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Teachers' challenges in implementing a learner's code of conduct for positive discipline in schools

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In the majority of South African schools, maintaining discipline remains a challenge – a situation which commands the attention of departmental officials both locally and internationally. When negative disciplinary approaches were prohibited in schools in this country, positive disciplinary measures were recommended in the form of a code of conduct for learners. In the study reported on here we examined the challenges that teachers face in using a code of conduct to maintain positive discipline among the learner cohort. The study was guided by positive discipline and democratic theories. These theories imply that discipline must be taught to learners so that they are equipped to behave appropriately and obey the school/classroom rules. Data were gathered from a total of 16 educators in 2 sampled schools in Pinetown, Durban, through semi-structured interviews, observation and document review. The findings reveal that a variety of challenges impeded the use of a learners' code of conduct, including a failure to review the document on a regular basis. The content of those codes was not widely communicated either, which meant that they remained ineffective in addressing each school's specific needs with regard to correcting misbehaviour. Based on the findings, we recommend that the Department of Basic Education raise awareness around democratic governance in schools to enhance positive discipline by means of up-to-date, enforced codes of conduct. Schools also need to encourage parents to be actively involved in their children's schooling, as a means of supporting teachers.

Keywords: democracy; implementation; learners' code of conduct; positive discipline

Introduction

In 1994 South Africa has been liberated from apartheid's abhorrent laws, yet in many schools, authoritarianism continues to prevail in the form of corporal punishment, despite the practice having been proven to be ineffective in curbing learner indiscipline (Reyneke, 2018). Studies by the Department of Basic Education ([DBE], 2018) and Zondo (2022) have shown that the use of punitive disciplinary techniques results in several problems. These problems include an inability to reform a learner's conscience, a failure to achieve voluntary and cheerful self-control, and a failure to make the delinquent strive to do well academically. Punitive techniques are not conducive for making learners obey without fear, but rather increase negative behaviour which is emblematic of anger, hatred, malice and abstinence, while only serving to make offenders more hardened (Glen, 1981, in Zondo, 2022). Ngubane (2018) agrees that such an approach results in learners showing signs of being emotionally and/or physically scarred, or, conversely, being overlooked – both of which only serve to perpetuate a cycle of violence and disciplinary problems in schools. In this regard, Mlalazi (2015), Shukla and Singh (2013) found that learners became desensitised and impervious to corporal punishment, and as a result their misbehaviour was aggravated rather than curtailed. Durrant and Ensom (2012, as cited in Ngubane, 2018:23) maintain that negative disciplinary measures (corporal punishment) have diverse unfavourable consequences, which include unwanted "physical, behavioural, cognitive, emotional and social development outcomes." Since these research findings invalidate the use of negative disciplinary approaches, it begs the question: How can learner indiscipline be effectively addressed in schools?

One possible alternative may be positive discipline, which can be enforced by implementing a learners' code of conduct to deal with indiscipline among this cohort. Such a code, if properly formulated, can serve as a tool for managing unwanted learner behaviour. According to the Department of Education ([DoE], 2000), a workable code should not only spell out the rules regarding learner behaviour but should also describe the disciplinary process(es) to be implemented following any transgression(s) on the part of a learner. Thus, a learners' code of conduct represents an expedient strategy for enhancing positive discipline in schools, where the aim is to foster positive learner behaviour (Zuković & Stojadinović, 2021). The Uganda Ministry of Education and Sport ([UMES], 2017) defines positive discipline as an approach which can be used to direct learner behaviour by focusing on schoolchildren's psychological and emotional needs. Dores (2020) points out that positive discipline involves giving learners clear guidelines on which behaviour is acceptable, and then supporting them as they learn to abide by those regulations. As Zondo and Mncube (2022) declare, this form of discipline helps children feel a sense of connection, it teaches them mutual respect and important social/life skills, and encourages them to discover what they are capable of.

In this day and age, hopes for the effective implementation of positive discipline are vested in the concept of a code of conduct for learners (Mncube & Zondo, 2020). As Durrant (2020) maintains, enforcing positive

discipline establishes a school climate that is conducive to helping learners learn and explore within an accommodating and democratic environment. Despite general praise for a type of discipline that is positive in nature, in the study on which this article is based we sought to identify what challenges teachers encountered in using a learners' code of conduct as a means of maintaining positive discipline in an educational context. With this undertaking we sought to offer insight into how the DBE can assist teachers/schools in dealing with the identified difficulties to ensure the smooth running of schools as violence-free sites where effective teaching and learning can take place.

Literature Review

Around the world physical punishment has been found to be fruitless in curbing learner indiscipline, or in dealing with learners with behavioural problems (Allen, 2016). Elkadi and Sharaf (2023) acknowledge that most teachers try their level best to maintain order and discipline in their classrooms, with varying success. In South Africa, problems have even been reported regarding the implementation of positive discipline in township schools. Obadire and Sinthumele (2021) note that related challenges include inadequate training of school governing body (SGB) members, a lack of concern about learner aggression, parents not making time to attend meetings at school, and power struggles within SGBs. As Zondo (2016) found, many parents, learners and other educational stakeholders only participate to a limited degree in the formulation of a code of conduct, which raises questions about how fit for purpose such a code might be. Zondo (2022), who highlights various challenges that can impede the implementation of positive disciplinary strategies, emphasises the lack of capacity to identify, adopt and sustain policies, to review the code of conduct, or to implement practices and systems that can efficiently meet all learners' needs.

Zondo and Mncube (2022) admit that schools face multiple challenges in their efforts to establish and maintain safe, positive environments in which both teaching and learning can flourish. Despite their best efforts to develop shared approaches that promote positive behaviour, educators are likely to continue to encounter confronting behaviour among learners. A lack of knowledge, misunderstandings and misconceptions among staff about behaviour management may also impede the implementation of a positive approach to discipline (Haruyama, 2019). Sant (2019) argues that realistic efforts are difficult to establish and maintain because many learners with learning and behavioural difficulties appear immune to recommended interventions and struggle to adhere to the daily demands of functioning in either classrooms or schools. They become passive, reluctant and negligent, and

respond slowly (if at all) to any targeted interventions aimed at offering behavioural support. Elkadi and Sharaf (2023) warn that the inappropriate use of positive and effective behavioural strategies can cause resistance among learners. Teachers who believe in traditional disciplinary strategies may be reluctant to implement positive disciplinary methods leading to an on/off approach. Such inconsistency is bound to thwart the successful implementation of any positive disciplinary strategies.

According to Kunene (2020), a lack of parental support also poses a challenge in contexts where stakeholders are attempting to implement a learners' code of conduct. Zondo (2016) found that many parents and educational stakeholders are not fully performing their roles (as mandated by legislation). They are hesitant to participate in decision-making as a result of their lack of educational qualifications, or due to power struggles among SGB members. According to Elkadi and Sharaf (2023), overcrowding in classrooms may further impede the implementation of positive discipline as learners in large classes tend to be unruly and rebellious, making it challenging for teachers to maintain order – a finding confirmed in Reyneke's (2018) study. A limited amount of space puts learners in close contact, allowing little personal space. Where too many learners are forced together in classrooms, hallways, bathrooms and cafeterias, unwanted behaviour (quarrels, and even theft) can be provoked (Zondo, 2022) resulting in effective teaching not taking place as it is impossible to maintain order and discipline under such circumstances (Glenn & Nelsen, 2021).

During the nationwide Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) lockdown, online learning became more prevalent, giving rise to novel disciplinary challenges (Modan, 2021). According to Jones (2020), teachers found it difficult to enforce discipline in a virtual environment, especially because existing learners' codes of conduct do not efficiently manage learners' online behaviour. Teachers were also confronted with learners who cheated during online tests or disrupted digital lessons (Jones, 2020). Many of these cases were never dealt with, since such eventualities were not covered in the existing school rules or codes of conduct. According to Modan (2021), these scenarios made it all the more imperative to call for immediate interventions, including a review of the code, to accommodate virtual learning. With learners alternating in-person school attendance, teachers struggled to identify masked learners, while those behind the masks tended to feel empowered to be disruptive since they could not be identified easily – and that made it difficult to impose rules/order (Zondo, 2022). With learners only attending classes on alternate days a gap arose in that teachers were unable to consistently teach learners

how to behave positively (Glenn & Nelsen, 2021) or to instil skills and values in learners through repetition and sustained praise. Moreover, some schools used morning assemblies to communicate information and motivate the school community, but under pandemic-related restrictions such gatherings were prohibited, meaning that learners could not be reprimanded for any emerging misbehaviour, which added to the disciplinary challenges facing educators (Obadire & Sinthumele, 2021). Modan (2021) confirms that long-established scholastic practices were indeed adversely affected by the global pandemic.

Theoretical underpinnings

This study is underpinned by Dreikurs' (1972) positive discipline theory and Dewey's (1940) democratic theory. Dreikurs' (1972) theory of positive discipline is based on the idea that all behaviour (antisocial acts, in particular) are purposeful and goal-directed. This theorist purports that learners might misbehave when seeking attention, hoping to gain power over an adult, avenging hurt feelings, or hiding their inadequacies (Dreikurs, 1972), and might achieve this by being disruptive, unruly or ungovernable. Dewey's (1940) democratic theory maintains that people learn how to be democratic by being members of a group or community that acts democratically. Hence, democracy works hand in hand with positive discipline in schools. Both these theories maintain that learners need to be taught discipline in order to behave properly, and this manifests itself in the form of a code of conduct which is drawn up within the parameters of democratic principles. The code of conduct is the positive discipline strategy that teachers use to enhance positive discipline in schools, (Zondo, 2022).

In many schools, negative disciplinary measures continue to be implemented, (Reyneke, 2018). Therefore, the proposed framework addresses the problem by encouraging educators to make the switch to positive strategies which involve reinforcing wanted behaviour through the establishment of an environment that is rich in, and rewards positive outcomes. Having learners "on board" in formulating a learners' code of conduct allows them to take control of their own lives and to take responsibility for their choices and actions. Thus far, a code of conduct is seen as a democratically crafted instrument that schools can use to enhance and instil positive discipline in the learner cohort. Then, in terms of the framework, a code of conduct is viewed as a set of rules that seek to cater for learners' diverse behavioural needs, and endeavours to manage their behaviour, the notion being that self-disciplined individuals can help their schools to remain orderly and disciplined environments in which positive and effective teaching and learning can take place. Dores (2020)

explains that for positive discipline to flourish, a code of conduct (addressing a democratic aspect) is vital, as it serves to enhance (corporate) social responsibility: an effective learners' code includes open rules about desirable behaviour, and closed rules directed at proscribed behaviour. It accommodates the behaviour of individual learners as well as the collective behaviour of the school as a whole (Dores, 2020). Such a set of rules serves as an alternative to corporal punishment and is used as a guide or manual for directing learner behaviour.

Looking at the principles of Dreikurs' (1972) positive discipline theory, as grounded in social psychology, the approach recognises that learners seek to fit into a certain group, and if that does not happen, negative behaviour ensues. The implication is that a code of conduct may be suitable as a means of enhancing discipline, leading Jones (2020) to suggest that positive discipline must be taught to youths of all ages – that makes it the school's responsibility (in addition to teaching the formal curriculum). Dreikurs, having studied children's behaviour for decades, came to the conclusion that misbehaviour always has an intention or goal, be it getting attention, seeking power/control, getting revenge or compensating for feelings of inadequacy. The implication is that discipline must be taught to learners so that they are equipped to behave appropriately and obey the school/classroom rules (Dores, 2020). To this end, a learners' code of conduct can offer a means of effecting discipline in schools in a positive manner, once drawn up within the parameters of democratic principles.

Problem Statement

Parents have continued to complain about their child(ren) being caned by teachers and there have even been reports of learners being injured to the extent of needing medical assistance (DBE, 2018), or being so traumatised that they needed counselling. Zondo (2016) confirms that corporal punishment has continued unabated in schools, despite its prohibition. As Mncube and Harber (2013) reveal, Childline visited 76 schools in Gauteng in 2011, and in almost every school, learners reported that corporal punishment was still being meted out. Why is this the case when corporal punishment is banned in South Africa under Section 10 of the South African Schools Act (SASA) (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996)? Worryingly, the positive disciplinary measures proposed by the DoE (2000) and SASA (RSA, 1996) have failed to combat indiscipline in South African schools. That gap offered us an opportunity to examine the effectiveness of the positive disciplinary strategies being employed and any challenges that teachers encounter in the implementation thereof. Adler (2012) maintains that positive discipline aims to teach learners to be accountable for their own lives and actions, and is

thus deemed to be a corrective means of managing unwanted conduct. Although many studies deal with disciplinary issues in schools, the majority tend to hone in on the traditional disciplinary strategies which teachers employ to deal with misbehaving learners, thereby failing to address how positive approaches, such as a code of conduct, can be enforced – provided it has been agreed to by all the educational stakeholders concerned. Therefore, to identify the challenges associated with the use of a code of conduct for learners, we examined the challenges that teachers face when implementing a code of conduct for learners in their schools.

Research Questions

From the problem discussed above, the following question was raised:

- 1) What challenges do teachers face when implementing the code of conduct for learners in schools?

Research Methods

This was a qualitative study located within an interpretive paradigm. Being qualitative in nature, the study allowed us to gain insight into the participants' lived experiences regarding the challenges they faced in using a code of conduct for learners. The aim was to expand on the existing body of knowledge, by describing and interpreting related phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We employed a phenomenological design (Vagle, 2018) to examine the participants' lived experiences. Having grounded the study in democratic theory (Dewey, 1940) and positive discipline theory (Dreikurs, 1972), schools rooted in a democratic approach to education and used a learners' code of conduct to impart discipline in the learner cohort were sampled. Thus, purposive sampling was used to sample three discipline committee (DC) members, one school principal, two school management team (SMT) members and two teacher representatives in an SGB (a sample of 16 participants).

Data Collection Instruments

To gain access to the participants' lived experiences and their perceptions on the use of a code of conduct as a way of inculcating positive discipline among the learners, semi-structured interviews, observation and document review were used to collect the data. Interviews were voice-recorded, participants were guaranteed privacy and confidentiality, and participants' consent was sought. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to gain first-hand information and use probing questions to address the research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). School disciplinary committee (SDC) meetings were observed to determine which policy or set of rules informed decisions taken against misbehaving learners. Each observation lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Learners' code of conduct, defaulters' books

and disciplinary hearing minutes were reviewed. These documents reflected records of issues relating to disciplinary matters arising in the schools under study. Our decision to peruse these texts was based on the fact that these were existing documents which did not interfere with, or alter, the setting in any way, had we sought to do so (Caulfield, 2022). These documents allowed us to uncover aspects of the research that other methods of data collection would not have exposed (triangulation). Confirmability, credibility and transferability were ensured for the trustworthiness of data, as participants were allowed access to the findings of the study. Lastly, participants' informed consent was sought and they were assured anonymity.

Data Analysis

We employed thematic data analysis, which Creswell (2013:193) maintains is commonly used to analyse qualitative data. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) note, data analysis includes the data-collection stage, transcription, categorising and sorting, making notes, jotting down ideas, joining related themes, formulating themes and, lastly, writing a report. For ethical reasons, the two participating schools were allocated pseudonyms, namely Nativa Secondary (NS) and Andolex Secondary (AS). The codes allocated to the participants were DCM (for disciplinary committee members), SP (for the school principals); SMT (for SMT members) and TR-SGB (for teacher representatives).

Results and Discussion

In this study we examined the challenges which teachers face in using a code of conduct for learners when maintaining positive discipline in schools. The data gathered were coded and classified into themes that emerged from the participants' verbatim utterances that had been transcribed and thematised. As such, the research findings are discussed under the following emergent themes:

- Neglecting to review the code of conduct
- Lack of stakeholder involvement in creating a code of conduct
- Lack of parental support for efforts to instil discipline in schools
- Power struggles
- Communication as a barrier to implementing a learners' code of conduct

Neglecting to Review the Code of Conduct

The participants were asked: "What challenges do teachers face when implementing the code of conduct for learners in schools?" Their responses revealed that the use of outdated codes was problematic and anathema to the implementation of a positive approach. Where such a code was found to exist, learners were not properly oriented to its content, which hindered their understanding thereof and their subsequent compliance. The findings

further reveal that the code was not made available to the learners, but remained on shelves or in teachers' files, rather than being distributed to the very people for whom it had been created in the first instance, as indicated in the following comment:

The code of conduct is not updated in terms of whether it is working or not working, and whether it is bringing in efficiency within a school. The code of conduct is there and it picks up dust, people are not implementing it as expected/outlined in the code of conduct for learners. However, if there is an active code of conduct, there will be misconducts that are being controlled, if those misconducts are not controlled and reported to the staff, then teachers will have challenges of not knowing whether the code of conduct is working, or not. (TR-SGB 2, NS)

As this participant emphasised, the code was dated and remained confined to paper, which means that it was ineffective in curbing learner misbehaviour or exercising adequate control. Any code which is archaic is not suited to meeting the demands that 21st-century learners impose on figures of authority. Rather than being a living, working document, the code thus merely existed as a formality and to show compliance. In that respect, it was incapable of guiding teachers, learners or parents, and was static, rather than a dynamic kind of framework which changed with the times. In the same vein, another participant argued as follows:

... even if the school code of conduct is there, [...] there is no proper orientation in terms of the applicability, especially to those joining the school for the first time and also orientating the parents and teachers. This is because, in most cases, you find that teachers themselves do not understand the school code of conduct, and that will pose a great challenge in [terms of] the workability [there] of... (SMT 2, AS)

From this comment it is clear that although a code of conduct existed at the school in question, it was not being communicated to either the parents or the learners. Thus, if it is not understood (even by teachers!), it is impossible to implement and fails to serve its intended purpose.

Our observational findings support those derived from the interviews, which bore testimony to the code being irrelevant and certainly insufficient. During a disciplinary meeting it was difficult for members to have a meaningful discussion and arrive at a solution which fully addressed the problem they were grappling with. These findings are corroborated by Zondo's (2016) study, which revealed that a failure to formulate and review the code of conduct posed challenges in terms of efforts aimed at implementing positive discipline. Allen (2016) points out that positive discipline advances a school's functionality by creating a system of relationships, rules, rewards and sanctions, all of which are designed to progressively develop self-discipline in learners. If this finding is anything to go by, teachers will continue to encounter disciplinary problems in the absence of

such a code. Therefore, it is recommended that the code of conduct be reviewed regularly to address disciplinary issues in schools.

Lack of Stakeholder Involvement in Creating a Code of Conduct

The participants' responses also revealed that a lack of stakeholder involvement was problematic: parent and learner stakeholders alike tended to shy away from participating in determining the outcome of rules and regulations involving their children/them. The findings further reveal that stakeholders were not sufficiently capacitated to execute their roles. One participant commented as follows:

For a code of conduct to be effective and efficient, a collaboration between all stakeholders – learners, parents, and teachers – is important. However, in a school that is not the case, you will find that it is only the teacher stakeholder or the principal perhaps, who is at the forefront in the formulation of the code of conduct for learners. There is no continuous engagement between the three stakeholders mentioned, to ensure that they are always informed with regard to the code [...]. At the most, learner stakeholder[s] ha[ve] little if no voice at all, in the discussion of [a] code of conduct for the[m]. The moment that some stakeholders are not part of the development of the code of conduct, it become[s] difficult for the code [...] to accomplish its goal as a strategy to enhance positive discipline in schools. (SP, AS)

As is evident from this comment, parent and learner stakeholders were not consulted in the process of compiling the code of conduct, which makes it difficult for the code to help educators attain its predetermined goal of instilling discipline in schools. This alone creates difficulties in terms of how anyone can expect learners – for whom the code was designed – to abide by rules which they did not create, approve, or are often not even aware of.

Dewey's (1940) democratic theory suggests that democracy in education is concerned with the widespread involvement and democratic participation of all stakeholders (i.e., members of the organisation, and those with a stake in its successful operation). Thus, the theory holds that there is a relationship between democracy and the delivery of quality education (Mncube & Zondo, 2020). The findings reported on here reveal a lack of participation and active involvement on the part of stakeholders, which constrained the effectiveness of the code. Indeed, not all stakeholders have active roles to play, perhaps due to their inability to make a valid input, nor does everyone wish to be heard during a meeting, but as a result, they end up as "passive bystanders, and unwilling subjects" on whom rules and regulations are imposed (Zondo, 2022:164). Notably, some participants highlighted that parents, learners, and teachers (to a certain degree) were consulted in developing the code of conduct, but not all participants agreed with the final outcome.

Lack of Parental Support for Efforts to Instil Discipline in Schools

The findings of the study reveal another significant challenge, which is that parents are not supportive enough of the school when it comes to disciplining their children. The findings also reveal that many learners were not adequately disciplined or monitored at home, which placed the onus for their development (academic and social) firmly on the shoulders of their teachers. Many learners misbehaved or behaved irresponsibly due to the upbringing they were receiving at home, and the unrestricted freedoms they witnessed in their society or community. Another perspective which emanated from the findings is that of child-headed families as the cause of learner indiscipline, because those learners already perceived themselves as adults. The following comment pertains to that claim:

The challenge is that the school and parents are not pulling [in] the same direction in terms of implementing positive discipline. The school is the extension of [the] home. If parents do not do justice in [directing] or disciplining their children, learners at school are to be expected to demonstrate disobedience and defiance towards school rules, because they are not used to [being] discipline[d] in their homes [...]. In some instances, parents are over-protective of their children, subsequently, learners misbehave at school because they know that their parents will stand by them, should the matter escalate to the extent that the parent will be called [to] school. (SMT 1, AS)

This participant referred to the united front which the school and the family should present, and the expectation that parents will discipline, where needed, or act promptly on a child's misbehaviour at home, so that being reprimanded for bad behaviour at school follows a continuum of guidance. It emerged further that many parents were overly defensive of their children, and that opportunistic learners capitalised on that.

With regard to parental support, the observational data suggest that some parents supported the school, while others did not. In one case, a parent waiting for a hearing to start, furiously demanded to know why s/he had been called to the school when s/he was supposed to be at work and had been compelled to take a day off to attend the hearing. Such behaviour was concerning, because instead of disciplining his/her child, the parent began venting at the teachers, asking why they did not do their job by disciplining the learner themselves. These findings were corroborated by Nene (2013) who attests that many parents have shifted the responsibility of disciplining their children to educators.

The positive discipline theory (Dreikurs, 1972) in which this study is grounded, maintains that parents and educators should teach, support and guide learners. Thus, to nurture in learners the necessary skills, beliefs, values and practices which will stand them in good stead once they have

completed their schooling (Zondo, 2022). The research findings did not support this theory, revealing that, in general, parents were largely unsupportive in helping the school maintain discipline. The literature reviewed (Zondo, 2016), corroborates these findings. The DBE (2018) concurs that a lack of parental support hampered the maintenance of discipline in South African schools. If learners are not guided by their parents when it comes to their expected behaviour at school, the hard work which has already started, and the gains that have been made, will be in vain. Thus, towards the attainment of a disciplined school environment, parents need to be involved and support teachers in instilling discipline in schools.

Power Struggles

From the findings it became clear that fraught, interpersonal relations and power struggles between teachers and the SMT undermined the work of those seeking to adopt a positive approach to discipline. The findings further show that a school's core business – teaching and preparing learners for meaningful citizenship – has created something of a war zone. This is because when there is bad blood between teachers and school managers, learners are the ones who suffer. In cases where interpersonal relations and power struggles manifest themselves, teaching and learning tend to be neglected because teachers bicker during meetings, instead of addressing the matters at hand, which include advancing the welfare of their learners. A case in point is the comment cited below:

Teacher fights and conflicts challenge the advancement of discipline in schools. When we experience hard feelings towards each other, sometimes we allow that to get in the way of conscientiously executing our duties as teachers. Even so, no matter the differences, we need to collaborate in ensuring the success of our learners, which is [...] not happening in schools. Instead, school managers are not leading the school, as they [have] their own agendas. (DCM 3, NS)

This participant highlighted that petty grievances among teachers resulted in the learners suffering because they were neglected. More importantly, the SMT allegedly failed to lead the school in question, since the battle for power prevented members from performing their duties effectively. One teacher representative stated the following:

Interpersonal relations among teachers can mess up a working environment. [...], if relations are not good, sabotage prevails and people will want to prove you wrong, and automatically they will not be supportive. And again, if you do something on your own, not receiving support from other teachers, it becomes something self-made and becomes your baby. If ever something bad happens, you will have no support from others, and you will be held responsible. (TR-SGB 1, NS)

Rather than collaborating, as this comment bears testimony, teachers worked against each other,

trying to score points and withholding their support. Just how difficult the situation is, is expressed in the following comment:

We experience challenges with the use of [a] code of conduct to discipline learners, because there are no strategic meetings where we are given [an] opportunity to come up with strategies and contribut[e] to [] the school rules. This is because, for the school rules to be implemented successfully, [they have to come] from the people that work together with parents and learners. And for a school [code of] conduct to come from only one person is not right, because the person may perhaps not [be] in close contact with the learners. We, as teachers, know the scope to be covered in terms of the rules to regulate [the] discipline [of] our learners. (TR-SGB 2, AS)

As is evident, some teachers and school managers were trapped in personal vendettas rather than fulfilling their obligation to teach and lead the school. Other teachers were dragged into such conflicts, and where the school's day-to-day operations were affected negatively, the learners probably bore the brunt of it, being denied the quality education they deserved.

The observational data confirm that, in staff meetings where teachers needed to engage with one another, few were afforded a chance to air their views (Zondo & Mncube, 2022). Instead, one person spoke, giving orders and directives. In a case where a particular teacher spoke, a defence mechanism was noted, in the form of threats. For that reason, many teachers remained passive and silent during meetings for fear of being targeted or victimised. Where comments were deemed "not constructive" by the speaker (chairperson), every observation was viewed as a personal attack. According to Haruyama (2019), misunderstandings, misperceptions and varying philosophies among staff can hinder the implementation of a positive disciplinary approach. Consensus will never be reached unless teachers – as the implementers of the policies – work together and tolerate opposing views. How can learners conform and tolerate one another as responsible citizens when their teachers fail to do so? This is a disaster in the making, which may result in the whole becoming dysfunctional and unproductive.

Communication as a Barrier to Implementing a Learners' Code of Conduct

A lack of communication and commitment was identified as a further challenge emanating from the participants' responses, as they impeded the implementation of a code of conduct for learners. Admittedly, the participants had mixed views in this regard – especially the SPs, who claimed that communication was the cornerstone of discipline in schools, and insisted that they communicated with members of the school community. The participating principals accused their teachers of not being committed, not wanting to be led, and not

taking orders. Many of the study participants disputed that allegation – as one participant stated:

There is no communication within the school. For example, [the] top-down management approach is [the] norm here, and our input is not valued. We do not discuss issues. However, if we can have meetings or briefing sessions where we put together ideas which are going to [...] reflect [on] misconduct or [...] how misconduct ha[s] been dealt with within a particular period, then it will make it easier for teachers to note if the code of conduct is indeed working, or not. (DCM 2, AS)

The lack of communication meant that teachers did not know what to do, which discouraged them and prompted them to stop enforcing the school rules as they did not know exactly what those entailed. One defensive principal stated:

We communicate policies or information with teachers, but the challenge is that teachers are not receptive, they do not want to be led/take orders. They want to do things their way and use their knowledge instead of policies. Or I can say they lack the commitment to perform their duties as teachers, in assisting the SMT with regard to learner indiscipline. [...] Teachers do not keep records for learner conduct [...], especially bad learner conduct. The challenge emanates when the learner conducts serious misconduct, and we have to suspend the learner, only to find that there are [no] records to back up our argument, as there are restrictions in terms of suspension and expulsion. (SP 1, NS)

From this comment, it is evident that "stubborn" teachers (perhaps unwittingly) contributed to learner indiscipline. Even if the school wished to suspend a learner, it would need to follow various steps and have instances of misconduct documented as evidence before ultimately being able to take definitive action. The principal in question denied the claims that the code was not communicated to all parties concerned.

The data from the document review support the findings from the interviews that teachers failed to keep a record of learner misconduct. A few teachers indeed kept incident books, but could not supply documentation to prove that they did record-keeping which would enable them to identify patterns of learner misbehaviour. The DCs did, however, have records of learner (mis)conduct, and the cases they had handled. As some participants claimed, there appeared to be no communication between teachers and parents. We found no evidence of a book detailing communications with parents, or messages (Short Message Service [SMSes] or WhatsApp) to discuss learner (mis)behaviour with parents or caregivers as a means of addressing learner indiscipline. Lapperts (2012) advocates that teachers should keep in constant contact with parents on a range of issues related to their school-going child(ren).

The findings further reveal that the majority of study participants commented on the outdated codes being enforced in their schools. Certainly, if a code

is no longer universally applicable, it cannot address the behavioural problems that schools encounter in dealing with 21st-century, technology-savvy learners. Therefore, we recommend that SGBs should ensure that a code of conduct is reviewed annually to remain cutting-edge in dealing with misbehaving learners. The findings also reveal that in schools where a code of conduct for learners existed, it was not sufficiently detailed to meet the needs of the particular school in enhancing discipline (Modan, 2021). Most participants viewed the code as an alternative to corporal punishment, but with the content not being regulated, misbehaving learners were given free rein. Teachers were unsuccessful at ensuring the effective use of the code, either due to uncertainty or ignorance. In this regard, advocacy is recommended to ensure that teachers are aware of their roles as policy implementers. Stakeholders' lack of participation impeded the efficiency of a learners' code in working to enhance positive discipline (Kunene, 2020). Notably, the lack of parental support and a lack of communication were of great concern. Interpersonal relations and power struggles between teachers and the SMT aggravated the difficulties which teachers already encountered in their efforts to advance the use of positive discipline.

It was striking to learn that many parents had largely shifted their parental responsibilities onto the teachers, which made it more difficult for educators to implement positive strategies when enforcing discipline. A lack of parental support was evident in the schools under study, as the parents did not collaborate with the school in terms of implementing positive discipline (or discipline in general) with respect to their children. The DBE (2018) declares that if parents are lax in disciplining their children when at school, those learners tend to be disobedient and non-conformist and are dismissive of the school rules because they are not used to being disciplined at home. That exacerbates disciplinary problems, making the code of conduct ineffective (Zondo, 2022) and irrelevant as a means of enhancing positive discipline. At that, collaboration and constant communication between the school and parents should be strengthened. In that way, learners will be used to being reprimanded within or outside the school premises, and thus, teachers' efforts towards using the code of conduct to enhance discipline will be effective.

Conclusion

Teachers encounter numerous challenges when attempting to use a learners' code to guide them in positively disciplining those in their care. Schools' use of archaic codes of conduct, and their failure to communicate the rules to all stakeholders, mean that the latter's specific needs or requirements are neither being considered nor addressed. As the observational data reveal, where a code of

conducted existed, it did not cover all aspects of learners' most frequent offences, which meant that teachers had to formulate new rules to ensure stability and uniformity in combatting misbehaviour. Stakeholder involvement, a lack of parental support, and a lack of participation complicated teachers' work and efforts at maintaining discipline in the classroom and on the school grounds. Nevertheless, the study revealed that involving all stakeholders could lighten the burden of instilling discipline in schools, since those contributors would participate in updating the code of conduct, and ultimately taking ownership thereof, abiding by it, and setting an example for others to emulate, thereby benefitting the school as a whole. The findings indicate that the challenges that teachers encounter in using a code of conduct in managing bad behaviour extend beyond their capabilities, meaning that the problem is worse than expected. The findings imply that discipline remains a problem for many schools, because teachers as agents of change are failing to implement the professed viable and legal tool (i.e., a code of conduct for learners) in order to enhance positive discipline in schools.

Based on the findings we recommend the following:

- Immediate intervention from departmental officials is needed to improve the disciplinary issues.
- The DBE raise awareness of the idea of democratic governance in schools, in enhancing positive discipline by means of a working code of conduct to guide learner and teacher behaviour in schools.
- Schools need to ensure that parents are actively involved in their children's schooling and show support for teachers by becoming partners in advancing their children's education.
- The DBE could offer advocacy for teachers towards improving their disciplinary skills.

Authors' Contributions

SSZ extracted the data from her thesis; VSM proofread the analysis and corrections. Finally, both authors read and corrected the final manuscript.

Notes

- i. This article is based on the doctoral thesis of Sindiswa Zondo.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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