

## Perceptions of Teachers of the School Suspension Program in Ghanaian High Schools

Isaac Rowland Aklamanu

(Third Year PhD Student)

Department of Health education and Recreation

Southern Illinois University

475 Clocktower Drive, Carbondale, IL 62901

### Abstract

*Suspension is a form of punishment used by schools in which students who have disobeyed the rules in schools are not allowed to attend school for a specific number of days. Research suggests that suspension is ineffective and can lead to further social problems, such as drug use and other societal crimes. In Ghana, educators have been seeking out solutions to curtail the behavioral issues within the classroom and among students. This study briefly examined the perceptions of teachers of a school suspension program in a Ghanaian school. Based on semi-structured interviews of eleven Ghanaian individuals at Midwest University, the results revealed that suspending by sending students home does not improve behaviors and students rather respond positively to corporal punishment as a way of positive behavior modification. The descriptive qualitative results and educational implications are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Suspension, Ghana, Corporal punishment, Disruptive Behaviors, Teachers' Perceptions, Administrators, Staff, Education

### 1. Introduction

Well-mannered and cultured behavior is highly treasured and expected of students, who are considered members of communities in Ghanaian society. The general function of families has been, and is, to raise children to behave in accepted ways. It is expected that traditional behavior patterns translate into respect for authority, be it in form of following classroom rules or the laws of the nation. In Ghana, schools have abandoned caning as a form of corporal punishment for students' misbehaviors. Instead, teachers have adopted a western type of punishment whereby students are given suspensions from school for a day or two according to what type of offense has been committed. Due to abandoning caning as a punishment, schools have increasingly reported concerns with students' disruptive behaviors in classroom. Many educators as well as teachers in Ghanaian schools have found themselves in a position of not knowing what to do in the absence of caning as punishment. Disruptive behavior can function as a major impediment to classroom learning (Slee, 1988). Safety issues, violence, drugs, and gun use have been major problems in schools (Skiba, 2000).

In countries such as the United States, zero tolerance policies have been adopted in an effort to decrease the prevalence of severe behavior problems within schools (Skiba, 2000; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Corporal punishment, such as caning, is by its very nature, an anti-human and abusive practice which Ghanaians believe provides a solution to every problem in the classroom. As such, Ghana as a country has to comply with international human rights laws (i.e., the Convention on the rights of the Child requires the prohibition of all corporal punishment in all settings be it at home or school) (UNICEF, Ghana). Ghana was once a British colony (formally the Gold Coast) until it gained independence in 1957. Ghana has ten major regions with various diverse and ethnic groupings, all of whom are distributed across the country; thus, Ghana is a society of diverse tribal groups with distinct identifying linguistic, religious, and socioeconomic attributes. Due to the vast diversity in tribal and ethnic groups in Ghana, significant factors warrant attention in terms of classroom management. Such diversity requires a great variety of management techniques in the classroom.

### 2. Purpose of the Study.

Because teachers in Ghana have abandoned the use of caning as a form of corporal punishment for students, many educators face issues in the management of their classroom environment (Ghana Education Services, 2009). Since caning as a corporal punishment was abolished in Ghanaian schools, student disruptive behavior has increased and students now appear to misbehave more, thus, get suspended (Ghana Education Services, 2009). By examining the perspectives of teachers, administrators, and other supporting staff, this research aims to examine why suspension continues to be used in Ghanaian schools despite the relative lack of evidence supporting its efficacy as a behavior management tool. If teachers are able to see improvement in students' behavior and attitudes after being suspended, then the suspension program should be promoted; however, if the suspension program proves to be ineffective, then alternative methods must be adopted.

### 3. Significance of the study

There is a growing problem of disruptive and violent behavior within schools today (Vavru, 2000). Teachers, administrators, and other staff members, such as counselors, must find the most effective form of disciplinary action (i.e., that which matches the offense) in order to deter students from negative disruptive behaviors. Such a solution is very important if there is to an established sense of law and order in our schools and communities. Such solutions could also prevent crimes, including drug and alcohol abuse among students.

## **4. Methods**

### **4.1.1. Research Questions**

The following four research questions (RQ) served as the foundation for inquiry in the current study: (RQ1) what do teachers, administrators, and staff believe is the rationale for, and impact of, the suspension of students in Ghanaian schools?(RQ2)what impact do teachers, administrators, and staff believe suspension has on student behavior?(RQ3) do the participants feel that adding counseling to the school curriculum would be beneficial?(RQ4) what are the perceptions of school suspensions in Ghana over corporal punishment and do participants think that the suspension program in Ghana should be replaced with another form of punishment?

### **5. Population and Data Sources**

The setting for the current research study was a Midwestern university. The population, in particular, was thus: individuals who were from Ghana, who were students at a Midwestern university, who were once teachers, were familiar with corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure for students in Ghana, and were familiar with the current suspension of students by sending them home for a day or two depending on the nature of the offense. In all, I interviewed 11 individuals who were identified and recruited for the study using a snowball sampling technique. The interviews lasted between 10 and 15 minutes and were conducted in order to (a) provide saturation of data and (b) ensure diversity of opinion. In addition to conducting interviews, I collected secondary data documents from Ghanaian education services so as to triangulate the data.

#### **5.1. Interview Protocol**

A semi-structured, open-ended interview format was chosen in order to collect data. While some interviews were conducted face-face, others were conducted over the phone. Regarding research question one (RQ1), the following interview questions were asked ( $n=11$ ). Firstly, the researcher asked informants to describe the overall impact that suspension has on student behavior. One follow up question was asked:did you expect students to change their behaviors by asking them to go home?

The following questions were asked during interviews with participants ( $n=10$ ) in order to provide an answer to research question two (RQ2): (1) do you think that adding counseling to the school curriculum in Ghana would be beneficial; (2) what kind of behavior led to suspension in Ghanaian schools, in your experience? Regarding research question three (RQ3), the following questions were asked among the informants ( $n=11$ ): (1) what is your perception of school suspension in Ghana as form of disciplinary action (compared to corporal punishment); (2) do you believe students respond to corporal punishment more positively than being asked to go home as means of punishment? Research question four (RQ4)was answered by having participants provide an answer to the following question: (1) do you think there should be a solution to the student suspension approach to punishment used in Ghana?

#### **5.2. Data Analysis**

Combined, the interview data and secondary data from Ghana education services sources served as the method of information from which an understanding of the teachers, administrators and staff perceptions of the school suspension program in Ghana was generated. During each interview, hand written notes were taken. Following the compilation of the interview notes and secondary data documents, all data were content analyzed (Vaismoradi, Turenen, & Bondas, 2013). Themes from the data analysis process are presented in the results section of the study.

## **6. Results and Discussions**

### **6.1. Research Question One**

The purpose of research question one was to understand the impact that teachers and administrators, and staff believe suspension has had on student behavior. Based on interviews with eleven (11) people involved in the study, various themes emerged. First, all participants agreed that suspensions do not work and, further, they do not have any impact on student behavior. Participants agreed that giving students – what amounts to be – a free day or two off from school does not result in any feeling of punishment, especially for those who may have unfavorable attitudes toward school. Second, most schools in Ghana do not practice grading systems – especially in elementary schools; therefore, suspending students from school has no effect on their behaviors and neither do they worry about getting poor grades due to suspension. Third, suspensions leave kids at home unsupervised, which leads to more problems. Regarding the follow up question, all participants agreed that they do not expect students to change their behavior because, most of the time, students misbehave in schools in order to be sent home.

#### **6.1.1 Research Question Two**

In the current study, research question two was developed as a means to understand whether adding counseling to the school curriculum in Ghana could be beneficial to students (i.e., could it curtail the negative and disruptive behaviors) and, additionally, to understand what kind of behaviors lead to suspension in Ghanaian schools. While analyzing the qualitative data generated in the current study, the researcher noticed that a consistent story regarding counseling availability was evident. The then participants interviewed were strongly in favor of adding counseling to the school curriculum in Ghana. It was agreed generally by the respondents that students generally have problems with their own families – which requires counseling. Therefore, by adding counseling to the school curriculum, students will be benefit in more ways than one. Students will get a chance to sit down with a counselor to discuss their behavior and develop a plan to help them avoid negative behaviors. One interesting problem identified by some of the participants ( $n=7$ ) was that, because students work various kinds of odd jobs (i.e.,clearing bushes, fetching water)to achieve financial stability, they view school as an opportunity to rest.

Another theme that emerged from the data was that most parents do not communicate with the teachers effectively due to language barriers. Because teachers and parents may be of different ethnic backgrounds, parent-teacher collaboration is generally weak. All these reality affect students.

Regarding the type of behaviors that lead to school suspension in Ghana ( $n=10$ ), participants listed the following: fighting in school, arriving at school late, being disobedient to peers and teachers, telling lies, disrupting in class, such as talking while a teacher is teaching, not paying school fees, stealing, and improper dressing.

### 6.1. 2. Research Question Three

The third research question was developed in order to understand the perceptions of teachers ( $n=11$ ) regarding school suspension in Ghana as a replacement for corporal punishment. Additionally, research question three was developed in order to understand whether students respond favorably to corporal punishment. Four themes emerged from the qualitative data regarding this research question. Firstly, participants agreed that the use of discipline is necessary to ensure obedience to school rules; however, Ghanaian schools have experienced high levels of disruptive behavior in school due to the absence of corporal punishment. Teachers have experienced more violence in the following ways: (a) student to student and (b) student to teacher (Agbenyaga, 2006). All participants agreed that sending students home from school is not helping the students. Secondly, the use of corporal punishment as a means of discipline might bring more harm than benefit (i.e., it could affect students emotionally, it could lead to the development of fear towards teachers, it could lead to feelings of helplessness and humiliation). Thirdly, some students, however, respond positively when corporal punishment is used, as they fear physical pain. Fourth, the participants also pointed out that parents often punish their children when they misbehave at home; hence, all participants agreed that students respond in positive ways to corporal punishment.

### 6.2. Research Question Four

The fourth research question was developed as a means to understand the overall perception of teachers on what should be the solution to student suspension policy in Ghanaian schools. In order to answer this question, the researcher analyzed a combined data set (i.e., interviews with the participants and a collected secondary data source, Ghana education service). First, the results showed that the number of students in each classroom is important when considering behavioral issues. Ghanaian schools are currently experiencing overcrowdings. One classroom may contain about 50 to 60 students, which makes it difficult for a teacher to control the classroom and manage the class effectively. Second, parents should be educated because prevention of violence and negative behavior must start within the family. Third, talking to students individually to solve their problems should help with behavioral issues. Fourth, teachers should show more love and affection toward every student. Fifth, schools should continue to practice morning devotion in order to boost the morale of students (i.e., encouraging them to live a positive life).

## 7. Conclusion

The findings revealed that disruptive behaviors in Ghanaian schools have increased since the abolishment of caning as a form of corporal punishment. Corporal punishment refers to intentional application of physical pain as a method of behavior change. However, suspending students from school by sending them home has done more harm than good to students in Ghanaian schools. The large student populations in the classroom, financial problems, family violence, disruptive behaviors in the homes, and language barriers of parents have contributed to the root causes of students' disruptive behaviors in schools. On the other hand, it is widely believed that discipline facilitates academic success. The findings showed that teachers perceived corporal punishment as a means of positive behavior modification as students typically respond positively when corporal punishment is applied. More importantly, counselors should be trained and appointed in schools and counseling should be integrated into the school curriculum. The number of students in the classroom should be reduced in order to allow effective classroom management by the teachers. This recommendation has the following implication: more classrooms should be built to accommodate the growing population of students in Ghanaian schools. In-service training on student behavior management should be offered to teachers so as to enable them to effectively manage their classroom. Such training may enable teachers to control their classroom without using corporal punishment.

## 8. References

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