

Learners' Perceptions of Possible Approaches to Curb Learner Indiscipline in South African Schools

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ABSTRACT The study is part of a larger study on the management of learner indiscipline in South African schools. This study sought to establish learners' views on the possible approaches that could be employed to curb indiscipline in schools. The study adopted a descriptive survey approach encompassing quantitative and qualitative approaches. It sought the insights of 280 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. The SPSS statistical package version 17 was used to analyze the quantitative data. Qualitative data was analysed through content analysis as emerging key issues led to themes that guided the analysis. It emerged from the study that participants felt strongly the need for the formation of teacher/ parent partnership teams in schools, random searches for dangerous weapons, compulsory guidance and counseling programmes in schools, equipping teachers with techniques to identify children with behaviour problems, focusing on prevention of indiscipline, random searches for drugs, compulsory stress management courses for all learners from senior phase, compulsory anger management courses for all learners from senior phase, monitoring school playgrounds and employing child psychologists in every school. The study concludes that a lot could be done to deal with learner indiscipline in schools by adopting preventive and proactive approaches. The study recommends a holistic approach to the management of learner indiscipline in schools in which all important stakeholders play pivotal roles. The study further recommends that under increasing psycho-social pressures there is need to expose learners to compulsory anger and stress management courses in schools specially at senior school level.

INTRODUCTION

In the light of growing cases of indiscipline in South African schools in quantity and magnitude, the issue of trying to address the challenge becomes imperative (Harber 2001; Thompson 2002). Effective and meaningful learning is possible in an environment where learners are disciplined and classroom management is often a headache for many teachers. Behaviour management as an integral part of classroom management is important in creating workable alternative approaches in dealing with learner indiscipline in schools. Evertson and Weinstein (2006) contend that classroom management is ranked the first or second serious educational problem. The way teachers handle issues of discipline in schools and classrooms is closely interlinked and intertwined with their management styles hence the need to reflect on these. School and classroom management styles, are a direct result of how school authorities and teachers conceptualize discipline. Resultant disciplinary measures applied in school and classrooms reflect the management style used. It goes without saying that discipline rests on the quality of the teacher who enforces it.

Evertson and Weinstein (2006) further observe that if a teacher views classroom management as controlling learners' behaviour and ensuring that there is discipline and order in class, this will be reflected in how such a teacher handles the issue of discipline in the class. Unlike relying on reactive and punitive disciplinary methods, teachers should be armed with techniques in prevention, temporary prevention and problem solving in handling disciplinary issues (Belvel and Jordan 2002). This, however, depends on the teacher's conceptualization of discipline. Hue and Wai-Shing (2008) observe that a modern, holistic and useful conceptualization of classroom and school management should focus on establishing a good climate and managing instruction and not exerting control over learners. Effective management entails assisting learners to be self disciplined. Classroom and school management, on the other hand, hinges on the teachers' or administrators' management orientation. Weber (2006), cited in Hue and Wai-Shing (2008) explains some common approaches to classroom and school management.

Classroom management approaches as stated by Hue and Wai-Shing (2008) show that there is no single effective approach to classroom man-

agement and that there is always a need for the teacher to understand the situation and analyse it first, before coming up with a workable approach. Intimidatory and wholly authoritarian approaches are often counter productive. According to these authors, the need to understand the uniqueness of learners, empower them and involve them in all aspects of discipline in the school and in the classrooms cannot be overemphasized. To this end, disciplinary measures are not forced down the throats of learners but instead emphasis is on teaching responsibility of and accountability to one's modes of behaviour (Noguera 2002).

Lewis (1997) talks of management models on the issue of handling learner indiscipline. He contends that the teacher should take charge of how learners behave and this is what he terms the model of control. Teachers should also work with learners in deciding how they should behave and this is called the model of management and there is also the model of influence (Lewis 1997). Lewis (1997) argues that the teacher should let learners decide on their own how they should behave. These approaches are summarized as teacher, learner and group oriented approaches. As already noted there is no single approach that works in all situations and the teacher has to use workable approaches in different situations.

Wolfgang and Glickman (1986) suggest intervention techniques that are in a continuum from non-interventionist, interactionist and interventionist approaches. Non-interventionist techniques include the teacher silently looking at a misbehaving learner. This, of course, depends on the nature, magnitude and prevalence of the forms of misbehaviour. Interactionist techniques may include directive statements and modeling whereas the interventionist includes physical intervention and isolation (Scarlet 2008). Hue and Wai-Shing (2008: 63) further observe that, "knowing how best to respond to unwanted behaviour is among the most important decisions teachers have to make." What is clear here is that it takes a real professional to decide when to ignore, reprimand, punish or counsel a perpetrator of misbehaviour. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to handling learner indiscipline (Tauber 2007). Failure by the teacher to respond appropriately to the exhibited form of learner misbehaviour could lead to further development of the misbehaviour through offending of the perpetrator culminating in uncontrollable forms of learner indiscipline. These are forms of indiscipline

that may result in injuries or fatalities in the school.

Marsh (2000) also describes a Classroom Management Model broken into three phases: the Preventative Phase in which the teacher engages in strategies to prevent inappropriate classroom behavior from occurring, the Corrective Phase in which the teacher thinks and implements measures to correct a behaviour while it is occurring and the Supportive Phase in which then teacher is expected to support learners once the behavior has occurred. Many under-skilled teachers place the emphasis on the corrective phase of Marsh's (2000) model. Although facing consequences is an integral element in child development, teachers must learn that the priority lies in preventing inappropriate behaviour from occurring in the first place. The model places emphasis on preventative strategies as important in dealing with indiscipline since teachers will find a lot less need to implement the corrective and supportive phases of the Classroom Management Model (Marsh 2000).

There is also the rehabilitative model in dealing with learner indiscipline (Adams 1992). It involves the understanding of learners' problems and helping them integrate with others without further problems is an important way of dealing with perpetrators of indiscipline. In this approach there is need for well-trained staff, accurate record keeping, and learner follow-up. It will be more costly to schools in terms of time and resources but it has far better results than punitive models of discipline (Adams 1992).

Orvis (2001) mentions the Responsibility Training Model as an approach to dealing with learner indiscipline. This is a non-coercive approach that was tried and which succeeded at Sturgis Charter School, Massachusetts in the United States America. The model is premised on the need to develop positive relationships with learners and helping them to reflect on and take responsibility for their behaviour in everything that they do. The model is a responsibility based, as opposed to a consequence based, approach to learner discipline. It is done with the realisation that punishment-based disciplinary measures like detention and suspension do little to help learners learn new, responsible behaviours to replace the ones that are not working for them or for their school community. Such measures ultimately have the effect of taking responsibility away from learners because they are never asked to reflect

on what they did, to fix any damage that was done, or to plan to do better (Orvis 2001).

The primary goal advocated by the responsibility training model is to create a positive school culture where the motivation to work and learn becomes intrinsic rather than tied to the promise of rewards and the threat of punishments. Such an approach is applicable in South African schools yet, it rests on the quality of teachers to implement it. Teachers need to motivate learners to work and assist them develop responsible behaviour. Relaxed and free learning environments in schools are mandatory. Only when students feel a sense of belonging and emotional safety can they become deeply and personally involved in their learning (Orvis 2001).

There are other alternatives to punishment-based disciplinary measures. One is the employment of strategies that lead children to focus on the actual standards that authority figures try to communicate rather than on the disciplinary means by which authority figures enforce these standards (Grusec and Goodnow 1994). It would be like compelling the young ones to live according to standards that they do not understand. Grusec and Goodnow (1994) observe the need for authority figure like parents and teachers to explain to the children their reasons as they evaluate the children's behaviour. If parents explain their reasons as they evaluate a child's behavior, the child will eventually comprehend the principles underpinning the messages. According to Grusec and Goodnow (1994), such an approach is "inductive" because it begins with concrete events and moves from the concrete to the general. Events are discussed with a child as an exploration of what was wrong from the authority figure's point of view. The child's wrongness is explained in terms of the effect the misbehaviour has had on others and/or on the child (Charles 2007). It is not only explained in terms of how it has violated standing rules and regulations. To this end, rules are discussed and children feel part of the rules and understand them better. In the process they learn to take responsibility for their behaviour insofar as it affects others and themselves.

The inductive approach is comparatively better than the traditional deductive method in which emphasis is to establish a rule and then punish a child when he breaks it (Charles 2007). Such a method does not usually consider whether the child understands the reasons for the rule or not,

while in the inductive method it is crucial. Firstly, for the inductive method to work, there has to be consistent and informative communication between the authority figure and child (Curwin and Mendler 1988). The second component of the inductive method is that the child has to accept the authority figure's views; how and whether he can accept them is affected by whether he believes that the authority figure's appraisal of his behaviour is commensurate with his own (Curwin and Mendler 1988). The gravity of cases of indiscipline should always be treated differently and minor misbehaviours acknowledged as minor. In such a way the child will have faith in the way his behaviour is appraised and judges the authority figures well. Once the child develops feelings that the authority figures are too hard on him and are cruel and unfair the working relationship is negatively affected (Belvel 2003). Inductive discipline thrives on a relationship of trust and mutual respect between the teacher and the learner. The teacher has to value the learners and seek to understand them better and assist them to be responsible for their actions (Charles 2007). It doesn't begin with a problem. It begins with the love for the child and his attachment and respect for the teacher. Docking (2001) observes that the teacher should not react to the learner's behavioural problems in a way that threatens their relationship. The relationship should be protected at all cost. Central to this approach is praise for a learner for very good behaviour exhibited and also a reward for good behaviour. Children may be given a leadership role on rotational basis as a sign that they have the teacher's trust as leaders.

What is clear from the literature on classroom management is the need for the teacher to be aware of the theories on discipline and employ them in practice as and when necessary. Gone are the days of a domineering and authoritative figure disciplining learners in the classroom. It is time educators embrace strategies to ignore less serious behaviour problems, manage those that cannot be ignored and resolve those that cannot be managed (Grossman 2003). The teacher in the modern classroom should have high behaviour problem diagnostic skills in order to nip in the bud most behaviour problems. The need for more proactive instead of reactive approaches is obvious. The study wanted to proffer alternative and workable approaches to dealing with learner indiscipline in schools. This is necessary

against the need to have a fresh look at the issue of disciplinary measures and advocate for more positive, preventative and learner-friendly disciplinary measures.

Goal of the Study

The study sought to establish learners' views on possible approaches that could be employed to end or at least minimize cases of indiscipline in schools. The study was guided by the question: What are the learners' views on the possible approaches that could be employed to curb indiscipline in schools?

METHOD

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 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.

Instruments: A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data whilst phenomenological interviews were used to collect qualitative data. The questionnaire was used to collect mainly the quantitative data required for the study. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed and some qualitative data was also collected through the questionnaire as respondents were allowed to comment on issues in some instances. 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 preferred to other forms of data collection as they enabled the researcher to naturally converse with the learners. This allowed the learners to freely express their feelings. The interviews also enabled the researcher to probe and prompt on answers given and this flexibility of interviews made it possible for the researcher to gather as much information as possible.

Reliability and Validity: The main statistical measure to determine reliability of the main gather-

ing tool, the questionnaire was the use of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The researcher made an SPSS generated Cronbach alpha coefficient calculation 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. Sun et al. (2007) observe that 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 tools was reliable. Validity means that findings are based on research evidence that does not fluctuate (Niemann et al. 2002). 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 researcher 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 usable questionnaires were returned out of the 300 administered, marking a 93.3 percent return rate. This very high return rate could be attributed to the facts that the researcher and contact persons were on the ground to administer and collect questionnaires and that the learners themselves were very willing to participate in the study.

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 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.

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

RESULTS

Learners' responses and statistical significance on possible approaches to overcome indiscipline are summarised in Table 1.

What is clear from Table 1 is that there were statistically significant differences between participants who agreed with the view on alternative approaches and those who disagreed. This suggests that participants felt strongly on the need for the formation of teacher/parent partnership teams in schools, random searches for dangerous weapons, compulsory guidance and counseling programmes in schools, equipping teachers with techniques to identify children with behaviour problems, focusing on prevention of indiscipline, random searches for drugs, compulsory stress management courses for all learners from senior phase, compulsory anger management courses for all learners from senior phase, monitoring school playgrounds and employing child psychologists in every school.

From interviews carried out with learners the following excerpts show what they had to say about alternative approaches to curbing indiscipline in schools. The question the interviewer posed was simply, "What do you think could be done to end or minimize indiscipline in this school?" Most of the views raised by interviewees pointed out the need for preventive approaches to the management of learner indiscipline in schools.

Respondent 1

Some of the boys in this school bring dangerous weapons to school. I saw one of the se-

nior guys with a sharp knife in the toilet. Such weapons could be used on other learners who could end up being seriously or fatally injured. Teachers should conduct random searches especially on all senior boys

Respondent 2

We have a problem where most problems like bullying and victimization occur during the break time. There is, therefore, our playgrounds need to be monitored to avoid problems.

Respondent 3

Some learners do not know how to control their anger. Whenever they are angry the really cause problems and if there was a way to teach learners to control their anger it would be very helpful.

Respondent 4

It is clear that some learners are stressed by a lot of things. Because of stress they end up causing trouble in the school. Stress issues should be addressed.

Respondent 5

Some parents do not know how bad their children behave in school and I think whenever there is a small problem parent should be alerted. If learners know that they could be reported to their parents they may stop mischief at school.

These are some of the excerpts taken verbatim from the interviewees and all these gave the

Table 1: Learners' responses and statistical significance on possible approaches to overcome indiscipline (N=280)

Possible approaches to overcome indiscipline	Responses				Significance		
	Yes	per- cent	No	per- cent	χ^2	df	P
Forming teacher/ parent partnership teams in schools	235	83.9	45	16.1	128.929	1	0.000*
Random searches for dangerous weapons	210	75.0	70	25.0	70.00	1	0.000*
Compulsory guidance and counseling programmes in schools.	212	75.7	68	24.3	74.057	1	0.000*
Equipping teachers with techniques to identify children with behaviour problems	225	80.4	55	19.6	103.214	1	0.000*
Focusing on prevention of indiscipline	227	81.1	53	18.9	108.129	1	0.000*
Random searches for drugs	221	78.9	59	21.1	93.729	1	0.000*
Compulsory stress management courses for all learners from senior phase	196	70.0	84	30.0	44.800	1	0.000*
Compulsory anger management course for all learners from senior phase	200	71.4	80	28.6	51.429	1	0.000*
Monitoring school playgrounds	227	81.1	53	18.9	108.129	1	0.000*
Employing child psychologists in every school	186	66.4	94	33.6	30.229	1	0.000*

*df =1, $p < 0.05$. Statistically significant difference between participants who said 'yes' and those who said 'no' because p is less than 0.05

interviewees' views on what could be done to minimize indiscipline in schools.

DISCUSSION

The study found that the formation of teacher/parent partnership teams in schools was suggested by the majority learner respondents. This finding is consistent with Mnyaka's (2006) observation of the whole school development approach in which all the key stakeholders, that is, parents and teachers cooperate to ensure discipline in schools. The same issue of teacher and parent partnerships is confirmed as very useful by Sheldon and Epstein (2002) whose study found that the more family and community involvement activities occurred in schools, the fewer the number of learners observed to be punished for indiscipline. Hence, the need for greater cooperation among schools, family and community contexts to improve learner behaviour and school discipline.

The study also found that the majority of the respondents advocated for the introduction of a compulsory stress and anger management courses in schools to help learners deal with their stress and anger which often manifest as indiscipline. The finding confirms Wilde's (1995) argument that anger management should be an integral component of the curriculum and that anger management is a skill that students can learn. The argument behind this is that, rather than waiting until indiscipline occurs and then devoting increased resources to hiring additional school resource officers, creating in-school suspension centers, suspending or expelling learners, a more effective approach would be to redirect resources to the implementation of prevention programmes and anger management courses are meant to prevent indiscipline (www.cfchildren.org).

The study also found that the majority of respondents advocated for a focus on prevention of indiscipline. These are issues which are more proactive rather than reactive. Such a finding is consistent with Belvel and Jordan (2002) and Grossnickle and Frank (1990) views that effective approaches to overcoming learner indiscipline in schools are those that emphasize prevention. Indiscipline is better nipped in the bud as opposed to trying to deal with it after the manifestation of acts of indiscipline.

The issue of preventative measures by way of instituting appropriate and timely intervention

strategies as dealing with forms of indiscipline after they have occurred may not help in dealing with the rising number of cases of indiscipline in schools. This is consistent with Tomczyk (2000) argument that emphasis should be placed on prevention of indiscipline and not on often useless reactive strategies. However, teachers need to be trained or probably retrained in behaviour management, if the implementation of such models could be fruitful.

The researcher advocates for the use of a behaviour management model such as the one on Figure 1.

In this model, the teacher at classroom level has a crucial role in identifying learners with behaviour problems long before any case of indiscipline arises. Emphasis is on preventive approaches to its management in schools as opposed to adopting reactive approaches (Belvel 2003). Identifying learners with behaviour problems in classes requires special skills. Even though teachers are exposed to the psychology of education courses during their years in training there is still need for specially designed courses to assist with skills in identifying learners with behaviour problems. According to this proposed model, teachers list and record names of learners with behaviour problems as well as the suspected behaviour problems. In the second step, teachers then meet according to phases or levels in the schools to classify behaviour problems and the learners involved. For example learners with drinking and smoking problems may be separated. In step three, once learners are classified into management groups they may then be divided into management classes. These classes are constituted in accordance with the relatedness on the disciplinary issues identified.

The teacher then designs intervention programmes for different classes. The intervention programmes are meant to elicit a discussion by participants by sensitizing them to the problems of indiscipline in general and their forms of indiscipline. The participants are encouraged to identify problems on their own and also find solutions to their problems. The teacher makes a follow up by attending to individual members of the class. This calls for one on one understanding and confiding of problems. The teacher should try as far as possible not to dictate terms to the individuals but to show them the light until they understand and appreciate the need not to be involved in indiscipline.

The teacher should try not to dictate terms to

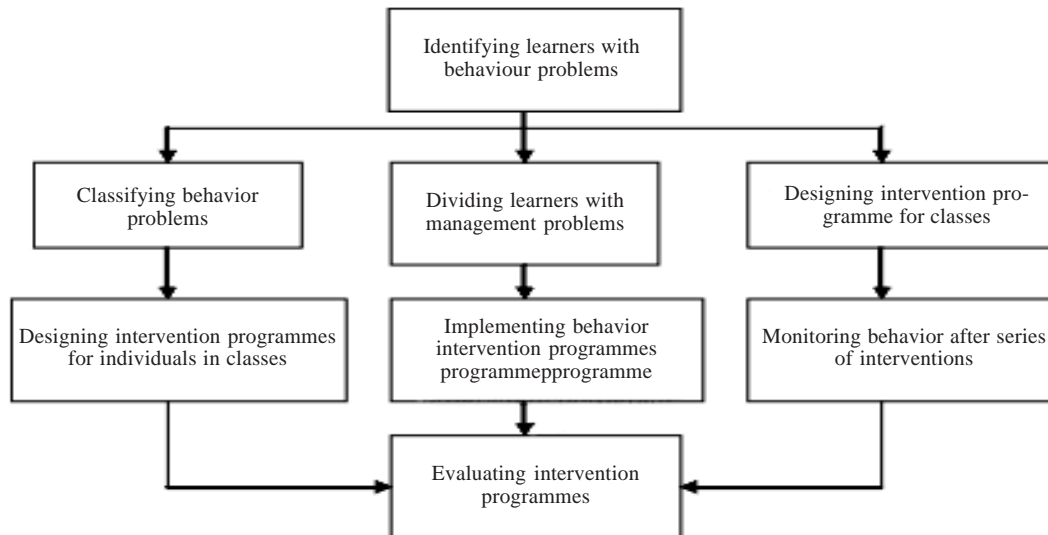


Fig. 1. Proposed Maphosa (2010) behaviour management model

the individuals but attempt to initiate a discussion on how best to improve behaviour until participants see the need to engage in activities to improve the way they behave. All activities should empower the individuals. The teacher should always keep an eye on the behaviour of the learners after a series of intervention programmes. This is done so as to notice any positive or negative changes and adjust the intervention programmes accordingly. Both class and individual intervention programmes should be evaluated formatively and summatively. However, formative evaluations are more important as they give feedback to the teachers and help measure the success or otherwise of the programmes.

In the above behaviour management strategy if put into practice by teachers may ensure the institution of prompt and meaningful interventions. The winning of the battle against indiscipline in schools lies in investing in prevention and timely intervention.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that a lot could be done to deal with learner indiscipline in schools by adopting preventive and proactive approaches. Such preventive approaches assist in detecting forms of indiscipline long before the manifestation of indiscipline.

The study further concludes that school

grounds should be properly monitored to ensure that they are safe all the time. The monitoring of school grounds makes it possible to detect perpetrators of indiscipline before they put the lives of other learners in danger.

Failure to cope with anger and stress is seen as one of the causes of indiscipline in schools. Students who are stressed and those who fail to control their anger are often found to commit serious forms of indiscipline that may affect the safety and security of others at school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends a holistic approach to the management of learner indiscipline in schools in which all important stakeholders play pivotal roles. All stakeholders in the school such as parents, teachers and school authorities have to work closely to deal with the issues of indiscipline in schools.

The study further recommends that under increasing psycho-social pressures there is need to expose learners to compulsory anger and stress management courses in schools specially at senior school level. Anger and stress management courses should be made compulsory in schools. Such courses assist learners to handle stress and deal with anger. This will go a long way in preventing indiscipline in schools.

The Department of Education should offer behaviour management courses to teachers. This

will enable teachers to detect behaviour problems long before they manifest as cases of indiscipline.

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