

Restorative Discipline as an Alternative to Beating in Nigerian Schools

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Abstract

This paper argues that a factor that contributes to violence in society is violence in the classroom. Teachers and administrators frequently use beating as punishment in schools, teaching students that violence is acceptable for solving problems. This paper presents an alternative method of classroom management. First, teachers can create a positive classroom climate that will reduce incidents of misbehaviour, creating less need for disciplinary action. When students misbehave, teachers can use a restorative discipline approach whereby the misbehaving student and teacher engage in a collaborative process, highlighting the injury caused by the misbehaviour and making reparations for the wrongdoing. Recommendations for educational practice, teacher training, and further research are made.

Introduction

Nigeria is plagued by violent conflict resolution. Plateau State has experienced numerous violent clashes with over 1,000 dead in the year 2010 (News Africa, 2010). The Southeast region of Nigeria is plagued by violence and kidnapping (Economist, Port Harcourt, 2010). The Nigerian elections in April 2011 resulted in widespread violence that caused about 800 deaths (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Even Abuja has recently suffered from violence, including a series of bomb blasts (Al Jazeera, 2011; BBC, 2011). Why is violence so common around this country? Where is violent conflict resolution learned? Few people would dispute the fact that the principal institution of learning in modern society is the school, so perhaps the answers may be found in the classroom.

An eminent psychologist, Albert Bandura, provided decisive evidence decades ago that children even as young as nursery school learn violent behaviours simply by observing others who engage in violence. As one example, Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1961) conducted an experimental study with nursery school children who were randomly assigned to either the treatment group where children observed an adult beat a doll or the control group where children observed an adult engage in non-aggressive behaviours. In both groups, after the child had watched the adult for ten minutes, the adult left the child in the room alone. Experimenters then observed the child for 20 additional minutes to measure the number of violent acts performed by the child. They found that children who observed the violent adult beat the doll engaged in significantly more violent behaviours than children who observed a non-aggressive adult. This study has been widely repeated, providing convincing evidence that children indeed learn violent behaviours by observing others. Therefore, pupils who observe their teachers using violence in the classroom likely learn that violence is the appropriate method for solving conflicts.

A survey of 90 mathematics teachers in Yobe state found that an overwhelming 69% of teachers use beating as a form of punishment in their classrooms (Daki, 2010). Beating pupils falls under the general term “corporal punishment.” Corporal punishment is the intentional application of physical pain as a way to change a person’s behaviour and may include hitting, slapping, pinching, shaking, using objects such as a stick, forcing painful body postures, and using excessive exercise drills (Greydanus, Pratt, Greydanus, Hofmann, & Tsegaye-Spates, 1992). Teachers typically use corporal punishment to achieve goals such as stopping pupils from misbehaving, maintaining discipline in the classroom, preventing violations of school rules, and helping pupils behave responsibly (Akhtar, n.d.). The advantages and disadvantages of corporal punishment in schools has sparked great debate and research worldwide.

The underlying philosophy of corporal punishment is that if a pupil feels pain after misbehaving, they will change their behaviours to engage in more positive acts in the future (Claassen, 2002). In a meta-analytical review of 88 separate studies that examined the use of corporal punishment, Gershoff (2002) found that corporal punishment was indeed positively associated with short-term obedience. In other words, pupils who are beaten typically change their behaviour immediately and obey the rules in the short-term. However, in the same study, Gershoff also found that corporal punishment was significantly related to negative behavioural outcomes in the long-term, such as increased criminal behaviour, increased antisocial behaviour, lower mental health, and decreased acceptance of morals. Most significantly, children who experienced beating as punishment had higher levels of aggression both as a child and also as an adult. Therefore, corporal punishment does lead to short-term obedience, but it has many major disadvantages in the long-term.

Furthermore, pupils who are beaten are more likely to cheat, lie, be disobedient in the long-term, and also show less remorse for their misbehaviour (Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-

Sims, 1997). The vast majority of research evidence concludes that corporal punishment is an ineffective method of discipline and has serious negative effects on the physical and mental health of pupils (Greydanus, 2010). Thus, the basic belief that corporal punishment leads to positive future behaviours is only true immediately after the beating and not in the long term.

Even though corporal punishment results in immediate obedience, it oftentimes does not result in improved acceptance of the school rules. When pupils feel pain, they typically also feel anger. Instead of considering the inappropriateness of their misbehaviour, the beaten pupil typically focuses their attention on resentment of the teacher who hurt them (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). In other words, when beaten, pupils do not take responsibility for their negative actions but instead are angry by the harsh punishment and blame the punisher – in the classroom, the teacher. Beating pupils creates a classroom atmosphere of fear and anxiety that is harmful for effective learning (Henniger, 2005). Indeed, there is no clear evidence that corporal punishment helps the teacher have better control of the classroom (Greydanus, 2010). After being beaten, pupils only change their behaviour to avoid a future beating. However, corporal punishment typically does not change the pupil's heart, something that is necessary for long-term behaviour modification.

In virtually all classrooms worldwide, pupils do engage in behaviour that is counterproductive to learning and contrary to acceptable social practices. Sometimes pupils misbehave because they cannot yet differentiate between correct and incorrect behaviours. At other times, pupils may feel bored, frustrated, upset, helpless, or simply mischievous while in school. Indeed, negative behaviours call for disciplinary action by the teacher. However, discipline and corporal punishment are not one and the same.

Just as teachers want their pupils to learn from their lessons, teachers should also view pupils' misbehaviours as an opportunity for pupils to learn about moral and socially acceptable behaviour. Corporal punishment only teaches the pupil which behaviours are

incorrect, and sometimes pupils do not even understand what they did to earn the beating. Corporal punishment does not teach the pupil why the misbehaviour is incorrect, or help the pupil learn strategies for engaging in positive behaviour in the future. Instead of simply beating pupils after misbehaving, the teacher should take action that helps the pupil learn from their mistakes and grow as an individual to better handle the situation in the future (Frieler, 2010). This is typically achieved by having in-depth discussions with pupils about their misbehaviour and strategies for more positive behaviors in the future. Instead of simply focusing on the short-term goal of stopping inappropriate behaviour, school discipline should instead concentrate on the long-term goal of helping pupils take responsibility for their own positive behaviour. Corporal punishment makes pupils obey the rules when the teacher is present, but they often return to their misbehaviour as soon as the teacher is absent. Effective long-term discipline requires teachers taking a different perspective than simply applying pain to obtain immediate obedience.

There are two principal strategies for promoting positive behaviours in school. The first is to prevent misbehaviours from occurring in the first place by creating a positive classroom climate. However, since misbehaviours do occur, the second strategy is to develop a restorative discipline approach to managing misbehaviour. The purpose of the rest of this paper is to describe these two strategies for promoting positive behaviour among pupils in the school environment.

Creating a Positive Classroom Climate

There are two perspectives that teachers can take when considering pupils' behaviour in the classroom (Eggen & Kauchak, 2004). The first is a disciplinary perspective whereby the teachers responds to pupils' misbehaviour. This perspective assumes that pupils will misbehave, so the teacher's only method of control is to punish pupils when they misbehave. On the other hand, the second perspective is that of classroom management whereby teachers

intentionally develop strategies to create and maintain an orderly learning environment. When teachers develop an interesting, orderly, and respectful learning environment, then pupils are less likely to misbehave in the first place and disciplinary problems are thereby reduced. There are three primary components necessary to develop a positive classroom climate: rules, respect, and interest.

Each classroom needs rules that are fair, reasonable, and age-appropriate (Morrison, 2006). For example, children in nursery school have a short attention span so they cannot realistically be expected to sit and pay attention to the teacher for long periods of time. If a nursery teacher sets the rule that the children should be completely silent for extended teaching periods, children will naturally misbehave because they have not matured to the point of being able to focus their attention on the teacher for a long time. Instead, nursery classroom rules and procedures should allow children plenty of time to move around and play which will thereby reduce the incidents of misbehaviour in the classroom that require discipline. Thus, classroom rules and procedures should reflect pupils' needs based on their maturation level.

The rules also need to be well explained to the pupils, as well as the reason why the rules have been set (Eggen & Kauchak, 2004). For example, the rule that the boys must braid their hair may seem arbitrary to pupils, but if they understand that the rule is in place to prevent transmission of head lice, then they will be more likely to follow the rule. Rules must also be fairly enforced for all pupils regardless of their gender, tribe, religion, or social status. When pupils perceive that there is injustice in the school environment whereby one group of pupils is held to a different standard than others, then pupils will be more likely to misbehave because of the perceived injustice.

The second component of a positive classroom environment is respect. When teachers show respect and care for the pupils, they are less likely to misbehave (Eggen & Kauchak,

2004; Greydanus et al., 1992). Therefore, teachers should develop a classroom environment where pupils feel valued, respected, and understood (Greydanus, 2010). To do this, teachers should reinforce positive behaviours through recognition, such as praise. When pupils are praised for their positive behaviours, they learn the positive behaviours that they should be doing. On the other hand, corporal punishment only informs pupils of behaviours they should not be doing. Pupils who feel cared for by their teachers have better classroom attendance, lower misconduct, and lower dropout rates (Frieler, 2010).

Finally, the classroom must be an interesting and enjoyable place for pupils to spend their time. Oftentimes pupils misbehave simply because they are bored or frustrated by the instruction. Carefully planning lessons that are interesting and relevant to pupils' lives keeps pupils engaged and busy on instructional activities, leaving little time and attention for misbehaviour. Lessons should also be specifically targeted to pupils' ability level. Pupils can engage in misbehaviour when too much or too little is expected of them in the classroom (Morrison, 2006). If the instruction is continually too difficult, pupils misbehave out of frustration. On the other hand, if the instruction is too easy, then pupils misbehave out of boredom. High quality teaching that is both interesting and aimed at the ability level of pupils can drastically reduce misbehaviours and the need for disciplinary action.

Managing Misbehaviour through Restorative Discipline

Even when a teacher expertly creates a positive classroom climate, pupils still misbehave for various reasons. One reason is that they may not yet understand appropriate behavior. Pupils may also be frustrated in a particular aspect of their life (possibly even unrelated to school). For example, maybe the pupils' parents are abusing them, which may cause the pupil to act out in school. Finally, even typically well-behaved pupils may misbehave by a simple lapse in judgment. Misbehaviour provides an opportunity for the teacher to engage in restorative discipline, a process that restores a wayward pupil back to the

classroom community and engage in positive learning behaviours. The philosophy of restorative discipline is that misbehaviour requires corrective discipline to educate the pupil about appropriate behaviours. In contrast to corporal punishment, restorative discipline tries to help misbehaving pupils understand what they did wrong, why their misbehaviour was harmful, and to develop empathy towards the individuals who were hurt by the misbehaviour (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). Furthermore, a misbehavior always happens because of a reason. Therefore, both the pupil and school officials look for the cause of the misbehaviour in order to identify any changes that need to be made to help the pupil avoid the misbehaviour in the future. Restorative discipline takes a long-term perspective with the goal of helping pupils become responsible, caring citizens.

Restorative discipline rests on the principle of providing appropriate consequences that encourage accountability for pupils' misbehaviour. Whereas corporal punishment views beating as the consequence of misbehaviour, restorative discipline looks for natural consequences that emphasize repairing harm and empathy toward those who have been offended by the misbehaviour. The restorative approach requires asking six questions after a misbehaviour (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005, p. 14):

1. Who has been hurt?
2. What are the needs of the person who has been hurt?
3. Who is responsible for meeting the hurt person's needs?
4. What was the reason for the misbehaviour?
5. Who has a stake in correcting the misbehaviour?
6. What is the appropriate process to involve stakeholders in an effort to put things right?

For example, if a pupil stole another pupil's pocket money, then the restorative discipline approach would ask the erring pupil to examine these six questions. By doing so,

the pupil should be able to understand that their misbehaviour has hurt the pupil whose money they stole, as well as hurting the trust of the teacher and other pupils. The pupil himself should recognize that he is responsible for returning the money and making an effort to rebuild the trust of the other members in the classroom. The erring pupil should thoughtfully consider the reasons why they stole the money. Then all of the stakeholders – the erring pupil, the teacher, and perhaps the parents and administration – can work together in developing a plan for restoring the erring pupil into positive relationships in the classroom.

This procedure can also work for less extreme misbehaviours, such as a pupil who frequently disrupts the class with talking. The pupil should have to think about who is being hurt by their disruptions, such as the other pupils who are losing instruction time. The pupil should identify why they are misbehaving, perhaps because they are frustrated because the instruction is too difficult. When the pupil articulates the reason for their misbehaviour, then the teacher might learn ways in which they have fallen short of creating a positive classroom climate. The teacher could then make constructive changes to make the classroom a more positive learning environment.

The procedure for implementing restorative discipline in the classroom is as follows (Raisin City Elementary School, 2008). First, the classroom rules are well explained at the beginning of the term. Because misbehaviour oftentimes is simply the result of a misjudgment, if a pupil breaks the rule, they are gently made aware of their misbehaviour and asked if they plan to change their behaviour. The teacher encourages and supports the pupil if they change their behaviour with a simple reminder. However, if the pupil does not change his/her behaviour after a few reminders, then they have a teacher/pupil meeting. In this meeting, the pupil and the teacher each describe the problem separately, considering the six questions listed above. After one party speaks, the other listens and summarizes what has been said. Then the teacher and pupil collaborate to develop a written agreement that includes

the restitution necessary to fix the problem that has been created by the misbehaviour and a plan to prevent the misbehaviour in the future. A few weeks after the teacher/pupil meeting, a follow-up meeting is held to ensure that the agreement is being followed. If the pupil holds to the agreement, then they are encouraged and supported. If the pupil does not hold to their agreement, then a family conference is held where the parents also meet with the teacher, pupil, and other stakeholders. A similar process is used to the teacher/pupil meeting where a written agreement is drawn up and signed by all parties.

One of the strengths of the restorative discipline approach is that it makes pupils consider their behaviour: what they did that was wrong, how their misbehaviour affected others, how they can correct their misbehaviour, and the reasons why they misbehaved. By taking a more thoughtful approach to classroom discipline, students are more likely to take responsibility for their actions and develop empathy toward the people they have wronged. These should be key goals for any classroom discipline policy. Indeed, the restorative discipline approach requires considerably more time and effort than corporal punishment. However, this process has more capacity for developing sustainable change in pupils' long-term behaviour.

Recommendations

Nigerian teachers need to consider alternative methods of classroom management in addition to corporal punishment. First, teachers should develop strategies that foster a positive classroom climate, including setting clear and realistic classroom rules, showing respect for all pupils, and making the instruction interesting and age-appropriate. When pupils are in a positive classroom environment, they are less likely to misbehave.

However, when pupils misbehave, teachers should first apply alternative methods of discipline. Educators around the world have developed a variety of nonviolent methods of classroom management and discipline. However, classroom teachers cannot practice what

they do not know. Training in alternative methods of classroom management needs to be available for both in-service and pre-service teachers. School authorities need to provide opportunities for teachers to receive training in effective nonviolent classroom management strategies (Greydanus et al., 1992).

Furthermore, educational researchers need to conduct extensive research to examine the prevalence, advantages, and disadvantages of corporal punishment in Nigerian classrooms. Indeed, most of the research cited in this paper was conducted outside of Africa. However, there is very little, if any, available research on the relative strengths and weaknesses of corporal punishment in Nigerian classrooms. Therefore, educational researchers need to develop a research agenda to collect scientific data on the effectiveness of corporal punishment in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Nigerians well know that education is the key to development. However, many do not realize that it is not just the classroom lessons that is educating the students, but also a teacher's discipline practices. When pupils see their teachers using violence in the form of beating to solve conflicts within the classroom, they learn that violence is an acceptable response to conflict (Greydanus et al., 1992; Paintal, 1999). Therefore, educators need to reconsider the use of violence in the form of corporal punishment as the primary discipline policy in classrooms.

A less violent, more caring society starts in the classroom. Teachers need to create a positive learning environment by setting, explaining, and fairly enforcing classroom rules. Pupils should feel that they are a valued member of the classroom. Teachers should carefully plan their lessons to be interesting and age-appropriate. When pupils misbehave, teachers should meet with students to help them understand the negative implication of their behaviour and identify strategies to help them change their behaviour in the future. If pupils

learn how to resolve conflicts in the classroom nonviolently, they will be more likely to also resolve conflicts in society nonviolently.

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