning process. One way to do this is for teachers to be well versed with their subject matter and this makes them to be respected by their students than teachers with the 'data deficiency syndrome' (Mushoriwa & Shumba, 2002). These are teachers who are less versed with their subject matter in their areas of specialization. Such teachers often have confrontations with their students because of ignorance about their subject matter and are not very comfortable to be asked challenging questions. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to be not dogmatic and should be able to learn some new ideas from their students because students are not like a *tabula rasa* or empty vessels where one pours in knowledge (Anderson & Payne, 1994; Lefrancois, 1997; Mwamwenda, 1996).

It also appears from the findings of this study that the majority of pupils are familiar with the laws and regulations that protect them against corporal punishment in Zimbabwean schools. It is very interesting to note that pupils cannot be taken for granted by some unscrupulous teachers in the new millennium because they seem to be aware of their rights within the school. This implies that pupils could possibly report any form of corporal punishment used by teachers in schools to their parents and other authorities.

What appears clear from the above findings is that some teachers seem not to be aware of the alternatives that they could utilize in order to maintain classroom control in schools. This paper has also attempted to come up with some of the alternatives that teachers could utilize to maintain classroom control in schools. First and foremost, the teacher needs to display an attitude of respect for the students so that students can feel that they are loved and understood by their teacher. In other words, the teacher should be positive and not negative attitudes towards the students all the time. This makes the students feel loved and cared for by the teacher. It must be pointed out that there are some children may have never have felt loved in their lives (Rohner, 1975; Rohner & Rohner, 1980; Shumba, 2003a, b & 2001). Therefore, it is important for teachers in their *loco-parentis* roles to develop a positive relationship with their students all the time (Shumba, 2002 & 2001).

There is also a need for both parents and students involvement in decision making about school issues that affect the students, including educational goals and disciplinary issues. Research suggests that lack of involvement in the education of their children often leads to classroom disciplinary problems in schools (Hyman & Wise, 1979; Kelly, 1983).

Inappropriate behavior can also be reduced by using a technique known as extinction (Benatar, 2004). This technique removes or eliminates the reinforcers that maintain the inappropriate actions. In this regard, the teacher or parent must use a calm voice when giving instructions and this normally eliminates problems. As such, teachers need to be trained in this aspect so that they can be handle children within the classroom. Other methods of handling inappropriate behavior are by holding teacher-parent conferences, revocation of privileges, after school detention and counseling. However, it must be pointed out that detaining the children equally indicates failure by the teacher to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect between their pupils and themselves (Benatar, 2004).

Another alternative is to develop a program to educate teachers, parents and school administrators on how to eliminate corporal punishment in schools and within the society. The negative effects of corporal punishment must be publicized and recognized by the public at large and this may result in a social atmosphere condemning it. Family therapists need to work with parents and students at home and in schools on the effects of corporal punishment on child development and educate them on alternatives that are available to eliminate it. It must be noted that corporal punishment is ineffective in producing durable behavior change of students in schools and at home.

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