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High-school teachers' perceptions of challenging learner behaviour

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This focuses on persistent behaviour that disrupts teaching and learning on a daily basis. Teachers' perceptions have been investigated within the framework provided by eco-systemic and asset-based approaches to learner behaviour and support. The intensity and prevalence of behavioural challenges were reportedly higher in urban than in rural schools. The eco-systemic and asset-based approaches can be recommended for training teachers to understand and manage learner behaviour.

Hoërskoolonderwysers se sienings van uitdagende leerdergedrag

Die artikel fokus op die aanhoudende hinderlike gedrag van leerders wat onderrig en leer op 'n daaglikse basis ontwrig. Onderwyers se sienings is binne die raamwerk van ekosistemiese en bategebaseerde benaderings tot leerdergedrag en ondersteuning ondersoek. Hoërskoolonderwysers in stedelike skole het 'n hoër intensiteit en teenwoordigheid van gedragsprobleme gerapporteer as die in plattelandse skole. Daar word aanbeveel dat die ekosistemiese en bategebaseerde benaderings tot die verstaan en hantering van leerdergedrag binne onderwyseropleiding oorweeg word.

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Teachers in South Africa and abroad report a drastic increase in challenging learner behaviour (VandenBerghe & Huberman 1999: 24, Prinsloo 2005: 449). Hallam (2007: 106) notes that an unusually high number of recent literature focuses on managing behaviour in schools. This is indicative of the high level of concern over this issue, one which teachers say contributes significantly to their high levels of stress (Blandford 1998: 61).

According to Prinsloo (2005: 449), teachers in South Africa report that they find it difficult to ensure and support quality learning processes in their classrooms due to the disrespectful and extremely disruptive behaviour of some learners. A percentage of teachers respond to this by annually leaving the profession. Teachers who remain in the profession are reportedly less motivated and merely try to "survive" each school day (Cangelosi 1997: 3). Corrie (2002: 7) mentions that the continuous struggle of teachers to manage difficult learner behaviour which takes up much of their time and energy leads to high levels of frustration and to their questioning their own efficacy.

This qualitative inquiry explores high-school teachers' perceptions of learners' challenging behaviour, and is based on the premise that the intensity of challenging behaviour forms a continuum; from incidences of less serious behaviour to behaviour problems of a clinical nature that constitute "special needs". This study focuses on incidences of less serious behaviour, the rationale for this being well stated by Corrie (2002: 6-7):

> The media would have us believe that teachers worry more about serious acts of violence than other sorts of challenging behaviour [...] yet the downside of teaching is managing the relentless grind of nitty-gritty behaviour that disrupts teaching and learning.

The context of a rapid education transformation forms the background for this study. Since 1994, the education system in South Africa has undergone far-reaching policy changes, reflecting the government's desire to restructure and transform a fragmented, conservative and authoritarian education system into a more inclusive and democratic system (Sayed 1998: 169) in line with the values and principles enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA 1996a). Changes at the policy level have presented major

challenges for communities, schools and teachers, in particular, as they have reconsidered and sought to change established perceptions and convictions. According to Moonsamy & Hasset (1997: 1), any process of change is challenging and complex, but is experienced as especially challenging when an individual is expected to change the perceptions and beliefs that have a direct impact on their own and others' behaviour. The demands currently made on teachers include coping with policy changes, rationalisation, decentralisation, a new curriculum, the abolition of corporal punishment, in addition to an increased teacher-learner ratio. These demands inevitably affect what happens in schools and classrooms on a daily basis and may negatively influence the relationship between teachers and learners. The increase in learner diversity is another direct result of new policy developments at national level. Both the Constitution of South Africa with its Bill of Rights (RSA 1996a) and the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (RSA 1996b) entrench the rights of all learners, regardless of race, colour, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, culture or language, to basic education and access to any educational institution of their choice.

Van Wyk (2001: 197) claims "most educators stated that the governments' stance on corporal punishment has greatly contributed to an increase in disciplinary problems at school". However, he feels that, because teachers lack a thorough knowledge and understanding of the different theoretical approaches on learner behaviour, they find it difficult to effectively manage behaviour in the classroom. Although a constructive and non-violent approach is promoted at policy level, teachers at the grassroots level do not necessarily agree or comply with this approach. It is important to bear in mind that teachers face challenging behaviour on a daily basis, and that historically corporal punishment formed an integral part of the relationship between teachers and learners in many schools. As any process of change is difficult and complex (DoE 2000: 9), it is inevitable that teachers resist what appears to be an easy official answer to complex problems.

Challenging behaviour is any learner behaviour that prevents a teacher from teaching and a learner from learning (Montgomery 1989: 10). Drawing on Apter, Foreman (1996: 271) contends: "What makes

behaviour a problem is when it is exhibited in the wrong place, at the wrong time, in the presence of the wrong people, and to an inappropriate degree". Prinsloo (2005: 455) gives the following examples of disruptive behaviour: refusing to obey requests and instructions; general noisiness; showing off; teasing; irritating or disturbing other learners; leaving their seats without permission; talking out of turn; calling out when the teacher or other learners are talking; making improper noises, and generally not paying attention. Corrie (2002: 25) extends the list by adding that some learners lose or forget learning material, with the result that they do not hand in assignments on time.

1. Framing the study

This study is based on the premise that teachers' perceptions of disruptive behaviour will definitely affect the way in which they manage such behaviour in the classroom. Schutte & McLennan (2001: 21) define perception as

> the process by which individuals organise and interpret their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment. Because each person gives his or her own meaning to stimuli, different individuals perceive things in different ways and the way a person interprets a situation is often more significant than the situation itself.

It can be deduced that teachers will hold different perceptions of what constitutes challenging behaviour (DoE 2000: 14). In light of this, it was deemed necessary to explore teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviour before developing strategies and techniques for dealing with it effectively.

Although an extensive body of research on disciplinary issues and classroom management was located, few studies focus specifically on the perceptions of high-school teachers of challenging behaviour in South Africa. Lytle and Cochran-Smith (Zeicher & Liston 1996: 5) lament that "the voices of teachers, the questions and the problems they pose, the frameworks they use to interpret and improve their practice, and the ways they define and understand their work lives are absent from the literature of research on teaching". They assert, "this void must be filled with teachers' voices". Donald

et al (2002: 20) support this saying, "What need[s] to be examined is what teachers think and why they think; and what they do, how they do it, and why they do it". It was decided to take up this challenge and to investigate high-school teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviour, in order to better inform the development of practices and strategies for schools and classrooms. Based on the belief that teachers will do their work in allegiance with their own assumptions and educational beliefs, while often not being aware of the implications of these for their own behaviour and practice in the classroom (Kagan 1992: 66, Eraut 2000: 118), the following research question was formulated: What are the perceptions of high-school teachers of challenging learner behaviour?

In light of the above it is important to explore recent approaches to learner behaviour with concomitant interventions and to challenge traditional and individual approaches. Earlier approaches to behaviour and behaviour problems mostly focused on the individual and tend to be based on a medical model (Ebersöhn & Eloff 2003: 6). Concepts such as causes, symptoms, diagnoses and treatment were used, reinforcing the medical perspective (Cooper *et al* 1994: 22). The more traditional perspectives on the origins of challenging behaviour focused on unconscious conflict, maladapted learning and maladapted thinking (Woolfol 2007: 208-9).

The best-known approach is probably the needs-based approach, which both Ebersöhn & Eloff (2003: 5) and Rose (2006: 236) equate with medical-model thinking; the pathology model or a deficit-based approach to assessment and intervention (and learner behaviour) is so embedded in our collective unconscious that it often goes unexplained. Emphasising problems, deficiencies and needs (Ebersöhn & Eloff 2003: 5, 2006: 17, Eloff & Ebersöhn 2001: 148), this approach thus focuses on what is wrong rather than on what is right. The learner is identified as the one with the problem, and the deficit nature of the learner and/or the learner's home environment is the common focus among teachers. Fundamental to the needs-based approach is the premise that "if you can establish everything that is needed or deficient, you can map a plan" for a possible intervention to help the learner (Ebersöhn & Eloff 2003: 5). This deficient view of

learners often leads to stereotyping and labelling (Rose 2006: 236). "Challenging behaviour thus also becomes a label that distinguishes one group of learners from another and places undue attention on what is wrong with the learners" (Calabrese *et al* 2007: 276). There is thus an urgent need to develop capacity within schools to reveal and challenge "deeply entrenched deficit views of difference, which define certain students as impossible to teach, and thus beyond 'fixing'" (Ainscow & Kaplan 2005: 114).

By contrast, the eco-systemic and asset-based approaches are considered more enabling and holistic approaches to assessment and support (Bouwer 2005: 51). In South Africa, the eco-systemic approach (Donald *et al* 2006: 34-48) has contributed significantly to overcoming the limitations of the needs-based approach. The eco-systemic approach takes cognisance of the broader social context in which problems manifest that negatively affect learner behaviour. Challenging behaviour, whether associated with intrinsic or extrinsic factors, is examined from a broader social setting, and thus offers a more complex and holistic understanding of situations and behaviour. The interrelatedness and mutual dependency of systems in the learner's context provides the framework for interpreting assessment information and for interventions (Bouwer 2005: 50).

The following premises form the basis of the eco-systemic approach to challenging behaviour:

- Unacceptable behaviour in the classroom does not originate in the individual but is a product of social interaction;
- Challenging behaviour is caused by a cyclical chain of actions and reactions between participants, and
- Interventions need to acknowledge all the role-players and systems within the learner's context (Cooper *et al* 1994: 25).

The eco-systemic approach stresses the importance of examining the perceptions and behaviour of all the parties involved during intervention. Thus, teachers need to reflect on their own perceptions based on their theoretical allegiances, and their subsequent behaviour towards learners in the classroom and how this affects learners and their behaviour. This approach involves all the role-players

in a non-judgmental, problem-solving analysis that works towards eliminating the negative interactions between systems (Ayers *et al* 1996: 49). Charlton & David (1993: 11) explain that "each individual child is embedded in a number of systems, notably family and school, and that the individuals' behaviour can only meaningfully be viewed in that sort of context". Despite the benefits and good intentions of the eco-systemic perspective, it unfortunately does not sufficiently overcome "the danger of becoming stuck in an endless list of problems and deficiencies" (Ebersöhn & Eloff 2003: 5). However, at least this issue is now viewed more broadly, located both in the learner and in all the systems in which the learner is embedded.

The asset-based approach was developed by Kretzmann & McKnight (1993) from their community development work in the USA (Eloff & Ebersöhn 2001: 150), and their work also informs the asset-based approach developed for the South African context (Ebersöhn & Eloff 2003: 13, 2006: 21, Eloff & Ebersöhn 2001: 153). Although the asset-based approach applies a totally different lens to the learner and the systems within his/her context (Ebersöhn & Eloff 2006: 16), the theoretical framework for the eco-systemic perspective (as developed by Donald *et al* 1997 and reported in Ebersöhn & Eloff 2006: 17) remains relevant.

The asset-based approach is an enablement perspective that uses assets, resources, capacities and strengths to deal with challenges and to provide support. Recently, Ebersöhn & Eloff (2006: 15) acknowledged that this approach grew out of and was enriched by Positive Psychology, which "emphasises intrinsic strengths, assets and resources and positive constructive intrapsychic domains" focusing "on building strength and well-being for children and families" (Ebersöhn & Eloff 2006: 15). While problems such as challenging behaviour are not ignored, the focus shifts to the personal strengths of the individual and the assets in the various systems in which the individual is involved that could be useful. Bouwer (2005: 51) defines personal strengths as "those intrinsic qualities which a person musters in addressing a difficulty head on or also when taking an alternative route to reach objectives", whereas assets comprise all the extrinsic resources in the individual's ecosystem.

In light of this framework, it is argued that, without ignoring unacceptable learner behaviour, teachers can choose to perceive such behaviour from a strength-based and enabling perspective. The asset-based approach thus provides a positive lens through which to view learners' strengths and competencies that can then be built upon and developed. It focuses on the accessible assets in the learners' ecosystems that could be used, instead of allowing "the power of impairment, shortcomings in the system or disadvantaged circumstances [to] fill all consciousness, blowing up the scale of the barriers to insurmountable proportions" (Bouwer 2005: 51).

2. Research design

A basic interpretive qualitative study was designed to learn directly from high-school teachers about the meaning they attributed to their perceptions of challenging learner behaviour (Merriam 2002: 6-7). The unit of analysis was thus the perceptions of teachers of challenging learner behaviour in high schools. The researchers, being the primary instruments of data collection and analysis, understood that objective observation was impossible and thus acknowledged that it was only in dialogue and through our own biographies that they could enter the meaning-making processes of the teachers (Denzin & Lincoln 2005: 6). In line with the principles of qualitative research, they worked from an inductive stance, not structuring the process too much as they wanted to capture the freedom and emergent development of action and representation in their data (Henning *et al* 2004: 3). The themes presented in this article "emerged from the analysis of the findings, rather than being pre-determined through relevant data" (Te Riele 2006: 63). The aim was to juxtapose the findings from the data with the eco-systemic and asset-based approaches as more appropriate lenses for deliberating on challenging learner behaviour and possible interventions and support. It was determined whether these approaches formed part of the espoused theories of the participating teachers.

2.1 Participants and context

The participants were high-school teachers drawn from eight schools in two different districts of the Western Cape. Four schools from urban areas and four schools from rural areas were purposefully selected. The represented schools varied from well-resourced schools to schools from traditionally disadvantaged areas in lower socio-economic communities.

The main selection criterion for high-school teacher participation was that they should be actively involved in classroom practice. Two teachers (one male and one female) were purposefully selected from each of the eight schools that had volunteered to participate in the research project. Two teachers from two of the rural schools, both in traditionally disadvantaged communities, could not participate in the focus group interview due to other responsibilities. They were interviewed individually after the analysis of the transcribed data from the focus group interviews had been completed. This was not ideal but presented an opportunity for verifying the data collected during the focus group interviews.

Of the teachers employed in rural schools, four were female and four male, with between five and 29 years' teaching experience. Seven of these teachers held both a degree and a Higher Diploma in Education (HDE), while one only held a Teacher's Diploma. Of the teachers employed at urban schools, four were female and four male and their teaching experience ranged from 16 to 35 years. Three of the teachers from the urban schools held both a degree and a Higher Diploma in Education (HDE), while two had completed a BEd Honours degree. Two of the teachers held Teaching Diplomas and one a PhD.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

The main source of data was information from formal semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, conducted with the sixteen participants in a context and at a time of their choice. As the participants were mainly Afrikaans speaking, the interviews were conducted in Afrikaans, using a prepared interview schedule comprising seven

open questions. In all cases, the researchers sought to create a context in which the participants could speak freely and openly.

The interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and then translated into English. The transcribed data was then analysed using the constant comparative method (Merriam 1998: 159) developed by Glaser & Strauss in 1967. This method is a key analytical approach of grounded theory studies (Patton 2002: 239, 490) and has been adopted by many researchers who are not seeking to build substantive theory. This is "because the basic strategy of the constant comparative method is compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research" (Merriam 1998: 159).

The constant comparative method entails an inductive process of meaning-making (Henning *et al* 2004: 115). This was done by assigning code words to a line, a sentence, or a paragraph of the transcribed data as a first step, and data was coded and recoded by constantly comparing incidents. The code words were then grouped or categorised provisionally around a specific concept. Units of meaning were then identified and compared to the provisional categories. New categories were developed where units of meaning did not fit a provisional category, and the category and its subcategories were then linked to develop main categories or themes (Merriam 1998: 159 & 2002: 143). Using this dynamic and complex process of making meaning of the data, four main themes emerged, establishing the main patterns for the data.

2.3 Data verification

Lincoln & Guba's model for verifying the data, as discussed in Babbie & Mouton (2001: 276-8), was used to ensure that the findings were trustworthy. The credibility was established by means of triangulation and peer examination, and transferability by means of a dense description of the data and by maximising the range of information that could be obtained from and about the specific context by purposefully selecting participants who were different from each other (Babbie & Mouton 2001: 277). Dependability was ensured by means of an audit trail of processes of gathering, analysis and interpretation of data, to allow others to trace the research from the beginning to

end, and to evaluate the trustworthiness of the findings (Maykut & Morehouse 1994: 146). Confirmability was similarly established for "the auditor to determine if the conclusions, interpretations and recommendations [could] be traced to their sources and if they [were] supported by the inquiry" (Babbie & Mouton 2001: 278).

2.4 Ethical measures

The ethical considerations suggested by Babbie & Mouton (2001: 520-5) and Miles & Huberman (1994: 291-2) were adhered to. This means that care was taken to acknowledge the participants' privacy, and to address them with sensitivity; to respect their right to anonymity, confidentiality and voluntary participation, and to conduct the interviews within a relationship of trust and transparency.

3. Research findings

One of the main findings of this study confirms Prinsloo's (2005: 454) contention that challenging learner behaviour occurs more frequently in urban than in rural schools. Consequently, in discussing the findings, special reference is made to the differences experienced by the teachers from urban and rural schools. It is interesting to note that, while the perceptions of one of the rural teachers concurred with that of the other participants, the other rural teachers' perceptions presented a contrasting view that challenges the bulk of research findings, and this exception will be addressed separately.

The teachers' perceptions are discussed under the four main themes that were derived from the data, and include a discussion on the type, prevalence, extent and possible causes of challenging behaviour; the management of challenging behaviour, and teachers' experiences.

3.1 Type, prevalence and extent of challenging behaviour

It is significant that the participants were at first reluctant to admit that they generally find learner behaviour taxing and difficult to handle. It was evident that this was a sensitive issue for teachers, as they consider their ability to "control" behaviour in their classrooms as an important indicator of their competence as teachers. Once they felt

more at ease in the group, they approached the issue more openly and acknowledged that it was one of the main problems they faced in the new education dispensation in South Africa (Prinsloo 2005: 449).

The teachers from rural schools cited talking out of turn or incessantly, and refusing to obey requests and instructions as their general problems, but in rural schools in less affluent communities, high levels of aggression, the use of addictive substances, smoking, stealing and vandalism were listed as the types of challenging behaviour. These findings concur with those of Coleman *et al* (Louw 1994: 438), that learners in the senior phase are more disruptive than those in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase. Louw mentions that this could possibly be ascribed to Senior Phase learners experiencing less independence and confidence, and having a greater need for peer acceptance (Louw 1994: 441). It is important that teachers in the Senior Phase be made aware of this factor, as acceptance by the peer group often carries more weight than does obedience to authority figures.

Teachers from both rural and urban schools highlighted poor school attendance and attention problems as major daily problems. More recently, Stone (1990: 31) and Prinsloo (2005: 452) warned that classroom culture may contribute significantly to lower motivation levels of learners, stating that teachers may blame learners for disruptive behaviour when the classroom culture and learning material do not invite learning. The teachers' own lack of motivation, enthusiasm and interest in learners contribute to a general unwillingness to learn and negative behaviour on the part of the learners (Prinsloo 2005: 452). Thus teachers not only have to teach, but also motivate learners to learn.

By contrast, teachers in urban schools mentioned that difficult learner behaviour makes significant inroads on their moral and work satisfaction. Corrie (2001: 4) points out that a general climate of undisciplined classroom behaviour may lead to wasting valuable teaching time and may so undermine teachers that they question their self-efficacy. During one of the interviews, one teacher mentioned that up to 90% of teaching time is spent on managing learner behaviour. Learners in urban schools appear to be more aware of their

rights, and are generally less motivated and less inclined to accept authority. One of the teachers explained:

> They are more arrogant. They are extremely aware of their rights. In the case of the grade eights and nines it is difficult to imagine. It is a complete nightmare [...] they laugh at you (Urban three).

Teachers with longer service records experienced the erosion of their authority particularly challenging. They preferred the previous conservative education dispensation where the authority of teachers was not questioned and teachers were respected. However, a more conservative education system also views learners as passive and uncritical recipients of knowledge (DoE 2000: 9) and is often based on the premise that "the better the discipline in schools and the quieter the learners in the educational situation, the more effective [is] the education [...] taking place" (Williams 2002: 31), a view that most educators no longer hold.

3.2 Causes of challenging behaviour

The teachers also postulated several causes for the increase in challenging learner behaviour, namely class size, the implementation of outcomes-based education, intrinsic and extrinsic factors in the learners, and the learners' context.

Both rural and urban teachers mentioned that overcrowded classrooms made it extremely difficult to exercise positive classroom discipline and to pay individual attention to learners who need it:

> Our classes are overcrowded and this gives rise to huge problems. You experience difficulty to keep all the learners at task and if you relax for a second, chaos erupts. Our biggest problem is the large classes and it contributes to the majority of disciplinary problems (Urban seven).
>
> Individual contact with learners is out of the question due to the large classes. The amount of learners in the class gives rise to chaos when you try to work with a learner individually (Rural three).

Christie (1999: 152) argues that the DoE cuts costs to the detriment of teachers who then have to cope with larger classes, whereas Brophy (1996: 4) is of the opinion that it is unreasonable to expect

teachers to cope with large classes and still provide quality education to all learners.

All the participating teachers referred to the implementation of outcomes-based education as an important contributing factor to classroom disciplinary problems. They explicitly highlighted inadequate training, feelings of uncertainty and the considerable amount of administrative responsibilities. With the implementation of outcomes-based education, Jansen & Christie (1999: 237) cite Muller as arguing that the importance of the teacher, who now has to cope with all the changes in the classroom, has been forgotten. The leap from traditional teaching to outcomes-based teaching is a large one and cannot be accomplished without the necessary training and support (Jansen & Christie 1999: 237). There is no doubt that the implementation process in South Africa has had a negative impact on teachers' morale, commitment and trust. In addition, implementation has been difficult due to the lack of resources and institutional capacity (in terms of both administrative systems and suitably trained teachers) (Engelbrecht 2006: 255).

Challenges arising from the learner and his/her context also contribute to classroom disciplinary problems. When employing an eco-systemic approach to behaviour challenges, it is important to acknowledge that schools and classrooms are not islands unto themselves and that each system affects and is affected by others. Each system possesses critical contributing factors and causes for challenging behaviour (Swart & Pettipher 2005: 10). Consequently, challenging learner behaviour can only be understood by comprehending the continuous dynamic interaction and interplay between the multiple influences affecting the life of the learner.

The data revealed that teachers believe that learners have negative attitudes to school and a negative future orientation. Teachers ascribe this to the parents' negative experiences of life in South Africa. As 45% of the total population live in poverty, and 33% are unemployed (Van Wyk 2001: 198), these factors are likely to contribute enormously to negativity among parents. Consequently, learners become despondent and question the value of education, as future work possibilities are not guaranteed:

> The larger part of the problem originates from outside the school and then the child brings the problem into the school. Now you have to deal with the child, but also with the parent, the parent's unemployment, the mother's drinking problem, his situation in the home [...] if it is a family problem or a community problem, he carries it into the school (Urban five).
>
> Everything starts at home. If I have to seek for the cause, I will not find it in the classroom, not at all. My total class comes from broken homes, stays with granny, or with somebody else (Rural four).

According to Zeicher & Liston (1996: X1), teachers must acknowledge the influence of social issues such as poverty, violence, work stress and HIV and Aids on learners. Such circumstances make learners vulnerable; they are often also the victims of physical, emotional and sexual abuse, resulting in a negative personal and academic self-concept and a low level of motivation. A study by Boulter (De la Rey Duncan *et al* 1997: 123) indicates that adolescents in South Africa struggle with issues such as poor self-confidence, self-image, emotional stability, health, the negative influence of the family, moral issues and general negativity. Teachers must be aware of these circumstances as such learners constitute the majority of the school population in South Africa (Prinsloo 2005: 451). Teachers in urban schools also mentioned the influence of the gang culture on learner behaviour:

> [There is] the enormous influence of the gang culture, especially [...]in the less affluent communities. The influence of the gang culture and the identification with [...] negative behaviour patterns [...] is a big problem in the school where I teach. (Urban Five)

Teachers from schools in less affluent rural and urban communities raised the influence of the freedom struggle prior to 1994 on the lives of current learners. They argued that the contemporary learner's parents have internalised the strong resistance to authority that was part of the lengthy period of political unrest, and that this is communicated to the children.

> ... It is perhaps something that comes from the struggle years, the struggle for freedom [...] This is maybe the reason why learners feel that they have to challenge authority. (Rural Four)

Peer-group pressure, language and culture differences, learning and reading problems, and learners' non-involvement in sport were also highlighted as contributing factors.

With regard to language and culture differences, one of the teachers mentioned:

> … When we have problems, it is very often due to language problems […] because they do not understand. Afrikaans is their third language. There are also culture differences. […] Some of them have less respect for a woman than a man, as this is the case in their culture. This is very difficult, all the cultures in one classroom and then we experience the language problem. The language ability is not adequate and this leads to disciplinary problems. (Rural Five)

Another teacher referred to learning and reading problems:

> It is because he cannot read and he cannot write, either. I enjoy working with the Grade Nines, but he is really functioning on Grade Five level; his intellectual level is Grade Five. Then I understand why he talks all the time, as he does not have a clue of what I am talking. (Rural Four)

Teachers further ascribed challenging behaviour to the nature of the families and communities of the learners. According to them, many parents are compelled to work long hours due to poor socio-economic circumstances, and learners are left at home without the necessary supervision and care. Bezuidenhout & Joubert (2003: 60) quote from a previous study that indicates that factors such as the absence of one or both of the parents in the lives of learners, the absence of adult or parental supervision at home after school, and a general lack of parenting skills due to young and inexperienced parents contribute to behaviour problems in schools and classrooms.

A final observation of the findings, when using the theoretical lens of the eco-systemic and asset-based approaches, is that teachers do not consider their own influence, that of classroom culture or the role of school organisation and other school factors when they list possible causes for challenging learner behaviour. Instead, the latter is mainly ascribed to problems within learners, their families or communities. The strengths of learners and potential assets in their social contexts are clearly not considered and have not been explored in addressing learner behaviour. The negative role of the DoE both

on national and provincial levels was also emphasised. Teachers believe that they have been disempowered by the high teacher-learner ratios, the abolishment of corporal punishment and the lack of support, in particular with regard to behaviour challenges in the classroom. The above discussion also highlights a culture of blame.

3.3 The management of challenging behaviour

When asked about strategies for managing disruptive behaviour, the teachers were despondent, and acknowledged that they often felt disempowered and challenged beyond their abilities. They find it difficult to seek successful strategies to address behavioural challenges. They had used the following strategies: ignoring challenging behaviour, sending learners out of the classroom, getting learners to stand throughout the period, and depriving learners of certain benefits, such as break time. Not all the teachers agreed with sending learners out of the classroom, as the learner then becomes somebody else's problem. Vorster & Sutcliffe (2000) do not recommend ignoring learners as challenging behaviour is a plea for help with the difficult process of identity formation, adding that "because their plea is misinterpreted or ignored, they have to fall back on their own, often ineffective, efforts at leading a meaningful existence" (Vorster & Sutcliffe 2000: 10).

One of the teachers suggested verbal reprimands as a strategy, and mentioned that she had found that conversations with individual learners often helped to compensate to some extent for their need for love and acceptance. In this respect Porteus *et al* (2001: 64) emphasise the implicit social context of human behaviour, stating that effectual discipline strategies should be considered in the context of relationships surrounding challenging learner behaviour. However, according to the teachers, peer group pressure often negates the good work that has been done on an individual level.

As mentioned earlier, one of the teachers reported that there was very little disruptive behaviour in her classroom and recommended the following guidelines for ensuring positive behaviour in the classroom. First, establish a positive relationship between the teacher and learner based on mutual respect. Secondly, make sure

that learners know the class rules and what constitutes acceptable behaviour for the classroom. Thirdly, teachers and learners should greet each other politely before starting classroom activities. She recommends that teachers communicate their expectations of the learners clearly before starting any activities. She mentions that thorough preparation and planning for each lesson is essential, together with sufficient flexibility to make changes and adaptations when necessary. Teachers need to talk and communicate with authority, and cultivate a positive classroom culture, taking care to develop the learner in totality and not only his/her cognitive dimension. Teachers should be able to meet the learners on their level without forfeiting any aspect of a healthy teacher-learner relationship, and should acknowledge when they have made mistakes. Lastly, she emphasised that it was helpful to raise problematic classroom behaviour with colleagues and to ask for their advice. According to her, teachers need to talk to each other more often and exchange ideas and strategies. Corrie (2002: 178) supports this, arguing that teachers have a professional responsibility to support learners who display challenging behaviour:

> It can never be ethical for teachers to turn their backs on learners that exhibit behaviour problems, or to count off the days to the end of the year when the behaviour problems become another teacher's concern.

Within the new human rights perspective in South Africa, a disciplinary system in a school should also acknowledge the human rights of and respect for others (RSA 1996a).

It is important to note that a distinguishing feature of this teacher is her acknowledgment of the importance of her own role in managing learner behaviour. She is acutely aware of her ability to make a difference in her classroom. From her recommendations, it is clear that she uses all her skills in the classroom, and acknowledges her colleagues as important assets in her support system. Within the asset-based approach, collaboration, relationships, and partnerships are thus also emphasised. Ebersöhn & Eloff (2006: 22) argue that "every time an individual uses his or her assets and capacities, the system becomes stronger and the individual is enabled".

3.4 Teachers' experiences of their profession

Teachers from both the urban and rural schools are of the opinion that their rights carry less weight than those of their learners and their parents. Parents are less inclined to accept responsibility for their children, forcing teachers to bear increasingly greater responsibility for learners. This causes additional stress for teachers, and is exacerbated by the Department of Education's expectations of "the impossible" from them. Low salaries and the lower status accorded to the teaching profession reinforce their poor work satisfaction.

Despite this negative picture, the data surprisingly reveals that teachers from rural schools were more optimistic about their profession than their colleagues from urban schools. These teachers generally framed their comments more positively:

> I am happy as a teacher. (Rural Three)
>
> I enjoy teaching every day. (Rural One)

Conversely, the comments of the teachers from urban schools exhibited low morale, many of them reporting that they suffer from stress-related illnesses. This was not evident in the data obtained from the teachers from rural schools. Here are some examples:

> Everything that we heard today (during the focus group interview) is negative and I cannot really add anything positive. (Urban Four)
>
> Teaching has become more difficult by the day and I would say that teaching is not for sissies. (Urban Seven)

4. Conclusion

This study indicated that it is important to determine teachers' perceptions of behavioural challenges in the classroom and school before recommending strategies for the management of learner behaviour. It was proposed that the eco-systemic and more recent asset-based approaches were appropriate lenses through which to explore this for two reasons. First, an eco-systemic perspective does not seek the origin of difficult learner behaviour within the individual learner in isolation, but considers all the complex and dynamic interactions between the different systems. Secondly, an asset-based approach

aims to identify strengths and assets in the learner and the learner's systems in order to manage learner behaviour more proactively and effectively.

The findings of this study confirm that behavioural challenges in schools are a complex and often overwhelming reality for teachers, one which they mainly attribute to problems within the learners themselves or in their families or communities. In line with previous findings reported by Prinsloo (2005: 454), the degree and prevalence of behavioural challenges are considered higher in urban schools with teachers reporting more stress-related illnesses than in rural schools, where teachers tend to feel more positive about their work.

The majority of the teachers view behavioural challenges from a problem- or needs-based approach, and it is significant that the overwhelming majority ignore their own and the schools' role as possible contributing factors to poor learner behaviour. The implicit belief that schools and classrooms are structured appropriately to meet the needs of all the learners persists. Likewise the view that when learners fail to thrive or succeed according to the predetermined norms of educational success, there must be something wrong with them and their families (Shields 2006: 69). This belief prevails, regardless of evidence that negative societal forces, the modelling of socially unacceptable behaviour, and a lack of parenting skills, social skills and adequate support contribute to problematic behaviour in schools. Consequently, the researchers join Van Wyk (2001: 199) in challenging "the perception that schools and teachers bear no responsibility for poor behaviour of learners".

It is evident from the data of this study that the teachers' own assumptions and educational beliefs do not reflect a holistic view of challenging behaviour; neither do they subscribe to ecosystemic and asset-based approaches. Instead they consider problem behaviour to be inherent to individual learners, their peer group relationships, their families or communities. Deficit thinking is unfortunately more prevalent than most teachers would care to admit (Shields 2006: 69), and teachers are in danger of "pathologizing the lived experiences of children" (Shields 2006: 69). Shields proceeds

to explain that these are examples of what is commonly framed as "blame the victim":

> [t]his is not to suggest that unequal living situations do not result in disparate readiness for school, that there should be no variations in outcome, or that all children will succeed in the same way and at the same levels. But it is to acknowledge that it is inappropriate to make assumptions about the potential or ability of any student or group of students based solely on their familial circumstances (Shields 2006: 69).

Should teachers hold views that favour the deficit model, they are absolved from taking responsibility for the extent to which their own behaviour contributes to problem learner behaviour and could reinforce a culture of blaming in schools. Such a culture could exacerbate learner behaviour problems and obscure solutions that are very often already present in individual capacities and systemic assets.

The contrasting viewpoint held by only one of the sixteen teachers is considered to be highly significant. This teacher, with fifteen years' experience in a previously disadvantaged school, reported that she was able to successfully manage learner behaviour, and recommended a positive and proactive approach. While acknowledging the detrimental effects of overcrowded classrooms and the implementation of outcomes-based education, she also considered her own attitudes and behaviour as the key to behaviour management in the classroom. This concurs with Prinsloo's (2005: 452) view that teachers are the most influential factor in learner behaviour and performance in the classroom.

This teacher also recommended certain strategies for managing learner behaviour successfully, and emphasised the importance of mutual respect as the foundation of a positive classroom culture. She advocates classroom rules that are negotiated with the learners, flexibility in adapting the curriculum, good planning and preparation, a strong individual focus on each learner, a readiness to acknowledge one's mistakes without forfeiting any authority and still meeting the learners on their level.

Most significant was the high value she accorded to collaborative, supportive and caring relationships with her colleagues. If

support is not forthcoming from the DoE, as is clearly the experience of the participants in this study, other communities of support that provide care and collaborative learning in schools are needed to assuage teachers' feelings of powerlessness and burnout. If the notion of a caring and supportive community is established among teachers and becomes an integral part of school culture, all learners would benefit, especially those who are more vulnerable. In this vein, Hallam (2007) advocates modelling "schools with high levels of communal organisation" as they "show more orderly behaviour". She adds that secondary schools that have pastoral care systems also tend to exhibit low levels of disruptive behaviour (Hallam 2007: 1).

Teachers will, however, not be able to change their assumptions, educational beliefs and consequently their perceptions, unless they are meaningfully exposed to more recent and alternative approaches to learner behaviour. Pre- and in-service training initiatives should thus make a concerted effort in this respect, and invite teachers to reflectively and critically consider their own assumptions and dispositions, along with the potential contribution of different factors such as school culture and organisation to problematic learner behaviour in the classroom (Van Wyk 2001). As shown in this instance, the eco-systemic and asset-based approaches offer an alternative way of examining learner behaviour in the classroom and should thus be strongly considered as lenses when offering pre- and in-service training on learner behaviour management in schools.

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