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# New teachers and corporal punishment in Ghanaian primary schools

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*[chapter in: Learning and teaching around the world: comparative and international studies in primary education, published in 2018 by Routledge, and edited by Liz Chamberlain and Kimberly Safford]*

## Introduction

This chapter is about two things. First, it is about how children are disciplined in Ghanaian primary schools. Second, it is about the experiences of Ghanaian educators on the cusp of becoming professional teachers, how their identity, intentions and imagined capabilities for teaching are navigated and negotiated through interactions with pupils and teachers in the 'real world' of the school. It draws on data from a wider study of student-teacher learning in Ghana<sup>1</sup>, but presents a vignette of one student-teacher called Dominic in his third year of teacher-training.

The majority of prospective primary-level teachers in Ghana study at residential colleges and work towards their Diploma in Education. The programme – known as the 'in-in-out' model – consists of two years at college studying subject knowledge, educational theories and methods, followed by one year, the 'out-programme', working as a practice-teacher in a school. Dominic was enrolled at a college in the south of Ghana and for his out-programme had been posted to a rural school 40km away, although traffic and road-conditions meant that it could take up to two hours to travel between them.

The research was framed conceptually through a socio-cultural lens (Wenger 1998) and analytically using Amartya Sen's capability approach (1999). Other work (Buckler 2015) describes how this framing was used to understand how student-teachers' development of professional capability – moving deeper into the practice of becoming a teacher - depends on the relationships they have developed within the formal and informal environments of teacher training, but also that these relationships shape how professional capabilities are identified, negotiated and pursued. This chapter illustrates this framing by showing how Dominic's perceptions of professional capability in relation to discipline shifted during the out-programme. It is presented in three sections which correlate with the generation of data through observations and interviews at three points during the 2014-2015 academic year. Through these sections, Dominic's articulations around corporal punishment are considered alongside international, national and local perspectives.

## November

*"The teachers here carry the cane and say it is the only language that Ghanaian children understand. No, no, no, it's not the only language they understand. Now, there is this student, he is very difficult in class so I have taken him as my friend and I think this is one way of amending their behaviour. Some of them are stubborn so I try to get close to them and find out why. You have to learn about them and learn why they are disturbing in class - maybe there are challenges at home - and see how you can help them to react differently... it's about building a relationship with them and taking time*

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*to become their friend... If you befriend them they feel they can relate to you and there is no need to use the cane”.*

Corporal punishment<sup>2</sup> is legal in Ghana, although there are regular calls for the government to ban it (Kyei-Gyamfi 2011). In 2011 the Constitution Review Commission suggested that greater clarity be provided in relation to disciplining children, but did not recommend changing the law. In 2012 and 2016 reports were filed with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child which accepted recommendations to ban corporal punishment, but in their most recent report, the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (GIEACPC 2017) suggested that while the government was committed to law-reform there were no clear plans to mobilise these recommendations.

Ghana is not unusual in this respect. In fact, despite almost all countries globally signing up to the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child which emphasises protection of children from ‘all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse’ (UN 1990:7), only eight percent of children live in countries in which these guidelines have been enshrined in law (UNICEF 2014). In Ghana the law is rooted in the 1998 Children’s Act which states that ‘correction of a child’ must be justified and reasonable (Ghanaian Government 1998).

School-based corporal punishment is still legal in 76 countries (SRSG 2012). A large-scale survey of children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Viet Nam reported that 50-90% of children had witnessed a teacher administering physical punishment in the week prior to the survey (Orgando Portela and Pells 2015). While others have highlighted that some teachers, parents and even children believe that corporal punishment is linked to improved learning (Parkes and Heslop 2011; Morrow and Singh, 2014), Orgando Portela and Pells’ longitudinal research found that corporal punishment at age 8 is associated with poorer learning outcomes at age 12 (see also UNICEF 2014).

Ghanaian Government directives aim to limit the use of physical punishment in educational settings, and outline severe repercussions for perpetrators. The Ghana Education Service’s Child Friendly School Standards document states that school should be a ‘safe environment [...] free from intimidation, violence and abuse including corporal punishment’ (see GIEACPC 2017). The Teachers’ Code of Conduct (GES 2008) states that children ‘should be free from [...] harmful or degrading punishment and any type of violence’ (p.4) and that ‘physical harm inflicted on pupils/students [...] constitutes a gross violation of the child’s rights’ (p.8). Teachers should not ‘administer any act of corporal punishment, or any act that inflicts physical pain [...] or causes physical harm to their pupils/students’, ‘threaten any pupil/student with harm with intent to put that person in fear of harm’, and teachers should ‘intervene to stop a fellow teacher from perpetrating physical violence or abuse on another pupil/student’ (*ibid*). However, these directives contradict other documentation such as the Code of Discipline for Schools which aligns with the Children’s Act’s stipulation on ‘justifiable’ correction and authorises the head-teacher, or a person authorised by the head-teacher, to administer up to four strokes of the cane (Kyei-Gyamfi 2011).

The confusing policy and media narrative over the legality of corporal punishment (Dery 2017), combined with widely-held acceptance, maintains the practice. A 2006 study reported that 43 percent of mothers and care-givers in Ghana believed physical punishment was appropriate (MICS in Kyei-Gyamfi 2011). CAMFED research found that 64 percent of teachers said it must be tolerated,

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<sup>2</sup> UNICEF (2014:4) defines corporal punishment as ‘any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light’.

while 94 percent of parents and 92 percent of students were in favour of school-based corporal punishment (GNA 2011).

## February

*"It's not like we are teachers, they don't respect us like teachers so we need to think of ways to get respect... so I just became very strict. I had to. But we only use the cane when the children get really out of hand... I set some homework and less than half of the class had done it, maybe 19 out of 60 and I was very angry. So I had to make them aware that I was as strict and as serious as any other teacher so I actually did cane those who had not done their homework. I think they were sorry and I told them the next time I would cane them again and they are better now. The fear is enough now and I can continue my approach of trying to get close to them"*

Dominic had been posted to a rural government school with oversight from a wealthy Presbyterian church which owned the land. Unlike many schools in similar locations in Ghana, it had smartly-painted classrooms surrounding a manicured field. But the field was rented-out for corporate events and the children were not allowed to play on it – their break-time was confined to the concrete steps between the field and the school buildings. Fresh from the college and keen to *"make a positive change in these children's lives"* Dominic and his fellow student-teachers raised money to buy netball posts. But within hours of them being erected on the field, the head-teacher instructed the caretaker to remove them. Dominic's colleague found the posts broken behind one of the classrooms. The incident was never discussed between the student-teachers and the staff. The essence of this situation, where the student-teachers were un-informed about, unhappy with or frustrated by an aspect of their experience on the out-programme, but felt unable to challenge, or even discuss the issue publicly, was replicated multiple times in the data. Three further examples are presented to give a sense of the context in which Dominic was working:

- Student-teachers are supposed to observe the teachers, and have their own teaching observed by their mentor. But in Dominic's school the student-teachers were mainly left on their own to teach. During the pilot-research and the three days spent shadowing Dominic over the year, there were no examples of him working alongside his mentor: *"In terms of learning it would be ideal if we could be in the classroom with the mentor. But we don't have that kind of culture here"*. Dominic had a *"good relationship"* with his mentor and didn't want to *"spoil it by raising the issue"*.
- Because the student-teachers live on-site, they have to contribute to the electricity bill. But the bill includes electricity used for the corporate events which require lighting and sound-systems running for several hours at weekends. The student-teachers complained to a teacher who said she would raise it with the principal but she never did, so the student-teachers continued to pay the bill: *"we did everything we could"*.
- At certain points in the year a tutor came from the college to assess the student-teachers. During one visit Dominic was marked-down for not covering everything in his lesson-plan. Actually, he had covered it in the previous lesson, but he didn't explain this because *"it would be wrong to contradict a tutor"*.

School-based experiences, as part of the teacher preparation process, are widely advocated as a key component of the drive to improve teaching quality in low-income contexts (Commission for Africa 2005; Moon 2013). Across Sub-Saharan Africa intended benefits of the school-based component are written into policy, for example in South Africa: 'Time spent in the workplace is considered to be very important and should provide the authentic context within which student-educators experience

and demonstrate the competence developed in the [...] curriculum' (DoE 2000). In Ghana the out-programme aims to 'deepen principles in methodology [...] and reflection which leads to a dynamic, developmental concept of "professional competence"' (GES 2001, in Eshun and Ashun 2013), although subsequent reports highlight challenges around the logistics of the out-component<sup>3</sup> and recommend cutting it from three to two semesters (GES 2015). Since 2015 teacher-education in Ghana has been supported by the UK Government-funded T-TEL<sup>4</sup> programme, which maintains the importance of the out-programme: *'Teaching-practice is an essential component [...] to develop the required professional skills and competencies, and a positive attitude towards the teaching profession. Teaching-practice also provides the right environment for student-teachers to familiarise themselves with all the processes of the school setting, and to observe examples of good practice'* (T-TEL 2016:5).

Of course, not all student-teachers face the lack of opportunities for professional dialogue that Dominic and his colleagues did. Chapter 24 of this book describes the experiences of a student-teacher in The Gambia who worked with the principal to implement school-wide changes in policy and pedagogy. In a survey of student-teachers in Nigeria, Nwanekezi et al (2011) found that the majority reported positive relationships with teachers and a willingness to obey school rules and school authority. Many, however, experience a 'reality shock' (Akyeampong and Lewin 2002:344) amidst expected conformity to established practices, rigid hierarchies of seniority (Westbrook et al 2009) and a lack of support which can compromise professional identities and intentions. So, what does it mean for student-teachers like Dominic when the 'authentic context', 'good practice' and the 'competences developed in the curriculum' are at odds? And when the 'positive relationships' student-teachers have with the teachers are dependent on them not challenging contradictions between rules and authority? How might student-teachers develop professional capability within a context in which they struggle to articulate capabilities they aspire to?

## June

*"So what I have learned is that punishment – like caning - doesn't really work. You can punish them over and over again but their behaviour won't change. We were taught in the college about other forms of punishment, and they do not work either. I thought that if you give the child a reward their behaviour will change over time. But that doesn't happen either... When I am a professional teacher I will try not to use the cane, but if things get bad, if it calls for it then I will need to use it. Sometimes no punishment will work, but if they are used to the cane you have to use it – and even just carry it around with you - to show that you are serious".*

In an older study of Ghanaian teachers, Akyeampong and Lewin (2002) found that the longer a teacher had been in the profession, the more likely they were to promote the cane as a form of discipline. They suggested that training programmes didn't adequately cover alternative methods or approaches, and that school contexts weakened teachers' beliefs. Dominic's college did cover alternative methods of discipline, which shaped his sense of what it meant to 'be' a teacher. However, in the school an alternative sense of what it meant to be a teacher appeared to be fixed and resistant to change, and there were no spaces – physical, in terms of time or in terms of appropriateness – where opportunities for student-teachers and teachers to discuss alternative practices or alternative ways of being could arise. The student-teachers were not included in staff

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<sup>3</sup> Including student-teachers not being able to find accommodation, long distances between colleges and schools limiting opportunities for supervision from college tutors, and inadequate incentives or support for mentoring.

<sup>4</sup> Transforming Teacher Education and Learning.

meetings, and teachers never visited the student-teachers in their accommodation, where they spent their breaks. As seen above, attempts made by the student-teachers to open up these spaces were not welcomed by the teaching staff.

The socio-cultural framing of this study draws on the idea of learning as a ‘process of becoming’ (Wenger 1998:215): students develop as teachers through the possibilities enabled by relations within the learning environment. The capabilities framing adds that possibilities for being changed and for making change – based on a shared sense of what is valued and what is not - are shaped through negotiation within the community. Learning is a movement towards participation in valued ways of being a teacher (see also Murphy and Wolfenden 2013). Dominic’s last quote suggests that by the end of the year his valued ways of ‘being’ a teacher involved being serious and strict, and the cane – more than just a means of discipline – embodies the local cultural script around what a teacher is and does and has the potential to do.

Examples which resonate with Dominic’s experience, where student-teachers feel their own knowledge is ‘oppressed’ (Dahl 2014:159) and where innovative teachers are ‘punished by the system’ (Asare and Nti 2014:8) are widely reported across Sub-Saharan Africa. However, there are recent reports of programmes which emphasise student-teacher voice, and create spaces for professional dialogue between tutors, student-teachers and mentors. A teacher-preparation programme in Kenya, for example, introduced a participatory action-research module. An evaluation reported that student-teachers were able to ‘raise their voices’ in the usually ‘somewhat disempowering context of teacher training’ (Dahl 2014:172). A school-based apprenticeship model of teacher-development in Malawi explicitly incorporated ‘interactions with others’ and built in opportunities for discussion and reflection between apprentices and mentors. A report acknowledged that the quality of these discussions depended on the commitment of the mentor, but there were several examples of mentor-teachers reflecting on discussions with the apprentices and making changes to their own practice (Safford et al 2013).

These examples emphasise recognition of the understanding that changes in teaching and learning at school-level require relational change within teacher-education (Schwille et al, 2007), and suggest the need for broader epistemological shifts which challenge the assumed relationship between seniority and expertise. But this chapter concludes with an example of how Dominic and his colleagues exercise capability around the edges of this assumed relationship and contributes to the currently limited literature on creative ways student-teachers can ‘adapt the knowledge and skills they have acquired through formal training’ (Adu-Yeboah 2011:4) and ‘think outside the box as they scrutinise and critique their own teaching and that of other teachers’ (Asare and Nti 2014:8):

*“If other teachers are caning, it isn’t my place to tell them to stop. So my colleagues and I came up with a plan. What we do is save up punishments until the mentor is in the room. Then we use other methods that aren’t painful or violent, or we show the mentor that we are trying to understand the child rather than just cane them. So in a way we are trying to teach [the mentors] by showing them new ways without challenging their authority”.*

### **Further Reading**

Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (GIEACPC)

<http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/>

### **Questions**

**1** Find out whether corporal punishment in schools is legal/illegal in your country, and what directives there are for teachers in relation to discipline. Does current policy reflect your own experiences of school?

**2** There is much evidence to show that many people across the world think that corporal punishment is acceptable. But the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (GIEACPC) suggests that repeated polls, when questions are phrased differently, yield very different results. Can you design a short survey to understand people's views on corporal punishment? Reflect on the wording of the questions and the kinds of responses they might return.

**3** What are the different pathways to teaching in your country? In what ways is dialogue between student-teachers and tutors/mentors facilitated in these pathways?

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