

The Prevalence of Corporal Punishment in Zimbabwean Schools in the Twenty-First Century: A Case Study of Gweru

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Abstract

This study investigated the prevalence of corporal punishment in Zimbabwean secondary schools in the first decade of the twenty first century. The focus of the study was to analyze the perceptions of students, teachers and heads in Gweru Urban secondary schools on the continued use of corporal punishment. Currently progressive scholars are calling for child centred and liberative pedagogy while human rights activists are calling for the banning of corporal punishment in schools. The study employed the descriptive survey method and the research instruments used were the questionnaire and the interview schedule. A sample of 5 school heads, 30 teachers and 45 students was selected. Research findings revealed that the use of corporal punishment is widespread in Gweru Urban secondary schools and it is applied indiscriminately on both female and male students. However, this is in direct contradiction and violation of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture's Minute number 362 of 1998 which clearly stresses that where it becomes necessary to apply corporal punishment heads are directly responsible or any member of staff authorized by the head, and that female students should not be subjected to any form of corporal punishment. The findings revealed that truancy, disruptive behaviour, bullying and theft are the main causes leading to the prevalence of corporal punishment in schools. The study recommends that teachers and heads need to be conscientised to adopt a democratic and professional conduct in their interaction with students. Guidance and counselling are also recommended as alternative means to corporal punishment. There is need to move away from the retrogressive practice of administering corporal punishment as it is deemed dehumanizing by the respondents.

Keywords: Corporal punishment, truancy, bullying, disruptive behaviour

Introduction

In most Zimbabwean schools students are indiscriminately subjected to corporal punishment. Educationally, corporal punishment has been generally defined as the infliction of pain by a teacher or other educational official upon the body of a student as a penalty for doing something which has been disapproved of by the punisher (Marinescu 2010). Donnelly and Strauss (2005:53) define corporal punishment as 'the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury for the purpose of correcting or controlling a child's behaviour'. The phrase 'pain but not injury' distinguishes corporal punishment from physical abuse. The thrust of this paper is on the socially acceptable and legal corporal punishment. The phrase 'with the intention of causing a child to experience pain' distinguishes corporal punishment from acts that have other purposes, but may cause pain. It also makes explicit the fact that causing pain is intentional and not incidental (Donnelly and Strauss, 2005). Benator (2001) defines corporal punishment as the infliction of physical pain upon the occurrence of perceived misbehaviour. Furthermore, corporal punishment is defined under human rights law as any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain and discomfort (Corporal Punishment, 2011). It is usually inflicted through canning, slapping, swatting and spanking. From these definitions, it may be deduced that those who advocate the continued use of corporal punishment believe that it is useful and effective in making students conform to the expected standards of behaviour at school in particular and society in general.

The use of corporal punishment has recently sparked criticism and heated debate locally, regionally and internationally from parents, educationists, psychologists and human rights activists. Two schools of thought have emerged in this debate. The first is that corporal punishment must be abolished with immediate effect as it is inhuman, abusive, and dehumanizing (Benator 2001, Bob 1978, Freire 1990, Farrel 2007, Showman 1993 and Spencer and Spencer 2001). The second school of thought is that most societies the world over are patriarchal in nature, and patriarchy as an ideology thrives on the threat of, or the actual use

of force (Bryson, 2003), that is, the belief in the philosophy that when negotiations fail, then try what force can! This view maintains that corporal punishment in schools serves as a deterrent as it facilitates the move of the child from the jurisdiction of the family to the jurisdiction of the state where she/he learns that anti-social behaviour goes with punishment (Hurlock 1978, Spencer and Spencer 2001 and Benator 2007). It is against this background that this study sought to investigate the prevalence of corporal punishment in schools, focusing on analyzing the perceptions of students, teachers and heads on its continued use in the first decade of the twenty first century.

Corporal punishment is as old as humanity itself. Corpun (2007) noted that corporal punishment was present in early civilizations of Greece, Rome, Israel and Egypt in Africa. The stick was the most prevalent form of meting out corporal punishment as is the case today. There is even an old saying to the effect that, "Spare the rod and spoil the child". Corpun (2007) further argues that in Medieval Europe, corporal punishment was motivated by attitudes of the then church where flogging was a commonly attached to the church, and as such, corporal punishment was a legitimate deterrent measure of indecorous behaviour. Benatar (2005) notes that theories of corporal punishment have generally been described as utilitarian and retributive. The utilitarian theories of punishment recognise that punishment has consequences for the offender and society upholds that the total good produced by the punishment should exceed the evil. It seeks to punish the offender and to discourage or deter future wrong doing. Retributive theories argue that punishment is justified if it is deserved. It is not concerned about the consequences, but the means of the punishment which should prevent other people from committing similar acts. The theories of corporal punishment focus on being retributive, preventive, reformative and deterrent on the premise that an offence has been committed which one has to be punished for. In this study, one cannot turn to theories on corporal punishment for answers to whether punishment is effective or harmful. Neither can he/she venture into any view about which theory of punishment is correct or interrogate the various theoretical foundations on punishment. Suffice to say, this is mainly

because the theoretical background is largely beyond the scope of this study. A number of studies have been carried out and written on whether punishment is justified and this study is not contributing to that discourse, but the focus is on the prevalence of corporal punishment in Zimbabwean schools. The majority of studies done to date show that spanking increases both long term as well as short term harm in children and also increases aggressive behaviour especially toward other people (Jenny 2009). However, many regard corporal punishment positively as a customary and necessary technique of child rearing. Punishment in school can thus be seen as serving a useful educational purpose. It facilitates the move from the jurisdiction of the family to the jurisdiction of the state, teaching the child that punishment is not always inflicted by close people who love one and know one (Benatar, 2005).

Peters (1980) asserts that as early as the eleventh century the renowned Archbishop of Canterbury, Arshen, was outspoken in what he saw as unnecessary cruel punishment of young innocent children. Corpun (2007) noted that John Locke's writing influenced Polish legislators to call for the ban of corporal punishment in Polish schools in 1783. Such views coupled with an incident in which a male student died after he was beaten by his school master led to the discouragement of corporal punishment in schools. The Human Rights Watch documented cases of corporal punishment which included hitting children with a belt, a set of rulers taped together, punching, slapping, striking or shoving a child forcefully. Corpun (2007) observed that the use of corporal punishment is prevalent in modern day schools, although its use has decreased significantly. The convention on the rights of the child which was adopted by the UN in 1989 forbids physical abuse of children by parents or caregivers. The convention has been ratified by all UN members except USA and Somalia. By the early twenty first century more than 100 countries had abandoned corporal punishment in schools (Corporal Punishment, 2011). In line with this, corporal punishment has been outlawed in many countries of Western Europe, China, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Africa, Thailand and Zimbabwe. This view was endorsed by the international convention on the rights of children (UN Children's Fund, 1999). The

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) explicitly requires all parties to take appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect children from all forms of physical / mental violence, injury, abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any person who has care of the child (Article 19 p1).

A study by Zindi (1997) revealed that corporal punishment is still condoned in most Zimbabwean schools, yet beating animals and injuring them in the same country is illegal! According to the Government of Zimbabwe, in terms of Statutory Instrument 362 of 1998, corporal punishment can be applied to male students on account of neglect of work, disobedience, wilful damage of property, theft, dishonesty, assault, bullying, indecency, or any misconduct of a serious nature. Zindi (1997) found out that corporal punishment is still a popular method of behavioural correction in Zimbabwe in spite of calls to be cautious in its use in schools. Similarly, Peters (1980) argues that, of all the forms of punishment in schools, the cane would be effective when used soon after the misbehaviour so that students can associate the two and appreciate why the act is forbidden. Spencer and Spencer (2001) maintain that corporal punishment is an integral part of the process through which schools achieve the fundamental objective they were established for, including the developing and moulding of a loyal and productive future citizen of Zimbabwe. Craigmore College in South Australia uses corporal punishment whenever it is required and all staff and parents are aware of these policies before enrolling in the school(Tucci et al, 2006). The parents sign a form declaring that they are aware of the school's disciplinary policies and agree before the child attends school. The corporal punishment is administered by senior staff/ principal and the errant pupil is smacked once or twice on the bottom by a small wooden paddle. It is done away from the presence of other pupils. There seems to be similarities with the Zimbabwean scenario except that what is used differs with the school.

However, critics of corporal punishment argue that it turns the classroom into a battle ground where the teacher finds himself/herself in the position of attacking and terrorizing the innocent, powerless and defenceless

students. According to Freire (1990), such a situation is dehumanizing to both the student and the teacher where the teacher is the oppressor (subject) and the student is the oppressed (object). However, whipping and even amputation remain prescribed punishment in several Middle Eastern nations that strictly observe Islamic law. Beatings and other forms of disciplinary action are still administered legally or covertly in most countries, Zimbabwe included. Bob (1978) noted that a classroom can be the most unruly and chaotic place despite the wooden ruler and its frequent use. Therefore, this study aimed to find out the prevalence of corporal punishment in schools and to analyze the perceptions of students (recipients), teachers and heads (administrators of corporal punishment) on the continued use of corporal punishment in the first decade of the twenty first century.

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey since the main objective was to establish the prevalence of corporal punishment in Gweru Urban Secondary Schools and also analyze the perceptions of students, teachers, and heads on its continued use in the twenty first century. Although the study made use of quantitative data, it is largely qualitative in nature so as to gather the true and actual feelings, opinions, attitudes and perceptions of the respondents on the continued use of corporal punishment in secondary schools. There are 12 secondary schools in Gweru Urban District. From these, 5 school heads, 30 teachers and 45 students were randomly sampled for the study, giving a sample size of 80 participants. The selected schools were government and council run. The researchers made efforts to find a representative, typical sample of the teachers, students and school heads. The sample had 3 male heads, 2 female heads, 10 male teachers, 20 female teachers, 25 male students and 20 female students. The ages of the respondents were from 13 to 19 years for the students and 24 to 60 for the teachers and school heads. Best and Khan (2003) maintain that the minimum representative sample is 10%. Therefore the above sample size is representative of the target population of the study. Three sets of questionnaires which were both closed and open ended, one for students, the second for teachers and the third for

heads were used to solicit for information. The questionnaires solicited information on the forms of corporal punishment meted out by the school, the frequencies, the experience with corporal punishment, reaction to the punishment and attitudes toward corporal punishment. The questions also included who administered the corporal punishment and the present attitude towards corporal punishment of the respondents. Face to face interviews were also used as research instruments. A pilot survey was carried out on a small number of students, teachers and heads in order to make sure all the questions were clear and sound, and any potentially ambiguous statements were eliminated as well as to establish the reliability and validity of the instruments.

Results and Discussion

Forms of corporal punishment

All the 80 interviewed students noted that they only knew of the cane or rod as the form of corporal punishment used in secondary schools. Similarly all the 30 teachers and 5 heads interviewed admitted to beating both male and female students using a stick or rod. From these findings, it can be concluded that caning as a form of corporal punishment is evident in Gweru Urban Secondary Schools.

Thirty six out of forty five students said that they had been subjected to corporal punishment by their teachers. Nine out of thirty teachers said that they used corporal punishment on a regular basis, while 3 out of 30 teachers condemned the use of corporal punishment. This evidence suggests that the use of corporal punishment is prevalent in Gweru Urban Secondary Schools. Nine out of forty five students said they were subjected to corporal punishment on a daily basis by their teachers, 25 out of 45 students revealed that they were beaten by their teachers on a weekly basis, 7 out of 45 students were beaten on a monthly basis, while 4 out of 45 students were yet to be subjected to corporal punishment by their teachers. The study also revealed that 18 out of 45 students were subjected to corporal punishment by all their subject teachers. Five out of forty five students said that only one of their subject teachers subjected them to corporal

punishment. All the 45 students admitted that their heads frequently subjected them or other students to corporal punishment.

Offences resulting in the use of corporal punishment

The students were asked to make a list of the offences that led to the administering of corporal punishment in their schools. They listed the following; passiveness in class, sleeping in class, (concentrating with closed eyes), noise, disruptive behaviour, not attending lessons, failure to do homework, fighting and bullying, breaking school furniture and theft. Teachers were also asked to enumerate offences that led them to administering corporal punishment. Their responses were similar to those listed by students above, but also included drunkenness, smoking, drugs, lateness and rudeness. The face to face interviews with school heads also identified rudeness to members of staff, malicious damage to property, refusal to follow lawful instructions from teachers, prefects and class monitors as offences resulting in corporal punishment. The general consensus from the students, teachers and heads was that students need to be subjected to corporal punishment for committing any of the above listed offenses, although students called for caution in the application of the afore said. The respondents have the same view with McMannus (1995) that the African child understands the language of the whip better than any other form of persuasion to behave well.

Arguments for continued use of corporal punishment

Students were asked to express their opinions on why their teachers subjected them to corporal punishment (i.e. the motivations by teachers behind the use of corporal punishment).

They responded thus:

'Some teachers beat us and hurt us for trivial issues'

'Some teachers beat us to defend their poor lesson preparation and presentation'

'Corporal punishment has become a habit, a culture by some teachers to silence dissenting students'

Twenty four of the thirty teachers on the other hand, said that corporal punishment was an integral part of the teaching and learning process and that any attempt to abolish it would compromise the authority of the teacher. This group of teachers argued that corporal punishment produces a well disciplined and orderly class. All the school heads complemented the teachers' sentiments adding that the whip produces a future loyal citizen of Zimbabwe. The teachers' and heads' views complement Majange (1992)'s findings that corporal punishment has a place in the classroom, provided it is administered properly and soberly.

Arguments Against the Continued use of Corporal Punishment in the Twenty-First Century.

Forty out of the forty five students revealed that the continued use of corporal punishment is unwarranted and has no advantage at all in the teaching and learning process. They argued that they could do much better without the presence of the stick or the whip. Thirty five out of the forty five students vehemently pointed out their dislike of the cane and called for its immediate and permanent withdrawal from the school system. The reasons given were:

'Some teachers beat us for flimsy reasons'

'Teachers beat us because they have their own social problems, particularly because they are experiencing difficult economic times like any other Zimbabwean'

'Some teachers hurt us in the process of beating us, we are not dogs'

'Some students abscond a particular subject, they fear the teacher's habitual beating'.

'Some teachers beat us so that we do not report their short comings'

'We are subjected to unjustified torture'

'Some of us have social problems emanating from homes which may not be solved by being beaten'

The students' opinions are in line with Zindi (1997)'s findings that corporal punishment causes physical pain and gives children a feeling

of fear and insecurity which may affect their emotional development. Robertson (1996) similarly found out that bad behaviour by students may stem from the family where there is violence in the home, family discord and disharmony, parental disorder, criminality among parents, large family size and general overcrowding. A student brought up in such a family may have problems in following the stringent morals demanded by the school, henceforth; corporal punishment may not be the appropriate solution. McMannus (1995) also found out that teachers sometimes beat students to defend their poor lesson planning and presentation. Yet poor lesson preparation and presentation breeds classroom misdemeanours and misbehaviours or sleeping. On the other hand, teachers and heads unanimously called for the continued use of corporal punishment in schools in the twenty first century. This is in line with Freire's (1990:118) observation that, "it is a rare peasant who once promoted to the rank of overseer, does not become much more of a tyranny than the original farm owner". Similarly, McMannus (1995) concluded that when the teacher resorts to the cane, she/he is admitting failure to teach, because teachers teach to change attitude, behaviour and way of thinking.

Teachers and Heads' Awareness of the Standing Rules and Regulations on the Use of Corporal Punishment

Teachers and school heads were asked to indicate their awareness of the standing rules, regulations, statutory instruments, or ministerial circulars on the use of corporal punishment in school. Three out of the thirty teachers expressed ignorance of such communication from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture. Eight out of the thirty teachers acknowledged that they were aware that only school heads, or those delegated the authority by the head, could administer corporal punishment to students. Six of the teachers admitted that they were not aware that female students should not be subjected to corporal punishment. Interestingly, 8 of the female students interviewed said that they had been subjected to corporal punishment by their teachers.

Alternatives to Corporal Punishment

Students, teachers and school heads were asked to suggest some alternatives to corporal punishment in the schools and came up with the following:

- Guidance and counselling
- Manual labour such as watering the school garden and flowers
- Sweeping school grounds and classrooms
- Slashing grass
- Toilet cleaning

However, their suggestions, except Guidance and Counselling, fall into the category of torture and are dehumanizing. For example, cleaning toilets mostly without protective clothing may expose students to diseases, and there are many diseases in the current Zimbabwean situation, let alone cholera!

Recommendations

From the study's findings, it is strongly recommended that the Government of Zimbabwe, through the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture conduct surveys in schools to establish how corporal punishment is being administered. There is need to ensure that through workshops and other relevant approaches, teachers and heads are conscientised on regulations and rules governing the use of corporal punishment in schools. As civic society, there is need to carry out aggressive awareness campaigns among teachers and school heads so as to save students from imminent torture, psychological trauma and dehumanization as result of corporal punishment. It is suggested that measures to raise awareness about the harmful effects of corporal punishment engage the Government, Non Governmental organizations and Human Rights Groups. It is further suggested that the use of alternative forms of discipline be encouraged and these should be administered in a manner which fosters self esteem and dignity of the child and is in conformity with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) as well as the rights of the African child. Teachers' colleges and universities should

also place emphasis on Human Rights Issues in their curriculum so that we have an all-round teacher who will regard students as clients, and fellow young human beings with full human rights. The Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture in addition, could also conscientise teachers on all its circulars, minutes, statues and regulations so that the dehumanization of students by teachers and heads in schools in the twenty first century is reduced or possibly stopped and the nation would promote other effective forms of positive discipline.

Conclusion

This study explored the prevalence of corporal punishment in secondary schools. The research findings revealed that the use of corporal punishment is prevalent in Zimbabwean secondary schools, often with devastating effects on some of the students. From the responses of the recipients of corporal punishment (the students), it is clear that it is a traumatic and inhuman experience which in most cases achieves the opposite of the intended. Other ventures of a similar nature are known to have equally produced similar results, contrary to what is expected or intended. There is need therefore to abolish corporal punishment in schools in the twenty first century so as to abide to democratic principles.

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