Journal of Educational Research on Children, Parents & Teachers, Volume 7, Number 2, 2026, 239-254
ISSN: 2664-3812, https://ercptjournal.org/

CHALLENGES IN MANAGING POSITIVE LEARNER DISCIPLINE IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A CASE OF SCHOOLS IN NGAKA MODIRI DISTRICT

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Abstract
Many schools in South Africa struggle to manage learner misbehaviour and often resort to punitive measures, which may exacerbate the problem. Positive discipline (PD) is therefore important, as it is grounded in human rights and corrective approaches. The aim of this study was to investigate the challenges school principals face when implementing PD among learners in public secondary schools. The study followed an interpretivist research paradigm aligned with a qualitative approach. Purposive sampling was used to select 15 participants, comprising principals from schools across the five subdistricts of the Ngaka Modiri Molema Education District. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interview with each participant. Thematic analysis yielded two themes: participants' understanding of PD and challenges associated with its implementation. The findings revealed that although many principals understood the concept and importance of positive learner discipline, some still had a limited understanding of it. The management of PD was further hindered by a lack of parental involvement, negative teacher attitudes, and learner unresponsiveness, all of which contributed to the ineffectiveness of PD in schools.

Keywords: positive discipline, parental involvement in positive discipline, teacher attitude, learner unresponsiveness

Introduction
Despite governmental efforts, safety in many South African schools remains a critical concern. Gangsterism, the presence of weapons, bullying, and alcohol and drug abuse are among the major challenges affecting school safety and security (Kweyama et al., 2024). Violence and bullying also remain widespread, with more than 3.2 million learners reportedly experiencing bullying annually (Kutywayo et al., 2024; Durham, 2025). Furthermore, limited security measures, gang activity, and substance abuse continue to undermine the creation of safe educational environments (Manatsa et al., 2015). Dlungwane and Hamlall (2024), as well as Ngidi and Ntinga (2025), further observe that township schools are particularly vulnerable to violence due to their location within communities characterised by high levels of crime.

Consequently, Mashego (2025) argues that the school safety crisis in South Africa requires a cultural shift—one that prioritises prevention and restoration over punishment. Addressing school violence is not only about improving responses after incidents occur, but also about creating environments in which such incidents are less likely to arise in the first place. One of the key approaches proposed to prevent and address school violence is positive discipline (PD), as highlighted in a study by Masinga and Sibanda (2026).

According to Mollo and Oosthuizen (2021), PD is a strategy that encourages teachers to discipline learners through respectful and constructive communication.

Similarly, Wang and Kuo (2019) describe PD as the use of positive disciplinary tactics to help learners develop appropriate behaviour and self-control, rather than relying on punishment for short-term compliance. In this sense, PD promotes discipline that is aligned with democratic values and human rights. It focuses on guiding learner behaviour by addressing their psychological and emotional needs and adopts an inclusive approach that uses discipline as a teaching tool rather than a punitive measure (Department of Basic Education, 2018). Research indicates that PD can enhance academic motivation (Hermahayu et al., 2025), strengthen learner commitment to education (Somayeh et al., 2013) and improve academic achievement and performance. It also contributes to the development of a safe school climate and a stronger sense of belonging among learners. However, several challenges hinder the effective implementation of PD in South African schools. Research points to issues related to the use of school codes of conduct. For example, Zondo and Mncube (2024) found that codes of conduct are often not reviewed regularly and are inadequately communicated to the broader school community. In addition, there is frequently a lack of alignment between home and school disciplinary practices (Schlebusch et al., 2022). Some parents continue to use corporal punishment, as reported in a study conducted in Eswatini by Tshabalala et al. (2024), which further complicates the consistent application of PD. These challenges highlight the need for deeper inquiry into the barriers to implementing PD, in order to move beyond policy ideals towards practical and sustainable application.

Internationally, research on PD has largely focused on its impact on student self-esteem (Slađana & Dušica, 2021), school climate (Abejón-Fuentes et al., 2025), and student wellbeing and academic achievement (Elkadi & Sharaf, 2023). In the South African context, studies have examined PD strategies (Zondo et al., 2023), perceptions of PD (Schlebusch et al., 2022), and frameworks for its implementation (Ndlovu et al., 2023). Additionally, Zondo and Mncube (2024) explored the challenges teachers face when using codes of conduct to promote positive discipline, focusing primarily on a single strategy while Sibanda and Mpofu (2017) assessed factors constraining use of positive discipline practices in Mzilikazi District Secondary Schools in Zimbabwe. Although studies conducted in South African schools are clear about what strategies used in PD there is dearth of information regarding challenges in implementation of PD. This study seeks to extend existing knowledge by examining the broader challenges of implementing PD in public schools, particularly those in disadvantaged communities, by highlighting the experiences of principals in leading and sustaining these practices. The discipline with dignity theory served as the foundation of and guide for this study. This theory was relevant to the study because it states how to implement and maintain discipline in a dignified manner, without involving corporal punishment. The Discipline with Dignity theory is discussed below.

Literature review and theoretical framework

The principles underpinning PD, according to Schlebusch et al. (2022), include respect for human rights, mutual respect between teachers and learners, the maintenance of healthy relationships, an emphasis on participation and cooperation, and the protection of learners' self-esteem. PD promotes a sense of belonging and long-term social-emotional development rather than immediate obedience, thereby emphasising restorative practices and learner growth.

A number of strategies are used in the implementation of PD. These include the use of a code of conduct to promote positive behaviour (Mlalazi et al., 2016), positive classroom management approaches, positive reinforcement, integrated community support services, modelling good behaviour, parental involvement and communication, as well as detention and the withdrawal of privileges (Zondo et al., 2023). Khasbiyah et al. (2025) further identify strategies such as building positive teacher–learner relationships, establishing clear, consistent, and collaborative classroom expectations, using logical consequences instead of punishment, and fostering social-emotional skills to encourage self-regulation.

PD can be strengthened through attention to both short-term and long-term solutions. Short-term disciplinary solutions aim to stop inappropriate learner behaviour while simultaneously explaining appropriate behaviour. These approaches focus on immediate, consistent, and positive interventions to correct behaviour. Examples include teachers monitoring school gates in the morning to address late coming and conducting discussions on the school code of conduct and classroom rules. Such activities encourage learners to adhere to routines and maintain orderly behaviour. However, short-term solutions should be complemented by long-term disciplinary approaches, which aim to help learners take responsibility for their own behaviour. Long-term solutions can be achieved through teaching learners' responsibility and developing their self-discipline. The emphasis is therefore on proactive, restorative, and systemic approaches rather than punitive measures, with the ultimate goal of promoting learners' social-emotional growth.

PD also relies on active participation and cooperation among teachers, learners, parents, and the broader community in fostering a respectful and safe learning environment. Prioritising greater parental involvement in both disciplinary and academic matters is crucial for creating a supportive educational environment (Carroll, 2022). In this regard, alignment between disciplinary approaches at school and at home is essential. Where there is a disconnect between the disciplinary practices applied at school and those used in learners' homes, efforts to implement PD effectively may be undermined. This further suggests that the success of PD in schools depends on stakeholders having a clear understanding of its purpose, value, and application as a disciplinary approach. The findings of Tshabalala et al. (2024) therefore highlight the need for extensive stakeholder sensitisation regarding PD. Furthermore, effective discipline requires collaborative efforts between teachers and parents. A study by Padayachee and Gcelu (2022) revealed that stakeholder collaboration is vital for the smooth functioning of schools, including the effective management of learner discipline.

Discipline with dignity theory suggests five principles of effective discipline that outline the roles of the principal when managing positive learner discipline in secondary schools, namely: discipline is a very important part of teaching; good discipline requires short-term solutions without sacrificing long-term goals; learners must always be treated with dignity; discipline must not interfere with motivation to learn; and responsibility is more important than obedience.

Research methodology

An interpretivist paradigm was adopted to examine how principals construct and attach meaning to the realities and challenges they experience when managing PD in their schools. Both the interpretivist paradigm and the qualitative research methodology were

instrumental in understanding participants' experiences and perceptions of PD and its associated challenges.

A purposive sampling method was used to select 15 secondary school principals (n = 15), with three principals drawn from each of the five sub-districts of the Ngaka Modiri Molema District. Of the 15 schools selected, five were village secondary schools, four township secondary schools, two urban secondary schools (one English school and one Afrikaans school), two former Model C schools, and two private schools. Involving participants from all types of secondary schools yielded rich data that would not have been acquired if only one type of school were selected. In-depth semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with all 15 participants. The interviews were guided by questions such as: *What is your understanding of PD?* and *What challenges have you experienced in implementing positive learner discipline?* Interviews *were* conducted at each school where the principals worked, in the privacy of their offices. Data, transcripts, and initial interpretations were shared with the study's participants to test the trustworthiness of the findings.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Furthermore, the study employed inductive reasoning, a bottom-up approach in which knowledge and understanding of the challenges associated with managing PD were constructed from patterns and themes emerging from the data. Trustworthiness was ensured by providing rich, detailed accounts of the research context, participant selection, and data collection procedures. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the university, which reviewed and approved the research (2013-U-0753).

Results

The findings yielded two main themes: participants' understanding of PD and the challenges associated with its implementation. The second theme further generated three subthemes, namely challenges related to parenting and parental involvement, challenges emanating from schools and teachers, and learner unresponsiveness.

Understanding PD

Theme 1 focuses on participants' understanding of the concept of PD. The following question was posed to all participants: *How do you, as a principal, understand the concept of PD?* The responses revealed that participants understood PD as an approach that focuses on correcting learner behaviour, encouraging learners to take responsibility for their actions, and teaching values. Participants responded as follows:

> "It is a kind of discipline that aims to correct rather than punish whoever has contravened whatever regulation." (Participant 1)
>
> "My understanding about positive learner discipline is that whatever discipline you practice when disciplining a learner, it shouldn't be something that is going to harm or affect the learner negatively. Instead, it should improve the behaviour of the learner so that they can be our future leaders." (Participant 8)

According to the participants, the aim of PD is to correct and improve learner behaviour without punishing learners. It is viewed as a form of discipline that does not seek to harm or negatively affect learners. Furthermore, PD is grounded in human rights principles because it protects the self-esteem of learners. Consequently, it rejects the infliction of

social, mental, physical, or verbal pain, hurt, or abuse on another person. The use of physical force may harm learners physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

Participants further highlighted the importance of PD in teaching learners values, responsibility, awareness of their actions, and the ability to make better choices.

> "To me, positive learner discipline refers to the discipline that will actually encourage the learner to take responsibility for their own actions." (Participant 7)
>
> "The intention of discipline is to make sure that a child realises and recognises his mistakes, acknowledges them, and corrective measures are put in place." (Participant 10)
>
> "My understanding of positive learner discipline means that, as the principal, the methods that I am going to use are not aimed at punishing the learner but at teaching them how to be responsible citizens. We are also preparing them to make better choices for their future and letting them know that for every action, there will be consequences." (Participant 5)
>
> "I believe that there must be certain values that must always be upheld. Thus, if learners are taught those values from an early age, then it means that they can grow and continue upholding those values, for example, simple things like respect." (Participant 9)
>
> "Respect has to be learned at home. When learners start schooling, they should already understand the importance of respect for others." (Participant 1)

These responses suggest that participants were aware of the role of PD in shaping learner behaviour and promoting values such as respect, responsibility, and self-regulation. PD was viewed as enabling learners to take responsibility for their actions. Taking responsibility involves acknowledging one's actions, decisions, and their consequences, thereby creating the possibility for future behavioural change. In addition, when learners acknowledge and recognise their mistakes, they are able to learn from them.

Values education was also regarded as important in schools because it encourages learners to become responsible citizens who contribute positively to their communities. Teaching values through PD is therefore essential for character development, the promotion of self-regulation, and the creation of safe and respectful learning environments. Supporting this view, Du Preez and Roux (2010) argue that maintaining positive discipline in classrooms requires a strong value base. Participants also recognised that values learned at home form the foundation of character development. In particular, they believed that values such as respect should be instilled in learners before they enter formal schooling, as these values shape children's worldview, behaviour, and moral development.

One participant further highlighted that PD could foster learners' love for schooling and education, while also promoting positive perceptions of teachers.

> "As you remember, in the olden days, corporal punishment was the disciplinary measure that was used to discipline learners. Now, during this dispensation, they want us to implement disciplinary measures that are going to make sure that learners love school and love education. When they look at teachers, they should see them as their role models, not as monsters or as people who are against them." (Participant 4)

The above statement suggests that PD focuses on proactive strategies that enhance learners' motivation to learn. However, some participants defined positive learner discipline simply as maintaining a positive attitude. Their responses indicated a limited understanding of PD as a disciplinary approach. Participants stated the following:

> "Positive learner discipline is about being positive about what you are doing and what you want to achieve; everything is going to be positive." (Participant 3)
>
> "I think it is a positive discipline if you punish a child for what they did, unlike when they are just accused of misbehaviour." (Participant 6)

These responses demonstrate that some participants had a limited understanding of PD. The first participant associated PD with positive thinking or optimism, which differs substantially from PD as a disciplinary approach. The second participant focused on ensuring that the correct learner is punished, thereby reflecting a disciplinary approach that still relies heavily on punishment. Although investigating incidents and identifying the actual culprits are important, the response remains largely punitive in orientation.

Literature provides several explanations for teachers' limited understanding of PD. According to Venter and Van Niekerk (2011), such limitations may stem from the historical dominance of punitive disciplinary approaches in South African schools, where punishment was widely used to control learner behaviour and teachers exercised extensive authority over classroom discipline. Furthermore, limited understanding of PD may also result from continued reliance on traditional punitive methods such as corporal punishment, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient support systems within schools (Gagnon et al., 2021).

Challenges pertaining to parenting and parental involvement

The statements below indicate that participants experienced a lack of parental involvement as a major challenge in the management of PD. Participants recognised that the successful implementation of PD requires active parental support and collaboration. The following responses were provided:

> "The cause of most problems is lack of parental involvement." (Participant 4)
>
> "Parents do not come to schools when they are called about their children's behaviour." (Participant 7)
>
> "The biggest problem we have is the unavailability of parents. Even those that are unemployed do not avail themselves when there are meetings about misconduct of learners." (Participant 10)
>
> "Cooperation of parents is a challenge. We can only be effective in our efforts if we work together with parents." (Participant 12)
>
> "You have children who come from stable homes financially; when you call the parents, learners respond by saying Mommy and Daddy are busy the whole day most of the time." (Participant 14)

Participants attributed many disciplinary problems to the lack of parental involvement. Parental involvement is important in all aspects of education, including learner discipline. In cases of learner misconduct, parents are expected to work collaboratively with schools in identifying and implementing solutions to behavioural challenges. However, participants highlighted that many parents fail to respond when called to school regarding disciplinary matters. Although some parents may be employed and financially stable, participants expressed concern that work commitments often prevent them from making

time for issues relating to their children's education and behaviour. As a result, schools become overburdened with the responsibility of managing learner misconduct without adequate parental support.

Participants further indicated that even some unemployed parents fail to respond to requests from schools, leaving schools to address disciplinary challenges on their own. The lack of parental involvement therefore emerged as one of the major challenges principals experience in implementing PD. Participants believed that stronger parental involvement and collaboration with schools could significantly reduce incidents of learner misconduct. This suggests that parental involvement is an essential component of effective PD in schools. When parents are actively invested in their children's education, learner misbehaviour may decrease. Supporting this view, Lumadi (2019) states that the home environment can influence children's disruptive behaviour, while parental support may mitigate such behaviour within educational settings. This finding highlights the importance of parental involvement in school disciplinary processes and procedures.

Participants in this study were also aware of some of the reasons why parents were reluctant to participate in meetings concerning learner misconduct. Participants stated the following:

> "Some parents are illiterate and that makes it difficult for them to understand the policies and the code of conduct and how they are implemented, even though we try our level best to ensure that all stakeholders familiarise themselves with the learner code of conduct of the school." (Participant 5)
>
> "I have realised that some of the parents are afraid of their kids." (Participant 1)
>
> "The challenges that we commonly come across are difficult parents who are failing to accept the fact that their children are ill-disciplined." (Participant 8)

The results above point to three main factors hindering the implementation of the learner code of conduct and PD. These include parental illiteracy, which makes it difficult for some parents to understand school policies and the code of conduct; parents who appear to be afraid of their own children; and parents who minimise or deny the seriousness of learner misconduct and its impact.

The lack of parental involvement, particularly regarding the enforcement of the learner code of conduct, presents a significant challenge for schools. The South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996) emphasises that parental involvement is essential for enforcing learner discipline and for ensuring a disciplined, safe, and effective learning environment. The results suggest that limited parental education contributes to weak parental involvement. Although schools appear to make efforts to familiarise parents with the code of conduct and educate them about its implementation, these efforts are often undermined by additional barriers that limit meaningful parental participation.

One participant referred to parents being "afraid" of their children. This may suggest that some parents are reluctant to discipline their children when they misbehave. Such fear may stem from a perceived loss of parental control, fear of conflict, children's strong personalities, or parental exhaustion and burnout. In some cases, this may result in permissive parenting practices in which children are raised with few boundaries or consequences for inappropriate behaviour. Wolhuter and Van der Walt (2020) describe this as a permissive parenting style, which may contribute to learner indiscipline at school. Regardless of the underlying causes, the consequences of such parenting approaches may negatively affect learner discipline at school and weaken parent–child relationships.

In turn, this may also hinder children's ability to form healthy relationships outside the home environment.

The results further suggest that parenting styles have a direct impact on learner discipline in schools. One participant highlighted how some absent parents attempt to compensate for their lack of involvement in their children's lives through material rewards, believing that these may contribute to discipline. The participant stated:

> "Unfortunately, parents who are working and are most of the time absent in their children's lives would rather give money and buy iPhones for learners and state that this will instil discipline." (Participant 15)

The participant's response suggests that uninvolved parenting is not regarded as an effective parenting style, even when parents are able to provide for their children's material needs. Although parenting styles differ, the statement above reflects the perception that some parents equate the provision of material possessions with responsible parenting and discipline. For example, parents may believe that giving children expensive items such as iPhones encourages responsibility and appropriate behaviour.

In some instances, parents were reported to interfere with school disciplinary processes and, at times, obstruct disciplinary efforts by accusing teachers of treating learners unfairly. Participants explained the situation as follows:

> "Parents love their children so much to the extent that when you try to discipline their children, parents will always be against you, thinking that you do not treat their child fairly." (Participant 6)
>
> "We cater to the middle class, and some of our parents are professionals. In some cases, they want to use people in senior positions to try and influence how we manage the school and how we administer discipline." (Participant 15)

The utterances of the participants indicate that some parents perceive teachers as treating their children unfairly when disciplinary measures are implemented. Such perceptions may create tension between parents and schools, particularly when there is a lack of shared understanding regarding acceptable behaviour, disciplinary expectations, and appropriate consequences for misconduct. These conflicts may arise from differing perceptions about children's behaviour, contrasting value systems, or disagreements regarding disciplinary procedures.

The results further indicate that some parents attempt to interfere with disciplinary processes by exerting pressure on school management or involving individuals in senior positions to influence disciplinary decisions in favour of their children. Instead of participating constructively in disciplinary meetings and processes, such parents may seek to challenge or undermine teachers' professional authority. This may place teachers under pressure and create fear of being reported to higher authorities or officials. Consequently, teachers may become reluctant to enforce disciplinary measures consistently. Such interference may compromise institutional standards and weaken the implementation of PD in schools. In some cases, schools may prioritise avoiding conflict with parents over maintaining consistent disciplinary practices and ensuring learner safety. The avoidance of conflict may therefore undermine teachers' authority, their sense of professional security, and the creation of a safe and orderly learning environment for all learners.

Participants also recognised that learner behavioural challenges may originate from the communities in which learners reside. Participants expressed the following views:

> "Every time learners return to the community where maybe their parents are not disciplining their own kids." (Participant 1)
>
> "Our learners emulate the behaviour in their communities. They see the violence and the abuse of women and children; they live with these every day." (Participant 10)
>
> "Societal issues and economic issues. Most of our learners are from poor backgrounds; they are living in informal settlements. This factor affects learner discipline." (Participant 9)

The participants' responses suggest an awareness that community conditions and experiences often spill over into the school environment. Learners are profoundly influenced by the communities in which they grow up, particularly when they are exposed to violence, abuse, poverty, and other social challenges. In many low-income South African communities, children are regularly exposed to high levels of community violence, which may shape their behaviour and attitudes. As a result, learners may reproduce behaviours and coping mechanisms that they observe in their surrounding environments.

Participants further highlighted socioeconomic challenges such as poverty and living in informal settlements, may negatively affect learner discipline. Such conditions may expose learners to instability, stress, violence, and limited adult supervision, all of which may contribute to behavioural difficulties at school.

Another issue emerging from the results is the lack of continuity in enforcing discipline between the home and school environments. Van der Walt et al. (2023) describe this situation as a "blame game" that sometimes occurs between schools and parents. In this context, schools may blame parents for failing to instil discipline at home, while parents may expect schools to assume primary responsibility for disciplining learners. This lack of shared responsibility and consistency may undermine the effective implementation of PD in schools.

Teachers resisting PD

Participants indicated that teachers may struggle with or resist the implementation of PD for a variety of reasons. Participants stated the following:

> "I think there is a lack of knowledge and understanding of positive discipline among teachers and members of the school management team." (Participant 1)
>
> "If a teacher is strict and consistent in maintaining discipline, other teachers do not like that. If they maintain a certain standard of discipline so as to create a good school environment for teaching and learning, other teachers and SMT members will start to question the motive and connive or conspire against them, even if they know that their actions are according to policy." (Participant 2)
>
> "We differ. Others still want to use corporal punishment to discipline children, others are into positive discipline, while others have given up completely on disciplining children. They even say that learners must do as they please. It is only those that are positive about learner discipline that participate in discussions about positive disciplinary measures for learners and disciplinary committees." (Participant 15)

The participants' responses revealed three main reasons why some teachers resist or fail to implement PD effectively. The first relates to a lack of knowledge and understanding of PD. This suggests that some teachers may perceive PD as difficult to implement because they have not been adequately trained or supported in applying positive disciplinary strategies. The second issue concerns discouragement and resistance from colleagues. Participants indicated that teachers who consistently apply disciplinary measures and maintain standards of behaviour may sometimes face criticism or opposition from other teachers and even members of the school management team. This may discourage educators from consistently implementing PD practices, despite such practices being aligned with school policy. The results suggest that inadequate understanding of PD among staff members may contribute to negative attitudes towards teachers who attempt to implement positive disciplinary measures effectively. The third issue relates to differing teacher preferences and attitudes towards learner discipline. Some teachers continue to favour traditional punitive methods such as corporal punishment, while others support PD approaches. At the same time, some teachers appear to have withdrawn completely from disciplinary responsibilities, expressing the view that learners should simply "do as they please." These findings suggest frustration, exhaustion, and possible feelings of helplessness among some educators. Teachers who continue to prefer punitive approaches may do so because these methods were historically entrenched in schools and are more familiar to them. Others may feel that PD is ineffective or may fear legal consequences associated with disciplinary practices they do not fully understand.

The results further suggest that some teachers may become disengaged from learner discipline because of burnout, lack of institutional support, or uncertainty regarding appropriate disciplinary procedures. Literature similarly indicates that teachers often report inadequate training and limited understanding of how to apply positive disciplinary techniques effectively within classroom settings.

Learner unresponsiveness to positive discipline

Participants highlighted that learners contributed to the challenges experienced by principals in implementing and managing discipline. Participants provided the following responses:

> "The challenge in most instances is with learners. When you start using positive discipline by talking to them and indicating why their actions are wrong, and encouraging them to take responsibility for their actions, they do not take it seriously. It is as if, because corporal punishment is not being used, what they have done is not considered serious" (Participant 3).
>
> "There are learners who respond positively to praise and enjoy being allocated leadership duties, but others show a negative attitude that indicates that they do not care about being praised" (Participant 8).
>
> "We use the code of conduct, which all learners in the school are familiar with. However, some learners do not care about rules; they will make sure that they break every rule just for the sake of it, knowing well what the consequences will be. They are rebellious, and you reach an extent of giving up on them" (Participant 5).

Participants underscore that some learners do not respond positively to positive discipline (PD). This may be because some learners are accustomed to corporal punishment and other disciplinary approaches that are not aligned with human rights principles. It may also indicate that the disciplinary measures used at school differ from those applied by parents at home. Such inconsistencies can undermine the school's efforts to implement PD effectively. These findings further suggest the need for teachers to be equipped with skills and strategies to manage learners who display rebellious behaviour.

Discussion

This study sought to investigate how PD is understood and the challenges encountered in implementing it in schools. The thematic analysis revealed that participants had developed new insights into PD and its associated challenges. Participants indicated that the aims of PD include correcting and improving learner behaviour while promoting respect for human rights. There was awareness that PD helps children develop emotional intelligence and life skills necessary for their well-being and success. Learners acquire these skills as they are taught to respect others, take responsibility for their actions, and practise self-regulation. Participants also noted the positive impact of PD on schooling and learning. Thus, principals in this study demonstrated an understanding of the concept of positive learner discipline. Participants therefore appeared to regard PD as a factor that attracts learners to schooling, in contrast to corporal punishment, which may push learners out of school. Similarly, Breen et al. (2015) found that children were more likely to trust teachers who did not use corporal punishment or who used it less frequently. Previous studies have demonstrated the negative effects of punitive discipline on learning and schooling. For example, punitive disciplinary approaches increase learner dropout rates (Haq et al., 2019) and reduce academic performance (Maiti, 2021; Idris, 2023). These findings suggest that participants acknowledged that corporal punishment is not an appropriate disciplinary method. Literature indicates that PD opposes the use of physical force (Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention & Department of Basic Education, 2012). It is regarded as a strategy for corrective behaviour rather than punishment (Zondo & Mncube, 2024). However, the findings also revealed that some principals still have a limited understanding of PD. Principals with limited understanding often fail to associate discipline with positivity, as their response to learner misbehaviour focuses mainly on punishment. South Africa's history of corporal punishment in schools continues to influence the implementation of progressive disciplinary strategies intended to address learner misbehaviour.

The findings of this study further indicate that challenges to the implementation of PD involve parents, teachers, and learners. Maintaining discipline in schools requires teamwork aimed at creating a consistent, supportive, and safe environment that promotes positive learner behaviour. According to the Department of Basic Education (2014), the management of learner discipline is a collective responsibility that can be likened to a three-legged pot consisting of teachers, parents, and learners. Each stakeholder therefore contributes to a consistent and unified framework for learner behaviour.

Parental involvement was affected by both parents who were employed and those who were unemployed. In some cases, parents appeared uninterested in participating in strategies aimed at addressing learner behaviour at school. This may stem from the belief that teachers have a better understanding of how discipline should be managed, or from

recognising the complexity of the task. This finding is supported by Bunijevac (2017), who argues that modern parents are often preoccupied with the demands and distractions of daily life, limiting their involvement in their children's educational experiences. Other challenges included parental illiteracy, parents being fearful of their own children, and parents downplaying the seriousness of learner misconduct and its consequences. When parents do not understand the contents of the school code of conduct, it becomes difficult for them to support learner adherence to school rules or actively participate in addressing behavioural problems. Furthermore, some parents may hesitate to discipline their children for fear of damaging their relationship with them. Such passive parenting may contribute to learners responding negatively to discipline. Additionally, parental minimisation or denial of learner misconduct can undermine disciplinary efforts within schools and discourage teachers from enforcing school rules and the code of conduct. Moreover, literature suggests that uninvolved parenting may contribute to severe behavioural challenges, including poor school attendance, substance abuse, and emotional instability (Widiastuti et al., 2025). Furthermore, uninvolved parenting often grants children a high degree of freedom because parents adopt a largely hands-off approach, despite meeting their children's basic needs (Sanvictores & Mendez, 2026). Such detachment may not always be intentional, as it may result from work-related demands and limited time with children. Nevertheless, these parents may remain emotionally detached and disengaged from their children's lives, which may negatively affect learner behaviour and discipline at school.

The findings also revealed parental interference in disciplinary matters. A disconnect appears to exist between parents and teachers regarding how and why learners should be disciplined. Teachers' efforts to establish behavioural boundaries and address learner misconduct sometimes resulted in conflict, including threats from parents to report teachers to senior officials. In some instances, parents influenced school authorities to favour their children when disciplinary action was taken. Such actions deprive teachers of the parental support needed to teach effectively and respond appropriately to challenging learner behaviour. Moreover, the findings highlight the potentially volatile nature of disciplinary processes, which may provoke parental interference and even aggression towards teachers. These findings corroborate previous studies indicating that learner disciplinary issues are a major source of conflict between parents and teachers (Berkowitz et al., 2025; Tiesman et al., 2013). It is perhaps for these reasons that Motseke (2016) concluded that parental involvement in learner discipline in township primary schools ranged from minimal to non-existent. Consequently, this study emphasises the need to strengthen parental participation in addressing learner disciplinary problems within schools. Nevertheless, there remains awareness that effective parent–teacher collaboration can produce positive outcomes and contribute to reducing incidents of learner misbehaviour.

With regard to teachers, this study found that the challenges were threefold: teachers who do not understand PD, those who undermine colleagues who attempt to implement PD, and those who have given up on disciplining learners altogether. Teachers who struggle to implement PD often rely on traditional punitive methods because of inadequate training, limited understanding of PD principles, or feelings of being

unsupported. This may result in inconsistent disciplinary practices within the school environment.

The findings relating to learners revealed that while some learners responded positively to PD strategies, others were perceived as rebellious and did not regard PD as a serious disciplinary approach. Consequently, such learners did not respond positively to these strategies. Similarly, Marumo and Zulu (2019) found that some learners welcomed alternative forms of discipline mainly because they replaced the abusive practice of corporal punishment. This suggests that learners hold mixed perceptions of alternative disciplinary approaches, appreciating the shift away from corporal punishment while simultaneously questioning the effectiveness of PD.

Conclusion

Positive learner discipline is a dynamic approach that requires a solid understanding in order to be implemented and sustained effectively. PD can only be effective when parents cooperate with schools in disciplinary processes. Although many teachers appear to understand the meaning and benefits of PD, some still show reluctance to implement it in schools. The negative attitudes of certain teachers towards PD may discourage even those who are beginning to embrace the approach.

In addition, inconsistencies between disciplinary strategies used at school and those practised at home and within communities contribute to the ineffectiveness of PD in schools. After school, learners often return to communities where discipline may not be reinforced by parents or caregivers. This creates challenges for schools attempting to maintain positive learner discipline. For PD to be effective and sustainable, there must be continuity between home and school, such that the values and disciplinary approaches promoted at school are also reinforced at home.

Training on PD, its importance, and effective implementation strategies should therefore not only target teachers, but also parents and learners.

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