A managerial perspective of the role of secondary school learners in the development and implementation of a code of conduct[1][2]

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the rights of learners on the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) in secondary schools to develop and implement a code of conduct for learners through their participation on the school governing body (SGB). The study attempted to determine how active involvement of learners on the SGB is perceived by both the RCL and School Management Teams (SMTs). The problem was investigated by means of a literature review and qualitative inquiry. Individual interviews were held with RCL members and chairpersons, school principals and a chairperson of one SGB in three secondary schools in Tshwane, South Africa. Findings indicated barriers to the roles of learners in developing and implementing a code of conduct.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

The problem of discipline in secondary schools has kept writers such as Moles (1990), Furtwengler (1996), Palardy (1996), Pienaar (2003) and Le Mottee (2005) searching for remedies to curb poor discipline. A number of these remedies touch on the role that can be played by learners in making decisions concerning discipline.

The South African School Act (SASA), Act No 84 of 1996, is a step in this direction. The SASA (RSA, 1996: 23) mandates that secondary school learners must participate in the governance of their school. It stipulates that the representative council of learners (RCL) – an organ for learner representation in government schools – should be part of the school governing body (SGB) and be vested with the responsibility of drawing up a code of conduct for learners. A code of conduct for learners is the most important document in maintaining discipline and in managing the role of learners in developing and implementing that code of conduct. Against this background, there is a need to research what role is accorded secondary school learners in developing and implementing a code of conduct, as well as what roles they are actually playing in the development and implementation of such a code.

No doubt, this poses a huge challenge to the SGB and school management which has been assigned the responsibility of implementing a code of conduct for learners, and has prompted writers such as Mncube (2005: 56) and Heystek (in De Groof, Heystek, Malherbe & Squelch, 2000: 93-110) to question if the RCL is effective in school governance.

In his research, Heystek (2001: 211) reveals that learners do not make positive contributions at the SGB meetings, and when they do, such contributions are generally viewed with scepticism. Heystek also points out that learners are excluded from some SGB meetings, which could prevent them from participating in developing and implementing the school's code of conduct. This confirmed the findings of studies conducted by Sithole (1995), Van Wyk (1998), McPherson (2000), and Carrim & Tshoane (2000).

According to Woods (2005: 126) and Cockburn (2006) learners should play a role in more democratic forms of distributed leadership, decision-making and policy implementation, as they constitute a major stakeholder group. In emphasising the importance of learner participation, Heystek (2001: 210) states that learners are supposed to be the main focus in schools. In the same paper, he recommends research to determine whether the contributions that learners make (some of which are in the area of the code of conduct) are realised.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To address the research problem, an inquiry using a qualitative approach was undertaken in order to obtain divergent and diversified perceptions of current practice in terms of management of discipline and the role of secondary school

learners in developing and implementing a code of conduct. A case study approach was employed to explore the extent to which the problem manifested in the secondary schools in Gauteng Province, in general, and the Tshwane South District, in particular. Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit (2004: 41) state that a case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. A variety of data-gathering methods was employed, including an overview of available literature in journals, books, official documents and educational legislation to explore the work of other writers on the role of learners in improving discipline and the function of management, particularly as it relates to South African schools. Considering the ban on corporal punishment and the search for alternatives, information-rich documents such as SASA (RSA, 1996) and publications of the Department of Education (1999a, 1999b, 2001) were important for this research.

SAMPLE AND DESCRIPTION OF SCHOOLS

Of the 52 secondary schools in the Tshwane South District, three were identified by purposeful sampling. In order to obtain divergent and diversified perceptions of current practice in terms of the management of discipline and the role of secondary school learners in developing and implementing a code of conduct, schools in different locations were used: School 1 is a former Model C school (this is a school which has received a state subsidy in the form of teachers' salaries to a fixed learner: teacher ratio but would have to raise the balance of its budget through fees and donations) that draws its learners mainly from a privileged and affluent environment. School 2 is situated in a densely populated urban area of Tshwane South. It is a technical school and draws its learners from various regions in Tshwane. School 3 is located in a disadvantaged black township community of Tshwane South District. All three schools are registered with the Gauteng Department of Education and are expected to comply with certain government regulations.

DATA GATHERING

Observations, interviews and document analysis were the principal methods of data gathering. To uncover the fundamental details of this study, informed participants were identified and involved through individual and focus interviews. A common interview schedule was used for all the participants, regardless of their constituency. The chairperson of the SGB and the principal of each school were interviewed because they direct the affairs of the school governing body/the school, which has been charged with the responsibility of adopting a code of conduct for its learners. Individual interviews were conducted with learner representatives who were RCL members on the SGB in each school. These interviews revealed the extent of learners' involvement, if any, and their perspective of involvement. Individual interviews are important to ensure that the participants feel safe and confident enough to divulge any information. According to Fraenkel & Wallen (1993: 384), this 'is a way research verifies or refutes impressions'.

Focus group interviews with class representatives of Grades 8 to 12 in each school (three focus groups in total) were conducted. This created an atmosphere of relaxed peer association where learners felt free to express their feelings and opinions. As Vaughn, Shay Schunm & Sinagub (1996: 4) explain, 'the major assumption of a focus group interview is that with a permissive atmosphere fostering a range of opinions, a more complete and revealing understanding of issues will be obtained'. It was assumed that given these circumstances, learners would be free to express their feelings about the code of conduct, the extent of their representation in its development and their willingness to adhere to it.

A total of nine interviews were conducted, comprising an individual interview with the chairperson of the SGB from School 3 and individual interviews with the principals of Schools 1 and 2; three individual interviews with three learner

representatives/chairpersons of the RCL of each school; and three focus group interviews with nine members of the RCL from Schools 1 and 2 and six members of the RCL from School 3. A total of thirty participants were interviewed. All interviews were recorded on audio tape and transcribed immediately thereafter. Gestures were noted. In the case of focus group interviews, flip charts were used to link responses with broader topics.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analysed using the procedures typical of qualitative research. Interviews were transcribed and coded, and responses grouped according to the questions asked. The participants' responses to each question were studied, thus gauging the views held by the majority of respondents. A manual analysis of data was possible owing to the reasonable size of the sample.

In addition, documentary sources were examined. The documents were used only to complement observations and interviews and enhance accountability; as such, these were not necessarily analysed in detail as substantive evidence. The main documents used were meeting agendas and minutes of the school governing bodies, letters and annual reports to parents, and discipline records. For ethical reasons, access to documents and records was negotiated in advance.

ETHICAL ISSUES

Approval for the research to be conducted in the relevant schools was first obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education. The informed consent of the participants was sought and they were given the normal guarantees regarding privacy and the right to withdraw from the study if a need arises. The following ethical issues were honoured:

Informed Consent: The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their participation. The participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw their participation at any time.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: In order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the identity of the schools and participants were kept anonymous. To this effect schools were given fictitious names.

Permission: was sought from the school principals to allow the use of documentary materials related to school governance matters.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by constitutional policies, theories and legislative provisions for managing discipline in educational management in developed and developing countries. Learners are entitled to a secure and orderly environment that is conducive to learning and proper teaching. The research seeks to discover and interpret the situation of discipline in secondary schools from the point of view of learner participation in developing a code of conduct through the mechanism of the Representative Council of Learners, with a view to offering a solution to the problem of discipline that will help learners to develop self-control and self-discipline. It offers an educational law perspective on the problem, with the aim of presenting a model for dealing with indiscipline in schools so that a secure environment may be restored. The South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996: 8) is the legal document that stipulates the limits of learner involvement in schools. A literature study was done in order to determine the situation of discipline and the theory and management of discipline prevalent in South Africa, in particular.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section combines significant data from the literature review with significant themes that emerged from interviews, observations and analysis of documents during the empirical inquiry. These emerging themes and sub-themes are as follows: perceived problems of indiscipline in secondary school learners, which include lack of discipline in the secondary schools, causes of indiscipline and effects of indiscipline; barriers to the role of learners in developing and implementing a code of conduct; lack of collaboration by the principal/management/SGB/educators, thus creating frustration in the Representative Council of Learners; conflict and communication barriers; and a code of conduct as a barrier. The findings are presented in the following categories:

- Lack of discipline in the participating schools.
- Barriers to the role of learners in developing and implementing a code of conduct.
- Lack of collaboration by the principal/management/SGB/educators, thus creating frustration in the Representative Council of Learners.
- Conflict and communication barriers.
- Code of conduct/policy as a barrier.
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School programme-related barriers (rigid timetable, timing of school governing body's meetings, lack of extracurricular activities and planning).

The researcher used the participants' responses verbatim. Quotations are either enclosed in quotation marks or the text is indented.

Lack of discipline in the participating schools

The data collected show that there is a lack of discipline among the learners of the participating schools. Examples include being disrespectful to those in authority, smoking, bunking, late coming, drug abuse, disruption of classes, making a noise, theft, jumping the fence, vandalism, wearing the wrong uniform, fighting, bullying and coming to classes with the wrong materials. All the participants agreed that discipline is a big problem in teaching and learning.

The participants of School 2 discussed the influence of alcohol, drug abuse and class disruption, among other problems, in their school. One of the focus-group participants lamented:

There is a serious lack of discipline at our school. I think we as a school struggling with discipline. Educators, prefects and the RCL are finding it difficult to maintain the high standard of discipline that the school used to have.

All the participants agreed that the issue of discipline is crucial to teaching and learning in schools. This research has shown that several factors are responsible for indiscipline in schools. These are: the home environment, the school environment, and the society. The first, the home environment relates to the learners' socio-economic background and parental involvement in schools. The participating learners, and principals identify home as the main cause of indiscipline in the school. Most of the participants who spoke on this issue felt that the solution should also come from home. The data indicate that among the causes of indiscipline, home ranks highest by appearing seven times out of the twenty-one responses shared by the four (home, school, society and learner) factors. The participants believe that if there is no discipline at home it would affect the discipline at school in the area of developing and implementing a code of conduct, which is basically about managing discipline. Secondly, the school environment relates to lapses in

the school management, absence of a code of conduct and educator neglect of duty/absenteeism. The participants complained that the school is a factor of indiscipline among learners in the areas of management, control of educators' neglect of duty/absenteeism and developing and implementing a code of conduct. Six responses out of the twenty-one responses for causes of indiscipline in the participating schools are devoted to school environment factors. Thirdly, the society relates to the environment, the democratisation process and the admission policy of the technical schools. Modern society, democratic changes and environmental influences are some of the factors that affect discipline in the school according to the data collected in this study. This factor has four responses out of the twenty-one responses on the factors that contribute to indiscipline in the participating schools; and the learner, which pertains to the underachievement of the learner. The data reveal that the learners themselves contribute, to a certain percentage, to the problem of indiscipline in the way of underachievement and unruly behaviour. Three responses out of the twenty-one responses for causes of indiscipline in the participating schools are devoted to learner-related factors.

All these factors have led to conflict between the educators and the learners, as well as disrupted teaching and learning, a low standard of education and low self-esteem among learners.

Recommendations for improvement, based on the results of the research

It was evident from the findings that disciplinary measures were top down in nature and learners were rarely involved in the formulation of school rules and in deciding the kind of punishment an offender should receive. The study recommends the use of learner-centred disciplinary measures. In drawing classroom and school rules, learners should be involved. This will assist in making them feel a sense of ownership of the rules and the need to uphold them. Enforcement of such rules is guaranteed as the learners are bound to be supportive as opposed to rules imposed on them. As Furtwengler (1996: 36) rightly points out, people can be motivated if they feel they have control over their own lives and would assume more responsibility if they have power and influence in the decisions that concern them. The study also recommends compulsory short courses on classroom management for educators as these would assist educators to understand, appreciate and use alternative and supportive disciplinary measures.

Barriers to the role of learners in developing and implementing a code of conduct

The results of this research show that there are many barriers to the role of learners in developing and implementing a code of conduct. They also identified variations in the application of the role of learners in the management of discipline in schools. These barriers are:

Lack of collaboration by the principal/management/educators/school governing body

Results show that the principals/management/educators/SGB are apathetic about collaborating with the RCL and they tend to exclude the latter – either totally or partially – from the SGB meetings. This creates a barrier that prevents learners from being able to participate in developing and implementing a code of conduct.

In School 1, the principal claims that he has excluded learners from participating in certain issues, such as discipline and school accounts, at the SGB meetings because he feels that those issues are 'beyond them'.

The RCL members from School 2 complained that the school management team turns down all their ideas, without even considering them. These members felt very frustrated and they claim that the learners who gave them their mandate have lost confidence in them and blame them for not being effective. A participant expresses this frustration as follows:

They [learners] say 'you are not doing anything, you are not doing anything' because they gave us things (proposal). They [learners] usually come to us with papers and we discuss for several hours and come up with good proposals but they [learners] don't see results. Each time we come back to them [learners] with such lame excuses given to us by the management, they think that they gave us their vote and we can't do anything. They [learners] say we let them down. So our voices are not being heard. The learners are fed up.

Recommendations for improvement, based on the results of the research

As recommended in the Guide for Representative Councils of Learners (Department of Education, 1999b), bureaucratic roadblocks between the principal and learners; between learners and educators; between the chairperson of the SGB and the principal; and between the chairperson of the SGB and the learners; need to be removed. The management of the affected schools needs to convene a meeting at which the learners and educators will be able to table their problems and find a way to resolve them.

A proper structure is required for RCL participation in the affected schools, for example the school governing bodies of black schools in the previously disadvantaged areas need to devise a structure to include their learners in their meetings. If learners are not permitted to participate in certain issues discussed by the school governing body, then the policy should dictate which these are and arrange an alternative time/forum for discussing these issues.

There is a need for the learners to be trained in communication skills. According to Furtwengler (1996: 37-45), training in communication skills and breaking the communication barrier between educators and learners are some of the techniques that may be used to improve discipline in the school through the learners' involvement in the programme: 'Reaching success through involvement'.

Conflict/communication barriers

Conflicts and communication barriers in the form of bureaucratic roadblocks in accessing the principal and conflict within the various groups of learners emerged as barriers to the role of learners in developing and implementing a code of conduct.

Participants at all three schools complained about the conflict that exists between the RCL members and the other learners they represent. According to the participants, this conflict is a result of jealousy on the part of the other learners. A participant from School 1 explained it this way:

There will always be guys who are jealous. There will always be guys who gang up against you. They give you trouble if you are disciplining them. But then if you are disciplining them you just keep your head and maintain your cool. Even with your own peers, there are guys who feel that they should be the one to be where you are right now. They will go out of their way to make sure you have hassles.

Recommendations for improvement, based on the results of the research

Extra-curricular activities such as sports will build the learners' team spirit and teach them to exercise self-control. The disadvantaged areas need special support in this regard. There is also a need for further training of the RCL members, especially in the area of communication. It is essential for all the learners playing a role in the implementation of a code of conduct to be trained in team building and promoting unity. Networking between the RCL of various schools is recommended, but this should be scheduled and monitored by the school management teams. There is a need for

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clearly defined duties and rights of the principal with respect to those of the chairperson of the school governing body, and these two persons need to work together in the interest of the learners.

Code of conduct/policy as a barrier

A code of conduct/policy was identified as a barrier, which is contradictory because schools need a code of conduct to enforce discipline. Nevertheless, where this code of conduct/policy is inadequate it constitutes a barrier to the role of learners in managing discipline. Some schools have written policies and constitutions about the role of learners, while others do not.

None of the learners in the three schools said that they had been involved in developing their code of conduct. The principal of School 1 said that the code of conduct at his school had been in existence for decades, and they merely revise it every year in consultation with the Representative Council of Learners. The participants at Schools 2 and 3 complained about the lack of visibility of their code of conduct and also said that the merit system was not being implemented to enable the affected learners to be rewarded. They also complained that certain practices were not included in the code of conduct. Some of them complained that discipline was not taken seriously, especially regarding disruptive behaviour in class. A participant from School 2 had the following to say:

All we like to see is things taken seriously like lack of discipline because things that are put in the code of conduct. They are taking things like weapon. Ok he/she can be expelled ok then how about the student who always disturb in classes, they are thinking that this person be suspended like two three days, then afterwards he comes back and then the same thing happens. [He complains of the management's opinion over what constitutes serious misbehaviour and deserves more attention which differs from the learners'.] So I don't see anything happening. I feel that it's useless to take a kid to a disciplinary hearing and then after he does the same thing again. A number of learners have been taken to the disciplinary hearing without any effect. So I feel that discipline will have to be taken to another level.

Recommendations for improvement, based on the results of the research

A well-developed code of conduct that elicits learner participation and which is visible and reinforced at the beginning of every term will go a long way in helping learners to develop self-control. The schools that lack a policy regarding the participation of learners need to put one in place urgently. It is also important to implement the merit system in the code of conduct at the right time, before it becomes a disciplinary problem. The Representative Council of Learners, disciplinary committee and management of the affected schools need to sit together and agree on what constitutes serious misbehaviour.

School programme-related barriers (rigid timetable, timing of school governing body's meetings, lack of extracurricular activities and planning)

The study identified the following aspects pertaining to the school programme as barriers to the role of learners in developing and implementing a code of conduct: a rigid timetable, timing of the SGB meetings, lack of extracurricular activities and lack of planning. Some participants complained that they were unable to fulfil their role in the RCL because of the school programme.

With regard to how the learners can contribute to discipline in their school through developing and implementing a code of conduct for learners, the RCL members of School 3 commented on the efforts they have made in this regard, as well as the barriers they have experienced that relate to school programmes:

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We are trying to make school more fun, practical. It's, kind of, boring coming to school doing the same things every year. You, like, want to make new things, make change, do some things different. [She complains about lack of extra-curricular activities in the school] RCL will create understanding and change the school.

Recommendations for improvement, based on the results of the research

It is important to have a flexible school programme and timetable that make provision for the learners' role in developing self-discipline through participating in concerts and other extracurricular activities. Learners should receive the timetable/school programme at the beginning of the term. SGB meetings should include the RCL and should be scheduled to take place during the day; alternatively, if these meetings are held in the evening, the safety of the learners should be considered.

CONCLUSION

The problems of discipline are considerable and very formidable for educators and it is quite obvious that educators alone cannot solve them. The learner who is at the centre of it all should be encouraged to participate. The literature review and the result of the investigation show that it is compulsory for learners to participate in the development and implementation of a code of conduct through the RCL and through their representation in the school governing body. Learners should be consulted in their own affairs. Research conducted by Cockburn (2006) and Mncube (2008) shows that they are willing to play that part.

The investigation reveals that this process is saddled with a lot of barriers with the result that the learners in some black schools are not being represented in the SGB and in the schools where they are represented; they are not allowed to participate in the hearing and decisions of certain nature. The results showed that the majority of participants were negative about the role of secondary school learners in developing and implementing a code of conduct. This investigation also shows that the learners are not involved in the development of their code of conduct. The emphasis on the implementation of a code of conduct is on self-discipline and self-control, which is shown in the literature.

The literature reveals that a participatory self-discipline approach will help learners learn democratic principles that will enable them to make positive decisions as democratic citizens. The South African Schools Act stipulates that the process of drawing the code of conduct for learners involves learners exploring their own ideas, deciding on the consequences of the behaviour, revisiting, evaluating and changing things if necessary. But this process is not done in black schools. In this case, the support of the principals, the educator and the chairpersons of school governing bodies in giving the learners the opportunity, creating extra-curricular activities and the right environment will go a long way to remedy the situation. This study reveals that learners desire to leave their footprints on the sand of time in their schools. They should be motivated to do so.

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