

Reconceptualising the Management of Classroom Discipline: A Contextual Analysis

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ABSTRACT Classroom management discourses are ongoing, due to their implications on teaching and learning. This qualitative paper explores the management of learner discipline in three public primary schools in the post-corporal-punishment era in South Africa, to understand the role context plays. Nine educators, purposely selected, participated in semi-structured interviews. Unstructured observations in Grade 7 classrooms provided information on how educators manage learner discipline practically, and validated what educators articulated during the interviews. The findings of the paper argue that although educators do not have the capabilities to manage learner discipline, context unarguably plays a major role in derailing attempts made. Existing challenges have negative implications for learners' educational wellbeing. The paper concludes by suggesting the necessity of empowering educators with skills to assist them, when managing classroom discipline, and the need to initiate context-specific strategies that align with the demands of using alternatives to corporal punishment.

INTRODUCTION

Classroom management is fundamental to ensure effective teaching and learning, and consequently, learner academic performance (Njoroge and Nyabuto 2014). Despite efforts by the educational sector globally to manage classroom challenges, learner indiscipline is on going, and has implications for academic achievement (Baruth and Mokoena 2016; Nunan 2018). In the South African context, before 2000, learner discipline was associated with corporal punishment, however, its negative undertones led to it being banned globally, paving the way for alternative strategies that are considered to be learner friendly (Asmal 2000). The intention of alternatives to corporal punishment (ATCP) was to protect children's rights (Asmal 2000), and to create an environment that promotes positive learning and prevents the physical abuse of learners (Ebrahim 2017).

Despite the potential of ATCP, some educators rate it negatively, and argue that it exacerbates learner indiscipline in the classroom (Rampa 2014). Their argument is that individual schools have unique characteristics that shape learner attitudes and behaviours in the classroom, thereby creating conditions that are not compatible with the principles of ATCP (Ntuli and Machaisa 2014). Consequently, some educators implement

corporal punishment in their classrooms, despite it being outlawed (Makhasane and Chikoko 2016; Tiwari 2019; Wolhuter 2016). These educators consider corporal punishment to be a viable tool for maintaining a classroom environment conducive to teaching and learning in their individual contexts (Moyo et al. 2014). Ras (2004) argues for the accommodation of individual school contexts and educators' attitudes and behaviours when designing education policies, to ensure effective implementation of the policies. In Ras's (2004) view, the failure to prioritise cultural and contextual realities, which could present obstacles to the implementation process of any policy, contributes to ineffective educational policies globally, because educators respond to education change in different ways, based on context. Ras's (2004) thinking reiterates the need to explore how educators manage learner misconduct in a specific context in South Africa.

Objective of the Study

This study inquired on how educators manage learner classroom discipline in the post-corporal-punishment era in South Africa, considering that only alternatives to corporal punishment are now permissible by law. Three public primary schools were sampled in order to understand the

role context plays in influencing the way classroom discipline is managed.

Literature Review

The way learner conduct is managed in classrooms is a concern for stakeholders, among whom are educators, parents, school governing bodies and education authorities (Gershoff 2017; Sullivan et al. 2014). Despite ongoing efforts to ensure effective classroom management, learner misconduct is on the rise, for multiple reasons (Rubbi Nunan and Ntombela 2019; Segalo and Rambuda 2018), and has implications for academic performance (Kiende 2019; Maphosa and Shumba 2010; Motseke 2010). In some contexts, learner performance is associated with the nature of discipline applied in the classroom (Lumadi 2019; Simba et al. 2016). The abolition of corporal punishment in maintaining learner discipline has had mixed reactions from educators, based on the ambiguities associated with managing classroom discipline using ATCP (Motseke 2019; Tiwari 2019). Some researchers argue that educators continue to use corporal punishment despite international condemnation of the practice, because they lack knowledge concerning children's rights and do not possess adequate skills to maintain a disciplined teaching and learning environment (Debalkie and Eriksen 2019; Dupper and Montgomery Dingus 2008; Ogbe 2015).

The Post-corporal-punishment Era in South African Schools

The new dispensation in South Africa requires the protection of human rights, as embedded in the 1996 constitution, including that of schoolchildren. The South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 outlaws the use of corporal punishment as a tool to manage learner discipline in the classroom (Asmal 2000; Republic of South Africa 1996). The argument put forth is that corporal punishment involves the use of violent means to solve problems in the classroom, which, consequently, reduces learner motivation, introduces aggressive tendencies, lowers self-esteem and introduces physical and emotional pain, which has negative implications for learners' ability to learn, hence, the need for more learner friendly approaches to discipline (Gershoff 2017; Motseke 2019).

The argument reiterates that learners who are disciplined using corporal punishment are likely to become withdrawn and unsocial, emotional rather than objective thinkers, and poor problem solvers (Human Right Watch 2010). Therefore, using approaches that lead to safer and more effective and inclusive methods of discipline within the classroom are recommendable (Human Right Watch 2010). Such strategies require the use of words rather than punitive actions when implementing discipline in the classroom. However, the implementation of ATCP as an acceptable classroom management strategy is an ongoing challenge for primary school educators in South Africa and beyond (Maphosa and Shumba 2010; Matthews 2016; Ngunju 2017).

Some educators blame the deteriorating classroom discipline at schools on ATCP and learners' homes and communities (Rubbi Nunan and Ntombela 2019; Simuforsa and Ngara 2014). A study in elementary schools in Bangladesh by Sultana, Reza and Bromfield (2019) confirms the existence of a relationship between learner demographics and the kind of discipline approach preferred by educators. In turn, Mkhize (2002) argues that when educators consider learners' backgrounds from a positive perspective, by knowing who they are and why they behave in certain ways, it will be easier to restore discipline in the classroom. However, many educators struggle to adapt the principles of ATCP to contextual realities in their individual schools, thus, inhibiting smooth implementation (Fakunmoju 2020; Moyo et al. 2014; Ntuli and Machaisa 2014). In the view of Maphosa and Shumba (2010), incidences of misconduct are exacerbated when learners know their rights and are aware of educators' limitations in relation to applying discipline, and this confirms educators' argument that ATCP disempowers them (Segalo and Rambuda 2018).

However, educators, in turn, are blamed for exhibiting certain behaviours (Hailu 2019) or using disciplinary strategies that exacerbate learner misconduct in the classroom (Makhasane and Chikoko 2016). These strategies and behaviours can be attributed to inadequate training and the nonchalant attitude of some educators (Glaser 2019; Munje 2019). There is a tendency for educators to deliberately ignore learner misbehaviour in the classroom, out of frustration, or to implement corporal punishment, despite it being

outlawed and condemned worldwide (Mncube and Dube 2019). This paper, therefore, seeks to explore the management of learner classroom discipline at selected schools in South Africa in the post-corporal-punishment era.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study (Yin 2018) took place in three predominantly isiXhosa speaking primary schools in an informal settlement in the Western Cape of South Africa. They are no fee schools, according to the classification of the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSSF) policy that clusters schools according to their level of need (Mestry and Ndhlovu 2014). The three schools experience similar socioeconomic conditions and cater for learners with similar backgrounds.

Data was obtained from nine purposely-selected educators who were teaching Grade 7 at the time of this study. The participants responded to semi-structured interviews. In addition, unstructured observations were conducted in Grade 7 classrooms to validate information emerging from the semi-structured interviews with educators concerning the management of learner discipline. Critical information that emerged during the observation, including information about learner classroom behaviour and educators' management strategies, were recorded manually.

Data Analysis

An audio recorder was used to capture data during the interviews. The data from the semi-structured interviews was crosschecked and compared with observations to ensure validity and reliability. The data was transcribed manually into written text, followed by manual coding to make sense of the data. A thematic method of analysis was then employed (Guest et al. 2012) to merge coded data in major themes.

Ethical Considerations

The University of the Western Cape and the Western Cape Department of Education gave permission for the research. The principals of the three schools consented individually for research to be conducted in their schools as mandated by

the Department of Basic Education. Participation by all educators was voluntary and each of them signed a consent form. For confidentiality purposes, the researcher uses P1 to P9 to refer to the nine educators respectively.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis enables the qualitative researcher to make sense of available data, first by coding and then generating relevant themes. Two main themes emerged from the analysis, that is, the causes and consequences of learner indiscipline, and the management of learner discipline in context.

The Causes and Consequences of Learner Classroom Misconduct

Negative learner classroom behaviour, according to educators, is largely contextual, and related to a lack of disciplinary mechanisms in learners' homes. In the view of educators, the lack of discipline at home unavoidably spills over into the classroom, with implications for teaching and learning. An educator explained:

"They [learners] are really undisciplined, it is like there is no discipline at home... The parents expect us to discipline the children. That is a big challenge because, we are here to teach, not to discipline children, but we must first discipline them before we can create the atmosphere conducive for learning... The problem starts at home and you can see the environment that they are in make them to behave the way they do in the classroom." (P7)

In support of the statement by P7, P4 said, *"At home, learners are not used to being corrected by talking, so how can that work in school when it is new to them. Charity must begin at home"*. This suggests that the educators' perceptions of learners and their backgrounds influence the way they approach learner discipline in the classroom. Such reactions are consistent with the findings of Carter Andrews and Gutwein (2020), who indicate that educator perceptions of learners' demographics consciously or unconsciously shape their disciplinary practices. Researchers, such as Simuforosa and Ngara (2014) and Segalo and Rambuda (2018), buttress the assumption by educators that the home should

nurture discipline in learners, so that learners can replicate this in the classroom – something educators argued is absent in their schools.

In addition, Simuforosa and Ngara (2014) argue that poverty ruptured family structures and unemployment contribute to negative learner misconduct in some South African schools. Simuforosa and Ngara (2014) note that the erosion of a nurturing environment in many homes contributes to learner indiscipline in the classrooms, which reinforces the complaints of educators. This may be the reason why Ras (2004) reiterates that education analysts and policymakers ought to consider contextual realities as a possible path to tackling learner misconduct in schools in general and classrooms in particular.

Educators explained how dynamics at the home front negatively influence learners' passion and interest in learning, and result in acts of indiscipline that consistently obstruct teaching and learning, thus, affecting how they perform. P7 bemoaned that, *"If the children are not disciplined, how on earth can we teach them to understand? It's like they just enjoy misbehaving in the classroom."*

In a study aimed at understanding how learner academic performance is influenced by poor conduct in Kenyan primary schools, Simba et al. (2016) concluded that the higher the level of learner misconduct, the lower their level of performance, and thereby aligning with these educators and also confirming the findings of a study by Njoroge and Nyabuto (2014). In revealing the consequent carefree attitude towards learning, P8 said:

"You see, it's almost as if they do not care, because they don't understand the importance of education, which is actually what it is. It is almost as if they are sitting here to get the day over. It's like being here just for the sake of being here. It is not for them to come and be educated, and to have a goal to go out there one day, and be something or somebody, or want to become this or that. They are just here to do other negative things".

In agreement with this educator, Martinez (2002: 161) notes that, "Resistant learners lack a fundamental belief that academic learning and achievement can help them achieve personal goals or initiate positive change" in their lives – because learners do not see classroom interruptions as being problematic. In corroboration, Zulu

et al. (2004: 174) note that a "lack of vision for a better future" contributes to South African learners not taking learning seriously.

Despite educators' claims, observations revealed that educators' perceptions of the learners and approaches adopted in the classroom were contributing to exacerbate learner misconduct. Some educators ignored incidents of misconduct in their classrooms, in essence, creating the impression that certain practices by learners were acceptable. For example, a student teacher was observed teaching in an atmosphere that was not conducive because she could not control the rowdy behaviour of learners, when, clearly, no learner could follow the lesson. In her view, she had made several efforts to effect discipline, to no avail, and hence, she concluded that it was useless trying. This gives reason to question the extent to which pre-service teachers are equipped with classroom management strategies (see Ngibe et al. 2019). In addition, observations indicated that the learners were dismissive of this educator. Zulu et al. (2004) suggest that the erosion of a culture of respect in society contributes to learners' outright disrespect for educators' presence. Segalo and Rambuda (2018) agree that learners do not have respect for educators.

However, when educators ignore learners' misbehaviour in the classroom and teach in an atmosphere that is not conducive, as the student teacher did, it could be equivalent to signalling tolerance to indiscipline without repercussions. Learners were observed back chatting, since the educator did not reprimand them. It was evident that this student teacher was demotivated and demoralised. Nevertheless, her approach to discipline promoted laissez-faire scenarios that make classrooms even more ungovernable, with implications for teaching and learning.

Educators assumed that disruptive behaviours by learners were sometimes beyond their control, because learners lacked the passion to learn, which made teaching a stressful job. The educators were concerned about the effect of such behaviours on learners, and that they, as educators, were being blamed for poor learner performance. According to P5, when learners are not disciplined teaching and learning cannot take place successfully. Similarly, P9 lamented that they as teachers were wrongly blamed for learner poor performance without considering other exigencies:

“This indiscipline thing goes a long way to hamper their progress educationally, but at the end what happens is that we the educators or the school is blamed for poor performance without knowing why they are failing. Seriously, they look at us as the bad guys, but we are not the bad guys here.”

The teachers were unanimous about the need to look at learners’ inability to perform beyond teachers’ capabilities, because learner attitudes and behaviours are negatively affecting teaching and learning. Abeygunawardena and Vithanapathirana (2019) agree that disruptive behaviour in the classroom has the potential to impact adverse effects on the ongoing lesson, since learner distraction leads to deviation from the lesson. Paradoxically, P4 noted that educators complained of learner behaviours but were not doing enough to motivate and communicate with learners in the classroom, and P4 suggested that such a strategy could contribute towards resolving learner classroom misconduct:

“My observations are that sometimes the learner is not interested in learning, and sometimes the educator does not make the learner interested or motivated in learning. They need to do more to encourage the learners to gain interest in learning.”

Similarly, Maphosa and Shumba (2010) question the approaches used by some educators to implement ATCP. Their argument is that strategies used by many educators to deal with learner misconduct, rather aggravate classroom challenges. This explains Mkhize’s (2002) view that educators have an obligation to know learners’ backgrounds, in order to adapt their disciplinary strategies to the learners’ contexts. According to Mkhize, this approach can restore discipline in the classroom, because knowing why learners are demotivated, and working to motivate them, could dissuade learners from engaging in disruptive behaviour.

The Management of Learner Misconduct

In this paper, the management of learner misconduct is centred on a particular school context. Narratives from educators indicate that a variety of challenges within this context derail attempts towards managing learner misconduct in the classroom. They claim that ATCP disempowered

them and left them at the mercy of learners, who know their rights and take full advantage of these rights. In the view of educators, the principles of ATCP, which they described as lacking in clarity, contribute to escalating learner misconduct in school contexts like theirs. According to P6, the daily struggles of educators to implement ATCP are fruitless, even when they attempted to establish a school code conduct:

“As a school we have unveiled a code of conduct, which would be introduced to parents. I think that maybe if that has been put in place, so many things may change in terms of discipline, and consequently how our learners will perform... I am not saying that the code of conduct will resolve, or eliminate indiscipline in the school, but it may help to reduce the level at which it is now. To properly implement this code of conduct, all stakeholders including parents, teachers, and learners have to work collaboratively.”

Dhlamini (2016) agrees that educators are struggling to manage learner misconduct in some school contexts, for a variety of reasons. The argument put forth by educators is that the types of negative behaviours exhibited by learners in their schools are not compatible with the principles of ATCP. These negative behaviours, educators argue, make it difficult to resolve classroom challenges through verbal reprimands, as enshrined in the ATCP’s tenets. P5 posits that the disempowerment brought about by ATCP exacerbates learner misconduct and renders educators helpless in the classroom:

“The corporal punishment thing that was taken away from us is one of the factors that perpetuate indiscipline within the classrooms. Its disbandment has tied our hands as educators, because the kids are aware that we are powerless, and that there is nothing we can do to them if they are indiscipline within the classroom.”

Researchers, such as Glaser (2019), Wolhuter (2016), and Maphosa and Shumba (2010), agree that ATCP renders educators powerless and vulnerable, as learners are quick to capitalise on the “no shouting and threatening” clause, which they exploit, making it traumatic and challenging for educators to manage chaotic classrooms. P5 argued that these feelings of disempowerment encourage educators to implement corporal punishment, as a desperate measure:

“How are we expected to handle kids who know that we cannot punish them? We can’t even shout at them, and we can’t even threaten them if they come late to school, or refuse to do assignments, or even a simple classroom activity.”

Over the years, researchers in different spaces have echoed concerns similar to those raised by these educators (Maphosa and Shumba 2010; Rampa 2014; Segalo and Rambuda 2018). Educators were of the view that undisciplined learners risk limiting their own education and that of others, when they are disruptive. P3 suggested the reintroduction of corporal punishment as a means to restore “normalcy” to classrooms. In corroboration, P2 believed that corporal punishment is the “language” best understood by these learners:

“I think without corporal punishment they know you can’t do anything. The teacher is not even allowed to yell at a child, or threaten him/her just to say maybe, if you do this or that again I will hit you. It’s considered a crime, you see, we are powerless.”

Furthermore, P2 elaborated on the limitations imposed on them by ATCP, which other participants agreed, forbids them from even shouting at or threatening a learner, irrespective of the circumstances. For these educators, the principles of ATCP make them powerless in the midst of learner misconduct in the classroom. As such, P2 argued that educators are afraid to correct learners, fearing to contravene the law, which in their view is tantamount to “sparing the rod and spoiling the child”, which for them is a poor child-rearing practice that exacerbates transgression in the classroom. P2 explained:

“We even see that this child, or that kid is going astray, is going to fail, because of the way he behaves, and other methods don’t work, but there is nothing we can do, we just leave them the way they are. They [the Department of Basic Education] make us behave that way; it is the law that restricts us.”

Seemingly, educators’ advocacy for the reinstatement of corporal punishment is an ongoing discourse, vivid in different contexts in South Africa and beyond, championed by educators and parents alike (Chingombe et al. 2017; Mayisela 2017).

However, P4 blamed educators for not using ATCP effectively, despite receiving training on classroom management practices. Nevertheless,

P4 affirmed that contextual realities call for the need to reinstate corporal punishment as a tool to maintain classroom discipline. This call is due to unsuccessful attempts to empower educators to use other alternatives to maintain classroom discipline. P4 supposes the context of some schools contributes to educators’ inability to implement classroom strategies learnt during trainings:

“We train our educators through a classroom management programme. However, it is still a challenge, considering the background of our learners. As Africans, we are still far from adapting to a system whereby we resolve a crisis with our children through talking to them. They do not actually take the method of talking seriously, unfortunately making corporal punishment a more suitable, and adaptable alternative in our school. For me, that is what can work for a school like ours, considering our backgrounds, because all these alternatives for our own community are very good only on paper.”

In spite of contextual realities and the limitations introduced by ATCP, findings show that educators’ attitudes and approaches used when dealing with classroom scenarios aggravate learner misconduct. For example, P1 was adamant that there no need to waste time talking to learners whom he is aware will either not listen or will repeat the same conduct the next day. In his view, engaging with such learners would be wasting precious teaching and learning time. His approach was to focus on those who were willing to learn. However, considering that learner focus and concentration reduces in disruptive classroom environments, the workability of this educator’s approach is debateable.

This view is supported by Maphosa and Shumba (2010) and, in particular, by Matthews (2016: ii), who states that, *“The troublesome situation has an impact on teachers, as they have to spend more time addressing challenging behaviour instead of spending that time on teaching a set curriculum and syllabus”*. In addition, Ngungu (2017) in a study based in Kenyan schools found that ATCP was one of the challenges enumerated by educators regarding the implementation of alternative discipline strategies in schools, because it consumed time meant for teaching and learning.

It is interesting to note that when some learners misbehave during lessons, others are likely to

be disengaged (see Abeygunawardena and Vithanapathirana 2019). Observations revealed that educators did not have workable alternatives or creative ways of gaining learners' attention and interest in the classroom, a finding that questions their capability to apply ATCP as an approach that can potentially resolve classroom scenarios (Maphosa and Shumba 2010). In some instances, when educators' efforts to reprimand unruly learners failed, they resorted to unconventional methods, which often created more chaos in the classroom, further exposing educators' vulnerability. For example, it emerged from observations that when some educators did not succeed in minimising learner misconduct in the classroom, they became frustrated and expelled learners from the lesson indiscriminately, sometimes indefinitely, irrespective of the offence, without interrogating or communicating with the supposed offender.

One such incident resulted in a physical confrontation between the educator and the learner and ended the lesson abruptly. It occurred when an educator saw a learner moving around the classroom without permission, and the educator told the learner to leave the classroom, without attempting to determine why the learner had left their seat. The learner attempted to explain, but the educator ignored the reasons given. Despite the researcher's presence in the classroom, the educator grabbed the learner by the arm in an effort to use physical force to eject the learner from the classroom, but the learner resisted and stood their ground, believing they had done nothing wrong. The confrontation that ensued attracted the attention of other learners, who cheered in admiration and support of the learner, leading to an abrupt termination of the lesson.

It is worth noting that stationery presents acute challenges in the schools, and the learner's efforts to explain the need to borrow a pencil from a classmate to copy notes, even though without asking for permission, from observation, should have elicited compassion from the educator. This also shows that the educator involved, in spite of over 10 years teaching experience, was unaware of the challenges learners face in his classroom. This resonates with Mkhize's (2002) argument that discipline in the classroom can be restored if educators understand their learners' backgrounds and the challenges they face, and if educators know why learners do certain things, and if edu-

cators adapt their approaches and decisions to fit contextual realities. The scenario above demonstrates how certain behaviours and/or disciplinary strategies of educators in the classroom exacerbate learner misconduct, with implications for teaching and learning (Hailu 2019; Makhasane and Chikoko 2016). Hence, reiterating the argument of Maphosa and Shumba (2010) that challenges in the classroom are worsened by educators' inability to implement ATCP.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the management of classroom discipline in schools that were previously disadvantaged in South Africa. The intention was to understand dynamics associated with the management of learner misconduct. This study was inspired by the fact that despite corporal punishment outlawed and replacement by ATCP, learner misconduct is ongoing, and in some contexts, on the rise. The findings reveal that learner misconduct in the selected schools seems to be a contextual problem that can only be resolved by strategies that have been adapted to local realities. Findings further indicate that educators were unaware of the contextual realities, and did not have the capabilities to deal with learner misconduct decisively and according to the principles of ATCP. This paper sheds light on the contextualisation of certain reforms relating to strategies to manage classroom behaviour, and it exposes educators' lack of capabilities to deal with learner discipline in specific school contexts, and unveils the complexities of learner misconduct in South African public primary schools in the post-corporal-punishment era, which is an ongoing discourse.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper suggests that educators should consider contextual realities when they decide on strategies to manage learner misconduct. Ongoing professional development for educators on how to manage learner misconduct in individual school contexts in response to the principles of ATCP is imperative. Therefore, policy designers need to rethink how policies concerning the management of learner misconduct are conceptualised and designed, and cognisant of school context and learner backgrounds. For maximum im-

pact, teacher-training institutions have to reconsider the training of pre-service teachers concerning classroom management.

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