

## Changing Teacher Education Students' Attitudes toward Using Corporal Punishment in the Classroom

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*There is overwhelming evidence that corporal punishment does not produce long-term changes in behavior and, worse still, may cause physical and psychological damage to the recipient of the punishment (Cryan, 1987; Larzelere, 1986; Straus & Donnelly, 1993; Straus & Kantor, 1994; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996). In a 1992 survey, Abrahams, Casey, and Daro found that only 38% of teachers in the South found abolishing corporal punishment in the classroom to be of above average importance, as compared with 68% of teachers in other regions. In two Southern universities, teacher education students wrote a literature review with empirical references on the pros and cons of corporal punishment. Using pretest and posttest attitude measures, this study found a decrease in students' support for corporal punishment.*

Despite an ever-increasing number of classroom management alternatives and programs, some educators and prospective educators still advocate the use of corporal punishment as an effective means for decreasing inappropriate behavior. Punishment involves the presentation of an aversive stimulus in an attempt to decrease the immediately preceding behavior. Corporal punishment is often used synonymously with spanking or paddling (Block, 1994; Gursky, 1992; Hyman, 1993; Vockell, 1991), "but more broadly defined, it is any punishment that inflicts bodily pain for disapproved behavior" (Gursky, 1992, p. 18). Some school districts have even expanded this definition to include disciplinary techniques that some teachers may not consider to be harsh, such as making a child stand for an extended period of time, requiring a student to run in place for a lengthy time period, or depriving a child of recreation (Hyman, 1993; Ryan, 1994).

Because the purpose of punishment is to decrease behavior, for corporal punishment to be effective, it too

presumably must decrease behavior. Yet the data on this disciplinary technique show that this is often not the case. There is overwhelming evidence that corporal punishment does not produce long-lasting changes in behavior, and, worse still, may cause physical and psychological damage to the recipient of the punishment (Cryan, 1987; Larzelere, 1986; Straus & Donnelly, 1993; Straus & Kantor, 1994; Turner & Finkelhor, 1996). Perhaps it was for these reasons that the United States military banned the practice of corporal punishment back in 1874 (Heymann, 1991).

Some side effects of corporal punishment include running away or truancy (McCown, Driscoll, & Roop, 1996), fear of the teacher and/or school, high levels of anxiety (Biehler & Snowman, 1997), feelings of helplessness and humiliation, and aggression and destruction at home and at school (Cryan, 1995). Heymann (1991) found that 1,157,270 American children are corporally punished each year and of these, nearly 20,000 are seriously injured in the process.

In many instances the student who receives corporal punishment receives it repeatedly over time (Block, 1994). In the best-case scenario, the behavior for which a student is corporally punished is temporarily suppressed, but this suppression of misbehavior does not ensure that students will behave appropriately in the future or even that they will know what behavior is expected of them (Biehler & Snowman, 1997; Block, 1994). If any technique to decrease behavior is not accompanied by an explanation of appropriate or expected behavior, it is

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unreasonable to expect students to demonstrate acceptable behavior.

Despite the serious limitations to using corporal punishment, parents and teachers alike advocate its use in the classroom. Furthermore, only approximately half the states in the United States have prohibited its use in the classroom (Block, 1994; Hyman, 1993; Richardson, Wilcox, & Dunne, 1994), despite the fact that among developed countries (e.g., all of Europe, Japan, China), the U.S., Canada, and Australia alone still allow paddling. Additionally, many national organizations, such as the National PTA, the National Education Association, the American Medical Association, and the American Bar Association, have all spoken out against corporal punishment (Gursky, 1992). Yet, a 1988 poll (Gallup & Elam) found that 50% of the public approved of paddling in the schools, 45% opposed it, and 5% weren't sure how they felt. A survey published in *Parents Magazine* (Groller, 1989) indicated that 38% of parents nationwide approved of paddling to discipline school children, whereas in Southern regions 53% of parents approved of this disciplinary practice. In a 1992 survey of teachers, Abrahams, Casey, and Daro found that only 38% of teachers in the Southern United States found abolishing corporal punishment in the classroom to be of above average importance, as compared with 68% of teachers in other regions of the U.S.

As indicated above, approval ratings of corporal discipline are disproportionate across regions of the United States, with Southern states indicating a greater acceptance of this practice. The Department of Education indicated that the top ten states in number of reported paddlings were all Southern states: Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Tennessee, Texas, Georgia, Louisiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Kentucky (Waters, 1993). Heymann (1991) found similar results with the exception that Florida was listed among the top ten states instead of Kentucky.

The first two authors of this paper have taught introductory educational psychology courses for several years in Southern universities to teacher education students. In open discussion about classroom management, the authors have found that many students espouse corporal punishment as an appropriate means for changing behavior mostly because "I got spanked and I turned out okay" or "Schools will fall to anarchy without the paddle." These reasons mirror those used by advocates of corporal punishment across the country (Block, 1994; Gursky, 1992). When presented with negative evidence concerning the effectiveness of corporal punishment by the instructors, many students become defensive and cling even more strongly to their belief that it is appropriate to paddle public school students.

The purpose of this study was to investigate a method for changing teacher education students' attitudes about the appropriateness of using corporal punishment in the classroom. Although numerous studies were found that showed negative effects of corporal punishment, none to the authors' knowledge have attempted to change the attitudes of persons who support it. Specifically, we thought that if students could become informed about the negative consequences of corporal punishment through discovery rather than listening to instructors preach about it, they might become less defensive and more likely to change their attitudes.

## Method

### *Participants and Design*

Ninety-two students enrolled in two undergraduate educational psychology courses at two different Southern state universities (Georgia and Mississippi) participated for course credit. The classes consisted of approximately 70% female, 30% male, and about 15% African-American students. Students were randomly assigned in equal numbers to either a treatment or a control group. From the Georgia university, there were 30 students in the treatment group and 26 students in the control group, whereas the Mississippi university had 29 students in each group. To ensure that every student was exposed to a potentially beneficial treatment, a crossover design was used where the treatment and control groups reversed roles after the first posttest.

### *Materials*

Students in the treatment group at both universities were required to write a literature review on "the pros and cons of corporal punishment in America's schools." Each student was required to include at least five references to empirical research articles in the paper. Students were encouraged to use computer databases such as ERIC and PSYCHLIT, and in the last paragraph of the paper, they were required to summarize the findings by stating whether or not corporal punishment "works." The papers were to be about two pages in length, typed, double-spaced, and students were instructed not to work with nor to discuss their assignment with their classmates.

Students in the control group were required to write a different paper. At the Georgia university, control students wrote on the topic of "what constitutes academic dishonesty," whereas at the Mississippi university, they wrote on the topic of "good teachers I have known." Neither assignment required references, and they too were to be about two pages in length.

The questionnaire consisted of five items. Each item consisted of a statement and five options that best

## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

characterized the student's position (strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree). One of the items read, "As a teacher, I am in favor of using corporal punishment as a disciplinary method." The other four items that did not refer to corporal punishment were listed simply to help mask the purpose of the study.

The following reliability and validity evidence was obtained for the one-item corporal punishment attitude measure. Control group students' responses to the item before and after the assignment were correlated to provide a measure of test-retest reliability. The Pearson correlation was .794. Face validity for the item was judged to be sufficient by the authors.

### Procedure

On the first day of class, students were given the questionnaire and completed it in about five minutes. Only students' responses to the corporal punishment item were recorded. Students were randomly assigned to be in either the treatment or control group.

Approximately one month later, students were given their respective assignments. Students in the treatment group received the corporal punishment assignment, whereas students in the control group received the alternative assignment (either "good teachers" or "academic dishonesty"). They were given one week to complete the assignment. After one week, students turned in their assignments and completed the questionnaire for a second time.

Students then received a second assignment. This time students in the treatment group received the alternative assignment and students in the control group received the corporal punishment assignment. After one week, students turned in their second assignments, which was followed by a third completion of the questionnaire.

### Results

Students' responses were scored as "strongly agree" = 5, "agree" = 4, "undecided" = 3, "disagree" = 2, and "strongly disagree" = 1. A mixed ANOVA was conducted on the corporal punishment scores with experimental group as the between-subjects factor and testing occasion as the within-subjects factor. Table 1 presents means and standard deviations for the scores. The main effect of group was not significant,  $F(1, 90) = .66$ ,  $MSE = 3.42$ ,  $p = .42$ . The main effect of testing, however, was significant,  $F(2, 180) = 4.25$ ,  $MSE = .62$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .045$ . A Tukey Honestly Significant Difference test was used to follow up this effect. For all students, their attitudes toward corporal punishment at the beginning of class ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) were more favorable than they were after completing the assignments ( $M =$

2.67,  $SD = 1.20$ ). The interaction effect of group by testing was not significant,  $F(2, 180) = .99$ ,  $p = .37$ .

Table 1  
Means (and Standard Deviations) for Corporal Punishment Acceptability Ratings (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Time that Teacher Questionnaire was Administered	Group		Control	
	Treatment ( $n = 46$ )		Control ( $n = 46$ )	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Beginning of term	3.00	(1.38)	3.02	(1.31)
After completing first assignment	2.65	(1.25)	3.00	(1.12)
After completing second assignment	2.59	(1.15)	2.76	(1.25)

To determine whether the groups of students from Southern universities were different in terms of their initial attitudes towards corporal punishment than students from other regions of the U.S., the same questionnaire was administered to 24 undergraduates enrolled in an educational psychology course at the University of South Dakota. The mean score on the corporal punishment item was 2.50 as compared to 3.01 for the Southern students, providing support for the earlier claim that corporal punishment is more accepted in Southern states.

After all papers were completed, the instructors encouraged class discussion about the issues mentioned in the students' papers. Students were eager to discuss the results of their research, particularly as they pertained to the findings on corporal punishment. Students reported that they were surprised at the negative consequences of corporal punishment and were also surprised at how easy it was for teachers to punish students too severely when inflicting corporal punishment. Several also indicated that they were less likely to utilize corporal punishment after completing the assignment than they were before reading the research.

### Discussion

The results of this experiment indicate that students' support for corporal punishment decreased over the course of the semester. Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain a statistically significant experimental effect to demonstrate that this change in attitude was due solely to the literature review paper the students completed. This effect failed to reach statistical significance due to low power, attributable to both a small effect size ( $\eta^2 = .045$ ) and sample size ( $n = 46$  in each group). Once all 92 students were considered in the overall effect of testing occasion, the change in their attitudes from the beginning of the semester to the end was statistically significant.

Because this research was designed to simply decrease Southern students' support for using corporal

punishment in the classroom, we were less concerned with exactly what caused the attitude change and more concerned with the fact that it did change over the course of the semester. The seemingly minuscule effect (a change from 3.01 to 2.67 on a five-point attitude scale) may result in major consequential effects if these pre-service teachers are influential in eventually abolishing the practice of corporal punishment.

The authors encourage teacher education instructors to consider using this intervention if they are interested in changing students' attitudes towards corporal punishment. It can be easily achieved as an assignment for the entire class. We also recommend discussion about corporal punishment after the assignment, rather than before. As previously mentioned, our experiences had been very negative when attempting to discuss corporal punishment without students having first explored the scientific literature. We found students to be very emotional about their beliefs and resistant to change. Once students discover the overwhelming scientific evidence regarding the negative effects of corporal punishment, they will be less likely to believe all arguments concerning corporal punishment must be based solely on personal experiences.

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