

Medical Social Work Students' Attitude and Childhood Experience of School Physical Punishment in Taiwan

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Abstract

Objects: This study was undertaken to examine attitude and experience of school physical punishment in Taiwan.

Method: A survey targeting undergraduates enrolled in medical social work was conducted. The sample consisted of 236 undergraduate students. The survey instrument was a self-administered questionnaire completed during class.

Results: Analyses revealed that despite of personal experience of being subjected to school physical punishment, respondents still approved of the use of physical punishment. If the motives behind the use of physical punishment can be justified as "love discipline", physical punishment as a disciplinary method is acceptable and can be tolerated. Certain cultural values and childrearing ideologies can be misinterpreted within the framework of school physical punishment that the distinction between respect and absolute obedience is ambiguous. Besides, there was an explicit connection between the effectiveness of physical punishment and marked improvement of academic performance.

Conclusion: This study indicates that school physical punishment is not necessary to be disapproved by medical social work students who had such experiences. As long as it is perceived as a method of effective discipline to correct behaviour or improve academic performance, it would continue to be accepted not only by parents, teachers but also children themselves.



Introduction

It is problematical to draw a line between appropriate discipline and inappropriate discipline. However, without an unambiguous definition, it may be difficult to recognize what inhuman or degrading discipline is and where the line is between abusive and acceptable discipline. Childhood discipline can be discussed generally from two locations: home and school. And methods of childhood discipline are varied. For instance, making reparation, detention or isolation in a unit in the school and strategies to increase pupils' desire to be praised, merits and so on constitutes methods of school disciplines (Parker-Jenkins, 1999:88). From various reported cases of physical child abuse, it is frequently noticeable that people in higher positions such as parents and teachers justify the use of physical punishment as a disciplinary method. They defend and rationalize their actions as correcting children's misbehaviour in children's own interests (Freeman, 1999: 134; *BBC News*, 8 February 2000). This is what Graziano(1994) called "subausive violence" that considered socially acceptable violence toward children for purposes of discipline such as slapping, spanking and paddling children with a flat wooden or other objects. Such justification leaves us no nearer to a solution to protecting children from potential violence.

Physical punishment of children has been culturally sanctioned as an acceptable disciplinary method in Taiwan for decades. Lai (1999) undertook a narrow-designed study focusing on the issue of inappropriate child discipline (Lai, 1999) and he considered applying non-injurious discipline to children such as verbal reprimand or slapping is an unavoidable child-rearing practice in Taiwan. Furthermore, if eighteen is the upper age limit of childhood, besides families, schools are the main place determining childhood experience. 'Temporary pain (*zhan shi xing teng tong*)' punishment was under consideration when the 1997 Regulation Governing the Counselling and Disciplining of Students by Teachers following the Teacher's Law, 1995 was drafted(Yang, 1996). In the draft, bodily harm can only be applied to palms of children under the condition that written authorization was obtained from guardians or parents of the child. However, the draft was clearly indicated that poor academic performance cannot be used as the reason for applying physical punishment (Huang, 2000; Feng, 1996: 64). 'Reasonable (my emphasis) ' physical punishment by teachers is considered to be an efficient way to help pupils to establish the right attitude and good behaviour (Zhang, 1998: 23). Beating pupils becomes a kind of 'love discipline (*ai de jiao yu*)'(Qu, 1979: 21). Similar controversy was noted when the Korean education authorities released new educational measures in 2002, which considered the reintroduction of physical punishment in school. The justifications were based on 'the collapse of teacher authority' and 'helplessness of the teacher authority figure' (*Digital Chosun Ilbo*, 18 March 2002).

And physical punishment used as a method of school discipline has been long

existed as an open secret in Taiwan despite the fact that the Ministry of Education adopted a policy of prohibiting school physical punishment and inhuman treatment since September 1935 (Zhang & Li, 1993: 21; Huang, 1982: 24; Yang & Wang, 1990: 77). Some well-known Taiwanese high schools are even famous for their 'strict discipline', usually referring to harsh discipline including abusive physical punishment of students in order to inculcate good habits and behaviour as the basis of a successful future. Despite that school physical punishment has been considered as a problem and has been discussed since at least as early as 1963 (*Gong Lun Bao*, 22 June 1963). From various reports, physical punishment used as a method of school discipline is still common in Taiwan (*Humanistic Education Magazine*, 1999, 2005).

To properly interpret phenomenon, scholars have noted that certain beliefs shape the values of a beating culture. For instance, people in Taiwan never tire of reminding themselves that the function of teacher authority in school is not only to teach and transmit knowledge but also to cultivate the moral enterprise of children. This is seen as one of the teachers' main responsibilities in society (Smith, 1991: 55). In Paragraph 4, Article 17 of the Amendment to Teacher Education Act (*jiao shi fa*), 1995, one of teachers' responsibilities is said to be as guiding or disciplining students for the purpose of cultivating the healthy character of pupils. Also, in countries such as Taiwan, China or Japan which are influenced by Chinese culture, the emphasis on social hierarchy leads to the attitude that children are expected to respect and obey parents in the home and they are supposed to respect and follow teachers in school (Jia, 2001: 118). This is so-called '*in loco parentis*'- teachers are important parent substitutes for children. The Chinese saying, children are considered to respect teachers as if the teacher were their own father (*yi jih wei shih, tsung shen wei fu*) is a good example to reflect such belief.

For the purpose of this research, discussion of school discipline will only focus on the use of physical punishment. It should be noted that school physical punishment is not limited to the infliction of physical pain. Obviously, it includes emotional punishment such as not talking to the child or warning the child about figures of fear (Creighton & Russell, 1995: 30). Various methods such as beating the palms or other body parts with an instrument such as a rattan cane, slapping faces with bare hands in front of the class, knocking heads, humiliating words, keeping the students from eating lunch and having students hit each other are known as ways of punishing schoolchildren in Taiwan.

This paper is concerned with students' attitudes and experience toward school discipline, especially physical punishment. The current research focuses on four questions: 1). why school physical punishment is still existed? 2). what factors may be important in shaping children's attitude of accepting physical punishment as a method of childhood discipline? and 3). how physical punishment of children is justified as a disciplinary right and accepted?

Method

Design

There were 236 participants in this study. The survey instrument was a self-administered questionnaire completed during class. Students were advised that their participation was voluntary and anonymous (the instructor was not present during the survey)

Sample

The sample were selected from the discipline of medical social work. The reason selecting this sample group is because medical social work students are in the position of the future mandated reporters. These pre-professionals are more likely to encounter cases of maltreatment, even child physical abuse. Understanding perceptions of physical punishment from viewpoints of the future mandated reporter can help to know what factors may be important in shaping their attitude of accepting physical punishment as a method of childhood discipline.

Measurement

The questionnaire consists of 10 statements and are responded to on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree(5).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 10.0. Following a description of the distribution of cases in the study, our analysis proceeds with the Chronbach's alpha reliability coefficient and corresponding 95 % confidence interval were computed. The chi square was the used test of significance. This is in addition to apply logistic regression analyses to our data. Factor analysis was also performed.

Three models of logistic regression analysis have been developed to examine the combined effects of child rearing attitude and cultural beliefs respectively. We employ a step-wise procedure in which control variables are entered at step 1. Five control variables were abstracted for the first model: (1). Respect of teachers (2). Disciplinary rights of teachers (3). Absolute obedience (4). Reasoning is *not* an effective disciplinary method (5). School corporal punishment is right. A second series of logistic regression equations assess how cultural beliefs and child disciplinary attitude predicts approval of efficiency of school physical punishment.

Again, control variables are entered at step 1 for the second model. The measures include respect teachers, the '*in loco parentis*' concept- teachers are important parent substitutes for children and absolute obedience when school physical punishment is applied. At step 2, we use disciplinary rights of teachers to predict why students accept physical punishment as the disciplinary method.

For the third model, the measures such as disciplinary rights of teachers, efficiency of apply physical punishment as the disciplinary method and reasoning is *not* an effective disciplinary method are entered to predict the indicator that school physical punishment is right. This model aims to understand why school physical punishment is considered to be appropriate.

Results

Three-fourth (75.4%) of participants were girls while 24.6% were boys. The internal consistency of 10 statements measured by the Chronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was .709.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (including 50.4% of *Strongly agree* and 48.3% of *Agree*) supported the view that teachers have a responsibility to help children to develop social values and principles. According to quantitative findings, 91% of respondents agreed the statement that respect for teachers and their teaching is important.

Table 1
Percentages of responses to 10 statements of the school physical punishment (N=236)

	Strongly agree	Agreed	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
S1. I consider that it is teacher's responsibility to teach children what is right or wrong in school.	50.4	48.3	0.8	0.4	0
S2. I consider it is very important that everyone should respect teachers and their teachings.	29.7	61.4	6.4	1.7	0.8
S3. I believe it is important that one should respect his/her teacher as if the teacher were his/her own father even if the teacher-student relationship has existed for only a single day.	5.9	38.1	36.9	15.7	3.4
S4. I consider that teachers have rights to physically punish students when students do something wrong.	1.7	39	28.8	22.9	7.2
S5 I consider that physical punishment is an effective way for teachers to teach					

student what is right or wrong.	0.8	32.6	25.4	32.6	8.1
S6. I consider absolute obedience is the only thing students need to do when teachers punish children.	0.4	1.7	17.8	51.7	28.4
S7. I consider that reasoning is <i>not</i> an effective way to correct students' behaviour or wrongdoing in Taiwan nowadays.	11.0	39.0	25.4	22.9	1.7
S8. I consider that school corporal punishment is wrong.	3.4	30.1	37.3	22.5	6.4
S9. I consider that corporal punishment of students by teachers still exists in Taiwan.	15.7	55.5	21.2	7.2	0.4
S10. I consider the 'zero physical punishment' policy is unlikely to implement fully in Taiwanese school.	37.7	53.8	5.9	1.7	0.8

Table 2
Logistic regression models

Model	Model X ²	df.	B	SE	Exp. (b)
1. Physical punishment is effective	134.744	5	-.197	.153	.821
2. Approval of physical punishment	31.554	3	.302	.157	1.352
3. School physical punishment is an acceptable disciplinary method	105.177	3	.137	.166	1.147

Table 3
Logistic regression model A: physical punishment is effective

Variable	odds ratio(OR)	95% CI		Significance
		Lower	Upper	
The concept of respect teachers and their teachings is important	1.195	0.600	2.382	0.613
The use of physical punishment is a disciplinary right of teachers	6.693	3.047	14.701	0.000****
Absolute obedience is required when physical punishment is applied	3.740	1.775	7.879	0.001***
Reasoning is <i>not</i> effective	1.098	0.644	1.870	0.731
School corporal punishment is right	2.825	1.393	5.733	0.004***

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005; ****p<0.001

Table 3 shows information of why school physical punishment was considered as an effective method. Students who believed the use of physical punishment is a disciplinary right of teacher (OR=6.693; CI=3.047, 14.701), absolute obedience is the only thing students need to do when teachers physically punish children (OR=3.740; CI=1.775, 7.879) and the use of physical punishment in school is right (OR=2.825; CI=1.393, 5.733) were more likely to approve effectiveness of using physical punishment in school. Students who admitted reasoning is not effective or respect teachers and their teaching are important, yet insignificant.

Table 4
Logistic regression model B: approval of the use of physical punishment

Variable	odds ratio(OR)	95% CI		Significance
		Lower	Upper	
The concept of respect teachers and their teachings is important.	2.894	1.508	5.554	0.001***
Teachers are important parent substitutes	0.924	0.610	1.399	0.708
Absolute obedience while physical punishment is used	2.797	1.672	4.679	0.000****

p<0.005; *p<0.001

Table 4 explained why students approved the use of physical punishment in school. The more respect students show toward their teachers and their teaching, the stronger students approve the use of physical punishment in school (OR=2.894; CI=1.508, 5.554). Additionally, these students who believe absolute obedience had a significantly high approval of school physical punishment (OR=2.797; CI=1.672, 4.679).

Table 5
Logistic regression model C: school physical punishment is an acceptable disciplinary method

Variable	odds ratio(OR)	95% CI		Significance
		Lower	Upper	
Disciplinary rights of teachers	5.124	2.504	10.486	0.000****
Physical punishment is effective	2.374	1.227	4.593	0.01*
Reasoning is <i>not</i> effective	1.354	0.796	2.301	0.263

*p<0.05; ****p<0.001

Two variables proved significant in the analysis of logistic regression model C while the variable of reasoning is *not* effective was no longer statistically significant. Students who had perceived the use of physical punishment is a disciplinary right of

teacher (OR=5.124; CI=2.504, 10.486) and physical punishment is effective (OR=2.374; CI=1.227, 4.593) were more likely to adopt physical punishment as an acceptable disciplinary method.

In the factor analysis, three factors were extracted: (1). Approval of effectiveness of school physical punishment, (2). Respect teachers as if their own parents, and (3). Disbelief the possible full ban of school physical punishment. Fifty-eight percent of the variance of all the variables (10 statements from the school physical punishment attitude scale) was explained by the three factors. Loadings of variables on factors and percentage of variance are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Factor loadings, percent of variance for principal components and varimax rotation

	Factor loadings		
	1	2	3
Teachers have disciplinary rights to physical punishment of students	.885	.125	-.030
Physical punishment is effective	.842	.085	-.123
School corporal punishment is right.	.833	.033	.037
Reasoning is not an effective disciplinary method in school	.524	.053	.113
Absolute obedience of students when teachers punish children.	.457	.076	-.366
The concept of respecting teachers and their teachings is important.	.137	.846	-.015
Teachers are parental substitutes	.069	.764	-.188
Teacher's responsibility to teach children what is right or wrong in school.	.039	.519	.532
The 'zero physical punishment' policy is unlikely to implement fully	.247	-.109	.782
Corporal punishment of students by teachers still exists in Taiwan.	-.350	-.118	.509
Percent of variance	28.26	16.27	13.53

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to examine 1). whether school physical punishment is perceived effective? 2). what factors may be important in shaping

children's attitude of accepting physical punishment as a method of childhood discipline? and 3). how physical punishment of children is justified as a disciplinary right and accepted?

Support of school physical punishment

The result of this study demonstrated 97% of the respondents reported being subjected to school physical punishment during childhood. Despite of personal experience of being subjected to school physical punishment, the findings highlighted respondents still approved of the use of physical punishment. Respondents were asked how they responded to approval of using school physical punishment. Not only respondents believed school physical punishment was acceptable, but also physical punishment was perceived as effective. Increased emphasis on the efficiency of physical punishment to correct wrongdoing has led relevant authorities (e.g. parents, teachers and the government) to be less likely to consider harmful physical and psychological consequences caused by hitting children. Few respondents were conscious that the use of physical punishment was harmful when the purpose of applying physical punishment was based on the 'love discipline' of teachers. The process and consequence of the harm physical punishment may cause was not a prior concern. Rather, if the motives behind the use of physical punishment can justify the potential harm, physical punishment as a disciplinary method is acceptable and can be tolerated.

More directly relevant for testing the idea that school physical punishment is acceptable, respondents were asked whether they would consider using physical punishment if they were teachers. Those who were subjected to teachers' physical punishment were more likely to consider using physical punishment if they were teachers (coefficient of contingency= .473, $p < 0.001$). Support for the intergenerational transmission of hitting as the disciplinary method was also obtained in this study. Respondents with a history of childhood physical punishment in school demonstrated a higher potential to the use of physical punishment than individuals without a history of childhood physical punishment in school.

Responsibilities of teachers

Teacher's authority in Taiwan has been highly respected. For instance, Xun Zi (313 B.C.-235 B.C.) emphasized the role of teachers extensively and believed that students should obey whatever teachers require. Thus, he stated the proverb, 'Heaven, Earth, Sovereign, Parents and Teachers (*tien di jun qin shi*)' (Shi, 2001: 174). Also, the saying, 'One should respect his teacher as if the teacher were his own father, even if the teacher-student relationship had existed for only a single day (*yi ri wei shi, zhong shen wei fu*)' clearly indicated the respectable status of teachers in society (Xie, 1991: 51; You, 1994: 21; Lai, 1995: 15). It is thought that respect, similar to that given to

parents and elders should be given to the teachers in school (Chyu & Smith, 1991: 109). Pupils are subjected to the teacher-pupil relationship in the same way as the parent-child relationship (Friedman, 1991:28). Thus, the parental right to discipline children, which is authorised according to Article 1085 of the Civil Code, is constantly cited as the basis of teachers' rights to discipline pupils (You, 1995: 58; Huang, 1996: 201).

Meanwhile, Fu (2001) argues that in Chinese culture, responsibility and duties are constantly seen as to bring advantages to someone while claiming rights is treated as receiving favours or benefits (Fu, 2001: 13; Jones, 1994: 26). For instance, responsibility of sons to fathers is filial piety and the duty of pupils to teachers is respect (Feng, 2001: 100). The notion of responsibility and duties is embedded in a network of relationships with others. In other words, responsibility, duties and rights exist unequally with which responsibility and duties mainly emphasized in Chinese culture. Thus, when discussion of rights is applied to teacher-pupil relations, teachers are seen as having a duty to teach pupils knowledge and skills while one of the pupils' duties is to show their respect and obedience to teachers. In this study, we found that respondents applied certain child-rearing ideologies, perceptions and cultural values such as filial obedience and socializing children to respect authority within the framework of accepting school physical punishment.

The main communication of this part we tried to provide is that certain cultural values and childrearing ideologies can help to clarify how they were misinterpreted within the framework of school physical punishment. This may assist in making a better distinction between respect and absolute obedience. As Friedman argues, in talking about authority we not only need to distinguish between the legitimate and illegitimate use of coercion but between coerced obedience and non-coerced deferential obedience (Friedman, 1990: 62). Through school physical punishment, it has helped us to understand the authority of the teachers. The finding of this study also reflected that students regarded teachers as being in authority to inflict pain by virtue of 'a right to do so'. Accordingly, if students resisted teachers' physical punishment, it could be considered as a culturally inappropriate act, challenging the authority of the teacher and a real threat to teachers' disciplinary rights.

Unsatisfactory academic performance

In Chen & Lin's study (1991), the reasons explained why teachers used physical punishment were unsatisfactory academic performance of pupils, misbehaviour of pupils and dignity of teachers being infringed (Chen & Lin, 1991: 33). Pupils in Taiwan are taught that obedience to teachers' demands is the normal, ubiquitous responsibility of being a student, since acquiring knowledge in school is seen as 'occupying the right spaces of childhood' (Ennew, 1998:21). Fulfilling the end of learning is seen as one of the pupils' responsibilities. Being beaten due to poor

academic performance was not identified as a degrading treatment. Instead, interviewees self blame themselves failing of fulfilling the duty to study hard. They were not conscious that school physical punishment should not be justified in the name of their best interests. Rather, there was an explicit connection between the effectiveness of physical punishment and marked improvement of academic performance. School physical punishment is considered deserved and pupils prepared themselves to accept the pain.

Limitations

The small sample study had limited generalizability of the findings. When few people are adopted as sample size, there is a danger of generalizing results from a small-scale study. Due to the limit of time and money costs, the age group in this study was drawn from university students. It would be too arbitrary to argue that results of this research can generalize to all student population of Taiwan in all age. Also, the limitation of the present study can be found in the selection of the sample. Sample selection from different groups such as teachers, parents or different educational background could possibly result different results. Therefore, I would rather cover detailed work with fewer people for the purpose of attracting academic attention to the issues of why school physical punishment is existed and why it is acceptable from young people's perspective rather trying to allow the generalization of results in the study (Rubin & Robin, 1995).

Some final thoughts

In the Chinese cultural context, it is desirable that teachers are to educate, to help bring out a child's ability and pass on a community's culture and instilling modes of behaviour (Parker-Jenkins, 1999). The question of why physical punishment still exists in Taiwanese school has been discussed for decades. Despite of researches exploring the practice of inappropriate physical discipline of children in various ways, proper understanding and awareness of this problem remains limited both at the governmental level and among the general public. Instead, it has been presented as inducing only a number of individual cases in which poor parenting or incompetence of teachers is the explanation. This study suggested that the failure to eliminate physical punishment of pupils was because both the public and the government have overlooked the social and cultural influences underlying acceptance of physical violence.

In interpreting the current findings, 91.5% of respondents disapproved the zero physical punishment policy could be implemented fully. The physical punishment ban was intended to increase awareness and early identification of excessive physical discipline and potential child physical abuse. If the government authority aims to implement the zero physical punishment policy effectively, actual knowledge of

students toward physical punishment should be understood. Recognizing attitude of accepting and approving the use of physical punishment as the disciplinary method is a good start to consider how to set a guideline to eliminating its occurrence. As discussed in Durrant (1999), one of the primary objectives to eliminating the use of physical punishment is to alter attitude toward the use of physical force with children. Not only teachers, school authorities but also students themselves should be targeted to alter the attitude of supporting physical punishment.

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