

Extreme Physical Punishment by Teachers and its Associations with Aggression and Victimization at School: A Study among Young Adolescents in Iran

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Abstract

Objectives: Physical punishment by teachers is accepted in Iranian schools, but it may at times take extreme forms, such as teachers burning the hands of pupils, or even breaking their bones. The study aims at investigating how frequently such punishments occur, and their relationship to perpetration of and victimization to peer aggression at school.

Methods: Data from 1244 young adolescents (649 boys, 595 girls; M age=12.7 yrs, SD=2.1 yrs) was collected in two cities, Mashhad and Eylam, in both public and private schools (totaling 24 schools) in Iran. Whether the pupils reported having been exposed to extreme forms of physical punishment (EPP) by teachers, such as burning of hands, and breaking of bones, was investigated and served as independent variables in MANOVAs with various types of aggression and victimization in school settings as dependent variables.

Results: Participants who had had their hands burnt (3.8% of respondents), and bones broken (4.8%) as punishment scored significantly higher on both perpetration of and victimization to almost all types of aggressive behavior at school. Notably, EPP by teachers had strong associations with the most severe forms of school aggression measured in the study, i.e. threatening (and, respectively, being threatened by) another pupil with a knife or a chain. EPP by teachers also was associated with EPP occurring at home.

Conclusion: Results indicate that EPP by teachers does indeed occur in Iran, in this sample it had been experienced by about 1/20 of respondents, and it was associated with both perpetration of and victimization to aggressive behaviors (in particular its harshest forms) in school settings.

Keywords: Physical punishment; Aggression; Victimization; School; Iran

Introduction

The aim of the present study was to investigate the prevalence of certain extreme forms of physical punishment (EPP) by teachers, such as burning of hands, and breaking of bones, in Iranian schools. A second aim was to investigate the associations between EPP by teachers and aggressive behavior in school settings, i.e. both perpetration of aggression towards other pupils, and victimization to the aggression of others.

Physical punishment (PP) at schools is one of the most fearful experiences that children are facing in Iran. Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to it [1]. Culturally, education is one of the first priorities in the Persian family. Oveisi et al. [2] found that 80% of parents believe in the necessity of punishment for educational reasons. Twenty percent of them applied severe PP themselves at home.

Bazargan and Lavasani [1] found that Iranian boys ran a greater risk to be punished by their teacher than girls. Most pupils believe that school authorities allow the teachers to punish them physically, and, furthermore, to punish them again if they complain.

A study by Sheikhattari et al. [3], also from Iran, showed that 43% of pupils reported having been physically punished at school. Mother's addiction, poor parental relationships, and residency in rural areas, were risk factors for PP both at home and school. In the same study, 54.4% of children reported experiencing some kind of neglect at school.

Kuhestani [4] found that 47.8% of boys had experienced PP by school staff. There was a positive correlation between PP, depression, and academic failure.

Similar findings have been made in other countries. Mahmoud et al. [5], in Nigeria, found that elementary school teachers commonly applied PP practices which could cause significant potential injury to their pupil's eyes. Almost a fifth of elementary school pupils had observed that elementary school teachers applied PP to the head (19.8%) and to the face (16.3%) of pupils.

In a study in India, Riaikhy and Kaur [6] found that 81% of adolescents had experienced PP at school. Nine and half percent of them were severely punished. Boys experienced a higher degree of severe punishment and injuries than girls. There was a positive correlation between experience of PP and anxiety among the adolescents.

Chen et al. [7], in a study conducted in China, found that 57.6% of students reported having been physically punished by teachers at least

once before the age of 16 years. Boys had a somewhat higher prevalence than girls (66.4% vs. 46.6%).

Chen and Wei [8], in a Taiwanese study, reported that 26.9% of students had been maltreated by teachers at least one time during the previous semester. Hitting, beating, or slapping were the most common forms of maltreatment. Boys and senior students were victimized more than others.

Benbenishty et al. [9], in a study conducted in Israel, found more than one fifth (22.2%) reported having been punished physically. Eight and half percent of them were kicked or punched by a staff member. Boys were victimized more than girls, and students in schools with a high percentage of low-income and low-education families ran a higher risk for exposure to PP.

It may thus be concluded that PP at school is a common phenomenon in many non-Western countries. However, extreme forms are rare. During recent years, several examples of alleged extreme punishment by school teachers in Iran have been filmed and uploaded on youtube [10,11]. The present study explored how frequent two examples of EPP by teachers, burning of hands, and breaking of bones, are happening in both public and private schools, in two Iranian cities, Mashhad and Eylam.

Method

Sample

Data was collected by use of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire that was filled in during the school day by 1,244 young adolescents (649 boys, 595 girls; M age=12.7 years, SD=2.1 years) in two cities, Mashhad (n=644) and Eylam (n=600) in both public (n=636) and private schools (n=608), totaling 24 schools, in Iran.

Instrument

Information about exposure to EPP by teachers was gathered in combination with questions pertaining to less extreme forms of PP, such as spanking, or beating with a stick. However, here only data on two forms of EPP will be presented. The children were asked whether they had had their (1) “hands burnt”, or (2) “bones broken” as a form of punishment by a teacher or headmaster at school. The pupils then responded, on a five-point scale ranging from 0=“never” to 4=“very often”.

Information about aggressive behavior at school was gathered with the Mini Direct and Indirect Aggression Inventory (Mini-DIA) [12]. The Mini-DIA is an abbreviated version of the Direct-Indirect Aggression Scales [13], developed as a less time-consuming version of the original instrument. It has been shown to yield similar results as the original scales [14]. Instead of consisting of multi-item scales measuring physical, verbal, and indirect aggression, the scales are instead single-item, and the types of aggression are defined to the respondents as follows: (1) physical aggression: “another pupil has for instance hit, kicked, or pushed you”; (2) verbal aggression: “another pupil has for instance screamed at you, or said hurtful things about you or [added in Iran] your family”; (3) indirect aggression: “another pupil has spread malignant gossip about you, spread untrue stories about you, or tried to freeze you out”. Respondents then state, on a

five-point scale, ranging from 0=“never” to 4=“often” to what extent they have been exposed to these. There is both a Victim and a Perpetrator Version of the Mini-DIA. The Perpetrator Version is formulated in similar wordings, with the exception that respondents now are stating the extent to which they themselves have behaved aggressively towards their peers at school.

In Iran, a more extreme form of aggressive behavior was added: (4) “threatened by [threatening] another pupil with a knife or a chain”.

Strategy of analysis

A multivariate analysis of variance approach (MANOVA) was adopted for the study, using SPSS-21 [15].

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the ethical board of Åbo Akademi University, and conducted with the consent of school authorities in Mashhad and Eylam, and the parents of the children.

Results

EPP by teachers had been experienced by a small but substantial minority of the Iranian pupils participating in the study: 3.8% of respondents (4.5% of boys, and 2.9% of girls) reported having had their hands burnt as punishment at school, and 4.8% (6.4% of boys, and 2.9% of girls) is having had bones broken as punishment at school.

There was a strong association between having had one’s hands burnt as punishment at school, and having had one’s hands burnt as punishment at home [$\chi^2(1)=167.08$, $p<.001$, $\phi^2=.14$]. Likewise, there was a strong association between having had bones broken as punishment at school, and having had bones broken as punishment at home [$\chi^2(1)=312.97$, $p<.001$, $\phi^2=.26$].

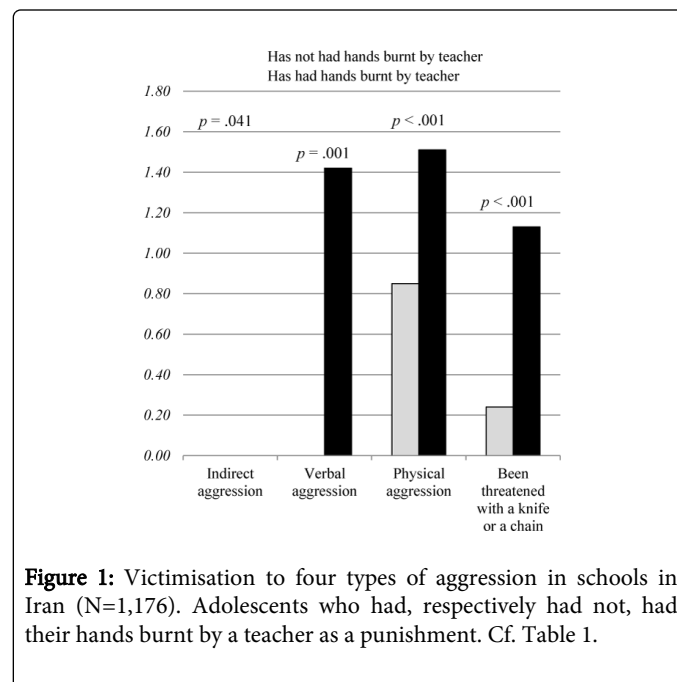


Figure 1: Victimization to four types of aggression in schools in Iran (N=1,176). Adolescents who had, respectively had not, had their hands burnt by a teacher as a punishment. Cf. Table 1.

Effect of Having Had Hands Burnt by a Teacher	F	df	p ≤	ηp2
Multivariate Analysis	13.65	4, 1216	.001	.043
Univariate Analyses				
Victim of Indirect Aggression	4.17	1, 1219	.041	.003
Victim of Verbal Aggression	11.09	"	.001	.009
Victim of Physical Aggression	14.50	"	.001	.012
Threatened with a Knife or Chain	48.15	"	.001	.038

Table 1: The results of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with having had hands burnt by a teacher or not as a punishment as an independent variable, and four types of victimization at school as dependent variables (N=1,176). Cf. (Figure 1).

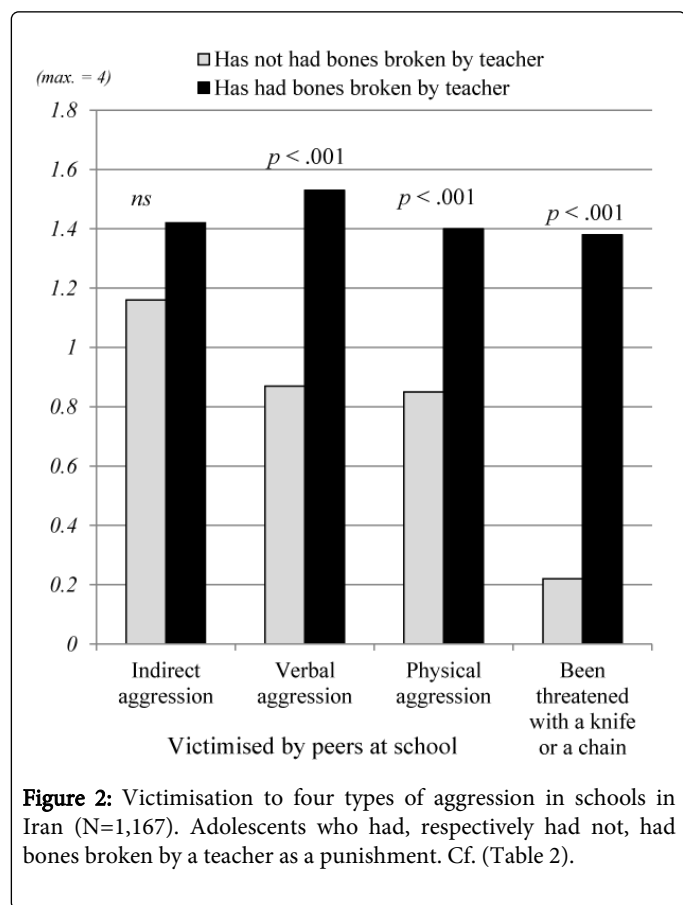


Figure 2: Victimization to four types of aggression in schools in Iran (N=1,167). Adolescents who had, respectively had not, had bones broken by a teacher as a punishment. Cf. (Table 2).

Effect of Having Had Bones Broken by a Teacher	F	df	p ≤	ηp2
Multivariate Analysis	28.15	4, 1217	.001	.085
Univariate Analyses				
Victim of Indirect Aggression	2.42	1, 1220	ns	.002
Victim of Verbal Aggression	19.77	"	.001	.016
Victim of Physical Aggression	12.14	"	.001	.010

Threatened with a Knife or Chain	103.08	"	.001	.078
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Table 2: The results of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with having had bones broken or not by a teacher as a punishment as an independent variable, and four types of victimization at school as dependent variables (N=1,167). Cf. (Figure 2).

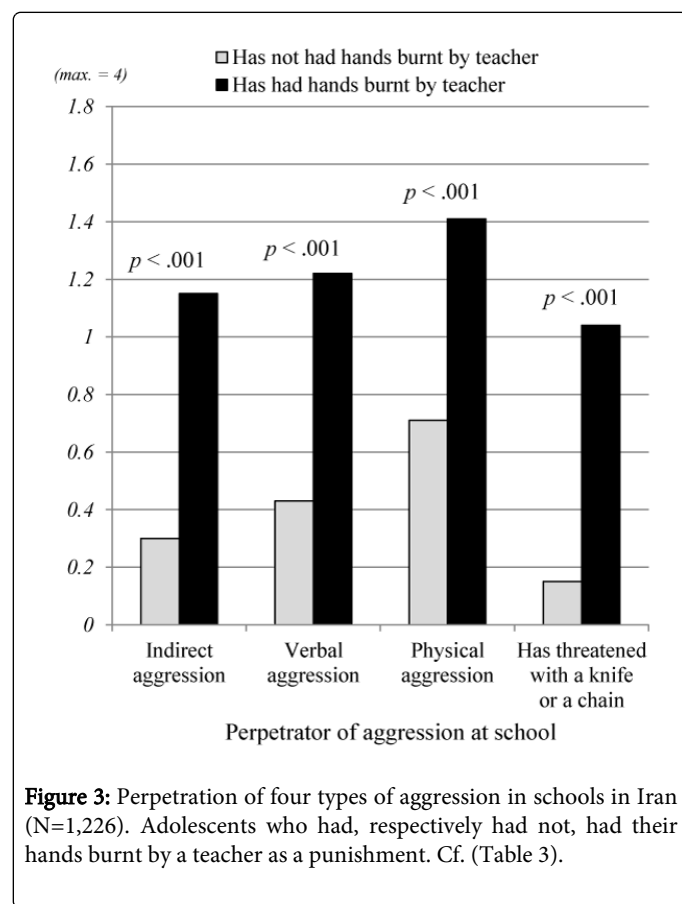


Figure 3: Perpetration of four types of aggression in schools in Iran (N=1,226). Adolescents who had, respectively had not, had their hands burnt by a teacher as a punishment. Cf. (Table 3).

Effect of Having Had Hands Burnt by a Teacher	F	df	p ≤	ηp2
Multivariate Analysis	32.89	4, 1221	.001	.097

Univariate Analyses				
Perpetrator of Indirect Aggression	74.06	1, 1224	.001	.057
Perpetrator of Verbal Aggression	42.19	"	.001	.033
Perpetrator of Physical Aggression	17.36	"	.001	.014
Has Threatened Others with a Knife or Chain	89.02	"	.001	.068

Table 3: The results of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with having had hands burnt or not by a teacher as a punishment as an independent variable, and four types of perpetration of aggression at school as dependent variables (N=1,226). Cf. (Figure 3).

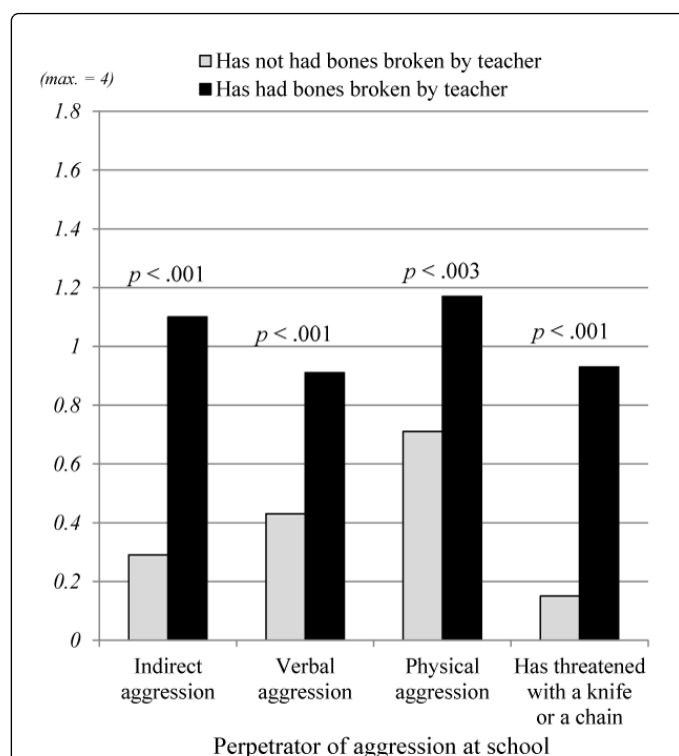


Figure 4: Perpetration of four types of aggression in schools in Iran (N=1,227). Adolescents who had, respectively had not, had bones broken by a teacher as a punishment. Cf. (Table 4).

Effect of Having Had Bones Broken	F	df	p ≤	ηp2
Multivariate Analysis	34.16	4, 1222	.001	.101
Univariate Analyses				
Perpetrator of Indirect Aggression	84.26	1, 1225	.001	.064
Perpetrator of Verbal Aggression	19.01	"	.001	.015
Perpetrator of Physical Aggression	9.16	"	.003	.007

Has Threatened Others with a Knife or Chain	85.52	"	.001	.065
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Table 4: The results of a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with having had bones broken or not by a teacher as a punishment as an independent variable, and four types of perpetration of aggression at school as dependent variables (N=1,227). Cf. (Figure 4).

(Tables 1-4), and (Figures 1-4), present results of MANOVAs comparing differences between adolescents who had had bones broken as a punishment by teachers, with those who had never experienced this type of punishment, and adolescents who had or had not had their hands burnt as a punishment by teachers, with various types of aggressive behavior at school, either as victims or perpetrators, as dependent variables. As the tables and figures indicate, these types of EPP were associated with almost all types of aggressive behavior at school, the only exception being victimization to indirect aggression for those who had had bones broken. The clearly strongest associations (effect sizes varying between $\eta_p^2=.038$ and $\eta_p^2=.078$) were with the most severe type of aggression at school, "threatening another pupil with a knife or a chain", both as a perpetrator and as a victim.

Discussion

The study found clear associations between EPP by teachers and aggression at school, both in the form of perpetration of aggression towards others, and in the form of victimization to the aggressive behavior directed towards them by others. Directions of cause and effect may of course only be speculated upon. It is of course possible that the extreme forms of punishment were directed against them due to their own aggressiveness directed to other pupils. However, it does not explain the strong associations also with victimization to aggressive behavior by others. It appears illogical that they were punished for being victims. Obviously, being a victim does not deserve punishment. Therefore, something else appears to be going on.

The strong associations between EPP at school and at home are also noteworthy. They are hardly a coincidence. They may reflect a prejudiced attitude towards a certain type of pupils, perhaps from a lower social class. More research on the topic is needed.

Since the present study is not longitudinal, it is not possible to draw conclusions about cause and effect. However, it is worth noting that the strongest associations were with the most extreme form of school aggression measured. The study indicates the need for further research to highlight the possible pathways behind the documented association between child abuse and its future impact on a victim's life.

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