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School learner behavioural management: context and practices in a South African school setting

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This study explored context and qualities of learner behavioural management with high school students in a historically disadvantaged South African urban school setting. Participants were a convenience sample of seven teachers (females = 3, and males = 4) mean teaching experience = 14 years; SD = 9.0738 years). They responded to an open-ended interview on influences on learner behavioural management and preferred management styles. The data was thematically analysed. Findings reported poor implementation of school code of conduct and lack of parental involvement to lower the learner management. Teachers reported the use of an autocratic management style which could potentially undermine long-term learner development and growth.

Keywords: behavioural management, discipline, management, teacher

Introduction

Learners present teachers with a wide range of behavioural diversity, for which management is needed to support their educational development (Babkie, 2006; Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010). In the implementation of learner management, schools and teachers are guided by statutory law and policies as well as professional ethics (Prinsloo, 2005; Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010; Coetzee, 2012). Learner behavioural management (also called discipline) is about positive approaches to teach a child self-control and confidence; therefore it needs careful implementation (Joubert & Prinsloo, 2008). Management of learner behaviour by a code of conduct could be viewed as being preventative in nature because it refers to basic rights, rules and consequences. Children's right to a safe learning environment is an important consideration in their behavioural management. Despite the processes that teachers employ using a code of conduct for learners to manage their behaviour, the interpretation of these processes at the classroom floor level depends on the teachers themselves, school culture and learner home environment (Bechuke & Debeila, 2012).

Moreover, the nature of the context, culture and belief system of each school influences which learner management systems are preferred. For example, in Ireland the Irish Teachers' Association published document guidelines for teachers on how to manage challenging learner behaviour (Irish National Teachers' Organization, 2004). Mamatey (2010) was of the view that in South Korea learner behavioural management was more punitive from its use of corporal punishment. McKeivitt and Braaksma (2013) and Michail, (2011) suggest best practices that develop positive learner school behaviour to include targeted learner support interventions.

In developing world contexts, teachers might be inclined to use punitive rather than learner development support approaches (Lukman & Hamadi, 2014; Nakpodia, 2010). For example, in Nigeria, retributive corporal punishment is still favoured by teachers as a corrective measure despite it being outlawed (Lukman & Hamadi,

2014). The same retributive approach seems prevalent in Kenya (Simatwa, 2012) and Zimbabwe (Manguvo, Whitney, & Chareka, 2011; Mpofo & Mapfumo, 2010; Mugabe & Maposa, 2013; Shumba, 2007; Shumba, 2011; Shumba, Chireshe, Simuforosa, & Ngara, 2014). Socioeconomic conditions among the learners and their community increases the risk of punitive approaches to behavioural management. This exploratory study examined influences on learner management practices in a historically disadvantaged school in South African.

South African Context and Practices

In the South African context, Section 8 of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 requires schools to have a purposive learner management environment for quality education (Republic of South Africa, 1996). A purposive learning environment is one which supports quality education for all the learners at the school (Guardino & Fullerton, 2010; Masitsa, 2011; Mestry & Khumalo, 2012). Furthermore, a purposive learning environment is one in which all learners are treated equally and are protected from any harm or disturbance that might mar their teaching or learning at the school. Similarly, Maguire, Ball, & Braun (2010) considered a purposive disciplined school environment to be geared towards the full development of the child.

Teacher socialization in learner behavioural management is important as it affects how teachers implement learner management interventions. Some South African teachers have little understanding of what discipline means (Govender & Sookrajh, 2014). Similarly, Kruger and van Schalkwyk (2008) identified three types of management styles, namely, the autocratic, democratic and permissive approaches, which culminate in the following classroom climates: openness, autonomous, controlled, familiar, paternalistic and closed. Research shows that an autonomous and controlled classroom is more preferred as it allows the learner to self-actualize himself or herself and learners are free to voice their fears without any fear of retribution.

Teachers may also apply different forms of a learner code of conduct both inside and outside the classroom, such as being excluded and ignored by the teacher in the classroom and the teacher being sarcastic in order to belittle the learner in front of the others (Segalo, 2013). Learners may also be denied privileges they used to enjoy before the misbehaviour occurred and in some extreme incidents may face suspension or expulsion from the school. Ndofirepi, Makaye, and Ndofirepe (2012) and Maphosa and Shumba (2010) suggest that the nature of schools and learner discipline should be based on democratic principles which purports a sense of self-respect and self-discipline. Assertions by Ndofirepi et al. (2012) suggest that teachers should strive to create learning environments that promote fairness, justice and respect for one another.

Learners from home environments where they experience violence, disadvantages and deprivation may present behavioural management challenges in school. For example, some learners might not have had any experience of being disciplined at home, others might not have had any value systems inculcated in them, and others are parents at home and have never experienced any disciplinary measure from an adult (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013; Shumba, Ndofirepi, & Musengi, 2012). Often, parental involvement in the behavioural management of the learners would assist behavioural compliance in school.

Above all, children have rights to basic protection from abuse and in-school behavioural management should not harm learners no matter how well intended. For example, teachers who admonish or punish the learners to send a stern message to other learners are in violation of children's rights to dignity as are practices involving corporal punishment and other dehumanising actions by the teachers (Motseke, 2010; Ndofirepi et al., 2012; Naong, 2007). Teachers in their *in loco parentis* roles are obliged to create a safe and nurturing environment for learners under their care (Byxbe & Urbina, 2013). Teachers with less preparation in child friendly learner management may be challenged to administer learner discipline which protects children's rights.

Goals of the study

This study explored learner behavioural management experiences of secondary school teachers from schools in a historically disadvantaged district in South Africa. The study was guided by the following question:

How do secondary school teachers perceive influences of learner behavioural management context and the specific learner discipline approaches they prefer?

Method

Research design

An exploratory qualitative research method was employed for this study. An exploratory research is defined as a qualitative research that seeks to clarify and define the nature of the problem rather than provide conclusive evidence (Payne & Payne, 2004). An exploratory qualitative design is appropriate for studying subjective experiences of the participants; in this case of teachers who administer learner behavioural management.

Participants and setting

Seven secondary school teachers were purposively sampled for the study (females = 3; males = 4; age range 28 to 52; mean teaching experience 14 years; SD = 9.0738 years). All teachers were based in urban township schools of the Lejweleputswa district of the Free State province. The district, like many other districts in the province, has experienced high levels of ill-discipline among the learners, such as late-coming to classes and school.

Data collection

Data on perceived context influences on learner school management and qualities of the preferred discipline approaches were collected through focus group interviews (Babbie, 2005). The following aspects were probed, namely, different types of discipline used by teachers and reasons for such choices, how they create conducive teaching and learning environments, and how their classroom management style contributes to a safe teaching and learning environment.

Procedure

Permission for the study was granted by the relevant provincial Department of Education. The participating teachers consented individually to the study. All the participants were informed of the aim, objectives, research methods, and the nature of their participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Data were collected at the schools during normal work hours. As a data trustworthiness check, the investigator and a collaborator transcribed the transcripts of the interviews separately and where there was no clarity the researcher went back to the participants to confirm aspects of the results which were not clear.

Data analysis

A thematic data analysis was used to categorize the main themes emerging from the focus group interviews. The veracity of the themes was cross-checked against literature control referencing related studies (Cukurova, 2009; Maphosa & Mammen, 2011, Ndofirepi et al., 2012).

Findings and Discussion

The following key themes emerged from the analysis: implementation context of the code of conduct rules and extent of parents/guardians and teacher preference for autocratic learner management style. These are considered next.

Theme 1: Code of conduct implementation context

All the teacher informants were of the view that that learner's behavioural excesses were linked to poor implementation of the school code of conduct. As result, learners were less respectful of teachers than they were supposed to be. For example, one of the male teachers responded in the following way:

At my school majority of learners especially boys seem to care less as how they talk and address the teachers. When you instruct them to do some work they just look at you as if you don't exist. As a teacher I feel helpless and I feel that there is not a lot that I can do to help my rebellious learners. (34 year old male teacher; 11 years teaching experience)

This view was echoed by a female teacher who said:

I normally refer to learners' Code of Conduct and the classroom rules when learners transgress them. However, it looks like they (schools rules) do not have any effect on them. They are just rules that have gathered dust and it is futile to manage learner disrespect and misconduct through rules of the school. (28 year old female teacher, 5 years' experience)

Learners lacked respect for the rights of others. As pointed-out by another 43 year old female teacher with 18 years of teaching experience:

I think there is a need for learners to be taught that other learners also have rights as well. Look, most of the learners think of their rights and not knowing that they have a duty to learn and there are also consequences for each action chosen

Poor implementation of the school code of conduct might discourage teachers from following up with behavioural support needs and at risk to selves and others (Mokhele, 2006). Joubert & Prinsloo (2008) were of the view that learners should be involved in the drafting of the code of conduct to win their compliance.

Theme 2: Lack of parental involvement in cooperative learner management

Six of the teachers reported that the parents leave it to the teachers to behaviourally manage learners in school instead of complementing the teachers in their efforts. For example, a 36 year old female teacher with 12 years of experience reported in the following way:

I feel that I cannot be expected to be a parent to my learners as their parents have failed to teach them basic values. In my classroom learners insult each other as they like. I am afraid they will tell me that I am not their parent and I should mind my own business

A 43 year old male teacher with 18 years of experience observed:

"There are times when you seriously talk with the learner regarding his or her misbehaviour and you invite the parent to the school to assist. During the meeting one sense that the parent is taking the side of his/her child and you are left with no option but to withdraw from the whole situation. As person you also feel that this is not my child and not my problem. I feel parents have failed their own children. Maybe they are afraid of their children and fear to hurt their feelings

Thus, teachers, parents and learners should agree on a set of rules and uphold them. Mncube (2009) and Niewenhuis (2007) point out that parental involvement is associated with positive behavioural outcomes, improved discipline and self-regulated behaviour on the part of the learners.

Theme 3: Classroom management style

The teachers reported that they mostly use an autocratic management style in their learner behavioural management. For instance, a 52 year old male teacher with 26 years of teaching experience said:

I am very strict with learners from the onset; if one is lenient you are not really going to get the academic achievements that you planned for. I use my own rules that works for me as a result learners do learn and I achieve my goals

The teacher further elaborated that:

For example, when learners are late for the class I do not allow them to enter in the classroom, they also know that I am harsh as I use corporal punishment, though in a mild way.

A 46 year old male teacher with 22 years of teaching experience agreed with his colleague by saying:

The school management, the school principal encourages that we should be firm with the learners, they want to hear loudly the voice of the teacher teaching. When voice of learners, it will not a surprise to get a visit from school management or the school principal enquiring about the noise taking place in the classroom.

Thus, the teachers perceived their autocratic behavioural management style to be consistent with the school cultural ethos regarding the learner discipline approach. This kind of learning environment implies that there is an absence of a nurturing, caring and pedagogical relationship between the teachers and the learner (Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010).

Summary and Conclusion

Limitations of the study include amongst others the size of the sample, which was not meant to generalize the findings of the study in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. However similar literature reviews and empirical findings in similar studies suggest that teachers' experiences of behavioural problems are reasoned from the same perspective, and similar experiences could be shared.

In conclusion, teachers prefer a rigid, autocratic management style or a teacher centred learner management approach. They perceive that approach to be appropriate in the context of the absence of parental involvement and a controlling school culture. As learner behavioural problems are a recurring phenomenon, it is important that teachers are empowered through developmental programmes dealing with handling difficult learners in their care. It is further suggested that the programme for student teachers at universities be strengthened to include a module on how to deal humanely with learners who experience behavioural difficulties.

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