

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISCIPLINE AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE:  
TOWARDS BUILDING SUSTAINABLE TEACHING AND LEARNING BEHAVIOURS IN  
SCHOOLS**

John W Foncha, VM Ngoqo, TN Mafumo and MW Maruma  
LSEMS, School of Education, University of Limpopo

**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to show that quality teaching and learning are the bed rock of discipline and academic performance. The main aim is to show how the escalation of indiscipline has effect on the academic performance of the learners. Indiscipline has become strife in schools and which has plunged our learners to a level where they are uncontrollable. To this effect, something needs to be done to build a good citizenry. The study is interpretive in nature within a qualitative design based on the case study of one urban school. The population included the teachers and the learners and the tools for data collection included observation, interviews and naturally occurring data. The study revealed that quality teaching and learning in schools lead to discipline and academic performance. It concluded that discipline can only be sustained if it is based on the rules drafted and owned by the community.

**Keywords:** Discipline, Learning Behaviour, School, Academic Performance

**Introduction/Background**

Discipline and academic performance have deteriorated in most schools since the emergence of the democratic dispensation in 1994. The period marked a shift from an authoritarian to a democratic rule (Naidoo, 2005) and has been viewed as a source of meaningful reforms that can improve the conditions in all the spheres of life. However, when these expectations cannot be fulfilled two decades into the democratic dispensation, such a vision becomes blurred and the people start to lose hope.

In view of the above, learners become the obvious casualties as the quality of teaching and learning deteriorates and the value of education corrode. Such a decline in the quality of education has resulted to schools finding it difficult to maintain discipline and acceptable standards of academic performance (Oliver, 2013). According to the ANC (1998), decline in academic excellence is perpetuated by the lack of a work ethic among the teachers, probably because they have become alienated from the changes taking place in education. Yet, some scholars agree that quality teaching and learning can play a crucial role in determining discipline and academic performance in schools (Ngoqo 2016). These scholars have reason to have such a belief since they have observed and witnessed quality teaching and learning playing a significant role in building and moulding a democratic and prosperous society (McCaffrey et al., 2003).

In this regard, Modisaotsile (2012) observes that there are many signs in the South African education that show there is a crisis. She asserts that while there are high rates of enrolment in schools each year, the output is increasingly poor. To this effect, she attributes the discrepancy to the poor quality of education. Access to quality education to all, irrespective of their origin (DoE, 1996). It also provided for free and compulsory schooling to children between the ages of seven and fifteen as well as to schools categorised under quintiles 1 to 3 for the purpose of redressing the discrepancies and the uneven distribution experiences of the past. In addition, it also equipped every member of the society with basic quality education that could enable them to lead quality lives (DoE, 1996).

SASA also speaks to the code of conduct for both teachers and the learners to ensure that teaching and learning proceeds without disruptive behaviour and offences (ELRC, 2001). Above all, it provides for democratic school governance through School Governing Bodies. In view of this, it allows for the SGBs and all the other stakeholders including the greater community, the departmental officials, teacher unions, the School Management Teams, the teachers and learners to participate and contribute towards the transformative action in schools.

In spite of South Africa's achievements and intention to improve the conditions in schools, discipline and academic performance continue to deteriorate two decades after the inception of

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the democratic dispensation. The deterioration seems to result from a lack of quality teaching and learning which is perpetuated by poor teacher training on the new curricula and the lack of teacher in-service training (Oliver, 2013). This is robbing the schools of vital knowledge, skills and the overall developments in education that could assist them to perform their tasks/duties diligently and efficiently. In this regard, it is needful to curb unwanted learner-behaviour which impacts negatively on academic performance.

**Literature Review**

The study adopted School improvement theory with the intention to improve conditions in the lives of the society by introducing educational reforms as a means towards economic growth, transformation and prominence regionally and internationally (James, 2008). In addition, school improvement lies at the heart of systemic transformative action. It is based among other educational imperatives on a simple but profoundly important assumption to improve discipline and academic performance on a broad scale. Sad simply, teaching and learning have to improve on a broad scale correspondingly to the former.

In other words, for a school to improve its condition, discipline and academic performance must be embedded and be deeply influenced by quality teaching and learning. This is echoed in the South African's Schools Act (SASA) which states that discipline must be maintained in school and classroom situations if the education of learners is to flourish without any disruptive behaviour or offences (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). Darling-Hammond (1996) amplifies this when he argues that discipline can have a positive impact on academic performance. In line with the foregoing debates, this study is aware that improvement is a process that connects both the researcher and the participants' actions to the instructional core. The core being the intersection of content, teacher knowledge and skills as well as learner engagement in the process of teaching and learning. To succeed in this process, a collaborative effort against indiscipline and poor academic performance is required from all the stakeholders. This is echoed in the quotation that follows:

Good to great comes by a cumulative process – step by step, action by action, decision by decision, turn upon turn of the flywheel – that adds up to sustained

and spectacular results... It is a quiet, deliberate process of figuring out what needs to be done to create the best future results and then taking those steps one way or the other (Collins, 2001 p.204).

The above quotation highlights that the stakeholders need to support each other and also to ensure that relational trust exists between them if they are to be successful in improving the conditions in schools. This appears convincing because among its principles, the School improvement theory intends to give rise to improved conditions in schools since it encourages every stakeholder to perform their duties and responsibilities to the best of their ability (Ngoqo, 2016). Thus, making a success of the government's intention to transform schools into centres of excellence, where the sustenance of quality teaching and learning together with the enhancement of discipline and academic performance is a top priority.

Furthermore, the choice for School improvement theory is derived from a desire by the researchers to see genuine improvement in learner outcomes and organizational conditions or an increase in the life prospects of all the learners. Secondly, it is derived from a concern about the impact of the widespread educational policy changes currently taking place in South Africa, some of which have been drawn on foreign models which are documented failures" (James, 2008). Thirdly, it is derived from the lack of literature to improve the quality of teaching and learning in South African schools – a deficiency which can impact negatively on the intention to promote quality teaching and learning for the enhancement of discipline and academic performance in South African schools.

In order to realise the aforementioned targets, there is dire need for social construction among the stakeholders. Constructivism or social constructivism (often combined with interpretivism) is typically an approach to qualitative research. Lantolf (2000) believes that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. In the process, they develop subjective meanings of their experiences towards certain objects or things. Sivasubramaniam (2004) identifies that human beings construct meanings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Secondly, human beings engage with their world and

make sense of it based on their historical and social perspectives – we are all born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture. Thus, these researchers sought to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally. They also interpret what they find, an interpretation shaped by their own experiences and background. Lastly, the basic generation of meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community.

Kepe's (2014) pursuit of alternatives to the Alternatives to Corporal Punishment comes as no surprise at this point. It derives from the escalation in the cases of indiscipline and poor academic performance in schools. Morrel (1994) defines discipline as teaching and this entails more than just the control over learners and their behaviour. In the same light, Wolhuter (1994) is of the opinion that the socio-political and educational vicissitudes of the post 1994 epoch meant that the traditional methods and strategies used to maintain discipline at schools could no longer be hired in a democratic societal context in which human rights are highly esteemed. Based on the above definitions, Kepe (2014) views discipline as a means of educating a learner to follow a particular code of conduct and the application of an order warranting carrying out of instructions. Some see discipline as a coercive mechanism while others view it as a collaborative process of building consensus acceptable behaviour with institutions and society (Ngoqo, 2016).

In view of this, Kepe's AATCP somehow concurs with the kind of reprimands suggested in ATCP but goes further to argue that such measures should be agreed upon by all the stakeholders if they are to hold water. Once all agree on the punishment measures to be applied, there may not even be a need for disciplinary hearings and all the time-consuming exercises. All the stakeholders would own up and accept whatever decision or reprimand that comes with the offence. Thus, it can be argued that discipline is a form of training intended to develop moral character or produce a pattern of behaviour acceptable to all, particularly now that the ATCP seem to have failed completely. As such, it urges all learning institutions to have a mutual comprehension of what discipline in schools actually entail. This assists in making sure that schools approach discipline holistically in a uniform and

acceptable way. In other words, discipline should encourage all the stakeholders to work together as a unit to agree on the rules and regulations promulgated into policies which define the expected standards of clothing, timekeeping, social behaviour, work ethics, and other disciplinary issues. Therefore, making sure that discipline becomes a virtue which may also be referred to as a disciplinary procedure or a euphemism for punishment (Ngoqo, 2016).

It is probably from this background that Wolhuter (1994) cautions against the employment or utilization of traditional methods and strategies in the maintenance of discipline in a democratic societal context. According to Wolhuter (1994), the traditional means of discipline can have a damaging effect on the dignity of individuals. In addition, a traditional means of discipline neither resonates with the democratic practices nor do they feature well with the socio-political and educational vicissitudes of the post 1994. The new democratic state is devoid of any modes of discipline which undermine the right of learners to human dignity and fair treatment. It is this right that seems to undermine quality teaching, academic performance and discipline which continue to deteriorate since ATCP was introduced. In light of this, it is disturbing to find that the contemporary alternative means of discipline fail to preserve discipline in schools, let alone good academic performance. Indiscipline has, instead, become a part of everyday life in some schools.

There are many incidents of indiscipline that affect learner academic performance. For instance a 15 year old boy was stabbed to death by a fellow learner in Newlands West, in Durban (Horner & Ngalwa, 2004). In a similar incident an 18 year old Grade 11 boy bled to death after being stabbed by a 15 year old from the same school (Mesatywa, 2006). The most important idea in mentioning the few is to indicate the negative impact these incidents have on both the academic performance and the school. They disrupt education and make it difficult and if not impossible for teaching and learning to be administered (Kepe, 2014). In the latter case the mother of the deceased boy expressed her disgust at what she called the failure of teachers to instil and maintain discipline in schools. She concluded, "I no longer have faith in our schools. When I sent my son to school, I entrusted his safety to teachers. They failed him" (Morrel, 1994 p.1).

It is evident that both teachers and learners are more concerned about the conditions in schools, particularly their safety and security in the face of such cases of indiscipline (Kepe, 2014). It is apparent from this argument that the unruly behaviour on the part of the learners has become habitual and is here to stay, in spite of the “better” alternative means of discipline introduced (Roger, 1998). Instances of indiscipline that were never thought of before in a schooling environment are rampant today: learners continue to bring weapons onto school premises and at times use them against other learners and their educators (Roger, 1998); there are also numerous incidents of shooting and assault resulting in killings within school premises, with most learners answering back to their teachers; they talk out of turn, getting out of seats without permission; and some are generally rowdy and tend to undermine the authority of the teachers (Kepe, 2014). As a result, teachers bemoan encounters with such proliferating acts of indiscipline which are disruptive to the core business of teaching and learning. Like Roger, Matsoga (2013) is of the opinion that such acts make it difficult for teaching and learning to be administered. It is interesting to note that while Kepe (2014); Rogers (1998) do not condone the use of traditional modes of discipline, they are convinced that these modes of discipline yielded the desired effect, when juxtaposed with the new forms of maintaining discipline.

The South African Schools Act provides the establishment of a code of conduct for learners at schools. The code of conduct prohibits traditional modes of discipline and replaces them with more democratic forms. In other words, it replaces the demonic corporal punishment that appeared to be an acceptable mode of punishment for so long (RSA, 1996).

These transformative policies view the traditional modes of discipline such as caning, whipping, kicking and forcing learners to stand in very uncomfortable and undignified positions, denying or restricting someone’s use of the toilet facilities; denying meals, drink, heat and shelter as a form of punishment; forcing someone to do excessive exercise, among others, as deliberate acts that cause pain or physical discomfort (Vally, 2005). It has been observed that these modes of punishment have been and continue to be used excessively in some school, particularly in black schools and white single-sex boys’ schools (Morrel, 2001). This was worse during the apartheid

years, when learners were treated like passive objects which could not have a say in the day-to-day running of the school; let alone questioning the authority of the teachers and the department (Vally, 2005). The nature of the system of ‘Bantu Education’ and the ‘Christian National Education’ was such that they could not counter or act contrary to the policies of the apartheid government. They were, therefore, forcibly made to condone corporal punishment in schools.

It can, therefore, be argued that the demise and absolute outlawing of the traditional modes of discipline and the replacement thereof by the so-called better disciplinary measures was orchestrated by the evils enacted with them (the traditional modes of discipline). These alternative measures would take consideration of a number of things in their application, including the learner’s age, sex and dignity, to mention just a few (SASA, 1996). De Kock (1996) is more explicit when he cites the Constitutional Court’s ruling to traditional modes of discipline, corporal punishment, in particular. It held that “deliberate infliction of physical pain on the person of the accused offends society’s notions of decency and is direct invasion of the right which every person has to human dignity” (De Kock, 1996 p.18).

Finally, and in a way to return to collaborative teaching, it can be argued that good discipline creates a conducive atmosphere for teaching and learning, because both teachers and learners feel safe and can perform their given tasks at will, without fear of the unknown. Poor discipline threatens the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. It places both the lives of the teachers and that of the learners in danger (Bilatyi, 2012); particularly now that the cases of indiscipline continue to escalate and academic performance deteriorates. However, coming together and working together towards curbing discipline and making sure that academic performance improves can change things around.

While this section has direct implications to what happens in schools, it falls short of prescribing the most effective means of curbing indiscipline and poor behaviour in schools. Of course, corporal punishment can result in torture that demeans the humaneness of the learner but, as many scholars have argued, the alternative measures introduced also fail to instil discipline in schools. It is, therefore, in this light that the study explores to what extent

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quality teaching and learning can enhance discipline and academic performance in schools.

**Methodology**

The study is qualitative in nature based on case study design within an interpretive paradigm. The data was collected through interviews with the teachers, naturally occurring data and observation. The researchers as ethnographers spent quite some time in the school premises to monitor the behaviours of the SMTs, teachers and the learners. The choice of school was based on its setting as there is a broken fence and gate with two shebeens around the school. The interviews were carried out with five teachers and the remaining population was observed and data captured in the form of field notes.

**Results and Discussion**

Data segment 1: Interviews with teachers

*Q: Do you think that your school environment is conducive for quality teaching and learning?*

*Mangaliso: As indicated in the questionnaire, the environment is more than conducive. The school has been built in the centre of town where it is quiet. The buildings are welcoming and the staff members are committed to and passionate about their work. No one is allowed to loiter about. Teachers are class bound and learners move from class to class. In addition, the classes display on the walls, material that is relevant to the subject being taught in that class.*

*Pretty: I have not been here for that long, but when I stepped in here I thought God brought me here. I was terribly hurt in my previous school ...To me it is very conducive because the children are so susceptible they accepted me here.*

*Jabu: It is not conducive. The area where it is built is noisy and people going to town from the nearest residents' area, Ginsberg, pass by the school. What is worse is the noise that is made by the people repairing cars next door. They don't listen and they seem to be a bad influence to our learners.*

*Q: What makes you want to go to school every day?*

*Mangaliso: This is a professional and learning community which has a strong and functional SGB and effective and efficient principal and*

*SMT. You can't just want to stay home and lose out on the nurturing taking place here.*

*Pretty: I love children and I know they love me too. That's why I maintain coming to this school was wonderful work of God.*

*Mandi: Everyone needs to work in order to survive. As I indicated I have a family to look after.*

*Data segment 2: Observation*

The area where the school is situated alone portrayed lack of discipline in both learners and educators. The building looks more like a residential house or for the most an office – a rent office for the Ginsberg residents prior to the new democratic dispensation in 1994. The classrooms in the main building are as small as the principal's office and the staffroom, while the outside classrooms are made up of two garages and decrepit (dilapidated) prefabricated rooms. The school gate is also broken and the concrete wall fencing is about 1.3m to 1.5m tall, thus giving the unruly learners the opportunity to enter and leave the school premises as they please, to the dislike and dismay of those learners who behave. Learners move in and out at will as well as smoke, do drugs around the train station.

*Data Segment 3: Naturally Occurring Data*

The field notes came handy under this theme as well. This became evident as some of the teachers who were not even participating in the project commented that running this school requires all the stakeholders to work together. *If we continue like this, we'll find it hard to curb indiscipline.* He further said that they know what they want, but can't go through with the ideas because everyone is doing his/her own thing. In essence we noted that the teachers are concerned about the situation at their school. At the same time one of the participants thinks that it is unacceptable that the teachers should be hands-on in learner discipline. He understands they should play the parental role at school but learners have their Representative Council who should be looking after their good and control their behaviour.

Another instance of indiscipline involves late-coming from both the teachers and learners. On the 10/02/2016, we arrived at 07h45. There were a number of learners in and around the school and only one car within the school yard. We could not tell how many teachers were there until later that afternoon, when we visited the

principal's office. The bell rang at 07h50 for prayers before the school could start at 8h00. Apart from the teachers who were already in school, two teachers arrived at 07h58, the other teachers arrived between 08h00 and 08h10, two more teachers and the principal's secretary arrived around 08h20, while four other teachers arrived between 08h21 and 08h30. The last teacher entered the school gates at 09h10 just as the bell rang signalling the end of the second period for the day. In all, ten teachers and the principal's secretary arrived late on the day.

Later that afternoon, when we visited the principal as planned, we learned that the school had twelve teachers appointed by the state. This meant, therefore, that there were only two teachers who were early that morning – ten others, including the principal's secretary, were late. While there were many learners who were late as well, it appears that they do so emulating what the teachers do. Pretty, one of the participants responded thus on the question whether or not quality teaching and learning can determine discipline and academic performance in schools, "Children live what they learn. If you as the educator are chaotic, undisciplined and disorganised, the learners will follow your bad example". The leadership appears slack in carrying out its duties while the teachers seem to view teaching as just any other 'job' and do not commit themselves to their work as they ought to do.

In view of the data presented above, Njoroge and Nyabuto (2014) opine that the environment should not be intimidating and threatening to learners if learners are to perform to the best of their abilities. Mothatha and Squelch (1997) concur that if discipline is not taken into consideration, the school environment would be dangerous and the educational process may become messy and disorderly. This is evident by the fact that there is continuous movement into and out of the school premises. The teacher who comes late cannot reprimand the learners because these learners are taking after them. With no control over the behaviour of learners, quality teaching cannot take place because there are no rules. Based on this, the environment of School throughout the study, seems disabling to quality teaching and learning. As evidenced in the data, the building of the school was a Native Affairs and a Rental office for the nearby Ginsberg township residents prior to 1994. It was, therefore, never meant to become a school which in itself is a problem.

It is needful to indicate that the school does not have a Code of Conduct for the learners; it relies on the School Policy which is vague and maybe tacit in terms of disciplinary action to be taken for offences committed. For this reason, it is difficult to argue whether or not procedures for the maintenance of discipline exist. Based on this, we doubt if quality teaching and learning take place in this school because while the teachers acknowledge issues of indiscipline among the learners, they seem to conceal the extent to which they prevail for fear of attack by the learners or to present themselves as amateurs. Thus, having teachers who are not willing to assist in disciplining learners out of fear of creating enemies with them becomes a non-issue. In other words, while such arguments are not acceptable in professional terms, they are realistic in daily lives. In view of this altercation, the ministry of education together with educators from the various institutions have tried to use a number of disciplinary measures to curb indiscipline in schools to no success. It appears that even what the authorities assume as harsh measures towards indiscipline do not work. Instead, the learners resent whatever kind of punishment that is administered for wrong-doing (Kepe, 2014). In summing up this appraisal, we find it appropriate to refer to Lukhele-Olorunju, who argues:

I do not think government alone has the solution, but should make this a national challenge that invites South Africans to throw in their contributions, no matter how seemingly insignificant. We are aware of the fact that there are many teachers who believe in their vocation and students who desire excellent education and are being frustrated by a few disasters. A system of flushing out the bad eggs and recognizing dedicated teachers and hardworking students is needed. Since parents are also victims and contributors to this problem, they will be more than willing to come up with a good suggestion to pave the way to solving this problem (Ngoqo, 2016)

Ngoqo (2016) calls upon all the stakeholders to come together to improve the conditions in schools which re-echoes the school improvement theory which is the aspiration of this study. She correctly believes that the enhancement of quality teaching and learning is

**Conclusion**

It has been argued that the learners are the objects of the teaching and learning process. As such they have to realise that the main reason for being in school is to learn and develop academically, socially, culturally and otherwise. Engaging the learners in this way can assist them to become more responsible and committed to their work and therefore strive to do their best to excel in their academic performances. In addition this may encourage the learners to respect the legitimacy and authority of teachers and adhere to the school rules and regulations as required by the Code of Conduct. Furthermore, they would also be able to respect their fellow-learners and avoid involving themselves in anti-social behaviour. Most importantly, once the learners have mastered the above behavioural habits, they may become better able to perform well academically, since they would not be having any baggage to hinder their progress. On the other hand, the teachers need to act and behave like professionals in order to bring about discipline and foster academic performance instead of considering themselves just as workers

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