

Teacher and learners' belief in a just world and perspectives of discipline of Grade 4 - 8 learners in South African schools

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Abstract

In the present study we examine the personal belief in a just world for teachers and learners in predominantly Afrikaans-speaking South African schools, and the relationship between teachers' personal belief in a just world and their perception of problem behavior in the classroom. The study is informed by national debates of school violence in South African schools, and international debates on zero-tolerance policies to address school violence. Our findings suggest that teachers' personal belief in a just world predicts their perception of problem behavior in classroom behavior in four areas, namely challenging authority, disrespecting rules and authority and teacher negativity. Teachers with a strong personal belief in a just world were more likely to view classroom behaviours as problematic. Children generally reported that their teachers were fair and just and liked them. However, boys were more likely to have experienced trouble with their teachers and to view them as unfair and unjust. We discuss the significance of the findings in terms of school violence and also mention gendered interpretations to school violence.

Keywords:

School violence, discipline, personal belief in a just world; classroom behavior; fairness

Introduction

South African schools are plagued by many and varied problems (Christie 2007). Some of the critical challenges that reportedly face schools include an overall flawed school system characterised by poor teacher morale and work ethic, lack of community and teacher support, low levels of accountability, and a range of discipline-related problems such as truancy and absenteeism, poor discipline, and high dropout rates (Mouton, Louw, and Stardom 2013). School violence in the form of physical violence, bullying, and gangsterism (Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya 2014), are some examples of several social ills found at South African schools. Burton and Leoschut (2013) report that just over a fifth of primary school children have experienced violence at school. Violence-related issues are frequently covered in the

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printed media, albeit in an episodic and somewhat sensationalist manner (Jacobs 2014). Researchers are concerned by a general lack of a learning culture in schools that is exacerbated by the high prevalence of violence in schools (Burton and Leoschut 2013). Principals believe school violence to be rooted in a lack of discipline at home that results in children being perceived as more mischievous. In addition, a third of the teachers report that learners verbally insult or shout at them, but only about half of these incidences are ever reported to the school principal.

Weeks (2012) describe a culture of learning as a collaborative learning experience that relies on the sharing of ideas, expectations, values and beliefs between teachers, learners and parents. Collaborative learning therefore assumes a kind of reciprocity between teachers and learners that we assume will be based on mutual respect, and understanding of their roles and responsibilities. In a report to the Minister of Education about schools that work (Christie 2007) pointed out that effective schools have highly committed principals and teachers, learners who feel at home in the school, and thrive on mutual acknowledgement, but that discipline was nevertheless becoming harder to maintain. Discipline is essential to effective teaching. It requires participants (i.e. teachers and learners) to acknowledge their responsibility toward one another and to treat each other fairly and justly. Most incidences of violence in South African schools happen in classrooms, so teachers who are not effective in managing classroom behaviour indirectly contribute to poor academic achievement outcomes in children.

An ineffective school environment and lack of commitment on the part of teachers and learners are detrimental to the wellbeing of everyone in the school. Effective teaching and learning in the classroom rely on reasonable and fair mutual expectations that teachers and learners have of one another. Teachers generally expect learners to be on time, to participate meaningfully and to be committed to the task of learning, while learners reasonably expect their teachers to be prepared, to assess them fairly and treat them well. To a degree, these mutual expectations assume trust in the fairness of the other that researchers describe as the personal contract. The personal contract is the foundation of the justice motive or just-world hypothesis (Lerner 2003). The just-world hypothesis states that people are committed to deserving the outcomes they want, and because they expect to be fairly rewarded for their efforts toward longterm goal attainment, they are also motivated to behave fairly toward others (Hafner and Begue 2005). Researchers agree that a strong personal belief in a just world is adaptive (Strelan 2007), and associated with a range of positive outcomes.

In a school setting, European researchers demonstrated that children with a strong belief in a just world were more likely to view their teachers as just, and they were less likely to experience distress (Peter et al. 2013). There is considerable evidence that the personal belief in a just world predicts wellbeing for children (Donat et al. 2016), academic achievement (Peter et al. 2012) and personal experience of bullying behaviours (Donat et al. 2012), and that these relationships are mediated by teacher justice. Correia and Dalbert (2008) found that children with a strong belief in a just world were less likely to bully others, and to defend victims against bullies. Far fewer studies focus on the role of personal justice beliefs of teachers. Some notable exceptions include a study by Dzuka and Dalbert (2007) in which they demonstrated that a strong personal belief in a just world was adaptive for teachers who experienced violence from students in schools. Also, Craig, Henderson and Murphy (2000) showed that the belief in a just world influenced prospective teachers' perceptions of the seriousness of bullying, and which behaviours were likely to be labelled as bullying. People with a strong PBJW are motivated to maintain their belief in a just world, so they are more likely to want to restore justice when they observe or experience injustice. Thus, people's personal beliefs in a just world influence their perception of problem behaviour and their response to it.

Based on the relationship between the PBJW and perception of problem behaviour, we expected that we would find a relationship between teachers' PBJW and their response to problem behaviours in their class. Particularly, we surmised that teachers with a high PBJW would be more likely to view problem behaviours as unjust, and to discipline children in an attempt to restore justice. How role players perceive violence determine their response to it are at the root of zero-tolerance policies that some schools follow. Zero-tolerance policies promote a one-size fits all approach to discipline, and promote an ineffective and unjust approach to learner discipline (Borgwald and Theixos 2013). Whether learners perceive their teachers as fair and just is an important consideration in terms of how schools respond to behaviours that are viewed as violent. For example, Burton and Leoschut's (2013) study on school violence includes serious offences such as rape and robbery, but also lesser offences, such as children shouting at the teacher. Classifying both these types of offences as evidence of school violence encourages a zero-tolerance approach to school violence that many researchers have recently criticised (Borgwald and Theixos 2013; Mitchell and Hambacher 2016). In South Africa, the Child Justice Act 75 of 2008 does not recognize bullying as a violent act, but it does make provision for unlawful acts frequently associated with bullying (such as *crimen injuria* and defamation) as schedule one (least serious) offenses (Gallinetti, 2009). School discipline requires school staff that are motivated to be fair and just and who can offer a differentiated response to problem behaviour. We argued that teachers with a strong PBJW might be more motivated to behave justly in their response to problem behaviour, and less inclined to behave unfairly toward children. More broadly, we argue that studies that rely on the reports of children, teachers and principals to document the prevalence, extent and seriousness of school violence, must account for the justice orientations of the role-players who report on school violence to ensure a more nuanced approach to the way that schools and society define school violence, and the policies they formulate in response.

Given the adaptive role of a personal belief in a just-world in terms of individual well-being, and the fact that it influences people's experience of fairness in many interpersonal and social contexts, we wanted to examine whether (i) learners experience their teachers as just and fair, and (ii) whether teachers' personal belief in a just world influenced how they perceive children's problem behaviours in the classroom.

Method

Sampling

A non-probable, purposive sampling procedure was followed to select child-participants from Grade 4 – 8 in the Tshwane region of Gauteng. In South Africa, the secondary school phase begins with Grade 8, which meant that primary and secondary schools could be selected. To ensure maximum diversity in the sample, we invited schools from different socio-economic and language backgrounds to participate in the study. All Grades at a particular school were invited, and the response rate for the main study was on average 62%.

Participants

The child-participants in the study were 1624 learners (male = 774; female = 850) ranging in age from 8 - 15 years ($m = 11.3$; $sd = 1.44$). Most learners were Afrikaans speaking ($f = 1120$, 69%). The 74 teacher participants (male = 20, female 54) were predominantly Afrikaans speaking ($f = 70$, 94%) with either a Degree / Diploma in Teaching ($f = 57$; 81%) or an Honours degree ($f = 12$; 16.2%).

Instruments

Learners completed the *Scale Teacher Justice* (STJ) (Dalbert and Stober 2002) that consists of 10 items (e.g. My teachers generally treat me fairly) on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). We obtained an Alpha coefficient of 0.72 that we regarded as acceptable given the age of the learners who participated.

Teachers completed the *Personal Belief in a Just World* (PBJW) scale (Dalbert 1999) containing 7 items (e.g. I believe I usually get what I deserve) on a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). We obtained an acceptable Alpha coefficient of 0.89 in the present study. Teachers also responded to 24 items addressing a range of statements related to discipline-related behaviours (e.g. The children in my class challenge my authority) that teachers may encounter in class, which we termed the *Class Behaviour Checklist* (CBC). The response options in the CBC are on a Likert-type scale including 1 (never), 2 (a few times a year), 3 (a few times per term), 4 (monthly), 5 (weekly) to 6 (everyday). We obtained an acceptable Alpha coefficient of 0.96 in the present study.

Data collection process

Ethical clearance was obtained prior to the study. We approached the principals of four primary schools and one secondary school for permission to collect data from teachers and children from Grades 4 - 7. Parents provided permission for their minor children to participate. After permission had been granted, the questionnaires were delivered to the school with instructions. After approximately two weeks the questionnaires were collected from the participating schools where it had been kept in the school safe. Data were analysed with SPSS Version 23.

Results

Learner perceptions of teacher justice

The mean for the 10-item STJ was 4.62 ($sd = 0.85$). Using independent samples t-test with Levene's Test for equality of variances, we found significant sex differences in the sample, with girls ($m = 4.67$, $sd = 0.83$) perceiving their teachers as more fair and just ($t = -2.58$, $df = 1622$, $p = 0.04$) than boys ($m = 4.56$, $sd = 0.86$).

The majority of the children indicated that they liked their teachers (male = 665, female = 776). However, of the 183 learners who indicated that they did not like their teacher, there were significantly more boys ($f = 109$, $chi = 11.713$, $df = 1$, $p = .001$) than girls ($f = 74$). Most of the children ($f = 1348$) thought that their teachers liked them, and there were significant differences between boys and girls on this variable. An independent samples t-test indicated a significant difference in children's perceptions of teacher justice ($t = 14.81$, $df = 1622$, $p = .000$) with the majority who perceive their teacher to like them, also perceiving their teachers as more just and fair ($m = 4.75$, $sd = 0.79$) than those who feel their teachers do not like them ($m = 3.97$, $sd = 0.84$). A cross-tabulation using the chi-square test revealed that there were significant differences in the distribution of those who have encountered trouble with their teachers and whether they felt their teachers liked them or not. The children who felt their teachers did not like them, were significantly more likely to indicate that they had also encountered trouble with their teachers before ($f = 198$, $chi = 4.19$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.04$). Learners

who indicated that they had encountered trouble with their teachers ($f = 1079$) also experienced their teachers as less fair and just ($t = -2.22$, $df = 1622$, $p = 0.03$).

Teachers' perception of classroom behaviour and their personal belief in a just world

Class Behaviour Checklist

Exploratory factor analysis (maximum likelihood estimation with promax rotation) was conducted with the 24-item CBC to determine its structure. Four factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, which explained 76.2% of the variance. The factor loadings appear in Table 1.

Table 1. Factor loadings of the Classroom Behaviour Checklist (CBC).

Factor	1	2	3	4
KG23	0.935	-0.221	-0.049	0.130
KG40	0.779	-0.155	0.335	-0.056
KG27	0.773	0.136	0.017	0.020
KG18	0.747	-0.008	-0.150	0.564
KG20	0.735	-0.108	-0.065	0.582
KG22	0.586	-0.059	0.182	0.157
KG31	0.571	0.393	-0.041	0.129
KG33	0.549	0.315	0.020	0.009
KG25	0.272	0.863	-0.200	-0.072
KG32	-0.010	0.815	0.000	0.098
KG29	-0.430	0.803	0.040	0.264
KG30	-0.158	0.786	0.042	0.133
KG26	0.228	0.713	0.222	-0.281
KG24	0.228	0.572	-0.061	0.119
KG37	0.162	-0.106	0.946	-0.158
KG38	0.236	-0.038	0.747	-0.002
KG39	0.311	-0.006	0.704	0.020
KG36	-0.131	0.051	0.701	0.248
KG34	-0.296	0.294	0.582	0.143
KG35	0.067	0.123	0.546	0.191
KG19	0.393	0.075	0.161	0.574
KG17	0.241	0.270	-0.080	0.495
KG28	0.004	0.351	0.167	0.448
KG21	0.124	0.307	0.282	0.352

Extraction method: Maximum likelihood.

Rotation converged in 12 iterations.

Chi-square = 315.74.

$df = 186$.

$p = 0.000$.

All factor loadings and cross-loadings were within an acceptable range. The factors were then renamed as follows: Factor 1 = *Challenging Authority* (Example: Children in my class have cursed me); Factor 2 = *Interpersonal conflict* (Example: Children in my class hurt one another); Factor 3 = *Disrespecting rules and property* (Example: Children in my class scribble on tables and walls); Factor 4 = *Teacher negativity* (Example: Children in my class are disrespectful). Scale reliabilities for the four factors were calculated next. The alpha coefficient for Challenging authority (8 items) was 0.94; for Interpersonal conflict (6 items) was 0.90; for Disrespecting rules and property (6 items) was 0.91; and for Teacher negativity (4 items) was 0.86. Pearson correlations for the four scales appear in Table 2.

Table 2. Pearson zero-order correlations for the CBC ($n = 74$).

		Authority	Conflict	Rules	Negativity	PBJW
Authority	Correlation	1	0.469	0.641	0.685	0.575
	Significance		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
95% CI	Upper		0.236	0.491	0.522	0.391
	Lower		0.643	0.759	0.806	0.727
Conflict	Correlation		1	0.627	0.713	0.221
	Significance			0.000	0.000	0.058
95% CI	Upper			0.454	0.572	-0.009
	Lower			0.770	0.814	0.424
Rules	Correlation			1	0.698	0.465
	Significance				0.000	0.000
95% CI	Upper				0.545	0.267
	Lower				0.826	0.632
Negativity	Correlation				1	0.593
	Significance					0.000
85% CI	Upper					0.454
	Lower					0.709

Moderate, significant correlations were found for all the scales of the CBC, providing construct-related evidence in support of the validity of the CBC. The descriptives for the CBC sub scales appear in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptives for the CBC.

Scale	N	Min	Max	m	sd	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	SE	Statistic	SE
Authority	74	1.13	6.00	2.99	1.54	0.527	0.279	-1.02	0.552
Conflict	74	1.00	6.00	3.17	1.36	0.352	0.279	-1.06	0.552
Rules	74	1.00	6.00	3.28	1.38	0.136	0.279	-1.36	0.552
Negativity	74	1.00	6.00	3.11	1.43	0.551	0.279	-1.05	0.552

An independent samples t-test with Levene's Test for equality of variances was used to examine sex differences on the CBC. We only found a significant difference for *Challenging authority* ($t = 2.38, df = 72, p = 0.20$), with male teachers being significantly more likely to feel that children challenge their authority ($m = 3.6; sd = 1.61$) than the female teachers ($m = 2.7; sd = 1.45$). No significant difference in CBC scale means was found between teachers in terms of the frequency with which they report problem behaviours.

Personal Belief in a Just World

The mean obtained for teachers' PBJW was 3.38 ($sd = 1.19$), with no significant differences between male and female teachers observed, or in terms of level of their qualifications. We then used general linear modelling to examine a multivariate model to see whether the PBJW would predict any of the outcome variables on the CBC. The results indicated a significant model ($F = 146.70, df = 4, p = .000$) with PBJW explaining 16.5% of the variance in teachers' propensity to interpret children's behaviour as *Challenging authority* ($f = 15,43, df = 1, p = .000$), 16% of the variance in *Disrespecting rules and authority* ($f = 14.54, df = 1, p = .000$), and accounting for 18% of the variance in *Teacher negativity* ($f = 17,48, df = 1, p = .000$). Using the median (3.42) to create two groups of teachers with a high PBJW (>3.42) and a low PBJW (<3.42), we found that teachers with a low PBJW were likely to report significantly lower mean problem behaviours related to *Challenging authority* ($t = -3.92, df = 72, p = .000$), *Disrespecting rules and property* ($t = -3.81, df = 72, p = .000$) and *Teacher negativity* ($t = -4.18, df = 72, p = .000$).

Origin and prevalence of discipline related problems in school

Next, we wanted to examine the prevalence of discipline-related problems that teachers report more closely. We used simple frequencies of the descriptors (never, a few times a year, a few times per term, monthly, weekly, daily) that teachers used to report problem behaviour in their class.

Roughly half of the teachers reported that discipline is never a serious problem ($f = 16$) or only a couple of times a year ($f = 20$). In terms of bullying, just over half of the teachers thought it was never a problem ($f = 12$), or only a few times a year ($f = 29$). A third of the participants considered theft a problem they experienced on a monthly ($f = 10$), weekly ($f = 12$) or daily ($f = 9$) basis. Overall, less than 15% of the teachers felt that the most of problems targeted in the CBC were a daily occurrence. Some exceptions are teachers who felt that children, on a daily basis, do not respect them ($f = 14$), swear at them ($f = 15$), must be silenced, so they can speak ($f = 16$), or arrive late in class ($f = 14$), or leave the class without permission ($f = 13$).

Regarding teachers' perceptions of the origin of behavioural problems, roughly two thirds agreed that it comes down to lack of interest in schoolwork ($f = 51$), poor home circumstances ($f = 49$), the child's negative attitude towards school and teachers ($f = 49$), parental un-involvement ($f = 47$), attention seeking behaviour by the child ($f = 47$), and improper home education by the parents ($f = 45$). However, fewer teachers agreed that the cause of behavioural problems could be related to strict and unreasonable teachers ($f = 37$) and personality clashes between teachers and children ($f = 34$). Teachers were also asked whether they thought certain problems were more associated with boys or girls. In all cases, roughly half of the teachers felt they could not judge it, but for the other half that replied, boys were most

likely to be implicated as responsible. Overall, there were no differences between male and female teachers in their ratings, except when it came to vandalism, female teachers were more likely to implicate boys than girls ($Chi = 8.09, df = 2, p = .02$).

Discussion

The effective schools study (Christie 2007) suggested that discipline was becoming harder to maintain in schools. The National School violence study (Burton and Leoschut 2013), as do Jacobs (2014) describes school violence as a complex phenomenon that involves a myriad of factors on an individual, family, and community level. In the present study, we focused on individual beliefs of justice in teachers and children, and how it may influence their perception of problem behaviour in the classroom.

The children in our sample generally thought their teachers were fair, they reported that they liked them, and also felt liked by their teachers. Boys who reported prior trouble with their teachers, were more likely to experience their teachers as unfair and to feel that they were not liked. Given that most of the teachers were female, we think that these findings may have gendered implications for the interpretation of school violence. Recently, Mullola et al. (2012) demonstrated that teachers were likely to perceive boys' temperament and educational competence more negatively than girls' and that this tendency was stronger for female teachers as compared to their male counterparts who held more positive views. Taking a broader perspective on gender stereotyping of school in Germany, Heyder and Kessels (2013) found that the more boys associated school with a feminine gender, the more they ascribed negative masculine traits to themselves and the lower their grades in German were. It is perhaps not surprising then, that girls in our study were significantly more likely to perceive their (mostly female) teachers as more fair and just than boys did. This pattern of findings suggests that children in the predominantly Afrikaans-speaking schools that we sampled hold similar views to children reported in international studies. One important implication of these findings for discipline in schools and school violence studies in general, is that children's experience of violence in the school context is likely to be influenced by a gendered school context that still treats boys and girls differently, and where boys are more likely to be experienced negatively. Broadly speaking, such gender discrimination constitutes a structural form of violence that creates the conditions for other types of violence to be perpetrated. Clearly, gender disparities on school level exist, with negative implications for boys who have to achieve in a system that discriminates against them. In South Africa, gender equality focuses primarily on ensuring that girls achieve equality with boys (Rarieya, Sanger and Moolman 2014), but our findings suggest that boys may also suffer from gender disparity in a different, perhaps more subtle manner. Zero-tolerance policies to school violence do not recognize structural forms of violence explicitly, or the cause thereof for that matter, which is one of the reasons why some consider such policies unfair and unjust.

With respect to the teachers in our sample, they reported problem behaviors in their classrooms in four areas, namely (i) challenging authority, (ii) disrespecting rules and property, (iii) interpersonal conflict, and (iv) their own propensity to be negative about children's behavior. We observed that male teachers were more sensitive to children who challenge their authority. Gender patterns in behavior are largely socialized and in the Afrikaans community, with exceptions of course, there is a strong patriarchal narrative that historically affords men the privilege of being the head of the household, and the one likely to make important decisions (Cloete 1992). This is not just a feature of Afrikaans communities however, but generally a characteristic of patriarchal societies of which South Africa is arguably an example.

MacNell, Driscoll, and Hunt (2015) demonstrated in an on-line study that students rated instructors they perceived to be male, significantly higher on aspects such as professionalism and fairness. The male teachers in our sample were all Afrikaans-speaking, and while it would not be correct to identify them as “Afrikaners”, it is also not far-fetched to recognize that many Afrikaans-speaking males have historically ascribed to a patriarchal Afrikaner view of society (Cloete 1992) that includes being the head of a household without being questioned, and making important decisions. It is from this perspective that we interpret our finding that Afrikaans male teachers were significantly more sensitive to perceiving children to challenge their position of authority. We do need to point to a limitation in these findings, namely that the sample of teachers was very small, with male teachers in the minority, and that this could have skewed the relationships we found.

In terms of the influence of teachers’ personal belief in a just world and how it affects their perception of problem behavior in the classroom, we found that it mattered for all areas of classroom behavior, but interpersonal conflict. In other words, teachers with a high personal belief in a just world were more likely to indicate higher frequencies of problem behaviors related to challenging their authority, disrespecting rules and property, and teacher negativity. Consistent with the theory, this finding implies that a strong PBJW makes it more likely that teachers will perceive problem behaviors as requiring discipline to maintain the justness of the world. Thus, teachers with a strong PBJW generally perceived problem behaviors to occur more frequently than those with a weak PBJW, which suggests that they may perceive behaviors related to school violence as being more of a problem than those with a lower PBJW. This may be necessary to maintain a consistent and just approach to discipline, but it may also encourage teachers to follow a zero-tolerance approach to discipline. However, since most of the children in our study indicated that they felt their teachers were fair, and liked them, it suggests that teachers were generally not disciplining children unfairly or too severely. At first glance, our findings may suggest (somewhat counter-intuitively) that having teachers with a lower PBJW may be more beneficial because they are not likely to view certain classroom behaviors to be problematic as frequently. However, teachers with a higher tolerance for problem behaviors may not discipline children appropriately and consistently when in fact, they need to be. On the other hand, teachers with a high PBJW who view behavior as problematic more frequently would possibly be more apt to institute zero-tolerance policies to violence that may have several adverse outcomes for learners in the school.

In terms of broader narratives of school violence, our findings suggest that the relationship between teachers’ PBJW and their perception of problem behavior in the classroom need to account for the role of personal justice orientations on the part of the role players who report on school violence. Such reports rely on largely on subjective perception of the frequency of having been exposed to violence, and should therefore be influenced by the individual’s PBJW. It may explain why, in Burton and Leoschut’s (2013) study of violence in South African schools, differences occur in the perception of principals and teachers with respect to school violence, as well as differences between the prevalence of violence reported by children and teachers, and the generally lower rates of reporting of incidents to school principals.

Lastly, we think our study also adds to the voice of other researchers who argue that a one-size-fits-all response to school violence, need to be reconsidered. If reports of the prevalence of school violence are determined by perception (which they are), then we need to understand more clearly the factors that influence these perceptions. Our study suggests that PBJW is one factor that must be considered. In addition, perhaps researchers should pay more attention to the lived experiences of boys in education and the possible ways in which their participation in education may be hampered by gender inequalities that, among other things, favor a feminine school environment. Different offenses require a differentiated and nuanced

approach to discipline that takes cognizance of the different reasons why such behavior develops and occurs. In South Africa, bullying has been demonstrated to be an indicator of other violent and anti-social behaviors (Liang, Flisher, & Lombard, 2007), but characterizing bullying as “violence” does not help because it instantly criminalizes bullying in the same way as serious forms of violence. Ignoring the fact that boys may become violent because they experience an education system that silences or discounts their way of being in the world, is a different kind of violence that requires a different approach. Psychologists generally agree that support to learners, teachers and schools in many cases require sensitivity to the fact that behavior occur as a result of the child’s personal and social context, family environment, and social relationships, and while serious offences need to be dealt with decisively, others may require a more empathic and developmentally appropriate forms of support rather than discipline. Understanding the justice orientations of children and teachers may help policy makers and practitioners to formulate a better response to discipline in South African schools.

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