



The Impact of Corporal Punishment on Young Learners; a Primary School Teacher's Perspectives and awareness of the issue

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تأثير العقاب البدني على المتعلمين الصغار:

وجهات نظر معلمي المدارس الابتدائية ووعيهم بهذه القضية

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الملخص:

يُعد العقاب البدني قضية مستمرة منذ زمن طويل في المؤسسات التعليمية، حيث يلجأ العديد من المعلمين والإداريين إلى استخدام الأساليب الجسدية كوسيلة لإدارة الصنوف الدراسية. ومع ذلك، يشير العديد من الباحثين إلى أن للعقاب البدني آثاراً خطيرة وطويلة الأمد على المتعلمين الصغار. كما تُظهر الأبحاث أن التعرض للعنف في المدارس يمكن أن يؤثر سلباً على الأداء الأكاديمي للطلبة، وصحتهم النفسية، ومستقبلهم، ورفاههم العام.

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى مراجعة الأدبيات المتعلقة بتأثير العقاب البدني على التحصيل الدراسي للطلاب، واستكشاف آثاره الأوسع على صحتهم الجسدية والانفعالية والنفسية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، سعت الدراسة إلى التعرف على آراء بعض معلمي المرحلة الابتدائية ومدى وعيهم بهذه الظاهرة، من خلال تحليل موضوعي لإجابات عدد من المعلمين باستخدام مقابلات شبه منظمة. وقد تم تفريغ البيانات وتحليلها بشكل منهجي.

أظهرت النتائج أن غالبية المعلمين يعارضون استخدام العقاب البدني، ويصفونه بأنه ضار وغير فعال. ومع ذلك، أقر بعض المشاركين بأن هناك تحديات نظمية وأعرافاً تقافية قد تدفع بعض المعلمين إلى اللجوء إليه. وعلى العموم، أشار معظم المعلمين إلى تبنيهم لأساليب بديلة إيجابية وبناءً تؤدي إلى بيئة مدرسية أكثر صحة ودعمًا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العقاب البدني، العنف، العاقب، الآثار.

Abstract:

Corporal punishment has been a long-standing issue in schools with many teachers and administrators adopt physical disciplines as a mean of classroom management. However, linguists argued that corporal punishment has severe and long lasting effects on young learners. Moreover, research suggests that exposure to violence in schools can have negative consequences on students academic performance, mental health, future, and overall wellbeing. The present study was an attempt to review the literature regarding the effects of corporal punishment on students' academic performance and to explore its broader impact on their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. In addition, aims to find out some primary school teachers' perspective and awareness of this phenomenon by thematically analyse responses of number of teachers throw semi-structured interview. The responses transcribed and analysed and the results showed that most teachers opposed corporal punishment and expressed its harmful and ineffective nature. However, there is recognition that systematic challenges and cultural issues could force some teachers into using it. Overall,



most teachers adopt positive and constructive alternatives that leads to healthier school climate.

Keywords: corporal punishment - violence - consequences - effects

Introduction

Corporal punishment in educational settings has been a deeply controversial and highly contested topic across multiple academic fields including psychology, education, and child development. Many researchers defined corporal punishment as the use of physical force intended to cause pain but not injury, to correct or control a child's behaviour (Gershoff, 2002). Schools in various regions still practice corporal punishment despite the increase of global advocacy for non-violent forms of discipline. While some proponents argue that it instills discipline and respect, a growing body of research has revealed its harmful and counterproductive effects.

General effects of corporal punishment

Over the past few decades, extensive studies have indicated that corporal punishment can significantly hinder students' academic achievement and overall well-being. The classroom environment, ideally a safe and nurturing space for learning, can be severely compromised by the use of physical punishment as a disciplinary strategy. Instead of promoting discipline, such practices often generate fear, anxiety, and resentment, which impair students' ability to concentrate and engage effectively in academic activities.

Beyond its educational implications, corporal punishment has also been linked to a wide range of physical, emotional, and psychological consequences. These include bodily injuries, increased aggression, depression, low self-esteem, and long-term mental health issues. This impact may more detrimental to young



learners, as they are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of violence and fear-based discipline during their early developmental stages.

Corporal punishment in the Libyan education system

Although the Libyan Ministry of Education has issued several decisions prohibiting the use of corporal punishment and all forms of violence against students — such as Decision No. 1013 of 2022, which clarified the use of alternative disciplinary methods like motivation, engagement, advice and guidance, and emphasized the role of social workers in monitoring student behaviour — many students in Libyan schools continue to be subjected to violence by principals, teachers, and even other school staff.

Despite the issuance of several educational policies and regulations prohibiting the use of corporal punishment in schools, many teachers continue to rely on it as a disciplinary measure. This persistent practice raises serious concerns about its physical, emotional, and psychological effects on pupils, particularly young learners, as well as the extent to which teachers are aware of such consequences and the availability of alternative methods for classroom management.

Aims and objectives of the study

The main aim of this study is to investigate the impact of corporal punishment on young learners and to examine teachers' awareness, perceptions, and disciplinary practices related to this phenomenon within primary schools.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Review relevant literature on the impact of corporal punishment on students' academic achievement, with particular focus on its physical, emotional, and psychological consequences.



2. Explore the level of awareness and perceptions off primary school teachers regarding the harmful effects of corporal punishment and their understanding of non-violent, alternative disciplinary strategies.
3. Identify whether teachers still resort to corporal punishment or instead employ alternative, positive methods to mange classroom behaviour.
4. Provide recommendations aimed at raising teachers' awareness and promoting the use of effective, non-violent approaches to discipline within the educational context.

Literature review:

Corporal punishment in educational settings has long been a topic of significant debate, particularly in relation to its effects on students' academic outcomes. While historically employed as a disciplinary method intended to correct misbehaviour, increasing evidence suggests that corporal punishment may have negative consequences on cognitive, emotional, and academic development (Gershoff, 2017). This literature review synthesizes research findings on the relationship between corporal punishment and student achievement, exploring the detrimental effects that physical disciplinary strategies can have on academic performance. Moreover, it aims to investigate its impact on the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of the young learners.

Corporal punishment is defined as the use of physical force with the intent to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, often for correcting behaviour (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). While banned in schools in many countries, corporal punishment remains legally or informally practiced in some regions, particularly in parts of Africa, Asia, and the southern United States (UNICEF, 2021). The persistence of corporal punishment underscores the importance of understanding its implications for educational outcomes.



In terms of theoretical framework, many theories support that negative effects can occur by corporal punishment in school environment. For instance, Social Learning Theory claims that children model behaviours they observe, including aggression, that young learners could acquire through corporal punishment (Bandura, 1977). Moreover, the theory of development suggests that punitive environments may undermine students' sense of security and motivation to engage in learning activities (Pianta & Hamre, 2009).

Corporal punishment and academic performance

Various studies associated corporal punishment to poor academic performance. Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of 75 studies and found regular associations between physical punishment and lower educational achievement. These findings led to increased anxiety, diminished school engagement, and damaged teacher-student relationships.

A longitudinal study conducted in India by Talwar, Carlson, and Lee (2011) established that children exposed to corporal punishment achieved lower on tests of executive function and school performance compared to their peers in non-punitive environments. In addition, Afifi et al (2017) revealed that children who experienced severe physical discipline were at a great risk for academic underachievement and lower literacy scores.

In addition, the emotional implications of corporal punishment further explain its impact on academic achievement. Research has shown that fear, stress, and feelings of humiliation resulting from physical punishment may impair memory retention and hinder concentration (Gershoff, 2017). These emotional states disrupt the optimal conditions necessary for learning, particularly in younger children who require emotional safety to thrive academically (Straus & Paschall, 2009).



What is more, corporal punishment also undermines the trust and rapport between teachers and students. According to Morrell (2001), students who are frequently exposed to physical punishment perceive school as a hostile environment, which may result in school avoidance, dropout, or disengagement. A constructive school climate, on the other hand, is significantly correlated with higher achievement and motivation (Thapa et al., 2013).

Research argued that non-violent disciplinary strategies, such as positive reinforcement, restorative practices, and socio-emotional learning yield to more positive academic outcomes (Bear, 2010). These methods promote self-regulation, increase engagement, and foster a supportive classroom climate conducive to academic success.

Physical Consequences

Corporal punishment poses direct physical risks to children, including bruises, injuries, and in extreme cases, permanent damage, or death. Studies have shown that physical discipline increases the risk of child abuse when boundaries between punishment and violence become blurred (Durrant & Ensom, 2012). In many cases, the physical harm inflicted goes beyond immediate pain and can lead to serious injuries, especially when objects are used or excessive force is applied (Gershoff, 2002).

Additionally, repeated exposure to physical punishment may lead to stress-related health issues. Research by Afifi et al. (2017) found that adults who experienced corporal punishment in childhood were more likely to suffer from physical health problems, such as cardiovascular issues, suggesting a link between early physical trauma and later health outcomes.

Emotional Consequences

Corporal punishment is associated with numerous adverse emotional outcomes in children. Frequent physical punishment has been linked to increased levels of



anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of helplessness (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Children subjected to physical discipline often perceive it as a sign of rejection, which can impair their emotional development and attachment to caregivers (Straus, 2001).

Furthermore, the emotional damage caused by corporal punishment may manifest in behavioural problems. Children punished physically are more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour, indicating that they may internalize violence as a legitimate response to conflict (Hecker et al., 2016).

Psychological Consequences

The psychological effects of corporal punishment are profound and long-lasting. Studies indicate that corporal punishment can impair cognitive development and executive functioning (MacKenzie, Nicklas, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2013). The fear and anxiety induced by physical discipline may hinder a child's ability to concentrate, learn, and perform well academically.

In addition, repeated corporal punishment may lead to psychological disorders. For instance, Afifi et al. (2012) found that individuals who experienced harsh physical punishment in childhood were more likely to suffer from mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse later in life. This correlation supports the assertion that corporal punishment undermines psychological resilience and increases vulnerability to mental health problems.

Moreover, corporal punishment can alter children's perception of authority and trust, leading to anti-social tendencies and difficulties in forming healthy interpersonal relationships (Gershoff, 2002).

Cultural and Societal Considerations

While some cultures continue to endorse corporal punishment as a traditional disciplinary method, evidence increasingly shows that such practices are not only harmful but also ineffective in the long term (UNICEF, 2014). International



bodies, including the United Nations, advocate for the global abolition of corporal punishment, citing human rights violations and the cumulative evidence of harm (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2021). In addition, Anwar et al (2021) argued that victims of school violence for mending their behaviour are more likely to behave badly in the future.

The reviewed literature provides compelling evidence that corporal punishment, though historically perceived as an effective disciplinary tool, has consistently been shown to produce detrimental outcomes across multiple domains of child development. Empirical studies demonstrate that physical disciplinary practices undermine academic achievement by fostering fear, anxiety, and disengagement, which disrupt students' motivation, concentration, and overall cognitive performance. Furthermore, the literature indicates that corporal punishment damages the teacher-student relationship, erodes trust, and cultivates a hostile learning environment that impedes emotional security and academic growth. Beyond its impact on learning outcomes, corporal punishment carries serious physical, emotional, and psychological repercussions. Research confirms that physical discipline can cause immediate bodily harm and long-term health complications, while also increasing the likelihood of emotional distress, low self-esteem, and mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. The internalization of violence as a means of problem-solving further perpetuates cycles of aggression and social maladjustment, highlighting its counterproductive role in shaping responsible and empathetic individuals.

In conclusion, the body of research underscores the urgent need for educational reform that prioritizes students' well-being and learning through supportive, empathetic, and developmentally appropriate disciplinary approaches. Abandoning corporal punishment in favour of constructive behavioural management strategies not only enhances academic outcomes but also



contributes to the holistic development of learners, fostering safer, more inclusive, and psychologically healthy school environments.

Methodology

A qualitative analysis approach is used to collect and interpret the data of this study. It intends to analyse the response of 12 teachers in three different primary schools in Gharyan to examine their perspectives and awareness about the impact of corporal punishment on young learners and to discover whether they follow another methods rather than punishment or not.

Procedure

A semi structured interviews carried out in three different schools, where interviewed four teachers in each. A thematic analysis is used to analyse the teachers' responses to the following questions that the researcher asked to them:

1. What is your general opinion about using corporal punishment as a disciplinary method in schools?
2. Do you believe that corporal punishment is effective in managing classroom behaviour?
3. In your opinion, what are the main reasons make teachers resort to corporal punishment?
4. What alternative discipline strategies do you use instead of corporal punishment?

Furthermore, they were given the opportunity to talk about the topic without being restricted to these questions and given the right to rise any other point interests them.



Results and analysis

The following are a thematic analysis of the responses of the teachers. For the list of the responses of the teachers, see **appendix .1.**

Code 1. General Attitudes toward Corporal Punishment

Theme: Strong Rejection of Corporal Punishment

Many teachers expressed clear opposition to the use of corporal punishment, particularly in primary education. They described it as ineffective, harmful, and counterproductive, particularly emphasizing the psychological and emotional harm it causes students (Responses 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10). One teacher referred to it as a sign of weakness and a lack of logic, while another highlighted the lasting trauma they experienced from being hit as a child (Response 12). Another one (response 6) supported the argument of the social learning theory about children model behaviours they observe such as aggression (Bandura, 1977).

e.g. **response 6** " I do not agree with the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure in schools. I believe there are more effective and less harmful ways to promote discipline and respect between students and teachers. Corporal punishment can have negative effects on students' mental and physical health and may foster a culture of aggression rather than promoting positive behaviour. Instead, I support the use of positive discipline methods that focus on positive reinforcement, effective communication, and psychological support for students".

Theme: Conditional Acceptance or Nostalgia

A minority of teachers expressed a nuanced or nostalgic view, acknowledging that mild physical discipline may have worked in the past or in certain contexts (Response 8). However, even those respondents generally supported finding better alternatives today.



Code 2. Perceived Effectiveness of Corporal Punishment

Theme: Ineffectiveness and Negative Outcomes

The consensus among teachers was that corporal punishment is not effective in achieving behavioural or academic goals (Responses 1, 2, 3, 5). Teachers emphasized that such punishment leads to fear, anxiety, hatred, and low self-esteem, rather than improved behaviour.

Code 3. Reasons Teachers Might Resort to Corporal Punishment

Theme: External Pressures and Lack of Support

Respondents identified overcrowded classrooms, lack of administrative support, and insufficient training or resources as reasons some teachers resort to physical punishment (Responses 4, 7, 11). These systemic pressures push teachers toward desperation, especially when dealing with persistent behavioural issues.

Theme: Cultural and Generational Influence

One teacher noted that many educators were themselves raised with corporal punishment and may subconsciously replicate those patterns unless retrained (Response 11). Another mentioned the cultural normalization of strict discipline in the past (Response 8).

Code 4. Alternative Discipline Strategies Used

Theme: Positive Discipline and Logical Consequences

Teachers reported using a range of non-violent disciplinary methods, including:

- Communication with parents (Responses 1, 6)
- Withholding privileges or activities (Responses 3, 4, 6)
- Deduction of points or reward systems (Response 6)
- Time-out strategies or designated reflection areas (Response 4)
- Encouragement, positive reinforcement, and motivational rewards (Responses 2, 12)



These strategies were favoured because they promote long-term behavioural change, mutual respect, and a supportive learning environment.

Discussion

The thematic analysis of teachers' responses revealed a prevailing rejection of corporal punishment within primary education. Most participants viewed it as harmful, ineffective, and incompatible with modern pedagogical principles. They emphasized its detrimental effects on students' psychological well-being, including fear, anxiety, and loss of self-esteem, which hinder learning and damage teacher-student relationships. A small minority expressed conditional acceptance or nostalgic reflections, suggesting that mild physical discipline may have once been effective but is now considered outdated and inappropriate. Teachers identified several external and cultural factors contributing to the persistence of corporal punishment, including overcrowded classrooms, limited institutional support, and deep-rooted cultural norms inherited from previous generations. Despite these challenges, respondents demonstrated a growing awareness of and preference for positive disciplinary approaches. These include communication with parents, motivational rewards, logical consequences, and reinforcement-based strategies that promote respect, responsibility, and long-term behavioural improvement. Overall, the findings indicate a significant shift among teachers toward non-violent, student-centred disciplinary methods, alongside recognition of the need for institutional support and professional development to ensure effective and sustainable implementation of these alternatives.

The findings of the current study align closely with existing literature. Teachers' rejection of corporal punishment and recognition of its harmful effects on academic performance, emotional well-being, and social development mirrors prior research (Gershoff & GroganKaylor, 2016; Talwar, Carlson & Lee, 2011).



In addition, systemic pressures and cultural influences that sometimes lead to the use of physical discipline also reflect patterns documented in previous studies (UNICEF, 2014; Anwar et al., 2021). Finally, the adoption of positive, nonviolent strategies such as reinforcement, parent communication, and restorative practices is consistent with the literature advocating for effective alternatives to corporal punishment (Bear, 2010; Thapa et al., 2013). Overall, the study supports and extends previous findings by showing how teachers apply these alternatives in practice within the Libyan school context.

Conclusion

The literature consistently demonstrates that corporal punishment has a detrimental effect on students' academic achievement. Through the erosion of emotional well-being, weakening of the teacher-student relationship, and creation of an adverse learning environment, physical discipline hinders students' ability to succeed academically. Furthermore, the literature strongly indicates that corporal punishment has detrimental physical, emotional, and psychological effects on children. Far from being an effective disciplinary measure, it fosters a cycle of violence, hinders emotional development, and contributes to long-term mental and physical health issues. Educators, parents, and policymakers must recognize the harms associated with corporal punishment and adopt alternative, non-violent methods of discipline that promote healthy development and learning.

The results of the study carried showed a positive attitude of teachers participated about the issue. Most of them are aware of negative impact of the phenomenon and are aware of number of positive alternative discipline strategies.



The limitations of the study and some future recommendations

The data of this study was limited to a small number of samples because it was carried at the end of the school year, where a small number of teachers were present in schools. This issue could have its effect on the accuracy of the results, so, I recommend that researchers in educational faculties and in the ministry of education should carry further research on the topic to avoid the consequences discussed. Moreover, Number of other methods can be carried to examine the issue such as, spending a school year observing a group of students where corporal punishment exists and find out how they academically perform at the end of the year, in addition, whether students who corporally punished have done well or not.

Moreover, it is recommended that educational authorities implement systematic professional development programs to enhance teachers' understanding of the adverse physical, emotional, and psychological impacts of corporal punishment and to promote evidence based, non-violent classroom management strategies, including positive reinforcement, counselling, and restorative practices. Teacher education curricula should incorporate modules on child rights, ethical responsibility, and socio-emotional competencies to cultivate empathetic and professionally competent educators. Furthermore, Ministries of Education should establish and enforce comprehensive policies prohibiting corporal punishment while ensuring accountability mechanisms, and schools should strengthen the roles of counsellors and social workers in monitoring student behaviour and providing emotional support. Parental engagement through structured awareness initiatives is also essential to reinforce positive disciplinary practices beyond the classroom.



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appendix 1. Responses of teachers

1. "Punishment in primary schools should not be corporal. Parents should be informed with any issue through the social worker to try to solve it. I used this method and I am sure that corporal punishment is useless and does not achieve any positive results".
2. " I do not agree with the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure in schools. I believe there are more effective and less harmful ways to promote discipline and respect between students and teachers. Corporal punishment can have negative effects on students' mental and physical health and may foster a culture of violence rather than promoting positive behaviour. Instead, I support the use of positive discipline methods that focus on positive reinforcement, effective communication, and psychological support for students".
- 3." I believe it is useless and ineffective. Threatening to prevent students from doing things they enjoy is better, such as preventing them from recess and keeping them busy with homework or work inside the school".
4. "Frankly, I'm not in favour of corporal punishment, but we understand that some teachers are forced to use it due to significant pressure, whether from the large number of students or the lack of support from the administration or even parents. Sometimes a teacher reaches a point where they lose control, but it's imperative that we find better alternatives, such as deducting points, temporarily depriving them of favourite activities, placing them in a designated place for reflection, or expelling them from the classroom as a last resort".
- 5." Corporal punishment must be replaced with more effective educational methods, as it can lead to negative long-term consequences, such as increased student violence and the destruction of trust between teacher and student".
6. "I do not agree with the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure in schools. I believe there are more effective and less harmful ways to promote discipline and respect between students and teachers. Corporal punishment can have negative effects on students' mental and physical health and may foster a culture of aggression rather than promoting positive behaviour. Instead, I support the use of positive discipline methods that focus on positive reinforcement, effective communication, and psychological support for students"
7. "The overwhelming number of students in a classroom prevents teachers from giving their best, and student mischief leads to the decision to use corporal punishment".
8. "If you ask any academic about their educational past, they'll be delighted to hear their story with the harshest teachers, where they were beaten, and they thank that teacher for his approach, because it was this teacher's strictness that shaped them academically".
9. "I'm not in favor of corporal punishment, but I wish simple corporal punishment would be reinstated as a form of discipline".
- 10." Of course, hitting is not a method for those who have no logic or argument, but rather an exploitation of physical strength by size or focus on those who are weaker"
11. "Why don't we start with the teachers? They are adults and should be given awareness, lessons, and courses in parenting and teaching methods for students!! Because they were raised in violence environment and didn't deserve to be reinforced".
12. "Think of different motivational methods and rewards...Draw their attention to the positive instead of making them hate you and hate education with you. My teacher beat me unjustly in first grade. I have never forgotten and I will never forget".