South African Journal of Education
Copyright © 2012 EASA
Vol 32:97-110

Governing bodies and learner discipline: managing rural schools in South Africa through a code of conduct

Raj Mestry and Jan Khumalo
Department of Education, Leadership and Management, University of Johannesburg
rajm@uj.ac.za

The South African Schools Act of 1996 provides that school governing bodies (SGBs) should adopt and assist in the enforcement of a learner code of conduct to maintain discipline effectively. This study focuses on the perceptions and experiences of SGBs in managing discipline in rural secondary schools through the design and enforcement of learner codes of conduct. A generic qualitative research paradigm was used to gain insight into the effectiveness of and factors impeding the enforcement of learner codes of conduct in rural secondary schools. For this purpose, data were collected from six secondary schools in the North West Province by means of focus group interviews and analysed according to Tesch's method of open coding. One of the major findings of the study revealed that many rural school governors still lack the relevant knowledge and skills to design and enforce a learner code of conduct effectively. The literacy levels of the majority of SGB members (parents) make it difficult for them to design and enforce the learner code of conduct, even though the department may have provided training. Furthermore, parent-governors are far removed from the day-to-day operations of the school, and consequently fail to contextualise the seriousness of discipline problems as well as to enforce the learner code of conduct effectively.

Introduction and background to the problem

According to Senge *et al*. (2000), few would argue that today schools globally are in trouble. The problems are sparking a national debate as educators, school boards, administrators, and parents search for ways to strengthen their school system at all levels, more effectively respond to the rapidly changing world around them, and better educate their children. To enable effective learning to take place it is critical that a safe, secure and positive environment is created (Joubert & Squelch, 2005:23). To this end, the Department of Education (2008:1) asserts that the school is committed to providing an environment for the delivery of quality teaching and learning by promoting the rights and safety of all learners, educators and parents. The school governing body (SGB) can and should play an important role in the establishment and maintenance of sound discipline (Joubert & Bray, 2007:80). For this reason, the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996a) mandates SGBs to adopt a code of conduct for learners as a way of "establishing a disciplined and purposeful school environment, dedicated to improving the quality of the learning process". In the context of this study, a disciplined environment refers to an environment free of any disruptive behaviour, which mostly relates to behaviour or action by learners that may negatively affect their education or that may interfere detrimentally with the atmosphere conducive to learning in the classroom

or any other school activity (Rossouw, 2007:395). Indeed, disruptive behaviour in South African schools has been reported widely and is said to include learners armed with dangerous weapons, learner on learner violence, learner on educator violence, vandalism, theft, and learners in possession with prohibited substances such as drugs and alcohol (News24.com., 2006). A learner code of conduct therefore, seeks to address such school environments.

A code of conduct for learners is a form of subordinate legislation that reflects the democratic principles of the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996b) by supporting the values of human dignity, equality and freedom. The code of conduct spells out rules regarding learner behaviour and describes the disciplinary process to be implemented concerning transgressions by learners (Department of Education, 2008:1). Rossouw (2007:82) makes the point that a code of conduct is a consensus document and its drafting process should be characterised by the involvement of parents, learners, educators and non-educators at the school.

Notwithstanding the requirement that every public school should have a disciplinary policy or a learner code of conduct to ensure a disciplined teaching and learning environment, there is a perception amongst stakeholders that learner discipline is a serious problem rendering many schools as ineffective institutions of teaching and learning (Charlton & David, 1994:6; Buck, 1992:36; Wheldall, 1992:2). Numerous experts (Oosthuizen, Roux & Van der Walt, 2003:373; Joubert, De Waal & Rossouw, 2004:84; Van Wyk, 2001:196; Mabeda & Prinsloo, 2000:34) rank learner discipline as one of the major concerns expressed by all stakeholders in the education process in South Africa. A study conducted by Rossouw (2003:413) revealed that there has been a decline in the level of discipline in schools in recent years and this has seriously hampered the teaching and learning process. Thompson (2002:7) who conducted a comprehensive study into discipline in primary and secondary education in South Africa confirms that there is a breakdown in discipline in schools. Many educators in rural secondary schools acknowledge that they have serious problems disciplining learners and are disempowered to deal with learners' disruptive behaviour (Van Wyk, 2001:52).

An important condition for the effectiveness of the learner code of conduct lies in its enforcement. Nitsch, Baetz and Hughes (2005:327) assert in this regard that one of the determinants of the effectiveness of a code of conduct is the degree to which code violations can be appropriately sanctioned. Furthermore, by virtue of its governance mandate, the SGB delegates the day-to-day enforcement of the code of conduct to the school management team and educators. The procedure for doing so should be clearly spelt out in the school policy on disciplinary measures. To this end, the school disciplinary committee, a sub-committee of the SGB must therefore ensure that the code of conduct is consistently and fairly enforced.

However, most SGBs tend to overlook the enactment and enforcement of a code of conduct for learners because they are reportedly not adequately empowered to perform these functions (Bray, 2005:133; Xaba, 2011:201). The lack of collaboration between the principal and other SGB members (Mestry, 2004:126), the lack of confidence amongst SGB members especially the parent-governors, and illiteracy among them (Maile, 2002:239), contribute to the SGBs inefficiency and precludes them from accessing relevant information. To this end and in relation to the problem of illiteracy, Van Wyk (2004:50) asserts that many SGBs, particularly in less advantaged areas do not have the required skills and experiences to exercise their powers. This raises the question of the effectiveness of and factors impeding the enforcement of learner codes of conduct at schools. The question this study seeks to address is therefore: *What are the perceptions and experiences of governing bodies in managing learner discipline in rural secondary schools through the enforcement of a learner code of conduct?*

Most studies address learner discipline from various angles, including the role of the SGB in the implementation of the learner code of conduct. This study focuses on the perceptions and experiences of rural secondary SGBs bodies regarding the effectiveness of learner codes of conduct by analysing factors impeding their effective enforcement.

The legal and theoretical framework for a learner code of conduct

The signing into law of the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996b) and the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996a) has impacted radically on the management of learner discipline in school. Although the principal, the school management team and educators normally form the most visible front in the disciplinary process, the SGB has a statutory or legal duty to ensure that correct structures and procedures are put in place so that any disciplinary measures taken against ill-disciplined learners are administered fairly and reasonably in accordance with the above-mentions laws.

Both Section 8 and Section 20 of the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996a) make it mandatory for all SGBs to develop and to adopt a code of conduct for learners which is aimed at establishing a disciplined and purposeful school environment, dedicated to improving the quality of the learning process. The code of conduct must include appropriate disciplinary processes for disciplining learners, and measures that will be followed in disciplinary processes. This will ensure that SGBs manage learner discipline fairly and justly in line with the provisions of Section 12(1) of the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996b), which provide for the right of everyone to freedom and security of the person, including the right not to be tortured in any way, and not to be treated or punished in a cruel, inhuman or degrading way.

The basic approach in the formulation of a code of conduct should be positive and preventive, in order to facilitate constructive learning (Rossouw, 2007:80; Bray 2005:135). Research has shown that a punitive approach does not lead to change in the learner's behaviour. Rossouw (2007:80) and Jackson (1994) maintain that what should be promoted is positive discipline and self-discipline, and that exemplary conduct should be rewarded to the same or a greater extent as the reaction to or punishment of misconduct. Furthermore, in the formulation of the code of conduct the development level of the learners should be kept in mind, and the language used must be easily comprehensible to make the content accessible. According to Joubert and Bray (2007:80), the code of conduct should contain a set of moral values, norms and principles in accordance with the ethos of the school and that of the wider community.

The design and enforcement of the learner code of conduct should be underpinned by Curwin and Mendler's (1980:33) three-dimensional approach to managing learner discipline. Firstly, the prevention dimension entails that SGBs adopt strategies to actively prevent disciplinary problems and deal with stress associated with classroom discipline. Secondly, the action dimension refers to what action SGBs can take when, in spite of all the steps taken to prevent disciplinary problems, they still occur. This includes keeping simple records and having strategies to avoid escalating minor problems into major ones. Thirdly, the resolution dimension implies that SGBs develop strategies to resolve problems with the chronic rule-breaker and the more extreme out-of-control learner. In this regard, the SGB is provided with *Guidelines for the Consideration of Governing Bodies in Adopting a Code of Conduct for Learners* (Republic of South Africa, 1998), which deals with serious transgressions such as, conduct which endangers and violates the safety of others; possession or use of dangerous

weapons; possession or use of unauthorised drugs or alcohol; fighting; assault or battery; immoral behaviour or profanity; theft or possession of stolen property; criminal behaviour such rape, bullying and intimidation of other learners.

It should be borne in mind that discipline at a school is not only measured against a well-drafted code of conduct, but to a greater extent against the proper enforcement thereof. As alluded to earlier, the enforcement of the code of conduct is a delegated task, especially because the SGB members (parent-governors in particular) cannot all be at a school operational level to do so. Thus, the school management team, educators and the disciplinary committee are primarily responsible for carrying out the prevention, action and resolution measures of the code of conduct.

Research design and methods

In pursuit of the aim of this study, a basic or generic qualitative research design was regarded as the most appropriate (Merriam, 1998:11), as it seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process or the perspectives and worldviews of people involved. This design was preferred because it enabled the researchers to collect rich data on the perceptions and experience of rural secondary school SGBs in managing learner discipline through the enforcement of the learner codes of conduct. This study is thus focused within the interpretative paradigm and aims to give a descriptive analysis of the SGBs perceptions and experiences of managing learner discipline through the design and enforcement of the learner code of conduct. These perceptions and experiences were obtained by means of semi-structured, open-ended focus group interviews.

The following key questions were asked at the focus group interviews:

- What are the SGBs' experiences in the design and enforcement of the learner code of conduct in their school?
- How do rural secondary schools enforce the learner code of conduct in managing discipline?
- What are the factors that impede the design and effective enforcement of the learner code of conduct?

It was also necessary to undertake a document analysis in the various schools selected. Documents such as the learner code of conduct, records of disciplinary problems and disciplinary measures taken by the school, and parent and departmental involvement in addressing some serious disciplinary problems.

This study was conducted in six rural secondary schools in the Moses Kotane West area of the Bojanala Platinum District in the North West Province. Purposeful sampling was used in this study. Best and Kahn (2006:19) state that purposeful sampling allowed the researchers to select schools where participants could provide rich information and those who experienced success or challenges in maintaining discipline in their schools. The participants who took part in the focus group interviews were chosen from SGBs who provided the researcher with their own experiences of the design and enforcement of the learner code of conduct in their schools. A total of six focus group discussions were conducted with an average of six to eight members per group. In total, 45 SGB members took part in the interviews. Each focus group interview consisted of the principal or their delegate, parent governors, teachers and non-teacher staff members, and learners on Representative Council of Learners (RCL). Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' position, age and level of education.

Table 1 List of participants selected for the focus group interviews

Position on SGB	Age range in years	Gender		Level of education
		Male	Female	
Principals	38 – 51	3	3	Teachers' Diploma First Degrees Honours degree
Chairpersons	40 – 49	1	5	Grade 4 – Grade 10
Parent governors	40 – 49	5	1	Grade 4 – Grade 10
Educator governors	31 – 47	6	6	Advanced Certificate in Education, Teachers' Diploma and First Degrees
Learner governors	16 – 19	6	6	Grade 10 – Grade 12
Non-teaching staff governors — admin clerks	25 – 30		3	Grade 12

There was a limitation in the size and representativeness of the sample. This study should have involved more participants at different levels (for example, heads of departments, and perhaps, department officials) to generalise the results for a larger population.

The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers and lasted for about fifty minutes each. They were conducted in English because schools provided the researcher with participants who could communicate in English. Permission was sought in writing from the schools and they were made aware of ethical considerations such as informed consent and privacy. The recorded interviews were transcribed by an expert in the field of qualitative research. Data was analysed according to Tesch's method of open coding in order to identify themes and categories (Creswell, 1994:155). The themes and categories that were identified during the data analysis process were compared with relevant literature to validate consistency.

Findings and discussion

In analysing data to gain insight into the perceptions and experiences of SGBs in managing learner discipline through the enforcement of learner codes of conduct, five themes and their categories relating to the effectiveness of and factors impeding the enforcement of learner codes of conduct at schools were identified. The first theme highlighted the lack of knowledge of legislation which included categories such as the competence of SGBs and the problems related to SGB training. Theme two dealt with preventative disciplinary strategies and the categories included corporal punishment and the actual discipline policy (code of conduct). The third theme emphasised the erosion of discipline which manifests itself in schools today and categories such as lack of respect and unacceptable behaviour. Theme four focused on environmental and social factors, and included lack of parental support and family background as categories. The fifth and final theme related to behaviour management and included cate-

gories such as the causes for learner misbehaviour and teacher behaviour management skills.

Theme one: Knowledge of legislation relating to learner discipline

The responses of most parent members of the SGB indicated that they have limited knowledge of relevant legislation underpinning the learner code of conduct and were uncertain as to whether that knowledge could really empower them to design and enforce the code of conduct. It was mentioned that designing and enforcing codes of conduct for learners were consequently and in most cases, left to the principals and educators at schools.

The parent governors' lack of knowledge of legislation

It would appear that many parents from rural areas serving on the SGB lacked the necessary knowledge, skills and experience on school matters and especially knowledge of legislation and some of the participants indicated that they don't even have a matriculation certificate. Teacher participant A indicated that the SGBs are lowly qualified and not sufficiently capacitated to be able to develop and implement policies in line with legislation. He remarked:

> *Most of the parents are not educated because they attended school during the dark days of Bantu Education. They can't understand all the laws that we must know how to design the code of conduct. Some have little knowledge of the provisions of SASA (South African Schools Act) and are not fully informed. You can also find some parents attended but had problems understanding the law. They are at the mercy of the principal and teachers in the SGBs. If the teachers and principal don't have sufficient knowledge, the whole SGB suffers*.

According to the Report of the Ministerial Review Committee on School Governance (Republic of South Africa, 2004:175), SGBs in South African schools are under-capacitated and not effective in engaging with the business of education. The ability of parents to govern effectively is sometimes constrained by a common sentiment that they are people without training and experience and therefore should not be allowed to interfere in professional activity (Sallis, 2001:1). Most parents on the SGB indicated that they would rather have the principal and school management team (SMT) design and enforce the learner code of conduct and they (the parents) would support the school in their endeavours to maintain effective discipline. This was indeed logical since the codes of conduct for learners were largely designed by principals and educators, although they could not define the kind of support they would render. They however explained that if due process was followed, they would approve whatever sanctions the SMT meted out to learners transgressing the code of conduct.

Problems related to training school governors

Participants commented that SGBs are not given adequate training to enable them to perform their duties effectively. Parent participant B stated:

> *We were once called to a training workshop after being elected as new SGBs. The workshop lasted for one day and the trainers tried to teach us everything in one day. It was difficult to learn all those things. We were told that there will be another workshop if the budget allows. We are waiting to see if that will happen.*

Participant C who is a parent member also believed that the lack of training impacted negatively on the effective functioning of SGBs. She remarked:

> *When people are not trained they can't be effective. The Department must do something. The new system has introduced things that we are not aware of and somebody must*

explain those things to us. We can't be left in the dark and be expected to implement policies of the new dispensation.

While it can be argued that training is not the only factor that can improve SGBs' abilities to design learner codes of conduct, it can be equally accepted that it has a significant role to play in facilitating the understanding of governors regarding designing learner codes of conduct as acknowledged by participants. Most of them felt strongly about the training provided by District offices. It was established that the days set aside for training, the duration of the training and the selected venues posed serious challenges to the SGBs, particularly the parent governors. Most training conducted by the districts or provincial departments of education was scheduled on Saturdays. Parents and teachers explained that this encroached on their personal commitments and excluded them from their social duties such as attending funerals, weddings and even doing their shopping. Even if the department were to conduct training during the weekdays, working parents will need to take official leave to attend these meetings, and if was held during the evenings, transport appeared to be the main reason for their non-attendance. Furthermore and understandably so, criticisms were also levelled on the use of English as the language of instruction and the one-size-fits-all training programme. Parents will find it easier to understand the various policies and legislation if these were also explained in their home language, mainly to simplify the legalese in legislation. Furthermore, Xaba (2011: 201) states that SGBs are not trained before they start their role as governors and this manifests in problems such as unfamiliarity with meeting procedures, problems with the specialist language used in meetings, difficulties in managing large volumes of paper, not knowing how to make a contribution, and not knowing appropriate legislation..

Provincial departments of education are required by the Schools Act to appropriate money for the training of SGBs (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). Section (19) (1) of the Schools Act states that the head of department must establish a programme to:

(a) provide introductory training for newly elected SGBs to enable them to perform their functions; and
(b) provide continuing training to SGBs to promote the effective performance of their functions or to enable them to assume additional functions.

In addition, the Head of Department should ensure that the principal and other officers of the department render all the necessary assistance to SGBs in the performance of their functions (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). However, this does not happen in practice because the provincial departments often claim that they have insufficient financial resources for this purpose.

Theme two: Preventive disciplinary strategies vs. punitive approaches

In this theme most participants contested the abolition of corporal punishment. However, some reflected on positive preventative disciplinary measures instead of punitive approaches as a means of disciplining learners. Two categories emerged, namely, the abolition of corporal punishment and the actual enforcement of the discipline policy (code of conduct).

Corporal punishment

The responses of the participants indicated their awareness that corporal punishment is banned in schools and yet it continues to be used. Participant E, a principal remarked:

Teachers are no longer allowed to beat the children. If your child is punished by the teacher and is seriously injured, you can go to the police station and open a case against

a teacher. No principal or teacher is allowed to assault learners anymore. The parents in the SGBs must know this and must not allow it to happen.

However, teacher participant F voiced his frustration at the prohibition of corporal punishment. He commented:

Since the banning of corporal punishment, we don't know what to do to the children. They do what they want. They don't do their homework and assignments and there's nothing that you can do. You try to involve the parents but they will tell you that they also have a problem with disciplining learners at home.

According to learner participant G, the government did well by banning the use of the stick in schools. She stated:

Sometimes teachers punish you for the things you didn't do. I think it's nice that we can't be beaten anymore and the teachers must respect our rights. If a child breaks the rules they must give him something to do and not beat him up. Some people have scars which they got from being beaten while at school and this is a traumatic experience.

The field notes also confirmed that some schools still use corporal punishment. In some instances, principals argued that the only way to get the discipline right was by using the stick. They conceded that they are aware that corporal punishment is against the law but that they use it secretly. The views expressed above indicate that a factor impeding the enforcement of learner codes of conduct, especially with regard to resolution strategies. The fact that the use of the outlawed corporal punishment still exists, indicates the difficulties regarding enforcing the use of alternative resolution strategies which should be contained in the learner codes of conduct. This indicates that SGBs are challenged in so far as enforcing codes of conduct and also indicates that, while reportedly designed at schools, these were not used.

The Schools Act makes it clear that corporal punishment may no longer be used in public and independent schools as a means of punishment (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). Schools should therefore find creative means of disciplining children. According to the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996b), everyone has the right not to be treated or punished in a cruel, inhuman or degrading way. It is therefore illegal for anybody to apply corporal punishment in respect of any learner at a public or independent school. Parents may not give principals or teachers permission to use corporal punishment (Potgieter *et al*., 1997:62). Moreover, the Department of Education (2000:7) asserts that corporal punishment does not nurture self-discipline in children. Instead, it evokes feelings of aggression or revenge and leads to anti-social behaviour.

Enforcement of code of conduct

Participants indicated that a discipline policy or code of conduct can be an effective preventative disciplinary measure if it is properly enforced. According to teacher participant H,

Our school does not have a clear policy on how to deal with learner conduct. In some cases there are only a few school rules which do not explain what is expected from learners and what will happen if learners don't comply with the code of conduct. Learners are not taught self-discipline and this may create discipline problems for the school.

However, teacher participant I argued that schools must not only design the code of conduct. They must ensure that they will be able to implement it. According to her,

Having a good policy is one thing, but implementing it is another. Schools should not have policies which are not working. It does not help to have a good policy which cannot help a school to achieve its objectives. SGBs must bear that in mind when they design the code of conduct.

An analysis of documents such as the learner register of misconduct indicated that schools do not enforce the learner code of conduct properly. There was no record of learner misconduct and no indication that the parents were required to sign for acknowledgement of the misconduct and consequent disciplinary action. Again, school could not provide evidence of the learner's disciplinary history which should be attached to the learner's profile card. Also, most of the schools did not have a school register of misconduct.

These factors indicate experiences of SGBs relating to the inability to design clear and enforceable learner codes of conduct, which is indicative of SGBs inabilities to design effective learner codes of conduct, let alone enforce them. In this regard, Bray (2005:133) points out that the SGB must be well-informed about the code of conduct so as to design and enforce it properly to ensure a disciplined school environment. This can be linked to the foregoing theme in so far as lack of knowledge and the ineffectiveness of the generic "*one-size-fits-all*" training proffered to SGBs. To this end, Oosthuizen and Roos (2003:38) assert that a clearly drafted code of conduct serves as a reciprocal code of conduct between learners themselves and learners and educators. In this way, learners are encouraged to display appropriate behaviour at all times. Once a school has a discipline policy as prescribed in the Schools Act, every educator should know the contents of the code of conduct and should utilise it to maintain proper discipline in class and at school (Oosthuizen, Rossouw & De Wet, 2004:75). The Department of Education (2000:20) affirms that the code of conduct will enable a school to create a positive learning environment by developing an incentive-based system that rewards good behaviour and encourages self-discipline. The learner code of conduct is a preventative disciplinary measure and ensures that all stakeholders, including learners, know exactly what kind of conduct is expected (Rossouw, 2003:427). Squelch (2000:19) maintain that the code of conduct should focus on positive discipline, self-discipline and inculcate a standard of behaviour that is recognised and accepted by civil society.

Theme three: Erosion of discipline

Participants mentioned that there is a general lack of learner discipline that hampers the teaching and learning process. Two categories emerged from this theme, namely, a lack of respect for teachers and unacceptable learner behaviour.

Lack of respect for teachers

Participants mentioned that learners do not show respect for those in authority such as teachers. As a result it becomes difficult to discipline such learners who seem to rebel against authority. Participant J who is a deputy principal remarked:

> *Learners have lost respect for the teachers. This problem has affected discipline negatively in schools. I think because they don't respect teachers, they think our school's code of conduct is just a piece of paper and they won't do anything with it. They also think that they won't feel the pain if the school enforces the code of conduct on them.*

Participant K who is a Departmental Head also asserted that a lack of respect for teachers is a serious problem which disturbs an environment of mutual trust which must exist between a teacher and a learner. She added:

> *These children become angry when teachers say they don't do their work. One of them nearly assaulted a teacher when the teacher demanded work from him. He was restrained by others. He has no respect (for the teacher) and he still wanted to go for the teacher.*

Oosthuizen, Roux and Van der Walt (2003:373) ascribe this problem to what they regard as

an era of civil disobedience associated with the struggle for freedom and democracy. Learners have developed arrogance towards both teachers and parents and this is exacerbated by the overemphasis on children's rights (Rossouw, 2003:413). It also seems clear that when parents fail to discipline their children at home the child could bring an undisciplined attitude to school.

Unacceptable learner behaviour

Bad behaviour is often displayed by learners who seek attention. In most homes, especially in rural villages, many learners live with their grandparents, parents are working, learners are heading households and there is often domestic violence. Teacher participant L asserts that:

> *We have observed that most of our learners don't stay with parents or real parents, they stay with grandmothers and then that's where lawlessness crops in. Most of the grandparents are unable to discipline them and to make sure that they do their work. So they come to school with bad behaviour from home.*

Van Wyk (2001:198) asserts that parents can contribute to the development of problem behaviour in their children by failing to equip them with social skills and support and by modelling inappropriate behaviour. If discipline structures, routines and specifically, parental involvement were in place in the home environment, then the burden of disciplining the child in the classroom or school environment would be significantly lessened for the teacher (Pienaar, 2003:266). These challenges seem to relate to the difficulty of designing codes of conduct that address behavioural problems that seem to emanate from source beyond the school's control, such as societal and family factors as described in the next theme.

Theme four: Environmental and social factors

Participants indicated that social factors are responsible for discipline problems amongst learners. In particular, two categories emerged namely, lack of parental support and family background.

Lack of parental support

Participants identified the lack of parental support in implementing the learner code of conduct. According to participant M, a principal,

> *It's only that we have a lack of support to implement it, especially on the side of the parents. These are parents of learners who break school rules and violate the learner code of conduct. Their children's misbehaviour tells you a lot about the type of families that they come from.*

Teacher participant N also believed that parents do not support the school enough and added:

> *They are not doing enough to support us as teachers in the school. When they are called for learners' work, especially the homework, they would say nasty things like, we are not teachers, we are not doing your work, so why must you call us to school. So, when you discipline their children they are not there to support you.*

Blandford (1998:32) and Sheldon and Epstein (2002:4) argue that an active partnership between parents and schools has great benefits and parents can have a powerful effect on children's behaviour. In most cases parents whose children behave well ensure that they arrive on time at school, behave appropriately, have proper uniforms, the necessary books and equipment: and do their homework on time.

The transformation of education in South Africa has defined the role of parents as key

partners in education (Morrell, 2001:294). The election of parents to SGBs allows them to be involved in issues of misconduct in schools and to participate in disciplinary proceedings as set out in the learner code of conduct. However, parental involvement in learner discipline in many schools has been lacking. Van Wyk (2001:198) states that many parents are reluctant to become involved in disciplinary issues involving their children and believe that the school should deal with the problem.

Family background

The participants have the perception that learners with discipline problems come from a family background where there is physical abuse, conflict and domestic violence. According to parent participant O:

> *Our learners come from a situation where, you know, parents are no longer together because they fought and there's divorce, so this affects their education — they no longer concentrate in the school and sometimes they get angry with the teachers.*

Another educator participant added that parents seem to have abrogated their responsibilities as primary teachers of learners, and remarked:

> *If children come to school with problems, the school will struggle to solve these problems because we must start at home. Parents have an important role to play but they neglect it.*

Both, the lack of parental support and learners' family backgrounds highlight factors that may impede the enforcement of the code of conduct. However, in both these cases, it becomes essential to deal with ill-disciplined learners in more holistic ways (Howard & Taylor,2007; State of Victoria, 2009).

Theme five: Behaviour management

Participants conceded that teachers and SGBs find it difficult to manage learner behaviour. Two categories emerged from this theme, namely, causes of learner misbehaviour and behaviour management skills.

Causes of learner misbehaviour

Parent participant P remarked that there is a myriad of causes of learner misbehaviour which are either personal or environmental. She commented:

> *Our children's misbehaviour is caused by either the child's behavioural disorder or the environment in which the child lives. Some children have inherent behavioural disorders which they acquired from birth. Others live in areas where there are social problems like alcohol and drug abuse, crime and a high unemployment rate. These social ills influence the behaviour of children when they get to school.*

Another respondent (Q) who is a parent believed that the situation at school can also cause discipline problems if positive discipline does not exist and the environment is not conducive to teaching and learning. He remarked:

> *The school situation can also lead to serious behavioural problems amongst learners. In a school where teachers are poor role models learners will not behave. You will find that teachers don't prepare for classes, come to school late and are often under the influence of intoxicating substances. Such a teacher cannot reprimand learners because they will not take him seriously.*

According to Ferreira and Badenhorst (2007:60) an important challenge confronting teachers

relates to managing and supporting learner behaviour effectively. Some of the factors which make it difficult for teachers to maintain discipline include overcrowded classrooms, lack of appropriate training for teachers, the abolition of corporal punishment and an increasing number of learners with special educational needs in the mainstream. In order to ameliorate this problem, schools should have rules of behaviour and a code of conduct for learners (Masitsa, 2007:155).

Behaviour management skills

Participants reasoned that the lack of behaviour management skills impacts negatively on the implementation of the learner code of conduct for maintaining discipline. Participant R, a principal, commented:

> *Teachers don't have behaviour management skills and when they are confronted with discipline problems, they run out of ideas. Some of them resort to old punitive methods while others do things that violate the rights of learners. There are still those who argue that the abolition of corporal punishment did not leave them with an equally effective deterrent against misconduct*.

According to a deputy principal, participant S, teachers must be equipped with the necessary skills to deal with learner misbehaviour:

> *Some teachers don't possess the necessary skills because they need to be developed. They should know that there are alternatives to punitive disciplinary measures. Even when they are given recent documents on the management of discipline, they don't study them. So, I don't know how they will keep themselves abreast of the latest developments if they don't study*.

The Department of Education (2000:12) posits that there are ways in which a positive culture of teaching and learning can be created in a school by implementing innovative and creative ideas. These ideas include, the adoption of a whole school approach which ensures that classroom discipline reflects the school's policies; the establishment of ground rules, consistent implementation of the rules, knowledge of learners and focus on relationship building; enthusiastic and professional management of the learning process and the learning environment; proper use of learning materials and the correct teaching methodology, inclusivity; giving learners the opportunity to succeed, allowing learners to take responsibility; devising positive strategies to deal with attention-seeking learners; involvement of parents and the use of professional assistance (Department of Education, 2000:12-14). According to Joubert and Squelch (2005:2), the school environment is as much a factor in discipline as home circumstances and personality. In addition to the strategies mentioned above, effective leadership, clear communication, and good planning by teachers, are some of the factors that are essential for preventing disciplinary problems (Walsh, 1997:113).

Conclusion

In this article we explored the perceptions and experiences of SGBs in the design and enforcement of the learner code of conduct. The data analysis indicated the difficulties SGBs and school in general experience regarding the design and enforcement of learner codes of conduct. Consequently and even though relevant legislation and policies are in place, teachers and SMTs still use severe punitive measures such as corporal punishment to discipline learners. The interviews with SGBs revealed that many of them are still grappling with the proper design of learner codes of conduct. In fact, it is apparent that while schools may have codes of conduct

designed by principals, their School Management Teams and educators, these are not properly designed to address discipline problems in terms of action, strategies and resolution and are thus unenforceable. Furthermore, lack of adequate knowledge of legislation and training militates against the ability of SGBs to perform functions such as the adoption of a learner code of conduct and its effective implementation. Moreover, teachers seemed not to have confidence in the effectiveness of their schools codes of conduct and enforceability of strategies to deal with learner discipline. The researchers believe that the proper design and effective enforcement of the code of conduct may address learner discipline problems and make the school a conducive environment for teaching and learning.

References

Best JW & Kahn JV 2006. *Research in Education*, 10th edn. United States of America: Pearson.

Blandford S 1998. *Managing Discipline in Schools*.London: Routledge.

Bray E 2005. Codes of conduct in public schools: a legal perspective. *South African Journal of Education*, 25:133-138.

Bray E 2007. School governance and management: background and concepts. In Joubert R & Bray E (eds). *Public school governance in South Africa*. Pretoria: CELP. pp 11-28.

Buck GH 1992. Classroom management and the disruptive child. *Music Educators Journal*, 79:36-42.

Charlton T & David K 1994. *Managing misbehaviour in schools*. London: Routledge.

Curwin RI & Mendler AN 1980. *The Discipline Book*. Reston: Prentice Hall. .

Creswell JW 1994. *Research design: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. London: Sage.

Department of Education 2000. *Alternatives to Corporal Punishment: The Learning Experience*. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Department of Education 2008. *Example of a Code of Conduct for a school*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Ferreira A & Badenhorst G 2007. Teacher values and the use of punishment in managing learner behaviour: An interpretative perspective. In Oosthuizen IJ, Rossouw JP, Russo CJ, Van der Walt JL & Wolhuter CC (eds). *Perspectives on learner conduct*. Potchefstroom: Platinum Press.

Howard A & Taylor L 2007. *Fostering school, family, and community involvement*. Washington, DC: The Hamilton Fish Institute on School and Community Violence & Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Jackson D 1994. *Discipline without anger or tears: A manual for teachers and school principals*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Joubert R & Bray E (eds) 2007. *Public School Governance in South Africa*. Pretoria:CELP.

Joubert R, De Waal E & Rossouw JP 2004. Discipline: Impact on access to equal educational opportunities. *Perspectives in Education,* 22(3):77-87.

Joubert R & Squelch J 2005. *Learner Discipline in schools,* 2nd edn. Pretoria: Centre for Education Law and Policy.

Nitsch D, Baetz M & Hughes JC 2005. Why codes of conduct violations go unreported: A conceptual framework to guide intervention and future research. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 57:327-341.

Mabeba MZ & Prinsloo E 2000. Perceptions of discipline and ensuing discipline problems in secondary education. *South African Journal of Education*, 20:34-41.

Maile S 2002. Accountability: An essential aspect of school governance. *South African Journal of Education*, 22:326-331.

Masitsa MG 2007. Substance use among township secondary students in South Africa — an emergent phenomenon. In Oosthuizen IJ, Rossouw JP, Russo CJ, Van der Walt JL & Wolhuter CC (eds). *Perspectives on learner conduct*. Potchefstroom: Platinum Press.

Merriam SB 1998. *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*. United States of America: Jossey- Bass.

Mestry R 2004. Financial Accountability: The principal or school governing body? *South African*

Journal of Education, 26:27-38.
Morrell R 2001. Corporal punishment in South African schools: a neglected explanation for its persistence. *South African Journal of Education*, 21:292-299.
Oosthuizen IJ & Roos MC 2003. Common Law. In Oosthuizen IJ (ed.). *Aspects of Education Law,* 3rd edn. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
Oosthuizen IJ, Roux JM & Van der Walt JL 2003. A classical approach to the restoration of discipline in South African Schools. *Koers*, 68:373-390.
Oosthuizen IJ, Rossouw JP & De Wet A 2004. *An Introduction to Education Law*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
Pienaar G 2003. A different approach to classroom discipline problems. *Educare*, 32:261-274.
Potgieter JM, Visser PJ, Van der Bank AJ, Mothata MS & Squelch JM 1997. *Understanding the South African Schools Act: What Public School Governors Need to Know*. Pretoria. Department of Education.
Republic of South Africa 1996a. *South African Schools Act*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
Republic of South Africa 1996b. *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
Republic of South Africa 1998. *Guidelines for the Consideration of Governing Bodies in adopting a Code Of Conduct For Learners (promulgated in terms of the South African Schools Act, 1996)*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
Republic of South Africa 2004. *Report of the Ministerial Review Committee on School Governance in South Africa*. Pretoria: Formerset Printers.
Rossouw JP 2003. Learner discipline in South African Public Schools — a qualitative study. *Koers,* 68:413-435.
Rossouw JP 2007. The role of the governing body in school discipline. In Joubert R & Bray E (eds). *Public school governance in South Africa*. Pretoria: CELP. pp 79-92).
Sallis J 2001. *Effective School Governors: A Practical Guide*. Great Britain: Pearson.
SengeP, Cambron-McCabe N, Lucas T, Smith B & Dutton J 2000. *The Fifth Discipline. Schools that learn*. New York: Random House.
Sheldon SB & Epstein JL 2002. Improving Student Behaviour and School discipline with Family and Community Involvement. *Education and Urban Society,* 35:4-26.
State of Victoria 2009. *Effective schools are engaging schools: student engagement policy guidelines*. http://www.education.vic.gov.au. Accessed: 2011/03/15.
Squelch J & Lemmer E 1994. *Eight keys to effective school management in South Africa*. Halfway House: Southern.
Squelch J 2000. *Discipline: Series on Education Transformation*. Pretoria: Centre for Education Law and Policy.
Thompson C 2002. Schools crisis of discipline. *Citizen,* 26 April.
Van Wyk N 2001. Perceptions and practices of discipline in urban black schools in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, 21:195-201.
Van Wyk N 2004. School governing bodies: the experiences of South African educators. *South African Journal of Education*, 24:49-54.
Walsh P 1997. *Educational management and the law*. Auckland: Longman.
Wheldall K 1992. *Discipline in schools*. London: Routledge.
Xaba MI 2011. The possible cause of school governance challenges in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education,* 31:201-211.