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Spare the rod and save the child, most South Africans believe

South African Social Attitudes Survey

A study to investigate changes in attitudes towards methods of disciplining school pupils among South Africans aged 16 years and older, by Mbithi wa Kivilu and Muchiri Wandai, was drawn from the annual SASAS between 2003 and 2006. The study also included other influences, such as religion, gender, and race on these attitudes.

The upsurge of violence in schools led to this study on what South Africans think about the methods used in schools for disciplining learners. The data gathered over four years included the following five methods of disciplining learners in South African schools:

- 1) Reasoning or discussion with learner
- 2) Corporal punishment by the teacher or principal
- 3) Physical labour in school
- 4) Detention after school hours
- 5) Additional learning tasks

These methods can be placed in two groups: firstly, methods that have the potential to cause pain or discomfort such as 'corporal punishment', 'physical labour like sweeping', and 'keeping learners after school hours'; and secondly, those methods that do not cause physical discomfort, such as 'reasoning/discussion' and 'giving additional learning tasks'.

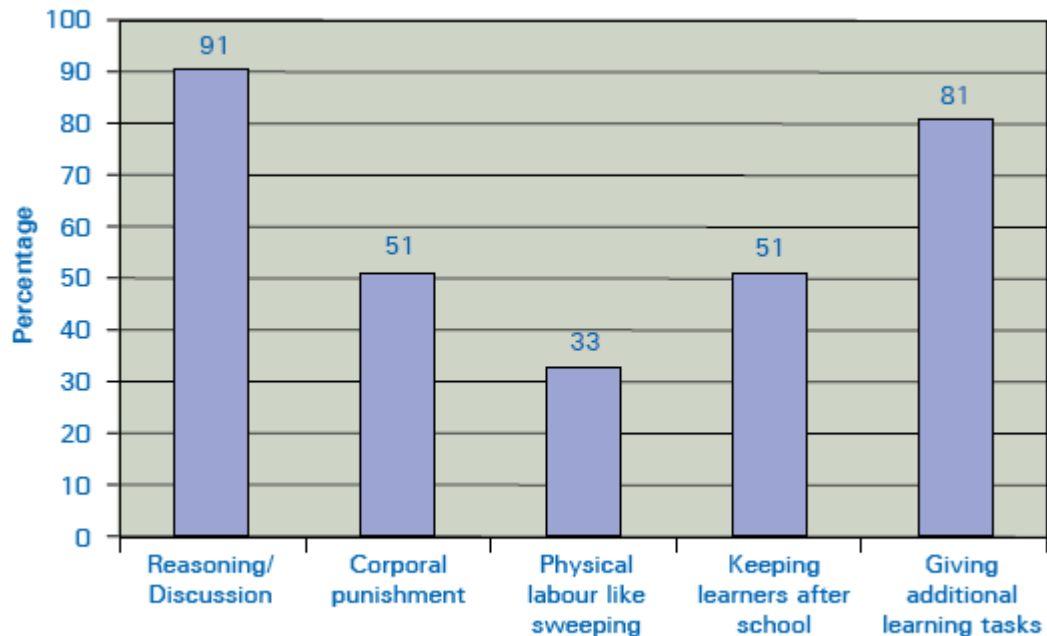
Respondents were required to respond to six statements on discipline on a scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'do not know'. In the following analysis, level 6 'do not know', was excluded.

Appealing to reason

The sample comprised of 4 980 respondents in 2003, 5 583 in 2004, 2 850 in 2005 and 2 904 in 2006.

Overall, 'reasoning/discussion' (91%) and 'giving additional learning tasks' (81%) were the two methods of disciplining learners that were supported by the largest proportion of respondents. On the other hand 'physical labour like sweeping' was the least supported, with only one out of every three respondents (33%) indicating support. The use of 'corporal punishment by either a teacher or school principal' and 'keeping learners after school' received equal support (51% each). The results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

*Figure 1: Percentage response to discipline method*

Although 'reasoning/discussion' and 'giving of additional learning tasks' were the most preferred methods of disciplining learners, there was a gradual decrease in the proportion that supported the former, while there was an increase in the proportion that supported 'giving of additional learning tasks' from 2003 to 2006. Support for corporal punishment remained unchanged while that for 'physical labour like sweeping' and 'keeping learners after school hours' decreased over the years. These results were confirmed using Binary Logistic Regression. Details of the results are shown in Figure 2.

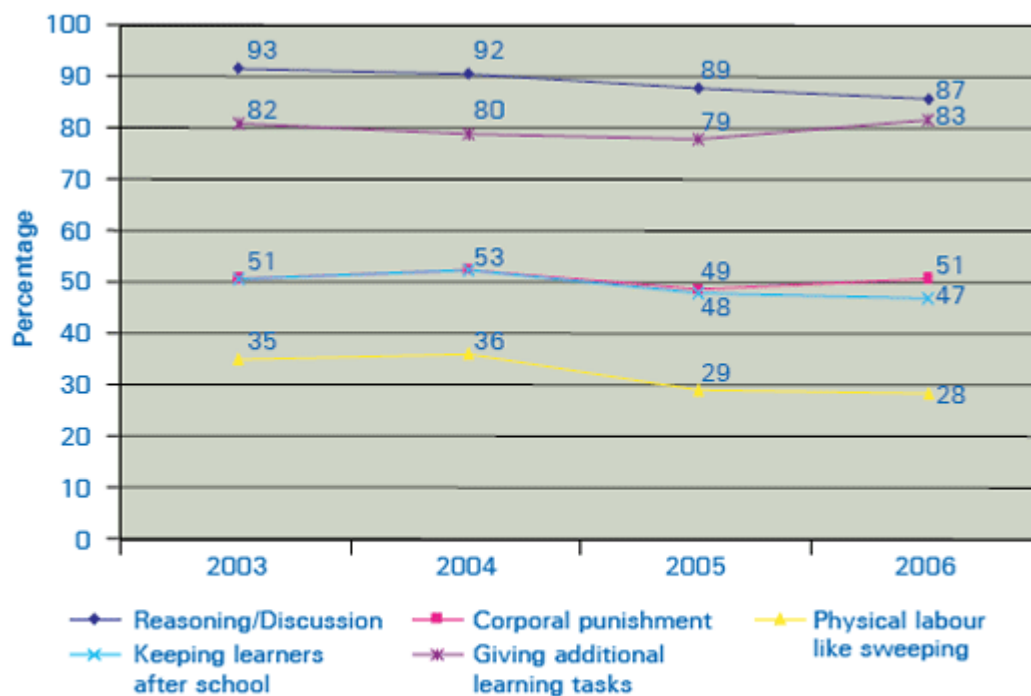


Figure 2: Percentage response to discipline method by year

Despite the ban many teachers continue to use corporal punishment for lack of alternative methods. R. Morell (2001) explains that 'among the reasons for the continued use of corporal punishment is the failure to specify alternative mechanisms for discipline, the rebelliousness of students, ongoing belief in the efficacy of authoritarian teaching and management styles among teachers, and very large classes that make it difficult to deploy alternative forms of discipline'.

Western Cape respondents in favour of discipline

Some significant differences in attitude toward the various methods appeared across the provinces. Apart from the 'reasoning/ discussion' method, respondents from the Western Cape tended to show the highest support for all the methods. The highest proportion (slightly over 60%) of the respondents in Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Free State and Northern Cape supported the use of corporal punishment. On the other hand, this method received the least support (about 42%) in Limpopo and North West. It would be interesting to investigate why respondents from KwaZulu-Natal showed the least support for 'physical labour like sweeping' and 'keeping learners after school hours'. Details of these results are provided in Figure 3.

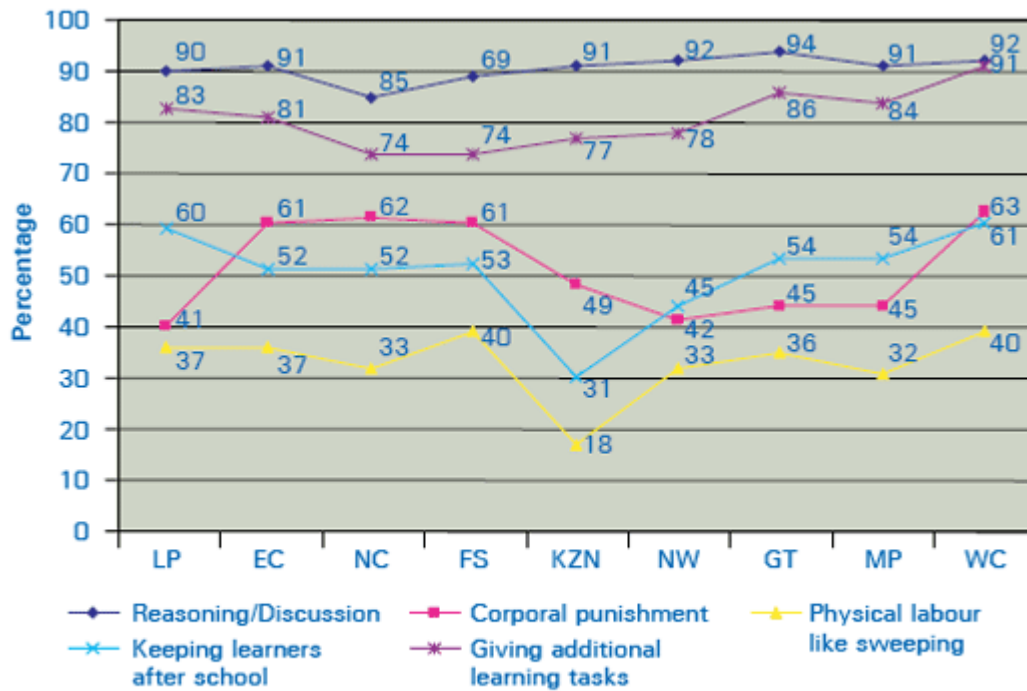


Figure 3: Percentage response to discipline method by province

Discipline methods differ by race

Compared to the other race groups, whites were least likely to support the use of 'reasoning/discussion', while Indians/Asians were four times more likely than whites to do so. A closer look at the analysis by race indicates that the response distributions for whites and coloureds are somewhat similar, as are those for blacks and Asians/Indians.

In relative terms, whites and coloureds tended to lend more support to methods that cause pain and discomfort, than did Indians/Asians and black respondents. For example, about 72% of whites and 62% of coloureds supported the use of 'corporal punishment' while only 35% of Indians/Asians and 48% of black respondents supported its use. Indians/Asians were also least likely, compared to whites, to support 'keeping learners after school hours' and 'physical labour like sweeping'. Coloureds were most likely to support 'keeping learners after school hours' and 'physical labour like sweeping' while black respondents were least likely to support 'giving of additional learning tasks'. These results are presented in Figure 4.

There were also statistically significant differences in attitudes towards the use of corporal punishment by gender and religious affiliation. Females, and respondents who did not consider themselves to belong to any religion, were less likely than their compatriots to support the use of this method. Females were also found to be less likely than males to support the use of 'keeping learners after school hours' and 'giving of additional learning tasks'.

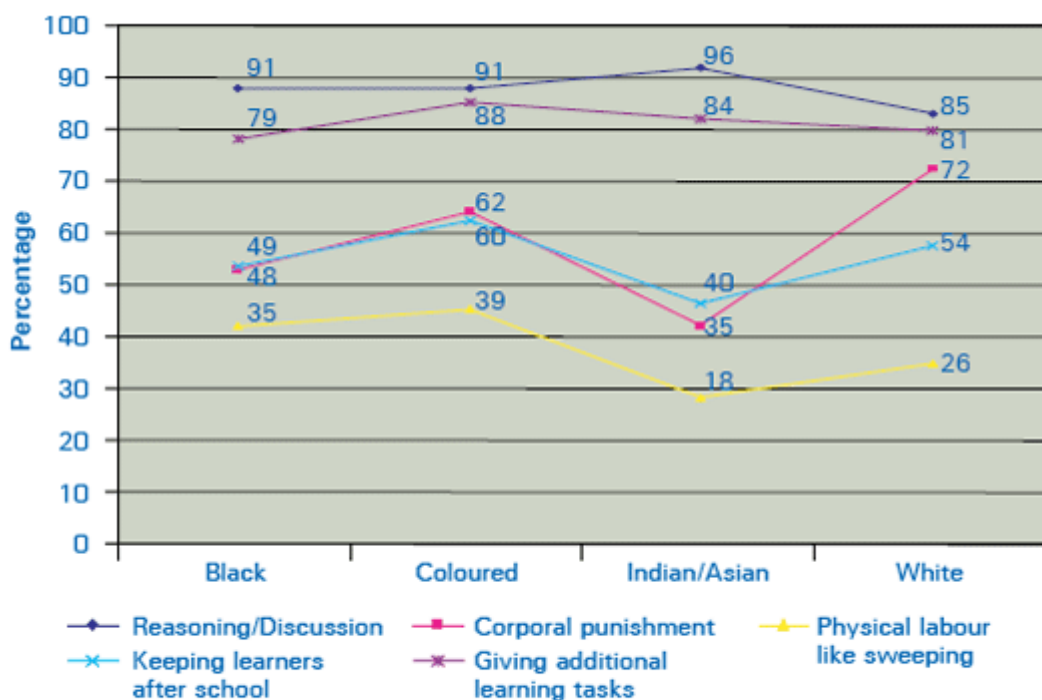


Figure 4: Percentage response to discipline method by race

Conclusion

Overall, the results showed that although support for 'reasoning/ discussion' as a method of discipline in schools declined from 2003 to 2006, it was still rated highly compared with the other disciplinary methods. 'Reasoning/discussion' and 'giving of additional learning tasks' were preferred to the other three methods of discipline, that is, higher proportions of respondents supported these two methods than the others.

Corporal punishment received more support than the other two methods that are construed to cause pain or discomfort, and 'physical labour like sweeping' received the least support. The impact of corporal punishment on learners includes the eliciting of negative emotions but little is known about the impact of the other methods in promoting desirable change in behaviour.

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