

Effectiveness of Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Circulars in managing students' misconduct in Zimbabwean schools

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Abstract: *This study sought to establish the effectiveness of Ministry Circulars in managing student misconduct in Bulawayo Urban Schools. Disciplinary power of teachers is provided by Ministry Circulars and it is an organic necessity in every society whose members it guides to their end by providing them with rules of action. This study explored teachers' views about the use of Ministry Circulars (P35) in managing student misconduct in Bulawayo urban schools. Questionnaires were used to collect data on the use of corporal punishment, suspension and expulsion with reference to Ministry Circulars in managing student misconduct in Bulawayo Urban Schools. Based on the premise that discipline approaches are conceptualized, the research highlights that students' discipline problems have grown into an epidemic in Bulawayo schools.*

Keywords: *misconduct, management of discipline,*

I. Introduction

Students are priceless assets and most essential elements in education. It is absolutely necessary to direct students to exhibit acceptable attitude and behaviour within and outside the school. Schools receive learners from communities in order to inculcate knowledge, skills and values which society expects them to have to become good adults, workers and citizens. School management specifies rules and regulations to guide the activities of members of the school as an organisation. Student's discipline is a prerequisite to almost everything a school has to offer students (Selfert and Vornberg, 2002). The doctrine of school discipline according to Nolte (1980) and Barrell (1978) is based on the concept of "loco parentis" which allows school authorities full responsibility for children's upbringing, the right of discipline and control. In effect, teachers have the right to punish students who contravene school laws. Discipline refers to a systematic instruction given to a disciple or a student. It defines the expected standards of clothing, timekeeping, social behaviour and work ethics. The term may be applied to the punishment which is the consequence of transgression of the code of behaviour. For this reason, the usage of school discipline sometimes means the administration of punishment, rather than behaving within the school rules. Discipline is educative order which tries to reach appropriate standards and follow rules for engaging in valuable educational activity (Wilson 1977). Any behavior contrary to discipline is misconduct. This includes behavior which makes other students feel unsafe, insecure in a learning situation. Criminal offences and behavior that is likely to put the school into disrepute could lead to disciplinary procedure (Hill 2006).

In schools where discipline is a serious problem, troublesome students scan sometimes make teachers react emotionally to the extent of using punishment. But punishment, instead of curbing behaviour, can aggravate it (Dreikurs et al., 1998). According to McManus (1995) punishment does not discourage misbehaviour but rather reinforces the pupils' view of adults as treacherous. With the increased enrolment figures schools, students discipline problems are bound to accentuate and cause more burdens on teachers and school administrators. Students' indiscipline has plagued schools leading to serious problems to behaviour management in schools. Observations show that students resort to unconstitutional measures in channelling their grievances. This situation has been a major concern to parents and those in the school community who suggest that disciplinary strategies be applied by teachers following Ministerial Circular Number P35 guidelines and that rapport be created between students and teachers as a systematic way to solving the problems. One wonders how effective are the guidelines provided by Circular P35 in alleviating the student's indiscipline. Hence there is need to investigate the effectiveness of Ministry Circulars in managing student misconduct in Bulawayo Urban Schools.

In the school system, discipline is necessary for the effective management, if the goals of the schools are to be accomplished. It is an element of managerial tasks that involves the measurement and correction of the performance of the subordinates to make sure that the objectives of the academic industry and plans desired to attain them are accomplished. Discipline in school includes any rational approach used by teachers to overcome the problems of the school environment. To bring about effective discipline of students, the school formulates a

set of rules to guide the conduct of students using Ministerial Circulars such as P35. The power of teachers to discipline students in the school stems from the doctrine of teachers acting in loco parentis. The doctrine of in loco parentis had been based on the assumption that by sending their children to school parents agree to delegate to school officials the power or parental authority to control their children's conduct in a manner that will be of best interest to the child. This situation is changing because parents however, agree that when the concept originated, education was voluntary and personal, the parent voluntarily committed the child to the authority of a teacher who usually spent the entire day with the child either in classroom or school thereby, developing something akin to parent/child relationship with the pupil. In Zimbabwe, there are alleged cases of teachers being threatened by students in course of discharging their duties. In some cases, the attacks have been violent. In the midst of these problems, there is a growing debate on whether Ministerial Circulars such as P35 are effective enough to curb disciplinary problems in Bulawayo urban schools.

Teachers are expected to maintain security and order in their classrooms (Bogdan, 2004). Students' misconduct is not only a nuisance to teachers; but a cause of concern to the whole society. In the light of the above, this article focuses on the ways teachers will address disciplinary problems in their classrooms as guided by Ministerial Circular Number P35. Some teachers have even attributed unsuccessful teaching to the amount of misconduct with which they have been confronted (Fernandez-Balboa 1991). The higher the rate of misconduct that the teachers are faced with, the less successful they feel. Teaching successfully with a low rate of misconduct (*i.e.*, maintaining order) is the aim of most teachers. Even though the absence of misconduct does not guarantee high student achievement, it allows an opportunity for learning to take place. Some teachers are aware of this and are adamant to succeed by minimizing misconduct. In contrast, other teachers may not think addressing misconduct is part of their teaching responsibilities and continue to look for appropriate strategies for handling misconduct throughout their teaching careers (Fernandez- Balboa, 1991:63).

What causes learners to misbehave is unclear and researchers do not yet have enough information to explain the causes from the students' points of view. Learners may or may not perceive misconduct in the same ways as their teachers. Therefore it is imperative to learn more about misconduct from the students' perspectives. Such information could promise a better understanding of the reasons why students misbehave, and could help the teachers to prevent and handle misconduct more effectively. In a survey in the United Kingdom it was established that 50% of primary school teachers and 50% of secondary school teachers spend extraordinary amounts of time controlling learners (Fields, 2000). Research has also pointed to the important value of teacher interventions through the use of policies from Ministry Circulars in the deterrence of student misconduct, with special reference to teacher interventions that are caring interventions (Astor, *et.al* 1999) yet, there are no clear indicators that student misconduct is declining.

II. Goals Of The Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of Ministry Circulars in managing student misconduct in Bulawayo Urban Schools. The use of Ministry Circulars by school Heads and teachers in managing disciplinary problems of students has created problems in the management of schools. The study focused on the use of Ministry Circulars in managing the misconduct of students in Bulawayo urban schools.

III. Methodology

Research Design

The survey design which was mainly qualitative in nature was used. Surveys are normally appropriate for studies that seek to obtain participants' perceptions, opinions and beliefs on phenomenon (Slavin 2007). Since the present study focuses on the effectiveness of Ministry Circulars in managing student misconduct in Bulawayo Urban schools the survey design was chosen as the most appropriate design for the study.

The Sample

30 teachers in 10 Bulawayo Urban schools were purposefully sampled. In purposeful sampling, the researcher selects the participants because they possess particular knowledge being sought (Cohen and Manion, 2009). In this study, the teachers were selected because of their knowledge and experience in the use of policies as given by the Ministry circulars such as P35. The teachers' ages ranged from 25 to 45 years while their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 20 years.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire with mainly open ended items was used in this study. The items focused on the effectiveness of Ministry Circulars in managing student misconduct in Bulawayo Urban schools. Two experts in research were asked to check on the relevance and clarity of the questionnaire items. Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire in written format using a narrative method. Each respondent was asked to identify three examples of disruptive behaviour that occurred most often in the Foundation Phase. The second question dealt with possible causes for the disruptive behaviour and the open-ended question provided for reflected general comments.

Data Collection Procedure

A research assistant distributed and collected the questionnaires. The research assistant explained the purpose of the study to the participants. The participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage during the study.

Data Analysis

The data was content analyzed. Content analysis produces a relatively systematic and comprehensive summary of data (Silverman 2004). Respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire in written format using a narrative method. Each respondent was asked to identify three examples of disruptive behaviour that occurred most often in their different schools. The other question dealt with possible causes for the disruptive behaviour and also sought to find the strategies the teachers are using to curb these forms of misconduct in schools. The responses were analysed through the use of tables.

IV. Results

The results are presented in Table 1 in accordance to the answers given by the participants.

Table 1: The perceptions of teachers on the management of student misconduct in Bulawayo Urban schools with reference to policies from Ministry Circulars

ITEMS	RESPONSES BY THE TEACHERS
a. Types of student misconduct in Bulawayo Urban schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stealing books, money etc. • Bullying others • Using bad language • Coming to school late • Not doing assigned work • Disrespecting teachers • Leaving school before time • Skipping classes • Vandalizing school property • Fighting with fellow pupils • Consuming alcohol Smoking • Taking drugs
b. Causes of student misconduct in Bulawayo Urban schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty • Over-permissive home environment • Over-permissive school environment • Low teacher morale • Teacher shortages • Teacher absenteeism • Poor classroom management by the teachers
c. Strategies being used by teachers to curb student misconduct in schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental involvement • Use of reasonable disciplinary policies and procedures. • Use of corporal punishment to all the students • Thorough preparation of work by the teachers. • Appropriate work given to students • Establish clear and comprehensive disciplinary codes for the school. • Encourage the students to respect their teachers and elders. • Involve the police where students are involved in house breaking or stealing.
d. How effective are the Ministry Circulars in helping teachers to deal with student misconduct in Bulawayo Urban schools?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry Circulars leave the teachers with very little power to control the students. • Teachers are not allowed to use corporal punishment to the girls and this increases bad behaviour among the girl student • Students are prone to misconduct if they know that teachers are not allowed to administer corporal punishment, and the one who is designated to do so may not be present. • Suspension and expulsion regulations (as prescribed by Ministry Circulars) cause some ambivalence in the school administration. When it comes to making decisions about a problem learner, the school head has to think twice in fear of embarrassment. • Because of Ministry Circulars, expulsion procedures make students believes that the school head teacher has no authority over them and so they sometimes mess up in front of him/her [school head] because they know he/she will keep talking without taking any action.

Table 1 show that the perceived major acts of misconduct in Bulawayo Urban schools are: Stealing books, money etc., bullying others, using bad language, not doing assigned work, disrespecting teachers, absconding lessons, vandalizing school property and consuming alcohol smoking. The Table also shows that the causes of these acts of misconduct include: over-permissive home environment, over-permissive school environment, low teacher morale, teacher absenteeism and poor classroom management by the teachers. The Table further shows that the participants used corporal punishment to manage student misconduct even if the Ministry policy did not allow that. The teachers also used a variety of activities to manage student misconduct and these included; use of reasonable disciplinary policies and procedures, thorough preparation of work by the teachers, appropriate work given to students, establishment clear and comprehensive disciplinary codes for the school, encouragement of students to respect their teachers and elders, and involvement the police where students are involved in house breaking or stealing. The teachers also felt that policies from Ministry Circulars leave the teachers with very little power to manage students' misconduct in the classrooms. In addition, the Table shows that the teachers were of the view that suspension and expulsion regulations (as prescribed by Ministry Circulars) cause some ambivalence in the school administration. When it comes to making decisions about a problem learner, the school head has to think twice in fear of embarrassment.

V. Discussion

The study found that educators generally see the major acts of misconduct in Bulawayo Urban schools as stealing, bullying others, using bad language, not doing assigned work, disrespecting teachers, absconding lessons, vandalizing school property and consuming alcohol or smoking. These acts of misconduct are caused by over-permissive home environment, over-permissive school environment, low teacher morale, teacher absenteeism and poor classroom management by the teachers. The study also found out that the teachers felt disempowered in their ability to maintain discipline in schools as a result of the Ministry Circulars whose policies enforces that teachers should not use corporal punishment in schools. This concurs with Makapela's (2006) findings that learners literally take advantage of educators because they know fully well that whatever punishment that is given, will not equal the pain of corporal punishment. The disempowering of teachers by the Ministry Circulars has also led to feelings of abdication of the critical role of disciplining learners.

The revelation in the study that teachers used of corporal punishment to all the students without following the Ministry of Primary and Secondary policies signals a recipe for chaos in our schools. In other words most teachers used corporal punishment illegally. Indiscipline creates unsafe schools that are a danger to both students and teachers. Educators need to be able to control learners and enforcing security and safety in schools is of utmost importance (Fishbaugh, Schroth, & Berkerely, 2003). However it has to be done following the Ministry's policies. In addition, most of the teachers were no longer concerned about ensuring discipline in the schools because the current policies have made all their efforts impossible.

The study further found that teachers managed to control students' misconduct through establishing clear and comprehensive disciplinary codes for the school children and the encouragement of the students to respect their teachers and elders. The importance of rules can never be overemphasised. Having class rules enables students to understand what kind of behaviour is expected from them. Distributing these rules and guidelines in print reinforces this understanding (Rayment, 2006:84). Rules can be displayed as written notices on walls, floors, and along pathways and passages throughout the school premises, including toilets, and can even be hung from classroom ceilings. Nieuwenhuis, Beckmann and Prinsloo (2007) observe that schools have a crucial role to perpetuate societal values and this can only be done if learners are taught to be responsible for their own behaviours. Similarly, Du Bois (2006) argues that a school system should mirror the society and teachers in the school should be in total control of learners. In every society, every citizen is expected to live within the confines of laws, bylaws, rules and regulations with the transgression of these laws yielding consequences that are at times too ghastly to contemplate.

Corporal punishment was viewed by teachers as a necessary form of punishment. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Policy Circular 35 forbids the use of corporal punishment by teachers without the recorded school head's approval. Most learners and parents understand the policy. Consequently, teachers who contemplated using corporal punishment "without authority" felt disempowered in the eyes of mischievous students. The provisions of Circular P.35 are that only the school head or her/his delegate can apply corporal punishment. A witness has to be present to countersign the number of strokes the offender receives. Ministry Circulars leave the teachers with very little power to control the students. Students are prone to misconduct if they know that teachers are not allowed to administer corporal punishment, and the one who is designated to do so may not be present. Suspension and expulsion regulations (as prescribed by Ministry Circulars) cause some ambivalence in the school administration. Expulsion procedures make students believes that the school head has no authority over them and so they sometimes mess up in front of him/her [school head] because they know he/she will keep talking without taking any action. When it comes to making decisions about a problem learner, the school head has to think twice in fear of embarrassment.

Teachers who felt disempowered by the policy on corporal punishment quietly relinquished their responsibility for administering learner discipline to heads of schools and ignored offenders. The teachers feel that the provisions of Circular P.35 and its implementation were inhibitive. Only the school heads had the mandate to expedite exclusion with the concurrence of parents and the Provincial Education Director (PED). The provisions of Policy Circular P.35 allow the excluded pupils could go to other or return to the same school after a prescribed period after having committed an offence. Policy Circular P.35 provides that school girls who fall pregnant be re-admitted into school after "maternity leave" when previously they were expelled from school. This is a good idea when considering that every child needs an educated mother and that education is every person's right. However, most teachers felt that the policy promoted promiscuity among students.

VI. Conclusion And Recommendations

This study sought to establish the effectiveness of Ministry Circulars in managing student misconduct in Bulawayo Urban Schools. It sought an in-depth understanding of the teachers' disciplinary capabilities in managing student's misconduct with reference to Ministry Circulars' policies. The study found that teachers felt disempowered by the outlawing of corporal punishment. It has become increasingly difficult for teachers to ensure discipline in schools as a result of the policies prescribed in Ministry Circular P35. Some educators are almost abdicating the responsibility of maintaining discipline in schools citing frustrations because of existing legislative instruments. The study recommends that teachers should be staff-developed on the use of co-operative and supportive disciplinary approaches. This would provide them with skills necessary to administer discipline at all times without resorting to corporal punishment. There should be close collaboration between parents and teachers to ensure the development of self-discipline. Parents should help schools by training children in good personal behavior which prepares learners to easily adapt to school discipline. Crafting school rules should involve all stakeholders to earn collaboration. Prefects should be inducted for self-confidence and re-assured of full support of school authorities, parents and the community.

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