

Nature of Teacher Participation in the Formulation and Implementation of School-based Student Discipline Policies

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ABSTRACT Indiscipline in schools is regarded as a major problem among students. The School Student Discipline Policy therefore provides a framework of what types of behavior are expected of students. A student discipline policy can help prevent and control student behaviour problems by coordinating the school's disciplinary procedures. Ensuring discipline in schools should not be the sole responsibility of one person. The aim of the research was to investigate the extent of teacher participation in the formulation and implementation of school discipline policies. The study adopted an interpretive qualitative research methodology and utilised a case study design. A purposive convenient sample of 5 school heads and 20 secondary school teachers formed the study. Data was collected through face to face interviews, documentary analysis and observation of two staff meetings per school. The study established that teachers were not involved in the formulation of school based discipline policies. In addition, they were not allowed to mete out corporal punishment to offenders. Most of the responding teachers were disgruntled by their non- involvement in decision- making in these crucial issues.

INTRODUCTION

Violence is clearly prevalent in many schools. Learners cannot learn, and teachers cannot teach effectively in an unsafe environment, and therefore order and discipline are necessary in schools. A lack of discipline in a school creates an environment that can become violent and unsafe (Smit 2010). In support, Operational Education Management (OEM 2009) articulates that discipline is obviously necessary for the functioning of a school. Indiscipline not only disrupts teaching and learning but can also endanger learners and educators. Furthermore, Yahaya et al. (2009), postulate that discipline is a rudimentary ingredient that plays a crucial role in school system, which insists on upholding the moral values of students. According to Yahaya et al. (2009) it comprises a wide spectrum of meaning, well from the negative or positive perspective. However, it is humans immune to always focus on the negative smell and that would be considered a popular issue if it involves an individual or a group that claims an intimate relationship within a society. They further assert that students' misconduct in the classroom interferes with teaching and learning and is thought to be precursor to late school dropout and similar negative social outcomes. Students' behavioural problems are also thought to be a leading contributor to teachers' stress and attrition.

According to Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS-2007), each school

should develop a behaviour code in partnership with its community and will manage student behaviour in partnership between students, their families and school staff. DECS (2007) further posits that schools are part of the communities in which they operate, and have a responsibility to work collaboratively at a local level and in order to develop collaborative partnerships:

- ♦ Each school should develop decision-making policies which encourage inclusive participation of the school community
- ♦ Schools will consult their communities and give them the opportunity to be involved in developing the behaviour code and to be involved in implementing and renewing it
- ♦ Students, families, school staff and services will work together to negotiate student development plans to support student learning and behaviour change and manage seriously or persistently irresponsible behaviour.

Wadesango and Shumba (2009) assert that student disciplinary policy is a code of conduct to be adhered to by students in a particular school. These are rules for student conduct. A student disciplinary policy can help prevent and control student behaviour problems by coordinating the school's disciplinary procedures. It also informs students what types of behaviour are expected of them and what types are forbidden. According to Smit (2010), a student disci-

plinary policy is intended to send a strong message that certain behaviours will not be tolerated by punishing all offenders. It guides teachers on how to maintain discipline.

Aspects that can be included in such a policy are among others:

- ♦ examples of student misbehaviour,
- ♦ use of corporal punishment and the procedures in which punishment will be applied
- ♦ consequences of failure to obey standards of conduct set by the school
- ♦ the importance of maintaining an atmosphere where orderly learning is possible and encouraged
- ♦ grievance procedures for parents and learners if they want to take up a matter against another learner or the school
- ♦ procedure that the school will follow in disciplining a learner (Smit 2010).

In support, Yahaya et al. (2009) are of the view that parents and schools should share the responsibility of promoting values and standards which will help younger people to establish sound behavioural codes of their lives. It is important that parents work in cooperation with their child's school and not just leave the school alone in the dark. According to the above authors, discipline problems can be dealt with much more effectively if both parties could share the similar and ideal vision which leads to prolific missions. The researcher feels that all groups of people affected by policy should be involved in formulating it. In this case, the students who must conform to the policy, the school personnel who must enforce it and the School Development Association (SDA) committee members who will be representing parents in general. All these people should sit down at the end of each year and come up with the code of conduct for students. These policies must be reviewed annually by the teachers, school administrators as well as SDA committees. The problem of non-participation of teachers in decision-making in critical issues such as formulation of discipline policies seems to be of great concern to them, because they feel that it discourages initiative and genuine commitment to their work. They also feel that their useful ideas are likely to be stifled or ignored if they are not fully involved in decision-making. There is a lot of debate on the significance of teachers' roles in decision-making. It is believed that improved decision-making leads to an engaged organisational climate, thus the work-

ing environment in schools is likely to be more favourable socially, urging stakeholders to be more productive (Smith 2003). It is against this background that the researcher developed interest to investigate the extent to which teachers are involved in decision making in critical school policies such as formulation of discipline policies. The study further sought to establish the nature of teacher involvement in meting corporal punishment.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative interpretive research methodology was adopted in this study since this research aimed at elucidating what the participants had to say with regard to decision-making in their natural settings. It was therefore imperative that such a methodological perspective be adopted to allow the findings to develop "from the data itself rather than from preconceived, rigidly structured, and highly quantified techniques that pigeonhole the empirical social world into the operational definitions that the researcher has constructed" (Creswell 2002:45). The problem identified in this study demanded that the participants themselves be allowed to freely express their feelings, views and opinions. To this end, Sherman and Webb (in Ely 1991:78) provide the following definition "...qualitative implies a direct concern with feelings, experiences and views as lived or felt or undergone..." This study adopted a case-study research design. A case study is described as a form of descriptor research that gathers a large amount of information about one or a few participants and thus investigates a few cases in considerable depth (Thomas and Nelson 2001). A purposive convenience sampling was adopted in the selection of participants for this study.

RESULTS

Most of the responding teachers from the five schools indicated that student disciplinary policy was a preserve for the administrators, that is, school head, deputy head, senior master, senior woman and the school disciplinary committee. Ordinary teachers were not involved in formulating the policies. The following are responses from the respondents; (R=teacher):

T5: Student discipline policy, in this school, is the responsibility of the headmaster and the deputy head as well as

the school disciplinary committee. They are the ones that come up with the policies.

T10: This one is done by the head and deputy head because when we look at the statutory instrument in education here in Zimbabwe, we find that it states that things like corporal punishment is done by the head and he has to log in somewhere, how many strokes the student has received, so it is also part of policy that teachers should not inflict such kind of thing on the pupil. The admin works together with the disciplinary committee.

T18: Student discipline policy is a preserve for the administration, that is the senior master, senior woman, the head and deputy head. They are the ones who come up with the policies. Class teachers are powerless, so once more, the head, deputy head, senior master and senior woman.

In order to verify the facts, the researcher probed the participating school heads. However, it emerged that various stakeholders were involved in the formulation of student discipline policies in all the five schools under study. Teachers' claim that they were left out in the formulation of policies was confirmed by one responding school heads (Head-H2) who gave the following comment *"Student discipline policy, especially here, it's the head, deputy, senior master and senior woman who make decisions on all disciplinary issues"*.

However, another school head pointed out that in his school, even students were involved in this area of decision making. This particular school head's sentiments were captured as follows:

H1: Student discipline policy? Right, we have an instrument from Ministry of Education and Culture which deals with discipline. That one, we sit down with the students and we map up the school code of conduct. We also look at people who are concerned with their welfare that is the senior master and senior woman.

Another school head also refuted what was found from the interviews held with teachers by pointing out that (H4) *"Each teacher is involved. We believe that we all have to instill good disci-*

pline in our students, so every teacher is involved but then when it comes to disciplinary issues, these are taken to the disciplinary committee"

It was unfortunate that in all staff meetings attended during the course of the research, not even a single school had this item on the agenda. When school documents were reviewed, it was discovered that in most of the schools, disciplinary issues were a prerogative of the disciplinary committee. The disciplinary committee consisted of the deputy head as chairperson, two senior teachers and any other two staff members nominated by teachers. This composition therefore implies that teachers had representatives in the committee and therefore the fact that they are not consulted could mean that these committees are not effective. Teachers indicated that there were disciplinary committees in their schools and that the members of the disciplinary committee were appointed by the school management.

The fact that SDAs were supposed to be involved in the formulation of such policies is also another indicator that school teachers were involved in this decision making area through their representatives who will be in the SDA committees. However, teachers wanted to be involved in the formulation of student disciplinary policies rather than being represented by the disciplinary committees. It also emerged in this study that some of the school heads never sat down with their disciplinary committees to come up with the student discipline policies but that they got these policies from their neighboring schools and enforced them in their schools.

Meting Out Corporal Punishment

A punishment is a penalty imposed for wrongdoing or a penalty imposed on an offender for a crime. However, the severity of the punishment must be in keeping with the kind of obligation which has been violated. There are therefore, various forms of punishment in schools which include suspension from school for a specified period of time and expulsion from school then the student will not be allowed to come back to that school. At times the offender can be asked to carry out a mammoth task like stumping a big tree. However the most common of all forms of punishment in schools is corporal punishment which is used to inflict physical pain on wrong

doers. Corporal punishments offer a more direct application of penalties for violating school rules.

Virtually all the responding teachers indicated that meting out corporal punishment was once again in the office of the school administrators who are; the head, deputy, senior master and the senior woman. These are normally regarded as the top four. All the respondents agreed that ordinary teachers were not involved in this area though they would love to be involved. These sentiments were captured from the responding teachers:

R4: Mainly it's the senior staff comprising of the head, the deputy head, the senior woman and the senior master who are involved in student discipline. Teachers only identify problem students and then advice the head who finds appropriate measures to take

R10: It involves the senior woman, senior master and the deputy head. These deal with disciplinary issues. Outstanding issues are taken to the head

R11: Meting out of corporal punishment is done by the head, deputy head and senior teachers. Ordinary teachers are not involved at all

However, a close scrutiny of the Statutory Instrument (1992: 84, Section 110) showed that teachers could also be involved in meting out corporal punishment in schools. The same instrument goes on to give conditions under which teachers can participate in the meting out of punishment in their schools. The condition is that the exercise must be done under the watchful eye of the school head. An analysis of the responses from the school heads on the same question shows that teachers are not allowed to mete corporal punishment. However, they can be involved in the identification of the offenders. To this end, H3 made the following comment: *"It's the teachers who identify the culprits and they are brought to the head's office, those who need canning, the deputy head and the senior master do it in the head's office."*

In an attempt to justify the non involvement of teachers in meting out punishment, H1 had this to say, *"If it comes to corporal punishment, the head is the only one authorized by the Government to beat students in Zimbabwe. Normally the disciplinary committee recommends to the school head."* This justification may not be something to rely on since Statutory Instrument gives

room for teachers to met out punishment as alluded to earlier on. A follow up was made with one of the heads in this study on why some teachers were being excluded from meting out punishment and he indicated that perhaps school heads refrain from involving their subordinates in meting out corporal punishment because it is a sensitive area. Teachers may injure students and it will be the school head who would be sued by the parents or guardians of the child.

All the participating teachers from the five schools felt that they needed to be allowed to met out corporal punishment. They felt that students would not respect them if they did not have the authority and power to mete out punishment. They felt that it was not proper for them to be allowed to mete out punishment only in the presence of their school heads as expressed in the government statutory instrument. They questioned the logic in failing to allow teachers to mete out punishment when they are given the authority to teach children. They further argued that they were professionals in one hand and also parents. They expressed the view that they always met out punishment to their own children in the interest of molding them into disciplined citizens of the country. It was therefore surprising to them that in some cases they were viewed as operating in *loco parentis* and yet denied the powers to exercise the provisions of the *loco parentis role* when it came to disciplining the students. The situation prevails in all five schools.

The staff meetings that were attended during the course of the research did not have this item on the agenda. Sets of minutes scrutinized indicated that teachers were not allowed to mete out punishment. In one set of minutes, the school head was said to have re-emphasized that he did not want to see any one practising corporal punishment. In that meeting, teachers were reminded to adhere to regulations. In another set of minutes, the following statement was recorded: *"The head again told members of staff that corporal punishment was one thing that was to be left to him or the deputy head. The head called upon teachers to desist from doing this and to respect the presence of the head and deputy head if they had been found inflicting corporal punishment. He further went on to say that teachers should not blame him when he summons them to his office to charge them if they be found executing corporal punishment"*

It was observed in the minutes that all five schools under study did not permit their staff members to apply corporal punishment. It is the researcher's interpretation that since most of the participating schools used disciplinary committees to formulate discipline policies, the same should go for meting out punishment. These committees should also be allowed by school administrators to be fully involved in this issue at hand. The head of one school indicated that teachers in his school contributed to the formulation of discipline policies but surprisingly, the same head does not allow teachers to mete out corporal punishment. This is despite the fact that the Ministry of Education allows every member of the school as an organization to carry out this as long as it is done in the presence of the school head. Any teacher who has identified a culprit should be allowed to mete out corporal punishment and this should be done in the head's office as per Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture requirements. Teachers feel that this is an important area where they are not fully involved. In my view teachers should be allowed to inflict corporal punishment but the whole exercise should be supervised by the school administrators. Corporal punishment should not be abolished as what is being advocated by some pressure groups but should be meted under strict conditions.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Most of the participants felt that they needed to be involved in the formulation of student discipline policy because they are the very people who interact with students much more than the administrators. They further narrate that order and discipline are prerequisites for effective instruction. To them, no order and effective instruction can ever exist in the absence of student discipline. Thus, they felt that an attempt to remove the teacher from student discipline is tantamount to incapacitating the teacher. A teacher who is stripped of the power and authority to discipline students often remain an ineffective educator. The impression one gets is that teachers may end up leaving students to misbehave on the pretext that it is not their business to instill discipline in the school. Teachers work closely with students and have first-hand knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, they are therefore the most valuable people to develop and

implement policies (Kumar and Scuderi 2000). Several benefits of teacher participation in decision making have been identified. Kumar and Scuderi (2000) assert that teacher participation in decision making enables teachers to become active participants in school management process. As a result, teachers will have a wider and greater ownership of the school, its vision and its priorities. Researchers tend to concur on the notion that some of the decisions made without consulting other stakeholders are not always successful (Rezabek 1999). Chivore (1995) found that people who participate in and help formulate decisions will support them and they will work hard to make them go because they are their ideas.

The study holds the opinion that school discipline should be the responsibility of all the adults in a school. To this end sociologists like Harralambos and Heald (1980) as supported by Giddens (1996) warn that school discipline is as important as national discipline. They contend that if schools fail to instill discipline they will be a breeding place for deviance and would be criminals. If the sentiments above are of any significance, then school discipline should not be a preserve of just administrators and the disciplinary committees. It emerged in this study that all teachers in this study were not allowed to mete out corporal punishment even under the supervision of the school head as per statutory instrument requirements. Teachers however appeared to think that they should be allowed room to discipline pupils. Ultimately teachers should be viewed as adults who act in *loco parentis*. Therefore they must make meaningful decisions on meting out punishment. Effective implementation of any decisions depends largely on the acceptance and support by other people. Teachers claimed that imposed decisions were not always successful in their implementation. It is important to consider other people's concerns. Their feelings and perceptions account for the success or failure of the decision.

The point is that if students got to know that teachers did not have authority to mete out punishment on them, teachers may not be respected by some of the students. Such a set up may affect learning since it is considered that in every normal setting, 20% of the people are likely to present disciplinary problems (Lipham 1997). Leaving all disciplinary problems to the school administration may also present problems be-

cause those who are authorised to mete out corporal punishment may fail to appreciate the gravity of the issue. Teachers may not take delight in that. Agreeably, meting out of corporal punishment is an issue that lies within the teachers' zone of influence which is the classroom. If Davis' (1997) advice in Riley (1984) is to be adopted, then there is every reason for teachers to met out corporal punishment within strict parameters. The fact that teachers want to be involved in meting out of corporal punishment confirms findings of a study conducted by Chivore (1995) in Harare that teachers wanted to be involved in the proper social and moral upbringing of students. They (responding teachers in Chivore's study) felt that students would not respect them if they did not have the authority and power to met out corporal punishment.

The main criticism levelled against the marginalisation of teachers in decision making is that imposed decisions lack clarity at implementation. In support Dunstan (1995) argues that subordinates find it hard to execute decisions made without their knowledge. This may be because teachers do not have a clear picture of what exactly is to be done. They may lack that desired critical mass in the form of competence, skills, knowledge, aptitude and attitude that is required to have a perfect decision. This confirms the results of a research carried out in Israel by Eggleston (1999) of Haifa University which indicated that policies and innovations dictated by heads on teachers are not fully implemented by teachers due to a number of factors, which amongst others include misinterpretation of the requirements. According to Statutory Instrument (1998:92), major stake holders should have power in school management and such people include the school head, school teachers and the community represented by SDA/SDC. Van Rensburg (2001) advocates that if schools are to remain in harmony with the community that they serve, they must allow for the participation of all stake holders in decision making. Rensburg further asserts that one forum for achieving this is to establish sit-based decision management committees comprising of parents and teachers. According to Morse et al. (1997), these committees may be directly involved in decision making or serve in an advisory role to the principal. The rational behind the involvement of these committees is to solve problems and make decisions that were previously the sole domain of management (Wall and Rinechart 1999).

CONCLUSION

The objective of the school discipline policy is to establish safe and positive learning communities which increase student responsibility and student learning. Discipline is obviously necessary for the functioning of a school. Classrooms and schools with more disciplinary problems are less conducive to learning. Unfair and unclear rules which are inconsistently enforced are associated with poor discipline in schools, there is therefore need to involve teachers in the formulation of school discipline policies if they are to be effective in implementing those policies. Teachers are completely left out during the formulation of school based discipline policies. This is a critical decision making area. They are keen to be involved or rather consulted as they would be required to maintain peace and order in their respective schools. Some ideas are not implemented because teachers do not know the objectives let alone the benefits that will accrue from them. When teachers feel party to a decision, they can implement it successfully and be proud of the outcome.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that all groups of people affected by policy should be involved in formulating it. Thus teachers should not be there to rubber stamp decisions.

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