

## Punishments in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Concepts and Justifications

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**Abstract.** This work titled “the meaning and justification of punishment in the secondary school system” has tried to explore the concept of punishment, as different from the often mistaken understanding and meaning of discipline. Discipline connotes more of a broader concept than punishment. It constitutes treatment to a learner, developing and training to act in accordance with rules. Although punishment inflicts some pain on the defiant, it can also be described as any intentional act used by teachers as well as parents to correct and bring back the defiant learner to a proper behaviour. The work observed that even though punishment is specific and more concrete, discipline is different and a bit abstract. It is the concern of the researcher to justify the fact that despite some apparent opposition of the usage of punishment, which is seen as evil within a school setting, nonetheless punishment is for the purposes of deterrence and reformation of wrongdoers within the school system. While this paper highlighted the justification of punishment to be used in the school setting to the erring learners as reformatory, it is the position of the paper that punishment is an essential evil.

**Keywords:** punishment, concept and justification

### 1. Introduction

One of the most seemingly challenging problems that cause teachers and parents heartache, frustration and the feelings of failure is the inappropriate behaviours of the child, who is very often tagged a learner found within the school setting. School administrators as well as teachers are deeply concerned about improper and unacceptable behaviours of learners at whatever level of education. The course of this worry is understandable because they are judged to be successful or not with their ability or inability to maintain certain level of order and control in the school. That is why the issue has occupied their time, because learners are generally, if not properly controlled, pruned towards the wrong direction. Socrates in Olivia complained that “children love luxury. They have bad manners and contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are (now) tyrants, not servants of their household. This is sufficient challenges to trouble the parents, teachers as well as the school administrators.

A teacher trapped in this dilemma, while making frantic effort to curb the problem, uses punishment as one of the means to have control of the learners. The word punishment seems to create some sort of feelings of dissatisfaction at some quarters. The reason may simple be attributed to the fact that it causes pain and unpleasantness, hence the debate whether its

applicability and workability is appropriate and possible or not. It is the concern of this paper, therefore, to explore the meaning and forms of punishment and to understand the issues and complexities regarding punishment in a school setting. In addition, the paper examines the theories, conditions and the justification of punishment in the school setting and provided an enlightened understanding in order to avoid the misleading way experts and laymen use punishment and discipline interchangeably. This is with the aim of coming out with a judgment whether or not, punishment as a corrective measure, is proper or not, and whether it should be acceptable or not within the secondary school setting.

## 2. Conceptual Clarifications

### 2.1 The Concept of Discipline

The origin of the concept of Discipline can be traced to its Latin origin *disciplina* which means instruction. This implies a set of rules and instructions to be given to learners to abide by. However, the concept can take a larger and broad perspective. From the Webster's Dictionary, collections of description of discipline are given:

- As the treatment suited to a discipline or learner.
- As the training to act in accordance with established rules.
- Subjection to rule, order and control, habit of obedience.
- Correction, chastisement inflicted by way of correction and training, hence training through suffering.

These definitions are broader in their horizon, but it suggests that the learner is being administered with some form of treatment so as to be in line with what is accepted within a particular context. He is compelled to live in conformity with what has been spelt out as the standard. However, the last definition resembles what can be described as punishment where the learner learns through some form of pains and unfavourable condition. This is likely to result in the formation of habit of obedience and compliance to rules and regulations that govern

a group or society, and especially in a school setting.

In whatever perspective one attempts to describe discipline, the likely trend is the fact that certain distilled mode of behaviours, dispositions and inclinations are expected from the learner. This is assumed to guarantee the smooth processes of teaching and learning within the school environment. What this position amounts to is that discipline entails condition under which educational processes cannot effectively take place without it. Aggarwal (2008) sees discipline as the decent and decorous conduct which contributes to harmony, joy and success love, orderliness, eagerness to discharge duties with regularity, promptitude and efficiency." This implies a causal link between discipline and educational processes, where the object is arriving at a decent environment for learning, teaching and acquiring a body of knowledge.

More, there is the perception that discipline can be used interchangeably with punishment. The proponents conceive the notion of discipline and punishment to be the same and applicable towards one direction. However, a careful analysis will reveal that discipline covers a range of phenomena in variety of contexts, while punishment is one-dimensional in nature. Even though both represent the principles by which certain conditions of order, especially within the school setting is assured, yet discipline goes beyond that. It refers to the personal culture one imbibes to guide him from within and tries to be consistent in doing a particular thing in a particular manner. It must be emphasized that: *Discipline is the general condition of order, (which) has to be maintained if teaching is to proceed. (If it fails) the teacher then has to have recourse to punishment he will have to employ forms of punishment that are both unpleasant and unpleasant and predictable to function as deterrence*"<sup>4</sup>

The rationale behind this fact is that of producing orderly and serene atmosphere towards learning especially within a formal school setting.

### 2.2 The Concept of Punishment

Once the word punishment is mentioned, it seems to suggest one thing straight away: that is to address the complexities of a defiant behaviour, which is mostly found within the school system. That is why Hirst and Peter describe it as a device to which teachers and parents often resort in order to maintain discipline.” It is the means by which school owners, through the teachers, use to set on the right track for erring children. So any device or means by which a child or learner is being called to order can be referred to as punishment. However, there is no specific mentioning of any device, thereby making this description of punishment a bit clumsy. Since the definition did not specify the type and now the punishment is being applied on the defiant child or learner, the definition is not sufficient to capture the whole process.

The foregoing description of punishment may pose a problem for one not to view the act of punishment as an action that is the product of anger. It must be emphasized that it is not when the teacher is being provoked by the defiant behaviour of the learner that he strikes. Rather, it should be viewed as Peters (1967) defined punishment as “the intentional infliction of pain or of something unpleasant on someone who has committed such a breach of rules. Here punishment must be intentional, must be planned and not just spontaneous. The act of punishing the defiant must be intended and should have a purpose. This purpose is ‘bringing home’ the erring learner or child. How does the act bring home the erring learner? Through the pain or feeling of discomfort that is placed on the defiant. This pain is supposed to deter the defiant, and those around, from the tendency of such misbehaviour. Here too, the specified punishment is not indicated.

There seems to be an impression these definitions of punishment bring to the human mind. That punishment is an unpleasant experience meted out to someone who has committed an offence and by a person who is in authority or an expert who has been given the express permission to do so. In other words, it is the process of inflicting pain on an individual who has committed an offence by a person in

authority. The emphasis here is also on the unpleasant nature of pains it brings to the deviant learner. The teacher is left to use his discretion to provide the dynamics of the fact of punishment on the offender, so as to suppress the unruly behaviour that stands as a threat to the learner and to the larger society.

The teacher is presumed to be an authority since he is expected to have a body of knowledge acquired in not handling the defiant behaviours in the learners, but also in the issue of control within the school setting. Propelled by this unfaltering conviction therefore, the teacher stands to fill in the gap found in the definitions of punishment. Having been supposedly educated, he decides the type, nature and extent of the punishment. So, punishment is any action or decision, duly taken in full compliance with the existing norms of the school setting with the intention of some corrective measures on the learners. This is with the aim of salvaging not only the deviant, but the entire learning group

It is worth appreciating that these painful feelings that punishment brings should be carefully distinguished from revenge. While punishment is as a result of a breach of rules for the sake of corrective measures, revenge on the other hand, is an act to make someone suffer some pain because he has made someone else suffered same. It looks like attack or a retributory kind of an attitude, which is vindictive in nature. Punishment by its description should make the school system responsible towards educating the younger ones and bringing the minimum condition to achieve this objective. It signals that certain kinds of behaviour that are of standard and are in line with the code be encouraged. While those that are not in line are so suppressed and possibly eliminated by the use of punishment.

The underlying principle that makes punishment significant is that it is meant to bring or impose certain restraint without destroying the positive personality of the learner. It is significant in bringing these minimum conditions under which learning atmosphere (the school setting) is achieved. This will however bring about personal development and eventually the

development of the larger society. An excessive unrestrained situation can destroy the creative abilities of the learner, while too relaxed a situation can destroy both the learner and the society. This therefore calls for a middle and moderate course upon which the interest of the individual is protected and the general good of the society made to flourish.

### 2.2.1 Theories of Punishment

Learners sometimes act in such a way that they endanger both the school setting and the large society. They are basically persuaded from behaving in such a way that they do not misbehave through the use of punishment. This follows that unwanted behaviour is accompanied by a negative reinforcement. Nevertheless, punishment is seen as a wicked act and not appropriate to be used within the school setting. Another opinion may suggest the contrary, that it is appropriate to use punishment in school for corrective measures. However, these different opinions are largely informed by theories of punishment.

We shall examine three theories of punishment as highlighted by Peters (1967), namely:

- Redistributive Theory of Punishment: This theory subscribes to 'an eye for an eye and tooth for tooth.'
- Deterrent theory of punishment: This is more civilized than the first.
- Reformatory theory of punishment: Which has tried to bring the defiant on the right and acceptable track.

The retributive theory's emphasis is vindictive in nature. It is vindictive because it is basically a revenge and it does nothing other than adding to the circle of violence. This is not likely to improve the learners' behaviour. It is, in fact, incapable of behaviour modification in the learner who may go defiant in the course of school activities. It leaves the learner aggrieved and creating a spirit of resentment. This does not eliminate the condition and possibility of diminishing unwanted behaviour. It creates some feelings of rejection to both the learner and

the learner's group. This makes it unwise not to discourage and discard it.

The second theory is deterrent in nature; basically to frighten the defiant and those who are likely to behave in the same defiant manner. This is to scare the defiant and others upon seeing how a particular punishment is exerted on a person whose behaviour defies the existing rules. This is looked upon as a more civilized solution, since it is supposed to correct both the defiant and those of his mates who are prone towards defiant behaviours.

There are cases in some secondary schools where if a student is caught jumping over the fence, he is made to bring forty (40) blocks. This type of punishment has to a large extent achieved its different posture. This is because it has succeeded in terrifying both the offenders and those with the tendencies. The fear is not unconnected with the fact that their parents will be aware of the crime, since the money for the block will come from them and are likely already being burdened with their welfare. No parent is likely to be happy with the situation and invariably, no reasonable child is likely to be happy with the situation of offending his parents. So they generally avoid such acts of misbehaviour so as to remain in the good book of both their teachers and parents.

Reformatory theory of punishment is most progressive in nature. This theory posits that any punishment imposed on a defiant learner, should be aimed at modifying the behaviour towards a more acceptable type of behaviour. If character degenerates, those measures that will be used to revitalize the defiant should be aimed at restoring a good character initially seen in the learner. The secondary school system in Nigeria has certain type of punishments that are reformatory in nature. Very often once a child is identified as having defied any existing rule, he is made to face the stringent measures of certain corporal punishment, like digging his height, uprooting a tree and sometimes suspension. That same child is being subjected to activities of the guidance and counseling unit of the school to ascertain the root cause(s) of the offence. This is with the purpose of finding lasting solution to

the deviancy. If there is success, then that is reformation, which is the 'be all and end all of punishment.

#### Condition/Criteria for Punishment

There seems to be a general feeling of disagreement and dissatisfaction among some educators and parents regarding the use of punishment. Arguments and debates have saturated the school setting on the appropriate measures to take in bringing back the learner who does not seem to conform to the laid down rules. This is likely to be directly connected with the abuse in the usage of punishment in the school system, either too high or too low for the defiant to learn any meaningful lesson. Unless the punishment was regarded as painful or at least unpleasant for the person, it should be something else but not punishment. For an act to be called punishment, it has to meet certain conditions as outlined by Harts:

- It must involve pain or other consequences normally considered unpleasant,
- It must be for an offence against legal rules,
- It must be of an actual or supposed offender for his offence,
- It must be intentionally administered by human beings other than offender and
- It must be imposed and administered by an authority constitute by a legal system against which the offence is committed.

For an act to be referred to as punishment, it must need the following conditions. The central idea here is that the act must give some painful experience, it must be planned and intentionally imposed and it must be given out by an authority. Some pertinent questions to ask, how does an active cause pain? What do we mean by pain? For any act to be regarded as painful, it must give some sort of hurt on any part of the body, it must create some feeling of extreme discomfort. This feeling of hurt and extreme discomfort must be planned to meet a specific goal or target. This goal or target is however the act of bringing back the erring learner on track by the competent authority in person of the teacher. But, is it any kind of hurt that produces a targeted goal in the learner? It suffice it to

admit the fact that not all of those painful hurts or feelings imposed on the deviant learner are likely to produce those expected outcome. However, a more balanced, well prepared and carefully imposed punishment is likely to bring about a positive transformation in behaviour of the deviant learner.

These conditions being outlined are sufficient to create a great deal of guilt within the defiant offender. Guilt and offence are closely related, because guilt presupposes offence, both should exist together to create and give that sense of repentance. The guilty offers another perspective to the process of abandoning the defiant behaviour of the learner. Guilt is an inner voice that speaks to the learner on the defiant behaviour. It needs stressing that not all persons hear the inner voice, but we can infer that the punishment will facilitate the necessary condition by the presence of pain inflicted on the defiant.

#### Forms of Punishment

In Nigeria today, there are several forms of corrective measures used in secondary schools which are often called punishment. The act of defiance knows no bound, because learners in whatever context and period, have the same tendencies towards going against existing norms. However, what is important is appropriating the right corrective measures to certain type of offense committed. Usually, the measures taken could be evaluated in the light of the philosophy of discipline that the system has appropriated for itself. Oliva has outlined a number of disciplinary measures. We shall examine five in the light of the Nigerian context.

- Detention keeping a defiant student in class or school while others are out.
- Dismissal from class and isolation sending misbehaving learners out of their classrooms or isolating defiant students who are disorderly from the rest of the class.
- Punishing the group for the offences of one person – punishing the whole class when discovering the particular student who commit the offence prove abortive.

- Corporal punishment: Generally not recommended in the school seen as the last resort.
- Suspension and expulsion: Denial of attendance to school activities for a stipulated period of time and when there is no hope of improvement under the school condition, complete withdrawal from the school.

Detention is very often common in lower classes, it is to deny the defiant either time for break or other activities outside the classroom. This makes the culprit to feel abandoned and with a feeling of being rejected especially if he was to do some extracurricular activities. The second corrective measures implies making the defiant to miss certain class work and activities by either sending him out or isolating him from the ongoing class activities. This measure is psychological in nature. It creates a sense of bad feelings especially if the learner desires to be part of the class for other reasons apart from the learning activities. It humiliates the defiant and makes it less likely for him to commit the offence again. The third corrective measure often brings a general condemnation of the act of the offender by his own group. It makes it less likely for the offender to commit an offence again. However, it may create some unhealthy feelings against the teacher or the authority by the whole group for being punished as a result of someone else's fault.

The fourth measure is quite the last option the school system uses. It is often discouraged even though it is quickest means of conveying to the offender that pain is the reward of committing defiant acts. It is often discouraged because it hurts the offender and it adds to the cycle of violence. The fifth measure makes the offender to miss certain activities of the school and gives him a period of sober examination of his acts. But it as well makes him to lag behind in the academic activities of the school. The expulsion measures are used in cases of which there is no hope of changing such a behaviour. It is done when the school system feels that enough is enough and that such will eventually negatively affects other students. These measures try to address students' difficulties which are

connected to personal and environmental factors. Therefore care and restraint must be exercised in the discharge of these measures which serve as corrective measures within the school system. It is largely in line to give punishment proportionate to the offence.

### **3. Justification of Punishment within the Secondary School Setting**

The school system is saddled with the responsibility of transmitting societal values, ideas and skills from the older generation to the younger ones. This happens commonly within the formal system or some form of arranged forum. When such opportunity occurs, children or learners from diverse background are brought together for this purpose. In this situation, there occurs certain level of socialization through which high level of interaction within them is realized. In such circumstances learners can be influenced towards morally unacceptable behaviour that should normally violate the laid down laws. This refers to peer-group influence. Jean Piaget's analysis of peer group influence is a good theory to hold on to in this case. His position is that a co-equal or associates of a particular child can exert certain level of pressure to influence an action, whether good or bad. This implies sameness of behaviour because the peer group is an avenue and source of interaction.

When a case of an influence towards the wrong direction is detected, indicating the likelihood of the exhibiting of a bad behaviour or the act has been committed already, "certain pain should be inflicted when a rule is broken and that it should necessary be inflicted on and only on the person who has broken the rule"<sup>10</sup> This gives the reason why pain through punishment should exist to serve as the deterrent and curb such tendencies towards misbehaviour. This is being propelled by the unfaltering conviction that this pain is likely to cause a change in behaviour and as deterrent to the rest of the scholars. This pain still brings a sense of moral order and so makes the school environment conducive.

In keeping with this belief, philosophers of Bentham's opinion have argued that pain is evil

and that pain through the use of punishment is primarily a mischief because of the discomfort and hurt it brings to the person who is the recipient of the act of punishment. They tend to see pain as retributive and so should be abandoned. They also maintain that it only adds to the circle of violence. However, a closer look at the act of punishment should be appreciative of the fact that pain through punishment is not something truly pleasant, but a little and calculated pain inflicted on those learners with deviant behaviour can do well than total refusal to sanction only offender. Because the most important reason behind the use of pain through punishment is to deter the learners so as to prevent future occurrence through the discomfort it brings to the sufferer.

The school system and indeed the larger society hold nothing tangible as regards the reason behind punishment other than deterrence, prevention and reformation. Deterrence primarily occurs when the feelings of discomfort and hurt is inflicted on the offender. This is likely to deter the defiant and those around, and is likely to serve as preventive measures towards, at least the consistency or frequency of the occurrence of such misbehaviour. In the supportive words of Peters the sharp shock involved in punishment may bring them to their senses and help to establish them in a socially more desirable form of conduct". This is what every school is supposed to hold tenaciously. There is, in addition to the above, a dominant but very important function of punishment in the school system. It makes the offender, having been punished, to be sober and further reflect on his action and see whether it will do any good towards achieving future goal.

However, but does pain received through punishment actually serve as deterrence? Does it even serve the preventive and reformatory purposes as the main reason of punishment within the school setting? In what way can we say that punishment has reduced defiant behaviours in the learners? Are there no cases of repeating such defiant behaviour at the very instance of giving the act of punishment? It is lamentable to discover instances where pain inflicted through punishment did not actually

give out the expected results. Instances abound where in schools, several types of punishments are inflicted on various offenders for various offences, yet same students and sometimes they even make new recruits into the business of committing a crime or the other. Peters<sup>12</sup> provides a comment that punishment is one of the most potent devices for bringing about estrangement. This is indicating an instance where the act of punishment brings isolation and eliminates any form or sign of behaviour modification. Instead of punishment doing to the defiant any good, it rather isolates him and isolation is likely to be a breeding ground for evil act.

But underneath Peters' position, there lays his position of quickly running away from that opinion. To counteract the former position about the estrangement of the individual by a punishment, he admitted the effectiveness of punishment within a school. He pointed out that in most cases, punishment, though it brings pain on the offender by the authority of the teacher, if it is used in a meaningful, planned and dispassionate manner, can do more good than harm. It can also transform someone who has gone defiant. After all, one of the roles of education on the learner is to bring about a positive change. The same Peters<sup>13</sup> "pointed out that there has to be some impartiality in preserving the rule of law. However, through establishing a good relationship with the individual punished, it will go a long way mitigating the estrangement which is often crated or perpetuated by excessive and unplanned punishment.

#### 4. Conclusion

In a school system, especially the secondary level, where parents take their children in confidence and trust, not minding the cost, they expect some form of good behaviour from the youngsters. They as well expect the school system to device potent measures to achieve that. This suggests that no parent goes home and sleep when the contrary is evident. The school system on its own does all to achieve that, and so the issue of punishment sets in when disobedience begins. In keeping to this scenario,

the findings and analysis in this work was an attempt to define the concept of punishment and the dynamics that are associated with its usage within the school system. It is plausible to admit the fact that although punishment causes pains and sometimes estranges the sufferer, the work has shared its voice to say with R.S. Peters that punishment is a necessary evil. An evil which is needed as a corrective measure within the school setting so that the minimum condition of adequate teaching and learning process can be achieved.

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