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PERCEPTIONS OF THE USES OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AND POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF ITS ABOLITION

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Corporal punishment has been used as a disciplinary procedure in Australian schools for many years despite considerable disagreement among educators concerning its effectiveness (Freeman, 1966; Manning, 1979; Maurer, 1974; Pallas, 1973). The controversy regarding the morality, educational efficacy and psychological consequences of corporal punishment has become an emotive public debate in recent years. In Western Australia, for example, as early as 1972 the Government Secondary Schools Discipline Committee recommended the phasing out of corporal punishment in both secondary and primary schools. However no action was taken and in 1984 the Committee of Inquiry into Education in Western Australia made a similar recommendation to government (Committee of Inquiry, 1984).

Corporal punishment was abolished in Victorian State schools in July 1983 following the Report of the Working Party on the abolition of corporal punishment (Curry, 1983; Statutory Rules, 1983). The debate in New South Wales has been particularly vigorous and in 1985 the NSW Teachers Federation ruled that its members would discontinue the use of corporal punishment in 1986. This action was followed by a ministerial decision to abolish corporal punishment in public schools commencing in 1987.

The debate within Australia and elsewhere over the uses of corporal punishment in schools has often taken place in the absence of empirical evidence from the field (Rose, 1984), or by reference to anecdotal reports (Harvey, 1983) and studies of small samples of selected schools (e.g. Ritchie, 1983). Ritchie and Ritchie (1981) found in New Zealand that males are more likely to be corporally punished at all levels of education than are females, and that males are more approving of the practice. In a related study of senior school students Ritchie found that those male students who were more frequently punished showed higher approval levels for corporal punishment than their less punished male peers (Ritchie, 1981).

Studies of corporal punishment in the home (e.g. Bryan and Freed, 1982) have indirect relevance to applications in school because of varying cultural sanctions applying in two contrasting social situations. The attitudes and values of parents

were shown to be important factors in the abolition of corporal punishment in the home in Sweden in 1979; in the years since 1960 a large majority of Swedish parents had come to believe that childrearing should take place without corporal punishment (Ziegert, 1983). Both teacher and community perceptions of corporal punishment in school would logically appear to be instrumental factors in its retention or abolition (Bowd, 1982).

No studies have been conducted on the consequences of systematic abolition of corporal punishment, however Harvey (1983) cites some evidence from a small number of Scottish schools that abolition resulted in no apparent deterioration in behaviour or in the conditions of learning. Opponents and proponents of corporal punishment have both tended to support their arguments with reference to laboratory studies of learning, punishment and social behaviour, or upon extrapolation from theories of learning and personality development (Maurer, 1974; Rose, 1984). Proponents claim that corporal punishment is quick and effective (Smith, Pollaway and West, 1979), and that it results in the rapid reduction of misbehaviour (Killory, 1974). It has also been cited as a way of showing support for parents and as important to teacher morale (Committee of Inquiry, W.A., 1984), as well as acting as a deterrent to misbehaviour among the punished individual's peers (Mercurio, 1972).

Opposition to corporal punishment in education based upon broad ethical and theoretical concerns has a lengthy history (Adler, 1970; Dreikurs, 1957; James, 1958). Specific arguments against corporal punishment have included claims that it involves both the modelling of aggressive behaviour and the drawing of attention to, and a consequent increase in, the behaviour punished (Bandura, 1965). It has also been proposed that corporal punishment is likely to result in increased aggression toward the source of the punishment (Delgado, 1963) and toward peers or objects present at the time or place of punishment (Agrin, Hake and Hutchinson, 1965). Bongiovanni and Hyman (1978) have argued that an important consequence of such punishment may be avoidance of the punishing agent and negative reactions toward school in general.

Rose (1984) conducted an extensive descriptive study of the uses of corporal punishment in the United States. Results indicated widespread use of corporal punishment at all grade levels and in all regions. Boys were punished more frequently than girls, most often in an administrative area by principal or vice principal and subsequent to significant time delay. Punished offences included both serious and trivial misbehaviour. Principals indicated strong support of corporal punishment in maintaining general discipline and staff morale.

The objective of the present study is to describe the uses of corporal punishment in New South Wales and Victoria and to examine some perceptions of changes in behaviour and learning conditions in Victoria subsequent to the abolition of corporal punishment in 1983.

Method

Participants

Ten percent random samples of schools were drawn from lists published by the NSW and Victorian Departments of Education. Special schools were excluded from the population before selection. The procedure yielded samples of 210 schools in Victoria and 215 schools in NSW.

Questionnaires were mailed to principals of selected schools in both States. An accompanying letter indicated that the survey was supported in Victoria by the Department of Education and in NSW by the NSW Teacher's Federation. Usable information was obtained from 141 principals in Victoria, a response rate of 67%. In NSW 76 usable questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 35%. The lower response rate may relate to the survey having been authorized by the NSW Teacher's Federation.

Questionnaires

The questionnaires were shortened adaptations of that employed by Rose (1984) in his study of corporal punishment in the United States. The questionnaires used in both States began with five multiple-choice items relating to demographic factors. Item six required a yes/no response indicating whether corporal punishment was currently in use (NSW) or had been in use prior to abolition (Victoria). Respondents who answered in the affirmative were requested to complete the remaining eight items. Seven objective items dealt with descriptive aspects of the uses of corporal punishment and were identical in both States. The final item was open-ended in NSW, requesting information about offences most often resulting in corporal punishment. The final item in the Victorian form was objective and solicited information concerning perceived changes in misbehaviour since the abolition of corporal punishment.

Results

Use of corporal punishment

Corporal punishment was reported to be used in 4.2% of Victorian schools prior to abolition. In NSW 64% of principals reported corporal punishment was in use at the time of the survey (March, 1985). The difference is statistically significant ($X^2 = 5.25$, $P .05$). Data relating to school location, size, sex distribution and grade level were obtained in both States.

The higher population density in Victoria is reflected in the distribution of schools according to community size (Table 1). A slightly higher proportion of schools within communities of less than 1,000 were surveyed in NSW, with a higher proportion of Victorian schools located in cities above 10,000. The difference is statistically significant ($X^2 = 101.65$, $P .01$). Schools located in rural areas and communities under 1,000 were contrasted with those in cities and towns above 1,000 for use of corporal punishment.

Table 1

School Location in Terms of Approximate Community Size

Community population	Percentage of schools located in community	
	N.S.W.	Victoria
rural	21.1	25.5
under 1 000	27.6	9.9
1 000 - 5 000	22.4	17.7
5 000 - 10 000	10.5	12.1
10 000 - 50 000	13.2	19.1
more than 50 000	5.2	15.6

Table 2

Rural Versus Urban School Location
and Use of Corporal Punishment in NSW*

Location	Percentage using Corporal Punishment	X^2	P
Rural	46	9.18	.01
Urban	79		

*Rural was defined by respondents indicating 'rural location' or location within a community of less than 1,000 population.

Table 3

Rural Versus Urban School Location
and Use of Corporal Punishment in Victoria*

Location	Percentage using Corporal Punishment	X^2	P
Rural	38	3.25	N.S.
Urban	54		

*Rural was defined by respondents indicating 'rural location' or location within a community of less than 1,000 population.

In both States higher proportions of urban schools used corporal punishment than was the case for rural schools, the difference achieving statistical significance for NSW but falling just short of significance for Victoria. The proportion of NSW urban schools employing corporal punishment in comparison with that in Victoria is also statistically significant ($X^2 = 7.58$, $P .01$). The differences in school size for each sample were investigated by comparing the proportions of schools in each State using four size categories (Table 4).

Table 4
Percentage of Schools in Each
Sample by Population

Student Population	Percentage of Schools in Sample	
	NSW	Victoria
0 - 300	63.2	56.0
301 - 600	23.7	26.2
601 - 900	5.3	14.2
above 901	7.9	3.5

Differences between the size of schools represented in each sample did not achieve statistical significance ($X^2 = 5.77$, NS).

As indicated in Table 5 virtually identical proportions of primary and secondary schools were surveyed in both States.

Table 5
Grade Level of Schools Surveyed

Level	NSW	Victoria
Primary (K-6)	75.0	75.2
Junior High/ (7-9 or 10)	5.3	—
High School	19.7	24.8

When grade level of school was related to the use of corporal punishment (Tables 6 and 7) less secondary than primary schools in Victoria reported having used corporal punishment, however this difference fell just short of statistical significance. In NSW the trend was in the opposite direction with slightly more secondary schools employing corporal punishment.

Table 6
Relationship Between Level of School
and Use of Corporal Punishment in NSW

Level of School	Percentage using Corporal Punishment	X^2	P
Primary (K-6)	61		
Secondary	68	.30	N.S.

Table 7
Relationship Between Level of School
and Use of Corporal Punishment in Victoria

Level of School	Percentage using Corporal Punishment	X^2	P
Primary (K-6)	53		
Secondary	34	3.62	N.S.

The difference between NSW and Victorian secondary schools in the use of corporal punishment (68% versus 34%) was significant at the .01 level ($X^2 = 7.16$).

Administrative and procedural aspects of corporal punishment

Delivery of corporal punishment. Respondents were asked to provide information concerning several procedural aspects of the then current employment of corporal punishment in NSW, and in the case of Victoria, prior to its abolition.

As indicated in Table 8 in neither State were referring teachers authorized to administer corporal punishment. In the largest proportion of schools it was usual for a combination of the principal and another administrator (usually the vice principal) to administer corporal punishment although in nearly as large a proportion of schools the principal alone was so authorized. In a small number of cases the vice principal administered corporal punishment alone, and in NSW (but not Victoria) occasionally another authorized teacher.

Table 8
Persons Administering Corporal Punishment

Individual authorized	Percentage of respondents indicating	
	NSW	Victoria
Referring Teacher	—	—
Principal	45.8	42.6
Other Teacher	2.1	—
Vice Principal/Deputy Principal	4.2	4.4
Combination	47.9	52.9

Percentages for Tables 8, 9, 10 and 11 are calculated against the number of respondents indicating corporal punishment was used in their schools.

Respondents were asked to indicate the location in which corporal punishment was administered (Table 9).

Table 9
Location in Which Corporal Punishment was Administred

Place	Percentage of respondents indicating	
	NSW	Victoria
Hallway	4.2	4.4
Principal's office	64.6	52.9
Classroom where behaviour occurred	—	5.9
Other classroom	—	—
Other administrative area	10.4	5.9
Combination	20.8	30.9

In both States corporal punishment was usually administered in the principal's office, another administrative area or a combination. Hallways were used in a small proportion of cases in both States and occasionally the classroom where the behaviour occurred was used in Victoria (but not in NSW).

Delay. Respondents were asked to estimate the time typically elapsing between the commission of an offence and the administration of corporal punishment.

Table 10
Estimated Delay Between Behaviour
and Administration of Corporal Punishment

Delay	Percentage of respondents indicating	
	NSW	Victoria
0 - 5 minutes	31.3	32.4
6 - 10 minutes	14.6	30.9
11 - 15 minutes	18.8	17.6
16 - 20 minutes	10.4	4.4
21 minutes or more	25.0	8.3
Median delay	11.5	8.3

As indicated in Table 10 in both States only approximately one-third of respondents indicated that corporal punishment was administered within 5 minutes, whereas in NSW delays of more than 15 minutes occurred in more than one-third of cases. The median delay in both States approximated 10 minutes. Where the patterns of delay between States were compared, the difference failed to achieve significance ($X^2 = 9.08$, NS).

Misbehaviour. Respondents in NSW were asked to indicate the types of behaviour for which corporal punishment was employed. This information was not solicited in Victoria where an alternative item was used to determine perceived changes in misbehaviour since abolition of corporal punishment.

All principals of schools using corporal punishment in NSW listed one or more behaviours leading to that punishment. Several, however, mentioned that it was seldom used and its existence served as a deterrent. Many respondents also indicated that corporal punishment was employed only after repeated offences, and most listed quite general categories of behaviour (e.g. 'insolence').

In some cases responses were so broad that they were not usable (e.g. 'persistent misbehaviour', 'continuing to break certain rules after repeated warnings'). The most frequent listed offences involved physical attacks on other students ('fighting' and 'bullying') and unacceptable verbal behaviour usually directed at teachers ('insolence', 'obscene language'). More serious forms of misbehaviour such as 'stealing' and 'assault on teachers' were infrequently mentioned.

Table 11
Behaviour Reported as Earning
Corporal Punishment in NSW

Behaviour	Percentage of respondents citing behaviour*
Fighting	40
Disrespect for authority	40
Obscene Language	33
Bullying	29
Disobedience	27
Vandalism	12
Endangering safety	8
Throwing stones	8
Stealing	8
Disruption of class	6
Assault on teacher	4
Writing offensive words	2
Spitting	2

Victorian principals of schools which had used corporal punishment before 1983 were asked to indicate their perceptions of possible changes in

Table 12
Perceived Changes in Misbehaviour Since
Abolition of Corporal Punishment in Victoria

Behaviour	Perceived Consequence		
	Increase	Decrease	No change
Fighting	33.8	7.4	58.8
Disruption in class	58.8	8.8	32.4
Disrespect for authority	61.8	7.4	30.9
Disobedience	64.7	5.9	29.4
Truancy	10.3	5.9	83.8

behaviour since abolition (Table 12). The categories of misbehaviour selected were based on the findings of Rose (1984) and respondents were required to indicate a perceived increase, decrease or no change for each since the abolition of corporal punishment. A majority indicated no perceived change in the

frequency of fighting and truancy, and perceived increases of disruption in class, disrespect for authority and disobedience.

Administrative opinion. Four items related to principals' perceptions of the effectiveness of corporal punishment in regard to (a) the general level of discipline in their schools, (b) the reductive effects on specific misbehaviour, (c) the maintenance of teacher morale, and (d) the demonstration of support of their teachers. Only principals of schools using corporal punishment (NSW) or having used it (Victoria) were requested to respond to these items. As indicated in Table 13, a majority of principals in both States responded affirmatively.

Table 13

Statement	Percentage agreeing			P
	NSW	Victoria	X ²	
Corporal punishment is/was effective in:				
Maintaining the general level of discipline in your school	85.4	77.9	1.13	N.S.
Reducing specific behaviour problems for specific students	95.8	83.8	6.90	.05
Maintaining teacher morale	87.5	69.1	5.57	.05
Demonstrating support of your teachers	87.5	67.6	6.33	.05

When responses were compared across States, significantly higher proportions of respondents in NSW believed corporal punishment to be effective in reducing specific behaviour problems for specific students, maintaining teacher morale and demonstrating support of teachers.

Discussions and Conclusions

The aims of the present study were descriptive. It was conducted in early 1985, approximately 18 months after the abolition of corporal punishment in Victoria but before announcements by the NSW Teacher's Federation and NSW Education Department signalling the end of corporal punishment in NSW public schools. The principal objectives of the study were to document and compare the uses of corporal punishment in both States, to examine the conditions of its administration and to assess perceptions of its effectiveness. A further objective was to examine principals' perceptions of some possible consequences of its abolition in Victoria.

Several limitations of the present study should be noted. First, to facilitate prompt and complete responses, a relatively short questionnaire was used and more controversial aspects of the topic were excluded from it (e.g. use of non-

approved methods of punishment, characteristics of most frequently punished students). Second, most questions involved a choice among fixed responses which may have restricted the range of possible answers. Third, The generalizability of present results depend upon the adequacy of the samples employed. Random sampling was used, however, because it was not feasible to follow up non-respondents, it is impossible to determine whether systematic differences might exist between them and those principals who responded to the survey.

The lower response rate in NSW may relate to the sponsorship of the survey by the Teacher's Federation rather than the Education Department. However, demographic data do not indicate that the procedure has biased the sample. All public school principals in NSW are members of the Teacher's Federation and the survey was conducted before the Federation determined a policy of abolition. These factors, together with the generally more conservative results from NSW imply that the reader may have reasonable confidence in the data presented herein.

The study documents the widespread use of corporal punishment in both States prior to its abolition. While it has been pervasive at both primary and secondary levels, as well as in rural and urban areas, its use in NSW has been more extensive than in Victoria. However, the popularity of corporal punishment is lower than in the United States where Rose (1984) found it was employed by 74% of schools. Rose also noted an inverse relationship between the size of the community in which the school was located and use of corporal punishment. In Australia this relationship is reversed, in that corporal punishment is used less frequently in rural areas and in schools having smaller student population. This may relate to higher levels of rural poverty and lower qualifications and experience of rural teachers in the United States in comparison with Australia.

The tendency for corporal punishment to decline as grade level increases present in Victoria and also noted by Rose (1984) in the United States is not indicated in NSW. This trend, along with the higher use of corporal punishment in that State, suggest that counselling resources and other support services will be important in facilitating school discipline after the abolition of corporal punishment in NSW.

Several variables have been identified concerning the administration of corporal punishment in both States and which relate to commonly accepted guidelines for the use of punishment. Such guidelines imply that if corporal punishment is to be effective, it should be characterized by consistent application and immediate application (Azrin and Holz, 1966; Sulztor-Azaroff and Mayer, 1977). The results of the present study suggest that both requirements are frequently unfulfilled. The requirement of consistent application is unfulfilled because of the lack of specificity in defining behaviours resulting in corporal punishment.

Terms such as "insolence" and "disobedience", for example, are so general that specific behaviour included in either category may or may not be published depending upon a variety of situation-specific factors. The frequently noted response that acts of misbehaviour were only corporally punished after repeated occurrence also indicates inconsistency in application. Secondly, the requirement of immediate application appears to have been seldom met in NSW and Victorian public schools. The location in which corporal punishment occurs is rarely the one in which the misbehaviour takes place and the delay as students move from the classroom or playground to an administrative office is typically about ten minutes. For 25% of cases in NSW the delay was more than 20 minutes.

Corporal punishments is usually administered in relative privacy and by an individual not directly witnessing the relevant misbehaviour. These observations parallel results reported by Rose (1984) describing the uses of corporal punishment in the United States. Rose speculates that privacy may preclude unwanted side-effects such as reinforcement via peer attention and humiliation resulting in generalized aversion to the total school situation.

These inferences are somewhat tenuous in the Australian situation where many students are aware of who 'is sent to the office' and where many principals report perceptions of corporal punishment as a general deterrent to misbehaviour.

The fundamental reason for using corporal punishment is the expectation that it will reduce the frequency of the behaviour punished and consequently assist in maintaining the general level of school discipline. A majority of principals in both States perceive corporal punishment as having these effects. Indeed, among NSW respondents the perception that it reduces specific behaviour problems for specific students is virtually universal with only 4% of respondents disagreeing in comparison with 16% in Victoria. Entrenched beliefs in the efficacy of corporal punishment in NSW may be counterproductive in the period following abolition and appropriate inservice education may be called for.

Victorian principals were less likely to perceive corporal punishment as helping maintain teacher morale and demonstrating support of teachers when compared with their NSW counterparts. It is not possible to identify these differences as consequential to the abolition of corporal punishment in Victoria; it could equally be argued that less positive views of corporal punishment in Victoria may in fact have contributed to its abolition there before NSW. Finally, Victorian principals' perceptions of changes in misbehaviour since the abolition of corporal punishment should not be interpreted as necessarily indicating actual consequences of abolition. Their perceptions may reflect trends that have occurred independently of the use or non-use of corporal punishment.

It is interesting to note that two-thirds of Victorian principals perceive either no change or a decrease in "fighting" since the abolition of corporal punishment. Fighting was the behaviour most often corporally punished in NSW and the United States (Rose, 1984). "Truancy" was perceived by 90% of

Victorian respondents as showing no change or a decrease since the abolition of corporal punishment. Rose (1984) notes that 4% of American principals cited this offence as most frequently leading to corporal punishment, however it was not cited by any NSW respondents in the present study. It therefore seems likely that truancy was seldom corporally punished in Victoria and it would follow that few would perceive its frequency as changing.

Three classes of misbehaviour, disruption in class, disrespect for authority, and disobedience are perceived by a majority of Victorian principals as increasing since the abolition of corporal punishment. All three classes of behaviour were cited by Rose (1984) as resulting in corporal punishment in the United States. Both disobedience and disrespect for authority were cited by a large number of NSW principals, although disruption in class was reported to less frequently lead to corporal punishment. Why do Victorian principals perceive some forms of misbehaviour increasing since the abolition of corporal punishment, while other forms of misbehaviour are perceived essentially as showing no change? The data presented in the present study do not provide a direct answer to this question. The perceived decline in fighting might hypothetically be linked to the reduction in modelled aggression and emotional side-effects afforded by the abolition of corporal punishment. However, it may well be linked to increased counselling resource provision since abolition, or to entirely independent social and cultural factors. The findings of the present study indicate a need for systematic investigation of the large variety of factors which relate to the perceived effectiveness of corporal punishment.

In summary, the results of the present investigation confirm that prior to its abolition, the use of corporal punishment in Victoria and New South Wales was widespread at all levels of education within public schools, despite a dearth of evidence relating to its effectiveness or desirability. The conditions under which it has been routinely administered are such that, in terms of laboratory derived learning principles, it must be judged inappropriate and ineffective. While majorities of principals in both States perceived corporal punishment as a useful disciplinary technique for several reasons, the data presented in this study indicate no substantial pattern of change in misbehaviour subsequent to its abolition.

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