

Beyond the Cane: Reimagining School Discipline in Fiji and the Pacific

Davendra Sharma 

Lecturer and PhD Scholar, University of Fiji, Fiji Islands

Doi <https://doi.org/10.55640/ijssll-06-04-03>

ABSTRACT

Corporal punishment has historically been embedded within schooling systems across Fiji and the Pacific, often justified as a culturally accepted method of maintaining discipline and authority. However, increasing global advocacy for child protection, alongside regional policy reforms aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, has intensified calls to critically reassess its role in contemporary education. This paper interrogates the continued use and perceived effectiveness of corporal punishment in addressing student behavioural challenges, arguing that it is neither pedagogically sustainable nor ethically defensible in modern learning environments.

Drawing on interdisciplinary literature, policy analysis, and emerging empirical insights from the Pacific context, the study highlights the adverse psychological, social, and educational consequences associated with punitive disciplinary practices. It further situates corporal punishment within broader ethical frameworks, particularly deontological ethics, utilitarianism, and the ethics of care, to demonstrate its incompatibility with principles of dignity, equity, and relational pedagogy. Importantly, the paper foregrounds the tension between entrenched cultural norms and evolving human rights discourses, emphasizing the need for contextually grounded yet transformative approaches to discipline.

In response, the paper advances a reconceptualization of school discipline through the lens of positive behaviour support, restorative practices, and culturally responsive pedagogy that resonate with Pacific values of respect, community, and reciprocity. It argues that effective discipline must move beyond compliance-driven models toward approaches that foster self-regulation, accountability, and holistic student development. The study concludes by offering policy and practice recommendations aimed at supporting educators, school leaders, and policymakers in transitioning from punitive to restorative and ethically grounded disciplinary frameworks.

Ultimately, this paper contributes to ongoing debates on educational reform in Fiji and the Pacific by positioning discipline not as control, but as a transformative process central to nurturing inclusive, respectful, and future-ready learners.

Keywords: Corporal punishment; school discipline; Fiji; Pacific education; restorative practices; positive behaviour support; ethics of care; culturally responsive pedagogy; student behaviour; educational reform.

INTRODUCTION

School discipline remains a central concern in education systems globally, shaping not only classroom order but also the broader goals of teaching, learning, and student development. In many contexts, including Fiji and the wider Pacific, disciplinary practices have historically been influenced by colonial legacies, socio-cultural norms, and institutional traditions that emphasize authority, obedience, and control (Thaman, 2009; Nabobo-Baba, 2006). Among these practices, corporal punishment has occupied a prominent position, often regarded as a legitimate and effective means of correcting student misbehaviour and maintaining school discipline. However, growing international scrutiny, evolving educational philosophies, and

increasing awareness of children's rights have prompted a critical re-evaluation of such punitive approaches.

Corporal punishment, typically defined as the use of physical force intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort as a form of discipline, has been widely debated in educational discourse. While some educators and community members continue to defend its use on cultural or pragmatic grounds, a substantial body of research indicates that corporal punishment is associated with a range of negative outcomes, including increased aggression, diminished self-esteem, and weakened teacher-student relationships (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; UNICEF, 2017). These findings challenge the assumption that physical punishment promotes positive behavioural change, suggesting instead that it may undermine the very educational objectives it seeks to

achieve.

In the Pacific region, the persistence of corporal punishment must be understood within a complex interplay of tradition, cultural values, and historical influences. Educational systems in countries such as Fiji were shaped during colonial periods that institutionalized hierarchical authority structures and disciplinary practices rooted in control and compliance (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). At the same time, indigenous Pacific value systems emphasize respect, relationality, communal responsibility, and moral guidance, principles that can both support and contradict punitive disciplinary approaches depending on their interpretation and application (Thaman, 2009). This duality creates a tension between maintaining cultural continuity and embracing progressive, rights-based educational reforms.

Internationally, the shift away from corporal punishment has been strongly influenced by human rights frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms the right of children to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence (United Nations, 1989). Many countries have responded by implementing legal bans and promoting alternative forms of discipline that are aligned with principles of dignity, respect, and child-centred pedagogy. In Fiji, policy discourse increasingly reflects these global trends, with growing emphasis on inclusive education, student wellbeing, and positive behaviour management, although implementation challenges remain (Ministry of Education, Fiji, 2020).

From an ethical perspective, the continued use of corporal punishment raises significant concerns. Within deontological frameworks, it may be seen as violating the inherent dignity and rights of the child, while utilitarian perspectives question whether its harmful consequences outweigh any perceived benefits. Similarly, the ethics of care emphasizes the importance of nurturing relationships, empathy, and trust in educational settings, values that are often compromised by punitive disciplinary practices (Noddings, 2013). These ethical considerations underscore the need to rethink discipline not merely as a mechanism of control, but as a relational and developmental process.

Contemporary educational research advocates for a shift toward alternative approaches to discipline that are both effective and ethically sound. Positive Behaviour Support (PBS), restorative practices, and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) have emerged as key frameworks for promoting constructive student behaviour while fostering supportive learning environments (Sugai & Horner, 2002; Morrison, 2007). These approaches prioritize prevention, skill-building, and relationship repair, aligning more closely with both international human rights standards and indigenous Pacific values of community and reciprocity. In particular, culturally responsive pedagogy offers a pathway for integrating local knowledge systems and values into

discipline practices, ensuring that reforms are contextually relevant and sustainable (Gay, 2018).

This paper, titled *"Beyond the Cane: Reimagining School Discipline in Fiji and the Pacific,"* seeks to critically examine the role of corporal punishment within contemporary educational settings and to explore viable alternatives that support positive student behaviour. The study is guided by three key objectives: (1) to analyse the historical, cultural, and policy contexts that have shaped disciplinary practices in Fiji and the Pacific; (2) to evaluate the effectiveness and ethical implications of corporal punishment; and (3) to identify and propose alternative approaches to discipline that are grounded in both global best practices and Pacific cultural values.

By situating the discussion within broader debates on educational reform, ethics, and cultural identity, this paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship that calls for transformative change in how discipline is conceptualized and enacted in schools. It argues that moving beyond corporal punishment is not simply a policy imperative, but a necessary step toward creating inclusive, respectful, and future-oriented education systems that nurture the holistic development of all learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising School Discipline

School discipline has evolved from traditional models of control and punishment toward more holistic approaches that emphasize student development, wellbeing, and social responsibility. Contemporary literature defines discipline not merely as the enforcement of rules, but as a pedagogical process of guiding behaviour, fostering self-regulation, and promoting ethical responsibility (Bear, 2010; Gregory et al., 2016). This shift reflects broader transformations in educational philosophy, particularly the movement from authoritarian to learner-centred and inclusive approaches.

However, in many contexts, including Fiji and the Pacific, discipline continues to be associated with compliance, authority, and punitive control, often reinforced by historical schooling systems and socio-cultural expectations (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009). This tension between traditional and progressive disciplinary paradigms forms a central theme in the literature.

Corporal Punishment: Definitions and Global Perspectives

Corporal punishment refers to the use of physical force intended to cause pain or discomfort as a means of correcting behaviour. Globally, it has been widely debated,

with increasing consensus among researchers and international organizations that it is ineffective and harmful (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

Empirical studies demonstrate that corporal punishment is associated with:

- Increased aggression and antisocial behaviour
- Poor mental health outcomes
- Reduced academic engagement

Furthermore, longitudinal research suggests that physical punishment does not lead to sustained behavioural improvement but instead contributes to cycles of violence and fear (UNICEF, 2017).

Corporal Punishment in Fiji and the Pacific Context

The persistence of corporal punishment in Fiji and the Pacific must be understood within a cultural, historical, and socio-political context. Studies indicate that corporal punishment is deeply embedded in both home and school environments, often perceived as a legitimate and even necessary form of discipline.

Across Pacific Island countries, corporal punishment remains highly prevalent. For instance, studies show that between 72% and 84% of children experience violent discipline in the home, reflecting its normalization within everyday social practices

. In Fiji specifically, approximately 81% of children experience some form of violent discipline, highlighting the scale of the issue

Cultural beliefs play a significant role in sustaining these practices. Corporal punishment is often justified as an expression of care, moral guidance, and parental responsibility, reinforced by religious interpretations and customary norms. This reflects a broader pattern in Pacific societies where discipline is intertwined with values of respect, obedience, and communal harmony.

However, this normalization of violence has significant implications. Research suggests that exposure to violent discipline contributes to:

- Intergenerational cycles of violence
- Reduced educational outcomes
- Long-term social and economic costs

Moreover, violence in schools is linked to broader patterns of bullying and aggression, which are reported at higher rates in Pacific countries compared to global averages

Policy and Legal Frameworks

In response to growing global concern, many countries have moved to prohibit corporal punishment in schools. In Fiji, corporal punishment has been legally banned since 2002

following a High Court ruling, and government policy continues to emphasize child protection and non-violent discipline. More recent policy discourse reinforces a zero-tolerance approach to corporal punishment, highlighting the importance of safeguarding children's rights and dignity

These developments are closely aligned with international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which mandates protection from all forms of physical and psychological violence (United Nations, 1989). Despite these policy shifts, implementation challenges persist, particularly in reconciling formal legal frameworks with deeply entrenched cultural practices.

Ethical Perspectives on Corporal Punishment

The literature increasingly engages with corporal punishment through ethical frameworks, highlighting its incompatibility with contemporary moral and educational values.

- Deontological ethics emphasizes the inherent dignity of the child, suggesting that physical punishment violates fundamental rights (Kant, 1785/2002).
- Utilitarian perspectives argue that the long-term harms of corporal punishment outweigh any short-term benefits.
- Ethics of care critiques punitive discipline for undermining trust, empathy, and relational learning (Noddings, 2013).

Collectively, these perspectives reinforce the argument that discipline should be educative rather than punitive, focusing on guidance rather than coercion.

Alternative Approaches to Discipline

A growing body of literature advocates for non-violent, evidence-based approaches to discipline that promote positive behaviour and holistic development.

Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)

PBS emphasizes proactive strategies, clear expectations, and reinforcement of positive behaviour. It has been shown to improve school climate and reduce behavioural issues (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

Restorative Practices

Restorative approaches focus on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships rather than punishing wrongdoing. These practices align closely with Pacific cultural traditions of reconciliation, such as *bulubulu* in

Fiji, which emphasizes forgiveness and community harmony (Thaman, 2009).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL programs develop students' emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and interpersonal skills, addressing the root causes of misbehaviour (CASEL, 2020).

Culturally Responsive Discipline

In Pacific contexts, culturally grounded approaches are essential. Scholars argue for integrating indigenous values such as:

- Respect (*vakaturaga*)
- Communal responsibility
- Relational accountability

These approaches provide culturally relevant alternatives to punitive discipline while maintaining social cohesion

Ongoing Debates and Tensions

Despite strong evidence against corporal punishment, debates persist in Fiji and the Pacific. Recent discussions indicate that some educators and community members advocate for its reintroduction due to concerns about declining student behaviour. Surveys suggest that a significant proportion of the population still supports corporal punishment, reflecting deeply rooted beliefs about discipline.

This highlights a critical tension between:

- Traditional authority-based discipline
- Modern rights-based and child-centred approaches

The literature suggests that resolving this tension requires not only policy reform but also cultural transformation, teacher training, and community engagement.

Table 1: Comparison of Corporal Punishment and Alternative Discipline Approaches

Aspect	Corporal Punishment	Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)	Restorative Practices	Culturally Responsive Discipline
Philosophy	Punitive, control-based	Preventive, behaviour-shaping	Relational, reconciliation-focused	Contextual, culturally grounded
Focus	Obedience and compliance	Behaviour modification and skill-building	Repairing harm and relationships	Respect for cultural norms and values
Role of Teacher	Authority figure enforcing punishment	Facilitator and behaviour coach	Mediator and guide	Cultural mediator and mentor
Student Role	Passive recipient of punishment	Active participant in learning behaviours	Active participant in dialogue and reflection	Active participant within cultural context
Impact on Behaviour	Short-term compliance; fear-based	Long-term behavioural improvement	Long-term relational and social development	Sustainable behaviour aligned with cultural identity
Psychological Effects	Fear, anxiety, resentment	Confidence, self-regulation	Empathy, accountability	Belonging, identity affirmation
Alignment with Child Rights	Often violates rights-based frameworks	Aligns with child protection principles	Strong alignment with rights and dignity	Aligns when culturally inclusive and non-violent
Suitability in Fiji/Pacific Context	Historically common but increasingly contested	Highly suitable with proper training	Highly suitable in collectivist societies	Highly suitable due to cultural resonance

Note. Compiled by the author based on literature from Bear (2010), Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016), Gregory et al. (2016),

Morrison (2007), Noddings (2013), Sugai and Horner (2002), and United Nations (1989)

LITERATURE GAPS

Despite the growing body of research on corporal punishment and school discipline, several significant gaps remain, particularly in the Fiji and Pacific context.

Limited Pacific-Centric Empirical Research

Much of the existing literature on corporal punishment is derived from Western contexts, with limited context-specific empirical studies in Fiji and the Pacific. There is a need for:

- Localised data on school-based discipline practices
- Comparative studies across Pacific Island countries
- Longitudinal research on behavioural outcomes

Insufficient Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

While Pacific values such as respect, relationality, and communal responsibility are frequently acknowledged, there is limited research on how these can be systematically integrated into formal school discipline frameworks. More work is needed to:

- Bridge indigenous practices with modern pedagogies
- Develop culturally grounded discipline models

Gap Between Policy and Practice

Although corporal punishment is legally banned in Fiji, evidence suggests that it persists in both homes and schools. This indicates a disconnect between:

- Policy frameworks
- Classroom realities

Research is needed to examine:

- Implementation challenges
- Teacher attitudes and practices
- Institutional accountability mechanisms

Limited Focus on Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development

There is insufficient research on how well teachers are trained to implement alternative discipline strategies such as restorative practices and PBS. Future studies should explore:

- Teacher competencies
- Professional development needs
- Classroom management challenges

Lack of Student Voice and Perspectives

Most studies focus on policy or adult perspectives, with

limited attention to students' lived experiences of discipline. Incorporating student voices is essential to:

- Understand the impact of disciplinary practices
- Develop more inclusive and responsive approaches

Emerging Issues: Digital Behaviour and 21st-Century Contexts

There is a growing gap in understanding how discipline frameworks address:

- Cyberbullying
- Digital misconduct
- Social media influences

This is particularly relevant in the context of digital transformation in Pacific education systems.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

This study is underpinned by a multidimensional conceptual framework that integrates ethical theory, behavioural theory, and culturally responsive pedagogy to critically examine school discipline practices in Fiji and the Pacific. The framework positions discipline not as a mechanism of control, but as a transformative, relational, and developmental process that shapes student behaviour, identity, and learning outcomes.

At its core, the framework is informed by three interrelated domains:

1. Ethical Foundations of Discipline
2. Behavioural and Educational Approaches to Discipline
3. Cultural and Contextual Influences (Pacific Context)

These domains interact to influence how discipline is conceptualised, enacted, and experienced within schools.

Ethical Foundations of Discipline

Ethical considerations provide a critical lens through which disciplinary practices are evaluated. This study draws on three key ethical traditions:

Deontological Ethics

Rooted in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, deontological ethics emphasizes duty, rights, and respect for human dignity. Within this framework:

- Students are viewed as ends in themselves, not as means to achieve compliance

- Corporal punishment is ethically problematic as it violates the inherent dignity and rights of the child (Kant, 1785/2002)

Utilitarianism

Associated with John Stuart Mill, utilitarianism evaluates actions based on their consequences:

- Corporal punishment is assessed in terms of overall harm versus benefit
- Evidence suggests that long-term harms outweigh short-term compliance (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016)

Ethics of Care

Developed by scholars such as Nel Noddings, the ethics of care emphasizes:

- Relationships
- Empathy
- Trust

From this perspective:

- Discipline should be relational and supportive, not punitive
- Teacher-student relationships are central to behaviour management (Noddings, 2013)

Synthesis of Ethical Perspectives

Together, these ethical frameworks suggest that:

- Discipline must respect human dignity
- Promote wellbeing and positive outcomes
- Be grounded in care and relational understanding

Behavioural and Educational Approaches to Discipline

The framework incorporates contemporary educational models that shift from punitive to developmental approaches.

Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)

PBS is a proactive, evidence-based framework that:

- Establishes clear behavioural expectations
- Reinforces positive behaviour
- Uses data-driven interventions

PBS conceptualises behaviour as learned and modifiable, emphasizing prevention over punishment (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

Restorative Practices

Restorative approaches focus on:

- Repairing harm

- Restoring relationships
- Promoting accountability

Rather than asking “*What rule was broken?*”, restorative practices ask:

- “*Who was harmed?*”
- “*How can the harm be repaired?*”

This aligns closely with Pacific communal values and traditional reconciliation processes.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL frameworks emphasize:

- Emotional regulation
- Empathy
- Interpersonal skills

These competencies address the root causes of misbehaviour, promoting long-term behavioural change (CASEL, 2020).

Integrated Behavioural Perspective

Collectively, these approaches conceptualise discipline as:

- Preventive rather than reactive
- Educational rather than punitive
- Developmental rather than controlling

Cultural and Contextual Influences: Pacific Perspective

A key dimension of this framework is the integration of Pacific cultural values and indigenous knowledge systems.

Indigenous Pacific Values

Scholars such as Konai Helu Thaman emphasize that Pacific education is grounded in:

- Respect (*vakaturaga*)
- Communal responsibility
- Reciprocity
- Relational accountability

These values shape expectations of behaviour and discipline in both schools and communities (Thaman, 2009).

Cultural Tensions in Discipline

The framework acknowledges a critical tension between:

- Traditional disciplinary practices (including corporal punishment)

- Modern rights-based approaches

This tension is influenced by:

- Colonial legacies
- Religious interpretations
- Societal expectations of authority and obedience (Nabobo-Baba, 2006)

Culturally Responsive Discipline

To address this tension, the framework advocates for:

- Integrating indigenous values into discipline practices
- Adapting global models (PBS, restorative practices) to local contexts
- Engaging communities in discipline reform

Conceptual Model of the Study

The conceptual framework can be represented as a dynamic interaction between three core components:

Inputs

- Cultural norms and values
- Policy and legal frameworks
- Teacher beliefs and practices

Processes (Mediating Factors)

- Ethical reasoning (dignity, care, justice)
- Behavioural approaches (PBS, restorative practices, SEL)
- Teacher–student relationships

Outputs

- Student behaviour outcomes
- School climate
- Student wellbeing and development

Proposed Relationship

- Traditional punitive practices (e.g., corporal punishment) → Short-term compliance but negative long-term outcomes
- Ethical and restorative approaches → Positive behaviour, improved relationships, and holistic development

Significance of the Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework contributes to the study by:

- Providing a theoretical foundation for analysing discipline practices
- Integrating global ethical theories with Pacific cultural perspectives

- Supporting the development of contextually relevant, non-violent discipline strategies

It also aligns with broader educational goals of:

- Inclusive education
- Student wellbeing
- 21st-century competencies

The conceptual framework positions school discipline as a multifaceted and context-dependent process, shaped by ethical considerations, educational practices, and cultural values. It challenges the continued reliance on corporal punishment and advocates for a transformative approach that is ethical, relational, and culturally responsive.

By integrating ethical theory, behavioural science, and Pacific epistemologies, the framework provides a robust foundation for reimagining discipline in Fiji and the Pacific—moving beyond control toward care, respect, and sustainable behaviour change.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

This section critically interprets the key themes emerging from the literature, conceptual framework, and contextual realities of Fiji and the wider Pacific. The discussion examines the continued presence of corporal punishment in relation to educational effectiveness, ethical considerations, cultural influences, and emerging alternatives. It also analyses the tension between traditional disciplinary practices and contemporary rights-based, learner-centred approaches. The analysis is guided by ethical theories, behavioural frameworks, and culturally responsive perspectives that underpin this study.

The Persistence of Corporal Punishment in Fiji and the Pacific

Despite legal prohibitions and policy reforms, corporal punishment continues to persist in both school and home environments across Fiji and the Pacific. This persistence is not merely a policy failure but reflects deeper socio-cultural and historical factors. Colonial education systems introduced hierarchical models of authority that normalized strict discipline and obedience, patterns that remain embedded in contemporary schooling practices (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009).

Furthermore, corporal punishment is often socially legitimized as a form of moral guidance and character building. In many Pacific communities, discipline is closely associated with respect, authority, and communal

expectations, where physical punishment is sometimes interpreted as an expression of care rather than harm. This cultural framing complicates reform efforts, as it positions corporal punishment not only as a pedagogical issue but also as a cultural and identity-related practice.

Effectiveness of Corporal Punishment: A Critical Evaluation

The evidence strongly indicates that corporal punishment is not an effective long-term strategy for improving student behaviour. While it may produce immediate compliance, it does not foster internalized self-discipline or positive behavioural change (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Instead, it is associated with adverse outcomes such as increased aggression, fear-based compliance, and weakened teacher–student relationships.

From a behavioural perspective, punishment-based approaches focus on suppressing undesirable behaviour rather than teaching appropriate alternatives. This aligns with Skinnerian behaviourist principles but fails to account for the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning. In contrast, contemporary educational research emphasizes that sustainable behaviour change requires skill development, emotional regulation, and positive reinforcement, rather than coercion (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

In the Pacific context, where relationality and community cohesion are central values, punitive approaches may undermine the very social fabric they aim to protect by eroding trust between teachers and students.

Ethical Implications of Corporal Punishment

Ethical analysis reveals significant tensions between corporal punishment and modern moral frameworks.

From a deontological perspective, corporal punishment violates the inherent dignity and rights of the child. Kantian ethics emphasizes that individuals must always be treated as ends in themselves, not as means to an end (Kant, 1785/2002). Physical punishment, by its coercive nature, risks instrumentalizing students as objects of control rather than respecting them as autonomous individuals.

From a utilitarian perspective, the long-term negative consequences of corporal punishment, psychological harm, reduced academic engagement, and potential normalization of violence, outweigh any short-term disciplinary benefits (Mill, 1863/2001; Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

The ethics of care, as articulated by Nel Noddings, further challenges punitive discipline by emphasizing empathy, relational trust, and nurturing interactions. Corporal punishment is fundamentally inconsistent with a care-based approach, as it introduces fear and power asymmetry into the teacher–student relationship, thereby weakening emotional bonds essential for effective learning (Noddings, 2013).

Collectively, these ethical perspectives suggest that corporal punishment is not only pedagogically ineffective but also morally problematic within contemporary educational systems.

Cultural Dynamics and the Pacific Context

One of the most significant insights from this analysis is the complex relationship between culture and discipline in Fiji and the Pacific. Cultural values such as respect (*vakaturaga*), communal responsibility, and obedience play an important role in shaping behavioural expectations in schools (Thaman, 2009).

However, the interpretation of these values in disciplinary contexts is not static. While some view corporal punishment as aligned with cultural norms of discipline and authority, others argue that authentic Pacific values emphasize relational harmony, care, and collective wellbeing—principles that can be better upheld through non-violent disciplinary approaches.

This creates a critical tension between:

- **Traditional disciplinary interpretations** that justify physical punishment
- **Evolving cultural and educational interpretations** that prioritize dignity, care, and holistic development

Reframing discipline through indigenous knowledge systems offers an opportunity to align modern pedagogical approaches with Pacific values, rather than positioning them in opposition.

Transitioning to Alternative Discipline Approaches

The literature strongly supports a shift toward alternative disciplinary frameworks that are both effective and ethically grounded. Approaches such as Positive Behaviour Support (PBS), restorative practices, and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) represent a paradigm shift from punishment to prevention and development.

PBS, for example, emphasizes proactive classroom management, clear behavioural expectations, and reinforcement of positive behaviour (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Restorative practices focus on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships, which aligns closely with Pacific traditions of reconciliation and communal accountability. SEL equips students with essential life skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, and conflict resolution (CASEL, 2020).

These approaches are particularly relevant in the Pacific context because they:

- Align with relational and community-oriented cultural values

- Promote long-term behavioural change rather than short-term compliance
- Foster inclusive and supportive school environments

Teacher Preparedness and Institutional Challenges

A critical factor influencing disciplinary practices is teacher preparedness. Many educators may lack adequate training in alternative discipline strategies, leading to continued reliance on traditional punitive methods. Teacher beliefs, classroom pressures, large class sizes, and limited resources further contribute to the persistence of corporal punishment. Institutionally, gaps between policy and practice remain a major challenge. Although policies discourage or prohibit corporal punishment, enforcement mechanisms, monitoring systems, and professional development opportunities are often insufficient. This results in inconsistencies in implementation and limited accountability at the school level. Addressing these challenges requires:

- Strengthened teacher education programs
- Continuous professional development
- Clear policy enforcement and support systems
- Leadership commitment at school and ministry levels

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this analysis have several implications:

1. **Policy Alignment and Enforcement**
Policies prohibiting corporal punishment must be supported by effective implementation strategies, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms.
2. **Teacher Professional Development**

Training programs should prioritize restorative practices, classroom management, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

3. **Cultural Engagement**
Reform efforts must involve communities, religious leaders, and cultural stakeholders to ensure that changes are contextually appropriate and socially accepted.
4. **Student-Centred Approaches**
Schools should adopt discipline models that prioritize student wellbeing, participation, and voice.
5. **Integration of Pacific Values**
Discipline frameworks should reflect indigenous principles of respect, reciprocity, and relational accountability, ensuring cultural relevance and sustainability.

Synthesis of the Conceptual Framework and Findings

The discussion confirms the validity of the conceptual framework guiding this study. Discipline in Fiji and the Pacific is shaped by the interaction of:

- Ethical considerations (dignity, care, justice)
- Behavioural approaches (PBS, restorative practices, SEL)
- Cultural contexts (Pacific values and traditions)

Corporal punishment emerges as a practice that is increasingly misaligned with these domains, whereas alternative approaches demonstrate stronger coherence with ethical principles, educational effectiveness, and cultural relevance.

Table 2: Key Strategies for Improving Student Behaviour in Schools

Strategy	Description	Theoretical Basis	Expected Outcomes	Implementation Considerations in Fiji/Pacific
Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)	A proactive approach that teaches and reinforces positive behaviours	Behaviourism and educational psychology	Reduced misconduct, improved school climate	Requires teacher training and policy support
Restorative Practices	Focus on repairing harm through dialogue, accountability, and reconciliation	Ethics of care and relational theory	Improved relationships, reduced repeat offences	Aligns well with communal and collective cultures
Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)	Development of self-awareness, self-management,	Developmental psychology	Improved emotional regulation and peer interaction	Needs curriculum integration and teacher capacity

	and interpersonal skills			
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	Teaching that incorporates students' cultural backgrounds and values	Constructivist and sociocultural theory	Increased engagement and inclusion	Essential in multicultural Pacific classrooms
Clear Behaviour Policies	Structured, transparent rules and consequences	Institutional governance frameworks	Consistency and fairness in discipline	Must be contextually adapted and well communicated
Teacher Professional Development	Continuous training in classroom management and ethics	Adult learning theory	Improved teacher competence and confidence	Requires institutional investment
Parental and Community Engagement	Involvement of families and communities in behaviour management	Ecological systems theory	Stronger support systems for students	Critical in Pacific communal societies

Note. Compiled by the author based on literature from Bear (2010), Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor (2016), Gregory et al. (2016), Morrison (2007), Noddings (2013), Sugai and Horner (2002), and United Nations (1989).

Conclusion of the Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that corporal punishment is neither an effective nor an ethically sustainable approach to school discipline in Fiji and the Pacific. While its persistence is influenced by cultural, historical, and institutional factors, there is growing momentum toward alternative disciplinary frameworks that emphasize care, respect, and holistic student development. Reimagining discipline requires not only policy reform but also cultural transformation, teacher capacity building, and community engagement.

Ultimately, moving “beyond the cane” involves redefining discipline as a constructive, relational, and developmental process that aligns with both global human rights standards and Pacific cultural values.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the continued use of corporal punishment within school discipline systems in Fiji and the wider Pacific, situating the discussion within ethical, cultural, educational, and policy perspectives. The analysis demonstrates that while corporal punishment has historically been embedded in both educational institutions and broader societal norms, its effectiveness as a strategy for promoting sustainable student behaviour is highly questionable. Evidence consistently shows that although it may produce short-term compliance, it fails to cultivate long-term

behavioural change, self-regulation, or intrinsic motivation among learners (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016).

From an ethical standpoint, corporal punishment is increasingly difficult to justify within contemporary moral frameworks. Deontological ethics emphasizes the inherent dignity and rights of the child, which are compromised through the use of physical punishment (Kant, 1785/2002). Utilitarian perspectives further challenge its use by highlighting the disproportionate long-term harms relative to any perceived short-term benefits (Mill, 1863/2001). In addition, the ethics of care underscores the importance of relational trust, empathy, and nurturing teacher–student relationships, all of which are undermined by punitive disciplinary approaches (Noddings, 2013). Together, these ethical traditions converge in rejecting corporal punishment as incompatible with the values of dignity, care, and justice that underpin modern education systems.

The study also highlights the complex cultural dynamics influencing discipline practices in Fiji and the Pacific. While corporal punishment is sometimes justified through cultural interpretations of authority, respect, and moral guidance, Pacific epistemologies also emphasize relationality, communal responsibility, and harmony—values that are more closely aligned with non-violent and restorative approaches to discipline (Thaman, 2009). This suggests that the persistence of corporal punishment is

not solely a cultural necessity but rather a result of evolving interpretations of tradition, shaped by historical, social, and institutional influences (Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

Importantly, the findings affirm that alternative disciplinary approaches—such as Positive Behaviour Support, restorative practices, and Social and Emotional Learning—offer more sustainable and ethically sound pathways for managing student behaviour. These approaches emphasize prevention, relationship-building, emotional development, and accountability, aligning with both global best practices and Pacific cultural values. As such, reimagining discipline involves a paradigm shift from punishment to guidance, from control to care, and from compliance to holistic development. In conclusion, corporal punishment cannot be considered an appropriate or sustainable solution to discipline challenges in Fiji and the Pacific. Moving beyond the cane requires not only policy reform but also a transformation in mindset, pedagogy, and institutional culture. Discipline must be reconceptualized as a developmental and relational process that supports the formation of responsible, respectful, and self-regulated individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to their communities.

WAY FORWARD

Reimagining school discipline in Fiji and the Pacific requires a coordinated, multi-level approach that integrates policy reform, teacher capacity building, cultural engagement, and community participation. The transition away from corporal punishment toward more constructive disciplinary frameworks is not merely a technical adjustment but a systemic transformation that involves all stakeholders in education.

Strengthening Policy Implementation and Accountability

Although many Pacific countries, including Fiji, have policies discouraging or prohibiting corporal punishment, implementation remains inconsistent. Moving forward, there is a need to:

- Strengthen enforcement mechanisms within schools
- Establish clear monitoring and reporting systems
- Ensure accountability at institutional and administrative levels

Policies must be supported by practical guidelines that clearly outline acceptable disciplinary practices and provide schools with structured alternatives. Alignment with international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child reinforces the importance of protecting students' rights and dignity (United Nations, 1989).

Teacher Professional Development and Capacity Building

Teachers play a central role in shaping classroom discipline practices. Therefore, continuous professional development is essential to equip educators with the skills and knowledge required to implement non-violent disciplinary approaches.

Training programs should include:

- Classroom management strategies
- Restorative practices
- Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)
- Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Teacher education institutions should also integrate these approaches into pre-service curricula to ensure that new teachers enter the profession with appropriate pedagogical competencies (Sugai & Horner, 2002; CASEL, 2020).

Integration of Culturally Responsive Discipline

Reform efforts must be contextually grounded in Pacific cultural values. Indigenous concepts such as respect (*vakaturaga*), communal responsibility, and relational accountability should be incorporated into discipline frameworks to ensure cultural relevance and acceptance (Thaman, 2009).

Rather than rejecting culture, schools should reinterpret and apply cultural values in ways that:

- Promote non-violence
- Encourage reconciliation and restoration
- Strengthen community ties

This approach bridges global educational standards with local epistemologies, creating a hybrid model of discipline that is both modern and culturally meaningful.

Adoption of Restorative and Preventive Approaches

Schools should progressively transition from punitive discipline to restorative and preventive models. Restorative practices focus on repairing harm, rebuilding relationships, and fostering accountability, making them particularly suitable for collectivist societies in the Pacific. Similarly, Positive Behaviour Support systems provide structured, evidence-based frameworks for preventing misbehaviour through clear expectations and reinforcement of positive actions. These approaches shift the focus from reacting to problems toward proactively building positive school environments.

Strengthening School Leadership and Governance

School leaders play a crucial role in shaping disciplinary culture. Effective leadership is required to:

- Model non-violent and ethical behaviour
- Support teachers in implementing alternative discipline strategies
- Foster a school-wide culture of respect and inclusion

Leadership training programs should emphasize ethical decision-making, inclusive practices, and the importance of aligning school policies with both national guidelines and global standards.

Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Sustainable change in disciplinary practices requires the involvement of parents, communities, religious leaders, and policymakers. Given that corporal punishment is often reinforced within homes and communities, awareness-raising initiatives are essential to shift societal attitudes.

Community engagement strategies may include:

- Public awareness campaigns
- Parent education programs
- Dialogue with cultural and religious leaders

Such engagement helps ensure that reforms are not perceived as externally imposed but are instead understood as collective efforts toward improving child wellbeing and educational outcomes.

Research and Continuous Evaluation

There is a need for ongoing research to monitor the effectiveness of alternative disciplinary approaches in the Pacific context. Future studies should:

- Examine student outcomes under restorative and PBS frameworks
- Explore teacher attitudes and experiences
- Evaluate policy implementation at school and national levels

Evidence-based decision-making will be critical in refining discipline policies and practices over time.

Final Reflection

The transition “beyond the cane” represents more than the elimination of corporal punishment; it signifies a broader transformation in how discipline is conceptualized, practiced, and experienced in schools. By integrating ethical principles, culturally responsive pedagogy, and evidence-based behavioural approaches, Fiji and the Pacific can develop discipline systems that are humane, effective, and aligned with the holistic development of learners.

Ultimately, the way forward lies in fostering educational environments that prioritize dignity, respect, care, and

accountability—ensuring that discipline becomes a tool for growth rather than a mechanism of control.

REFERENCES

1. Aristotle. (2009). *Nicomachean ethics* (W. D. Ross, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published ca. 350 B.C.E.)
2. Bear, G. G. (2010). *School discipline and self-discipline: A practical guide to promoting prosocial student behavior*. Guilford Press.
3. CASEL. (2020). *What is social and emotional learning?* Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>
4. Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
5. Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2016). Spanking and child outcomes: Old controversies and new meta-analyses. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(4), 453–469. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000191>
6. Gregory, A., Clawson, K., Davis, A., & Gerewitz, J. (2016). The promise of restorative practices to transform teacher-student relationships and achieve equity in school discipline. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(2), 325–353. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315602726>
7. Harman, G. (1975). Moral relativism defended. *Philosophical Review*, 84(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2184078>
8. Kant, I. (2002). *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals* (A. W. Wood, Trans.). Yale University Press. (Original work published 1785)
9. Locke, J. (1988). *Two treatises of government* (P. Laslett, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1689)
10. Mill, J. S. (2001). *Utilitarianism*. Hackett Publishing. (Original work published 1863)
11. Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, Fiji. (2020). *Policy on child protection in schools*. Government of Fiji.
12. Morrison, B. (2007). *Restoring safe school communities: A whole school response to bullying, violence, and alienation*. Federation Press.
13. Nabobo-Baba, U. (2006). *Knowing and learning: An indigenous Fijian approach*. University of the South Pacific.
14. Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
15. Rachels, J., & Rachels, S. (2019). *The elements of moral philosophy* (9th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
16. Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Harvard

University Press.

17. Sugai, G., & Horner, R. (2002). The evolution of discipline practices: School-wide positive behavior supports. *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, 24(1-2), 23-50. https://doi.org/10.1300/J019v24n01_03
18. Thaman, K. H. (2009). Towards cultural democracy in teaching and learning with specific reference to Pacific Island nations. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3(2), 1-9.
19. UNICEF. (2017). *A familiar face: Violence in the lives of children and adolescents*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/familiar-face>
20. United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>