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Towards a Positive Discipline Model in Ghanaian Schools: Views of Stakeholders

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Abstract
The main aim of this study is to evaluate the opinions of stakeholders in Ghana's education regarding positive discipline as a behaviour management approach amidst pervasive levels of indiscipline among senior high school students in the country. It also considered some contextual variables that confront the effective implementation of positive discipline across various cultures. This paper utilised documentary evidence and content analysis to evaluate information using a desktop approach. Data were gathered from both primary and secondary sources, which included media reports, press releases, and letters from agencies within the Ministry of Education of Ghana, as well as empirical studies on the topic conducted between 2017 and 2025. The paper revealed convoluted and entrenched opinions being expressed by stakeholders in the country regarding the efficacy of such an approach in resolving disciplinary issues among students. It suggested the need for broader stakeholder engagement on the subject, and further suggested the need for empirical research to reveal the specific contextual factors that militate against the acceptance of the policy. Moreover, the study called for courses on emotional intelligence and behaviour modification to be included in the training of teachers.

Key terms: Behaviour management, indiscipline, positive discipline, punishment, students.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, there have been rising levels of indiscipline among senior high school students in Ghana. This menace is generating attention from various stakeholders, leading to various policy initiatives from agencies within the Ministry of Education of the country. One of these policies is Positive Discipline, which has received mixed reactions from policy implementers like teachers. This paper sought to review and ascertain the status quo with regard to the opinions of stakeholders on the success of the policy. It utilised desktop research by accessing data from both primary and secondary sources. The sources included media reports, press releases by agencies of the Ministry of Education, and some empirical evaluations on positive discipline policy in Ghana. These sources date from 2017 to 2025.

The paper is structured into a number of sections. It begins by presenting an overview of the use of corporal punishment globally, and narrowed down to the reasons for its application in Ghana. Reports on some models of positive discipline, and empirical studies conducted in some countries on reasons teachers give for their failure to accept positive discipline are also presented. The paper highlighted a link between emotional intelligence and positive discipline. A section of the paper presented a coherent chronology of events on behaviour problems exhibited by students and the reaction and views of stakeholders on those matters. The paper ends by offering a conclusion and recommendations to stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Use of Corporal Punishment in Behaviour Management

Disruptive behaviour involving students in schools is generating attention worldwide (Mabuza et al., 2017; Ndlovu et al., 2023; Valente et al, 2018). The issue is alarming and becoming difficult to mitigate (Du Plessis, 2015). Many countries, including the United States of America, are grappling with an uptick in disruptive student behaviour after the COVID-19 pandemic; which has resulted in banishing various disciplinary policies such as the "Equity Ideology" in other to make way for school disciplinary decisions to be based on behaviour instead of race (Education Week, 2025).

Over the years, the common approach teachers use in managing the disruptive behaviour of students is corporal punishment. The use of punishment dates back to antiquity, even though there is not enough evidence of the practice among hunter-gatherer societies (Durrant, 2020). Using corporal punishment to manage disruptive behaviours results in lasting dangers in different domains of learners (Heekes et al, 2020).

It has been observed that the practice does very little to promote long-term behaviour change but rather results in escalation of violence (Akyina & Heeralal, 2024; Vargo & Gushanas, 2023) as in the axiom "violence breeds violence", and sometimes even leads to death (Humphreys, 2008). Because of these dangers, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. a is targeted at creating a non-violent and safe learning environment for learners (United Nations, 2016). Accordingly, out of 197 countries worldwide, 128 of them have placed a ban on the use of corporal punishment in schools (Mughal et al., 2023).

Notwithstanding the global shift away from using corporal punishment to manage behaviour, it is still persisting at high levels in schools in countries (Durrant, 2020; Humphreys, 2008). The menace is, however, sometimes under-reported (Heekes et al., 2020) even in countries where the practice has been outlawed (Humphreys, 2008). Research conducted by Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016) revealed that 90 per cent of learners in low and middle-income countries still experience corporal punishment in schools, with close to 250 million (two-thirds) of children experiencing it (UNICEF, 2017). In Ghana, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (2018) reported that the use of punishment is pervasive worldwide, and Ghana is no different. The Ministry further revealed that Ghana is second to Yemen and first in Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of the use of corporal punishment.

Reasons for the Application of Punishment

Varied reasons are advanced for the continued use of punishment in Africa. These reasons include religious norms (Durrant, 2020; Last, 2000), social norms (Kyegombe et al., 2017), and for the good of the victims (Hunter & Morrell, 2021). One other basis for

the continuous application of corporal punishment as a corrective tool in Africa is what has been termed as cultural legitimacy (Durrant, 2008; Pinheiro, 2006), where punishment is frequently construed to be necessary for nurturing children to adulthood (Ennew, 2019). Teachers and other caregivers are holding sustained arguments in favour of it (Durrant, 2020) on the grounds that physical abuse is an act of violence, whilst physical punishment is an acceptable tool for correcting behaviour. This view has been contested by research (Durrant et al., 2017; Ennew, 2019).

Elbla (2012) discovered that teachers choose to use corporal punishment because of a lack of alternatives to behaviour management, whilst also citing stress and frustration. This perspective reveals the lack of pedagogical competence in terms of behaviour management, as well as a lack of emotional competence on the part of respondents.

Similar findings were reported by Kyei-Arthur et al. (2024) where Ghanaian parents mentioned the need to release frustration as part of the reasons for the use of punishment. Akyina and Heeralal (2024) also found two emerging themes pertaining to the refusal of Ghanaian teachers to stop using corporal punishment. These themes centred on the non-deterrent nature of alternatives to corporal punishment and implementation challenges to those alternatives.

These concerns show that the use of corporal punishment by caregivers and teachers is based on a multiplicity of reasons. The justifications reveal a cultural entrenchment, a societal approval, and also portray a lack of needed competencies required for effective use of alternatives to corporal punishment.

Positive Discipline Policy

The documented dangers of corporal punishment on victims have resulted in proposals and policy directives for caregivers to adopt Positive Discipline (Ndlovu et al., 2023), which has become the widely approved approach to reducing undesirable behaviour (Kayalar et al., 2019; Mabuza et al, 2017; Muhia, n.d). These proposals for teachers to adopt the use of positive discipline are corroborated by empirical literature (Arianto & Mulyono, 2023).

Positive discipline is premised on the work of Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs's Individual Psychology (Nelsen, 2023) and, for that matter, positive psychology. Watts and Ergüner-Tekinalp (2017) in their publication titled "Positive Psychology: A Neo-Adlerian Perspective" advanced the recognition of Adler's work as the original positive psychology in academic discourse. Durrant (2007) defined positive discipline to include long-term remedies that nurture learners' self-discipline; meaningful communication of one's expectations; enhancing cordial relationships; developing in children life competencies; and teaching non-violence, courtesy, self-respect, empathy, respect for others, and human rights. Different models of positive discipline have been implemented across the world with different outcomes.

Empirical Studies on Positive Discipline

Experimental studies carried out in some countries in the global south using varied models of positive discipline have reported desirable outcomes. A quasi-experimental pilot study conducted by Mughal et al. (2023) on offering a positive discipline module for public school teachers in Pakistan revealed good outcomes and concluded that a positive disciplining programme is a possible approach in public schools for reducing misbehaviour. Similar experimental studies (Devries et al., 2015; Kyegombe et al., 2017) conducted on primary schools in Uganda using a model known as *The Good School Toolkit* found that the use of corporal punishment by teachers on students decreased considerably. Baker-Henningham (2018) in a study in Jamaica using *The Irie Classroom Toolbox* gave positive results as well.

Additionally, a number of empirical studies which sought to evaluate the impact of the approach on various dimensions of learners have reported favourable outcomes. For instance, Schlebusch et al. (2022), as well as Tshewang (2022), contend that positive discipline is effective in nurturing productive behaviours among learners. Zuković and Stojadinović (2021) also reported that the implementation of positive discipline holds the promise of enhancing the self-esteem of students and adolescents. Arianto and Mulyono (2023) accentuated this by reporting a rate of 88 per cent and 90 per cent, respectively, increases in terms of students' discipline in completing assignments and school attendance as a result of

positive discipline. In the view of Kayalar et al. (2019), it accounts for self-respect, self-regulation, and effective communication. Similar findings were reported by Akyina and Heeralal (2024) that positive discipline enhances behaviour and the overall school climate.

That notwithstanding, inconsistent findings were reported by studies which also sought to evaluate the effectiveness of alternatives to corporal punishment in Kenya (Ghati & Mbirthi, 2022) and Ghana (Abonyi & Salifu, 2023). Similarly, Fabbri et al. (2021) found no evidence to argue that positive discipline intervention models such as *EmpaTeach* helped to reduce corporal punishment meted out to elementary and high school students in the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp in Tanzania. These conflicting reports suggest that there is no convergence on the efficiency of positive discipline in the African context.

The opinions of teachers and caregivers on plausible shortfalls of positive discipline have also been gauged. Caregivers have criticised it as a Western approach which is alienated from African culture, and therefore the cause of pervasive levels of indiscipline currently prevailing in schools (Schlebusch et al., 2022). Others perceive it as a waste of time and an ineffective measure to manage behaviour (Zondo et al., 2023). Studies further show that some teachers felt frustrated and ineffective (Zondo et al., 2023) and reported they were cornered and constrained (Lopes & Oliveira, 2017) in dealing with indiscipline among students using positive discipline. Consequently, a section of teachers rejects it (Mabuza et al., 2017).

Why Teachers Fail to Accept Positive Discipline

Various reasons account for the failure of teachers and stakeholders to accept positive discipline as a behavioural management approach. Clearly, some countries encounter challenges in implementing positive discipline (Mlalazi, 2015). Lack of stakeholder-engagement (Ndlovu et al., 2023); little comprehension of positive discipline by stakeholders (Akwaboah, 2021; Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012; Mabuza et al., 2017); a narrow appreciation of positive discipline as a weak solution to disruptive behaviours of learners in schools (Schlebusch et al., 2022); failure to openly address the attitudes of caregivers towards corporal punishment aimed at weakening its acceptance, beliefs about corporal punishment (Baker-Henningham, 2018) are some of them. Extant literature (Mabuza et al., 2017) has equally laid claim to the fact that for any positive discipline model to be successful, it requires educational establishments that have qualified teachers with conducive emotional factors.

Link between Emotional Intelligence and Positive Discipline

Competencies of teachers towards the implementation of positive discipline are a fundamental condition (Zuković & Stojadinović, 2021) because teachers are expected to regulate and reflect on their behaviour (Durrant, 2010). At the close of the twentieth century, Hargreaves (1998) declared that "emotions are at the heart of teaching" (p. 835). This assertion means that studies on positive discipline should consider the role of emotional intelligence because they share a large domain of knowledge. Takšić (2002) defined emotional intelligence as the set of abilities to process emotion-laden information competently.

Salovey and Mayer conducted a pioneering study which investigated emotional intelligence as a construct, and it has fast become part of the lexicon of both academic and lay narratives (Eissa, 2008). The American Dialect Society identified 'emotional intelligence' as the most useful novel phrase of 1995 (Takšić, 2002). This illustrates both the interest in the concept and its relevance to human wellbeing (Almheiri, 2021). Emotional intelligence is fast becoming pronounced and inevitable and must be accepted as part of positive psychology and therefore, positive discipline (Almheiri, 2021; Bar-On, 2010).

Teachers' job description requires them to be adept at handling a variety of routines, including curricular modifications and student discipline, which have an emotional toll on them (Al-Busaidi et al., 2019). The stressful nature of these routines compels teachers to react impulsively, hence the need for emotional self-regulation (International Rescue Committee, n.d.). Emotional intelligence is a fundamental variable that influences behaviour management in schools (Valente et al, 2018).

Teachers who possess high emotional intelligence turn to provide a conducive learning environment, handle disruptive behaviour constructively, and achieve better learning outcomes (Shahab et al., 2025). As revealed by Agbaria (2021) positive correlation between teachers' classroom management competencies and emotional intelligence. Schneider et al., cited in Ngui and Lay (2020), submit that persons who score high in emotional intelligence are resilient and easily adapt to changes, which may include changes in educational policies. This makes it imperative for teachers to possess emotional intelligence to be able to handle this onerous task (Agbaria, 2017), which has received little investigation (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017).

It is a bare fact that the emotional dimension of teachers is one of the basic domains of teaching, yet it is ignored by individuals who advocate educational policy and reform (Hargreaves, 1998). Research over the years has revealed that educators worldwide acknowledge emotional intelligence as a vital competence, with some countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Finland, and Pakistan, incorporating it in their teacher education (Shahab et al., 2025). The observation made by Hargreaves, however, seems apt in the context of Ghana, where various policy initiatives on teacher preparation have still not made any deliberate effort to develop the emotional intelligence of teachers. For instance, the National Teachers Standards (NTS), developed to serve as the minimum benchmark for the training and certification of teachers in Ghana, is conspicuously silent on any set of indicators on emotional intelligence. This attests to the expression of frustration among Ghanaian teachers in abandoning corporal punishment.

Chronology of Behaviour Problems in Ghanaian Senior High Schools

In Ghana, managing the disruptive behaviour of senior high school students is of grave concern to stakeholders. Media reports (Citi Newsroom, 2023; Ghanaian Times, 2021) on misconduct among senior high school students are frequent occurrences. For instance, in November 2022, a viral video was circulated on social media where some students in Chiana SHS in the Upper East Region were recorded using foul language on the President of the Republic (Ghana Education Service, 2022). The culprits were dismissed by the Disciplinary Committee of the school but had to rescind their decision after the President of the Republic intervened (Ghana Education Service, 2023a). Subsequently, the escalating spate of indiscipline compelled the Director General of Ghana Education Service (GES) to direct all educational institutions to appoint deans of discipline in schools with effect from June 9 2023, after recording a high rate of indiscipline in schools (Ghana Education Service, 2023b).

Despite the directive to appoint deans of discipline to curb indiscipline, the trend continued, resulting in casualties and irreparable harm. For instance, in July 2023, a worrying incident was reported (Ghana Education Service, 2023c) involving high school students in Adisadel College in the Central Region, which went viral on social media. A more gruesome incident occurred within the period, resulting in the demise of a final-year student in O'Reilly SHS in the Greater Accra Region of the country in September 2024 (Ghana Education Service, 2024a).

The records revealed that the menace is persistent and widespread in the country. Consequently, on October 31 2024 the GES released a letter (Ghana Education Service, 2024b) conveying a resolved to assign two professionals including psychologists to each second cycle (SHS/SHTS/STEM) institution in the country to promote a safe school environment, as well as ensuring the psychosocial and emotional wellbeing of all learners. This is part of deliberate interventions towards the implementation of a National Behaviour Standards Guide for Learners (NBSGL), which was put in place in 2024 to ensure discipline through "coaching and nurturing" instead of "telling and sanctioning".

Prior to these, corporal punishment and other forms of harsh punishments were used to reform undesirable behaviours of students. The use of corporal punishment in pre-tertiary schools was, however, officially banned by GES in February 2017. This ban was reiterated in 2019 and intensified in 2021 by the National Schools Inspectorate Authority (NaSIA) (National Schools Inspectorate Authority, 2021) and the GES (Ghana Education Service, 2021) as a result of the continuous use of corporal punishment by teachers at the pre-tertiary levels of education in

Ghana. Teachers were accordingly directed to adopt positive discipline as the only strategy for managing and modifying the undesirable behaviour of learners.

Opinion of Stakeholders on Positive Discipline

These directives by the Ministry of Education and its agencies for teachers to adopt positive discipline tools in curbing indiscipline are met with criticisms from stakeholders in education in the country. For instance, Kofi Asare, the Executive Director of Africa Education Watch, in 2021 lamented that positive discipline may be a contributory factor to the high rate of indiscipline in schools in the country (Citi Newsroom, 2021). The Conference of Heads of Assisted Secondary Schools (CHASS) made similar pronouncements against positive discipline (Citi Newsroom, 2023b; Ghanaian Times, 2021). Consistent to their position, CHASS made a distress proposal to the Minister of Education in May 2025 to establish a special unit within the Ghana Police Service to take charge of indiscipline in senior high schools as the bad spectacle of school violence continues to elude the efforts of stakeholders (Ghanaweb, 2025; Metrotvonline.com, 2025). This proposal amplifies a lack of confidence in positive discipline as stakeholders begin to express confidence in security agencies, who often instil order by exacting sanctions.

Teachers also believe the policy is not helpful in minimising indiscipline among students (Abonyi & Salifu, 2023), and some continue to apply physical violence, resulting in punitive measures, such as the case of an Assistant Headmaster of Nkwantia Presby SHS (Ghana Education Service, 2023). Other stakeholders, including the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), called for the reintroduction of corporal punishment as a measure of curbing indiscipline among students (GhanaWeb, 2023). Some academics, including Prof. Adinkrah-Appiah, have contributed to the discourse by accentuating the position of GNAT (Citi Newsroom, 2023a).

These differing views validate the assertions of Baker-Henningham (2018), as well as Heekes et al. (2020), that legislations and bans alone are not sufficient in eliminating corporal punishment in schools. Bussman et al. (2011) also made a striking pronouncement that public education alone is not capable of modifying attitudes towards punishment. This means that it is necessary to consider other factors, including emotional intelligence.

The role of emotional intelligence in ensuring successful implementations of educational reforms at all levels of education, including the secondary levels, has been amplified by commentators (Zeidner et al., cited in Zeidner et al., 2004). That notwithstanding, in the midst of these sentiments and emotional outbursts by stakeholders in the country, scholarly investigations on emotional intelligence and positive discipline have offered little attention to the link between the variables (Agbaria, 2017; Tok et al., 2013). Moreover, in Ghana, there is a void in the literature of positive behaviour management (Gunu, 2017), which amplifies the suggestion made by Tok et al. (2013) on the need for research on emotional intelligence and behaviour management. More investigation on the role of emotional intelligence (loss of self-control) and attitudes towards eliminating teacher violence in varied settings is justified and sorely needed (Fabbri et al., 2021).

The attitude of teachers and other caregivers towards positive discipline in schools has been of interest to scholars in some countries such as Taiwan (Shih et al., 2015), Pakistan (Mughal et al, 2023), Swaziland (Mabuza et al., 2017), South Africa (Schlebusch et al., 2022; Zondo et al., 2023), and Ghana (Abonyi & Salifu, 2023; Ibrahim, 2022). However, caregivers' application of positive discipline (Southey, 2021) and its challenges and adaptability (Chen & Hu, 2023) have not been clearly comprehended and thoroughly explored in other cultures apart from the Western world, despite over a hundred years of scholarly investigation on the topic. Much of the attention of scholars is skewed towards only corporal punishment (Save the Children, 2020) whilst offering little evidence on effective ways of minimising the canker in low-and middle-income countries (Kyegombe et al., 2017).

Pioneering studies on positive discipline in Ghana either predated the introduction of positive discipline in the country (Gunu, 2017) or only used qualitative methods to explore the potential of such a policy in schools (Gunu, 2019). After the introduction of positive discipline in the country, it appears that few studies (Abonyi & Salifu, 2023; Akwaboah, 2021; Akyina & Heeralal, 2024) have been conducted on the topic.

These are all qualitative studies which explored the views of teachers in selected basic schools in the Greater Accra and Central regions of Ghana, where Abonyi and Salifu (2023) concluded that their findings could not be generalised to cover other areas in the country.

Save the Children (2015), in a multi-country study involving Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Ethiopia, proposed the need for studies in each African country to thoroughly evaluate positive disciplinary practices of caregivers. This was subsequently corroborated by Southey (2020), who recommended more investigation into the role of teachers in promoting positive discipline after scrutinising the practices of mothers and fathers. Particularly in Ghana, the rising cases of indiscipline among SHS students justify a sorely needed scientific investigation into the relationship between the emotional intelligence of teachers and their attitudes towards positive discipline in eliminating disruptive behaviour. It appears there is a dearth of studies and a paucity of research on the influence of teachers' emotional intelligence and attitudes towards the use of positive discipline in behaviour management.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: From the foregoing discourse, it is evident that genuine efforts are being made by education regulatory bodies in Ghana to provide a safe school environment for learners through the use of positive behavioural approaches in the face of concerning levels of indiscipline among students in the country, which calls for swift redress. The paper also brings to light a sustained level of rejection from policy implementers such as teachers and CHASS, including opinion leaders and civil society organisations in the country, who continue to accuse the novel policy of positive discipline of being ineffective in curbing indiscipline in the country.

The stalemate presents a number of implications for all stakeholders and calls for broader conversations. Teachers are completely against the policy and seem to demonstrate a level of frustration and helplessness in dealing with the rising levels of indiscipline in the schools. This will likely lead to an escalation in the situation, which will not support academic work. Consequently, academic outcomes and the holistic development of learners will be undermined.

Recommendations: This paper believes that stakeholder engagement is urgently required for dialogue on the way forward. Such engagements should focus on taking the views of teachers and on how to alter the attitudes of stakeholders about the behaviour management practices of teachers in schools. This might take the form of building the capacity of teachers on various psychological strategies that are applied to manage behaviours. Also, empirical studies need to be conducted to identify the implementation challenges of positive discipline. More so, teacher training programmes in the country need to make deliberate efforts at including courses on emotional intelligence and behaviour modification as part of the core skills and domains of the NTS of the country, since the current framework is not explicit on nurturing those vital skills required for proper behaviour management in schools.

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