

EXPLORING THE CAUSES OF INDISCIPLINE IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the causes of indiscipline in Zimbabwean schools. It is based on observation, experience and other researches done before. Marxists' ideas are used to explain the causes of deviant behaviour in schools. These are highlighted as the difference between the two classes, that is the ruling class and the working class which fight for scarce resources within the society. Left with no option the working class tends to use other methods to get the resources, which might be considered as deviance by those in power who impose their rules and interests through the knowledge offered by education system. In addition to this teacher attitude and expectations, school climate and location and also mass media are some of the major causes of deviant behaviour among school children. The last part of the paper gives a number of suggestions on the ways in which such behaviour can be reduced by the school, parents and even the government. In brief schools must set realistic goals for the learners and also involve them in the formulation of rules and regulations. There must also be good relationship between the school and the community by engaging parents in the organisation of school activities such as Speech and Prize Giving days and even educational tours to mention a few. A number of suggestions were highlighted by different researchers both nationally and internationally on the reduction of deviant behaviour in schools.

Key words

Discipline, deviance, working class and ruling class

Introduction: Context

Human social life is governed by norms and values. Without these to define our behaviour, our activities would be chaotic (Giddens and Sutton, 2013) but not everyone conforms to the social expectations, that is, some people deviate, for example in a school set up. Rules and regulations are set for everyone but others are always found on the other side of the law because of varying reasons as going to be reflected in this write up. We should acknowledge the fact that deviance and conflict are inevitable in schools (Gwirayi, 2010). The magnitude of deviant behaviour is

determined by the type of administration, teachers, students, ancillary staff and socio- economic status of parents, among other factors (Ibid). Those who conform seem to be on the decline, meaning to say those who misbehave in schools are on the increase.

This paper considers the causes of the increase of indiscipline in schools especially among secondary school learners, which is considered as deviance. From my observation and experience, during the 2007 and 2008 Zimbabwean economic breakdown, most schools were left with very few or no teachers at all to attend to learners leading to disciplinary problems and some schools even experienced strikes by learners. The most common cases of misbehaviour include drug abuse, bullying, truancy and stealing among others cases and this involves both sexes though boys are the most perpetrators of indiscipline. This was also highlighted by Bronfenbrenner (1979) who believes that economic and political situations in a country strongly influence children's behaviour. Therefore, if this problem is to be reduced, there is need to find the causes first then the solutions, which is the focus of this paper leading eventually to the realisation of educational goals by learners. Gwirayi (2010) observes that one of the busiest committees in schools is the disciplinary committee. This shows the commitment of individuals to norms and values stipulated. Different sociological perspectives looked at indiscipline as an aspect of deviance. This write up will look at it from a Marxist perspective using the labelling theory, after which different factors that cause deviant behaviour are discussed.

Marxism paradigm

There is no one theory which can explain deviance since it is believed to be relative, that is, it depends with the context or society. Marxists believe that deviance is caused by the capitalist system which defines it so (www.learningsite.co.uk). Society is made up of two groups, according to Marxists, that is, the ruling class and working class. These classes always fight for scarce resources leading to conflict within society. Those without or the working class are likely to use other methods to get the resources, which is likely to be considered as deviance by those in power (www.cliffnotes.deviance-com). For example in schools, poor children may engage in stealing so as to also have the resources. In the same vein, Haralambos and Holborn (2013) believe that the state passes laws which support the interest of those in power to maintain their power in order to control the subject class. Chambliss (1983) in Haralambos and Holborn (2010) avers that greediness, self-interest and hostility generated by those in power motivate many crimes at all levels within the society. This means that even in schools the ruling class also impose their interests using the system, as highlighted by Althusser when he talks of education as an ideological state apparatus (Ibid). Therefore, lack of resources or the inequality in the distribution can make someone act in a deviant way in trying to acquire the resources, hence setting a trap for the poor. It is not only the social background that causes deviance, labelling also contributes much as reflected below.

Labelling has come to be one of the many ways of understanding deviance at any level. Labelling theorists interpret deviance, “not as a set of characteristics of individuals or groups but as a process of interaction between deviants and non-deviants” (Giddens, 2008:128). By and large the rules in terms of which deviance is defined and the contexts in which they are applied are framed by the wealthy for the poor, by men for women, by the older people for the younger, and by ethnic majorities for the minority groups (Ibid). For example if the children of the affluent engage in deviant behaviour it is regarded by everyone as part of growing up, but once it is done by those from poor background it is seen as evidence of tendencies towards juvenile delinquency. Once labelled the individuals are likely to be treated as untrustworthy, even by teachers at school, leading to deviant behaviour by the very individuals hence the perpetuation of indiscipline in schools. While this is most applicable in schools, there are other factors which also contribute to the deviant behaviour which is manifested in schools such as home background and mass media as reflected below.

Causes of deviance in schools

The disciplinary problem among learners is an issue of concern for teachers, parents, community and the world at large. There are various factors that cause indiscipline in schools such as home factors, school factors, environment and technology among others as discussed below.

Home factors

Type of family plays a crucial role in the discipline of a child. The family is regarded as the primary and chief agent of socialisation (Schaefer, 2010), therefore if the family lacks the good aspects it is likely to produce problematic children in society who will also cause problems in schools. Marxists regard a family as a unit system (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013) which consists of many small units. Therefore, if one unit fails to perform well then the whole system is affected. For example, boys from single parent homes are likely to have behaviour problems (Macionis and Plummer, 2008) because of lack of male guidance and discipline. This on the other hand may have detrimental effects on the child’s academic performance.

Furthermore, financially, most single parents cannot afford to support their children adequately. Most children from such families lack adequate learning materials and even uniforms which may negatively affect their learning in general. Berns (2010) concurs with Macionis and Plummer (2008) in saying that delinquent behaviours such as truancy, drug and alcohol abuses are synonymous with single parenthood children. In the same vein, Giddens (2013) also asserts that instead of engaging in pro- learning activities, most learners from single parenting families habitually partake in anti- school activities such as bullying. In light of the aforesaid, most single parent homes breed problematic children. Fell (2000) believes that parents of pupils who have no interest in education are likely to encourage their children to assume a similar attitude, provoking rebellious behaviour. This is also highlighted by Meltzer (1986) who says children who perform badly at school have low self-esteem and have a negative self-image that can lead to disciplinary problems. Negative attitude towards school by learners can be a problem because it will be

against the teacher's expectations. This is most observed in cases where learners do not do homework or play truant during lessons. Parents of such children do not attend school organised activities such as consultation or Prize and Speech Days. In such homes some parents do not have time even to help their children with homework, and consider this to be the duty of the teacher. In other cases it is the children of the rich who cause problems, which may be caused by having too much at home in terms of resources, hence might not be worried about school at all. They will tend to disturb and influence others because they know that even if they fail they will still find something to do in life because of their parents' positions in society (Giddens and Sutton, 2013). While home factors contribute a lot to indiscipline in schools, school-specific factors also have got a role to play in the difference in behaviour of learners.

School factors

In-school factors can cause disciplinary problems among learners leading to disruption of lessons and the general smooth running of the school. From an interactionist perspective teacher attitude and expectations affect the learners' academic performance (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). For example, the teacher's comments may affect the learner negatively or positively. After receiving a negative comment from the teacher the child might decide not to come to school or just disturb others during lessons so that he/she can be sent outside the classroom. Such children can continue to be problematic if the issue is not addressed.

On the other hand, Bears (1998) observes that teachers who come to school late allow the first few minutes of the lesson to be spent in an environment devoid of basic classroom rules. If this continues, pupils will be natured towards indiscipline largely due to too much unsupervised free time. Furthermore, poor planning and teaching methods on the part of the teacher contribute to indiscipline in schools (www.wiki.answers.com). Fell (2000) also emphasises that if a teacher is a poor teacher, indiscipline is most likely to be rampant in that class, and also if the teacher-pupil relationship is not good. On the other hand, teachers who are well connected to their students may face less disciplinary problems than those who are not.

School administration can also be a promoter of indiscipline (Gwirayi, 2010). There is no doubt that learners have many needs which can cause disorder in schools if not well attended to in time, especially by the school administration. Still on school leadership, gender plays a critical role in some cases where some boys seem to have problems with women leadership. Radical feminists believe that even in classrooms boys may resist being punished by female teachers or becoming rowdy when female teachers are on duty (Ibid). This is mostly experienced in secondary schools where there are big boys.

Arguably, rules and regulations can be a source of deviant behaviour by learners, that is, if they are too tight or too loose. While most people see deviance as a negative aspect in the school, the functionalists view it as necessary for both the teachers and the school administrators. It can be a source of change (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). The school authorities, and even the teachers, may be forced to change or revise their rules and regulations, or even procedures, to

reduce indiscipline in the school or classroom. Merton also observes that if pupils fail to achieve and meet the expectations of the school they always find means of realising the success (Giddens and Sutton, 2013). An example is in a school set up where some learners find themselves in such situations and end up copying other learners' work so as to succeed, which will end them in trouble with the teachers. On the other hand the school authorities need to lead by example and serve as role models to pupils (www.indiscipline-at-school.html). Learners may appear misbehaving and yet they will be imitating the teachers' bad behaviour. In some instances, learners misbehave because of lack of supervision. Therefore teachers need to occupy learners fully to reduce deviance, especially with learners of high ability.

Mass media

Mass media can be one other factor which exerts much influence on individuals (www.sgo.sagepub.com). Mass media include printed and electronic and are things such as television, newspapers, radios, Internet and phones to list a few, for example the movies they see on television and other bad behaviours which they can copy. Those with smart phones can search for such things as pornography and other non-educational materials which may lead them to engage in anti-school activities like sending each other pictures and messages during lessons. However those who put their phones to good use benefit a lot from Internet. Some schools do not even allow phones in the school premises because of bad behaviour amongst the students. More strict policies are needed to solve this problem. Zimbabwe, just like other countries, does not allow teachers to apply corporal punishment on learners (www.myzim.co.zw). In the absence of other recommended or acceptable methods of punishment, such policies give learners freedom to do what they want because they know that they are protected by the state and thus perpetuating disciplinary problems in schools. This is not to advocate for corporal punishment. The last part of this paper will give some recommendations which can help all those concerned to reduce indiscipline in learning institutions.

SUGGESTIONS

Deviance is a challenge in our schools which needs to be reduced or addressed. Below are suggestions on how teachers, school heads, the state and parents can help in reducing indiscipline in schools.

- Schools must set realistic goals for the learners which they can achieve without too much pressure.
- Learners must be involved in the formulation of rules and regulations and this can be done through their representatives or as a class.
- Deviance can be an indicator showing that something is not right, so teachers and school administrators should revisit their rules, teaching methods and learning activities.
- Teachers must be well versed with the students' home background.
- The parents must be encouraged to attend and be engaged in school organised activities such as annual general meetings, educational trips, Speech and Prize and consultation days to name a few. The relationship between the parents and the school will assist in shaping desirable behaviour in learners both at home and at school.

- The teachers must be exemplary and thus model good behaviour, including punctuality and presence during lessons.
- Knowing the children's culture is of paramount importance to the teacher as this may provide cues as to why children behave the way they do.
- Supervision of children's work is also important and this includes the use of phones and Internet on computers.
- There is need to revise the policies on discipline so to empower the teachers with disciplinary actions which are effective, since corporal punishment is considered inhuman.
- There is need to cultivate healthy teacher-learner relationships that empower learners and provide them the space to express themselves freely. If such space is not given to them, they will always find ways of making themselves heard, which are normally deviant in nature.
- Frequent workshops and seminars are necessary in schools to staff-develop teachers on how to prevent and handle deviant behaviour by learners.

McCaghy and Capron (1997) in Gwirayi (2010) suggest that students should:

- Postpone immediate gratification in the interest of achieving long term goals.
- Control physical aggression by playing constructively.
- Respect other people's properties.

These disciplinary problems are not only in Zimbabwe as reflected below by Berns (2010) who suggested the following as ways of reducing such problems in Western schools.

- Appoint right persons who are professionally trained disciplinarians of solid character and moral fiber to manage those primary and secondary schools which are underachieving academically and have become breeding grounds for criminals.
- There must be sound leadership and action at every level of education starting from home then schools.
- Our media houses and churches need to be part of the struggle.
- Psychological counselling is also needed for more serious bad behaviours.
- Numbers of male and female teachers in schools must balance in order for students to get models to emulate especially those from single parent families.
- School heads and deputy heads must be carefully selected and trained to manage these schools better.
- Teachers must be trained as counsellors so as to help manage deviant learners.
- Loving, caring but firm and decisive discipline at home and at schools is what learners understand and respond to positively.

Conclusion

In summary the paper has looked at the causes of indiscipline in Zimbabwean schools based on the Marxist perspective where the theorists believe that deviance is caused by the difference in social backgrounds of the learners. Also in-school factors such as teacher attitude, school climate and administration to name a few contribute to the disciplinary problems faced in schools to some extent. Mass media was also highlighted as another source of deviant behaviour among learners where they tend to search for non-educational materials from the internet using their phones or school computers. A number of suggestions were given to reduce such behaviour in schools. Some of them being, the need for good relationship between the school and the community, involvement of learners in their learning activities as much as possible including the formulation of rules and regulations that affect them. Also there is need to revisit the policies by the government for example the one on corporal punishment.

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