

The teacher–learner relationship in the management of discipline in public high schools

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Abstract

This article discusses data from a case study involving Grade 8–12 teachers in 14 classrooms. In all the schools that were identified, one teacher from each of the schools was identified for interviewing. After the interview the teacher was used as an 'informant' to identify other teachers who could provide additional information on the issue of classroom discipline in public high schools. Teachers are uncertain about how to relate to the learners and still maintain discipline in the classrooms. Reasons for the persistence of poor teacher–learner relationship include lack of knowledge regarding the effective use of alternatives to corporal punishment and the use of power to establish teacher authority. The results of the study showed that teachers, who are successful in managing misbehaviour in the classrooms, maintain good relations with the learners, encourage self-discipline and dignity, and involve the parents, learner peers as well as other teachers in the learning process. Involving all people who are close to the learner is essential in encouraging the learner to accept the teacher's authority and establish the required interpersonal classroom relationships.

Key words: discipline; family-teacher relationship; managing discipline; teacher authority; teacher-learner relationship

Introduction

In studying classroom discipline, teacher authority and teacher–learner relationships appear to be integral features in the management of discipline in public high schools. Before 1994 teachers were encouraged to use the cane as a method of keeping control in the classrooms. The teachers were also empowered to be in charge in the classroom, but in a hostile or authoritarian manner. In this way teachers were made to believe that power and authority were the bases for control and discipline. The classroom environment was

formal and tended to be tense, and the learners were not given any say in disciplinary matters.

The research indicates that teachers are uncertain how to relate to the learners and still maintain discipline in the classrooms. After the abolition of corporal punishment, teachers were expected to relate to learners in a friendly way and to establish a more relaxed atmosphere. But some teachers were afraid to encourage personal relationships with their learners, fearing that this would lead to a loss of authority in the classrooms. Positive teacher–learner relationships have the potential of creating a conducive learning environment in the classroom and will determine whether or not a learner can benefit from the teaching–learning situation. ‘Teachers should be aware of the need for a positive loving relationship if learning is to take place’ (Hood and Hood 2001, 171). It is believed that in a relationship of trust positive educative learning can be achieved. ‘If trust in the relationship between educator and learner is lacking, the educator is in a position of power instead of authority’ (Oosthuizen, Wolhuter and du Toit 2003, 463). Therefore, favourable relationships can and must be established in the classroom.

Problem statement and aim of the research

Spaulding (1992, 65) contends that teaching is nothing if not about relationships, but training in how teachers should relate to the learners in this new era has never been offered. Most teachers are still uncertain about the type of interpersonal relationship that will ensure the desired classroom environment. It is against this background that the research question ‘*How does one find a balance between building a positive teacher–learner relationship and the need for discipline*’ was formulated. Hence this article has the following objectives:

- to identify strategies to encourage learners to accept teacher authority
- to point out the influence of classroom management and control within interpersonal relationships.

Related literature on the teacher–learner relationship

Some of the education literature (Robertson 1996; Charles 2002; Balson 1992; Kruger and van Schalkwyk 1997) attempts to examine how the teacher–learner relationship could help in promoting effective classroom discipline. Kruger and van Schalkwyk (1997) look at various ways of promoting good relations in the classroom. It was found that behaving consistently, and being open and approachable will ensure a healthy relationship (162). In support of this Robertson (1996) contends that using humour, friendly greetings and non-verbal supportive behaviour may help improve such relations. Spaulding (1992, 70), however, is of the opinion that teachers should avoid ‘humour targeted at the learners’. Furthermore, Kruger and van Schalkwyk (1997) discovered that the quality of the relationships in the classroom has a great influence

on the extent of productive or disruptive behaviour that is evidenced in the classroom context. Charles (2002) proposes a plan that emphasises the prevention of misbehaviour in human relationships. Charles is of the opinion that teachers should work together with learners from a position of social equality. Robertson (1996, 58), in turn, argues that ‘teachers who solicit friendship, run the risk of appearing to their learners as being in need of acceptance’. Robertson believes that teachers should establish their authority in the classroom by establishing a definite classroom policy. ‘When authority is not established some learners may take over the control and in effect determine when teaching can take place’ (Robertson 1996, 58). However, Balson (1992, 63) argues that when rules or routines are decided by the teacher without consulting the learners, many learners will feel ‘inclined to ignore such rules’. These authors agree that authority is the essential feature of the early relationship, but how do teachers establish a less authoritarian working relationship without losing control in the classrooms? Again the problem remains about the best way to promote good relations and to encourage learners to accept the teacher’s authority in the classroom.

The body of literature cited above examined the classroom management and control by the teacher as an emergent phenomenon within interpersonal relationships. The teacher–learner relationship in the classroom should be based on mutual respect and trust. To achieve this, teachers have to be in close partnership with the learners when making decisions that affect the class. Both teachers and learners work as a team to achieve predetermined the goals and objectives of the lesson. That is, the ideal teacher–learner relationship is the one that recognises learners as partners in the education process. In this environment, there is less hindrance and learners work harmoniously with others (Gauteng Department of Education 2000). According to Deiro (2005, 10) the teacher–learner relationship is an example of ‘influential relationship’. ‘Influential relationships are formed to create a challenge in one or both parties in the relationship’ (10). The teacher is constantly modifying the behaviours of his or her learners.

Discipline, classroom management and teacher authority

Discipline is the practice of care and respect for others and self. It is about ‘safe guarding the rights of people who are exposed to uncooperative, aggressive or blocking responses by others’ (Humphrey 1998, 10). In support of this, Oosthuizen, Roux and van der Walt (2003) 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. According to the South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996 section 11(2), discipline should be corrective and nurturing. In managing discipline in the classroom teachers have to remove other forms of punishment harmful to learners’ self-esteem. This implies that physical punishment as well as emotional castigation has no place in the classroom. Positive, constructive discipline should promote the development of self-discipline. This can be achieved if teachers can ‘model true discipleship for the learners to emulate’ (Oosthuizen et al.

2003, 466). The management of discipline therefore calls on teachers to make children feel emotionally comfortable and physically safe so that they (learners) can develop self-discipline (intrinsic discipline) and accountability in their actions. Every teacher has to create an environment in which each learner is guided towards an attitude of caring and respect for other learners. Charles (2002, 13) discovered that teachers should improve ways they relate and work with learners by working in a ‘collaborative manner’. Collaboration implies that teachers recognise learners as partners in education, but not that learners take control of the teaching–learning situation. Teachers must take charge of specific procedures in the classrooms to ensure that learning does indeed occur. The teacher–learner relationship therefore refers to the communication and understanding that exist between the teacher and the learners.

According to Fontana (1985, 124), classroom management means the way in which individual teachers organise their approach to learning and how they organise the classroom as an aid to that process of learning. It is therefore clear that teachers’ classroom management involves learner management and lesson planning skills. Doveton, Langa and Steyn (1991, 121) state that pupil management deals with the establishment of procedures and a conducive atmosphere for all learning activities. The extent to which learners are involved in the lesson activities will influence the interpersonal relationship between the teacher and his or her learners. But many studies have demonstrated that not all teachers are successful at creating order and discipline in the classroom. For instance, Rogers (1994, 65) discovered that ‘newly qualified teachers often find classroom control the most demanding aspect of their new profession’. These teachers use punishment and scare tactics to gain control over the learners and make learners accept their authority. But gaining control over children has been regarded as one of the principal causes of the violence and disruptive behaviour in many schools (Turner 1973, 26).

This brings one to the following question: what is the influence of teacher authority in managing discipline in the classroom? Kok and Grobler (2000) (cited by Oosthuizen et al. 2003, 463) stress the fact that authority appropriately applied can be described as invitational education ‘towards the learner to develop his potential to become a responsible adult’. Teachers have authority due to the principle *in loco parentis*. The parent and principal have given the teacher certain authority. According to South African common law, a parent has a duty to protect his or her child by taking adequate care. The teacher acting in the place of a parent also has a duty to protect the learner against danger. This gives the teacher the right to exercise authority. However, Peters (1973) in Ngoepe (1997, 3) warns teachers against regarding authority as a kind of force. The focus should be on self-control rather than on external control. Children should be taught how and why to do the right thing. Turner (1973, 28) discovered that the only form of discipline which is lasting ‘is that which stems from within the person’. Therefore, the teacher’s function is to contribute to the authentic self-realisation of every learner. Voluntary compliance should be pursued with learners. ‘The essential feature of an authority relationship is that the subordinate acts voluntarily . . .’ (Robertson 1989:55)

Research Methodology

In late 2002 I conducted a survey in seven Pretoria government high schools. The non-probability sampling method was used for the selection of the sample, which involved Grade 8 to 12 teachers in fourteen classrooms. This method allowed the researcher to identify participants who could provide information on the topic, not participants who necessarily represent some larger population. It was not possible to include the entire population because this would have increased the life span of the project. Parahoo (1997, 21) points out that '[i]t is easier to collect more, and independent data from a smaller than larger number of people'. The survey was designed to describe and explain the role of teachers in the management of discipline in public high schools. The research was conducted two years after the Gauteng Department of Education had released a guide for educators – *An alternative to corporal punishment* (2000). In the guide the department urges teachers to manage the learning process and the learning environment enthusiastically and professionally. The following are some alternatives to corporal punishment outlined by the Gauteng Department of Education (2000, 13–14):

- Be inclusive – use materials, pictures, language, posters and so on that reflect diversity.
- Give learners the opportunity to succeed – the teacher should take steps to avoid favouritism.
- Involve parents – discuss any behaviour problems the learner might have with his/her parents.
- Allow learners to take responsibility – provide space for learners to be responsible.
- Establish ground rules – set class rules with your learners at the beginning of the year.

However, Lorgat in *The Educators' Voice* (August 2003) discovered that very few schools in Gauteng know of the policy on corporal punishment and the alternatives to corporal punishment. After corporal punishment had been banned in schools, teachers needed to make a paradigm shift in order to see discipline in its true positive and constructive sense. During the study it became clear that teachers lack the necessary knowledge of how to establish positive teacher–learner relationships that can lead to a working relationship. Hence the title: *the teacher–learner relationship in the management of discipline in public high schools*, was adopted for this article.

The triangulation method as a technique for collecting data was used. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the teachers in the sample. This type of interview offered the researcher an opportunity to ask general questions and spend much time listening to what teachers said, rather than asking detailed questions. Capturing and reporting what really goes on in the classrooms can only capture the complexities, richness and diversity of their experiences as teachers. The questions included the following: Do you have any disciplinary problems with learners? What kind of problems? How do you deal with these problems? Are there any teacher-learner relationships established in your school? How do these relationships help in promoting discipline? Do you have any policy on discipline? Are your policies considerate of learners' rights? Secondly,

observation was used in a non-participatory form to determine how teachers manage discipline in the classrooms. The principles of classroom management were set out in the form of a checklist, which was completed by the researcher during the observation sessions (see Table 1). Classroom observation was followed by further interviews and the collection of documents, that is, after classroom observation the same teacher was interviewed again. This was done because my presence in the classroom could have made the learners change their behaviour. I refrained from taking part in the classroom routines as my experience and values could have influenced the results. However, after formal approval from the school principals was obtained and I was given permission to conduct the study, rapport was established with teachers in order to gather worthwhile data. Documentary sources as part of triangulation were also used. Documentary sources such as written notices and letters, record books, classroom policy and the general school policy were collected.

In order to make sense of what the interviewees said about their experiences, and beliefs and perceptions that teachers had about carrying out disciplinary measures, data analysis was undertaken during data collection periods and also after completion of data collection. I used the results of early data analysis to guide subsequent data collection. To be able to deal with the mass of unstructured data, the following themes that seemed to predominate in the raw transcripts were selected: discipline, teacher–learner relationship, human rights and classroom management. Later these themes were used in the matrix to collect data in one place, so that it could be interpreted. During the final analysis of data, patterns that emerged from raw data displayed in the matrix, were used to develop chains of linkages between variables. Data interpretation was based heavily on the connections, common aspects, and linkages among the data sections, categories and patterns. During the study, symbols were used to identify schools and teachers to ensure the anonymity of the participants and the schools, e.g. School ‘A’ Teacher 1 (male) and Teacher 2 (female). In this analysis data was not interpreted looking at a certain race or sex although two schools in the research population were multiracial.

Table 1: Observation checklist

	Yes	No
Preparation		
Consistency		
Effectiveness		
Flexibility		
Respect		
Justice and fairness		
Build positive relationship		

Findings

From the data collected, an analysis indicated a number of emerging themes that are discussed below:

Classroom management and control

According to Teacher 1 at School D, teachers spent most of their teaching time dealing with learners' misconduct: 'We actually spend more time on disciplinary problems than on teaching. Everyday we deal with cases of bunking the lessons, coming late to the class, fighting in the classrooms.' Lack of supervision and control seem to contribute to learners' misconduct. As teacher 1 at School A admits: 'Learners should be supervised all the time. Leaving them on their own causes many problems.' Teacher 1 in School F agrees: 'The moment learners are not occupied they will start rambling around. Plan your work in such a way that it covers the entire period.' Teachers must control extra work given to the learners. As Teacher 2 in School A puts it: 'Give them extra work, but control it as well. Learners are clever, if you do not check the work, they quickly notice and will never do it again.' These findings illustrate the importance of classroom management and control. The teacher has to control all the activities in the classroom. He or she can also delegate classroom activities to the learners. For instance, Teacher 2 in School G was assisted by one learner to collect dictionaries from the library and hand them out to other learners. Putting learners in charge of certain classroom activities gives them recognition. Teacher 2 in School B uses learner leaders to control other learners during group activity. The teacher as a classroom leader ensures that the groups as a whole operate effectively. Learners seem to realise the importance of behaving well if requested to do so by their peers. Unfortunately, teachers do not realise this and want to be in control of the learning process all the time. Being in class early and preparing well can prevent misbehaviour. Some teachers did not do enough preparation and consequently had difficulty in starting with their lessons. It is difficult to control learners with no clear objectives on which to focus the lesson. Teachers should remain in charge of classroom control and guide the learning process.

Teacher authority

Overcrowding in the classrooms makes the job of controlling learners difficult. Teacher 2 at School D had this to say about the problem: 'I am teaching six classes with 45 learners each. I cannot help them individually in a single period.' I observed many broken desks, forcing learners to sit around in large numbers. It seems it is difficult to move around in overcrowded classrooms and establish a relationship of trust with the learners. It is also difficult for the teachers to establish their authority without the assistance from the school management team. Unfortunately some teachers are beginning to lose hope. One frustrated teacher at School E, Teacher 2 said: 'I do not send disruptive learners to the principal's office because you will be told that you as a teacher are unable to manage your

classes . . . so I am leaving.’ However, in School F the principal and his deputies monitor classes that are disruptive and assist teachers in dealing with problems with discipline. Again it seems that there is a lack of self-discipline among the learners. As Teacher 2 in School E told me: ‘Learners use bad language in the presence of the teacher, come late to the class very often . . .’ Teacher 2 in School A noted the following as a result of the lack of self-discipline: ‘Self-discipline is lacking, they want to work only when the teacher is around. They do not do their homework.’ Lack of self-discipline seems to result in learners who are very rude and disrespectful. According to the teachers, self-discipline has to be taught at home by parents. For instance, Teacher 2 in School C says: ‘Learners must have self-discipline first, and it should be taught at home by the parents.’ Teachers realise the importance of parent involvement in the management of discipline in schools. Of course this depends on parents who understand law and order. Many parents still support the use of corporal punishment by teachers to establish their authority in the classrooms. Some of these parents even use it at home. This is power-based authority, which in turn will affect the relationship of trust negatively. School B and School G use a system of two letters to notify and invite parents to the school for children’s serious misconduct. In the first letter, the learner is made aware of the misconduct. In the second letter, the learner is notified of the consequences of his or her misconduct including calling the parent to the school.

Contrary to the experiences of most teachers, two teachers appeared not to have experienced serious discipline problems with learners. They planned for ways to address learners’ misconduct. Teacher 1 at School B said: ‘The problems are not so big I have to go and seek help. At the beginning of the year I let different classes develop class rules and I compared these rules to develop a classroom policy.’ Similarly, Teacher 2 at School G argues that: ‘I must set an example, be in class on time. Teach learners about what is happening in real life – choose universal things . . .’. Allowing learners to participate in formulating a classroom policy is one of their fundamental rights. Classroom rules that have been made must reflect the more general rules that have been outlined in the Education Policy and South African Schools Act of 1996. Some teachers do not formulate classroom rules, and if they do, they do not involve their learners. These are some of the classroom rules used by Teacher 1 at School F for the learners:

- If I eat in class . . . I will have to bring food for everyone the next day.
- If I am found with other subject books . . . My books will disappear forever.
- If I talk too much nonsense . . . The teacher will glue my lips with Pritt.

It is also clear that teachers have to be a living example of the kind of discipline we expect from learners. Some teachers are not models of good behaviour. I observed teachers coming late to the classes, bunking the lessons and even using unkind words. Teacher 2 in School E kept on saying to the learners ‘little nonsense’. Learners who reacted negatively were detained after school. Sarcastic remarks by the teacher arouse feelings of aggression in the learners and withdrawal from the teaching–learning

situation. Today's children will not accept a parent or authority figure who does not respect them. As teacher 2 in School A puts it: 'If you show them what is right and wrong, they will end up respecting you.' It seems respect can contribute to a positive classroom climate in which teachers can establish their authority.

Teacher 2 in School C has a different view on how to deal with discipline problems: 'Attend to the learners individually and try to motivate them. Show them that you care by being open to them.' The teacher sees the importance of building a loving and caring relationship with the learners. It is not difficult to discipline learners in an environment of trust and understanding. This relationship seems to encourage learners to be receptive to their teachers and willing to learn. As Teacher 1 in School A told me: 'If you teach, learners will be willing to learn.' Teachers seem to realise that (1) each learner makes a choice to learn, and (2) each learner decides to behave well. But children need to be assisted to realise the importance of education and good behaviour. Another way teachers can establish their authority is by involving parents and children's guardians. Teacher 1 in School A noticed this: 'Between learners and teachers, discipline becomes an easier thing to instil. For instance if the teacher is close to a certain learner, and this learner misbehaves, the teacher is used to talking to the learner. But for serious misconduct, inform the parents.'

Gone are the days when teachers used to visit learners' homes and establish close ties with the family. The teacher was viewed as a 'family teacher'. Like a family doctor, the 'family teacher' could be called every time the child misbehaved or struggled with schoolwork. Parents could then encourage their children to accept the 'family teacher' and other teachers as guardians in schools. Teacher 1 in School A echoed this view: 'Learners view the teacher as a guardian . . . they will open up to you.' Opening up to a teacher can mean (1) trusting the teacher (2) and accepting the teacher's authority. According to the teachers, a working classroom environment will be realised when there is a willingness by learners to accept the teacher's authority.

Conclusion

The research project shows how high school teachers practise balancing the building of positive teacher–learner relationships with the need for discipline. The findings reveal that teachers who are successful in managing misbehaviour in the classrooms maintain good relations with the learners. Teachers encourage mutual respect and dignity in the classrooms by the following means:

- Involving learners in establishing classroom policy
- Allowing learners to take leadership roles
- Role modelling the expected behaviour
- Involving parents, peers and other teachers close to the learner
- Respecting learners.

By giving attention to the five factors mentioned above teachers seem to apply a democratic classroom management style. Teachers apply this style without compromising their authority for they take the final decision in combining the class rules to develop a policy.

The findings have also demonstrated that many teachers have difficulty in managing their classes. They encounter serious problems, which make it impossible for them to maintain a relationship of mutual trust and respect in their classrooms. The problem lies with the approach of teachers to classroom management and learner discipline. These teachers still use authoritarian teaching strategies which encourage learners to rely heavily on the teachers. They cannot be blamed. Most of them were trained within the framework of a segregated education system. They must receive retraining to enable them to work effectively in a truly democratic education system. Teachers can also learn from their counterparts in the above paragraph who act as facilitators of education events. Teachers do not effectively exercise authority over learners. In a democratic classroom, the teacher–learner relationship should be based on the learner’s willingness to accept the teacher’s authority. Learners should not be forced, but invited to take part in this relationship. It is not ethical or feasible to attempt to maintain relationships by use of power since ‘power is the probability of carrying out one’s will in a social situation, despite resistance from others’ (Robertson 1989, 53).

Teachers urgently need to be taught alternatives to corporal punishment. In many of our classrooms the emphasis is still on punitive forms of discipline. Teachers wait until misbehaviour occurs before taking action. The emphasis should rather be on the following preventive disciplinary measures:

- Positive discipline: not blaming, pushing, shouting and using sarcasm.
- Classroom arrangement: place the furniture in such a way that it is easy to see every learner.

Making a learner stand outside for the duration of the teaching period is not an alternative, but it denies a learner his or her basic right – the right to education. Punishment can be avoided if a relationship of trust, respect and co operation existed between the teacher and learner. This relationship of trust gives birth to educative love. However, this educative love must not be confused with soft-heartedness. The learner should be reprimanded to protect his or her dignity and integrity.

In reaction to this spate of violence in South African schools in 2006, the national education spokesperson Lunga Ngqengelele said that teachers, principals and district personnel could not solve the crime at schools alone. ‘We needed community involvement in order to deal with this scourge’ (*City Press*, 22 October 2006). He is right. Lack of support and help from parents presents a serious hindrance to learners’ acceptance of teachers’ authority. Parents should also teach children to accept teachers as their parents *in loco parentis* or at least as guardians. Only in a mother–daughter or father–son relationship will children accept the teachers’ authority. This is the position teachers

should assume if they want lasting and working relationships in their classrooms. The findings also indicated that although teachers' lesson planning skills are not the major cause of learners' behavioural problems, such skills need to be well established and applied. The Department of Education can assist teachers in improving their lesson planning skills and learner management skills. Lastly, it should be stated that positive classroom management, control mechanisms and teacher authority towards a positive teacher–learner relationship will in turn minimise the occurrence of misbehaviour in the classroom.

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