

Physical Punishment Must Be Abolished

Roosevelt Ratliff

When I was a beginning high school teacher and football coach in the Tulsa, Oklahoma, Public Schools, I was often asked to punish disruptive students. In my unsolicited role as paddle-swinger I was often embarrassed for others to hear the repeated echoes of wood-to-flesh resounding in the boys' restroom. Like most beginning professionals I was dedicated, energetic, and determined to succeed. I had no idea that I was probably doing more harm than good.

Corporal punishment is a long-established method of discipline in American schools. Anchored deeply in Judeo-Christian beliefs about child-rearing, it began in colonial times when the common response to disobedient children was literally to "beat the devil out of them." The general attitude was that misbehaving children were inhabited by evil spirits and had to be physically exorcised (Radbill, 1974).

Modern educators may not believe in spirits, but many of them continue to believe in paddling. A national survey of teachers conducted by Mary Ann Levine (1978) in cooperation with Harold G. Shane found that about one-third of those responding opposed the use of corporal punishment in all instances. Forty-six percent opposed use of corporal punishment except as a response to bodily assault. Levine concluded that sentiment in favor of paddling may be diminishing among teachers.

Nevertheless, the majority of educators and other adults apparently continues to support the practice. Perhaps the most comprehen-



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sive state survey on the subject in recent years was conducted in Pennsylvania by Reardon and Reynolds (1975). Of the 292 school districts responding, 269 officially approved the use of corporal punishment, 16 prohibited it, and seven were undecided. Opinions of the six groups surveyed are shown in Figure 1.

Although the actual use of corporal punishment was not strongly advocated, most respondents, except students, wanted it to be available. The reasons given were:

It will cause changes in behavior. Students learn self-discipline from it. It can be less harmful than some other forms of humiliation. There are situa-

tions where it is the most appropriate technique. It is the only thing that will work with some students. There is no harmful effect on student attitudes. Its elimination could seriously affect the learning atmosphere in the school (p. 24).

Is It Good for Students?

Such views no longer go unquestioned. The most common ones are examined by Clarizio (1975). First, there is a general belief that physical punishment is good for the development of students' moral character, sense of personal responsibility, and self-discipline. Challenging this assumption, Bongiovanni (1977) maintains that corporal punishment is counterproductive to the welfare of students and antithetical to the goals of education. Feshbach and Feshbach (1973) contend that various forms of psychopathy in children are positively correlated with the degree of physical punishment they have received.

Bandura and Walters (1963) found that children learn aggressive behavior by imitating the aggressive acts of others. McCandless (1977) interprets such studies to mean that

... children imitate or model

Figure 1. Attitudes Toward Corporal Punishment*

	% Favor	% Opposed	% Not Sure
School Board Presidents	81	12	6
Principals	78	13	8
Administrators	68	25	6
Teachers	74	16	9
Parents	71	21	7
Total Adults	75	17	8
Students	25	51	25

* Reardon and Reynolds, 1975, pp. 7-8.

upon aggressive adults; thus the finding is reasonable that arbitrary and unreasonable methods of control and high levels of physical punishment are associated with aggressive child behavior (p. 152).

One does not have to be a psychologist to believe that the aggressive behavior exhibited by increasing numbers of today's youth is related to physical and other forms of questionable punishment they receive in school. Student vandalism, robbery, attacks on teachers and other students, and hostility towards school authority reflect aggression students experience at home and/or in school. A massive study of school violence by the National Institute of Education found a high correlation between physical punishment and violent behavior of students (*Violent Schools*, 1978, pp. 146-47).

The Only Thing They Understand?

A second common assumption explored by Clarizio is that corporal punishment serves as the only recourse in the maintenance of order; that the paddle is the only thing some students understand. This belief is fairly common in some rural schools that tend to follow tradition more than others, and in large urban schools that use corporal punishment mainly to expedite handling large numbers of discipline cases (Schumacher, 1971).

The best evidence that discipline can be maintained without resorting to violence is the small but growing number of states and school districts that have abandoned use of corporal punishment (Friedman and Hyman, 1977). New Jersey and Massachusetts have banned it entirely, and in Maine, educators may use physical force only for compelling reasons, such as self-defense or removal of a disruptive student.

A survey of 58 school districts representing approximately two

million students reported to have abolished corporal punishment was conducted by the Temple University based National Center for the Study of Corporal Punishment and Alternatives in the Schools. Twenty-two percent of the schools said it was eliminated because it was ineffective. Other frequently stated causes included community pressure, reactions to bad incidents, legal or administrative decisions, and the use of more effective means of discipline. Less common reasons were protection from lawsuits, a conviction that corporal punishment was inhumane, and a commitment to student rights. Eleven percent of the districts eliminated corporal punishment in direct response to state laws while 89 percent ended it by vote of the school board¹ (Farley and others, 1977).

Corporal punishment illuminates what I call the grand paradox of American public school education. What we teach in our schools often differs from how we teach it; there is a disparity between content and process. Schools teach stu-

dents they have certain inviolable rights, including protection from cruel and unusual punishment guaranteed by the eighth amendment and the right to due process as expressed in the fourteenth amendment. But when they punish students, they often deny them these rights. Therefore corporal punishment represents a major obstacle to achieving democracy and social justice in schools.

Unequal Treatment

Furthermore, a select group of students are the most frequent recipients of corporal punishment (Bakan, 1970; and Polier and others, 1974). A 1975 survey in the Miami, Florida, schools found that two-thirds of those punished were black even though blacks were only

¹A state court of appeals in St. Louis, Missouri, has ruled that school boards in that state do not have authority to ban the use of corporal punishment. "May School Boards Ban Corporal Punishment?" *School Law Letter* 7, 2 (July 1978), Missouri School Boards Association.



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about one-fourth of the student population (Maurer, 1977). A survey of 116 schools in the states of Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia found that black and other minority male students received a significantly higher proportion of punishment than their white peers. The same held true for black females compared to white females (Glackman and others, 1978).

Race and ethnicity play an important part in who gets punished. A broader implication hinges on class and social stratification; if a student is poor, his or her chances of receiving physical punishment are about four to five times greater than those of a student who is not.

The problem is not that these students are singled out for punishment, but that the negative self-image many bring with them to school is inadvertently reinforced. Students begin to see the school as their enemy, and their achievement is affected.

Physical Violence Is Never "Reasonable"

The evidence suggests that physical punishment does not result in improved behavior and that it can be harmful to students both physically and mentally. Faced with the threat of universal nuclear holocaust and knowing the history of domestic strife among our citizenry, schools must not continue the use of archaic methods of discipline that provide models of aggression for students to emulate.

At a time when school violence is high and the public is demanding better discipline, the argument to abolish the hickory stick for more constructive methods of discipline

may not appear convincing. Nevertheless, we must not overlook the disturbing fact that students are the only citizens in our society subject to physical punishment by law. The question is not what punishment is "reasonable" and what is "unreasonable" as some court rulings suggest, but whether the use of physical violence on students affronts democratic values and infringes on individual rights. I believe it does.

Recognizing the validity of this position, some schools have dispensed completely with use of corporal punishment. Impeded by constraints and limitations, others discourage the practice. For those who believe our schools should reflect the democratic values they are supposed to teach, this is an encouraging sign. I share the optimism of those committed to transforming the school into a humane and just institution that refuses to condone violence toward those to whom our future is entrusted. *[E]*

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