

## Learners' Views on the Effects of Disciplinary Measures in South African Schools

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**ABSTRACT** This paper is a part of a larger study on learner indiscipline in South African schools. The study was a descriptive survey and made use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The paper is based on learners' views on the effects of disciplinary measures used by teachers in South African schools. The sample consisted of 280 learners who were selected through stratified random sampling from 15 independent schools in Mthatha district in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data whilst phenomenological interviews were used to collect additional qualitative data. SPSS statistical package was used to analyze the quantitative data. Qualitative data were analysed through content analysis and emerging key issues led to themes that guided analysis. The paper documents learners' reports on the different kinds and forms of punishment currently used in schools. In general, the conclusions from the learners' views were that the different disciplinary measures used to deal with indiscipline seemingly failed, *inter alia*, to: help the offenders to understand disciplinary problems; teach responsible behaviour, behaviour accountability, respect for the rights and feelings of others or conflict resolution; avoid resentment of educators; deter offenders. The study also found that the learners view that the disciplinary measures which are currently used in schools largely led to negative rather than positive effects. The study recommends the use of supportive, proactive and cooperative disciplinary measures to deal with learner indiscipline. Such measures ensure positive and long-lasting effects necessary for the development of self discipline and responsible behavior amongst learners.

### INTRODUCTION

Handling the issue of discipline is a challenge that requires proper and meaningful disciplinary measures that produce the desired results. Schools in South Africa grapple with a rise in the magnitude of different kinds and forms of learner indiscipline (Matsoga 2003; Wright and Keetly 2003; Geragae 2008).

There are serious cases of indiscipline that may warrant suspension, such as fighting, threatening educators, the use of drugs and the possession and/or use of weapons. The major responsibility of school authorities and educators is the safety and well-being of all learners and staff. There are circumstances in which the removal of a learner from the school is justifiable for the safety and security of many. Suspension should serve to deter the offender and would-be offenders (McConville 2003). There are some behaviours that do justify removal of a learner from a classroom or even the school.

There are cases that maliciously prevent other learners from learning such as serious classroom disruption, bullying, threatening, destructive or violent behavior inside or outside of a school that make learning or active participation in a class difficult or impossible (Harrison 2005).

Arguments in favour of suspension as a disciplinary measure can be summarized as follows: creating a safe environment for other learners, allowing the offender to reflect on his/her bad behaviour, showing the offender that bad behaviour has dire consequences, serving as deterrent to the offender, serving as an example to potential offenders and denying privileges to make sure that offenders learn from their mistakes (Carlsmith 2002).

Nevertheless, research has shown that most punishments result in development of an attitude of fear in learners (Strauss 2001). An offender suffers from fear before and after the administering of punishment. Psychological thinking contends that children raised through fear or those subjected to fear in their childhood often have the problem of showing little originality or initiative in their thinking (Noguera 2003). The use of punishment on children may also result in cruelty and intolerance (Zaibert 2006). A child who is most intolerant and cruel in his treatment of others is usually one who has been brought up on punishment (Noguera 2003).

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Such a child's attitude is one of resentment and, not being able to retaliate against those who inflicted the punishment, he/she takes it out on others. However, there may be a need to ensure that a child understands the disciplinary problem committed so as to appreciate the punishment given and minimize feelings of resentment (McConville 2003).

Proponents of the negative effects of punishment argue that there is no research to support the deterrent effect of punishment (McConville 2003; Taylor and Nixon 2004). Taylor and Nixon (2004) contend this by giving an analogy of the situation in the adult world where prisons are full of criminals who knew precisely what might happen if they were caught. Therefore, even when learners are aware of the negative consequences of their indiscipline, they may still commit acts of indiscipline. Most learners' choice to obey rules has more to do with the expected benefits that come with acceptable behaviour than the fear of punishment for misbehaviour (Adams 1992). A school, therefore, needs to be a rewarding environment for those learners who behave appropriately all the time.

The use of mostly punitive disciplinary measures may not be very useful. According to Lewis (1997), punitive disciplinary measures may force learners to engage in trickery to outwit the adults. When a child's only inhibition against a misdeed is the fear that he will be caught and punished, he is strongly tempted to be more careful not to be caught the next time (Lewis 1997). Children may develop wrong and dangerous notions that they should not commit certain acts of indiscipline simply to avoid getting caught. If they happen to be successful in outwitting authority, then the situation becomes very serious (McConville 2003). In such cases punishment has negative and far reaching consequences that do not help in curbing indiscipline.

Some of the problems associated with punitive measures such as suspension or expulsion are: the loss of learner's valuable learning time; denying the learner the right to an education; not helping the learner to understand his/her own behaviour problems; lack of support for the learner; dumping the learner; creating a more hardened offender; creating feelings of revenge in the learner (Reyna 2001). It is against these observations that some scholars and researchers argue against the use of punitive disciplinary measures in schools and advocate for posi-

tive discipline (Charles 2007). It is further asserted that through punishment, the 'wrong message' is sent to perpetrators of indiscipline who are punished. For example, by being suspended from school, learners become more aggressive and violent (Strauss 1996). It sends a message that one is such a problem to the school that one does not deserve the school's attention or its support.

Punitive disciplinary measures may also cause the learners to develop a hatred of the adults, especially educators and administrators (Bliz and Darley 2004). Such measures may result in learners losing love for their educators and developing hatred towards them. Perpetrators of indiscipline who are punished may also attempt to retaliate. In being punished, a learner is humiliated, isolated and labelled and this all results in resentment (Noguera 2003). This clearly shows that punishment could have negative and far reaching consequences when used to manage learner indiscipline. In the context of the foregoing discussion, punitive disciplinary measures are taken as cold, cruel, inhumane, non-supportive and harsh (Strauss 2001). It is therefore clear that punishment-based disciplinary measures have severe negative and harmful effects. Such measures may serve as dangerous rather than useful tools to manage indiscipline in schools.

### Research Objective

The study sought to ascertain learners' views of the positive and negative effects of the disciplinary measures currently in use in selected schools.

## METHOD

### Research Design

The study was a descriptive survey of fifteen schools in one circuit in one educational district. A survey is typified by a collection of data from a population, or some sample drawn from it, which enables the assessment of the relative incidence, distribution and interrelationships of naturally occurring phenomena (Schulze 2003). For this study, a descriptive survey was justified on the basis that the researchers sought opinions, feelings, attitudes and beliefs of a number

of learners in order to identify relationships and patterns. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Qualitative data was sought as flesh to beef up the quantitative bones (Onwuegbuzi and Teddlie 2003).

**Sample:** Twenty learners drawn from each of the fifteen schools participated in the study. Stratified random sampling was employed to select learners from different type of schools namely the junior secondary and high schools. The biographical variables of the learners are shown in Table 1. Ten learners were purposefully selected from those who had completed the questionnaire for the purpose of interviews. Purposeful sampling selects information rich cases for in-depth study (Patton 1990). In this study the researchers targeted learners who could provide rich insights on the effects of disciplinary measures. Relevant demographic data are given in Table 1.

**Table 1: Sample grid (N= 280)**

Biographical variable	Variable description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	115	41.1
	Female	165	58.9
Age Group	12 -14	79	28.2
	15 – 17	139	49.6
	18 – 20	60	21.4
	Over 20	2	0.7
	7	39	13.9
Grade Level	8	44	15.7
	9	51	18.2
	10	41	14.6
	11	49	17.5
	12	56	20.0
School Type	Junior Secondary School	129	46.1
	High School	151	53.9

**Instruments:** A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data whilst phenomenological interviews were used to collect additional qualitative data. Interviews were preferred to other forms of data collection and as observed by (Kvale 1996), they enabled the researchers to naturally converse with the learners

**Reliability and Validity:** To enhance the reliability of the questionnaire used in this study, the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) generated Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated. The calculated coefficient average value of 0.7 was found and it indicated that the questionnaire used in the study was reliable.

Validity of the questionnaire was established by seeking an expert's comments on the suitability of the questionnaire items in line with the research questions.

**Procedures:** The researchers administered the questionnaire with the assistance of trained contact persons who were identified from the participating schools. A total of 280 questionnaires were returned out of the 300 administered, marking a 93.3% return rate. This very high return rate could be attributed to the facts that the researchers and contact persons were on the ground to administer and collect questionnaires and the learners themselves were very enthusiastic to participate in the study.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to pose questions to selected learners. Interview question items were designed in such a way that they gave room for further probing and prompting. All interview proceedings were audio taped with permission from the interviewees and later transcribed. Despite giving consent, some participants felt uncomfortable at times with the use of the tape recorder and the strenuous note-taking method which was employed.

**Data Analysis:** Quantitative data were analysed statistically with the aid of the SPSS version 17 software whereas qualitative data reporting took form of narratives and thick description.

**Ethical Issues:** Permission to conduct interviews for research purposes was sought from principals well in advance and necessary appointment were made in such a way that research activities did not interfere with teaching and learning in the schools. The research participants completed an informed consent form after the purpose of the study was explained to them. All participants under the age of sixteen had the consent form filled in on their behalf by their parents or guardians.

## RESULTS

As Table 2 shows, mean scores represent the following alternatives 1-Strongly Agree, 2 – Agree, 3 – Uncertain, 4 – Disagree and 5 – Strongly Disagree. A mean of 3 represents an uncertain or neutral response of participants while a mean below 3 indicates that learner participants as a group tended to agree with the given statement on the effects of the disciplin-

**Table 2: Learners' views on the effects of disciplinary measures on minor forms of indiscipline (N=280)**

<i>Effects of disciplinary measures for minor offenses</i>	<i>Responses</i>					
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Range</i>
Disciplinary measures help to deter offender	280	3.93	1.10	4	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to teach responsible behaviour	280	4.17	0.98	5	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to deter others.	280	4.04	1.02	4	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to teach self-discipline	280	4.24	0.90	5	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to teach accountability to one's behaviour	280	4.10	0.91	4	4	5
Disciplinary measures help offender understand disciplinary problem.	280	4.00	1.05	4	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to teach respect for rights and feelings of other learners	280	3.90	1.15	5	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to ensure future cooperation	280	3.95	1.08	4	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to offender to respect other learners' rights	280	4.18	0.93	5	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to avoid resentment to educators	280	3.54	1.17	4	4	5

ary measures on minor forms of indiscipline. Means above 3, indicate that participants tended to disagree with the given statement on effects of the disciplinary measures on minor forms of indiscipline. What could be concluded from the means is that respondents tended to disagree with the views that the disciplinary measures in place helped to teach: self-discipline; respect for rights of other learners; responsible behaviour; accountability for one's behaviour; and, to help an offender understand disciplinary problems. The respondents further tended to disagree as a group that the disciplinary measures helped to: ensure future cooperation; deter the offender; consider the feelings of others; or avoid resentment. All the statements that had the highest means and modes suggested a tendency of the respondents to disagree with given views on positive effects of the disciplinary measures used to deal with minor forms of indiscipline.

In interviews carried out with selected learners, it was also clear that mostly negative effects resulted from the use of some disciplinary measures. Some of the notable negative affects raised in interviews were: hatred for the teachers; making offenders hardened than before; offenders competing to outperform each other in mischief; increased non-cooperation with teachers, and resulting in repeat offenders. Some of the interviewed learners said:

#### **Learner X**

*Once one is punished for an offence committed they (one!) may not want to repeat the offence again. But we have some boys who are always on punishment and never seem to change. Some enjoy being on punishment.*

#### **Learner Y**

*The disciplinary measures used by teachers make some of the senior boys refuse to cooperate with teachers. The boys do not want to be humiliated in class.*

#### **Learner Z**

*Even if learners know that if they misbehave, they get punished they always misbehave. So, punishments do not seem to work.*

These observations revealed the mostly negative effects of punishment as shown by interviewees.

Table 3 shows mean scores represented the following alternatives; 1-Strongly Agree, 2 – Agree, 3 – Uncertain, 4 – Disagree, 5 – Strongly Disagree. The descriptions given under Table 2 regarding the interpretation of a mean of 3, a mean below 3 and a mean above 3 apply here also. It is clear from the means that respondents

**Table 3: Learners' views on the effects of disciplinary measures identified for major forms of indiscipline (N=280)**

<i>Extent disciplinary measures for major offenses bring about the following behaviours</i>	<i>Responses</i>					
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Range</i>
Disciplinary measures help to deter offender.	280	3.96	1.03	4	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to teach responsible behaviour.	280	3.97	1.00	4	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to deter others.	280	3.89	1.02	4	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to teach self-discipline.	280	4.03	0.92	4	4	4
Disciplinary measures help offender understand disciplinary problem.	280	3.85	0.98	4	4	5
Disciplinary measures help to teach accountability for one's behaviour.	280	3.86	1.05	4	4	4
Disciplinary measures help to teach respect for rights of other learners.	280	3.86	1.07	4	4	4
Disciplinary measures help the offender to consider other learner's feelings.	280	3.81	1.12	4	4	4
Disciplinary measures help to avoid resentment to educators.	280	3.52	1.19	4	4	4
Disciplinary measures help to ensure future cooperation.	280	3.85	1.02	4	4	4

tended to disagree with the views that the disciplinary measures in place helped to: deter offenders; teach responsible behaviour; deter others; teach behaviour accountability; help the offender to understand disciplinary problems; teach respect for rights and feelings of others; ensure future cooperation; consider the other learners' rights; avoid resentment of educators; and, teach conflict handling. All the statements that had the highest means and modes suggested this disagreement with the given views.

In response to the question: 'How do you feel on the way teachers discipline you in your school?' during interviews, a litany of accounts on the effects of disciplinary measures were given. Some of the responses included comments such as some interviewees: hated educators for the way they punished them; punishments were too harsh, or too often meted out; never really understood why they were punished in the first place. One interviewee talked of an educator who punished the whole class for one or a few individuals who misbehaved. Below are transcriptions of some of the views given by some of the interviewed learners:

#### **Learner A**

*Teachers are just after humiliating us in class. Instead of physical punishment they should talk to us nicely.*

#### **Learner B**

*I hate any teacher who spansks me. Spanking is painful.*

#### **Learner C**

*Imagine being detained in class while other learners go out for break. It is unfair because I will be hungry and I need to eat.*

#### **Learner D**

*Teachers who punish learners who break school rules are good because they do it to correct us yet some learners do not realise it.*

However, some interviewees indicated instances where they felt that they deserved the punishment they had received from educators and had tried to correct their mistakes to avoid future punishment.

In summary, the analysed statistical and qualitative data showed the varying levels of the learner respondents' views on the effects of the disciplinary measures.

## **DISCUSSION**

Most of the learner respondents appeared to agree with the view that disciplinary measures used to deal with minor forms of indiscipline

resulted in deterring the offenders and other learners from committing similar offences. Interviewed learners revealed that a growing rise in learner indiscipline in schools showed that disciplinary measures were not deterrent enough. This finding concurs with the claims by Charles (2007) that punishment-based disciplinary measures often achieve negative effects when used and the analogy cited earlier by (Taylor and Nixon 2004) regarding the observation that some people commit offences despite knowing the consequences beforehand. This suggests that fear of punishment as a consequence is not useful when dealing with learner indiscipline, especially in the case of young offenders. Learners can break rules even when they are fully aware of the harsh punishments which may await them, if caught.

Most learner respondents to the questionnaire, however, were in agreement that disciplinary measures used to deal with major forms of indiscipline deterred offenders and other learners. Interviewed learners revealed that many learners were afraid of being suspended and expelled from school. Some also indicated that they did not want their parents or guardians to know that they misbehaved at school. This finding contradicts the observations in the literature that seemed to dismiss punishment-based disciplinary measures as unworkable and counterproductive (McConville 2003). If learners were afraid of being suspended or expelled from school, then one may safely conclude that such measures had a positive effect. Yet the issue is whether disciplinary measures should thrive on instilling fear in learners for them to be deemed useful.

The majority of respondents to the questionnaire agreed to disagree with the view that disciplinary measures used for both minor and major forms of indiscipline helped the offenders to understand the disciplinary problem and also to develop responsible behaviour. This concurs with Canter and Canter's (2001) observation that punishment-based disciplinary measures are authority-based and Strauss' (2001) observation that such measures are cold, cruel, inhumane, non supportive and harsh. The fact that the disciplinary measures seemed not to help the offender understand a disciplinary problem with the view to assist in the development of responsible behaviour shows serious shortcomings associated with the disciplinary measures employed in schools today.

The most positive and fundamental effect of a useful disciplinary measure is the extent to which its application on offenders result in the teaching of self-discipline (Scharle and Szabo 2000). The revelation in the study that most learner respondents to the questionnaire disagreed with the view that the disciplinary measures used for both minor and major forms of learner indiscipline resulted in the teaching of self-indiscipline is indicative of a problem. This finding corroborates Orvis' (2001) views that permanent and long-lasting positive effects of disciplinary measures are premised on the need to develop positive relationships with learners and help them to reflect on and to take responsibility for their behaviours in everything they do. This is the issue of self-discipline which is responsibility-based, as opposed to a consequence-based disciplinary approach (Parkey and Stahan 2002).

Furthermore, the revelation in the study that some of the disciplinary measures used resulted in learners' lack of cooperation with teachers validates claims by Jaffe et al. (2004) that punishment-based disciplinary measures such as corporal punishment may only help to further increase prevalence of negative behavior in children. If disciplinary measures used result in worsening of the behavior of children, it is clear that such disciplinary measures will not be useful. Hence, there is a need for teachers to consider alternative proactive measures.

The negative effects of punishment-based disciplinary measures as found in the study further corroborate claims by Turner and Muller (2004) who content that physical punishment as a disciplinary measure often breeds aggression in children. Therefore, it becomes a real problem if teachers attempt to discipline learners and they, in turn, become more aggressive. A closer examination of the chosen disciplinary measures becomes imperative. This should be done with a view to assist learners to understand how to behave without instilling pain or invoking coercion.

## CONCLUSION

From the findings in this study, it can be concluded that disciplinary measures for minor forms of indiscipline which are currently practiced in schools seemingly fail to teach: self-discipline; respect for rights of other learners;

responsible behaviour; accountability for one's behaviour; and, help the offenders understand disciplinary problems. Disciplinary measures were also viewed to be failing to help to deter the offender, help the offender to consider the feelings of others and help to avoid resentment.

On the effects of disciplinary measures on major forms of indiscipline, it can be concluded that disciplinary measures seemingly failed to help to: deter offenders, teach responsible behaviour; deter others; teach behaviour accountability and respect for rights and feelings of others; help the offenders to understand disciplinary problems; ensure future cooperation; avoid resentment of educators; and, teach conflict handling.

Teachers in general need to take humane forms of punishments to deal with learner indiscipline in schools within the context of human rights gaining centre-stage significance in day-to-day human interactions in the present century. In particular, teachers in South Africa have to be legally obliged to the South African Constitution, as amended, which prohibits inhumane punishments such as corporal punishment and other physical or verbal abuses. The force of the provisions in the currently operating South African Schools Act which embodies the constitutional provisions on punishment need to be strictly implemented in South African schools.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The study sought to establish learners' views on the effects of the disciplinary measures currently in use in schools selected to participate in the study. Considering the findings from the study the following recommendations are made:

- Teachers should desist from using punishment-based disciplinary measures as these have negative consequences in dealing with learner indiscipline.
- Teachers should consider the nature of repercussions that the disciplinary measures they employ may result in. This consideration will allow them to use disciplinary measures with positive effects on the learners' behavior.
- Teachers should use supportive, proactive and cooperative disciplinary measures when dealing with learner indiscipline. Such disciplinary measures assist learners develop

self-discipline which is the best form of discipline that has to be nurtured in learners.

- The Department of Education should invest time and resources in training teachers to use alternative disciplinary measures as this will enable teachers to handle learner indiscipline while at the same time taking care of the rights of children.
- Teachers need to take humane forms of punishments to deal with learner indiscipline in schools within the context of human rights gaining centre-stage significance.

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