



The Attitude of Teachers towards Hinderances Affecting Safety in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The aim of this academic paper was to investigate educators' perceptions of how learners' rights to safety affect disciplinary procedures in secondary schools in the Umbumbulu Circuit of KwaZulu-Natal. The study adopted a qualitative approach, where semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 10 purposively selected educators. The thematic analysis technique was employed to analyse the data. The main findings of the study indicated that educators had their own perceptions of how learners' rights to safety affect the way they attend to disciplinary issues when a learner has transgressed. The educators' perceptions of learners' rights to safety affect disciplinary procedures for many reasons, including poor understanding of relevant education laws and policies. The results also showed that teachers think that the legislation guiding teaching and learning, as well as disciplinary procedures, is marred with contradictions, which make discipline management not only difficult, but also exposes both the learners and the educators to unsafe environments. The study also indicated that the teachers are sensitive to learners' rights to safety, resulting in restricted attention to learners who are guilty of an offence in the school. In light of these findings, it was recommended that there should be mandatory continuous in-service workshops for the educators, on how learner discipline can be maintained.

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1. Introduction and Conceptualisation of the Problem

1.1. Introduction

The focus of this research study is on the educator's perceptions of how learners' rights to safety affect disciplinary procedures in secondary schools. In this chapter, the background to the study is discussed, followed by the problem statement, aims of the study, research objectives and research questions. The intended contributions to the body of knowledge and delimitations of the study are discussed. Finally, I outline the chapters of the thesis.

1.2. Background To The Study

Issues of learners' rights to safety and how they affect disciplinary procedures in schools have become a global concern (Kreifels & Warton, 2019; Segalo & Rambuda, 2018). According to the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2017), each year up to one billion school-going learners experience some form of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, which is an infringement on their basic human rights. This form of abuse (UNESCO, 2017) is perpetuated in the name of exacting discipline. Further explains that the violation of learners' rights to safety often leads to educational underachievement due to cognitive, emotional, and social problems associated with these violations. A safe and secure school environment is a prerequisite for effective teaching and learning (Porter, McDermott, Daniels & Ingram, 2021). Within an education system, the responsibility of ensuring the effectiveness of teaching and learning is mainly the domain of educators (Segalo & Rambuda, 2018). Given this reality, the respect of, and adherence to learners' rights to safety is squarely on the international educational agenda.

South Africa's case is not different from the alarm being raised by UNESCO. Within the South African education system, issues of learners' rights to safety in schools have become topical in the post-apartheid era. As part of efforts to ensure learners' rights to safety, the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996), together with the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996), was passed to guarantee that learners' rights to safety are not infringed upon.

1.3. Problem Statement

The Constitution of South Africa (RSA, 1996) enshrined in it the Bill of Rights which seeks to protect the rights of all persons. In addition to the national Constitution, other legislative instruments, such as the SASA (RSA, 1996) and the Employment of Education Act (EEA, 1998), implore all persons within the education system and especially educators, to ensure that learners' rights are not violated. On the contrary, there have been increasing reports of incidents of learner abuse at the hands of educators, which amounts to the infringement of learners' rights (Obadire & Sinthumule, 2021). On the other hand, the behaviour of learners in South African schools has been at the top of the agenda on the education front – not a week passes by without the media reporting on violence within schools. The major challenge is that some learners live in crime-ridden communities and it seems that the spill-over effect is what is witnessed in schools - it has become common for learners to carry knives, guns and other sharp objects to schools, that may cause bodily harm to both their fellow learners and educators.

Current reportage about shootings, stabbings and other acts of violence happening mostly at public schools within South Africa is on the ascendancy (Mayer, Nickerson & Jimerson, 2021). Regardless of attempts by the National and Provincial governments of education to make schools violence-free zones, some learners enter school premises under the influence of substances such as drugs and alcohol (Banda, 2022). Recent studies (Miller, Smith, Caldwell, Mathews & Wegner, 2021; Banda, 2022) suggest that this has developed into a culture that undermines the maintenance of discipline in schools adversely affecting teaching and learning. I could not establish from the literature reviewed the educators' perceptions on how learners' rights to safety affect them when they must maintain discipline in schools.

Some studies on the issues of learner's rights violations (Obadire & Sinthumule, 2021, Segalo & Rambuda, 2018) have tended to focus on adherence to human rights in education. In the context of the above, this study therefore focuses on what educators think about how learners' rights to safety affect them when they follow disciplinary procedures as legislated.

1.4. Intended Contributions To The Body Of Knowledge

This study takes place at a crucial period in South Africa's education system, when issues of human rights and abuse have gained traction, and is therefore a timely study. According to The National Research Foundation records, very few studies have delved into a comparative understanding of how learners' rights affect disciplinary procedures at the basic education level, hence, this study will be a first of its kind in the Umbumbulu Circuit in KwaZulu-Natal, concerning this topical phenomenon. Given the trans-disciplinary nature of the work, it should make an innovative and worthwhile contribution to the field of education. The findings may also contribute to the following: a) Knowledge about educators' duties and responsibilities in human rights education pertaining to learner' rights to safety, b) awareness of how disciplinary procedures impacts learners' rights to safety, c) Knowledge of how to apply appropriate disciplinary measures in accordance with statutory laws of the country.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the literature reviewed for this study, as well as the conceptual framework, and these are guided by the objectives and research questions informing the study. The chapter proceeds as follows: the conceptual framework is provided, followed by a historical overview of human rights. The legal framework on children's human rights is also presented to provide a holistic understanding of children's rights. Essentially, issues of learner discipline in South African schools are also deliberated on. The involvement of educators in disciplinary matters in schools is described in the context of the extent to which learners' rights to safety are also infringing on the educators. The section mainly highlights the challenges being faced by educators, in their efforts to institute discipline among the learners. In line with this, the educators' perceptions of the disciplinary procedures are also discussed. Most importantly, the levels of violence in South African schools are scrutinised, and before concluding the chapter, it is also important to highlight parental involvement in supporting learner discipline in schools.

2.2. Summary

Chapter 2 presented the review of literature from various sources relevant to this study. This chapter specifically discussed the conceptual lens with which to view and understand how educators' perceptions of learners' rights to safety affect disciplinary procedures within the current education context. A historical overview of human rights both nationally and internationally was discussed as well as how legislative instruments both before and after the apartheid system have shaped the current debate on disciplinary procedures in schools. Furthermore, the perception of how learners' rights to safety affect disciplinary procedures in secondary schools in the Umbumbulu circuit was explored.

2.3. Participants' perceptions of learners' awareness of their responsibilities within the policies and legislation

The significance of the current policies/ and legislation is how they prepare learners for their responsibilities. Existing awareness of learners' responsibilities within the policies and legislation was checked with the participants. The findings indicated that the educators considered it important for learners to be aware of their responsibilities in schools. Mixed feelings were expressed by the participants, regarding the level of awareness of learners' responsibilities. One participant believed that the schools are not doing enough to sensitise learners on their responsibilities, according to the policies/legislation, because if they knew, they would misbehave:

I don't think so. And, if these learners know their rights, they will misbehave, because even though we don't use corporal punishment, some of them are not aware ukuthi it's just the law that says so. They think we are not just using it. If they know all their rights, they will do whatever they want. Remember, in our school, for the learners to use drugs is not allowed. For them, maybe they think if I use drugs today, maybe the teacher will expel me, they don't know that they still have the right to come back to school. If we can just tell them all their rights, I think they will misbehave very much (E8).

Another participant opined that learners' rights are overemphasised in the Life Orientation subject, and had this to say:

Most of the learner rights are over-emphasised, especially in Life Orientation Life orientation deals mostly with learner rights and over-emphasises these rights, yet the responsibilities are not thoroughly dealt with, so there is that imbalance, even these students know everything about their rights, but nothing about their responsibilities and they cannot associate a responsibility to a certain right they just know that they have right to be protected, right to safety not to be punished but to avoid that they are not aware or they don't want to take responsibility (E3).

Another participant noted that learners should not be made aware of their rights because they will grossly misbehave:

No, I don't think schools do enough. I don't think they do assist in this process, because I think the responsibility for schools is a bigger one. They shouldn't be made aware of too many rights and then it should be some kind of a refresher to say this is the code of conduct. This is how you should understand your rights. What it means is that parents as well should be orientated around the code of conduct, not just the code of conduct. Including all the Acts that affect learners and schools, e.g., Children's Act, the Bill of Rights, SA Schools Act, all those things should be orientated to learners and parents, so that we would be able to work together as a collective to make sure that the schooling environment is proper. So I don't think as a school we've done enough in terms of doing the orientation and also reinforcing it as time goes. As it should be from year one up to year five, should not be something that stops just that in the beginning and then until the end of matric. (E1)"

E9 maintained that learners were not given access to the policies or educated on the policies:

I don't fully think there might have been much thinking on policies, but there's never ever been a session where, am speaking about this particular school where I am, referring to the school that I come from as well. You know, you'd expect that each learner has been given a school policy with a code of conduct, but now because of the resources, availability of resources... Some stuff is not easy to be able to be available to the entire school. I don't know about the parents, but I think there can still be some improvements as far as that section is concerned just to let everybody in the school read and know these are the school rules and codes of conduct. This is how the school is run. This is the circumstance if you do that, this is what will happen. I believe more can be done (E9).

Another participant highlighted that the schools are not doing enough to educate learners on their responsibilities as spelt by the policies. The participant had this to say:

I would say schools are not doing enough. We do have cases whereby, maybe beginning of the year, all learners are given the code of conduct in the school. It is read to them within the classroom environment right discussed with the class teacher. But there are different copies also. But you find out that maybe that's the only time when

the learners are made aware. The other cases where the learners will be made aware of the school conduct in hall classes. But then the learners won't take that on seriously because they're just thinking "What is ABC? Just a subject that we are doing". So, I would have loved to see any learner who is not involved in indiscipline (E6).

Meanwhile, E7 admitted the schools were not intimating the learners of their rights and responsibilities adequately:

I don't think as a school we offer enough, because I have been in this school for the past five years, but we have never had an occasion whereby we assemble learners and remind them of their rights and their responsibilities. I've never been part of such an initiative, in fact, it has never happened. I think the little that is being done is done through the subject which is life orientation, and they do have a section which talks about those particular issues (E7).

In view of the findings presented above, Banja (2019,) suggests that learners be made aware of their rights and responsibilities in school. Dano and Thwala (2022) opine that educators should educate learners on what is expected of them, concerning their responsibilities. Similarly, Dhlamini (2017) argues that successful school management is the responsibility of school leaders, who should make educators and learners know their rights and related responsibilities, for proper school functionality. On the other hand, Enkel et al. (2017) assert that the administrative style of a successful leader must include regular awareness of stakeholders' responsibilities in the school system. Obadire and Sinthumule (2021) indicate that SASA as a framework for disciplinary procedure provides a clear understanding of the responsibilities of the learners and schools as a whole, while Obilor and Miwari (2021) agree that much rests on individual schools' ability to educate both learners and educators on the responsibilities, as relate to learners' rights to safety.

According to Gagnon, Sylvester, and Marsh (2021), creating more awareness of learners' responsibilities is what schools should do regularly. Many South African schools do not see the necessity of creating awareness of learners' responsibilities. This means that learners' rights to safety are not highlighted. Many reasons for the failure to educate or provide learners with more awareness of learners' rights include the fear of the schools that learners would abuse their rights and would be totally out of control or discipline in schools (Munongi & Pillay, 2020). This finding by Munongi and Pillay (2020) also emerged in this study, where E8 and other participants shared the same sentiments that learners should not be made aware of their rights, as they would get out of hand.

The Department of Education (2007) indicates that the learners' right to safety is to enhance teaching and learning in South African schools, through SASA and other policies and legislation. In the same way, Segalo and Rambuda (2018) report that educators' views on the rights of learners significantly influence their readiness to expose learners to their responsibilities within the learners' rights to safety policies/legislation. Treacy and Glowa (2017) concur with UNESCO's (2017) position on the rights of learners to safety in schools, but they noted that emphasis should be placed on the responsibilities that accompany these rights. Govender (2022), however, cautions on the need for educators to be mindful of learners' rights to safety while disciplinary procedures are conducted. Learners can be made to understand their responsibilities and the consequences of their actions, despite their rights within the regulations. In view of this, Kutywayo

et al. (2022) report that many South African educators have limited knowledge of policies and legislation regarding the responsibilities of the learners and cannot adequately create awareness thereof. The involvement of both the SMTs and the SGBs of the respective schools is therefore critical in this regard.

2.4. Educators' perceptions of parents' understanding of learner's right to safety and their involvement

With regard to parental involvement in disciplinary procedures in schools, the participants highlighted some barriers against parents' understanding of learners' rights and their involvement in disciplinary procedures. The general perception of the participants in this regard is indicated below:

As educators, we are not that much in contact with the parents, it's the governing body who are the ones in contact with the parents. So, when it comes to governing body, our governing body is failing to bring that parental involvement, we only deal with parents when we talk about the rate of failure. Maybe, if we want to make a major change like introducing or phasing out a subject or stream, but just to call parents and educate them or explain to them that is a new change from the department is saying this and this, so the school is doing this to respond. We don't have a platform to sit down with parents, so their involvement is not satisfying, we are not working together with the parents (E3).

One participant responded that parents are involved through parents' meetings and also provided with copies of policies:

They call in the parents and inform them, and they also call in the parents' meeting so that they know about school policies. We normally make copies of school policies and send them to parents so that they know what is expected of the learners at school. I don't know whether their kids are aware of the policies, I don't think they do look at it. Each and every learner, each and every parent, each and every year, we used to get a copy of the school policy. I don't think the parents keep reminding the learners about school policies, because being late at school is a bad thing, but they keep on doing it even though they stay around the school, so I don't think they are following the policies. I don't think parents are just like reminding them " (E8).

Another participant also admitted that parents were usually informed in general meetings, but this was not adequate:

I personally have never had a meeting where I call parents about orientating them around the code of conduct and disciplinary measures of the school, of what happens when discipline will have never had a class manager as much as we've had meetings, talking about the academic performance of learners but not disciplinary measures and procedures. There was a meeting about the code of conduct of the school with all parents. The meeting discussed an amendment to the school code of conduct...I guess the problem is the consistency part, as much as it was done in one of the years, then is not done every year. So, the consistency part becomes a problem because then, we are not always understanding the same thing all the time (E1).

Positively, some participants indicated that parents were involved in their schools' disciplinary procedures, as noted herein:

I'm loving the way that they are doing it in this particular school...the parent body is very active. Whenever a case or whatever has to be dealt with, with regard to school policies and stuff, they are always involved. The school makes sure they're informed on time. And when major decisions have to be made without fail, the parents get in touch and come and represent the case and so whatever action has to be taken, they are not left in the dark...they actually work in the school as our security personnel, some are here every day, security in the parent body. We got parents who are part of the school's security committee. A parent is even the chairperson of that body. Whenever something happens, they know first and then disseminate that information. If there has to be a parent meeting regarding some problems in the school, they're never ever left in the dark. So, parents play a critical role in this school... (E9).

Each and every year, there are cases whereby parents are called for a parents' meeting, especially at the end of the year, there is an annual general meeting for the parents in the school. Then, during that time, parents are always given the opportunity to decide on the issue of their learners, for example, dress code, extra classes and disciplinary issues. Previously, we had cases where there was a problem concerning the use of cell phones by students. Some parents defended their children by saying the phones were being used for research (E6).

E7 on the other hand, posited that parents get involved only when learners needed to be punished:

I don't think we've done enough, I need to admit that first, but what has happened from what I've seen, is more of a reactive approach where there is an instance when a learner misbehaves and then a parent is called in a sitting to discuss what has happened. The parents sometimes recommend the meeting out of corporal punishment by the teachers themselves. And this is the very thing that teachers are prevented from using as a corrective measure in school. One parent angrily said, his child does not belong to the government but rather to him and therefore no one can tell him how his child must be disciplined (E7).

From the responses presented above, it is evident that most of the educators admitted that parents were actively involved in schools' disciplinary procedures, while a few described parental involvement in disciplinary procedures as not encouraging. In light of this, West and Meier (2020) suggest that the involvement of parents in the running of the school system is critical to the success of the education system in every country. Treacy and Glowa (2017) posit that for school Principals who are learner-centered, parents will always be adequately involved. On that note, Sadik (2018) asserts that parents are significant stakeholders who can assist in learners' discipline in partnership with the educators. Educators therefore need to collaborate with parents, if disciplinary procedures are to be effective.

Some schools choose not to engage parents, especially when they are not cooperating or willing to support school

leaders or educators (Govender, 2022). According to Lumadi (2019), sometimes it is difficult to bring everyone on board when discussing disciplinary matters, but it is necessary for a leader to know how every educator within a school could be made to understand that discipline is a general objective of a school, because it ensures functionality. In light of this, Mowen (2019), suggests that leaders explore all necessary avenues and use available resources that can lead to greater learner achievements. Dano and Thwala (2022) note that learners' misbehaviour or indiscipline may be fuelled by a lack of cooperation or support from the parents to the school system. Thus, Obadire and Sinthumule (2021) recommend that school Principals should create good platforms between educators and parents to encourage learners. The DoE (2007) provides insights into approaches that can be explored to integrate parents into school administration. The call by the DoE encourages a broad consensus on finding a workable solution towards disciplinary procedures in schools.

3. Summary

This chapter presented and discussed the data collected for the study. I therefore summarised the findings of the study on educators' perceptions of how learners' rights to safety affect disciplinary procedures in secondary schools in the Umbumbulu Circuit of KwaZulu-Natal. In the main, the findings of the study revealed that the perceptions of educators affect disciplinary procedures in schools and varied from one educator and school to another, due to some contextual factors.

Given the widespread abolition of corporal punishment in South African schools, educators face different challenges in disciplinary procedures, and this requires adequate support from all stakeholders, learners and parents included. The study established that many educators are scared of implementing disciplinary procedures in schools because they lack adequate awareness of policies and legislation on learners' rights, while others indicated that they could not implement discipline in schools due to inadequate or lack of support from parents, school management and education officials. The findings also highlighted the critical need for educators to be work-shopped on how disciplinary procedures should be handled in schools. The educators reiterated the need for the protection of their rights, as they all felt that more priority is given to the learners, at their expense. It was also observed that the integration of parents and community leaders, and school management team members into the disciplinary procedures of schools is a challenge. Lastly, the chapter also established that stakeholders in the education system need to support schools' disciplinary procedures, while policies and legislation should be adequately and correctly interpreted by learners, parents and educators. This would enhance disciplinary procedures through educators in schools. Having said that, the next chapter presents the summary, findings and recommendations for the study.

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