Positive Discipline as an Alternative to Traditional Punishment in Sri Lankan Schools: A Systematic Review of Literature

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ABSTRACT

Positive discipline is increasingly recognized worldwide as a rights-based, learner-centered alternative to punitive school discipline. Sri Lanka has built a substantial legal architecture against corporal punishment, most recently through the 2025 amendment introducing Section 308A of the Penal Code; yet national surveys continue to report that a majority of students still experience physical or psychological punishment in the classroom. This paper reviews international and Sri Lankan literature to (i) synthesise the theoretical foundations of positive discipline drawn from Skinner, Bandura, Dreikurs, Glasser and Zehr, (ii) compare international, South Asian and Sri Lankan empirical evidence on punitive versus positive disciplinary outcomes, (iii) identify the factors shaping implementation in Sri Lankan classrooms, and (iv) derive policy implications. A qualitative documentary analysis was undertaken of peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews and meta-analyses, national surveys, legislation, and international policy reports, published predominantly between 2018 and 2025 alongside seminal theoretical works, which were thematically analysed and triangulated. The review confirms that punitive methods secure short-term compliance at the cost of long-term aggression, anxiety and disengagement, whereas positive and restorative approaches are consistently associated with stronger self-regulation, safer school climates and more trusting teacher-student relationships. In Sri Lanka, however, a persistent law-practice gap is sustained by limited teacher preparation, inconsistent school leadership, culturally embedded beliefs equating punishment with effective discipline, and weak monitoring mechanisms at zonal level. The review concludes that legal prohibition alone cannot transform classroom practice, and that sustainable reform requires embedding positive discipline within pre-service and in-service teacher education, whole-school behaviour frameworks, school counselling infrastructure, and stronger zonal monitoring and accountability systems.

Keywords: positive discipline, corporal punishment, school discipline, teacher attitudes, child rights, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Maintaining student discipline is a core responsibility of schools, shaping teaching effectiveness, academic achievement and students' social-emotional development. For decades, many education systems, including Sri Lanka's, relied heavily on physical and psychological punishment to manage student behaviour, a practice increasingly challenged by evidence on children's developmental psychology and rights. Internationally, school discipline has gradually shifted from punishment-oriented behavioural control towards learner-centred, restorative approaches, a transition driven by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), UNESCO's education policy agenda (UNESCO, 2015), and a growing evidence base on the harms of corporal punishment (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Heekes et al., 2022).

Sri Lanka has demonstrated considerable policy commitment to protecting children's rights within schools. Ministry of Education Circular No. 2016/12 (29 April 2016) prohibits corporal punishment in state schools (Ministry of Education, 2016), and the Penal Code (Amendment) Act, No. 08 of 2025, has criminalised the physical punishment of children through the introduction of Section 308A (Sri Lanka, 2025). The judiciary has reinforced this trajectory: in SC/FR/97/2017, the Supreme Court found that a teacher's use of corporal punishment against a student violated the constitutional prohibition of degrading treatment (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2024). Nevertheless, national research continues to document the

persistence of punitive practice. A cross-sectional study of 948 students and 459 teachers across six districts found that 80.4% of students had experienced at least one form of corporal punishment and 72.5% had experienced psychological aggression during a single school term, with 53% reporting recurrent physical punishment (Zoysa, Senarath, & de Silva, 2021). Qualitative work with government-school teachers similarly found that most had used corporal punishment at some point in their careers and considered it acceptable when applied "in moderation" (Lakshman, 2018). This persistent gap between legal prohibition and everyday classroom practice constitutes the central problem addressed in this review.

Positive discipline offers a theoretically grounded and empirically supported alternative. It is not characterised by permissiveness or the absence of behavioural expectations; rather, it integrates high expectations with empathy, communication, guidance and mutual respect, aiming to cultivate self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and responsible decision-making rather than suppressing behaviour through fear (Durrant, 2018). Although Sri Lankan empirical studies on corporal punishment have grown over the past two decades, comprehensive reviews synthesising theoretical foundations, international and local empirical evidence, and implementation factors within the Sri Lankan school context remain limited; existing studies tend to be fragmented, examining either the prevalence of punishment or teachers' attitudes in isolation.

This paper therefore critically reviews contemporary literature on positive discipline as an alternative to traditional punishment in Sri Lankan schools. It synthesises theoretical foundations, international and Sri Lankan empirical findings, and the contextual factors shaping implementation, and derives policy implications consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which commits states to ensuring inclusive, equitable, quality education and safe, non-violent learning environments for all learners. By integrating evidence from educational psychology, behaviour management, human-rights law and educational policy, the review aims to provide a more complete picture than the largely prevalence-focused Sri Lankan literature has offered to date, capable of informing both teacher-education curricula and zonal-level policy.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the documentary-analysis method used to identify and synthesise the literature. Section 3 examines the prevalence and consequences of traditional punitive discipline internationally and in Sri Lanka. Section 4 sets out the theoretical foundations of positive discipline. Section 5 reviews empirical evidence on disciplinary outcomes in international, Sri Lankan and wider South Asian contexts. Section 6 identifies the factors shaping implementation, and Section 7 derives policy implications for Sri Lanka before Section 8 concludes. The review is intended as a stand-alone, nationally focused synthesis of the research and policy landscape, capable of informing teacher education, school leadership and education-authority policy.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative literature-review design using documentary analysis to synthesise, rather than generate, empirical evidence. The documentary corpus comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews and meta-analyses, scholarly books, Sri Lankan theses, Ministry of Education circulars, national legislation, and reports by UNESCO, UNICEF and the National Child Protection Authority. Searches were conducted using Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed sources and institutional repositories. Search terms were used singly and in combinations, including ‘positive discipline’, ‘corporal punishment’, ‘school discipline’, ‘restorative practice’, ‘classroom management’, ‘teacher attitudes’ and ‘Sri Lanka’. Where relevant, reference lists of retrieved publications were also examined to identify additional sources. Legislation and policy instruments, including those used for the South Asian comparison in Section 5.3, were taken from the issuing authorities or from the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children’s country reports.

Sources were eligible when they (i) addressed school discipline, corporal punishment, positive discipline, restorative practice or closely related constructs; (ii) were peer-reviewed or issued by a recognised institutional authority; (iii) provided evidence from international or Sri Lankan settings relevant to contextual comparison; and (iv) were published predominantly between 2018 and 2025, while seminal theoretical works were retained where foundational (e.g., Skinner, 1938; Bandura, 1977; Dreikurs et al., 1998; Glasser, 1998; Zehr, 2015). Sources were screened for relevance to the review questions and read iteratively. Concepts were coded thematically and grouped under five analytical themes: traditional punishment, theoretical foundations, empirical

outcomes, implementation factors and policy implications. Findings were compared across international, South Asian and Sri Lankan sources to identify convergence, divergence and gaps. Figure 1 summarises the sequence of selection and analysis steps, and Table 1 the composition of the final corpus.

Figure 1. Sequence of source selection and analysis

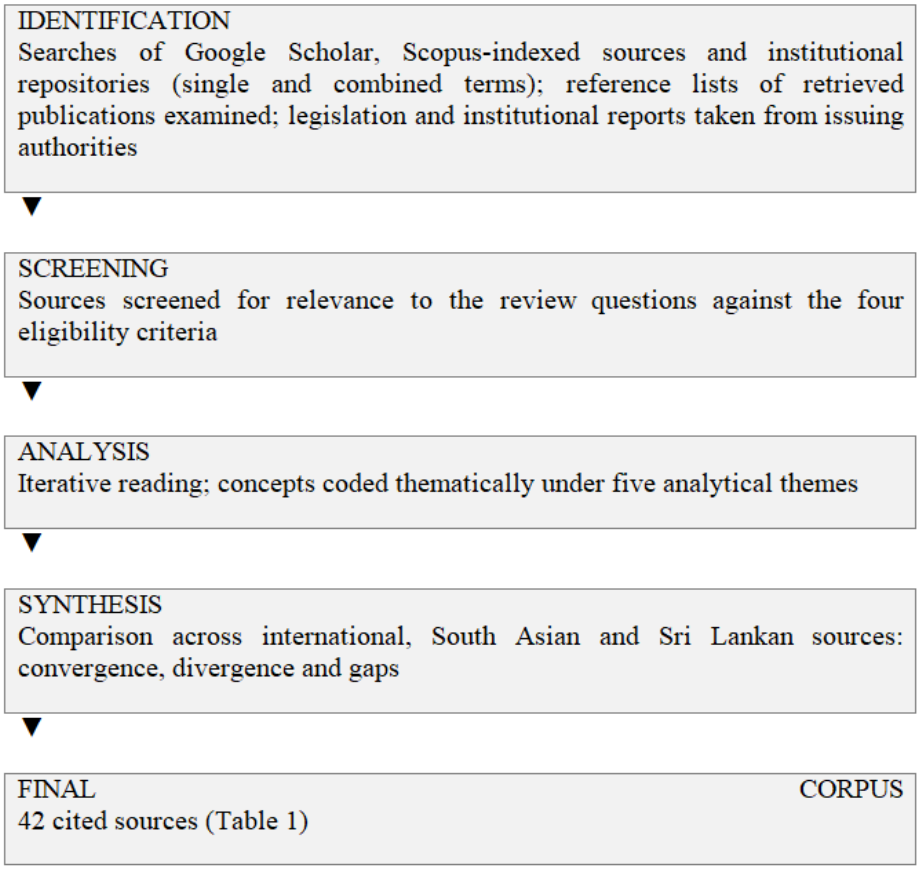


Table 1. Composition of the final corpus of cited sources

Source type	**Number cited**	**Examples**
Peer-reviewed journal articles	18	Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor (2016); Heekes et al. (2022); Lakshman (2018); Zoysa et al. (2021)
Theoretical and seminal books	5	Skinner (1938); Bandura (1977); Dreikurs et al. (1998); Glasser (1998); Zehr (2015)
Sri Lankan theses (unpublished MEd)	3	Ilangasinghe (2005); Wijayalakshmi (2005); Jayasinghe (2021)
Legislation, circulars and treaty	5	Ministry of Education (2016); Sri Lanka (2025); Government of India (2009); Government of Pakistan (2021); United Nations (1989)
Institutional and policy reports	11	National Child Protection Authority (2019); UNESCO (2015); UNICEF (2021); Global Initiative reports; Learning Policy Institute briefs; Gregory & Evans (2020)
Total	**42**	**Excludes Page et al. (2021), a reporting guideline**

The available study records did not preserve a reproducible count of records retrieved, duplicates removed, or items excluded at each screening stage. Numerical selection totals are therefore not reported, and this review should not be interpreted as a PRISMA-compliant systematic review (Page et al., 2021). This limitation is acknowledged in interpreting the scope of the synthesis.

3. Traditional Punitive Discipline: Prevalence and Consequences

Traditional punishment refers to disciplinary practices intended to suppress undesirable behaviour by imposing physical pain, fear or emotional discomfort. It encompasses corporal punishment — caning, hitting, forced kneeling or prolonged standing — and psychological punishment, including verbal humiliation, ridicule, public shaming, threats and withdrawal of privileges. Although behaviourist accounts once framed punishment as an effective behaviour-reduction mechanism, contemporary research increasingly questions both its ethical acceptability and its long-term effectiveness, and international medical and public-health bodies now treat school corporal punishment as a child-protection concern rather than a legitimate pedagogical tool (American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on School Health, 2023).

A systematic review of corporal punishment across roughly 100 countries found that the practice remains widespread despite growing legal prohibition, and is consistently correlated with poorer academic engagement and mental-health outcomes across income settings, with prevalence often highest in precisely the low- and middle-income contexts where child-protection infrastructure is weakest (Gershoff, 2017; Heekes et al., 2022). A meta-analytic review of school corporal punishment similarly concluded that physical punishment is associated with increased externalising and internalising problems in children — including aggression, conduct problems, anxiety and depressive symptoms — with no evidence of compensatory behavioural benefit even in the short term (Visser, van der Put, & Assink, 2022). At the parenting level, Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor's (2016) meta-analysis of five decades of research found that physical punishment predicts increased child aggression, antisocial behaviour and mental-health difficulties, and is not associated with improved compliance over time — a pattern subsequently extended to low- and middle-income country contexts through an ongoing systematic review protocol (Cuartas, Gershoff, Bailey, & McCoy, 2022). The American Academy of Pediatrics has accordingly called for the abolition of corporal punishment in all school settings, noting its disproportionate use against already-marginalised students, including students with disabilities (American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on School Health, 2023).

Sri Lankan evidence mirrors this pattern. National surveys report that the large majority of students continue to experience physical or psychological punishment despite Ministry of Education prohibitions (National Child Protection Authority, 2019; Zoysa et al., 2021), while qualitative interviews with teachers reveal that punitive discipline is often defended as a culturally legitimate tool of classroom control rather than rejected outright (Lakshman, 2018). Secondary-level research further indicates that students subjected to physical punishment often persist in the very misbehaviour it targets, suggesting a self-reinforcing cycle rather than genuine correction (Menikdiwela, 2020). Traditional punishment also raises equity concerns: it disproportionately affects students with learning difficulties, behavioural disorders or socio-economic disadvantage, overlooking developmental needs in favour of immediate compliance, and — as international evidence on discipline disparities suggests — often falls hardest on already-disadvantaged groups within a school population. These findings collectively motivate a paradigm shift toward disciplinary approaches that build responsibility, emotional competence and ethical decision-making rather than relying on fear-based control.

4. Theoretical Foundations of Positive Discipline

Positive discipline draws on a multidisciplinary theoretical base spanning behaviourist, cognitive-social, humanistic and restorative traditions. Five theorists provide its principal conceptual scaffolding.

Skinner's Operant Conditioning

Skinner's (1938) behaviourist framework demonstrates that behaviour shaped through positive reinforcement is more durable than behaviour suppressed through punishment, since punishment only temporarily inhibits an act without teaching an adaptive alternative and can generate avoidance, anxiety or covert defiance as side effects.

Applied to the classroom, this principle underpins positive discipline's emphasis on reinforcing desired behaviour — through praise, recognition or privilege — rather than merely penalising its absence, and on making behavioural expectations explicit and consistently reinforced rather than assumed.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory positions teachers as behavioural models whose conduct students imitate, particularly where the teacher holds status, warmth or perceived competence. Because children learn as much from observing adult behaviour as from direct instruction, a teacher who resorts to aggression, sarcasm or humiliation implicitly models those same responses as legitimate means of resolving conflict, undermining the very self-control that discipline seeks to instil. Conversely, teachers who model calm, respectful problem-solving provide students with an internalisable script for managing their own frustration and conflict with peers.

Dreikurs' Democratic Discipline

Dreikurs, Grunwald and Pepper (1998; originally 1968) interpret misbehaviour as a mistaken search for belonging and significance — through attention-seeking, power struggles, revenge or displays of inadequacy — to be addressed through collaborative problem-solving rather than authoritarian sanction. Rather than treating misbehaviour as something to be punished, teachers are encouraged to diagnose the underlying goal driving it and respond in ways that redirect the student toward legitimate avenues for belonging. Involving students in establishing classroom rules and natural or logical consequences fosters mutual respect and shared responsibility, both central to positive discipline and to democratic citizenship more broadly.

Glasser's Choice Theory

Glasser (1998) frames behaviour as students' attempt to satisfy fundamental psychological needs — belonging, power, freedom, fun and survival. Positive discipline aligned with choice theory emphasises student ownership of behaviour: teachers cultivate caring relationships and structured opportunities for reflection, self-evaluation and negotiated planning so that responsible choices emerge from internal motivation rather than external threat of punishment. Glasser's later "quality school" model extends this logic to whole-school culture, arguing that coercive management systems cannot produce the quality of engagement that need-satisfying, relationship-based systems can.

Zehr's Restorative Justice Theory

Zehr (2015) reorients discipline away from the retributive question of who broke the rule and how they should be punished towards the restorative questions of who has been harmed, what their needs are, and whose obligation it is to repair that harm and rebuild relationships. Restorative practices — circles, mediation, peer conferencing and structured restorative conversations — encourage accountability while preserving students' dignity, and depend on sustained institutional commitment, staff training and administrative buy-in rather than isolated interventions to be effective; implemented only sporadically or by individual teachers, restorative approaches tend to lose credibility with both students and staff.

Synthesis

Although these theories originate from distinct psychological traditions, they converge on shared principles: behavioural development is strongest within supportive relationships rather than fear-based control; positive reinforcement, modelling and reflective participation outperform sanction; discipline should build self-regulation and intrinsic motivation rather than temporary compliance; and teachers function most effectively as facilitators of behavioural growth rather than enforcers of rules. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual architecture for the empirical and policy discussion that follows.

The convergence between the five perspectives, and the classroom alternatives each supports, are summarised in Table 2.

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Table 2. Core theories of positive discipline and the classroom alternatives to punishment they support

Theory	Core premise	Implication for punitive discipline	Classroom alternative
Skinner: operant conditioning	Behaviour is shaped by its consequences; reinforcement produces more durable change than punishment.	Punishment only temporarily inhibits behaviour, teaches no adaptive alternative and can produce avoidance, anxiety or covert defiance.	Explicit, consistently reinforced expectations; praise, recognition or privileges for desired behaviour.
Bandura: social learning	Students learn by observing and imitating models, especially those with status, warmth or competence.	Teacher aggression, sarcasm or humiliation models the same responses as legitimate ways of resolving conflict.	Teachers modelling calm, respectful problem-solving that students can internalise.
Dreikurs: democratic discipline	Misbehaviour is a mistaken search for belonging and significance (attention, power, revenge, inadequacy).	Authoritarian sanction ignores the goal driving the behaviour.	Collaborative problem-solving; students involved in setting rules; natural or logical consequences.
Glasser: choice theory	Behaviour is an attempt to satisfy basic needs: belonging, power, freedom, fun and survival.	External threat undermines ownership and engagement; coercive systems cannot produce need-satisfying relationships.	Caring relationships; reflection, self-evaluation and negotiated plans; whole-school "quality school" culture.
Zehr: restorative justice	Wrongdoing harms people and relationships and creates obligations to repair.	The retributive question of who broke the rule and how to punish misses harm, needs and repair.	Restorative circles, mediation, peer conferencing and restorative conversations, backed by training and whole-school commitment.

5. Empirical Evidence from International and Sri Lankan Studies

International Evidence

International evidence consistently shows that punitive and exclusionary discipline produce short-term compliance at the expense of long-term wellbeing, whereas restorative and positive approaches yield broader and more durable benefits. Beyond the meta-analytic evidence on corporal punishment discussed above (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Visser et al., 2022; Heekes et al., 2022), research on restorative practice demonstrates reductions in suspensions and disciplinary referrals alongside improvements in students' sense of belonging and trust in teachers (Gregory & Evans, 2020; Klevan, 2021). A statewide analysis of more than 265,000 Californian middle-school students found that greater exposure to restorative practices was associated with improved academic achievement and reduced out-of-school suspension, with the strongest gains among historically disadvantaged groups (Learning Policy Institute, 2023b). Meta-analyses of classroom-management interventions similarly report large effects on student behaviour when teachers are trained in specific, evidence-based strategies rather than generic disciplinary rules (Korpershoek, de Boer, & Mouw, 2025), while systematic reviews of social-emotional learning programmes show consistent reductions in disruptive behaviour alongside improved engagement and achievement across grade levels (Learning Policy Institute, 2023a; Taylor & Wong, 2019).

The strength of this evidence base has begun to shift professional and policy consensus in high-income settings. In the United States, the American Academy of Pediatrics has formally called for the abolition of corporal punishment in all school settings, citing consistent evidence of harm and disproportionate use against Black students and students with disabilities, and recommending that schools invest instead in positive behavioural support systems (American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on School Health, 2023). Systematic reviews of restorative practice implementation caution, however, that effect sizes vary considerably across studies, and that benefits are strongest where restorative approaches are embedded as a whole-school culture change rather than a discrete programme bolted onto an otherwise punitive disciplinary structure (Gregory & Evans, 2020). This distinction between technique and culture recurs throughout the literature and is central to the implementation factors discussed in Section 6.

Comparative studies from other developing-country contexts reinforce these findings and extend them beyond high-income settings. In Mauritius, a conceptual model of learner discipline management found that democratic, relationship-based approaches produced more consistent behavioural improvement than rule-enforcement alone (Jinot & Johannes, 2021). Research in South Africa similarly found that disciplinary committees relying on punitive codes of conduct achieved compliance but not sustained behavioural change, whereas schools with clearer positive-discipline strategies reported stronger student cooperation, even though corporal punishment — despite being illegal since 1996 — continues to be reported by roughly a third to a half of learners in some provinces (Mathebula & Runhare, 2021; Zondo, Mncube, & Adu, 2023; Sibanda & Mathwasa, 2020). In the Philippines, a phenomenological study of values-education teachers found that positive discipline, though initially difficult to apply consistently under large class sizes and limited resources, produced more respectful classroom relationships once teachers received adequate mentoring and peer support (Escobal, Arboleda, Jarina, & Caluza, 2023). A qualitative study of South Asian schools more broadly found that teachers who had received explicit training in non-punitive alternatives reported greater confidence in managing large, under-resourced classrooms without resorting to corporal punishment, though such training remained the exception rather than the norm across the region (Rahman, 2021). Collectively, this literature indicates that the effectiveness of positive discipline depends less on any single technique than on sustained professional development, supportive leadership and whole-school, rather than isolated, implementation — a conclusion with direct relevance to the Sri Lankan context examined next.

Evidence from Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan empirical research reveals a persistent gap between policy and practice. Earlier studies found corporal punishment widely accepted by teachers as an effective disciplinary tool, even though students themselves perceived it as distressing and educationally ineffective (Ilangasinghe, 2005; Wijayalakshmi, 2005). More recent national data confirm the continued high prevalence of both physical and psychological punishment: 80.4% of surveyed students reported experiencing at least one corporal punishment strategy and 72.5% reported psychological aggression during a single school term, with 53% reporting recurrent physical punishment rather than an isolated incident (Zoysa et al., 2021), a pattern consistent with the National Child Protection Authority's (2019) earlier national survey.

Qualitative interviews with 28 government-school teachers in Colombo found that the large majority had used corporal punishment at some point in their careers and considered moderate use pedagogically justified, framing it as a legitimate extension of a teacher's traditional authority rather than a rights violation (Lakshman, 2018). Notably, these teachers did not describe themselves as opposed to discipline reform in principle; rather, they distinguished between what they regarded as excessive or retaliatory punishment, which they condemned, and moderate physical correction, which many still defended — a nuance that suggests policy messaging framed purely around prohibition may be less persuasive than messaging that offers teachers a credible, practical alternative. The same study found that the great majority of participating teachers expressed an unmet need for structured training in classroom-management alternatives, indicating that the barrier to reform in at least this sample was less ideological resistance than a skills and confidence gap.

Sri Lankan literature also documents growing, if uneven, recognition of positive discipline as a practical alternative. Studies of secondary-level misbehaviour suggest that punitive responses often entrench rather than resolve behavioural difficulty, indicating a self-reinforcing cycle of classroom conflict in which punishment

escalates in severity without producing durable behavioural change (Menikdiwela, 2020), while research on emotional-management strategies among mid-adolescent students highlights the value of structured social-emotional interventions — teaching students to identify, label and regulate emotional responses — over disciplinary sanction alone (Jayasinghe, 2021). Judicial developments have reinforced the legislative direction: the 2021 Supreme Court ruling in SC/FR/97/2017, which found that a teacher's physical punishment of a student violated the constitutional prohibition on degrading treatment, together with the 2025 criminalisation of corporal punishment under Section 308A of the Penal Code, together constitute one of the more comprehensive legal frameworks against school corporal punishment in South Asia (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2024; Sri Lanka, 2025).

Nevertheless, implementation remains inconsistent, since most Sri Lankan teachers report limited formal preparation in positive behaviour management during either pre-service or in-service training, and monitoring of compliance with existing circulars remains largely reactive, triggered by complaints rather than systematic inspection. Overall, the Sri Lankan evidence base indicates that legislative reform, though necessary, is not sufficient: behavioural management in many schools continues to rely on inherited punitive habits, underscoring the need for systematic teacher education, institutional support and monitoring aligned with contemporary child-rights frameworks (United Nations, 1989; UNICEF, 2021).

Regional Evidence from South Asia

Sri Lanka's experience forms part of a wider South Asian trajectory. A regional review by the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, SAARCLAW and the South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (2014) found that almost all South Asian states had laws permitting or authorising physical violence against children in the name of discipline in at least one setting, and recommended explicit prohibition in all settings. Subsequent reform has been uneven, as Table 3 summarises.

Nepal illustrates a judicially led route to reform. In 2005 its Supreme Court struck down the legal defence for minor beating under the previous Children Act, and the Act Relating to Children 2018 subsequently prohibited corporal punishment in all settings, making Nepal the first South Asian state to achieve full prohibition (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, n.d.-a). The sequence of court ruling followed by comprehensive statute parallels Sri Lanka's own movement from the 2016 circular and the Supreme Court's decision in SC/FR/97/2017 towards the 2025 Penal Code amendment. India's Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 prohibits physical punishment and mental harassment of children in school under Section 17(1); contravention renders the person liable to disciplinary action under the service rules applicable to them (Government of India, 2009), so that the sanction rests on employment discipline rather than on a stand-alone penal provision. Pakistan illustrates a fragmented, sub-national pattern: Act No. XLIX of 2021 prohibits corporal punishment in public and private schools and other educational settings, including religious institutions, as well as in child-care institutions and the juvenile justice system, but extends only to the Islamabad Capital Territory (Government of Pakistan, 2021), and prohibition remains incomplete in the rest of the country and in the home (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, n.d.-b).

Table 3. Legal prohibition of corporal punishment in schools: Sri Lanka and selected South Asian jurisdictions

Jurisdiction	Principal instrument(s)	Coverage and sanction	Notable feature
Sri Lanka	Ministry of Education Circular No. 2016/12; SC/FR/97/2017; Penal Code (Amendment) Act No. 08 of 2025 (Section 308A)	Circular prohibition in state schools; judicial finding of degrading treatment; criminalisation of physical punishment of children	Administrative, judicial and criminal-law measures combined
India	Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009, Section 17	Physical punishment and mental harassment of children in school	Sanction rests on employment discipline

		prohibited; disciplinary action under service rules	
Nepal	Supreme Court ruling (2005); Act Relating to Children 2018	Corporal punishment prohibited in all settings, including schools	First South Asian state with full prohibition; court ruling preceded statute
Pakistan (Islamabad Capital Territory)	Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act 2021 (Act No. XLIX of 2021)	Public and private schools, religious and other educational settings, care and juvenile justice; home not covered	Applies only within the Islamabad Capital Territory

Read alongside Sri Lanka's circular, constitutional jurisprudence and criminal-law provision, the regional comparison suggests three points. First, Sri Lanka's legal framework is among the more comprehensive in the region, which sharpens rather than resolves the question of implementation. Second, reform across the region has typically moved through court rulings, administrative instructions and partial statutory bans before fuller prohibition, and the sanctions attached range from employment discipline to criminal liability. Third, the South Asian qualitative evidence discussed in Section 5.1 (Rahman, 2021) indicates that where prohibition is not accompanied by training in non-punitive alternatives, teachers in large, under-resourced classrooms have few practical options. These regional parallels reinforce the policy priorities set out in Section 7.

6. Factors Influencing the Implementation of Positive Discipline

The successful adoption of positive discipline depends on an interaction of teacher-related, institutional, socio-cultural and policy factors, rather than on classroom technique alone. Even where teachers hold favourable attitudes toward positive discipline in principle, the literature reviewed above shows that implementation frequently falters at the level of practice, suggesting that attitude change and skill acquisition must be pursued together rather than sequentially.

Teacher Knowledge and Professional Competence

Teacher preparation is among the strongest determinants of successful implementation. Meta-analytic evidence shows that classroom-management training produces large improvements in student behaviour specifically when it equips teachers with concrete, evidence-based strategies rather than general exhortations to be positive (Korpershoek et al., 2025). Conversely, inadequately prepared teachers tend to fall back on the disciplinary methods they themselves experienced as students (Lakshman, 2018), a pattern documented across both Sri Lankan and comparable South Asian contexts (Rahman, 2021). This suggests that teacher-education reform should prioritise practical, rehearsed classroom-management skills — de-escalation, structured redirection, restorative conversation — over abstract discussion of children's rights alone, since the latter, while important, does not by itself equip teachers to manage a disruptive lesson in real time.

School Leadership and Organisational Culture

Whole-school, rather than fragmented, implementation is consistently associated with stronger and more consistent outcomes (Learning Policy Institute, 2023b; Zondo et al., 2023). Principals who model collaboration and allocate professional learning time create the organisational conditions under which individual teachers' efforts at positive discipline are reinforced rather than undermined by inconsistent expectations elsewhere in the school. Where school leadership continues to treat corporal punishment as an implicit fallback for particularly disruptive students, individual teachers attempting positive discipline may find themselves professionally isolated, which the literature identifies as a significant driver of reversion to punitive habits under pressure.

Cultural Beliefs and Traditional Attitudes

Deeply rooted cultural beliefs equating punishment with effective discipline remain among the most persistent barriers to reform. Sri Lankan teachers frequently characterise moderate corporal punishment as a legitimate extension of parental authority rather than a rights violation (Lakshman, 2018), and similar attitudes have been documented in other South Asian and African contexts (Rahman, 2021; Mathebula & Runhare, 2021). Changing such beliefs requires sustained awareness-raising that engages directly with teachers' own socialisation as students, rather than legal reform alone; evidence from teacher-attitude research suggests that messaging emphasising demonstrable classroom benefits of positive discipline is more persuasive than messaging framed solely around legal risk or compliance.

Parental and Community Involvement

Positive discipline is most effective when home and school apply consistent expectations. Inconsistency between the two environments has been shown to weaken the durability of school-based behavioural interventions, indicating that parental workshops and structured communication should accompany classroom-level reform (UNICEF, 2021). In the Sri Lankan context, where corporal punishment retains considerable acceptance within the home as well as the school, community-level awareness programmes addressing both settings simultaneously are likely to be more effective than school-only interventions.

Educational Policy, Monitoring and Resources

Legal prohibition provides a necessary but insufficient structural foundation. Large class sizes, limited counselling provision and weak monitoring at zonal level increase teachers' reliance on punitive methods as a means of immediate behavioural control (National Child Protection Authority, 2019). Strengthening counselling services, teacher-student ratios and systematic monitoring is therefore essential to translate legislative commitments into classroom-level change; without such investment, prohibition risks becoming a paper commitment that shifts punitive practice underground rather than eliminating it, a dynamic several of the studies reviewed above associate with under-reporting relative to actual prevalence.

7. Policy Implications for Sri Lanka

The reviewed literature points to several priorities for translating Sri Lanka's legal commitments into sustained classroom practice.

Strengthening Teacher Education

Pre-service and in-service teacher education should embed evidence-based modules on classroom management, restorative practice and social-emotional learning, supported by mentoring and reflective practice rather than one-off workshops, consistent with meta-analytic findings that specificity and sustained coaching drive intervention effectiveness (Korpershoek et al., 2025).

Developing National Implementation Guidelines

Existing circulars prohibit corporal punishment but offer limited practical guidance. National guidelines detailing behaviour-management frameworks, restorative procedures and documentation mechanisms would promote greater consistency across schools and reduce ambiguity for teachers seeking non-punitive alternatives.

Promoting Whole-School Positive Behaviour Frameworks

Given the evidence that fragmented, individual-teacher efforts produce weaker outcomes than coordinated approaches (Learning Policy Institute, 2023b), school improvement plans should embed positive discipline as a whole-school quality-assurance component rather than an optional classroom technique.

Strengthening Counselling and Student Support

Because positive discipline depends on understanding the underlying causes of behaviour, schools require stronger counselling provision and educational-psychology support capable of addressing students' developmental and emotional needs before difficulties escalate.

Enhancing Parental and Community Awareness

Ministry-led parent education and community engagement should directly challenge the cultural equating of punishment with effective discipline, ensuring that non-violent disciplinary approaches are reinforced consistently across home and school.

Strengthening Zonal Monitoring and Accountability

Zonal education offices should establish systematic mechanisms — school inspections, self-evaluation and student well-being indicators — that monitor not only prohibited practices but also recognise and disseminate effective positive-discipline practice, consistent with the monitoring gaps identified in this review.

LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEWED LITERATURE

Several limitations qualify the conclusions drawn from this review. First, Sri Lankan empirical research on positive discipline remains comparatively thin relative to the extensive literature documenting the prevalence of corporal punishment; consequently, much of the evidence on implementation strategies is extrapolated from international, and particularly Western, contexts whose institutional resourcing and cultural attitudes toward authority differ from the Sri Lankan school system. Second, several of the local studies drawn upon are small-scale, qualitative or unpublished theses, which strengthens contextual richness but limits generalisability. Third, because numerical selection totals were not preserved (Section 2), this paper is a qualitative documentary review rather than a PRISMA-compliant systematic review (Page et al., 2021); it does not claim exhaustive coverage of every relevant publication, and inclusion decisions, while guided by explicit criteria, retain an element of researcher judgement. Fourth, the South Asian comparison in Section 5.3 is limited to selected jurisdictions and relies mainly on legal and policy documents rather than harmonised prevalence data. These limitations reinforce, rather than undermine, the case made in Section 7 for further empirical research specific to Sri Lankan education zones.

CONCLUSION

The transition from traditional punishment to positive discipline represents one of the most significant developments in contemporary educational practice. International evidence demonstrates that punitive approaches secure only short-term compliance while contributing to aggression, anxiety and disengagement, whereas positive and restorative approaches are consistently associated with stronger self-regulation, safer school climates and more trusting teacher-student relationships (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Visser et al., 2022; Gregory & Evans, 2020). Sri Lanka has established a substantial legal foundation for eliminating corporal punishment, most recently through Section 308A of the Penal Code, yet national data confirm that punitive practice persists at high levels despite this prohibition (Zoysa et al., 2021; Lakshman, 2018). This disjuncture demonstrates that legislative reform alone cannot transform classroom behaviour management.

Sustainable reform instead requires a systems-level approach: integrating positive discipline into teacher education, developing practical national implementation guidelines, promoting whole-school behavioural frameworks, expanding counselling provision, strengthening parental engagement, and reinforcing zonal monitoring and accountability. Positive discipline should be understood not merely as an alternative classroom-management technique but as an educational philosophy that respects children's dignity while cultivating responsible citizenship. Continued empirical research — particularly on the implementation of positive discipline within specific Sri Lankan education zones and school types — will be essential to ensure that disciplinary reform translates legal protection into lived classroom experience, consistent with national priorities and Sustainable Development Goal 4.

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