

Exploring the school administrators' challenges in managing learner discipline in the Capricorn North District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

This study explored discipline management practices in three high schools in the Capricorn North District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Employing a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of twelve participants, including principals, teachers and learners, to capture diverse perspectives on learner discipline. The schools were selected for their well-documented discipline-related challenges, ensuring the generation of rich and contextually meaningful data. Data collection adhered to ethical standards, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. This process enabled the categorization of data into meaningful themes, highlighting commonalities across participants' responses and enhancing the depth of interpretation. Findings revealed that, although schools implement a range of strategies to address learner indiscipline, persistent challenges remain, including limited parental involvement, inadequate resources and inconsistent enforcement of disciplinary policies. Nonetheless, collaborative practices among teachers, learners, and school management teams emerged as critical in fostering a more disciplined and supportive learning environment. The study concludes that effective discipline management requires a holistic, multi-level approach that integrates school policies, community participation, and active learner engagement.

Keywords: Discipline, Management, Parental Involvement, Policy, School Administrators

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1 INTRODUCTION

The study sought to identify the sources of indiscipline, the strategies used to manage discipline, and the effectiveness of these strategies in creating a conducive learning environment. By exploring these issues, the study aimed to provide insights into the complexities of discipline management in high schools, to inform policies and practices that can help to improve discipline and promote a positive school culture. The type and severity of poor discipline among secondary school pupils in Capricorn North District have increased since physical punishment was outlawed in South African schools (Obadire & Sinthumele, 2021; Zondo & Mncube, 2024). To handle discipline issues and create a solution that can be used in all schools to manage discipline, an effective approach, along with the participation of stakeholders in the schools, needs to be taken into consideration (Padayachee & Gcelu, 2022).

The conception of learner discipline has been a subject of debate among researchers and educators. According to Masitsa (2019), learner discipline encompasses the behaviours and attitudes of

learners that conform to the rules, regulations and expectations of the school. Ngcobo (2016) defines learner discipline as the ability of learners to follow instructions, respect authority and take responsibility for their actions. Researchers have argued that learner discipline is influenced by a range of factors, including socioeconomic status, parental involvement and teacher-learner relationships (Mokoena, 2018; Phahladira & Kgosi, 2020). Sibaya (2015) suggests that learner discipline is closely linked to academic achievement, with well-disciplined learners tending to perform better academically. Conversely, indiscipline among learners has been associated with poor academic performance, absenteeism and dropout rates (DuPaul & Kern, 2023; Huang et al., 2020). The literature highlights the importance of creating a positive school culture that promotes learner discipline, respect and responsibility (Thabethe, 2019; Elkadi & Sharaf, 2023). Effective discipline management strategies, such as positive behaviour support and restorative justice, have been shown to improve learner discipline and reduce misbehaviours (Xaba, 2017; Oxley & Holden, 2021). Moreover, researchers have emphasized the need for school administrators to adopt a holistic approach to discipline management, addressing the social, emotional and academic needs of learners (Mthethwa, 2017; Limber & Small, 2022).

Setting the tone for a supportive environment for teaching and learning discipline is crucial in schools. The Capricorn North District in Limpopo province has experienced a problem with lax discipline in secondary schools (Masitsa, 2019). Studies have claimed that due to the unruly behavior of their learners, teachers experienced stress and sometimes left their positions (Khuzwayo, 2021). Maintaining learners' discipline is essential for providing a good learning environment (Macleod, 2020). Effective discipline procedures employed by teachers encourage learning, facilitate the accomplishment of objectives and elevate academic standards (Rodriguez & Welsh, 2022; Webster-Stratton, 2022). Research indicates that many educators struggle to manage learners' misbehavior, while others can effectively enforce discipline in the classroom (DuPaul & Kern, 2023; Maseko, 2025). An influential factor in a learner's success in learning is the teacher's strategy to manage discipline effectively (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Peel, 2020).

According to Sekhonyane (2018), most underperforming schools have discipline issues, which is where many challenges begin. This study examines how a lack of discipline impacts learner performance and undermines educator morale. Poor discipline is a chronic problem in the Capricorn North district, which impacts overall school performance. To address underperforming schools, the Department of Education implemented Section 58 of the South African Schools Act (South African Human Rights Commission, 2018). The existence of well-disciplined schools depends on collaborative efforts between educators, school administrators and other stakeholders to develop effective discipline management plans (Padayachee & Gcelu, 2022; Obadire, 2022). Disruptive behavior in secondary schools has a detrimental effect on teaching and learning (Wolhuter & Van Staden, 2008; Johnson, 2022). The study concludes that schools are spaces where poor discipline and violence are increasingly evident, which requires urgent solutions (Mokwena et al., 2020).

The management of discipline has been a constant challenge in most high schools in the Capricorn North district of Limpopo Province. In the past, these schools have struggled to maintain a conducive learning environment due to rampant indiscipline among learners (Masitsa, 2019; Obadire & Sinthumele, 2021). This phenomenon has been attributed to the lack of effective disciplinary measures, inadequate parental involvement and socioeconomic factors (Mthethwa, 2017; Phahladira & Kgosi, 2020). For instance, the South African Human Rights Commission (2018) revealed that learners in Limpopo province were prone to gangsterism, drug abuse and delinquency, which often disrupted the learning process. The consequences of indiscipline in schools are far-reaching, negatively impacting learners' academic performance, teacher morale and school image (Elkadi & Sharaf, 2023). Furthermore, the inability of school authorities to manage discipline effectively has led to a breakdown in relationships among learners, teachers and parents, creating an environment of fear and mistrust (Mokoena, 2018).

In addition, learner discipline is a national and international concern (Wolhuter & Van Staden, 2008). This problem is not limited to South African schools but is a global phenomenon Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2023. Research has shown that the key challenge is managing school-based

indiscipline effectively (Limber & Small, 2022). This problem affects learning environments and disrupts teaching. Schools are increasingly perceived as unsafe and unsheltered, with learners and educators experiencing fear and insecurity (Welsh, 2023; World Medical Association, 2013). In the Capricorn North District, several schools have experienced incidents of violence and disorder, which have affected teaching and learning (Sibaya, 2015; South African Human Rights Commission, 2018).

Moreover, teachers consistently struggle to maintain discipline in high schools (Mthethwa, 2017; Ngcobo, 2016). Student indiscipline is a widespread problem in the Capricorn North district (Masitsa, 2019). Researchers have identified various contributing factors, including poor teacher-student relationships, low socioeconomic status and a lack of parental involvement (Mokoena, 2018; Phahladira & Kgosi, 2020). Discipline management requires a multi-stakeholder approach that considers emotional, academic and social factors (Padayachee & Gcelu, 2022). Effective discipline management enhances learning environments and promotes academic success (Rodriguez & Welsh, 2022; DuPaul & Kern, 2023). The cited literature offers a range of strategies for addressing school-based indiscipline, suggesting the need for collaboration between teachers, SMTs and SGBs (Padayachee & Gcelu, 2022; Elkadi & Sharaf, 2023). A coordinated approach is essential to creating and maintaining a learning environment that supports academic success (Xaba, 2017). Sekhonyane (2018) notes that the Department of Education conducts annual hearings aligned with Section 58, emphasizing the role of school managers and educators in curbing ill-discipline.

In line with that, Capricorn North, like many other districts in Limpopo, contains numerous secondary schools facing severe discipline challenges (Obadire, 2022). These challenges contribute to poor learner performance and reduced pass rates. The Department of Education responds through policy enforcement and disciplinary hearings, highlighting the widespread nature of the problem (South African Human Rights Commission, 2018). For well-disciplined schools to exist, teachers and administrators must collaborate on effective discipline strategies tailored to their school contexts. Therefore, the researcher aims to identify challenges related to the management of discipline in schools and develop strategies or measures that can be implemented to address the poor management of discipline in schools.

A significant challenge faced by high schools in managing discipline is the absence or ambiguity of clear discipline policies (Motseke, 2019). This lack of structured guidelines and protocols can lead to inconsistency, confusion and subjective decision-making, often resulting in disputes and grievances. In such cases, teachers may apply different standards to similar misbehaviors, leading to perceptions of unfairness. Furthermore, the absence of explicit policies hinders effective discipline management by creating environments in which expectations and consequences are unclear to learners (Masingi, 2017). As a result, learners may struggle to understand what constitutes acceptable behavior and the consequences of misconduct, thereby reducing their sense of accountability and responsibility. Building on this concern, another core issue that exacerbates indiscipline is the inconsistent interpretation and application of disciplinary policies by school stakeholders. Mathebula and Runhare (2021) highlight that disciplinary committees often lack proper training on implementing school codes of conduct, resulting in procedural errors and unequal enforcement. Zondo and Mncube (2024) reinforce this point, arguing that non-uniform application leads learners to perceive disciplinary processes as biased, weakening their effectiveness. Additionally, Masitsa (2019) emphasizes that poor communication and dissemination of these policies further contribute to confusion among both learners and educators. Therefore, to mitigate these challenges, schools must prioritize policy orientation workshops and collaborative reviews to ensure shared understanding and consistent implementation.

In addition to unclear policies, the absence of effective alternative disciplinary strategies poses a major challenge (Motseke, 2019). The banning of corporal punishment left many schools with a disciplinary vacuum, often exploited by learners (Maphosa & Shumba, 2009). Without restorative or rehabilitative practices, opportunities to nurture positive learner-teacher relationships are diminished (Masingi, 2017), especially in contexts burdened by social challenges like poverty and crime (Obadire & Sinthumele, 2021). This disciplinary gap is further compounded by a lack of

teacher training in innovative, non-punitive approaches. Egunlusi (2020) notes that, in the absence of formal alternatives, educators frequently default to informal or reactive measures, which may escalate conflict rather than resolve it. In response, Oxley and Holden (2021) advocate for inclusive, developmentally appropriate strategies rooted in equity and empathy. Similarly, Elkadi and Sharaf (2023) demonstrates that restorative conversations and empathy-driven interventions can improve learner well-being and school engagement. However, the lack of ongoing professional development remains a barrier to mainstreaming these practices (Xaba, 2017), particularly in under-resourced schools.

Another pressing issue undermining learner discipline is the lack of parental involvement in school affairs (Padayachee & Gcelu, 2022). Although active parental engagement is strongly linked to improved learner behavior and academic outcomes, many schools report limited collaboration with parents. This disconnect undermines teacher efforts to manage behavior and leaves learners without a consistent support system between school and home. Chinenye and Victor (2018) suggests that stronger communication channels and increased parental participation in school governance can help close this gap and promote accountability. Moreover, research shows that in high-risk communities—where gang violence and social instability are prevalent, parental involvement is especially crucial. Khuzwayo (2021) emphasizes that parental support reinforces school values and can shield learners from negative external influences. However, as Lumadi (2020) observes, many parents feel alienated from the school system due to a lack of communication or perceived judgment by educators. Addressing this issue requires inclusive strategies that respect cultural and socio-economic diversity. Motlekoa (2020) recommends approaches such as home visits and community-based meetings to foster trust and improve collaboration between schools and families.

Socio-economic conditions also have a significant impact on learner behavior and school discipline (Masingi, 2017). Studies reveal a strong correlation between poverty, behavioral problems and the breakdown of school discipline systems, particularly in disadvantaged communities (Obadire & Sinthumele, 2021). Poverty-related challenges such as hunger, lack of transportation and high crime rates create additional stress for learners, which often manifests as disruptive behavior in the classroom. Supporting this view, Phahladira and Kgosi (2020) argue that basic needs deprivation—such as food insecurity and unstable housing—heightens learners' emotional stress and increases the likelihood of defiance and aggression. Additionally, Mokwena et al. (2020) points out that poorly implemented national policies, especially those related to drug abuse prevention, fail to address these underlying issues. The South African Human Rights Commission (2018) echoes this concern, calling for integrated psychosocial support systems to be embedded in schools. These findings underscore the need for holistic interventions that extend beyond punishment and address the root causes of learner misconduct.

On the contrary, positive, respectful interactions between teachers and learners are essential for effective discipline management (Masingi, 2017). When these relationships are weak—often due to large class sizes, teacher burnout, or lack of support—learners may feel disconnected and act out (Motseke, 2019). Cultivating a supportive classroom climate through empathy, consistency and effective communication can significantly improve learner behavior. Johnson (2022) emphasizes that school leaders must play an active role in promoting a culture of trust and collaboration among staff and learners. However, as Macleod (2020) points out, limited teacher training in emotional intelligence and conflict resolution reduces their capacity to manage discipline constructively. Further compounding the issue is teacher stress and burnout, especially in overcrowded classrooms (Huang et al., 2020). To better understand and address these relational dynamics, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) advocate for qualitative inquiry into teachers' lived experiences, which can inform more context-sensitive strategies.

With that, one effective approach to improving learner discipline involves establishing comprehensive, transparent discipline policies (Masingi, 2017). These policies help establish clear behavioral expectations and consequences, promoting fairness and consistency in disciplinary practices. In contrast, policy ambiguities often lead to confusion and undermine the credibility of the disciplinary system. Well-articulated policies promote accountability and support the

development of a conducive learning environment. However, for such policies to be truly effective, they must be context-sensitive and collaboratively developed. Ngcobo (2016) cautions that top-down policy implementation often neglects the unique socio-cultural and institutional realities of individual schools, rendering them ineffective. Maseko (2025) supports a participatory model, arguing that involving heads of departments and teacher teams in policy formulation enhances buy-in and improves enforcement. Furthermore, Rodriguez and Welsh (2022) highlights the importance of ongoing training and open forums where staff and learners can review and discuss school rules, thereby promoting transparency and mutual understanding. Another foundational strategy is the intentional nurturing of positive teacher-learner relationships. Teachers who actively engage with learners' backgrounds, interests and personal challenges can build trust and rapport that significantly reduces misbehavior (Masingi, 2017). Activities such as mentorship, extracurricular involvement and learner leadership initiatives create opportunities for connection, which foster mutual respect and cooperation (Motseke, 2019).

This approach is further supported by evidence showing that many behavioral issues stem from emotional distress or unmet psychological needs. Khoury-Kassabri et al. (2023) explains that acts of rebellion among adolescents often signal a need for emotional support, which empathetic teacher engagement can help address. DuPaul and Kern (2023) emphasizes the role of structured behavioral interventions, such as positive reinforcement, in redirecting disruptive behavior. Complementing this, Webster-Stratton (2022) advocates for emotional coaching techniques that teach learners to self-regulate while deepening their trust in teachers. Together, these insights underscore the power of strong interpersonal connections in maintaining classroom discipline.

Alongside school-based efforts, fostering parental involvement has proven to be a vital strategy in managing learner discipline. Active engagement of parents—through regular communication, parent-teacher meetings and participation in school governance—helps align home and school expectations (Padayachee & Gcelu, 2022). Chinenye and Victor (2018) asserts that when parents collaborate with schools in addressing behavioral issues, learners receive more consistent guidance and are held more accountable for their actions. To deepen this engagement, schools must move beyond traditional methods and adopt more inclusive, responsive approaches. Limber and Small (2022) stresses the importance of culturally relevant family engagement models that recognize parents as co-educators rather than passive observers. Peel (2020) adds that common barriers to parental involvement—such as work obligations, low literacy and past negative experiences with schooling—must be acknowledged and addressed. Welsh (2023) recommends practical solutions, including flexible communication tools like WhatsApp, SMS and home visits, as well as workshops to build parents' confidence in supporting school discipline efforts.

Furthermore, another proactive strategy involves offering alternative academic or extracurricular avenues that channel learner energy into positive and purposeful activities. Programs in arts, music, sports and vocational subjects have been shown to reduce behavioral issues by increasing learner engagement and motivation (Masingi, 2017). When learners find areas where they excel and feel valued, their resistance to school norms often diminishes (Motseke, 2019). Empirical studies support this approach. Elkadi and Sharaf (2023) found that students participating in extracurricular programs exhibited enhanced academic performance and improved emotional self-regulation. Similarly, Bolatito (2021) advocates for incorporating creative and technical subjects into the curriculum to accommodate diverse learner strengths and reduce disengagement. Obadire and Sinthumele (2021) further notes that such interventions foster a sense of belonging and identity, which traditional academic pathways may not always provide. Thus, offering interest-based alternatives not only curbs indiscipline but also contributes to the holistic development of learners.

Finally, in response to the complex influence of poverty and socio-economic stressors on learner behavior, many schools are implementing targeted support interventions. Programs such as school-based mentorship, counseling and community outreach help create a nurturing environment that fosters both academic and social well-being (Obadire & Sinthumele, 2021). These interventions provide learners with essential resources and psychosocial support, improving their capacity to engage productively in school (Masingi, 2017). Yet, to be truly effective, these strategies must

be multidimensional and grounded in principles of social justice. Masitsa (2019) recommends combining school feeding schemes, peer mentorship and trauma-informed practices to mitigate the stressors learners face outside school. Lumadi (2020) emphasizes the importance of epistemic justice, advocating for equitable access to learning tools and supportive teaching approaches. Additionally, Mokoena (2018) underscores the role of partnerships with NGOs and social workers in extending support beyond the classroom, ensuring that learners and their families receive sustained assistance. These comprehensive efforts contribute to a more stable and disciplined school environment.

To clearly establish the research gap and justify the need for this study, the existing literature identifies several areas where prior research is limited or inconclusive, providing a foundation for the current investigation. While studies have extensively documented challenges in school discipline, such as unclear policies (Motseke, 2019; Masingi, 2017), inconsistent application of disciplinary procedures (Mathebula & Runhare, 2021; Zondo & Mncube, 2024), insufficient alternative strategies (Maphosa & Shumba, 2009; Egunlusi, 2020), limited parental involvement (Padayachee & Gcelu, 2022), socio-economic influences (Obadire & Sinthumele, 2021; Phahladira & Kgosi, 2020) and weak teacher-learner relationships (Masingi, 2017; Motseke, 2019), these studies often address these factors in isolation or within limited contexts. Most research highlights general correlations between these factors and learner behavior, but few offer an integrated, systems-based understanding of how these challenges interact across multiple levels of influence, including individual, familial, school, community and policy contexts. Additionally, while prior work recommends interventions such as policy development, parental engagement, restorative practices and socio-emotional support programs, there is limited empirical evidence regarding their implementation and effectiveness in under-resourced South African schools, particularly in rural settings. Moreover, many studies focus on the descriptive identification of challenges without sufficiently exploring practical, context-specific strategies that school administrators can adopt to improve discipline in real-time classroom and community contexts.

The current study addresses this gap by adopting Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) as a framework, providing a holistic lens through which to examine the interplay between learners, teachers, parents, school policies and socio-economic factors. By situating discipline within interacting microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem levels, this research moves beyond fragmented analyses to explore how these systems collectively shape learner behavior and the effectiveness of disciplinary strategies. It also responds to the lack of empirical studies examining integrated approaches to discipline management in rural South African high schools, emphasizing context-sensitive and participatory strategies that include policy clarification, teacher capacity building, parental involvement and psychosocial support. In doing so, this study not only documents the challenges experienced by school administrators but also identifies actionable measures that address these challenges holistically, offering both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of school discipline management. This dual focus—understanding systemic influences and proposing contextually relevant interventions—underscores the “need” for the study and distinguishes it from prior research.

This study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST), which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multiple environmental influences on student discipline. The theory describes human development as resulting from reciprocal interactions between individuals and their surrounding systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tudge et al., 2021). At the microsystem level, it focuses on direct interactions within learners' immediate environments, such as relationships with teachers, peers and parents. Research indicates that strained teacher-learner relationships and limited parental support significantly contribute to disruptive behavior in South African schools (Maphalala & Mpofu, 2020). The mesosystem refers to the connections between microsystems, for example, the coordination (or lack of it) between home and school environments. When communication and collaboration between parents and educators are weak, learners receive conflicting behavioral expectations, which can lead to increased indiscipline (Madhlango & Gordon, 2021). The exosystem encompasses social and institutional structures that indirectly influence learners, such as parental employment, school management and community safety.

Studies in rural South African contexts show how poverty, unemployment and absent school leadership contribute to poor student behavior (Nkosi, 2021). The macrosystem includes national policies, cultural values and societal norms that influence how discipline is defined and enforced. The abolition of corporal punishment and the adoption of rights-based education frameworks have led schools to implement alternative discipline strategies. However, educators often report lacking the training and resources needed to apply these strategies effectively (Maringe & Tshabangu, 2022). The chronosystem considers socio-historical changes over time. In South Africa, a significant shift has been from punitive to developmental disciplinary approaches. While this change is commendable in theory, it has presented challenges for school administrators, especially in under-resourced areas where professional development opportunities are limited (Molepo, 2023). Using Bronfenbrenner's theory enables this study to frame learner discipline within a web of interacting systems, highlighting that discipline issues are not solely school problems but are also shaped by broader socio-cultural, economic and institutional factors. Therefore, solutions require coordinated efforts among teachers, families, communities and policymakers. The following figure shows Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

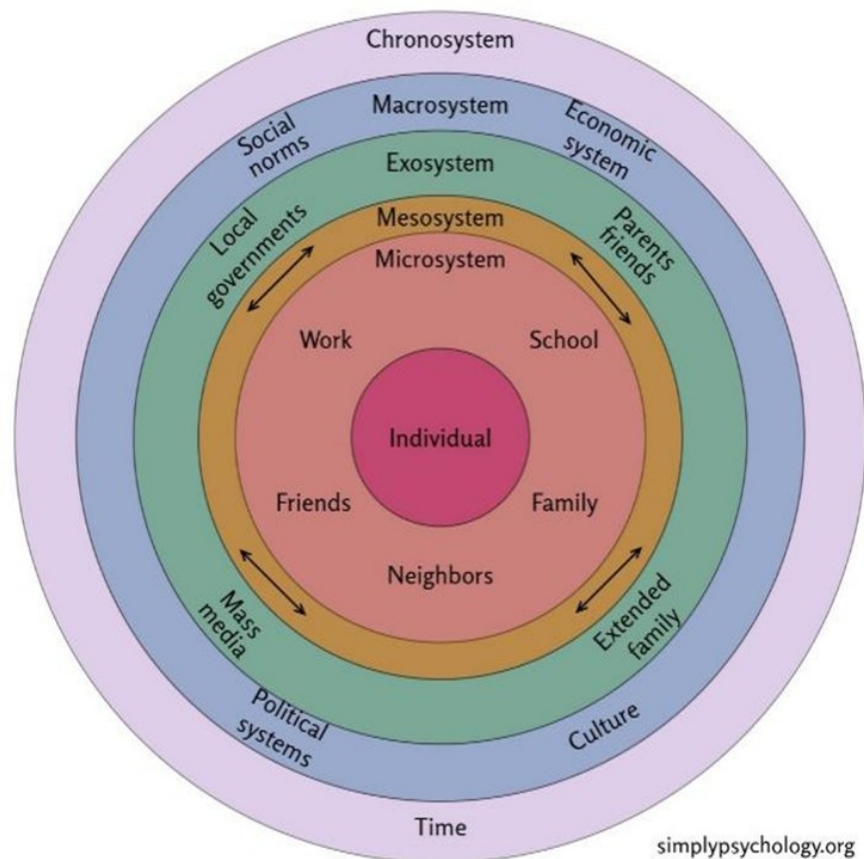


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory shown in a diagram.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_systems_theory#The_five_systems

2 METHODS

2.1 Research Method

To gain a deeper understanding of the challenges experienced by school administrators in managing discipline in high schools within the Capricorn North District of Limpopo Province, this

study adopted a qualitative research approach (Cohen et al., 2006). This approach was chosen for its capacity to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the research phenomenon and to generate rich, detailed data about participants' experiences and perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A phenomenological orientation underpinned the study, focusing on the lived experiences of school administrators and educators involved in discipline management (Creswell, 2013).

2.2 Research Design

A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed within an interpretivist paradigm (Machimana et al., 2018; Rashid et al., 2019). This design enabled the researcher to study discipline-related experiences in real-life contexts across three distinct high schools in the district. As Bhandari (2021) states, a research design guides the process of collecting and analyzing data to answer the research questions. The case study approach was suitable for examining the complexities of discipline management in context (Abeysekera et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). The design allowed for a holistic examination of the issue by considering the various stakeholders' roles and interactions within the school setting (Merriam, 2009).

2.3 Population and sampling

The study was conducted in three high schools situated in the Capricorn North District of Limpopo Province, namely School A, School B and School C. These schools were purposively selected because they were known to experience persistent discipline-related challenges and were accessible to the researcher for in-depth engagement. Their selection was also informed by their varied contexts, which provided differences in learner demographics, school leadership practices and community involvement, thereby offering richer comparative insights into discipline management.

The study population consisted of school administrators (principals and deputy principals), teachers and learners who were directly involved in issues of discipline management. A purposive sampling strategy was employed for this population. Purposeful selection was considered most suitable because the study required participants with direct, lived experiences who could provide rich, detailed and contextually relevant data. The final sample consisted of three principals (one from each school), three teachers with extensive experience in classroom management and six learners (two from each school) who had either been the subject of discipline or had actively witnessed disciplinary processes.

This mix of participants ensured that multiple perspectives were obtained: administrators contributed institutional and policy-level insights, teachers provided classroom-based experiences and learners offered their interpretations of disciplinary practices. This form of purposeful sampling is supported by Creswell (2013), who emphasizes that qualitative inquiry requires researchers to select participants who can provide rich, information-laden accounts aligned with the study's objectives. Robinson (2013) also highlights the importance of careful sampling in qualitative research, stressing that participant selection must be deliberate to maximize the depth and quality of data collected.

The sample size of twelve participants was considered adequate for this qualitative design because it provided sufficient diversity across stakeholder groups while remaining manageable for detailed thematic analysis. This aligns with Creswell (2013) view that smaller, focused samples are appropriate in qualitative studies since the emphasis is on depth of understanding rather than representativeness. By deliberately focusing on individuals most knowledgeable about the phenomenon, the study ensured the generation of trustworthy, nuanced insights into discipline management practices in the selected schools.

2.4 Research Instrument

Data were collected using two primary sources: semi-structured interviews, lasting between 25 and 40 minutes and observations of discipline management practices in two schools. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility and depth in participants' responses (Busetto et al., 2020). Open-ended questions explored participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the challenges of discipline management. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed (Creswell, 2013). Observations were conducted over two weeks, focusing on classrooms, schoolyards and general teacher-learner interactions. Observation forms were used to collect data, which was then analyzed by creating codes and grouping them into themes that represent broader patterns in the data. The researcher took detailed field notes on strategies used by teachers and school leaders (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Observations were informant-guided and aimed at triangulating the data obtained from interviews, thereby enhancing the validity of findings.

2.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data gathering followed a stepwise, ethically informed process that moved from formal permissions and participant consent to data collection, management and analysis. Ethical clearance for the study was first obtained from the relevant institutional review board; permission to conduct the research in the Capricorn North district and in the identified schools was then sought from the provincial and district education offices and from individual school principals and SGBs. Schools that granted permission were given an information sheet describing the study's purpose, procedures, risks and benefits. For all individual participants, written informed consent was obtained; for learners under the age of majority, written parental/guardian consent and learner assent were secured before data collection began.

Participants and sites were recruited purposively to ensure representation of the key stakeholder groups relevant to discipline management. After obtaining institutional and parental permissions, the research team contacted potential participants with an invitation letter explaining the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality measures in place. Interview times and observation visits were negotiated with school leadership to minimize disruption to teaching and to respect school schedules. Prior to formal data collection, the instruments were pilot tested at one school that was not part of the main sample; the pilot informed small revisions to question wording, the observation checklist and the document extraction form.

Data collection then proceeded in three parallel strands. Interviews were conducted in private locations at the schools or another mutually agreed venue. Each interview began with a reminder of the participant's rights, confirmation of consent for audio recording and a brief warm-up question to build rapport. Interviews were semi-structured and typically lasted long enough to cover the core areas, while allowing participants to elaborate on their responses. Probing was used to clarify responses and elicit concrete examples. Where participants preferred, interviews were conducted in a local language with a trained translator present; recordings were later translated and transcribed verbatim. Observations were scheduled to capture typical classroom lessons and were conducted non-intrusively. The researcher completed the observation checklist in real time and supplemented it with rich field notes immediately after each session to preserve contextual detail. Where possible, multiple observation sessions were made per school to increase the representativeness of the data and to observe consistency (or inconsistency) across different lessons and teachers.

All audio recordings and documents were securely stored on password-protected devices and backed up to encrypted storage. Transcription was done verbatim and, where translations were required, cross-checked by a second bilingual researcher for accuracy. Participants were assigned anonymised codes and identifying details were removed from transcripts and reports. To enhance credibility, member checking was used: participants were offered the opportunity to review their interview transcripts or a concise summary of the interpreted findings and to suggest corrections or clarifications.

Data analysis began once a substantial portion of the data had been collected and continued iteratively. Thematic analysis, following a systematic sequence of familiarization, open coding, theme development, reviewing and defining themes, was applied to interview transcripts, observation notes and document data. Coding was initially inductive but remained continuously cross-referenced with the research questions. Triangulation across data sources was used to corroborate findings and to surface contradictions or unique insights. Where appropriate, coding was checked by a second analyst to establish inter-coder consistency and any disagreements were resolved through discussion and reference to the raw data. The analytic process was documented in an audit trail and reflective memos were kept to record analytic decisions and to support confirmability.

2.6 Data analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was supported by the *Atlas.ti* software, which facilitated systematic coding and theme development (Muhr, 2013). The analysis process began with open coding, guided by the study's objectives and research questions (Peel, 2020). Codes were categorized into broader themes and validated through member checking and peer debriefing to ensure credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013). The transcription and coding process enabled the categorization of data into meaningful groups. Commonalities across participants' responses were identified, enhancing the interpretation and depth of findings.

2.7 Ethical considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards throughout the research process. All participants provided informed consent before data collection and measures were taken to ensure privacy, confidentiality and voluntary participation (Bchat & Jones, 2014). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To uphold anonymity, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant authorities before the commencement of the study. The data collection methods were non-intrusive and did not interfere with the normal operations of the schools. The study posed no foreseeable risks to participants and adhered to the principles of autonomy, beneficence and justice (Resnick, 2015; World Health Organization, 2013).

3 FINDINGS

This section presents the findings based on the challenges faced by school administrators, strategies to address poor discipline management, the role of parental and stakeholder involvement in discipline improvement and stakeholder intervention help to improve discipline in schools when managing discipline in high schools in the Capricorn North district of Limpopo province. The findings are organized into themes and sub-themes derived through thematic analysis.

3.1 Data from semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interviews generated rich qualitative data that illuminated the challenges and strategies associated with discipline management in high schools within the Capricorn North District of Limpopo Province. Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, involving transcription, coding and categorization of participants' responses into meaningful groups. The analysis revealed four major themes: Behavioural issues, Institutional and policy constraints, Discipline management and Stakeholder partnerships and collaborative support. A summary of themes, representative responses and interpretations is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes, Sample Responses and Interpretations

Theme	Sample Responses	Interpretation / Implications
1. Behavioural Issues	1. "One of the major challenges was dealing with defiant and disruptive learners who refused to follow instructions and would often argue with us. Another challenge was the lack of support from parents and administrators, which made it difficult for us to enforce discipline and maintain order in the classroom." (T1, School A) 2. "We often felt misunderstood and frustrated with the way discipline was managed in schools. Teachers were too strict and didn't understand our struggles... policies were unfair and biased." (P1, School A)	Participants highlighted the prevalence of behavioural challenges such as defiance, disruption and feelings of unfair treatment. Lack of parental and administrative support compounded these issues, showing how discipline management is shaped by both learner behaviour and systemic weaknesses. The findings imply that empathy, fairness and stronger parent-teacher partnerships are critical in addressing behavioural issues.
2. Institutional and Policy Constraints	1. "Effective strategies for addressing poor management of discipline... included implementing clear rules and consequences, fostering positive relationships with students and providing alternative discipline methods such as restorative justice." (T2, School B) 2. "Our school put in place measures to address poor management of discipline. We developed and communicated a clear discipline policy... established a discipline committee to ensure fairness and consistency." (P2, School B)	Participants recognized that outdated or inconsistent policies hindered discipline management. However, schools that implemented clear codes of conduct, restorative justice practices and supportive structures (discipline committees, mentorship) reported more positive environments. This suggests that institutional reforms and consistent policy enforcement are vital for sustainable discipline management.

Theme	Sample Responses	Interpretation / Implications
3. Discipline Management	1. "I encouraged parental involvement through volunteering in the classroom and attending parent-teacher conferences... learners whose parents were involved tended to exhibit better behaviour and a more positive attitude toward learning." (T1, School A) 2. "By involving parents in the development of school policies and procedures, we were able to create a more collaborative approach to discipline management... we saw an improvement in learner behaviour." (P1, School A)	The data underscored the central role of parental engagement in shaping learner discipline. When parents actively participated through PTA meetings, policy input and consistent communication, learners displayed better behaviour and stronger motivation. This indicates that parental involvement is not supplementary but foundational in effective discipline management.
4. Stakeholder Partnerships and Collaborative Support	1. "We worked closely with stakeholders, including parents, school administrators and community leaders... stakeholder intervention helped to provide learners with additional support and resources." (T1, School B) 2. "I engaged with stakeholders, including teachers, parents and community leaders, to develop a collaborative approach... we saw a significant improvement in learner behaviours and a more positive school culture overall." (P2, School A)	Stakeholder involvement, including community leaders and external partners, was viewed as transformative in addressing root causes of misbehaviour. Collaboration expanded the support network for learners and strengthened school culture. This highlights that discipline is not only a school issue but a community responsibility, requiring multisectoral support.

Theme 1: Behavioural Issues

The findings revealed that behavioural challenges such as defiance, classroom disruption, and a lack of respect for authority remain central to discipline management in schools. Teachers reported struggling with learners who ignored instructions, while learners expressed feelings of unfair treatment and strict disciplinary enforcement. These findings suggest a gap between learners' perspectives and teachers' enforcement strategies. Consistent with earlier studies, behavioural misconduct often emerges where parental support and home-based discipline are weak, thereby transferring the burden entirely to teachers. The implication is that schools must combine clear disciplinary strategies with empathy and fairness, ensuring that learner voices are acknowledged.

Theme 2: Institutional and Policy Constraints

Participants noted that discipline management was undermined by outdated policies, inconsistent enforcement and inadequate support from the district. Some schools introduced restorative justice practices, discipline committees and mentorship programmes as institutional reforms, which improved fairness and learner accountability. This echoes findings in the literature that effective discipline frameworks require coherent policies, teacher training and institutional backing to succeed. The implication is that policy reform and consistent implementation are essential to reduce bias and maintain a balanced school climate.

Theme 3: Discipline Management

A strong theme that emerged was the importance of parental involvement. Teachers and principals noted that learners with active parental engagement demonstrated better discipline and academic commitment. Regular communication, PTA meetings and parent participation in policy development created a collaborative environment where discipline was more positively enforced. These results confirm research that emphasises the central role of family-school partnerships in shaping learner behaviour. The implication is that discipline management cannot be achieved in isolation; parents must be recognised as equal partners in education.

Theme 4: Stakeholder Partnerships and Collaborative Support

The data further showed that discipline challenges extend beyond the school walls, requiring collaboration with community stakeholders. Participants reported that involving community leaders, parents and external organisations helped identify root causes of misbehaviour, such as socioeconomic challenges, while also providing additional support and resources to learners. This reflects the broader understanding that effective discipline is a community responsibility. The implication is that sustainable solutions require a multisectoral approach where schools, families and communities share responsibility for learner behaviour and school culture.

3.2 Data from observation analysis

Observations were conducted in classrooms across the three high schools to complement the semi-structured interviews. The aim was to capture real-time evidence of discipline management, including teacher-learner interactions, enforcement of rules and classroom climate. The observations were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved coding behaviours and events, identifying patterns and grouping them into meaningful themes.

Theme	Observed Evidence	Interpretation / Implications
1. Communication Gaps	Teachers often failed to clearly communicate behavioural expectations and disciplinary procedures to learners. Changes in policy were inconsistently conveyed, causing some teachers to apply rules differently or overlook them.	Inconsistent communication created confusion and frustration among learners, undermining respect for authority. This indicates that clear, transparent communication of expectations and rules is critical for effective discipline management.

Theme	Observed Evidence	Interpretation / Implications
2. Inconsistent Enforcement of Rules	Learners who repeatedly disrupted lessons were sometimes warned but not consistently disciplined. On other occasions, similar behaviour was punished harshly for some learners but ignored for others.	Inconsistency in applying disciplinary measures eroded teacher authority and encouraged learners to challenge rules. The implication is that uniform enforcement of rules is necessary to maintain fairness and credibility in discipline management.
3. Weak Classroom Boundaries	Teachers struggled to establish clear behavioural boundaries, allowing minor misbehaviours (e.g., loud talking) to escalate without intervention.	Lack of boundaries fostered a culture of disobedience, making classrooms harder to manage. This suggests that establishing and maintaining consistent boundaries is essential for a controlled learning environment.
4. Escalation of Conflicts	Miscommunication and inconsistent rule enforcement sometimes led to open conflicts between staff and learners. Teachers were then forced to resolve tensions reactively rather than preventively.	Without proactive management, minor disciplinary issues can escalate, placing additional strain on teachers and administrators. This highlights the need for structured frameworks, clear policies and proactive monitoring to prevent conflicts.

The observational data reinforced the interview findings, demonstrating that discipline management in these high schools is hampered by communication gaps, inconsistent rule enforcement, weak classroom boundaries and reactive conflict resolution. Teachers were observed struggling to convey behavioural expectations clearly and when rules were applied inconsistently, learners quickly exploited these gaps. This aligns with research indicating that inconsistent disciplinary practices undermine authority and learner compliance.

The observations also showed that minor misbehaviours, if not addressed consistently, could escalate into broader classroom disruptions, leaving teachers to manage conflicts reactively rather than proactively. This suggests a direct link between teacher communication, consistency and classroom climate, emphasizing the need for structured and transparent disciplinary frameworks. The findings imply that for effective discipline management, schools must prioritize clear communication of rules, consistent enforcement and proactive strategies to prevent escalation of conflicts, thereby fostering a respectful and orderly learning environment.

4 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study aimed to explore the challenges that school administrators face in managing learner discipline in high schools within the Capricorn North District of Limpopo Province, as well as the strategies adopted to improve it. The findings are presented under four central themes. The results showed that educators face numerous difficulties in maintaining discipline. Teachers and principals reported frequent incidents involving learners who were uncooperative, disrespectful and intentionally disruptive. Such behaviors included arguing with staff, ignoring instructions and interrupting lessons. These issues align with findings by [Zondo and Mncube \(2024\)](#), who note that indiscipline remains a widespread concern in South African schools, often characterized by defiance and truancy and with [Huang et al. \(2020\)](#), who found that disruptive behavior

undermines teaching and learning. However, unlike some prior studies that emphasize truancy as the primary indicator of indiscipline, the current study observed that verbal defiance and classroom interruptions were more prevalent, suggesting a shift toward more direct challenges to authority within this context.

Another challenge highlighted was the lack of support from both parents and school leadership. Many educators expressed concern over parents' limited involvement in their children's schooling, weakening disciplinary efforts. This supports Padayachee and Gcelu (2022), who link poor learner behavior to insufficient parental guidance and Khuzwayo (2021), who notes that social issues such as gang violence exacerbate disciplinary difficulties without parental collaboration. In contrast to Mathebula and Runhare (2021), who emphasize systemic infrastructural constraints, this study found that even schools with adequate resources still struggled with discipline, pointing to gaps in communication and consistent enforcement as critical factors. Furthermore, teachers reported feeling overwhelmed due to outdated disciplinary approaches, limited resources and insufficient institutional backing, echoing Mokoena (2018), who emphasizes that weak teacher-learner relationships affect discipline management.

Educators described various strategies to address behavioral issues. These included establishing clear rules, codes of conduct and applying consistent disciplinary measures such as merit/demerit systems. According to Johnson (2022), such clarity helps learners understand expectations and promotes uniformity in responses to misbehavior. Similarly, Macleod (2020) highlights that consistent rule enforcement fosters structure and responsibility among learners. Restorative justice was also emphasized as a useful approach, promoting responsibility and repair of harm (Mokwena et al., 2020; Obadire, 2022). While prior research emphasizes restorative justice mainly in urban contexts, this study demonstrates its relevance in a rural South African district, showing adaptability of such strategies across settings. Mentorship programs involving peer and teacher support were implemented to guide learners, aligned with Lumadi (2020). Professional development was another key strategy, supporting Xaba (2017) and DuPaul and Kern (2023) on the importance of teacher training. However, unlike some studies that report widespread availability of training, the current findings suggest that rural schools face limited access, making consistent professional development challenging.

The findings revealed that increased parental participation positively influenced learner behaviour. Educators encouraged parents to attend school meetings, volunteer in classrooms and be involved in decision-making. When parents were regularly updated about their children's progress, learners demonstrated improved accountability and discipline. This supports Obadire and Sinthumele (2021) and Van Wyk and Lemmer (2009, as cited in Padayachee and Gcelu (2022)). However, unlike contexts reported in prior literature where parental involvement is high, this study found engagement levels varied considerably, often constrained by socioeconomic pressures and limited parental literacy. The study also found that working with external stakeholders such as community leaders and school governing bodies strengthened discipline systems. These collaborations addressed underlying social issues, consistent with Phahladira and Kgosi (2020) and Mathebula and Runhare (2021).

Unlike some prior studies that emphasize formal interventions, this study highlights informal community support as equally impactful in rural settings. Observational data reinforced interview results. Many teachers lacked adequate classroom management skills and struggled to communicate behaviour expectations effectively. Additionally, the influence of learners' socioeconomic challenges and limited parental guidance was observable, supporting Obadire and Sinthumele (2021) and Phahladira and Kgosi (2020). In contrast to some earlier studies that primarily attribute indiscipline to teacher-related factors, the current findings suggest that learner behavior is equally shaped by family and community contexts, indicating the need for multi-level interventions that integrate school, home and community support.

4.1 Limitations

The study was also limited to exploring the challenges faced by school administrators in managing discipline and did not examine the effectiveness of specific discipline management strategies. The study was conducted in only one district in Limpopo province and did not explore the challenges faced by school administrators in other districts. The study's delimitations enabled a more in-depth exploration of the research topic.

5 CONCLUSION

Gaining a better knowledge of the situations, rules and procedures that affect discipline management, as well as the effects of misbehavior on student results, is the goal of the study. Through the use of a qualitative research methodology, this study aims to offer a deep, contextual understanding of the difficulties administrators and teachers encounter when handling discipline, ultimately guiding the creation of focused tactics that foster a constructive, encouraging and comfortable learning environment. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which revealed that the participants faced several challenges when managing discipline, including inadequate resources, lack of support from parents and the community and inadequate training on discipline management strategies. The findings also showed that the participants employed various strategies to manage discipline, including counseling, detention and suspension, but noted that these strategies were often ineffective in addressing the root causes of misbehavior. The study's findings have implications for policy and practice, highlighting the need for schools to adopt a more holistic approach to discipline management that addresses the social and emotional needs of students.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for action are suggested. School administrators in the Capricorn North district of Limpopo province should develop and implement comprehensive discipline management policies that involve all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and students. Additionally, school administrators should provide teachers with training and support on effective discipline management strategies. Furthermore, schools should establish functional discipline committees that include representatives from teachers, parents, and learners to address disciplinary issues. The Department of Education should also provide resources and support to schools to enable them to manage discipline effectively. Moreover, schools should foster a positive school culture that promotes respect, empathy and responsibility among students. Finally, schools should establish partnerships with local communities and organizations to provide additional support to learners and teachers.

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