

Disciplinary Measures Used in South African Schools: How Do Learners View Their Effectiveness?

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ABSTRACT The study reports on learners' views on the effectiveness of disciplinary measures used against them by educators in South African schools. The study was a descriptive survey that was a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. It looked into insights of 300 learners selected from 15 independent schools in Mthatha district in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Data were collected mainly through a semi-structured questionnaire administered on selected learners as well as interviews with selected learners. Quantitative data were analysed with the aid of the SPSS version 17 software whereas qualitative data reporting took form of narratives and thick description. The study revealed that most disciplinary measures used to deal with minor forms of indiscipline were rated lowly and they were also judged to be mostly ineffective in: deterring offenders, teaching self-discipline, teaching behaviour accountability, helping the offenders understand disciplinary problem, avoiding resentment, ensuring future cooperation and ensuring the offender considered other learners' feelings. The study also found that a number of disciplinary measures used to deal with major forms of indiscipline were rated as ineffective in: teaching behaviour accountability, responsible behaviour, self-discipline, respect of other learners, handling of conflict and helping the offender to understand the disciplinary issue. The study concludes that disciplinary measures that are mostly punitive are ineffective in curbing learner indiscipline in schools. The study recommends the use of learner-centered, supportive, proactive and cooperative disciplinary measures when dealing with learner indiscipline.

INTRODUCTION

There is growing concern on the ever increasing cases of learner indiscipline in South African schools (Aziza 2001; Cheunyane 2008). Indiscipline has led to safety and security concerns in schools (Netshitahame and Vollenhoven 2002; Mnyaka 2006). There are reported cases of serious injuries and fatalities within school premises in some schools in South Africa (Ngcukana 2009). School authorities and educators are in a dilemma as they seek to find effective ways of dealing with issues of learner indiscipline while at the same time protecting the rights of children as demanded by the country's Constitution. The issue of coming up with effective ways of dealing with learner indiscipline would assist in curbing learner indiscipline. This ensure safe and secure schools as well as conducive environments for meaningful teaching and learning.

Punishment-based disciplinary measures may only help to deter inappropriate behaviours in so far as they provoke fear in learners (Holden 2002). Children come to fear for their posses-

sions (that they may be taken away), privileges (that they may be revoked), preferences (that they may be used against them) and even safety and well being (Zaibert 2006). Learners do not necessarily come to understand why their behaviour was wrong, or how their behaviour negatively impacted others (McConville 2003). In contrast, the effects of discipline on learners ought to be an increased sense of responsibility, self-confidence and the ability to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate behaviour (Wolfgang 2001).

Punishment, like suspension, detention or expulsion, or the deliberate infliction of unpleasantness on someone judged to have done wrong, may be very tempting to educators (Mcconville 2003). It is very important for educators to avoid making learners feel bad in response to their own bad behaviour. However, punishment does not teach a learner anything other than that it is alright to hurt others (Zaibert 2006). Instead, educators should strive to discipline their children in order to help them better themselves and their situations. Properly disciplined children will grow to be happy, healthy and productive members of not just the family, but society as well (Sprague and Walker 2004).

While it is a traditional school practice to punish learners, tradition does not justify some ways that could be inappropriate. Punishment-based disciplinary measures may become exces-

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sive, inappropriate, counterproductive, and wrong (Zaibert 2006). In clarifying the motives behind discipline and punishment, Ramadiro and Vally (2005: 4) make a comparison which shows that the usefulness of any disciplinary measure is dependent on the motive behind it and the manner in which it is administered. Though it is a violation of human rights, some authorities argue that when well implemented, a hugely considered harsh form of punishment could be useful (Gershoff 2002). Useful disciplinary measures, therefore, should consider the learner's feelings, should not be harsh, should try to make the learner learn and ultimately develop habits of self-discipline and responsibility.

Another view on the effectiveness of punishment rests on the extent to which learners are involved in the formulation and implementation of disciplinary measures. Parkey and Strahan (2002) observe that traditionally, maintenance of good learner discipline has relied on establishment of rules, targeting misbehaviour and exacting penalties. These are authoritarian approaches that sidelined learners' views and feelings and expected learners to conform to pre-set adult disciplinary standards. Involvement of learners at school and classroom level in the formulation and implementation of disciplinary measures helps to create positive school and classroom environments (Noguera 2002; Vitto 2003).

Noguera (2002) alludes to the current thinking that effective disciplinary methods should be participatory in nature, where educators and learners are partners. This assists in teaching learners self-discipline contrary to externally driven disciplinary requirements whose results could be ephemeral or counter productive. Moles (1989) postulates that learner involvement in disciplinary issues that affect them has far reaching and long lasting effects as the learners develop a culture of being part of decision making. Learners learn to accept and comply with school rules as 'theirs'. Moles (1989) further argues that involving learners in all the facets of the educational process increases social bonding and increased cooperation between educators and learners. The above view is significant in scenarios where indiscipline in schools is exacerbated by the feeling of antagonism that exists between educators and learners. This is usually a negative effect of 'top-down' management styles. Learners may feel issues are imposed on

them and will naturally resist them so the disciplinary situations may get out of hand.

The effectiveness of any given disciplinary measure could, therefore, be assessed by the extent to which it enables the fulfillment of the following parameters: ability to deter offenders, ability to deter others, teaching self-discipline and teaching behaviour accountability (Gershoff 2002). It is also measured by its ability to teach conflict handling strategies, ability to help the offender understand the offence committed, teaching responsible behaviour, helping to teach the offender to consider rights and feeling of others (Wolfgang 2001). An effective disciplinary measure should also have the ability to involve learners in its formulation and implementation, should be commensurate with the offence committed and should be implemented soon after offence is committed (Docking 2001; Gershoff 2002; Ramadiro and Vally 2005).

With the above summarized parameters against which the effectiveness of any given disciplinary measure could be gauged, it becomes necessary to find common grounds to ascertain the effectiveness of disciplinary measures used in schools. This study aims to capture learners' views on the effectiveness of disciplinary measures used in their schools and classrooms. The intention is to find out how the disciplinary measures used are able to achieve the desired goals with the view to advocate for disciplinary approaches that could achieve the goals of developing self-discipline and responsible behavior in learners as compared to punitive, reactive methods that may not achieve desired results. This was sought from the learners' perspectives.

Research Question

The study sought to address the research question: What are the learners' views on the effectiveness of disciplinary approaches used in the selected Mthatha schools.

METHOD

Design

The study was a descriptive survey of schools in one circuit in one educational district. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Qualitative data were 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.

Instruments: A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from 300 learners. Interviews were a supplementary source of data collection in the study in line with the adopted style to combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches in a single study. Interviews were used to collect qualitative data for the study. Interviews were preferred to other forms of data collection as they enabled the researchers to naturally converse with the learners. This allowed the learners to freely express their feelings. The interviews also enabled the researchers to probe and prompt on answers given and this flexibility of interviews made it possible for the researchers to gather as much information as possible.

Reliability and Validity: The main statistical measure to determine reliability of the main gathering tool, the questionnaire was the use of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. An SPSS generated Cronbach alpha coefficient calculation was made for all sections of the questionnaires for learners used to collect data in this study. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient average for the learners was 0.7. Since 0.7 indicates an acceptable reliability coefficient, the coefficients of all sections were found to be reliable hence the safe conclusion that the questionnaire used in this study as main data collection tool was reliable. A lot of measures were also employed in ensuring the validity of the instruments. The questionnaire was given to an expert in Discipline and Punishment who analysed its suitability in line with the research questions. The expert's comments further helped to improve the validity of the questionnaires. The pilot test also helped to improve the learners' questionnaires as well as the interview schedules.

Procedures: The researchers administered the questionnaire with the assistance of contact persons who had been identified in the participating schools. Through the use of trained contact persons the administration was easily done to ensure a high return level. 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 ques-

tionnaires and the learners themselves were very enthusiastic to participate in the study.

Ethical Issues: Permission to conduct the research was sought from principals well in advance and necessary appointment were made in such a way that research activities did not shall not interfere with teaching and learning in the school. 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. Interview question items were designed in such a way that they gave room for further probing and prompting.

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.

RESULTS

In Table 1 talking to learners, corporal punishment and verbal reprimands were rated as effective while demotion from leadership positions, manual tasks, sending learners out classroom, kneeling on the floor, menial tasks, denial of privileges, not marking learners' work, verbal insults and ignoring were seemingly all considered ineffective.

The second phase of establishing perceptions on the effectiveness of disciplinary measures was done when respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of disciplinary measures used to deal with minor forms of indiscipline against the given parameters.

In Table 2 respondents tended to rate the disciplinary measures used to deal with minor forms of indiscipline as ineffective in deterring offenders, teaching self-discipline, teaching behaviour accountability, helping the offenders understand disciplinary problem, avoiding resentment, ensuring future cooperation and ensuring the offender considered other learners' feelings.

In Table 3, respondents as a group rated guidance and counselling, talking to learners, use of stress management techniques, use of anger management techniques, detention, referral to psychologists, suspension and community service as effective, with means above 3 whereas manual labour, expulsion, demotion and transferring were rated as ineffective.

Table 1: Learners' responses regarding the effectiveness of disciplinary measures used for minor forms of indiscipline (N=280)

<i>Statement on effectiveness of disciplinary measures for minor offense</i>	<i>Responses</i>					
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Range</i>
Talking to learners	280	3.31	1.41	4	4	4
Corporal punishment	280	3.10	1.60	5	3	4
Demotion from leadership positions	280	2.94	1.37	3	3	4
Verbal reprimands	280	3.09	1.33	3	3	4
Manual tasks	280	2.83	1.39	1	3	4
Menial tasks	280	2.54	1.26	1	3	4
Kneeling on the floor	280	2.78	1.32	3	3	4
Denial of privileges	280	2.36	1.37	1	2	4
Sending learners out of class	280	2.80	1.49	1	3	4
Ignoring	280	1.98	1.26	1	1	4
Verbal insults	280	2.05	1.42	1	1	4
Not marking learners' work	280	2.33	1.44	1	2	4

Table 2: Learners' responses on the effectiveness of disciplinary measures used for minor forms of indiscipline as rated against given parameters (N=280)

<i>Extent disciplinary measures for minor 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>
Deterring offender	280	2.20	1.30	3	3	4
Deterring others	280	3.36	1.24	3	3	4
Helping offender understand disciplinary problem	280	2.58	1.26	4	4	4
Teaching responsible behavior	280	2.90	1.19	5	4	4
Teaching self-discipline	280	2.82	1.19	5	4	4
Teaching behaviour accountability	280	2.75	1.20	4	4	4
Teaching respect for rights other learners	280	3.78	1.19	4	4	4
Avoiding resentment to educators	280	2.21	1.23	3	3	4
Ensures future cooperation	280	2.50	1.26	4	4	4
The offender considers the feelings of other learners	280	2.41	1.34	4	4	5

Table 3: Learners' responses regarding the effectiveness of disciplinary measures used for major forms of indiscipline (N= 280)

<i>Statement on effectiveness of disciplinary measures on major offense</i>	<i>Responses</i>					
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Range</i>
Guidance and Counseling	280	3.57	1.31	5	4	4
Use of stress management techniques	280	3.28	1.21	3	3	4
Use of anger management techniques	280	3.17	1.29	3	3	4
Talking to learners	280	3.45	1.28	4	4	4
Referral to psychologist	280	3.15	1.31	3	3	4
Demotion	280	2.77	1.37	1	3	4
Detention	280	3.15	1.36	4	3	4
Suspension	280	3.14	1.46	4	3	4
Manual labour	280	2.99	1.33	3	3	4
Expulsion	280	2.98	1.52	1	3	4
Community service	280	3.06	1.27	3	3	4
Transferring	280	2.51	1.30	1	3	4

In Table 4 the researchers summarize learners' responses on the effectiveness of disciplinary measures used for major forms of indiscipline as rated against given parameters.

The second phase of establishing perceptions

of the effectiveness of disciplinary measures was done when learner respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of disciplinary measures used to deal with major forms of indiscipline against the given parameters

Table 4: Learners' responses on the effectiveness of disciplinary measures used for major forms of indiscipline as rated against given parameters (N=280)

<i>Rating of disciplinary measures for major offenses are effective</i>	<i>Responses</i>					
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Range</i>
Teaching behaviour accountability	280	2.90	1.33	3	3	4
Teaching responsible behavior	280	2.99	1.52	1	3	4
Teaching self-discipline	280	2.36	1.37	1	2	4
Teaching respect for rights other learners	280	3.60	1.17	4	4	4
Teaching the handling of conflicts	280	2.02	1.40	1	2	4
Helping offender understand disciplinary problem	280	3.47	1.21	4	4	4
Ensures future cooperation	280	3.47	1.13	4	4	4
The offender considers the feelings of other learners	280	3.31	1.24	4	3	4
Avoiding resentment to educators	280	3.26	1.24	4	3	4
Deterring offender	280	2.75	1.39	1	3	4
Deterring others	280	2.51	1.30	1	3	4

In Table 4, learner respondents tended to rate the disciplinary measures used to deal with major forms of indiscipline as ineffective in teaching behaviour accountability, teaching responsible behaviour, teaching self discipline, teaching respect of other learners, teaching handling of conflict and helping the offender to understand the disciplinary issue.

DISCUSSION

Data on the effectiveness of disciplinary measures used were solicited from two perspectives. The first one was how respondents would rate individual disciplinary measures for both minor and major forms of indiscipline as they were used in their schools and the second one was the effectiveness of disciplinary measures for minor and major forms of indiscipline against the parameters of judging the effectiveness of disciplinary measures as revealed in the literature.

Most of the disciplinary measures applied for minor forms of indiscipline had a mean of above 3 suggesting that they were not very effective when they were used. Sending learners out of class and denying them privileges, for example, were rated as very ineffective. Interviewed educators revealed that some learners actually enjoyed being sent out of class and had the audacity to commit further acts of indiscipline while on punishment. This serves to confirm findings by Strauss (1996) that punitive disciplinary measures may not really achieve the desired purpose of deterring learners. An interesting contrast was the educators and learners responses

on the effectiveness of corporal punishment and findings in the literature. Learner respondents rated corporal punishment highly as an effective disciplinary measure yet this seems to contradict findings from the literature study that suggest problems associated with the use of corporal punishment in schools (Carlsmith 2002).

The rating of different disciplinary measures for minor forms of indiscipline against given parameters also produced interesting results. Learner respondents rated the disciplinary measures low on the ability to deter offenders, deter other learners, helping offenders understand disciplinary measures as well as the teaching of responsible behavior and self-discipline. Such findings are consistent with those by Docking (2001), Gershoff (2002) and Ramadiro and Vally (2005) who contend that effective disciplinary measures should teach responsible behaviour and the inculcation of self-discipline and this is not achieved through punishment-based disciplinary measures.

On disciplinary measures in response to major forms of indiscipline, the majority of learner respondents to the questionnaire rated disciplinary measures such as suspension, expulsion, manual labour, detention and demotion low, suggesting that these measures were ineffective in dealing with major forms of learner indiscipline in schools. This corroborates with findings by Carlsmith (2002) that current punitive disciplinary measures in schools were not able to curb learner indiscipline.

Disciplinary measures such as referral to psychologists, guidance and counseling, stress and anger management courses were rated as highly

effective in dealing with major forms of indiscipline. This confirms studies by Marsh (2000) that there is a need for more innovative approaches to deal with learner indiscipline.

Rated against given parameters, the disciplinary measures were rated low by learner respondents to the questionnaire on their effectiveness in deterring offenders and other learners, making learners understand disciplinary problems as well as teaching responsible behaviour and self-discipline. Orvis (2001) contends that the teaching of self-discipline is an important attribute of any meaningful disciplinary measure. Through responsible behaviour and self-discipline a learner internalizes expected modes of behaviour and can behave accordingly without fear of being punished but by being aware of the necessity of good conduct (Wolfgang 2001; Wienstein et al. 2004).

The disciplinary measures in use in schools for major forms of indiscipline were also rated low in their ability to teach behaviour accountability, ensuring future cooperation as well as teaching the handling of conflict. In behaviour accountability, for example, a learner should be aware of both positive and negative consequences of his or her modes of behaviour and this is an integral component of proactive disciplinary strategies (Canter and Canter 2001). Therefore, if disciplinary measures in use in schools largely fail to teach behaviour accountability, it means they leave a lot to be desired and it cannot be business as usual in schools especially in the wake of the increase in the number of cases of indiscipline.

The revelation that the respondents found disciplinary measures ineffective in teaching conflict handling, is indicative of a serious problem associated with the measures in use in schools. Whenever there is a group of people, conflict is inevitable. Hence, it is important to develop meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships in schools and classrooms (Grossman 2003). School and classroom environments are full of conflict and there are a myriad of contributory factors to this conflict. Heydenberk et al. (2006) further postulate that conflict is normal, and even healthy part of relationships. It is argued that, two people are not necessarily expected to agree on everything at all times. Since conflict is inevitable in relationships, learning to deal with it in a healthy way is crucial. When conflict is mismanaged, it can harm the relationship. But when it is handled in a

respectful and positive way, conflict provides an opportunity for growth, ultimately strengthening the bond between and among people (Bodine and Crawford 1998). The need for conflict management and resolution skills is, therefore, necessary in ensuring that conflict situations do not degenerate into feuds and wars leading to injury and fatalities. This ties in well with the observation by Wilde (1995) that learners in schools need to be equipped with skills to handle conflict on their own even without the intervention of educators.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that disciplinary measures that are mostly punitive are ineffective in curbing learner indiscipline in schools. Punitive disciplinary measures used involved inflicting pain on perpetrators of indiscipline. Such disciplinary measures were not effective in teaching self-discipline and behavior accountability.

Disciplinary measures used in schools were also found to be ineffective in deterring offenders and would-be offenders. If schools employ disciplinary measures and pupils still commit more and severe cases of indiscipline despite the punishment, it only serves to show that such measures are not productive.

The study further concludes that disciplinary measures used in schools failed to teach conflict-handling. Most of the problems between and among learners are as a result of conflict. Disciplinary measures should inculcate in learners the ability to handle conflict so as to avoid problems emanating from conflicts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the use of learner-centered disciplinary measures. In drawing classroom and school rules, learners should be involved. This will assist in making them feel a sense of ownership of the rules and the need to uphold them. Enforcement of such rules is guaranteed as the learners are bound to be supportive as opposed to rules imposed on them.

The Department of Education should invest time and finances in training teachers to use supportive, proactive and cooperative disciplinary measures. Such disciplinary approaches ought not to wait until cases of indiscipline are committed. They assist in teaching self-disci-

pline such that learners internalise acceptable ways of behaving even in the absence of teachers.

Schools should also have time to teach conflict resolution skills to learners. This will enable learners to find solutions to any form of conflict without resorting to violence, which often leads to injuries and fatalities in schools. Learners should be able to handle conflict on their own as some gross cases of indiscipline are often a result of minor conflicts between and among learners.

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