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# Observations of teachers in Ilorin, Nigeria on their practices of corporal punishment that are potentially injurious to their pupils' eyes

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To document the observations of elementary school teachers (ESTs) in Ilorin, Nigeria on their practice of some types of corporal punishment (CP) that could result in eye injuries among their pupils.

**Materials and Methods:** A short battery of questions that explored ESTs' observations on attitudes to, and knowledge of some commonly used CP practices was self-administered on 172 consenting teachers from six sampled schools. The potentials for their pupils to sustain eye injuries while receiving such CP practices were inferred from the usage of items with sharp and protruding ends to administer CP, and the application of CP onto pupils' body parts that are in close proximity to the eye such as the head and face.

**Results:** Only 50 of the 172 ESTs favored the practice of CP of pupils by their teachers. Analyses of several potentially moderating variables on this response such as ESTs' ages, years of EST teaching experience, school, and class or grade that EST teaches did not prove significant. Over three-quarters of ESTs (80.2%) had ever observed that pupils were being disciplined by ESTs with a cane. About a fifth of them had also observed that ESTs applied CP to the head (19.8%) and the face (16.3%) of pupils.

**Conclusion:** Findings suggest that ESTs' commonly employed CP practices have significant injurious potential to their pupils' eyes. It is recommended that CP be abolished in elementary schools, and instead alternative nonabusiv methods of disciplining erring pupils by teachers be introduced.

**Keywords:** Corporal punishment, eye injuries in childhood, school discipline

## Résumé

**Objectif:** Pour documenter les observations des enseignants de l'école primaire (est) Ilorin, Nigeria sur leur pratique de certains types de châtiments corporels (CP) qui pourraient entraîner des blessures aux yeux parmi leurs élèves.

**Matériaux et procédés:** Une batterie courte de questions qui explore les observations des écotecnologies sur les connaissances et les attitudes certains couramment utilisés CP pratiques a été auto-administré sur 172 consentants enseignants de six écoles échantillonnées. Les potentiels pour leurs élèves maintenir les blessures aux yeux tout en recevant ces pratiques de CP ont été déduites de l'utilisation des éléments avec des extrémités saillantes et nette d'administrer le CP et l'application de CP sur les parties du corps des élèves qui sont à proximité immédiate de l'œil telles que la tête et du visage.

**Résultats:** Seulement 50 de la 172 est favorisé la pratique du CP des élèves par leurs enseignants. Analyses de plusieurs potentiellement modérer les variables sur cette réponse comme des écotecnologies vieillit, années d'expérience en enseignement EST, école et classe ou grade EST enseigne n'a pas prouvé les principales conventions. Plus des trois quarts des écotecnologies (80,2%) avaient jamais observé qu'élèves ont été étant disciplinées par ESTs avec

une canne. Sur un fifth d'entre eux avait également observé que les écotechnologies appliqué CP à la tête (19,8%) et le visage (16,3%) des élèves.

**Conclusion:** Résultats suggèrent pratiques de CP couramment employées des que ESTs ont signifié préjudiciable potentiel de yeux de leurs élèves. Il est recommandé que le CP soit abolie dans les écoles élémentaires et plutôt alternative nonabusive être introduit des méthodes de discipline dévoyés élèves par les enseignants.

**Mots clés:** Le châtiment corporel, les blessures aux yeux dans l'enfance, la discipline scolaire

## Introduction

Corporal punishment (CP) is the means to discipline children by the use of physical force<sup>[1]</sup> and has been identified as the commonest form of child abuse.<sup>[2]</sup> Its use by parents and other care givers is common,<sup>[3,4]</sup> as children with difficult and coercive behavior often provokes such harsh discipline from adults.<sup>[4,5]</sup> In many developing countries of Africa, cultural attitudes<sup>[2]</sup> and noncriminalization of such acts<sup>[6,7]</sup> have often blurred the distinction between discipline and abuse, and thereby make CP practice widespread and tolerated.

Elementary schooling is the first phase of formal education system in Nigeria and lasts for 6 years. Currently, over 26 million pupils between the ages of 6 and 12 years in 59 000 elementary (primary) schools in Nigeria are being taught by about 600 000 elementary school teachers (ESTs).<sup>[8]</sup> A large proportion of the earlier studies on CP dealt with those perpetrated by parents,<sup>[1,3,9-11]</sup> as not only are parents the major care givers, but also because parental violence against children is the most prevalent type of family violence.<sup>[6,7]</sup>

Eye injuries had resulted from some CP practices in domestic and school settings.<sup>[12-16]</sup> It is therefore incumbent on eye care physicians (ophthalmologists) to conduct relevant studies into those particular forms of CP, with a view to generating data that can be used to demonstrate the inherent dangers to pupils' eyes and thereby discourage the practice of CP and eliminate avoidable eye injuries and blindness among children. The aim of this study is to document the observations of ESTs in Ilorin, Nigeria on their practice of some types of CP that are potentially injurious to their pupils' eyes.

## Materials and Methods

This study is a part of a wider one which sought to determine the perceptions of ESTs of some key factors that have strong bearing on their pupils' eye health. The descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted within Ilorin, the capital city of Kwara state, Nigeria between mid-May and mid-July 2005. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 172 ESTs of a total of 283 (60.8% response rate)

teaching in the six sampled schools. The six sampled schools were selected by simple balloting from the total of 184 public elementary schools within Ilorin metropolis. To ensure that the questions were meaningful and well understood the questionnaires were first pre-tested at a different school within Ilorin which was not within the sampled six. It was during this pre-test that it was discovered that most of the ESTs were unwilling to self-report themselves on their practices of CP for fear of self-incrimination. As they would rather report on their own and other teacher's practices of CP indirectly through making innocuous observations, the questionnaires were subsequently modified accordingly.

Personal data including the age, gender, and class or grade that the teacher was teaching, educational qualification, and years of teaching experience were first recorded. The aspects of the practice of CP that were probed were restricted to only such physical CP practices that are commonly used in Nigerian elementary schools and which have some potentials for causing eye injuries. These include ascertaining if the respondent EST favored the use of CP in general as a disciplinary measure for pupils or not. Second, the EST was asked if he or she had ever seen any of the more commonly-used items for CP in Nigeria such as a cane, horse-whip (a leather thong made from animal hide and locally known as koboko), local broom (a bunch of fine dried stick fibers with sharp ends), hand, or any other specified item being used to inflict CP on a pupil. Finally, the EST was to state the parts of the pupil's body (buttocks, backside, palm of the hands, head, face) that were being used to receive CP.

The responses which were in the form of yes or no answers were pre-coded and then fed into and analyzed with a computer using the SSPS 12 statistical software. Chi-square test was used to determine any significant difference and a *P* value of <0.05 was taken as significant wherever necessary.

## Results

Of a total of 283 ESTs that were available then in the six sampled public elementary school, 172 ESTs consented to participate in this study and returned

their questionnaires, thereby giving a coverage rate of 60.8%. Of them, 35 were males and 91 were females (M : F = 1 : 2.9), and their ages ranged from 25 to 56 years with a mean age of 39.5 years. Their professional educational qualifications included the Nigerian teacher's grade two certificate (12, 7%), the Nigerian certificate in education (75, 43.6%), and university degree (70, 40.7%). The remaining 15 (8.7%) listed qualifications for the other ESTs were nonprofessional teaching ones. The mean number of pupils in a class was 32.6, and the mode was 30.

Only 50 of the 172 ESTs favored the practice of CP of pupils by their teachers. Analyses of several potentially moderating variables on this response such as ESTs' age categories ( $P = 0.76$ ), ESTs' gender ( $P = 0.774$ ), years of EST teaching experience ( $P = 0.625$ ), school ( $P = 0.31$ ), and class or grade that EST teaches ( $P = 0.720$ ) did not prove significant.

Over three-quarters of ESTs (80.2%) had ever observed pupils being disciplined by ESTs with the means of a cane, whereas close to half of them (45.9%) had observed the same practice with the use of a horse-whip (a leather thong made from animal hide and locally known as koboko). Table 1 details the responses of the ESTs to the question on whether they had ever observed the use of each of the specified item to dispense CP to erring pupils.

Although majority of the ESTs had observed that pupils' body parts such as the buttocks (61%), back-side (48.8%), and the palms of the hand (52.3%) are the sites of choice for dispensing CP to pupils, nearly a fifth of them had also observed the head (19.8%) and the face (16.3%) being used [Table 2].

**Table 1: Items observed by teachers as being used to dispense corporal punishment to erring pupils**

Items	Number of teachers, n = 172			
	Yes	%	No	%
Cane	138	80.2	34	19.8
Horse whip (koboko)	79	45.9	93	54.1
Broom	32	18.6	140	81.4
Hand	52	30.2	120	69.6

**Table 2: Parts of the pupils' body to which corporal punishment were applied**

Parts of the body	Number of teachers, n = 172			
	Yes	%	No	%
Buttocks	105	61	67	39
Back	84	48.8	88	51.2
Palm	90	52.3	82	47.7
Head	34	19.8	138	80.2
Face	28	16.3	144	83.7

## Discussion

ESTs, by virtue of their professional training, should constitute the sub-class of children caregivers that ought to be better aware of the negative emotional and physical effects of CP on children. Hence, they are not only expected not to resort to such practices,<sup>[17]</sup> but also to serve as mandated reporters whenever they notice such signs and symptoms of such maltreatment of children by their parents.<sup>[18]</sup> The effectiveness of CP as a disciplinary measure is not assured.<sup>[17-20]</sup> Although controversies still rage on, on whether CP has any effect on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes in children subjected to it,<sup>[3,21]</sup> no such controversies surround the definite occurrence of eye injuries that result from such practices.<sup>[12-15]</sup> However, we wish to point out that majority of these same ESTs had adequate knowledge of, the correct attitude to, and correct practices of, the factors that have positive bearings on their pupils' eye health.<sup>[22]</sup>

Though only less than one-third of ESTs (29.1%) reportedly favored CP in this study, the proportion of the ESTs that actually practiced CP could be inferred to be much higher. The reasons for this inference include first, the fact that an EST who was out-rightly unwilling to self-report his or her own actual practice of CP (please see pre-test comments under methods) might still likely under-report the practice of the collective group (of ESTs) even if the report is only in the form of nonself-incriminating observations that we had to resort in this study. Second, the huge discrepancy between the response in the section dealing with which of the ESTs merely favored CP and the remaining two that directly probed the actual observed practices of CP was in favor of the latter. Although less than one-third of ESTs favored CP, close to two-third of them (61%) had observed a cane as being used to dispense CP and four-fifths (80.2%) had observed the buttocks as the favored part of pupils' body that CP was administered to. Third, such discrepancy between opinions on the practice of CP and its actual practice in a delicate issue such as CP should be expected as has been documented elsewhere.<sup>[1]</sup> Lastly, in the absence of any legislation which explicitly bans the practice of CP in Nigeria as obtains in some other countries<sup>[1,7,11]</sup> and the absence of specific guidelines on the practice of CP in schools as being advocated elsewhere,<sup>[19-21,23]</sup> the practice of CP by ESTs in schools would be expectedly more wide-spread than admitted. This disturbing trend was also commented on by the American Academy of Pediatrics,<sup>[19]</sup> which quoted figures of CP being administered in schools in the United States as between 1 and 2 million times a year. There are no reliable data in Nigeria to make such estimates as the legislative injunction that

requires documentation of CP practices in schools at the head-teacher's office, which were not observed generally including the schools in which this study took place. The availability of such a database would not only facilitate epidemiological studies on CP practices but also make the identification of EST perpetrators easier as demonstrated in Zimbabwe.<sup>[24]</sup>

All the items commonly used to dispense CP to pupils are dangerous from eye health point of view, as they could all cause severe ocular damage if they hit the eye directly. The chance of these items being misdirected to hit the eye balls is high, as a struggling child who is in pain while receiving CP could not be reasonably expected to keep still and avert his or her face and eyes out of harm's way. For this same reason, the fact that the majority of the ESTs were not observed to beat the pupils around the face and head may not completely lessen the chance of eye injuries occurring during administration of CP. Items such as the cane and the local broom which have pointed parts could cause penetrating eye injuries by piercing the eyes, while the hand and leather thong (koboko) could cause equally devastating nonpiercing type of ocular injuries through sheer blunt force.<sup>[16]</sup>

In fact there is no items in common use for administering CP that is safe enough and no body parts of choice of pupils on to which CP could be administered safely; CP practice in any form should be discouraged. Instead, ESTs need to undergo training programs on alternative nonabusive methods of disciplining erring pupils.<sup>[1,3,19,20,25]</sup> There is also a need to toughen the existing legislation in northern Nigeria (article 55 of the penal code) with a view to abolishing CP and also to severely penalize any such act that results in grievous body harm such as eye injury and blindness.<sup>[16]</sup> The current legislation which reads that "Nothing is an offence which does not amount to the infliction of grievous hurt upon any person and which is done by a schoolmaster for the purpose of correcting a child under eighteen years of age entrusted to his charge; or by a master for the purpose of correcting his servant or apprentice such servant or apprentice being under eighteen years of age" almost confers immunity on ESTs to practice CP, including those that are potentially injurious to pupils' eyes. Explicit ban of CP as enacted in some other countries<sup>[7]</sup> should be emulated elsewhere.

## Conclusion

Though less than one-third of teachers in Ilorin, Nigeria self-reportedly favored the practice of teachers administering on their erring pupils, over four-fifths of them had actually observed the practice

taking place, which therefore implies a wide-spread practice of CP. Because a significant proportion of such CP practices might injure pupils' eyes, among other negative emotional and developmental effects, ophthalmologists should lend their voice to those of their colleague care-givers in abolishing the use of CP as a disciplinary measure. It is recommended that training programs for teachers on alternative nonabusive methods of disciplining erring pupils be introduced and existing legislation toughened to abolish CP and punish perpetrators.

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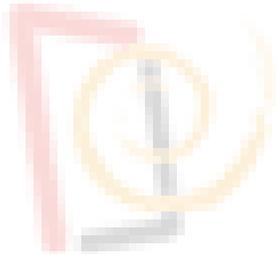
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