

Original article

Tracing the Conceptual Transformation of Corporal Punishment in The Foundations of Modern Pedagogy

Mariana Arbeláez-Cataño  *

Faculty of Education, University of Antioquia, Colombia

Abstract

This article examines how corporal punishment was conceptualized, justified, and gradually displaced within the foundational texts of modern pedagogy. Designed as a theoretical genealogy, that is, a historically informed conceptual analysis that traces how ideas transform across a defined intellectual tradition, the study draws on the primary educational writings of five canonical figures (Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Herbart) and on the secondary scholarship that has interpreted their work. Sources were selected based on thematic relevance, philosophical proximity to the concept of punishment, and historiographical significance. The analytical procedure combines close textual reading of primary sources with a relational synthesis that traces conceptual threads across authors. The interpretive strategy is explicitly non-linear: it does not offer a chronological survey or a narrative of progressive abolition but argues that the transformation of punishment in modern pedagogical thought is best understood as a relational shift that goes from punishment as an instrument of school discipline (with Comenius) toward punishment as a technology of school governance (with Herbart). Throughout this transition, conceptions of the body, childhood, and schooling changed in tandem with the logic of punishment, not eliminating it, but displacing its moral architecture. The analysis situates these authors within their historical and philosophical contexts, identifies persistent gaps in the existing scholarship, and argues that studying the historical roots of punitive practices enriches contemporary debates on discipline, education, and child rights.

Keywords: Corporal Punishment, History of Education, Modern Pedagogy, Childhood, Discipline, Governance

Received: 04 May 2026 * Accepted: 22 July 2026 * Published: 25 August 2026

* Corresponding author:

Mariana Arbeláez-Cataño is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at University of Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia. Her research interests include Pedagogy, History, Arts and Philosophy. She has lived, worked, and studied in Medellín, Colombia.
Email: mariana.arbelaez@udea.edu.co

INTRODUCTION

Few practices have proven as enduring, or as contentious, in the history of education, as the physical punishment of children. For much of recorded history, administering pain to schoolchildren was not only accepted but actively prescribed, justified by religious authority, legal tradition, and pedagogical conviction alike (Durrant, 2022; Scott, 2006). The idea that pain could function as a learning mechanism, or that fear of the rod could prevent the repetition of offenses, circulated across centuries and cultures with remarkable tenacity, persisting in formal school practice well into the twentieth century (Middleton, 2008).

What makes this persistence historically striking is not merely its duration, but the gap it reveals between theoretical proscription and practical reality. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the emerging pedagogical literature was already calling for restraint, and punishment was to be moderate, impartial, and reserved for genuine moral failures. Yet, testimony from schoolchildren and teachers of that era consistently tells a different story in which punishment was arbitrary, frequent, and structurally embedded in daily school life (Middleton, 2008). This gap between what was prescribed and what was practiced suggests that the intellectual evolution of punishment is not simply a story of progressive enlightenment, but a history of conceptual displacement and reinvention.

The present article approaches this problem through the lens of nine foundational texts of modern pedagogy that Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Herbart wrote. They are chosen because they are the most cited as the basis of modern educational thought, and their writings span a period that goes from the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, in which attitudes toward childhood, the body, and the purposes of schooling underwent a decisive transformation. In this research, we delve into: *The School of Infancy* (1630/1956), *The Great Didactic* (1657/1907) and the *Pampedia* (1662/1992) from Comenius; *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693/1830) from Locke; *Emile or On Education* (1762/1918) from Rousseau; *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children* (1801/1894) and *Letters on Early Education* (1827/1898) from Pestalozzi; and *The Science of Education* (1806/1908) and *Outlines of Educational Doctrine* (1835/1904) from Herbart. Reading their work against the secondary literature that has studied them, we identify a conceptual trajectory that has not yet been fully articulated, because punishment in these authors is reconceptualized as modern pedagogical theory shifts its operative logic from discipline to governance.

Our argument is not that these five authors share a unified theory of punishment, but that it is possible to read them relationally rather than comparatively, tracing the conceptual threads that connect and distinguish their positions. This relational reading reveals a discernible conceptual trajectory that no single-author study has been able to capture in its full contour, and also surfaces the anthropological and moral assumptions that underlie each position. The assumptions about punishment often refer to the nature of the child's body, the purposes of schooling, and the legitimate uses of authority in educational

settings. However, as stated before, this selection of thinkers is not arbitrary, because Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Herbart are representative names for the canonical history of modern pedagogy (Dussel & Caruso, 1999; Thomas, 2021). Comenius represents the foundational moment of systematic didactic theory; Locke provides the empiricist-philosophical grounding of modern educational thought; Rousseau introduces the child-centered turn that would define progressive pedagogy; Pestalozzi translates Rousseau's insights into institutional and affective practice; and Herbart produces the first fully systematic science of education. Each of these contributions was decisive, and the passage between them is precisely what makes this relational reading possible. Other canonical figures such as Schleiermacher, Fröbel, or Durkheim are also pedagogically significant, but Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Herbart establish the most appropriate corpus for the conceptual argument being developed.

In doing so, this article contributes to a body of scholarship that is wider than pedagogical history alone. Contemporary debates over school discipline, restorative justice, and the rights of children remain entangled with the conceptual inheritance of these authors, whether or not this connection is explicitly recognized. As one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly calls for ending all forms of violence against children, the theoretical genealogy of punishment in educational thought is not merely an academic exercise but a contribution to ongoing ethical and policy deliberations.

The article proceeds as follows. It first establishes a conceptual framework organized around three interlocking concepts, namely body, childhood, and schooling, which are constitutive of what punishment means pedagogically. It then provides a brief historical backdrop situating the five authors within longer punitive traditions. In the central sections, it examines each author, tracing how conceptions of the body, childhood, and schooling shape that author's understanding of punishment and its limits. It then offers a synthesis that reinforces the relation between the five thinkers and articulates the movement from discipline to governance. Finally, it identifies gaps in the existing scholarship and proposes directions for further research. Throughout, the central claim is that corporal punishment in modern pedagogical thought was not abolished but displaced, interiorized, and reframed. This is why a discernible conceptual trajectory connects the five authors even though their educational philosophies differ in significant ways.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Corporal punishment in historical context

The word "punish" derives from the Latin *castigare*, meaning to lead toward purity or to correct deviation (Mejía Correa, 2019). This etymology already encodes the moral teleology that has historically governed the practice: punishment is not mere harm but directed harm in the service of moral reformation. What counts as punishment, however, is not a stable category, because the nomenclature of punishment is culturally freighted, and the terms through which it is named (e.g., "corporal

punishment”, “physical discipline”, “violence in the name of correction”) are not interchangeable (Garbarino, 2005). Their different connotations carry different moral valences, and the choice between them has always been a choice about what the practice means and who bears responsibility for it.

For present purposes, we adopt the definitional framework provided by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2007), which defines “corporal” or “physical” punishment as any punishment in which physical force is used with the intention of causing some degree of pain or discomfort, however slight. This includes striking children in any manner, as well as other physically coercive practices such as forcing children into uncomfortable positions, compelling them to ingest unpleasant substances, or causing burns. The definitional breadth of this formulation itself is historically significant, and contemporary definitions enumerate what past centuries often normalized or rendered invisible.

It is also important to note that corporal punishment, as a concept, cannot be cleanly separated from the broader disciplinary economies of schooling. As Dussel and Caruso (1999) remind us, the school has always been creative in punishing, for example: kneeling on corn kernels, holding a stomach full of water for hours, standing with arms extended in a cross, the ruler striking the fingers, pulling the ears or the hair. All of these are techniques applied to the body that, through repetition, become naturalized and practically invisible for everyone. The line between punishment and discipline, between what is administered as correction and what is simply enforced as order, has always been blurred. This blurring is itself part of what the modern pedagogical tradition sought, with uneven success, to negotiate.

Three interlocking concepts: body, childhood, and school

An adequate understanding of punishment in modern pedagogy requires attending simultaneously to three concepts that modernity invented, in the precise sense of bringing them into new theoretical focus: body, childhood, and school. These are three constitutive concepts for what punishment means pedagogically. To inflict punishment on a schoolchild is already to operate within a set of assumptions about what the child's body is, what childhood is, and what the school is for.

The body, as a concept, is a distinctive theoretical object that emerged in Europe between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, precisely the period in which Comenius and Locke were writing. Le Breton (2021) argues that the concept of “modern body” was born in a markedly dualist context in which body and soul were conceived as separable, even opposed. He also notes that the rationalization of the world during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries carried with it a corresponding rationalization of corporeal conceptions. Punishment, in this context, is not simply applied to a passive physical surface; it addresses a body that is already invested with particular meanings (as the seat of vice, as the medium of divine correction, or as the locus of obedience to be inscribed).

Childhood, similarly, is a concept with a relatively recent origin. Ariès's (1987) foundational work established the now-common observation that the medieval child was treated as a small adult, and that

the differentiation of childhood as a protected and developmentally distinct phase of life is a modern achievement. Narodowski (1994) refines this point by emphasizing that childhood is a social and historical category whose content varies with the circumstances in which it is named. The transition from the late medieval to the early modern period brought a new sensibility where children began to be “infantilized”, individuated from adult society, and placed in a position of recognized dependence and formative need. This transformation created the conditions for modern pedagogy as a specialized discourse addressed particularly to the child and to those responsible for governing her.

The school, finally, is the institutional frame in which the other two concepts converge. What we now understand as “school” is itself a modern construction, even if forms of institutionalized instruction existed long before. The school as a site of deliberate and systematic formation where children are separated from adult society, subjected to a curriculum, and placed under the authority of a teacher is the specific institutional context in which the pedagogical treatment of punishment is most fully articulated. It is also the context in which the distance between theory and practice has been most vividly exposed. The concepts body, childhood, and schooling do not function as mere contextual backdrop in what follows; they constitute the analytical grid through which each author’s engagement with punishment is examined. In the sections dedicated to each author, we ask consistently: what conception of the child’s body underlies this theory of punishment? What image of childhood does it presuppose or produce? And what institutional purposes does the school serve in justifying, limiting, or displacing punitive practices? Holding these three guiding questions constant across all five authors is what transforms a series of individual analyses into a coherent conceptual trajectory.

HISTORICAL BACKDROP: BEFORE THE AUTHORS

If the history of schooling begins with the Sumerians, then so too does the history of school punishment (Torrecilla Hernández, 1998). In ancient Mesopotamia, the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi established punishments for children who struck their fathers, and yet the same code afforded slaves better treatment than it did children (Durrant, 2022; Torrecilla Hernández, 1998). The juxtaposition is historically instructive, because where the child’s body was concerned, the rod preceded the law.

In classical antiquity, Plato and Aristotle defended the moral utility of using corporal punishment on children, grounding it in theories of virtue formation and habituation (Lenta, 2017; Mishra, 2022). Quintilian represents the first clearly documented opposition to punishment, and he rejected its pain and fear, arguing that physical punishment equated children with slaves and produced not virtue but resentment (Durrant, 2022; Scott, 2006; Thomas, 2021; Torrecilla Hernández, 1998). Quintilian’s dissent, however, remained marginal. In Roman school-forms, the *ferula* was standard equipment, and the accounts of authors such as Horace, Augustine of Hippo, and Juvenal record corporal punishment as a kind of initiation into the educated classes, a rite of passage rather than an anomaly (Parsons, 2018; Thomas, 2021). Furthermore, in Late Antiquity, it became legally permissible for parents to strike their

children as a form of discipline; however, this was not culturally accepted, as it was considered a humiliating practice typical of slavery, one that ran counter to social expectations of proper child-rearing (Hillner, 2009; Saller, 1991).

The medieval period extended this logic, furnishing it with theological grounding. For Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, corporal punishment served a divine function: it corrected the innate wickedness of children (conceptualized through the doctrine of original sin), and redirected their souls toward salvation (Parsons, 2015; Smith, 2014). Parsons (2015, 2018) traces how this spiritual economy of punishment expanded through the early centuries of Christianity, with the rod acquiring both moral and eschatological significance: it was thought to save two souls simultaneously (the chastised child, redirected from vice, and the teacher, rewarded for the act of correction). Also, the proverbial formulation “spare the rod and spoil the child”, derived from Proverbs 13:24, encapsulated this conviction with memorable economy (Bunge, 2024).

But not everyone accepted these justifications without qualification. Saint Paul, Montaigne, and Erasmus of Rotterdam all called for moderation or critique (Torrecilla Hernández, 1998). Montaigne described classrooms as “prisons of captive youth” and advocated for what he called “severe sweetness”, and Erasmus held that resort to physical punishment revealed the teacher's lack of genuinely effective disciplinary technique. These voices represent early dissenting positions that would later find fuller theoretical elaboration in the authors examined below. The pre-modern traditions reviewed here establish the moral economy within which the modern pedagogical treatment of punishment must be understood. This refers to a world in which the rod was not a failure of pedagogy but its instrument, not a symptom of a teacher's inadequacy but proof of his moral seriousness. What changes with the modern authors is precisely this presupposition, and with it, the body, childhood, and schooling are all redefined.

THE PEDAGOGICAL CANON AND THE PROBLEM OF PUNISHMENT

Comenius: discipline as the condition of education

John Amos Comenius (1592–1670) is conventionally positioned as the first systematic theorist of modern pedagogy, and his treatment of punishment reflects the transitional character of his historical moment. Writing in the seventeenth century, Comenius grounded his educational philosophy in a theological vision of humanity as fallen but perfectible, and this anthropological premise directly shaped his account of discipline and punishment.

For Comenius, discipline was not an incidental feature of schooling but its enabling condition. As Herrera Beltrán (2020) shows in her reading of *The Great Didactic* (1657/1907), discipline for Comenius was oriented toward the correction of moral faults, known as deviations from virtue understood in relation to a divine moral order. Within this framework, Comenius proposed a graduated schema in which punishment occupied the highest, most extreme position: it was the last recourse, to be employed only when constant observation and verbal correction had failed.

Comenius's goal was explicitly to remove the instruments of physical punishment from the classroom, and he insisted that reason should guide the individual, never violence (Norlin, 2020). Any method departing from rationality was, in his view, a direct insult to God. Comenius (1657/1907) himself expressed this with notable directness in *The Great Didactic*:

For our enemy Satan is on the watch not only while we sleep, but also while we wake, and as we sow good seed in the minds of our pupils he contrives to plant his own weeds there as well ... We must therefore strive against them by means of discipline, that is to say, by using blame or punishment, words or blows, as the occasion demands. (p. 216)

This passage reveals the theological frame that authorizes punishment while simultaneously revealing its logic. There, he established that discipline responds not to pedagogical failure but to moral threat, that the school is a field of spiritual contest, and that the teacher's authority to punish derives from the same moral economy that authorizes God's correction of the fallen. Crucially, it is a position in which punishment is not a technology of will-formation (as it will become in Herbart) but an act of moral and spiritual intervention.

Norlin's (2020) study of Comenius and school discipline is particularly illuminating here. He contextualizes Comenius' position within the pious and moral education of the seventeenth century and argues that researchers who restrict "modernity" to the nineteenth-century context frequently misread the conceptual stakes of earlier modern authors. For Comenius, the school was a moral and theological project, and punishment's role within it could only be understood in relation to that larger telos. Finally, Norlin (2020) also identifies a dimension of Comenius' thought that remains underexplored: the connection between discipline and what Comenius conceptualized as piety: the aspiration to shape children not only through external constraint but through an internalized orientation toward God.

Locke: from fear to moral agency

John Locke (1632–1704) represents a decisive shift in the philosophical grounding of educational thought, even as his practical recommendations on punishment retain notable ambiguities. His foundational commitment in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693/1830) is empiricist, and there the child enters the world as a "blank slate", without innate ideas or innate moral disposition. Under these circumstances, education appears to be the process by which experience inscribes character, and this has direct implications for punishment.

If character is formed by experience, then the manner in which punishment is experienced matters enormously. Locke's objection to corporal punishment was not primarily moral but psychological and pedagogical. For him, physical punishment produced fear and pain, and fear and pain were not reliable moral teachers; they taught children to avoid detection rather than to develop the rational moral agency that Locke held to be the true goal of education (Boeker, 2023; Waldow, 2020). His preference was for governance through reason and example, for making children understand the moral consequences of

their actions rather than simply conditioning them through aversion. As Locke himself argued, routinizing punishment destroyed its utility and created a cycle of offense, correction, and forgiveness that naturalized bad behavior but did not extinguish it.

Nonetheless, Locke did not categorically reject corporal punishment. Tuckness (2010) identifies the specific condition under which Locke endorsed it: when a child's rebelliousness had become a systematic refusal of all authority, making reproof indispensable. This is a significant qualification, for it reveals that even in Locke's framework, the body remained an available site of correction when reason failed or when it had not yet been sufficiently formed. Waldow's (2020) analysis extends this point by arguing that, for Locke, subjects' capacity to understand themselves as moral agents was precisely what made the meaning of rewards and punishments comprehensible to them. Punishment was thus embedded within a broader theory of moral subjectivity, rather than standing as a simple corrective instrument. According to Locke (1693/1830):

The smart of the rod, if shame accompanies it not, soon ceases, and is forgotten, and will quickly, by use, lose its terror ... ; for it is shame of the fault, and the disgrace that attends it, that they should stand in fear of, rather than pain, if you would have them have a temper truly ingenuous. (p. 98)

This raises the question that Locke's framework does not fully resolve: what does it mean that the body remains the last available site of correction precisely when reason fails? If the pedagogical project is to form rational moral agents, the persistence of corporal punishment as an exception reveals the limit of that project, a limit built into the theory itself. The body is demoted from its role as the primary locus of discipline (as in Comenius), but it is never fully evacuated; it returns as the residual resource of authority when rational governance breaks down. In this sense, Locke's position is philosophically transitional, and it presupposes the body's educability while preserving its availability as a site of coercion.

Rousseau: nature, consequence, and the refusal of authority

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) radicalized the child-centered tendencies implicit in Locke's work, producing an account of education and punishment that diverged sharply from what preceded it. Where Locke posited a blank slate to be inscribed through controlled experience, Rousseau posited a naturally good child whose development could only be corrupted by premature social imposition, an anthropological wager with radical consequences for the theory of punishment.

In *Emile or On Education* (1762/1918), Rousseau argued that if children were naturally good, there was no innate wickedness to correct and no fallen nature to discipline back toward virtue. The “negative education”, as his pedagogical proposal, consisted precisely in removing obstacles from the child's natural development. Rousseau did not see the need to actively shape a child through teaching and correction; instead, he recognized the importance of nature in these processes. Punishment, in this framework, was not abolished but relocated and, in a certain way, naturalized. He believed that children

who acted imprudently would suffer the natural consequences of their actions, and those consequences would constitute their lessons:

Keep the child dependent on things alone, and you will have followed the order of Nature in his education. Offer to his indiscreet caprices only physical obstacles or punishments which result from his actions themselves, and which he recalls on occasion. Without forbidding him to do wrong, it suffices to prevent him from doing it. Only experience or want of power should serve as law for him. (Rousseau, 1762/1918, pp. 46-47)

This was what Rousseau called the “law of necessity”, in which only experience and the absence of power over nature should serve as law for the child (Nazar, 2021; Thomas, 2021). In addition, Mintz (2012) offers one of the most careful readings of Rousseau's position on punishment, examining how the prospect of a “barbaric education” premised on tears, threats, and coercion was, for Rousseau, not merely pedagogically ineffective but morally destructive: it condemned children to a future of misery and deprived them of the experience of genuine happiness.

Rousseau also objected to Locke's system of rewards and punishments on the grounds that it subjected children to adult normative standards they were not yet capable of understanding (Nazar, 2021). The child's moral development, in this view, could not be accelerated through external sanction; it required time, experience, and freedom from premature authority. Yet Rousseau's rejection of overt punishment does not resolve the problem of authority. In his view, Emile's education involves extensive adult orchestration of his environment, where the tutor controls what he sees, what he encounters, and what consequences he experiences. The child appears free, but his freedom is carefully staged. This is what might be called the coercive paradox in Rousseau's pedagogy: the rejection of visible punishment is compatible with, indeed may require, an even more pervasive form of adult control over the conditions of experience. Punishment is naturalized, but nature itself is managed. In terms of body, childhood, and schooling, Rousseau's child has the most autonomous body of the five authors studied, but that body's autonomy is secured by an invisible architecture of supervision that Foucault (2002) would later theorize as the hallmark of modern disciplinary power.

Pestalozzi: care, sentiment, and the limits of the rod

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) received Rousseau's influence directly, but his theorization of punishment was shaped equally by the Romantic emotional sensibility of his era and by the practical exigencies of working with impoverished children. *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children* (1801/1894) and *Letters on Early Education* (1827/1898), his two key pedagogical texts, reveal an author for whom the affective dimensions of education were foundational, and for whom the classroom as a space of care was the operative ideal.

Scribner and Warnick (2021) situate Pestalozzi's appearance at the moment of Romantic emotional sensibility, arguing that this cultural context rendered resort to corporal punishment

intellectually untenable for authors like him. Together with Rousseau and Fröbel, Pestalozzi promoted a vision of childhood that privileged care over correction, gradually assimilating the classroom to the protective domestic sphere of the middle-class home. His criticism of traditional school-keeping method that relied on rote repetition, setting tasks, and “*warning* and *chastising* with the rod when the tasks were not learnt” (Pestalozzi, 1801/1894, p. 44), was grounded in his direct observation that such methods left children idle, bored, and prone to mischief. In other words, corporal punishment was not only morally objectionable but also pedagogically counterproductive.

Still, Pestalozzi's rejection of corporal punishment was not categorical. He acknowledged that physical punishment, while cruel, might not be entirely inadmissible under all circumstances. What he did insist was that discipline should not rest on the fear of punishment, which he regarded as a negative and unreliable moral brake. He stated that education required internal unity, coherence, and deep knowledge of human nature rather than the arbitrary concatenation of “admonitions and corrections, rewards and punishments” (Pestalozzi, 1827/1898, p. 79). Allen (2017) and Dussel and Caruso (1999) usefully note that, like Locke and Rousseau, Pestalozzi placed observation and perception at the center of the learning process, a commitment that aligned with his turn away from externally imposed punishment and toward understanding the individual child. What Pestalozzi adds, however, is a reconceptualization of the child's body that goes beyond Locke's empiricist “mind embodied” and Rousseau's naturalist body-as-first-medium-of-experience.

For Pestalozzi in particular, the body is no longer primarily the object of correction, because it is part of a broader developmental and emotional whole. The school's task is not to discipline the body into submission but to create conditions in which body and mind develop together. This reimagining of the school as a space of care rather than correction is Pestalozzi's most enduring contribution to the displacement of corporal punishment from the pedagogical repertoire. In conclusion, we identify in Pestalozzi not a philosophical argument against punishment but an institutional alternative to it.

Herbart: government, will, and the memory of the rod

Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841) occupies a pivotal and underappreciated position in the genealogy of pedagogical thinking about punishment. Herbart represents a more complex case in terms of the main topic. Unlike Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, and Pestalozzi, Herbart appears as a rigorous systematizer of pedagogy who neither simply endorsed traditional punishment nor categorically rejected it but integrated it into a comprehensive theory of school governance.

Herbart's pedagogical system, as analyzed by Dussel and Caruso (1999), Hudson (1946), and Huarte Cuéllar (2012), was organized around a triadic relationship among teacher, student, and knowledge, and oriented toward the moral formation of the will as its highest aim. Like Kant (whose chair in philosophy at the University of Königsberg he inherited), Herbart held morality to be the ultimate purpose of education. But his treatment of governance, instruction, and discipline as the three

constitutive elements of pedagogy gave the problem of authority and obedience a systematic treatment that was largely absent in the discourses of his predecessors.

In *The Science of Education* (1806/1908), Herbart argued that governance was the precondition for instruction and discipline: the mind bowed to authority, and the first move of all governance was therefore the threat of punishment. This was not a naive defense of coercion, but a recognition of the practical conditions under which educational authority operated. In *Outlines of Educational Doctrine* (1835/1904), he elaborated his position with characteristic precision. There, the coercion of freedom was the most common form of punishment, and the goal was not to eliminate corporal punishment but to instill a profound fear of it, such that its memory alone would operate as a deterrent. He considered it harmful to destroy a child's self-respect through actual blows, yet saw nothing problematic in the lasting mental impression of having received them:

Recollection of the rod does not hurt a boy. Nor is there any harm in his present conviction that a flogging is henceforth as much beyond the range of possibility as his meriting such treatment. But it would, no doubt, be injurious to actually violate his self-respect by a blow, however little he might mind the physical pain. (Herbart, 1835/1904, p. 34)

This position is philosophically striking, and it has received very little sustained attention in secondary literature. Wilson (1971) and Dussel and Caruso (1999) identify Herbart as one who approved of corporal punishment within his broader framework, but none of them examines the philosophical texture of this approval. Huarte Cuéllar (2012) and Hudson (1946) provide useful contextualizations of Herbart's educational philosophy, but they also do not take punishment as their specific object of inquiry.

The result is a significant lacuna showing that Herbart's account of the relationship between punishment, governance, and will-formation has not been adequately theorized. Equally underexplored is whether Herbart represents the culmination or the partial reversal of the earlier trajectory. He systematizes the modern logic of governance, disciplining the will through internalized authority. He also reintroduces the acceptability of physical punishment in a way that Pestalozzi explicitly refused. Given that Herbart is the one who exposes most clearly the unresolved contradiction at the heart of modern pedagogy, this is a tension that could be philosophically productive and not merely inconsistent. The desire to form free, morally autonomous subjects through structured external authority is a constant tension in Herbart's work. However, if forming free subjects requires obedience, and that obedience is only achieved through fear of the rod, then this obedience is not the one that produces moral autonomy. Herbart holds both horns of this dilemma simultaneously, and it is this simultaneity that makes his position a culminating rather than a concluding moment in the trajectory traced here.

A RELATIONAL READING: FROM DISCIPLINE TO GOVERNANCE

Reading these five authors relationally and not individually reveals a transformation that no single-author study has been able to capture in its full contour. The arc from Comenius to Herbart is not

a linear narrative of abolition, because physical punishment does not simply disappear from the pedagogical literature across these two centuries. It is, rather, a story of conceptual displacement and moral reframing.

Comenius framed punishment within the logic of school discipline: it was the extreme instrument of a graded corrective hierarchy, reserved for moral failures and authorized by theological principle. Locke shifted the frame toward moral agency and rational governance: punishment was problematic not because it was violent but because it was epistemically and psychologically ill-suited to the formation of rational, self-governing subjects. Rousseau displaced the source of punishment from the teacher's authority to the natural order of consequences, effectively denaturalizing the adult's claim to correct the child through force. Pestalozzi embedded this critique within a Romantic emotional economy in which the school was increasingly conceived as a space of care, and in which the rod became a symbol of failure in education. Herbart, finally, reintroduced punishment, now theorized as part of the governance of the will, within a systematic account of the conditions under which instruction and moral formation could succeed.

This trajectory can be characterized, borrowing a distinction that becomes explicit in Herbart's vocabulary but is implicitly structured across all five authors, as a shift from discipline to governance. Discipline, in its early modern usage, was primarily concerned with maintaining order, correcting deviance, and habituating children to the requirements of moral and social life. Governance, as it emerges in Herbart's systematic pedagogy, involves a more complex and internalized relationship. For Herbart, the aim is to shape the will, to produce subjects who obey not from fear but from understanding, and in whom the memory of authority operates even in authority's absence.

What is notable about this shift is that it does not abolish the cruelty of punishment altogether. It changes what punishment is for and where it operates. In the discourse of governance, physical punishment becomes paradoxically more sophisticated as it becomes less necessary: its threat must be real, but its use reveals a failure of governance rather than an exercise of it. This is the sense in which Herbart's position, often dismissed as reactionary, may be read as the culmination of a pedagogical logic that began with Comenius. From that moment, punishment became progressively interiorized, transformed from external compulsion to internal memory, and from the body to the will.

Wilson (1971) anticipates a dimension of this argument when he observes that the period between Rousseau and Pestalozzi witnessed not the abolition of punishment but the validation of new punitive forms such as verbal correction, detention, extra work, and public humiliation, all as substitutes for corporal punishment. If we follow this observation, the moral architecture of punishment was not dismantled but reconstructed. The body was, at least partially, substituted by psychological and social mechanisms of correction that proved no less coercive, and sometimes considerably more insidious.

This reading resonates with Foucault's (2002) broader argument in *Discipline and Punish*, where the transition from spectacular bodily punishment to disciplinary surveillance and normalization is traced across penal and institutional history. Foucault (2002), for example, outlined the modern understanding of the concept of "body," which, in his view, proved to be a clear indication of the emergence of a new normative framework known as "economy of power" (Driver, 1985). However, we have reserved this point for the end because Foucault functions in this article as a supporting theoretical reference and not as a primary analytical framework. His argument about the interiorization of punitive power provides a useful point of resonance for the pedagogical trajectory traced here, but the analysis does not depend on it. For Foucault, modernity did not make punishment gentler; it made it more pervasive, more diffuse, and more effectively internalized.

The pedagogical trajectory traced here suggests a parallel dynamic within educational thought, though one with its own specificities that Foucault's penal genealogy does not capture: the body of the schoolchild is not simply the target of power but the site of an anthropological wager about nature, perfectibility, and the possibilities of formation. The child's moral educability (i.e., her capacity to be formed, not merely controlled) is precisely what distinguishes the pedagogical logic from the penal one, and it is this distinction that explains why the shift from discipline to governance in the pedagogical tradition has a different texture from the shift Foucault describes.

GAPS AND RESEARCH HORIZONS

A review of the existing scholarship on punishment in the work of these five authors reveals a field that is productive but fragmented. Studies have tended to approach each author independently, with research on punishment appearing as a subsidiary theme within broader investigations of discipline, moral education, or other philosophical perspectives. No comprehensive study has attempted to read these five authors relationally, tracing the conceptual transformation of punishment across their work as a connected trajectory. The present article undertakes precisely that relational reading. It does so on the basis of secondary sources and a selective but purposeful engagement with primary texts, offering a conceptual map rather than a comprehensive primary-source analysis. A fully systematic analysis of the primary pedagogical corpus, with sustained close reading of each author's own words, constitutes the necessary next step in the research program this article initiates.

For Comenius, the studies of Clauser (1961), Dent (2021), Herrera Beltrán (2020), and Norlin (2020) have addressed discipline and moral formation with varying degrees of specificity. Norlin's work is perhaps the most theoretically rigorous and the most attentive to the risk of anachronistic periodization. For Locke, Boeker (2023), Tuckness (2010), and Waldow (2020) have each contributed partial perspectives: Boeker (2023) from the angle of moral agency, Tuckness (2010) from a retributivist reading of Locke's broader theory of punishment, and Waldow (2020) from the philosophy of experience and selfhood. What is missing is an account that takes Locke's pedagogical texts as its primary source

and interrogates the coherence and limits of his position on punishment within the context of early modern schooling.

The scholarship on Rousseau and punishment is sparse in proportion to his influence. Despite the enormous literature on Rousseau's theory of childhood and natural education, focused studies on his treatment of punishment remain limited. Mintz (2012), Nazar (2021), and Reisert (2012) offer useful partial analyses, particularly in their dialogical readings that place Rousseau in conversation with Locke and Kant. But a sustained engagement with the problem of punishment in *Emile*, including the question of how Rousseau's "natural consequences" framework addresses the coercive dimensions of educational authority, remains to be developed.

For Pestalozzi, the situation is similar. Allen (2017) and Sellars and Imig (2021) address aspects of his work relevant to discipline and care but treat punishment as a secondary concern. The intersection of Pestalozzian pedagogy with the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of the Romantic period that shaped his reconceptualization of the classroom as a domestic space has not been analyzed with explicit attention to what this meant for the theory and practice of punishment.

The lacuna is most pronounced for Herbart. Despite the significance of his systematic pedagogy for subsequent educational theory, the scholarship on his treatment of punishment is minimal. Huarte Cuéllar (2012) and Hudson (1946) provide broad overviews of his educational philosophy but do not theorize punishment specifically. This gap is particularly consequential given that, if Herbart's account of governance, will, and the memory of punishment represents a culminating moment in the modern pedagogical reconceptualization of punishment, then the neglect of this dimension of his work leaves the historical analysis incomplete.

Beyond author-specific lacunae, the existing scholarship exhibits several structural gaps. First, most studies approach punishment from either a historicist or a philosophical angle, rarely integrating the two. The result is either a history of practices without adequate theoretical grounding, or a philosophical analysis without historical contextualization. Second, the existing literature has largely neglected the question of how conceptions of the body as a theoretical object changed across these two centuries of pedagogical writing, and what implications these changes had for the meaning and legitimacy of physical punishment. Third, as Garland (1999) observed more than two decades ago, the sociology of punishment has remained underconnected to the history of educational theory, a disconnection that persists and represents an opportunity for interdisciplinary synthesis.

Conclusion

The study of corporal punishment in the foundations of modern pedagogy is not a closed historical question. As this review has argued, the five canonical figures most closely associated with the birth of modern pedagogical thought did not simply move from acceptance to rejection of physical punishment; they transformed its conceptual architecture, its moral justifications, and its relationship to the broader

projects of childhood formation and school governance. Understanding this transformation is prerequisite to understanding how contemporary educational discourse was shaped.

Three contributions stand out from this analysis. First, a relational reading of Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Herbart reveals a discernible conceptual trajectory from discipline to governance that no study has articulated. This is not a claim for unity across thinkers whose educational philosophies differ in significant ways; it is a claim for a relational pattern that connects and distinguishes their positions in a way that illuminates the historical logic of modern pedagogy. The trajectory is not a story of progressive abolition but of conceptual internalization, where the locus of punishment moves from the body outward (and eventually inward), from external compulsion to threatened authority to the memory of correction. Second, the conceptual triad of body, childhood, and school is shown to be constitutive of what punishment means pedagogically, because the way in which these three concepts were theorized determined what punishment could mean and be. Third, the gaps in the existing scholarship are substantial enough to warrant a systematic investigation of primary sources (i.e., the pedagogical texts themselves) as the necessary next step, and the present article provides the conceptual map for that investigation.

Contemporary debates about school discipline, restorative justice practices, and the rights of children in educational settings are not free from this inheritance, and the analysis developed here suggests several concrete implications. On one hand, the shift from discipline to governance traced across these five authors helps explain why contemporary school systems have moved from overt physical punishment toward more diffuse mechanisms of behavioral management (e.g., digital surveillance, behavioral point systems, exclusionary practices) without necessarily questioning the punitive logic that underlies them. These practices inherit the Herbartian grammar of governance where the body is no longer the primary target, but the will is still the object of structured authority. On the other hand, the coercive paradox identified in Rousseau's pedagogy has direct implications for restorative justice initiatives in schools: the replacement of punishment with "natural" or "logical" consequences does not automatically evacuate the adult's orchestrating role.

Furthermore, the conceptual triad of body, childhood, and school established here provides a framework for analyzing contemporary debates about corporal punishment bans, providing them with the theoretical depth that empirical policy research often lacks. The conceptual categories through which educators, policymakers, and scholars think about discipline, the purposes of punishment, the moral status of the child's body, and the relationship between authority and formation, continue to be shaped, often invisibly, by the legacy of these foundational authors. Making this legacy visible, including its ambiguities and its unresolved tensions, is a contribution not only to the history of education but to the quality of current educational thinking.

The question of how corporal punishment was conceptualized in modern pedagogical thought is, finally, a question about how modern societies have understood the relationship between power, formation, and the child. That relationship has not been resolved, only reconfigured. Attending to its historical depth is one of the conditions for thinking about it more clearly.

Additional Declaration

Author Contributions

The author was responsible for the conceptualization, analysis, writing, revision, and proofreading of the manuscript.

Funding

This study was not funded by any institution or organization.

Responsible Artificial Intelligence Statement

In this study, artificial intelligence tools were used exclusively for language editing purposes, as English is not the first language of the author. The tools were not used to generate ideas, arguments, or content. The author takes full responsibility for all content in this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this study.

Ethics Approval

This study does not require ethics committee approval as it does not involve any direct application on human or animal subjects.

REFERENCES

- Allen, A. T. (2017). Pestalozzi, Fröbel, and the origins of the kindergarten. In *The transatlantic kindergarten: Education and women's movements in Germany and the United States* (pp. 10–32). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190274412.003.0002>
- Ariès, P. (1987). *Centuries of childhood: A social history of family life* (R. Baldick, Trans.). Vintage.
- Boeker, R. (2023). Locke on education, persons, and moral agency. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 31(2), 202–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2023.2250179>
- Bunge, M. J. (2024). Christianity, child well-being, and corporal punishment. In R. Domingo, G. S. Hauk, & T. P. Jackson (Eds.), *Faith in law, law in faith* (pp. 540–567). Brill Nijhoff. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004546189_029
- Clauser, J. K. (1961). Comenius considers discipline. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 39(1), 50–53.
- Comenius, J. A. (1907). *The Great Didactic of John Amos Comenius* (M. W. Keatinge, Ed. & Trans.). Adam and Charles Black. (Original work published 1657).

- Comenius, J. A. (1956). *The School of Infancy* (E. M. Eller, Ed.). University of North Carolina Press. (Original work published 1630).
- Comenius, J. A. (1992). *Pampedia (Educación Universal)* (F. Gómez Rodríguez de Castro, Trans.). Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia. (Original work published 1662).
- Dent, R. A. (2021). John Amos Comenius: Inciting the millennium through educational reform. *Religions*, 12(11). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12111012>
- Driver, F. (1985). Power, space, and the body: A critical assessment of Foucault's Discipline and Punish. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 3(4), 425–446. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d030425>
- Durrant, J. E. (2022). Corporal punishment: From ancient history to global progress. In R. Geffner et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal violence and abuse across the lifespan* (pp. 343–365). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89999-2_13
- Dussel, I., & Caruso, M. (1999). *La invención del aula: Una genealogía de las formas de enseñar*. Santillana.
- Foucault, M. (2002). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books.
- Garbarino, J. (2005). Corporal punishment. In M. Donnelly & M. A. Straus (Eds.), *Corporal punishment of children in theoretical perspective* (pp. 35–48). Yale University Press.
- Garland, D. (1999). *Punishment and modern society: A study in social theory*. University of Chicago Press.
- Herbart, J. F. (1904). *Outlines of educational doctrine* (A. F. Lange, Trans.). Macmillan. (Original work published 1835).
- Herbart, J. F. (1908). *The science of education* (H. M. Felkin & E. Felkin, Trans.). D. C. Heath and Co. <http://archive.org/details/scienceofeducati00herbuoft> (Original work published 1806).
- Herrera Beltrán, C. X. (2013). Castigos corporales y escuela en la Colombia de los siglos XIX y XX. *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación*, 62, 69–87.
- Herrera Beltrán, C. X. (2020). "Para la formación, urge disciplinar el cuerpo." In G. Bustamante Zamudio et al. (Eds.), *Comenio y la Didáctica Magna: El problema de la formación* (pp. 109–122). Universidad Pedagógica Nacional.
- Hillner, J. (2009). Monks and children: Corporal punishment in late antiquity. *European Review of History*, 16(6), 773–791. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480903368046>
- Huarte Cuéllar, R. (2012). Kant y Herbart: Dos visiones de la pedagogía como ciencia entre los siglos XVIII y XIX. *Fermentario*, 6.
- Hudson, R. L. (1946). Herbart: His philosophy and educational implications. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 24(3), 159–166. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1489505>
- Le Breton, D. (2021). *Antropología del cuerpo y modernidad*. Prometeo Libros.
- Lenta, P. (2017). *Corporal punishment: A philosophical assessment*. Routledge.
- Locke, J. (1830). Some thoughts concerning education. In *The library of education* (Vol. 1, pp. 1-257). Gray & Bowen. (Original work published 1693).
- Mejía Correa, M. P. (2019). *El poder de los impotentes: Representaciones de los educadores sobre el castigo físico infligido a los niños*. Editorial Universidad de Antioquia.
- Middleton, J. (2008). The experience of corporal punishment in schools, 1890–1940. *History of Education*, 37(2), 253–275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00467600701607882>

- Mintz, A. I. (2012). The happy and suffering student? Rousseau's Emile and the path not taken in progressive educational thought. *Educational Theory*, 62(3), 249–265. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2012.00445.x>
- Mishra, A. (2022). Ethical questions concerning corporal punishment of children: Touring its implications and directions. *International Journal of Applied Ethics*, 8(1), 1–10.
- Narodowski, M. (1994). *Infancia y poder: La conformación de la pedagogía moderna*. Aique Grupo Editor.
- Nazar, H. (2021). Locke and Rousseau on educating for freedom. In J. Gordon-Roth, & S. Weinberg (Eds.), *The Lockean mind* (pp. 406–415). Routledge.
- Norlin, B. (2020). Comenius, moral and pious education, and the why, when and how of school discipline. *History of Education*, 49(3), 287–312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2020.1739759>
- Parsons, B. (2015). The way of the rod: The functions of beating in late medieval pedagogy. *Modern Philology*, 113(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1086/680664>
- Parsons, B. (2018). *Punishment and medieval education*. Boydell & Brewer.
- Pestalozzi, J. H. (1894). *How Gertrude teaches her children* (E. Cooke, Ed.; L. E. Holland & F. C. Turner, Trans.). C. W. Bardeen. (Original work published 1801).
- Pestalozzi, J. H. (1898). *Letters on early education*. C. W. Bardeen. (Original work published 1827).
- Reisert, J. R. (2012). Kant and Rousseau on moral education. In K. Roth, & C. Surprenant (Eds.), *Kant and education* (pp. 12–25). Routledge.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1918). *Rousseau's Emile or treatise on education* (W. H. Payne, Trans.). D. Appleton and Co. <http://archive.org/details/rousseauemileor00rousiala> (Original work published 1762).
- Saller, R. (1991). Corporal punishment, authority, and obedience in the Roman household. In B. Rawson (Ed.), *Marriage, divorce, and children in ancient Rome* (pp. 152–165). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198149187.003.0008>
- Scott, G. R. (2006). *The history of corporal punishment*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315828367>
- Scribner, C. F., & Warnick, B. R. (2021). *Spare the rod: Punishment and the moral community of schools*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226785844.001.0001>
- Sellars, M., & Imig, D. (2021). Pestalozzi and pedagogies of love: Pathways to educational reform. *Early Child Development and Care*, 191(7–8), 1152–1163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2020.1845667>
- Simon, J. S. (2013). *Punishment and the political technologies of the body*. In J. Simons, & R. Sparks (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of punishment and society* (pp. 60–89). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446247624.n4>
- Smith, K. M. (2014). Disciplining childhood. In *The government of childhood* (pp. 75–129). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137312273_4
- Thomas, G. (2021). *Education: A very short introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199643264.001.0001>
- Torrecilla Hernández, L. (1998). *Niñez y castigo: Historia del castigo escolar*. Universidad de Valladolid.
- Tuckness, A. (2010). Retribution and restitution in Locke's theory of punishment. *The Journal of Politics*, 72(3), 720–732. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381610000125>

- UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2007). *General Comment No. 8: The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment*. United Nations.
- Waldow, A. (2020). Locke's experiential persons. In *Experience embodied: Early modern accounts of the human place in nature* (pp. 51–94). Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190086114.003.0003>
- Wilson, R. M. (1971). *A study of attitudes towards corporal punishment as an educational procedure from the earliest times to the present* [Master's thesis, University of Victoria].
<https://hdl.handle.net/1828/20162>