# Challenges facing the implementation of children's rights in primary schools in Ethiopia

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## Abstract

The primary objective of this study is to examine the challenges facing the implementation of children's rights to protection from physical punishment when schools administer discipline. The study, which was conducted in primary schools in a city in Southern Ethiopia, employed qualitative research involving interviews, observations and open-ended questionnaires. The findings indicate that children are exposed to various forms of physical punishments in schools. The challenges are mainly posed by traditional authoritarian child-rearing practices and a lack of knowledge about children's rights among teachers and parent teacher representatives, despite senior leadership appearing familiar with the rhetoric regarding physical punishment.

*Key words:* Children's rights, Physical Punishment, Ethiopia

## Introduction

This study[1] seeks to identify and discuss the challenges facing the implementation of children's right to protection from physical punishment when primary schools administer discipline. Children are among the most vulnerable members of any society and therefore require special care and assistance. Conceptually, the rights of children regarding education are enshrined in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). That article also states that parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the present conventions.

The Implementation Handbook of the UNCRC relates the ethical aspects of administering discipline to the obligations in article 19 of the UNCRC. The article underlines children's right to protection from "all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse" (Hodgkin & Newell 2002, p. 424). In particular, UNCRC has made it clear that all forms of physical punishment, however light, are unacceptable forms of discipline in schools or elsewhere (Hodgkin & Newell 2002).

More specifically, the present study focuses on whether and how primary schools in an urban area of southern Ethiopia are administering school discipline in a manner consistent with international, national, and local legislation. We focus primarily on the practices and views of the stakeholders regarding the use of physical punishment in selected schools. Furthermore, the schools use of discipline will be discussed critically in light of theoretical perspectives on child-rearing as well as the UNCRC. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by specially focusing on the stakeholders'

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[1] The study is part of a Norad- funded project focusing on improving quality of Early Years Reading Instructions in Ethiopia. Norad is the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation.

views and practices, as well as adding to the limited research about child-rearing in primary schools in a low-income country in Sub-Saharan Africa.

During the past decade, the educational discourse on children's rights to education in developing countries, has tended to focus primarily on access to education for all. Ethiopia has made tremendous progress in achieving universal primary education (EFA, 2015). According to UNESCO the gross enrollment rate in primary school was 97.2 percent for girls and 106.94 percent for boys in 2015.[2] On the other hand, there are also several challenges to ensuring the quality of education in Ethiopia. Surveys indicate that the outcomes of Ethiopian children's literacy learning are very poor, there are high pupil-to-teacher ratios, an insufficient number and low quality of trained teachers, as well as a lack of appropriate learning material in schools (USAID Ethiopia, EFA 2016). Several Education for All Monitoring Reports have clearly stated the need to address questions about quality and sustainability in global educational issues, alongside the work for access for all (EFA 2015, 2016, 2017). The quest for quality includes both structural and processual aspects of education (Mwaura, Sylva, Malmberg, 2011, EFA 2015). The present article deals with questions about the quality of processual aspects, namely the administering of school discipline in conformity with the UNCRC in Ethiopian primary schools.

Some studies and laws use the term "corporal punishment", while others use "physical punishment" or "violence". (Portela & Pells 2015, The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia No. 1/ 1995, UNCRC, Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan 2002). In the present study we follow the UNCRC's definition, which sees the terms as having equal meaning and weight, and specifies that "'corporal' or 'physical' punishment is any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light" (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2016, p.4).

The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia No. 1/ 1995, Article 36, is in line with the UNCRC when it states that "Every child has the right to be free of corporal punishment or cruel and inhumane treatment in schools and other institutions responsible for the care of children". This is followed by the school administration regulations issued by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education in 1998, which state that "corporal punishment is not among permitted disciplinary measures" (Portela & Pells, 2015).

However, physical punishment remains prevalent, with 30 percent of children aged 11–17 reporting that they have experienced physical punishment in Ethiopian schools (African Child Policy Forum 2014). Previous studies of schools in Ethiopia indicate that the youngest school children in Ethiopia are at greater risk of experiencing physical punishment, whereas adolescents often report higher levels of mental violence (Portela & Pells 2015). Such studies indicate the importance of following up on the use and understanding of physical punishment in primary schools in Ethiopia. Violence in schools, including physical and verbal abuse by teachers and peers, is the primary reason given by Ethiopian children for disliking school. According to USAID, the completion rate for primary school in Ethiopia was only 54.4 percent in 2015. The reasons for this are complex (EFA, 2015). Although the present article focuses on physical punishment in primary schools, we also acknowledge the challenges that mental violence causes in Ethiopian schools.

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[2] According to UNESCO, the gross enrollment rate can exceed 100 percent due to the inclusion of over-aged and under-aged students because of early or late entrants, and grade repetition.

## A rights-based approach

This article takes a rights-based approach to children, which implies that children have the right to protection from all forms of physical and mental punishment. However, a rights-based approach may conflict to some degree with the more traditional and widespread investment-based approach that is commonly found among parents and communities in southern Ethiopia (Abebe & Tefera 2014). An investment-based approach emphasizes children's duties and their mutual and interdependent role in a community. This investment-based approach is often perceived as a contradiction to the rights-based approach that describes the separate and individual rights of children (Ansell 2005, Morgan 2013, Pupavac 2011). However, several efforts are currently being made with limited resources in Ethiopia to adhere to children's rights. This should be acknowledged, despite current gaps between ideal and reality (Abebe &Tefera, 2014; Lemessa & Kjørholt, 2013).

## A prototype approach to child-rearing

Much of the existing research about physical punishment on children comes from a home context, where parents are the ones administrating the punitive actions (Portela &Pells 2015). Furthermore, most of the research about physical punishment is from high-income countries, principally the United States, and derives mainly from psychological studies (Portela & Pells, 2015). A dilemma related to such studies is that they may be criticized for being based on an investment-based understanding of children and childhood, and a lack of conscience about ethical aspects regarding the child's human dignity in child-rearing (Qvortrup 2009).

The following section presents three different prototypes of adult control in child rearing, based on studies from the Unites States, by the psychologist Diana Baumrind. Despite the original American cultural context of Baumrind's research, more recent cross-cultural research has confirmed that the three typologies can be viewed as global dimensions, although there will be cultural variations within the prototypes in various cultural settings (Chao 1994; Robinson et al., 1996). The prototypes have previously proven to be useful analytical concepts in child- rearing research within a Sub-Saharan context (Awujo, 2006). Although Baumrind's research is based on parent–child relations, she argued that the prototypes also have influenced the child rearing practices of educators as well as child development experts (Baumrind, 1966). The prototypes have also recently been applied as concepts regarding how teachers relate to students in primary schools (Nordahl, 2013).

## Authoritarian child-rearing prototype

The authoritarian prototype values obedience as a virtue and commonly uses physical punishment, verbal hostility, non-reasoning and punitive strategies to deal with situations where children's actions conflict with the adult (Baumrind, 1966; Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, & Hart 1995). According to Baumrind, the authoritarian adult commonly attempts to shape, control, and evaluate the behavior and attitudes of the child in accordance with a set standard of conduct that is often theologically motivated and formulated by a higher authority (Baumrind 1966).

## Permissive and authoritative child-rearing prototype

The permissive adult attempts to behave in a non-punitive and affirmative manner toward the child's impulses, desires, and actions. The adult consults the child about decisions, gives explanations for rules, and ignores misbehavior (Baumrind 1966, Robinson et al., 1996). The authoritative adult prototype takes an intermediate position between the permissive and authoritarian prototypes. An authoritative child-rearing prototype attempts to direct the child's activities in a rational and issue-oriented manner. The adult encourages verbal give-and-take and shares with the child the reasoning behind the policies, and also solicits the child's objections when he or she refuses to conform. However, the authoritative adult values both autonomous self-will and disciplined conformity. Therefore, firm control is exercised at point of adult-child divergence, but does not hem the child in with restrictions. The authoritative adult is also characterized by warmth and empathic approaches in communication with children (Baumrind 1966, Robinson et al., 1996).

## Child-rearing in Ethiopia and the administration of school discipline

Studies indicate a connection between child-rearing ideals in a society depending on the form of livelihood. In traditional agricultural societies, parents depend more on their children for help, which contributes to an emphasis on obedience and respect in the relationship between parents and children (Baumrind 1966; Hundeide 1988 & 1995, Pupavac 2011,). Previous studies have indicated that an authoritarian style of parenting is common in most parts of Ethiopia (Abebe & Tefera 2014). According to the longitudinal study conducted by UNICEF in Ethiopia in 2015, physical punishment in Ethiopian schools is prevalent when four in ten children enrolled in school experienced physical punishment by the age of eight. In sum, the study revealed that the youngest school boys and children from disadvantaged backgrounds are at greater risk of physical punishment than adolescents and girls in primary school. (Referred to in the report as corporal punishment). The UNICEF study also showed that children in urban areas in Ethiopia reported experiencing more physical punishment than children in rural areas (Portela, & Pells, 2015). The results from the UNICEF study clearly reveal an unfortunate asymmetrical situation between the official legal and policy position on physical punishment and the implementation of children's rights in primary schools.

## Method

A qualitative case study was employed to examine the challenges schools encountered when attempting to implement children's right to protection from physical punishment when schools administer discipline. As Stake (1995) noted, case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case with the aim of understanding its activity within its specific context. A central part of case study research is obtaining thick description of the setting studies, one that provides a sense of what it is like to experience that setting from the standpoint of the natural actors in that settings (Geertz 1973).

The unit population of the study were children, teachers, principals, and members of parent–teacher associations (PTAs). The schools and interviewees were selected using purposive sampling. Herbret and Irene (1995, p. 66) noted that three guidelines are considered in using purposive sampling: knowledge about the cultural arena or situation or experience being studied, willingness to talk, and representing the various points of view.

An inclusion criterion was developed to select the schools and participants for the present study. Obtaining participants' willingness and consent took place during the phase of developing the inclusion criteria. Four principals, twelve teachers, twelve students and six members of PTAs, were finally included from four primary schools.

The case study combined semi-structured interviewing and questionnaires; underpinned by non-participant observation in the schools where the study was undertaken. The semi-structured interviews held with individual principals, teachers, children and members of PTA offered the researchers a degree of flexibility to structure the interview depending on individual responses. The interview took 90 minutes with each participant and was concluded in two weeks. Likewise, a semi-structured questionnaire to principals, teachers, children and members of PTA was designed to elicit opinions on challenges faced in administering schools disciplines.

Open-ended questionnaire was distributed to gather opinions of children on any form of harms and physical punishments that they experienced when schools administer disciplines. The questionnaires complemented the interviews, and added value to the study in terms of triangulation. Data gathered using the aforementioned sources were interpreted using thematic analysis. All research material was initially prepared in Amharic and translated into English by employing language experts to maintain the accuracy of translation.

*Table 1.* Research Participant groups and specific research tools

| Participant group | Semi-structured interview | Semi-structured questionnaire |
|---|---|---|
| Principals | 4 | 4 |
| Teachers | 4 | 12 |
| Student | 8 | 12 |
| PTA members | 4 | 6 |
| Total | 20 | 34 |

In addition, the study employed observation as a means to check whether the acts listed in the questionnaires are still present. The observation was conducted for a week in four primary schools and grades undertaken into observation were 5 to 8. The local researcher being together with his one male and one female assistant observed the situation carefully across the whole day. The research team were aware of the sensitivity of researching this topic in schools. This was most apparent during the course of interview. Interviewees were asked to express their honest opinion however the research team were aware that the very nature of the topic might place constraints on what adults and children felt able to discuss. This was part of the ethical considerations surrounding the research in addition to the need to maintain confidentiality.

**Findings**

*Practices that contradict policies and conventions*

In all four schools in which this study was conducted, bylaws discourage all forms of punishment towards students. In other words, the school bylaws are developed with reference to the national laws, educational policies, and the UNCRC. However, the interviews held with children and teachers revealed that teachers are punishing the

students physically. The teachers beat the students by slapping them or using rulers, as well as pinching them, even though such actions contravene the schools' bylaws. One of the students who was interviewed was very critical of this conflicting situation:

> Teachers act beyond their limit ratified in the school discipline when they observe unethical behavior …We are exposed to such physical and verbal punishments as beating, kneeling down before students and using derogatory words affecting our emotion.

The teachers' use of physical punishment has clear parallels with the authoritarian child-rearing approach, where the use of physical punishment is a common reaction to children's opposition (Baumrind 1966; Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen & Hart 1995).

Furthermore, the interviews with the principals and teachers revealed that children's rights and local policies are not well internalized by the teachers. One of the teachers explained:

> We pay less attention to being acquainted with the details of the rights of children engraved in various international conventions and the Constitution of Ethiopia … Being unaware of the bylaws of the schools may expose us to unintentionally of naively overstepping the rights of children in the schools. I can say that teachers here in the school are not well aligned with acts that are entailed in all the policies, constitutional orders and conventions.

## Discussion

### *Training and application of children's rights*

Firstly, one may ask why teachers pay less attention to becoming acquainted with children's rights. Is it because of a lack of interest, motivation or commitment? When the teacher respond that they pay less attention to being acquainted with the details of the rights of children, one may also question whether children's right to protection from all forms of violence can be regarded as details? All experts acknowledge that severe, harsh and punitive forms of physical punishment are detrimental to children's well-being and ethically unacceptable (Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan 2002 p. 581). This may indicate that, in addition to violating important rules and regulations, the teachers use of punishment is not beneficial to the students.

As shown below, the data seems to indicate that a central challenge when implementing children's rights is the teachers' lack of thorough knowledge of and attention to children's rights, the National Constitution, as well as local policies regarding children in school settings. In that regard, one may also ask what kind of training the teachers have received previously and how the courses in current Teacher Education Colleges in Ethiopia facilitate such training? A recent UNICEF report about physical punishment in schools in Ethiopia and the like stated that legislation is an important first step in eradicating the use of corporal punishment, but is not sufficient on its own (Portela and Pells 2015).

The data from the selected schools in this study, show that the teachers use physical punishment in reaction to students' failure to obey basic policies in the schools. A representative from the PTA explained that:

> The teachers become harsh when students fail to follow the basic rules and policies of the schools such as; being late to school hours, improper dressing of school uniforms, disrespecting class room rules, scolding of their mates, bullying and jumping over the fence of the school compound.

If teachers commonly become harsh and use both physical and verbal forms of punishment when children overstep the policies, this may indicate that the teachers do not acknowledge that their students are only children and are thereby entitled to protection from such forms of punishment by both international and local laws and conventions.

Some supporters of children's rights underline that children should not be given responsibilities that are beyond their maturity (Bae 2006). If an investment-based understanding of children is interpreted in a way that legitimatizes the use of physical punishment when children fail to adhere to their responsibilities, then such interpretations need to be challenged in light of the right-based approach.

### *The support of physical punishment*

Both the teachers and the PTA representative in this study supported the use of physical punishment in schools. The PTA representative referred to the traditional Ethiopian culture, which supports the idea that children improve their behavior when they are punished physically:

> Our culture and the way we are brought up supports the use of physical punishment as a means to mold the character of children. Hence, most of the parents use similar types of child-rearing. But the punishment should be very mild and not inflict any harm on the body parts of children or impair their emotions.

The above quotation indicates a strong belief in what has previously been referred to as an authoritarian prototype of child-rearing in the Ethiopian culture (Abebe & Tefera 2014). The ethical reasoning of the PTA representative also shows how the belief in the authoritarian approach is strongly linked with a belief in the positive consequences of using physical punishment. Furthermore, the PTA representative seems to imply that since most of the parents physically punish their children at home, they also approve that the teachers can do so in school. This line of reasoning was also found among teachers in a study about teachers' well-being in townships in a South African context (Olsen & Hagen 2015). However, the PTA representative also included some limitations regarding what forms of physical punishment they approve of, in order to avoid negative effects.

In line with the teachers, the PTA representative showed no awareness of the fact that the use of physical punishment in primary school is forbidden at all formal levels, locally, nationally, and internationally. The PTA's focus on specifying what forms of physical punishments it approves of does show concern for the well-being of the children, but not to the same degree as the laws and conventions demand.

From a child-rights approach, even light forms of physical punishments are considered as a violation of children's rights (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016, p. 4). Studies of child rearing have often debated the benefits and downsides of light forms of physical punishment, and whether this should be considered as physical violence. However, the evidence purporting to show whether light forms of physical punishment has a beneficial effect on child behavior or a more positive effect than available alternatives is inconclusive (Baumrind 1966, Baumrind, Larzelere, & Cowan 2002, Lenta, 2012). From a children's rights approach, such discussions may even be considered as a dead end. It may therefore seem as if the support of the cultural tradition that supports the use of physical punishment in schools is yet another challenge with regard to the implementation of children's rights in primary schools in Ethiopia.

The cultural tradition may also contribute to what has previously been mentioned as teachers' lack of acquaintance and possibly commitment, as well as motivation concerning the implementation of children's rights to protection from physical punishment in primary schools. Therefore, the challenge is how to change such deep-rooted cultural traditions and attitudes among both teachers and parents. The UNICEF report about physical punishment in schools in Ethiopia from 2015 argues that teachers need to be trained and supported in the use of non-violent or positive methods of discipline (Portela and Pells 2015). It may seem as though this is still the case, which raises the central question of what kind of training is offered to Ethiopian teachers with regards to both children's rights and non-violent methods of discipline. Could a culturally adapted version of an authoritative approach be an alternative to the existing authoritarian approaches in Ethiopian schools? These are important questions to follow up on in future research and development in schools and among teacher trainers in Ethiopia.

The principals who were interviewed indicated that teachers are increasingly using alternative approaches to physical punishment, such as advising students and sending them to relevant clubs when they are behaving wrongly. This seems like a positive development in the direction of a non-violent approach, which should be encouraged in order to facilitate the implementation of children's right to protection from physical punishment in Ethiopian schools. According to Baumrind's research, warmth and non-coercive child rearing is related positively to children's development of both social and cognitive competence (Baumrind 1989).

### The institutional norms

Interviews with the principals in the four schools showed that they do not support the use of physical punishment towards children in schools. They explained that if they discover any form of physical punishment against children, there are various sanctions enacted based on the bylaws. One of the principals explained:

> Teachers use various verbal and physical punishments in the schools. Reports against these types of punishments usually arrive to the office of the principals' repeatedly. There are teachers who have been warned, dismissed, and fined in the school I am administering. I do not encourage any form of punishment to be held in the school in the name of enforcing the school bylaws. I often prepare a stage where teachers can explain their views on the disciplinary measures to be in line with the school bylaws or disciplines. However, I am not confident enough to say that I am able to stop the use of all forms of physical and verbal punishments.

The principal's attitudes towards physical punishment in schools are contrary to the views of the teachers and PTA. Furthermore, the principal's attitudes seem to be more in line with those of the students and the UNCRC, as well as the National Constitution. However, the students seem critical of the lack of follow-up by the school, and felt that teachers who do not follow the laws should be held accountable for their actions.

Although the principals are the head of the schools, their opinions do not seem to stop the teachers from physically punishing the students. Nor does their use of sanctions against teachers who use physical punishment seem to prevent teachers from employing authoritarian child-rearing approaches.

Interviews with the staff in the schools indicated that reports coming to the academic leaders of different units about the use of physical punishment in the schools are not condemned because such actions are not traditionally regarded as harmful practices.

Again, this shows how the belief in the traditional authoritarian child-rearing approach is a hindrance to implementing children's rights in the schools. This may seem to indicate that the unwritten norms in the schools are still heavily influenced by the traditional authoritarian child-rearing approach (Abebe & Tefera 2014).

In order to eradicate the use of physical punishment, the UNICEF report argues that it is necessary to understand the institutional norms that are preventing implementation and legislation from being supported by a wider range of preventative measures in policies and programs (Pinheiro in Portela & Pells 2015, p. 30).

The Implementation Handbook for the UNCRC requires that all appropriate measures must be taken to ensure that physical and other cruel or degrading punishments are never used in schools. It may seem as though a central challenge is that sufficient measures have not yet been taken in order to change the institutional attitudes and norms in the four schools in this study, despite senior leadership advocating against the use of physical punishment.

**Summary and conclusion**

This study has identified and discussed several challenges facing the implementation of children's rights to protection from physical punishment when Ethiopian primary schools administer discipline.

Drawing on findings from four primary schools in an urban area in Southern Ethiopia, this study has shown that there clearly are several and fundamental challenges related to the implementation of children's rights in primary schools.

The challenges are related to a lack of awareness about children's rights, as well as Ethiopian teachers and PTA's support of using physical punishment in schools that may mirror the use of physical punishment at home. This situation contributes to the prevalence of authoritarian child-rearing practices, which supports the use of physical punishment towards children in primary schools. The students are clearly distressed by the teachers' use of physical punishment and believe that the school should do more to prevent such actions. Despite the principals' awareness of children's rights in primary schools, a fundamental challenge is the lack of strong institutional norms that alter the existing authoritarian child-rearing practices.

The results from this study clearly indicate a prolonged need to develop teacher's competence with regard to non-violent approaches to administering discipline in Ethiopian primary schools.

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