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Victims' experiences of learner challenging behaviour in primary schools in Phoenix, South Africa

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Victims' experiences of learner challenging behaviour in South African primary schools are an ongoing problem that is cause for concern, where additionally, the parents of the perpetrators are unapologetic, and defending their wrongdoing. In this scenario, there is little teachers can do to address ill-disciplined learners. In effect, teacher helplessness has further intensified the problem in primary schools. To establish the way in which the victims experience challenging behaviour, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of six learners ($N = 6$). Results indicate that the victims continuously suffer at the hands, and indeed the feet, of violent learners. Furthermore, as their cries go unheard, the problem remains persistent. Since schools have been failing to respond effectively to learner challenging behaviour, this article recommends immediate intervention by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to offer a more constructive solution to this problem, one that will effect change and offer relief and protection to the victims. The article concludes that victims continue to suffer, with little or no safeguarding from teachers. Future research ought to include the role of teachers in safeguarding learners against learner victimisation and challenging behaviour in primary schools.

Keywords: behaviour; experiences; fear; impact; learner wellbeing; primary schools; victims

Introduction and Background

Challenging behaviour in primary schools is a phenomenon that many South African teachers are all too familiar with. Since their hands are tied, it has subsequently become difficult for teachers to address and manage ill-disciplined learners (Naong, 2007). Hence, vulnerable learners have become ongoing targets for those learners who continuously exhibit challenging behaviour, and cause them physical harm and emotional suffering. As the learners' behaviours grow more challenging, so to do teachers' concerns grow increasingly grave. This phenomenon, however, is not peculiar to South African teachers alone, as learner indiscipline is a problem that affects teachers internationally (Botha, 2014; Marais & Meier, 2010; Mncube & Harber, 2013; Naong, 2007). Given that learner challenging behaviour is an international problem (Mncube & Harber, 2013), learners abroad may be interested to know that their behaviour may be no different to that of learners in South African schools, and if these behaviours were to continue or in any way escalate, education in schools abroad may be similarly compromised and at risk.

This article explores and portrays some experiences of the victims of challenging learner behaviour, and its impact on their wellbeing. The aim is to provide an overview of the concern in South African primary schools with regard to experiences suffered by the victims. Learners are reportedly being bullied and assaulted in South African primary schools. Some of these attacks have been highlighted as overbearing and brutal, and have included incidents of learner violence and stabbings, leading to loss of life (South African Council of Educators [SACE], 2011). The SACE (2011:13) reported further that learners suffer "repeated victimisation at the hands of their aggressors at school." According to Mncube and Harber (2013), learners in South African schools carry weapons. Clearly, with the current situation getting out of hand, learner indiscipline has reached its pinnacle. Evidently, articles have reported on learner indiscipline and school brutality, however, there is a scarcity of literature that focuses on the lived experiences and impact of learner challenging behaviour on its victims.

To ensure that victims are not lost through the schooling system, and that they receive relief and safeguarding against the abuse of the perpetrators, this article reports on the victims' experiences and its impact on their wellbeing as a scaffold to understanding the victims' predicament in primary schools and how challenging behaviour is cruelly affecting them.

Conceptualising Challenging Behaviour

Challenging behaviour by nature, according to Kaiser and Rasminsky (2007), is harmful to oneself and others, including adults. What is more, is that challenging behaviour perpetuates chaos, and disrupts learning. Challenging behaviour includes anything from not settling down to classroom activities, and may extend but is not restricted to verbal and physical abuse toward other learners (including teachers), violence, and bullying and intimidation, to name a few (Marais & Meier, 2010). To gain insight and understanding into the complex nature of learner challenging behaviour within the primary school context, challenging behaviour, as outlined by Kaiser and Rasminsky (2007), will be classified into aggression, provocation, disruption, bullying and isolation type behaviours which may also overlap.

Aggression type behaviours, which cause deliberate harm to learners, may extend from mocking and teasing to physical violence, and can lead to hospitalisation or the death of learners (Botha, 2014; Coon & Mitterer, 2010; SACE, 2011; Singh, GD & Steyn, 2014). A study by Marais and Meier (2010) also highlighted

how learners engage in aggressive fist fights, including kicking and slapping other learners. Victims experiencing this type of abuse undergo intense physical and emotional suffering as well as develop future psychological problems (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2007). Provocation is a type of behaviour that occurs when children are provoked and are compelled to fight back to defend and protect themselves against any form of harm (Botha, 2014). GD Singh and Steyn (2014) confirm that when provoked, child victims will usually attack those who harm them, instantly turning into the perpetrator. For Marais and Meier (2010), physical fighting is the most common form of provoked behaviour learners use in school to try to solve their everyday squabbles.

Disruption type behaviours, according to N Singh (2012), cause interruptions in the classroom and disturbances in school, and may also destabilise the school's functionality. Naong (2007:284) attests to the fact that disruptive behaviour "creates conditions of fear and intimidation" and generates a negative school environment. Botha (2014) concurs that violence in South African schools prevents schools from establishing conducive learning environments and further compromises its efforts to strengthen the learners' social relationships and emotional well-being. Kaiser and Rasminsky (2007) point out that the use of vulgar language by learners constitutes another type of disruption behaviour which violates the learning environment, and prevents the victims from learning. Bullying is a more serious type of disruption behaviour and includes deliberate acts of cruelty that is frequently displayed by a child or group of children towards other children (Marais & Meier, 2010; Singh, GD & Steyn, 2014). Moreover, Marais and Meier (2010) and Mncube and Harber (2013) reveal that bullying is a daily recurring act in schools and occurs in various forms including taunting, humiliating and intimidating, stealing, and physically harming other learners, to mention a few. The SACE (2011) also reported that learners form gangs in schools to control other learners. Essentially, bullies gain control and dominate their victims by petrifying and silencing them with threats of harm should they complain about them (Marais & Meier, 2010).

Victims in particular go into depression and engage in isolation type behaviours which mainly include dissociation or withdrawal (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2007). Campbell (1995) and Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2002) point out that depression in children suppresses them and cause difficulty in socialising with others. To avoid facing up to their problems, child victims may shut themselves off, avoid relationships, and remain silent and withdrawn (Campbell, 1995). These isolation type behaviours, according to Pringle (1986), are known to lead to emotional suffering in

children and cause them imminent resentment toward others. Emotional suffering in children is also known to impair their self-image (The American Academy of Paediatrics, 2013). Additionally, witnessing acts of challenging behaviour for some learners may be disturbing and can cause psychological trauma leading to maladaptive behaviours, including failure (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2007; Singh, GD & Steyn, 2014). These victims, as highlighted by Botha (2014) and GD Singh and Steyn (2014), become anti-social and find it difficult to make or keep friends.

Theoretical Framework

This study was underpinned by the general systems theory to understand the importance and connectedness of systems working together. Developed in 1936 by Biologist, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the general systems theory suggests that change in behaviour in one part of a system will affect behaviour in other parts of a system (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2006; Marais & Meier, 2010; Naong, 2007; Von Bertalanffy, 1968). In essence, disturbances occurring in any one part of the system will disturb all other parts of the system and cause the system to go into a state of disequilibrium (Donald et al., 2006; Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2010). Similarly, learner indiscipline is getting out of control and causing disturbances in the school system. To restore the system back to a state of equilibrium, Donald et al. (2006, 2010) and Gregory (2012) maintain that problems occurring within the system that threaten and cause disturbances to the system must be identified, and a solution to the problem must be found. The systems theory also posits that parts of a system cannot be understood in isolation, but as an amalgamated whole. Moreover, systems interact and work together for the purpose of achieving the systems' mutual goals (Gregory, 2012).

Each part of a system has a specific role function and is expected to execute and make decisions that will accomplish the goals within the system in order to keep the system healthy and maintain certain boundaries among systems (Donald et al., 2006, 2010; Gregory, 2012). Similarly, when learners forget their primary role function in school, this affects the fundamental purpose and ethos of the school system, and causes disturbances and chaos that leads the system into a state of disequilibrium (Campbell, 1995; Coetzee, 2005; Marais & Meier, 2010; Naong, 2007). Moreover, school systems that are disruptive are perceived by society as being incompetently run-down, poorly maintained and functioning ineffectively (Mncube & Harber, 2013). The role of the parts within systems, therefore, is crucial in determining just how well a system is able to function and govern its health (Donald et al., 2010). The DBE and the teachers alike have a crucial role

to play in ensuring learners are both disciplined, and protected against ill-disciplined learners. Although Donald et al. (2010) postulate that schools, as open systems, ought to form interactive partnerships with their school communities that will function as efficient and successful educational organisations, schools were evidently receiving little or no help from the DBE, or other social partners, such as the Assessment centres and local child welfares, and were failing to effectively respond to and address ill-disciplined learners in schools, nor were they able to safeguard its victims. Additionally, there were no longer any Guidance counsellors in school, which according to Daniels (2013), left a vacuum in providing support in guidance and counselling to learners at school. The South African government's declining economic resources available to the DBE, including the implementation of Curriculum 2005 (Department of Education [DoE], 1997) which removed specialist teachers from primary schools, to expect generalised teachers to become specialist teachers, no longer allow for the employment of specialised school based support personnel, namely the school guidance counsellor. The guidance counsellors previously played a crucial role in addressing and counselling ill-disciplined learners. Equally important is the provision of support and encouragement to the victims.

Since the government's decision to abolish corporal punishment in schools, according to the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996a), teachers were not at liberty to impose corporal punishment on any learner. In fact, the problem grew worse (Naong, 2007) as teachers were no longer allowed to scold, shout at, or discipline a learner in any negative way. Moreover, these strategies were perceived to be offensive and warranted disciplinary hearings, suspension, or worst, dismissal of the teacher. Due to their disempowerment and helplessness, (Naong, 2007), teachers were failing to correct unwanted behaviour or restore good behaviour in learners. For Mncube and Harber (2013), teachers are also not specifically trained to deal with the problem behaviours learners present with, and are therefore unsuccessful in adequately subduing ill-disciplined learners. Hence, learner indiscipline is diffusing increasing harm to all parts of the school and is furthermore threatening the school system. Marais and Meier (2010), Naong (2007) and GD Singh and Steyn (2014) concur that schools felt abandoned in dealing with ill-disciplined learners on their own. Donald et al. (2010) and the SACE (2011) nonetheless argue that schools as organisational systems ought to devise relevant policies and put contingencies in place that will direct the protective functioning and governance of the school system.

Mncube and Harber (2013) on the other hand posit that schools are considered to be subsystems of society, which simply replicate the plight experienced in broader society. There are also concerns that schools are susceptible to the same plight as found in this regard within the broader society (Mncube & Harber, 2013). What's more is that a review committee, DoE (2000) also found that South African teachers were inadequately trained to deal with the problems that learners experienced. Moreover, the disturbances in schools, due in most part to the propagation of some of governments' policies and practices, also contribute to the victims' plight of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of ill-disciplined learners, who increasingly continue to exhibit worsening behaviour. Teachers are not allowed to impose physical punishment on learners, yet ill-disciplined learners continue to physically harm other learners, and teachers have little or no support to effectively counteract this problem. This lack of support, according to Naong (2007), is not unique to South African teachers alone, particularly since it is representative of a universal practice. The systems theory also implies that the problem of learner challenging behaviour lies in the environment the learner interacts in (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998; Naong, 2007). Furthermore, the environment itself is responsible for the learners' behaviours. Hence, learners alone should not be held responsible for their behaviours. Since their environments are responsible for negatively influencing their behaviours, their environments ought to be equally responsible for a positive change to their behaviour. Therefore, changing the school environment in some way may eventually lead to changing the learners' behaviours (Chance, 2009). Just as the systems theory predicts, unless a solution to this problem is found, the problem will prevail. In effect, challenging behaviour is predicted to continue to victimise learners, rob them of their happiness, and either suppress them into isolation or compel them to act out in destructive ways.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

A qualitative research approach was embraced to exemplify an interpretive view. Since qualitative research is more evolving in nature, the focus of the research is placed here on the victims' lived experiences of learner challenging behaviour in the natural school environment (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Neuman, 2011). A qualitative research approach is also referred to as an interpretative approach (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The interpretative approach, which emanated from the interpretivist paradigm, generated useful data and interpretations as narratives.

Data Collection and Analysis

This article translates from a larger case study conducted at three primary schools in Phoenix, South Africa, and reports on the victims' experiences of learner challenging behaviour. Data presented in this article was constructed from the voices of six victims ($N = 6$) of challenging behaviour, through the form of semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which lasted for about an hour. The management team of each sample school purposively sampled two participants, aged between nine and fifteen years to participate in this study (Neuman, 2011). Interviews, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2005) and Maree (2007), are highly effective in obtaining information from participants. The interviewees were asked to answer a set of pre-determined open-ended questions, guided by an interview schedule. The audio recordings from the interviews received careful listening, and the data was analysed and coded into common themes using thematic analysis (Neuman, 2011).

Trustworthiness/Reliability

The victims' interpretations were of a subjective nature, and accepted as the truth of their lived experiences. Common links within themes during the analysis phase were interconnected using the related data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

All ethical considerations and protocols were observed, and consent was gained from the schools and the parents of the participants to conduct and tape record the interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect all identities. The participants' confidentiality was guaranteed and their autonomy was maintained. Since a sample of only three schools were used in this study and the interpretations of the victims were of a subjective nature and considered to be their truthfulness, the findings are context bound and generalisations outside this context cannot be made.

Discussion

The focus of the article guided the data analysis and revealed three themes worth emphasising. The themes are presented and discussed in the following sequence: the experiences of the victims, impact of experiences on the learners' wellbeing, the victims' need for protection.

The Experiences of the Victims

The following direct quotes by the victims indicate that they experienced aggression, provocation, disruption, bullying and isolation type behaviours at the hands of ill-disciplined learners. In most cases, these behaviour types overlap.

The following experiences of aggression-type behaviours were quoted.

Kwazi: *"this boy had a knife in the break and took it out and said he is going to cut my neck off. He wanted to poke my eye [...] he put the knife and cut me here"* [pointing to the one centimetre scar on the left side of his face between his ear and eye].

Joe: *"They put their hands by my throat and squeeze tight [...] they were hitting me down by the grounds [...] punching me [...] and pushing me in the long grass. They kick me on my thigh and when I try to run, they skip my leg."*

Tokozi: *"They are hitting me and pushing me on the floor [...] the grade six girls and grade seven boys [...] they smack me. One time they punched me and kicked me and threw stones on me [...] the stone hit my eye. I had to go to the doctors and the doctor put me a plastic [covering her left eye with her right hand] [...] I had five stitches. I stayed away seven days from school."*

Inthi: *One boy showed me a knife after school [...] he just came and put it over here (pointing to his chest) but he left me when he saw I didn't have any money."*

The complaints from the victims suggest that they were subjected to brutality and assault and suffered dearly at the hands of their aggressors. Learners were being punched, kicked, slapped and threatened on a daily basis. They were also being attacked and threatened at knife point. Mncube and Harber (2013) did confirm that the learners in South African schools carried weapons. Clearly, the constitutional rights of learners were being violated, which contravened the democratic Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996b). Furthermore, victims that experience this type of abuse suffer excruciating pain and anguish. These acts of brutality led to the learners seeking medical assistance, which required stitches and left scars, and could very easily have been fatal. Learners also had to remain absent from school to recuperate. Botha (2014), Coon and Mitterer (2010), SACE (2011) and GD Singh and Steyn (2014) did point out that aggressive behaviours led to hospitalisation or even death of its victims. The systems theory pointed out that the environment was responsible for the learners' behaviour and further anticipated that if the environment was changed in some way then behaviour was likely to change in other ways (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998; Naong, 2007).

The following quotes indicate that the learners were being bullied.

Kwazi: *"That boy is putting me on the floor and forcing money out of me. He is saying if I don't have money he is going to catch me after school [...] he said if I don't give him money I'm going to heaven."*

Joe: *"They pull my juice bottle and lunch and run and tell lies they never do it. I was going to the tuck-shop and the bullies came to pull my money out of my pocket."*

Tokozi: *"They come and put their hands in our pocket and take our money [...] every time my*

mother gives me R5 [...] when I come to school they take my money. They take my lunch and throw my lunch box on the floor and run away. They eat and throw the paper on my face [...] then they tell lies they didn't bully me [...]"

Inthi: *"Every day in the grounds this boy asks me for lunch and if I don't give him he comes to hit me [...] the boy demands for money then if I don't have it he slaps me."*

Nicholas: *"Every day they are teasing me Mr Bean [...] they worry me for my pictures [...] they hit me ... and they always blame me for everything they did [...]"*

Zakwe: *"They like to bully me and hit me. Every day they are hitting me [...] the same boys [...] they wait for me outside the school by the gate and hit me [...]"*

The articulations of the victims suggest that they were subject to constant harassment, intimidation and threat by other learners in school. Their possessions were forcefully removed and taken away from them. They were also subjected to teasing and humiliation, and were falsely blamed by the bullies, for their wrongdoing. A study conducted by Marais and Meier (2010) revealed similar findings of physical and verbal aggressive type behaviours exhibited by primary school learners. A study by Mncube and Harber (2013:14) also revealed that learner bullying in schools occur through "physical violence, threats, name-calling, ridicule, humiliation, and abusive comments." Marais and Meier (2010) and GD Singh and Steyn (2014) posited that bullying was a frequent and deliberate act of cruelty towards others. Furthermore, victims had to experience and endure these cruel acts of bullying on a daily basis. Continuous abuse of children, as highlighted by The American Academy of Paediatrics (2013), causes them emotional suffering and tarnishes their self-image. Furthermore, the injuries suffered by the learners cause them to remain absent from school to recuperate. Additionally, Marais and Meier (2010) pointed out that bullying spawned turmoil in school and caused fear among learners, and was likely to lead the school to a state of disequilibrium.

Impact of Experiences on the Learners' Wellbeing

The following quotations by the victims indicate that their wellbeing was being compromised.

Tokoza: *"My sister is in Grade Two [...] they hit her and punch her. In the break I have to protect her. I have to hide every time. I take my sister and go hide in the toilet and sometimes under the trees."*

Joe: *"My brother is in Grade One [...] they try to take his juice bottle [...] they hit my brother when I'm not there. They punch his face and pull his hair. I protect my brother and take care of him [...] I hide him every time so they don't get him."*

Zakwe: *"I try to hide [from] them [...] but they wait for me [...]"*

The articulations of the victims indicate that their mental health and wellbeing are compromised.

Furthermore, their siblings were also being attacked. There are further implications, namely that although the victims were fearful of their attackers, their allegiance to protect their siblings led to them putting their own fears aside to build up their courage, to protect their younger siblings. These learners were consequently compelled to act courageously to ensure that their siblings were protected against harm, that is, the same harm they endured. Similarly, the systems theory posits that the system must be protected against any harm. Problems must be identified, and solutions must be found, particularly since parts of a system are interactive, and rely on one another for their survival (Donald et al., 2006, 2010; Gregory, 2012).

In an attempt to solve their problem, learners were obliged to remain on constant alert, and to stay as far from the clutches of their abusers as possible. The systems theory did postulate that a change in behaviour in one part of a system will affect behaviour in other parts of a system (Donald et al., 2006; Marais & Meier, 2010; Naong, 2007; Von Bertalanffy, 1968). These learners were forced to isolate themselves and run and hide from the bullies. However, it was not nearly possible for Tokoza and Joe to continuously be present to protect their siblings. Maag (2004) and Powell, Symbaluk and Honey (2009) also confirmed that fear in learners causes them to become dissociated and depressed. Kaiser and Rasminsky (2007) maintain that challenging learner behaviour affected the physical and emotional wellbeing of the learners. Furthermore, there were no guidance counsellors in schools to neither counsel and attend to the victim's mental health and wellbeing, nor give counsel to the perpetrators. Additionally, it is a growing concern that the victims were held captive and being abused, and forced to protect themselves without any help from teachers.

The Victims' Need for Protection

The following quotes by the learners indicate that the teachers were ineffective in safeguarding them against victimisation.

Kwazi: *"If I tell the teacher then he is going to bring his friends after school and hit me [...] he is going to kill me."*

Joe: *"The children don't listen to the teacher [...] they argue with the teacher. They throw things at the teacher."*

Tokoza: *"When I'm going to tell the teacher, they are saying they going to get me after school. They have a big mouth with the teacher. They don't listen to the teacher [...] they can even hit me when the teacher is there [...] I keep quiet and take the hiding."*

Inthi: *"If I go tell the teacher he threatens to hit me after school."*

Nicholas: *"[...] the teachers don't do anything [...] they just scold them [...] and they do it again."*

It is clear from the articulations of the victims that the teachers were not able to protect them against harm. If ill-disciplined learners have little respect for teachers, they were unlikely to have any respect for other learners. Moreover, if teachers are unable to protect learners then learners will continue to be left unprotected against abuse. Kaiser and Rasminsky (2007) did accentuate that continuous abuse of learners, was harmful to them and placed them at risk for future social problems. Naong (2007) did mention that due to the abolition of corporal punishment in 1996, teachers felt disempowered, and could do little to manage learner indiscipline in schools. On the contrary, the systems theory postulates that systems must co-operate and work together for the purpose of achieving the systems' (schools') mutual goals (Gregory, 2012). Teacher helplessness caused the victims to remain silent, and to endure humiliation and abuse, as learners knew very well that teachers were not able to do much to help them. Additionally, the learners feared that if they spoke out, they would endure further victimisation by the bullies.

Conclusion

This article exposes some of the victims' experiences of learner challenging behaviour in primary schools in Phoenix, South Africa, which is a grave concern. Moreover, learners are left exposed without the protection of teachers. As their cries go unheard, the problem remains. School-based violence, brutality, and victimisation seem to be the order of the day. This article concludes that the problem in South African primary schools grew serious enough to warrant immediate intervention from the DBE. Additionally, should the country's economic situation change, perhaps the South African government, as a matter of primacy, can consider reinstating guidance counsellors back into schools to address learner behavioural issues as a precursor to managing learner ill-discipline that can contribute to sustaining the mental health and wellbeing of learners. Their services can also extend to reforming parents to execute better guidance to their children's upbringing to strengthen their psychosocial skills.

Note

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