

The Knowledge, Practice, and Perception Regarding Corporal Punishment Among Teachers in Jaffna Educational Zone, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Corporal punishment (CP), despite being considered an act punishable by law, is still practiced in homes and schools in Sri Lanka.

Methods: This descriptive cross-sectional institute-based study aimed to assess the knowledge, perception, and practice regarding CP among teachers in the Jaffna educational zone in Sri Lanka.

Results: The study involved 212 participants, out of which 160 (75.5%) were female. About 155 (73%) of the participants belonged to the age group of 31 to 50 years. About 114 (54.2%) participants had received training in disciplining students. About 7.5% had good knowledge, 33% had average knowledge, 24% had poor knowledge, and 35.4% had very poor knowledge regarding CP. In 28% (n = 59) were involved in CP. 58% (n = 123) had a negative perception of CP. The study found no significant correlation between socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, race, and religion and knowledge about CP.

Conclusion: This study demonstrated that the knowledge and practices on CP among this study population can further be improved. Larger-scale studies including participants of wider ethnic and geographical span would yield more data which might suggest the need for further inculcating knowledge on CP among teachers in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Corporal punishment, School teachers, Knowledge, Perception, Practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal violence affects approximately 50% of children globally.¹ Exposure to violence can negatively impact their physical and psycho-social development.¹⁻³ As a teacher, ensuring student discipline is crucial. Positive discipline, corporal punishment (CP), and psychological aggression are the approaches employed to address misbehavior. However, CP and psychological aggression are negative methods of disciplining.⁴ A physical force intended to cause a child pain but not injury to correct or control their behavior is considered CP.⁵ The act of physically harming a child through punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning, shaking, or any other form of physical injury is known as physical abuse.⁶ Unfortunately, CP is still prevalent in homes and schools in Sri Lanka.⁶ It often takes the form of hitting with a hand or an instrument but can also include other methods like pinching, hair pulling, or making students kneel or stand for extended periods.⁷ Parental and school teachers' understanding of CP is decisive in determining its incidence in children. Similarly, it is important to recognize that there is a thin line separating CP from physical abuse. Some view these two as part of a continuum, and excessively or too severely administered CP is considered physical abuse.^{8,9}

The debate over the advantages and disadvantages of CP has been ongoing for several decades.⁸ There are varying opinions

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regarding the effectiveness of the CP. Some suggest it may be useful in specific circumstances, while others believe it is ineffective or potentially harmful.¹⁰ It is important to understand that CP may be brought up in discussions of child abuse due to its significant negative impact on a child's well-being. Adverse developmental and behavioral damages are just a few of the harms of this type of punishment.¹¹ Many children's rights advocates consider it a form of physical abuse.¹² In an ideal world, a nurturing teacher-student relationship and positive disciplining would be sufficient to prevent student misbehavior. Regrettably, this is not the current state of affairs. Despite advocating for implementing positive disciplinary tactics,

there are still numerous cases where teachers resort to negative methods of discipline.⁷ This study will evaluate the knowledge, practice, and perception regarding CP among teachers in the Jaffna educational zone, Northern Province, Sri Lanka.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive cross-sectional institute-based study was conducted in targeted schools in the Jaffna educational zone. The study period was from 3rd July to 20th October 2022, and the school teachers in the Jaffna academic zone were selected as the study population. The unwilling to participate were excluded. A simple, random, convenient sampling method was used as the sampling technique. A self-administered questionnaire was provided in Tamil and English languages. A pilot study was performed to validate the questionnaire. The investigator/co-investigators carried out data collection for one month from the time of receiving ethical approval. Data was collected from available teachers in the staff room without compromising their working hours. The statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 21.

RESULTS

In the study, 212 teachers participated, out of which 76% (n = 160) were females and 24% (n = 52) were males. Most participants (94%, n = 199) were Sri Lankan Tamil, while 6% (n = 13) were Muslim. Most of the participants followed Hinduism (76%, n = 161), while 18% (n = 38) followed Christianity, and 13% (n = 06) followed Islam. The study revealed that 88% (n = 186) of the participants were teachers who were doing classroom teaching, and 12% (n = 26) were teachers who were doing administrative work.

The age range of the participants was between 20 to 60 years. Of them, 73% (n = 155) were between 31 to 50 years. Regarding the level of education, 40% (n = 80) of the teachers had completed their postgraduate education, while only 0.5% (n = 01) had studied up to G.C.E O/L. More than half (54%, n = 114) of the participants had training in disciplining students. Table 1 shows the sociodemographic factors of the teachers.

According to the knowledge test (Table 3), only 7.5% (n = 16) of the participants had good knowledge (scored more than 70), while a significant portion of the respondents (35.4%, n = 75) had very poor knowledge (scored less than 35). The rest of the participants had average knowledge (33%, n = 70) and poor knowledge (24.1%, n = 51), respectively. Table 2 shows the participants' level of knowledge.

Regarding corporal punishment, most participants (72%, n = 153) were not practicing it; however, out of the 28% (n = 59) who adopted corporal punishment, 44% (n = 26) employed "hitting with a hand or stick" or "squeezing the ears" as a form of punishment. Only 3% (n = 02) of the participants used "making the student kneel or stand for a while" as a form of punishment, while 17% (n = 10) used "informing parents" as a form of punishment. 36% (n = 21) of the participants used more than one form of punishment in their practice. Methods of practice of CP are shown in Table 3.

Table 1: Socio-demographic factors of the participants

		Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Female	160	76
	Male	52	24
Age category	20–30	24	11
	31–40	76	36
	41–50	79	37
	51–60	33	16
Ethnic group	Sri Lankan Tamil	199	94
	Muslim	13	06
Religion	Hindu	161	76
	Christian	38	18
	Islam	13	06
Marital status	Married	193	91
	Single	13	06
	Divorced	2	01
	Separated	1	0.5
	Widow/Widower	3	1.5
Position at school	Vice Principal	3	1.5
	Deputy Principal	2	01
	Sectional Head	6	03
	Class Teacher	201	94.5
Educational level	O/L	1	0.5
	A/L	35	16.5
	Undergraduate degree	50	23
	Postgraduate degree	84	40
	College of Education	42	20

Table 2: Knowledge of the participants

	Number (n)	Percent (%)
Good knowledge (More than 70)	16	08
Average knowledge (50–70)	70	33
Poor knowledge (35–50)	51	24
Very poor knowledge (Less than 35)	75	35
Total	212	100

Table 3: Methods practiced by teachers to discipline the students

	Number (n)	Percent (%)
Not practice	153	72
Hitting with a hand or stick or squeezing the ears	26	12
Making the student kneel or stand for a period	2	01
Punishing via informing parents	10	05
More than one form of CP	21	10
Total	212	100

The participants had varying opinions on the necessity of CP on students. 40% (n = 85) agreed with the idea that "In certain situations, children deserve to be physically punished." In 65% (n = 138) believed that "parents and teachers should be strict with their children to control their behavior." In 60% (n = 127) stated,

Table 4: Describe the responses given by the teachers regarding the statements about CP

Questions	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
In certain conditions, children deserve to be beaten	6.1	34.4	22.6	27.8	9.0
To control child behaviors' parents and teachers should be strict with their children	27.4	37.7	16.5	11.3	7.1
Children should obey their parents and teachers	58.5	27.4	8.5	4.7	9.0
CP associates with psychological problems in children later in life rather than a favorable attitude towards such discipline	28.3	31.6	23.1	9.9	7.1
CP associated with good academic performance of children	4.2	18.9	21.7	37.3	17.9
CP should be prohibited at home and in the school environment	16.0	25.9	28.8	22.2	7.1
School teachers have the right to punish the child in case of any misbehavior	17.0	38.7	21.7	13.7	9.0

Table 5: Statistical analysis of knowledge vs. demographics, training on CP, practices of CP, and perception on CP of the participants

		Good	Average	Poor	Very poor	
Age Category	20–30	12.5	37.5	25	26	$\chi^2 = 5.364$
	31–40	7.9	34.2	17.1	40.8	df = 9
	41–50	6.3	31.6	29.1	32.9+	p = 0.802
	51–60	6	30.3	27.3	36.4	
Gender	Male	1.9	36.5	25	36.5	$\chi^2 = 3.198$
	Female	9.3	31.9	23.5	35	df = 3 p = 0.362
Marital status	Married	6.7	34.2	23.3	35.8	$\chi^2 = 6.360$
	Other	15.8	21.1	31.6	31.6	df = 3 p = 0.339
Training on disciplining students	Trained	5.2	33.9	24.3	36.5	$\chi^2 = 1.97$
	Not trained	10.3	32.0	23.7	34.0	df = 3 p = 0.579
Practicing CP	Yes	6.8	37.3	20.3	35.6	$\chi^2 = 0.986$
	No	7.8	31.4	25.5	35.3	df = 3 p = 0.805
Type of perception	Positive	6.7	34.4	24.4	34.4	$\chi^2 = 0.305$
	Negative	8.2	32.0	23.8	36.1	df = 3 p = 0.959

“Corporal punishment can lead to psychological problems in children later in life instead of promoting discipline.” In 86% (n = 182) agreed that “Children should obey their parents and teachers.” In 42% (n = 89) believed “Corporal punishment should be prohibited at home and school.” In 56% (n = 119) agreed that “School teachers have the right to punish a child in case of misbehavior.” Most participants (55%, n = 117) disagreed with the idea that “Corporal punishment leads to increased academic performance in children.” Overall, 42% (n = 89) of teachers had a positive perception of corporal punishment, while 58% (n = 123) had a negative perception. Table 4 reveals teachers’ perceptions of different statements.

After analyzing the data, we found that there is no significant correlation between socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, race, and religion, and knowledge about corporal punishment. However, individuals aged between 20 and 30 tended to have average or above-average knowledge about it. On the other hand, those aged 31 to

50 had a higher number of poor and very poor knowledge about the subject. Nonetheless, we found no significant difference in knowledge and training in disciplining students among the participants (Table 5).

DISCUSSION

This study is aimed to assess the knowledge, practice, and perception of school teachers regarding CP. Since all schools in the study area were taught in Tamil medium, there were no Sinhalese teachers in the study population.

According to a study by De Soya *et al.* in 2017., only 103 out of 459 (22.4%) of Sri Lankan teachers received training in disciplining students.⁷ In contrast, the present study found that 54.2% of participants received some form of training in disciplining the children. Due to increased awareness of CP, the Ministry of Education may have trained their teachers in recent years, which could be a reason for the above observation.



Our study revealed that most teachers' knowledge was average and poor (57%, $n = 121$). Only 8% ($n = 16$) of participants had good knowledge (>70), while a significant number of people (35%, $n = 75$) had very poor knowledge (Scored less than 35). No similar studies were found that assessed the knowledge of Sri Lankan teachers regarding CP. However, studies have been conducted in different parts of the globe on the knowledge of child maltreatment, abuse and reporting such cases. These studies have shown a significant lack of knowledge among teachers in these areas.¹³⁻¹⁵

Even though most teachers had an average knowledge of CP, most participants (72.2%, $n=153$) were not involved in any CP. Teachers who use corporal punishment may not provide accurate reports about it, as they may be inclined to portray themselves in a more positive light, resulting in a falsely lower prevalence rate of corporal punishment among teachers. In 2015, Portela and Pells published a study comparing corporal punishment frequency across countries that may share similar socioeconomic features, such as higher poverty rates. When compared with the findings of that study, the use of CP in our study (27.8%) was higher than in countries such as Peru (0.7%), Vietnam (0.1%), and Ethiopia (12%) but not as high as in India (34%).¹⁶ In the present study, 44.1% ($n = 26$) of teachers who were engaged in CP used "Hitting with a hand or stick or squeezing the ears" as a form of CP. The study by de Soyza *et al.* also revealed that "Hitting with a hand or stick or squeezing the ears" has the highest prevalence (42.4%) among the CP methods.⁷

Our study revealed that teachers had a more negative perception of corporal punishment (CP) than a positive perception. Interestingly, CP was prohibited by the ancient Sri Lankan kings, but the colonial rulers accepted and promoted it in schools.¹⁶ The ethnic conflict and unrest among communities from 1983 to 2009 also contributed to teachers' negative perceptions of CP.⁶ Those who have been victims of CP during their childhood or have witnessed colleagues practicing it are more likely to perceive it negatively.¹¹

In the present study, no significant association was found between training in CP and practicing CP. However, a study conducted in Uganda revealed that the increasing number of training programs reduces the incidence of CP in schools.¹⁷ A study conducted in Sri Lanka concluded that schools with well-informed teachers experience fewer incidents of CP.⁷ The same author conducted another study on parental knowledge of CP, which revealed that most parents have inadequate knowledge of the subject. Furthermore, many perceive CP as a useful and necessary disciplinary measure, and preventing it would be imposing Western ideas on Sri Lanka.⁶

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study results, it was found that most participants had only average knowledge of CP, and a few were practicing it. Furthermore, the negative perceptions towards CP were higher than the positive ones. In light of these findings, it can be recommended that adequate information about CP should be integrated into the curriculum of universities, colleges of education, and teachers training colleges.

Establishing a clear definition of CP in Sri Lanka's legal system would prevent confusion and deception. All teachers should be informed of the negative repercussions of corporal punishment. Teachers who have used corporal punishment through an impartial inquiry must be held accountable for it legally and administratively.

Establishing a system that allows students and parents to report cases of corporal punishment is crucial. Schools must implement a zero-tolerance policy for any form of CP towards students. To achieve this goal, each school should form a committee consisting of the principal, teachers, students, and parents. This committee would organize regular activities to create an environment where CP towards students is discouraged. Additionally, educating the wider community through media programs is a necessity. Any media promoting CP towards children as acceptable should be circumvented. Further research on the knowledge and outcomes of CP could be conducted to provide more insight into this area.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

U Mayorathan - Study concept, design, Statistical analysis, manuscript preparation; S Pranavan - manuscript preparation, critical analysis; Moganalakshan M. - Data collection; Niroshini JSA- Data collection; Jiffry AM - Data collection; Munasinghe BM - Manuscript preparation, critical analysis

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article

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