

## Values and Beliefs Regarding Discipline Practices: How School Culture Impacts Teacher Responses to Student Misbehavior

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*The purpose of this study was to determine whether teachers' sense of efficacy influences their attitude towards the use of physical punishment in schools. There were two groups of participants in the study: pre-service and in-service early childhood teachers. The sample was made up of 78 in-service teachers from two different school districts and 61 pre-service teachers from a mid-western university early childhood education preparation program. There were multiple significant findings in the study. Teachers who value developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) significantly use non-punitive responses more frequently. Values about corporal punishment and self-efficacy were not related to non-punitive responses. Teachers in the school district that allows principal-approved corporal punishment were less likely to use non-punitive responses. In-service teachers used more punitive responses than the pre-service teachers. However, overall referral to principal for corporal punishment did not seem to be related to teacher efficacy, thus, leading us to believe that teacher efficacy and teachers' attitudes towards physical punishment are completely unrelated, and may be two different constructs.*

A teacher's positive sense of efficacy in a classroom is linked to positive experiences and outcomes, including the use of more developmentally appropriate teaching practices, such as positive classroom management techniques (Cousins & Walker, 2000; Guskey, 1987). Bandura (1994) defines efficacy as the way people see their ability to handle different occurrences in their lives. The researcher asserts that beliefs

about self-efficacy affect decisions people make in their lives, their motivation levels, and how they deal with daily stress. A teacher's job is not an easy one. They have to meet many daily demands including welcoming the children, keeping them safe, reporting attendance, teaching a curriculum to a group of children with differentiated instructional and emotional needs, managing the classroom, administering and interpreting assessment tools, meeting the needs of children with delays and disabilities in their inclusive setting, collaborating with fellow teachers in planning and implementation, engaging and communicating with parents, and many more. It is without a doubt a stressful job.

A teacher's response to children's misbehavior may be characterized by reasoning, re-directing, mediating, or may include threatening and yelling, and at times even referrals to the principal's office. In the United States, corporal punishment (i.e., physical punishment) in schools is legal in 19 of the 50 states (Farrall, 2014). Discipline referrals to the principal's office are often referrals for physical punishment to be inflicted by the school administrator.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a teacher's sense of efficacy influences his/her attitude toward the use of physical punishment in schools. It is unknown whether a teacher's sense of efficacy is related to his/her attitude toward physical punishment. Kennedy (1995) suggested that the biggest predictor of teachers' use of physical punishment was a history of physical punishment administered by their parents. In order to understand how efficacy influences teachers' behaviors and the known outcomes of those actions, the term self-efficacy needs to be understood from a theoretical perspective by examining existing research.

### **Self-efficacy**

According to Bandura (1977), if people do not feel a positive sense of efficacy about certain situations, they tend to stay away from those conditions because they do not believe they have the skills necessary to manage them appropriately. According to Baker (2005), teachers often give an account of experiencing “discipline related stress” when trying to manage children’s misbehaviors. Not only does the way people view their efficacy influence their activities and surroundings, but it can help with the way they handle the situation if they also expect themselves to be successful (Bandura, 1977). Bandura explained that the expectation of being successful or unsuccessful controls how much energy people apply and the amount of time they spend facing the difficult or uncomfortable experience. If the person is in fact successful in the face of an obstacle, the individual’s sense of efficacy is positively reinforced. The opposite is also true: when individuals end their efforts before they are successful, their fear and lack of efficacy are reinforced and can hinder efforts in future difficult situations. Just because individuals view themselves as being capable of performing successfully, does not mean that they will be successful, as there are other determining factors for a desired outcome. If the person is lacking necessary skills or capabilities, expecting to be successful is not going to be enough to actually perform successfully (Bandura, 1977). However, Bandura (1977) makes it clear that efficacy is a large determining factor in what situations a person will engage in, as well as their attitude towards it.

In an empirical review conducted by Ross (1998), teacher efficacy was found to be a predictor of students’ self-esteem and pro-social attitudes, teachers’ professional commitment, teacher stress, and classroom management strategies. Teachers who view themselves as capable of teaching challenging or uninterested students are considered

to have internal control, and teachers who view the environment as having more of an impact on student learning than their own personal teaching skills are considered to have external control (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). Additionally, research studies indicate that teachers who have a high sense of efficacy engage students in more developmentally appropriate ways (e.g. Ciyer, Nagasawa, Swadener, & Patet, 2010; Henson, 2001; Hoy & Spero, 2005).

### **Values and Beliefs**

A positive or negative attitude toward corporal punishment depends greatly on teachers' values and beliefs which are impacted by their cultures and are often transmitted and accepted from generation to generation without evaluation. Culture has been defined as "the values, traditions, and symbol systems of a long-standing social group that give purpose and meaning to children's daily activities and interpersonal relationships" (McDevitt & Ormond, 2013, p. 5). In order to create supportive environments for children, teachers need to consider how their own cultural experiences affect the way they respond to children in the classroom. Miller and Goodnow (1995) assert that teachers tend to see their own customs as normal. Yet, cultural groups differ in the standards they use to determine which behaviors are correct and which behaviors are incorrect (McDevitt & Ormond, 2013). Often times individuals who were physically punished at home or school as children will argue that "I turned out fine," dismissing a conversation about research-based guidance practices considered to be more effective and appropriate.

Borg (2001) states that a belief is a thought or idea that is held to be true by an individual consciously or unconsciously, but the individual also recognizes that others may hold a different belief. Beliefs and values assist individuals in making sense of the world by shaping how new

events or pieces of information are viewed. Teachers' beliefs, or "beliefs of relevance to an individual's teaching," (Borg, 2001, p. 187) as well as their professional preparation (Flores & Riojas-Cortez, 2009), can shape how they choose to teach within the classroom (Pajares, 1992). These values and beliefs that teacher's hold, which are greatly influenced by personal experiences, are the heart of their daily decision-making and have an unswerving impact on the methods and practices they choose to utilize in their classrooms (Xiang, Lowry, & McBride, 2002).

What a teacher believes and holds to be true and the actions the teacher actually takes can be very different. For example, pre-service teachers often hold strong commitments to past beliefs that were developed based on knowledge, but may be changed after experiencing a new event, which suggests that teachers' actions in a classroom might not always align with their values and beliefs (Pajares, 1992). When a teacher's beliefs change--from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach, for instance—it is not always reflected in their classroom practices (Miranda & Damico, 2015). It is known, however, that what early childhood teachers believe, what they know, and what they are able to do strongly guide the teaching practices taking place, which in turn are greatly influential on the development and growth of the children (Chang, Muckelroy, Pulido-Tobiassen, & Dowell, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

### **Developmentally Appropriate Practices and Alignment with the NAEYC Code of Ethics**

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) involves teachers meeting children's needs socially, cognitively, and physically, both individually and within a group, as well as helping children plan and meet achievable learning goals. DAP considers each child's home life, cultural values, and

individual traits to best meet their needs (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; McMullen, 1999). Skillful decision-making is a necessity in effective teaching. According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), children receive the most developmentally appropriate teaching from teachers who have the wisdom, judgment, and ability to use good classroom management strategies and are able to effectively use them.

The first principle of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Code of Ethics states, “Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. *This principle has precedence over all others in this Code*” (NAEYC, 2005, p. 3). The NAEYC Code of Ethics supports DAP and discourages any physically or emotionally damaging practices such as physical punishment. If a teacher engages in developmentally appropriate practice his/her attitude toward classroom management should reflect the first principle of the Code of Ethics (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, NAEYC, 2005). Developmentally appropriate classroom management techniques include the teaching of self-regulation, generating alternative solutions and implementing them, and guiding the children through evaluating and reflecting on their actions (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Gartrell, 2012).

Developmentally inappropriate practices such as shaming a child, the use of physical punishment, being disrespectful, or being emotionally degrading or damaging do not align with the NAEYC Code of Ethics (NAEYC, 2005). Physical punishment is deemed as an inappropriate practice, and while the leaders in the field of early childhood exhort professionals to abide by the NAEYC code of ethics, the fact that physical punishment is legal in some states exemplifies how divided all opinions are about this form of discipline.

### **Legality and Perceptions of Physical Punishment**

In the United States, corporal punishment (i.e., physical punishment) in schools is legal in 19 of the 50 states. The first state to ban corporal punishment in schools was New Jersey in 1867 and the latest to ban it was New Mexico in 2011. The states that allow corporal punishment in the schools are predominantly in the midwestern or southern parts of the United States (Rollins, 2012).

Williamson (2011) states that corporal punishment is deeply rooted in culture and religion. Furthermore, it is perceived as an acceptable and effective method of disciplining in order to teach children right from wrong in both home and school contexts (Graziano & Kuncze, 1992; Graziano & Namaste, 1990; Greven, 1990; Straus, 1991). Some religions are perceived by many adults to advocate for this type of punishment. It is therefore expectable that states that still hold physical punishment in schools as legal are mostly in the South with a culture characterized by social conservatism and large numbers of evangelical and Protestant religious groups (Flynn, 1994).

Just as the legality of physical punishment is divided, so are researchers' findings regarding the effects of spanking. For example, Holden and colleagues (Holden & Edwards, 1989; Holden, Coleman, & Schmidt, 1995; Holden, Miller, & Harris, 1999; and Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006) strongly oppose physical punishment. Others caution that there are contradictory research findings about the effects of spanking (Larzelere, 1986) and that corporal punishment in schools may offer some educational benefits (Han, 2014). However, Williamson (2011) states that "Overwhelmingly, research has shown that not only is corporal punishment not effective in diminishing unwanted behaviors but, it can be detrimental to the student" (p.27).

Little is known about the relationship between teachers' attitudes toward spanking and their responses to

children's misbehaviors in the classroom. The literature does point out that teachers with a high sense of efficacy "were not as likely as low efficacy teachers to appear angered or threatened by the misbehavior of students" (Dembo & Gibson, 1985, p. 177). Thus, it seems important to understand the concept of efficacy and investigate its relationship to attitudes toward spanking.

### **Teacher's Sense of Efficacy in Relation to Classroom Management Practices**

Some research indicates that early childhood and elementary teachers who have a greater sense of efficacy use teaching strategies or practices that align with developmentally appropriate practice, such as: more developmentally appropriate classroom management techniques (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000), being less critical of students who make a mistake, working longer with those who are not understanding, building student autonomy, and setting achievable goals (Dembo & Gibson, 1985). Classroom management is defined as "teachers' beliefs in their capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to maintain classroom order" (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000, p. 242). Effective management of a classroom is an important skill for teachers to have because time for instruction is lost if misbehavior is not dealt with accordingly (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). Teachers who take a classroom management course may have a higher sense of self-efficacy (Kurt, Ekici, & Gungor, 2014). Teachers who do not believe in their abilities to effectively guide a classroom are challenged by their ineffectiveness every single day and experience difficulty reaching students and helping them meet educational goals (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). Research has shown that teachers who have a more traditional (custodial) attitude toward classroom management provide a more rigid and highly controlled classroom setting (e.g. Rimm-Kaufman

& Sawyer, 2004; Willower, Eidell, & Hoy, 1967; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990). Research indicates that use of physical and emotional violence as disciplinary measures may be influenced by teachers' perception of their ability to control positive outcomes (Khoury-Kassabri, 2012). However, there has been little research conducted on whether a teacher's sense of efficacy is related to a teacher's responses to students' misbehavior and whether their attitudes predict the use of physical punishment.

### **Methods**

#### Sample

This study included two groups of participants: in-service and pre-service early childhood teachers who were recruited through convenience sampling. The in-service teachers were from 12 elementary schools in two different school districts in the Midwest. Pre-service teachers were enrolled in a midwestern university's early childhood education teacher preparation program. A total of 151 responded to a questionnaire. However, 12 questionnaires were deleted due to incomplete data, leaving 139 total questionnaires. The data analysis conducted is based on the information provided by 139 participants, specifically, 78 in-service teachers and 61 pre-service teachers. All in-service teachers were female, and there were 60 female and 1 male pre-service teachers. In-service teachers' ages ranged from 22-61 years with a mean of 37.1. The average number of years teaching was 11.01, and the average class size was 27.23 children. Pre-service teachers' ages ranged from 19-25 years ( $M = 21.23$ ).

#### Measures

Participants completed a series of questionnaires about their self-efficacy in teaching, their values and beliefs about discipline, and their discipline practices. In addition, in-service participants came from two different school districts, one that

allows principal-approved corporal punishment and one that does not, thus providing insight into the effect of school culture on values and beliefs regarding physical punishment. Pre-service participants completed field experiences in both settings while receiving instruction on DAP.

#### Teachers' sense of efficacy.

The Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale-long form (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) was used to measure efficacy. The scale contains 24-items that measure the following efficacy constructs: student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management. This questionnaire is a Likert type scale with responses ranging from nothing (1) to a great deal (9). Alpha reliability for this sample was .94.

#### Values and beliefs regarding discipline practices.

Some questions assessing values and beliefs regarding discipline practices were included in the assessment packet. These questions were an adaptation of Cohen's (1996) questionnaire used for the study "Teachers and pupils' attitudes and practices regarding the abolition of corporal punishment in schools in the Gauteng area." There are 18-item Likert type questions where responders indicate their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements. Responses range from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). Of the original 18 items, 14 items loaded strongly (loading greater than .3) on two factors: one about developmentally appropriate practices and one about corporal punishment. Examples of the developmentally appropriate practices include: "Sending students out of the class removes the problem but does not solve it," and "Organized/prepared teachers have less discipline problems." Examples of the corporal punishment factor include: "Corporal punishment is necessary in order to maintain discipline at school," and

“Corporal punishment increases aggression in students.” These factors had alpha reliability of .71 and .81 respectively.

#### Teacher response to student misbehavior.

The Teacher Response to Student Misbehavior questionnaire is based on the work by Holden and Zambarano (1992) and Holden, Coleman, and Schmidt (1995). This is a 12-item Likert questionnaire that asks how frequently a participant would use different discipline responses with his/her students. These responses range from never (1) to very frequently (6). Factor analysis suggested three factors for the 12 items (loadings greater than .3). Two of the factors were retained for this analysis focusing on punitive behaviors and non-punitive behaviors. Examples of punitive behaviors include: Time-out and threatening. Examples of non-punitive behaviors include: Reasoning/Explaining and negotiating.

#### **Data Analysis**

A series of regression analyses were performed in order to show the moderated impact of self-efficacy and values and beliefs on discipline practices. There were two outcomes, non-punitive responses and punitive responses, three predictors, self-efficacy and values and beliefs about developmentally appropriate practices and corporal punishment, and two moderators, School district and pre-service status. First, a series of models were run with just teachers from the two school districts. Second, the pre-service teachers were included to see how they differed. All non-significant interactions were removed for the final model. All analyses were performed in Stata 13.

### Results

The first set of regression results just dealing with the in-service teachers are reported in Table 1. None of the interactions were significant, so only the models without interactions, but retaining the main effects of the moderators, are reported. Teachers who reported higher value of and belief in developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) reported significantly more non-punitive responses. Higher value of and belief in corporal punishment was not significantly related to non-punitive responses. Teacher self-efficacy was also not significantly related to non-punitive responses. Teachers from the school district that allows principal-approved corporal punishment responded with non-punitive practices significantly less than teachers from the school district that did not allow any form of corporal punishment. Results indicated that there is evidence for the influence of values and beliefs about both DAP and corporal punishment on punitive responses (see table 1). Teachers with a higher value of and belief in DAP showed significantly fewer punitive responses and teachers with a higher value of and belief in corporal punishment showed significantly more punitive responses. Teachers' self-efficacy was not significantly related to punitive responses and school district was also not significantly related to punitive responses.

The results for the full sample including both pre- and in-service teachers are found in Table 2. The results predicting non-punitive responses replicated the results for the smaller sample (in-service teachers only) with higher value of and belief in DAP showing more non-punitive responses and value and belief in corporal punishment not being significantly related. Self-efficacy was also not related to non-punitive responses. In-service teacher from the corporal punishment allowed school district show fewer non-punitive responses compared to the pre-service teachers. No significant difference was found between pre-service teachers

**Table 1: In-service teachers 'predictors of higher value of and belief in developmentally appropriate practices**

Non-punitive responses					
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$
Intercept	4.39	0.08	51.83	0.000	
Values and beliefs about DAP	0.52	0.15	3.52	0.001	0.40
Values and beliefs about corporal punishment	0.02	0.08	0.28	0.780	0.03
Efficacy	-0.06	0.12	-0.46	0.647	-0.05
District – Corporal	-0.48	0.20	-2.46	0.016	-0.28
Punitive responses					
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$
Intercept	2.56	0.08	33.46	0.000	
Values and beliefs about DAP	-0.27	0.13	-2.00	0.050	-0.22
Values and beliefs about corporal punishment	0.24	0.07	3.40	0.001	0.38
Efficacy	-0.02	0.11	-0.19	0.850	-0.02
District - Corporal	0.11	0.18	0.61	0.543	0.07

**Table 2: In-service and pre-service teachers' predictors of punitive responses**

Non-punitive responses					
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>
Intercept	4.59	0.09	52.45	0.000	
Values and beliefs about DAP	0.51	0.11	4.56	0.000	0.38
Values and beliefs about corporal punishment	-0.04	0.06	-0.74	0.461	-0.06
Efficacy	0.01	0.08	0.18	0.856	0.01
District - Corporal	-0.61	0.20	-3.06	0.003	-0.28
District - No Corporal	-0.19	0.12	-1.58	0.118	-0.13
Punitive responses					
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>
Intercept	2.17	0.08	25.62	0.000	
Values and beliefs about DAP	-0.09	0.11	-0.83	0.407	-0.07
Values and beliefs about corporal punishment	0.19	0.06	3.41	0.001	0.28
Efficacy	-0.14	0.08	-1.83	0.070	-0.15
District - Corporal	0.51	0.19	2.63	0.009	0.23
District - No Corporal	0.39	0.12	3.26	0.001	0.27

and teachers from the school district that did not allow corporal punishment.

The inclusion of the pre-service teachers changed the results for the punitive responses. Higher value of and belief in corporal punishment was still significantly associated with more punitive responses, but higher value of and belief in DAP was no longer significantly related to punitive responses. Higher teacher self-efficacy was related to fewer punitive responses, though only marginally significant. Lastly, in-service teachers (from both school districts) used significantly more punitive responses than the pre-service teachers.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study are enlightening and confusing at the same time. As expected, teachers who value developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) favor the use of non-punitive responses. Teachers in the school district that allows principal-approved corporal punishment use non-punitive responses significantly less than those in the district that banned physical punishment. One would expect individuals with high efficacy to have better classroom management skills, thus not needing to resort to physical punishment. The fact that referrals to the principal for corporal punishment did not have a significant relationship to teacher efficacy leads us to believe that teacher efficacy and teacher attitude towards physical punishment are unrelated, and they may be two completely different constructs. Perhaps because physical punishment is an option the teacher may use it as an opportunity to pass the responsibility to the principal to manage the problem while he/she continues with the instruction. They may see guidance techniques such as reasoning and explaining as too time consuming or a weak approach to teaching.

Williamson (2011) states that corporal punishment is deeply rooted in culture and religion. Efforts to eliminate the use of corporal punishment in public schools may be particularly challenging in regions where there is cultural and legal approval of the practice. Flynn (1994) suggests that if schools take a stand against corporal punishment it may cause parents to question its value and effectiveness. Gilmartin (1979) stated that "public schools can and should be expected to set a positive example for parents to follow" (p. 23). Perhaps the opposite will be equally valuable; if parents refuse to sign permission forms allowing school administrators to inflict corporal punishment on their children, maybe schools will abandon this practice.

School principals have been identified in the literature as having a very influential role in establishing supportive conditions for instructional improvement (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz & Louis, 2009). Therefore, it is important for early childhood educators to not only provide training where positive guidance techniques can be taught and raise awareness for what is considered ethical behavior in our profession to pre-service and in-service teachers, but also, and especially to school administrators. The National Association for the Education of Young Children Code of Ethics states, "Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. *This principle has precedence over all others in this Code* (NAEYC, 2005, p. 3). All school personnel need to be aware of and abide by this position statement.

No study is perfect and acknowledging the limitations is an important part of transparency. This study has a sample size on the smaller size, particularly for the interactions. Regardless, we had sufficient sample (no zero cells) to test interactions.

### Future Research

The study has limitations. Replicating the study with a larger number of participants may yield different results. In addition, the sample was from the southern Midwest and mostly rural communities, thus future research should include urban and suburban settings in the northern, eastern and western United States. This may contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between physical punishment and teacher efficacy. There is much work to be done in two areas: (a) there is a need for more understanding of why physical punishment still has a role in some schools, communities, and regions and, (b) to eliminate this practice.

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