EXPLORING SARCASM AS A REPLACEMENT FOR CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA

L. SEGALO

Abstract

The dawn of a democratic South Africa in 1994 established a society entrenched in Human Rights milieu. As such, public schools are meant to align their policies with the rule of the law. Particularly, section 10 (1) of South African Schools Act, 84 1996 (hereafter SASA) respectfully prohibits the administration of corporal punishment directed at a learner in public schools. The subsequent section 10 (2) of SASA admonishes that any person contravening section 10 (1) of SASA is liable on conviction to a sentence which could be imposed for assault. These mentioned provisions of the school legislation are consistent with section 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA) which affords every person the inherent right to dignity of the person.

Against the afore-mentioned legislative provisions, teachers have resorted to the use of sarcasm as a tool to inflict punishment in the manner that it could be equated with corporal punishment. Sarcasm is a form of language that is used to cause emotional and psychological harm, belittle, ridicule and humiliate the person it directed at. Judged against the provisions of the legislation governing schools in South African public schools, sarcasm could be said to be a direct violation of fundamental rights of learners to dignity of the person.

In order to explore the intonation of sarcasm as supplement for corporal punishment the research paper employed a qualitative critical emancipatory research (CER) approach. Data gathered through a purposive sample of ten secondary teachers was analysed by the use of textual oriented discourse analyses.

Keywords: sarcasm, corporal punishment, Human Rights, South African Schools Act, critical emancipatory research, textual oriented discourse analyses.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Schools as the places where children spend majority of hours during the day are supposed to be safe places for learning to take place. Nieuwenhuis, (2007:208) and Masitsa, (2011:166) state that schools should be characterized by and defined by danger free environment free of possible harm, fear, humiliation, ridicule, intimidation and harassment both for learners and educators.

As stated in the title of this paper, teachers are expected to observe and reflect on how learners and teachers adhere to an agreed upon code of conduct as stipulated in the school policies. Code of conduct for learners at the school play a pivotal role as a binding regulatory mechanism on the conduct of all parties involved. As a result, the code of conduct for learners should not be contradictory, ambiguous and difficult to interpret and apply and must be legal (Bray, 2009:485).

On the same token the code of conduct should be consistent with the Constitution and South African Schools Act, 1996 (hereafter SASA) and other related provincial policy directives. Furthermore, instilling discipline in learners through adherence to code of conduct implies absence of self-discipline by learners. In order to capture the reflections of teachers' observations and experiences on how they apply discipline to their learners, the use of sarcasm is explored as an alternative harmful disciplining mechanism.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: VICARIOUS LEARNING

Bandura, (1995:3), Eastman & Marzillier, (1984:22) describe vicarious or modelling as a motivation received by seeing others performing a task. The people who observe the modelled behaviour judges himself or herself against what could be achieved by himself or herself on the capabilities portrayed by the model. Bandura, (1995) distinguishes between two types of modelling, that is live and symbolic modelling. Live modelling are people who are seen on a daily basis whereas symbolic models are the people we are not in touch with but are passionate about. Based on this theoretical learning framework, it could be inferred that some teachers who teach today were taught in environments that were void of protection of the rights of learners, a permissible violent schooling environment. The home and the schooling environment has changed over the last eighteen years, today there is massive awareness on the rights of the children and other vulnerable segments of the community such as women. However, violence still takes the place symbolically in the media through television and newspapers. As such, some people become conditioned to violence as acceptable, more so if it is applied in moderate dosages such as pinching or in a sarcastic manner to belittle or ridicule the learner. Likewise, it is not surprising to hear people say that they are what they are because of corporal punishment. Bandura (1994:198) refers to these assertions as verbal persuasion which is used to influence other people by means of spoken words. Verbal persuasion is normally used to motivate people and raise their levels of expectations that expected results could be achieved. Teachers who use covert language couched in violence as a way of disciplining learners could be viewed in the in this light.

3.　　NATURE OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Maree and Cherian, (2004:72) report that corporal punishment varies from one context to the other within different cultures and might be characterized by the following incidents;

*   　　Hitting the child with the hand, cane, shoe, belt, book, or ruler,
*   　　Kicking or shaking or throwing the child,
*   　　Pinching or pulling the child,
*   　　Forcing a child to sit in an uncomfortable position,
*   　　Forcing the child to undergo strenuous physical exercise or forced labour, and
*   　　Scarring the child.

Venter and van Niekerk, (2011:244) view corporal punishment on learners as deeply rooted in the way the society raises its children. As such the use of corporal punishment is linked to the standard of discipline directed at children (Shumba, Ndofirepi and Musengi, 2012:288, Mokhele, 2006:150) and Shumba, Mpofu, Chireshe & Mapfumo, (2010:2). There have been a number of philosophical rationalizations on the use of corporal punishment such religion, social control and rights of parents' movement. Parents who adhere to Christianity believe that they are granted an authority to discipline their children by God (Christian Education South Africa v. The Minister Of Education, 2000, CC).[1]   The Biblical has been used as canon for the administration of corporal punishment on children in particular the Book of Proverbs assembled by King Solomon. The use of spanking might be the reflection and philosophy of King Solomon in the rearing of his son Rehoboam.   However, the effect of King Solomon's rearing on his son could have been the down fall of kingship as he was hated by his own people. Likewise, the use of the proverb spare the rod, spoil the child has been attributed to the Bible. However, the hermeneutical discourse of the rod has many meanings. Proverb 22:15; states, "foolishness is bound in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him. Proverb, 13:24; reads; 'He that spareth his rod hateth his son, but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him'.

The etymology of the word rod could be traced to the Hebrew word 'Shebet'. The Shebet was used as the walking stick held by the head of the family, the king's sceptre or the shepherd's crook which was used to rescue and guide sheep. A version of the Shebet is carried by bishops as a symbol of guiding and not beating followers. The concept of physical correction could be incorrectly ascribed to the Biblical duty to punish their children by inflicting corporal punishment.

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[1] The central question to be answered in the present appeal, from a decision in a Local Division, was whether, when Parliament enacted the South African Schools Act (wherein it prohibited corporal punishment in schools), it had violated the rights of parents of children at independent schools who, in line with their religious convictions, had consented to its use.

Correction is from Hebrew word 'muwcar'[2] which means 'come let us reason together'. As such, reasoning together dispels the notion of administering physical punishment on the child. This view of 'muwcar' is consistent with the South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996 section 11(2) which demands that discipline should be corrective and nurturing. Punishment of learners should be void of punishment of harmful elements to the dignity and self-esteem of learners.

4.   THE NATURE OF PUNISHMENT IMPOSED AS CORRECTIVE MEASURE

Joubert, (2009:502) posits that school discipline ought to be positive and not punitive. Likewise, discipline is about positive behaviour management aimed at promoting appropriate behaviour and self-discipline and self-control among the learners. Joubert, (2009:503) differentiates among three types of discipline as follows:

- Preventative discipline – which concerns itself with basic rights, clear rules and consequences,
- Corrective discipline- which refers to the educator's action that is carried out to correct disruptive, anti-social or deviant behavior, and
- Supportive discipline- which refers to correction of behavior is received fairly and that positive working relationships are established.

On the one hand, punitive discipline is an action or penalty imposed on a person for breaking the rule or showing improper conduct (UNESCO, 2011:11). As such punishment is aimed at controlling behaviour through negative means. Likewise, punishment would involve either verbal negative reprimands or physical or emotional pain. Negative verbal or physical or emotional punishment could not be related to the concept of muwcar. On the one hand Venter and van Niekerk, (2011:243) bring to light that corporal punishment is entrenched in the use of power. Referring to the Michel Foucault Venter and van Niekerk (2011) dwell on the characteristics of discipline as embodied in punctuality, neatness, submissiveness to authority.

5.   CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SARCASM

Sarcasm is a language usage applied in social interaction and conversation with the purpose of mocking others. Sarcasm in its form it is used to say the opposite of what is meant. As such, sarcasm could mean the same thing as irony (Kotthoff, (2003:1878). According to Kotthoff, (2003) irony is recognized by the tone in which is spoken or from the affected person whom the speech is directed at where speech contradicts what it meant to convey. On the one hand, Rockwell, (2000:484) refers to sarcasm as an indirect form of speech intentionally used to produce a particular effect on the listener.

[2]www.oldtestament.com/hebrew/lexicons/muwcar (which means to chasten, correct, discipline, instruct or rebuke)

Others such as Prinstein, Boergers and Verber, (2001) view sarcasm as a form of overt verbal aggression used in the classroom situation where the teacher is a dominant figure it could be used to instil fear, ridicule and to harass learners as it conveys emotions and thoughts. Instead of using force in a form of corporal punishment teachers might use hurtful words directed at learners which is in direct violation of the right of learners to dignity.

6.   THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Having outlined and clarified the concepts, discipline, code of conduct, corporal punishment and sarcasm as form of negative verbal punishment, the following research questions are stated as follows;

- What are the reason teachers use sarcasm as a form of negative punishment?
- How is sarcasm interpreted by teachers as a form of punishment?
- How often do teachers use sarcasm in the classroom?
- What are the reasons teachers are not using alternatives mechanism to measures to verbal punishment?
- Is the use of sarcasm differs from one gender to the other?
- Does age have an influence on the use sarcasm among teachers?
- Is experience in teaching a factor that influences the use of sarcasm by teachers? And
- Is teaching qualifications a factor that has an influence on the use of sarcasm by teachers?

7.   THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

In order to answer the above-mentioned research questions the research paper employed a CER qualitative research method. This research method approach was chosen as ideal as it strives to uncover the deep seated overt aggressive behaviours of teachers when instilling discipline in the teaching and learning encounter. CER approach has an emancipatory interest and transformative in nature. The approach undertaken by this research study was based on how teachers use their authority and power in a pedagogic relationship in relation to their learners. It was further assumed by the research study that teachers by being aware of their powers and the role models roles played would be able to redeem and liberate themselves from possible collusion with the law and the ills associated with verbal aggression towards learners. Ten secondary school teachers were purposively selected. Five male and female teachers were interviewed using Ineke Meuleberg-Buskens' free attitude interview technique (1997:28).

Table 1.1: Biographical information of respondents

Respondent	Gender of the respondent	Age of the respondent	Teaching experience of the respondents	Highest teaching qualification of the respondent
1	Male	42	17	B Ed (Hons)
2	Female	35	10	B A Ed
3	Male	33	7	HED
4	Female	45	17	ACE
5	Male	29	4	B A Ed
6	Female	30	4	ACE
7	Male	55	30	HED
8	Female	44	19	HED
9	Male	51	24	B Ed (Hons)
10	Female	54	27	ACE

Based on table 1.1 it could be rationalized that the teaching experiences, age and qualifications of the respondents are fairly balanced in order to understand the policies regulating harmful punishment to learners in public schools.

8. DATA GATHERING INSTRUMENT

Structured in-depth interview technique was utilized in this study as a method of data collection. Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2007:58) state that an in-depth interview is an extensive interview used in the primary stage of the research process as metaphoric in a miner and a traveller framework. Flick (2010:170) and Kvale (2010:19), refer to an interview in terms of two metaphors, interviewer as miner and interviewer as a traveler. Miner metaphor is a worker who digs information buried deep underneath the ground embodied in the conscious and subconscious minds of the participants. Interviews are further useful when they uncover underlying motivations and attitudes beyond straightforward responses to unstructured questions. Furthermore, in-depth interviews seek deep information and knowledge such as lived experiences, values, decisions, ideologies and cultural knowledge (Johnson 2002:104).

9. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis technique employed by this research study was based on Fairclough's textual oriented discourse analysis (1992:18). Fairclough (1992) and van Dijk (2011:352) seem to agree research analyses should strive to discover and address social problems, power relations and possible forms of social actions. Mahlomaholo and Nkoane (2002:90) allude to critical discourse analysis as journeying longer to uncover the underlying conscious and psychic structures of the researched. Once the researched are able to find themselves they are able to move and restructure how they used to behave. As such it was hoped that teachers in secondary schools in purposively sampled schools would be able to understand through their own commission reasons for applying verbal assault directed at the learners.

Discussion of the findings

The findings of this research study are arranged under the following themes resulting from the questions posed to the ten secondary school teachers in the Lejweleputswa district of the Free State province. As a result the following interview question was tossed. To what an extent do you belief is the reason teachers use sarcasm as a form of punishment?

Lack of management

Teachers interviewed reported that one the main teachers would use verbal abuse directed at learners was that they lacked effective strategies of dealing with ill-discipline among the learners. Teachers seems to lack control of managing issues such as interruptions as a result of learner late coming and in-complete homework. One of the teachers interviewed mentioned the following:

> *"I believe that today's children are spoilt because they are given rights they did not work for, 'now how do you discipline the learner whose' parents did not teach him manners".*

This view of discipline by teachers suggests that teachers are likely to feel in control of the classroom when there is order and lack of disruptions. This is supported by Morrell, (2001:293) when reporting that teachers "felt disempowered by the government when taking away their powers to use corporal punishment in the classroom". In this research study the findings revealed that irrespective of education level, gender and age teachers felt that disempowered as a result of abolishment of corporal punishment in public schools. Teachers who felt that their powers were taken away could imply that they lacked professional training as observed by Maphosa, Mutekwe, Machingambi, Wadesango and Ndofirepi, (2012:549).

Maphosa et al, (2012:549) posit that teachers could be empowered through proper lesson planning, being available to teachers and resolving conflicts between and among learners. As a result, learners' rights should be viewed in the same light as proper management of the classroom and teacher professionalism.

Views of teachers: the need to use corporal punishment

Despite the sprawl of the culture of human rights education, it seems that teachers are culturally entrenched in what they believe is proper discipline for learners. This research study established that there is a general view among teachers in secondary schools to use corporal punishment irrespective of the possible repercussions from the Department of Basic Education. This view is supported by Morrell, (2011) when observing that there is a relationship between corporal punishment being administered at home and at the school. The response of one teacher when asked why is verbal or sarcasm being used by teachers was phrased in the following way:

> *"At least you would not be arrested or accused of child bashing if you just say one or two more words to remind them that you can be as nasty as they are. The following question was asked, as a teacher what is your understanding of corporal punishment".*

This view expressed in the above is that it seems that teachers have an innate need to inflict punishment to learners in one way or the other. This view is in line with Naong, (2009:293) when reporting that majority of teachers indicate that the have "customized methods of disciplining their learners in the classroom.

When probed further on the need to use corporal punishment the teacher further stated:

"According to my understanding corporal punishment is about using a cane or a belt or a stick to be applied to the learner on his or her hands or buttocks. However, some teachers do use pinching or a ruler on the hand's fingers. At times you can use your hands because you are being pushed to the limits".

The above-mentioned narrations of the teachers could suggest that the environment in which people live in is violence infested, in the media and at home (Shmueli, 2010:283). As a result, people who are exposed to violence situation tend to view violence as normal and part of life.

Perception: violence make learners listen

The following question was posited to the respondents, how often you use words that are hurtful to learners in your care:

"Every time the opportunity presents itself I am able to tell the learner who is misbehaving one or two words to get him straight". The response of the teacher suggests that hurtful and violent intonations hurled at learners are acceptable as far as are being used by teachers. This view could demonstrate the need of teachers to be respected and listen to by their teachers.

10.   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this paper at the begging was to explore the use of sarcasm as a subtle strategy that teachers use as a replacement of corporal punishment in public schools in the Free State province. The researcher through interaction with teachers learned that sarcasm is rampant and teachers seem to have warmed up to its extensive usage. Despite the efforts of the Department of Education to make schools safe places of learning through the abolishment of corporal punishment and human rights education teachers persist to use corporal punishment.

The researcher is of the view that teachers should be made aware of the human rights they commit against their learners. On the same note, the schools should create sound teacher-learner relationship based on the principle of care and respect for one another.

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