



## The dilemma of corporal punishment for teachers in two South African primary schools

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### Abstract

Corporal punishment continues to be used, albeit as a contested and abolished practice in South African schools. Using the theoretical framework of dilemmatic spaces, this article explores the various factors that created dilemmas and contestations for teachers about the practice of corporal punishment. Data were generated through qualitative, narrative semi-structured interviews. Seven teachers, teaching at two primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa were purposively selected. The study employed the interpretivist paradigm to foreground participants' subjective voices. The findings indicate the dilemma of corporal punishment is ever present and influenced by various contextual, ideological, religious, cultural and personal factors, that make it difficult for teachers to determine the correct response. The dilemma of corporal punishment is complex and multi-layered and teachers' decisions ultimately rest on pragmatism rather than moral reasoning about its use. Thus, the findings suggest that corporal punishment may persist unless deeper understanding of the complexity that surrounds teachers' professional lives are explored. The study calls for developing contextual understandings of how corporal punishment creates dilemmas for teachers' professional and personal identities and practices. Such understandings are essential for creating effective and humane interventions at individual, institutional and systemic levels that address the complex factors influencing teachers' practices.

**Keywords:** Context, corporal punishment, culture, dilemmas, ideology, religion

### Introduction

Teaching is a complex process influenced by a variety of factors ranging from personal beliefs to broader socio-political issues. These factors often create dilemmas that force teachers to critically question their practices about what it means to be a teacher (Ding & Wang, 2018). Such dilemmas are particularly evident when teachers are expected to adapt and respond to policy initiatives like Inclusive Education or professional guidelines governing the Curriculum and Assessment policy. In responding to policy demands, dilemmas emerge where teachers' professional responsibilities and ethical actions are constrained leaving them uncertain about their professional judgement. For example, when attempting to accommodate classroom diversity, teachers' knowledge of inclusive education is limited (Molbaek, 2018) and their pedagogical strategies are inadequate (Bertram, Mthiyane &

Naidoo, 2021). The dilemma of juggling policy obligations, while remaining professionally agential and ethically responsive to diverse learners' needs (Molla & Nolan, 2020), often leaves teachers uncertain about the "right thing to do" (Honig, 1994, p. 572).

This paper examines specific dilemmas that corporal punishment creates for teachers in two South African primary schools. The South African context is characterised by high violence and crime rates, deepening socio-economic challenges, and where the persistent use of corporal punishment in schools exists, particularly in previously marginalised schools (Makhasane & Chikoko, 2016; Mayisela, 2018; Mncube & Dube, 2019; Mahlangu, Chirwa, Machisa, Sikweyiya, Shai & Jewkes, 2021). However, corporal punishment is prohibited by the South African Schools Act of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996) with the Department of Education proposing

alternative strategies to corporal punishment (DoE, 2000a).

Existing research on corporal punishment focuses primarily on explaining its persistence or proposing prevention strategies. For example, international researchers refer to religion, culture and socialisation practices to explain its persistence in both home and educational contexts (Font & Gershoff, 2017; Cuartas, 2021; Heekes, Kruger, Lester & Ward, 2022). South African research particularly emphasises social and structural influences associated with race and class factors to explain teachers continued use of corporal punishment (Makhasane & Chikoko, 2016; Mayisela, 2018). Additionally, Hunter and Morrell (2021) explored how parents and community beliefs about corporal punishment contributes to its persistence. As a way to prevent corporal punishment Makhasane and Chikoko's (2016) research suggests that teachers be used as assets to challenge corporal punishment usage, whilst Mayisela (2018) calls for teacher psychological support to unlearn historical socialisation practices that regard corporal punishment as the only viable means to maintain discipline.

Despite this growing body of knowledge on corporal punishment internationally and nationally, significant gaps remain. Current research has not adequately examined how teachers experience corporal punishment as a complex dilemma where daily interactions with parents, learners, extended community, religion, culture and ideology have to be continually negotiated. Further, research has not sufficiently detailed the dilemmas that emerge when corporal punishment policies conflict with contextual realities. This study addresses these gaps by exploring corporal punishment as a complex dilemma from teachers' perspectives. It examines how teachers navigate the tensions between local contextual influences including cultural, religious, historical norms and practices, alongside policy imperatives. Specifically, the study aims to: i) identify the underlying factors that contribute to the dilemma teachers face in relation to corporal punishment, and ii) explore how they justify their decisions regarding corporal punishment within the school and community context. This study

contributes to understanding corporal punishment as an ethical dilemma that remains persistently unresolved.

In the sections that follow, corporal punishment is first defined and contextualised as a global concern. Thereafter, corporal punishment is presented as a dilemma within the South African context, highlighting various paradoxes and contestations that surround corporal punishment in schools particularly plagued by poor educational outcomes and numerous social challenges (Makhasane & Chikoko, 2016). The methodological approach is then presented, demonstrating how examining teachers' thoughts, beliefs and practices of corporal punishment in two South African primary schools offers insights into this ongoing dilemma. Finally, the paper promotes deeper understanding of teacher professional lives, positioning corporal punishment as an ever-present and unresolved dilemma.

## Literature review

### *Defining and contextualising corporal punishment*

Corporal punishment is defined as disciplinary action in which physical force is used to inflict pain or discomfort, however slight (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Studies have shown that this practice can manifest itself in various forms, such as pinching, kicking, hitting and shaking, and can also lead to emotional and psychological harm (Breen, Daniels & Tomlinson, 2015; Ogando Portela & Pells, 2015; Mayisela, 2018; Glaser, 2019).

Corporal punishment persists globally, despite been banned in many countries. More alarming is that even where legal prohibition occurs, the practice continues (Breen et al., 2015; Ogando Portela & Pells, 2015; Heekes et al., 2022), revealing a disconnect between policy intentions and practical realities. The persistence of corporal punishment is attributed to historical legacies of colonial rule and apartheid that normalised violence as an acceptable cultural norm (Tafa, 2002; Morrell, 2001; Novelli & Sayed, 2016; Tiwari, 2019). This has thus created

resistance to policy changes despite evidence of long-term detrimental effects on learners, including damaged teacher-student relationships (Mayisela, 2018), increased psychosocial trauma (Gershoff, 2017; Heekes et al., 2022) and poor learning outcomes (Oganda Portela & Pells, 2015). Despite these negative consequences on learners, it is surprising that such a large number of learners across the world still experience corporal punishment (Veriava & Power, 2017; Reyneke, 2018; Heekes et al., 2022). These contradictions suggest that current research while documenting consequences of corporal punishment fail to unpack the complex dynamics sustaining these practices. This article addresses this gap by exploring this paradox as an ongoing dilemma that teachers navigate daily.

### *The dilemma of corporal punishment for teachers in South African schools*

Corporal punishment continues to be a contentious issue in South African education, despite its legal prohibition (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Mahlangu et al. (2021) notes that corporal punishment is a key disciplinary tool particularly in schools that cater for poor, working-class learners, with persistent beliefs by teachers that it is the most effective means to ensure discipline. Current scholarship on corporal punishment in South Africa has emerged from multiple disciplines such as psychology, leadership, education and human rights perspectives (Makhasane & Chikoko, 2016; Mayisela, 2018; Hunter & Morrell, 2021). However, this research has not fully explored how teachers experience corporal punishment as a multifaceted dilemma influenced by cultural heritage, historical legacies, religion and human rights and competing policy imperatives.

South Africa's apartheid legacy has contributed to the entrenchment of corporal punishment as a "teaching tool" (Mayisela, 2018, p. 294), where teachers are caught between historically grounded practices and current policy directives. The National Education Policy Act of 1996 explicitly prohibits corporal punishment in educational institutions (Republic of South Africa, 1996). However, statistics show that the practice persists. Approximately 1.3 million learners in

South African schools reported being subjected to corporal punishment (Reyneke, 2018). The unintended consequence is that blame is shifted to teachers without addressing the structural determinants of violence, to explain its continued persistence (Hunter & Morrell, 2021). The expectation that policy can immediately change deeply ingrained belief systems is seemingly unlikely, as policy changes often fail to reflect classroom realities (Zembylas, Charalambous, Charalambous & Kendeou, 2011). Teachers bring their own ideological and personal beliefs about corporal punishment into their classroom that may contradict policy and threaten their identities.

The South African Department of Education has attempted to support teachers towards transformation; however, teachers have questioned these initiatives. Alternative approaches, such as the Safe Schools Initiative (Department of Education, 2015), or the use of detention as an alternative to corporal punishment are viewed with scepticism by teachers. In a study conducted by Mayisela (2021, p.2) teachers argued that the Department of Education initiatives have left them deskilled and viewed the removal of corporal punishment as eliminating a "functional tool." Additionally, the absence of clear definitions of what constitutes corporal punishment compounds accountability challenges, creating conflicting messages that exacerbate teachers' loss of authority.

It is crucial to consider context as a determinant of the prevalence of corporal punishment. Oganda Portela and Pells' (2015) longitudinal study across Ethiopia, India, Vietnam and Peru shows how high-poverty environments, combined with a lack of resources and inadequate teacher training, correlates with increased violence, a finding that points to systemic constraints. Within such high-need contexts, Hunter and Morrell (2021) found that corporal punishment serves two functions: viz to negotiate scarce resources and to maintain generational authority. Thus, positioning corporal punishment as a human rights violation in such contexts holds little traction.

The complex relationship between parents and teachers adds another layer of

complexity that current research treats superficially. The tacit approval of corporal punishment, particularly in more authoritarian households, creates conflicting expectations for teachers and their practices (Morrell, 2001; Ntshwarang & Sewpaul, 2021). Hunter and Morrell's (2021) finding that black African cultures distinguish between assault and beating with the latter regarded as more culturally acceptable. This reveals how teachers must navigate not only policy requirements but also parental cultural expectations. Moreover, the ideological hegemony of deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and practices persist where for elders (including teachers of the same culture) within communities, the use of corporal punishment is about the assertion of authority. In the current context of prevailing emphasis on children rights (Ntshwarang & Sewpaul, 2021), parents and teacher struggle to retain authority and thus hold onto enduring cultural beliefs and practices.

### ***The expanding roles and functions of teachers in South Africa***

The challenges facing South African education, particularly extreme social and educational inequality, have profound implications for the role of teachers. Key policies such as the Norms and Standards (DoE, 2000b); White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) and the Tirisano Plan of Action (DoE, 2003) have expanded the role of teachers to include tasks that were traditionally associated with families (Martin & Amin, 2020; Morrow, 2007; Hoadley, 2009). As a result, teachers function not only as teachers but also as social workers, counsellors and psychologists, especially in high-needs settings.

Alongside this policy expansion, teachers struggle with the paradoxes of corporal punishment. For example, policy guidelines position teachers as quasi-parents, however, teachers face ethical dilemmas in implementing this role. Additionally, the duality of their role - as both teachers and quasi-parents — presents a challenge in high-need contexts, further complicated by changing social norms and ethical discourses about corporal punishment as a human rights violation (Mitchell, Crowson & Schipps, 2011, Burchell, 2018). While teachers are

expected to act as surrogate parents, giving them a perceived right to corporal punishment, they also face societal norms that increasingly reject such methods. The problems are exacerbated by deteriorating working conditions and declining social respect for teachers which consequently affects teacher morale and their ability to enforce discipline (Novelli & Sayed, 2016).

The relationship between teachers and learners is further destabilised by the increase in physical and cyber-bullying against teachers. This has spilled into murder, where TimesLive in 2022 reported the fatal shooting of a teacher by a learner. Increased violence in schools have led to researchers likening teaching to the dangerous work done by the police force (Mthanti, 2023). These incidents not only challenge the premise of *in loco parentis*, but also undermines teacher's ability to enforce discipline, further complicating their role. Teachers find themselves caught between expectations to act as surrogate parents while operating within restrictive policy frameworks that limit their perceived disciplinary option, thus leading to disempowerment and feelings of uncertainty.

The use of corporal punishment also divides researchers' opinions. While some have highlighted its negative effects, others attribute violence against teachers to students' moral decline (Reyneke, 2018) and inadequate parental guidance where violence is learned behaviour (Venketsamy, Baxen & Hu, 2023). These perspectives cannot be understood without considering larger socio-economic factors such as poverty and crime that influence these practices (Oganda Portela & Pells, 2015). Furthermore, parental endorsement of corporal punishment and its acceptance by students as a means to academic success (Morrow & Singh, 2014) is indicative of a broader societal problem. The complexity of teachers' evolving roles in South Africa reveals a fundamental limitation of policy reform. While legislation may alter formal practices, it rarely transforms underlying attitudes and beliefs that sustain corporal punishment. This disconnect creates persistent tensions between policy expectations and contextual realities, leaving teachers navigating competing demands from different stakeholders. Consequently, corporal

punishment emerges not as a problem to be solved through policy imperatives, but as an ongoing professional dilemma that reflects deeper contradictions within the South African educational system.

### Theoretical framework

To understand the persistence of corporal punishment as an ever-present dilemma for teachers teaching within a poverty-stricken context, I draw on the theoretical concept of dilemmatic spaces by Honig (1994) and Fransson and Grannäs (2013). As defined by Honig (1994, p. 568), dilemmas are ethically based conflicts between “values, obligations or commitments” for which there is no final solution. These dilemmas are located in ‘dilemmatic spaces’, which are described as social constructions influenced by structural conditions and relational aspects (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013). Within education, dilemmas occur in everyday relations that exist in a schooling context. Teachers daily relate and interact with parents, colleagues, learners and policies, where ideas, practices, values and beliefs can cause contestation which results in dilemmas for teachers on an individual and social level. Thus, dilemmas are always present in the everyday lives of people.

Fransson and Grannäs (2013) indicate that in using the concept of dilemmatic spaces, it is possible to examine the interconnection between teachers as individuals and the schooling context with its various influences like history, culture, religion and ideology. Moreover, it becomes conceivable to understand how teachers are positioned or position themselves in order to negotiate contextual influences on their practices and decision making. In attempting to understand a highly contentious issue like corporal punishment, that is underpinned by competing ideologies, religious idioms, policy regulations and cultural practices, teachers often find themselves in a dilemmatic situation without knowing what is the correct way to respond. The correct decision is a challenging process as teachers are aware that whatever decision they make affects them on a personal and professional level, as well as others within the schooling context.

Additionally, Fransson and Grannäs (2013, p.7) indicate that “a dilemmas cannot be fully solved without leaving some reminder” and this means that teachers have to make compromises. When compromising, teachers need to consider the range of options and interests available to in order to make a decision. Further, dilemmas are never fully resolved and are instead only managed. The compromise for teachers when it comes to corporal punishment may be between the loss of professional authority and identity versus the potential loss of their jobs. The result is that in managing the dilemma, it will continually emerge at a different time and with different compromises. What the theory of dilemmatic spaces allows one to do, is to examine the dilemmas and the associated decision-making processes that form part of teachers everyday relational lives and practices. Further, Chen, Wei and Jiang (2017) indicate that the concept of dilemmatic spaces allows researchers to examine not only the complexity of the phenomenon but also teachers’ attempts to negotiate and renegotiate the contestations and contradictions implicit in any ethical dilemma.

### Methods

To understand the complexity of the phenomenon of corporal punishment, a qualitative narrative approach was used to generate rich in-depth data. Narrative data excerpts used in this study come from a doctoral study undertaken by the author that explored teachers’ practices of social justice and equity within deeply unequal contexts. Qualitative researchers Cohen, Manion and Morrison, (2018) and Creswell, (2008) indicate that qualitative approach is valuable as it allows for personal engagement between a researcher and the participants within a natural setting to occur. This is important for understanding a phenomenon like corporal punishment, where participants’ experiences, ideas and behaviours are recognised as complex, contradictory and meaningful (Reich, 2021). Connelly and Clandinin (1990), Cobbold, (2015) and Mohajan (2018) also provide insight into the value of narrative inquiry that proved appropriate to explore corporal punishment. For these authors, narrative inquiry makes visible the personal situated world of participants and reveals the

interconnected nature of context, subjective interpretation and experience. This methodological choice provided the base in which to understand the dilemma of corporal punishment influenced by various contextual factors that ultimately created dilemmas for teachers in the two schools.

This study adopted the interpretivist paradigm which according to Guba and Lincoln (1989) focuses on understanding individuals experiences and interpretations of the world. A researcher working within this paradigm foregrounds the voices of the participants. This was an appropriate choice particularly for exploring how the dilemma of corporal punishment is understood and experienced by teachers in this study.

The study took place in two schools located in historically disadvantaged black, African townships in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The two schools reflect the social, cultural, historical and racialised landscape and provide contextually specific details into the ways in which these factors coalesce to produce dilemmas for teachers about the practice of corporal punishment. Both the schools are public co-educational schools and had a learner population of over 1200. The schools catered for grades 1-7. The learners come from low socio-economic backgrounds and reflect the socio-economic status of the surrounding community.

### ***Sampling strategy***

Purposive and availability sampling were used for the study, focusing on teachers of mathematics and English from two primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal. The seven participants were between 25 and 55 years old and all of Black, African descent. It should be noted that the findings are context-specific and not generalisable. 4 were male and 3 females who taught from Grades 4-7. The sample of seven participants were those who had volunteered to be part of the study.

### ***Data generation instruments.***

Data generation was guided by the research aims: to identify the underlying factors that contribute to the dilemmas teachers face in relation to corporal punishment as well as how

they justify their decisions regarding corporal punishment. In this study, the primary data generation tool used was semi-structured interviews. Data was generated in two rounds of narrative interviews over six months, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Narrative interviews foreground the voices of participants (Bryne, 2017) where their sense and meaning making is privileged (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The choice of in-depth semi-structured interviews therefore proved invaluable as it offered the flexibility to gain in-depth rich self-stories about corporal punishment and its influences from participants. The interviews were conducted in English, as preferred by the participants, and were recorded with their consent. All interviews took place after school hours, either at the school or in their homes.

### ***Data analysis***

Thematic analysis strategies as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012) were used to analyse and interpret the narrative data. After multiple readings, the text was coded inductively to allow the data to speak for itself and then to identify common patterns. These patterns were then categorised and further reduced, leading to the emergence of key themes that summarise the complex interplay of factors influencing teachers' attitudes to corporal punishment.

### ***Ethical approval***

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education. Further, informed consent was gained from the School Governing Body, the Principals of the schools and the participants before the commencement of the study. Participation was voluntary and participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study or to refuse to answer questions that were uncomfortable. Confidentiality was assured and identities protected through the use of pseudonyms chosen by participants themselves. The findings are discussed in the next section

### Results

#### *Sources of dilemmas in teachers' relational roles*

The findings from the narrative interviews reveal three main sources of dilemmas faced by teachers in poor educational settings: teachers' relational roles, the intersection of culture, politics and persuasion and the influence of Christianity.

#### *The complex relational roles of teachers*

The extracts from the teachers' narratives highlight the complex roles they have to take on due to the spatial and contextual demands of their work environment and the lives of their students. Ghettoh summed up this feeling by saying, *"You have to be a nurse, a teacher, a social worker and a mother."* Evange echoed this, adding, *"a counsellor, a friend and someone to turn to and talk to."* B.V. emphasised the need to approach students' problems like a parent: *"I have to take care of their problems like a parent and not like a teacher... you give them attention and support when they have problems."*

In these poverty-stricken contexts, where problems such as crime, unemployment and lack of parental engagement are commonplace, the role of teachers expands to fill the gaps traditionally covered by trained professionals such as psychologists and health workers. Such role expansions are not voluntary, but enforced by the context in which these teachers work. Joel reinforced this by saying, *"They are my children too. I have to treat them the way I treat my own children,"* while Sthe and Zippo explained that they often act as *'father figures'* and in some cases even as *'doctors'*. What emerges from the data is that the roles teachers take on are in direct correlation to what teachers perceive as necessary because of contextual demands. It depicts the relationships that they are required to have with learners. By taking on these various roles, in particular the role of quasi-parents (Hunter & Morrell, 2021), teachers are thus obligated not only for the education of learners but also for their well-being. It thus extends their professional roles to include personal roles and responsibilities.

#### *Ideological and relational tensions*

Teachers not only take these roles described above seriously, but also grapple with the complexities and dilemmas associated with them. For example, the role of educator creates tensions between their professional and parental roles. Ghettoh described her dilemma by asking, *"If a parent is afraid to discipline a child, how can I?... Parents have a bigger role to play in their children's lives..... they expect teachers to do their job."* Ghettoh's narrative highlights the dilemma she experiences between parents' expectations and her own professional responsibilities. Together these intensify the dilemma of corporal punishment for Ghettoh who finds it difficult to negotiate and respond effectively when forced into the disciplinary role by parents who are *'afraid'* to discipline their children. With forcing teachers to become disciplinarians, parents are also shifting the consequences for infractions onto teachers as well.

Teachers also described the dilemmatic tension that arises when confronted with students' rights. Ghettoh emphasises that the students' rights discourse is learned at a very young age causing uncertainty surrounding her role as teacher and parent, *"if I give a small [smack] they and even my own grandchildren will say 10111."*

Ngubs describes his frustration as the student's rights discourse causes him to lose confidence in his professional knowledge of how to discipline, *"I asked myself, 'What are these mechanisms we can use to discipline a child?'.... What is a good, what is a good punishment?"* His disillusionment is evident as he faces the paradox of being an authority figure whose authority is constantly undermined. These utterances by Ghettoh and Ngubs illustrate how the rights discourse has become ideologically conflictual with their professional knowledge and the knowledge that they have of the community within which they teach and live. The result is uncertain teachers who question their professional ability. Thus, corporal punishment is both blight and benefit and demonstrate the interplay between societal and individual level ideas. The consequences for these teachers are that they are

uncertain of what is the right way in which to act (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013).

### ***Risks and effects***

The narratives also pointed to serious consequences for teachers who attempt to fulfil these complex roles. Sthe and Ngubs emphasised the precariousness of their situation and pointed out that the use of corporal punishment put their jobs at risk. Sthe said, “*It’s the fear that you might lose your job... I have to deal with it,*” while Ngubs added, “*We were warned about it. So, we don’t do that because it is tricky now... It’s difficult to be that parent for them.*”

Sthe and Ngubs’ utterances illuminate the fear and confusion when trying to decide what is the best course of action. The role imposed on them makes it difficult to carry out what they believe are the duties of parents as well and what can be considered professional suicide. Not knowing how to act causes a dilemma for these teachers.

### **The teacher’s dilemma: the intersection of culture, politics and persuasion in the use of corporal punishment**

#### ***Cultural influences and community expectations***

Teachers face a dilemma between cultural expectations, policies and their personal experiences when it comes to corporal punishment. As the field observations and interviews show, community cultural norms play an important role in shaping teachers’ beliefs.

Ngubs explains, “*For African [communities], corporal punishment is effective because we are used to it at home. So, in a way, it is effective for us as Black, because we are used to that, even if it is banned by the government.*”

Ngubs points to the history of structural violence by the apartheid government, as African communities are ‘*used to it at home.*’ The patented use of corporal punishment extended into the schooling system reinforces and reproduces the belief that the practice is *effective* and should be continued despite the prohibition of it in policy and legislation. The ‘ideological cachet’ (Kurian, 2020, p. 198) of corporal punishment being

historical, cultural and effective thus ensures it longevity.

### ***Deeply held beliefs among teachers***

Further justifications teachers cite for using corporal punishment often correspond to their internalised beliefs. These beliefs are based on their own experiences as children subjected to such punishment. As BV explains, “*We used to think that the cane steers the child. That is ingrained in my mind.*” Commenting on the challenge of adapting to the new political environment, Sthe says: “*Nowadays, the Constitution says corporal punishment has been abolished. You have to abide by that, even if ‘he who spares the rod, spoils the child’.*” The use of the word ‘ingrained’ suggests the powerful intergenerational influence of apartheid and colonialist ideology that underpin the appeal of corporal punishment (Kurian, 2020). These deeply ingrained beliefs are contrary to the Constitution of South Africa and current human rights discourse. The imperatives of the Constitution force Sthe to reluctantly ‘abide’ by its rules despite his personal judgement belief that failing to use corporal punishment results in learners’ poor behaviour. In such instances the directives of policy cause Sthe in particular to question his personal and professional judgement as he is unable to reconcile what is the best practice.

### ***Parental attitude towards punishment***

Parents in the community not only support corporal punishment but insist on it, especially if they consider their children “*naughty*” According to Evange, parents in the community are “*very, very strict.*” This insistence reinforces teachers’ belief in the practice, so they feel justified in upholding it as a cultural norm. Zippo adds that parents often encourage its use in school: “*When you call them to school, they say, ‘Use corporal punishment; why don’t you use it when I tell you to?’*” Teachers feel caught between community support and political restrictions, leading to complex justifications for their practices. These statements reflect empirical evidence that indicate that corporal punishment is a cultural practice endorsed by Black, African

parents and communities (Makhasane & Chikoko, 2016; Makhasane & Mthembu, 2019).

### *The influence of Christianity*

All the teachers interviewed claimed to be devout Christians and invoked biblical teachings to justify their use of corporal punishment. Evange explains, *“My values are the Bible. In the Zulu version it says, ‘The cane will never kill a child.’”* BV uses Christian texts to argue that discipline is a religiously sanctioned practice, saying, *“Even Jesus disciplined people who misbehaved.”* Further, she shows the role she has to play as a steward to the teachings of Jesus, stating *“We put in their minds that the stick is the one that directs the child.”* Evange is also a minister in the church and regards himself as a shepherd of God who has the moral obligation to guide learners using corporal punishment. He states: *“Corporal punishment is channelled into love and discipline so that they are reminded that they are here to study. But not to beat a child until she bleeds.”* Evange’s view positions corporal punishment as a well-intentioned strategy meant to promote learning.

However, the use of religious and cultural justifications raises ethical and pedagogical problems that has consequences. For example, BV, mentions that the Christian approach sometimes means that punishment *“is done in an unfair way, such as putting them on the floor so they feel the pain and do the work.”* This coincides with research showing that corporal punishment can lead to an association of learning with violence and fear (for example: Morrow & Singh, 2014; Makhasane & Chikoko, 2016; Tiwari, 2019).

### **Discussion**

This study explored the various factors that position corporal punishment as an ever-present dilemma for teachers and how they justify their decisions about corporal punishment. The findings also show the complicated dynamics that arise when teachers consider the use of corporal punishment, particularly in relation to their decision-making processes. Using Fransson and Grannäs’ theoretical framework, the study identifies different elements — material, interactional, contextual and ideological — that

lead to internal conflict in educational settings and determined how teachers made their decisions about their professional lives. These elements not only influence teachers’ perceptions of their professional duties, but also shape their professional and personal identities. The findings underline the multi-layered complexity associated with the decision for or against the use of corporal punishment.

The study highlights the interplay of context, ideology and interpersonal relationships that poses a dilemma for teachers, concurring with Fransson and Grannäs’ (2013, p. 14) claim that a people’s experiences of dilemmas are always in “in relation to surrounding structures (laws, regulations, rules, codes of conduct... power issues, norms and values... thus dilemmas become more like positions than situations and more like positioning than problem solving”. Findings suggest that teachers respond to their immediate pedagogical context and often adopt roles they deem necessary, in particular the parental role, which is also shaped by policy directives and their own personal and professional beliefs about their commitment to learners. Similar to studies conducted by Easthope and Easthope (2000), Wood (2019) and Martin and Amin (2020), the moral obligation to take on the parental role results in the intensification and extension of teachers’ work. The additional roles and responsibilities become part of an unwritten script that insidiously guides teachers into performing the attributes of a parent who cares and who also disciplines, to demonstrate that they are ‘good teachers’ responsive to the demands of context.

However, the contextual teachers’ roles — as parent, disciplinarian and educator are fraught with tensions and contradictions. While teachers are expected to perform parental duties, defined as in loco parentis, their responsibilities are constrained by both policy directives and the expectations of students and their actual parents. The narrative excerpts of teachers such as Ghettoh and Ngubs for example reveal a relational landscape characterised by power dynamics that they perceive as disempowering. In examining the parental role, findings reveal that it is ambiguous and full of contradictions, creating an illusion of disciplinary authority that quickly dissolves upon

closer examination. Teachers face legal consequences and the loss of their professional standing, which exacerbates their sense of powerlessness and puts their professional identity at risk. Scholars such as Ritchie and Wilson (2000); Day, Kingston, Stobart and Sammons (2006); Thomas and Beauchamp (2010) and Fransson and Grannäs (2013) emphasise the intertwining of personal and professional identity. However, the interconnectedness of the personal and professional result is a conflicted professional identity, one of both authority and vulnerability, struggling for legitimacy. Within such a context, teachers find it difficult to negotiate corporal punishment unable to decide how they 'ought' to position themselves (Fransson, 2016).

At the same time, teachers find themselves in a tangled hierarchy of power involving not only policy and normative values and rules but also students and parents, which adds to the dilemmatic tensions. For parents, teachers are mere instruments – forcing them to act as parents without the safety net associated with corporal punishment as a parent. For students, they are a potential tool to threaten job security. In this relational space, teachers struggle to determine the best disciplinary practice particularly when intervention strategies from the Department of Education are not effective (Hunter & Morrell, 2021; Mayisela, 2021). Similar to findings from Segalo and Rambuda (2018) and Novelli and Sayed (2016), teachers encounter a corrosion of their status that de-professionalises them. In such a situation, the teachers are unable to adapt to and navigate contextual expectations, human rights discourses and the associated altered power relationships with learners and parents (Maddamsetti, 2023). The dilemmas are complex, shaped by contextual issues and influenced by broader social, cultural and political pressures, and raise issues of critical importance for both policy and practice in education. Further, this complex web of relationships creates paradoxical and competing identities for teachers.

In addition, the study reveals ideological tensions that affect teachers' identities. The ideological tensions stem from teachers' religious and cultural beliefs. In relation to religion, a shared belief among teachers, based on the Christian

adage "he who spares the rod spoils the child," serves as a normative guide for their professional actions. The acceptance of this religious intergenerational religious maxim and historical thinking about the desirability of corporal punishment according to Kurian (2020) is what accounts for the persistence of corporal punishment and the association of schooling with fear for learners. Moreover, Evange's association of corporal punishment with love for better academic achievement may be viewed as well-intentioned albeit lacking in reflection of its consequences of its effects (Oganda Portela & Pells, 2015; Veriava & Power, 2017). What this also reveals is the deeply ingrained nature of religious socialisation. However, this is in contradiction to the current socio-political climate and human rights discourses which are in contradistinction to religious edicts and cause a dilemma for teachers. Both religious and historical influences limit teachers' choices and lead to ideological conflicts that contradict the policy of prohibiting corporal punishment.

The dual pressures of religious teachings and socio-political contexts, as described by Ghatak and Abel (2013) and Hulme (2009), place conflicting demands on teachers and result in fragmented and fragile identities. This is compounded by additional dilemmas arising from conflicting cultural norms of corporal punishment as an 'African asset' (Makhasane & Chikoko, 2016, p. 5), together with parental expectations and teachers' own unspoken beliefs about the practice. Further, whilst teachers are positioned as 'agents of change' within schools, they are unable to negotiate deeply held cultural, community and societal norms that structure their thoughts and practices. The consequences are that teachers similar to the findings by Ntshwarange and Sewpaul (2021) struggle to maintain a position of authority and status. It is for this reason that Kurian (2020) claims that embedded norms prevent reflection and transformation and that this is an act of violence itself. The difficulty of critiquing one's own cultural heritage, and community demands for the continued use of corporal punishment is evident, limiting teachers' ability to act as moral transformative teachers. The consequence is that culture becomes an effective ideological tool that reproduces corporal

punishment as an accepted practice by adults. It is therefore important to understand the systemic underpinnings of corporal punishment which reproduce the value of corporal punishment and becomes an ever-present dilemma for teachers. This suggests the need for self-reflection by teachers to question the ways in which they perpetuate corporal punishment.

These complications and tensions create an uncertain personal and professional identity and attempts to negotiate towards a more stable identity is impossible. It is for this reason that Honig (1994) indicates that dilemmas are 'ever-present' and based on the data presented especially in contexts that are marginalised.

In summary, the complicated balance that teachers have to find lies in what Fransson and Grannäs (2013) call a 'sufficient compromise'. This compromise is based less on moral or ethical concerns about the violence inherent in corporal punishment and more on pragmatic considerations of job security. In this complex environment, the possibility of using corporal punishment remains a persistent dilemma, suggesting that teachers' discomfort and uncertainty need to be addressed to enable better decision-making in complex situations. This multi-layered issue requires deeper dialogue among education stakeholders to reconcile practice with political and ethical considerations.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has taken an in-depth look at the complexity teachers face when addressing the issue of corporal punishment in educational settings. Based on Honig and Fransson and Grannäs' theoretical framework, the findings show that the decision to use or refrain from corporal punishment is multi-layered and inextricably linked to teachers' personal and professional identities and contextual influences. This concurs with Fransson and Grannäs' (2013, p. 14) understanding that a person's experiences of a dilemma are always influenced by "surrounding structures."

Further, this study has shed light on the kaleidoscopic facets that shape teachers' decisions regarding corporal punishment and accentuates the

need for nuanced understandings that consider the multiple influences on their professional identities. Findings therefore suggest that the use of corporal punishment will persist unless deeper understanding of the complexity that surrounds teachers' professional lives are explored. As the field continues to evolve, so must our understanding of these complex issues, for only through a comprehensive understanding can effective and humane interventions be formulated.

Based on the study findings, several recommendations emerge. First, teacher professional development programmes must reframe school settings as dilemmatic spaces (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013, Honig, 1994) and explicitly address the contextual realities influenced by cultural, historical, religious, and ideological factors. Second, the influences noted above are integral to schools and thus psychological support for teachers to manage these persistent dilemmas are critical. Professional support systems must acknowledge the ongoing challenges associated with corporal punishment and the manner in which it influences teachers personal and professional identities and practices. Third, the Department of Basic Education must develop disciplinary initiatives that are cognisant of contextual realities while prioritising teachers and learners emotional and mental well-being. In this way a more humane school environment can be engendered.

Future research should explore more adaptive models of teacher identity that could better manage these dilemmatic spaces. It would also be useful to extend this research to broader educational contexts and political landscapes to identify how external changes might influence teachers' internal decision-making processes.

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