



Research Article

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Secondary Schools Practices of Learner Suspensions and Re-Integration in the School Community

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Abstract

This research paper explores the strategies that are used by secondary schools in South African setting to readmission their suspended learners back in the school community. A plethora of literature review revealed little on the strategies that are offered by the schools to the learners who get suspended and later re-integrated in their respective school communities. The South African school system allows the schools to suspend learners who serious offenses that are against the school policies for a period of not more than a week (South African Schools Act, 84, 1996). A qualitative research study was conducted to explore the strategies that school principals of secondary schools employ when the learner is re-integrated in the school community after his or her suspension has lapsed. A purposive sample of seven secondary school principals was used. An in-depth interview technique was used to collect data. Data was analyzed by means of themes that emerged from the questions that were posed to the school principals. Analyzed data demonstrate that there is a need to develop strategies for secondary schools to re-integrate learners back in the school communities. There was not sufficient evidence that show the strategies that schools use for the re-integration of suspended learners back in the school communities.

Keywords: *Re-integration, suspended, learners, school communities, serious offences, misconduct*

1. Introduction and Background

Learners' misconduct and serious misconduct is a possible occurrence in many schools, in South Africa and elsewhere (Maphosa, 2011, Maphosa & Shumba 2010). This paper explores the nature of learners' suspensions and how they are reintegrated in the school communities. The research paper assumes that once the suspension of the learner has expired after a week duration in the South African context, the learner is freely allowed back in the school community, which is the classroom, school premises and playing grounds, unless there are restrictions attached to the re-admission of the learner at the school. Equally, the researcher is of the view that if there are restrictions to the re-admission of the learner, which makes the learner suspended punished perpetually (Maree & Cherian, 2004).

The nature of the growing child is changeable (Zulu, van der Merwe & van der Walt, 2004). Learners as children, they are likely to develop in different ways, some very submissive and obedient to the rules of the school. On the other hand, some children's growth is characterized by being

rebellious and resolute towards the rule of the school laws (Brown, 2007). Grounded on this theorization, the researcher espouses that the likelihood of breaching the school rules seems likely, on any given time. In a South African context, many children grow-up under challenging situations, through which they are not resourced to deal with (Maphosa, 2011). Unruly behaviour and ignorance of the school rules are some of the common causes of ill-discipline among learners outside and inside the classroom (Wolhuter & Russo, 2013, Kourkoutas & Wolhuter, 2013). Learners' behavioural problems affect the running of schools negatively (Motseke, 2020).

Eloff, Oosthuizen and Steyn, (2010) state that educational legislations emphasise the need for proper order to secure optimal learning and teaching environment for all the learners at the school. Under the section 8 of the South African Schools Act, 86, of 1996, a school must adopt a learner code of conduct and becomes binding to all the learners at the school after consultation with all the school's stakeholders (Reyneke, 2019, Mestry & Khumalo, 2012, Bray, 2005). Reyneke, 2019 alludes that a school's code of conduct functions similarly to the law, for example, the law consists of a body of norms, values and rules which society has accepted as its law; people (i.e., persons as bearers of rights and obligations) must obey the law and when the law is disobeyed, legal measures must be enforced to restore legal equilibrium. The code of conduct likewise operates to promote, maintain and enforce learner discipline in the school, and restore order and equilibrium in the learner community. On the one hand, Serame, Oosthuizen, Wolhuter and Zulu, 2013, state that school rules in the learner code of conduct help to develop learners' self-control to improve their behaviour. In an event any of these stated rules in the learner code of conduct are broken, the learner might be disciplined. Learner misconduct in South African schools is categorized into less serious misconduct and serious misconduct (Bekink, 2009). Oosthuizen, Wolhuter and du Toit, (2003) establish that learner serious misconduct might take the form of carrying of dangerous weapons to school, being in possession of illegal drugs and to conduct that endangers the lives of other learners and the teachers. As such, suspension of a learner from the school might be defined as a temporary refusal or exclusion from the school or the accommodation section. A learner might be suspended for a period of less than a week after a fair hearing (Segalo, 2020).

The South African Schools Act, 86, of 1996 (Schools Act) under section 9 (1) permits the any public school to suspend a learner or learner from its school a period not exceeding a week. Once the learner is temporarily excluded and is at home, not much is known what happens. It can only be inferred that parents or the guardians of the suspended learner bear the responsibility the erred behaviour of their children. Based on this notion, the research paper, probes how the Schools Act advises the schools on the measures or processes the schools must take to re-integrate the offending learners in the school communities. Having considered the different sub-sections of section 9, there is no clear directive on what the school who had suspended the learner have to do when re-integrating such a particular learner at the school (Mestry & Khumalo 2019). Supposedly, the School Act, not giving any directive, except where the court of law has directed so, the schools are left with no option but to develop their own policy mechanism on how such suspended learners will be re-admitted at the school. Wolhuter and Russo, (2013) mention that in Singapore suspension of learners is very rare as the following processes are followed, namely, counselling by school counsellors or educational psychologists, reflection whereby learners are made to write down what they did wrong and why it is wrong, punitive measures such as demerit points, which may result in the deprivation of school awards, disqualification from representing the school in competitions, suspensions, (rare), expulsions (rare) and caning (rare). From this observation it might be assumed that proper guidance of learners by teachers might circumvent learners being suspended or expelled from the school.

1.1 *Negativity associated with learner suspension*

Though the aim of learner suspension is to give time and space to school authorities to realign their learner school policies and to afford parents time to address the problem of their child, it also has a negative image attached to it. The school authorities need to have this in mind when suspending a

learner from the school. Allen, (20210) reminds that teaching is a profession that requires the ability to be responsive to new demands and changing needs of the learners. The negativity associated with learner suspension can be understood in a triad, the learner who is suspended, the family of the learner suspended and the name of the school who do the suspension. Additionally, Oosthuizen, Wolhuter and du Toit, (2003), warn that the effects that might accompany learner suspension includes but not limited to, impaired academic achievement, social isolation, loss of self-esteem, an increased anxiety, damage to the ego, humiliation, enhanced feelings of aggression and to some extent self-destructive behaviours.

Reyneke, 2010, also cautions about retaliatory behaviour, either from the suspended learner or parent of the suspended learner which might take the form of parents assaulting educators, children insulting, attacking and even killing educators, learners assaulting and killing one another, violent attacks and killings on school grounds by outsiders. Teise and Gaillard, (2019), point that in learner discipline, a consciousness space must be created to address injustices that arise from disciplinary practices, processes or procedures that are embedded in learner codes of conduct applied in South African schools. Such sensitivity and awareness are important since education and schooling is primarily political in nature and could potentially use discipline practices to promote and sustain social injustices and oppression. It is for this reason that social justice involves a disposition towards recognising and eradicating all forms of oppression and differential treatment existent in the practices and policies of some of the schools.

2. Theoretical Lens- Restorative Justice and Peace Education

Re-integration of the learners who have transgressed has not been sufficiently accounted for in the literature, except where mention of restorative justice is alluded to (Abaunza. (2013, Hopkins, 2002). In their studies on restorative justice in schools, Reyneke, (2011) and Hammett and Marshall, (2017), Staeheli and Hammett, (2013) view restorative justice as the process through which harm done to people and relationships need to be restored and repaired. As such, violation or serious misconduct committed by the offending learners is not only the breaking of the school rules, rather violation of the institution that has accommodated them, as well as violation against people and relationships (Reyneke, 2013). In the context of this re-integration, will presupposes that the learner who has offended and now reintegrated must be welcomed and accepted by all the institution and those relationships he or she harmed in the process of transgression (Teise, 2015). Teise, (2019) teaches that social justice in education aims at restoring the dignity of those learners who have been discriminated against, who have been silenced and who have been marginalised. It could therefore be regarded as a form of education aiming to restore the dignity and the humanity of these learners. Gilland Niens (2014:3) talks of humanising education which can develop in learners a set of values and approaches that could potentially enable them to re-engage with the “other” and restore relationships. Applying principles of social justice in education, and more specifically in learner discipline, should primarily restore the dignity of learners. The inability of the school community to accept fully the re-integration of the suspended learner might imply that restorative justice is not upheld.

3. Research Aim, Objective and Question

The aim of this paper was to explore the strategies that are used by the schools to re-integrate suspended learners in their school communities. As a result, the objective of the research study was:

1. Comprehend the current practices of re-integrating suspended learners in the school communities,

The research question that underpinned this research study was, what mechanism are used by secondary schools to re-integrate suspended learners from school after their suspensions have lapsed?.

4. Method

A qualitative research was used with an interpretivist approach. In the context of this study, interpretations provided for by the school principals express their view which are both objective and subjective based on what their school policies aspire to achieve against their personal views on re-integration process (Potrac, Jones & Nelson, 2014, Kroeze, 2012, Terre Blance, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). Based on the subjective experiences of the school principals with similar cases, it could be deduced that views on re-integration is mainly depended on their life-views, personal circumstances, personal backgrounds and their managerial experiences, to mention but a few.

4.1 Participants and setting

A purposive sample of seven secondary school principals was employed for this study (Female = 04; Male = 05; age range 32 to 54). The rationale for the purposive sampling was that it was easy to access and locate the participating school principals. All participating school principals were based in historically disadvantaged secondary schools in in South African setting. It was assumed that the findings of this research study will reveal similar outcomes across processes of re-integration of school principals' perceptions across, gender, age, managerial experience and schools.

4.2 Data collection

An in-depth interview was used to collect data from the seven school principals. (Creswell, Plano, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003). Brinkmann and Kvale, (2018) elaborate that an in-depth interview consists of direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge. Thus, their (school principals) expressions were to establish their subjective views regarding their motivations, the culture of their school practices and attitudes towards a particular form of learner re-integration in the school community. Kvale and Brinkmann, (2014) aver that the subjective attitudes, motivations and opinion expressions must be contextualized in the power that school principals wield when taken decisions to suspend the learner from the school to protect the good name of the school and the best interests of other learners at the school. Among others, the following were asked during the interview, specifically, what forms of practices are used for learner re-integration at your school and what conditions are set-out for the re-integration of the learner who was suspended from the school.

4.3 Ethical consideration and trustworthiness

Clegg and Slife, (2009), Brinkmann and Kvale, (2008) states that it is important that the researcher informs the participants of the aim, objectives, research methods and the nature of the importance of their participation. Furthermore, the participants concerted in writing of their free will to participate in the research study (Sefotho, 2018, Hostetler, 2005). The school principals participating in this study were given fictitious names and referred to principal # and so forth. Resnik and Shamoo, (2011)'s sentiment on the Singapore statement on research integrity and accountability was followed. Silverman, (2020), Seale and Silverman, (1997), point that the test of quality of qualitative research lies in its quality of the power of its language to display a picture of the world in which we discover something about ourselves and our common humanity. Peer member check was used to establish whether the data transcribed reflects what was claimed by the research question and aim of the study to establish data trustworthiness of the research study (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, (2016). Additionally, the researcher provided a detail description of the voices of the participants in the analysis of data (Gunawan, 2015). To ensure data trustworthiness interpretive validity was applied where the researcher and the researched mutually described and constructed the incidents of learner re-integration strategies or absence of researched.

4.4 Data analysis

Green, Willis, Hughes, Small, Welch, Gibbs and Daly, (2007), s approach to thematic data analysis was employed which might include or exclude other themes. Codes were applied reliably throughout the data. As the code book containing code definitions is developed and refined, the researcher went back and re-code previously coded material to make certain that data examined early in the analysis is coded in the same manner and with the same coding definitions/criteria as data addressed later in the analysis. This to thematic data analysis approach of Castleberry and Nolen, (2018) was used used in the thematic analysis of this research study.

5. Results

Having completed their suspension, learners are expected to come back to the school. From the interviews with the school principals, it was not clear what procedure in the school policies required from the school. The following themes are briefly discussed:

Theme 1: School programmes to re-integrate

From the participants interviewed, they indicated that there was a need to have they schools having re-integration of suspended learners at their schools. During the interviews, it became apparent that the schools did not have re-integration programmes. For example, the female school principal#1 expressed the following:

"It is a dismay that my school do not have programme such as the re-integration of the suspended learner back in the school community, I strongly believe such programme will assist the learners to understand their actions has consequences for erroneous behaviour", it is necessary to involve other community services to assist with the harnessing and nurturing of acceptable behaviour of learners who get into trouble with the law.

From the above- mention appearance, it could be learned that re-integration programmes for offending learners is crucial.

The other male school principal #2 pointed out that there was a need for a more inclusive programme for the suspended learner into the school. This is how his feelings and opinions were expressed:

"I think the school should have programmes that will involve those were previously affected by the learners' behaviour, the perception that they held about the learner might be changed in the process.

This view of the school principal shows solution orientated direction, that their learner is just accepted back at the school with mixed feelings of dislike. According to the school principal interviewed it could be inferred that there was a need for a counselling programme that focuses on self-learning and self-repair. Despite what the participants said, it appeared that it will be important that school principals through the School Governing Bodies should implement policy amendments. The following theme discusses the need for parental involvement.

Theme 2: Parental involvement

Parents as natural custodians of their children have a responsibility to instil values that are socially acceptable to their children (Altschul, (2011). The extent to which and level of parental involvement parent play is also likely to show in their involvement of the re-integration of the suspended learner within the school community was somehow morbid. This is what the school principal #3 retorted on:

"To my experience some of the parents only get involved at the beginning when the suspended learner returns to the school, thereafter, many parents leave their responsibility to the school. Parents needs to align their values that they practice at home to that of the general school community".

This female school principal further stated the following:

"You see many of learners who get suspended at the school do not have a sound family support system. They tend to be owned their own or their peers who ill-advised them. Therefore, their values are devoid of social skills that are necessary for the development of their teenage stages.

From the mentioned excerpts from the two school principals, it is important to state that the school has a responsibility to foster parental involvement in the education and best interest of their children. The confusion or misunderstandings of parental role or the school is possibly found in Stuart, (2009), by stating that the principle of *in loco parentis* (in the place of the parent on campus or school related educational excursions) should not have a *loco standi* in schools because of many parents do not approve of the schools to search or discipline their children.

Theme3: Support towards the suspended learner

Temporary removal from the school in the form of suspension is said to reduce a learner's engagement with his or her education (Reyneke, 2019). Furthermore, the researcher presupposes that suspensions do little to deter a learner from misbehaving. Suspension of the learner from the school also have the potential of stigmatizing the offending learner. As a result, the academic support to be rendered to the suspended learner plays an important role. When asked what academic support is rendered to the suspended learners, these were some of the school principals #4' responses.

"There is a need at my school to reflect on how the school is able to meet the needs of the learners who are temporarily excluded from my school as a result of suspension"

This statement was supported by male school principal #5 by saying:

"As a matter of fact, there is not enough academic support that is rendered to the learners who offended and are re-admitted at the school as a result of suspension"

The above responses from the school principals illustrate that there is need for the schools to have elaborate efficient strategies to support re-integrated learners academically within the schooling system.

6. Discussion

The triad relationship, the parent, the school and the learner play an important role in the ensuing challenge in school discipline. The inability to accept and take responsibility for the serious misconduct of learners which necessitates suspension from the school needs would not be a question of debate. However, it should be noted that prevailing political and socio-cultural differences in many societies in the world and so, in South Africa become more pronounced when learners violate their code of rules which parents might not have fully participated in them. Revisiting restorative justice posture as a mitigating factor in this study, it is important to highlight the importance of the safety (of the learner, the parent, the teachers and that of other learners) from being harmed. Hopkins, (2002) assures that restorative justice constitutes an innovative approach to both offending or challenging behaviour which puts repairing harm done to relationships and people over and above the need for assigning blame and dispensing punishment. By following this path restorative justice could be argued, is a way of finding one another in the triad education relationship which requires honesty, transparency and willingness to restore the sound equilibrium in the lost faith.

Restorative justice is defined not in terms of those who are to blame 'getting their just desserts' but as 'all those affected by an "offence" or incident being involved in finding a mutually acceptable way forward'. In this context the 'offenders' or wrongdoers are also recognised as having been affected and therefore involved in finding the way forward. From the findings in this study, it is demonstrated that there is a lot to be done to establish what the purpose of education for the future

of learners, to be upright citizens, trustworthy and responsible for their education. On the same notion, the school needs to accept its *in loco parentis* of a reasonable teacher despite challenging moral decay in the society manifested in schools. Parents should not avoid their natural responsibilities of raising their children in co-existing manner with other children and their immediate environments. As cautioned by Teise, (2019), restorative justice will be likely impaired in the education triad if pursuance is not based on self-accepting notion of cultural differences, rather a political score which has become cases of the court of law in South Africa. Lastly, the school which suspends the erred learner should also recognize its inherent wielding of power that has the potential of labelling the offending learner which might have negative outcomes that are not the interest of re-integrating the learner in school community as warned by Oosthuizen, Wolhuter and du Toit, (2003) and Reyneke, 2010.

7. Conclusion

The forgoing brief discussions on the findings of the research study demonstrate that there are no clear strategies that school principals in their schools are using for the purpose of re-integrating suspended in their school communities. It could, therefore, be argued that the likelihood of re-offending and being suspended again looms large. Finally, the importance of re-integration of suspended learners in the school communities should be investigated on how schools could resource in this regard.

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