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Advancing Women In Leadership

Legitimated Violence in Schools: The Power Behind the Paddle

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Laws that defend the rights of the child, Jesus' model of valuing and embracing children, and female ethics of care and compassion offer hope of transformed schools where principals and teachers protect and nurture children's lives and dreams.

Introduction

Corporal punishment is a form of discipline in which an adult deliberately inflicts pain on children to correct misbehavior (Paintal, 1999). Since the colonial period, corporal punishment has been accepted and practiced in American schools. Although use has steadily declined since the 1970s, the Center for Effective Discipline (2000) estimates that public school officials administer corporal punishment to more than two thousand American schoolchildren every day. This paper examines one principal's use of corporal punishment. The analysis unmaskes four forces that legitimate corporal punishment: tradition, law, religion, and hegemonic masculinity. The conclusion identifies alternatives for just and humane treatment of schoolchildren.

Methodology, Data Collection, and Ethical Considerations

Data were collected during a two-year ethnographic study of an elementary school principal. The writer was participant-observer in this study which was conducted using established methods and principles of anthropological fieldwork. Ethical commitments required replacing proper names with pseudonyms in published reports. (see Lee, 2000, and Lee & van den Berg, in press, for a discussion of methodological and ethical considerations in this study.) The scope of the study was broad; only the issue of corporal punishment is discussed here.

The Principal, the School and the District

Principal Haines, students suggested, resembled former President Ronald Reagan. For 31 years, this aging Caucasian educator of rural, southern, religious upbringing served the Riverside School District. As principal, he established a reputation as a "white knight" who rescued troubled schools. Mr. Haines was reassigned to Washington School where I planned to study his efforts to improve the school.

Riverside School District was located in an economically and racially layered suburb near a major midwestern city. The district included 14 elementary schools, three middle, and three high schools with a total enrollment of over 11,000 students. The school district was divided geographically and racially by a small river known by insiders as the "Mason-Dixon Line." District enrollment was 44% African American and 56% Caucasian. South of the Mason-Dixon Line, Principal Haines' domain, schools served predominantly African American poor and working-class communities.

Washington School was a P-6 elementary building with approximately 450 students and 30 staff members. African-American students comprised more than 77% of enrollment, the highest percentage of any Riverside school. More than 63% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch, again the highest percentage in the district. Washington was beleaguered by low student achievement, poor discipline, and weak teacher morale. Principal Haines explained:

[W]hen I came... to Roosevelt, they called it the armpit o' the district. But Washington, it's worse. If ya take the left armpit 'n the right armpit 'n move 'em ta the center of the back an' slide 'em down, that's Washington. (Field notes)

The following vignette offers an account of one afternoon at Washington School. The subsequent analysis unmask forces that legitimate corporal punishment in schools.

"The Strong Arm of the Law"

Principal Haines sat down at his desk, pulled out the bottom drawer to serve as a footstool and leaned back in his chair. "Ya know, Sharon, I used ta be a pastor. Well, in a way, I still am. God's given these people to me. I'm responsible for 'em. These kids and teachers are my congregation. This school is my church."

A small African American boy burst into his office. "Mr. Haines, a girl up on a ladder in our room. Miss Yates can't git her to come down." Principal Haines stood, grabbed his paddle known as "the strong arm of the law," slid it into the right sleeve of his jacket, and headed out the door.

Miss Yates waited at her classroom door. Her third graders sat motionless, staring at the girl screaming on the third rung of the stepladder.

"Who is she?" Mr. Haines asked.

"She's one of Mrs. Farley's [special education students]," Miss Yates whispered.

The principal strode confidently across the room, pulled the girl from the ladder and carried her to the hall. Putting her down, without a word, he shook his right arm. The paddle slipped into his hand, and he gave her five quick, hard swats. Mr. Haines led her through the long hallway and up the stairs to the special education classroom. He opened the classroom door and pushed the child inside.

As he walked toward the office, Joan Smith called out to him, "Mr. Haines! I have a couple of boys I want you to meet."

"Bring 'em on in."

Mrs. Smith and two African American boys came to the office. "Mr. Haines?" She handed him two completed discipline forms. "You already know Andre." She pointed at a chair, and Andre sat. "This is Orlando. He just came to Washington yesterday."

"Come on in, Orlando." The boy entered his office, and Mr. Haines closed the door. In less than three minutes, the door opened. As Orlando left, the principal concluded in a mock African American vernacular, "I don't know how yo' behaved at yo' other school, but yo' not gonna act like that here! Ya hear? Andre! Come in."

Mr. Haines and the boy stood facing each other. The principal spoke with quiet intensity. The boy did not respond. They glared at each other in silence. Finally, Mr. Haines stood and reached for his paddle. He tapped it twice on the surface of his desk. Andre obeyed the unspoken cue. The boy leaned over and placed his hands where the paddle had touched the desk. Mr. Haines took a long, deep breath and struck five sharp swats.

The principal placed his hand on the boy's shoulder, spinning him around. Andre turned, his eyes downcast. Mr. Haines stuck the paddle under the boy's chin and lifted his face until their eyes met. The man towered over the boy.

The Principal and the Paddle

Dismissing the significance of corporal punishment would be relatively easy if these were isolated incidences, but sanctioned violence against children is routine in many American schools. Official reports indicated that during Principal Haines' two years at Washington School, Haines paddled 80 students a total of 218 times. During the same two-year period, the 13 other elementary principals reported a total of 150 paddlings. Mr. Haines reported using corporal punishment more frequently than all the other Riverside principals combined. Significantly, the two schools headed by female principals reported no incidents of corporal punishment. Of the students Mr. Haines paddled, 86% were African American; 14% were Caucasian; 88% were male; 12% were female.

Statistics gathered during the study indicated that Principal Haines underreported corporal punishment. Instances of students paddled several times in the course of a

single day were reported as one only. He maintained no records regarding punishment of students with disabilities.

Joyce Mitchell, an experienced and respected assistant principal, worked closely with Mr. Haines, but a male teacher, not the assistant principal, paddled when the principal was absent. Ms. Mitchell refused to use corporal punishment, instead practicing, and advocating more humane approaches.

Female teachers expressed confidence in Principal Haines' use of corporal punishment. Firm discipline, they claimed, was his greatest strength as an administrator:

There's never any indecisiveness.... It makes me very secure knowing... I'm ... gonna be supported in the office. I'm going to get backing.... [Paddling] works. It really does. [Students] know they're not getting away with anything.... You feel like you have control of your classroom, and he has control of the school.... It's very secure knowing he's at the helm. (Tape transcription)

In an interview, Superintendent Samuel Tate explained Principal Haines' use of corporal punishment:

Alvin sees great value in corporal punishment.... That's southern.... There are strong traditions... and discipline is a big thing in the south.... There was an absolute preoccupation with discipline, and kids were supposed to be afraid when the principal came around. And if that principal didn't come around with a little crop, WHAP! They weren't doin' their job. (Tape transcription)

Legitimated Violence in Schools

Violence is the use of physical force to cause pain (Jackman, 2001). Corporal punishment, then, may be defined as violence that causes pain to control victims' behavior. Hall (in press) explains that violence is sanctioned by a specific social order as a means of social control.

Tradition

Tradition supports use of corporal punishment in schools. The practice has been well documented in the history of Western civilization (deMause, 1974; Scott, 1938; Welsh, 1978). American norms of corporal punishment originated in the New England colonies where strict discipline was intended to break children's wills and assure obedience. Corporal punishment was "necessary and useful... an act of love" (Spring, 1997, p. 36). The New England Primer (1805), a textbook with multiple editions widely used from 1690 to 1900, reflected the legitimated violence of early American schools: "F The Idle Fool Is Whipt at School" (p. 13).

Ravitch (1974) documented severe discipline in New York City schools continuing through the 19th and into the 20th century. The U.S.

Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (1999) reported that corporal punishment persisted in American schools throughout the 20th century although frequency began to decline in the 1970s. In 1976, for example, states submitted reports to the Office of Civil Rights indicating that more than 1.5 million children were paddled at school. In 1998, just over 365 thousand incidences were reported. Hyman, Zelikoff, and Clarke (1988) warned of underreporting and estimated that actual numbers might be twice those reported. This study of Principal Haines provides evidence to support their hypothesis.

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (1999) and Shaw and Braden (1990) reported that corporal punishment was applied in a discriminatory manner: victims were usually male, poor, ethnic or language minorities, or students with disabilities. Again, results of this study were consistent with those findings.

Law and Corporal Punishment

Since the colonial period, common law held that educators could use reasonable force against students to maintain order. At that time, corporal punishment in schools was embedded in a larger context of state-sanctioned violence: masters whipped slaves and indentured servants; husbands beat wives; guards caned prisoners; officers flogged soldiers and sailors; mental asylums beat and caged the mentally ill; parents spanked children; and educators paddled students. Today, only the last two, violence against children, are legal in the U.S.

Legislation prohibiting corporal punishment has been approved in 27 states, primarily in the north and east (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000). Similar legislation proposed in other states was opposed by the Bush Administration. ([see Table 1](#)). President Bush supported a 2001 proposal in Congress to protect educators from liability when corporal punishment was used (Sealey, 2001).

The U.S. Supreme Court upheld use of corporal punishment in schools in *Ingraham v. Wright* (1977). In essence, the Court found that the Eighth Amendment's Cruel and Unusual Treatment Clause provided protection for criminals but not schoolchildren. The Court deferred decisions about student discipline to local school authorities, a pattern perpetuated by lower federal and state courts (Imbrogno, 2002). In general, U.S. courts emphasize the rights of school officials to maintain control rather than the rights of the child (Roy, 2001).

Respect for the rights of children is growing worldwide. Every industrialized nation in the world, except the U.S., has abolished corporal punishment in schools. Adopted in 1989 by the United Nations General Assembly, 191 nations have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Only the U.S. and Somalia have failed to approve the convention which calls for a worldwide ban on corporal punishment (Imbrogno, 2002).

Religion and Corporal Punishment

Studies indicate that Protestant Fundamentalists are more likely than members of other religious groups to use corporal punishment (Grasmick, Bursik, & Kimpel,

1991; Grasmick, Morgan, & Kennedy, 1992; Oosterhuis, 1993; Wiehe, 1990). The admonition, "Spare the rod and spoil the child," commonly quoted as scripture, is actually from a poem by Samuel Butler, a 17th century English writer. The biblical verse most similar to this is Proverbs 13:24, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him." The Hebrew word translated "rod" in this verse is the same word used in Psalms 23:4, "thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." The shepherd's rod, Popcak and Popcak (2000) explain, was used to guide, not beat, the sheep. They maintain that the rod of comfort would not be used to hurt children.

The words discipline and punish are not synonymous. The Latin root of the word discipline is *discipuli* meaning "student" or "disciple." Discipline therefore implies a teacher-student or Rabbi-disciple relationship. The purpose is literally to teach children about loving, respectful relationships. The term "punishment" is derived from the Greek *poine* and its Latin derivative *poena* meaning revenge, the roots of the words pain, penalty, penitentiary, and penance. Punishment involves inflicting pain as revenge. The relationship is punisher-victim; the goal is compliance and control.

Biblical hermeneutics, a continuing source of controversy and division among religious groups, offers contrasting interpretations of biblical events and themes. Some writers (Brock, 1988; Brown & Parker, 1989; Heyward, 1999; Hopkins, 1995; Williams, 1993) contend that the Bible not only allows corporal punishment, but actually encourages child abuse. To illustrate, they cite the patriarch Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and Jesus' crucifixion which, they contend, portrays God as a "divine child abuser." Greven (1992) warns that the religious and authoritarian nature of corporal punishment leads children to believe that they are evil and accept violence as natural and normal. Browning, Bunge, and Wall (2001) condemn Christianity's "poisonous pedagogy" that emphasizes original sin, adult ownership of children, the need for absolute obedience, and physical punishment to break their wills.

Popcak and Popcak (2000) and Grasmick, Bursik, and Kimpel (1991) argue against corporal punishment citing the New Testament's gentle, loving portrait of the adult-child relationship. In Jesus' story of the prodigal son, for example, the father responded with forgiveness to his son's disobedience. Jesus blessed and embraced children and encouraged adults to be more child-like. From this perspective, Jesus was non-violent, challenging the brutality of the existing social order, defending the poor, healing the sick, and raising the status of Samaritans, slaves, women, and children. Deacon (2000) maintains that:

The Bible is essentially a history of love -- divine love, reaching out to ever broadening circles of humanity as one category of prejudice and exclusion after another is overcome by love, the cohesive force that draws all God's creation together into one whole. Jesus preached and practiced an inclusive, universal Gospel that set aside cheap moralisms in favor of love. (p.292)

Hegemonic Masculinity

"Hegemonic masculinity" (Blackmore & Kenway, 1993) also legitimates corporal punishment. Schools, as gendered organizations, structure unequal power relationships between females and males. Teaching is considered a feminine activity, an extension of the nurturing and child-rearing function of women in the home and family. Educational administration has been constituted as a "masculinist enterprise" (Blackmore & Kenway, 1993). Leadership functions, including paddling, are associated with masculine authority, control, violence, and virility (Eisenstein, 1993).

Harvard psychiatrist James Gilligan (2001) argues that men often view "violence as proof of masculinity." Zoologist Desmond Morris (1967) raised the dark image of corporal punishment as a sado-masochistic ritual:

the adoption of the female sexual rump-presentation posture as an appeasement gesture.... is largely confined now to a form of schoolboy punishment, with rhythmic whipping replacing the pelvic thrusts of the dominant male.... [S]choolmasters... were performing an ancient primate form of ritual copulation with their pupils. They could just as well inflict pain on their victims without forcing them to adopt the bent-over submissive posture. (It is significant that schoolgirls are rarely, if ever, beaten this way -- the sexual origins of the act would then become obvious.) (pp. 167-178) [parens in original]

According to psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982), masculinist conceptions of justice are based on an "ethic of rights." From this perspective, men may feel they have the right to paddle children. Tradition, common law, the U.S. Supreme Court, and state and district policies sanction this "administrative assault" (Diamond, 1997) on children.

Women tend to choose non-violent, humane approaches to help children develop self discipline. Feminist understandings of justice emanate from an "ethic of care" and responsibility for others (Gilligan, 1982; Lyons, 1983; Noddings, 1984). Feminine ethics emphasize relationships, interdependence, empathy, and compassion.

Carol Gilligan (1982) cited two biblical passages to explain masculine and feminine conceptions of justice. Significantly, her exemplars also reveal how males and females tend to regard children. When God directed him to sacrifice his son, Abraham obeyed without question. Clearly, the patriarch valued obedience more than the life of his child. Centuries later, two women appeared before King Solomon, both claiming to be the mother of the same infant. Solomon ordered the boy cut in two to give each woman half. To save the life of her child, the true mother lied, saying the boy belonged to the other woman. Obviously, she valued the life of her child more than her rights, more than truth itself.

Conclusion

Not as spectacular or newsworthy as guns or knives in schools, American society does not "count" corporal punishment as "real" violence (Stein, 2001). Bandman

(1977) argues, however, that children have rights to dignity, respect, self-respect and the "right to one's body" (p. 176). Justice, he contends, requires that children have the right to "a decent and fulfilling life... equal in care and resources to the most advantaged members of society" (p.178). Because children cannot claim their rights, Bandman maintains that adults are ethically and morally obligated to act on their behalf.

it is better to live in a world with... obnoxious students than to live in a world of quiet, docile, and obedient students whom one drugs or beats into submission like donkeys. To have rights... is to be free of a master-slave, authoritarian relation. (p.170)

This paper has argued that sanctioned violence in schools dehumanizes both child and adult, abused and abuser. Paddling threatens the safety of schools and assaults the dignity of the human spirit.

Tradition, laws protecting adult rights, certain religious beliefs, and masculine views of justice legitimate adult violence on American schoolchildren. Laws that defend the rights of the child, Jesus' model of valuing and embracing children, and female ethics of care and compassion offer hope of transformed schools where principals and teachers protect and nurture children's lives and dreams.

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