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## A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF DISCIPLINE POLICIES AND THE ETHICS OF PUNISHMENT IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

*This paper presents a philosophical appraisal of discipline policies and the ethics of punishment in Nigerian secondary schools. Drawing on ethical theories and educational philosophy, it critically examines the underlying values, justifications, and consequences of disciplinary practices, particularly corporal punishment. The study explores how such practices reflect broader societal norms and interrogates their alignment with principles of human dignity, justice, and child rights. It also highlights the tension between maintaining school order and fostering a nurturing, respectful learning environment. Using a multidisciplinary lens, the paper evaluates the moral implications of punishment in education and proposes alternative approaches that are ethically sound and pedagogically effective. The findings suggest an urgent need for reforming school discipline policies to ensure they are guided by restorative justice, empathy, and respect for the rights of learners.*

**Keywords:** Discipline policies, ethics of punishment, Nigerian education, secondary schools, corporal punishment and educational philosophy.

### Introduction

Discipline in education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective learning, social development, and moral formation. It encompasses the methods, rules, and consequences by which schools instill acceptable behavior, encourage academic engagement, and foster a safe learning environment. In the context of Nigerian secondary schools, discipline policies have historically included an array of strategies such as corporal punishment, suspension, expulsion, manual labor, moral instruction, and, in some instances, counseling. These disciplinary measures are intended to maintain order and mold students into socially responsible citizens. However, the moral foundations and long-term implications of these methods remain a topic of vigorous debate among

educators, philosophers, psychologists, and child-rights advocates. The reliance on corporal punishment, for instance, reflects not only traditional Nigerian societal norms but also colonial-era educational frameworks that emphasized compliance and authority over personal development. While such practices may have been seen as necessary tools for instilling discipline, contemporary educational theories and human rights frameworks increasingly question their ethical validity and pedagogical efficacy. With the rise of global educational standards and Nigeria's formal adoption of child protection conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the ethical scrutiny of punishment-based discipline has intensified. Internationally, there is a marked shift from punitive to restorative approaches that emphasize conflict resolution, empathy development, and moral reasoning. A philosophical appraisal of Nigerian school discipline policies therefore becomes essential not only to understand the moral justification behind certain practices but also to assess their compatibility with contemporary values such as autonomy, dignity, justice, and emotional well-being. Such an evaluation enables us to ask fundamental questions: Do current policies cultivate ethical reasoning and responsible citizenship? Or do they merely enforce short-term compliance through fear and coercion? This paper attempts to navigate these philosophical dilemmas by critically examining the ethical foundations and real-world consequences of various disciplinary approaches in Nigerian secondary schools.

### **The Philosophical Foundation of Discipline in Education**

From a philosophical standpoint, discipline in education is not simply about control or punishment but about the development of moral character and rational autonomy. Classical thinkers like Socrates emphasized that education should lead students to understand what is good and just, through self-reflection and dialogue. Discipline, in this light, is not imposed externally but emerges from internalized values and reasoned behavior. This perspective views learners as capable of moral growth, rather than as passive subjects requiring coercion. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a key figure in the Enlightenment, further advanced this view by arguing that true education must respect the natural development of the child. He believed that discipline should be intrinsic, encouraging children to learn through experience and moral reasoning rather than through fear of punishment (Noddings, 2016). According to Rousseau, externally enforced discipline especially when it involves fear, shame, or pain can deform the natural development of autonomy and ethical judgment. For Rousseau, education must be nurturing, allowing students to develop a sense of self-governance and responsibility.

According to Obizue, Enomah & Onyebu (2025), Nigerian secondary schools often operate within a disciplinary paradigm that leans heavily toward authoritarianism. This model, shaped by cultural and colonial legacies, prioritizes obedience, conformity, and hierarchical control. Teachers and school authorities are seen as ultimate moral arbiters, and students are frequently expected to

submit unquestioningly to authority. Discipline, in this sense, is frequently understood as something to be *imposed* rather than *cultivated*. This authoritarian approach raises serious philosophical concerns. While it may produce short-term behavioral compliance, it often undermines the development of critical thinking, ethical independence, and emotional intelligence. When students are disciplined through fear, shame, or physical pain, the primary lesson they internalize is not moral understanding but avoidance of punishment. This contradicts the foundational aim of education, which is to foster moral agency. (Obizue, Enomah & Onyebu, 2025), opined that it is essential to recognize that authoritarian disciplinary policies disproportionately affect students from marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds. These students are often subjected to harsher forms of discipline, reinforcing social inequalities and exclusion. Philosophically, this violates the principles of justice and equity, two fundamental pillars of ethical reasoning in education, thus, the philosophical foundation of discipline in Nigerian schools demands re-evaluation. Rather than seeing discipline as a mechanism of control, it should be redefined as a collaborative process through which students learn self-discipline, empathy, respect, and social responsibility. Ethical discipline should not alienate or degrade the learner but should engage them in a moral journey toward becoming reflective, responsible citizens.

### **Ethical Frameworks for School Discipline**

A philosophical evaluation of school discipline must consider various ethical frameworks to determine whether punishment policies are morally justified, effective, and compatible with the values of a democratic educational system. In the Nigerian context, where school discipline often includes corporal punishment, suspension, and public shaming, it is essential to scrutinize such measures through utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics lenses.

### **Utilitarian Justification**

Utilitarianism, as articulated by philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, holds that an action is morally right if it promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Applied to discipline, this framework would justify punitive actions only if they result in a net increase in order, safety, or academic achievement for the majority of students. However, evidence from Nigerian secondary schools suggests that the utilitarian justification for corporal punishment and harsh disciplinary practices is weak. Ekanem and Edet (2013) conducted a study in Calabar and concluded that corporal punishment, despite its widespread use, had little to no deterrent effect and was frequently counterproductive. Students subjected to physical punishment often experienced trauma, disengagement, and aggression outcomes that undermine collective well-being rather than promote it (Ekanem & Edet, 2013). Similarly, Uko and Edem (2016) observed that students who experienced frequent punitive measures were more likely to develop negative

attitudes toward school, thus impairing the overall learning climate. This aligns with recent global studies that correlate punitive environments with poor academic performance and high dropout rates (Gershoff & Font, 2016). The utilitarian model therefore fails to justify punishment methods that generate more harm than good within the educational ecosystem.

### **Deontological / Rights-Based Ethics**

Deontology, particularly as framed by Immanuel Kant, emphasizes the intrinsic dignity of individuals and the moral imperative to treat persons as ends in themselves, never merely as means. From this view, school discipline must respect students' autonomy and rights, regardless of the intended outcomes. In the Nigerian context, corporal punishment and other degrading disciplinary methods often violate the inherent dignity of the child. Temitope Obasaju Stephen (2013) argues that such measures are fundamentally incompatible with the rights of the child, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Child Rights Act (CRA) of Nigeria. Section 11 of the CRA explicitly guarantees the right to dignity and prohibits all forms of maltreatment or inhuman treatment. Yet, despite this legal framework, corporal punishment persists legally ambiguous due to other statutes like Sections 55 and 295 of the Criminal Code Act and Penal Code, which permit "reasonable" correction by teachers and parents (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Eze, 2020). The inconsistency between statutory protections and traditional disciplinary practices reveals a moral and legal dissonance. As Onoyase (2021) notes, a truly ethical school discipline policy must harmonize educational authority with human rights obligations, especially in safeguarding children's psychological and physical well-being.

### **Virtue Ethics and Restorative Approaches**

Virtue ethics, drawing from Aristotelian philosophy, shifts the focus from rules and consequences to the cultivation of moral character. The objective of discipline, therefore, should not be control or retribution, but the formation of virtues such as respect, self-control, empathy, and responsibility. Corporal punishment and coercive sanctions fail to nurture these qualities. Instead, they often provoke fear, shame, and defiance, which are antithetical to moral development (Adewale & Osagie, 2018). In contrast, restorative practices such as mediation, reflective dialogue, and community-based problem-solving encourage students to take responsibility for their actions and to repair harm done to others. These approaches align with African communal values of reconciliation and collective responsibility, offering culturally grounded alternatives to retributive punishment. For example, Iroegbu and Eze (2019), argue for a restorative model grounded in traditional Igbo justice mechanisms, where dialogue and moral suasion were emphasized over violence. Their research in Enugu State schools shows that implementing peer-led restorative practices led to reduced infractions and improved school climate. Moreover, the UNICEF Nigeria

Education Strategy (2020), endorses rights-based and restorative approaches to discipline, affirming their effectiveness in promoting inclusive and safe learning environments.

### **Traditional and Contemporary Disciplinary Approaches in Nigeria**

Disciplinary practices in Nigerian secondary schools reflect a complex blend of indigenous customs, colonial legacies, and modern educational theories. Traditionally, physical punishment was considered a legitimate corrective tool used by both parents and teachers to instill discipline. This approach has been retained even in the post-colonial education system, where it was reinforced by authoritarian colonial administrative structures (Uzoечи & Ekwueme, 2021). Despite being banned by the Federal Ministry of Education, corporal punishment continues to be prevalent in schools across the country. Its persistence is tied to societal beliefs that equate discipline with physical correction and obedience with moral integrity (UNICEF Nigeria, 2019). However, mounting evidence points to the long-term psychological harm and counterproductive behavioral outcomes associated with such practices (TheCable, 2022). By contrast, contemporary approaches rooted in restorative justice and positive discipline frameworks are gradually being adopted, particularly in urban private schools. These include non-violent methods such as:

- Peer-to-peer mediation
- Reflective journaling
- Conflict-resolution sessions
- Removal of privileges
- Guided counseling and mentorship

These approaches are designed not only to correct behavior but also to nurture empathy, self-regulation, and community accountability (Adewale & Abubakar, 2017). Unfortunately, their adoption remains uneven and often superficial due to systemic issues like underfunding, teacher workload, and cultural resistance.

### **Legal and Policy Developments**

Nigeria ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1991, and its national Child Rights Act of 2003 explicitly prohibits physical and emotional abuse of children, including in educational settings. Furthermore, the CRC General Comment No. 8 strongly advocates for the abolition of all forms of corporal punishment, calling it incompatible with the child's right to dignity and development. Nevertheless, legal enforcement is far from comprehensive. As noted, only two-thirds of Nigerian states have domesticated the Child Rights Act, leaving many students

vulnerable to outdated practices under the Criminal Code and Sharia law (End Corporal Punishment, 2016). The CRC monitoring committee has repeatedly urged Nigeria to repeal these provisions and fully integrate child protection policies across all states. To address this legal vacuum, UNICEF and the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) launched a National Action Plan in 2022 aimed at eradicating corporal punishment in schools. This plan emphasizes teacher retraining, public awareness campaigns, and integration of rights-based education into school curricula (TheCable, 2022).

## **Consequences of Disciplinary Practices**

### **Psychological and Emotional Trauma**

The psychological toll of corporal punishment in Nigerian schools is far-reaching. Numerous case reports highlight its devastating effects. For instance, in 2025, a student at Obada Grammar School in Ogun State, Monday Ariyo, reportedly collapsed and died after enduring 24 strokes of the cane and 162 frog jumps as punishment a tragic instance that underscores how physical punishment can lead to fatal consequences (Akinyemi, 2025). Similarly, in 2022, a 12-year-old boy, Emmanuel Amidu, died in Lagos after suffering extreme flogging from a teacher, prompting outrage and renewed calls for disciplinary reform (Premium Times, 2022). Even when not fatal, such punishments inflict deep emotional wounds. Former students often report trauma long after their school years. Some describe being tied to planks or crosses and publicly flogged for lateness or minor offenses, with lasting effects including anxiety, resentment, and low self-esteem (Okonkwo, 2023). Victims have reported flashbacks and fear responses associated with school settings clear signs of post-traumatic stress.

### **Academic Decline and School Avoidance**

Corporal punishment not only harms mental health but also has measurable academic consequences. In Ogun State, research indicates a strong correlation between physical discipline and poor academic outcomes, including declining test scores, absenteeism, and eventual dropout (Adegbite & Oladipo, 2023). Students often skip classes to avoid abusive teachers or a hostile school environment. This avoidance behavior disrupts learning continuity and undermines the fundamental purpose of schooling. International studies echo these patterns, showing that harsh discipline reduces cognitive engagement and motivation to learn, particularly among younger students (Talwar, Carlson, & Lee, 2011). The school climate becomes one of fear rather than curiosity and participation.

## **Erosion of Trust and Relational Damage**

Another overlooked consequence of punitive discipline is the erosion of trust in student-teacher relationships. In a study conducted in Anambra State, it was found that authoritarian teaching styles often tied to corporal punishment significantly reduce students' perception of teachers as trustworthy mentors (Ughamadu, Okoye, & Ibe, 2021). Teachers become agents of punishment rather than educators or guides. This adversarial relationship cultivates a culture of silence and avoidance. Students are less likely to report bullying, ask for help, or engage in classroom discussions. This undermines the relational framework essential to effective pedagogy and positive youth development.

## **Reinforcing Social Inequalities**

Disciplinary practices also tend to disproportionately affect marginalized populations. Students from public schools, low-income households, or minority ethnic groups often face harsher treatment than their peers in elite private institutions. A study from Ibadan shows that public-school students reported significantly higher rates of physical punishment and fewer options for redress (Alade & Ogunyemi, 2022). These patterns mirror and reinforce broader societal inequalities. Moreover, evidence suggests that students perceived as “problematic” due to poor performance or behavioral issues are more likely to be targeted, perpetuating cycles of academic failure and social exclusion. In contrast, when restorative approaches are implemented such as peer mediation or reflective dialogue, these disparities are often reduced, fostering equity and inclusion (Adewale & Abubakar, 2017).

## **Moral Justification and the Way Forward**

### **Ethical Criteria for Just Discipline**

Ethically sound disciplinary policies rest on three foundational criteria; respect for dignity, proportionality, and educational alignment each deeply rooted in moral and pedagogical theory.

#### *a) Affirming Human Dignity*

At its core, discipline must honor each student as a rational being with intrinsic worth, not an instrument of compliance. As Stephen (2013) emphasizes, methods that humiliate, devalue, or commodify students (like public flogging or shaming) undermine the Kantian ideal of treating individuals as ends in themselves. Ethical discipline entails addressing misbehavior without stripping a child of self-respect or moral agency.

#### *b) Proportionality and Contextual Sensitivity*

Discipline should be calibrated to the nature of the misconduct and the context in which it occurs.

Minor infractions such as tardiness or talkativeness do not warrant severe corporal punishment. Punishments that are visibly disproportionate (e.g., multiple lashes for minor disruption) not only provoke resentment but violate the principle of fairness. In contrast, restorative conversations, time-outs, or supervised demerits can deliver correction without inflicting undue harm.

### *c) Alignment with Educational Goals*

Beyond enforcing rules, discipline should foster reflection, self-regulation, and ethical growth. The aim is not compliance born of fear but internal moral development. When students understand the impact of their actions, assume responsibility, and engage in restorative processes, discipline becomes an educational opportunity instead of a punitive obstacle. Corporal punishment fails each criterion: it degrades dignity, exceeds proportion, and obstructs moral development. In its place, discipline should nurture resilience, self-awareness, and communal responsibility.

## **Reform Recommendations**

### *Legislative Harmonization and Enforcement*

Despite the Child Rights Act (2003) explicitly banning corporal punishment, inconsistent adoption across Nigerian states undermines legal protections. Many states still allow punitive measures under colonial-era penal codes or customary laws. Harmonizing legislation requires all states to fully domesticate the Act and repeal conflicting clauses in existing statutes. The tragic death of a student in Ogun State highlights how legal ambiguity can lead to abuse and tragedy (Akinyemi, 2025). Enforcing these reforms must involve clear sanctions for noncompliance, regular inspections, and accountability for institutional failures.

### *Promote Restorative and Positive Discipline*

Restorative frameworks such as **conflict-resolution circles**, **peer mediation**, and **reflective journaling** offer transformative alternatives that turn discipline into dialogue. Students can express remorse, make amends, and reconcile with those impacted by their actions. These practices foster empathy, mutual understanding, and relational repair. Evidence from Nigerian pilot programs shows reduced infractions, improved attendance, and a stronger sense of school community (Adewale & Abubakar, 2017).

### *Mandatory Professional Development*

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping school climate. Therefore, structured in-service training must be provided to equip educators with skills in child psychology, conflict mediation, and rights-based classroom management. In Ogun State, the government has already mandated workshops for teachers when banning physical punishment demonstrating how policy and



capacity-building can work in tandem (Premium Times, 2021). These efforts must be scaled nationwide, with ongoing support and mentorship.

### ***Establish Child-Friendly Reporting Systems***

Empowering students to report abuse safely and anonymously is essential. Schools should institutionalize child protection hotlines, designate safeguarding officers, and convene community-based oversight committees. These mechanisms should allow complaints without fear of retribution, ensuring that violations are swiftly investigated. When institutional trust increases, so too does the social deterrent against unethical discipline.

### ***Engage Families and Communities***

Cultural norms often reinforce the legitimacy of physical punishment. Changing these norms requires meaningful engagement with parents and community leaders. Hosting workshops, PTA dialogues, and public information campaigns can shift perceptions toward restorative and non-violent forms of discipline. One notable case demonstrates this power: a mother in Lagos intervened when her child was brutally beaten, confronted the school authorities, and ensured the matter was reported to the police, ultimately leading to justice (Okonkwo, 2023). This illustrates how empowered families can act as agents of change.

### **Conclusion**

Empirical research and practical case studies consistently demonstrate the harmful impact of punitive disciplinary practices, particularly corporal punishment within Nigerian secondary schools. These consequences are far-reaching and multifaceted. Psychologically, students subjected to harsh punishment often experience trauma, anxiety, and depression. Academically, they may suffer from school avoidance, low performance, and increased dropout rates. Socially, such disciplinary measures strain relationships between students and educators, fostering an atmosphere of fear and resentment rather than trust and cooperation. From a utilitarian perspective, which emphasizes actions that produce the greatest good for the greatest number, corporal punishment fails because its short-term behavioral control comes at the cost of long-term emotional, social, and academic damage. It causes more harm than good. From a deontological standpoint, that judge actions based on their adherence to rules and duties rather than consequences, corporal punishment is also unjustifiable. It violates the inherent dignity of the child, breaches ethical duties of care, and conflicts with both local (Child Rights Act, 2003) and international (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) legal standards that protect children from inhumane treatment. Thus, the moral justification for physical and punitive discipline is not only weak but fundamentally flawed. The continued reliance on such approaches represents a

failure to align educational practice with ethical reasoning, legal mandates, and contemporary child psychology.

The path forward requires transformative and multi-level reform:

- Restorative and rights-based approaches must replace fear-based discipline. These include methods such as restorative circles, peer mediation, and values-based behavior management systems that foster accountability, empathy, and reconciliation.
- Harmonizing and enforcing legal frameworks is essential. Conflicting statutes between the Penal Code and the Child Rights Act must be resolved. States that have not domesticated the CRA must do so immediately, and robust enforcement mechanisms must be put in place.
- Professional development for educators should be mandatory and ongoing. Teachers must be equipped not just with pedagogical tools but also with ethical sensitivity, legal knowledge, and psychosocial training in managing student behavior constructively.
- Protective and anonymous reporting systems must be institutionalized in schools to provide children a safe avenue to report abuse or excessive punishment without fear of retaliation.
- Family and community engagement is pivotal. Cultural attitudes that valorize corporal punishment need to be reshaped through advocacy, sensitization campaigns, and inclusive dialogue involving religious leaders, parents, educators, and students.

Ultimately, discipline must be reframed not as an act of control but as a formative process aimed at nurturing responsible, empathetic, and morally conscious individuals. Schools must become environments where students feel respected, understood, and safe spaces that promote not only intellectual development but also emotional and ethical maturity. In conclusion, the urgency for reform is beyond academic debate it is a moral, social, and developmental necessity. A nation that aspires to raise future leaders of integrity must first ensure that its classrooms reflect dignity, justice, and care in every disciplinary act. The future of Nigeria's education depends not on the force of punishment but on the force of principled, human-centered reform.

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