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THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD AND 'THE GOOD OF THE LEARNERS'
A comparative ethnographical survey on the abolition of corporal punishment in South African schools

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In contemporary South Africa, the abolition of corporal punishment symbolizes a break with the previous schooling system. A qualitative study in four formerly segregated schools south of Johannesburg showcases different realities and discourses on corporal punishment. The practices vary from its total abolition to its continued maintenance. Most learners in a Soweto-based school justify its use to maintain discipline in a hostile environment. Adding to conventional perspectives on the abolition of corporal punishment, a comprehensive approach provides a contextualized understanding of its function in the eyes of the school community, and reveals complex links between corporal punishment and a practice of care.

Context of the research

This article is based on the results of a survey undertaken in the context of a larger study funded by the French Institute of South Africa and the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). The research teams on interethnic relations at the University of Paris 7 and on sociology of education at the University of Geneva were also involved. The investigations spanned a period of three years from October 2004 to October 2007. The research aimed at defining the role of schools in the transformation of social relationships and the construction of a participative and non-racial democratic model in South Africa. Accordingly, our intention is to shed light on issues pertaining to the transformation, racialization and deracialization of schools in South Africa by identifying three levels at which changes impact: (1) on the organization, functioning, experience and the representations of the school spaces; (2) on the production and uptake of new identity resources and discourses by school actors; and (3) on the forms and the manifestations of violence at school (especially on the ways these relate to the residues of violence inherited from life under the apartheid regime).

At the theoretical and methodological levels, this research is the continuation of, and draws on previous studies undertaken in schools in South Africa (Franchi, 2003a; Franchi and Duncan, 2003; Franchi and Swart, 2003) and in France (Franchi, 2003b; Franchi and Andronikof-Anglade, 2001; Payet, 1995, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2005; Payet and Franchi, 2006). In France, we examined the changes to the discourses and practices related to equality, discrimination, integrating immigrant learners and violence prevailing in and around schools over the past 20 years. More specifically, we examined (1) the process of ethnicization[1] of educational relationships; (2) the growing importance attributed to questions of violence in schools in connection with a discourse on the cultural differences of learners whose families immigrated to France from North and West Africa, and more recently from Turkey; and (3) the practices of segregation of these learners, implemented legally or unofficially by families and school institutions in spite of a prevailing ethos of non-discrimination and equality in the French national education system. It is interesting to note that the tendency in France is to implement educational policies that try to redress these segregationist drifts by fighting against discrimination at the local school level (children of so-called immigrant origin are most often French by birth, but identify with their mainly Muslim parents who immigrated from former French colonies to seek work in the 1960s and 1970s or to join migrant family members in the 1980s and 1990s. They comprise approximately 10–15 percent of the general school population but represent up to 85 percent of the school population in inner-city neighbourhood priority education schools).

In South Africa, the focus is a more proactive one, and centres on promoting the integration of and respect for the cultural diversity of national groups within the new democratic South African schools in line with the prevailing myth of social transformation (Soudien, 2004). These schools are for the most part born out of the proverbial ashes of four separate and unequal systems of education (White, Indian, Coloured and Bantu education), historically entrenched in the racist ideology and legislation of apartheid.

This research – and particularly the subject developed in this article – also follows on from a series of studies carried out on violence in schools in France (Franchi and Colin, 2005; Payet, 1995, 1997, 1998) and on violence in schools within societies and economies in transition, as for example in Tunisia, where a programme was sponsored by UNICEF on violence in the discriminated school institutions of 'Greater Tunis' (Payet, 2006). This latter study used the rhetoric of the 'rights of the child', promoted by international and non-governmental organizations alike, as an analytic tool to shed light on the discrepancies that exist between the intentions of these organizations and their representatives in national governments and the ordinary experience of school actors.

At the methodological level, the present study draws on the same body of earlier research carried out in South Africa, France and Tunisia. It uses

qualitative methods as a framework for undertaking a series of ethnographical observations, focus groups and interviews in four case study schools. Other instruments included were: open-ended questionnaires on self-definitions of identity, the emotional challenges that learners face in their daily lives and their impact on the experiences of teaching and learning, and on teacher burnout; focus group interviews with learners and teachers on different aspects of their current experiences of the learning relationship and peer relations (as compared, where applicable, to previous or imagined experiences of schooling under apartheid rule); and photo reports made by learners on their 'life at school'.

The sample for the present research is made up of four secondary schools located in the southwestern administrative district of Johannesburg, in the province of Gauteng. The four schools were selected in collaboration with the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) as representative of schools that fell under each of the four systems of education set up during apartheid (Black, Coloured, Indian and White), and have been transformed since 1994 to reflect different systems of redress of formerly underprivileged educational systems in accordance with the new dispensation and Constitution of South Africa. They provide an opportunity to analyse the various paths of desegregation that can be identified since 1994 (both within the educational teams and at the level of national schools) (Bamberg, 2004; Sujee, 2004).

The abolition of corporal punishment at school: preliminary results

This section focuses on one of the controversial issues raised in the interviews by school actors, and especially by learners, namely the abolition of corporal punishment in post-1994 South African schools. This abolition is taken as a symbol of the political break with the former apartheid system, which lauded authoritarian educational practices. It also heralds the advent of a new South Africa, whose Constitution is often presented as one of the most respectful of human rights, be they individual or collective, worldwide. Thus, the 'rights of the child' are to be considered an asset for the new South African, democratic and multicultural nation, to adopt the wording of the new international law. Moreover, the Constitution also promotes egalitarian relationships between the various groups of the nation, be they of a cultural, ethnic or gender type (Bray, 2004; Kiguwa, 2006).

During the course of our study, we noted that the various members of the school communities – teachers, heads of schools, learners and parents – were all well informed and aware of the changes in policies enacted in the realm of school discipline, and would frequently use the expression the 'rights of the child'. In addition to this common knowledge, we found different interpretations, experiences and approaches towards this notion and towards policies concerning the abolition of corporal punishment. First, in general, the

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teachers and heads of schools tended to deny the continued use of disciplinary action that entails corporal punishment, while the learners did not hide the fact that these practices continue to be used (in variable proportions according to establishments). Second, the majority of teachers complained about an abusive use of the notion of 'rights' by learners ('they speak only about their rights, not about their duties'). Last, the learners' opinions varied greatly on this same issue: some denounced it, while others tried to find excuses for justifying resorting to corporal punishment.

Hence we face a double discrepancy. On the one hand, between a wilful official discourse, at the level of the national and provincial educational authorities, that insists upon the disappearance of corporal punishment, and a reality in which this practice can very rarely be said to have disappeared (Vally, 1999a, 1999b), and is still used to some degree or another in at least three of the four high schools we studied. And on the other hand, between the differing opinions found among the learners, who are either in agreement with or opposed to this practice.

This double discrepancy needs to be examined in light of the dynamic local contexts of each of the four high schools studied. The practice of corporal punishment was reported to have almost disappeared, except in one or two instances, in the historically 'White' school in our sample. Here, while the educational teams have undergone some changes since the reclassification of the school as a Model C school in the early 1990s (these changes comprise the integration of Black teachers in a majority 'White' – western – teacher environment and school culture), the most significant changes relate to the learner population. Where access to this school before 1990 was reserved for a vast majority of 'White' learners (in the apartheid nomenclature), today more than 80 percent of the learners are 'Black'.[2]

By contrast, in the school located in a district of the ex-township of Soweto (which was historically reserved for 'African' learners), although the learners and educators were often the most vociferous proponents of discourses and claims related to 'learners' rights', these have little bearing on the realities of corporal punishment; the latter remains common and exists side-by-side with real changes at the level of pedagogical and constitutional understandings and readings of school realities. The attitude found among those educators in favour of corporal punishment can be characterized as ambivalent (as one participant commented, 'though I can see why it's not the best solution, a good caning helped to straighten me out as a youngster and there's no reason why it won't be good for the youth of today'), and sets them firmly aside from those (in the main female educators) who repudiate the practice unequivocally.

Between these two extremes, in the ex-Indian education and ex-Coloured education schools, the practice of corporal punishment was found to be more variable and, based on reports by learners, is used by approximately half of the teachers (with variation according to the schools and learners interviewed).

The opinions of the learners were directly correlated with the prevailing opinions of the educators in the schools. In the ex-'White' schools, where the practice has actually been abandoned as illegal, the learners were quick to denounce those rare teachers who continue to use it. In contrast, learners in the ex-'African' school located in Soweto tended to express ambivalence as similar to their educators when qualifying corporal punishment: they tried to justify the use of this practice as a necessary disciplinary measure, while at the same time denouncing its negative effects on the learners' self-esteem and integrity (humiliation, violence). In the schools where the opinions of educators on these practices were more diversified, the learners' opinions also varied.

Provisional interpretation of the results

The present discussion pertains to all four schools involved in the study and endeavours to shed light on the findings by formulating hypotheses about those factors that may account for the variation in use of corporal punishment, the reticence by some educators to abandon this practice, while others seem able to do so, and the pervasive ambivalence that continues to enshroud this problematic in spite of a history of apartheid violence and humiliation that educators claim to be only too willing to overthrow. As surprising and necessitous of interpretation is the tendency of some learners to justify a practice that goes against the very rights of which they are cognizant and to which they lay claim as children and as learners. The interpretations advanced in this section provide an opportunity to link these findings with other data collected in this same study, and at the same time constitute the hypotheses against which to empirically test these data.

Different points of view among learners

Corporal punishment: an old-fashioned practice: A first interpretation consists in focusing on the relationship between the transformation of teaching practices and the transformation of their principle of legitimacy as perceived by the learners. In other words, the abolition of a practice goes along with a disappearance of its principle of legitimacy. When teachers assume the passage from the former principle of a disciplinary relationship based on the possibility for corporal punishment to the new one in which corporal punishment is no longer an option, they transmit a new educational message to the learners as well. This seems to be the case in the ex-'White' school. It must be noted that the learners adhere to this new principle, not only because it benefits them (in so far as they are no longer physically hit) but also because (1) it is used by all the teachers in the school and (2) it is a catalyst for a more efficient educational relationship.

It follows that in the schools where the disciplinary practices of the teachers vary, the former coexisting with the newer ones, the differences that

were found in the learners' opinions can be explained according to the following two factors. First, there is no common understanding among the teachers, and different types of punishments are used in accordance with different principles of justification. Second, this heterogeneity of disciplinary forms and principles can create situations of injustice and does not permit teachers to establish a level of efficiency in the classroom that is considered satisfactory by the learners. By satisfactory, learners meant a level of decorum that is conducive to learning and minimizes disruption of the lesson.

Therefore, it is necessary to refine the formulation of the first interpretation. We can undoubtedly observe a correspondence between the disciplinary practices of the educators and the opinions of the learners, but this parallelism is not automatic. It is not of a kind where the reality of practices invariably influences opinions. Rather, it can be explained by reasons connected with the coherence and the efficiency of teachers' disciplinary practices as observed by learners, as well as by the degree of internal coherence between teachers' opinions about this practice and their behaviours. With regard to the latter, whether teachers use corporal punishment or not, it remains a practice that all consider to be 'old fashioned' in so far as it is a relic of a recent apartheid past and contradictory to newer, constitutionally embedded conceptions of learners' rights and pedagogical philosophies of education in the new South Africa.

Corporal punishment: a practice that is necessary because of its efficiency: By privileging the contextualized and pragmatic dimensions of the disciplinary practice of corporal punishment over and above its ideological dimension, we end up with a second interpretation, by the learners, of this practice. Learners justify corporal punishment on the basis that it seems to them to be a fair and effective way of maintaining peace and order in the classroom in the face of certain disruptive behaviours:

> Most of the time it's justified, 'cause arriving late, not doing your homework and making noise when you've got work to do. (Girl student from T. high school)

Learners then perceive corporal punishment as being in accordance with their expectations of the teacher's role – to keep the class under control, to punish when the rules are not respected, to guarantee conditions that permit learning. Corporal punishment is emptied here of any negative intention, perversion or connection to evil. On the contrary, it is connoted positively, with an educational dimension. Corporal punishment is accepted on the grounds that it is justified and even more so when it is not accompanied by deliberate and excessive violence:

> *Girl from*
> *T. high school*: I think in a way that corporal punishment, they use it because they're trying to keep the school in control, most of it takes the form of discipline, like they tell you not to do this and then you do that if it is good; you don't listen to them, some of them do not like it and so they like hitting, to keep us disciplined. I think it is to keep the

> child and tell him that what he did was not right, that he must learn
> from wrong and try to learn from his mistakes.
>
> *Interviewer*: So do you think it is good when it is not in excess?
> *Girl*:   Yes.
> *Interviewer*: Have you personally been hit?
> *Girl*:   Yeah, they do hit someone on the head, but it is not that strong . . .
> I understand because we're learners, we make noises, we do this, and
> we don't listen. So like … they try to keep us in line.

> I think, corporal punishment in moderation is good, but naturally you get people
> who really take it to the extreme, but if it's controlled, yeah, I think it's a good thing
> because sometimes kids go overboard. (Boy from M. High)

In spite of these justificatory pleas for corporal punishment, one can read between the lines of these excerpts that some ambivalence remains about the violence that underpins this practice. Words like 'not that strong', 'in moderation', 'if it's controlled' place a proviso on the use of a means of discipline that the learner suspects can easily get out of hand and push the educator 'overboard' into an area of infringement of his or her rights as a learner and as a child.

Corporal punishment: a practice justified by the good it does for the school community: Beyond the dimension of efficiency, a third interpretation of corporal punishment was that it is justified by the fact that not only is the learners' disturbance of the class annoying, but it is illegitimate and a source of frustration and suffering for those learners who do not disturb the class. In a way, the reasoning is reversed (in the learners' discourse): it is the disturbance that is illegitimate, and its reduction makes the corporal punishment justifiable. The disturbance destroys the peace that is one of the essential resources of effective learning and, consequently, of one's access to an opportunity to get a diploma through which to get out of poverty (and therefore avoid deterministic reproduction of social lack). This destruction of a resource through which to achieve success at school is felt to be very serious by the learners since, in a discriminating environment, these resources are scarce.

This discourse was encountered more frequently in the three historically more underprivileged schools (Black, Coloured and Indian schools) in our sample. It is also adopted by those learners who assert that they feel like working and is thus not common to all of them. In the photo report produced by two learners at a school, the comments indicated the negative image attached to disruptive learners:

> These boys affect us with [their] smoke [smoking] and we were suggesting that there
> should be a change.
> There is a high rate of smoking dagga in our school.
> These children are disrespectful in class. They fight a lot in class; they don't even
> respect the teacher.
> This boy smokes chalk when the teachers are not in class. (Photo captions by girls
> from B. secondary school)

The high expectation that learners from very challenged sociohistorical backgrounds have of their school enables us to posit the assumption that these learners support the practice of corporal punishment. This expectation can be expressed directly, as in the following comment:

> The thing I like about this school is that when we are in class we get serious about the education we get inside the class. (Girl from B. secondary school)

Or this can be expressed indirectly through the complaints and the frustrations linked to being taught in a school that is poorly equipped:

> These are friends who do not have a place to eat their lunch. They eat their lunch standing [up] and the school has no paving.
> This is where we have been emptying our dustbins for years and it was never changed.
> There are many students in the school but we have to wait a long time to use the toilets because they are so dirty.
> [The school grounds are very hilly] and we have no place to stay and we have no playgrounds to play on.
> In this school we need tuck shops and the food that they are selling us is not healthy enough. (Photo captions by girls from B. secondary school)

Again, while learners seemed adamant about the 'evil' associated with disruptive and deviant behaviour in school, this should not be, in and of itself, a reason to justify corporal punishment. Unless the children are reasoning on the basis of an assumption that no other means of disciplinary action on the part of teachers can achieve satisfactory restraint of this behaviour or change it. This brings us to posit that the learner is in the position of a child who identifies with and takes up the thinking of the adults who set the tone for what is possible and what is not. Through their discourses and behaviour in the classroom and in the playground, educators explicitly and implicitly convey to the learners their understandings of the authority they exert and the confidence they have in the different forms of discipline at their disposal. In the Soweto school, a feedback meeting in which the results of this study were presented to the educators revealed that at least half of the educational team remain convinced that while corporal punishment is illegal and must therefore be stopped, it remains effective and good for the child and the school community. This conviction could well constitute the basis for identification among the learners and account for the contradictory understandings of this practice that they reported.

An in-depth analysis of the reasons for the educators' ambivalence towards a disciplinary practice that served to keep them in their place when *they* were learners under apartheid education falls beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, it remains important to note and question the lack of confidence and belief in alternative forms of discipline among many of those very educators who suffered humiliation and extremes of violence at the hands of 'sir', who denigrated them while teaching them only that which was deemed useful for an *undermensch* in apartheid South Africa. We can only suppose that a mechanism is at play that is related to a repetition of one's own

experiences (by inflicting them on one's learners) in an unconscious attempt to master the emotions that they elicited and which must have been repressed for one to continue exerting the same humiliation and violence on others.

Factors that explain the variations in the opinions expressed by the learners

'School context' is the most determinant variable in the learners' perception of the legitimacy or the illegality of the persistence of practices of corporal punishment in school. This variable, however, acts in interaction with two other variables: on the one hand, the learners' level of schooling (which is partly an apparent variable and determined by the family's socioeconomic status), and on the other hand, the gender of the learners. It is obvious that the perception of corporal punishment is correlated with the level of personal experience of the punishment. Corporal punishment was used more often with learners in the higher grades (level of schooling) than the lower grades; more with children with learning difficulties at school than those who were good learners; and more with boys than with girls. A combination of the different variables created a highly exposed group: the male learners in higher grades, from underprivileged backgrounds and with learning difficulties.

To be a girl or a boy is to be confronted in a very different way with regard to corporal punishment:

> Some teachers if you're a girl they hit you on the hand, if you're a boy they hit you in the face.

A group of girls we interviewed together did not spontaneously broach the subject of corporal punishment, while, in a subsequent interview with a group of boys, the subject proves more important and gives rise to more elaborate answers. In response to the following question, 'what do you dislike at school?', a mixed group of boys and girls responded differently: boys complained about corporal punishment. Whereas girls denounced the learners who litter the classroom and school yard with pieces of paper or those who make a noise in class, the boys explained their overexposure to corporal punishment by the fact that they have less control over their behaviour and are distracted by their environment out of school, and this gets in the way of their homework:

> But the problem is, boys are all lazier than girls, because ok girls, they're like thinking, 'oh if I don't do my homework', they say like 'the sir will hit me' so they do it. So we boys when we come home we're thinking of going around with drinks, and playing around. When you come back home late, you forget what your homework are, you're thinking of playing around. I copy my homework in the morning. That's why mostly boys, they dislike corporal punishment.

A girl recognizes this disparity and proposes:

> I think they should change the discipline so it can be equal amongst boys and girls.

One should note, however, that if the girls are relatively spared from corporal punishment, they are overexposed to violence of a sexual order

(HSRC, 2001). While a direct relationship between corporal punishment and these other forms of corrupt relationships between teachers and pupils cannot be directly deduced from the study, one of the observed side-effects of the focus on corporal punishment does seem to be the avoidance of the continuation or emergence of a less visible form of violence, a form that is more taboo, of which the victims are mainly female pupils (harassing, stroking and rape).

We are suggesting that a relationship exists between all forms of violence exerted by adults in the position of educators on learners. Whether this violence takes a physical or a sexual form, it is possible to conjecture that both cases are indicative of the lack of a policing of boundaries between adults and children in the school context. Moreover, both corporal punishment and sexual harassment of female learners reflect a failure to negotiate an internally (psychologically) and externally (within the observed relationship) acceptable measure of proximity and distance in the adult–child relationship. This latter point refers to the common search for closeness and need for distance that underpins all relationships between parental figures and their pupils. The psychological and social rule that states that 'we are not all the same' (or that adults and children hold different positions in the family, the school and the society) functions as a necessary safeguard when searching for this proximal distance that permits the adult to perform an educative function of transmitting, socializing but also protecting the developing child. The policing of boundaries between adults and children can come from the educator (internal conscience), who restrains his or her temptation to enter into an inappropriate form of relationship with a learner in his or her care. Where this does not occur, the boundaries between educator and learner should be protected by external policing systems, e.g. institutional forms of sanctioning. In both corporal punishment and sexual harassment of learners, we noted the helplessness experienced by school management when it comes to ensuring that educational staff conform to existing regulations in these domains.

This may be related to a history of apartheid education and the deregulation of the school system during 'the freedom struggle'. During the period of struggle, there prevailed an ideology of a shared political position of equality among educators and learners engaged in a common fight to free education from the shackles of apartheid. This notion of political equality appears now to cloud the asymmetrical nature of the teacher–pupil relationship and negates the important distinction between their positions and roles in the system. Moreover, the political incitement of youths to go against the counsel of their parents and teachers if it were counter to the aims and objectives of the struggle for freedom may also make it more difficult for the new generation of teachers (who were those same youths during the struggle for freedom period) to assume the authority to restrict the behaviour of the learners in their charge or with the internal 'parental' resources to protect those in their care.

The findings related to corporal punishment highlight the importance of examining present ideologies and practices in this domain in light of the two

historical periods that preceded it, namely apartheid and the struggle for freedom. This gives an added level of complexity to the construct of the school context in so far as the four schools' involvement in the struggle period varies widely. According to reports given by the school principals, the Soweto-based school was the only one that was active and involved as a whole community during this period, followed by the historically Coloured school. The historically Indian school's involvement was limited to promoting the integration of 'Black' learners and to the individual experiences of particular teachers.

The political use of the abolition of corporal punishment

We suggest that the 'universal ethical perspective' on corporal punishment – which is that endorsed by the South African government and by NGOs also – is not able to account fully for the 'situated experiential perspective' of the learners and educators. The 'universal ethical perspective' cannot capture the intrinsic dynamic of a perspective that is at once individual and collective, psychological and social, and whose reasons are dictated by experience and shaped by its contradictions. As such, a universal ethical perspective on corporal punishment seems abstract, idealistic and incapable of generating the changes in practice necessary for transformation.

According to the official perspective, corporal punishment is an anti-democratic and anti-ethical practice. It is at variance with the rights of the child; it is a negation of the respect for his or her physical and moral integrity. It maintains the custom of violence – the elements of its legitimization and the conditions of its reproduction. It is in opposition to the development of symmetrical relationships based on respect for others, negotiation and constructing the common good.

From the point of view of the learners in schools located in underprivileged, segregated areas, corporal punishment is sometimes presented as a necessary practice, which guarantees the peace of the class and protects it from the threats posed by its disruptive learners. At the same time, learners insist on the need to apply it in a metered and caring way, which belies the underlying confusion associated with thinking about a practice that is considered both educative and violent. To the learners in class, those learners who are not in class but who haunt the school with their disruptive presence in and around the school grounds embody the violence of the street, abdication in the face of fate and acceptance of a fate of misery. They destroy the rare resources that could provide the opportunity to act on fate and create a different and better future.

The political and institutional perspective is different from that found among learners. The perspective of learners reflected more closely the lived experiences that learners have of corporal punishment and the understandings and theories that they extrapolate from these experiences. The differences found between these two perspectives, namely the abstract political institutional one and the contextually situated one, reflect an opposition between

two perspectives in ethics. The first one defines the ethical in relation to theories and concepts that are taken as universals and can therefore be applied to the analysis of the particular in a top-down direction. The second perspective constructs its understanding of ethics from an analysis of the shared theories, rooted in a particular life context. The latter is more akin to the bottom-up approaches to knowledge production in the human sciences. From the political point of view, corporal punishment is considered an obstacle to democratization, whereas the parties concerned (the school actors) believe it to be designed to support and strengthen the process of schooling in underprivileged schools and hence the process of democratization. How can we explain the distance between these two visions? Moreover, how can we explain the paradoxical alliance, in underprivileged schools, between a teaching practice that could be charged with being reactionary and a logic that appears progressive?

When learners speak about acceptance and justification of corporal punishment, let us not forget that it is on the condition that corporal punishment be fair and not excessive. It is only when it is in the service of the peace of the class, and not the perversion of the teacher, that corporal punishment can be justified by the learners.[3] The learners in the underprivileged schools certainly do not expect to receive corporal punishment! They ask for conditions for education that are appropriate and equal. It is in connection with the latter definition that corporal punishment is deemed acceptable, as a benign form of pain that permits order and discipline to be maintained in a hostile environment.

If we consider the government's position, it denounces the backward practices of teachers that hinder the democratic process. It positions itself as a punitive, critical figure that reprimands teachers who resort to corporal punishment for not having the desire or the capacity to transform their practices and abandon the former system in favour of becoming professionals in a modern school in a modern nation.[4] Our conversations with the teachers and our observations in the schools revealed another facet of this reality. In the underprivileged schools, financial resources are extremely limited and do not create decent working conditions for teachers or learners (Fiske and Ladd, 2004). The funding by the provincial government does not compensate for the moderate school fees paid by each child or for the fact that many of the families cannot afford them and do not in fact manage to pay them on time. Moreover, the possibilities of raising additional funds in underprivileged environments are limited. The consequences of this are that these schools are bound to work under very unfavourable material conditions, are likely to have an insufficient number of teachers, overcrowded classes, unsuitable and precarious premises, very basic equipment or a lack thereof. Under such conditions, it is even more difficult to motivate those learners who experience difficult family conditions and have probably broken with the school institution.

The material we gathered in the schools reveals high levels of burnout, fatigue and low morale among the teaching faculty. The teachers suffer from these difficult conditions of employment, aggravated by the constant increase

in the evaluation tasks imposed by the government in the name of a modern educational management system, in line with the new international standards of a global education. They also suffer from a moral exposure to the personal and domestic difficulties of their young students and from their inability to help them concretely. Finally, they suffer from a lack of recognition, be it from society or the government. It is in this context that the discourse on the abolition of corporal punishment takes place. On the one hand, it stigmatizes teachers without providing them with the resources for training that will encourage them to change their disciplinary practices. On the other hand, it is not accompanied by any concrete improvement in their working conditions – conditions in which other practices could be applied.

The official discourse on corporal punishment – that of international organizations and adopted by the new South African government – stems from a universal ethical register. Applied in a decontextualized form to the local context, it appears an ideological and technocratic approach that gives the government a formidable pretext not to bear its responsibility in and for the current situation. The government can and does place the blame exclusively on the 'bad teachers' for all that was inherited from the apartheid system and from which these teachers have not managed to break loose. This deepens further the drastic disparities that exist between schools located in more privileged areas and those situated in the ex-townships, not to mention the continuing stigmatization of so-called township schools and the flight to so-called 'White' schools (Chisholm, 2004; Chisholm et al., 2003; Nkomo et al., 2004).

But this official discourse has concrete effects too. Received as an ideological speech, disconnected from the reality of teaching (Carrim and Tshoane, 2000), it acts to discourage the teachers even further (Holman, 1999, cited in Vally, 1999a), to increase their disinvestment and reinforce their abdication. In certain cases, the teachers can obey the new standard and abolish corporal punishment from their disciplinary practice. But in so doing, it might indeed be possible that letting go of the stick also means abandoning the relationship of proximity and attention vis-a-vis the learners. Because – and the very paradox of corporal punishment resides here – if it is accepted by the learners of the poorer schools, it seems to be because it falls within a relationship of proximity and therefore within the dynamic economy of *care*. Corporal punishment is considered, in practice, to be one of the registers of a relationship of proximity, inseparable though not necessarily equivalent to other forms, such as compliments, listening and marks of affection. To demonize corporal punishment is to risk a situation in which only its perverse form is retained, but not its place in an economy of *care*.

It is certain that from an absolute point of view, corporal punishment is not justifiable, and the objective remains its eradication. But perhaps it is advisable to be politically incorrect in order to be ethically relevant. In an environment that is hostile to schooling, where many children and teenagers are deprived of a domestic frame of reference, an authority figure or structure

that helps them to build their lives; where they are exposed to all kinds of temptations that provide a means of escape (drugs, gambling, crime, etc.), corporal punishment appears to the learners to be a necessary educational measure. But it is not corporal punishment in and of itself that the learners seek and accept from adults; it is corporal punishment in the form of attention, a relationship of proximity, an insufficient but nonetheless existing answer to their quest for limits and love. It is when it is used supposedly in a practice of care that corporal punishment becomes acceptable to them. In otherwords, the child's or youth's confusion of violence with care may suggest their identification with the very same reasoning of the adult who says 'I'm beating you for your own good'.

What the learners say about corporal punishment is that it is necessary and acceptable, but unbearable when it departs from the policy of care. The learners in the underprivileged schools surveyed expressed a vital lack of assistance, of being listened to; they complained about overloaded, tired teachers, who are no longer available to care about their students' learning difficulties or understand them:

> Educators feeling exhausted after a long day of hard work. (Photo caption by student in T. high school)
> This teacher is a counsellor because she teaches life orientation so she understands everyone's problem. (Photo caption by student in B. high school)

The acceptance of corporal punishment will last for as long as it is accompanied by other registers of proximity and with *care*. Should the opposite occur, corporal punishment would be rejected for contributing to the suffering and the humiliation of the learners.

> *Boy from*
> *T. high school*: What I like in the school is when teachers are not like drastic as . . . we can talk to them and they can speak to us and . . . and what I dislike is the corporal punishment. Because sometimes, ok we do stupid mistakes but they don't accept it. Ok, it's like coming late, when you come late, sometimes the teacher sometimes they understand your point of view, the reason for being late, sometimes most of the learners don't do works including me, ok, I do work, but not that much, then . . .
> *Interviewer*: Your homework?
> *Boy*: Yes. The problem is, sometimes I don't understand why, I feel scared to ask, like I don't understand this actually. That's the reason why I don't do my homework. It's so; that's my dislike of the school, corporal punishment.
> *Interviewer*: Scared?
> *Boy*: It's just that when it comes to teach us I get shy, even when they ask for their question when I have to answer, it's like I'm scared, I'm feeling like if I say that wrong they'll hit me, that's why . . . . That's why sometimes I feel scared.

Corporal punishment, though justified by some learners, appears here in its naked form as a spectre of violence that hangs over the learning relationship and hinders all forms of exploration and even thinking. The learner is

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afraid to venture into unknown territory, to explore new horizons of thought, to let his or her imagination flow, for fear that the adult's lack of acceptance will take the form of violent reprisals. The rapprochement of corporal punishment and care takes on a different dimension in this light. The confusion of violence with care seems more than anything else to be a relic of the distorted thinking that underpinned the repressive and puritan ideology that built apartheid. It is a system of care underscored by the violation of the very person you proclaim to care for.

When corporal punishment in itself, without contextualizing its meaning, is considered to be reprehensible, this thwarts any attempts to think about and generate the resources needed to respond to the emotional needs of the learners. The failure to offer schools the financial, human and professional resources (Porteus et al., 2001) – the time and space for collective and individual listening, trained teachers, specialists of the helping relationship, a networking with other institutions – shows and obscures at the same time the failure to conduct a genuine policy of *care*.

Conclusion

The comprehensive approach used in this research enabled us to identify corporal punishment as a familiar means for teachers to apply in a hostile environment and a way to address the dual disciplinary constraint of maintaining order in the classroom and educating the learners. According to this perspective, the onus indeed rests upon the teachers to limit their use of the 'stick' for the 'peace of the class' as well as for 'the good of the learners'. This approach departs from a universal ethics vision that demonizes corporal punishment; it has meaning within a particular context, for both the learners and the teachers. More importantly, it reveals the dimension of concern that learners and educators associate with corporal punishment, and its link with an economy of care. In so doing, it provides an alternative to conventional formulations regarding the abolition of corporal punishment, without in any way condoning its wholesale use. In our view, the search for alternative forms of educating and setting limits for the learner need to go hand-in-hand with thinking about ways of maintaining the proximal educational relationship needed to foster concern, provide care and protect the emotional and physical well-being of the developing child.

At the heart of this matter, recognizing the enmeshment of violence and care in education constitutes the necessary condition for thinking about the issue of corporal punishment and its abolition. This enmeshment is the product of several centuries of a violent and perverse philosophy of education, legitimated by traditional values and, in the case of 'Blacks', further entrenched by an ideological justification that consisted in treating 'Blacks' like overgrown children. Submitting to the violence of the adult (master-oppressor) as a means of gaining access to maturity can be seen to have

deeply fashioned the minds of children who were raised and schooled under apartheid. This continues when these same children become educators, contaminating their professional representations of the relationship to the learner-child.[5] This could explain to some extent why the abolition of corporal punishment in the historically 'White' school in our sample seems to be being achieved with relatively less difficulty than in the other three schools, where resistance to the idea that it is contrary to the good of the child remains high in spite of an ideological embrace of the constitutional ethics related to the 'rights of the child'. Rather than this being due to a difference between the educators in the four schools as to the level of adherence to the constitutional changes that place the protection of the rights of the child and learner at the centre of the learning relationship, the degree to which some educators were exposed to wholesale violence and arbitrary humiliation in their own education may make it paradoxically more difficult for them to abandon the idea that it was not 'for their own good' and that their own teachers may not have been motivated by concern and benevolence alone. An educational ethos based on the protection of the rights of the child contrasts sharply with the idea of childhood and of education that was historically imposed on 'Black' children under apartheid. Though it is possible to recognize and counter this idea at a conscious level, the child inside the educator may continue to want to find reason and benevolence where only racism and hatred prevail.

But it is not only the collective and individual histories of the educators in the four schools that explain the differences in their practices and representations of corporal punishment and its abolition. At a fundamental level, prevailing socioeconomic inequalities prevent the establishment of a common vision. The 'system of poverty' that structures the social and family environments of learners in three of the four schools studied maintains and moreover reinforces the link between violence and the eradication of violence. The struggle between 'good' and 'bad' is a daily one, lived as such by the professionals and inhabitants of these neighbourhoods. It is so often a losing battle, that it seems that violence is inevitable in order to resist the force of 'bad'. 'For the child's own good' we make use of a form of violence that we know to be bad but which remains immediately available and whose long-term effects we deny. It is no other than this fatal necessity, nothing short of this devastating paradox, that the learners highlight when they formulate a mortifying alliance between violence and care in their justifications of the use of corporal punishment. Their point of view cannot be understood without considering the violence that weighs down on their daily lives and obstructs their future, even if the practice of corporal punishment, far from rendering the spaces of school and home and neighbourhood hermetic, links them in a senseless logic.

Taken out of context, the radical and distant stigmatization of corporal punishment is felt as a symbolic attack on the teachers. This symbolic violence is then turned on the learners, the weakest in the system, and corporal punishment has all the likelihood of becoming corrupted and taking on the

shape of violence and humiliation. Where official policies fail to recognize the difficulties experienced by the teachers and the learners in underprivileged schools, the mismatch between the learners' demands for love – especially those who live under dire family and social conditions – and the disillusionment and ambivalence of their teachers poses formidable challenges to the South African schooling system. It can easily lead to corrupt forms of the relationship between teachers and learners: of mutual indifference (following the example of French schools), of a violence that is exerted gratuitously (especially with boys) and of a proximity that borders on harassment of a private nature (especially for girls). If the first of these, namely a relationship of mutual indifference, is barely perceptible, the latter forms are already manifest in the active humiliation of boys in the name of discipline and the confusing sexual registers (real or imagined) that underpin relationships between male teachers and female learners. These latter forms of violence are deeply disturbing in that they reactivate images of the oppressive forms of relating reminiscent of those inherited from the time of apartheid.

Notes

1.   Ethnicization is defined as a process of 'othering' (Riggins, 1997) that constructs difference and legitimates inequalities on the basis of 'race' or its more politically correct 'cultural', 'religious' or 'ethnic' substitutes. It does so by attributing the cause of certain sociohistorically constructed phenomena (such as unemployment, school failure, delinquency) to a particular group, identified by its foreign origin (youth of immigrant descent) and by a so-called culture that is constructed as too different from that of the dominant group to be integrated (the Maghrebins, Black Africans). Ethnicization can be further understood as emerging through processes of social categorization, stigmatization and racial ideology. It always implies the idea of inequality, the other being constructed as handicapped by his or her so-called cultural difference or 'cultural deficit'. The tendency to explain the school failure or violent behaviour of certain youth of so-called immigrant descent by referring to a supposed 'cultural handicap' or 'cultural deficit' (Bordet et al., 2000: 10) is a case in point.
      Ultimately, ethnicization underscores the superiority and legitimacy of the 'true national' by rendering visible the illegitimacy of the 'false national' (Balibar, 1990) or by discursively repudiating the 'unwanted immigrant' (van Dijk, 1997). Moreover, ethnicization functions to legitimate, justify and normalize sociohistorical inequalities constructed on the basis of 'ethnic', 'racial', 'national' or 'religious' criteria, by attributing the cause for these inequalities to the nature of the person supposedly categorized as possessing or belonging to a particular 'culture', 'religion', 'ethnicity' or 'race'. By rendering 'minority' individuals and their families responsible for the difficulties they encounter, ethnicization allows the dominant group to divert attention from and deny responsibility for the very mechanisms through which 'ethnic' inequalities are constructed and maintained within society, and the socioeconomic and political benefit they continue to derive from this process.
2.   This term encompasses all persons formerly categorized as Black, Coloured and Indian.
3.   Let us also not forget that these representations emerge in a world where no alternatives to corporal punishment have as yet been formulated. A point of note in this regard is the considerable difficulty that the learners in the workshops had imagining a school in which corporal punishment would be absent. This contrasted sharply with the consistency and proliferation of the discourses they had formulated to denounce/justify the practice of corporal punishment.

4.   Jansen (2000) develops the notion of 'policy as symbolism'. Education policy 'is best described as a struggle for the achievement of a broad political symbolism that would mark the shift from apartheid to post-apartheid society. . . . Every single case of education policy-making demonstrates, in different ways, the preoccupation of the state with settling policy struggles in the political domain rather than the realm of practice' (Jansen, 2000: 46). Elsewhere, Jansen comments: 'The reliance on political symbolism as the overarching framework for education policy-making effectively rules out any major transformation of education in South Africa's future. . . . But schools will not change and education will not improve' (Sayed and Jansen, 2001).

5.   It is thus that in the school based in Soweto, among a team of educators who stand out for their dedication to improving the schooling conditions of the children in the 'Black' community of Soweto and in the new South Africa, some remain personally convinced that the corporal punishment they received as pupils contributed favourably to their own education and to their personal development.

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