Is Punishment (Corporal or Verbal) an Effective means of Discipline in Schools? : Case Study of Two Basic Schools in Greater Khartoum/Sudan

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The study reported on, in this paper sought to investigate on the issue of corporal and verbal punishment as means of disciplining pupils’ behavior in basic schools in Sudan. The practice of corporal punishment in schools is an indication of the absence of meaningful access to quality education that all nations worldwide are aiming to achieve by the year 2015. Moreover, punishment is against children rights that are well considered in the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) which is ratified by government of Sudan. The main focus of the current study is on the reasons that led some teachers’ support and use corporal punishment in basic schools in Khartoum state, Sudan though they are aware of its prohibition as it was spelt in the country’s education policy. Pupils’ opinions and perceptions about the use of punishment in schools are also looked into. The data for this study was collected by adopting qualitative research design. The study was conducted in two basic schools in Khartoum state (one governmental and one private school) from which ten teachers were selected and interviewed in addition to a group discussion held with ten pupils in grades seven and eight. The study findings revealed the facts that some teachers knew that punishment has negative impact on pupils’ behaviour and personality but there are no other alternatives they could follow: other teachers believed that they punish their pupils due to the stress and frustration they experience. The school environment is poor and lacking all facilities that might be useful for modeling pupils’ behavior and absorbing the unwanted behaviors. Pupils on the other hand see no justification for their teachers to hit, kick, slap or call them with bad names. Some of the pupils mentioned that they have developed sense and feelings of fear, frustration, aggression, low self-esteem, low confidence and lacked motivation for learning as result of the continuous punishment. The study concluded by stressing the issue that a meaningful access to quality education is one that strengthens the promotion of children psychological well being and competencies. The practice of punishment (physical or verbal) on pupils in schools is a reflection of poor teaching and discipline.

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1. Introduction

School environment should be conducive for learning and is meant to be a clean, healthy, attractive, safe and emotionally supportive place where children are socialized, well guided and educated. Furthermore, schools are more than simply physical places of teaching subjects of knowledge or practicing skills; they are of the same great value as that of homes. In schools teachers and educators play the roles of supporting and guiding the learners to develop their potentials. Children enroll in basic schools at critical stages (age six years to thirteen years old) of their personality development, accordingly any harm (physically, verbally or emotionally) cause to them will negatively impact their self esteem and psychological well being.

Schools’ administrators and educators believe that discipline is needed in schools if the aim is to produce well educated and disciplined pupils. According to this argument discipline is necessary to provide obedience to school rules and correcting pupils misbehaviors. This is why many believers of punishment in school find a link between corporal punishment as a means of managing pupils’ problems on one hand and school’s discipline on the other hand (Brown, 2009). In this regard many theorists attempted to define school discipline and punishment, for instance, Rosen (1997), Eggleton (2001) and Cameron (2006) defined school discipline as a branch of knowledge-training that develops self control, character, efficiency to enforce obedience and compliance to school authority and rules and in this context corporal punishment is used by some teachers to cause physical pain on the learners to correct their misbehaviors and maintain school discipline.

From a psychological point of view Skinner (1968) who was one of the famous behavioral learning theorists’ defined punishments as unpleasant and painful events (stimuli) if administered after the occurrence of certain behavior will decrease the likelihood of that behavior to occur again. According to Skinner punishment takes different forms and types, however, Skinner does not advise the use of punishment as a technique of controlling/correcting unwanted behaviors as it causes harm on the person being punished and produces negative emotions and future behavioral problems. For Skinner rewards are found to be practically more effective than punishment in enforcing and strengthening positive behaviors and emotions among the young learners, hence their applications in learning are essential.

2. Impact of punishment on children behavior

In spite of the adverse side effects of punishment, some teachers and school administrators resort to administer corporal and verbal punishment to correct children misbehaviors in most parts of the world, however the argument that could be raised here is that, even if punishment produces immediate results as obedience when teachers are present, it does not guarantee the sustainability of this obedience behavior when the teachers are not present. Furthermore, corporal punishment on its own does not teach children what is right from wrong and sometimes creates more complications.

Many studies reported on the negative impacts of punishment on children behaviors and emotions. For instance, Agbenyega (2006) study results indicated that majority of the teachers (where the study was conducted in Ghana)
administer corporal punishment to students who perform poorly in academic work. What is threatening here as raised by Agbenyega is that students with special learning needs/problems and not identified might be punished for their poor performance. Robinson et al (2005) study results summarized the side effects of corporal punishment in running away, fear of teacher, feelings of helplessness, humiliation, aggression and destruction at home and school, abuse and criminal activities. In the same line, Gershoff (2002) argued that the more harshly a child was hit, the more likely he/she is to be aggressive or to have mental health problems. In her study Gershoff found a link between spanking practiced by parents on their children and 10 negative behaviors including aggression, antisocial behavior and mental health problems. The only one positive result identified by Gershoff was the quick compliance with parental demands.

Considering the side effects of punishment and its harmful consequences on children behaviors and future life, child psychologists, educational psychologists and behavioral learning theorists emphasized the importance of examining children/pupils behavioral problems and solving them through the positive support and procedures rather than using punishment as tools for discipline in schools (Travers et al, 1993). Kilimci (2009) conducted study in Adana, Turkey; in this study he reported that "children are the victims of corporal punishment at elementary schools. The study's observations and the interviews proved that children's rights were abused"(p: 242). Kilimic's findings confirmed with the previously mentioned results.

All the researchers and theorists' arguments discussed above emphasized the point that punishment (verbal/corporal) in schools causes harm and produces negative side effects on learners' behavior and self-esteem. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) were the most outstanding international documents advocating for human/children rights protection. The development of human potentials (through proper education and training), child protection, prohibition of discrimination, exploitation and abuse, right to survival and human dignity are well spelt in these UN documents. Moreover, these Rights Conventions set principles for global acknowledgement and commitment for human respect and protection.

Moreover, the global concerns on Education for All (EFA) in 1990 and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) in the 2000 have stressed the issue of providing children with meaning full quality education that promotes their future well beings. Corporal/verbal punishment is an indication of poor quality education as it damages the behaviour and personality of the learners. Sudan government prohibited punishment in schools and this is well spelt in the country education policies. However, some basic schools teachers still support the use of punishment in controlling learners' misbehaviours, therefore, comes the importance of this study in trying to investigate and report on such issue by looking into both teachers and pupils' perceptions, insights and feelings about the use and effectiveness of punishment in schools so a better understanding and solution to the problem will be suggested. How these perceptions/insights are investigated and analyzed is described in the coming section.
3. Research methods and context

Data for this study were collected by adopting qualitative research strategy using semi-structured interview and focus group discussions. The choice of the qualitative design for the study allowed the researcher to deepen her understanding of why and under what circumstances do some basic schools teachers opt to use the techniques of punishment (verbal or corporal) in controlling pupils' misbehaviors and maintaining discipline in classrooms and schools. Furthermore, the understanding of how do pupils react and feel about this punishment is also investigated through this qualitative research design. Therefore, the focus of the researcher in this study centered around hearing the voices of both teachers and pupils, hence comes the suitability of qualitative research as argued by Bryman (2008) "qualitative research is a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in collection and analysis of data" (p. 266).

The area of this study is Khartoum state, Omdurman province, Sudan. Two co-educational basic schools (governmental and private school) were chosen for the study and the sample consisted of 10 male and female teachers (five from each school) and 10 male and female pupils (five from each school as well) in grade seven & eight within the age of 12 and 13 years old. Teachers (six males and four females) and pupils (five males and five females) were selected randomly and all of them voluntarily agreed to participate in the study after informing them about its purpose and the confidentiality of the responses they give.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used as main instruments for collecting the data that was done in Jan/Feb 2012. The choice for these instruments were based on what Kalve (2009) has pointed that; through interview's conversations about what people are saying researchers get to know them, understand their world, learn about their experiences, perceptions and feelings which enrich the research undertaken and make knowledge generated from it more solid and trustworthy. The teachers were interviewed while focus group discussions were held with the pupils. The questions of the interviews and discussions were based on issues such as: Why do teachers adopt and support the techniques of punishment as means of discipline in schools? Are they aware of its consequences on pupils' emotions and psychological well beings? What other alternatives teachers could use to maintain discipline in schools? How do pupils on the other hand feel of the corporal and verbal punishment? Do they think/believe in punishment effectiveness as means of discipline in schools? Then these teachers' and pupils' responses were analyzed and discussed in the next section.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section of the paper focuses on presenting and discussing the findings of the data that had been collected from the teachers and pupils. The collected data was first translated from Arabic to English, then transcribed and categorized into main themes that could answer the research questions and the following issues were emerged.

Teachers' responses about the use of corporal and verbal punishment in schools

The interview questions directed to teachers focused on a) teachers' knowledge of punishment, its purposes and types, b) rationale for using punishment as technique of discipline in schools, c) other alternatives of correcting pupils' misbehaviors.

a) Teachers' knowledge of punishment:

Most of the interviewed teachers in both schools agreed on the fact that punishment could be physical or verbal and it is meant to correct pupils' misbehaviors and maintain discipline in classrooms and schools. One of the teacher (a female teacher from the private school) mentioned that "sometimes, I punish my pupils as this will make them
obedient and ready to do their assigned exercises in time” (Mahasin, interviewed in Jan 2012). Another male teacher (from the governmental school) confirmed this by indicating that pupils in grades seven and eight are adolescents and behave in tough ways towards each other in the school yard and in classes, most teachers complain about their irritating misbehaviors, noise and disobedience, therefore in such situations some teachers hit and beat using sticks and whips to maintain school discipline. This finding goes in line with the results of Brown's study (2009) in which it was found that majority of the teachers surveyed indicated that student misconduct and lack of respect for teachers are big problems in Korea, this why there is a support among those teachers for the use of corporal punishment at the middle school levels. Again the current study finding also confirms with Feinstein & Mwahombela (2010) study where it was found that majority of the teachers in Tanzania supported the use of punishment in Secondary Schools but with moderation. However, what is not clear for those teachers is that "discipline and correcting pupils' misbehaviors do not necessarily have to involve corporal punishment" as argued by Kilimici (2009, p: 242).

A male teacher (private school) does not like to hit his pupils instead he said

I use verbal words such as: today am angry with you, am not happy with the way you behaved, is not a friend of you. I found using these kinds of words more effective than the beating, hitting, kicking or slapping children (Ahmed interviewed in Feb 2012).

b) Rationale for using punishment as a discipline technique in schools

The interviewed teachers maintained that punishment produces immediate change in the learners' behavior and help the teacher to control the class. But at the same times the interviewed teachers have observed that, this change produced through punishment are a temporary change and the punished pupils especially boys most of the times return back to the unwanted behavior. Moreover, some punished pupils become more aggressive and violent with their peers while girls if punished tend to cry, become frightened and isolate themselves from their mates for some times. These findings confirmed with what is argued by the child psychologists, educational psychologists, behavioral learning theorists, rights activists and researchers that corporal punishment side effects (long term harm) on children behavior and self-esteem is exceeding its positive effectiveness in correcting the misbehaviors (short term obedience) (Skinner, (1968), Gershoff (2002), Robinson et al (2005), Agbenyega (2006) and Kilimici (2009)). Therefore, why do majority of the interviewed teachers punish their pupils? Among the answers they gave is the poor academic performance of the pupils, the poor and stressful school environment: shortage of textbooks and teaching aids, no drinking water, no latrines, overcrowded classes with limited number of teachers, absence of extracurricular activities and playing grounds, the difficult situation of the teachers in terms of low salaries (governmental schools in particular) and absence of in service training. These factors produce stress and frustration on teachers and when teachers are frustrated and stressed, they do not think of applying other alternatives to make their teaching more effective and productive, punishment is the easiest way for them, and so they resort to use it as means of discipline.

c) Other alternatives of maintaining discipline in school

Some of the interviewed teachers (private school) said that they rarely use physical punishment in their classes. They tend to use other alternatives and found their effectiveness in correcting pupils' misbehavior. One of the male teachers mentioned in this regard:

When a pupil fails to do his/her homework or misbehaves in the class, I ask him/her not to go for the break and stay inside the class to write and complete the homework, I found this (doing the homework and the prevention from enjoying the break) to have positive impact on the pupils and does not create sense of fear, aggression, hatred and isolation in the learner (Ali, interviewed in Jan 2012).

A female teacher (governmental school) went further and maintained that;
when a pupil does something wrong, I usually ask him/her to do something for the class, this could be cleaning the black board for a week, taking the exercises books to the office, creating a social event like organizing a conversation session in the class where pupils participate telling stories or jokes, etc…. and I found this method very useful (Mona, Interviewed in Jan 2012).

Among the other alternatives that could be used to maintain discipline some teachers mentioned the followings; "ask the pupil to leave the class, ask the pupil to do more homework, to stand at the back of the class and let him/her think of how to improve his/her behaviour". However, again teachers raised the issue of these alternatives' effectiveness with difficult to control pupils? Busienei's study (2012) concluded with the same finding of teachers' belief about the effectiveness of other alternatives compared to corporal punishment. Extracurricular activities could be one of the ways to absorb children misbehaviors as mentioned by some interviewed teachers in this current study, however, due to the current difficult situations in schools in Sudan, the required tools for these activities are lacking, hence comes the issue of what to do to maintain discipline in schools of very poor unattractive school environment?

Pupils' reactions and feelings about punishment (corporal/verbal) in schools

Pupils raised very interesting issues during the focus group discussion, for instance, they mentioned that, the physical punishment is still used as means of discipline in their schools. Most of them have been beaten with whip (the Sudanese one as they call it) which is very painful, sometimes causes bleeding and injuries. Other tools used include sticks and hand for slapping or pulling hair. The reasons for such physical punishment vary as indicated by the pupils, it might be because of not doing the homework, making noise in the class, misbehaving in the school yard during the breaks, conflict with peers, academic failure, not wearing the uniform, nail polish for girls, coming late to school, failing to pay the fees, in addition to other reasons.

Furthermore, some teachers use verbal words to correct misbehaviors in classes as one of the pupils (from the private school) said: "we pupils always hear words such as donkey, stupid, goat, and ugly from some of our teachers in the school"(Ahmed, focus group discussion, Feb 2012). Another female pupil from the governmental school agreed on this and maintained that " among the words that I usually hear from my teacher are ugly, stupid, hopeless and careless girl, you will be nothing in the future" (Marwa, focus group discussion, Feb 2012). A male pupil from the same school agreed with his school mate and added "some teachers call us street children, dirty and you have no parents to behave you" (Ali, focus group discussion, Feb 2012).

The reactions of the pupils as a result of the punishment (physical and verbal) include lack of concentration during the lesson, difficulty in reading, writing, solving mathematical questions, escaping from the school. The pupils mentioned different types of feelings that they developed when punished like feeling angry, hatred to the lesson and the teacher, sad, inferior, aggressive and violent. Girls feel upset, frightened from the teacher, isolated, inferior, dislike to the subject and the teacher, less confident and hesitant to take initiatives to answer questions asked by teachers. One of the female pupils (governmental school) confirmed these mentioned negative feelings by saying that "I feel frightened and hesitant when the teacher ask me to read loudly to the class, I hate the shouting makes by her when I fail to pronounce words correctly" (Manal, focus group discussion, Feb 2012).

Moreover, the pupils were asked if the physical punishment is more harmful than the verbal ones, surprisingly, they agreed that both kinds of punishments are of same harm and pain to them. The physical pain of beating with whip and stick is same as psychological feeling of inferiority, humiliation and belittling resulted from hearing insulting words that mentioned before.

The pupils concluded their discussion by stressing the idea that punishment did not maintain discipline and success in school, what really have impact is the way of teaching and delivering the lessons, continuous guidance and support, the way of interaction in the school yard and the mutual respect between the teachers and the pupils. The points raised by the pupils in this study confirmed with the previous researches and the arguments raised by most child psychologists, researchers and theorists that punishment long term impact on children future behavior and self-esteem is exceeding its immediate impact in maintaining discipline and correcting learners' misbehaviors.
5. Conclusion

The discussion in this paper shows that punishment (corporal and verbal) is still supported and used as means of maintaining discipline in some basic schools in Sudan. Some of the interviewed teachers knew its negative impact on pupils' behaviors but for them no other means are as influential as punishment due to the difficulty they face in dealing with pupils of grades seven and eight. The poor unattractive school environment and the overpopulated classes (especially in the governmental school) make it difficult for the teachers to apply other alternatives of maintaining discipline.

Pupils on the other hand maintained that, they had developed senses of humiliation, inferiority, anxiety, fear, upset, anger, aggression, frustration, low self-esteem, low confidence and poor concentration in classes when punished. For those pupils punishment is against their humanity, dignity and impacting their future wellbeing, hence it should be avoided.

Both opinions (teachers and pupils) raise an important issue for education authority in Sudan. There should be a practical mechanism to follow the practice of education policies (the prohibition of punishment in schools is one of them) in schools. There should be legal actions against the teachers and schools where punishment is practiced. Children should be made aware of their rights and their shared responsibility in contributing to maintain discipline in schools. Government should invest more and more on improving the school environments and teachers' working conditions. The training of the teachers to raise their knowledge on making their teaching effective and attractive through the use of other alternative discipline styles is an urgent issue. Knowing how to plan and start the lessons in time and applying reinforcement techniques are more influential than punishment in correcting pupils' misbehaviors and running the classrooms and school smoothly if followed by teachers. Providing schools with counselors will also help teachers in counseling and guiding pupils with problems.

Finally, unless more keen efforts are taken to make education offered to pupils (in these two schools and other schools) where punishment is practiced more effective, education will not be a meaningful quality education and the controversy on the support and use of corporal/verbal punishment will still remain.

Notes

1 All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. They have been used to maintain the anonymity of the respondents.

References


