

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: A CASE STUDY IN SOUTHWESTERN MADAGASCAR

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the relationship between corporate punishment and academic performance in the southwestern region of Madagascar by exploring how teachers, parents, and students perceive the practice and how these perceptions influence classroom discipline and learning outcomes amid the tension between cultural traditions and official educational policies. Employing a qualitative research design, the study was conducted between 2023 and 2024 in Toliara I, Manombo, and Befandefa, involving 25 teachers, 30 parents, and 40 students aged 10–15 years. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify patterns of perception and practice. The results reveal that teachers, particularly in under-resourced classrooms, consider corporal punishment indispensable for maintaining order; parents, especially in rural areas, regard it as an act of care and responsibility; while students demonstrate ambivalence, recognizing both fear and increased compliance. Observational findings further showed that classrooms where corporal punishment persisted displayed stricter discipline but also greater levels of student anxiety and frustration. These findings highlight the cultural legitimacy of corporal punishment despite its prohibition, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive teacher training, investment in non-violent classroom management strategies, and stronger dialogue between policymakers and communities to bridge the gap between legislation and lived realities.

Keywords: Corporal, Punishment, Performance, Classroom, Discipline.

INTRODUCTION

Corporal punishment in schools has long been a controversial subject, shaped by deep cultural traditions and challenged by international debates on child rights and educational quality. In Madagascar, as in many other parts of the world, education is closely linked to discipline, and discipline often carries the weight of physical correction. The common Malagasy proverb, “*Zanaka tiana tsy itsitsiana ratsan-kazo*” literally, “the beloved child should not be spared the rod”, illustrates the belief that correction, even when it causes physical pain, is an act of care (Poutrin & Lusset, 2011; Zuberi et al., 2025). In this context, corporate punishment is not only tolerated but often justified as a necessary method for maintaining order and ensuring children's academic progress. However, the official stance of the Malagasy state diverges sharply from this cultural perspective (Eric et al., 2025; Lansford, 2025). According to the Ministry of Education's Bulletin n° 09, corporate punishment is strictly prohibited, and teachers risk losing their teaching license if they resort to it (Comité des droits de l'enfant des Nations unies, 2006). The contradiction between law and practice raises important questions about how children are disciplined and how such practices affect their academic performance (Won et al., 2025; Visser & Put, 2022).

The persistence of corporal punishment is not unique to Madagascar.

Historically, it has been a widely accepted means of enforcing discipline across societies. Scholars such as Gershoff et al., (2019) and Idris (2023) defended its educational value, emphasizing that pain could strengthen moral and intellectual growth. Centuries later, Maiti (2021) echoed the importance of discipline in moral education, and Chang et al., (2025) demonstrated through behavioral psychology that punishment can change behavior, at least in the short term. These theories laid a foundation that legitimized corporate punishment as part of pedagogy for generations. Yet modern psychology and child development research has increasingly highlighted its limitations and harmful effects. Puri & Chaudhari (2025) meta-analysis, for example, found strong associations between physical punishment and negative outcomes, such as aggression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Similarly, Eric et al., (2025) and El-Khani et al., (2025) showed that increased awareness of its ineffectiveness reduced teachers' support for such practices.

More recent studies reinforce these findings but also emphasize regional differences. Gershoff et al., (2019) documented how corporate punishment in schools was linked to lower achievement and adjustment difficulties, even when intended to improve academic focus. In Ghana, Agbenyega (2006) observed that corporate punishment often targeted children with special learning needs, worsening their exclusion from meaningful education. In Tanzania, Feinstein and Mwahombela (2010) reported that teachers supported corporate punishment to maintain authority but recognized its potential to cause long-term harm. In Sudan, Elbla (2012) and Dennis & Owusu-Addo (2023) revealed that teachers relied on corporal and verbal punishment because of poor school environments and overcrowded classes, despite being aware of its damaging impact on students' confidence and motivation. These studies highlight the persistence of the practice in low-resource settings, where teachers often feel unequipped to manage classrooms without physical discipline.

Despite such international research, Madagascar remains underrepresented in scholarly debates on corporal punishment. Most existing studies in African and global contexts focus on West Africa, East Africa, or South Asia. The unique sociocultural setting of Madagascar, particularly in its southwestern region, has not been systematically studied. This region is characterized by both urban centers such as Toliara and rural communities such as Manombo and Befandefa. These areas illustrate stark contrasts in educational resources, cultural practices, and attitudes toward discipline (Emynorane et al., 2024). Interviews conducted with teachers and parents in the field reveal that many believe the decline of academic performance is directly linked to the prohibition of corporate punishment. Parents in rural zones argue that without correction, children lose respect for authority, stop listening, and risk becoming idle. Teachers, especially in under-resourced schools, admit that they lack alternative methods to maintain order, and some claim that eliminating corporate punishment has weakened classroom discipline and reduced student performance.

The gap between national policy and local reality creates a tension that has not been addressed in academic literature. On the one hand, international institutions such as UNICEF and the World Health Organization strongly condemn corporate punishment, insisting on child-friendly, participatory approaches to discipline. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Madagascar, calls for the abolition of all forms of violence against children. On the other hand, in everyday practice, rural communities continue to defend corporate

punishment as an integral part of education, tied to local values of respect, obedience, and responsibility. This paradox is not sufficiently explored in global studies that tend to adopt a universalist stance without accounting for cultural and contextual nuances (Van Dorn, 2023).

This study explores how corporate punishment relates to academic performance in the southwestern region of Madagascar, focusing on communities in Toliara I, Manombo, and Befandefa. It considers the cultural setting in which physical discipline is practiced and the views of teachers, parents, and students who consider it as necessary for maintaining order (Busienei, 2012; Brassard & Edwards, 2024; Emynorane et al., 2024). The study also looks at how the official ban on corporate punishment is received in daily school life and how this tension affects learning. Therefore, the central research problem addressed in this study is how the persistence of corporate punishment, despite its legal prohibition, influences students' academic performance and shapes the broader dynamics of school discipline in a context where cultural traditions and educational policies are in direct conflict. By centering on local realities, the study adds new insights to the debate and questions assumptions that may not reflect the lived experiences of Malagasy communities.

The significance of this study is threefold. Academically, it enriches the existing body of research on corporate punishment by providing a case study from a region that has been largely neglected in comparative analyses. It situates Madagascar within broader debates on education and child rights while highlighting the cultural specificity of disciplinary practices. Socioculturally, the study offers insight into how communities negotiate between tradition and international norms, showing that resistance to prohibition is not simply a matter of ignorance but also of cultural identity and practical concerns about classroom management. Practically, the findings have implications for policymakers and educators who must reconcile the tension between protecting children's rights and supporting teachers in contexts where resources are scarce and alternative strategies are limited.

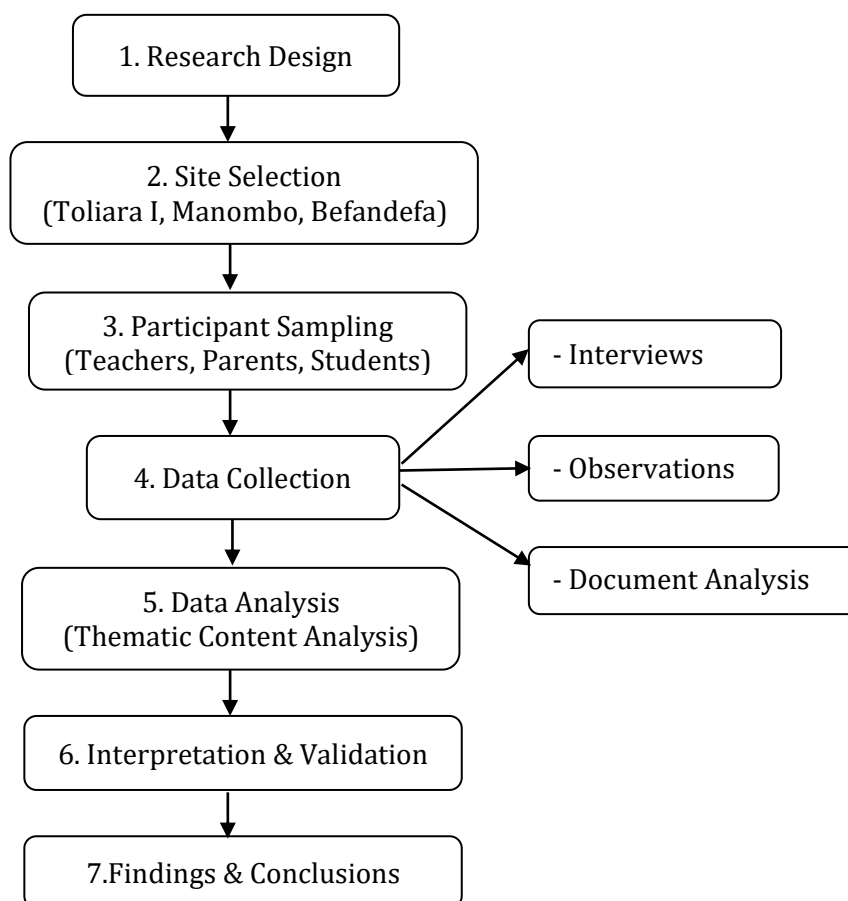
RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach, chosen because it allows a deeper understanding of people's perceptions, beliefs, and lived experiences regarding corporate punishment and academic performance (Emynorane et al., 2025). Rather than relying on numbers, a qualitative study makes it possible to capture the meanings that teachers, parents, and students give to discipline and schooling. Since the use of corporate punishment is closely tied to cultural values and local realities, this approach provides the flexibility needed to explore how the practice is understood and justified within different communities.

The study was carried out between 2023 and 2024 in three areas of southwestern Madagascar: Toliara I (urban), Manombo (semi-rural), and Befandefa (rural). The sample included 25 teachers, 10 in Toliara, 8 in Manombo, 7 in Befandefa, 30 parents divided into 15 from rural areas and 15 from urban settings, and 40 students aged between 10 to 15 years old. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, including official texts such as the Ministry of Education's Bulletin n° 09 and reports from organizations such as UNICEF and the WHO. Thematic content analysis was used to organize responses into categories such as favorable perceptions, critical views, and observed effects on school performance and

discipline. To ensure reliability, findings were compared across different groups of participants, and care was taken to check the consistency of information collected through interviews, observations, and documents. The overall process of the study is illustrated in the research flow diagram presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research flow diagram of the study process



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Interviews and observations across the three sites showed that teachers relied heavily on corporate punishment as a tool for maintaining classroom discipline. In Toliara I, most teachers described using relatively light sanctions such as kneeling or holding a “chair position,” measures that were typically reserved for cases of disobedience. In Manombo, teachers reported more moderate sanctions, such as light strikes with a ruler on the palm, which they believed restored discipline without creating lasting resentment. In Befandefa, where classrooms often lack basic resources, teachers expressed the strongest defense of corporate punishment, repeatedly linking the prohibition of such practices to declining student performance and weakened authority in the classroom.

Parents' accounts reinforced this reliance on corporal punishment, particularly in rural settings. Many emphasized that physical correction was not only necessary but also an act of responsibility in raising respectful and successful children. A frequently cited sentiment was that “the child who is not corrected by the hand will be corrected by the street,” reflecting a widely held belief that

discipline prevents future delinquency. In contrast, parents in Toliara I expressed more divided opinions, with some endorsing child rights discourses that reject violence while others continued to argue that moderate physical punishment remains indispensable for shaping children's character.

Students' testimonies revealed a more complex and ambivalent picture. While many admitted to fearing corporate punishment, they also acknowledged that it motivated them to concentrate on their studies and follow classroom instructions. Some further observed that the absence of sanctions often encouraged disruptive behavior among their peers. Classroom observations supported these accounts: in Befandefa, where corporate punishment persisted, students generally appeared more disciplined and attentive, whereas in Toliara I, where the practice had been largely abandoned, classrooms tended to be noisier and more difficult to control.

Taken together, these findings suggest that corporate punishment continues to occupy a central role in the cultural understanding of discipline and academic seriousness in southwestern Madagascar. Despite its prohibition in law and the growing influence of international child rights frameworks, local teachers, parents, and students still associate physical correction with effective learning and respect for authority, underscoring the persistence of a cultural distinction between corrective discipline and abusive violence.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight the persistence of corporal punishment as both a disciplinary tool and a cultural practice in southwestern Madagascar, despite its prohibition by national law. Teachers and parents alike continue to defend its use, associating it with classroom order, student respect, and academic seriousness. This finding must be situated within broader international debates about corporate punishment and its impact on children's learning and well-being. Study across Africa and beyond has consistently documented this tension: on one side, communities view corporate punishment as a necessary tool for shaping responsible citizens; on the other, global organizations and child psychologists stress its harmful consequences.

The teachers' reliance on corporal punishment as a classroom management strategy mirrors patterns documented in other low-resource contexts. Elbla's (2012) study in Sudan found that teachers turned to both corporate and verbal punishment not out of ignorance of the harms, but because of crowded classes, lack of materials, and the stress of poor working conditions. In such environments, punishment becomes an immediate way to secure obedience, even if its long-term effectiveness is doubtful. Similarly, in Tanzania, Feinstein and Mwahombela (2010) reported that teachers supported corporate punishment because it provided authority in otherwise difficult circumstances. The Malagasy teachers in Toliara, Manombo, and Befandefa expressed similar frustrations, particularly regarding the challenge of maintaining respect and focus without physical discipline. This suggests that the persistence of corporal punishment is not only cultural but also linked to structural deficiencies in the educational system.

Parents' attitudes reinforce this picture of continuity between school and home. In rural areas especially, corporal punishment is widely accepted as an expression of care and responsibility. This echoes Agbenyega's (2006) findings in Ghana, where parents often endorsed corporal punishment as proof of love and commitment to their children's future. The Malagasy proverb, "*Zanaka tiana tsy*

itsitsiana ratsan-kazo”, means “the beloved child should not be spared the rod”, reflects this sentiment clearly. At the same time, the contrast between rural and urban settings in Madagascar points to shifting values. In Toliara I, where parents have more exposure to global discourses on child rights, resistance to corporal punishment was more pronounced, resembling patterns seen in other urban African contexts where modernization and human rights advocacy are reshaping parental expectations.

The views of students present a more nuanced picture. While many expressed fear and discomfort, some admitted that punishment helped them remain focused. This ambivalence is consistent with findings from Anderson and Payne (1994) in Barbados, where children simultaneously rejected corporal punishment as unfair yet recognized its role in reinforcing academic effort. Ward et al., (2023) provide a useful framework for interpreting these contradictions: their study demonstrated that corporal punishment may produce short-term compliance but is linked to lower achievement and adjustment over time. In Madagascar, the same dynamic appears, children comply under threat of punishment, yet the deeper effects on confidence, motivation, and learning are likely negative, as suggested by international evidence.

The persistence of corporal punishment in Madagascar must also be interpreted within its philosophical and religious justifications. Wei (2024) stressed the formative power of discipline. These perspectives remain influential in local reasoning, where discipline is equated with moral education. Contemporary religious voices reinforce this legitimacy. For example, figures such as Kilimci (2009) and Van Dorn (2023) argue that physical correction, administered with love, guides children toward obedience and moral order. Even Pope Francis suggested in 2015 that mild correction can preserve dignity if done respectfully. In Madagascar, where religion and tradition are deeply embedded in daily life, such perspectives resonate strongly, contributing to the continued acceptance of corporal punishment despite global condemnation.

This reasoning also finds parallels in other Christian and psychological traditions that frame corporal punishment as legitimate when administered with moderation, love, and responsibility. Pope Francis' (2015) statement is echoed by voices such as Tedd Tripp (1995), pastor and author of *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, who views physical discipline within a Christian family setting as an act of love intended to guide children toward obedience and faith. Likewise, James Dobson (1970), psychologist and founder of Focus on the Family, has defended moderate spanking as necessary to preserve parental authority, while considering that discipline should always be followed by affection and reconciliation. These positions suggest that for some communities, corporal punishment is not synonymous with violence, but rather a measured pedagogy of responsibility, an argument that helps explain its persistence in Madagascar, where religious and cultural values strongly influence child-rearing practices.

Beyond individual voices, data collected in Madagascar shows that corporal punishment itself is not perceived as a single practice but as a spectrum ranging from corrective to abusive. A local typology distinguishes between “light” sanctions, such as kneeling, standing in uncomfortable positions, or writing extra exercises, which are seen as pedagogical; “moderate” punishments, such as a light strike with a ruler or short exclusions, tolerated if carefully controlled; and “excessive” punishments, such as violent blows, humiliations, or physical injuries, which are universally rejected as abusive. This distinction aligns with broader

religious and psychological arguments that emphasize intention and proportionality in discipline (Emynorane et al., 2025; Won et al., 2025). It also reveals the importance of cultural interpretation: while international frameworks often condemn corporate punishment in absolute terms, Malagasy communities evaluate it on a scale, differentiating correction from cruelty.

The broader body of psychological research points to the limits and dangers of such reasoning. Meta-analysis from Gershoff et al., (2019) and Toure-Pegnougo et al., (2025) demonstrated that corporate punishment is strongly associated with negative outcomes such as aggression, anxiety, and reduced academic motivation. IDănilă et al., (2024) also showed that as teachers became more aware of these consequences, support for corporate punishment declined. Elbla (2012) found that Sudanese pupils reported humiliation, fear, and loss of confidence as outcomes of punishment, observations echoed by Malagasy students who admitted feeling anxious or humiliated. These parallels suggest that while cultural rationales for punishment persist, the experiences of children are remarkably consistent: punishment produces compliance at the cost of psychological well-being and sustained learning.

The paradox in Madagascar is therefore not only between prohibition and practice, but also between short-term orders and long-term educational goals. Teachers in Befandefa defended corporate punishment because it ensured silence and focus in class, but this very silence may come at the expense of creativity, participation, and critical thinking. Kumar et al. (2022), studying India, highlighted how corporate punishment interacts with social hierarchies, showing that lower-caste children were disproportionately targeted, undermining equity in learning. Similar dynamics may be at play in Madagascar, where marginalized rural communities could experience corporate punishment not only as discipline but also as reinforcement of broader social inequalities.

Another layer of complexity lies in the gap between international advocacy and local realities. UNICEF and the WHO (2016) consistently call for child-friendly, participatory education, condemning corporate punishment as a violation of rights. Yet, Oben and Xu (2025) note, when teachers lack training and resources, the prohibition of corporate punishment can feel impractical, even harmful, because it leaves teachers with few tools for managing behavior. The Malagasy case demonstrates this vividly: the Bulletin n° 09 bans corporate punishment, but teachers in the field often perceive the law as unrealistic. This tension shows the importance of contextualized strategies that bridge policy ideals with the day-to-day challenges of educators.

The Malagasy context also raises important questions about the cultural adaptation of global child rights frameworks. The proverb "*Mena tany, mena ovy*", means, "the yam is red because the soil is red", captures the idea that educational norms are rooted in cultural soils. Universalist arguments against corporal punishment risk being perceived as foreign impositions if they do not engage with local values. This does not justify violence, but it highlights the need for dialogue between international institutions and local communities. Studies such as Kilimci (2009) in Turkey and Brown (2009) in South Korea have shown that support for corporal punishment often diminishes when teachers and parents are offered effective alternatives. Without such alternatives, prohibition alone is unlikely to change practice.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that corporate punishment in southwestern Madagascar remains deeply embedded in cultural norms and school practices despite its prohibition by law and international frameworks. Teachers and parents consider it as essential for discipline and academic focus, while students express mixed feelings of fear, compliance, and frustration. The findings also indicate that corporate punishment is often considered acceptable when it remains light and moderate, reflecting a cultural distinction between corrective discipline and abusive violence. The study's scope, limited to three districts and a small sample, limits broader generalization. Recommendations include strengthening teacher training with practical alternatives to physical correction and fostering dialogue between policymakers, educators, and communities to reconcile cultural practices with child protection standards. Future research should extend to other regions of Madagascar, adopt mixed-method approaches, and investigate sustainable non-violent strategies for classroom management.

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