

Vincent Adzahlie-Mensah

Department of Social Studies Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

Latencies and perspectives on Ghana’s Code of Discipline for Basic Schools

Abstract

This paper reports documentary and interview data on the code of discipline for Ghanaian Basic Schools to argue in support of pre-service and in-service training for teachers on positive behaviour modification techniques. The research approach was mainly qualitative using a case study design. The data is drawn from the Unified Code of Discipline for Basic Education Schools, interviews with teachers and 15 students. Whereas minimalist research generally takes off with an idea of schooling as an objective good, this paper deviates by highlighting school as a field of regulation where students’ experience severe discipline forms of control implicated in the educational experiences of students and the identities they negotiate within the institution. It highlights that the existence of caning suggests persistence of physical violence against children. The central argument is that, education reforms, if they are to be truly successful, should carefully consider school discipline as an important framework in discussing the nature of schools as child-friendly institutions that support and nurture potential. The existence of caning suggests that global pathways to abolishing physical punishment are not integrated into teacher training in alternative behaviour modification techniques aimed at realizing children’s rights in Ghana. The findings suggest that school disciplinary practices can provide alternative understandings to why many children in developing countries stay away from schools.

Introduction

The theoretical approach to this research sits uncomfortably with considerations of education as an objective good (Molteno et al., 2000; Parkes et al., 2013). I take the view that “the authoritarian organisational style of schooling bequeathed by ... colonialism remains a firm legacy” (Harber, 2004:62). I was attached to the view that Ghana’s school system is still dominated by colonial canon, worldview, and epistemology (Dei, 2004).

So, this paper explored beneath the surface of Ghana’s educational achievement to highlight how institutionalised discipline and punishment is a central part of efforts that subordinate students. In the exploration, I benefitted from Foucault’s (1995) idea of schools as institutions that are meant to ‘discipline and punish’; and long standing arguments that a key purpose of schooling was the subordination of students through institutional discipline (Uchendu, 1979; Harber, 2004). I benefitted from the literature that authority patterns and forms of discipline continue to perpetrate colonial relations of domination that were current many decades ago (Molteno et al., 2000; Harber, 2004). The works of Parkes (2009) argued that forms of discipline both locate students as ‘colonized subjects’ and work cyclically to reproduce their identities as docile subjects. Other works draw our attention to schools as institutions where students experience violence through various forms of discipline (Dei, 2004; Parkes et al., 2013).

Yet, those who have read much of the quantification research in Ghana are accustomed to reading about Ghana’s progress towards achieving Education for All (EFA) goals. Research has not focused on exploring how much of the colonial styles of school and classroom discipline that Molteno et al. (2000:13) argued, remain entrenched in ex-colonies account for the deficits in Ghana’s education system.

The extant literature on school discipline in developing countries talk of the Victorian predilection for physical chastisement or use of corporal punishment (caning), which was spread to many parts of the globe through colonialism (Harber, 2004; Tafa, 2002). The grounds for such spread have been the “religious concept of beating evil out of children” (Tafa, 2002:2) and “the perceived right of teachers to punish, inherent in the need to maintain control and order” (Harber, 2004:73). Over the last decade, studies from former colonies including India, Mali, Lebanon, Liberia, Mozambique, Pakistan, Mongolia, and Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, Ghana, which identified the persistence of colonial-style characteristics of authoritarianism, stress on conformity and regulation of students in school (Molteno et al., 2000; London, 2002; Harber, 2004). The studies highlight that these colonial regimes of power remain entrenched in former colonies because education ministry officials continue to be resistant to any change with the refrain that abolition would result in classroom disorder and failure (Molteno et al., 2000; Harber, 2004).

Studies in other former British colonies - Barbados, (Anderson & Payne, 1994), Kenya (Human Rights Watch, 1999:7-8), Botswana (Tafa, 2002) - identified that the school system inhabited “nineteenth century British traditions of school discipline, including the widespread use of the cane” (Human Rights Watch, 1999:7-8). In relation to Ghana, Killingray (1994) explained that caning was used as ‘the rod of empire’ by which colonial teachers controlled students. Luggard (1922:560) justified corporal punishment with the distasteful notion that “the primitive African does not feel” the pain. He depicted, native children as “nude savage children” acting with “inaccessible fastness of a cannibal” and so, required the “formation of character” (p.217).

As such, this paper departs from the pattern of quantification and positivistic ‘etiology’ of schooling to the view that, aside from the longstanding problems we know of from research on schooling in developing countries, other problems “can be attributed to the dismal failure of the postcolonial state to change the existing system so that it reflects changing times, circumstances and social realities” (Dei, 2004:6). It sallies away from dominant functionalist analysis although it recognizes the potential of schooling to improve human capital, demographic transition, preventive health care and reductions in inequality (Lockheed et al., 1980; Cochrane et al., 1980; MOESS, 2008). A departure from positivistic functionalist analysis was because necessary achieving Universal Primary Completion (UPC) seemed perplexing and elusive in developing countries, including Ghana despite although research projects have generated much knowledge on educational problems (e.g. Colclough et al., 2003; Dei, 2004; Akyeampong et al., 2007). Regardless of constitutional obligations to provide education for all, decentralisation of educational administration and implementations of special schemes for girls, the literature suggests that many developing countries including Ghana are not on track to achieve UPC (Boyle et al., 2002; Dei, 2004; Pryor, 2005; Akyeampong et al., 2007; Lewin, 2009). Following concerns in the Ghanaian literature that many students viewed school as “uninteresting” or “hell” (Obeng, 2002; Pryor & Ampiah, 2003; Akyeampong et al., 2007) This research explored disciplinary policy and practice in a Ghanaian basic school to provide some knowledge on school practices that may confound the achievement of EFA goals in Ghana.

Research question

The research questions were:

1. What are the policy provisions that guide school discipline?
2. What are the students’ perspectives on school disciplinary practices?

Methods

The research approach was mainly qualitative using a case study design. The main research from which this paper is written was conducted using institutional ethnography which implied being drawn into dialogic studies of different dimensions – structural, social and cultural - of everyday school. Only one rural Ghanaian Basic School was involved in the study.

The data were collected using document analysis and interviews. The main sources of the interview data were with 15 students aged 11-15 years while other school members (headteacher and teachers) were used as significant others (Cohen et al., 2011). The student participants were selected after two weeks of observation and longitudinal analysis of school register for students in Primary 4, 5 and 6. The participants were students who have stayed in the school since enrolment in Primary 1. The interview data were collected through fifteen one-on-one interviews with the student participants and episodic interviews with other school members. The document study involved content analysis of the Unified Code of Discipline for Basic Education Schools.

The analysis involved critical discourse analyses (Fairclough, 2003). In so doing I drew on principles involved membership categorisation analysis, narrative analysis and content analysis as described by MacLure et al. (2012). The presentation in this paper highlights participants 'voices', sometimes quoting their comments verbatim.

Results

This section presents the results of the study in two sections. The first section presents document data from a content analysis of the Unified Code of Discipline for Basic Education Schools. The second section presents participants' views that were gathered from field interview on the Unified Code of Discipline for Basic Education Schools.

Procedures and recommended punishments in the code of discipline

The discuss the documentary data gathered from the Unified Code of Discipline for Basic Education Schools (MOE, 2006). By code of discipline I mean

the disciplinary measures that may deter pupils from committing offences and compel them to exercise self-control and self-discipline in their day-to-day activities (MOE, 2006: 257).

In my previous works I have discussed how school policy tasks the headteacher as the pre-eminent authority figure with the duty of maintaining discipline (MOE, 2006:11; Adzahlie-Mensah, 2013). School policy required that conscious efforts are made to promote self-regulation among students and teachers. For example, it is provided that, if a student *is a habitual latecomer or truant influence him or her to change by appointment as bellboy or post-boy* (MOE, 2006, p.15). Central to this type of discipline is the notion of promoting *the kind of discipline that lasts and is carried outside the school into the community* (MOE, p.11). The underlying idea is to self-regulation and peer regulation or a type of discipline involving teachers and students:

Pupils and teachers should learn to discipline themselves and be the first to disapprove of their peers who break the agreed rules. (MOE, 2006:11-12).

Part of the headteacher's duty of maintaining discipline is the concurrent *duty ... to punish pupils* or students (p.13). It is provided that *punishment should be severe enough to act as a deterrent to others* (MOE, 2006:257). What punishment is "severe enough" is not defined in the Handbook. Thus the severity of punishment as a form of control is left to the discretion of the individual administering the disciplinary measure at a given moment. However, the *Unified Code of Discipline for Basic Education Schools* spells out punishments for various 'offences'. By way of summary, the recommended punishments outlined for offences include warning, caning, groundwork (scrubbing veranda or toilet, weeding etc.), counselling, withdrawal, suspension from school, and detention.

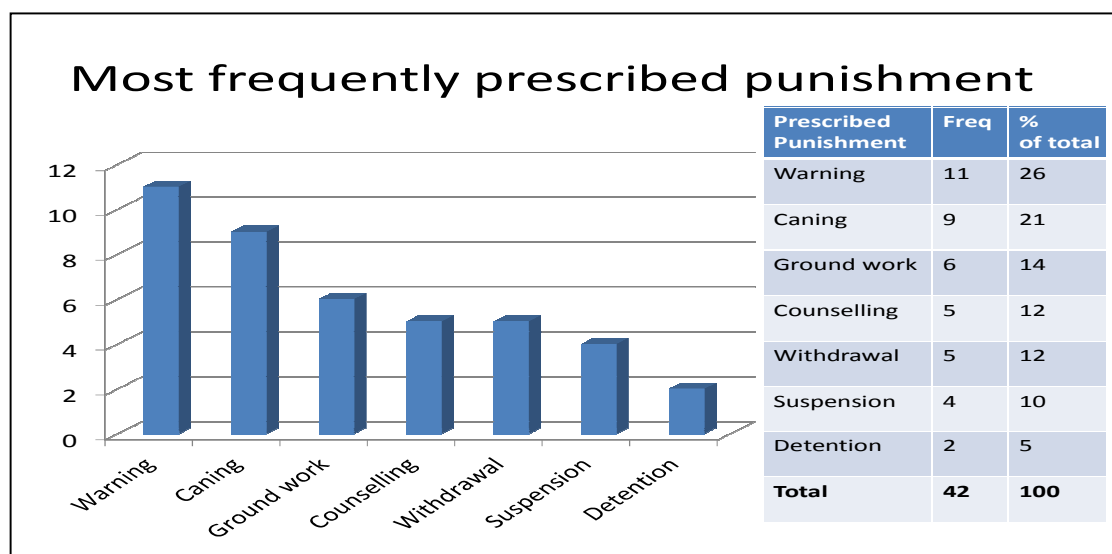


Figure 1: Most frequently prescribed punishment in the Unified Code of Discipline for Basic Education Schools.

Source: Field data drawn from the Unified Code of Discipline for Basic Education Schools

The Figure 1 shows that caning is most frequently (21%) prescribed as punishment for all offences aside warning (26%) students. The representation showed that caning is prescribed for nine (9) out of the 18 offences outlined in the Code of Discipline. Those punishments include fighting, quarrelling/teasing, stealing, squandering of school fees, illicit use of drugs including drinking alcohol and smoking, flouting authority, assault and sexual misconduct. Groundwork was the next most frequent (14%). It is prescribed for as punishment for six (6) offences including littering, fighting, quarrelling/teasing, stealing, assault and leaving school without permission. Counselling (12%) is prescribed for five (5) offences – habitual lateness, absenteeism/truancy/leaving school under false pretence, tale-bearing/telling lies, stealing, squandering of fees, illicit drug use and failure to do homework. Withdrawal/restriction from school activities and suspension together constitute 22% whereas detention is the least frequently (5%) prescribed punishment. Withdrawal of privileges is suggested as punishment for habitual lateness, flouting of authority, assault, sexual misconduct, pregnancy/termination of pregnancy. Suspension is prescribed as punishment for flouting authority, assault on a colleague, assault on staff and sexual misconduct. Detention is suggested for failure to do homework and failure to do homework. The following excerpts from the Headteachers' Handbook below are key provisions that limit the use of particular punishments.

1. Under normal circumstances, suspension should not exceed 5 days and should be applied to Junior Secondary pupils only
2. Cases of suspension should be brought to the notice of the parents/guardians of the pupils concerned
3. Caning should not exceed 4 strokes and must be administered by the Headmaster/mistress or under his/her supervision and recorded
4. Sanctions should in all cases be appropriate to the age of the pupil and the misdemeanour involved
5. In order that children do not develop aversion to farming/gardening, this type of punishment should be used as sparingly as possible
6. Notwithstanding the above guidelines each case should be considered on its own merit.
7. Prizes/rewards should be given to pupils to encourage good behaviour in the school (MOE, 2006:262)

As the provisions indicated, the *Unified Code of Discipline for Basic Education Schools* allows suspensions and caning of up to 4 strokes although punishment should be appropriate to the age of the pupil. It is important to note that whereas physical punishment is now outlawed in most countries, the

Education Act of 1961 (as amended by Act 778, 2008) which is the principal legislation on education in Ghana authorises the headteacher to administer caning as punishment. This may be argued as a legitimisation of violence against children, but it further highlights the persistence of schools as “coercive and violent places” (Adams, 1991:40). Some school policy provisions in the Headteachers’ Handbook which are intended to secure protection of children are outlined are the following:

- *Illegal punishment, violence and brutal acts against the pupils are criminal offences for which the teacher can be taken to a court of law*
- *Corporal punishment must be administered only by you, but on the rare occasions when you delegate this responsibility, must supervise its administration*
- *Whipping or beating pupils because they cannot read or work sums correctly is not allowed.*
- *You must keep a punishment book for serious punishments such as suspension and caning. These should not occur often. The purpose of this record is to protect pupils from unreasonable punishment, violence and brutality from teachers and to avoid giving parents and guardians cause for negative criticism of teachers*

(MOE, 2006:13)

Several issues can be deduced from the provisions listed above. The main concern is possibility of abuse: illegal punishment, violence and brutal acts against students. From a human rights perspective, that constitutes a legitimisation of abuse of physical punishment with opportunities to violate children’s rights in education. The provisions permitted corporal punishment (caning) to be administered by the headteacher. The headteacher can delegate the *responsibility* to cane only on *rare occasions* and must supervise its administration. Suspension and corporal punishment *should not occur often*. The headteacher must keep record of all caning and suspension in a clearly labelled punishment book. The record of punishment must include the date of the punishments, personal data (name, sex and age) of the offending student, the offence, the punishment, the name of the teacher administering the punishment and the comment of the headteacher. However, interview responses from students, discussions with headteacher/teachers and my observation of disciplinary practices revealed some mismatch between policy and practice.

Views on the school code of discipline

This section presents views of the headteacher, teachers and students on the school code of discipline. The comments presented, mainly focus on the main form of punishment, caning. When I asked the headteacher about how the caning was administered in the school, she explained,

Anyway the truth is that I feel caning is a violation of children, so my personal philosophy is that I don't cane even my children. I have delegated that authority to the teachers ... [and] I don't cane at all. No, No. The teachers cane because they are younger and more youthful. I don't think I want to get involved.

Her comments have two dimensions. First, she feels caning constitutes violation of children. As a personal philosophy, she will not cane or *want to get involved* in caning students. Thus in contrast with school policy the headteacher did not administer the cane. However, in keeping with policy requirements and in fulfilment of her positioning as an authority figure she delegated the responsibility of caning to the teachers. When I asked her why she would not stop caning in the school, the headteacher explained,

Sir, the fact is that the children here are stubborn; especially the boys. It is not easy to control them. In fact that is why I have been telling you I want more male teachers. If you drop the cane, the children will rule the teachers in this school. We are here at the school level and we know what is happening. I will say we need to cane them ... I don't think we can control the children without caning them.

These comments represent a tension in the personal and professional positioning of the headteacher on caning. Whereas the headteacher reported that she would not use the cane on children at home, she ironically, emphasised a willingness to use the same punishment to fulfil the disciplinary mission of the school. In addition the headteacher believes caning is the only way to control students and approves it as the predominant mode of punishment in the school. The comment does not only represent a rationalised normalisation of caning as the only form of punishment. It represents contradictions in how the headteacher's philosophy that caning constitutes a violation of children interfaces with the professional requirement to control students. This apparently contradictory positioning over corporal punishment is further illustrated in the fact that the headteacher *wanted more male teachers* to administer the cane. This, I would argue, endorses a gendered culture of male entitlements in enforcing hegemonic modes of masculine identity of male teachers as disciplinarians. There is another gender undertone where the headteacher's conviction is that boys are more stubborn and difficult to control. This is observed by teachers. For example, when three students [one male and two females] reported to school late, the teacher-on-duty declared, *you are a boy so you will receive four and you girls will receive three each...* On another occasion, a male teacher commented, *you boys are more stubborn than girls, you must receive more lashes*. On that occasion, the boys received five strokes while each girl received three.

However, the headteacher's comment also reflects the rationality in which the institution is grounded; a rationality of school as a place where students become 'a problem' (MacLure et al., 2012) to be solved through regulation. Bhabha (2004) suggests that constructing people as a problem indicates colonial discourse to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.

From Bhabha's understanding, the headteacher's comment illustrates how professional disciplinary requirements to exercise control over students override her personal belief that caning perpetuates a culture of violence against children. The comments also highlight social class and gender dimension in school discipline. Class distinction is evident where the children in the school (unlike the headteacher's children at home) can only be controlled by violence. This reliance on caning as the main form of punishment speaks back in terms of violence against children in school, which stands in opposition to international human rights based frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The idea that teachers cannot control students without caning also suggests a dearth of knowledge or gap in teacher training in alternative behaviour modification techniques that focus on re-enforcing good behaviour and constructive forms of democratic discipline (Harber, 2004). One way to deal with this inertia may be an engagement with Bernstein's (2000) ideas about re-contextualisation. This will mean decontextualising school practices from the colonial frame of logic focused on authoritarianism and production of conformist to Ghana's democratic context which values and respects children (Ghana Children's Act, 1998).

When we discussed how caning is administered, the headteacher stated,

Honestly, some teachers are abusing the caning. ... I am also a parent; in fact some teachers are wicked in caning some of the children. If I am standing there, I tell them [teachers] how many lashes to give. ...the policy says we must give a fair hearing. But we don't do this. We just cane the children. Let me tell you that some children have stopped school because of the way my teachers cane. Some have changed to private school because of the same reason. The teachers have made the children afraid of everybody including myself [headteacher]. I believe they [student] think I am in support and they are right because they see me telling the teachers to cane them. I don't know how I can change this...

(One-on-One discussion with Headteacher, Thursday December 2, 2011)

Thus the headteacher observed some teachers administer caning to the effect that contravene school policy but would make little effort to intervene. The comment 'speaks' to the regulatory effects of caning: students transferring to other (private) schools or dropping out. It also highlights that teachers administer the cane with reference to official guidelines. Although the Headteachers' Handbook (MOE, 2006:13) listed *caning* as one of two *serious punishments* which *should not occur too often*, my observation of caning showed that the provisions were rarely followed. It was rare to see 30 minutes pass without caning.

From this background I asked if she keeps records of caning and how students were protected from "unreasonable punishments, violence and brutality" as directed in the Headteachers' Handbook (MOE, 2006:13). She responded,

Eh! You make me laugh loud. We have a punishment book and I can show it to you but how can I possibly enter all these canings going on. I can't even supervise all these canings that occur each day. It is not possible. We have the book but I don't use it. I don't think I made any entries since I came to this school. That is the difficulty. You see, the problem is I cannot be everywhere all the time. If you complain about how teachers cane, some will stop caning totally. The problem is you cannot control the children alone. So, I appeal to them to be humane. I tell them, 'please know that some of these children may become future leaders so treat them kindly'. I tell the teachers, 'if you mishandle any student beyond reasonable treatment, I will personally lead the parents to press a case against you at the education office and anywhere.' If you check properly you see the P3 teacher doesn't like caning and the children will be disturbing. It is because I complained about the way she was handling one particular child. ... Sometimes as the head-teacher you are locked-up in this kind of difficult situation and you don't know what to do.

(One-on-One discussion with Head-teacher, Thursday December 2, 2011)

The headteacher's comments further showed that discipline is understood as only through violence and not negotiated with students. She seemed grounded in the fear of losing teacher co-operation to control students. So, as teacher authority acts as a counter hegemonic force to headteacher authority, students had little protection from caning.

In my conversations with teachers, they often explained caning with expressions such as

- *there is nothing wrong with it*
- *we all went through it*
- *it is the only way these children can be disciplined*
- *it is not possible to discipline these children without caning them*

When we discussed how girls are handled during caning, a female teacher (Teacher 2) responded:

We all went through it. There is nothing wrong with it. You just have to be careful when caning them.... I cane them at the buttocks too. We all do.

The comments indicate how the teacher's sex has little relation to attitudes to caning. Both female and male teachers cane students for offences including those for which caning was not prescribed. Students were caned for reporting to school late, not performing morning duties, talking in class or at school assembly, disobeying teachers, giving wrong answers in class, and fighting in school or class. Other offences include but not limited to refusal to offer prayer during school worship, inability to solve problems or failure to respond correctly to teacher's question during classroom instruction.

When we discussed the modes of discipline in the school, a primary four male student said (and other students agreed) that:

Student 3: *You see the problem is that everything the teachers don't even ask you any question before they lash you. I think we are in a democratic country so I should have the chance to defend myself. As for here the teacher will cane you the moment the class prefect say you have talked or you are late to school. I think it is bad.*

(Group Interview, November 4, 2011)

Student comments about how teachers punish include:

Student 3: *Sir, they cane everywhere! If you stay calm, they will still hit your head before they beat your bottom. When they finish and you are going they cane your legs. Sometimes they say, 'bring your palm!' Another time they will cane your fingers when they say 'do like this' or they will cane your back. Sir, simply they will cane the place that will pain you.*

Student 9: *Sir, ... the way the teachers punish us is not good at all ... even our parents don't punish us like that. ... Every time caning, caning, caning. Why? They just do anything they like to you. Sir, me I think it is not good.*

Student 2: *Sir, if you don't like coming to school always, one day when you come the teacher will call you at assembly and you bend your waist or hold the pillar. Sometimes they will ask the big boys to hold your hands. ... and Sir, they will cane you in front of the whole school*

(Group Interview, November 4, 2011)

These comments highlighted elements of humiliation in how students were treated during caning. The comments of Student 3 suggest teachers aim to inflict pain in keeping with the school policy requirement that punishment should be severe enough to serve as deterrent. Some studies in Ghana (CHRAJ, 2011; Ofori et al., 2011) found that some students were injured during caning. Beneath the surface of student comments is understanding of caning as a major constraint for students. The comments of Student 9, echoes Adams' (1991:40) reflections that the problem of schooling is not its disciplinary nature but "often being more punitive than the home". Other student comments were more emotional.

Student 1: *Sir, you feel very bad in front of your friends. Everyone looks at you somehow, as if you are not a normal human being.*

Student 11: *You feel that you are not a human being. Me, I become worried and sad.*

Student 13: *Sir, simply you feel ashamed. Look at what the teacher did to me in the class today. Is that how you treat a human being? They just want you to feel bad and ashamed. You just feel that you are nobody.*

Student 15: *Sir, if it were you how will you feel? You just feel disgraced....*

Further student comments on caning include:

Student 4: *Those who don't come to school every day suffer more than all of us. They cane them. Six canes!*

Student 12: *If you come to school late ... you cannot dodge the cane.*

Student 13: *Those who don't like coming to school at all ... they suffer from the cane.*

Student 14: *Sir in this school, if you don't want the cane always, just come to school always and come early.*

The student comments indicate that latecomers and truants suffered much of the caning although the Headteachers Handbook (MOE, 2006:15) provides that habitual latecomers should be influenced to change by appointment as bellboy or post-boy. Also, teachers often 'call upon' the cane as the 'rod of discipline' and disgrace that is a constant reminder of the distributed power positions in school policy.

Such teacher enactments seemed to traverse school policy which also students felt powerless to challenge. Whereas this may be pejoratively treated as enactment of teacher agency, it justifies the point from historical explorations of Shipman (1971), Green (1990), Adams (1991) and Harber (2004) that schools in developing countries have maintained the colonial characteristics as extremely coercive and violent places. In reference to those disciplinary characteristics of schooling, Shute (1992:7) specifically argues that "schools have not necessarily much to do with education ... they were mainly institutions of control". Control, as Molteno et al. (2000) found in other ex-colonies mainly involves corporal punishment in the form of caning, which in Luggard's (1922) colonial frame of logic passes as a way of moulding behaviour. Thus, it may be argued that school structural practices do not make the institution a learning arena which is welcoming, supportive and nurture potential (Lewin, 2007: 33). In that sense, it is important to have alternative understandings or analysis of why many children in developing countries stay away from schools; and why many of those who enrol drop out.

Conclusion and recommendations

Whereas minimalist research generally takes off with an idea of schooling as an objective good, this paper deviates by highlighting the ways in which formal institutional regimes (the school code of discipline) organise student experiences of schooling. In terms of school discipline discussed in this paper, students felt regulated at every move, every space and at every utterance; and were severely punished for deviation. The findings highlight the existence of caning as a form of punishment and suggests persistence of authoritarian modes of school discipline that promote violence against children. This means that education reforms, if they are to be truly successful, should carefully consider school discipline too. An important framework will be to discuss the nature of schools as child-friendly institutions that support and nurture potential. The results from cross country research analyses in Ghana, Kenya and Mozambique hold lots of promise on some of the steps to developing a child-friendly school environment (Parkes & Heslop, 2011; Parkes et al., 2013). In particular, however, caning suggests that global pathways to abolishing physical punishment are not integrated into teacher training in alternative behaviour modification techniques aimed at realizing children's rights in Ghana. The term behaviour modification is based on the principle that rewarding appropriate behaviour is more effective than punishing inappropriate behaviour. This strategy also involves using simple verbal reinforcers such as 'good job' and 'I believe you can solve this task'. This helps to reinforce good behaviour, which becomes intrinsically motivated. It makes the students feel good and develop positive self-image too. The teachers' non-use of these positive ways of intervening with challenging behaviour implies a need to provide pre-service and in-service training on positive behaviour modification techniques.

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