

Implementing a Learners' Code of Conduct for Positive Discipline in Schools

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Abstract

Dealing with misbehaving learners remains a significant challenge for teachers in South African schools. Since the use of corporal punishment and other punitive measures in dealing with misbehaving learners is now illegal, alternative positive disciplinary measures have had to be put in place. There were nearly 11,600 cases of documented corporal punishment in schools across the country in 2019. In KwaZulu-Natal alone, the number of learners who experienced corporal punishment increased by three per cent, affecting a total of 226 372 learners between 2018 and 2019. The study reported on here, examined teachers' and learners' experiences in respect of the implementation of a learners' code of conduct, to instil positive discipline in schools. Underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative research approach and phenomenological design. Two schools were sampled and, semi-structured interviews, observation and document reviews were used to collect data. The findings revealed that some teachers indeed implemented such a code of conduct, which communicated learners' expected behaviour by outlining the rules and regulating behaviour. Notably, the findings also revealed that the code of conduct did not instil positive discipline across the board, as many learners continued misbehaving. Based on the findings, the study recommends that schools ensure that a proper code of conduct be drawn up to help teachers address learner indiscipline and that officials from the Department of Education undertake regular visits to schools, to offer support and arrange workshops/internet-based training to guide teachers on how to use such a code effectively.

Keywords: code of conduct, negative discipline, positive discipline

1. Introduction

Traditionally, before South Africa achieved independence in 1994, schools relied on the use of corporal punishment and other punitive approaches to maintain discipline among learners. Mlalazi (2015) points out that, in the past, schools resorted to negative disciplinary management which was based on reactive responses, rather than proactive approaches. Such punitive approaches were subsequently replaced by positive disciplinary measures, which were enforced through a code of conduct for learners as an alternative to corporal punishment (or negative disciplinary approaches) (Bilaty, 2017). Such advances notwithstanding, in schools in this country, teachers continue to experience setbacks when it comes to managing learners' disruptive behaviour. Maphosa and Shumba (2010) maintain that, in the absence of corporal punishment, many teachers are still struggling to instil discipline in class. As a result, they resort to using negative disciplinary approaches which have been proven to have serious physical, psychological, behavioural, and developmental consequences for learners (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2018). This situation continues despite corporal punishment having been officially abolished under the Abolition of Corporal Punishment Act, 33 of 1997 (RSA, 1997) – legislation which makes any associated negative/punitive strategies that are implemented to deal with misbehaving learners, both unlawful and a criminal offence (Bilaty, 2017). For example, the DBE (2019) reports 11593 cases of corporal punishment in schools nationally in 2019. The report further shows that the percentage of learners who were subjected to corporal punishment in schools had increased nationwide by ten per cent from 2018–2019. In KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) alone, near the north of Durban, the number of learners who experienced corporal punishment increased by three per cent, affecting a total of 226 372 learners between 2018 and 2019 (DBE, 2019). Kunene (2020) sustains that until recent times teachers continue to administer corporal punishment to learners.

As Morrell (2001) found, corporal punishment remains prevalent in South African schools. Haruyama (2019) confirms this, reporting that many educators continue to depend on negative measures to maintain discipline amongst

the learner cohort. To rectify these injustices, educationists propose that positive discipline be enforced through a code of conduct for learners, as an alternative tool to negative forms of discipline (Department of Education [DoE], 2000; Franklin & Harrington, 2019). Sun (2015) defines a code of conduct as a tool designed specifically to outline expected learner behaviour, serving to guide and regulate school discipline, while acting as a medium or means of democratising education. Franklin and Harrington (2019) advise that such a code must be collectively constructed (with learners' collaboration) and explicitly taught to learners at the beginning of a school year. As far as the DBE (2018) is concerned, discipline of a positive nature refers to the practice of training or teaching learners to obey the code of conduct in both the short and long term. Haruyama (2019) purports that the goal of positive discipline is for learners to develop self-discipline through their own efforts, rather than the efforts of others (usually enforced through monitoring, threats, fear, or force).

Mbagala (2019) maintains that in the main, negative discipline or punishment is external, and does not promote or allow self-discipline to be achieved. According to Bej (2016), punishment generally only stops bad or unwanted behaviour for the moment and does not have positive, long-term outcomes. Sun (2015) suggests that discipline can be maintained by laying down rules and procedures for behaviour, exercising strong leadership, and using suitable disciplinary measures to correct bad behaviour – in that sense, a code of conduct for learners is ideal. For Mthiyane (2013), such a code must be a “disciplinary document, drafted within definite legal bounds, whereby the people for whom the code is intended, take part in its creation and have a voice in making decisions related to it”. In this regard, a learners' code of conduct aims to replace corporal punishment or act as one of the positive disciplinary strategies to use in eradicating negative discipline from schools. Against this backdrop, the study reported on here examined teachers' and learners' experiences in respect of the implementation of a learners' code of conduct for positive discipline in South African schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teachers' Experiences in Implementing a Learners' Code of Conduct for Positive Discipline in Schools

In South African schools, corporal punishment has been prohibited by legislation under the Abolition of Corporal Punishment Act, 33 of 1997 (RSA, 1997). As the literature shows, however, the law is consistently being flouted, and corporal punishment remains a feature of school life, which means the teachers who employ such methods are continuing to perpetuate and teach violence to the learners of this country (Mncube & Harber, 2010; Mncube & Mthanti, 2014). Although Kunene (2020) cautions would-be perpetrators that where incidents of corporal punishment have been reported the guilty parties have been prosecuted and charged, the Eastern Cape DoE (EC DoE, 2018) revealed that it was not unusual for teachers to support corporal punishment, claiming that it had worked for them as children, and rather than harming them, had shaped their character. At the summit in 2018 (EC DoE, 2018), the counterargument was made that harking back to the past does not in any way address the harmful effects of corporal punishment in the present.

The current state of affairs highlights the need for the South African government to exterminate corporal punishment from schools and introduce positive means of disciplining a child, in the form of a code of conduct for learners. To that end, the DBE (2018) stipulates the types of disciplinary measures, and the levels of positive discipline that schools should use to enforce law and order, through such a code. Proposed measures include reflection (a verbal warning, time out, letter writing, an oral apology, the child's name being recorded); penalty (withdrawal of privileges, detention, signing of a disciplinary or behavioural contract, a disciplinary talk with the learner, a demerit or community service); reparation (a public apology, having to replace/repair where damage was done, an official reprimand, parents being involved); and last resort (parent–principal meeting, referral, suspension, and/or expulsion) (DBE, 2018). Having highlighted the four types of disciplinary measures, next the focus is on the levels of discipline that any code of conduct for learners should spell out, to enhance the positive nature of discipline in schools (DBE, 2018). These levels of discipline vary from Level 1 to Level 5 misconduct, and are explained as follows:

- Level 1: Misbehaviour in the classroom (i.e., failing to attend class on time, leaving class without permission, cheating, failing to complete homework, dishonesty)
- Level 2: Breaking the rules of school conduct (i.e., frequent repetition of a Level 1 infringement, possession of intoxicating substances, cheating in examinations, verbally threatening the safety of another person)
- Level 3: Serious violation of the school rules (i.e., through frequent repetition of a Level 2 infringement)
- Level 4: Very serious violation of the school rules (i.e., through severely disruptive behaviour, theft, vandalism, frequent repetition of level 1 and 2 infringements)

Level 5: Criminal acts (i.e., which violate the school's code of conduct and rules, extortion of another person's property, frequent repetition of a Level 4 infringement).

The South African Schools Act (SASA), 84 of 1996 (RSA, 1996b), stipulates the use of a code of conduct to discipline learners in schools across this nation. Franklin and Harrington (2019) aver that, for a code to be effective, it has to be jointly created and taught at the beginning of the year, as a way of enabling a teacher/school to communicate what is expected of learners. Mathe (2008) maintains that a code of conduct articulates what constitutes acceptable behaviour in schools, promotes positive and self-discipline, establishes a disciplined and purpose-driven school environment, and establishes a well-organised school milieu in which effective teaching and learning can take place. Zondo's (2017) study confirms that a learners' code is a fundamental instrument for maintaining positive discipline in an educational context – where such a code was used, teachers reported an improvement in the classroom atmosphere and in learners' behaviour, attitudes, and academic performance. In similar contexts, learners were found to be at lower risk of using drugs where a code of conduct offered behavioural guidelines (Lopes & Oliveira, 2017). As Jones (2015) points out, a code of conduct remains a very positive strategy for managing learner behaviour and maintaining discipline in class, which in turn assist in improving learners' marks and boosting their self-esteem. Mugabe and Maphosa (2013) declare that such a code promotes a sense of accountability and ownership, confident that if learners take pride in helping to draw up the code, they are bound to support and adopt it. In similar vein, Franklin and Harrington (2019) note that behavioural policies (codes of conduct) that are conscripted collectively are more likely to be adhered to than an indiscriminate set of rules imposed by teachers or officials. Moreover, the enforcement of such a code constitutes democracy in action in educational settings.

Clearly, the effective implementation of positive discipline entails the prevention of indiscipline, and thrives on the use of proactive, empowering, and cooperative approaches in managing or curbing unwanted behaviour. As Adelabu (2021) notes, this should entail the use of non-punitive methods to teach valuable social and life skills, in a manner that is respectful and encouraging for both learners and teachers. In a context where classroom rules are effectively implemented, teachers are motivated to teach and have no wish to leave their classrooms under false pretexts (Barnes & Shudak, 2022). A study by Uslu and Gizir (2017) revealed that effective teachers had fewer (or minimal) classroom disciplinary problems, not because they were good at restoring discipline, but because they were good at establishing classroom procedures and rules that made the most of the time available for teaching and learning, and for creating a conducive teaching environment. Franklin and Harrington (2019) purport that articulating rules as “a set of rights” that learners are liable to protect not only serves to make them feel responsible for managing their own behaviour but also affords them a chance to experience the democratic process.

3. Theoretical Underpinnings

Underpinning the study is the positive discipline theory developed by Rudolf Dreikurs (1972), and the democratic theory developed by John Dewey (1940). Dreikurs' (1972) notion of positive discipline centres on the idea that all people (even young learners) want to fit in and be accepted by others. As Dreikurs (1972) explains, learners misbehave in an attempt to receive attention; to gain control over adults; to seek revenge when feeling hurt; or to disguise feelings of insufficiency, by withholding their participation in the classroom/school. Jones (2015) maintains that all behaviours – including misbehaviours – are purposeful and directed toward gaining social recognition. Joan (2018) agrees that a person's internal goals result in specific external behaviour, which suggests that whatever behaviour manifests on the outside, can be linked to internal processes. This means that underlying happenings (or problems) compel learners to behave in a particular manner – by misbehaving or acting out. The democratic theory developed by Dewey (1940) maintains that people (young learners included) learn how to be democratic by being members of a group or community that acts democratically since all of us acquire knowledge or learning through a “hands-on” approach. As he maintains (Dewey, 1916), democratic education is a social process in which stakeholders consult and communicate widely when making decisions, and affording an equal voice to all members of a group. In the domain of education, democratic theory thus suggests that learners should be nurtured and assisted as they develop and master the host of problem-solving skills they will require in adulthood. This is inclusive of allowing them to take social responsibility, test their democratic rights, and indulge in meaningful participation (i.e., in formulating school rules).

Agyemang (cited in Olawale, 2021) defines democracy as a supportive and participatory form of control that enables leaders to make informed decisions, mindful of the ideas/views of those being governed. Since this study draws on a code of conduct for learners as a means of implementing positive discipline in schools, given the above definitions, democracy in education involves allowing learners to make their voices heard, and to continue with their learning

activities while having a say in decision-making processes, since such a code will ultimately influence them directly. Learner participation in the drafting of a code of conduct is thus imperative if such a code is to attain its goals and objectives. According to Bergmark and Westman (2018), this is best achieved when learners are actively engaged in formulating school policies or rules. Zondo (2017) purports that when learners are involved in the process of formulating school rules, those directives become easier to adhere to, because the learners participated actively, understood the content, and agreed to conform to specific regulations. Learners need to be taught discipline if they are to behave properly, therefore a workable code of conduct has to be drawn up within the parameters of democratic principles. The theories advanced by Dreikurs (1972) and Dewey (1940) were deemed the most appropriate for this investigation, which looked into the implementation of a code of conduct/school rules for learners as a strategy for improving positive discipline in schools. To arrive at a disciplined and orderly school environment, a code of conduct as an alternative to corporal punishment is assumed to instil positive behaviours, by guiding learners to choose and manifest the desired conduct.

4. Problem Statement and Research Question

It is more than 25 years since corporal punishment was proscribed in South African schools, following section 10 of SASA (RSA, 1996b). Despite this abolition, as reported earlier, some teachers continue to resort to physical means of punishment (Bilaty, 2017; Ngubane, 2018). Greydanus (as cited in Ngubane, 2018, p. 135) declares that

learners who received corporal punishment had difficulty in sleeping, tiredness, feelings of sorrow and insignificance, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, increased anger and outbursts of aggression, difficulty with concentration, lowered school achievement, antisocial behaviour, intense dislike of authority, a tendency for school avoidance, school drop-out, and other evidence of negative high-risk adolescent behaviour.

The DBE's (2019) report paints a concerning picture of just how rife corporal punishment is in local schools, with almost a quarter of the KZN learners polled between 2018 and 2019, admitting to having been subjected to physical aggression on the school premises. Teachers in Durban schools in the eThekweni municipality were named as being among the top offenders in the country when it came to the use of corporal punishment (DBE, 2019). The literature clearly shows a gap in terms of the implementation of positive disciplinary strategies as alternatives to corporal punishment and other forms of negative discipline. As Kunene (2020) reveals, it is unclear what type of support school management and the DBE provide to teachers, in adhering to the directive to implement positive disciplinary strategies. Thus, to examine teachers' and learners' experiences in respect of the implementation of positive disciplinary strategies, the following research question was formulated: What are teachers' and learners' experiences of the implementation of a code of conduct for learners in schools?

5. Research Methods

The larger qualitative study reported on here, was underpinned by the interpretive paradigm, and employed a phenomenological design as a data-collection strategy. Alase (2017) maintains that a phenomenological approach affords a researcher the greatest opportunity to understand the lived experiences of those participating in the research. For Vagle (2018), the phenomenological design seeks to understand how people experience the phenomenon being studied. This approach was deemed eminently suitable, as it accommodated a small-sized sample (van de Ven, 2016), which helped the researchers arrive at a deeper understanding of teachers' and learners' experiences when it came to the implementation of a learners' code of conduct as a means of effecting positive discipline. According to Cohen et al. (2018), doing purposive sampling enables a researcher to hand-pick the cases needed for his/her sample, based on their relevance to the study. Thus, two schools were sampled on the basis that they professed to use codes of conduct to discipline their respective learner cohorts. In each school, the targeted sample consisted of three disciplinary committee members, one school principal, two school management team (SMT) members, two teacher representatives in the school governing body (SGB), and two members of the representative council for learners (RCL) (n=20). The participants were selected for the fact that they formed part of, and had a voice in, the respective SGBs. Semi-structured interviews, observation and document review were used to collect data. In addressing ethical issues, participants' anonymity, confidentiality and privacy were respected, and their written consent was sought prior to commencing data collection.

6. Data Analysis

The researchers used the thematic approach of coding, sorting and categorisation to analyse the responses of the participants, prior to writing a report – in keeping with the procedure suggested by Creswell (2013). For data presentation, pseudonyms were used for the two selected schools, namely Nativia Secondary (NS) and Andolex Secondary (AS). At each school the participants were coded: the three disciplinary committee members were coded

DCM1, DCM2 and DCM3; the school principal was SP1, the two SMT members SMT1 and SMT2; the two teacher representatives in the SGB, TR-SGB1 and TR-SGB2, and two RCLs, RCL1 and RCL2.

7. Results

The results capture the participating teachers' and learners' experiences in respect of the importance of a code of conduct for implementing positive discipline in schools. To that end, data were presented under the following themes:

7.1 *The Use of a Code of Conduct for Learners, to Implement Positive Discipline*

Participants were asked, "What are teachers' experiences in the implementation of the code of conduct for learners in school?" Their responses revealed that a code is the most important strategy a school can use to ensure learners' good behaviour, and communicate the expected comporment to them. Consistency proved to be another vital aspect in the implementation of such a code. As one participant declared:

The code of conduct is an official document that spells out what is expected from learners, parents, teachers, and all other parties involved in a school community. And again, it establishes [...] positive discipline and creates an environment that is conducive to effective teaching and learning. Additionally, it is important because it describes the disciplinary procedures to be taken against misbehaving learners, as it stipulates the corrective measures to [be] taken as per [the] offence. Therefore, when a learner has done something wrong, for it to be corrected there must be a formal written document, such as a code of conduct, to refer [to]. More importantly, the records of learner behaviour – both good and bad – must be kept, even though teachers find it difficult. As a result, it brings about inconsistency [i]n keeping records. (SMT 2, AS)

As this participant explained, a code of conduct acts as a guide, outlining learners' expected behaviours in addition to recommending corrective measures to be taken if a learner misbehaves. From the findings it emerged that the code should list the offence as well as the necessary corrective measures, in dealing with, or eradicating, unwanted behaviour. Notably, the participant emphasised the importance of record-keeping, cautioning that if teachers fail to keep records it creates inconsistencies in the use of the code. This sentiment was shared by a young participant, who confirmed:

By looking at the code of conduct, you know exactly [which] steps [will] be taken when you misbehave. Because always our teachers tell us to look at it, so that we can see the levels of offences and the recommended disciplinary procedures to be taken against misbehaving learners. (RCL 1, AS)

From this learner participant's response, it is clear that the code in use at AS was at pains to describe the nature of an offence, as well as the corrective disciplinary procedures to take, in ensuring that a spirit of positive behaviour reigned amongst learners themselves, and amongst teachers and learners. How such a code was received, is evident from this statement:

... the school code of conduct for learners also serves as a guide to what can be done to a learner [who] has done something that is against the code of conduct, and that misconduct should be equivalent to the sanction applicable. In that way, learners are [willing] to take the punishment or corrective measures. When you use a code of conduct, you use [the] term "corrective measures", because you are not punishing a learner, since we are not allowed to punish learners, but we are supposed to correct the learners. (DCM 1, NS)

Identifying the code as a guide, this participant explained that it gives direction in respect of the appropriate measures to take when learners misbehave. The use of the term "corrective" also has more positive connotations than "punishment", which confirms the uplifting nature of this type of discipline.

Another participant emphasised the importance of the code, stating that "any institution that is run without rules [...] it becomes chaos ... or chaotic. So, to ensure that we experience order in the school, a code of conduct needs to be there, so that learners know what is it that is expected and not expected from them" (DCM 1, AS). The participant acknowledged the importance of rules, warning that, without rules, any institution would become disorderly and disorganised, which – in the case of a school – can impede the very function for which schools were created in the first place, which is to effect learning in a cohort of learners.

From the participants' comments, it transpired that the code of conduct helped to ensure the protection and safety of learners and teachers alike, while protecting school property. As one participant observed:

The code of conduct ensures that learners own the school, and feel protected and [...] part of the school [...]. In terms of ownership, it should be like their home. Everything in the school, like desks or school

property, they need to respect it like they [would] respect their facilities or property at home. (TR-SGB 1, NS)

This participant called attention to the fact that a code of conduct fosters a sense of ownership amongst all the stakeholders of the school, and it pertains to infrastructure and school property alike, which need to be handled with care and respect. Another participant elaborated on that point:

A code of conduct ensures safety and [a] violen[ce]-free school environment, where teaching and learning can take place. This goes as far as the regulation of public spaces, like littering on the school grounds, vandalism of the school property in any form, it can be writing on walls using chalk, graffiti to insult other learners/teachers, or writing vulgar language on walls, insulting someone, embarrassing drawings, leaving the toilets unclean, etc. (SP 1, AS)

From this participant's comment it is clear that the code played a vital role in outlining the rules and regulations on how to treat school property (moveable and immovable), and to respect others in the process.

The findings also revealed that a learners' code ensures quality in respect of management systems, and adherence to the values enshrined in the mission/vision statement of the institution. Importantly, an effective code is cutting-edge, valid, and flexible enough to change with the times, rather than being fixed and rigid. Ideally, it should be able to accommodate any unusual matters or fresh challenges to discipline in a school. As this principal explained:

For a code of conduct to ensure internal control and quality management systems, it should not be static but dynamic, it should be moving with [the] times. [...] In the code, you will find that there are rules that guide proper behaviour, but that behaviour keeps on changing, and that behaviour should be addressed in the code, and emulate the times in which the school is functioning. And again [...] the code of conduct curbs learners from bad behaviour. If there is any event that there are rules that need to be repealed, then [they] should be, if they are no longer in line with [the] current times in which the institution is functioning. (SP1-NS)

This participant emphasised the need for a code of conduct to be flexible in curbing bad behaviour, but conceded that where a stipulation or rule no longer applies, is draconian, or fails to curb or address misbehaviour, it should be revoked. In a similar vein, another participant declared:

I normally abbreviate the code of conduct as "VACCS", meaning valid, authentic, current, consistent and sufficient. A valid code of conduct ensures a very high level of validity, authenticity and consistency in dealing with issues of conduct in [a] school. The code of conduct is consistent, so it helps to consider variables that might be the characteristics of an institution, and [are] sufficient to cover all issues of behaviour in a school. Hence, I'm saying it must be sufficient. (DCM 2, AS)

This comment reflects a comprehensive view of the characteristics of an effective learners' code of conduct

Although all schools were mandated by the DBE and the constitution of the country (RSA, 1996a) to establish and implement a code of conduct for learners, some of the participants' responses showed that, theoretically, they knew about the code, but in practice it was not visible, accessible, or made available to the very people for whom it was designed. Moreover, the findings revealed that the code was mainly ineffective, as learners persisted in misbehaving, despite knowing what was expected of them. In this regard, a participating SGB member stated:

Not having a code of conduct in place ... makes it very difficult to discipline, because you have to thumb-suck any disciplinary measure that you will use. Hence, this will backfire down the line [...]. It becomes difficult to deal with a case using common sense, because there will be questions that parents will ask, for example, and you will have no answers or you will give the answer that is different to the answer that you will give to the parent, in case [an]other learner [makes] the very same mistake. (TR-SGB 2, AS)

Unless a code of conduct for learners is in place, teachers are "flying blind", and this poses a problem when it comes to being consistent in disciplining learners. It opens the door to unwarranted punishment and bullying on the part of the teacher. As one learner participant confirmed, "I know that there is a school code of conduct or schools' rules that we need to follow. But we were never given a copy. Our teacher always tell[s] us about [the] code of conduct, but I have never seen it" (RCL 2, NS). This young participant confirmed the fact that learners were only told about the existence of a code regulating their behaviour, without receiving a hard copy or ever perusing it. Perhaps word of mouth is not sufficient, as this participant observed:

The code of conduct is not working, because learners continue to misbehave even if they know that there are rules regulating their behaviour. Learners are made aware of the DOs and DON'Ts within the school, yet we still encounter disciplinary cases to deal with. (DCM 2, NS)

The participants' views ascertain that the code of conduct is ineffective in curbing learners' from misbehaving.

8. Discussion of Findings

The discussion captures the participants' experiences in the importance of a code of conduct for implementing positive discipline in schools.

The findings revealed a code as the most important strategy a school can use to ensure learners' good behaviour, and communicate the expected conduct. The code of conduct that the researchers perused supported the findings from the interviews, confirming that such a code is an important document for enhancing positive discipline. The code itself outlines learners' expected behaviours, and clearly stipulates the rules which must be adhered to. If learners understand the code and abide by the rules, chaos and disturbances in the functioning of the school can most likely be avoided. The researchers' observational findings supported those derived from the interviews and document review: during a disciplinary committee hearing, it was observed that the committee referred to the learners' code of conduct to explain to a learner which rule s/he had breached, as well as the nature of his/her offence. The code states that "learners are expected to abide by the school rules concerning appearance and behaviour when representing the school both during school hours and after school hours, at school and away from school. Learners may not say or do anything that will discredit themselves or the school." This rule explains not only the scope of the code, but also the extent to which it can be used to deal with infringements.

Apart from enhancing positive behaviour, the findings revealed that such a code helps with the creation and establishment of an environment that is conducive to effective teaching and learning. These findings are supported by the DBE (2018), which maintains that a learners' code of conduct can help to encourage learners to do the right thing, behave civilly at all times, and act in a just and democratic manner. These findings are supported by Bilaty (2017), who avers that the main idea behind a code of conduct is to articulate what represents tolerable behaviour in schools, to promote positive and self-discipline, to establish a disciplined and orderly milieu in which effective teaching and learning can take place, and to delineate how instances of disobedience (or infringements of the code) will be dealt with. The Eastern Cape DoE (2018) maintains that such a code can assist misbehaving learners to develop their character if they are taught how to behave better, and are encouraged to interact with others by adhering to democratic principles. Kunene's (2020) findings reported a decrease in the number of office referrals and instances of learner indiscipline in those schools found to have effective positive disciplinary measures in place.

From the findings, it transpired that such a code is an important document for ensuring that a school remains a haven where rules about public (and private) spaces apply. The observational findings, however, refuted those of the interviews and document reviews: when walking down the corridors, the researchers observed messages in chalk on the walls, slandering some learners – there was even vulgar language written in paint. The fact that learners were insulted, and that those insults had remained there for quite some time without being erased or removed, is an indication that nobody cares. Underpinned by Dreikurs' (1972) positive discipline theory, which suggests that a learner's misbehaviour is directed toward a goal, it became clear in the course of the study that learners misbehaved because they were seeking attention or wanted to establish some power over adults, retaliated when hurt, and became aggressive – as was evident from the writings on the walls. If such cases are prevalent in schools then the code of conduct represents mere window-dressing, and does not serve its intended purpose. These findings are corroborated by Mncube and Harber (2010), who found that the vandalism of school property speaks to a decline in the culture of respect for others. Uslu and Gizir (2017) maintain that it has become commonplace for misbehaving learners to use graffiti to insult one another. They caution that, in some instances, teachers are also the victims of graffiti or slanderous comments written on classroom and toilet walls. In an earlier study, Mugabe and Maphosa (2013) found that in schools where discipline was lacking vandalism prevailed, and that included theft from classrooms, or the breaking of windows, desks, and chairs. Such destructive behaviour is indicative of the fact that schools still have a long way to go, in establishing an environment in which discipline prevails. Furthermore, where such behaviour is tolerated the schools suffer in the end, with high learner drop-out rates, low pass rates, and general neglect (DBE, 2018). Many teachers feel frustrated and powerless if their learners fail to perform well, and are overwhelmed by all the negativity around them – this explains why so many educators suffer from anxiety or stress-related issues.

If a code is not authentic, valid, sufficient, consistent or current, its applicability and relevance in curtailing learners' bad behaviours will be moot. Notably, the findings emanating from the document review contradicted those of the interviews: when reviewing the code, the researchers noted that it was scanty, insufficient, and too outdated to truly

curb learners' behaviours in modern-day contexts. Similarly, from the observations it became clear that, when disciplining misbehaving learners, reference was made to sets of rules. However, the researchers established that even though one school had a code of conduct for learners (or a set of rules), not all learners had copies of it. Rather, reference was made to the rules during assembly, and the rules were cascaded down to the learners by the teachers, who enforced them in the classroom. The findings suggested that, for a learners' code of conduct to remain adequate and relevant it needs to be reviewed regularly, and must accommodate the dynamic nature of a particular school environment. This will contribute immensely to a culture of positive discipline, because such a code will address the contemporary and unique issues which obtain in a particular school (Adelabu, 2021). This corroborates the views of Assali (2015), who maintains that learners need to find the code of conduct (to which they are expected to adhere) both relevant and appropriate in their situation, if it is to establish a positive culture of behaviour in their school. This finding confirms what Zondo's (2017) study points out, which is that for a code of conduct to be effective it needs to be revisited often, so that remains versatile yet consistent.

The findings draw attention to the fact that schools cannot shy away from making available a code of conduct for learners, if they wish to cultivate a culture of positive discipline. Corroborating this view is Zondo (2017), who suggests that schools often do not put enough (if any) effort into discussing with the learners the formulation and implementation of rules and regulations. This makes it difficult for the advocates of such discipline (e.g., a disciplinary committee) to uphold the laws and fulfil their mission. Dewey's (1940) theory of democracy, on which this study is also grounded, suggests that learners are entitled to voice their opinions with regard to matters which influence them both directly or indirectly, and in schools the RCLs can play an invaluable role in the setting of school rules. If a code is not updated and new rules are suddenly imposed, that means learners will have had no input at all in formulating the self-same regulations which they have to abide by, and this will cause indiscipline and chaos, making the ideal of inculcating positive discipline in them, nothing but a pipe dream. Emanating from the study was the fact that the existing code of conduct did not effectively address disciplinary problems as they arose. As some young participants highlighted, they were not called upon to help formulate the code and therefore were not aware of what it contains. As such, this compromises the notion of democracy in action. Jones (2015) maintains that where rules are laid down without explanation, learners are likely to follow their conscience or desires, rather than giving in to the authoritative strictures to which they are subjected in schools. Hence, the findings suggest that the code of conduct – in its current form and implementation – is not an effective tool.

The findings further revealed that a code of conduct is important for enhancing positive discipline, as it is used to discourage learners from demonstrating disorderly behaviours which exacerbate aggression and disruption in schools. Such codes can be used to enforce discipline, by clearly communicating what constitutes "expected" behaviour. It is worth noting, however, based on certain participants' comments, that the code was not comprehensive, or sufficiently detailed to address different types of comportment. The document review revealed the existence of a code of conduct at one of the schools under study, but it lacked detail and failed to cover all eventualities arising around disciplinary matters. This presented problems during disciplinary proceedings, because the rules regulating/specifying learners' behaviour did not address many of the modern-day behavioural problems which schools encounter. The findings from the observations and document review supported those of the interviews, in that one school had a code of learner conduct, while the other had a set of rules to guide the actions of its learners. The identified shortcomings of these documents related to their failure to ensure consistency, their lack of detail, and the outdated nature of the stipulations/regulations in dealing with tech-savvy, worldly wise adolescents. Several contradictions were identified in the participants' statements, with some attesting that their school had a code of conduct, and others saying it did not – a scenario which compelled those in authority to make up their own rules, as they went along.

9. Conclusion

The findings revealed the code of conduct for learners to be a crucial document for outlining the rules and regulations school-goers have to adhere to, and for instilling discipline through positive means. In practice, such a code specifies the expected learner behaviour and outlines the rules regulating behaviour at a particular school, thereby helping to ensure the protection and safety of all learners, teachers, and other members of the school community, in addition to engendering respect for school property. In a disciplined environment, the school can achieve its mission of fostering in learners responsibility for their own actions and behaviours. The code also ensures that quality management systems are in place to give effect to the values enshrined in the mission and vision statement of each school, and in so doing create a positive environment in which teaching and learning can happen unhindered.

As some participants reported, the code of conduct was not effective in implementing positive discipline in schools, as learners continued to misbehave, despite knowing the rules regulating their behaviour. Such waywardness could be attributed to the fact that some younger participants were not called on to offer their inputs when the code was originally formulated, or had never read it since its formulation, which meant, for them, the rules were laid down without any context, and thus did not demand adherence. This finding implies that educationists and government should take a closer look at the use of alternatives to corporal punishment, and the value which a code of conduct can bring to this context. Educational stakeholders need to assess whether or not such disciplinary measures are (or will be) effective. The researchers' observation concluded that the education system and government exacerbated many of the challenges schools are facing, concerning discipline.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings it is recommended that schools ensure that a democratically agreed-to code of conduct be drawn up, to help teachers address indiscipline amongst the learner cohort. Furthermore, the DBE and the teacher unions should deploy officials to make continuous visits to schools to assess their disciplinary circumstances, so that they can offer support, through workshops for teachers or disciplinary committee members, and also by making available internet-based training to ensure that the latter are upskilled and capacitated to deal with misbehaving learners.

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