

Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Punishment as a Discipline in a Primary School: A Case Study in an Area of Southeastern China

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Abstract : Punishment as a discipline in schools is widely discussed globally, as it is often considered effective for managing children's misbehaviours. This original study investigates Chinese primary students' and teachers' perceptions of punishment and the reasons behind teachers' use of punishment. Grounded in Attribution, Attachment and Efficacy theories, this case study, employing a mixed methods research approach, was conducted in one primary school in an area of Southeastern China. A total of 246 sixth-grade students were selected to respond to the questionnaire, and four class teachers were interviewed. The results also inform policymakers to develop alternative approaches for helping teachers effectively deal with students' misbehaviours.

Keywords: Punishment; Primary School Students; Discipline

1. Introduction

It is believed that discipline is vital and needed to educate school-aged children and correct their misbehaviours, especially within the context of compulsory education. There is an increasing tendency among teachers to adopt punishment as a discipline to educate students. Nevertheless, several studies have reported the negative impacts of punishment on children's behaviours and psychological symptoms.

However, a significant body of literature still indicates that the majority of teachers in various countries. In contrast, in Australia and Israel, more positive management like discussion and reward, is frequently applied in schools. Moreover, the literature also reflects that the use of punishment has a link with the distinctive educational systems. As a result, this educational system requires students to

obtain higher testing scores, which is regarded as a pivotal role in students' success.

1.1 Definition and Forms of Punishment

Arguably, people from different backgrounds would be affected by various environments and cultures, therefore the definition of punishment is varied in distinctive countries and aspects (Hofstede & Bond, 1984). Historically, punishment in educational settings was commonly involved in corporal or physical punishment (Umezina & Elendu, 2012) It is defined as the use of physical force with the intention of causing children to experience bodily pain but not necessarily injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behaviours (Tomoda et al., 2009; Watakakosol et al., 2019).

1.2 Punishment in the Chinese Context

Informed by the various literature concerning the side effects of punishment on children, in 2005, the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China enacted *Laws on the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Minors* to prohibit teachers and parents from using any form of corporal punishment on children under eighteen years old, including any commit corporal punishment directly or corporal punishment in disguised form (The State Council of the People's Republic of China [The State of Council], 2005). However, some teachers feel conflicted and at a loss as to what to do to deal with students' behavioural problems and control classroom indiscipline in schools (Liu, 2017).

1.3 Theoretical Framework

In this study, the Efficacy, Attribution and Attachment theories are employed to support investigating the use of punishment and possible factors contributing to teachers' using

punishment as classroom discipline from several theoretical perspectives.

In the context of education, efficacy focuses on teachers' self-efficacy to manage class, which has positive effects on their educational process. More specifically, it refers to teachers' beliefs about their techniques and disciplines to regulate class or children's misbehavior.

Attribution theory is a well-established psychological concept of human motivation developed by Heider (1920). Simply stated in educational aspects, teachers attribute the reasons for using punishment in class to the students and their own beliefs of the positive effects of punishment.

Attachment theory was defined as a lasting and enduring psychological connection between human beings. Likewise, Bergin and Bergin (2009) emphasise the importance of attachment theory in the classroom.

The three theories worked together are highly related to this study.

2. Purposes of the Study

This original study aims to conduct research drawing on new data collected from Chinese primary students, thereby contributing to the new empirical evidence in punishment within the Chinese context.

3. Methodology

This research employed a case study methodology within a mixed methods research design, integrating quantitative analysis from questionnaires and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. Given the complexity and contextual nature of the use of punishment across the world, a case study can provide an in-depth and context-specific investigation of students' and teachers' attitudes toward the use of punishment in school, as well as what possible factors contribute to teachers opt to use the techniques of punishment in controlling pupils' misbehaviours from students' and teachers' perspectives within the current society and policy of China.

3.1 Participants and Setting

The area of this study is a primary school in a region located in Southeastern China. The study included two groups of participants: students and their class teachers who take

charge of them at this selected school. The students were the main participants in this study. While considering the influence of Confucianism and the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students in China, teachers would affect students' values and beliefs about the use of punishment in some ways like conveying their own ideas to students in class. Therefore, it is essential to understand teachers' perceptions and beliefs towards punishment before researching students.

3.2 Data Collection Technique

In this study, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed. Specifically, the paper-based questionnaire was applied to distribute to students. This is because of the regulations in the selected schools restricting students' use of digital devices during school hours to maintain a focused learning environment.

3.3 Procedure

Permission to carry out the study was granted by the Centre of Educational Studies, the University of Warwick, the United Kingdom. The data for this study was gathered in March 2019 by the researcher in person. The paper-based questionnaire was first distributed to 246 students and the four class teachers during their break time, which took around 20-25 minutes. To gain students' ideas naturally and reflectively, the teachers were not allowed to stand next to them. Subsequently, teachers were invited to attend face-to-face and one-to-one meetings in an unoccupied classroom or their own office that were selected by them. This is to guarantee the interviewees were relaxed during the interviews. All the interviews were lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Before the interview, the researcher obtained permission from the teachers to audio recording during the interview. All ethical considerations, including participants' rights, anonymity, confidentiality and privacy of this research were guaranteed.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis was divided into two parts, including descriptive and bivariate analysis for numerical data, as well as discourse analysis for interview data. The analysis of

numerical data was bivariate analysis with two categorical variables.

4. Results

The purpose of this study was to examine students' and teachers' perceptions of punishment in a Chinese primary school. It aimed to comprehend the perceived benefits and weaknesses of punishment used as a discipline from students' and teachers' perspectives. The results were presented in two main separate parts: teachers' views on punishment and students' views on punishment respectively.

4.1 Teachers' Perceptions of Punishment

4.1.1 Reasons for using Punishment in class

All four teachers expressed their perceptions on the possible reasons that contribute teachers to using punishment as a technique to educate students in Chinese class. Concerning the purpose of assessing their opinions, the teachers were provided five-point Likert-type scale questions to explore their ideas about the reasons why teachers use punishment in class. In order to compare the differences between agreement and disagreement, "strongly agreed" and "agreed" were combined with "agreed", meanwhile, "strongly disagreed" and "disagreed" were intergraded with "disagreed", as shown below in Table 1. The data in the subsequent sections of students' responses would be presented as same.

Table 1. Teachers' Views on the Reasons for using Punishment in class

Variables	Percentages (Frequency)		
	Disagreed	Neutral	Agreed
Making noise in class	0	0	100% (n=4)
Hindering other students in class	25% (n=1)	0	75% (n=3)
Off task in class	0	0	100% (n=4)
Unpunctuality for class	0	1 (25%)	75% (n=3)
Eating in class	0	0	100% (n=4)
Sleeping in class	0	50% (n=2)	50% (n=2)
Lower test grades	100% (n=4)	0	0
Failing to complete homework	0	0	100% (n=4)

Data obtained revealed that all teachers consider the most crucial reasons contributing teachers to the use of punishment as a discipline are students' misbehaviours in class, including making noise, being off task, eating in class, and failing to complete homework. One teacher explained in the interview that those behaviours have disturbed their teaching

plan and further emphasised the immediate effect of punishment on addressing those behaviours, "I cannot discuss with students who misbehaved individually. Thus, punishment is necessary for me to manage students' behaviours and maintain their attention in class. It also can facilitate the teaching process by ensuring classroom discipline" (T3). Moreover, one teacher also elaborated on the reasons for administering punishment because of failing to complete homework, "students who do not finish homework is a negative learning attitude that is supposed to be educated and help them to form a positive learning attitude" (T2).

4.1.2 Attitudes towards Punishment in Schools

To examine teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the use of punishment as a discipline to regulate children in schools, teachers were provided with a series of statements and asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each. The percentages of each statement are compared and presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Teachers' Views and Attitudes on Punishment in Schools

Variables	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
1) Our education system depends on punishment (education would become a mass without punishment)	0	0	100% (4)
2) Punishment is necessary to maintain discipline in class	0	25% (1)	75% (3)
3) Punishment is the only way to maintain discipline	75% (3)	25% (1)	0
4) Punishment makes students understand quickly in class	100% (4)	0	0
5) Punishment is helpful in decreasing students' discipline problems in class	0	0	100% (4)
6) Punishment motivates students to concentrate in class	0	0	100% (4)
7) Punishment has positively influenced on students' learning in class	25% (1)	100% (4)	75% (3)
8) Punishment helps with improving creative abilities of students	100% (4)	0	0
9) Punishment could create a pleasant relationship between teacher and the student	75% (3)	0	25% (1)
10) Punishment should be not allowed in schools	50% (2)	50% (2)	0
11) Punishment may lead to students' demotivation and contributes to poor performance	25% (1)	0	75% (3)

12) You would punish students who have negative behaviours in class	0	0	100% (4)
13) You would punish students who have lower test grades or do not complete their homework	0	0	100% (4)

As shown in Table 2, the majority of teachers endorsed the belief that punishment is an effective technique for controlling children's misbehaviours and managing the class, as specifically demonstrated in Items 1, 5 and 6 (n=4), and Item 2 (n=3).

Nevertheless, these teachers also believed that punishment is the only way to maintain discipline (n=3) and could not make students understand quickly in class (n=4). One teacher shared her experience, "Sometimes, punishment is not ineffective for students. For example, when students hindering other students in class, teachers may warn or shout at them. However, they also did not correct their mistakes and still did the same thing (T2)".

4.2 Students' Perceptions of Punishment

4.2.1 Reasons for Teachers using Punishment in class

The statistical results revealed that the primary reasons for teachers using punishment in class were students' misbehaviours, as perceived by students, including off-task behaviour (88.62%, n=218), making noise (62.60%, n=154), and hindering other students (58.54%, n=144). Following this, some

students also considered poor academic performance would be a reason punished by teachers. Specifically, less than half of students reported that teachers punished students as a result of their lower test grades (46.34%, n=112), unpunctuality for class (41.46%, n=93), and eating in class (41.06%, n=101). The detailed information can be found in Table 3 as shown below.

Table 3. Students' Perceptions on the Possible Reasons of Teachers Using Punishment

Variables	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Making noise in class	154	62.60
Hindering other students in class	144	58.54
Off task in class	218	88.62
Unpunctuality for class	93	41.46
Eating in class	101	41.06
Sleeping in class	64	26.02
Fail to complete homework	60	24.39
Lower test grades	112	46.34

4.2.2 Attitudes of Punishment in Schools

As shown in Table 4, the descriptive data showed that students generally hold negative attitudes towards each statement. More specifically, over half of the students (58.94%, n=145) assumed that teachers would punish students because of their misbehaviours, followed by lower test grades or failing to finish their homework (57.32%, n=141).

Table 4. Students' Attitudes towards punishment in schools

Variables	Disagree	Undecided	Agree
1) Punishment is necessary to maintain discipline in class	36.18% (n=89)	43.09% (n=106)	20.73% (n=51)
2) Punishment motivates students to concentrate in class	38.21% (n=94)	40.65% (n=100)	21.14% (n=52)
3) Punishment has positive influence toward students' learning in class	37.40% (n=92)	37.40% (n=92)	25.20% (n=62)
4) Punishment could maintain good relationship between teachers and students	60.98% (n=150)	30.08% (n=74)	8.94% (n=22)
5) Punishment makes students understand quickly in class	26.02% (n=64)	38.62% (n=95)	35.37% (n=87)
6) Punishment should be not allowed in schools	29.67% (n=73)	37.80% (n=93)	32.52% (n=80)
7) Punishment causes some students to escape from classroom and drop out	26.83% (n=66)	41.06% (n=101)	32.11% (n=79)
8) Punishment may lead to students' demotivation and contributes to poor performance	21.95% (n=54)	38.21% (n=94)	39.43% (n=97)
9) Teachers would punish some students who have misbehaviours	9.35% (n=23)	31.30% (n=77)	58.94% (n=145)
10) Teachers would punish some students who have lower test grades or do not their homework	8.54% (n=21)	33.74% (n=83)	57.32% (n=141)

Note. N=246. Percentages indicate the number of participants who expressed their agreement and disagreement on each item; (n) in parentheses.

5. Discussion

Grounded in Efficacy, Attachment and Attribution theories, this study concluded the major findings:

- Students generally showed their negative attitudes towards the use of punishment, whereas teachers maintained positive beliefs, viewing punishment as an effective technique for controlling students and managing class.
- Both students and teachers considered that students' misbehaviours were the crucial factors contributing to the use of punishment. However, differences emerged in specific factors.

5.1 Possible Factors contributing to Teachers using Punishment

Firstly, the findings suggest that both teachers and students believed that if students failed to complete homework would be punished. This is because in China, failing to complete homework is a kind of negative learning attitude. In this regard, punitive discipline, such as setting extra work, is an applicable method to handle this misbehaviour. Notably, all teachers showed the lowest level of agreement on the factor of students' lower test grades would be punished by teachers. The discrepancy between students' and teachers' perceptions is attributed to their different understanding of punishment. Therefore, the results could not generalise all teachers' ideas in the Chinese primary school.

The results of this study, which include students' and teachers' views on the reasons contributing teachers to punish students, corresponded with Attribution Theory. It involves in teacher attributing the reasons for using punishment to students' behaviours or cultural values. Likewise, students attribute the teachers' use of punishment to their own behaviours or teachers' emotions.

5.2 Attitudes Towards the Use of Punishment as a Discipline

As the results revealed, teachers showed favourable attitudes towards the use of punishment while most students tended to disagree with the use of punishment in class. The findings found that teachers felt that the educational system relies on punishment since it is necessary and beneficial for decreasing students' indiscipline and managing the

overpopulation of class. This idea might be caused by family education and the current Chinese educational system. One teacher points out the current situation in Chinese family education that parents overindulge their children and tolerate any mistakes of them. It results in students lacking the ability to self-regulate and the awareness of realising their mistakes in class. This is attributed to traditional norms of Confucianism and the long history of teachers using punishment to strengthen their authority in China (Yang, 2009). It is argued that teachers' responses are, which corresponds with Efficacy theory. Interestingly, as supported by one interviewee, teachers in this study expressed that they are aware of the importance of other disciplines to normalise students in schools instead of only punishment, but they lack alternative strategies to quickly control students. This meaningfully signifies that strengthening teachers' skills and learning alternative disciplines to deal with students' problems might be vital and valuable.

Moreover, teachers in this study believed that punishment would demotivate creativity but positively influence students' learning abilities. Although teachers understood the side effects of punishment on students' creativity, they still used it because they deemed that punishment could increase students' learning abilities and outcomes. This is in line with some international literature (Chou et al., 2013; Ngussa & Mdalingwa, 2017; Sun, 2015), indicating that most teachers deem punishment progressing students' poor academic performance. In contrast with students' perceptions in this study, they connected the punishment to demotivation and poor academic performance. More importantly, it is argued that students feel humiliated and embarrassed when faced with teachers' punishment, resulting in their less interest in studying and dropping out of the class, thereby causing poor academic performance (Geiger, 2017; Jyoti & Neetu, 2013; Lodhi & Siddiqui, 2014). Teachers are more concentrated on the positive effects of punishment like controlling class or behaviours while paying less attention to students' development and feelings (Sadik, 2018). On the contrary, students focus on their feelings while they are not concerned about

the classroom rules and the whole lesson.

5.3 Implication for Policy and Practice

In summary, this study discussed each research question's findings and highlighted the two aspects that policymakers and schools need to be concerned about: reducing classroom size and providing training for teachers regarding alternative teaching strategies.

Firstly, policymakers and the local Educational Authority need to reduce the classroom size, which could not only alleviate teachers' pressure but also enhance their teaching quality.

Secondly, schools need to provide more opportunities for teachers to obtain training. This could help teachers learn more alternative and effective disciplines and understand how to apply alternative teaching strategies to respond to students' behaviours. It is essential to note that the use of different disciplines is supposed to vary with each student.

5.4 Recommendation for the Further Study

The key overarching recommendation about the investigation of punishment that required further detailed discussed and critiqued.. Individual interviews might more greatly understand students' perceptions towards the use of punishment and the effect of punishment.

5.5 Significance of the Study

This study sought to promote an understanding of students' perceptions of punishment as a disciplinary tool. Additionally, this study creates a context for policy-makers and schools to develop alternative strategies for helping teachers effectively deal with students' misbehaviours.

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