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Corporal Punishment Resurfaces in Viral Video

Discipline or Dissonance: When the Classroom Breaks Trust

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Opening Reflection

Discipline is meant to guide, not to harm. In South Africa's classrooms, where learners carry the weight of history, trauma and hope, the way we correct behaviour speaks volumes about the kind of society we are building. When a teacher was filmed slapping learners at a school in Ladysmith, the video did more than spark outrage, it reopened a wound. It reminded us that the law may change, but culture takes time. And that trust, once broken, must be rebuilt with care.

What Happened

On 3 September 2025, a video surfaced showing a teacher at Dr Joseph Shabalala Secondary School slapping three learners on the head in front of their classmates. The footage, reportedly filmed by another learner, went viral, prompting swift condemnation from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education. MEC Siphso Hlomuka visited the school, affirmed that corporal punishment is illegal, and launched an internal investigation. SADTU also condemned the incident, calling it "very unfortunate" and reiterating that physical discipline is prohibited by law.

What It Reveals

This incident exposes a lingering tension in South African education: the gap between policy and practice. Corporal punishment was outlawed in 1997, yet it persists in pockets where stress, under-resourcing and cultural norms collide. It also reveals the fragility of learner safety, especially when discipline becomes public humiliation.

From a systems-thinking lens, this is not just a disciplinary failure, it is a relational breakdown. It reflects the need for trauma-informed training, restorative practices and leadership that models dignity.

Why It Matters

Learners deserve to feel safe, respected and heard. When discipline turns violent, it undermines not only their rights but their capacity to learn. It also damages the moral authority of educators and erodes the culture of care that schools must embody.

Philosophically, this touches on Ubuntu, restorative justice and child-centred pedagogy. Discipline must be developmental, not destructive. It must teach accountability without inflicting shame.

Reflective Responses

What does respectful discipline look like in South African schools?

It looks like listening before reacting, understanding before reprimanding. It means creating spaces where learners are corrected with compassion, not fear.

How do we support teachers under pressure?

By offering training in emotional regulation, classroom management and restorative approaches. By recognising that violence often stems from burnout, not intent.

What systems must be in place to prevent recurrence?

- Clear reporting channels for learners
- Regular staff development on legal and ethical discipline
- Peer support networks for educators
- Strong leadership that models non-violence

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Legal Context and Stats (2025):

- Corporal punishment was banned in South African schools under the South African Schools Act (1996)
- A 2023 DBE report found that 1 in 5 learners had experienced physical punishment at school
- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which South Africa is a signatory, prohibits all forms of physical and mental violence against children

“You cannot teach a child by hurting them. You teach by building trust, by modelling respect, by showing what it means to be human.” - *Prof. Jonathan Jansen*