Learner discipline in the post-corporal punishment era: What an experience!

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Learner discipline is one of the bases of effective teaching and learning. If learners are not well disciplined, schools will not provide the best possible education. Therefore, it is important that good disciplinary measures and procedures be put in place in any school. In this article we investigate how learners in schools are currently being disciplined without violating their human rights. The nature and the causes of learners' disciplinary problems are fundamental. A qualitative data-collection approach was employed in this research. Purposive non-probability sampling was used to select the participants for the study. Experienced educators from school disciplinary committees, Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs) and the school principals of 4 schools were interviewed. We found that the common causes of learners' disciplinary problems varied from school to school. Furthermore, effective school management was found to be at the heart of learner discipline and the general academic performance of the school. We recommend that parents as first teachers should instil values and morals for their children to distinguish right from wrong.

Keywords: corporal punishment; disciplinary problem; discipline; disruptive learner; misconduct; school discipline

Introduction

The lack of discipline among learners in schools has been one of the foremost problems facing schools over the years. Globally, learner discipline affects the effectiveness of the education system and it demotivates educators (Belle, 2007). Simuforosa and Rosemary (2014) confirm that the problem of learner discipline is on the increase – both nationally and internationally. Recent studies reveal that the problem is on the rise in African schools. The degree to which incidents happen varies from less serious misbehaviour to more serious misconduct. In extreme cases, learners hurt and even kill one another on the school grounds (Tlhapi, 2015).

Tlhapi (2015) confirms that a lack of discipline among learners affects learners' academic performance; since effective teaching and learning cannot be achieved in a disordered school environment. Mestry and Khumalo (2012) further assert that effective institutions for teaching and learning must have good disciplinary measures in place. Effective discipline in schools creates a peaceful and effective educational environment that is secure for learners, and teaching and non-teaching staff (Bechuke & Debeila, 2012). Learners learn best in a secure and healthy environment (Mtsweni, 2008).

Education legislation, school principals and educators face extreme challenges in the management of learner discipline without affecting the learners' rights (Morrell, 2001). The South African legislation clearly prohibits the use of corporal punishment in schools (Department of Education, 2001). Since corporal punishment has been abolished, many schools struggle with maintaining substantial learner discipline. It is essential and imperative to understand that discipline is different from punishment and it should not be treated as such. Discipline should rather be regarded as a way of guiding and helping learners to learn what is right and what is expected of them (Department of Education, 2000).

The purpose of this research was to determine how learner discipline in public schools is managed in the post-corporal punishment era – without violating the rights of learners. The content of this article is essential to all education stakeholders who interact with learners on a daily basis. In the article we identify different approaches that educators and principals can effectively use to discipline learners – without resorting to corporal punishment.

Literature Review

Scholarly studies reveal that there are serious disciplinary problems in South Africa schools (Thompson, 2002) and the maintenance of learner discipline is crucial for effective teaching and learning. Therefore, it is important that all schools develop appropriate approaches to maintain learner discipline. Nthebe (2006) asserts that the nature and causes of ill-discipline are key to providing quality education.

Conceptualisation

The South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996a) and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996b) have a great impact on managing learners' discipline in schools without infringing on learners' rights. School discipline helps learners to improve their behaviour (Jinot, 2018). The enforcement of discipline by educators and school management is an important task, in order for effective teaching and learning to take place (Tlhapi, 2015). Many educators posit that they have problems with disciplining learners; because they have been deprived of the authority and power to deal with badly behaved learners, due to the abolition of corporal punishment (Mestry & Khumalo, 2012). It is clear that corporal

punishment does not nurture self-discipline in children; but it rather makes learners aggressive and vengeful, which results in anti-social behavior.

Our study was anchored in Patterson's social interactional stage model of discipline. This model assumes that the parents' behaviour has a great influence on learner behaviour. Patterson's model emphasises that when parents lack supervision of their children or use harsh and inconsistent parenting styles to discipline children, such children will misbehave more (Jinot, 2018). Social interaction in the family puts emphasis on factors that affect human social development. Children are observant and imitate parents as they grow.

Manifestation of learner-disciplinary problems
According to Njoroge and Nyabuto (2014), common learner-disciplinary problems are manifested in various ways; and they take different forms in various public schools. This is supported by Lukman and Hamadi (2014) who listed the different types of misbehaviour that interfere with school activities: learners missing lessons, learners repeatedly asking to go to the toilet, making rude remarks, truancy, smoking in the toilets, talking when the educator is teaching, being abusive, bullying, physical fights, and stealing. Masekoameng's (2010) study discovered other forms of unacceptable learner behaviour to include damaging school property, violations of the school's code of conduct, leaving the school premises without permission, and defiance of school authority.

Alidzulwi (2000), on the other hand, claims that some disciplinary problems are so serious that many secondary schools have now been turned into battlefields, where learners carry dangerous weapons like guns and knives. More severe disciplinary problems observed by Rossouw (2003) include learners smoking marijuana, stealing, persistent absenteeism, bullying, gambling, the destruction of school property, examination malpractices, the verbal and sexual assault of fellow learners and educators, the watching of pornographic films and pictures.

In support of Alidzulwi's (2000) claim, Lukman and Hamadi (2014) report serious incidents of learners burning down classrooms, setting educators' cars on fire, and attacking educators, principals and co-learners with knives. Ntuli (2012) asserts that disciplinary problems among learners are almost the same in all schools; but the intensity of those problems varies considerably. Mwamwenda (2004) contends that learner disciplinary problems have different origins; some originate within the individual learner; some from the school, parents, educators, and even from society. Wolhuter and Steyn (2003), concur that the causes of learner disciplinary problems in schools emanate from different

sources. These can be inherent within the individual learner, or the system. Masingi (2017) concludes that the causes of learner disciplinary problems are complicated; and they cannot be attributed to only one factor.

If the source of the learners' disciplinary problems can be identified, it should not be difficult for the educators and school management to help the learners resolve the behavioural problems (Rossouw, 2003). Therefore, when a learner misbehaves, it is important for educators to identify the causes and to understand the learners' behaviour – from the perspective of the internal and external factors. In this paper, the causes of learner disciplinary problems are discussed as emanating from different factors (Belle, 2016; Dupper, 2010). The forms of learner disciplinary problems identified above have a direct impact on teaching and learning. The disciplinary problems in the classroom and those that stem from outside need to be addressed.

Learner disciplinary approaches
Various scholars suggest different disciplinary strategies as the way of reducing the problem of learner discipline. One of the factors that contributes to learners' academic achievement is good discipline. Since most of the disciplinary problems emanate from school, it is therefore, important that parents, principals, educators and community members should be involved (Belle, 2016). Kiprop and Chepkilot (2011) point out that the involvement of parents in children's education influences the behaviour of learners – both at home and at school. Mokhele (2006) suggests that the educator-learner relationship is important for establishing effective discipline.

The educator-learner relationship ensures that educators understand each learner, and that they are able to identify the root causes of learner disciplinary problems. Martin and Loomis (2013) claim that the learners' community has a great influence on learners' conduct. People with strong ties to a community are easily controlled by the communal norms. Therefore, there should be a mutual participation of the local community in the life of the school, in order to provide peace and order within the school and the community (Makendano, 2016). A strong educator-learner relationship enhances learning. Learners who perceive their educators to be supportive of their educational needs are more engaged in learning.

The introduction of competent professional counsellors, who can help learners with disciplinary problems, is one of the strategies for which schools can opt. Responsible and accountable professional counsellors help to discuss the aftermath of misbehaviour and the advantage of good behaviour with learners. The advice of the school counsellor could help to

eradicate the high number of incidents of misbehaviour among learners – both inside and outside the school (Simuforosa & Rosemary, 2014). School counselors are essential partners for educators. Educators can use school counselors to solve problems that interfere with learners' success.

Mtsweni (2008) suggests that schools should involve learners in the drafting of the school rules, such as the school's code of conduct. This would make them see the rules as being fair and easy to obey; effective rules should motivate learners to comply with the school policies (Ntuli, 2012). The principle of "nothing for us without us" should be adhered to. The RCL must always be engaged as a strategy to control and address learner disciplinary problems. This creates a positive and secure school environment free of threats and misbehaviour; where learners enforce the discipline on their own.

The availability of rewards and praise also motivates learners to consistently obey the school rules (Mtsweni, 2008). Njoroge and Nyabuto (2014) suggest that learners who have made a great effort to avoid ill discipline must be recognised, praised and rewarded. Rewarding learners who behaved well, should be considered. Praising learners augments acceptable behavior; it is a way of appreciating compliance. Learners become motivated and adhere to the rules.

Tlhapi (2015) proposes that educators who display expertise in curriculum delivery rather than using coercive power over their learners, can succeed in maintaining class discipline. The professional competence of an educator has a positive influence on learners' behaviour. Educators who command effective and efficient classroom management skills are not liabilities.

Current learner discipline guidelines

Maintaining learner discipline in schools calls for a strong parent-teacher partnership. The provisions of the National Discipline Policy in South Africa and how the different role players carry out discipline in the school are critical. According to Vally (1998), all students are always expected to behave in ways that promote learning. Educators have autonomous responsibility to always be in control of their classrooms and to make any reasonable rules. Learners are always expected to respect educators and comply in the classrooms, on the playgrounds, during any educational excursions or at any sponsored activities (Department of Education, 2001).

Educators find it challenging to implement disciplinary measures in their quest to maintain order and discipline in schools. The South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996a) sets out a list of responsibilities for role-players to manage and control learner discipline. The adoption of a learners' code of conduct, and setting up disciplinary committees, which will conduct fair hearings on serious discipline cases, subject wrongdoers to corrective measures, suspend learners or recommend expulsion for misbehaving learners. It is imperative for every learner to sign a declaration as a way of upholding the code of conduct. These corrective measures will go a long way in resolving disciplinary problems.

Despite having the guidelines on how to maintain discipline, many schools still practice corporal punishment. The learners' code of conduct is designed with the purpose of creating a safe and secure learning environment in which a learner is not denied the right to be treated fairly and responsibly, to demonstrate an acceptable level of respect, to be taught in a safe and disciplined learning atmosphere, and to be treated with dignity and respect. The school's disciplinary policy and relevant regulations need to be fairly and consistently applied when managing unruly behaviour.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used to deal with the research questions. An exploration of the participants' views on managing learners' discipline was substantially made. A purposive non-probability sampling technique was used to select prospective participants. Educators with at least 5 years of teaching experience, members of the School Governing Body (SGB), RCLs and school principals were identified as knowledgeable informants who provided more information about the problem. The participants were deliberately sampled in recognition of their experience as being successful in managing learners' discipline. Data were collected directly from the participants via face-to-face interactive interviews. Participants' views were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. Research ethics were adhered to throughout the study.

Results

Themes were identified from the information collected from the participants on the topic. Types of learner discipline problems, their causes, the role of stakeholders, as well as different approaches relevant to schools emerged. The participants had experienced similar disciplinary problems in their respective schools. One of the educators commented on the common types of learner disciplinary problems:

> *Learners' failure to do their classwork and homework; learners fights each other; but they do not use weapons on the school premises; they smoke cigarettes in the school; they abuse drugs; sometimes the learners leave school without permission, come to school drunk and intoxicated with a drug. Some senior learners' sexually harass junior learners; learners' bully their classmates and junior learners.*

Disciplinary problems in schools do not arise without reasons. The problems emanate from different, but related factors, such as school, family, society and even learners themselves.

Family and Home Background
The participants concur that one of the causes of learners' disciplinary problems originate from the family and the home. Educators believe that some of the learners come from child-headed families, where there is inadequate parental care. One of the educators remarked as follows:

> *The causes of disciplinary problems among learners in my school are the lack of parental care and love; some parents are not always available for their children. They are always busy with their own affairs. Some parents live and work in cities; while their children stay alone at home. Such parents only come to visit their children periodically. Learners from these homes receive little or no parental monitoring and guidance from their parents.*

Poverty
Poverty-stricken children can hardly concentrate on their school work; since such children depend on state grants and the national school-nutrition programme. When these learners come to school with empty stomachs, they lack the necessary strength to study. One of the learners said: "*Social economic problems and poverty make learners to steal at school, when their parents are unable to provide for their needs.*"

Peer-Pressure Influence
Social efficacy and the influence of peers can be detrimental to the learners' academic attainments. The impact of peer pressure has far-reaching implications on the academic aspirations of the learners. The participants acknowledged the negative effects of peer pressure, as being another cause of learners' disciplinary problems. One of the learners had this to say:

> *Peer influence can make learners to get involved in alcohol and drug abuse and the use of vulgar language. I observed in school that when learners are under the influence of alcohol and drugs they become violent and they misbehave with their fellow learners and educators; and they make the school unsafe for us.*

Overcrowded Classroom
Overpopulated classrooms limit the quality of teaching and learning. The interactions between the educators and the learners may be compromised. We found that educators also lack the necessary skills to manage their overcrowded classes; and consequently, the negative reinforcement strategies, like punishment, fail to bear fruit. The consequences of inadequate classrooms have a bearing on the quality of the educators. The participants noted and identified overcrowded classrooms as one of the causes of disciplinary problems among learners. One of the principals commented as follows:

> *Most of the classrooms are overpopulated and overcrowded. The overcrowded classrooms are poorly ventilated with insufficient infrastructure, such as chairs and tables. Three learners share a desk meant for two. When a classroom is overcrowded and not conducive for learning, the learners can become restless; and they then misbehave.*

Lack of Extracurricular Activities
Extracurricular activities get learners committed, giving them the opportunity to engage and explore other avenues, whereby their potentials may become well focused. The exposure of learners to a variety of ideas, interests and career opportunities stimulate their curiosity; the lack of extracurricular activities may cause hyperactive learners to misbehave. One of the principals remarked the following:

> *The lack of extracurricular activities in schools disadvantages the hyperactive learners and learners who struggle academically. They hardly identify and develop their talents. Likewise, learners with psychological disorders, in-born traits, and hyperactive learners are always restless, disruptive in class, when they are not fully engaged with positive activities.*

Society and Media
Society and the media portray violence as being normal ways of life. Learners watch violence on television as being the right path for achieving one's aim. One of the principals pointed out the following:

> *Society's influence, such as violence, corruption, negative influence from the media, have a negative influence on the learners' behaviour. Most of the television programmes are full of violence. Some of these programmes teach learners to misbehave, to be violent, and to use weapons to fight; and they inculcate criminality.*

Discussion
This study reveals that there are different types of learner disciplinary problems in schools. This is evidenced by various scholars, who continue to mention the same types of disciplinary problems among learners in their studies. Ntuli (2012) argues that disciplinary problems among learners are almost the same in all schools; but the intensity of those problems differs from one school to another. The different types of unacceptable behaviour range from minor cases to extreme incidents.

Disciplinary problems do not just happen without reasons. The study has shown that the causes of learner disciplinary problems emerge from different interrelated factors, such as the school, the family, society and even the learners themselves. The home was noted as one of the major causes of learners' misbehaviour. Education officials believe that some of the learners come

from child-headed families without proper parental care. Learners who lack parental care and parental love are hardly supported in their studies at home. De Witt and Lessing (2013) postulate that children become prone to acquire bad behaviour from their friends. Learners who lack proper guidance and whose basic needs are not met at home, lose focus on schoolwork (Umo, 2013).

We discovered that, as learners interact, they learn different behaviour from each other. Some behaviour is appreciated; some is discouraged. Learners are highly influenced by their peers. Learners copy their peers as a way of confirming their identity and then become involved in unacceptable behaviour. The unconscious demand for wanting to impress schoolmates and educators traps them. Peer group influence is a serious issue that results in learner's misbehaviour – both in and out of schools. Jinot (2018) depicts that there is a feeling of togetherness among learners when they are in a group; and they greatly influence one another by indulging in unpleasant behaviour, such as drug abuse.

Overcrowded classrooms are also a cause of disciplinary problems among learners. It was discovered that, when the classroom is not conducive for teaching and learning, the learners misbehave. The reason for overcrowded classrooms in many of the public schools is due to too few educators, inappropriate school buildings, and a lack of learning support materials (LSM). It is not easy for an educator to manage an overpopulated classroom. Disciplinary problems are common in overcrowded classrooms. The classrooms are not ideal for effective teaching and learning. Marais (2016) claims that an overcrowded classroom is usually noisy, subject to fighting, bullying, and the harassment of smaller and weaker learners. Overcrowded classrooms force learners to compete for inadequate space, resources and learning facilities (Masingi, 2017).

The lack of extracurricular activities in schools deprives many learners of the opportunity to demonstrate their academic potential. The academically weak learners loose self-confidence and their talents are hardly noticed. These types of learners can be frustrated and divert their energy into disrupting classroom activities. Njoroge and Nyabuto (2014) confirm that the lack of extracurricular activities leads to disciplinary problems, especially among hyperactive learners; who must be kept busy throughout.

Society and the media portray violence as the normal way of life. Learners watch violence on television, and they see it as the right path for achieving one's goals. Attitudes towards peers are influenced by personal and contextual factors. Many learners come to school with a disciplinary problem inherited from home and their society. Learners' ill discipline is a reflection of society's behaviour. Scholars posit that racism, violence and other antisocial behaviour are acquired by learners from the media and society, which are detrimental to their academic progress (Wolhuter & Steyn, 2003). Learners are constantly exposed to violent acts in the media, on the internet, and in video and computer games.

Effective discipline can hardly be achieved without involvement and the support of parents and guardians. Parents are expected to give guidance on which movies to watch and which PlayStation games to purchase. It is important for parents and the school to work hand in hand. Successful schools ensure that parents are critical participants in maintaining school discipline. When large numbers of parents are not supportive, learner disciplinary problems become difficult to control.

According to the Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa (2014), the management of learners' discipline is teamwork, which can be equated to a three-legged pot that comprises educators, parents, and learners. The most important role of moulding learners' behaviour is placed on the shoulders of the parents (Manamela, 2015). Therefore, family and school should work together as partners, recognising each other's area of competence to improve learner discipline (Oosthuizen & Botha, 2015). Schools that have involved community leaders in school discipline have achieved great response and support from the parents. Less disciplinary problems and higher levels of academic learner performance have been experienced. Academic success in such schools is certain. Collaboration with the parents, community leaders, and community members is critical. Mutual participation of the local community restores discipline, peace and order within the school.

To remain relevant in the changing world, the school needs to continuously come up with new disciplinary approaches that suit each situation and the changing society, rather than depending on old disciplinary approaches. De Atouguia (2014) reveals that there is no one-size-fits-all disciplinary strategy. To effectively manage learner discipline, the school should organise seminars for parents, in order to enlighten them on positive ways for disciplining their children and to encourage parents to be involved in their children's education. Organising seminars and conferences on learner discipline for parents is another way of involving parents in the education of their children. Involving parents in their children's education can have a positive influence on the learners' academic performance.

For educators to efficiently and effectively manage learner discipline, such educators must be excellent in the subject content, have good teaching skills, good classroom management and build a positive educator-learner relationship with great

support from the school principal. Educators' professional and classroom management skills help educators to prepare well before going to class and to apply the correct strategy to deal with learners' behaviour. As suggested by Tlhapi (2015), educators should develop authority by displaying expertise in curriculum delivery, rather than by using coercive power to discipline learners. Wolhuter and Steyn (2003) regard this as the professional competence of an educator that has a positive influence on the learners' behaviour. Educators who maintain effective and efficient discipline among learners must have substantial classroom-management skills.

It is vital to involve stakeholders in the drafting of the learners' code of conduct. School rules and regulations that have been blessed by stakeholders are more easily implemented. A learner code of conduct is a strong disciplinary policy that controls learner behaviour. Breaching of this code of conduct is a serious offence that goes with discipline. School rules guide the way learners behave and interact with each other and their educators in and out of the classroom. The school that involves the community in school discipline has a great response and support from the parents, with less disciplinary problems and higher levels of learners' academic performance. Success in such schools is always determined by the support and co-operation of parents, community leaders and community members as they occupy the position of a watch-dog of the school. Mutual participation between the community and the school should be established and maintained. Cordial relationships between the school, parents, and the community would always improve learner discipline (Joseph, 2013). When the local community takes ownership of a school, discipline, peace and order can co-exist.

Apart from the learners' code of conduct, it is equally important for educators to demonstrate to learners that they love them and care about their academic progress. Learners need to feel honoured and respected; because, they are key members of the school community. Good educator-learner relationships help to build learners' self-esteem, thereby making learners feel loved and experience a sense of belonging. It is crucial for educators to create a non-threatening and pleasant atmosphere, which strengthens interactive teaching and learning. A positive educator-learner relationship supports educators in understanding the root causes of learner disciplinary problems. A positive educator-learner relationship is characterised by loving and caring, good listening skills and openness; as it enhances a positive school climate.

Praise and reward improve good behavior. The reduction of bad behaviour among leaners is critical in any learning environment. Acknowledgement of well-behaved learners is a way of encouraging good behaviour and motivating those learners who would behave differently. Njoroge and Nyabuto (2014) suggest that learners who have made a great effort to avoid ill discipline must be recognised, praised and rewarded. Yuanshan, Chang and Youyan (2011) support the following approaches to manage learner discipline: reward good behaviour, removing privileges from poorly disciplined learners, detention of misbehaving learners, demerits and punishing misbehaviour.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that learner disciplinary problems are global phenomena, and they are similar in most secondary schools. The factors causing learner disciplinary problems are numerous. These factors could be from the school or outside the school; and this would include home and society. It was discovered that home and family background are the principal causes of learners' disciplinary problems. Learners grow up watching violent programmes on television and social media, and also see this in the neighbourhood; learners begin to think that this is society's way of life and the right path for achieving one's desires. School-related factors, such as insufficient infrastructure and resources, overcrowded classrooms, an overemphasis on learners' rights, a lack of in-service training programmes to equip educators with different disciplinary approaches, and the misconduct of educators adds to learners' ill discipline. Different approaches can be used to achieve effective discipline at schools. Such approaches include involving parents, encouraging parents to discipline their children with love, and acting as role models for their children. Young people emulate their role models when they grow up. When effectively used, praise and reward can turn around behaviour challenges and improve learners' attitudes towards learning. Involving stakeholders who have an interest in the education of their children can substantially improve discipline among learners.

Recommendations

We propose that the following be considered by the parents, schools, and educators as they provide learner discipline without contravening the statutes:

- All stakeholders should work together as a team to promote effective school discipline, especially educators, since team collaboration influences daily practice. Educators who are united leave no gap for mischievous learners. Learners can easily spot division among educators.
- Parents should be actively involved in the education of their children. Parents should inculcate values and morals in their children at an early stage. Parents should visit the school regularly to ensure that their children remain disciplined from home to school.
- With the support of the government and parents, the school should provide sports facilities to encourage

extracurricular activities in schools, to assist hyperactive learners, as well as learners that are weak academically, in order to discover their hidden talents and passions.

- Priority should be given to a shortage of resources, especially provision of classrooms. This should be treated as a national crisis. A long-term solution is to build additional classrooms and to provide enough educators. When classrooms are not conducive to teaching and learning, the learners find opportunities to misbehave.

Authors' Contributions

OT Obadire collected data through interviews, and wrote the manuscript. DA Sinthumule provided the structure and analysed the data. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

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