Learner discipline in South African schools: The parental dimension

Prof. C.C. Wolhuter*
Comparative and International Education Professor
Research Unit: Education and Human Rights in Diversity (Edu-HRight)
North-West University
Charl.Wolhuter@nwu.ac.za

Prof. J.L. van der Walt
Research Unit: Education and Human Rights in Diversity (Edu-HRight)
North-West University
Hannesv290@gmail.com

Prof. N.A. Broer
Research Unit: Education and Human Rights in Diversity (Edu-HRight)
North-West University
n.a.broer@live.com

Dr N. Mollo
Research Unit: Education and Human Rights in Diversity (Edu-HRight)
North-West University
Nicholus.Mollo@nwu.ac.za

Dr K Mampane
Research Unit: Education and Human Rights in Diversity (Edu-HRight)
North-West University
33294038@nwu.ac.za

*To whom correspondence should be directed

Abstract

Learner discipline has been a major issue in South African schools for some time now. The issue of learner discipline in schools is complicated in that it involves at least six dimensions: the learner-, teacher-, school-, education system-, parental or family- and society-related dimensions. The purpose of this article is to present the results of a study on one of the hitherto under-researched dimensions of this complex issue, namely the dimension concerning the parents of school-going children. The article presents the results of a survey done on a purposive sample of 402 parents of learners at schools in two South African provinces. The survey explored the respondents' views of the state of discipline of their children at home, their relationships with their children in the home environment, their views regarding discipline problems at school, their views on the management of learner discipline in schools and their views on the role of parents in curbing the discipline problems of their children at school. The investigation revealed that the respondents understood the need for sound discipline of their children both at home and at school, for a healthy parent-school partnership and for cooperation in this regard. They also displayed a positive view of the state of discipline of their children at home and at school, of their own and the schools' management of learner discipline problems and of their own role as parents in terms of parent–school relations. However, when viewed together with research that examined the experience of learners, principals and teachers, and with evidence regarding the broader society, the respondents in this study seemed to be living with a false sense of complacency in that they tended to think that the discipline of their children at home and in school was as good as could be expected. Such a complacent attitude on the part of parents is detrimental to the maintenance of sound discipline both at home and at school. This research fills a lacuna in research in on the issue of learner discipline in schools, South African schools in particular in that it focused on the parental–family-home dimension. This project has underlined the importance of follow-up research for the purpose of exploring ways in which not only unwarranted parental complacency about the situation can be countered but also the (in)discipline displayed by learners at home and in school.

Opsomming

Leerderdissipline is 'n brandpunt in Suid-Afrikaanse skole. Die saak van leerderdissipline aan skole is veelkantig en gekompliseerd, met ten minste ses dimensies of stelle faktore, te wete leerder-, onderwyser-, skool-, ouer-, samelewing- en onderwysstelselverwante faktore. Hierdie artikel doen verslag van die resultate van navorsing oor een faktor waaroor tot dusver min navorsing gedoen is, naamlik die ouerdimensie of -faktor. 'n Steekproef van 402 ouers van leerders in Suid-Afrikaanse skole se menings en belewenisse rakende die stand van dissipline in ouerhuise sowel as by skole, die hantering van dissipline by skole en die rol van ouers in die bekamping van dissiplineprobleme by skole is ondersoek. Die respondente het laat blyk dat hulle die noodsaaklikheid van gesonde dissipline onder hul kinders by die huis sowel as by die skool besef. Hulle verstaan ook die rol van die ouer-skool-vennootskap en ondersteuning in hierdie verband. Die ouers het 'n positiewe belewenis en evaluering van die stand van dissipline by hul huise en by die skole wat hul kinders bywoon, asook van hul rol as ouers betreffende ouer-skool-verhoudinge in hierdie verband. Wanneer hierdie bevindinge egter naas die resultate van navorsing oor die belewenis van leerders, hoofde en onderwysers, asook getuienis uit die breë samelewing, geplaas word, blyk die respondente 'n vals of ongegronde gevoel van selftevredenheid te hê, wat skadelik is vir die handhawing van gesonde dissipline. Hierdie navorsing vul 'n leemte met betrekking tot die vraagstuk van leerderdissipline aan skole, Suid-Afrikaanse skole in die besonder, in soverre dit die totnogtoe in die navorsing versaakte ouer-gesin-tuisomgewing dimensie belig. Die projek het die belangrikheid van opvolgnavorsing ten einde wyses waarop nie net ongegronde ouerselftevredenheid teëgegaan kan word nie, maar ook die gebrek aan dissipline van leerders tuis en op skool, benadruk.

1. Introduction

A multitude of media reports (see Von Vollenhoven, 2022) and a voluminous body of scholarly literature (see Zulu, Oosthuizen & Wolhuter, 2019 for a list of such publications) attest to the fact that learner discipline has become a major issue in South African schools. An example of this body of literature can be found in a special issue of this journal devoted to the subject of learner discipline in schools (*Journal of Christian Scholarship*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2010). Special issues have also been devoted to this topic by other journals in the past two decades – *Koers* (two special issues, vol. 68, no. 4, 2003; vol. 78, no. 3, 2013), the *Journal for the Humanities* (vol. 47, no. 3) and the *Journal of Education Studies* (vol. 8, no. 9). This problem of poor learner discipline in schools is not limited to South Africa; it is evident in education systems worldwide. A lacuna in all the publications on learner discipline, in South Africa as well as internationally, is research on the parental dimension of learner discipline in schools. The aim of this article is to present the results of a study on the parental dimension of learner discipline. This is an aspect of learner discipline that has so far been under-researched. The discussion commences with a general outline of the factors involved in the issue of learner discipline in schools. This is done for the purpose of determining where the parental factor fits in the issue of learner discipline as a complex phenomenon. Thereafter, the research method is explained, followed by a presentation and a discussion of the results of the investigation.

2. Conceptual framework: Learner discipline in schools

The purpose of this section is to give a brief overview of research that has been done in the past regarding the issue of learner discipline. In doing so, we also highlight the concepts that played a key role in the research reported in this paper.

Research has revealed that there are six sets of factors involved, or dimensions that can be distinguished regarding learner discipline in schools (see Wolhuter, De Wet & Van der Walt, 2019). Put differently, these are six sets of factors that have a bearing on the state of learner discipline in schools. This means that, when the issue of learner discipline is contemplated, all these factors should be considered. The six sets of factors to be reckoned with, as briefly mentioned in the introduction above, are learner-, teacher-, school-, education system-, parental or family- and society-related factors.

Learner discipline in a classroom depends, firstly, on *learner-related* factors, such as the age or life phase of the learners, their physical health and psychological state and their interests and aptitudes. Research by Wolhuter, Oosthuizen and Van Staden (2010) revealed that learner discipline problems appear to be more abundant and of a more serious nature at the secondary school level than at primary school level. *Teacher-related* factors refer to a teacher's competency level, the extent to which he or she is accepted as a role model for learners as well as the quality of teacher-learner relationships (Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office, 1989:67-72). *School-related* factors refer to school management arrangements, the type and execution of school leadership (see Curran & Finch, 2021), the availability and condition of school infrastructure, class size (i.e., the teacher-learner ratio) and the organisation climate and culture prevailing in the school. A case study done by Van der Westhuizen, Oosthuizen and Wolhuter (2008) demonstrated how the introduction of a congenial organisation culture in a school could lead to improved learner discipline.

It should further be pointed out that research on the experiences of learners regarding the state of learner discipline in South African schools (e.g., Hochfeld, Schmid, Errington & Omar, 2022; Wolhuter & Oosthuizen, 2003; and especially the *Report of the 2016 International Progress in Early Reading Study*, PIRLS 2016, see Mullis, Martin, Foy & Hooper, 2017, and also Wolhuter, 2021) paints a much bleaker picture regarding the state of learner discipline in South African schools. In the 2016 PIRLS study, Grade 4 learners, as respondents, in 60 participating countries were asked how often they experienced bullying at the hands of other learners. A total of 32% of the South African respondents indicated that they did on a weekly basis, the highest of all the PIRLS participating countries (Mullis *et al.*, 2017:225). By comparison, the figure for the United States of America was 15%, for England 15%, for the United Arab Emirates 25% and for New Zealand 24% (Mullis *et al.*, 2017).

Parent-related factors, the issue addressed in this paper, are parents' involvement in and support of schools, their modelling and child-raising styles and the practices they follow with their children at home (Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2020). *Society-related* factors, such as the level of social capital available in society, the incidence of social pathologies and the hierarchy of values and norms in society, can also affect the level of learner discipline in schools (Van der Walt, Potgieter & Wolhuter, 2009). Lastly, the *education system* can also have an impact on the state of learner

discipline in a school. The national education system of a country provides the structural environment and parameters (in the form of governance in circuits, districts and provincial and national offices) for the above-mentioned teacher- and school-related factors. System-wide arrangements can have an impact on teacher competency, the availability and maintenance of school infrastructure, authority structures and the autonomy and the morale of the teachers plying their trade in the system (Wolhuter *et al*., 2019).

These first three sets of factors (learner-, teacher- and school-related) have been subjected to extensive research. However, not much research has so far been done regarding the societal dimension, the education system dimension and particularly the parental dimension. This is deplorable given the fact that in the current public discourse on this issue in South Africa, the role of the parent is often highlighted as key in addressing the issue of learners' antisocial behaviour in schools and communal life (see De Klerk-Luttig, 2023; Steyn, 2023). This neglect of scholarly attention to the parental dimension of learner discipline in schools can be seen as part of a tendency in education scholarship to overlook the role of parents as key actors in the education of children (in this case, school learners). Moreover, in cases where researchers have recognised parents as key stakeholders in the school education of their children, the research has dealt with a range of topics but not with the issue of learner discipline (see Proctor, Roch, Breidenstein & Forsey, 2020).

One of the papers that has dealt with the role of parents with respect to learner discipline, an article by Wolhuter and Van der Walt (2020), contains a conceptual-theoretical reflection on the parental dimension. In their opinion, this dimension embraces four constituent factors: parenting style, the moral example parents set for their children, the family structure and dynamics, and parent-school relations, including parental involvement in school matters. Their findings, in brief, are as follows: With reference to the conventional distinction between three parenting styles (authoritarian, permissive and authoritative), they found that the authoritarian and permissive parenting styles tend to lead to ill-discipline among learners at school, whereas the authoritative parenting style seems to be best to promote sound learner discipline in school. Their investigation also revealed that the moral example set by parents plays a key role in forming children's attitudes regarding acceptable behaviour. Regarding the family structure and dynamics, their investigation showed that material and emotional stress in the family tends to lead to an increase in learner indiscipline at school. Their investigation finally revealed that parental involvement and sound parent-school relations should be seen as essential ingredients in shaping learners' behaviour at school.

The discussion so far shows that the issue of parental discipline constitutes only one part of a large, complex picture involving an array of role players. It is difficult, if not impossible, for researchers to keep some of the subsystems in the complex constant while studying only one in isolation, in this case, the role of parents with respect to the discipline displayed by their children both at home and at school. There are simply too many interconnections and feedback loops in the system to be reckoned with. On the other hand, according to Anderson (1999:218), a researcher or, as in the case reported in this article, a team of researchers, may revert to a form of reductionism (for instance, the use of a questionnaire for a particular group of respondents) in order to detect emergent patterns with respect to parents' roles in the discipline displayed by their children. Such patterns tend to emerge from the complexities of the system because of a tendency in systems to display a degree of "self-organising behaviour", meaning that "starting in a random state, they usually evolve toward order instead of disorder" (Anderson, 1999:218). Plotnitsky (2006:47, 50) correctly remarked that one "needs to find a way to handle the situation, physically and philosophically … and in this way create new order". As will be argued in more detail below, God created everything to be orderly at their most basic levels; since the creation of human beings, it has been the task of researchers to discover the God-given order in a phenomenon under scrutiny. In the research reported in this article, we resorted to two theories as the theoretical framework to help us understand the complexities surrounding parental discipline.

Theoretical framework

We invoked chaos theory and complexity theory for two purposes in this research. On the one hand, they enabled us to gain a deeper, contextual understanding of the discipline situation in schools and of the role of parents, and on the other, they enabled us to develop a reformational perspective on the situation that we discovered through the research.

Chaos theory, despite the fact that, taken at face value, it seems irreconcilable with a Christian ontology and cosmology, is in line with the Scriptural injunction in 1 Corinthians 14:40: "Let all things be done decently and in order" (KJV). Chaos theory affords researchers with an instrument for understanding the divine cosmic order. The theory can be explained with the aid of a metaphor. As a human being, a parent (or a researcher, for that matter) can only see life and all the activities therein from a creaturely, human perspective, much like a person looking at the reverse side of an expertly crafted tapestry: the observer sees only a melange of mixed colours and loose threads, with only the barest outline of the picture discernible. As human beings, we do not

have a God's-eye view of the tapestry, of the well-designed and -organised divine picture planned, created and maintained by the Creator. It is indeed as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:12: "For now we see through a glass, darkly, … now I know in part …" (KJV).

The complexity theory, on the other hand, helped us, as researchers, to understand that the weak discipline displayed by some learners at school may only be the pinnacle of an iceberg or one aspect of a complex assemblage (see Plotnitsky, 2006:42). A complex system, such as an education system and the school, in cooperation and in interrelationship with other role players, such as the parents, religious organisations and the surrounding community, can be described as a set of interdependent parts that together make up a whole that is interdependent upon some even larger environment (Anderson, 1999:216). This complexity involves a sizable number of variables that are interrelated in an organic totality and, in the end, constitute an organised whole (Raworth, 2022:136).

No single parent, researcher or research team can attain a complete view of the heterogeneous, yet interactive space of relationships represented by the parental home, broader society, school and education department (and other role players or stakeholders) where a wide array of differences, similarities and interactions constantly occur. Discipline (and weak discipline) in school occurs in a dynamic space-time, or as Deleuze and Guattari (1994:53) note, in "a sea of energy of thought [and activity], a space at the edge of chaos". According to Deleuze and Guattari (1994:201), there are "infinite variabilities" in terms of actions regarding order and discipline in parental homes and schools that "appear and disappear", and this – we would contend – is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to put an end to the discipline problems that South African schools are currently being afflicted with.

Since it is our task as researchers to try to discover, understand, and describe the order deeply hidden in our observable surroundings, such as in a parental home and in a school, we conducted an empirical investigation on the basis of the above conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The following section of this article contains a report on that part of the investigation into the parental aspect regarding learner discipline at a selected group of South African schools.

3. Empirical investigation

3.1 Instrument

A self-constructed questionnaire was developed to discover South African parents' perspectives on the discipline of their children, both at home and in school. In compiling items for the questionnaire, we drew on two sets of sources. The first was a questionnaire on learner discipline in schools that had been developed, tested and refined by the research group at the North-West University. This questionnaire was used to discover teachers' perspectives on learner discipline in schools and resulted in numerous publications (e.g., Wolhuter & Van Staden, 2007, 2008, 2009). The second was the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSQD) of Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen and Hart (2001).

Therefore, the questionnaire consisted of two parts, of which the first part consisted of a slightly adapted version of the PSQD. The second part had five sub-sections, namely: 1) respondents' views on the state of discipline among their children at home; 2) respondents' views on the relationship with their children at home; 3) respondents' views on the state, causes and effects of learner discipline problems at their children's schools; 4) respondents' views on management of learner discipline in schools; 5) respondents' views on the role of parents in curbing the discipline problems of their children at school. Respondents were also asked to provide some relevant biographical details.

The instrument consisted of Likert-type scale items and open-ended qualitative questions. The Likert scale employed was "never", "once in a while", "about half of the time" and "always". A mixed-method approach was followed in that open-ended questions were added to the quantitative items (Creamer, 2018:19; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018:382). The items were derived from a previously developed theoretical framework that focused on learner discipline at home and in the school context.

3.2 Data collection

Two provinces of South Africa were selected for this project: North-West and Mpumalanga. The findings of this study can, therefore, not be generalised to the entire country. A purposive sampling (non-probability) strategy was used to select different research sites and participants, as it was not feasible to use (stratified) random sampling due to the Covid-19 pandemic at the time. Specific schools were targeted based on their availability. The research sites included ex-Model C schools, township schools and rural schools.

Questionnaires were distributed to the schools for dissemination to parents. They were distributed in ways that minimised direct human contact during the pandemic. The completed questionnaires were collected from the schools on appointed dates. At each school, a sample was drawn from its parent corps. Sixteen schools and 448 parents in total responded favourably.

3.3   Data processing

Survey data analysis software was used to analyse the data. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for analysing the quantitative data, and validity analysis and reliability analysis were employed. In the processing of the data, the following had to be taken into account: Many cells in the database were empty (representing missing data) where parents had not responded to statements. It was decided beforehand that responses lacking more than 10% of the 90 statements (apart from the biographical information) would be removed from the database. This left a total of 402 of the original 448 questionnaires in the database. In N = 70 cases, respondents did not closely follow the guidelines given for completing of some specific items of the questionnaire. The resulting incorrect responses were eliminated from the database.

3.4   Validity and Reliability

The data relating to parenting styles (part 1 of the questionnaire) came from a standardized questionnaire, the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSQD).

Experts in the field of discipline problems compiled the questionnaire. It was then checked for validity by independent experts (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013:91). Because the second five sections (part 2) of the questionnaire were not used as subscales, no factor analysis was performed on the data from these sections.

3.5   Ethical considerations

The project was approved by the Ethical Committee of the university under whose auspices the investigation was done. (Ethical clearance number to be inserted after double-blind review of this chapter.)

3.6 Biographical profile of respondents

The questionnaire was completed by 402 parents in two provinces of South Africa, namely North-West and Mpumalanga. These parents came from all the major school types in South Africa. The distribution of the respondents as per school type is presented in Table 1. While not claiming to be statistically accurately representative of the South African school mosaic, the results of Table 1 show that parents with children in all the major school types in South Africa completed the questionnaire.

Table 1

Distribution of respondents as per school type

School type	Percentage of respondents (N=402)
Ex-Model C school (better endowed, historically white school)	19
Township school (historically black urban schools)	33
(Former) Homeland school (situated in one of the former homelands)	34
Farm school (located on a farm, i.e., a school for children of farm labourers)	15

Twenty-one percent of the respondents were male and zeventy-nine percent female. Far more mothers than fathers completed the questionnaire. The number of female respondents counted almost four times that of male respondents. This should not be construed that the sample was unbalanced or unrepresentative. For a number of reasons, many children in South Africa stay in single-mother-headed households. The divorce rate in South Africa is high (see Statistics South Africa, 2023). The Human Sciences Research Council estimates that over 60 percent of South African children do not stay with their biological fathers (Japhet, 2023).

Table 2 presents the age profile of respondents. Nearly seventy percent of therespondents are aged between thirty and fifty year.

Table 2

Age Distribution of Respondents

Age (years)	Percentage of Respondents (N=402)
18-20	13
21-29	6
30-39	36
40-49	32
50-59	11
60+	2

Responses regarding the number of children respondents had are presented in Table 3. The average number of children respondents had was 2,82. Half of the parents (55%) had two or three children.

Table 3

Number of Children Respondents had

Number of Children	Percentage of Respondents (N=402)
1	16
2	29
3	26
4	17
5	9
> 6	3

Respondents' responses regarding the school level of their children are presented in table 4. Most respondents had one or more children at a primary school. One-third of the respondents had children at both a primary school and a secondary school.

Table 4

Respondents' responses regarding their children's school level

School Level	Percentage of Responses (N=402)
Primary	42
Secondary	23
Primary and Secondary	35

Respondents' responses regarding the Quintile of the school which their children attended are presented in table 5 (In South Africa, public schools are categorised into five Quintiles, according to the average income level of parents. Schools attended by children from the least affluent households are Quintile 1 schools, and schools attended by children from the most affluent households are Quintle 5 schools). The majority of parents had children who attended a fifth quintile school. The children of nearly a quarter of the parents went to a fourth quintile school. So the vast majority of children attended a school in the highest two quintiles.

Table 5

Respondents' responses regarding the quintile in which the school which their children attended resorts

Quintile	Percentage of Responses (N=402)
1	15
2	31
3	21
4	12
5	22

Seven per cent of respondents indicated that they served on the School Governing Body of the school which their child/ren attended. This means that the vast majority of respondents had no particular official involvement with the activities of the school their children attended.

The above responses show that while the sample cannot claim to be exactly representative of the school, parent and learner populations of South Africa, the sample does include the full range of schools (in terms of school types), parents (gender and age), families (in terms of income level) and learners (school phase).

4. Results

This section is based on the data collected with the abovementioned questionnaire. Only data relevant to the subject of this article are taken into consideration.

4.1 Respondents' relationships with their children at home

The respondents' responses to items on their relationships with their children at home are presented in Table 6. From the results of the survey, it seems that most of these parents understand the need for sound discipline at home and believe that teachers and parents were partners in instilling good discipline in their children. In response to the statement "My style of parenting is to tell my children what they should do because I am their parent. I do not listen to what they say", more than a third either agreed or partially agreed. So, in their methods of instilling discipline, some parents tend to be somewhat authoritarian. Yet, despite such strong authoritarianism, the overwhelming majority of the parents feel that the atmosphere in their homes is casual and not stressful.

Table 6

Respondents' responses to items regarding the relationships with their children at home

Items	Percentage of Responses (N=402)			
	I disagree	I partially disagree	I partially agree	I agree
I insist on good discipline at home	3	2	13	82
My approach to inculcating acceptable morals in my child is that teachers should help learners adopt acceptable moral behaviour.	4	3	19	74

My style of parenting is to tell my children what they should do because I am their parent. I do not listen to what they say.	43	21	16	20
The atmosphere in my home is casual and not stressful.	6	4	20	70

4.2 Respondents' views on the state, causes and effects of learner discipline problems at school

The respondents' responses to questions concerning the state, causes and effects of learner discipline problems at school are presented in Table 7. A large proportion of respondents (40%) do not (fully) agree with the statement that the standard of discipline in schools in South Africa is very good. In the publication of Wolhuter and Van Staden (2008:394) (admittedly dated, but the only survey comparable with the one reported on in this article) on a survey of teachers, the respondents' assessment of the state of discipline in their schools was somewhat more positively than that of the parents in the current study. Nonetheless, full half of respondents could not give a positive assessment regarding the state of discipline in South African schools, which is a cause for concern.

Table 7

Respondents' responses to questions about the state, causes and effects of learner discipline problems at school

Item	Percentage of Responses (N=402)			
	I disagree	I partially disagree	I partially agree	I agree
The standard of discipline in schools in South Africa is very good.	22	18	28	32

4.3 Respondents' views on the management of learner discipline in schools

The respondents' views on the management of learner discipline in schools are presented in Table 8. The respondents indicated that they were kept well abreast and informed by their children, the teachers and the management team of the school regarding the state of discipline at the schools attended by their children. Furthermore, they felt that the schools attended by their children were taking a strict stand regarding discipline.

Table 8

Respondents' views on the management of learner discipline in schools

Items	Percentage of Responses (N=402)			
	I disagree	I partially disagree	I partially agree	I agree
The parent component of the governing body of my child's school is absolutely strict with the children and expects them to display excellent discipline at all times.	7	10	23	60
I get information about discipline issues at my child's school from teachers and the management of the school.	19	9	17	55
I get information about discipline issues at my child's school from my child.	16	6	24	54

4.4 Respondents' views on the role of parents in curbing the discipline problems of their children at school

The respondents' responses to questions surveying their views on the role of parents in curbing the discipline problems of their children at school are presented in Table 9. It seems that the overwhelming majority of the parents were satisfied with the way in which discipline matters were handled by the schools attended by their children. The parents reported that they always went to the school when they were invited, they had participated in disciplinary hearings in which their children were implicated, and they were of the opinion that such hearings had a positive effect on the behaviour of their children. At the same time, the fact that almost half of the parents indicated that they had attended a disciplinary proceeding of a child seems to be at odds with their positive assessment of the discipline situation both at home and at the schools attended by their children, as discussed earlier.

Table 9

Respondents' views on the role of parents in curbing the discipline problems of their children at school

Items	Percentage of Responses (N=402)		
	Yes	No	Not applicable
I always go to school when I am invited.	85	11	4
I have participated in a disciplinary proceeding regarding the behaviour of my child.	46	49	5
If your response to the above question is "yes", does this mean that your participation in your child's disciplinary procedures has improved your child's behaviour at school?	95	5	0

The responding parents' assessment regarding their own roles and involvement in schools for the purpose of assisting in maintaining discipline does not tie in with the results of existing research on parental involvement in schools and the efficacy of school governing bodies in South African schools. Such research has revealed that, according to the experience of teachers and principals, there is a lack of adequate involvement of parents in their children's schools (e.g., Grobler, 2022; Michael, 2004; Michael, Wolhuter & Van Wyk, 2012; Nzimande, 2006; Simango, 2007). There are also several reports of school governing bodies that function less efficiently than can be expected, some of them even being barely functional or outright dysfunctional (e.g., Clase, Kok & Van der Merwe, 2007; Gumede, 2020; Maluleka, 2008). The reasons for their sub-optimal functioning, as portrayed in these studies, vary. The efficacy of school governing bodies in the maintenance of sound discipline in schools in conjunction with the (supportive and cooperative) role of parents has thus far escaped the attention of scholars. Research in this regard is sorely needed. The few studies that did cover the parental aspect, such as that of Mahlangu (2018), did not attend to the function of maintaining discipline in schools but, nevertheless, pointed out the wide gap between parents and principals regarding the efficacy of school governing bodies.

5. Discussion

As explained in the conceptual-theoretical framework that formed the basis of this empirical investigation, it is no simple task for an individual person, such as a parent, to think in terms of a complex education system that is dynamic, unstable and even unpredictable (Raworth, 2022:130) or to have complete or satisfactory insight into the part played by one of his or her children in the complexity embodied in the intertwinement of family and school life. Looked at from the outside, the behaviour associated with life in the family home and in the school appears chaotic in the sense that it is difficult to manage and to keep under control – it is dynamic, even messy, driven by the choices and the preferences of all the role players, full of contradiction and power play, never in equilibrium (there is always something that disturbs the order) and never static (Barrett, 2009:151).

The complexity and chaos theories discussed in the section containing the theoretical framework on which the empirical investigation was based could arguably also come to the aid of parents in discovering a way out of the current situation in which they and their children find themselves. A parent can approach the problem of parental discipline as one small piece of a huge and complex puzzle "at the edge of chaos". The parents of a particular child can view the actions of their child, and also their own behaviour, vis-à-vis the child as only one small piece of the entire puzzle of life and as something unique in their particular social context. No parent is able to attend to the entire complex implied by the phrase "school discipline". Each parent is responsible for attending only to a single "loose thread" in the tapestry of their family life at home. A single socially unacceptable act on the part of a child may represent such a loose thread and may resonate negatively with life at school if not timeously nipped in the bud by the parents. Put differently, a single antisocial act on the part of the child could be seen as just one small piece of the puzzle that the parents and the child are building. In Biblical terms, this comes down to parents concentrating on letting their light shine right there where they find themselves in a particular encounter with their child who has behaved unacceptably (see Mat. 15:16; Luke 11:35, 16:8; John 3:21, 12:35; Rom. 13:12; 2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 5:8; Phil. 2:15; 1 John 1:7; 1 John 2:10).

The evidence flowing from this research can be summarised in two phrases that also set the pointers for follow-up research and the improvement of practice. These two phrases are "unwarranted complacency" and "discordance and a need for communication".

While parents appreciate the need for sound discipline at home and for a partnership between parents (the parental home) and teachers (the school), they seem to be unjustifiably complacent regarding the state of discipline in these two environments. This point becomes clear when the results of this investigation are compared to the outcomes of research done in the context of the lived experiences of other stakeholders, where other dimensions of the discipline issue have been examined. Such research regarding the lived experiences of learners (e.g., the latest round of the PIRLS study), teachers (e.g., Wolhuter & Van Staden, 2007, 2008, 2009), student teachers during practice teaching (e.g., Wolhuter & Steyn, 2010) and principals (e.g., Mentz, Wolhuter & Steyn, 2003) presents a much less optimistic picture with respect to the state of discipline in schools. Research on the community or societal dimension of discipline also seems to be at odds with the complacency of the responding parents in this study. Research drawing on teachers' and principals' experiences regarding parental involvement in school matters led to much more negative conclusions than what the responses of the parents reported in this project would seem to embody.

Specific features of society in South Africa, such as violence, a lack of social capital and moral bankruptcy, all have knock-on effects on the behaviour of learners in school, as has been pointed out by public leaders (e.g., Daniel, 2018) and scholars (e.g., Osman, 2017). This situation has been corroborated by empirical research (e.g., Ngwokabuenui 2015:64, 69). South African society suffers from a lack of social capital, which has a negative impact on its education efforts (see Romanowski, 2022). Therefore, Van der Walt *et al*. (2009:40-41) argue that the extant lack of social capital in South African society should be seen as detrimental to the maintenance of good learner discipline in South African schools.

The responding parents in this study seem to live with a false sense of security, which is at variance with the situation in schools and even in the lives of their children. They do not seem to be well tuned to the experience of other constituencies or stakeholders in the multifaceted issue of learner discipline in schools (the "chaotic" and complex situation in which they and their children find themselves). These other constituencies or stakeholders are their children, as well as teachers, parents and society at large. There are contradictions even in their own narratives that seem to suggest that they suffer from a false sense of complacency. Nearly half of the respondents indicated they had been present at a school disciplinary proceeding of their children. Such hearings are normally reserved as a method of handling discipline only for serious or habitual offenders.

6. Recommendations

There is a need for effective, honest and open communication lines to get parents on the same page as their children and teachers. However, as the very first step, follow-up research is needed to probe the experience of teachers and principals regarding the state of discipline in the homes of learners, the role of parents in this regard and the role of parents in ensuring sound discipline in schools.

A research project should also be considered to examine the lived experience of learners regarding the discipline situation in their homes. Research regarding the teacher, principal and learner perspective with respect to learner discipline in schools has already been done (and cited in this article). What is still lacking is research on how these constituencies regard and experience the home and parental factor in the entire complex referred to as "learner discipline". Only after the views and perspectives of all the stakeholders involved in the complexity of learner discipline have been probed can a plan be devised for open communication lines among all parties concerned and can a concerted, muscular approach to the issue of learner discipline in schools be attempted.

7. Conclusion

This research has found that parents have an unwarranted sense of security and satisfaction regarding the state of learner discipline at schools. What can be suggested is follow-up research on the experience of other stakeholders in the education project, that is, principals, teachers and learners themselves, regarding the state of discipline at schools, as well as in parental homes. The outcomes of such research can be used to construct a complete picture regarding the state of learner discipline at school and at home, and that picture can then be used as the basis for an open discussion on how to improve the state of learner discipline in schools and in parental homes.

The research reported in this paper partly fills a hiatus in research on school discipline in South Africa, namely regarding the parental-family-home dimension. To gain a deeper understanding of the situation, follow-up research is required that explores ways in which not only the parental complacency about the situation discovered by this research can be countered but also the (in)discipline displayed by learners at home and in school.

Bibliography

ANDERSON, P. 1999. Complexity theory and organisation science. *Organisation Science,* 10(3):216-232.

BARRETT, S.R. 2009. *Anthropology.* Toronto: Toronto University Press.

CLASE, P., KOK, J. & VAN DER MERWE, M. 2007. Tensions between school governing bodies and education authorities in South Africa and proposed resolutions thereof. *South African Journal of Education,* 27(2):243-263.

CREAMER, E.G. 2018. An Introduction to Fully Integrated Mixed Methods Research. Los Angeles: Sage.

CRESWELL, J.W. & PLANO CLARK, V.L. 2018. Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research. 3rd ed. California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

CURRAN, C. & FINCH, M.A. 2021. Reforming school discipline: Responses by school district leadership to revised state guidelines for student codes of conduct. *Educational Administration Quarterly,* 57(2):179-220.

DANIEL, L. 2018. Schools in South Africa are becoming more violent. *The South African.* 18 September. https://www.thesouthafrican.com/south-africa-schools-violent-minister-speaks-out/ Retrieved on 28 October 2018.

DE KLERK-LUTTIG, J. 2023. Waarheen is ons op pad met SA se kinders? *Die Burger.* 28 February:11.

DELEUZE, G. & GUATTARI, F. 1994. *What is philosophy?* London: Verso. (Translated by G. Burchell & H. Tomlinson).

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE AND THE WELSH OFFICE (UNITED KINGDOM). 1989. Discipline in schools: Report of the Committee of Inquiry chaired by Lord Elton. London: HMSO.

GROBLER, A. 2022. Teachers' experiences of parents' involvement in foundation phase learning during COVID-19. *Perspectives in Education,* 40(2):17-31.

GUMEDE, V.W. 2020. Cultural implications for learners' effectiveness as governors of schools in rural South Africa. *South African Journal of Education,* 40(3). https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v40n3a165

HOCHFELD, T., SCHMID, J., ERRINGTON & OMAR, S. 2022 Learners' perspectives on school safety in Johannesburg. *South African Journal of Education,* 42(1):1-9. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v42n1a1936

JAPHET, G. 2023. It's Father's Day – but South African society suffering profound absence of father figures. *Daily Maverick,* 14 June 2023. https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2023-06-14-its-fathers-day-but-south-africa-society-suffering-profound-absence-of-father-figures/ Date of access: 30 November 2023.

LEEDY, P.D & ORMROD, J.E. 2013. Practical Research: Planning and design (10th ed.). New Jesey: Pearson Education, Inc.

MAHLANGU, W.V. 2018. Pertinent leadership and governance challenges facing schools in South Africa. In Popov, N., Wolhuter, C., Smith, J.M., Hilton, G., Ogunleye, J., Achinewhu-Nworgu, E. & Niemczyk, E. (Eds.). *Education in modern* society, pp. 137-142*.* Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society.

MALULEKA, M. 2008. The capacity of school governing bodies in rural schools of the Moretele district of the Nkangala region. (Unpublished MEd dissertation). University of South Africa, Pretoria.

MENTZ, P.J., WOLHUTER, C.C. & STEYN, S.C. 2003. 'n Perspektief op dissiplineprobleme in Afrikaanse skole. *Koers,* 68(4):391-412.

MICHAEL, S. 2004. The management of parent involvement in multicultural schools in the Umlazi district. (Unpublished MEd dissertation). University of South Africa, Pretoria.

MICHAEL, S., WOLHUTER, C.C. & VAN WYK, N. 2012. The management of parental involvement in multicultural schools in South Africa: A case study*. Center for Education Policy Studies Journal*, 2(1):57-81.

MULLIS, I.V.S., MARTIN, M.O., FOY, P. & HOOPER, M. 2017. *PIRLS 2016: International results in reading*. Buffalo, NY: IEA TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Center, Lynch School of Education, Boston College.

NGWOKABUENUI, P.Y. 2015. Students' indiscipline: Types, causes and possible solutions: The case of secondary schools in Cameroon. *Journal of Education and Practice,* 6(22):64-72.

NZIMANDE, N. 2006. An investigation into how principals are managing parental involvement in school matters. Unpublished Masters of Education Dissertation, University of Zululand.

OSMAN, R. 2017. Discipline problems in South African schools: Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Witwatersrand University, (Interview on Radio 702). https://wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/2017/2019-09/discipline-problems-in-south-african-schools.html Retrieved on 29 October 2018.

PLOTNITSKY, A. 2006. Chaosmologies: Quantum field theory, chaos and thought in Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy*? *Paragraph*, 29(2):40-56.

PROCTOR, H., ROCH, A., BREIDENSTEIN, G. & FORSEY, M. 2020. Parents, schools and the twenty-first-century state: Comparative perspectives. *Comparative Education,* 56(3):317-330.

RAWORTH, K. 2022. *Doughnut economics.* London: Penguin Books.

ROBINSON, C.C., MANDLECO, B., OLSEN, S.F. & HART, C.H. 2001. The parenting styles and dimensions questionnaire (PSQD). In Perlmutter, B.F., Touliatos, J. & Holden, B.W. (Eds.). *Handbook of family measurement techniques. Vol. 3: Instruments & index,* pp. 319-321. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

ROMANOWSKI, M.H. 2022. Using social capital to develop South African principals and schools. *Prospects,* 53(3-4):405-420.

SIMANGO, R.H. 2007. The management of parent volunteers at secondary schools in Limpopo province. (Unpublished MEd dissertation). University of South Africa, Pretoria.

STATISTICS SOUTH AFRICA. 2023. Marriages on the decline in South Africa https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p= 16142 Date of access: 30 November 2023.

STEYN, H.J. 2023. Empowering parents to support their children to survive and thrive in school: A present-day challenge. In Popov, N. Wolhuter, C. De Beer, L., Hilton G., Ogunleye, J., Achinewhu, E. & Niemczyk, E. (Eds.). *Recovering education: Using the experiences and learning acquired to build new and better education systems,* pp. 29-35. Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society.

VAN DER WALT, J.L., POTGIETER, F.J. & WOLHUTER, C.C. 2009. Addressing the discipline problem in South African schools by increasing the supply of social capital in society: A position paper. *Journal of Educational Studies,* 8(1):47-59.

VAN DER WESTHUIZEN, P.C., OOSTHUIZEN, I.J. & WOLHUTER, C.C. 2008. The relationship between an effective organizational culture and student discipline in a boarding school. *Education and Urban Society,* 40(2):205-225.

VON VOLLENHOVEN, J. 2022. Dissipline in skole: Wat is die oplossing? *Pretoria FM*, 23 September 2023. https://www.pretoriafm.co.za/dissipline-in-skole-wat-is-die-oplossing/ Retrieved on 18 February 2023.

WOLHUTER, C.C. 2021. The effect of discipline on the academic performance of learners: International perspectives from the 2016 progress in international reading literacy study and the implications thereof for South Africa. In Botha, J. (Ed.). *Discipline in education: Some less frequently explored issues*, pp. 245-281. Durbanville: AOSIS.

WOLHUTER, C.C., DE WET, C. & VAN DER WALT, J.L. 2019. The congeniality to sound learner discipline of the Finnish education system: Relevance for approaching learner discipline in South African schools. In C.B. Zulu, I.J. Oosthuizen & C.C. Wolhuter (Eds.). *A scholarly inquiry into disciplinary practices in educational institutions (NWU Education and Human Rights in Diversity Series Volume 2)*, pp. 199-228. Cape Town: AOSIS. https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2019.BK157.09

WOLHUTER, C.C. & OOSTHUIZEN, I.J. 2003. 'n Leerderperspektief op dissipline: 'n Kwalitatiewe ontleding. *Koers,* 68(4):437-456.

WOLHUTER, C.C. & STEYN, H.J. 2010. Eerstejaarstudente se belewing van leerderdissipline tydens praktiese onderwys. *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap,* 46(1):211-226.

WOLHUTER, C.C. & VAN DER WALT, J.L. 2020. Indiscipline in South African Schools: The parental/community perspective. *Koers,* 85(1):1-11.

WOLHUTER, C.C. & VAN STADEN, J.G. 2007. Learner misconduct in the Free State, Eastern Cape and Vaal Triangle (South Africa): An empirical study of the experiences of teachers. In Oosthuizen, I.J., Rossouw, J.P., Russo, C.J., van der Walt, J.L. & Wolhuter, C.C. (Eds.). *Perspectives on learner conduct,* pp. 394-406. Potchefstroom: Festina Lente.

WOLHUTER, C.C. & VAN STADEN, J.G. 2008. Bestaan daar 'n dissiplinekrisis in Suid-Afrikaanse skole? Belewenis van opvoeders. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe,* 48(3):389-398.

WOLHUTER, C.C. & VAN STADEN, J.G. 2009. Gender differences in South African educators' experience and handling of learner discipline problems at school. *Journal of Educational Studies,* 8(1):100-108.

WOLHUTER, C.C., OOSTHUIZEN, I.J. & VAN STADEN, J.G. 2010. Skoolfase/leerderouderdom as faktor in leerderdissipline in Suid-Afrikaanse skole. *Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap,* 46(1):169-186.

ZULU, C.B., OOSTHUIZEN, I.J. & WOLHUTER, C.C. (Eds.). 2019. *A scholarly inquiry into disciplinary practices in educational institutions*. Durbanville: AOSIS.