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SCHOOL DETENTION IN FINLAND: A PILOT STUDY

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Abstract:

Although detention is one of the most popular methods of punishment in schools, it is being met with increasing criticism as an educational intervention. Few studies have explored its use to date; therefore, the present pilot study was planned to survey the popularity of detention. By analyzing a representative sample of comprehensive school teachers (N = 2,276) in Finland at grade levels 1-9, it was found that 30% of Finnish school teachers regularly use this punishment. Differences in use were observed across gender, age, and teacher category. These results provide a baseline against which future follow-up studies can be compared.

Keywords: after-school detention, classroom management, Finland, survey, teachers

1. Introduction

Detention is one of the classic forms of punishment used by school teachers. In detention, the student is typically obligated to attend a designated classroom and sit there for a specified period, usually without doing anything. In Finland, the Act on Basic Education (1998) determines that detention can last a maximum of two hours. Before its implementation, a student must be heard, and his/her guardians must be given an opportunity to be heard. According to the recent amendment, the student can be ordered to undertake school work during the detention hour (Act on Basic Education, 1998). Details concerning the use of detention differ from country to country. In Victoria, Australia, detention is not allowed to exceed forty-five minutes, and it must consist of school work (Victoria State Government, 2014). In the United Kingdom, the

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length of detention is not determined by law, but the punishment must be “reasonable” (Legislation.gov.uk, 1997).

Recent interviews with two Finnish school principals provided a glimpse of the current use of detention in schools (Knaappila, 2014). The principal of a comprehensive school described that the typical reasons for detention in his school were failure to do homework or being late for lessons. Instances of misconduct are tallied, and detention is ordered based on cumulative scores. A second principal, who was from a senior high school, stated that, in his school, the main reason for detention was unauthorized exit from the school area. Punishment was implemented every Wednesday after school hours (Knaappila, 2014). In both these schools, thus, detention was part of school-wide classroom management programs in which the rules were plainly framed, and the implementation of detention was institutionalized as part of the schools’ routines.

From the perspective of behavioral learning theory, detention comes close to a timeout procedure. Specifically, detention reminds isolation timeout in which the student is removed from the reinforcing environment to an environment where, hopefully, no reinforcers are available (Matson & DiLorenzo, 1984, p. 80; Wolery, Bailey, & Sugai, 1988). Timeout is considered a form of punishment even if it is not perceived as aversive as many other procedures (Costenbader & Reading-Brown, 1995; Turner & Watson, 1999).

While detention resembles isolation timeout, it has some distinctive characteristics. First, procedures that are normally called timeout entail short time periods. In most studies, the length of the timeout varies from five to 20 minutes. Timeouts as short as 10 seconds have been found to be effective (Matson & DiLorenzo, 1984, p. 81). Conversely, detention times typically start from about one hour. Second, because the effective use of punishment requires that the consequence be implemented immediately after the behavior occurs, timeout must be delivered as an instant consequence of behavior (Matson & DiLorenzo, 1984, p. 133). When detention is used, students may have to wait several days before the punishment is implemented. It is known that such a delay corrupts the efficacy of the procedure. Third, when using isolation timeout, the central issue is to remove the child from the reinforcers within the “time-in” environment. Timeout thus functions best in instances in which the child can clearly discriminate between these two conditions. For instance, if the unwanted behavior is maintained by the teacher’s attention, isolation timeout effectively removes those aspects of the environment that are responsible for sustaining the negative behavior. Conversely, when using detention, issues concerning reinforcement schedules are not generally observed. In some cases, detention may provide reinforcing stimuli that are not controlled for. These dissimilarities between timeout and detention demonstrate that the philosophy behind detention differs from that of timeout.

Timeout has been, at least in the past, one of the most widely used forms of punishments (Matson & DiLorenzo, 1984, p. 80). According to a study performed in the US, 71% of elementary school teachers and 51% of junior high school teachers used it (Zabel, 1986). Detention has, as well, been a firmly institutionalized procedure, as is evident in its insertion into school legislation in many countries. Detention was found to be the primary consequence for students in middle (26%) and high (28%) school in a study containing more than 1,500 schools nationwide in the U.S. (Spaulding et al., 2010). In a sample of 47 schools from Maryland and Ohio, detention was given to seven percent of students at the elementary level and 20% of students attending secondary school (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). In Finland, detention was applied in 85% schools of a sample of more than 1,000 schools (Peltonen & Sarpolahti, 2010). It was more frequently used in large schools and cities and was overall the most popular method of punishment. At the elementary level, detention was used, on average, five times a year in a population of 100 students, while at the secondary level, it was used ten times more often (Peltonen & Sarpolahti, 2010).

Timeout procedures have been shown to be generally effective in reducing a variety of unwanted behaviors (Matson & DiLorenzo, 1984, Turner & Watson, 1999), including disruptive classroom behavior (Grskovic et al., 2004; Vegas, Jenson, & Kircher, 2007). These studies have applied short-term timeout schedules, mostly to very young children.

Much less research has been conducted on the efficacy of detention as a punishment method. Overall, existing studies have not been able to validate it as an educational intervention. Isolation timeout punishment of durations between five to 60 minutes was investigated in a special school environment (Costenbader & Reading-Brown, 1995). Timeout was given as an immediate consequence of unwanted behavior, but the length of the timeout periods made it somewhat similar to detention practices. The program was not considered effective, and authors considered it likely that for some students, the procedure was actually rewarding because it provided an escape from demanding classroom situations. In another study, Atkins et al. (2002) observed that the use of school detention and suspension actually increased disruptive behavior in some students. After-school detention had no positive effects when used as a consequence of missing completion of homework (Conover, 1990) or when applied as a punishment for tardiness (Caldarella, Christensen, Young, & Densley, 2011).

While being a form of punishment, detention shares the disadvantages of most punishment procedures (Axelrod & Apsche, 1983; Matson & DiLorenzo, 1984), including the negative emotional side-effects of destroying teacher-student relationships and possible neglect of individual rights. Hence, the use of punishment has been increasingly debated (Kohn, 2006). In Finland, the media has begun to publish

news on schools that have announced a ban on the use of detention (MTV, 2015; Pölkki, 2015, January 13).

The problem seems to be that school teachers often do not have a variety of methods at their disposal to manage student misconduct. According to US school administrators, normal methods include conferences, parental notices, detention, suspension, and expulsion (Green & Barnes, 1993). In Finland, the Act on Basic Education (1998) allows the use of detention, written warnings, suspension, and expulsion for three months. Educational conferences were recently added to this list in the hope of encouraging teachers to use softer management methods for problematic behaviors (Act on Basic Education, 1998; MTV, 2015).

Recent demands from the teachers' trade union include greater leeway in implementing time-limited suspension (Nissinen, 2016, October 10). However, such measures may only shift the problems elsewhere. As confirmed by the policy statement of the American Academy of Pediatrics (2003), suspension and expulsion exacerbate negative side effects, such as academic deterioration, and in the worst cases, they cause student alienation, delinquency, crime, and substance abuse. Greater knowledge of positive behavior interventions (e.g., Sailor, Dunlap, Sugai, & Horner, 2011) would likely provide more permanent solutions to behavior problems. Unfortunately, the expertise concerning these methods remains limited among school teachers.

Given the lack of empirical evidence of its effectiveness, the use of detention seems to be determined by other factors, possibly including the prevailing school practices and personality characteristics of the teachers. An interesting dimension might be the child-centeredness of the teacher, an aspect raised in discussions, for example, by John Dewey (1902, pp. 7–9). In addition to learning, child- or learner-centeredness can be defined as including a focus on individual learners, their interests, backgrounds, experiences, and needs (Henson, 2003). Teachers who are more child-centered would be expected to use fewer severe forms of punishment, such as detention, than teachers who discipline by traditional means.

In view of the scarce literature on the use of detention as a punishment in schools, the present study was conducted to review the current situation in Finland. The aim of this study was to establish a baseline concerning the frequency of detention use, across which future studies could compare their results by considering the expected loss of its popularity. This study aimed to not only survey teachers who still use detention but explore how teachers who employ this method differ from those who do not. Of special interest are the associations of teacher category, age, and gender on a teacher's use of detention.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The study participants ($N = 2,276$) were school teachers ($n = 2,059$) and school directors ($n = 217$), all but 35 of which were also working as teachers. The sample consisted of classroom teachers ($n = 1,041$) working in grades 1–6, subject teachers ($n = 755$) working mainly in grades 7–9, and special education teachers ($n = 445$) working in grades 1–9. The age of their students varied between 7 and 16 years. Of all the participants, 80.5% were women. The participants' mean age was 47 years, and they had an average of 18 years of teaching experience. Compared with the teacher statistics from the year 2013 collected by the National Board of Education (Kumpulainen, 2014), the number of women in the sample (80.5%) was somewhat higher than in this data source (73.6%). Other comparisons could not be made.

2.2 Data Collection

The data were collected by 52 volunteer university students participating in the course on quantitative methodologies during their second year of teacher training. The participating students formed 29 groups of one to three students. Each group was given a sample of Finnish municipalities for data collection. A total of 223 municipalities were selected in alphabetical order from the list of 317 Finnish municipalities, excluding Swedish-speaking communities. The students collected the teachers' e-mail addresses from the schools' websites. In most cases, they were easily accessible. Approximately 12,245 e-mails containing the hyperlink to the survey were sent, and 2,416 replies (19.7%) were returned. Part of the questionnaires contained missing data. A total of 99 cases were excluded because they were neither teachers nor school directors. The cover letter specified that the survey was anonymous and that no participant could be identified. Most groups sent one reminder to the recipients. The university students participated in the data collection on a voluntary basis and used the data they collected for their personal study accomplishments.

2.3 Measures and Analysis

The questionnaire contained demographic questions as well as items relating to various aspects of school life, which are not reported here. The use of school detention was measured using the item "I use detention as a form of punishment," with "yes" or "no" as response alternatives. The use of group work was measured with the item "I use group work on a weekly basis in my classroom," with "yes" or "no" as response alternatives. The results were analyzed using the SPSS version 22. Statistical analyses using cross-tabulation, statistical tests, Pearson correlation coefficients, and Cohen's d

were applied. In order to compare teachers of different ages, the participants were divided into five age groups using deciles as cutting points.

3. Results

Detention was used by 30.5% of the teachers in the survey (Table 1). It was used almost two times more frequently among subject teachers who taught mainly grades 7–9 than classroom teachers who taught grades 1–6. Male teachers used it more frequently than female teachers, but this was dependent on the teacher category. Among subject teachers, no difference between genders was observed in the use of detention. The use of detention was also associated with the age of the teacher. Teachers who used it were younger (45.0 years) than those who did not (47.7 years), $t(2124) = 5.95$, $p < .000$, $d = .28$. Table 1 shows that in terms of percentages, the age groups differed distinctly from each other.

Table 1: The use of detention across gender, teacher category, and age group

Teacher category	N	No %	Yes %	Total %	χ^2	df	p
Classroom teacher					18.60	1	.000***
Male	197	63.5	36.5	100			
Female	821	78.2	21.8	100			
Subject teacher					1.51	1	.220
Male	172	62.8	37.2	100			
Female	546	57.5	42.5	100			
Special ed. teacher					13.67	1	.000***
Male	42	50.0	50.0	100			
Female	358	76.5	23.5	100			
Gender comparison					14.14	1	.000***
Male	411	61.8	38.2	100			
Female	1725	71.3	28.7	100			
Teacher categories					58.75	2	.000***
Classroom teacher	1018	75.3	24.7	100			
Subject teacher	718	58.8	41.2	100			
Special ed. teacher	400	73.8	26.3	100			
Age groups (deciles)					38.41	4	.000***
19-38	446	59.4	40.6	100			
29-45	476	66.4	33.6	100			
46-50	370	70.3	29.7	100			
51-56	478	74.5	25.5	100			
57-68	386	76.7	23.3	100			
Total	2136	79.5	30.5	100			

The use of detention was associated with the delegation of group work in the classroom. Subject teachers who delegated group work on a weekly basis used detention less often (31.3%) than those subject teachers who did not (45.8%), $\chi^2 (1) = 13.56, p < .000^{***}$. The same was true for special education teachers (20.1% against 29.5%), $\chi^2 (1) = 4.10, p = .043^*$, but not for classroom teachers (24.7% against 24.6%).

4. Discussion

Previous research has established that the use of detention is much more prevalent at the secondary school level than in elementary level classrooms. Detention has been recognized as the most popular method of punishment, especially in secondary school. In Finland, it was found to be most common in cities and larger schools. The present study surveyed the use of detention against the perspective of teacher characteristics and found that a large minority of teachers still use detention. This was true across all teacher categories.

As expected on the basis of previous research, subject teachers instructing the upper grade levels used detention more often than classroom teachers. Male classroom and special education teachers used it more frequently than their female colleagues while no gender difference was observed among subject teachers. The most frequent users of detention were male special education teachers, half of whom employed the practice. Previous research has found some other gender differences in terms of classroom management. It has been reported that male teachers focus more on maintaining authority in the classroom (Chudgar & Sankar, 2008) and are considered to have better classroom order than female teachers (Saloviita, 2016).

The age of the teacher was associated with the use of detention. Older teachers used it less frequently than younger ones; thus, the practice was most prevalent among teachers who were younger than 39 years and least prevalent among teachers who were older than 56 years. When gender and age were combined, it was found that about half of male teachers younger than 39 years used detention. Thus, young male teachers were most prone to maintaining their authority through punishment.

Subject teachers and special education teachers who delegated group work in their classrooms used detention less often than their colleagues. Group work has been presented as an example of child-centered pedagogy (UNESCO, 1994; 2009, p. 20). This connection gave tentative support to the idea that teachers who are more child-centered may use detention less often than other teachers. However, to establish firmer conclusions, the dimension of child-centeredness should be measured using a scale that consists of more than one item. No association between the use of group work and the use of detention was observed among classroom teachers.

The popularity of punishment procedures in education has generally been on the decrease. In Finland, the acceptability of physical punishment of children has dropped dramatically among Finnish adults from 47% in 1981 to 15% in 2014 (Sariola, 2014). Therefore, it appears that traditional forms of school punishment, such as detention, are also losing legitimacy, as manifested in public discussions (MTV, 2015; Pölkki, 2015, January 13). Such trends as positive behavior support (PBS) have been gaining ground as new means of treating unwanted behavior, substituting old forms of negative treatment (Carr et al., 1994; Koegel, Koegel, & Dunlap, 1996; Meyer, & Evans, 1989).

The present study had its limitations. One of them was the low response rate. Although the sample was large and covered the entire country, it was found to be biased, at least in terms of the mild overrepresentation of female teachers. The largest limitation was that detention was only studied through a single item. The results shed light on the use of detention in the schools, but a more versatile investigation would have been advisable. The percentages reported are the most important outcome and provide a baseline for future inquiries on the popularity of detention.

The present study indicated that younger teachers were the most frequent users of detention, while older teachers used it less frequently. The results of this study did not clarify the reasons why this was so. Therefore, further study is recommended. It would also be interesting to survey teachers on their experiences regarding the effectiveness of detention. Additionally, variables associated with its use regarding frequency and student and school characteristics would shed light on this common practice.

As acceptance of the most severe forms of punishment in education decreases, it can be expected that the number of schools and teachers who will use detention will decrease in the future. Milder forms of punishment, such as a short-term timeout, are less problematic, and they have proven to be effective when used correctly (Grskovic et al., 2004; Matson & DiLorenzo, 1984, p. 81; Vegas, Jenson, & Kircher, 2007).

Therefore, pre-service and in-service training on positive behavioral support methods for teachers are needed. As the use of detention programs often seems to be based on whole school planning, corresponding whole school approaches, such as school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports (SWPBIS), are needed (Childs, Kincaid, George, & Gage, 2015). Examples of their effectiveness are richly available (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010; Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012). Understandably, in developing these whole-school approaches, the school principals must play a central role as change agents.

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