

Reading 12

Spoil the rod, spare the child

Salim Vally

Notes

Teachers often confuse authority with power, to use the distinction made at the beginning of Reading 11. Probably the most common means of wielding power (for teachers) has been the use of corporal punishment.

The following extract was taken from a two-part article in *The Educator's Voice*, published by SADTU. Vally briefly analyses some of the reasons for the popularity of corporal punishment among teachers in South Africa. Corporal punishment is of course now illegal in South Africa (as it is in many countries). However, it still has many supporters among teachers and parents.

Vally goes on to summarize a number of different research findings that indicate that corporal punishment has few, if any, educational advantages. Even if you feel inclined to question the research, the question remains: should professional teachers advocate a practice upon which so much doubt has been cast?

Reading

coercion: forcing someone to do something

[...] When it comes to discipline, the emphasis should be on capturing interest rather than on *coercion*, on building dignity and self-discipline, instead of being punitive.

[But] corporal punishment as a social practice has existed in South Africa for centuries and will be difficult to eradicate overnight. In the name of discipline, teacher and parental duty, character formation and religious precept, many educators were expected – if not compelled – to administer corporal punishment. During the apartheid years, Christian National Education, and later fundamental pedagogics, were the grounding in which compulsion, moulding, and corporal punishment were the ‘scientifically irrefutable’ way to educate children.

irrefutable: cannot be questioned or disproved

This edited excerpt is taken from Vally, S. 1998. ‘Spoil the rod, spare the child.’ *The Educator's Voice*. December 1998. 2(9): 4–5. South African Democratic Teacher's Union (SADTU).

[...] The tradition around corporal punishment has resulted in a significant number of parents, teachers, and principals *fervently* believing in its effectiveness, despite solid evidence to the contrary.

fervently: strongly, vigorously

[...] Many teachers see the abolition of corporal punishment as contributing to their loss of authority, particularly as they have not been introduced to effective methods of maintaining discipline. This factor – together with financial pressures, job insecurity, negative working environments, and huge numbers of pupils in the classroom – results in teachers working under very difficult and stressful circumstances.

The breakdown of control and displaced aggression on the part of some teachers is understandable, and these issues must be addressed. But learning theorists across the spectrum have expressed *unanimity* that corporal punishment *exacerbates* disciplinary problems in the long term. Countless studies across time and in many countries point to the harmful effects of corporal punishment on the pupil, the teachers, and society.

unanimity: complete agreement among a group

exacerbates: to make a situation worse

Summary of research on the effects of corporal punishment

- Corporal punishment tends to develop aggressive hostility – not self-discipline; it generates feelings of revenge and aggressiveness, and increases vandalism.
- It discourages the search for alternative means of discipline: it becomes a crutch supporting poor teaching. It narrows the options of educators and tarnishes the image of teaching.
- By striking a pupil, the teacher provides a model that violence is an acceptable way to express dissatisfaction and a legitimate way of resolving tensions; it teaches that inflicting pain and instilling fear is the proper way to power; some studies have pointed to the correlation between corporal punishment and wife battering as well as child abuse; the victims of beating and abuse often become the *perpetrators*.
- The same behaviour that may cause one teacher to turn to corporal punishment [...] may not even disturb another teacher, or may be handled in a different way.
- Physical punishment does not deter. Corporal punishment is usually administered to those who are accustomed to it and who accept it as routine, rather than a deterrent; some pupils even brag about it, using it as a badge of courage among their peers.
- Pupils generally focus on the beating, not the reasons behind it; the argument that punishment stops bad behaviour implies that such behaviour is stopped *for all time*. Yet the black books of high schools show the same pupils being beaten for the same offences by the same teachers over and

perpetrators: those who commit the wrongdoing

aversion: dislike, hatred

over again; corporal punishment contributes to a general *aversion* towards schools; it reduces the ability to concentrate; leads to distant student/teacher relations; restricts emotional development, self-esteem, and self-confidence; and it has been found to be an important factor contributing to truancy and dropping-out.

emulate: try to copy

inhibit: to restrict or prevent a process or an action

denigration: saying (or implying) that the learner is not very good, or that the learner's efforts are not worthy of attention

- Supporters of corporal punishment believe it should be used in order for pupils to respect teachers, but respect is developed when pupils appreciate that teachers have skills from which they can learn, or have qualities they can admire or *emulate*. The ability to frighten or bully does not instil respect; respect through fear may *inhibit* behaviour in the physical presence of the person in authority, *but it evaporates when the person is no longer present*.
- There is a perception that psychological ill-treatment in the form of humiliation, insults, *denigration*, and intimidation is more harmful in the long term than a swift smack. This is probably true. Yet those who physically ill-treat pupils are, fairly predictably, *also* mistreating them psychologically; there is no doubt that psychological abuse is highly undesirable; the point is not to substitute psychological abuse for physical abuse, or vice versa.