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Discipline and Codes of Conduct

Discipline or Dissonance?

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Opening Reflection

Discipline in schools is not just about rules, it's about relationships. It shapes how learners experience authority, safety and belonging. In South Africa, where histories of violence and exclusion still echo through our classrooms, the way we approach discipline carries profound ethical weight. The BELA Bill proposes reforms to school codes of conduct, aiming to protect learners' rights and dignity. But it also invites us to ask: Are we building cultures of care, or simply refining control?

What the BELA Bill Says

- Corporal punishment is explicitly prohibited in all school-related activities, including hostels.
- Initiation practices (hazing, rituals) are banned.
- Codes of conduct must accommodate learners' cultural beliefs, religious observances and medical circumstances.
- Schools must include an exemption clause in their codes of conduct.
- Disciplinary proceedings must be age-appropriate and in the best interests of the learner.
- Definitions of serious misconduct are clarified, especially regarding drugs and alcohol.

What's Changed: From SASA to BELA

Under SASA (1996):

Corporal punishment was banned, but enforcement was inconsistent. Codes of conduct were locally developed, with limited oversight. Cultural and religious exemptions were not formally required.

Under BELA (2024):

The Bill strengthens enforcement, mandates inclusive codes of conduct, and formalises protections for learners during disciplinary processes.

Key Shift:

From informal, locally interpreted discipline to structured, rights-based frameworks with explicit protections and prohibitions.

Why It Matters

This clause affirms the constitutional rights of learners to safety, dignity and cultural expression. It moves discipline away from punishment and towards restorative practice. However, implementation will require deep shifts in school culture, staff training and community engagement.

From a systems-thinking lens, discipline must be relational, developmental and just. It cannot be reduced to compliance, it must be rooted in care. Philosophically, this aligns with restorative justice, child-centred pedagogy and Ubuntu ethics, where every learner is seen as a whole person, not just a behavioural case.

Reflective Responses

What does respectful discipline look like in practice?

It looks like listening before judging, understanding before reacting. It means creating spaces where learners feel safe to grow, not afraid to fail.

How do we honour cultural and religious diversity in codes of conduct?

By consulting communities, offering exemptions where needed, and ensuring that policies reflect the lived realities of learners.

What support do schools need to implement these changes meaningfully?

- Training in restorative practices and trauma-informed care
- Access to counsellors and social workers
- Clear guidelines for inclusive policy development
- Ongoing dialogue with parents and learners

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Statistics from DBE and UNICEF (2024):

- 1 in 3 learners report experiencing verbal or emotional abuse in school settings.
- Only 40% of schools have access to trained counsellors or psychosocial support.
- Schools using restorative discipline report a 25% drop in repeat offences.

“Discipline must be rooted in respect. When we punish without understanding, we fail not only the child, but the future.” - <i>Dr. Mamphela Ramphele</i>
