Teachers' View on Causes of Ill-Discipline in Three Rural Secondary Schools of Nkangala District of Education

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Abstract

The article reports on a study that investigates the views of teachers on causes of ill- discipline in three rural secondary schools. The study used qualitative, semi-structured interviews with three secondary school teachers from Nkangala education district in Mpumalanga province. The study also used focus group discussions with grade ten learners from three schools. The evidence from this study suggests that the causes of ill-discipline are not always with learners. Some of the ill-discipline problems identified by the study are caused by the organization of schooling itself, poor teaching, negative relations between learners and teachers and home environment. This study provides insights on how other factors not learners only, can actually cause disciplinary problems in schools.

Keywords: *Home life, schooling system, cultural practices*

1. Introduction

One of the pressing issues in schools is school discipline. Historically secondary schools have been characterised by learner misbehaving, especially from boy learners. The hallmark of an effectively functioning of a school is effective system of discipline of both learners and educators. In schools where discipline is a problem, the culture of teaching and learning tend to move into a downward spiral (Lorgat, 2003). Attending functioning schools, free from disciplinary problems is a means through which learners can acquire knowledge to be socially and economically responsible. The approach to school discipline problem cannot be a 'fix –the- kids' approach. It is the assumption of this study that in part, the root cause of ill -discipline may not be with the either learners or educators.

In South Africa, South African Schools' Act of 1996, banned corporal punishment, but there are still parents and teachers who desire the return of corporal punishment. Conservative social critics have attributed many of the failures of public schools to lax disciplinary practices applied there. "Spare the rod, spoil the child," the refrain has it. Liberals usually fail to see any potential merits in this criticism and argue that public schools failure were the results of too authoritarian and rigid disciplinary practices that produced learner alienation (Arum 2005, 159). A survey of 1, 000 parents in England and Wales in 2000, found that 51% thought that corporal punishment should be reintroduced in schools (Carvel 2000). In Canada a 1990 study of the perceptions of school authorities (teachers, principals, superintendents, Department of education officials and school board trustees) regarding the rights of students and parents reported that 79% said corporal can be justified (cited in Ross Epp, 1996: 177). Based on what these scholars are saying, ill- discipline in schools seems to be a major concern not only for South Africa but for other countries. Skiba et.al also found that exclusionary school ill-discipline consequences are more frequent, harsher and less congruent to the incident for African American students, particular males, even though no evidence support the claim that they are more disruptive than their white peers. Metlife, 2006 September and public agenda confirm what Skiba et al are saying when he says classroom discipline; especially in urban contexts is a major concern of American teachers. Studies of school discipline have consistently documented the disproportionality of African American students, particularly males, involved in exclusionary school discipline (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2000)

Few studies have examined causes of ill-discipline in rural secondary school; this study seeks to answer the following question: Are causes of ill-discipline only with learners?

2. Purpose of the Study

Despite all rhetoric surrounding school discipline, empirical analysis has been quite limited. Contrary to the argument that

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increasing school leniency was itself to blame for increasing school disorder. This paper is aiming at exploring causes of ill- discipline in three rural secondary schools from Nkangala district.

3. Problem Statement

Poor performance of secondary schools in the district under study has been a worry factor. It is argued that private schools outperform public schools in part because they are able to maintain stricter disciplinary climates. It is assumed that if ill-discipline in the sample schools could be reduced, performance of learners might improve. Ill- discipline in school is as old as education itself. There is a need to understand the context in which ill- discipline occur. Studies conducted in South Africa on school discipline indicated that ill- discipline lies at the very heart of a culture of teaching and learning (Phatlane 2003 Mohapi 2007). Unless we know causes that contribute towards ill- discipline in secondary schools, teachers, school managers and departmental officials will find it difficult to implement strategies that might help in reducing ill- discipline.

4. Motivation and Rationale of the Study

Secondary schools in Nkangala district were the study was conducted their performance of grade 12 learners was always below the required percentage by the National department. As a former circuit manager in the area, I always received report of late-coming, absenteeism and conflict among teachers and parents, socio cultural practices and lack of infrastructure that impacted negatively on teaching and learning. Thus there was ample opportunity to study how these factors impacted upon ill- discipline which affected school effectiveness and learner performance.

5. Ill-Discipline Related Practices

For the purpose of this paper ill-discipline will mean any outbreak of aggressiveness among peers, violence within teacher- learner relationship, disorderly classrooms, a behavioural disorder that is classified as an act of delinquency such as stealing, lying, being abusive, playing truant, playing truancy, not doing school's work, bullying and not disrespectful to teachers and parents. In South African schools, the on-going attempt in restoring discipline in schools, bearing in mind the banning of corporal punishment by South African School Act, Act 84 of 1996 (SASA), may be perceived by educators as the removal of the only available effective means of maintaining sound discipline in the class. Empirical research has suggested that the use of strict disciplinary practices such as corporal punishment could lead to lower educational achievement and higher rates of delinquency (Arum 2005). The Department of Education in South Africa through South African Schools Act number 86 of 1994 condones the use classroom rules, detention and other systems as a way of disciplining learners however the effective and efficient use of these systems may be dependent on a number of contextual factors. From a rural educator's perspective, who still witnesses parents using corporal punishment at home, the same form of punishment may become the only means of keeping order their classrooms when new systems fail them. It is easy to understand how such educators, acting in loco parentis, may see no wrong in using corporal punishment that is why many parents equate discipline with corporal punishment and are at a lost when it comes to exercising any other kind of discipline (Van Wyk & Lemmer 2009).

6. Theoretical Perspective

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development underpinned this paper. This ecological perspective stresses the importance of understanding the relationship between the organism and various environmental systems (Hetherington; Parker 1993). Children are seen as active participants in creating their own environment. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is multi-dimensional and it suggests that the level of interacting systems such as biological, psychological, social and cultural result in growth development and change (Smith et al 2003). From the fore going statement, the researcher argues that what happen in the society and schools might cause ill-discipline, this is in line with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, that school and home environment might contribute to learners' or teachers' deviant behaviour. Individuals and groups may be understood more clearly within different social context, as well as in terms of the way changes in the macro structures of the system influence those in the micro-systems (Smith et al 2003). The importance of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model in this paper is the premise that the ecological environment is set of four nested systems, the most familiar is micro-system, that is what individual experiences in a given setting. For learners

a micro- system may consist of the school's environment with teachers and learners, another micro-system may be the home environment with parents and the community. A home environment might affect the learner in its school performance, where cultural adherence comes into play. Home environment may further impact on learner's behaviour at school.

7. Methodology

The data reported in this paper are derived from my doctoral study conducted. Qualitative approach was used. Qualitative researchers believe that the task of a qualitative researcher is to acquire insight and develop understanding by the researcher getting close to the data in order to understand participants' point of view and to obtain social knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln 2000), meaning that it is the responsibility of the researcher to make sense of the data provided by participants. A number of ethical issues were considered confidentiality, anonymity and privacy were respected, consent of all participants were sought, the researcher outlined the aim and purpose of the research to all participants and feedback to participants was provided, both to verify data used for analysis and to comment on interpretation.

8. Data Collection and Analysis

A thematic approach was adapted to data analysis, which involved developing themes and patterns (Guba & Lincoln 1985. The data was analysed manually by making summaries of the accounts of participants.
    During interviews teachers were asked same questions; namely:
-    *How do you feel when learners misbehave in your class?*
-    *In your own opinion what are causes of ill-discipline in your class?*
    Focus discussions with learners revolved around the following themes:
-    *Absenteeism and late coming*
-    *Teaching and noise making in the class*
-    *Involvement of parent in schools' affairs*
    Without sound discipline in the classroom, there will be no effective teaching and learning. The following themes emerged from analysed data:

9. Home Environment

According to participants reflections; parental support and care are lacking because parents are disadvantaged and poor, learners sometimes especially boy-learners are expected to work on Fridays to help their parents to earn better salary at the end of the week. When they come to school on Monday teachers punish them for their absence. Parents are partners in education. Learners in this study indicated that their parents do not participate in schools' affairs; they do not attendance meeting because they work far from home. One teacher said:

> "Learners come from different family background, sometimes a learner from poor background who is exposed to unpleasant home conditions when come to school he rebel against teachers".

It is evident from this study that it will be difficult for an abused child to focus on school work. Home life for some learners might involve being overindulged by parents and such learners might expect same from teachers at school.
    One teacher said:

> "Children coming from rich family are spoiled; when you touch they report you to their parents".

One teacher also reported:

> "I am having a girl in my class who always misses my mathematic period."

The teacher did not really bother to ask this learner why she is late. The teacher always reminds the child that she will fail at the end of the year.
    During the discussions learners said they are late to school not for their own making. One learner said:

> "When a teacher is late no one punishes him but teachers punish us when we are late without asking us why we are

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late?"

"I hate it when they punish me for the mistake I did not do"; Said another learner.

Learners said their classes are overcrowded and boy learners are uncontrollable and make noise. When the principal hears the noise he just come and punishes the whole class.

10. School Environment

Teachers indicated that they are aware that ill-discipline behaviour hinders effective teaching and learning. According to them alternatives to corporal punishment provided by the Department of Basic Education to deal with disciplinary issues are not effective. One teacher indicated that:

"Learners are spoiled by the department and they think they know too much".

From the statement above, it seems teachers are not happy about certain procedures and policies recommended by Department of Basic Education to deal with ill discipline. It was indicated during the discussion that their classrooms are over-crowded, teachers said they cannot manage noise making in the class because at times the environment is not conducive for teaching. Overcrowding does not allow proper interaction with individual learners. It defeats the principle of outcome based education. Teachers' absenteeism in the class while he/she is the staffroom contributed towards in-discipline in the three schools. During the focus group discussion one learner said:

"One day there was no teacher in our class, a teacher from one class came to teach us because learners were fighting in the class".

One leaner also said:

"During month end is just a waste of time to go to school because many teachers become absent and no one will punish them"

One girl said*:*

I do not like it when the teacher punish me for being late, because every day when I go to the toilet there is a queue and I become late to my class after short break"

11. Socio Cultural Practices

The three rural secondary schools in the study are in the former KwaNdebele homeland which is in the cultural heartland of Ndebele cultural practices. As is often the case in the traditional patriarchal African societies, Ndebele women do not enjoy the same social status as their male counterparts. Parents do not invest in the education of their daughters. They believe that they will be married during their adolescence and will then focus on raising family. Young girls are socialized into believing that males are born to be dominant over females and that they should not presume to compete with their male counterparts in any aspect of social life, as results girls are inclined to drop out of school before their education is completed, at certain point they absent themselves from school taking care of their siblings. One teacher complaint of a girl learner who misses her mathematics class. Every morning before coming to school the girl need to take her child to a crèche, as a results she is always late. According to the teacher the girl will fail at the end of the year. The teacher does not bother to find out the causes of her late coming.

12. Discussion

The study has argued that there are numerous factors that might contribute to ill-discipline in Schools. The perspective of the study is that ill- discipline seen as a deviant behaviour and impact on teaching and learning in the three sample rural secondary schools may have three dimensions:
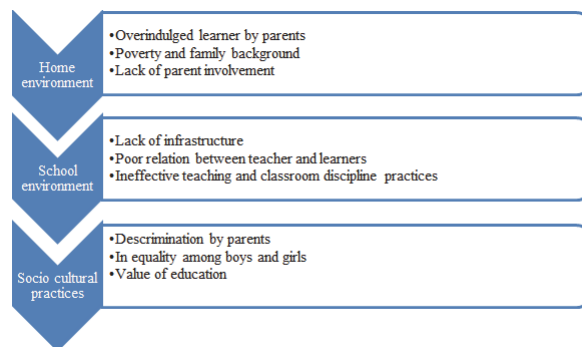
Figure 1: Three dimensions of causes of ill- discipline

Teachers should understand that sometimes when learners behave there way they behave; by being absent or by being late to the school, perhaps is because of certain home or school environment circumstances that force them to display the kind of unacceptable behaviour. This study attempted to reveal aspects of cultural practices, home and school environment that may influence pattern of disruptive behaviour resulting into ill-discipline in schools . All these aspects affect quality of teaching, teachers' job satisfaction, parent-school relations and teacher-learner relations.

13. Conclusion

The study revealed that not only learners must be blamed for ill-discipline in schools; there might be other factors that contribute to ill-discipline in schools. The study shown that schooling system, home environment which includes poor parent involvement and socio cultural practices should be considered as contributory factors to school ill-discipline in the three sampled rural secondary schools. Teachers need to understand that, they must not think that learners come late to school because they are not afraid of them, they must find out the cause of late coming or learner absenteeism. Although corporal punishment was abolished in 1996, teachers are not using alternatives to corporal punishment provided by the government, they think the system is failing them by removing corporal punishment.

It could be inferred from this line of reasoning that although participants may justify that discipline is a thorny issue in schools, they should be aware there are other causes of ill- discipline in schools. . It has become clear, as set out in this article, that causes of ill- discipline are not always with learners.

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