



Maintaining Learner Discipline in Secondary Schools: How School Management Teams Employ Collaborative Strategies to Sustain Learner Discipline

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10.46303/ressat.2025.38

Article Info

Received: October 24, 2023

Accepted: March 3, 2024

Published: October 29, 2025

How to cite

Padayachee, A. S., Gcelu, N., & Makhasane S. (2025). Maintaining Learner Discipline in Secondary Schools: How School Management Teams Employ Collaborative Strategies to Sustain Learner Discipline. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 10(3), 61-72.

<https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2025.38>

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ABSTRACT

Indiscipline remains a persistent issue in schools worldwide. The preponderance of literature associated with indiscipline highlights its severity and the frequency of its manifestation, rendering it a global problem. The frequency of indiscipline on the African continent has also been a focus of educational research undertaken by various scholars. The literature presents a general conception of the lack of discipline in South African schools. Since the post-apartheid education system in South Africa, school management teams have been tasked with managing discipline in schools. Research suggests that school management teams have established and are currently implementing strategies to manage learner discipline. Yet, despite the implementation of these strategies, the persistence of indiscipline in schools across South Africa remains a reality. Therefore, strategies need to be used to sustain learner discipline in schools. This study explored collaborative strategies for maintaining learner discipline in secondary schools within the Ilembe education district. This study is grounded in the Theory of Collaborative Leadership. The sample size comprised 24 secondary schools in the Ilembe education district. Four participants were selected per school, resulting in a total of 96 participants, comprising the principal, one deputy principal, and two departmental heads per school. The participants were selected through simple random sampling. A qualitative research approach was used for this study. The study revealed that collaborative leadership was employed by School Management Teams (SMTs) to lead collaborations in schools to sustain learner discipline. It is recommended that a collaborative leadership approach be adopted to encourage stakeholders to approach all aspects of school management in partnership with those who have a vested interest in the school.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration; collaborative leadership; indiscipline; learner discipline; legislation; policy; secondary schools; sustaining; school management teams

INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shift in educational management, involving the devolution of school management in South Africa, has led to numerous changes in the country's educational landscape, with school discipline increasingly becoming a contentious issue for both education practitioners and policymakers. Mkancu (2019) describes schools as a microcosm of the heteronormative and patriarchal society in which they exist. Although not confined to secondary schools, indiscipline appears to be more prevalent in secondary schools. According to Masekela, Ngoben, and Sepang (2024), students within the 12-18 age group in primary and secondary schools are classified as adolescents, undergoing a multitude of physical and emotional changes. These changes commonly result in deviant and undesirable behaviours among adolescents and teenagers, and the pressures and challenges inherent to adolescence often manifest as disruptive and uncontrollable behaviour. It is worth noting that school indiscipline is not peculiar to the South African school context. It is clear that school violence is a global problem, and South Africa is no exception (van Wyk, 2023).

Studies and media reports portraying violent and indisciplined incidents in South African schools reveal that violence is increasing at an alarming rate and requires urgent attention (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). Research suggests that indiscipline in South African schools stems from more significant societal issues that are not accounted for by legislation and policy frameworks. Regrettably, violence is such a prevalent issue in South Africa that Le Roux and Mokhele (2011) contend that crime and violence in South Africa are a way of life, and schools are not immune to the violence from the community. The post-1996 dispensation should have brought reform and overall improvement in all spheres of the education sector. However, the reality is that South African schools are crippled by indiscipline now more than ever.

The alarming rates of school violence and indiscipline in South African schools and the unsafe school environments they create have fostered the development and implementation of policies such as the *National School Safety Framework and Regulations for Safety Measures at all Public Schools* to ensure safety at schools. Additionally, in its stipulations for a school code of conduct, the South African Schools Act (84 of 1996) served as a safeguard against bad behaviour and ineffective management. School management strategies guided by the policies are implemented in South African schools, yet indiscipline worsens. This suggests that, regrettably, indiscipline in South African schools stems from more significant societal issues that are not adequately addressed by legislation and policy frameworks (Padayachee, 2024). The premise of indiscipline lies in the absence of a sound philosophy that deeply roots learners' attitudes and values.

Accordingly, the leadership responsibility of the school management team (SMT) in South African schools is to address various challenges within the school, including learner-teacher violence (Makhasane & Majong, 2023). A study by Padayachee and Gcelu (2019) revealed that school management teams use collaborative strategies to manage discipline in secondary schools. Collaborative strategies refer to established and implemented processes by

all school stakeholders. Furthermore, it is essential to note that stakeholders involved in some form of collaboration must have a degree of autonomy rather than a generalised merging of stakeholders' efforts. Despite the plethora of information surrounding discipline, we still find flaws, loopholes, and gaps in the literature that lead us to consider how these highly commended strategies can be used to achieve maximum effectiveness. It is argued that the defects in discipline management are catalysts for the current issues of indiscipline. Therefore, within this context, collaborative strategies for sustaining learner discipline were explored.

The gap the researchers attempted to close in the literature, as mentioned above, is the lack of research regarding the use of collaborative strategies to sustain learner discipline. The focus of this study was the discourses surrounding the management of learner discipline, with an emphasis on enhancing strategies that maintain discipline. The researcher explored the collaborative strategies school management teams use to sustain learner discipline in the ILembe Education District secondary schools.

Purpose of the research

The study examines the collaborative strategies employed by School Management Teams to maintain discipline in the ILembe District.

This study focuses on exploring how school management teams (SMTs) use collaborative strategies to sustain learner discipline in secondary schools. The study aims to investigate how SMTs can utilise collaborative strategies to address the issue of poor discipline, which is prevalent in secondary schools in the Republic. Literature suggests that education departments worldwide are implementing strategies to assist school managers and educators in managing discipline, yet learner misconduct remains a reality. Although SMTs currently employ existing strategies to manage learners, they are not focused on utilising collaborative strategies; therefore, the reality of discipline in schools remains a point of contention. Therefore, this study aims to explore collaborative approaches to sustain learner discipline in secondary schools. The research question was consequently posed: How do school management teams use collaborative strategies to maintain learner discipline in secondary schools in the ILembe education district?

METHOD

Design

In this study, a qualitative approach was chosen to explore the participants' behaviour, beliefs, perceptions and experiences regarding the collaborative discipline strategies used by school stakeholders. The researcher aimed to understand human phenomena and explore the meaning that the selected participants contributed to this study.

Sample

The target population for this study comprised 121 schools from the ILembe education district in KwaZulu-Natal. The participants for the qualitative data collection were selected through a non-probability sampling method. Stockemer (2019) notes that purposive sampling selects a

smaller group of subjects based on certain characteristics that the researcher predetermines before the study. It uses the judgment of an expert in deciding cases, or it selects cases with a specific purpose in mind (Neuman, 2014). The sample for qualitative data consisted of one principal, one deputy principal, and two departmental heads from four schools, as they are directly involved in managing discipline in schools.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview was used, and participants were at ease in providing “thick descriptions” of the issues raised in the first strand. Yin (2016) postulates that in qualitative interviews, critical questions are designed to be open-ended rather than closed-ended. Questions were, therefore, designed to be open-ended, allowing the researcher to draw detailed responses from participants. Flick (2018) postulates that in semi-structured interviews, follow-up questions, also known as probes, are formulated in relation to what the interviewees have already said. Following this principle, the researcher used probing questions to gather further information.

Data collection

Before commencing the interviews, the researchers obtained permission from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Free State. After receiving ethical clearance, the researchers sought permission to conduct research from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education. Upon authorisation, participants were telephonically contacted to arrange appointments before visiting the selected schools. Upon arrival, the researchers provided the participants with a brief overview of the study’s purpose. Participants were then asked to sign the permission form, acknowledging the research conducted in their respective schools.

Most interviews had been planned as face-to-face, but due to COVID-19, they had to be conducted over digital platforms such as Skype and Zoom. Leavy (2017) suggests that, although not identical to face-to-face experiences, video-conferencing and Skype interviews offer many benefits of in-person interviews, allowing you to talk to people who might not be accessible in person due to their geographical location. Despite the advantages of using digital platforms, problems arose from a poor data connection, resulting in increased time spent on interviews. The researcher also noticed that some participants rushed through certain questions due to the nature of the interview's conduct. To accommodate this, the researcher made herself more familiar with the questions in the interview schedule to limit time wastage.

Data analysis

The researchers created verbatim transcriptions of the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. The transcripts were then coded using a qualitative analysis software program, NVivo. The researchers used predetermined themes related to the study's final objective and any issues that arose and required further explanation. Yin (2018) notes that qualitative research involves studying the meaning of people’s lives as experienced under real-world conditions. This is integral to understanding the study at hand, as school management is a

multifaceted social issue that transcends the borders of education, requiring solutions to problems that exist under 'real-world conditions.'

RESULTS

Collaboration can be influenced by the leader of the school

An interesting point was raised when participants were asked about the collaborative strategies they used and their effectiveness. Mr Mthembu, the principal of a school, stated:

Well, collaboration can be as effective as the team you choose. The community chooses the team, and if they are chosen based on some kind of agenda, let's face it SGBs are chosen to come into schools to exploit tenders. The SGBs were chosen to set up positions for family and friends, and the SGBs were set up to remove certain race groups and replace them with others. That's the fact of the matter. So how effective? It's going to be as effective as how strong the leader is. Here again, the principal is the ex-officio member [of SGB], and if he gains the confidence of his community and he can stand up in a community meeting and say you are sending me people that are here for other reasons besides what they came for; the community must be strong enough to stand up at the next election meeting and say we want people who come to school to support, not the principal, but support what the school is doing. Subsequently, the SGB will be as effective as the strength of the community behind it, and it will be as effective as how fair it is to the policies of the school. It cannot show loyalty to a person or an organisation. It must show loyalty to what is the purpose of the school.

The above excerpt indicates that school principals can initiate effective collaboration. This initiative is possible when the community members buy into the school as an organisation and support its vision and mission, demonstrating collaborative leadership. He further maintained that principals could influence such decisions as the election of SGB members by reporting back to the community if they are not performing their core responsibilities. However, role players who pursue personal goals may undermine the effectiveness of collaborative leadership.

Don't wait for the government to change things; form partnerships to address indiscipline

Participants from all four schools lamented the government's lack of support in managing learner discipline. Participants from two schools stated there were many ways to incorporate assistance from external stakeholders. They further pointed out that aid for discipline management was available, but SMTs must be willing to accept the assistance. Mr Dunn, a Deputy Principal, spoke of the collaboration, saying:

***Partners for Possibility** is an organisation that SMTs in our area work with, and it is phenomenal. It's nothing to do with the education department whatsoever. It's actually just a mindset shift in the teachers and principals, and bringing in new ways of learning, inviting other NGOs to help the kids and impact the kids' lives. The SMT are trained as teachers, and now they are playing a full-on management role, and if you look at that scenario, it isn't easy. The kids themselves come with massive social challenges. Teachers aren't equipped to deal with that. Huge classes, under-*

resourced and a lack of input really by the DoE, to be honest. Bad leadership makes them an island on their own, or they form these clusters of the ones that are dynamic, and then they rub off on each other, and they actually work together, and I think that's powerful. And don't wait for the government to change it. So, I think for a lot of us, it's that support an outside person who is entirely unrelated to our scenarios who rubs off ideas and give us encouragement and put together a vision plan for our schools. It's like there are probably many other ways of sustaining discipline this but now we've got partners we can work with to actually obtain some of these dreams to work within the school. I really think it's built on the most unrelated relationships and cross the border of private business and government because they bring skills and bring corporate backing, and they bring outside people; so, it's like this bridge-building space between private and public.

Mr Dunn's response is indicative of successful collaboration as presented. This school had an SMT geared to finding solutions to sustain learner discipline. The inclusion of partnerships is intended to provide encouragement, support, and assistance in a vision for the school. The SMT of this school, therefore, demonstrates collaborative leadership qualities. Their leadership philosophy enables organisations to shift away from traditional, controlling leadership practices toward more relational, collaborative, and participatory approaches, resulting in more progressive and sustainable growth (Gerard et al., 2017).

The findings revealed several key conditions, including a clear strategy for the partnership, a robust organisational structure with sufficient staff to support the activity, and both flexibility and reflexivity to adapt to shifting circumstances and new developments. From Mr Dunn's response, it is apparent that the SMT had a clear strategy for collaboration and networking with external stakeholders. Furthermore, after identifying that the DoE would not assist in this regard, they shifted their circumstances from the need to action, creating room for further support and development.

Discipline must be approached holistically and practically; there are lives attached to it

Concerning the theme presented above, the participants stated that policies aside, discipline must be approached holistically and practically. As mentioned, the participants saw policies guiding discipline management as static documents. Hence, they alluded to adapting and personalising the disciplined approach. Mr Khan, a Departmental head, stated:

When one thinks about what we had, in terms of this culture, the ethos of this school. And one looks at it now, what we've lost, and it's not as if the SMT hasn't tried; they have. But it just failed because of the will in terms of ... I'm not sure whether its leadership, I'm not sure whether it's lack of support, I'm not sure whether it's a combination of both, I'm not sure if it's the perspective of the individual of what's important that contributes to this decline; but there is a steady decline of our schools. For discipline to be holistic and practical, each school must govern itself independently. See, the department will give you a policy. You don't have to follow it; make it personal. If it were your family, what would you do to build the ethos, to build the culture of

learning and teaching, aside from what another school is doing and get the support needed? There's no support in the hierarchy.

The key implication in the above response is that schools should approach discipline as a family effort, a collaborative one in which the needs of learners are addressed. Mr Khan's view of how discipline should be approached is supported by the proponents of collaboration, Chrislip and Larson (1994), who state that collaborative leadership operates under the premise that, if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic vision and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organisation or community. Participants noted that by coming together and addressing the issue of indiscipline in schools through practical approaches, the benefits would be far-reaching, rather than relying on a broad policy to address unique situations that arise. While the policies may guide general managerial issues, they should not be set in stone.

DISCUSSION

The role of SMT in policy management is as vital as the role of the principal in such matters. The study revealed that the principal, as the chief executive officer, can lead collaborative efforts to sustain learner discipline by applying collaborative leadership skills. This aligns with the findings of Mohapi and Chombo (2021), who state that the principal is morally and legally obligated to cooperate and collaborate with the school governors in the best interest of the school. According to Goodness (2025), SMTs, when equipped with strategic insight, cultural competency, and collaborative abilities, play a crucial role in creating safe, disciplined, and inclusive school environments through effective anti-bullying leadership. When SMTs model positive conduct and encourage open communication among stakeholders, instances of indiscipline are more likely to be reported and addressed (Notana & Boboyi, 2025).

The participants asserted that the SMT needed to display transparency in their management approach and collaboratively lead all stakeholders to form partnerships that can help sustain discipline. Dewitt (2016) argues that collaborative leadership necessitates commitment and dedication, and that collaborative leaders must be transparent, honest, trustworthy, compassionate, and responsible to foster effective working relationships. In collaboratively leading stakeholders towards sustaining discipline, DeWitt (2016) suggests that collaborative leaders should allow others to have a voice in all decision-making, allow for a shared vision, and foster partnerships for learning. Leithwood and Louis (2012) assert that collective leadership is the extent of influence that organisational members and stakeholders exert on decisions in their schools. Participants further stated that when the SMT leads by example, all stakeholders buy into the cultivation of a safe school environment. Le Mottee and Kelly (2017) assert that a positive school climate is achieved through a collaborative approach among learners, educators, and community members working together to plan school improvements, identify what works best, and address the current needs of the school. This is reiterated by Elkaleh, Ali, Khurma, and Sheriff (2025), who state that collaborative practices

develop a sense of shared purpose, accountability, and social responsibility toward the well-being of society. Furthermore, sustainable leaders create an innovative and collaborative organisational culture where sustainable values, concepts and goals are embraced and practised by all members (Liao, 2022).

Another approach deemed effective by participants was initiating collaboration among small groups. Participants spoke of the power of communities that rally behind the school to assist in all matters pertaining to discipline. This leads to an understanding that the power of a small group can have dynamic effects at times. One particular school respondent spoke of a workshop in which they learnt of the power of small groups. This organisation hosts workshops for SMT members, and many schools in Ilembe mentioned that they were part of it. It was interesting to discover how involved the SMT of this school was in educating members on how to best support the school, as they took it upon themselves to attend a workshop outside of school hours. Here, they learnt about how to engage the community in managing behaviour by giving everyone a voice and an opportunity to contribute their strengths and skills to support the school. By bringing this concept back to the school and initiating it, they were able to launch a whole-school approach to sustaining discipline, with respect and accountability for all individuals. The power of small groups was highly praised by participants, and the impact of this group on fostering a climate of teaching and learning was evident. It is for the reasons mentioned above that the data collected led to the discovery of how collaborations should start immediately, without awaiting intervention by the DoE.

Participants mentioned a range of non-governmental organisations and external stakeholders who were willing to assist them as schools. However, what was made clear was that the SMT was supposed to be willing to ask for help. Participants who claimed that discipline was sustained at their schools stated that the SMT established networks with organisations that were helping other schools in Ilembe district. They did not sit back and complain about the many things that the DoE was not doing to assist them. Rather, they took it upon themselves to engage, form networks, and work towards creating a safe environment for all. Participants further stated that collaboration was a powerful tool that could be used to sustain discipline. They further maintained that regardless of the size of the group or team, collaboration can be successful if all stakeholders within the group or team are willing to work towards a common goal. Participants further noted that there is much potential in the power of small groups. They indicated that small groups can initiate collaboration that yields dynamic results.

In adopting a whole-school approach to discipline, participants emphasised that buy-in from all stakeholders was necessary. Participants mentioned that the only time approaches to managing discipline were rendered successful was when stakeholders were willing to participate in its implementation, rather than merely having it present on paper, where it remained useless. Participants from schools that had buy-in from all stakeholders, including the SMT, educators, learners, SGB, and external stakeholders, observed that collaboration was at its optimum when every stakeholder was driven to protect the school against indiscipline. One

participant even mentioned that, as a principal, he got the SMT to buy into sustaining discipline by getting level one teachers involved in the management of the school. This is demonstrative of collaborative leadership. However, the threat to effective collaboration, mostly mentioned by participants, was a lack of interest from the SGB as a major stakeholder in the management of discipline in schools. The key finding from this sub-theme was that participants asserted that the buy-in and collaboration could be influenced by the school leader through collaborative leadership practices. If a leader sees a threat to collaboration, he can apply his collaborative leadership skills and influence the situation by asking the 'owners' of the school, i.e. the community, to get on board and to elect those who are willing to serve in the best interest of the learners and the school at large. They stated that by the leader leading by example, the community sees the investment made by the leader. In this way, when it is time to choose representation from the community, the community knows you as a leader and what you stand for, and as a result, a winning team is selected.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the collaborative strategies employed by SMTs to maintain learner discipline. The findings revealed that such strategies were in place, and through collaborative leadership, SMTs were influencing all stakeholders to collaborate for the benefit of the school. Participants indicated that when stakeholders are held accountable, collaboration becomes heightened. The SMT needed to invest time in ensuring that a follow-up is made on the implementation of daily tasks and policies regarding the management of discipline. Participants assert that when people are called to account, a whole-school approach works effortlessly. All it takes is to get the initial start-up right. The whole-school approach was recommended by participants, therefore indicating that it is effective in sustaining discipline. The key point to note in a whole-school approach is that when stakeholders are held accountable, the approach operates like a well-oiled machine, proving beneficial in sustaining discipline. Furthermore, stakeholders are collaborating in the process.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, strict regulations regarding social distancing were imposed. Data collection was problematic as the researcher conducted interviews under Level 3 of lockdown, and as such, some participants did not want to be interviewed face-to-face. Therefore, the researcher conducted interviews via social media platforms, including Zoom and Skype.

The focus of this study was on the issue of indiscipline in schools. Participants in this study comprised SMT members and were therefore required to be knowledgeable of policies, procedures and strategies related to discipline in secondary schools. However, not all SMT members were knowledgeable about the aforementioned aspects.

It is recommended that principals adopt a collaborative leadership approach in managing schools and lead by example, demonstrating what they want to achieve for their schools. In doing so, adopting a collaborative leadership approach will encourage stakeholders to approach

all aspects of school management with an open mind, considering the interests of all stakeholders who have a vested interest in the school. To facilitate collaborative efforts, the SGB should incorporate accountability and transparency in all matters, thereby enhancing collaboration.

Acknowledgment

This article is produced from a thesis written by Amy Sarah Padayachee titled: Exploring The Use Of Collaborative Strategies By School Management Teams To Sustain Learner Discipline In Secondary Schools, under the supervision of Dr Ntombizandile Gcelu.

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