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Research article

Teachers' stress intensifies violent disciplining in Tanzanian secondary schools

Tobias Hecker^{a,d,*}, Katharina Goessmann^b, Mabula Nkuba^{b,c}, Katharin Hermenau^{b,d}^a Department of Psychology, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany^b Department of Psychology, University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany^c Department of Educational Psychology and Curriculum Studies, Dar es Salaam University College of Education, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania^d vivo international, www.vivo.org

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ABSTRACT

Violent forms of discipline in schools continue to be widespread across the globe despite their damaging effects. Since little is known about factors influencing the extent of violence applied by teachers, this study aimed to investigate the influence of teachers' stress, work satisfaction, and personal characteristics on their disciplining style. Using structural equation modeling, associations between violent discipline, burnout symptoms, and job perceptions (pressure and difficulties in class) reported by 222 teachers from 11 secondary schools in Tanzania in 2015 were analyzed. Results indicated a direct association between perceived stress and emotional violent discipline ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$) as well as physical violent discipline ($\beta = .37$, $p < .001$). Perceived stress also mediated the association between job perceptions and both forms of violent disciplining. The model showed good model fit ($\chi^2 [44, n = 222] = 67.47$ ($p = .013$), CFI = .94, TLI = .91, IFI = .94, RMSEA = .049 [90%-CI = .02–.07, PCLOSE = .50], SRMR = .06). Our findings suggest that teachers' personal perceptions of their work as well as their stress burden play a role in their disciplining styles. Our findings underline the importance of integrating topics, such as stress and coping as well as positive, nonviolent discipline measures into the regular teacher's training and in addition to develop and evaluate school-based preventative interventions for teachers.

1. Introduction

School corporal punishment continues to be a legal means of disciplining children in a third of the world's countries (Gershoff, 2017; Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children [GIEACPC], 2015) and millions of children and adolescents frequently experience violent forms of discipline in educational settings (Straus, 2010), although protection of the physical and mental integrity of all children is formalized in Article 19 of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989). Violent discipline is defined as an act of physical or psychological force including corporal punishment and other forms of physical or emotional maltreatment intended to cause corporal or emotional pain for purposes of correction or control of the child's behavior (Straus & Mouradian, 1998; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 2007). Violent discipline in schools is particularly widespread in African and Asian countries and in the USA (Chen & Wei, 2011; Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children [GIEACPC], 2015), and survey data suggests that countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have the highest levels of societal support for corporal punishment (UNICEF, 2014). The problem is underlined by the notice that the legal status of school

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Bielefeld University, Postbox 100131, 33501 Bielefeld, Germany.
E-mail address: tobias.hecker@uni-bielefeld.de (T. Hecker).

corporal punishment in many countries seems to have minimal impact on the actual practice of violent disciplining (Parkes & Heslop, 2011) as its use continues to be high in some countries that have achieved law reforms prohibiting it (Feinstein & Mwachombela, 2010; Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children [GIEACPC], 2015).

Among the countries with the highest prevalence rates and in which violent discipline at school is still legal is the United Republic of Tanzania, although the country is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2016). Despite government guidelines in 2000 reducing corporal punishment in schools, namely that the use of strokes was reduced from six to four per administration, and that it must be administered by head teachers only (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2016), the use of violent discipline by regular teachers continues to be prevalent and still supported by authorities (Tanzania Daily News, 2013). Furthermore, teachers' regular training fails to convey nonviolent ways to handle children's misbehaviors (Nkuba & Kyaruzi, 2015). Unsurprisingly, a large body of research indicates that teachers in Tanzanian schools regularly administer violent forms of disciplining (Feinstein & Mwachombela, 2010; Frankenberg, Holmqvist, & Rubenson, 2010).

1.1. Factors influencing the use of violent punishment in schools

While much is known about parents' use of corporal punishment, there is less research about school corporal punishment (Gershoff, 2017). Already Belsky (1984) in his influential theoretical model on parenting emphasized the influence of personality, interpersonal conflicts, work-related stress and societal beliefs on parenting behavior.

Teachers often consider violent punishment as the only way to deal with students' inappropriate behavior (Flannery, Wester, & Singer, 2004; Yaghambe & Tshabangu, 2013). Common reasons for the use of violent punishment that were put forward by educators in Sub-Saharan Africa are perceived expectations of its usefulness by parents and the society at large as a means of ensuring respect, and, above all, the aim of maintaining discipline in class, which reflects the teachers' belief that removing violent punishment from schools equates the removal of all discipline from the class rooms (Feinstein & Mwachombela, 2010).

These often stated justifications can be seen as a reflection of the underlying structure of dominance and oppression in school systems in post-colonial African countries that originates from the colonialists' intention to control the indigenous population by imprinting authoritarian and hierarchical structures onto society (Harber, 2002). In many places this has resulted in excessive efforts to shaping pupils into successful society members by all available means, resulting in application of violent punishment in case of failure of exams and even for minor offences and unintentional mistakes (Anbarasan, 1999). This rationale of discipline, order, and success continues to prevail, despite the fact that harsh punishment has been repeatedly reported to actually contradict the intended outcome of improving students' discipline and school performance (Antonowicz, 2010; Hecker, Hermenau, Salmen, Teicher, & Elbert, 2016). In fact, there is thus far no evidence indicating that violent disciplining promotes learning; instead substantial evidence shows that it is linked with physical harm, mental and behavioral health problems, and impaired achievement (Gershoff, 2017).

Other underlying factors that contribute to violent discipline by teachers have not been investigated comprehensively. However, since violent punishment has been reported to be more prevalent in stressful and demanding educational settings (Greydanus et al., 2003; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006), in line with Belsky's model (1984) on parenting there is reason to hypothesize that circumstances of teachers' work contribute to violent punishing also in settings, in which the practice appears to be the norm. Teaching students is generally considered a 'high stress' profession (Kyriacou, 2001), and teachers worldwide are prone to experience burnout, which is defined as a "state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that results from long-term involvement in work situations that are emotionally demanding" (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001, p. 501). Teaching conditions in countries in Sub-Sahara Africa are reported to be particularly poor and stressful due to scarcity of resources (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). Teachers are challenged to cope with insufficient school equipment, lack of personnel, overcrowded classrooms, and deficient school management with hierarchical authority structures (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012). Additionally, low and declining payment in the educational sector is said to be a major threat to teaching performance and motivation in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007; Wolf, Torrente, McCoy, Rasheed, & Aber, 2015). The literature suggests that these high demands and negative perceptions on the job lead to increased stress symptoms in teachers (Milfont, Denny, Ameratunga, Robinson, & Merry, 2008). Negative professional self-concepts and low gratification received from teaching seem to particularly contribute to teachers' burnout risk (Friedman & Farber, 1992).

High levels of stress and burnout are in turn associated with generally increased aggression potential (Knezevic et al., 2011), and comprehensive research on teachers' stress has shown that this can increase negative affect in teachers as well as dysfunctional educational styles (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013) by increasing lack of patience with students and poor teacher-student relationships (Wolf et al., 2015). For example, Kop, Euwema, and Schaufeli (1999) found positive correlations of stress with both attitudes towards the use of violence and the reported actual use of violent acts. Considering the demanding and stressful circumstances it is not surprising that physical violence in Sub-Saharan African schools not seldom results in excessive acts sometimes even leading to the death of the punished student (Feinstein & Mwachombela, 2010; Naker, 2005).

Further associations between teachers' stress and job perceptions with other personal background characteristics need also to be taken into account. The literature suggests that stress and burnout as well as attitudes towards the job might be influenced by several personal and situational characteristics like teachers' age (Lackritz, 2004), socioeconomic status, gender (Serrano, Moya-Albiol, & Salvador, 2008), teaching experience (Louw, George, & Esterhuysen, 2011), educational background (Luk, Chan, Cheong, & Ko, 2010), weekly work hours at school (Otero-López, Mariño, & Bolaño, 2008), and class size (Bümen, 2010). However, these associations with feelings of stress and dissatisfaction at work do not occur in a consistent manner (Kyriacou, 2001), and it is argued that stress is rather influenced by the interaction of different demographic and situational factors (Montgomery & Rupp,

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