

Introduction

Education in South Africa has gone through major social, political, economical changes in the quest to establish a democratic and humane nation. In my essay I have selected the aspect of Discipline of the current education policy to investigate. In my essay I will attempt to review the National Discipline Policy in South Africa and how the different role players implement discipline in the school environment. I will go on to further discuss how the discipline policy has developed in the South African context during the Apartheid and post apartheid years ,as well as the difficulties and problems associated with implementing the Discipline policy in South African schools will then form part of my critique .my conclusions and recommendations will follow thereafter.

Vally, S (1998), states with regards to discipline in the classroom that,

“All students are expected to conduct themselves in a manner conducive to learning, at all times in all places and activities. Teachers are in charge of their classrooms ,and can make any reasonable rule for governing their classroom ,which is acceptable to the administration, students are expected to respect all teachers at all times and follow their directions whether they are in the classroom , on the playground ,in the halls, or at any sponsored activities ” (Valley S ,Dept of Education , 1998)

In today's society, teachers feel like they do not exercise enough control in the classroom due to the fact that corporal punishment has been banned in all schools under the South African Schools Act. Many educators have found themselves in a position of not knowing what to do in the absence of corporal punishment.

In my discussion on Discipline, there is a significant distinction that should be made between discipline and punishment. As many educators confuse the two as being the same concept. 'Punishment', in my opinion is based on the belief that if children are made to suffer for doing wrong, they will not repeat their mistakes. On the other hand 'Discipline', "is associated with positive behavior management aimed at promoting appropriate behavior and developing self-discipline and self control in learners."(Department of Education, 2000).Here we see that the concepts of 'Discipline' and 'Punishment' have different meanings although they are sometimes used interchangeably. The real challenge lies in the implementation of disciplinary measures that will maintain order in the schools with understanding and compassion.

Punishment is seen by the Department of Education as "an aspect of discipline that involves actions taken in response to inappropriate behavior in order to correct or modify behavior and to restore harmonious relations" (2000).It is usually tied to a process of supporting the norms of the majority of learners, parents and educators who determine the norms and values in a school. when learners behave in a way that is seen unacceptable to the majority at the school ,the majority expects learners to be punished .in this regards learners and their parents , need to sit down together with the school staff and school governing body to highlight what inappropriate behavior or misconduct is seen as , at school. This then instills the need for a comprehensive code of conduct for learners.

"Empowerment will inevitably, I believe; result in a certain degree of loss of being in authority. But the teacher who is an 'authority' not 'in authority' will be better able to guide and nurture pupils to engage in their own analysis and made their own decisions based on the guidance." (Bardill, N .J, Ambassador to Switzerland, Saamtrek Conference, February 2001)

South African Code of Conduct for Schools- Discipline Policy

"The legal documents with which any disciplinary measure may not conflict are the following:

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (and subsequent revisions thereof)

The Bill of Human Rights" (www.education.pwv.gov.za accessed on 04/09/07)

South African law has created a legal context and it is important for all role players associated with the school to know the law related to school discipline and punishment, so that they can continue building and maintaining an effective school. In 1996, corporal punishment was prohibited in schools in terms of the South African Schools' Act (Section 10.1.). Corporal punishment goes against a person's right to freedom and security which says people have the right not to be treated or punished in a cruel, inhuman or degrading way.

Teachers, who relied solely on corporal punishment for discipline at school, still grapple with the problem of what to do to replace corporal punishment. No training in alternative forms of discipline was provided for teachers. As a result teachers felt, and still feel, that there is nothing that they can do to discipline children at school. Many teachers still use corporal punishment. I observe that schools using corporal punishment experience the most serious discipline issues. The continued use of this practice sustains the false belief that it is acceptable to solve problems using violence. In terms of the South African Schools Act (1996), the governing body of a school must adopt a code of conduct for learners and may suspend learners or recommend learners for expulsion after a fair hearing. Section 10 of the Schools

Act prohibits the administering of corporal punishment. However difficult it has become to maintain discipline at schools in the wake of these regulations, it should be kept in mind that these are legislations, which have to be observed. The consequences of violating these laws could lead to criminal action against educators.

Discipline is obviously necessary for the functioning of a school. Indiscipline not only disrupts teaching and learning but can also endanger learners and educators. I have also noticed whilst doing my research and during my practice teaching last year, that learners who misbehave tend to perform poorly at school and also tend to be absent frequently. Some learners have also lost the culture of respect and trust of their educators. Disruptive behaviour or other forms of misconduct by learners often negatively affects fellow learner's safety, security and success in education.

After thorough research, it is evident that good discipline is a cornerstone in the foundation of successful schools. However, South African principals, educators and school governing bodies face one of the most challenging tasks in trying to create and maintain a safe discipline environment. A structured and efficient discipline policy that works needs to be implemented in schools, where each school by law has to make a report of its school safety and discipline plan, ensuring that they are enforcing and putting to practice what the policy states.

The maintenance of good discipline at school, I feel, is everybody's responsibility. Even people who may not have a vested interest in school have a duty to report or correct deviant behaviour such as smoking, playing truant, horseplay and the use of foul language amongst our learners in and out of school. The role players that impact directly towards the maintaining of good discipline in schools are the School Governing Body, The Form Class Teacher, the Class monitor, RCL reps, Subject teachers, officials on ground duty, the school management team, the principal and lastly the parent. The governing body at each school must consult with educators, parents and learners to draft a code of conduct for learners using alternatives to corporal punishment.

This code of conduct must include:

The types of misbehavior that will be punished.

The types of punishment that will be given for different forms of misbehavior.

Procedure that the school will follow in disciplining a learner.

Grievance procedures for parents and learners if they want to take up a matter against another learner or the school. (South Africans Schools Act,1996)

The following are a list of responsibilities that the role players administer in the success of good discipline in schools.

1. The Role of the Governing Body:

Adopt a code of conduct at schools in consultation with learners, educators and parents.

Set up a tribunal, which will conduct fair hearings on serious discipline cases.

Issue warnings to learners, suspend learners or recommend learners for expulsion in terms of the provisions of the South African School Act.

The Role of the Form Teacher:

The form teacher serves in the capacity of "in loco parentis" . It is important that the educator gets to know all the children in the class as closely as possible; in this role the form teacher will find that sometimes he/she will praise the child and at other times will have to reprimand or discipline the child. There will also be times when the provision of pastoral care will be necessary.

The form teacher should be the first to find out if a child is experiencing any problem at school.

Keeping in mind the various legislations on the code of conduct adopted by the governing body, the form teacher must adopt a set of class rules for the learners.

Each learner should then sign a document regarding his/her preparedness to uphold the class rules.

Keep detailed records on learners (absence from school, discipline problems, late arrivals, etc.)

Role of Class Monitor:

Maintain discipline in the absence of the teacher.

Report Discipline problems to the teacher.

Role of RCL Rep:

Assist the monitor in executing duties

Represents the class in decisions taken at RCL meetings.

Role of Subject Teacher:

Keep detailed records of subject related transgressions.

Subject teacher must report all serious problems related to the learner to the form teacher.

Role of Official on Ground Duty:

The educator on duty must handle incidents occurring on the grounds during breaks, in the mornings and after school.

Role of School Management Team:

- Receive an act upon complaints of a serious nature.
- Set up meeting with parents if necessary.
- Keep detailed records of incidents in the incident book.
- Recommend to the principal any further action necessary.

Role of the Principal:

- Investigate offences of a very serious nature (e.g. bomb threat, arson attempt, etc.)
- Submit safety and security report to circuit office.
- Authorise search of learners and seizure of dangerous weapons.

Role of the Parent:

- The school recognises the parent as one of the highest authorities in the life of the child.
- Educators are encouraged to inform parents as often as possible of the conduct and behaviour of the learners.
- Discipline Policy during the Apartheid Years and Post – Apartheid years.

“Any deliberate act against a child that inflicts pain or physical discomfort to punish or contain him/her. This includes, but is not limited to, spanking, slapping, pinching, paddling or hitting a child with a hand or with an object; denying or restricting a child’s use of the toilet; denying meals, drink, heat and shelter, pushing or pulling a child with force, forcing the child to do exercise.” (www.childadvocate.org.htm accessed on 05/09/07)

The Christian National Education was designed to support the apartheid system by schooling children to become passive citizens who would accept authority unquestioningly. Corporal punishment was part of a bigger picture of an authoritarian approach to managing a school environment which was based on the view that children need to be controlled by adults and that measures such as “sarcasm”, “shouting” and other “abusive forms of behaviour” (www.childadvocate.org.htm accessed on 07/09/07) were ways of teaching children a lesson or ensuring that they were so afraid that they never stepped out of line. These measures used to maintain discipline were, “reactive”, “punitive”, “humiliating” and “punishing” rather than “corrective” and “nurturing”. (www.childadvocate.org.htm accessed on 07/09/07) Teachers were encouraged to use the cane during this era as a way of keeping control and dealing with those who stepped out of line. Beating children to discipline or punish them was simply taken for granted in a society so familiar with violence. During the 1970’s, however when resistance to apartheid swelled, student organisations began to demand an end to abuse in the classroom and in the 1980s learners, educators and parents formed “Education Without Fear” (www.infogov.za accessed on 07/09/07) to campaign actively against the whipping of children.

At the same time, international thinking about corporal punishment began to change. Increasingly, research showed a direct link between corporal punishment and levels of violence in society. Communities around the world began to see the “scrapping” (www.infogov.za accessed on 08/09/07) of corporal punishment in schools as an important step towards creating more peaceful and tolerant societies. Now, in “Europe, North America, Australia, Japan and many other countries, corporal punishment has been banned.” (www.infogov.za accessed on 08/09/07)

In a society like ours with a long history of violence and abuse of human rights the transition to peace, tolerance and respect for human rights was not an easy one. Schools have a vital role to play in bringing about this transformation. After 1994 when South Africa adopted the new democratic constitution a legislation to outlaw corporal punishment was passed.

South Africa is one of the signatories to the “Convention on the Rights of the Child” (www.infogov.za accessed on 09/09/07), whose aim is to protect the child from all forms of physical and mental violence.

The “African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child” (www.infogov.za accessed on 08/09/07) also commits its members to ensure that a child who is subjected to discipline shall be treated with dignity and respect.

The South African Constitution in Section 12 states “Everyone has the right not to be treated or punished in a cruel, inhuman, or degrading way” (www.infogov.za accessed on 07/09/07).

The National Education Policy Act (1996) says, “No person shall administer corporal punishment or subject a student to psychological or physical abuse at any educational institution.” (www.infogov.za accessed on 07/09/07)

The South African Schools Act (1996) says, “(1) no person may administer corporal punishment at a school to a learner; (2) Any person who contravenes subsection 1 is guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to a sentence which could be imposed for assault.”

Although most people accept that corporal punishment has no place in school or society, some still believe that “to spare the rod is to spoil the child”. They argue that their cultural and/or religious freedom is being curbed because they are no longer allowed to discipline children with physical force in their schools. Christian Education South Africa (CESA) an

association of 209 independent Christian schools around the country, mounted two unsuccessful court challenges against the state, arguing that the S.A Schools Act contravenes the Constitution by outlawing corporal punishment in independent schools as well as public schools, and that educators in these independent schools should be allowed to beat children if granted permission by parents.

The two largest teacher unions, “the South African Democratic Teachers Union and the National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa” (www.childadvocate.org.htm accessed on 06/09/07), have given their full support to the banning of corporal punishment and the development of alternative strategies for discipline. With these alternative discipline strategies a Discipline Policy was drawn up, which applied to all schools.

Some educators believe that children will neither show them respect nor develop discipline to work unless they are beaten or threatened with being beaten. They feel that they no longer have power because they are not able to use corporal punishment. Corporal punishment is also “quick and easy” and other methods require “time and patience” (www.education.pwv.gov.za accessed on 04/09/07) which most educators lack. Since most educators themselves experienced no harmful effects from having being beaten as children there is no reason why they should not use it to. Some educators feel the only way to deal with difficult or disruptive learners with behavioural problems that don’t respond to other disciplinary measures are to beat them. For some educators corporal punishment is part of their culture of religious beliefs. Another view is that learners think that they got away with wrong doing, and will repeat their misconduct.

There are also those educators who believe that corporal punishment is wrong, but they don’t always know what to use instead of physical force, or the threat of it to maintain discipline and a culture of learning. Discipline is a part of the daily life of learners and educators; it demands a great deal of time, creativity, commitment and resources. At times educators find it difficult to adhere to the present discipline policy.

Critique of Policy

There are many difficulties and problems associated with implementing the discipline policy in South African schools in respect of the code of conduct. South Africa is a country with unusually high levels of violence, with areas loaded with social pain. “Many educators have to deal with the terrifying and constant threat of gangsterism, assaults on teachers and brutal rapes of schoolgirls.” (Department of Education, 2000). Despite these violent realities corporal punishment continued to be used in schools as a means of discipline.

The mission of the Government is to raise educational standards. Standards cannot be raised if pupils miss school and behave badly when they are present at school. Attendance and good behaviour are preconditions for effective learning. Dealing with poor behaviour is as much part of improving pupil performance as good teaching. The reason why we should tackle the behaviour problem is because education is about values as well as knowledge and skills. Values such as respect, courtesy and consideration are the foundations of a civilized society. That includes respect for others and respect for authority. Heads, teachers and other school staff deserve respect. There can never be any justification for subjecting them to assault verbal or physical.

Vally, S at a conference on alternative disciplinary measures in high schools on March 31, 1998 said there was a lot of evidence to suggest that many schools still practiced corporal punishment. Vally (1998) said physical punishment of pupils was a sad reflection of the country’s violent society. The conference, held at the Feather Market Centre, provided a platform for parents, teachers and the education department to discuss suitable alternatives to corporal punishment. “Fear and discipline are not compatible” Vally (1998) said. “Punishment need not be synonymous with discipline .By striking the pupil; the educator provides a model to the child that violence is an acceptable way to behave. Physical punishment does not deter. It encourages anti-social aggressiveness and vandalism”, Vally (1998) concluded.

The aim of the code of conduct is to maintain the disciplined and purposeful school environment. It is dedicated to the maintenance and improvement of the quality of the learning process of the refinement of the culture of effective learning and teaching. The code of conduct ensures that every learner has the right to be treated fairly and responsibly, to show respect to others, to be taught in a safe and disciplines environment, and to be treated with respect by the school.

The school’s discipline policy needs to be fairly and consistently applied by teachers in handling disruptive behaviour. Effective systems of support for teachers, especially those with less experience need to be agreed by the head teacher. Schools should be alert to the fact that some difficult behaviour results from special educational needs which are not met, such as emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Several studies have researched alternative options corporal punishment, such as behaviour modification and positive reinforcement. Briefly, this involves rewarding the child for good behaviour or probing the reasons behind the child’s actions. I feel that it is also necessary to be aware of a child’s home circumstances. For example, children might be

frequently late for school because they were the eldest siblings and had to dress and feed brothers and sisters before coming to class. Pupils could also be helped with self discipline by encouraging them to model themselves on another peer, a respectable adult or fictitious person.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Discipline and respect for authority may be unfashionable concepts but educators should not be afraid to use them. The future of our learners lie in our hands, we owe it to them to have the chance to grow up in a society that is safe and to learn in an environment where there is respect for all.

It goes without saying that no real learning can take place in an environment of fear and illegality. Neither can the values of the Constitution be enforced in young South Africans in an environment where they are being exposed daily with impunity not only must learners and educators be safe from threats outside the school gates, but safe from each other. I strongly feel that, no learning and teaching can take place in an environment where teachers and learners inflict harm on each other.

Those who teach and learn in schools are among the most progressive members of their community. In our extremely violent society it means modelling, for young people, the benefits of a path that uses discussion and dialogue rather than violent confrontation, one that demonstrates to learners and to the broader community, how much better the quality of life is, for law abiding citizens. If there is no respect for discipline and of those who administer rules then the result will be the chaos that exists in so many of our schools.

Even though traditionally, I feel South African schools are hierarchical institutions, which administer authoritarian discipline to manage young people rigidly, rather than enlighten them with the new discipline policy. A new generation will emerge where lines of accountability are clear, where discipline is fair, just and proportionate, and where there is a sense of purpose.

Clearly the violent atmosphere in South African schools is a reflection of the broader society. I think the solution in the long term is to address the societal conditions that provoke the problems of violence. Many learners come from situations where unemployment, poverty and abuse are the norm. I feel that most gang-related violence in schools is caused by learners that have finished schools; or youth that are unemployed and they should be given priority attention. The consistent and frequent nature of violence and lack of discipline in South African society and schools has brought about a dangerous feeling of disempowerment amongst educators.

I feel that due to financial restraints the Department cannot employ specialised teachers to assist schools with a track record of violence as well as occasional visits by social workers is insufficient to win the confidence of school communities and address problems facing the education system. Therefore, I suggest that a solution would be to relieve admired and trusted teachers of teaching hours to provide counselling services, mainly concentrated to include a participation facility designed to allow children to consider and process their experiences and their worlds.

We as future educators need to change the way we think about discipline in school. It is no longer enough to preserve the past's narrow perception of the role of discipline. Schools are just beginning to learn and understand that discipline includes much more. How students behave should, in fact, be an area of instruction on a par with academic content in schools.

While significant strides have been made to humanise schooling, such as the prohibition of corporal punishment, educators in South Africa should continue their efforts to increase safety and justice in their schools, to break the cycle of poor discipline that inevitably results in violence.

References:

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