



The role of race in preservice teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards corporal punishment & child maltreatment



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Corporal punishment used in U.S. homes and some schools
- Teachers are mandated reporters of maltreatment
- Examined racial group effects on corporal punishment, child maltreatment and reporting
- African Americans more accepting of corporal punishment
- Asian participants lower in rating of abusiveness in hypothetical discipline scenarios

A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

In school contexts where corporal punishment is permitted, teachers have two potentially conflicting roles; an indirect participant in the administration of corporal punishment and as a mandated reporter of child maltreatment. Attitudes influenced by racial group may further complicate the issue. The purpose of this study was to examine the associations between preservice teachers' race and their attitudes towards corporal punishment, child maltreatment, mandated reporting and their perceptions of parental discipline techniques. Results indicated differences by racial group on attitudes towards corporal punishment and ratings of abusiveness of parental discipline practices. Implications for teacher education are discussed.

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Internationally, the use of corporal punishment is one disciplinary practice that simultaneously receives widespread public support, as well as condemnation from child development experts (Robinson, Funk, Beth & Bush, 2005, pp. 117–139). Despite worldwide support for an international ban on corporal punishment, parents in the U.S. are free to utilize corporal punishment in disciplining their children. By the time a child reaches adolescence, eighty-five percent of children in U.S. homes have received some form of physical punishment at the hands of their parents (Gershoff, 2010, pp. 33–58).

In the U.S. despite a decline in positive attitudes towards the use of corporal punishment as a discipline practice with children, the research is unclear about whether that has translated into a decline in the actual use of corporal punishment (Taillieu, Afifi, Mota, Keyes,

& Sareen, 2014, pp. 1885–1894). Some studies suggest that there has been an overall 18% decline in the use of corporal punishment to discipline children over the years 1975–2002 (Zolotor, Theodore, Runyan, Chang, & Laskey, 2011, pp. 57–66). In addition, between, 1992–2004, substantiated cases of physical abuse declined forty-three percent (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006, pp. 658–716). However, it should be noted that lack of substantiation by child protective services (CPS) does not necessarily mean lower rates of corporal punishment or even fewer cases of physical abuse. A lower substantiation rate means fewer cases were substantiated during that time.

In the international context, the seemingly contradictory attitudes towards corporal punishment and its use found in the U.S., are also in evidence. Every country in the world but one (USA), has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which prohibits “degrading treatment and punishment” (UN General Assembly, 1989) and encourages national legislation prohibiting such punishments. Thus, 197 countries in the world have

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signed and ratified the CRC, yet only 48 countries have now banned the use of corporal punishment in all areas of a child's life (home and school) (Freeman & Saunders, 2014, pp. 681–709); Global Initiative 2016; Watkinson & Rock, 2016, pp. 86–98). In countries which have banned corporal punishment in all settings, declines in the use of corporal punishment have been dramatic. For example, in Finland, the second country to ban corporal punishment, one study found that in 1964 94% of parents reported using physical punishment towards their children but by the beginning of the 21st century the rate had fallen to 11%. Outside of Europe, the use of physical punishment in disciplining children is more widespread (Watkinson & Rock, 2016, pp. 86–98). A recent report by UNICEF (2010) indicated that over half of children from middle and low income countries experienced physical punishment or psychological aggression in 2005–06. Thus, despite changes in official policies, corporal punishment of children remains an international issue.

In the U.S, in addition to its widespread use in the home, nineteen of the fifty states still allow corporal punishment in schools. Some estimates put the number of children experiencing corporal punishment in schools at nearly a quarter million a year. These punishments, usually administered with wooden paddles, have resulted in 10,000 to 20,000 visits per year to doctors seeking medical treatment (Wasserman, 2011, pp. 1029–1101). Proponents of school use argue that corporal punishment is an effective way to promptly control risky student behaviors (Robinson, Funk, Land, & Bush, 2005, pp.117–139); Vockell, 1991, pp. 278–283; Wilson, 2002, pp. 409–416). Others argue that corporal punishment not only violates human rights' laws, but is also an ineffective method of discipline and teaches the child that violence is acceptable for dealing with misbehavior (Farmer & Stinson, 2010, pp. 1035–1069); Little & Akin-Little, 2008, pp. 227–234). Some research also indicates adverse psychological outcomes in children who experience corporal punishment, such as increased aggression, poor behavioral and emotional adjustment, delinquency and other criminal behavior (Aucoin, Frick, & Bodin, 2006, pp. 527–541; Gershoff, 2002, pp. 539–579). Internationally, physical discipline is still a regular part of school life for children, particularly in low income countries. For example, in South Korea and China, more than half of children in grades four through six experienced corporal punishment in their schools (Kim et al., 2000, pp. 1163–1173). Teachers in many Asian countries tend to have trouble differentiating between corporal punishment and educative discipline (Lwo & Yuan, 2011, pp. 137–164). Additionally, the use of corporal punishment in schools is also acceptable in many African countries. In Kenya for example, most of preschool aged children have experienced corporal punishment by their teachers. Teachers use corporal punishment as one method to maintain order and rules in their classrooms (Mwai, Kimengi, & Kipsoi, 2014, pp. 90–100). In addition, most of primary school aged children in Tanzania have experienced corporal punishment in their schools (Hecker, Hermenau, Isele, & Elbert, 2014, pp. 884–892).

In the U.S. school context where corporal punishment is permitted, teachers have two potentially conflicting roles; an indirect participant in the administration of corporal punishment and a mandated reporter of child maltreatment. All 50 states have now passed mandatory reporting laws, which require teachers, among other professionals, to report suspected child maltreatment. Data on child maltreatment reporting indicates that teachers and other educational personnel, are one of the largest contributors to maltreatment reports each year, but have the lowest substantiation rates (Kesner & Bingham, 2010, pp. 267–274).

This potential conflict in roles may be complicated by regional and racial/cultural attitudes towards corporal punishment. For example, the majority of states which still permit corporal

punishment in schools; lie in the southern region of the U.S. Robinson et al. (2005, pp. 117–139) summarized the findings of several studies which support the idea that teacher acceptance of corporal punishment use in schools is higher in the southern United States. Educators in southern states rated the importance of abolishing corporal punishment in schools at a lower rate than teachers from other regions of the U.S., 38% vs. 68% respectively (Abrahams, Casey, & Daro, 1992, pp. 229–238). Some have suggested that cultural beliefs related to the beneficial effects of corporal punishment may be more prevalent in the southern U.S. (Dupper & Dingus, 2008, pp. 243–250; Human Rights Watch, 2008). Supporting the practice and ideas of corporal punishment could be deeply embedded in cultural traditions and values (Ripoll-Nunez & Rohner, 2006, pp. 220–249), which may influence the acceptance of the use of corporal punishment in schools (Marones, 2013, pp. 10–11).

Race is a social construct. Culture on the other hand is comprised of cultural beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors shared by a particular group of people (Nieto & Bode, 2011). Race and culture are often conflated especially in the literature on corporal punishment and child maltreatment. However, despite the inadequacies of categorizing an often time disparate group of people with one racial label, researchers in the U.S. utilize the U.S. Bureau of the Census categories to disaggregate the experiences of various racial and cultural groups. With this caveat in mind, trends indicated that between 2002 and 2012 racial demographics in U.S. schools shifted. White student representation in school populations decreased 8%–51%, while African American student representation declined from 17% to 16%. Hispanic student representation increased 6% such that Hispanic students now comprise about one-fourth of the school population (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). These student demographics coupled with an overwhelmingly White teacher population greatly increases the likelihood of cultural conflict. While there has been a slight shift in the racial demographics of teachers in the US, teachers are overwhelmingly White. Eight-four percent of teachers in 2011 were White, down from 91% in 1986 (Feistritzer, 2011, p. 15).

Although there is tremendous diversity within each racial group, there are some commonalities. Different racial groups may have different expectations regarding the appropriateness and use of corporal punishment in disciplining children (Gershoff, 2002, pp. 539–579; Ripoll-Nunez, & Rohner, 2006, pp. 220–249). For example, historically, Hispanic parents report the use of corporal punishment at a rate similar to White parents, although the rate of decline in the use of corporal punishment has been greater for White parents over the past 20 years (Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010). In addition, one study found acculturation differences in Hispanic populations may impact the use of corporal punishment (Lee & Atschul, 2015, pp. 475–498). One study found that foreign-born Hispanic immigrants were less likely to use corporal punishment than US-born Hispanics. African American parents tend to utilize corporal punishment at a higher rate than the three other racial groups (Landsford, 2010, pp. 89–106; Taillieu et al., 2014, pp. 1885–1894); however some research suggests fewer deleterious effects of corporal punishment in African American children compared to White children (Horn, Joseph, & Cheng, 2004, pp.1162–1168; Landsford, 2010, pp. 89–106; Simons, Su, & Simons, 2013, pp. 1273–1285; Taillieu et al., 2014, pp. 1885–1894). On the other hand, as collectivistic in nature, Asian culture views individuals as interdependent and children are expected to be obedient to their parents (e.g., authoritarian parenting style). Parents view their children and the actions of their children as extensions of themselves. Asian parents are less likely to use rewards in disciplining their children and more likely to use corporal punishment (Kim & Hong, 2007, pp. 60–68).

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