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Disciplinary practices in the early grades: Creating culturally responsive learning environments in South Africa

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Discipline is essential to learning, but in culturally diverse groups it could become a challenge for teachers. Positive discipline, respect for human rights and the creation of a sense of belonging promotes culturally responsive and disciplined learners. This study investigated the social and cultural contexts of discipline in early grade South African classrooms from the perspective of the teachers. Nine teachers were interviewed through semi-structured interviews regarding their disciplinary strategies and cultural responsiveness. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, teacher participants provided photographs of the classroom layouts, observation checklists, and field notes of the disciplinary practices implemented in the classrooms. Data was thematically analysed. The findings confirm that diversity is a challenge due to external factors such as parent expectations, as well as internal factors such as the management of differences between the teachers' beliefs and those of the learners. Another finding relates to the importance of creating a disciplined classroom environment and finding a positive alliance between policy and implementation. New insights emerged regarding the way cultural responsiveness affirms the unique culture of a classroom and thereby supports its management and discipline.

Keywords: culturally responsive learning environment; disciplinary practices; early grade classrooms

Introduction

The concept of classroom "disciplinary practices" can be misperceived to refer to silent and inactive learners managed by despondent teachers trying to control unruly behaviour, which they believe should already have been addressed at home. According to Monroe (2009:322) "[d]iscipline is a widespread concern in public schools." Brown (2004:325) mentions that for teachers to be seen as effective, they should "possess the skills to provide a classroom environment that adequately addresses student needs, validates diverse cultures, and advocates equitable access to educational opportunities for all." Diversity of language, culture, and development, to name just a few, demands an inclusive approach to education, especially with regard to discipline in the classroom.

The provision of more inclusive schools in South Africa over the last number of years has created new challenges and demands. Schools have become diverse in terms of the cultural backgrounds of learners, which includes home language, religion, ethnicity/race, and socio-economic status, and their accompanying disciplinary practices. Since the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, disciplining learners through corporal punishment has been banned and inclusive education encouraged. South Africa is currently one of the many countries facing disciplinary problems in schools (Marais & Meier, 2010; Monroe, 2009; Oosthuizen, Roux & Van der Walt, 2003; Rossouw, 2003; Yariv, 2012). Schools and teachers had (and have) to find alternative ways of disciplining learners in the newly constructed society (Erasmus, 2009:1–2).

It is important for teachers to value the diversity in today's classrooms and recognise the contributions of these differences to themselves and their learners. Hurtado (2001:200) asserts that interactions across diverse cultures and racial or ethnic groups in a classroom are beneficial as they serve to prepare those involved for living in a complex and diverse society. The diversity "becomes a necessary part of the curriculum." Bornman and Rose (2010) state that the best way for teachers to accommodate diversity is to strive to create a supportive classroom environment. Such a supportive classroom environment develops a strong sense of belonging – belonging to a group that endeavours to share common norms, values, and behaviour. This can essentially be considered as a culture in itself.

The Bill of Rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996b) opposes discrimination and upholds the value of diversity. A culture based on respect for human rights and supported by parents, teachers, and learners is one worth protecting and perpetuating. Respecting the dignity of each human being leads to respect for other cultures, including the culture of the classroom.

A culturally responsive learning environment requires disciplinary practices that respect the unique culture of each learner. For any culture to thrive, it is essential that positive role models advocate and live the values and norms held true by the group. In a classroom setting, these are the teachers who hopefully pass this role on to the learners they serve.

The research question to be answered in this article is whether a learning environment responsive to cultural diversity and to the unique development of each learner can support the management of a classroom and its disciplinary practice, and also promote respect for the unique culture of the classroom.

This article reports on findings from a larger study conducted in a South African context. In this article we highlight certain concepts or aspects of discipline in the early grades of a school environment. These include the necessity to create a disciplined classroom environment through teachers' disciplinary practices, challenges

teachers face regarding diversity, and the need for a positive alliance between relevant policies and their implementation.

Conceptual Platform

Disciplinary practices

Discipline is often understood to refer to “order or an absence of behavioural problems” (Erasmus, 2009:8) that implies a certain expected pattern or way of behaviour. Teachers are expected to maintain discipline in the classroom, correcting behavioural problems that arise, and redirecting conduct if the expected behaviour is absent. Oosthuizen, Roux and Van der Walt (2003, cited in Erasmus, 2009:8) are of the opinion that “the application of discipline should not be construed as solely a clamp-down on unruly, mischievous and disruptive behaviour, but as a means of entering into a loving, caring and guiding relationship with learners.” Meier and Marais (2007:321) confirm this by stating that “discipline is about positive behaviour management and developing self-discipline and self-control in learners.”

Positive discipline, which incorporates a particular view, belief, and concern about education, is based on the principle that behaviour is motivated through people seeking a sense of belonging or connecting as well as having meaning in their social context (Chadsey & McVittie, 2006:2). According to Coetzee (2010:480–481) it is grounded in human rights, having mutual respect, maintaining good relationships through communication and co-operation, framing and enforcing boundaries in a positive and consistent manner, modelling acceptable behaviour, and building responsibility and self-discipline. Durrant (2010:15) emphasises the importance of applying positive discipline to teach learners life-long skills as well as the values of self-respect, empathy, and respect for others and their rights.

Discipline and behaviour are interlinked and influence each other according to the young child’s development. MacNaughton and Williams (2004:4) argue that effective teaching centres on a teacher’s knowledge and understanding of a combination of factors such as child development, individual traits, knowledge of policies, and cultural and family values. Gordon and Browne (2014:214) assert that “discipline is deeply embedded within the values and beliefs of the family ... and each family is unique in the way it interprets cultural values.” Cultural factors are therefore paramount to understanding child behaviour and indeed encompass aspects of all the afore-mentioned factors.

Policy context

Classroom management is influenced significantly by the policies and laws regulating a country as

well as by teachers’ personal views, beliefs, and concerns about education (Yariv, 2012). The South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) (Republic of South Africa, 1996a) and the White Paper on Education, published in 1995 after the first democratic elections in South Africa, brought changes to many sectors of South Africa’s education system. It helped create a unified education and training system “committed to equal access, non-discrimination and redress” (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 1995:25), and also laid the foundation for Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education (Department of Education, 2001) to promote tolerance, respect, and support for diversity and the human rights of all, especially those with disabilities and/or those marginalised. The Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996b) promotes respect for, among others, the language, culture, and rights of all people based on the values of human dignity, equality, and freedom.

The Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (Department of Higher Education and Training, Republic of South Africa, 2015:64) encourages not only a sense of unity and inclusiveness in class, but also one of recognising uniqueness. Teachers are required to “understand [learners’] individual needs” and “know who their learners are” (Department of Higher Education and Training, Republic of South Africa, 2015:64). Understanding who learners are includes recognising the factors influencing their behaviour. Gordon and Browne (2014:237–242) recommend being cognisant of the developmental, environmental, individual, emotional-social, and cultural factors related to learners, in order to understand their behaviour better.

The Foundation Phase, as understood in South African schools, refers to the first four years in which learners receive one year of informal teaching in Grade R (R for reception) and formal schooling from Grades 1 to 3. According to the Department of Basic Education “Early Childhood Development (ECD) applies to the process by which children from birth to at least nine years of age grow and thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, morally and socially. Part of the ECD is the Foundation Phase (Grades R and Grades 1–3), which also forms the first part of the General Educational and Training band of the NQF [National Qualifications Framework]” (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2011:6–7). Foundation Phase learners are therefore those up to the age of nine or 10 years. This is a vital time for children to develop mentally, physically, and emotionally so that they can better manage the challenges awaiting them in the next phase or level of schooling.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

In this exploratory case study (Yin, 2003) nine Foundation Phase (specifically Grade 3) teachers from three English-medium and culturally diverse government schools in the metropolitan area of Tshwane (Pretoria) were interviewed and observed in their classrooms. The learners were observed as indirect participants responding to the teachers' disciplinary strategies. The study aimed to gather and interpret information collected during the interviews regarding teachers' understanding of discipline, factors influencing discipline, the role of cultural diversity in this context, and the disciplinary practices that could possibly promote a culturally responsive learning environment in the Foundation Phase. A qualitative and interpretivist paradigm was used for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon studied and to formulate a new interpretation accordingly (Mouton, 2001:113).

The decision to target these participants and this context was prompted by various factors. Grade 3 is a significant time for learners in South Africa, as it marks a time of preparation for the challenges of Grade 4, the start of the Intermediate Phase, where more subjects, teachers, and complex assessments come into play and learners' social, emotional, mental, and physical development is often challenged. The role of discipline and classroom management therefore become crucial at this point. The schools chosen were, at the time of the research (2016) known as schools rich in cultural diversity and for effective disciplinary practices.

Ethical clearance was obtained and adequate measures regarding informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and safety of participants were taken. The strategies of crystallisation, member checking, consistency, and using the natural setting for observations (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007:40) were used to improve the trustworthiness and credibility of this study. The use of interviews, observations, field notes, and photographs to collect data and comparing the findings of the different collection techniques ensured crystallisation. To ensure that they had been understood correctly, participants were required to read the data collected, and colleagues and fellow researchers were asked to give their opinions on the research as a way of member checking. Data was collected as consistently as possible using an observation checklist, a semi-structured interview schedule, and a photograph checklist. Data collection and data analysis also took place consistently for the different participants and schools. Participants and learners were observed in their natural environment at their schools. Using multiple methods to gather data also helped triangulate the findings and improve the validity of the data. In addition, a pilot study was conducted before the actual

investigation to test the data collection strategies, particularly the interview questions, and to assess the practicality of the interview guide and the observation checklist.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data obtained was collected mainly through semi-structured and individual interviews, structured observations (using the observation checklist), field notes (of interviews and using a recording sheet), and visual data (using photographs of classroom layouts taken of empty classrooms). The teachers were interviewed about their perceptions and experiences of discipline in Foundation Phase classrooms. The questions revolved around the following issues: the definition of discipline for the teachers and learners, the exploration of cultural diversity in the classrooms, experienced challenges relating to discipline in this phase, possible differences in the behaviour of learners of different genders or from different cultures, effective and ineffective disciplinary strategies and class rules, disciplinary strategies aimed at creating a culturally responsive class, the teacher's role in discipline, and the support of colleagues, parents, principals, and policies regarding discipline.

Qualitative data was organised and coded using an inductive process and content analysis. Creswell's (2014:197–199) recommended steps for developing themes from raw data were applied by initially reading through all the data, dividing the text into segments of information, and then labelling these segments with codes, reducing the overlap and redundancy of codes, and finally collapsing codes into themes. These themes and the findings from this study are elaborated on in the following section.

Findings

From the analysis of the interviews, photographs, and observation data, three broad themes, which are set out below, emerged.

Creating a Disciplined Classroom Environment that is Sensitive to Diversity

All participants agreed on the importance of creating a disciplined classroom environment for effective teaching and learning to take place. One of the participants stated as follows: "[w]e need to keep them [learners] on the right track in order for us to do our teaching ... to teach effectively." Participants also agreed that the teacher was ultimately responsible for managing behaviour in that environment. One of the participants explained: "If you are setting a good example, the kids should be able to follow the example that you are setting." One teacher seemed to emphasise her sole ownership of the classroom by stating that "[t]hey're on my turf," thereby possibly expecting learners to rely solely on her verbal responses with

regard to their behaviour as no rules were visually displayed in the room. However, most teachers demonstrated an interactive environment regarding discipline, e.g. star charts, learners writing in the behaviour journals, giving and taking of rewards, and responsibility for the daily management of the class being shared by teacher and learners.

Various disciplinary strategies and techniques were observed, noted, and photographed. These included recognising and rewarding good behaviour (positive reinforcement) of individuals as well as random grouping of the class into teams, maintaining a stimulating and active class environment, removing privileges, penalising with detention or time-out, creating role models, using points systems (behavioural management), using a warning system, maintaining journals or tracking sheets, and sending special soft toys (Lazy Lizard or Ellie the Elephant) home as a reward for good behaviour. Some strategies were maintained consistently for longer periods of time, while others were used anew each day, allowing each learner to start on a clean slate. Rules, guidelines to improve listening, as well as progressive disciplinary steps (e.g. reminders, time-outs, a behaviour journal, disciplinary notes, and phone calls to parents) were clearly displayed in some classrooms. Most of the participants confirmed that positive reinforcement strategies were most effective for creating a disciplined and culturally responsive learning environment.

The importance of focusing not only on positive reinforcement, but on encouragement, modelling positive behaviour, maintaining engagement, acknowledging the individual, and promoting ownership as ways to maintain a disciplined and conducive learning environment was highlighted. One of the participants stated: "I like to focus more on the positive rather than the negative. I feel that they also respond better to it, instead of being moaned at the whole time." Values were deemed important in the discipline and management of a classroom as exemplified by the following comment: "It's basically to get the children to be considerate of one another, to have self-discipline, which should basically be taught at home, to have good manners, to know when to speak, to know when they must listen ... to have respect for one another and for one another's, each other's property."

Diversity as a Challenge

Diversity in terms of cultures, beliefs, norms, socio-economic circumstances, language, gender, ability, age, and parental expectations posed challenges in the way these influenced learners' behaviour in class.

Such challenges, categorized as predominantly external to the teachers, included parents' expectations, as stated by one of the

participants: "Some parents see this as education that we [teachers] are supposed to do everything" without any support and involvement from home, irrespective of economic circumstances and different religions. The reality of teachers, learners, and parents using different home languages challenged effective communication. One teacher confirmed this: "You know our school, where you cater for 21 countries' diplomats' children, so we have a big diversity in the language." Assertions were also made that different cultures often view and respond to the issue of discipline differently. One participant noted: "[learners are] coming from homes with different views, different discipline procedures, where there's actually no discipline sometimes at home"; and "[t]heir parents allow them to speak to them in certain ways, or to talk while they are talking ... they look at the TV while their parents are instructing them, so they don't look at the teachers or [look at] the friend or the peer that is talking to them in their eyes" [*sic*]. From one perspective it is deemed respectful to make eye contact with the teacher, while the same behaviour is deemed disrespectful from another, despite the need to look at a teacher frequently in order to facilitate understanding, learning, and imitating – especially in the Foundation Phase.

An internal challenge noted was how teachers managed the differences of their own beliefs and values and those of the learners. When asked about this, one of the observations was that the "teacher seems scared/uncomfortable answering race-related questions" and the teacher's answer was recorded as: "I don't think we think that way anymore. They are all the same." Other internal challenges included bullying, homework not being done, big classes ("We've got high numbers in our classrooms and that is obviously harder ... where you can't actually be with every child all the time"), and differences in activity levels among learners. Despite the challenges, however, teachers seemed to agree that sensitivity to and tolerance for differences were important for effective classroom management.

Positive Alliance between Policy and Implementation

The final theme, a positive alliance between policies and their implementation, also pointed to the importance of effective communication and engagement among stakeholders. This included communication between teachers (verbally, weekly meetings for planning and updating documents, school-based support team meetings, record-keeping), communication between the principal, parents, and teachers (personal written or electronic communication, homework diaries), and involvement by principals (disciplinary management, training, support, open-door policy for discussion of serious matters). Most of the participants' com-

ments reflected a positive view of their principals and colleagues. Although comments concerning parent-teacher communication differed, the general perception was that most parents responded well to personal communication between the class teacher and parent, especially from parents invested in their children's lives. These and other insights, including the necessity to create a disciplined classroom environment by managing behaviour through positive perceptions and strategies, reveal the need for teachers, learners, and parents to experience a sense of belonging and sharing common norms by creating a common space or culture.

Discussion

Disciplinary challenges at schools are a global concern, and creating a disciplined environment in a learning setting is deemed important – especially in the early grade classrooms. Although many academics regard disciplinary practices for young children as important, few publications resulting from research projects on the issue have been published in recent years.

The literature (Chadsey & McVittie, 2006; Coetzee, 2010; Durrant, 2010) and data from the study acknowledge the need for management through positive discipline. Grounded in human rights, this form of discipline encourages learning through cooperation and motivates positive behaviour through a sense of belonging.

The development of a sense of belonging can also be encouraged through observing and imitating what one sees and experiences. Teachers model acceptable behaviour, and those who respect the identities of the learners in their class set the tone for others in the class to follow. Even in the case of proactive (rather than reactive) measures, the emphasis is still on building positive relationships, and on teachers focusing on what goes right rather than on what goes wrong.

Indeed, proactive measures alone are not enough; a long-term and sustainable approach is needed in classrooms where preventative, maintaining, supportive, and reactive tactics are all encouraged, and curricula and policies are continuously updated to suit the diversities in a class (Stewart, 2004:324). This depends not only on the teachers and learners, but also on all relevant stakeholders such as parents and policy makers.

Parental involvement, according to the views of the teachers in the study, has a significant effect on child behaviour and ultimately on self-discipline. However, it was noteworthy in the case study that parents were not directly or clearly involved in the drawing up of policies and codes of conduct, and neither were the learners. The involvement of all stakeholders from an educational setting in the very structures and processes that guide them is a matter deserving further research and attention. Coetzee (2010:479) mentions that

teachers may associate the recognition of rights with surrendering control. This may be part of the reason why the schools in the study did not seem to actively involve parents in the drawing up of the code of conduct or other policies at the schools, and perhaps also why learners were not always asked to be part of the development of classroom rules. However, the participating teachers all agreed that it was important for them to be supported by parents and that parental involvement helped create a more disciplined classroom.

Apart from parental involvement, teachers in the study also mentioned that differences in their own and parents' and learners' beliefs, values, and cultures influenced and even challenged discipline. This was especially true if the differences or perceptions of differences affected communication, understanding and expectations of what each was supposed to be contributing to the learners' education. There appears to be a need for respect in this regard – agreeing to disagree, but also finding consensus and compromise in creating a classroom environment attuned to diversity.

As stated before, the Department of Higher Education and Training, Republic of South Africa (2015) encourages beginner teachers not only to understand and manage diversity, but also to understand the uniqueness of the individual. That said, it is just as important to remember our common humanity and the fact that all learners have similar needs and desires – the need for love, safety, a sense of belonging, to know that their voices are heard, and that they have ownership in their choices. Respecting one's own rights and those of others creates inevitable and reciprocal links to respecting the rights of all as diverse groups and cultures. If this view is taken as a given, then it would seem plausible that the next step would be to recognise the classroom itself as a culture worthy of respect.

Although the findings are only true for this case and cannot be generalised to a broader population, insights from the findings confirm the argument that a culturally responsive learning environment can promote discipline and effective classroom management, especially if the classroom can be assumed to have or be a culture in itself.

Implications for Classroom Management

Cultural diversity in a classroom implies a mixture of perspectives, values, needs, and contributions, all of which must be recognised in the teaching and learning environment. It is indeed true that all people are more the same than different – in a classroom all learners in their common humanness experience similar needs and desires. However, there are differences in how we express and experience these needs and desires, which consequently make us unique. Being aware of and acknowledging these differences in a classroom is

part and parcel of what a teacher does. Managing these differences and taking advantage of the value of these differences in a way that benefits the teaching and learning experiences of all involved, can be challenging for many teachers.

Teachers must remain cognisant of the reality of different cultures and ethnicities in a classroom. Engelbrecht and Swanepoel (2009:39) maintain that learning itself can be facilitated by raising awareness of cultural differences, using different languages as a resource for learning, and developing assessment practices that are not culturally biased. The creation and experience of a culturally responsive learning environment affects and effects curriculum changes since, among others, different perspectives must be respected, transformation in language and content must be implemented, and a more holistic view of assessment needs to be applied. Such changes were and still are necessary in the politically transformed context of South Africa.

Conclusion

A positive disciplinary approach instils this sense of belonging and encourages learning through cooperation and a focus on the positive. This approach is based on human rights and helps create a culturally responsive learning environment. The perspectives of the Foundation Phase teachers interviewed on these issues also highlighted the necessity to create a disciplined classroom environment by applying practices that focus on the positive rather than the negative.

The culture of the classroom was recognised in its own right, and in the context of respecting the dignity of each human being, and other cultures. In being cognisant of respect in the classroom, one also becomes cognisant of the need to be able to adapt to the varying and diverse contexts in which one finds oneself. Learners will always be confronted with changing and sometimes contradictory cultures in which they live – family, classroom, peers, the world of the media, and so forth. Without losing respect for one's dignity or for that of others, it seems just as important to be able to adjust and regulate oneself to the norms and values of different cultures. Skills training relating to respect and regulation in this regard may be a subject for further research. In other words, when developing a culturally responsive learning environment to promote discipline, should the skill of adapting to new situations, without losing oneself, not also be investigated and promoted?

Diversity in all its forms should not be feared, but rather embraced and used to develop respect for humanity. Teachers who role-model this and learners who incorporate this into the understanding of themselves and the world can go a long way in creating learning environments that are responsive and fair.

Implications of the Study

Studies on investigating classrooms as cultural entities within the broader school and community environment would improve understanding on discipline-related issues. Further exploration can be conducted on the dynamics of the unique culture in each classroom. In this study parents were not directly involved in the drawing up of policies and codes of conduct, and neither were the learners. Further research investigating the active involvement of all stakeholders in an educational setting is suggested. Insights emerging from such studies can benefit teacher training programmes and continuous professional development of current teachers.

Authors' Contributions

Chevonne Prins conducted the research and provided data for the manuscript, Ina Joubert wrote and edited the manuscript, Judite Ferreira-Prevost wrote and edited the manuscript, Melanie Moen wrote and edited the manuscript.

Notes

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