



## Positive Discipline Practices in Schools: A Case of Mzilikazi District Secondary Schools in Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

*The study assessed factors constraining use of positive discipline practices in Mzilikazi District Secondary Schools. Qualitative approach and case study design were employed. Purposively selected participants from four secondary schools comprised four school heads; twenty members of the disciplinary committee, four school counsellors, forty prefects and four School Development Committee chairpersons. Data analysed thematically were collected using face to face semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. Results revealed that lack of role models, ineffective communication, not rewarding positive behaviour, ineffective monitoring and inadequate financial resources constrained use of positive discipline practices in selected schools. The study concluded that factors that constrained use of positive discipline practices in schools mainly emanated from teachers, learners, parents and the members of the community. It is recommended that schools should initiate training programmes for teachers and parents to positively influence their discipline practices in enhancing use of positive discipline practices.*

**Keywords:** *discipline, discipline practices, positive discipline, secondary schools*

### 1. Introduction

Globally, teachers and administrators strive to maintain order and control in schools (Demuth, 2011). The growing expectation from the society is that educational institutions provide socially tolerable, effective and efficient measures to guarantee safe, prolific environs where there is minimisation of untoward behaviour and promotion of pro-social behaviour (Sugai et al. 2000). However, disciplining learners has proved to be a mammoth task for schools especially in using punitive versus supportive disciplinary strategies. To ensure academic success and providing a safe learning environment, it is, therefore, essential for schools to establish effective discipline methods (Luiselli, Putnam, Handler & Feinberg, 2005). In a bid to maintain positive discipline, schools have adopted various strategies such as communication, modelling positive behaviour, training of staff and parents, positive reinforcement and many others. In spite of unsurpassed efforts by schools to produce shared methods that enhance positive behaviour, they continue to encounter situations of challenging behaviour such as bullying, insubordination, drug and alcohol abuse, destruction of property, violence, assault and many others (Irish National Teachers' Organization, 2004; Demuth, 2011).

## 2. Background

Research based procedures on using positive discipline practices focus on increasing desirable behaviours and emphasis is on positive changes in learner's environment than simply decreasing undesirable behaviours through punishment. Such changes involve using role models, reinforcing the behaviour positively, compassionate relationship between the teacher and the learner, supportive family and specialist personnel's assistance (National Association of School Psychologists, 2002). In United States of America, research has repeatedly validated that dangerous and disruptive learner behaviours cannot be solved by use of suspension, expulsion and other punitive measures (National Association of School Psychologists, 2002).

Zimbabwe, as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on Child's Rights (1989), has, through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MOPSE) encouraged schools to use positive discipline practices when disciplining learners, at the same time adopt reasonable policies and measures to ensure that children are protected from maltreatment, neglect or any form of abuse (The Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013: Chapter 2 Article 2.11; Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture, 1999). Currently, with emphasis on human rights and children's rights, there has been a move from negative to positive practices of maintaining discipline in schools. The MOPSE has initiated supervision visits; and staff development programmes as a way of imparting knowledge and skills to teachers on how to employ positive discipline practices (Bowora, 2010).

Despite the guiding principles discoursed above, apprehensions and whinges were raised by members of the civic society, parents and learners through various forms of media asserting that learners felt insecure at school as they were continually exposed to reactive discipline practices (Sibanda, 2013, the Zimbabwean newspaper reporter, Malazi, Rembe & Shumba, 2016b). Considering the issues raised informally by concerned stakeholders and media, it is not clear what factors constrain schools in using positive discipline practices. It in light of the preceding discussion, that this study sought to assess the factors that constrain use of positive discipline practices in Mzilikazi District Secondary Schools.

## 3. Literature review

Research studies have revealed various unique constraining factors that negatively affect schools in applying positive discipline practices. The major factors include varying philosophies among staff about behaviour management, misunderstanding, lack of knowledge and misperceptions in dealing with learners who have shown unbecoming behaviour (McKevitt, Dempsey, Ternus & Shriver, 2012). It has been observed that some members of staff might be reluctant in rewarding learners for undertaking their responsibility, preferring instead to rely on more reactive methods (Maag, 2001; Kincaid, Childs, Blasé & Wallace, 2007). Nkabinde's (2007) study concluded that teachers failed to adopt available alternative methods to corporal punishment when disciplining learners because most of them still held that corporal punishment was the most suitable way of dealing with learners' ill-behaviour. Furthermore, Maphosa and Shumba (2010) found that the absence of corporal punishment in schools led to disempowerment of teachers as they found it difficult to maintain discipline in schools. However, Bear (2010) argues that excluding methods that enhance self-discipline might not teach learners the skills that will stimulate suitable and autonomously guided conduct. This is evident when adult supervision, systematic rewards, clear rules and expectations, and consequences for misbehaviour are the main methods used in managing learner behaviour. When those external rewards are later removed the learner might fail to function individually.

Scholars like Feuerborn and Tyre (2012) observe that schools provide limited prospects for their members of staff to develop professionally and quite often they find it difficult to cope with the diverse social, emotional, and behavioural needs of their learners. Bechuke and Debeila (2012) elaborate that the school community members who deal with behaviour modification procedures should be allowed to do so only after they have received sufficient training.

Lack of parental guidance among learners has been observed as a major factor that contributes to unproductive use of positive discipline practices in schools. Research has shown that

in United States of America, in the last three decades, children have missed almost twelve hours of parental time a week as most parents take longer hours at work. Parents usually fail to spend quality time with their children, nurturing and training them in manners, morals, and respect for people and property because they come home stressed out from their jobs (Demuth, 2011). Irish National Teachers' Organization (2004) agrees that lack of social skills and poor language development, together with lack of parenting skills may lead to a child displaying unbecoming behaviour. Such behaviour might be used as a survival technique in the child's environs.

The Michigan Department of Education (2010) notes that the successful implementation of any school programme can be challenging as hindrances which embrace reducing available resources, competing demands on available time and decline in budgets could stifle the intervention programmes. Murithi (2010); McKeivitt et al. (2012) and Onderi and Makori (2013) confirm that lack of funds, limited time with learners, insufficient resources, pressure from various stakeholders and the impact of socio-political issues may hinder implementation of positive behaviour interventions in schools.

Teachers and parents are expected by the society to model positive behaviour to learners. However, this has not been always the case as some teachers have been accused by learners as being habitual drunkards (Rono & Gichana, as cited in Murithi, 2010). Murithi (2010) cites an incident in Kenya where more than one hundred learners at a school rioted citing indecent dressing by some of the teachers which disrupted learners' concentration during lessons. In addition, Nene (2013) observes that some parents display violent and aggressive behaviour towards school staff which in turn influences learner behaviour negatively.

In his study in Kenya, Kindiki (2009) found that the obstructions to interpersonal communication which impede effective communication in schools involved fear of the administration by the learners especially where it is not open but repressive and overlooked learners' grievances, lack of proper hierarchy of authority to whom grievances are forwarded, peer pressure, unclearly stated rules and regulations to guide learners' behaviour and intrusion by overprotective parents and guardians. It emerged that intrusion by overprotective parents would lead to communication breakdown in the school because the school administration would feel annoyed by such parents while the learners in question would think they have been given permission to misbehave at school. For this reason, therefore, there was need for this study to respond to the question: What factors constrain use of positive discipline practices in Mzilikazi District Secondary Schools?

#### **4. Research Methodology**

Qualitative approach which involves fieldwork in which the researcher physically goes to the participants' setting or site in order to observe them as they normally and naturally behave (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) was adopted in this study to explore the factors constraining use of positive discipline practices in Mzilikazi District Secondary Schools. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning that the participants have constructed and how the participants make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 2002). The study also employed a case study design which is fundamentally an exhaustive investigation of a particular unit under study.

The population involved ten secondary schools in Mzilikazi District from which four were purposively selected. Participants comprised four school heads, four school counsellors, twenty members of the disciplinary committee, forty prefects and four School Development Committee chairpersons.

Research instruments used in the study comprised face to face semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. Using face to face semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to adjust the questions where required, elucidate uncertainty and ensure that the responses are appropriately understood by repeating or rephrasing the questions (Alsaawi, 2014).

Qualitative data were coded systematically and analysis was based on themes to address the research question. Credibility and trustworthiness were ensured by use of member checks and triangulation of data (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Pertaining to ethical issues, the researchers sought permission from MOPSE to conduct the study and were granted. When conducting the study, the

researchers also took into cognisance ethical issues of consent, protection from harm, honesty, confidentiality and anonymity.

## 5. Results

The findings of the study based on identified themes are presented as follows: communication, modelling positive behaviour, training of staff and parents, positive behaviour reinforcement and monitoring and support. Participants were coded as follows: SH1-SH4 = School Heads, SC1-SC4 = School Counsellors, SDC1-SDC4 = School Development Committee chairpersons, FGDC1-FGDC4 = Focus Group interview for Members of the Disciplinary Committee and FGP1-FGP4 = Focus Group interview for Prefects.

### 5.1 Communication

Responding to the question on factors that hindered the effective use of communication as positive discipline practice in schools, the participants indicated that lack of response from parents when invited to schools, misuse of some communication channels and not keeping parents informed through newsletters were some of the factors that obstruct effective use of communication in schools. Examples of responses are as follows:

*FGDC4: Resistance from some of the parents even if we invite them to school they do not come forward.*

*SH1: The suggestion box was there but it ended up not being used for its intended purpose. I do not know whether it was learners or members of staff, it has since been removed temporarily.*

*SH4: We rarely write newsletters because in the past we had a challenge for stationery.*

The responses given above by the participants illustrate that secondary schools encounter some obstacles in enforcing positive discipline through use of communication.

### 5.2 Modelling positive behaviour

The participants were asked to respond to the question pertaining to factors that inhibited use of modelling positive behaviour in maintaining positive discipline in schools. It emerged from the responses that there are some members of staff, parents and members of the community who fail to model positive behaviour to learners. Participants' remarks are presented below:

*FGDC2: Some of the younger teachers are not good role models.*

*FGP3: Some of the staff members do not lead by example.*

*FGP4: Some members of staff are not good role models.*

*SC2: Some members of the community are bribed by learners to come to school and pose as their parents/guardians if learners have cases and they are asked by the school to bring in their parents/guardians. Sometimes you find one member of the community representing quite a number of learners in the group claiming to be their relative. This kind of behaviour among community members is quite disturbing.*

*FGDC2: The challenge we encounter is that learners lack role models from their parents or families. We have found that in some cases which we deal with, for example, when it comes to drug and alcohol abuse, we find that some parents or family members who are involved will give their children marijuana to come and sell at school. Some if they have shebeens at home; these children are the ones who sell beer.*

In addition, SDC chairpersons, as parents also expressed disappointment on the way some members of staff and the community behave in the presence of learners. This is the challenge they have observed which reiterate the observations of other participants.

*SDC1: The nature of the society we are living in today has negative influence on the behaviour of*

children.

*SDC2: The problem is that nowadays we lack good role models from the school and community, that is, some members of staff do not conduct themselves properly in front of learners and sometimes the type of language being used is not good for learners. The community members are also letting us down.*

*SDC3: Some members of staff show unbecoming behaviour in the presence of learners, for example, smoking cigarette or drinking beer at a nearby bottle store during lunch time. Some members of staff do not dress according to the dress code.*

The data presented reveal that some of the constraints encountered in using positive discipline practices emanate from members of staff, parents and community members who are the people expected to be emulated by learners. The given responses imply that there is lack of cooperation in use of positive behaviour modelling in schools.

### 5.3 Training of staff and parents

Regarding factors that constrain the training of staff and parents, it came out from the participants that inadequate financial resources were a major challenge. Most of the participants unanimously agreed that insufficient financial resources inhibited holding of workshops and staff development programmes to train staff and parents in use of positive discipline practices. Some of the responses given are as follows:

*SH1: Lack of funding hinders the holding of a number of workshops for teachers and parents, and also limits the invitation of facilitators.*

*SH2: Financial constraints inhibit use of positive discipline practices, for example, organising workshops for parents.*

*FGDC3: Lack of financial resources hinders the training of parents.*

*SC3: The problem is lack of financial resources which does not permit us to hold more workshops.*

*SDC1: Financial constraints to hold workshops for parents are a challenge. There is really need to train parents because some of them do not understand the issue of positive discipline; they still believe that children should be beaten in order to discipline them.*

As demonstrated by participants' responses, the major constraining factor faced by schools to successfully use positive discipline practices is insufficient financial resources. This has proved to be a hindrance especially in the training of parents whom the majority have shown ignorance on how positive discipline practices should be employed.

### 5.4 Positive behaviour reinforcement

Pertaining to factors that suppress use of positive behaviour reinforcement, the participants cited that sometimes schools put more emphasis on rewarding performance on academic aspect and ignoring the issue of positive behaviour. It also emerged that sometimes rewarded behaviour might not be permanent as it has been observed that if learners become too dependent on rewards they might relapse in terms of behaviour if the rewards are withdrawn. It was also mentioned by participants that some parents do not appreciate the change of behaviour which their child might have shown. Examples of sentiments raised by participants are as follows:

*FGDC2: In most cases schools focus mainly on rewarding learners who perform well in academic subjects ignoring improvement in learners' behaviour. None recognition of positive behaviour might result in the learner falling back to bad behaviour practices.*

*FGP3: The main challenge is that sometimes if students are no longer rewarded positively the bad behaviour resurfaces.*

*SDC4: The problem is that the parents of these days do not reward their children. If they were doing that we should be having less problems of behaviour at school.*

The views of the participants suggest that reinforcement of learners' positive behaviour is constrained by various factors which originate from the school, parents and learners. These hurdles

obstruct successful use of positive discipline practices in schools.

### 5.5 Monitoring and support

The participants were asked to unveil the challenges experienced by schools in monitoring and supporting use of positive discipline practices. In their responses most of the participants exposed mainly inadequate time to monitor use of positive discipline practices, lack of support from members of staff and parents as major hindrances encountered by secondary schools. Some of their responses are given below.

*SH2: There is lack of support from some members of staff; some go against the code of conduct at times they fail to model positive behaviour; some teachers are reluctant to teach guidance and counselling lessons since they view it as extra load.*

*FGP4: The challenge is lack of support from some members of staff who continue to use negative discipline strategies.*

*SDC1: The major hindrance is lack of support from some of the parents who do not monitor their children at home so that they implement what is encouraged at school in terms of positive behaviour.*

*FGDC3: We have a challenge for time; we do not have enough time to monitor the implementation fully because we will also be teaching.*

*SC4: Inadequate time stifles the monitoring and support of the implementation of guidance and counselling programmes in the school.*

*FGP1: As a double session school, there is limited time to adequately monitor students.*

The participants' views presented above give an impression that monitoring and supporting use of positive discipline practices are not effectively done in secondary schools.

## 6. Discussion

Regarding constraints encountered in use of positive discipline practices in Mzilikazi District Secondary Schools, the study found that there was resistance from some of the parents even if they were invited to school they did not respond. The findings of the current study reinforce the results of Kindiki's (2009) study that intrusion by overprotective parents would lead to communication breakdown in the school because the school administration would feel annoyed by such parents while the learners in question would think they have been given permission to misbehave at school. The findings of the study also revealed that there was misuse of some of the communication channels by some members of the school community, for instance, suggestion boxes which ended up not being used for intended purposes. The finding confirms the results of the study by Subbiah (2004) which revealed that participants in her study felt that communication links between class teachers and class representatives were not always good because teachers had a habit of pretending to be too busy with other activities. It was further found that some schools did not keep parents informed about positive discipline issues through newsletters. According to Ndamani (as cited in Ntuli, 2012) lack of communication between the school and the home contributes to prevalence of cases of untoward behaviour in secondary schools.

The study established that some members of staff were not good role models. It emerged from the findings that some members of staff would smoke cigarettes or consume alcohol at nearby bottle stores during lunch time while learners would be watching them. The findings of the study are in line with the results of the study conducted by Mugabe and Maposa (2013) which revealed that there were some teachers who flouted school regulations by sharing alcoholic drinks and cigarettes with learners. The findings also correspond with observation from literature reviewed that some teachers have been accused by learners as being habitual drunkards (Rono & Gichana, as cited in Murithi, 2010).

The results of the study further revealed that some members of staff did not dress according to the dress code. The finding is consistent with what was said by Yaroson (as cited in Salifu & Agbenyaga, 2012) that a study in Ghanaian schools revealed that teachers contributed to

disciplinary problems by modelling shabby dressing and indecent attires which denoted nudity. The finding also confirms Murithi's (2010) observation that in Kenya learners at a secondary school rioted citing indecent dressing by some of the teachers which disrupted learners' concentration during lessons.

The study also found that some parents did not model good behaviour to their children. The findings revealed that some parents or members of the family who were involved in drug and alcohol abuse would give their children marijuana to sell to other learners at school. Some parents if they sell beer at home would ask their children to sell beer to the customers. The findings of the study concur with the results of the study by Mugabe and Maposa (2013) that some parents received stolen properties from children while others sent children to buy cigarettes and alcoholic drinks exposing them to temptation to consume them. The findings of the study further revealed that some members of the community did not model positive behaviour to learners as they were bribed by learners to come to school and pose as their parents/guardians if learners had disciplinary cases.

It came out from the study that inadequate funds limited the number of workshops to train teachers and parents. The finding of this study confirms what was found in literature that the successful implementation of any school programme can be challenging as hindrances which embrace reducing available resources, competing demands on available time and decline in budgets could stifle the intervention programmes (Michigan Department of Education, 2010). The result of the current study also corroborates with McKeivitt et al. (2012) that lack of funds hamper the implementation of intervention programmes in schools.

It emerged from the study that in most cases schools focus mainly on rewarding learners who perform well in academic subjects ignoring improvement in learners' behaviour. The finding is consistent with what was found in reviewed literature that some members of staff might be reluctant in rewarding learners for undertaking what they are supposed to do, preferring instead to rely on more reactive methods (Maag, 2001; Kincaid, Childs, Blasé & Wallace, 2007). It was also revealed by the current finding that some learners whose positive behaviour was no longer rewarded positively, the bad behaviour resurfaced. The finding supports Bear's (2010) observation that when the external rewards are later removed the learner might fail to function individualistically. Furthermore, the study found that some parents did not reward their children's positive behaviour. The current study results are in line with observation by Irish National Teachers' Organization (2004) and Demuth (2011) that in spite of unsurpassed efforts by schools to produce shared methods that enhance positive behaviour, they continue to encounter situations of challenging behaviour.

The results of the study established that there was inadequate time to effectively monitor the use of positive discipline practices in schools. The study also found that there was lack of support from some members of staff. The findings of this study affirm the results of the study by Mugabe and Maposa (2013) which revealed that some staff members protected learner offenders in disciplinary committees; and ill-educated teachers discouraged prefects from "overcommitting" themselves to prefect duties under the pretext that it negatively affected learners' academic performance. In addition, some teachers used abusive language to restrain improper behaviour among learners. The findings of the current study are also commensurate with Ward's (2007) observation that despite research support as authenticated practices, there is sufficient evidence that positive discipline practices are extremely underutilised in the public schools. This study further found that there was lack of support from some of the parents who did not monitor their children at home so that they reinforced the positive behaviour encouraged at school. The finding is consistent with results of the study by Mugabe and Maposa (2013) which revealed that some parents relinquished their responsibility to the school under the pretext that school discipline was none of their business.

## 7. Conclusion

The study assessed factors constraining use of positive discipline practices in schools. Conclusions drawn from the findings of the study indicate that factors that constrained use of positive discipline

practices in selected secondary schools mainly emanated from teachers, learners, parents and the members of the community. There is evidence from the results that inadequate financial resources inhibited schools to organise workshops to train teachers and parents. It is, therefore, recommended that schools should mobilise financial resources and initiate the training programmes for teachers and parents to positively influence their discipline practices in order to enhance use of positive discipline practices. Since the study was conducted in urban schools, it is recommended that another study should be conducted in rural secondary schools so that the results could be compared.

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