

## **REFLECTING ON THE USE OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLS: AN ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS APPROACH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The abolishment of corporal punishment is facing resistance in different institutions in Zimbabwe. This research was conducted to establish factors that militate against effective implementation of the ban on corporal punishment schools at Jerera growth point in Zaka district of Masvingo province in Zimbabwe with the aim of finding strategies that can be used to make the ban a success. The study used the qualitative case study design to gather data from five teachers, five children and five parents. Teachers were randomly selected and parents were selected using stratified random sampling in order include both parents with a standard of education above Ordinary level and below Ordinary level. The study revealed that teachers held on to the use of corporal punishment mainly because of fear of indiscipline in children, lack knowledge of alternative ways of discipline, that punishment is cultural tool for discipline. Based on the participants' responses it was suggested that a holistic approach guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory be used to effectively eradicate corporal punishment.*

**Keywords:** corporal punishment/physical punishment

### **BACKGROUND**

The use of corporal punishment has for long been a cause for concern to people both in and out of the education sector. The negative effects of its use as a strategy to discipline pupils are well documented. A meta-analysis of 12 studies found that corporal punishment is significantly associated with a decrease in children's mental health, inclusive of behaviour disorders, depression and hopelessness (Gershoff 2002); suicide attempts, alcohol/drug dependency, low self-esteem, hostility and emotional instability (Fergusson and Lynskey 1997; de Zoysa 2008; Devore 2006).

Other negative effects of corporal punishment are that children who are sad, angry or anxious can hardly concentrate on assignments or play (which they need to develop their potential) as confirmed by Talwar, Carlson and Kang (2011). Their studies also reveal that children in schools which use corporal punishment perform significantly worse in tasks that involve executive functioning. Executive functioning refers to psychological processes such as planning, abstract thinking and delayed gratification. Also, since corporal punishment does not teach and explain how children's negative behaviour affects others, the development of their moral reasoning suffers stunted growth. They thus remain at the earliest stage (Obedience and punishment orientation stage) of Kohlberg's theory of moral development at which the child reasoning is based on the physical consequences of action (McLeod 2013). This kind of moral reasoning reduces empathy (Lopez et al 2001) and moral regulation (Kerr

etal 2004). In a nutshell, corporal punishment is detrimental to the cognitive, social, moral and emotional development of children.

Corporal punishment is also viewed as a violation of children's rights in several countries. It is against this backdrop that Zimbabwe, alongside other nations worldwide has sought to ban corporal punishment in schools. By virtue of its ratification of the Convention of the Rights of the Child(1989), Zimbabwe assumed the obligation to take appropriate legislative, administrative, social and education measures to protect the child from all forms of physical and mental violence. Zimbabwe subsequently partially embraced the convention by restricting the use of corporal punishment to boys. In an effort to comply with article 241 of the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act of 2004, and article 15 of the pre-2013 constitution as well as section 69(2) (4) of the Education Act (2004), corporal punishment was administered to boys in accordance with specified procedure.

Further developments on the issue of corporal punishment took place with the enacting of the new Zimbabwean constitution in 2013. The constitution protects the rights of all persons to respect for and protection of their human dignity and integrity, including the rights of freedom from all forms of violence from public or private sources and not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. This clause of the constitution means that corporal punishment is prohibited in all institutions of the country including the home, school and in execution of court judgement. According to the Zimbabwean constitution there is no longer gender discrimination with regard to corporal punishment. In abolishing physical punishment Zimbabwe measures up to internationally recognized standards and international instruments that it acceded to (Legal Resources Foundations 2014). Zimbabwe joined other countries like Kenya and The Republic of Congo which abolished corporal punishment in 2010 and South Africa in 1996 (ibid). By taking this position the Government of Zimbabwe has sparked a lot of debate on whether abolishing corporal punishment in schools is the right way to go. The fact that despite the provisions of the current constitution, corporal punishment is still being used in schools motivated this research.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The use of corporal punishment in schools was banned on the grounds that it was a violation of human rights and had negative effects on the development of children. Regardless of the constitutional provisions some teachers are still inclined towards using physical punishment as a form of 'discipline' in Zimbabwean schools. This worrisome state of affairs may be an indication that simply formulating policies and passing laws against corporal punishment is inadequate. There is need to find ways by which proper and effective discipline can be secured in schools as well as in every other institution without resorting to harmful corporal punishment.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Why do teachers continue to use corporal punishment in schools?
2. Are teachers and parents aware of the adverse effects of using corporal punishment?
3. Are teachers and parents aware of alternative forms of punishment that can be used in schools?

## THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

This study is informed by Bronfenbrenners's ecological systems theory. This theory enabled the researchers to understand the nature of the problem of corporal punishment in Zimbabwe and also helped to find possible solutions. The theory explains how everything in a child and the child's environment affects how the child grows and develops (Oswald, 2015). Of importance to note about this theory is that the child's development is not only affected by the ecological systems surrounding the child, but also by the child's individuality. This implies that what the child does and is, determine how the child's environment will respond to him or her. Bronfenbrenner (1979) refers to this state of affairs as *bi-directional influences*. This theory looks at a child's development within the context of the system of relationships that form his or her environment. The interaction between factors in the child's maturing biology, his immediate family/community environment and the societal landscape fuels and steers his development, (Oswald 2015). It is important to note that what an adult is today is a product of the influences of his or her ecological systems both as child and adult. It therefore must not escape our awareness that the way teachers and parents view the issue of corporal punishment is influenced by the ecological systems that nurtured them as they grew up.

Bronfenbrenner in Oswald (2015) identified four main layers of systems that are nested within each other, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exo-system and macro-system. Therefore, to study the child's development we need to look not only at the child and her immediate environment, but at the interaction of the larger environment as well. The microsystem is the immediate environment the child lives in. It includes the family, school or day care centers, peers and church. These groups or organizations' interactions with the child influence the child's development either positively or negatively. Since the influence between the child and the systems is bidirectional it is important to note that how the child acts and reacts to the use of corporal punishment from people in the Microsystems will affect how they treat them in return.

The mesosystem, which is the second closest to the child describes how the different parts of the microsystem work together for the sake of the child (ibid). For example, interactions between the school and the family affect the child, therefore how the child lives in the home will affect the child's behaviour at school and vice versa. This research examined interaction between the parts of the microsystem, that is, the school and the family vis-à-vis the issue corporal punishment.

The next level is the exosystem which includes other people and institutions. that the child has no direct interaction with but still have an influence on the child's development, such as parents' work place, extended family members and the neighborhood. The structures in this layer impact the child's development by interacting with some structure in her microsystem (Berk, 2000)

The last level is the macrosystem which is quite remote to the child but still has great influence on the child. This level includes relative freedoms permitted by the national government, cultural values, the economy and wars to mention a few. This means that policies made by the government, in this case on the issue of punishment, influence other systems through the ripple effect.

## METHODOLOGY

The research adopted the qualitative case study approach to gain insight into why corporal punishment continues to be administered on pupils despite its ban and what strategies could be employed for its effective abolition. The case study was utilized because it is a qualitative research method used to examine contemporary real life situations and 'provides the basis for

application of ideas and extension of methods' (Magwa and Magwa 2015). The phenomenon of continued use of corporal punishment in schools needed "an in-depth investigation" which is consistent with the case study design.

The population of this study was constituted by school teachers, parents and school children from five schools around Jerera growth point in Zaka District of Masvingo province in Zimbabwe.

The sample drawn from the population was fifteen in total. This comprised five (5) teachers, five (5) pupils and five (5) parents. In this research the participants were chosen using stratified random sampling in the case of parents in order to represent two levels of education, that is, those with Ordinary level and above and those who had lower than Ordinary level standard of education. The information on the level of education of the parents was drawn from teachers' record books. Children of parents selected automatically became participants. Teachers were randomly selected.

This study used the interview to gather data. This data gathering technique was a powerful means of obtaining information and gaining insights into peoples' behaviors, beliefs and attitudes (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000; Gray 2004). Semi-structured interviews permitted the researchers to generate key themes, issues and questions to be covered (Corbetta 2003). David and Sutton in Magwa and Magwa (2015) assert that the advantage of having key themes and sub questions in advance lies in giving the researcher a sense of order from which to draw questions for unplanned encounters.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The main purpose of the study was to establish why teachers are still inclined to use corporal punishment despite its ban. Data were presented in descriptive form under following sub themes.

- i. Use of corporal punishment.
- ii. Awareness on ban on corporal punishment in the schools.
- iii. Reasons for continued use of corporal punishment.
- iv. Strategies for eradicating corporal punishment.

### **Use of Corporal Punishment**

All teachers and children admitted that corporal punishment was still being used in the schools. This confirms that corporal punishment was still being used in the schools in spite of the ban. Only two (40%) out of five parents said that they did not use corporal punishment on their children at home. These happened to be those whose education level was above Ordinary level. This suggests that these parents were well aware of the negative effects of physical punishment. The children of the parents with an education above Ordinary level said that their parents never administered corporal punishment on them. This agrees with what their parents said. It reflects the truthfulness of the responses given by the research participants. 60% of the children affirmed they were beaten both at school and at home. These results confirm the observations made by The Human Rights Watch (2014) that each year thousands of students are subjected to corporal punishment despite the many forms of harm associated with it. According to Ecological Systems Theory, interactions between the child and the microsystems that form his immediate environment have direct influence on the child's development (Paquette and Ryan 2001). This means that both teachers and parents are stifling their children's development through corporal punishment which has been proven to have negative effects on child development.

### **Awareness of the Ban on Corporal Punishment**

All teachers and parents were asked if they were aware of the ban on corporal punishment. 100% of the teachers responded that they were aware. The fact that all teachers were aware of the ban yet still used corporal punishment indicates that there is a problem that needs to be attended to. Of the five parents who were interviewed 60% indicated that they were aware of the ban while 40% confessed ignorance of the ban. The parents with above Ordinary level education constituted those who were aware of the ban. This indicates that they were abreast of developments in the country while 40% of the parents who confessed ignorance may need education on the issue.

### **Why Teachers Hold on to the Use of Punishment**

The following are the main responses given by teachers to explain why they still use corporal punishment;

- i. Children become undisciplined without corporal punishment.
- ii. Beating is the language pupils understand because they are beaten at home.
- iii. Some parents encourage teachers to beat children because they say that if we do not beat them they do not work hard. Some parents even ask us to beat their children for misbehaving at home.
- iv. It is the fastest way to restore order and make pupils behave.
- v. Disciplining children through corporal punishment is part of our culture, so doing away with it renders us powerless as authority figures. We were also beaten by our parents and teachers.

The statement that children become undisciplined if corporal punishment is not used suggests that some teachers lack alternative strategies to use in bringing about discipline in children, hence they resort to the easiest and 'quickest' way, disregarding the harmful effects of corporal punishment mentioned earlier on. On further probing, teachers indicated that they had to beat the children repeatedly for the same unwanted behaviour. This may mean that corporal punishment is ineffective. This agrees with Smith (2006) and Gershoff (2002;2008) who note that corporal punishment is ineffective in that it only stops behaviour immediately but does not necessarily stop children from doing the same thing in future. Gershoff, (2008) goes on to say that corporal punishment does not teach right from wrong. In addition, Smith (2006) says discipline involves teaching children the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, and it makes them aware of the values and actions that are acceptable in their family and society. This shows the inadequacy of corporal punishment as a way of discipline, hence the need to educate teachers and parents on alternative ways to achieve discipline. It is important to note that the issue of children being undisciplined can be traced back to the use of corporal punishment that does not teach children right from wrong. It can thus be said that the use of corporal punishment is among the major factors that perpetuate indiscipline in children.

Another statement that is quite expressive is that, 'corporal punishment is the language that the children understand because they are beaten at home'. This means that what is done at school is only a continuation of what is practiced at home since the school and the home share the same culture. Trying to ban punishment in the school only and not the home creates a discord that makes it difficult to nurture children in a positive way. It therefore implies that the family and the school should follow the same practices for the abolishment of punishment to be effective in the schools.



The fact that some parents encourage teachers to hit children and even go to the extent of bringing their children to be disciplined for offences committed at home reveals the reality that corporal punishment is normative in Zimbabwean culture and tradition. This lines up with Stantrock's (2006) observation that most parents learn parenting practices from their own parents. Corporal punishment is one of the parenting practices that has been passed on to the present generation. As such, even with the law in place, it is difficult to abruptly stop the entrenched practice of using corporal punishment both in the home and school. This situation is aptly described by the saying, 'old habits die hard'. In view of this, the issue of the abolishment of corporal punishment cannot be solved at school (microsystem) level exclusive of other larger systems in which the microsystem is nested. There is need to take a holistic approach in trying to make the abolishment of physical punishment effective in all relevant institutions, the school in particular.

### **Strategies for Eradication of Corporal Punishment**

The findings discussed above provide a guide as to which strategies can be used to effectively eradicate corporal punishment in schools.

- i. Both parents and teachers need education on the harmful effects of corporal punishment on children's development. This helps both parents and teachers to let go of cultural practices that are detrimental to children's development and begin to appreciate the need for the abolishment of corporal punishment.
- ii. Since teachers and parents are influenced by societal norms and values it is also important for society at large to be made cognisant of the effects of punishment.
- iii. At the exosystem level the different ministries should develop support programs to assist teachers and parents in developing alternative methods of disciplining children.
- iv. Laws and policies on corporal punishment enacted at macrosystems level need to be explained at all levels of the systems that surround the child including the children themselves.

### **CONCLUSION**

It has been established that corporal punishment on children is still being used as a form of discipline in spite of its ban through The Zimbabwean Constitution of 2013. Several human rights organizations agitated for this ban citing the violent nature of corporal punishment and that it is a violation of rights. In view of this problem a holistic approach that searches for factors militating against and strategies that can be used for elimination of physical punishment can utilize Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Along with passing laws and policies against the use of corporal punishment the Zimbabwean government needs mechanisms of educating all levels of the systems that surround that the child on the adverse effects of corporal punishment has on the child. Parents and teachers also need education on alternative strategies to teach child discipline without using corporal punishment. In short, Zimbabwe needs 'to rebuild the nest' (Bronfenbrenner 1990).

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