

A Psychoeducational Perspective of Discipline in Schools and the Abolishing of Corporal Punishment*

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ABSTRACT Media reports suggest that students in many schools, especially rural schools, display arrogance, violence, rudeness, truancy and other types of misconduct. In the light of above and with the implications of the implementation of the Schools Act in mind, it was investigated whether the South African government's decision to abolish physical punishment was viable and whether it had any impact on student conduct. A sample was drawn of 400 learners and 100 teachers from 10 high schools in an educational region of the North West Province of South Africa. The main objective of the study was to investigate the effects of the abolition of physical punishment on discipline. In contrast to the thrust of the theoretical investigation that revealed that the abolition of corporal punishment would probably lead to an increase in poor behavior, the empirical investigation, particularly the application of the Chi-square test, indicated no positive relationship between the abolition of corporal punishment and increase in misconduct. The study recommends that alternative forms of disciplinary measures are necessary to replace corporal punishment in order to improve the teaching/learning situation.

INTRODUCTION

Discipline in a positive sense refers to learning, regulated scholarship, guidance and orderliness, and may therefore qualify as an integral part of an effective educational endeavor in which parents and teachers give assistance to a learner seeking help, but on the other hand, in trying to maintain good conduct, violence must be avoided since it can result in serious long standing physical, emotional and psychological implications for both teachers and learners and these include reduced self-esteem, distress, risk of depression, suicide, reduced school attendance, diminished ability to learn and even school dropout. Good discipline thus allows learners to work well, which will ultimately lead to better academic achievements (Baumann and Krskova 2016).

The present situation in South African schools seems to suggest that a lack of discipline and increase in violence among high school students has led to a continuation of unsuccessful learning and teaching, hence an increase in misconduct, which affects the lives of both teachers and learners (Mthanti and Mncube 2014). Principals in the North West Province of South Africa also pointed out that bullying, assault and fighting among learners were the most common types of misconduct in schools. Disci-

pline is thus essential for the functioning of a school (Western Cape Department of Education 2015).

Research targeting education students revealed that the abolition of corporal punishment had been a mistake leading to poor discipline in schools. The effect of learner misconduct on teaching commitments also seems to suggest that learners who deliberately interrupt educators' teaching through disruptive behavior was the single most prominent type of misconduct mentioned by a number of headmasters (Rossouw 2007).

Absence from class, including arriving late, bunking, theft, using abusive language and undermining teacher authority is also mentioned as having a major impact on schools (Ferreira et al. 2007). It is therefore essential to maintain a strict code of conduct in classrooms since research by Baumann and Winzar (2016) indicate that countries that enforce strict discipline in classrooms have better academic results.

Background Factors

Punishment is the act of causing pain, suffering or loss that serves as retribution and where unpleasant consequences follow socially unacceptable behavior (Webster 2010). Punishment at schools includes expulsion, suspen-

sion and physical pain. In view of this, classroom teachers are more likely to show their disapproval by means of facial gestures, reprimands, giving detention, assigning unpleasant activities, ordering time out and sometimes using physical punishment (Baron 2006). Moreover, this type of punishment can also be seen as a disciplinary measure that uses physical force with the intention of causing pain to the recipient but not bodily harm. With this in mind corporal punishment may at times be seen as cruel sending the wrong signal to students, hence the use of physical punishment creates an atmosphere conducive to violence (Arcus 2004; Unisa 2012). Thus the impact of violence in schools often leads to serious social and economic consequences suggest Mthanti and MnCuba (2014).

For the purposes of this study, conduct, misconduct, behavior, misdemeanors have been used interchangeably with disruptive behavior. Disruptive behavior is simply behavior, which is not acceptable and is attributable to disciplinary problems in class. In other words, it affects the basic rights of the learners to feel safe and be treated with respect (Marais and Meier 2010). In order to minimize learner misconduct, discipline, which relates to issues of school management, ways of getting things done at schools or education orderliness will have to be strictly implemented. It is further argued that discipline may also be perceived as the development of the individual and the promotion of self-actualization and empowerment. Discipline thus is important for the safety of all learners (Masitsa 2008). The introduction of the Schools Act 84 of 1996 did not help the discipline process much as corporal punishment was done away with. Abolition of corporal punishment is almost nonexistent in most Western countries including all European lands (Wikipedia 2016).

Research in South Africa shows that schools continue to administer corporal punishment to curtail misconduct among learners and more than half (55.6%) of those interviewed had been subjected to physical punishment for bad behavior (Burton 2009). Tozer (2010) believes that the use of violence is an issue of power, as teachers believe that violence can be used to control those weaker than others, and hence it is argued that corporal punishment negatively affects relationships and often creates resentment and hostility, which have been associated with school drop-

out and vandalism (Mwamawenda 2008; Makhubele 2014; Govender and Sookrajh 2015).

Defining Corporal Punishment in the South African Context

Corporal punishment in South Africa has been used to deal with misconduct swiftly, which raises fear and pain and should therefore be replaced by instilling self-discipline. Corporal punishment has therefore been outlawed in this country. Section 10 of the Schools Act of 1996 has made the administration of corporal punishment a criminal offence in South African schools. Therefore, educators need to formulate strategies that take account of learners' rights and protection (Maphosa and Shumba 2010). Thus, Frechette and Romano (2015) believe that though corporal punishment maybe highly prevalent, legal reforms and public education efforts to limit it, could lead to a decrease in its use. Many South African educators have difficulty finding an alternative to this traditional method of punishment and it is argued that corporal punishment persists because parents use it at home and support its use at school (Morrel 2003; Msomi 2004; Bhana 2012). In view of this, it must be noted that according to the new South African Schools Act (RSA 1996), an environment conducive to a healthy study atmosphere must be administered while expulsion and suspension should be exercised with great caution since recent research has shown that suspension is closely related to high drop out and delinquency rates (Losen 2015). Efforts by educators to bring about a safe and healthy teaching environment where learners can thrive and succeed must be supported by school leaders and policies. However, it is clear that some policies intended to establish a safe haven for orderly conduct has failed and caused more harm (Weingarten 2016).

Despite the ban on corporal punishment, it is still practiced, often for minor issues (Rohrs 2016). Those who advocate for corporal punishment argue that the ever-growing disregard for authority among the youth stems from the abolition of physical punishment both at home and at school. Studies have established a strong relationship between corporal punishment and the development of aggressive behavior by learners, hence corporal punishment has a tendency to promote hostility instead of self-discipline.

For many learners, especially boys, it leads to feelings of revenge, anti-social aggressiveness and a high rate of vandalism (Gregan-Kaylor 2006; My News 24 2016).

The present situation in South African schools demonstrates that a lack of discipline and self-discipline among high school learners has led to a continuation of unsuccessful learning and teaching (Mtsweni 2009). As it is unethical to physically punish learners according to the Schools Act No. 10, the then Minister of Education, designed a comprehensive document entitled 'Alternatives to Corporal Punishment'. Disciplinary measures to be taken in South African schools are clearly outlined in different levels posit Maphosa and Shumba (2010). Thus, the permissive style of discipline, which has an optimistic view of human nature and believes that if learners are left alone, they will make good decisions and behave in a favorable way might be best suited to the South Africa scenario (Zabel and Zabel 2006; Sawa 2013; Stratford 2014). An empirical investigation was conducted based on the theoretical insights that flowed from the conceptual-theoretical framework set out above. The study aimed at exploring the psychoeducational perspective of discipline in schools and the abolishing of corporal punishment in South Africa.

Problem Statement

The problem of discipline and punishment in schools have been part of the education profession for a long time now, and there seems to be no solution to this ongoing issue. Debate based on religious, social and cultural values suggests that it is essential to punish children physically because it helps bring about the values of society, good conduct and discipline in them (Masitsa 2008). Abolition of corporal punishment is tantamount to loosening the teachers' grip on the learners. The inference here is that, if exercised with care, this type punishment brings about an immediate decrease in bad behavior, produces respect for authority, obedience and self-discipline (Grayson 2008). It can be argued, on the other hand, that corporal punishment does not result in long-term behavioral change and tends to be counterproductive. Also, no compelling evidence exists to support the claim that physical strikes can improve a child's behavior or mental health (Russo 2015). It is suggested that excessive punishment is merely a

temporary measure to stop the learner's bad behavior in order to prevent further beating, only to bottle up resentment, rage and frustration, which resurfaces at a later stage (Dlamini 2006; Gershoff and Gregan-Kaylor 2016; University of Texas at Austin 2016).

With this in mind, this article purports to shed light on and provide insight into learner misconduct and the teaching/learning environment in the North West Province of South Africa, as a result of the banning of corporal punishment. The study, the findings on which this article reports, concentrated on discovering evidence concerning the effects of abolishing corporal punishment on learner conduct.

Objectives

The main aim of the study was therefore to investigate the effects of the abolition of physical punishment on discipline and to establish the relationship, if any, between corporal punishment and the teaching/learning environment.

Hypothesis

In this study, the null hypothesis tested therefore was:

There is no significant relationship between corporal punishment and the nature of the learning/teaching environment.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research was contextualized by the post-positivist paradigm based on the following assumptions (Creswell 2014): Firstly, all knowledge is conjectural, and therefore absolute truth cannot be established. Secondly, research is a process of making claims, thereafter refining them or abandoning them to accommodate other claims that deserve more attention. Finally, post-positivism is not a form of relativism and can therefore retain the idea of objective truth. This is essential for competent enquiry (Creswell 2014). The research study was constructed in the context of these assumptions. The framework is the product of the researchers' constructive-hermeneutic understanding of views expressed in the relevant literature. Conducting research in this manner requires the researcher to be mindful that knowledge is conjectural, and

hence absolute truth can never be established. This means that evidence found in research is always imperfect and fallible, thus research is a process of making claims, which deserves more credit (Philips and Barbules 2002). The research design and method in which the study was grounded are described below.

Research Design

The data was collected using the quantitative method and was underpinned by a post-positivistic research theory whose assumptions represent the traditional form of research. These hold true more for quantitative research than the qualitative approach (Creswell 2014). Empirical observation and measurement were utilized to determine the effects of the abolition of corporal punishment on learner behavior. In order to discover such effects, the null hypothesis tested was that “there is no significant relationship between the abolition of corporal punishment and nature of the teaching/learning environment”. Thus, it became apparent that using the quantitative method in analyzing data would be best suited for the study since this approach involves collecting numerical data, which are objective and not influenced in any way by the researchers’ prejudice (Denscombe 2010). Survey data was used to describe and explain the status of phenomena, to trace change and to draw comparisons. Thus, implicit in the notion of survey is the idea that research should have a wide range, a breathtaking view, that is, a panoramic view and ‘taking it all in’. Similar to this research, surveys relate to the present state of affairs and involve an attempt to provide a view of how things are at a specific time at which data is collected (Leedy and Ormrod 2010; Maree 2010).

Instrumentation

Based on the evidence at hand, it was inferred that the best way of gathering information directly from respondents would be by

means of a scheduled structured questionnaire. This method is based on a set of questions with fixed wording and indicators of how to answer each question, thus a structured (close-ended) questionnaire using the 4-point Likert scale was used since it is characterized by choices between alternative responses that are given (Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly disagree). A self-constructed questionnaire with twelve items was used. The questionnaire had only one section and the wording was such that it could easily elicit appropriate reactions from the respondents. With this type of a questionnaire, data can be enlarged and classified more easily and the number of possible responses is limited (Bless and Higson Smith 2005; Wilson 2009; Kumar 2011).¹

Population and Sampling

The target population included high schools in one educational region of the North West Province (n=20) and it was selected with the assistance of the Area Project Officers regional managers. The findings of the study are therefore valid for schools in this region only.

Simple random sampling was used and the sample size included ten schools (n=10). In total, 400 questionnaires were distributed to 400 students and 100 were handed out to teachers. The response rate was ninety-five percent.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness Issues

Ethical guidelines were followed, which included guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Permission to carry out this investigation was granted by the Provincial Department of Education and further consent was given by the principals to conduct research at their schools. To observe content validity, which is concerned with accuracy of the questions asked, data was collected and explanations provided (Denscombe 2010), the questionnaire was structured in such a manner that

Table 1: Population and sample

<i>Schools in one region of NWP</i>	<i>Population</i>			<i>Sample</i>		
	<i>Number of schools</i>	<i>Learners</i>	<i>Educators</i>	<i>Number of schools selected</i>	<i>Learners</i>	<i>Educators</i>
	40	1200	300	20	400	100

questions were clearly articulated and directed. Face validity (where all the items had an indication to relate in some way to corporal punishment) and content validity (where all items used had a bearing on learner conduct and corporal punishment as described in the theoretical study) were applied. To establish the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for the questionnaire dealing with misconduct and misdemeanors and the result 0.801 suggests that it was satisfactory (Table 2).

Table: 2 Cronbach's alpha

Variable	N	Mean	STD Dev	Cronbach's	Comment
School	20 500	3.75	1.27	0.801	Good and consistent

Data Collection Processing and Administration

The researchers distributed the questionnaires personally. This had the advantage that

the purpose of the study could be explained clearly before the respondents attempted to respond to the questions. The quantitative method was applied in analyzing data. The raw data was organized and analyzed, and the chi-squared test was applied to test the null hypothesis. With the assistance of statistical consultants, computer-aided statistical analysis was employed in the form of calculations of frequencies, percentages, means and chi-squares by means of meta-analysis (Suter 2012).

FINDINGS

Abolishing of Corporal Punishment and Effect on Misdemeanors

Table 3 presents the responses to the questionnaire relating to misconduct and misbehavior. The respondents were requested to respond to twelve statements in connection with misconduct as well as the teaching/learning pro-

Table 3: Candidates (including educators) responses to questionnaire on misdemeanours

Statements agree	Strongly	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
	1	2	3	4	
<i>Since the Banning of Physical Punishment:</i>					
Truancy in writing tests among learners has increased and this affects academic performance.	121 (24.6%)	236 (48.1%)	119 (24.2%)	15 (3.1%)	491 (100)
Learners have less respect for school authorities and this reflects poorly on teaching.	70 (14.3%)	224 (45.6%)	137 (27.9%)	60 (12.2%)	491 (100)
Learners are not punctual in class with the result teaching is affected.	131 (26.6%)	174 (35.3%)	96 (19.5%)	92 (18.7%)	493 (100)
Damage to and stealing school property has risen, thus depleting resources.	54 (11.0%)	159 (32.4%)	173 (35.2%)	105 (21.4%)	491 (100)
Learners fight among themselves regularly	84 (17.1%)	216 (44.0%)	135 (27.5%)	56 (11.4%)	491 (100)
Students fight and swear at teachers demotivating them.	102 (20.7%)	201 (40.9%)	138 (28.0%)	51 (10.4%)	492 (100)
Disobedience among learners is on the increase, this affects the T/L process.	47 (9.6%)	134 (27.5%)	221 (45.3%)	86 (17.6%)	488 (100)
Smoking and drinking among learners have increased	148 (30%)	190 (38.5%)	86 (17.4%)	69 (14.0%)	493 (100)
There has been increase in overall learner absenteeism	34 (6.9%)	127 (25.9%)	161 (32.8%)	169 (34.4%)	491 (100)
The handling and use of banned substance on school premises have increased and this affects overall performance.	78 (16.0%)	228 (46.6%)	81 (16.6%)	102 (20.9%)	489 (100)
Sexual abuses have shown an increase among learners.	44 (9.0%)	186 (38.0%)	144 (29.4%)	115 (23.5%)	489 (100)
Incidents of pregnancy among learners have shown an increase which affects the learning process.	164 (33.5%)	187 (38.2%)	98 (20.0%)	41 (8.4%)	490 (100)

cess. They were asked to rate each item on a scale of 1 to 4 (1: Strongly Agree, 2: Agree, 3: Disagree, 4: Strongly Disagree).

The analysis indicates that the majority (73%) of the respondents display a negative attitude to writing class tests on a regular basis, while sixty percent agreed that students have less respect for educators, which leads to poor teaching. 61.9 percent of the candidates believed that learners are not punctual and this has a negative effect on teaching. A large percentage of respondents at seventy percent asserted that students stole more property since physical punishment was outlawed and 29.6 percent to the contrary. The majority of participants at sixty-one percent accepted that students fought among themselves since the abolition of physical punishment. A large number of respondents at 61.1 percent maintained that learners swore at teachers and this affected teaching, while thirty-eight percent indicated to the contrary. Only 37.1 percent of the respondents asserted that disobedience is on the increase. The majority sixty-eight percent noted that more alcoholic drinks were consumed at schools since the banning of corporal punishment, however, only thirty-three percent accepted that learners play truant or stay away from schools on a regular basis. A large number of participants (63%) believed that students do drugs more often since the abolition of physical punishment, while forty-seven percent thought that students commit sexual offences regularly. A large portion of the respondents (71%) suggested that female learners fall pregnant more regularly since the abolition of corporal punishment, thus affecting the teaching/learning process.

Relationship between Abolishing of Corporal Punishment and Misdemeanors

Based on the findings of the study, it is evident that the abolition of corporal punishment played a role in the increase of learner misdemeanors such as drinking, smoking, disrespect for teachers and truancy at schools. However, the chi-squared test applied to the findings indicates that no significant relationship exists between the abolition of corporal punishment and increased misdemeanors. Consequently, there was no need to reject the null hypothesis, and this suggests that there was no significant relationship between the abolition of corporal pun-

ishment and the increase in misdemeanors such as substance abuse, disrespect for teachers, increase in pregnancy and truancy (see Table 4).

Although the data, taken at face value, showed that the abolition of physical punishment did have an effect on misconduct, the chi-squared test applied to the data indicated that no significant relationship existed between the abolition of corporal punishment and increased misdemeanors, hence the failure to reject the null hypothesis. As the Pearson chi-square (P value) values were 0.280 and 0.474 > than 0.05 (significant point) (Table 4), the null hypothesis could not be rejected. Acceptance of the null hypothesis implied that the abolition of corporal punishment did not play a major role in increased misdemeanors and the teaching/learning process though the literature survey indicates to the contrary.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from the theory as expounded above in the conceptual-theoretical framework, which seems to suggest that learner misconduct might have escalated since the abolition of corporal punishment in schools. This was corroborated by Masitsa's study (2008) in which it was found that learners were not sufficiently disciplined, and among others, they were guilty of stealing other learners' property, vandalizing school property, fighting amongst themselves and also stealing school property. All this constitutes serious misdemeanors, and according to the Department of Education's guidelines on school discipline, disciplinary measures for such misconduct should be applied (Maphosa and Shumba 2010). These measures should exclude corporal punishment, as it has been outlawed in South Africa. Despite this ban, the number of cases relating to physical punishment has increased drastically. The South African Council of Educators (SACE) received 245 reports of corporal punishment against educators in 2014-2015 as compared to the 202 cases in 2013-2014 (The New Age 2015).

However, the empirical data in the study were cross tabulated, and no significant relationship was found between the abolition of corporal punishment in schools and the increase in misdemeanors such as drinking, smoking, disrespect for teachers and truancy. Whereas the theoretical analysis of this study seems to suggest an

Table 4: Chi-squared tests

a.

	<i>Value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</i>	<i>Exact Sig. (2-sided)</i>	<i>Exact Sig. (1-sided)</i>
Pearson Chi-square	1.169 ^a	1	.280		
Continuity correction ^b	.354	1	.552		
Likelihood ratio	1.197	1	.274		
Fisher's Exact Test				.367	.278
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.104	1	.293		
N of Valid Cases	18				

3 cells (75.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.11.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

<i>Chi-squared tests</i>					
	<i>Value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</i>	<i>Exact Sig. (2-sided)</i>	<i>Exact Sig. (1-sided)</i>
Pearson Chi-Square	.513 ^a	1	.474		
Continuity Correction ^b	.049	1	.826		
Likelihood Ratio	.523	1	.470		
Fisher's Exact Test				.637	.417
Linear-by-Linear Association	.485	1	.486		
N of Valid Cases	18				

a. 3 cells (75.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.72.

increase in misdemeanors due to the absence of corporal punishment, the chi-squared test applied to the findings suggests that no significant relationship exists between abolition of physical punishment and bad behavior. Thus it would be unnecessary to use harsh physical punishment, as it does not improve the learners' in school behavior or academic performance (Hickmon 2010).

The interviews conducted in this study with various respondents, showed that the reason for ineffectiveness of corporal punishment could be attributed to the teachers' apprehension in view of the abolishment of corporal punishment by Section 10 of the South African Schools Act of 1996, in terms of which the infliction of bodily punishment became a criminal offence. Grinstein and Kronrod (2016) confirm that the use of praise, scolding and an assertive tone can encourage desired behavior. Oosthuizen (2007) conducted a study on methods for dealing with misdemeanors in the Kenneth Kaunda region of the North West Province of South Africa, and found that teachers in that region regarded corporal punishment as a rather ineffective way of dealing with learner misconduct and misbehavior. It would therefore be prudent for teachers to seri-

ously consider alternative interaction techniques of disciplining the learner such as giving them advice and curtailing their allowance and perks (Shaikhmag and Assan 2014).

CONCLUSION

The chi-squared test applied to the analyzed data confirmed that no real connection existed between the abolishment of corporal punishment and increase in student misconduct (Table 4). The study showed that teachers and principals were not too keen on using corporal punishment as a means of restoring good behavior. This is understandable in view of the fact that international studies have linked corporal punishment to increases in aggression, more disruptive behavior in classrooms, vandalism, lower academic achievement, poor attention span, school phobia, depression and even retaliation against teachers, and also in view of the abolishment of corporal punishment by South African legislation. In view of this, it is suggested that educators and the Department of Education apply their minds to the problem of replacing corporal punishment with disciplinary measures that will be pedagogically justifiable such

as giving learners good advice and asking parents to curtail their allowance and perks. Research has shown that using the positive approach to ill discipline has a more pleasant impact on the teaching/learning environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings and empirical evidence, it would be in the best interest of learning if teachers consider alternate ways of bringing about discipline. Providing alternative techniques to teachers can contribute to better understanding of the learners. The use of such techniques brought about affirmative results. It is suggested that a need exists to support and strengthen current efforts to increase basic levels of good management, school effectiveness and educator professionalism in learning institutions. This may help reduce violence and indiscipline.

NOTE

*1 Copy of the questionnaire is available from the authors.

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